

A (Brazilian) Tale of Two Dimes: Hopes & Contradictions

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The current strikes and mass protests in Brazil are part of a global wave of struggles against traditional political institutions and the notion of leadership. This essay highlights the absence of any clear political project answering the demands coming from the streets.

Since 2012 Brazil has been experiencing one of the most exciting and challenging political times of its recent history. It is not due to the electoral victory of a specific party or politician, neither a new set of laws endowing more or less rights to citizens, nor the establishment of a new political or economic regime. Real politics is now taking place outside institutions, without leaders, and has been showing little inclination towards empty negotiations, usually performed by supposed representatives. This new politics radically introduces informal political participation, demanding autonomy as an important characteristic of action, into the public sphere.

A new global wave of dissatisfaction is bringing people together around common demands, creating forms of resistance and mobilization despite the state and elites' initiatives to demotivate them. Democratic innovations, such as the participatory processes experienced in the country in the last two decades, have also been incapable of overcoming the dominant political and economic forces. An increasing amount of people have lost their fear at expressing anger against the social conditions in the country and have become aware of the violence from the state and the contradictions of capitalism. When the images of millions of people taking to the streets in more than 350 cities and towns started to spread around the world in June 2013, many people couldn't believe Brazil had entered the group of countries that since 2011 were experiencing large social protests. This surprise could be easily eroded if we consider that there were more than enough reasons for social disrupt in a country with one of the highest rates of income concentration, inequalities in social rights and terrible conditions in public services. The World Cup was just a window of opportunity for this political outbreak.

This article deals with the current socio-political conflicts in Brazil, expressed through street riots, strikes, political polarization and attempts of repression and dialogue from the different levels of Government. It discusses the difficulties and the limits faced by traditional liberal democratic institutions ruled by dominant economic interests in establishing relations of reliability with the new social movements.

Smoke signals

One can hardly argue that the events of June 2013 in Brazil were completely unforeseeable. Since 2008, the number of strikes in Brazil had been growing already. In 2012, the year before the protests, the country faced 873 strikes, the biggest number since 1997 (Dieese, 2013)¹. In the public sector, the strike of the technical-administrative workers of the federal universities, which comprised more than 100,000 workers, lasted for 124 days and the strike of the 72,000 mail workers lasted for 9 days. In the private sector, the strikes of the civil construction workers in the city of Fortaleza, as well as in the oil and metal companies, mobilized more than 50,000 workers each. There was also a national bank employees strike that reached the number of 280,000 workers who stopped working for 10 days. Compared to 2011, the amount of hours on strike was 37% higher in 2012. The absence of a single political actor (collective or individual) able to take the leadership in this scenario is worth mentioning, as it happened previously with the Union of the Metal Workers' strikes in the late 1970s (the roots of ex-president Lula's political history). These events, despite showing an increasing tendency to social conflicts among Brazilians, are still strongly linked with organized groups, such as traditional labor unions.

The new cycle of protests that emerged in June 2013 seems to be more independent from traditional organizations. One example is the successful strike of garbage collectors during the last carnival in Rio de Janeiro. The initial reaction from the Mayor's office was to discredit the strike, comparing strikers to "delinquents" and calling the police to protect those willing to work. After negotiating with the City Council the Union achieved a pay rise, however much smaller than expected by the strikers. As a consequence, workers rejected the agreement and no longer accepted the Union as a valid representative of their interests. As popular support for the strikers increased and garbage accumulated in the streets, the Mayor's office decided to negotiate and accepted the demands directly expressed by the workers. This struggle shows signs of a new political trend, based on the confrontation with hierarchical authorities and the strikers' affirmation of autonomy. As a consequence, popular support to collective actions, solidarity with the poor, skepticism towards political parties, anger towards corruption and the rejection of police brutality formed a common ground in these recent uprisings.

A Representation Crisis

Demonstrators and strikers in many cities in Brazil show little compliance with those willing to be representatives of their claims and demands. This tends to show the incapacity of old institutions, such as labor unions and political parties, to represent the people, but it also shares common features with what could be construed as a global crisis of political representation. The rise of public transport fare (both at municipal and state level) sparked the revolts in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in June 2013, but we should remember that in the past 10 years, every capital in Brazil has experienced at least one protest related to public transportation issues (Ortellado et al., 2013). In June, after several displays of extreme violence from the anti-riot police, demonstrations quickly dominated the political agenda and kept growing in the following days, in an uncoordinated way, reaching the whole country. Although these

¹ Amongst those, 53% happened in the private sector, but the ones in the public sector mobilized more workers for a longer period. Some of these strikes should be highlighted for their significance (in terms of amount of workers they mobilize).

actions were not always organized by the local Free Fare Movements (MPLs), they played an important role in lambasting current transportation policies, marked by corruption and focused on private profits. They showed how a very concrete demand – that of cancelling the 20-cent rise in the transportation fare – went against the market. The movement managed to bring more visibility to their demand of a free bus transportation system.

Speaking about Occupy Wall Street (OWS), Zizek’s analysis (2012: 89) made the same argument: “A great art of politics is to insist on a particular demand that, while thoroughly realist, feasible and legitimate, disturbs the core of the hegemonic ideology.” The different levels of government also had great difficulties negotiating with the MPL, which is organized horizontally, in a federal way, with consensual decision-making and no leaders. As the demonstrations increased and spread over the country, more demands were incorporated besides the initial one, for better and costless transportation. In this sense, the political dynamic at stake resembled a frequent criticism directed at the OWS, denouncing their vague agenda. “You are not telling us what you want!” was a sentence often repeated in the United States when the movement started to grow. In Brazil, movements were mostly demanding a better health and educational system, denouncing corruption, small salaries and the public expenses for the World Cup.

Since June last year, the polls show that support for the demonstrations has changed significantly. In June 2013, 81% of the population supported the World Cup, a number which dropped to 52% in 2014. However, the number of people opposing protests has also been increasing: from 15% in June 2013 to 42% now. As the social uprisings were growing throughout the country, it was possible to notice the increasing popularity of a discourse drawing a “line of purity” between two types of demonstrators: the “good citizen”, entitled to express his opinion, always in a “pacific” way, given that “we live in a democracy”; and the “vandals”, whose only goal is to destroy public property and provoke chaos through violence. The emergence of the “Black Bloc” tactics in the Brazilian streets² gave more weight to the discourse on the “line of purity” used by conservatives and government members to criminalize social movements. In the common narrative (also incorporated by part of the left) Black Blocs are formed by violent and non-politicized criminals. These critics don’t recognize the political character of direct actions and, by doing so, end up legitimizing police brutality. But the images of violent repression perpetrated by the military police during the first demonstrations in June 2013 were also vital for raising solidarity among the population, acting as a catalyst in the social enlargement of the mobilization.

On July 14th 2013, Amarildo, an assistant bricklayer, disappeared after being taken by military policeman for interrogation at the headquarters of the Pacifying Police Unity (UPP) during the “Operation Armed Peace” in Rocinha, the biggest favela of Rio de Janeiro. After massive public pressure, the information came out: he had been tortured and killed by the police. What happened to Amarildo is emblematic of the current situation of basic human rights violation in Brazil, where police brutality paradoxically attracted more people to the streets. Under the command of the

² The “Black Bloc” tactics can be traced back to the 1980s in Germany and gained more international visibility after the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999.

Governor of the State of São Paulo, and with the support of the Federal Government, since the events of June, the police have been training, developing and recycling tactics of violence. Furthermore, in late 2013 the Ministry of Defense (the civilian cabinet responsible for managing the Military in Brazil) published a document establishing the guidelines for the use of the Armed Forces to “guarantee Law and Order”. In the document, addressing the growing discontent towards the World Cup, social movements and social organizations are described as “opponent forces to the military operations” and are to be treated as such.

Participation: attempting to soften social conflicts

The scaling up of protests throughout the country illustrates the traditional dichotomy between organization and spontaneity in social movements. Without leaders, without representatives, without official spokesperson, mobilized by groups formed on the internet, a surprising amount of people gathered to express their political dissatisfaction: some denounced corruption, or public expenses for the World Cup, while others demanded better public services, or revolted against the political and economic system. Without formal institutions to guide demonstrators, it allowed a huge range of political activists with different ideologies to express their views. Politicians, academics, media and the police were lost, each one trying to interpret the riots through their own frame.

Assuming that the events in Brazil are part of a global cycle of struggles, it is natural to see them as rooted in a deep distrust of representation and traditional political institutions. The current configuration of what is called ‘democracy’ seems to be mostly constituted by a group of institutions and practices concerned to mitigate dissent in certain parts of society. Consensus building, majority approval and minority participation in public institutions have been broadly reported as an efficient way to improve public policies and to legitimize governmental decisions.

In the past two decades, Brazil became recognized as an example in the development of participatory democracy. Its most famous invention (which was the point of convergence of many historical experiences of the left with councils and popular committees) was the Participatory Budget (PB). The excitement it produced in parts of the academia and in social movements in the 1990s and 2000s has since then suffered a definite erosion. Even inside the Workers’ Party, that has disseminated the project during that period, the PB does not generate the same enthusiasm as before, as the party shifted its alliances towards the economic elite and conservative parties. It was evident after the party won the 2012 São Paulo election for City Council. The proposal in participation presented by the Mayor Fernando Haddad can be considered, from all possible angles, as a withdrawal in comparison with the project developed by the same party in the city ten years before. Evidently, this ‘participatory wave’ in the country was never free from contradictions and limits. A significant part of the theoretical production about this issue got more concerned with the supposed efficacy of the participatory institutional frameworks. But the academic world was not the only one to be diverted in the last years. The political parties and international organizations multiplied failed attempts at organizing processes whose participatory dimension was solely aimed at legitimizing decisions already taken according to interests other than those of the population. Although some of these experiments have an honest goal of opening the decision-making process, their effectiveness depends on

the political convenience of elected leaders. In the case where participation might have a negative effect in elections or in political or social alliances, it happens to be completely emptied out or simply inexistent. In Brazil, this is aggravated by the fact that the political system requires broad coalitions for the sake of so-called 'governability'. As a result, conservative 'allies' are always in power. If the incapacity of representative institutions to deal with the needs and preferences of the people is not overcome, participatory institutions are doomed to fail and the interests of those in power usually dominate.

The World Cup is a good example of those limits. In the past years, the tournament became a symbol of dissatisfaction with the misspending of public funds (in the benefit of a small fringe of businessmen in Brazil) in a country with serious problems of infrastructure and bad quality of public services. Ironically, the event was initially perceived, by some opinion leaders, as something able to strengthen the national sense of belonging through the production of a common imaginary, in which the idea of Brazil as an emergent power in the international arena played an important role. Indeed, the World Cup became a useful catalyst for a process of social convergence, but of a different kind, sparking dissent. In the context of obscure relations with FIFA, improving the quality of decision-making and its legitimacy through participatory instruments was not even considered, as the absence of dialogue between government and the population concerning necessary urban renovations has shown. Why couldn't the population of Brazil participate in the decisions that the World Cup involved? Wouldn't this be the greatest example of the possibility of asserting popular sovereignty?

The global dissatisfaction with contemporary democracy shows that the idea of participation cannot be controlled by governments to limit social dissent and legitimize their decisions. Beside the emphasis on 'dignity' as a political demand, the occupants of the public squares around the world demanded "real democracy". The distance between reality and political participation denounced by the activists can be related to the exhaustion of the latter concept in the past decade. When everything becomes 'participatory' (even some police stations in Brazil are called that way), the word loses a lot of its potential; democracy itself loses its meaning, as it no longer refers to self-government. It becomes more related to governing the state with legitimacy than governing what is common through empowered collective decision-making.

The constituents struggle to be recognized as sovereign citizens could lead to the transformation of the established power. However, their strength is located only outside the state. At all levels of governments, there has been a clear lack of concern in empowering the popular assemblies that started after the June events. In this sense, demanding "real democracy" may not only result in criticizing the representative tradition, but also in acknowledging the need to radicalize the creation of popular power. Interestingly enough, many of the demands coming from the streets could find responses in mechanisms intending to increase transparency with popular control over public expenditure.

Perspectives for the future

So far, we have described the current political scenario in Brazil as part of a global cycle of struggles. One common element in these struggles is the refusal to recognize in the traditional political institutions the same legitimacy attached to the previous political generations. This goes hand in hand with an intense criticism of the idea of leadership. The crisis seems to be related also to a generational dynamic, with the youth being more affected and having less economic stability. In this regard, the struggles of the last few years have opened an intense process of collaborative learning. The occupation of the squares, the streets and the public spaces in general, is creating new possibilities for political experimentation. From a cognitive point of view, this also seems to be a characteristic of this new generation of activists: they are open to experiment and are also searching for adequate tools. Thus, waiting for the institutionalization of these social forces to assess their impact does not make much sense nowadays. There seems to be more potential in the idea of reclaiming the public spaces and the public budgets as common properties, following Negri's proposition:

So, what is a common property? A common property, from a juridical point of view, is easily defined: it's a public property that, instead of having public bosses or public owners, belongs to subjects that are active in that sector or in that reality; it is managed by them. The common property is this act through which the subjects manage, for instance, the urban network of transportation because it belongs to them, because the common has become or been recognized as a condition of life, as a biopolitical condition. What does it mean a metropolis without transportation? Nothing. [...] The common property is not simply defined by the state, it is defined by what singularities make of this common space, by the way they use this common space [...] (Negri, 2005).

The citizens of Brazilian society and of the city of São Paulo participate in the many initiatives of building democratic experiences, as they participate in the experiments tried by the various movements in their own dynamics. The subversive expressions of popular culture must not be ignored. The poetical gatherings in the periphery of São Paulo, the Hip-Hop movement in New York, the Tunisian reggae bands, the graffiti on the walls of Cairo all show a proliferation of aesthetic manifestations feeding common imaginaries with narratives of the daily efforts made to achieve dignity in the cities. Those efforts deal directly with power, resistance and hope.

It could be argued therefore that a politics of resistance follows power in that it too is capillary in nature, branching out in many different ways. It takes not simply the obvious routes of physical resistance, but also follows the paths of the imagination where resistance to power is not only told but also valued – it forms part of the narratives of everyday life that give meaning to encounter with power” (Tripp, 2013: 6).

Finally, it's important to say that the signals that have been emerging in the past months point towards an increasing social polarization in Brazil. On the one hand, Brazil experiences the continuing protests, the strikes, the intensification of the processes of popular mobilization and the growing resistance of groups that organize themselves around different social struggles (such as the demilitarization of the police, the legalization of drugs, the right of abortion, sexual rights and the good quality of public services). On the other hand, one also observes an increasing

reaction of the repressive forces, be them institutional or informal. The growing number of cases of people being beaten, sometimes to death, by groups of self-declared “*vigilantes*” has also been brought to public awareness lately³.

The so-called democracy is no longer showing its capacity to control political conflict or to attend to people’s demands and choices. If political willingness meets on-the-ground mobilization and popular support, a fertile ground for political innovation is set. If political parties and leaders are inclined to transform political institutions into more democratic and legitimate entities, they will have to integrate conflicts and diversity, to ground their power at level of the street and to accept the legitimate existence of political practices outside the legal framework of the state. Political creativity should always be free. That is what maintains a society alive.

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³ One example is what happened with a teenage boy who was stripped naked and chained to a lamppost in Rio de Janeiro, after allegedly trying to mug a pedestrian. He was stabbed in the ear before being shackled by his neck with a bicycle lock.