

# Brazil's Racial Capitalism at a Turning Point

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In February, I published an article in the *International Marxist-Humanist* reporting that the political scene was horrible in Brazil. Five months ago, I had in my mind how fascism was growing quickly under the hegemony of identity politics, especially with social movements' fragmentation, and the increase of anti-communist thought, with slanders against Marx as totalitarian, Eurocentric and colonial. I said that all of this, in addition to the legacy of almost 15 years of Workers' Party government that ended via an institutional coup d'état in 2016, was leading to the destruction - ideological and material - of the left.

When I said it was horrible, I also had in my mind all the cuts in social policies imposed by the illegitimate Temer government and its allies that left thousands of professors without their salaries for more than four months and almost closed down my University; the setbacks in constitutional rights introduced by the most conservative Congress since the military dictatorship; the increase in killings of LGBT people and of violence against women and femicide; the massacres in rural areas and the accelerating expropriation of lands from campesinos and traditional communities; the endless genocide of Black and Indigenous peoples that murders daily people like me — my age or younger — in the main cities of my country. I had in mind my 19-year-old Black communist comrade Nathalia, who killed herself last year because she could not support the pain of being a Black - and violated - woman anymore (such as many other students in my University in the past years).

From February to today the situation worsened in a scary, barbaric way. The federal government still imposes harsh austerity measures that have deadly impacts on the working class - especially members of vulnerable groups. Despite the huge cuts in the public budget to social services, such as public health, retirement and education, on February 20th, the government decreed a federal intervention in Rio's Public Security System - an unplanned extreme military measure that is estimated to cost 3.1 billion reais[1] (something around 1 billion US dollars, an amount that corresponds to almost half of the total public health spending - R\$ 6.4 billion - in the Rio de Janeiro state budget proposal for 2018). The intervention is based upon a provision of the Constitution that is to be used as an *ultima ratio* in extreme cases and cannot be run by a military unit.

There is no apparent reason for this intervention; Rio is not even considered one of the country's ten most dangerous or conflict-ridden cities. In violation of the Constitution, moreover, the president declared that it is an intervention "of a military nature," nominated a general from the Army to command the intervention. The government publicly characterized this effort as a "laboratory" for the rest of the country,[2] which means that it is an experiment tested in Rio that will be used in the whole country in the future. The federal intervention - which is currently scheduled to last until December 31 - opens a new chapter in the militarization of the lives of the working class in Brazil.

The announcement of the intervention was accompanied by strategies to shield the authorities from

any kind of accountability for what could happen as a result. At the meeting with the Council of the Republic, the general intervenor said it was necessary to give the armed forces “a guarantee allowing them to act without the risk of a new Truth Commission.”[3] For those who don’t know our history, the Truth Commission was installed in 2012 by the federal government – after huge pressure from civil society – to investigate accusations of torture, killings and other crimes committed by Brazilian Armed Forces during the last dictatorship when thousands of citizens disappeared or were executed.

Thus, the more serious implication of this military policy is to protect human rights violators from accountability. This is even more shocking if we consider that a few months before the intervention was decreed, Congress passed a federal law that reverses one of the most disputed achievements of what we called the democratic transition: the law that transferred the judgment of crimes committed by the Armed Forces (including the military police) against civilians from the military to civilian courts. It means that all acts committed by military and military police officers will no longer be subject to the civilian courts. We call this law the state’s formal license to kill.

Armed with a framework of impunity or safe conduct to violate our rights, days of intervention followed, with military vehicles on the streets, children’s backpacks searched by heavily armed soldiers, and killings of favela residents. To better illustrate the extent of state terrorism we are living in, I will provide you with a quick example: Less than a month ago, we saw a sheriff interviewed on a midday TV show stating that he would go to one of Rio’s favelas and “drown the ground in blood” in revenge for a policeman who was killed the day before. He also said, “No human rights organization or Facebook denunciation could stop the police entering and killing.” The next day, the police fulfilled this commitment, as citizens were killed or injured by bullets shot from helicopters, among them children and women, and this in broad daylight (a practice that has been repeatedly used in Rio’s favelas). No public authority – at the state or federal level – publicly condemned this attitude from the state police in Rio. This shows the present level of democratic rupture.

While huge sectors of the middle class all over the country support the militarization of public security in an attitude of both alienation and despair, the media focus on other issues like the FIFA World Cup in Russia. Meanwhile, military intervention consolidates the state’s attacks on the rights, freedoms, and living conditions the working class. The level of state authoritarianism is rising in the context of deep precaritization and expropriation, where space has been created for the public expression of fascist discourses that preach the elimination of “the other” within civil society. Brazilian critical thinkers Guilherme Gonçalves and Marta Machado have been calling this phenomenon “authoritarian neoliberalism” and linking the rise of fascism and state’s terrorism to the wave of expropriations. They suggest that although neoliberalism – with austerity and privatizations – is not a new phenomenon in Brazil, there is something different in the face Temer’s regime gives neoliberalism[4]. I share their analysis and would like to argue that we are approaching a turning point. However, while the organized left is still confused about what is really going on with Brazilian representative democracy, there is also no common ground among socialist intellectuals.

On March 14th, less than a month after military intervention was decreed in Rio, Marielle Franco was killed. It’s still hard to believe. One of city council members who received the most votes in Rio’s history – the only Black and revolutionary socialist I can remember seeing occupying a political position in Brazil – was brutally murdered. Personally, it is still hard for me to talk about this: I began my socialist activism when I was 16 years old in the student movement and soon joined the same tendency from the same party as she (Party of Socialism and Liberty-PSOL). We used to attend the same meetings and lived in the same neighborhood. I left the party over political disagreements in 2012, but a huge part of the activist I am today is influenced by her. Marielle was brutally killed with nine shots in a political murder in the center of Rio, the second biggest city of the country.

Her murder – for which clear evidence exists that it was committed by well-trained state officers – was a clear attack not only on the Brazilian left, or on human rights defenders in general, but particularly on every Black proletarian woman who dares to fight in the political space of Brazil. To me, it clearly shows how social totality in terms of exploitation and inequality works at the present stage of capitalism – and how capitalism is intersectional in matters of class, race and gender through violent, direct expropriation. Also, it presents the clearest evidence that representative democracy is totally compatible with an authoritarian state for the working class and that the reformist option has failed. Let me expand on this point by looking briefly at Marielle’s political life.

As a member of Rio de Janeiro’s State Human Rights Commission for over 10 years, Marielle always fought within the established institutions. She worked tirelessly to defend the rights of Black women, Black and young people in the favelas, LGBTQ+ and other vulnerable communities, publicly denouncing extrajudicial executions and state violence. She was elected to the city council for the first time in 2016. Two weeks before her shooting, she had been appointed rapporteur for a special commission that the city council had created to monitor the ongoing federal intervention in Rio de Janeiro and the militarization of public security. She had been expressing herself publicly against it. Until today, we have no answers about who may be responsible for her murder and state authorities remain silent about it.

After her shocking murder, the general feeling amongst the left and social movements is that of theoretical loss, disbelief, institutional rupture and profound hopelessness. Definitely, it seems that Brazilian capitalism achieved a point of no return. Despite the wide expansion of formal rights for minorities, reality shows that there is no longer space for liberal human rights and there is no hope in building a better world. Socialists, human rights NGOs, Blacks, women, and LGBTQ+ movements are all shocked and each took her murder as a personal attack. All those fragmented sectors went together into the streets in what became absolutely massive demonstrations, with only one slogan: Justice for Marielle. During that month, the same feeling that paralyzed thousands of us made us feel the totality again. We all cried together at her funeral, and we were all called upon to rethink our political practices. Marielle’s murder also helped remind us that after almost 400 years under slavery and a total of 30 years under two different anti-communist military dictatorships, the relatively young Brazilian democratic tradition never really existed for us, the working class. Black, indigenous, and poor, expropriated of everything, we are survivors from a genocide that violently incarcerates *en masse* and kills more than 60,000 citizens per year — more than half of whom are youths (ages 15–29) and 77 percent are Black. Despite the expansion of formal rights achieved since the unified struggles that led to the establishment of our democratic constitution in 1988, we had always been under classic neoliberal and neoliberal-developmental regimes that never aimed or were capable of achieving a real diminishment of inequalities and that had always used direct extraeconomic violence against us.

The big inter-class agreement promoted by the Workers’ Party after Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva achieved power in 2002 worked by way of the cooptation of the major trade unions and the social movements that had been organized up to then. Neoliberal compromises with the support of financial capital for some mildly redistributive social policies were the primary condition for its maintenance and expansion. Gradually, while expanding formal rights and investing in inclusion-through-credit politics, Lula’s government rebooted the economy and assured economic growth by investing in commodities. However, as Alfredo Saad-Filho highlights, after the oscillation of the Chinese economy, the global crisis reached the periphery and the price of agricultural commodities and minerals plummeted. Brazil’s prominent new role in the global economy was evident, but since the crisis reached the country in 2013, it has become clear that bank concentration, high interest rates, and financialization of the social policies of the Lula Era would be insufficient for the protection of the financial system.[5]

The improvement in the economy, which took place through Lula's policy of mass consumption including the impoverished masses under the credit system, was followed by a big wave of formal rights for women and Black people, and their inclusion in public spaces, such as universities, through affirmative action. While the traditional left was not self-reflective on issues involving gender, race, and sexuality, downplaying those debates, the major Brazilian urban centers were flooded with theories linked to identity politics and with horizontal movements. These sought to overcome the "old and oppressive left," and to achieve respect and formal recognition for minorities, and through this, opportunities for them to occupy higher social positions.

However, Workers' Party government policies along with an alliance with bourgeois and conservative parties led to the reaffirmation of the country as a commodities/raw materials producer. This had the effect also of strengthening the most reactionary sector of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, the rural landowners who control our agribusiness sector. Deeply white, conservatively religious, and violent, they are literally the figure of the Master, the old slaveowning class. Gradually gaining power during Lula's government, they now control a parliamentary majority- and Brazilian states. The absence of a real agrarian reform and the absorption of militant leaders in the state bureaucracy weakened the major campesino - and revolutionary - movement we had in the countryside (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra) and fragmented all the others. The growing dependence on non-industrial and low-tech goods and the deindustrialization process were determinant to also weakening the Worker's Party's social base, found mostly among the traditional working-class, both trade unionists and landless peasants. An increasingly conservative mentality among the working people emerged in this context.

Also, through an anti-corruption crusade against the Worker's Party, the mainstream bourgeois media stirred up the urban middle classes, which already had economic, social, and political grievances. As Saad-Filho pointed out, since the first term of Lula's government, the number of upper-middle-class jobs was declining, with 4.3 million posts paying between 5 and 10 times the minimum wage vanishing in the 2000s. In the meantime, the big bourgeoisie was doing very well, and the poor advanced quickly in some respects: even domestic servants got covered under the labor laws; the working-class could now travel on occasion in airplanes - and their children even go to the university! The upper middle classes felt squeezed economically and deprived of their historical privileged spaces. Since Lula's election, they were also displaced from the state bureaucracy, which, as mentioned earlier and also highlighted by Saad-Filho, "had been populated by thousands of cadres appointed by the Workers' Party and the left, to the detriment of 'better-educated,' whiter, and, presumably, more deserving upper-middle class competitors." [6] These phenomena increased the colonialist-rooted hatred that the Brazilian white upper middle classes always had against the working-class. Thereupon, a deep fascist wave arose, with a racist and a deeply anticommunist core, masked inside an ultra-nationalist and pro-military intervention discourse.

This formed the context of the parliamentary *coup d'état* in 2016, which allowed an unelected government - the most unpopular in the world according to opinion polls - to approve a constitutional amendment limiting public spending for twenty years and a labor law reform that would universalize precarity. The result so far was, in 2017, a shrinkage by 7.6% of Brazilian family income, with 60.8% of this income affected by bank debt, and an unemployment rate of 12.4%. In a single year, from 2016 and 2017, the number of Brazilians living in extreme poverty increased by 11.2%, from 13.34 million to 14.83 million people. While profits of R\$ 53.9 billion accrued to the four largest private banks in the country, approval for the Temer government sank to 3% of the population according to opinion polls. [7]

At first glance - especially after my sharp critique above of Lula's administration, it might seem strange to make this connection, but Marielle's murder and Lula's arrest had a lot in common.

In a post-slavery society like Brazil (one of the 10 countries with the highest levels of social inequality in the world), the arbitrary prosecution and arrest of the first and only northern proletarian president, who was only semi-literate in his youth, and the murder of a Black lesbian councilwoman with favela roots are directly linked in the sense that these events represent the core characteristic of Brazilian racial capitalism, and – the aspect I want to highlight here – its expropriation-based essence.

This kind of capitalism always worked as a huge form of disciplinary rule over the working class. It doesn't matter how hard our left tries to occupy spaces in representative democracy in order to reform it, to make it less damaging for the working classes, for we will never get rid of these crucial aspects in a capitalist society. You Black, you woman, you proletarian, don't you dare to take part in politics! This is the message that Brazilian dominant classes pass to us.

Is it only in Brazil that representative democracy and fascism work together in the same sentence? Despite the specificities of each social formation, which of course need to be considered, it doesn't seem to me that this is a solely Brazilian phenomenon. And the state of the world today seems only confirms that the only way out must be international organization. In the Brazilian case, the necessity for international working-class organization to solve what appear to be "Brazilian problems" is becoming more and more evident each day.

Lula's arrest on April 7 can be a good barometer of working-class capacity to respond at the national level. He is the most popular president in Brazilian history and finished his second term with 90% favorability in the polls. He was sentenced to twelve years in prison for passive corruption with weak evidence, in a politically motivated trial – completely unfair if we take into account the political partiality of the judge and the deeply corrupt political scenario. Despite all the attempts to mobilize popular support against the arbitrary judgment and sentence, and after he was imprisoned, the working class simply couldn't react. He has been imprisoned for four months now, with every chance that he will die there. The craziest part is this: He is still leading by a wide margin in voter preferences for the presidency in opinion polls. Unfortunately, however, no candidate endorsed by him or by the Worker's Party has been able to achieve his level of popularity. The second candidate is the fascist ex-military Jair Bolsonaro (more on him below). I want to stress here that even with this level of popular support for Lula and with the fascist threat, the working class is at present unable to take to the streets in large numbers, let alone stop the country in a general strike.

Social scientists still have trouble explaining this situation. Some of them blame a lack of political consciousness, or even the 'subaltern nature' of the Brazilian people. (Yes, some are still thinking in such terms.) I don't have a ready answer either. What I can see is a mixture of terrible fear, suffering, poverty, lack of social support, and unemployment and precarity within the working class.

When it comes to the fear factor, we cannot forget that Brazil is one of the countries with the highest levels in the Americas of killings of human rights defenders' killings. Those numbers have also increased due to the political situation, with killings usually in the form of massacres. Usually, more than 4 individuals are killed in the same time, with involvement of state actors and huge levels of impunity. As already mentioned, racism and police brutality against Black people also have played a big role in the decline of democracy. Under the so-called wars on drugs, *state racial* terrorism, genocide, and mass incarceration, people living in the peripheries and favelas have just one concern, to survive. Between January and March 2017, a staggering one in three violent deaths in the city of São Paulo had a police officer as the perpetrator. When people in favelas try to hold street demonstrations in their communities, the same police that brutally repress demonstrations in the center of the city using non-lethal weapons instead attack them here with live ammunition. In this context, there is no space for progressive debates or demonstrations of any kind among the working class – again, the majority of Lula's voters.

The same violent and repressive reality can be seen regarding gender and sexuality issues. Reported violence and killings are increasing rapidly. Brazil has been considered one of the most dangerous places in the world for transgender people.[8] This means that despite the rise of LGBT movements and feminism, the working class is becoming even more homophobic and conservative. In part, this is because those movements are primarily linked to identity politics and individualist activism and there is almost no dialogue between them and the mass of working people — the peasantry, the proletariat, and the “precariat,” whose conversion to Pentecostal alt-right churches has also been massive.

In this year’s Brazilian presidential elections, scheduled for October, the scenario is completely frightening – please keep in mind that Lula is still in first place, with the double the poll numbers of the second candidate, despite languishing in prison. The second candidate is the fascist Jair Bolsonaro, already called the “Tropical Trump.”[9]Bolsonaro mixes racist and sexist hate speech in a religious, militarized and nationalist public discourse. To make matters worse, research demonstrates that this year we will have 71 military officers running in local elections in 23 of the 27 Brazilian states. At the time of my earlier article in February, I thought that a new path of military dictatorship was being built in the country – through democratic institutions and legal mechanisms. Today, the military is openly saying that “the time has come to get back in power by democratic means,” as stated by General Antonio Mourão, the high-ranking officer who has been organizing candidates to form a military caucus in the new Congress to support Bolsonaro. Unable to overcome their fragmentation and to coalesce in a unified coalition, none the socialist left candidates have been able to attain more than 1% in the pre-election polls.

Surprisingly, new actors are emerging in this situation. In May, we were surprised by a weeklong truck drivers strike, which was able to shut down the country, as it suddenly provoked a supply crisis. It was a complex scenario for the traditional left to understand. The drivers are an autonomous precariat, fragmented and totally heterogeneous. They have the most diverse ideological composition – some of them were asking for a military dictatorship, while others called for Lula’s freedom. The bigger part of the traditional left labeled the strike non-progressivist, since it could be a lock-out made by entrepreneurs from the logistic sector. But the larger point is that the left was not able to explain why it would be a lock-out, and worse, didn’t try to join the strike to convince the workers and unite other categories in a general strike. They simply ignored the possibility that the lockout could turn into a real strike.

Other movements of this kind – especially among the precariat – are popping up. The National Black Women’s Network is being reactivated in states such as Rio after 30 years and a huge number of Black women are running as autonomous candidates for parliament through the traditional left parties, in an attempt to change the political scenario.

Favela dwellers and youth collectives still organizing demonstrations and trying to fight against militarization, human rights violations and for the right to live.

I asked in February and I will ask again now. How long will our acts of bravery last? Can our fragmented and pragmatic efforts dispell an increasingly fascist national atmosphere? I don’t have an answer for the first question, but I am sure that for the second the immediate answer is no. Look where we have arrived via reformist pragmatism and fragmentation! In the middle of barbarism, building another society is urgent. I don’t know if we will live to see it become a reality, but I can only fight – transforming my grief into a commitment to rebuild revolutionary internationalist Marxism; helping to reunite the working class; understanding the working class as it really is, diversity in unity. Recognizing and learning from our different survival strategies within the class struggle and hoping that a better future could be possible for all of us. I believe that the path to do this is understanding, as Tithi Bhattacharya writes, “Every social and political movement ‘tending’ in

the direction of gains for the working class as a whole, or of challenging the power of capital as a whole, must be considered an aspect of class struggle.”[10] In this regard, I would like to highlight race and gender-based movements like the Brazilian Favela’s Mothers Movement against police brutality and militarization (Rede Contra a Violência) – from whose resistance we have so much to learn.

I am convinced that the only way out for humanity now is found in the African expression, “Ubuntu,” as Marielle and our Black feminist tradition used to say – “I am because we are.” But I am also convinced that the only path to completely understand this saying is to fully grasp social totality, that is, capitalist totality. We cannot rely on solidarity for convenience, just momentary solidarity; we must understand that there is no “other,” that what we call solidarity with the other is in reality solidarity with ourselves – since no oppression, no expropriation, no exploitation is autonomous.

Capitalism is individualizing but is not individualistic, capitalism is universal – in the sense of its ideology, domination and exploitation. It is a universal a priori and this universal, which is bourgeois, white, male, and heteronormative, is not – and never was nor will be – what we, the working class, need or desire. We need to build on a daily basis a universal for the future, with no national boundaries, with no borders, and with diversity in unity, as Marx pointed out 200 years ago.

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[1] Actually, there is no transparency on the total cost of the measure. Despite being first announced as a deficit in the public expenditure for the security system – to be covered by the intervention – this is the total programmed spending guaranteed for the public security system in Rio in 2018. For the intervention alone, Temer freed up in March an additional 1.2 billion reais, which was added to the already existent spending to Rio’s 2018 public security. For more, see: <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/braga-netto-nega-passivo-de-r-31-bilhoes-na-seguranca-do-rj.ghtml>

[2] Cf. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/rio-could-be-laboratory-for-solving-brazil-crime-crisis/2018/02/19/242b6ff0-15a6-11e8-930c-45838ad0d77a\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.4cba00550678](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/rio-could-be-laboratory-for-solving-brazil-crime-crisis/2018/02/19/242b6ff0-15a6-11e8-930c-45838ad0d77a_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4cba00550678)

[3] Cf. <https://g1.globo.com/politica/blog/cristiana-lobo/post/general-vilas-boas-militares-precisam-ter-garantia-para-agir-sem-o-risco-de-surgir-uma-nova-comissao-da-verdade.ghtml>

[4] Cf. Gonçalves, Guilherme; Machado, Marta. Neoliberalismo autoritário em cinco atos: do salvamento de bancos à morte de Marielle. Revista Le monde Diplomatique.. EDIÇÃO – 129 | BRASIL, Abril 2018. Disponível em: <https://diplomatique.org.br/neoliberalismo-autoritario-em-cinco-atos/>

[5] Saad-Filho, Alfredo. 2018. “The attack on Lula and threats to Brasil’s Democracy.”

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[6] Saad-Filho, Alfredo. 2016. “Overthrowing Dilma Rousseff: It’s class war & their class is winning.”

FocaalBlog, 22 March.

[7] Data extracted from: Gonçalves, Guilherme; Machado, Marta. Neoliberalismo autoritário em cinco atos: do salvamento de bancos à morte de Marielle. Revista Le monde Diplomatique.. EDIÇÃO - 129 | BRASIL, Abril 2018. Disponível em: <https://diplomatie.org.br/neoliberalismo-autoritario-em-cinco-atos/>

[8] Half of the reported killings of transgender people in the world occur here. Data from 2017 Report “The Vicious Circle of Violence: Trans and Gender-Diverse People, Migration, and Sex Work” the NGO “Trans Respect versus Homophobia. <http://transrespect.org/en/tvt-publication-series/>

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[9] Phillips, Tom. *The Guardian*. 2018. “Trump of the tropics: the ‘dangerous’ candidate leading Brazil’s presidential race.”

[10] Bhattacharya, Tithi, ed. 2017. *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*. London: Pluto Press. p. 85.

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