

## **The right-wing backlash in Brazil and beyond \***

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Right-wing movements in Latin America play a significant role in the region's political life. In this sense, they are not distinct from those analysed in Europe or the United States. Nonetheless, these movements have not generated anything like the level of analysis of their counterparts in those regions. They remain woefully understudied. This paper attempts to fill that void by analysing right-wing movements in one of the countries in the region. We use Brazil as a case study to discuss the rise of right-wing mobilization, particularly focussing on backlash to gender and LGBT rights, in Latin America. We do so by looking at how creating a moral panic around topics such as “family threat” set up anti-rights opportunities. We finish with a discussion on the impact of right-wing movements for democracy in Brazil, in the region and beyond.

### **Introduction**

Who is entitled to have rights? This paper examines how right-wing movements attempt to prevent individuals, especially women and members of LGBT groups, to access equal rights through the use of terms such as “moral worth” and “family values”. At the core of our discussion about the backlash of social rights in Latin America is the need to compare and contrast the case examined here with similar movements outside the region. The vast enterprise of studies on right-wing movements in Western Europe only rarely travels outside a few national boundaries. Eastern

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Europe and the United States are occasionally included. For the most part, right-wing movements are not seen as comparable. Sometimes the reason for excluding Latin America is expressly stated, particularly because the historical experiences are so distinct, for example the long duration of personal or military dictatorships. Interpretations of right-wing movements in Latin America by scholars outside the region tend to be viewed as those associated with the period of authoritarian rule in the 1970s and 1980s, or misunderstood as having little impact on political life (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1630). Analysis within the region has tended to focus on right-wing political parties, religious groups, or the military (Hunter 1997, Luna and Rovira 2014, Fortes 2016, Goldstein 2019). There are few studies of right-wing movements comparing regions. Latin America is thus seen as largely irrelevant to the comparative study of right-wing movements. This article disagrees. It contends that the problem is not the distinctiveness or irrelevance of Latin America's right-wing movements, but the weakness of the existing analytical frameworks. Despite differences among right-wing movements, comparison is not only possible but also contributes to analytical refinement. New, powerful right-wing movements have emerged in the region as a response to the social justice gains in the 1990s to the present. The contexts of their rise, the political implications in this development, and how comparative frameworks can travel outside the region are the three pillars guiding this article.

We start with the third pillar: how to create a strong conceptual framework that defines right-wing mobilization in the region and allows for comparison elsewhere? A central step in building such a framework is defining right-wing movements. Scholars have struggled to develop a good definition. Some focus on the conservative nature of such movements in attempting to preserve the status quo, leading to a "backlash" against or a "roll-back" from gains by the left. Others focus on the economic, or neo-liberal right, that attempts to trim down the state and advance free trade and anti-globalization movements. There is a so-called "moral" right that focuses on decay in

traditional values, such as the family, heteronormativity, and traditional gender and sexual norms. A “nostalgic” right idealizes an authoritarian or fascist past that established security and order, while a nativist right-wing is xenophobic, nationalist, and racist, threatened by immigration and “foreign” values and interests. How can one definition capture this breadth and diversity? Rea (2018) offers such a uniting understanding of the contemporary right: the notion of merit and deservedness. Right-wing ideology focuses on rights that are bestowed on those who “prove” their value. Rights for the left correspond to individuals or groups on the basis of equality or humanness (Rea 2018, 91).<sup>1</sup> Rea’s definition operates for all groups. The differences—fear, threat, nostalgia, conservatism, morality—do not define movements, but rather reflect how movements are framed, and when and how they respond to particular political, social and economic moments.

In the case of Latin America, countermovements, or backlash movements, are perhaps the most pervasive in the region. Framing, especially naming, blaming, aiming, claiming (Payne 2000, 22-24), allows for a discourse of threat or crisis that unites a broad group behind political action. They respond to an identifiable cause of political (social, moral, economic) problems. Defined as “an organized response to a social movement, with the purpose of blocking the movement’s activities, resisting change, and presenting alternative points of view,”<sup>2</sup> these countermovements or backlash movements exist to oppose and counter, or roll back, the social, economic, political, and cultural rights made by social movements advancing gender and other rights in the region. We look at the case of Brazil to discuss how mobilizing against advances made by LGBT and feminist movements gained momentum in the country.

## **How, when and why? Political opportunity for right-wing mobilization in Brazil**

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<sup>1</sup> Rea derives his definition (91) from Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien (2008), who in turn base their definition on D.D. Raphael (2001).

<sup>2</sup> *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 2018. See also (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Mottl, 1980).

Political moments do not necessarily catalyse movements to emerge, but can allow them to take advantage of certain opportunities to broaden their base of support and heighten their power (Caiani and della Porta 2011; Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012). These political opportunities may shape the kinds of framing processes in which right-wing movements become involved, such as the legitimating myths and coded language they use, to heighten their appeal within civil society at key moments. When focusing on political opportunity, instability and economic downturn are the two conditions most commonly associated with the rise of right-wing mobilization. In the case of Brazil, however, right-wing movements had a compelling space to mobilise. In addition to economic crisis and political instability, moral panic revolving around gender and sexuality gained ground in 2013.

When in 2013 bus-fares became more expensive across Brazil, a social movement called *Movimento Passe Livre*, which demands free access to public transportation, mobilised (Saad-Filho 2013, Purdy 2017). First, the city of São Paulo and soon many capitals in Brazil demanded reduction in public transport fares. What started as a clear claim to access public transportation, chaotically spiralled into a loose movement demanding better infrastructure, public security, education, and other requests. The mobilization behind social spending contrasted with a counter example of public spending on the expensive structures designed for the FIFA World-Cup 2014 and the Rio Olympic Games 2016. The timing of the mobilization corresponded to the economic crisis following the end of the commodities' export cycle and a decade of economic growth. Not only had transportation prices increased but austerity measures had begun to have devastating effects (de Souza Santos 2019, 160). In the context of questioning over priorities during the period of growth and their long-term implications, *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL), a neo-liberal right-wing movement, gained ground. With a slogan to free the country from corruption, economic

crisis, and left-wing ideology (especially focusing on an anti-party programme called “School without Parties”), the movement reached a crescendo after the June 2013 street riots. It was pivotal in the demonstrations demanding President Rousseff’s impeachment. Exposing how this right-wing movement exploited political and economic instability to create opportunities is not the end of the story. This group not only responded to crisis, it was instrumental in creating it.

Creating a threat, or “moral panic” (Cohen 2011) is key to understanding MBL’s impact. The movement’s engagement in anti-LGBT and anti-feminism attacks was fundamental to its popularity. MBL fostered fear that LGBT movements had promoted homosexuality in the schools by teaching young children how to become gay. It catalysed a movement that linked anti-corruption, neoliberalism, anti-abortion, and heteronormative agendas. It not only combined issue areas, it united other movements behind this common cause, namely conservative political parties and religious groups (mainly Catholic and Evangelical). Together, they claimed to act in defence of “the family” by re-establishing traditional and clearly defined male and female roles, marriage, and parenting, with no tolerance for abortion or homosexual relationships.

The fight against corruption and crime associated with the threat represented by gender rights fed into Bolsonaro’s law and order Presidential campaign. Bolsonaro, before running for president in 2018, was a member of the parliament for 27 years, and yet he was running for president as an outsider by emphasizing a position in the *baixo-clero* (how members with a low-profile in Brazil’s Congress are known). Politicians in such positions highlight ignorance of the political system to avoid any trace of compliance with corruption schemes. The strength of Bolsonaro’s campaign was thus two-fold, a weak political performance in the congress that gave him distance from corruption schemes, and a strong vocalization against LGBT rights and in favor of a stronger police and military apparatus for the country on social media. In addition, he

heightened ties with evangelicals by being baptized in Israel, though he proclaimed to be catholic, which made him close to both faiths.

Saving the country thus meant denying LGBT and feminist groups their rights, while protecting the rights of others (heterosexuals, neoliberals, and Christian religious groups). This is the political movement which drew on sentiments that opposed political parties and particularly corruption, while forging a neoliberal, moralist, and anti-feminist agenda.

How the MBL united forces that crossed class lines, to include the poor and those dependent on the state, particularly single mothers and racial and religiously marginalized, depended on its mobilization strategies. The movement used street politics with banners, slogans, and even choreographed dances that in their form (rather than their content) represented popular sectors. In addition, MBL also presented a nationalist imagery of Brazil as masculine, strong, and protective, capable of saving the country from threat. The victory of Bolsonaro in 2018 Brazil's presidential elections is a result of this mobilisation.

## **Implications**

MBL's strategy has certain inherent limitations. It has managed to unite forces behind an agenda that advances the rights for a few (wealthier, white, religious majorities) and not the majority still dependent on the state for survival. It has also depended on economic and political instability that may not prevail over the long-term. Capitalizing on a particular moment is not viable over the long-term and suggest that the movement may lose its momentum.

In addition, the MBL's platform is unlikely to sustain its popular appeal. The solution to gender ideology in the schools through private education and home schooling necessarily entails restricted access to education for the majority of Brazilians. Not only do such exclusionary

solutions limit popular appeal, they also threaten democracy. MBL advances authoritarian solutions to perceived threats and danger.

These implications demand comparison. In places such as the United States and Western Europe, the robustness of institutions is often seen as a bulwark against the development of anti-rights movements into authoritarian regimes. Whether authoritarianism is what differentiates Latin American countries from other regions in the world may be seen in the case of Brazil, as Bolsonaro's government has given increasing space to the military in the command of ministries. One thing we already know, dictatorship alone is not a reason to avoid comparison across regions. The context of emergence of right-wing movements and political implications travel beyond Brazil.

## **Conclusion**

The focus on Latin American progressive social movements often ignores the emergence of counter, or backlash, movements. This article discusses the rise of right-wing mobilization in Brazil, connecting that phenomenon with approaches to right-wing movements in Europe and elsewhere in Latin America. What Brazil demonstrates is the ability of such right-wing movements to use the context of economic crisis and political instability to generate moral panic. Lessons from the Brazilian case travel beyond the country and the region. A unifying definition of right-wing movements offered by Rea (2018) implies that such movements can legitimate violence against undeserving individuals, in Brazil these are the LGBT and feminist movements perceived as threatening the 'family'. Brazil's variant of right-wing movements unites otherwise fragmented and incompatible groups behind a heteronormative agenda. It thus is comparable to other movements outside the country and the region that have the mobilizational capacity drawing from political opportunities (economic crisis and political instability) to create perceived threats to the nation. The impact on

democracy in Brazil is clear. A next step for research is to look more comparatively at the impact of other right-wing movements on contemporary democracies.



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