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Reform and Political Crisis in Brazil

*Class Conflicts in Workers' Party Governments
and the Rise of Bolsonaro Neo-fascism*

By

Armando Boito

Translated by

Angela Tesheiner

Lenita M R Pisetta



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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

*This book is dedicated to my grandson Leonardo, who
will live his youth in the challenging 21st century*



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Preface to the English Edition

In this preface, I intend to offer the reader who is not closely acquainted with Brazilian politics some factual information to facilitate reading this book; I present its themes, clarify the theoretical approach adopted, and, finally, explain the conditions of production of the research from which this book originates. This is a revised and expanded version of my work published in Brazil in 2018, *Reforma e crise política no Brasil – os conflitos de classe nos governos do PT*. Campinas and São Paulo: Editora Unicamp and Editora Unesp.

I

A serious political crisis shook Brazil in 2015–2016 and, since then, the country plunged into a deep economic crisis, has been facing an accelerated deterioration of the popular classes' living standards, and sees its democracy threatened. That political crisis triggered a dynamic that, first, caused the deposition of the president elected in 2014 – Dilma Rousseff of the Workers' Party (PT) – through a fraudulent impeachment process, and then led the country to an extreme right-wing government, headed by President Jair Bolsonaro. As we will see in this book, this government combines a new type of fascism with the economic and social policy of neoliberalism. This crisis should be analyzed in light of the more general context of contemporary events in Latin America, but before we do so, let us try to see it more closely.

Dilma Rousseff had been elected for a second presidential term in October 2014, and her election campaign was based on a discourse that criticized neoliberalism and, particularly, financial capital and its demands for a restrictive fiscal policy that was contrary to economic growth. The Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) – which, despite its name, never had anything to do with social democracy and was, in fact, the vanguard of neoliberalism in Brazil – did not accept the result of the polls. This was the fourth consecutive time the PSDB was beaten in the presidential elections. It had been defeated by the PT of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in 2002, 2006, 2010, and again in 2014. This seemed to be too much for the party, which decided to break with the democratic game. The PSDB went to court trying to prevent Dilma from taking office, to no avail (see Table 1 for a history of the political parties in government).

That would have been the end of it, had it not been for the fact that, stimulated by the behavior of the PSDB and the mainstream press, the upper fraction of the Brazilian middle class started to promote in 2015 massive street

TABLE 1 Brazilian governments – 1995–2021*

Governments	Political characterization	Social, economic, foreign, and citizenship policy
<p><i>1995–2002 – President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazilian Social Democracy Party – PSDB)</i> Fernando Henrique is a well-known intellectual who, in the distant past, had defended left ideologies. His party, the PSDB, was the vanguard of neoliberalism in Brazil.</p>	<p>Two presidential terms – each of four years, as determined by law. Dismantling of the developmentalist state and installation of the neoliberal capitalist model.</p>	<p>Minimal state, privatizations, trade liberalization, denationalization, curtailment of social rights. Foreign policy of subordination to the United States. Sale to private capital of dozens of large state-owned companies. Reduction by half of the average customs tariff. End of the legislation that required the general readjustment of wages according to the inflation accumulated in the previous year.</p>
<p><i>2003–2010 – President Lula da Silva (Workers’ Party – PT)</i> Lula da Silva was a metalworker and trade unionist. His party was created in 1980 by the workers’ union movement and the progressive fraction of the middle class. Since the late 1990s, it has become a center-left party which the right and the far-right consider their main enemy.</p>	<p>Two presidential terms – each of four years, as determined by law. Moderate changes in social, economic, foreign, and citizenship policy. Maintenance of the neoliberal capitalist economic model.</p>	<p>Neodevelopmentalism: State intervention in the economy to stimulate growth and reduce poverty. Foreign policy in conflict with the U.S. policy. Political recognition of the black, feminist, indigenous, and LGBT movements. Government strongly opposed by the mainstream press, as well as by the neoliberal right and far-right. Lula da Silva concludes his second term with record popular approval.</p>

TABLE 1 Brazilian governments – 1995–2021 (*cont.*)

Governments	Political characterization	Social, economic, foreign, and citizenship policy
<p><i>2011–2016 – President Dilma Rousseff (Workers’ Party – PT)</i> Economist belonging to the ECLAC’s developmentalist tradition. First woman to become president of Brazil.</p>	<p>Two presidential terms – the second having been cut short when she was impeached. Her policy was a kind of “neodevelopmentalism of crisis,” with successive advances and retreats in the socioeconomic policy.</p>	<p>Maintenance of the main points of Lula’s government policy, but with concessions to neoliberal fiscal policy. Strong defense of and initiative for the formation of the BRICS. Extension of labor rights to domestic workers, breaking with the tradition of wealthy Brazilian families to treat them as servants. Measures in favor of the black, feminist, indigenous, and LGBT movements.</p>
<p><i>2016–2018 – President Michel Temer (Brazilian Democratic Movement – MDB)</i> Notoriously corrupt politician belonging to a large conservative party with cronyist practices. He was Vice-President to Dilma Rousseff.</p>	<p>Government created by the impeachment coup. Completed the remaining time of Dilma Rousseff’s second term. Return to neoliberal politics, now in even more extreme terms.</p>	<p>New privatizations, denationalization of companies, radical neoliberal reform of labor law and the public budget – actual freeze on public spending for a period of twenty years.</p>
<p><i>2019–2022 – President Jair Bolsonaro (Liberal Social Party – PSL – currently unaffiliated to any party)</i> A far-right politician, he is a retired Army captain. He publicly</p>	<p>In office since January 1, 2019. Neoliberalism in economic and social policy, and neo-fascist stance towards democratic rights. Bolsonaro has militarized his</p>	<p>Neoliberal Social Security reform, new measures against labor law, measures against indigenous peoples, suspension of environmental protection initiatives, passive subordination to the United</p>

TABLE 1 Brazilian governments – 1995–2021 (*cont.*)

Governments	Political characterization	Social, economic, foreign, and citizenship policy
defends the return of Brazil's military dictatorship, the use of torture against left-wing politicians, and the relaxation of legal regulations to allow big landowners the use of firearms against peasants and indigenous people.	government: he has appointed about nine thousand Armed Forces officers to his cabinet and other senior public positions traditionally held by civilians.	States' foreign policy, and aggressive stances against China and the Arab world in the international arena. Anti-communist and anti-democratic discourse, also hostile to the black, feminist, indigenous, and LGBT movements. During the first half of 2020, Jair Bolsonaro spoke at several street demonstrations calling for the closure of the National Congress and the Supreme Federal Court.

* *Observation.* Brazil is a presidential democracy. The President of the Republic accumulates the positions of head of state and head of government, and has a fixed term of office of four years, maintained even if the government does not have or comes to lose the majority in the National Congress. Furthermore, Brazilian presidentialism has authoritarian characteristics. The National Congress is of minor importance. The presidents tend to abuse their prerogative to issue the so-called Provisional Measures, which do not require the approval of the Legislative Branch to come into force. In theory, the National Congress can later revoke such measures, but it is very difficult to achieve that in practice.

demonstrations whose manifest objective was the fight “against corruption,” and whose latent objective, although initially surreptitious, was the deposition of the elected president. The protesters were actively instigated by a large, highly politicized judicial operation, called “Operation Car Wash” (*Operação Lava-Jato*), which had uncovered corrupt practices among politicians from several parties, including the PT, and businessmen who provided equipment and services to the Brazilian oil giant – Petrobras. The prosecutors and the judge who worked on Operation Car Wash disrespected elementary rules of the criminal procedure and passed privileged and confidential information to the mainstream press, which started a relentless campaign to stir up the people “against corruption” and against the PT government, practically calling

for street demonstrations. The movement quickly changed from the alleged struggle “against corruption” to the explicit struggle for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff.

The Brazilian bourgeoisie was divided. A substantial part of it had been opposing the PT governments since Lula da Silva’s presidency (2003–2010), but another part had shown them its support. In the political crisis of 2015 and 2016, the part of the bourgeoisie that had been backing the PT governments started gradually to defect. The segments that left the government felt dissatisfied with the fall in economic growth and uncomfortable with what they considered to be the growing interventionism of the PT governments in the economy, and that is why they welcomed the PSDB’s promises that, with the deposition of Dilma Rousseff, it would be possible to carry out the neoliberal reforms in the Social Welfare System and the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT). Rousseff’s government was severely weakened and, for reasons that we will analyze in this book, the labor and popular movements did not mobilize significantly in her defense.

The forces that ousted Dilma Rousseff in August 2016 intended to carry out, shall we say, a “one-off surgical intervention.” In their view, they were merely correcting a “transient shortcoming in democracy.” In the 2018 presidential election, everything should have returned to normal, preferably with the PSDB assuming the Presidency of the Republic. That is not what happened, though. The events of 2018, the result of a very particular set of circumstances that we will examine in the Afterword, written especially for this English edition, caught observers and analysts of Brazilian politics by surprise. The candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro – a retired military man, an unimpressive federal representative in Congress, and a defender of the military dictatorship – proved to be much stronger than initially expected. Conversely, the candidates of the traditional big bourgeois parties, such as the PSDB, showed weak numbers in the polls. To defeat the PT candidate Fernando Haddad – Lula da Silva had been arrested and prevented from running as a result of the lawfare that victimized him – the bourgeoisie then decided to embark on the risky political move of supporting Jair Bolsonaro. The “market,” as the reports in the mainstream press showed, endorsed the candidacy of the extreme right, even though the candidate was not under its control. Bolsonaro’s approval rates in the polls grew sharply and steadily as the income and formal education levels of the sample subjects increased. In the middle of 2018, mainly thanks to the support of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal Christian churches, he managed to obtain electoral support among the popular classes as well and won the October election.

During the PT administrations (2003–2016), Brazil was one of the countries included in the “pink wave” of reformist governments that took over South America in the 2000s and part of the 2010s—Argentina, with Nestor and Cristina Kirchner, both of the Peronist Justicialist Party; Uruguay, with Tabaré Vázquez and José Mujica, of the Broad Front; Paraguay, with Fernando Lugo; Bolivia, with Evo Morales, of the Movement for Socialism (MAS); Ecuador, with Rafael Correa, of the PAIS Alliance; and Venezuela, with Chaves and Maduro. Since 2012, with Fernando Lugo’s deposition, these governments have been thrown, one by one, into a crisis. It is inevitable to draw the connection between these political crises and the economic crisis of capitalism that began in 2008. Some of these governments were overthrown by coups d’état of a new type; others were defeated in the polls.

To understand Brazilian politics, there is something important the reader should know right from the start. Although the PT governments, as center-left governments, were included in the “pink wave” of South America, they presented a serious weakness when compared to their counterparts in the sub-continent. Brazil, like all other South American countries, is a presidential democracy. The PT’s government, due to the weakness of the parliamentary representation of the left and center-left, depended on conservative parties to build a precarious support base in the National Congress. Their support base both within the party and in Congress was fragile and unstable, severely hindering the progressive reach of their policies, thus facilitating the August 2016 coup d’état. Suffice it to remember that, in the Brazilian case, it was a party belonging to the government’s own allied base – in fact, its largest and most important party, since it even held the vice-presidency of the Republic – that coordinated, to the surprise of some, the fraudulent impeachment process against Dilma Rousseff. In Latin American countries whose left and center-left governments and parties hold the majority in the National Congress, the path of the coup d’état through impeachment is blocked. This is the case, for example, of Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia and Venezuela. These progressive governments had a parliamentary majority – or close to it – constituted by their own parties or, in the Uruguayan case, by an alliance of progressive parties. In fact, and contrary to the current perception that persists among Brazilian politicians and observers, the Brazilian left and center-left, including the PT, have a rather weak party organization when compared to their counterparts in the countries aforementioned. In addition, the Brazilian left and center-left have their eyes excessively focused on executive positions, and their candidates emphasize their own figure at the expense of the image of the party to

which they belong, thus demonstrating the powerful influence of the populist, presidentialist, authoritarian, tradition of Brazilian politics in the bosom of the country's left and center-left.

In the early 2020s, the left and center-left have already returned to power in Argentina and Bolivia and are about to do so in Ecuador. The Brazilian situation, as we have indicated, is quite different. A new 'pink wave' is taking shape in Latin America and Brazil, this time, may be left out.

II

This book is divided into two parts, both of which analyze, over twelve texts, the Brazilian politics of the recent period. In the first part, we analyze the governments headed by the Workers' Party (PT) between 2003 and 2016. They were governments that we call neodevelopmentalists, given that they sought to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty through state intervention in the economy, moving away from the neoliberal program and ideology of the so-called minimal state. These are the themes examined in this part: the social, economic, and foreign policies advanced by these administrations; the heterogeneous political forces that, as leading or subordinate forces, either backed the PT governments or challenged them; the clashing interests, ideologies, and political programs; the political phenomenon of "Lulism" – an expression derived from the name of former President Lula da Silva – and the insertion of different social movements, rooted in different popular segments, in the political process at the time.

In its second part, the book analyzes the various dimensions and consequences of the political crisis that resulted in the ousting of President Dilma Rousseff in August 2016 and, subsequently, the rise to power of the extreme right candidate Jair Bolsonaro in January 2019. We maintain that the dynamics of the crisis were determined, fundamentally, by the distributive conflict among classes and class fractions, and that it resulted, above all, from an offensive by the political camp that aspired to restore the neoliberal policy that had prevailed in Brazil in the 1990s. These are the topics examined in this part: the interests and objectives of the different political forces that mobilized to depose the Rousseff government; the destabilization of Brazilian democracy as a result of an impeachment process without a crime of responsibility that could justify it – a real coup d'état; the fragile resistance of the democratic and popular camp to this coup d'état; the institutional conflicts

and the politicization of the judiciary as an integral part of the political crisis; the abrupt change, immediately after the deposition of Dilma Rousseff, of the content of the social, economic, foreign, and environmental policies of the Brazilian state; and the circumstances that allowed the victory of candidate Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 presidential election. We seek to demonstrate, as we have already indicated, that the Bolsonaro government engenders the combination, never before witnessed in the Brazilian political history, of extreme neoliberalism and a new type of fascism.

III

The theoretical approach we have adopted, which is grounded on Marxist political theory, seeks to detect, on the one hand, the relations among the institutions, the political process, and the clash among parties and ideologies; and, on the other hand, the conflicts among the different classes and class fractions present in the economy and society. Some clarifications are in order here. First: I use the word *conflicts* and not class *struggle* because what we have in Brazil is a dispute over the distribution of the wealth produced and not over the organization – capitalist or socialist – of the economy and society. The class struggle itself, the one whose main goal is to overcome capitalism, does not exist in Brazil today. Second, it is true that distributive class conflicts are not the only conflicts that determine the conduction of Brazilian politics. The struggles of women, blacks, and the LGBT movements had a significant presence in political disputes during the PT governments, in the dynamics of the political crisis of 2015–2016, and, as we will see, even more so in the rise of Jair Bolsonaro to the Presidency of the Republic. What we understand, however, is that distributive class conflicts have occupied the main position throughout this period. Third: our theoretical approach, which consists of establishing the link of politics with the economy and society, differs from the hegemonic institutionalist approach in contemporary Political Science, given that the latter separates the action and the political institutions from society as a whole. Our analysis does not ignore the importance of the values and norms that govern the different political institutions, but it does not treat them the same way that Institutionalism does. To illustrate this, Chapters 8 and 9 of this book deal specifically with different institutions of the Brazilian state and consider, simultaneously, institutional determination and class determination in the action of the persons in these institutions.

Fourthly, it is worth clarifying that we conceive of the distributive conflicts among classes and class fractions not in a bipolar but in a multipolar way, and

that is precisely the reason why we refuse to operate with the simple conceptual opposition between capital and labor, or between bourgeoisie and working class. Capital, that is, the bourgeoisie, is not a homogeneous bloc without fissures, as we can ascertain from the classic Marxist texts since the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and from the theoretical developments carried out in this field by Nicos Poulantzas. As a rule, the bourgeoisie is divided – albeit in a flexible and, to some extent, unstable way – into fractions that can intervene, and did intervene in the case we analyzed, as autonomous social forces in the political process, that is, social forces endowed with a political program of their own. We had a fraction of the Brazilian bourgeoisie interested in the neodevelopmentalist policy of the PT governments, and another fraction that embraced the neoliberal policy. Another reason why we refuse the simple opposition capital/labor is that it dismisses the diversity that exists among the dominated classes, especially in an economy of dependent capitalism as the one we find in Brazil. Our approach aims precisely at contemplating this diversity: it analyzes the middle class and its different fractions, which actively, massively intervened in various political camps during the crisis of 2015–2016; it analyzes the position of the peasantry and its various layers, not least because each layer received a different treatment from the PT governments; it addresses the matter of the marginal mass of workers, who played a fundamental role as a support-class – politically disorganized, but electorally decisive – for the governments and candidates of the PT; and, of course, our approach also considers the working class in the strict sense – the manual wage workers – whose union movement was politically divided in the period in question.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that yet another reason why our analysis would not go very far if we were satisfied with the simple capital/labor opposition is that, during most of this period, it was not the conflict between the bourgeoisie and a unified bloc of the popular classes that was at the center of the political process. The popular movements were limited to a demanding and very segmented struggle, which is why they ended up accommodated in either of the two political camps into which the Brazilian bourgeoisie was divided: the neodevelopmentalist camp and the neoliberal camp. Consequently, the main contradiction around which the whole Brazilian political process revolved was that between the bourgeois fractions.

IV

The chapters that make up this book were written between 2007 and 2020. They are the result of the research I have been conducting on Brazilian politics. Throughout this period, and as my studies progressed, my analysis underwent some rectifications. However, the basic ideas with which I explained the success of the PT governments also proved to be very useful later on to explain why these governments plunged into crisis. My first chapters already made it very clear that the PT governments were facing powerful interests and, moreover, that the political front that supported these governments was riddled with internal contradictions that could become exacerbated, opening the gates to the advance of enemy forces as soon as the political climate looked propitious.

As it happens with collections, like the one I am publishing now, the reader will find some repetitive content in the chapters. I tried to reduce these repetitions, but to make each chapter of the book readable and understandable on its own, I could not avoid them entirely. This occurs mainly on the subject of the characterization of the bloc in power during the studied period. However, they are repetitions only in part. From one chapter to the next, some conclusions change and, even when I return to ideas from previous texts, I do it with a new formulation, seeking to improve the presentation and clarification of the theses.

Most of this book is the result of research that I carried out when coordinating a collective research project titled “Politics and Social Classes in Neoliberal Capitalism,” which was funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (Fapesp). Each researcher had a specific object to investigate within the general theme expressed in the project title. My task was to study the organization of the state power and the political process in Brazil in the period under consideration, in order to characterize the general political context of the other more specific topics of the research. Of the twelve texts gathered here, three were written in coauthorship with colleagues who worked with me – Alfredo Saad-Filho, Andréia Galvão, Paula Marcelino, and Tatiana Berringer. I thank them for allowing such texts to be published here. In addition to these colleagues, teachers and students from the University of Campinas (Unicamp), the University of São Paulo (USP), and São Paulo State University (Unesp) also took part in the project. In total, we were about 30 active researchers. I would like to thank all of them for the rich exchange of information and ideas they provided me. I would also like to thank the researchers at the Center for Marxist Studies (Cemarx) at Unicamp, where the project was based. Whether they participated or not in this project, they have shared the ambitious task of renewing Marxism and producing knowledge about Brazil.

It does not hurt to add: the theses and arguments presented here are my responsibility.

São Paulo, February 2021

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