

# Brazil's Cultural Battleground

## Public Universities and the New Right

by  
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*After assuming the presidency in January 2019, Bolsonaro used the machinery of government to wage culture warfare. Public universities, sites of cultivation of a new moral radicalism of the left over recent decades, became primary cultural battlegrounds. With its attacks on public universities (demonization, unconstitutional government interference, budget cuts, and political persecution), Bolsonaro's government nurtured the reactionary imagination of Brazil's new right and challenged the cultural hegemony of the left and thus undermined a biopolitical pact that once tied public universities to the defense of a right to life.*

*Depois de assumir a presidência em Janeiro 2019, Bolsonaro utilizou a máquina do governo para fazer uma guerra cultural. As universidades públicas, viveiros pela formação de um novo radicalismo moral da esquerda durante as últimas décadas, se converteram em importantes campos de batalha culturais nessa guerra. Com sua ofensiva contra as universidades públicas (demonização, interferência do governo inconstitucional, cortes orçamentais e perseguições políticas), o governo Bolsonaro fomentou um imaginário reacionário na direita brasileira que desafiou a hegemonia cultural da esquerda e, por conseguinte, minou um pacto biopolítico que anteriormente vinculava as universidades públicas à defesa do direito à vida.*

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The explosion of discontent across Brazilian cities in June 2013 and the right's subsequent conquest of the streets demonstrated that the country's progressive neoliberal settlement was not as consolidated as its champions had supposed. But no one expected Bolsonaro. And yet, once the unexpected transpires, hindsight transforms it into the inevitable through vindication of a historical rationality. What else was to be expected? For many of Bolsonaro's detractors, his presidency was the result of elite betrayal of Brazilian democracy. For his devotees—those who call him Mito (Myth)—it represented the hope of salvation from ethical and cultural degeneracy. As political intrigue plowed fertile ground for counterrevolution, Bolsonaro's presidential election

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campaign of 2018 polarized these moral postures, presenting conflict between them as not just inevitable but essential.

With Bolsonaro in power, Brazil provided a dramatic example of the popular authoritarianism that has reshaped the ideological landscape of liberal democracies.<sup>1</sup> Bolsonaro nurtured the reactionary imagination of a new authoritarian right, according to which “cultural Marxism” appears as an imported threat to an essential, conservative Brazilian character. Identifying those at the forefront of progressive politics today—black, indigenous, and landless activists, feminists, members of the LGBTQI+ community, those engaged in historical struggles for rights—as internal enemies, he provided license for violence against them.

Over the past two decades, public universities have provided spaces for the cultivation of a new moral radicalism of the left, contributing to a progressive cultural politics that has stretched the moral contours of Brazil’s conservative society (Arantes, 2021; 2022a; 2022b). Broadly celebrated by the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party—PT) during its time in government, between 2003 and 2016, this cultural politics was integrated into a social pact that promised freedom to consume for the poor and freedom to accumulate for the rich—a biopolitical pact to the extent that consumption enabled by targeted state assistance (that is, without fundamental challenges to neoliberal hegemony) was imagined as guaranteeing a humanitarian minimum of survival.

But behind the picture of class conciliation presented by the PT government, old authoritarian tendencies of the Brazilian state persisted. Initially accelerating the deindustrialization begun in the 1980s, the PT entrenched a neoextractivist model of development. It expanded Brazil’s “agricultural frontier,” offering lucrative contracts to private energy and construction firms and colluding in the violent displacement of vulnerable populations in the Amazon and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the long genocide of poor black Brazilians in metropolitan peripheries continued unabated, as the militarized “pacification” of favelas caused thousands of civilian deaths. As Giorgio Agamben (1998: 71–72) has argued, the biopolitical rationality that affirms a right to life also makes life more vulnerable. The preservation of certain lives comes to depend on the disposability of others. In Brazil, race plays a particularly important role, alongside class, in determining this distinction. As a biopolitical pact was consolidated under PT rule, Brazil’s black proletariat remained subject to a necropolitics that has now been generalized under Bolsonaro.

During the years of PT government, affirmative action and freedom of cultural expression, complements to assistentialism, became bound up in the defense of a right to life. The PT viewed public universities as important sites for their promotion. But as the new right grew between the presidential elections of 2014 and 2018, providing a political base for Bolsonarismo—the movement ideologically committed to supporting Bolsonaro—it singled out the public university as a symbol of the left’s corruption of Brazilian society. For Bolsonaro, attacks on the public university would become functional to a rupture with Brazil’s biopolitical pact.<sup>2</sup>

The new right has positioned itself in opposition to established knowledge and science, which it associates with the cultural hegemony of the left. All scientific research carried out by public universities thus becomes subject to

sweeping epistemological contestation. And as the negation of science enables deforestation, the deregulation of toxic pesticides, and the promotion of unproven treatment for COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes convenient to the interests of economic elites on whom Bolsonaro's government is politically dependent.

## BRAZIL'S CULTURE WAR

The notion that society is trapped in a culture war has become a commonplace of Brazilian political commentary over the past few years. Brazilian progressives have generally viewed cultural antagonism as reflecting a substantively new configuration of politics, which, taking form in the Anglosphere and then spreading across capitalist democracies, arrived belatedly in Brazil in the aftermath of the 2013 mass protests.<sup>3</sup> The impression, then, is that cultural warfare has been visited upon Brazil and promoted by capital to fracture the erstwhile consensus on consumerist inclusion. While a departure from Bolsonaro's Manicheism, this outlook nonetheless presupposes political polarization. But, in contemporary Brazil, as Rodrigo Nunes (2020a) has argued, polarization is asymmetric or, rather, polarization of cultural preferences does not map onto polarization of ideological propositions.<sup>4</sup> Radically opposite moral projects now emanate from the far right, on the one hand, and an inflated political center, on the other. The suggestion of polarization thus tends to obscure the relationship between the moderation of the left and the eruption of cultural war.

When the PT came to power, in 2003, under the leadership of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, it sought to expand economic and social opportunities for the historically marginalized. The cost of efforts to universalize the right to life was then suppression of political challenges to capital. His government consolidated social protection, raised the minimum wage, and broadened access to higher education, while attracting financial speculators with world-beating real interest rates and launching national agribusiness and mining companies into the global commodities festival. Bank profits increased eightfold under Lula's government (*Veja*, 2014); poverty was reduced by more than 50 percent (*O Globo*, May 3, 2011).

Cultural change within public institutions became important to the PT's project of inclusion. Although certain institutions remained beholden to a conservative oligarchy—most obviously, those of the judiciary—a progressive, neomanagerial ethos became hegemonic in those most directly involved in the reproduction of mores—those responsible for arts and culture, education, media, and human rights, for example. Universities, in particular, became vehicles for the expansion of a public sphere presumed to protect the right to life. Changes in the racial and class composition of university graduates—accelerated after Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, expanded affirmative action, in 2012—contributed to the growth of the professional class, albeit without commensurate upgrading in the labor market.

Gramscian ideas gained influence within the PT in the 1980s. At its Fifth National Assembly, in 1987, the party recognized the centrality of electoral

politics in the pursuit of hegemony; it accepted the possibility of transforming civil society through legislative and institutional reform (Secco, 2003). Once in government, the PT was able to consummate the new cultural hegemony of the left, partly through its concessions to neoliberal political economy. After two terms, Lula's approval by 87 percent of Brazilians seemed to represent not only vindication for the moral ideal of inclusion but also near-realization of this ideal. But, as Francisco de Oliveira (2006: 22) argued, the PT had achieved "hegemony in reverse": the dominant had ostensibly accepted the morality of the dominated, on condition that the form of capitalist relations not be questioned.

After the 2013 uprisings, in the run-up to the 2014 presidential election, as the right, cheered on by the news media, took to the streets, a principal charge leveled against the PT government was that it had "rigged" the state in its favor: Public bureaucracies had been filled with left-wing ideologues, who had built up a clientelistic network around the party, profiting from corruption and preventing a democratic alternation of power. New reactionary groups, such as Movimento Brasil Livre (Free Brazil Movement) and Vem Pra Rua (Come to the Streets), then popularized the notion that the left's penetration of public institutions was part of a Gramscian strategy. Although there was an element of truth in this, the suggestion that the success of this strategy had taken Brazil to the brink of a communist takeover was indicative of a conspiratorialism that would be used to radicalize the right-wing protest movement. The primary intellectual influence on these groups was Olavo de Carvalho, who for a couple of decades had been penning diatribes against the propagation of left-wing ideas by figures from across the political establishment. In 1994, he wrote of Gramsci as "a prophet of imbecility" and "a character who has never been to Brazil, who died half a century ago, and who secretly directs events in this part of the world" (Carvalho, 2014: 55). Carvalho, who died in 2022, saw as a serious threat the infiltration of institutions by what he referred to as a "Gramscian mafia" (1999). The Gramscian cultural revolution, he asserted, was more subtle and more effective than Leninist vanguardism: "It infiltrates imperceptibly and leads to the psychological domination of the multitudes" (2014: 57).

In 1986, members of the armed forces initiated Project Orvil (*livro* [book] spelled backwards), a secretive endeavor aimed at countering critical accounts of the military regime. The book they produced—now accessible online in its 966-page entirety—organizes Brazil's political history since 1922 according to four phases of communist strategy. In the last of these, beginning after the suppression of armed struggle in 1974, communists infiltrate institutions to bring about a cultural transformation that will enable them to gain power without the need for violent revolution. As João Cezar de Castro Rocha (2020) points out, if communism is presented as an ideology alien and inimical to national culture, then it must be combated as a matter of national security. Any Brazilian deemed sympathetic to communist transformation then becomes an internal enemy.

Jair Bolsonaro explicitly subscribes to this logic, and so do many of the military figures who occupied key posts in his government—not least the retired generals who feel betrayed by the democratic concessions of the later military governments and slighted by the 2012 National Truth Commission. According

to Rocha, the narrative of Orvil, the logic of national security, and their contemporary dissemination through the fanaticism of Olavo de Carvalho and his disciples configure Brazil's contemporary culture war.

The accusation that the left has used politics to impose a transgressive culture (feminism, antiracism, LGBTQI+ and indigenous rights) on Brazilian society became decisive during the 2018 election. Playing to political disaffection and creeping religious moralism, the PT's opponents had connected a decline in living standards to the corruption of what they had imagined to be essential Brazilian values. Bolsonaro's candidacy then emerged as a mimetic response to those who, without expectation of social transformation, sought affirmation of what it meant to be Brazilian—what it meant to be a “good citizen.” The normalization of his nihilistic will to extreme violence seemed to confirm that Brazil and politics as such had parted ways. And yet, Bolsonaro's unequivocal threat to a right to life somehow represented a radicalization of the logic through which life had been progressively politicized. Bolsonaro secured the support of capital through an opportunistic neoliberal turn, but it was cultural warfare that won him the election. And he then relied on cultural warfare to consolidate his social base. Continuing to demonize the Gramscian left, his allies in Congress and online themselves would speak of the necessity of waging a “war of position.”

### **“CULTURAL MARXISM”: ARCHENEMY OF BOLSONARISMO**

While Bolsonaristas regard “Gramscianism” as a method of political subversion, they regard “cultural Marxism” as the ideology being spread by the left. In a 1999 essay denouncing cultural Marxism, the retired U.S. Navy commander Gerald L. Atkinson argued that, although the Cold War had ended abroad, young middle-class students had “converted the economic theory of Marx to culture in American society,” promoting radical feminism, “so-called civil rights,” and other countercultural agendas. These “draft-dodging, pot-smoking hippies” had drawn inspiration from the Frankfurt School, as well as Gramsci. Notwithstanding Atkinson's garbled synthesis of this intellectual history, his essay is of note on account of its publication in a series of essays on cultural Marxism by military personnel—and on account of its connection of themes that would become central to the discourse of the alt-right. The pursuit of cultural hegemony through the infiltration of institutions, he argued, was a “quiet revolution” whose ultimate goal was the destruction of “American civilization”—“the most vital and precious descendant of Western civilization.” Atkinson's immediate concern was the influence of cultural Marxists on education, specifically in military academies.

Atkinson did not coin the term “cultural Marxism,” but he was among the first to deploy it as invective.<sup>5</sup> He followed the paleoconservative commentator William S. Lind (1997; 2004) in equating cultural Marxism with political correctness. Both picked up on the role of postwar counterculture and the new left in reshaping the moral contours of American society. But they failed to recognize that the postmodern demand for recognition of subjective experience had emerged from an immanent critique of orthodox Marxism. They instead

imagined that the use of a new moral technology to silence conservatives had been determined by a coordinated revision of revolutionary strategy.<sup>6</sup>

The critique of cultural Marxism was popularized and radicalized through the Tea Party and, more recently, the alt-right. Conservative movements themselves have thus assumed an increasingly revolutionary character in relation to the stasis of progressives. Recognizing them as a viable electoral base, Trump pointed to cultural Marxism, in its putative international manifestation—"globalism"—as the cause of America's civilizational malaise.<sup>7</sup> And yet, to the extent that globalism can be considered to exist, it is surely a predominantly American invention. Indeed, as ethno-nationalists outside the United States have denounced globalism, they have replicated, *mutatis mutandis*, an American critique of American universalism.

Olavo de Carvalho, who took up residency in the United States in 2005 and accompanied the rise of these conservative movements, was most prolific in adapting the critique of cultural Marxism and globalism to the Brazilian context. But, as with many of Brazil's cultural imports from the United States, this critique has been adapted as burlesque. Its conspiratorialist character is performatively exaggerated in the manner of an outsider seeking authoritative recognition. Vulgar and obscure conspiracy theories from the past are revived to implicate cultural Marxists in the production of threats that are more pervasive, more imminent, and more dangerous. Carvalho claimed that Pepsi used aborted human fetuses to sweeten its cola and that Theodor Adorno composed songs for the Beatles.

Haunted by the specter of cultural Marxism in recent years, segments of Brazil's new right have often invoked a transcendental logic. The growth of fundamentalism across the country—most obviously in the form of socially conservative evangelicalism but also in the form of dogmatic commitment to neoliberal reason—has surely contributed to this. It is fitting that those who adhere to a closed belief system that can sustain the gratuitous contortion of facts should anoint as their leader someone they refer to as Mito.

Bolsonarismo is not exactly an anti-intellectual movement. Indeed, the performance of erudition has been crucial in building support for its historical revisionism—on the military dictatorship, on Nazism, etc. Rather, it has positioned itself in opposition to established knowledge, scientific expertise, and liberal truths as products of left-wing cultural hegemony. Its belief system is then imagined as producing authentic knowledge, accessible to outsiders to elite education and mainstream media. While Bolsonaro's opposition to scientific evidence, on COVID-19 or climate change, is a gesture to certain economic elites, it is primarily aimed at reinforcing the belief system of his movement. Since he relies politically on cultural warfare—on government by symbols—this opposition must be progressively radicalized.

It is unsurprising, then, that education has become the primary battleground in Brazil's culture war. Early critiques of cultural Marxism in the United States bemoaned indoctrination in universities, and, across the Western world, universities have become sites of dispute over free speech and the soul of liberalism. For Bolsonaro, dismantling public universities, considered long-standing strongholds of the left, was instrumental to the maintenance of political power and denial of the right to life.



## THE ATTACK ON THE HUMANITIES AND PAULO FREIRE

From 2005 on, increase in the number of public universities and campuses expanded the academic job market and improved access to higher education in the frontier zones of Brazilian capitalism—in the semiarid hinterlands, in the Amazon region, on the periphery of major cities (Marques and Cêpeda, 2012; Vinhais, 2013). University campuses themselves became more plural environments, as affirmative action addressed the historical underrepresentation of black, low-income, indigenous, and disabled students (Passos, 2015; Fonaprace, 2019). New and redesigned humanities courses challenged existing research methods and agendas, focusing particularly on race, gender, sexual orientation, violence, and dispossession; engagement with decolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer theories shifted attention to epistemology. At the same time, these courses drew on Brazil's Marxist tradition, rooted in the 1950s, to question the country's incorporation into the financialized world economy.

No longer the preserve of the white cosmopolitan middle class, humanities faculties became sites of cultivation of a new multiethnic intellectuality that would radicalize the cultural politics of the Brazilian left, breaking free of the well-behaved consensualism of the PT. Once again, they became targets of right-wing vitriol, with cultural warriors of the new right, as well as military hard-liners, singling them out as centers for the dissemination of cultural Marxism. Following Bolsonaro's election, the humanities became the focus of government attempts to undermine the financial stability and moral integrity of public universities. Cuts in government funding for research and postgraduate scholarships have disproportionately affected the humanities.<sup>8</sup>

Incorporated into the new right's moral critique of the humanities is a suggestion that they are not just unproductive but counterproductive to the expansion of business and entrepreneurial culture. Bolsonaro's government favors a model of financing for higher education that would withdraw all public funding from the humanities. During a protest against the Supreme Court in June 2020, Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub said, "As a Brazilian, I don't want more sociologists, I don't want more anthropologists, I don't want more philosophers" (*O Estado de São Paulo*, April 30, 2019; and see political cartoon at <https://www.diariodocentrodomundo.com.br/ministerio-da-educacao-de-bolsonaro-por-clayton/>). He had questioned the utility of the humanities since his inauguration as minister, in April 2019. "Rather than Northeastern universities doing sociology, doing philosophy in the hinterlands," he affirmed at that moment, "[they should] do agronomy" (quoted in Souza, 2019).

The Northeast is one of the most culturally diverse regions of Brazil. And, with the lowest human development index value, it is also one of the poorest, mainly on account of the oligarchic concentration of land and power, uneven development, and drought.<sup>9</sup> For the very reason that it exists on the margins of Brazil's fitful process of modernization, it has been a cradle of popular culture and critical thought. It has also historically voted for left-wing politicians, and it is the epicenter of political resistance to Bolsonarismo. In the second round of the 2018 presidential election, Bolsonaro lost in all the Northeastern states, and in 2022 he lost in all by an even greater margin.

It is no coincidence that the figure most hated by Brazil's new right is an educator and philosopher from the Northeast: Paulo Freire (1921–1997), perhaps Brazil's most influential intellectual export.<sup>10</sup> As it took form on the streets, the new right marched under banners demonizing Paulo Freire. One of the most common read: "Enough of Marxist indoctrination! Enough of Paulo Freire!" The founder of *Escola Sem Partido* (School without Political Party)—a campaign of the new right to call out "ideological bias" in the classroom—has argued that Freire's teachings are antithetical to the Brazilian constitution. Bolsonaro has called the educator an "energumen" and an "idol of the left" (Mazul, 2019). Weintraub tried to remove a bust of Freire from the main entrance of the Ministry of Education. A congresswoman allied with the government introduced a bill to depose Freire as patron of Brazilian education.

Freire was already identified as a threat during the dictatorship. On October 18, 1964, a few days after he was forced into exile, he was accused by a military inquiry of being "one of the people most responsible for subverting the less fortunate . . . a crypto-communist in the form of a literacy teacher."<sup>11</sup> For the new right, Paulo Freire has become symbolic of a three-tiered threat to Brazilian society: cultural Marxism, paving the way for an ascent of the masses and then for communism. His connection to liberation theology is taken as proof of his perversion of traditional morality. Eduardo Bolsonaro, a congressman and son of the president, has referred to him as the "Brazilian version of Antonio Gramsci."

But do humanities scholars, armed with the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, pose a sufficient threat to the political project of the new right to warrant their nomination as primary targets of cultural warfare? To be sure, their very existence challenges the new right's own designs on cultural hegemony and, by extension, the promotion of its political and economic reason. Despite a generalized commodification of expertise over recent decades, the humanities lend themselves less readily to the logic of market expansion. Indeed, predominantly progressive, humanities scholars in Brazil's public universities have tended to defend a conception of knowledge as a public good in itself, and therefore they have defended the autonomy of universities and freedom of thought. In the name of life and citizenship, they have often opposed the state and parastate violence, environmental depredation, precarization of labor, and religious intolerance promoted by Bolsonaro, and they have collaborated with the social movements, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral institutions he seeks to criminalize. Most notably, perhaps, the humanities provide methods for critically engaging with the world—with historical processes, with human imagination, with facts. As humanities faculties produce teachers, artists, journalists, politicians, and activists, it is not only the spread of a particular progressive morality that threatens Brazil's new right but also the possibility of critique, which undermines authoritarian impositions and distortions.

### BEDLAM! MORAL CONDEMNATION AND DECLINISM

Weintraub's predecessor, Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez, had been appointed as Bolsonaro's first minister of education on the recommendation of Olavo de Carvalho. A former professor at one of Brazil's main military academies and a



long-standing opponent of progressive morality—in an interview in 2004 he criticized “the politically correct globalism that put forward the crazy proposal of ‘gender education’” (Faermann, 2018)—he had taken office vowing to combat cultural Marxism.<sup>12</sup> But he had been dismissed three months later, purportedly because he lacked managerial experience.

Weintraub—a banking executive with limited academic credentials—would more clearly articulate the economic justification for culture warfare in the vernacular of neoliberal management. His first notable intervention following his inauguration was the announcement of budget cuts for federal universities causing “bedlam” (*balbúrdia*), “messing around, holding ridiculous events, with landless activists on campus, people naked on campus” (*O Estado de São Paulo*, April 30, 2019; and see screen capture from YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7C\\_qJnd5fT8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7C_qJnd5fT8)). His criteria were questioned by the provosts and academic communities of the first three universities to face cuts. All three had exemplary performance indicators and had recently climbed the university rankings but had 20 percent of their discretionary budgets summarily blocked (Agostini, 2019). Over the following days, funding was suspended for all 68 federal universities. Universities would be granted full access to their budgets only after two major nationwide protests in defense of public education, in May and August 2019.

Among other unsubstantiated accusations against universities, Weintraub later suggested that they were cultivating “vast marijuana plantations” and using chemistry laboratories to produce “synthetic drugs and methamphetamines” (quoted in Bermúdez, 2019). In response, the União Nacional dos Estudantes (National Union of Students—UNE) filed a civil suit for defamation against the minister, who was ordered to pay R\$50,000 to a federal fund. Weintraub was eventually forced out of the ministry after the publication of a recording of a ministerial meeting in which he recommended arresting members of the Supreme Court. He flew to the United States, apparently to escape investigation, and took up the post of regional director at the World Bank.

Over the coming days, two people were put forward to replace Weintraub and then discarded, one after being officially named minister. Neither was a cultural warrior, as Weintraub and Vélez Rodríguez had been, and the debacle exposed a struggle for control of the ministry between factions within the government. One of the two, Carlos Decotelli, a professor at the Naval Academy, had been put forward by senior military figures.<sup>13</sup> His nomination seemed indicative of the political ascendancy of the military. However, news networks were soon tipped off about inaccuracies in Decotelli’s CV. It turned out that he had falsely claimed to have completed doctoral and postdoctoral studies. Two days after his nomination, he resigned, and the military lost an opportunity to capture the Ministry of Education.<sup>14</sup>

The installation as minister of Milton Ribeiro, a Protestant pastor, confirmed that, for now, education would remain a cultural battleground. During a sermon in 2018, Ribeiro had condemned public universities for encouraging “sexual practices totally without limits.” “It doesn’t matter,” he had explained, “whether it is a man or a woman, this one or that one, old or young, what matters is the moment. . . . This is what they are teaching our children in universities” (UOL, 2020b). The new minister also attacked Freire: “I had the patience

to read his most famous text, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I challenge a scholar to explain where he wants to go with his metaphors. He transplants values of Marxism and tries to instill them in teaching and pedagogy" (*Gazeta do Povo*, October 4, 2020).

In 2021, Ribeiro attempted to intervene in the national examination for access to superior education. Three years earlier Bolsonaro had criticized the inclusion of a question regarding homosexuality and transsexuality, and he had then continuously demanded that the exam reflect the moral values of his government. When Ribeiro eventually authorized the federal police to monitor the development of the exam, 37 senior members of the body responsible for administering the exam renounced their roles, claiming that they had been subject to harassment. One of them denounced the censorship of more than 20 questions by the body's president on behalf of the government. He noted that there had been particular interference with questions relating to Brazilian history over the past 50 years, covering the period of military dictatorship (SoU\_Ciência, 2021).

During the ministerial meeting that led to Weintraub's demise, he had digressed toward another gripe of the new right. "I hate the term 'indigenous people,'" he railed; "I hate the 'gypsy people.' There is only one people in this country—the Brazilian people. . . . [Let's] end this affair of different peoples and their privileges" (Simon, 2020). Weintraub's aggressive opposition to multiculturalism is characteristic of a resurgent white nationalist discourse that attributes progress to the same rulers who upheld the legality of slavery longer than any country on earth. His last act before leaving the ministry was to suspend the postgraduate quota policy in federal universities.

Quotas for undergraduate courses, written into law in 2012, radically changed the profile of students at the most prestigious public universities. According to the *Forúm Nacional de Pró-Reitores de Assuntos Comunitários e Estudantis* (Brazilian National Forum of Vice Provosts for Community and Student Affairs), quotas increased the proportion of black and indigenous students in undergraduate cohorts from 36.2 percent in 2003 to 53.5 percent in 2018 (Fonaprace, 2019). They also notably improved access for students from low and lower-middle income families, who constituted 42.8 percent of the undergraduate student body in 2003 and 70.1 percent in 2018 (Arantes, 2021).

Cultural polarization cannot be neatly explained according to class distinctions, but class interests nonetheless underlie and shape the discursive struggles of the culture war. That, for the first time, affluent whites might be displaced from the intellectual vanguard of Brazilian society surely provokes their collective anxiety—if not resentment. Indeed, such sentiments are manifest in declinist narratives reproduced by the new right, according to which Brazil's public universities have fallen into decay. In fact, Brazil ranks twelfth in the world in terms of academic research and had the fifth-highest average research growth rate between 2008 and 2018.<sup>15</sup> According to the 2020 *Times Higher Education Ranking for Latin America*, 16 of the region's top 25 universities are Brazilian, and 14 of those are public. The ideology of declinists is exposed by their frequent assertion that Brazil's public universities have been overtaken by private universities. Bolsonaro himself has claimed that "few [Brazilian] universities have research, and, of those few, the majority are in the private sector" (Moura, 2019). But, according to the Brazilian Academy of Science, 95 percent of research

in Brazil is produced by public universities (Moura, 2019), and of the country's top 20 universities in terms of research and quality of teaching 18 are public (*Times*, 2020).

## THE ATTACK ON UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY

During the week before Bolsonaro was elected president, in October 2018, more than two dozen universities were targeted by police operations purportedly aimed at preventing the dissemination of electoral propaganda by public institutions. In a telling demonstration of the political allegiance of Brazil's military police and of the electoral judges who authorized the operations, manifestations in defense of democracy were deemed favorable to Bolsonaro's opponent, the PT's Fernando Haddad, who was minister of education under Lula. Evoking memories of censorship and political persecution during the military dictatorship, police tore down banners, interrupted classes, public debates, and protests, collected statements and personal information without warrants, and even detained students and teachers (Saldaña, 2018). Two days before the election, Supreme Court Justice Carmen Lúcia signed a precautionary measure preventing police interventions on university campuses. A few weeks later, the Supreme Court reiterated the constitutional principle of university autonomy and restricted the activity of state security forces in all public universities.

Faced with this obstacle to direct repression, Bolsonaro undermined the autonomy of public universities by interfering in their nomination of rectors<sup>16</sup> and in their democratic management procedures (established in accordance with Article 206 of the Brazilian constitution). Although Brazilian law grants the president the right to appoint rectors, it is conventional for the president to accept the nominations of university councils based on consultation with their academic communities. During his first two years in power, Bolsonaro appointed 14 rectors not nominated by universities, opting for candidates aligned with the ideology of his government. He also placed five universities under temporary external management in cases in which nomination processes were questioned.

In the hope of overriding the protocol for nominating rectors, Bolsonaro enacted two "provisional measures" (emergency measures that do not require congressional approval). The first remained in force for the maximum period of four months, allowing the government to nominate rectors without regard for the lists presented by university councils, and was rejected by Congress at the end of this period. A few weeks later, the government passed another, granting the Ministry of Education the power to name temporary rectors where the standard nomination process had been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. After only 48 hours, Davi Alcolumbre, president of the Senate at the time and occasional ally of Bolsonaro, took the unusual step of suspending the measure, arguing that it represented an attack on the autonomy and democratic management of universities (UOL, 2020a). In October 2020, the Supreme Court began an inquiry into the legality of Bolsonaro's disregard for the nomination of rectors by university communities.

Under Bolsonaro, the federal government also notably increased surveillance of public sector workers, from police officials to academics. The Secretariat for Integrated Police Operations, established ostensibly to coordinate national police investigations, focused on monitoring members of “antifascist movements” (Valente, 2020). The government held dossiers on the political activity of more than 1,000 public sector workers, which it shared with military intelligence agencies. There were already loopholes in Brazilian antiterror law that could be used to justify political repression as a preventive measure. University teachers were victims of political persecution, outsourced to new-right activist groups, or dressed up as investigators of criminal misconduct.

University managers were subject to legal investigations that adopt the methods of Operation Car Wash—a highly politicized investigation into corruption involving the national oil company, Petrobras, and politicians from Brazil’s largest parties. The aggressive condemnation-by-media characteristic of Operation Car Wash was used to undermine university management in the tragic and emblematic case against Luiz Carlos Cancellier, the rector of the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Cancellier was arrested in 2017, accused of involvement in the illegal diversion of university funds. He was placed in preventive detention, despite there being no evidence that he was attempting to impede investigations. Freed a few days later, he was then prohibited from entering the university without police escort. Humiliated and demoralized, he committed suicide. “My death was decreed when I was banned from the university,” he wrote in his suicide note (Charleaux, 2018).

Despite the shock caused by Cancellier’s death and despite the absence of incriminating evidence against him, those involved in the investigation against the university showed no sign of remorse.<sup>17</sup> Erika Marena, the police chief leading the investigation and a former member of the Operation Car Wash prosecuting task force, was subsequently promoted to a role advising Bolsonaro’s justice minister, Sérgio Moro (who had been the leading judge in Operation Car Wash and had controversially sentenced Lula to prison, preventing him from running for president in 2018). Staff at Cancellier’s university who questioned the conduct of investigators were threatened with defamation charges. A few months after Cancellier’s death, the federal police broke with due process once again, this time targeting the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, the country’s highest-ranking federal university. University vice provosts and a former rector were preventively detained without any indication that there was proof against them (Rodrigues, 2017).

In the first month of the Bolsonaro government, Sérgio Moro and Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez, then minister of education, signed an order for an inquest into institutions of higher education. Bolsonaro referred to it as the “Car Wash for Education.” However, it was later discreetly abandoned, and it disappeared from the news media. It had been intended as an investigation not only into public universities but also into public subsidies for private universities—“undue favors, embezzlement, the illegal granting of scholarships” (Gomes, 2019). The day after the investigation was announced, shares in private education dropped 7 percent, provoking a dip on the Brazilian stock exchange. Weintraub later claimed that announcement of the investigation would have

“alerted education companies and their managers, who could have rushed to destroy any evidence” (Formenti, 2019).

The private education lobby had been responsible for the stillbirth of the Car Wash for Education. Elizabeth Guedes, president of the Associação Brasileira de Mantenedoras de Ensino Superior (Brazilian Association for Private Universities) and sister of Bolsonaro’s powerful minister of the economy, Paulo Guedes, had acted against it. Guedes is himself an investor in private distance learning, and he has been the central figure in determining cuts to federal university budgets that create opportunities for the expansion of private higher education (Console, 2019). He is also being investigated by the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the federal police on the charge that he defrauded state pension funds to favor his own companies, among them the investment fund BR Educacional (*Forúm*, 2020).

Although the inquest into higher education was scrapped, public universities remained subject to monitoring by the Federal Court of Accounts (Tribunal de Contas da União). Heightened scrutiny of university management in 2022 produced no evidence of the misuse of public funding. However, in March Ribeiro was revealed to have authorized a kickback scheme involving evangelical pastors, who were granted privileged access to negotiations of the allocation of funds through municipal governments (BBC Brasil, 2022; and see political cartoon at <https://acasadevidro.com/bolsofascistas-no-poder/>). The scandal forced Bolsonaro to exonerate Ribeiro, who was subsequently imprisoned.

## CUTTING THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

In 2016, Dilma Rousseff’s political opponents used accounting irregularities as a dubious but viable pretext to impeach her. Soon afterwards, the government of Michel Temer passed a constitutional amendment that placed a 20-year freeze on public spending except for inflation adjustments. Investment in education and health had steadily increased during Lula’s two terms in office and Dilma’s first. But it had stagnated in 2014, as the Brazilian economy entered an economic recession from which it has not since recovered—partly on account of the constitutional restriction on the use of government spending to stimulate aggregate demand.

Between 2014 and 2021, government funding for the maintenance of all 68 federal universities (excluding staff salaries) decreased by 73 percent, from R\$10.2 billion to R\$3.7 billion (according to the SoU\_Ciência HE Public Budget Data Board; see Figure 1). The provision of basic services on campus, such as cleaning and security, has decreased, and low-paid service workers on precarious contracts have been dismissed. The investment budget of universities fell from R\$3.16 billion to R\$35 million. University buildings have fallen into disrepair and planned construction work has been suspended. Over the same period, there was a 59 percent drop in government expenditure on research and postgraduate programs, grants, and scholarships. The Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development—CNPq) and the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento



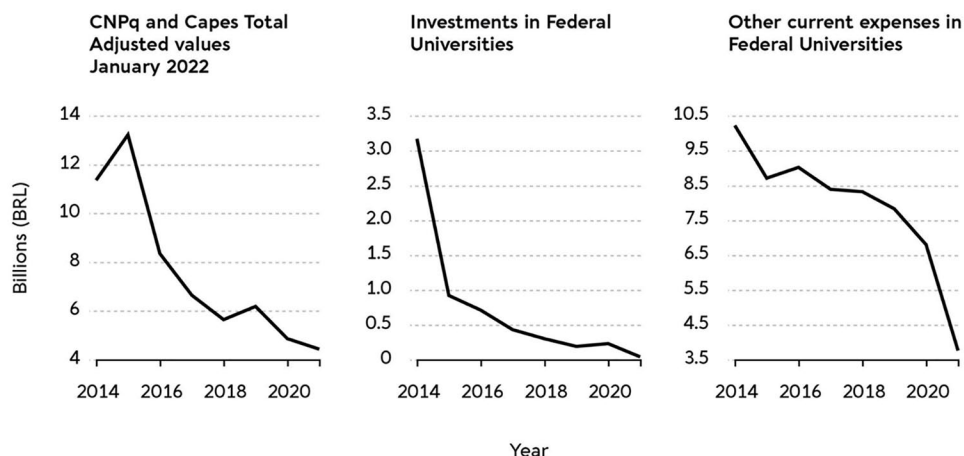


Figure 1. The decline in research funds and graduate scholarships by CNPq and CAPES (left), in investment (buildings, equipment and libraries) (middle), and in the maintenance budgets of federal public universities (right), in billions of reais, adjusted annually according to the IPCA, 2014–2021 (data from the National Treasury treated by Sou\_Ciência Research Center).

de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education—CAPES) have had 61 percent of their funding cut since 2014.

Previously presented as an unfortunate necessity of economic management, cuts to public universities were presented by the Bolsonaro government with Panglossian enthusiasm. For Guedes, a protégé of Chile’s “Chicago Boys,” minimization of state expenditure is an ideological preference. While promoting reductions in university budgets and personnel, he called for the introduction of tuition fees, private financing of university programs, and competitive bidding for the provision of all nonacademic services within universities.<sup>18</sup> This is in keeping with World Bank recommendations set out in *A Fair Adjustment* (2017), according to which universities should follow the model of private financing in place in the United States since the late 1970s.

In May 2019, Weintraub announced a 30 percent cut in the discretionary budgets of federal universities. In the following days, the shares of Brazil’s six largest private higher education companies registered an increase, while the Bovespa (São Paulo’s stock market) was in decline. A week later demonstrations against the Bolsonaro governments in several cities drew more than 1 million. In July, Weintraub launched Future-se, a program that promised to “strengthen the financial autonomy of universities.” “Financial autonomy,” here, entailed a responsibility to raise funds independently, which implied a significant reduction in the academic autonomy of public universities. The program would have transformed them into sites of entrepreneurial activity and business consultancy, where research would be produced to meet the demands of the private sector. Universities would be free to treat campuses as real estate and issue securities in financial markets. The program would create barriers to tenure for university teachers, who would preferably be hired by private foundations and companies, through short-term contracts (Leher et al., 2020).

Bolsonaro’s government also promoted distance learning as a means of cutting costs and expanding the profits of the private sector. Private higher

education institutions had already been transitioning to a business model that prioritized virtual education—a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance learning reduces expenditure on infrastructure and personnel; it encourages the organization of teaching into distinct products, accessible to students at their own convenience; lessons and learning materials can therefore be competitively bid, and permanent teaching staff become disposable (Sousa, 2019). In December 2019, Bolsonaro's government raised the limit for online components in on-campus courses from 20 percent to 40 percent.

That same month, federal universities and institutes, student unions, and social movements in São Paulo launched a manifesto entitled "Toward Another Future," challenging the government's plans for public education (Sudré, 2019). Those who blazed a trail into public universities for historically excluded groups have been called upon to defend the space they have come to occupy. Unions, scientific research associations, professional colleges, and civic movements also have an important role to play in mobilizing society in defense of public education, highlighting its relevance to the development of a more just and democratic society.

### CONCLUSION: DEFENDING PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES, RESISTING ANNIHILATION

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the frailty of the biopolitical pact through which liberal-democratic states have restricted political subjectivities with the promise of life. In Brazil, where the reproduction of "unpolitical" populations extends the legacies of slavery and colonial expropriation, the state has always treated a great many lives as disposable, even when this injustice is drowned out by celebration of the social diffusion of consumer power. Under the PT, public universities became spaces of social and cultural innovation that challenged the historical discrimination through which such injustice is rationalized (Arantes, 2021).

Sustained by a paroxysmal politics of annihilation, Bolsonaro found in the COVID-19 pandemic an opportunity to contest epistemological order and hasten a rupture with Brazil's fragile biopolitical pact. This rupture implies a disappearance of universities from the public sphere—the transformation of higher education into a private consumer good and its disconnection from social and civic goods that might protect a right to life. But that this was in the interests of certain segments of capital was of concern to Bolsonaro only because maintenance of their support was politically expedient.

Political power (along with the material benefits and legal protection this provides him and his family) was Bolsonaro's primary concern when inciting cultural warfare. And he responded to political challenges by intensifying his assault on public universities. In August 2020, as Brazil's official death toll from COVID-19 surpassed 100,000, the government informed rectors of federal universities that, in 2021, there would be a further cut of 18.2 percent in their unrestricted budgets, which are used to cover operating costs (Amaral, 2020). In October 2022, as Bolsonaro trailed Lula in the presidential race, he once again blocked university maintenance budgets, even withdrawing funds from

federal university accounts, but the public universities' decisive response to the prospect of their collapse has demonstrated a capacity to resist.

Rather than readily accepting a transition from face-to-face undergraduate education to distance learning, public universities have increased the provision of open and extracurricular courses. They have reached beyond the academic community, organizing online debates and establishing solidarity networks that provide health care, including psychological support. Thus the continuation of many university activities, even at the height of the pandemic, contributed to the development of an open university model.

Public universities played an important role in disseminating scientifically grounded information on the epidemiology of COVID-19. Within three months of the virus's reaching Brazil, federal universities launched 1,200 research projects focused on prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, on hospital management, and on the implications for education, work, and income. They were also involved in the development of vaccines, many in partnership with scientific communities abroad.<sup>19</sup> Public university laboratories have been adapted to increase the production of ventilators, personal protective equipment, and basic medication. And, for the first time, all of the country's university hospitals have come together to establish a collective procurement system.

After Bolsonaro's defeat by Lula in the presidential election of October 2022, there exists an opportunity for government to reinforce the resistance of public universities to the predation of capital. But Lula, for whom conciliation is an ideal rather than a tactic, faces numerous challenges to changing the course of government policy. He will seek to satisfy the diverse demands of the very broad political coalition that accompanied him on his path to electoral victory. He will need to manage the expectations of a divided society, vulnerable to the manipulations of Bolsonaro's base, which refuses to accept defeat and will continue to petition for a military coup. And he will need to redress the devastation of state institutions—in particular those responsible for education, science and technology, health, the environment and the demarcated indigenous territories, culture, and human rights—by reversing recent laws that limit government spending.

If Lula is to reconstruct the state, he will need to reidentify the priorities of government while uniting and empowering his social base. To be sure, this is not an agenda of transformation. Nonetheless, it is one that can put the brakes on the social disintegration accelerated by Bolsonaro, reaffirming the essential, if minimum, value of human life. Its fortune may well be indicative of the possibilities of resisting and even overcoming contemporary necropolitical regimes elsewhere in the world. Brazil has been a laboratory for the spoliation practiced amidst modernity's collapse. Might it yet, then, show a more hopeful future to all those who, facing an impasse, nonetheless struggle to construct new pathways—new *alamedas*<sup>20</sup>—to a better society?

## NOTES

1. Following Adam Przeworski, André Singer (2020) uses the phrase "furtive authoritarianism" to describe a process through which liberal democracies are being eroded from within, by stealth. This plays down the overt and cathartic celebration of antidemocratic violence through which new authoritarian movements have established a popular base, even if only in the critical moment of electoral disputes.

2. Rodrigo Nunes (2020b) argues that, through their fatally negligent response to COVID-19, the administrations of Bolsonaro in Brazil and Donald Trump in the United States, in particular, are experimenting with a mode of government that breaks from a putative biopolitical pact.

3. In one of the first articles to discuss Brazil's culture war, published in 2014, Pablo Ortellado made a case for its novelty. James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991) is often cited as providing the terms of opposition between progressive and "orthodox" cultural positions.

4. Nunes draws on an interview with Paulo Arantes (Lucena, 2014) in his discussion of this asymmetric polarization. According to Arantes, "The official left in Brazil is moderate. The other side is not moderate."

5. The editor of *Telos*, Trent Schoyer, seems to have been the first to write of "cultural Marxism," in reference to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (1973). Martin Jay (2011) suggests that the "opening salvo" in the attack on cultural Marxism came from a follower of the conspiratorialist Lyndon Larouche, Michael Minnicino, who in 1992 published an essay associating the Frankfurt School with political correctness. Iná Camargo Costa (2020) roots the critique of cultural Marxism in Hitler's attack on "cultural Bolshevism," which he imagined as a Jewish conspiracy. Samuel Moyn (2018) also argues that "the wider discourse around cultural Marxism today resembles nothing so much as a version of the Judeobolshevik myth updated for a new age."

6. Atkinson relies on a superficial reading of Herbert Marcuse to validate his argument on the unity of the new revolutionary struggle. Marcuse had written that "the traditional idea of revolution and the traditional strategy of revolution has [*sic*] ended" (2005: 124). Marcuse has become a favorite target of contemporary critics of cultural Marxism. He is also referenced in Project Orvil.

7. "The future does not belong to globalists," he said, during his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019.

8. This is demonstrated by figures published by the Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduados (National Association of Graduate Students—ANPG). <http://www.anpg.org.br/16/07/2020/sem-cota-emprestimo-portaria-34-cortaria-bolsas-em-todas-as-areas-do-conhecimento/>.

9. The so-called Northeastern Question is one of the classic themes of the social sciences and development studies in Brazil, addressed by Celso Furtado, Inácio Rangel, Francisco de Oliveira, and Victor Nunes Leal, among others.

10. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) has been published in more than 20 languages. According to a 2016 study by Elliott Green of the London School of Economics, it is the third-most-cited work in the humanities worldwide, ahead of works by Michel Foucault and Karl Marx. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/05/12/what-are-the-most-cited-publications-in-the-social-sciences-according-to-google-scholar/>.

11. The inquiry was led by Lieutenant Colonel Hélio Ibiapina Lima, who was later named by the National Truth Commission as having committed human rights violations during the years of military rule (Haddad, 2019).

12. Vélez Rodríguez (see 2006) had been protesting the influence of left-wing ideology on education for many years.

13. More than 6,000 members of the armed forces occupy positions in government, and Bolsonaro has appeared increasingly politically dependent on the senior generals who surround him.

14. Decotelli's resignation triggered a public debate about structural racism in Brazil. He would have been the country's first black minister of education and the only black minister in Bolsonaro's government. At least four of Bolsonaro's other ministers have lied in their CVs without being subjected to the same scrutiny. As Decotelli pointed out, "There are many white people with imperfections in their curriculums working without disturbing anyone" (Bermúdez, 2020).

15. This ranking is produced by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics of the National Science Foundation and is based on publication in peer-reviewed science and engineering journals, books, and conference proceedings. <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2019/nsf19317/overview.htm>.

16. We use the term "rector" to refer to the most senior official in university administration, known in Brazil as the *reitor*. This official is equivalent to the president in most U.S. universities and the vice chancellor in most UK universities.

17. No evidence was presented against Cancellier in either the 6,000-page inquiry or the 800-page final report of the investigation.

18. After the Bolsonaro government's pension reform was approved by the lower house of Congress, Guedes endorsed a proposal by Weintraub to reduce the budget of public universities, introduce tuition fees, and promote private financing (*Forúm*, 2019). This proposal gave rise to the Future-se project.

19. A data board entitled "Federal Universities in Defense of Life" produced by SoU\_Ciência Research Center in partnership with Associação Nacional dos Dirigentes das Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior (National Association of Directors of Federal Higher Education Institutions—ANDIFES) summarizes the activities of Brazil's federal universities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://souciencia.unifesp.br/paineis/universidadesemdefesadavida/>.

20. This is a reference to the final speech of Salvador Allende, given shortly before his death, in September 1973: "Go forward knowing that, sooner rather than later, the great avenues [*las grandes alamedas*] through which the free man will walk to build a better society will open again."

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