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## RESISTANCE IN TIMES OF A PANDEMIC: SOCIAL DISORDER IN BRAZIL IN CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

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1. This article is the result of communication presented at GT3 - Urban and rural social struggles at the VI International Symposium Social Struggles in Latin America organized by GEPAL/UDEL, which took place virtually from September 13 to 17, 2021.

**Abstract:** This article aims to present some reflections and controversies in concern of capital crisis as a globalized systemic crisis and its consequences for social struggles resistances of the leftist spectrum. To this end, we propose a brief mapping of social struggles in Brazil during the coronavirus pandemic that proved to be significant, either because they were actions proposed by historical popular organizations of the Brazilian left, or because they unexpectedly caused an impact due to their mobilization capacity. We will analyze two expressions of social struggles: those promoted by social campaigns consolidated in the post-re-democratization period and the popular revolts that emerged from the June 2013 journeys.

**Keywords:** Social campaigns, popular uprising, crisis, pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION

The recent Brazilian reality is marked by an extreme right-wing government and an unprecedented global pandemic. Thus, we see a conjunctural picture even less favorable than that of the decade before social struggles and anti-systemic criticism. (CORRÊA & VIEIRA, 2021) This perverse confluence exacerbates the effects of the economic, environmental and social crisis that has structurally devastated the country and the world for at least five decades (MENEGAT, 2018). Despite this finding, it is still essential to ask ourselves: are we letting ourselves die? Is there any possible form of resistance? Where are the social campaigns and subjects in struggle? Is there something new being gestated that could present itself as a radical critical practice?

In order to develop these problematizations, we have divided the text into two parts. In the first, we present a reflection on the historical trajectory of social campaigns in the countryside and in the city, seeking to identify elements that help us understand the

process of integration to the order through which it has passed (CORRÊA, 2018). In the second part, we will deal with a counterpoint from the “spontaneous” popular revolts, that is, without the vertical organization from an organized social campaign, which emerged in June 2013 in the country and, although on a much smaller scale, are still present in Brazilian daily life, as was the case of the strike by delivery people and app drivers. (CORRÊA & SILVA, 2021).

We intend to avoid any normative analysis, seeking to address the systemic complexities that impose, on the one hand, the need to resist the ongoing social massacre and, on the other hand, the tendency to integrate into the social order, either through the apparently inevitable institutionalization of the social campaigns or through “uncontrolled” revolts that can be incorporated by sectors of the extreme right. Thus, seeking to avoid idealistic enthusiasms or catastrophic pessimisms, we problematize these elements in order to contribute to critical thinking and its potential.

## “OLD” SOCIAL CAMPAIGNS: FACING THE STATE AND BACK TO THE STREETS?

A limit that we have identified in our historical time is the lack of expectations regarding a possible future. This has been presented, in the case of social campaigns, as the lowering of expectations and demands to the minimum possible to be carried out at the moment. There doesn't seem to be, in the short or medium term, a possibility of better days. (ARANTES, 2014) The fetishization process has intensified to the point that the solutions proposed by the left for the crisis of capital seem to operate as attempts to repair and therefore restitution of a lost order, which was, not long ago, the target of radical questioning by these same organizations. We understand the conflicts analyzed as processes inseparable

from the crisis of value production. (KURZ, 2014).

The forms of struggle of social campaigns have changed substantially in the countryside and in the city over the last two decades in Brazil. Campaigns that led to conflicts over land in the 1990s and 2000s reviewed the occupation of large estates as the main strategy of struggle.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, there was an increase in conflicts involving traditional, quilombola and indigenous communities, through the process of expropriation brought about by the advance of capital in the countryside. These changes caused the methodology of the main vehicle for systematizing rural struggles, the traditional “Caderno de Conflitos no Campo” prepared by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), to change its methodology twice: in 2010, when it started to count the manifestations in the sum of land occupations; and, in 2015, when it started to count indigenous repossessions as occupations as well. Furthermore, several measures of state regulation had the effect of replacing self-organizing processes with an organization under the tutelage of the State, either through the signing of agreements or by incorporating demands into public policies.

It is interesting to note that in a recent interview, João Pedro Stédile, national leader of the Landless Rural Workers Campaign, stated that land occupations are not taking place so that families do not become “cannon fodder for the police”<sup>3</sup>. In the same interview, the leader of the campaign waves towards the 2022 elections, supporting Lula’s candidacy: “We are already campaigning for Lula, there is no need to come to an election. Lula is the main and only popular leader who can get

this country out of this shit.” This position is quite different from what was taken during the FHC government (PSDB) and his UDR minions, after the massacre in Eldorado dos Carajás, on April 17, 1996, which gave rise to the MST’s National Struggle Day, known as “red April”. In these days there were simultaneous occupations in all the states where the campaign was territorialized.

The campaigns that act in the cities, mainly in the peripheries, are quite heterogeneous, both in relation to the agenda and in relation to the forms of organization. In addition, urban peripheries are not only organized by leftist or progressive social campaigns, as is the case of the black campaign, women’s campaign, homeless workers’ campaign, unemployed workers’ campaign, among others. Some expressions of this multiplicity of insertions are the presence of large corporations that, through foundations, social organizations and the like, develop cultural and educational projects on the outskirts of large cities (CATINI, 2021), as well as the multiplication of Pentecostal churches that discipline the workers. disciplining them with the promise of healing their ailments. Although the action of the business community or the churches with workers is not the focus of our analysis, it is important to emphasize that these workers have at their disposal not only what is offered by the traditional forces of the left, and it is important to discuss how these proposals differ.

In the broad spectrum of urban leftists, the Homeless Workers Campaign (MTST) has gained notoriety in recent years due to the growing exposure of its main leader Guilherme Boulos, candidate for mayor

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2. An explicit statement of this option of changing the forms of struggle and demands of the MST can be found in this interview with the national leader of the organization João Paulo Rodrigues, “MST 30 years: we are in the corner of the ring” granted to Reporter Brazil on 11/02/ 2014, <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2014/02/mst-30-anos-estamos-no-canto-do-ringue/> (accessed on 06/12/2021)

3. Available on the website: <https://revistaforum.com.br/politica/stedile-diz-que-mst-nao-ocupa-terras-para-nao-virar-bucha-de-canhao-para-o-capitao-insano/>. Accessed on 05/10/2021.

(PSOL) of São Paulo in the last municipal elections. But even before the electoral turn of the MTST, there was already the leadership of the: “Frente Povo Sem Medo” by this social campaign, while the popular: “Frente Brasil” that is led by the Popular Consultation, an organization closely linked to the MST. These fronts of struggle have explicitly taken an electoral path as the social struggle as a direct confrontation with capital and the State cools down. The thesis by Isadora Guerreiro (2018) demonstrated some of the mechanisms that came to dominate the daily struggle for housing and the internal dynamics of urban leftist campaigns, especially the MTST. In this sense, we briefly mention the registrations and scoring systems used by organizations to select who deserves to win their home or not. Acting as mediators in the implementation of public policies, which took place throughout the 2000s through the hiring of large construction companies (to the detriment of collective self-construction practices), the housing struggle campaigns began to select the target audience and manage the scarce resources. available. (ARANTES, 2013)

The election of the Bolsonaro government started a new period for the “old” social campaigns in Brazil, the defeat at the polls put in check the successful policy of mitigating social ills by focusing on the demands of the working class, especially that organized by social campaigns such as MST, MTST, MTD, among others, and also by the trade union campaign whose some sectors left the “working class leadership” for the “management of capital/labor contradictions” by the state apparatus. Since then, opposition to the government has sought to politically differentiate itself from the president and his followers. The economic and political crisis persists after unsuccessful attempts to postpone it through reforms such as the Spending Ceiling Law, successive pension reforms, labor reforms,

among other austerity measures in search of an unattainable balance in public accounts, a situation deeply worsened by the health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, to the previously announced economic tragedy, there is added the health tragedy that currently leads us to swallow crying in the face of more than 480,000 deaths in the country. A casualty count that increases so fast that it has become a challenge to follow it up for the production of an academic text. And can nothing be done about this social tragedy that has become widespread as a Brazilian reality?

On the one hand, there is a broad and unrestricted response that has won the support of the population beyond the declared Bolsonaro supporters, including those who say they regretted voting for the extreme right or even those who voted for the left: the early treatment kit. As the most efficient concrete response emerging from the anti-lockdown campaign, adherence to chloroquine feeds on the wait for a vaccine that will take too long to reach the entire population. And this can, finally, be replaced by an immediate response, albeit of dubious effectiveness. Something is being done. And those who cannot stop going out every day to go to work, that is, a gigantic amount of formal and informal workers from the middle to popular classes, can no longer bear to feel fear and wait for death, for themselves and their loved ones. There are also the many who cannot escape denialism out of a desperate need to work, because work and life are inextricably confused. The prison of work to which we are already accustomed has become a digital torture, while the house has become a space of suffering. For those who do not have the “privilege” of formal work, whether virtual or face-to-face, that is, for the huge superfluous population, with no place, overcrowding hills, slums, urban peripheries, a lockdown with high circulation restrictions represents the aggravation of the

already too painful struggle for survival. This crooked terrain seems fertile for the crazy “exits” presented by the current government of the extreme right.

Despite this distressing adherence to the “answers” on the right, social campaigns have sought to establish networks and solidarity actions that have been formed to support vulnerable populations. In this sense, the articulation of the campaigns has been important, seeking resources and logistics for the distribution of basic food baskets on the outskirts of large urban centers, including food and hygiene kits to prevent transmission. A certain spirit of mutual support has led many people to individually contribute with relatives, neighbors, friends, friends of friends or total strangers, who have lost a family member or who are unable to guarantee their livelihood.

In a pandemic context, street demonstrations have become a risky and contradictory option in the face of the denialism we face daily. Initially, pots and pans were held as a means of demonstration against the genocidal policy, in defense of life and the Unified Health System. There were also motorcades and street demonstrations in defense of the government. The traditional 1st of May, stage of major demonstrations from the left, was also disputed by the right: several demonstrators took to the streets to express their unconditional support expressed by the motto: “I support the President”. The kidnapping of the streets by the right, as well as the slogan “Bolsonaro 2022”, disputed the spotlight with Lula’s statement, guiding the 2022 elections to the right. Despite the need to differentiate ourselves on the left, some collective initiatives risked proposing a return to streets. On May 29, social campaigns together with trade union campaigns and opposition parties organized “Outta here, Bolsonaro” acts, animated by the CPI of the

pandemic, with shouts of order: “Out with the government of death and hunger”, “Out with the government of death and hunger”. Bolsonaro, genocidal!”, “The government is more dangerous than the virus!”, “Food on the plate, vaccine in the arm!”, “No shot, no virus, no hunger!”, among others.

Left organizations, however, remain fearful of fighting in the streets, and the guidelines for the next acts are to avoid confrontation by betting on symbolic acts. The alternative seems to focus on the upcoming elections, with the strategic acts being to wear down the government and guarantee an “organized” militancy. But why has the electoral route, which seeks to reinsert compensatory social policies and neoliberal economic policy, become the main outlet for Brazilian social campaigns?

The “Army of Stédile” that Lula threatened to put on the streets in his defense in 2015, unarmed and ragged, is now fighting battles in the eagerness to return to their old jobs in the high and low echelons of the state bureaucratic structure, including public-private partnerships. private. But this is not a cross that only the landless have to carry, and that is independent of the truth and combativeness of their individual militants, as we observe a worldwide reflux of struggles beyond the State and Parliament.

After a decade and a half in state power, the left, institutionalized or not, has become the defender of democracy and its institutions, and thus confused with an order that no longer stands, shattered by the advance of the economic crisis and the pandemic. Vulnerable populations can then find a culprit for their misery and opt for the immediate alternative of an extreme right that ideologically revolts against the media, corporations, the legislature, the judiciary, “against everything that is there”, which no one else can put up with. This inversion of roles perplexed the

social campaigns that, unarmed, became exasperated by the advance of conservative ideas among the popular sectors.

## **POPULAR REVOLT: SOMETHING IS OUT OF ORDER**

The economic crisis of 2008 showed that successive attempts to contain it essentially led to postponement measures, the so-called “flights forward”. Mechanisms such as the privatization of public services, the spoliation of land and natural resources, the withdrawal of rights and the financialization of the economy are insufficient for the necessary re-composition of descending rates of profit. (MARX, 1984; KURZ, 2014) The wall is right there and these responses are exhausted a little later when the bubble bursts, the bill arrives, and with it come the inevitable interest and corrections. This process is accompanied by the progressive reduction of prospects for expanding, or at least maintaining, the social rights that existed until then. There is no provision of rights if there is no minimum economic stability to support the indebted National States, which pushes away to lose sight of the predictions of minimal improvement in the living conditions of the population. (MENEGAT, 2018)

The crisis of the left is an expression and moment of the crisis of capitalism. One of the expressions of this inseparable relationship is the fact that several progressive governments and left-wing parties, and in some cases even considered extreme left, adhere to the neoliberal ideology they once fought. And so, the alternatives proved increasingly incapable of taking the necessary leap to minimally contain the advance of capital in all spheres of life. The 2000s were marked by the intensification and precariousness of work due to the flexibilization and deregulation of social policies. The lack of prospects for a

better future, generated feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction that could no longer be suppressed, either by the meritocratic discourses of the order, or by channeling demands through forms of institutionalized left such as parties, unions and organized social campaigns.

The financial collapse of 2008 is, according to Lazzarato (2019), the opening of the “apocalyptic times” in which we live, the beginning of a period that is now marked by political ruptures in different regions of the world. The 2010s began with an explosion of popular uprisings/rebellions on all continents: “(...) It started in North Africa, overthrowing dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen; it spread to Europe, with occupations and strikes in Spain and Greece and revolt in the suburbs of London; broke out in Chile and occupied Wall Street in the US, reaching even Russia at the end of the year.” (CARNEIRO, 2012, p. 07)

These manifestations had some common characteristics: the occupation of squares and public spaces, the use of social media as the main means of convening and dissemination and the refusal of political articulations with institutionalized organizations, in addition to the lack of political and ideological unity, of a strategy or common program. These revolts erupted in an apparently abrupt and disorganized way, leaving not only the dominant sectors astonished, but especially the organized left. The astonishment was mainly due to the large number of people mobilized and the radicality of their actions, being compared to historical events of great symbolism such as May 1968 and the spring of 1848 (CARNEIRO, 2012).

The existing literature on social campaigns<sup>4</sup>, despite being quite extensive and traditional in the field of Social Sciences, it seems insufficient for the analysis of recent

4. For a balance of the issue and to understand the perspective in our analysis, that of the class struggle, consult Galvão (2011).

social conflicts in the world, and even more distant from what we experience in the Brazilian reality. Zibechi (2020) identifies limits in this sense by indicating the plurality of Latin American popular campaigns and their structurally distinct characteristics, from the context of their emergence to their claims and forms of struggle, in relation to the “new social campaigns” that emerged in Europe and the United States. USA in the 1970s, and which supported the development of theories about social campaigns (GOHN, 2007).

Zibechi proposes the use of the term “peoples in campaign” to think about Latin American struggles. However, we understand that both this proposed alternative and the conceptualization of Social Campaigns with a capital M are limited for thinking about the emergence of popular revolts. We identified profound differences between the campaigns that emerged after the re-democratization in Brazil since the 1980s and the collective manifestations that exploded throughout the 2010s, with the great milestone in Brazil being the so-called Journeys of June 2013. (MORAES et al., 2014)

Like the previously mentioned revolts, the June Journeys emerged “outside” conventional organizational structures. Convoked at first by the campaign: “Movimento Passe Livre”, made up primarily of young people, these street demonstrations had as their main demand the fight against the increase in public transport fares. However, as state repression intensified against the demonstrations, with direct police aggression and arrests of protesters, more people joined the street acts that proliferated in all capitals and main cities in the interior of the country. In a few days there were thousands and then millions of people on the streets, and any normality was interrupted by a repressed popular dissatisfaction. It became increasingly difficult to identify the common agenda/demand that mobilized

different sectors of the population, essentially encompassing young people, from the middle classes to the impoverished popular sectors of the urban periphery, which were organized in an unprecedented way. Without sound cars, the voice of one became the voice of all through the juggler. Without leaders and spokespersons for the campaign, everyone could talk to the press. It was about putting horizontality into practice, and the objective was, after all, to “lose control” in order to give vent to popular revolt. (MARTINS & CORDEIRO, 2014).

In the same mobilization, several agendas began to coexist, some of them contradictory to each other. The federal and state governments, which initially underestimated the demonstrations, had to step back or promote actions as a way to appease the widespread social conflict. The federal government, already weakened by the economic crisis, is even more stunned by a revolt that puts an end to the fragile conciliation between capital and work. An action platform was proposed that involved five, broad and not very specific, national pacts: Fiscal responsibility; Political reform, including the fight against corruption; Health; Transport and Education, which proved to be insufficient to contain the political instability that followed, leading to the, at least fallacious, impeachment process of Dilma Roussef (PT). The June days are still treated by many sectors of the left as a heretical youth irresponsibility, which opened Pandora’s box and led the extreme right to state power with the election of Jair Bolsonaro. It is interesting to ask ourselves why these sectors accuse the new generations of the left with autonomist tendencies of collaborating for an “advance of fascism” insofar as they allowed the “population in general” to express their views of the world in a broad and unrestricted way, instead of seek to understand the underlying elements that contributed to these

very repugnant conceptions of self and others expressed by a significant portion of the Brazilian population, whether on the streets or at the polls. (NUNES, 2021)

It is undeniable that, since this massive popular uprising, a new phase for social struggles in Brazil began. Gradually, sectors of the right, more or less organized, began to call for street acts, as the left increasingly turned to the defense of state institutionality and the canons of democratic instances. (UM GRUPO DE MILITANTES, 2019) An opposition to the PT governments was consolidated, which now had a popular social base willing to mobilize and fight against the order, as this same order was confused with the PT's managements. and "all that was there".

To some extent, as a consequence of the limits of a management policy on the left of a society in irremediable crisis, and regardless of the risks of strengthening sectors of the extreme right, a time of revolts with no clear direction, without a negotiation committee, without control, no direction. The relationship with the state institutionality of these manifestations is very different from that experienced by the social campaigns of previous decades. However, even if there is no clear tendency towards integration with the capitalist institutional order, the strong relationship of the revolt with the political structures in which it is immersed is undeniable. The tactics of struggle, although innovative and with a temporary disruptive force of societal normality, and the organizational form, although profoundly critical of the structures of the "old left" insofar as it avoids tendencies to reconcile with the order, has not shown itself to be capable of promoting (still) a questioning of the order that in fact subverts the foundations of the capitalist system in crisis.

Finally, it is essential to point out that, as a result of the June days, we had the occupations

of high school students from more than 1,000 schools throughout Brazil in 2015/2016, whose forms of organization and tactics of struggle were directly inspired by the "popular revolt" ignited by the Free Pass Campaign in 2013. In addition, during the Coronavirus pandemic, the App Delivery strike, outside the union party structure, is heir to these experiences that seek in some way, even if "strange" and not very determined, to organize outside the order that is ultimately sought to be fought. Future uncertainties through the social massacre that has been living in Brazil in times of a pandemic produce a proliferation of questions about the possibilities between the old and the new of contemporary social struggles. In this sense, we present this reflection in order to face the dilemmas, limits and powers of a time marked by defeats.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Only a careful historical reconstruction could recover the process of institutionalization and adaptation to the capitalist order of some of the largest and most significant social campaigns ever seen in the contemporary global experience, which, despite the collective will, were transmuted from radical critics to barbarism managers. This process, in addition to interdicting struggles with potentially anti-systemic tactics and strategy, disarmed radical criticism. The struggle for rights - for the landless, the homeless, blacks, women, LGBTTs, indigenous people - each with their powers and limits, there is no way to escape the historical defeats that surround us. Although they can nurture collective experiences that actually save lives, they depend to the limit on begging from indebted companies and states or on the success of their integration into the market.

From the most socially explosive uprisings, like June 2013 and the Chilean uprising, to the more focused ones, like the high school



occupations in 2015/2016 and the recent strikes by drivers and couriers via apps, it is undeniable that there is something new to the struggle. Social. Each and every explosion involves risks, after all, the uncontrollability of its force and reach is patent. As options

run out, it may be time to face the fear of losing control and the risk of getting burned. If we cannot escape, may our capture reveal the caged animal's revolt and not the bovine passivity so acclaimed by the Bolsonaro government.

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