

**“Human Rights for the Righteous Humans”:
The influence of Brazilian Conservatism on the national
perception of human rights**

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Abstract

In the past years Brazil has been through innumerable corruption scandals and increasing political polarization, which has led to the impeachment of a president and a serious economic crisis. However, these are not the only consequences generated by the clash between the left and the right wing in the country. In right wing populist discourse, human rights have been systematically identified with the political left – as this is captured in the popular conservative saying “Direitos Humanos para Humanos Direitos” (Human Rights for the Righteous Humans), meaning that the fundamental purpose of human rights is the protection of outlaws and the perpetuation of the weakness of that state that has to treat all individuals equally. For the Brazilian far right, human rights are a synonym of exaggerated and harmful “political correctness.” The aim of this paper is to understand how and why the term has become pejorative for a whole political segment, and what its effects are on Brazilian national and foreign policy regarding the human rights agenda.

Keywords: human rights, political left, political right, ideology, Brazilian politics

Introduction

In 2015, protesters went to the streets to claim their rights and to profess their dissatisfaction with the political and economic situation of Brazil. The turmoil that unfolded from March to August regarding the endemic corruption in the country put not only new social issues on the agenda, but also brought new socially privileged groups to the political arena. Conservatism was the dominant ideology of the protests (Messenberg, 2017). The events led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in

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2016. Among the protesters' ideas was the association of human rights with the liberal ideology connected to the "Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT" (Workers' Party), the party in government since 2003. The aim of this work is to comprehend the reasons behind the emergence of this negative interpretation of human rights coming from the far right in Brazil, as well as the implications thereof for politics and policies.

The construction of the left-right dichotomy in Brazil is deeply connected to the country's historical path as a former European colony and as a Latin American country that used to be a dictatorship in its recent past. These opposite political forces, towards the end of the period of dictatorship, were closely related to the involvement of the parties in the old authoritarian regime (Madeira and Tarouco, 2011). Therefore, to answer the main question of this paper, we will analyze the historical construction of Brazilian politics and the history of human rights in Brazil. This will be investigated in light of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, and the linguistic-philosophical concept of *Weltanschauung* (Worldview) by Max Weber. Both sociological theories, seen through the lens of constructivism, can help us understand the Brazilian *zeitgeist*, regarding the clash of conservative and liberal ideologies and as to what implications this may carry internationally.

Conservatism and human rights in Brazil

Right and left are inevitably awkward and ill-fitting terms, while at the same time they are mutually excluding and exhaustive (Bobbio, 1995). Bobbio thus contests this distinction arguing that no doctrine can simultaneously belong to both sides even as they cannot perfectly belong within this dichotomous characterization. Coming from the French Revolution of 1789, the opposed terms were classified by the concept of movement (change) or order (reactionism), and we still carry this binary legacy in our contemporary politics. However, it is important to highlight that the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new issues in International Relations have greatly influenced the political landscape, contributing to a growing sense of change among political parties in this respect (Madeira and Tarouco, 2011).

Benoit and Laver, in their in-depth study of the policy positioning of political parties, explain the left-right spectrum as follows:

“[...] the left-right scale in a given political system can be seen as having to do with economic policy – where economic policy might include policies on the

trade-offs between lower taxation and higher public spending, for example, or between the regulation and deregulation of business and industry. It may also be seen as having to do with “social” policy on matters such as abortion, gay rights and euthanasia. The left-right scale might be seen as having a bearing on foreign and defense policy on matters such as military spending, overseas aid, and dealings with international organizations such as the United Nations. In other words, there is a lot of substantive policy content that people typically regard as being natural to associate with the left-right spectrum in politics, and one approach to defining and estimating a left-right scale is to construct this scale from its substantive content.” (Benoit and Laver, 2006: 189)

In many Latin American countries and in Brazil, this political distinction does not hold at all. These nations did not go through the same historical and revolutionary processes that shaped politics in European/Western countries (*ibidem*). As a matter of fact, many of the policies and governance ideals put into practice by former colonies are simply due to attempts to emulate European/Western politics in a totally different environment, under vastly different conditions. The U.S. concept of how to define right-wing vs. left-wing ideology would, for instance, typically attribute the defense of human rights and constitutionalism for the right-wing; and peace and internationalism to the left-wing, but this does not correspond to Brazilian reality.

The period of dictatorship in Brazil started with a *coup d’etat* organized by military groups in 1964, and lasted until 1985. It was a period marked by a constant disrespect for fundamental legal principles where the government imposed its doctrine of “national security,” which was deliberately kept vague and flexible in its interpretation (Mezarobba, 2010). The twenty-one years of authoritarianism in Brazil shaped politics, configuring the current multiparty system. During the 1990s, the ideological debate was brought back to the political agenda related to issues which are closer to the classical left-right distinction, such as the privatization of public services and the deregulation of the economy (Madeira and Tarouco, 2013). As a result, the left-right axis was divided into two dimensions: political ideologies and economic ideologies. Within leftist political ideas, we can find the protection of human rights.

“In Latin American history, in general, and in Brazil in particular, the denial of these rights is notable, especially towards economically disadvantaged citizens, and with a total disrespect for the promotion of human dignity. It is the result of a

history marked by profound inequalities between those who have everything and those who have nothing, which is a consequence firstly of an elitist political-social structure and oligarchy that is resistant to the essential transformations necessary to improve the quality of life of the latter” (Barbosa, 2008: 27).²

In Brazil, human rights are guaranteed by the Federal Constitution of 1988, which can be considered a great legal advance, since the country’s history was marked by major episodes of serious disrespect for these rights. The country has lived through a long period of slavery and only achieved the right to religious freedom in 1891. During the Military Regime, the political repression increased, and torture, abduction, murder and the disappearance of enemies of the government was commonplace. For this reason, leftist parties distanced themselves from the anti-communist and violent dictatorship by promoting human rights. The idea that all humans are equal before the law was considered threatening to the higher classes of society. In this sense, it is important to stress that conservatism is closely related to the economic elites in the country. In the words of sociologist Pierucci:

“Conservatism is, first of all, a proposal of sociability. ... It is a combination of practices (of distinction, hierarchy, contempt, humiliation, intolerance, aggression, prophylaxis, segregation), of spontaneous discourses, and doctrinal discourses, covering the public sphere and private life, political and economic solutions, and also moral restoration: rationalizations, principles and stereotypes, ghosts and prejudices spinning around or being born in the radius of an obsession with identity, that is, of self- preservation through the Other of an ‘I’ or a threatened ‘we’” (Pierucci, 1990: 10).³

This segregationist conservatism is widely seen during times of crisis and it divides Brazil’s population.

From 2003 to 2016, Brazil was governed by the left-wing Workers Party (PT). In a presidential system with four-year terms, the first eight years of the 2000s saw Luis Inácio Lula da Silva as President. He had a reputation of fighting for the poor and the minorities, and it was during his presidential term that many affirmative action measures

² My translation from Portuguese.

³ My translation from Portuguese.

came into force. All things considered, it is realistic to claim that the right wing in Brazil is historically connected to social status, along with a belief in the supremacy of private property, free enterprise, the valorization of tradition and the praise of the nobility (Messenberg, 2017). After Lula, President Dilma Rousseff tried to continue his legacy and “although their [...] governments never formally adhered to analogous positions, there were frequent accusations that they were transforming Brazil into Venezuela by opposition politicians, media and public opinion” (Messenberg, 2017: 636)⁴. The middle classes also vented their fury against the widening of social citizenship, including changes in the state, in welfare transfer programs, in university and state school quotas for blacks, in terms of the labor rights of domestic servants, etc. (Saad-Filho and Boito, 2016: 220).

The protests in 2015 were not only the consequence of an “excluded” political right, but also the consequence of a growing economic crisis. The 2015 demonstrations erupted in the political vacuum created by the paralysis of Dilma’s administration because of its own failings and by Brazil’s worsening economy (Saad-Filho and Boito, 2016: 213). Corruption scandals, increasing violence and the recent dissatisfaction towards the Brazil’s hosting of the 2014 World Cup, brought hundreds of thousands of high/middle class protesters to the streets (*ibidem*). One of the results from this turmoil was the motto “*Direitos Humanos para Humanos Direitos*” (Human Rights for the Righteous Humans), which shows a clear effort to distance the protesters’ ideologies from the PT’s leftist ideologies. The idea of this sentence is to criticize equality and the state that wants to “enforce” it. The linguistic nature of this slogan, and its meaning in the social context will be analyzed in the next part of this paper.

The construction of *Weltanschauung* through cultural hegemony

To comprehend the main events that culminated in the crisis in Brazil, and the reasons behind them, Alexander Wendt's constructivist theory can greatly help us (1987). Policies are not determined by either the agents (policy-makers), or the structures, but in an interaction between them. This gives the actors and the system equal ontological status.

The conservative ideology towards human rights in Brazil can be addressed through the framework provided by Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, as it reflects

⁴ My translation from Portuguese.

on the relation between culture and power (Lears, 1985), and explains how specific cultural views become dominant in a social structure.

As it was mentioned previously, during the period of dictatorship, Brazil's political right based power on law and order, and was associated with the economic elite. Compared to the political left, conservative parties are connected to the wealthier classes that demand most of all stability. The current right-wing ideologies were thus built to represent opposition. "For Gramsci, ideology is not merely a system of beliefs that reflect specific class interests; its development is more complex" (Lears, 1985: 570) – in the case of the political right in Brazil, it is built on antagonism towards the lower classes. During the protests in Brazil, the ruling party was leftist. Thus, in order to achieve dominance in the political struggle, the extreme right politicians and media influencers used articulations inspired by Bolivarianism and Communism to impose their worldview on elements of society outside their core constituency through fear (Messenberg, 2017). The resulting new right-wing bloc can be characterized as follows:

"The 'new right' describes a large and heterogeneous field of social groups, interests and values that have converged around an unremitting rejection of the PT and selected aspects of its rule. These groups include (mainly, though not exclusively, US-based) imperialist interests, large domestic capital integrated with the empire (the international Brazilian bourgeoisie dominated by finance but including segments of manufacturing and agribusiness), the upper middle class and sections of the broad working class that, for religious or ideological reasons, oppose the expansion of civic rights and progressive values, with current flashpoints centered around abortion and homosexuality (a generation ago divorce fulfilled a similar role)" (Saad-Filho and Boito, 2016: 222).⁵

It is also instructive to apply Weber's concept of *Weltanschauung* (the worldviews of a group, expressed by linguistic means) to understand the new right's ideological structures (Weber, 1992:113). In the sentence "Human Rights for the Righteous Humans", the worldview of the conservative strata of society in Brazil is explicit: "blind" equality is harmful. The new right thus undermines minorities and seeks to disempower much of Brazil's population. The aim here was to shock and to be represented in the media – in this way, as Gramsci predicts, they executed an act of domination to build up the

⁵ My translation from Portuguese.

hegemony of their ideology. Inevitably, the protests and the media support for right-wing claims thus changed the *Weltanschauung* of much of Brazil when talking about human rights.

Brazilian foreign policy can be expected to change due to systemic reasons (structures – such as the changed *Weltanschauung* referred to above) as well as the government's agenda (the preferences of the agents) [Pinheiro and Milani, 2011]. In the past years, Brazil has shown increasing activity in the field of human rights in international affairs; e.g. in recognizing the relevance of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. As Pinheiro and Milani observe,

“the arrival of new actors tends to change the problematization of how the state should behave internationally in the defense of human rights and how this issue relates to the field of security, development and international cooperation. This observation becomes even more relevant in the analysis of international practices of protection and intervention in the name of human rights, since these often reveal dilemmas, discursive ambivalences and behavioral inconsistencies that lie between two poles: the necessary denunciation of a rhetoric of power and adherence to the philosophical principle of a cosmopolitan society of citizens of the world” (Pinheiro and Milani, 2011:34).⁶

In 2009, Mercosur created the Institute for Human Rights Policies, with the aim to broaden the discussion, promotion and development of national and regional studies and strategies on human rights among its member states, advancing rights, strengthening citizenship and consolidating the democracies in these states (Oliveira, Silva and Muniz, 2017). Nevertheless, due to the protests in Brazil, the now prevalent negative attitude towards human rights in the country and the bureaucracy of a transitional government, the project was only approved by Congress in 2017. Moreover, another significant consequence from the demonstrations of 2015 and the rise of the slogan “Human Rights for the Righteous Humans” is that rise of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency. His views certainly do not promise the kind of active and inclusive engagement on human rights issues that was promised by the above-mentioned initiative.

⁶ My translation from Portuguese.

Conclusion

According to the constructivist perspective, the international system is socially constructed. It can and should change constantly. It is what we make of it. The central suggestion of constructivism is that ideological structures are pretty much as imperative as material factors in a universal framework for the interpretation of action in a social context.

Moreover, normative structures shape the character of, and the agents base their decisions and activities on, these same structures. Insights from Gramsci and Weber can greatly contribute to the understanding of Brazilians' increasingly conservative worldview. The implication of the processes observed is a big step back for Brazil's democratic development.

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