

Brazil: how big a defeat?

[Interview with Valério Arcary \(PSOL\), published by *International Socialism* \(quarterly review, published by UK SWP\), issue #161, Dec 2018](#) (online on Dec 13, 2018)

With the election at the end of October 2018 of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil, the advance of the far right went global. His astonishing victory followed three years of political crisis that saw the last elected president Dilma Rousseff impeached and her predecessor Lula da Silva jailed for corruption, a process that ended the period (2003-16) when the Workers Party (PT) governed Brazil. ¹ The overthrow of the Workers Party by an alliance of right-wing parliamentarians and judges produced a massive crisis for the entire Brazilian left. The historian Valério Arcary, a revolutionary socialist activist since the 1970s, was one of the leaders of a breakaway from one of the main Trotskyist organisations, the Unified Workers Socialist Party (PSTU), provoked by this crisis. He is now a leading member of Resistência, a revolutionary current inside the radical-left Party for Socialism and Freedom (PSOL). He talked to Alex Callinicos about the meaning of Bolsonaro's election.

I am hoping that we can use this interview to situate Bolsonaro's victory historically and theoretically. So—first of all: for people outside Brazil, but maybe also for inside Brazil as well, it would be good to put Bolsonaro's victory in the context of the *longue durée* (the long-term perspective) of Brazilian history. Even with my limited knowledge there are two elements that seem to me particularly important as reference points: first of all, the history of colonialism, slavery and racism, and, secondly, the much more recent history of the military dictatorship. It would be interesting to hear your thoughts about this.

VA: Yes, in the *longue durée*, the first thing we could say is that we have been under a democratic-presidential regime for the past 30 years. We have had eight elections since 1989, and the Workers Party won four of them. This is absolutely, exceptional, it never happened before. You know the prognostic that Leon Trotsky made in the 1930s about the future of possible liberal-democratic regimes in peripheral countries. In the 1930s, in that context, Trotsky was very sceptical about democratic regimes in Latin America in particular. He was in Mexico and he was speaking with Matteo Fossa, who was a union leader from Argentina who came to Coyoacan to do an interview. Trotsky said it was very difficult to think about stable democratic regimes in peripheral dependent countries.² It was not a “catastrophist” perspective. This prognostic was, essentially, confirmed in the “laboratory of history” during 30 years. Class struggles were so intense, and the danger of revolution so real and imminent, that the political domination was preserved through different kinds of authoritarian regimes, including the 20 years of military dictatorship after 1964 in Brazil. The irony in the situation that we're living in is that we have had, for the first time, 30-35 years of more or less stable, democratic, civil, union, political, cultural liberties in Brazil.

The irony of history is that now a huge fraction of the dominant class is supporting not only the perspective of the Bolsonaro government but also some changes in the regime—it's not only a change of government, it's the possibility of Bonapartism—transformations in the semi-presidential regime that had an equilibrium between the congress, the judiciary, the armed forces

and the executive.³ But Bolsonaro's neofascist speech is not a reaction to the danger of revolution. It's the reaction of a fraction of the bourgeoisie, supported by the majority of the middle class, to 13 years of class collaboration government with the Workers Party; after four years of economic recession and the worst social crisis in half a century with over 12 million people unemployed and 27 million in part-time jobs. If you consider the economically active population of Brazil is 105 million people, you have an idea of the disaster.

Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery, in 1888, and that meant 350 years of slavery. So there is a major difference between Brazil and our closest neighbours, Uruguay, Argentina and Chile. The main difference is that the social class structure is different. Social inequality is qualitatively greater. Of course, Argentina and Chile are different from Europe, but these are countries that have a middle class that is not so far apart from the working class. Here the middle classes are socially and racially separated from the working class. It's not only that we don't have a fraction of the bourgeoisie that is black. Even in the middle classes black people are an extreme minority, although the majority of the country and in some provinces a huge majority of the country is descended from the Afro-slave working class. This has not only huge political consequences—it's more than consequences. You can't understand the country if you don't understand the racist frontiers that isolate the working class and the majority of the people from the middle classes.

We have this scheme that was built by Marxism after the Russian Revolution. Basically, the scheme is that the condition for the class struggle to develop is that you need a revolutionary fighting disposition in the working class, you need to split the propertied classes and you need also to gain the majority of the middle classes if you want to change the society. Even the leadership of the reformists work with this scheme—it's a theoretical model. This scheme of course is useful also for a country like Brazil. But it's completely different, as I was telling you, if we compare Brazil with Argentina. Because the working class can actually attract a majority of the nation; it did so in the last years of the fight against the military dictatorship. But only in very special circumstances have we had examples of the working class's disposition to fight, its energy and its capacity to attract a majority of the middle class—with one exception: Rio Grande do Sul in the far south, a very peculiar province in Brazil because it's the only province where European migration generated a vibrant middle class in the interior in agriculture.

So it's more like Argentina in that sense?

Yes, more similar to Argentina. So this is a first observation. The second observation, also in a historical perspective but closer, is that this democratic regime was stable but the main reason was that we had a very exceptional situation in Brazil with the presence of the Workers Party. We can't understand the Bolsonaro victory now if we don't have an analysis of these 13 years of Workers Party government. There is a debate now over whether Bolsonaro's victory is, essentially, the Workers Party's fault. Well, there is a big grain of truth in this, but it's short-sighted to make this absolute. It's superficial.

What we are seeing is a historical, dramatic example of the limits class-collaborationist governments have in Brazil. The economic and social possibility of progressive reforms has been demonstrated to be small and ephemeral. The Workers Party had a strategy of developing social services during its government, and actually it did it. That meant that the public education system

was expanded. As an example, an important national network of polytechnical universities where I worked for decades expanded its presence from 27 cities to about 600—a huge expansion. I worked at the biggest unit in São Paulo, where students could graduate in about 40 subjects, engineering, architecture, physics, biology and so on. It was a huge expansion. The health system was universalised. The Workers Party also expanded the social security system. Between 2003 and 2013, while the economy was growing and social peace was established, the majority of the bourgeoisie supported the Lula⁴ and Dilma Rousseff governments. After the most dramatic impact of the international economic crisis and the massive spontaneous mobilisations of June 2013, it turned to a position of critical support. And, finally, after 2015 it decided to impeach the Workers Party government.

The huge majority of the dominant class came to the conclusion that these social services became too expensive and the state got too big. They are writing and polemicising in the newspapers, on the radio and TV: “The state is too big, the state is too expensive. We give the people too many services. If we carry on like this, the economy will stagnate forever, it will suffer a long and dramatic stagnation.” This is the same neoliberal speech all over the world, but this was the first time in Brazil that the dominant class explicitly argued that the state is too big, that democracy is too expensive and that we need a smaller state. Fernando Collor in the 1990s, the first elected president, promoted this kind of discussion but his government was an adventure and ended with his impeachment in 1992. Then we had the two administrations of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and the split from the Brazilian Democratic Movement that generated the PSDB, the social democratic bourgeois party. They produced similar rhetoric, but not to the same extent. Of course, they carried out privatisation and so on.

This is the eighth presidential election since the end of the dictatorship. Now, with this far-right--we call it neofascist--Bolsonaro, this is explicit, the neoliberal speech, and they want to make this adjustment. Of course, there is a grain of truth when we say: “If the Workers Party, during 13 years, had made more radical reforms, the social base of the Workers Party in the working class would have been more motivated to defend Dilma Rousseff when the impeachment battle was opened two years ago.” That’s probably true, although it’s a counterfactual hypothesis.

Of course, if Dilma had not nominated Joaquim Levy as economic chief of staff—that was what the banking system wanted—and if she had made a turn to the left and had moved to putting the armed forces generals on trial, moved against the media corporation monopolies, if she had a different orientation towards unemployment, maybe the political mobilisation of the working class would have given her the support to confront the bourgeois offensive and the mobilisation of the middle classes in 2016. But I think it’s dangerous to say we could have split the middle classes and have the majority of the middle classes. It’s not a serious counterfactual.

Probably, even if the latest Workers Party government under Dilma had made a turn to the left and the organised sectors of the working class were convinced to fight seriously against the impeachment, the middle classes would have made a turn to the right. Because what made the movement of the middle classes was not, essentially, the anti-corruption speech—of course the vocabulary of the mobilisation was corruption, but we cannot be naïve. When Dilma was impeached, we had Michel Temer’s government and Michel Temer’s government was denounced for corruption—absurd situations that were much more serious than those that affected the Workers Party. Temer was personally recorded in an unbelievable conversation with

one of the richest bourgeois in Brazil, and he actually said: “it would be good if you paid Eduardo Cunha [the ex-president of the Chamber of Deputies in the National Congress] to keep quiet in prison, not to denounce us!” This was recorded! Everyone who watches TV—which means 60 million households in Brazil—could hear the president saying to one of the richest men in Brazil: “Pay him to shut up!”. And the middle class didn’t move. We tried to mobilise the middle class, the Workers Party did not try, but PSOL tried, and we had big meetings in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but big meetings with 30,000 people, 40,000 in Rio. That’s not big enough for Brazil. It’s big for us, but it’s not really decisively big for Brazil.

So why did the middle classes turn to the right? They gave mass support to the impeachment, and after that, in the last two years, they made a second move to the most right-wing positions and supported Bolsonaro and abandoned the PSDB, which we could describe as centre-right liberal. They made that shift because, in historical perspective, their social position actually has been changing since the fall of the dictatorship. The modern new middle class still has gigantic privileges, in the material and status senses. The middle class is resisting the changes that have been taking place slowly in the last decades. What is the main change? You have three levels of stratification of people that live from a wage (I suppose it’s the same methodology that’s used in Britain). We have the manual workers, blue collar jobs. Then you have a second level, the routine workers in services in white collar jobs. They have to obey rules and protocols. They don’t have the initiative of deciding anything. Then you have the third level, the higher educated people. So you have three levels of wages and prestige.

What happened over the past 35 years, but much more intensively during the 13 years of Workers Party governments, is that the average manual worker’s wage, since the end of the dictatorship, went up—slowly, through a generation. It rose from levels of almost biological poverty. The minimum wage went from US\$100 to US\$250 a month. At the second level, the level of the routine white-collar workers, public teachers and people that work in trades, wages have stagnated. The average wage of all the population that is economically active is the equivalent of two minimum wages, or US\$500 a month. Routine white-collar workers whose wages have stagnated used to get the equivalent of four, even five minimum wages. But now what has changed is that there is almost no difference between manual and routine white-collar workers’ wages. A young industrial worker, not in a big factory like in the automobile or steel industry, but a common industrial worker, can get two and a half minimum wages, just like someone who starts as a public school teacher. And what happened to the higher educated people, like engineers, medical doctors, lawyers? Their wages did not stagnate, they have been in slow but invariable decay. Now young people with a prestigious college degree, when they start work, if they can find a job, the best they can expect is four or five times the minimum wage.

Of course, we have also to consider the petty bourgeoisie with heritage and property. The middle class still have inherited privileges. Where does this come from? Most comes from housing and much higher education. The main strategy of the parents of those of us of European descent who had no money—they were immigrants—was to buy or build a house. They wanted to be urban, they didn’t want to work on the land, but they were not educated. So the main issue was to get a house. Half a century ago, houses were not expensive in Brazil. Building a house was not expensive because manual work was semi-slave. So they got houses. They sold the houses and bought apartments. In the past 20 years apartments and houses had an amazing increase in valuation. The pressure of the international market in Brazil came from the access that Brazilian

banks had to international finance. Previously, it had been extremely difficult for the Brazilian fraction of the financial system to get access to abundant international loans. Once they received these loans, they could offer credit to people to buy houses. So old housing increased in value. The majority of the Brazilian middle classes do live on the wages they receive for being highly educated, but they also live off their housing properties. This means that social inequality between capital and labour was not reduced during the Workers Party governments, only between those that live from wages. Capital is extremely concentrated; the bourgeoisie is extremely small and rich. The working class became more homogeneous, and the middle class lost position, rank and status, although still maintaining huge privileges.

I'm giving some examples, but the main issue is that these middle classes in Brazil lost their status during the past 35 years. It's not calamitous, because they still have their privileges. But it's a completely new experience because generation after generation—although Brazilian history is astonishing!—the middle class were getting a higher and higher standard of life. That means that my mother lived better than my grandmother and I live better than my mother. But the future is much less certain. You do understand the overall picture? So the main issues are the dramatic social inequality inherited from the past of slavery and the status of the middle class, the changes during the democratic regime, the shift to the right of the middle classes, and the role of the Workers Party.

To finish, if the Workers Party had made radical reforms, we can see in perspective, we would have a civil war, we'd go to a situation as serious as, or more serious than, Venezuela. So we have a reaction of the bourgeoisie, with the middle class base, against the concessions capitalism had to make to the working class during the past 30 years in order to sustain the democratic-liberal regime. And if the concessions were harder, were greater, although reformist, it would be Venezuela, it would be a step in the direction of civil war. It would be good—yes, for us, the revolutionary left, it would be good. But it would be much more dangerous because we would not have electoral fascism, we would probably have militant fascism, which is not the same thing.

Let's come back to the question of fascism, but before we do that: What you say is extremely interesting. What you're saying is that Bolsonaro comes out of both the relative material decline of the middle class but also, to use a phrase of Pierre Bourdieu's, the kind of class racism that informs Brazilian society.

Exactly.

Racism, class privilege and class superiority fuse in a society such as Brazil. The comparison with Venezuela is interesting because in the attitudes towards Hugo Chávez during the bosses' strike of 2002-3, you could see exactly that kind of class racism. It's also interesting that you're talking about what I'd call the new middle class. In other words, you're not talking about the classical petty bourgeoisie—small shopkeepers and so on—you're talking about people in what had been relatively privileged white-collar work, including lawyers, university professors and people like that.[5](#)

Just to complete the analysis of Bolsonaro's base: he won a majority of the vote and he did very well even in the first round. There's a lot of talk about his support among the poor

and the issue of law and order. What I'm trying to say, to win a majority he can't have won just with the votes of the new middle class. How was he able to reach into the poorer sections of society?

Yes, law and order played an important role, because people are scared by the strengthening of organised crime. We have over 600,000 jailed in a terrifying penitentiary prisoner system. Criminal organisations became really strong during the past 20 years. The increase in urban violence has been systematic: homicide rates of over 60,000 murders a year, which means over 30 homicides for each 100,000 people. We should also consider the reaction of a more retrograde sector of society, more racist, misogynist and homophobic, to the impact of the urban, generational and cultural transition of society. And finally, we must also consider the role played by the *WhatsApp* illegal fake news scandal: private companies used databases in the US in order to send tens of millions of messages with all kinds of absurd, bizarre, weird accusations against the Workers Party candidate.

Well, Bolsonaro won with 55 per cent of the vote. And Fernando Haddad, the PT candidate, got 45 per cent. So we have a huge division in the working class—on a regional basis. In the north-east Bolsonaro was defeated, the Workers Party had 70 per cent, Bolsonaro only 30 per cent. In the north-east he's the expression mainly of the bourgeoisie, the middle class and European descendants. But the north-east has only 35 per cent of the Brazilian population. The south-east—that means Minas Gerais, Rio and São Paulo—this triangle is the heart of Brazil, and he won there, with more or less 60-65 per cent of the vote—higher than his national share of 55 per cent. Large sections of the working class voted for Bolsonaro.

When we talk about Brazil, we can't see mainly the European or the Argentinian social structure. It's socially different. You have the bourgeoisie, you have several levels of middle classes, then you have the working class that has a contract, and the working layers below them. In numbers what does that mean? You have 208 million people in Brazil; 140 million are over 18 years old and are able to vote. Almost 34 million are retired. The economically active population is estimated at 105 million. You must remember that 45 per cent of adult women are housewives. In the private sector, with the recession, you have now 34 million people. In the public sector you have 12 million functionaries, with contracts—at the level of municipalities, provinces, and the federal government. Most of them are municipal—six million people work for the cities. Then you have four million people working for the provinces—most of them teachers and police. And then you have one and a half million people working for the federal government.

But below the working class with contracts of 45-50 million people, you have now 40 million people who work on a fluctuating basis. Ten million of them have a bourgeois they work for, they have a boss. They don't have a contract and so they don't have all the legal protection a contract offers. But they have a boss who they obey—they are workers in the historical sense of the working class. But the other 30 million, they do work, but they don't get a boss to work for. So they work for themselves. Mainly what do they do? They improvise. So if my refrigerator has a problem, I look for someone to help me and he comes and fixes it. He's not a petty bourgeois because he doesn't have an enterprise. He just lives around this neighbourhood and offers his services as a manual working guy who has some skills. Others work in commerce. They buy and sell things. They improvise.

What's the difference with Europe or even Argentina, although this difference is getting smaller? Essentially the difference is that the people who live from work are divided. Two-thirds have a boss, either in the private sector, with or without a contract, or in the public sector. But there is one third of the working class that doesn't have a boss. We call them semi-proletarian, others sub-proletarian. This is huge in Brazil, gigantic, immense.

To understand the vote for Bolsonaro, we must understand the relation that sectors of the working class have with the middle class. It's impossible to understand this if you don't put it in the context of the fact that the transition from an agrarian to an urban society was made in Brazil in one generation. In the 1950s Brazil was an agrarian country. How agrarian? More than 60 per cent of the economically active population was in the interior. In one generation, what China made with 300 million people, Brazil made with 20-25 per cent of the labour force that it had in the 1960s and 1970s. In 25 years the country changed completely. Maybe you don't know that we have more than 80 per cent—86 per cent—of the economic labour force in huge cities and that we have almost 20 cities that have at least one million people. São Paulo and Rio are two of the biggest metropolitan areas in the world. It's different from Mexico. Mexico still has 50 per cent of its population in the agrarian interior.

When you have a change like this it means that people left the region where they were born or their parents were born. The demographic curve of Brazilian society is also very intense. "Very intense" means that when I arrived in the 1980s, women's fertility rate was still four children per woman; now it's below two children per woman. So you have a demographic curve completely different from Uruguay or Argentina. Brazil was, until the 1980s, a society where half of the country were babies and young people and the average life expectancy was extremely low. And what happened during these 30 years of the democratic liberal regime was that these big structural changes, from the agrarian society to the urban society, from larger to small families, etc, happened very fast, but the changes in consciousness and the cultural changes are slower.

So in ideological terms, if we compare the ideological references of the mentality of the majority of the working class, they live in cities, but many, especially those over 50 years old, still have a rural mentality. So they are extremely conservative, they are extremely religious, and they have extremely low levels of instruction. Almost one third of the population of age 15 or over cannot attribute meaning to what they read. They are illiterate.

These structural issues have a weight because the Workers Party got bigger in the 1980s, becoming what we might call a historically late labour party that had an important implantation in unions. But in the 1990s, when it became a vibrant mass electoral party, its main speech was radical-democratic. It was oriented towards the left sector of the middle classes. This was when Lula became "Lulinha Peace and Love", as it was put during the 2002 presidential election.⁶ He actually said this to the country: "I've become a sweet man. I'm not a negative man any more. I'm not the man who wanted to change Brazil and confront the rich. I want to stimulate class collaboration and coordination between classes."

It's completely different if the power of attraction or the power of mobilisation of the working class pushes, electorally, sectors of the middle classes, or if it's the opposite—if it's the middle classes that push the working class. What happened in this election was that the middle classes pushed the working class. Two years ago, in an amazing and surprising and scary movement, the

middle classes came on to the streets in millions—something over five million to bring down Dilma Rousseff’s government. It never happened before, with the exception of the 1984 mobilisation, the final mobilisation against the military dictatorship—what we call the “Diretas movement”, the movement to claim the right directly to elect the president by universal suffrage. (Remember that at that time the illiterate could not vote: the constitution in 1988 was the first big juridical transformation, and one of the main things was that everyone over 18 could vote, whether or not they were literate or educated, at least at primary levels of education.)

And the middle class dragged the working class. The sectors of the working class that voted for Bolsonaro did it because, first, in the working class, they take the corruption issue very seriously. The middle class are cynical about it. In the middle class it’s a matter for conversation, but what they really want is a society where they are respected and valorised for what they understand to be their meritocratic privileges.

In the working class you have the strong terror of poverty, you’ll find the fear of falling into the precarious situation of the semi-proletariat. But you have also a strong pressure from the lumpenproletariat. Because you have not only a proletariat and a semi-proletariat, you have a mass of lumpenproletarians that have to survive dealing with illegal activities.

There are millions of people who live from criminal activity—criminal in the sense that they are illegal. I’ll give you some numbers. We have now in Brazil over 600,000 people in jail. We are the fourth country in the world—after the United States, China and Russia—for prison population. In São Paulo province, we have over 200,000 people in jail. Each of them has two and a half dependants. It means over 500,000 people dependent on people in jail. And we have a criminal organisation—*Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC)—it’s an amazing name, it’s a leftist name, it has a history from the period of the dictatorship when leftists were in prison with the normal criminals. The PCC organises a system where it pays one minimum wage to each family of the prisoners. It means that we have 41 million people in São Paulo province and about one million people are linked to the PCC. So if you get onto the subway there’s a good chance that out of the 40 people in the coach one lives from illegal criminal money.

The main issue is the relationship between the working class, the lumpen, and the middle classes. The working class are very pressured by the lumpen. And in some regions of Brazil, it’s almost impossible that a working class family does not have a member that’s linked to criminal activities. So we have a strong pressure from the lumpen. But you still have the other pressure, the ideological pressure that comes from the middle class perception of the world. And during the 13 years of the Workers Party government, they did not make any kind of political-ideological fight to give the working class a different perspective of the world. They embraced the middle class perception of the world. And the middle class perception of the world is that capitalism is great, the market economy is great and what must prevail is meritocracy—everyone has a role to play in society proportional to his abilities, to his capacities, to his will, to his disposition.

What did Bolsonaro say that had an appeal to the working class? He said: “All the democratic system is corrupt and I will fight corruption and I will fight crime. I will fight the criminal activities. I will fight the criminal organisations. And I will abolish corruption and I will do it surgically, with a sword—it will be hard but it will be fast.” And when he became a martyr,

because he was stabbed, that played a big role. Remember that one year ago he had only 15 per cent support in the polls. When the electoral process began he was still on 15 per cent. When Lula could not present his candidacy, Bolsonaro came to the first position, and went to 22 per cent. After the stabbing he went from 29 to 42 per cent in the polls. So the stabbing played a major role.

You've covered quite a lot, so I want to focus in now on what Bolsonaro represents in terms of the politics of the far right. And you've started what I think is a very useful debate about his relationship with fascism.⁷ It's a complicated question because on the whole people in our tradition, in the Trotskyist tradition, are cautious about calling far-right figures fascist because we build on Trotsky's very specific analysis.⁸ But, of course, theory isn't just about repeating what was said in the past, it's about grappling with the phenomena of the present. This isn't just a question for Brazil, when we look, say, at Austria where we have a coalition government that includes a fascist party.

The thing that makes me cautious about calling someone like Bolsonaro a fascist is the following. If we look at the classical fascist movements, critical to them is that they are a mass movement, with an organised party machine that mobilises the petty bourgeoisie and more broadly the middle classes and backward sections of the working class around an ideology that has, at least verbally, anti-capitalist elements and that gives the fascist leadership a degree of autonomy from both, on the one hand, the military and, on the other hand, the bourgeoisie. We can see this most clearly in the case of the National Socialist regime in Germany.⁹ For me these are critical features of classical fascism—the movement, the plebeian anti-capitalist ideology, and the relative autonomy of the fascist party in power. So if we look at the evolution of the Hitler regime, Trotsky said it would end up as a military dictatorship, but after the July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler, it's the SS, the fascist section of the state bureaucracy, that is killing the generals, not the other way round. We can't expect history simply to repeat itself, clearly we're seeing a new configuration of fascism, but how important is it that we're not seeing some of the classical characteristics? It's not just a Brazilian question. In France the Rassemblement National has 50,000 members—compared to the National Socialists that's nothing; compared to the British Labour Party it's nothing—the Labour Party has half a million members. I think I've posed what is the question for me.

It's a good question, and we pose it to ourselves every day—we don't have strong opinions on this, we're not dogmatic. We don't call Bolsonaro a fascist; we call him a neo-fascist. With the word "neo-fascist" we want to say it's not fascism. In Brazilian society it's probably not possible to have a fascist movement. This is a hypothesis: I hope it's not possible! That's the optimist in me. For us, the essential idea of fascism is that it's counter-revolutionary—it's everything you said and I'll make a point on each aspect. But the main issue is that fascism is a counter-revolutionary political instrument to fight against proletarian socialist or anti-capitalist revolution—historically, the danger of a European revolution, or the danger of the Italian or the German or the Portuguese or the Spanish revolution. Then come the other factors. Bolsonaro isn't that, because there's no danger of revolution.

Unfortunately.

It's reactionary fascist vocabulary engaged against a reformist party in government that collaborated with the major factions of the "Paulista" (São Paulo based) leadership of the bourgeoisie. We say "neo-fascist" because Bolsonaro is reactionary, not counter-revolutionary. But we have an open mind. The last word is not yet spoken. The final evaluation depends on the international situation of capitalism, the stagnation of the Brazilian capitalist economy, the reaction of the working class against this government—it depends, it can get worse. Bolsonaro's main project is a Bonapartist government. He's not planning a fascist dictatorship. He builds an improvised political instrument that has a fascist vocabulary, but the project is not fascism but a Bonapartist authoritarian government. He wants to change the equilibrium between the executive, the congress, the judiciary, the military, the police and the media. He spoke several times about the relations between these institutions and how these will change, he said very clearly.

Bolsonaro said several times: "Liberal media, do you hear me? I'm telling you—you're fake news"—just like Donald Trump. "You will be strangled economically by me as president. Can you hear me? You opposed me, you criticised me—you will be destroyed economically." All this in as many words. Against the *Folha de São Paulo*, against the Frias family who own it. I'm not so certain what will happen to the most important newspaper in Brazil. It's a completely family newspaper. The Marinho family, who own the *Globo* TV empire, are really scared of this guy. So they are pressuring and trying to embrace and they will probably reposition themselves, accept him as a far-right legal government.

Coming back to the main question, now the aspects. The first aspect, the middle class mobilisation: Bolsonaro made that. It's the new middle class in a dependent country and he mobilised them. People went to the streets. The second aspect, the fascist mass party: he doesn't have that. But he has a party, the Social Liberal Party (PSL)—we're talking about dozens of thousands of members—it's not big. But he's started a campaign to affiliate 70 million people through the internet. He's making a campaign on the internet and the goal of the campaign is "Build the Party! We'll be 70 Million People!" There's no chance that that can be done at this moment. It's a bluff. But he knows that he couldn't have won without the spontaneous but very effective organisation of dozens of thousands of people in the main cities of Brazil. That meant that, for the past three years, since 2015, when the middle class started their movement and went on the streets to overthrow the government of Dilma Rousseff, every city with an airport, every time he arrives at the airport there were thousands of people waiting for him. This is organised. It's a working day and people don't go to work and stay all the day with him. For three years he's been doing that. So he has dozens of thousands. Will that get larger? Probably. But 70 million? Impossible. They don't have the organisers to do that. To organise 70 million you would need to organise hundreds of thousands of politically active and professionally competent people. But something Bolsonaro will organise. He knows he needs support.

The relationship with the military is a conflictual one. It's a collaboration, a strong relation, but the parties to it have different interests. Yesterday, for instance, the most important general in power, General Eduardo Villas Bôas, gave an interview to the *Folha* saying: "We will collaborate with the government, but it won't be a military government and we are very very worried that the image of the armed forces will be contaminated with that of the Bolsonaro government. We're not the same thing." And Bolsonaro contradicts the generals, publicly. He

says: “I respect the generals, but it’s the captain [ie Bolsonaro himself, an ex-army officer] who was elected. No general was elected, but I was elected.” He pressures them also.

This is not fascism—it’s neo-fascism. The danger is a Bonapartist regime. And even the concept of neo-fascism is a theoretical concept in construction. And we don’t make parallels with the developed countries. This is a phenomenon with the specificities of a peripheral country. You can’t say that 55 per cent of the country voted for a fascist, because they don’t know that. They voted for a conservative authoritarian candidacy. That’s what they see.

Let me finally take up the question of Bolsonaro’s relationship to neoliberalism, because the way you describe the outlook of the bourgeoisie and the middle class is that they want a radicalisation of neoliberalism—the state is too big, etc, etc. And that’s clearly the programme of some of the people in Bolsonaro’s government, for example Paulo Guedes, his nominee for minister of finance, who has a PhD from Chicago and who says he wants to do to Brazil what the Chicago Boys did to Chile under Augusto Pinochet.¹⁰ This again is a genuine problem: with the far right more generally, are we seeing an authoritarian turn of neoliberalism or is this something different (or a combination of the two)? I’m asking you this about the Brazilian case. I can see problems with simply trying to radicalise neoliberalism: first, in terms of the kind of appeal to the poor and to sections of the working class that Bolsonaro makes, if there’s a real attack on the social programmes that the PT introduced, that may be popular with people in the middle class, it won’t be popular among the poorest; secondly, historically the Brazilian bourgeoisie has been very dependent on the state—so just privatising everything presumably is going to be a problem for at least sections of the bourgeoisie.

Well, in Brazil the dominant class improvise a lot—in this sense they are very American. Ideology doesn’t have a big weight on the dominant class or in Brazilian society. Ideas don’t play the role they do in Britain or in Europe. Ideas play a role in history at some level, we know that, but Brazil is a very non-ideological society. So the Brazilian bourgeoisie is not a fanatic for any kind of ideology—they’re very empirical people. There will be conflicts and there will be sectors of the bourgeoisie that will be sacrificed, but the main issue is what will be the relationship between Bolsonaro and the financial sector of the bourgeoisie in São Paulo? That is the main question, because this is the most powerful fraction of the bourgeoisie in Brazil.

Bolsonaro will try to make a budget shock next year. We have the biggest government budget deficit in the dependent countries—8 per cent of GDP. This is much higher than Argentina, which is less than 5 per cent. Bolsonaro wants a zero deficit next year. It has never been done. The São Paulo bourgeoisie support this because the government debt is the main question: it is over 75 per cent of GDP, the highest proportion in the dependent countries. So there are two anomalies in the Brazilian economy, one of the biggest in the dependent countries, with a total GDP of \$2 trillion. The two anomalies are that the budget deficit is over 8 per cent of GDP and overall government debt is 75 per cent of GDP. Bolsonaro wants to achieve a zero deficit and then a budget surplus within two years. The Paulista fraction of the bourgeoisie support this plan. They think it’s not reasonable to do it in one year or two, but they support it. So they will have support to make a neoliberal shock.

The second aspect is: will Bolsonaro sell Petrobras? This is huge. Will he sell the public banks? This is huge. Will he sell the national state electrical company, Eletrobras? This is huge. He will probably sell the Correios, the mail company—it's a huge national state enterprise. But the others, I would say: let's see, it's a practical question. Neoliberalism is an ideology; how they adapt it to the conflicts inside the bourgeoisie is the main issue.

There is the other aspect of the question. It is not possible to make this budget shock without making a very radical reform of the social system and there will be a social reaction to that. This is another issue. He needs to establish a 65 minimum retirement age, and abolish the five-year difference between the retirement age for men and women. The answer is very difficult to give because it depends on one question to which we don't have the answer: what kind of defeat did we have? How to calibrate the defeat. Usually our movement, the Trotskyist movement, we are very passionate about the working class. It is very difficult for us to calibrate defeats. We are incorrigible optimists. We have this class faith. It's in our soul. The two hearts of Trotskyism are internationalism and confidence in the working class. So the main question is: did we have in the last two or three years culminating in the electoral victory of Bolsonaro a historical defeat or is it only a political defeat?

We—*Resistência* in general, myself (I play a role in this)—think it's not a historic defeat. But we are open minded. We will confirm whether we are right in the next six months. The two tragic moments of the dictatorship, 1964 and 1968, were a historic defeat, and we needed between 15 and 20 years to make mass movements in 1984. A historic defeat means that a generation feels defeated, has lost confidence in itself. So people get atomised. People get demoralised. In the enterprises workers get split, smashed. The unions survive but there's no massive sector—not necessarily the majority of the working class—that responds to what the unions say and what the left says. The left speaks to itself; it has no mass audience.

The main question is: was the turn to the right of the middle classes, the unification of the bourgeoisie, the dramatic form taken by the end of the Workers Party experience, with the criminalising of the Workers Party leadership and the criminalising of Lula himself, a historic defeat? Lula in prison isn't a secondary question, it's a symbol for the politically educated, experienced sectors of the working class, who influence the younger generation (there aren't a lot of militants active in the big enterprises over 55 or 60 years of age, most of the militants are in their 30s, but those that are have a huge authority), for them Lula rotting in prison is a demonstration of the strength of the state and of the dominant class.

We don't think it's a historic defeat. We think we can organise mass resistance. But we don't close the door to discussion of the other hypothesis. If it's a historic defeat, it will take some time before a new generation begins to move. The main thing is to look at the youngest, those who put themselves into activity after the protest movement of 2013, they are the most active sector, the sector that has the highest fighting disposition. Will they be extremely isolated inside the enterprises, and people don't respond to them, and then they get demoralised because they feel the weight of the demoralisation of the masses? How will this relationship between vanguard and mass movements play out? So on this matter we are cautious, we are waiting. With both concepts—neofascism and historic versus political defeat—we pose the different options and we'll see. We'll be more certain in six months.

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Notes:

[1](#) See Albuquerque, 2016, and Anderson, 2016, on the development of this crisis.

[2](#) Trotsky, 1938.

[3](#) Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) argued that the equilibrium of forces that developed between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the French Revolution of 1848 allowed Napoleon III to construct an authoritarian regime that secured property and order. In the 1930s Trotsky described Bonapartism as a “transitional governmental form” between bourgeois democracy and fascism, “a military-police dictatorship...barely concealed with the decorations of parliamentarism”—Trotsky, 1971, pp438-439. There is a helpful discussion of the fascist state as one form of “exceptional state” in Poulantzas, 1974, especially chapter 7. Poulantzas argues that the exceptional form of state (eg fascism, Bonapartism, military dictatorship) is characterised by its “relative autonomy...with respect to the dominant classes and fractions”, which is “necessary to the exceptional state in order to reorganise relations within the power bloc and hegemony, within the framework of the political crisis” that allowed the emergence of this form in the first place—Poulantzas, 1974, p347.

[4](#) Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, metalworkers’ leader in the 1980s, one of the founders of the PT in 1980 and its first leader and president of Brazil 2003-10 was convicted on highly controversial charges of corruption in 2017 and jailed in April 2018. Lula’s imprisonment prevented him from running in the 2018 presidential election, which he might have won.

[5](#) Callinicos, 1983.

[6](#) Zanini, 2018.

[7](#) Arcary, 2018.

[8](#) Trotsky, 1971.

[9](#) See Callinicos, 2001.

[10](#) Schipani and Leahy, 2018.

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