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# THE RECONFIGURATION OF POWER

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- *An analysis of human rights, religion and the dispute for democracy in Brazil*

## ABSTRACT

*The idea of rethinking “power”, in other words rethinking its central position and how it circulates, was provoked by the need to seek out alternative ways of handling the challenges facing defenders of human rights freedom and democracy, which are being posed today by the extreme right in a number of different countries. This involves an understanding of how the strategies of the extreme right have been hampering discussions surrounding these topics, how they have made recognition of the importance and efficacy of them difficult and have also limited many of the efforts being made, by pushing for a “war of narrative”. Rethinking power also points to a challenge for progressive forces, committed to human rights, in that they must listen and understand the power that circulates at the grassroots level and learn alternative methods of action and communication. There is an urgent need to diversify in terms of strategy, narratives and above all of those working in these areas.*

## KEYWORDS

Power | Democracy | Human rights | Extreme right | Collectivity

*Free societies all around the world face an implacable new enemy. This foe has no army, no navy; it comes from no country we can point to on a map. It is everywhere and nowhere, because it is not out there but in here. Rather than threatening societies with destruction from without, like the Nazis and the Soviets once did, this foe threatens them from within.*

*A peril that is everywhere and nowhere is elusive, hard to discern, to pin down. We all sense it, but we struggle to name it. Torrents of ink are spilled describing its components and features, but it remains elusive.*

*Our first task, then, is to name it. Only then can we grasp it, fight it and defeat it.*

*What is this new foe that threatens our freedom, our prosperity, even our survival as democratic societies?*

*The answer is power, in a malignant new form.*

*Every era has seen one or more forms of political malignancy. What we are seeing today is a revanchist variant that mimics democracy while undermining it, scorning all limits. It is as if political power had taken stock of every method free societies have devised over the centuries to domesticate it and plotted to strike back.*

*That is why I think of it as the revenge of power.*

Moisés Naím in *The Revenge of Power*<sup>1</sup>

## 1 • Introduction

With the extreme right's new methods to undermine democracy, progressive forces have had to take a closer look at the intricacies of power. The extreme right and the many reactionary movements (organised and otherwise) have understood the language of "institutional democratic order" and have started to take advantage of it. Reactionary hermeneutics of democracy, freedom and other fundamental rights have brought confusion to the public debate, to the point where it has been reduced to a hackneyed "dispute of narratives". The local and global extreme right has instilled in the public debate the idea that there is a project of power that needs to be tackled, a progressive, communist, leftist one.

In the cases of Jair Bolsonaro and Damareo Alves, in Brazil; José Kast and Chiara Barchiesi, in Chile; Maria del Rosario Guerra and Maria Fernanda Cabal, in Colombia; Nayib Bukele, president of El Salvador; Alejandro Giammattei, in Guatemala, the defence of "democracy" and the guarantee of "freedom" and defending the country's sovereignty, are presented as life missions

and as political commitment. The Latin-American “democratic” extreme right sits comfortably alongside the “illiberal” democracy of Viktor Orbán, in Hungary, the fight for national identity and individual freedom of Giorgia Meloni, in Italy and of the Spanish Vox party.

It is clear that this situation represents an enormous challenge to progressive forces throughout the continent. This means that these same progressive forces are now being forced to try to understand and react to the ways in which power is being expressed and disputed in the current scenario. Values that are dear to the people and organisations that are committed to human rights have been depleted and co-opted in the public debate. This has greatly hindered the way in which we speak about these values, how we identify the risks surrounding them and how we work towards a free inclusive society.

## 2 • Revolutionary transformations of power

The journalist Moisés Naím’s now classic book of 2013, *The End of Power*, makes an important contribution to an understanding of power and illustrates that power as we conceive it, represented in images and institutions, is in decline in a world that has become far more dynamic. Naím identifies the principal reasons for this decline in power, or reconfiguration of power, and he divides it into three categories that he calls “revolutionary transformations”.

The first of these is the “*More*” revolution. This is characterised by growth and abundance in all areas: the number of countries, population sizes, standards of living, illiteracy rates, advances in medical technology, the number and range of products, political parties, religions etc. In addition, it is a world in which there is more inequality, more economic imbalance, more people being affected by extreme poverty and more arms being produced leading to an increase in violence. At the same time, however, the desire for a political system based on democracy is gaining ground; there is greater popular participation and a more active civil society and we see this in the proliferation of movements and organisations.

Therefore, Naím acknowledges a type of revolution with this simple and seemingly generic “*More*”. This “*More*” is not merely quantitative, it is the complexification of a diverse world, with greater challenges for those who wish for it to be more inclusive, fair and equal. I would like to include the fundamental role of other aspects of “*More*” in a dialogue with the author. The pluralisation and diversification of critical concepts and perspectives concerning reality, principally subordinated contexts and how the creation of new channels and strategies for communications/interaction could be seen as part of this “*More*”. There is one aspect of “*More*” that was and still is essential in tackling the many faces of colonial power. I am referring specifically to the conservative forces that feed and are fed by this political, economic and religious articulation and which, in a hegemonic dispute, retain power in the hands of an elite minority, who simultaneously attempt to force and impose their will on society. This will be political, economic and religious in nature, the latter based on a fantasy of global morality.

By way of an example we could look to the reality of many of Brazil's peripheries, particularly the *favelas*, territories that have arisen out of marginalisation, precarisation, the elimination of social participation and the (im)possibility of thriving in the city. These territories are also, however, potent centres of social, cultural and political creativity. Living in the *favelas*, where there are deficient essential services, violent repression by the armed wing of the state and violent domination by organised crime (whether by drug trafficking factions or paramilitary groups, in Rio de Janeiro) requires wisdom, social technology, a political outlook and considerable imagination.

The wisdom required is related to various survival tactics developed by the people of the community living and transiting in situations of armed conflict in which they have to overcome fear and to see certain things, but act as though they do not. They have to attribute some degree of "normality" to absurdities, such as rights violations and limit situations, while simultaneously seeking the best and safest living conditions in the midst of precariousness. This demands social technology, in that networks of solidarity are forged, not necessarily in an organised way, but in ways that foster communication and caretaking in the *favela*. Social technology was fundamental during the Covid-19 pandemic, and has been for decades, given the need to manage the "economics of care", in situations of extreme poverty, principally caring for children and the elderly, the responsibility for which usually falls on women. While some analysts and researchers do not see it this way, the whole dynamic of the *favelas* demands the capacity to assess situations and to be imaginative. There is a need "to read situations" and imagine possibilities for living and progressing.

However, relations with these territories are often still based on a rationale of precarity and deprivation. In a relationship based on this rationale, the territories and their communities are seen as people who have little, or nothing, to give and everything to receive. In this sense, it is fundamental to recognise the role of local collectives and organisations that act as powerful networks for charting and "translating" from and for the community. It is also important to mention the role that many evangelical churches play in the *favelas*, principally the Pentecostal ones, as an example of this social technology. Pentecostal churchgoers living in the peripheries are certainly not simply believers repeating verses from the bible, who are submissive to conservative pastoral leaders. Evangelicals are also the articulators of dynamic networks that allow people to maintain some dignity in their lives, within these territories and in the midst of the challenges faced there.

In the category "Mobility", Naím states that "there is more of everything, it moves wider and faster".<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in one sense, this mobility is referring to the circulation of products and content and in another sense to actual movement. The activities and organisation of society in movement are fundamental for it to progress, but increasingly, there are parallel movements that aim to maintain societal conditions exactly as they are, or even to return to the conditions of the past.

Worldwide reactionary movements and the extreme right have been intensifying and diversifying their attacks to prevent societies from moving towards renewal, equality and the acknowledgement

of diversity. They oppose the advance of democracy. As “more” world views, narratives and lifestyles present a challenge to the ultra-conservative power of colonial heritage, there is a need to broaden and diversify the movements that have pushed societies into conditions of greater inclusion and equality, despite the difficulties and resistance. Movements and organised civil society cannot be the only actors in this transformation process. The whole of society must be involved. This movement should also be seen by – and shared with – *disorganised society*, in other words, citizens who are alienated from political and social protagonism.

Lastly, the author talks about a revolution of *Mentality*, a reflection of the big changes in ways of thinking, expectations and in the aspirations that accompany these transformations. I would add that this revolution has been intensified by the recognition of the dignity of social minorities, but also by reactionary identity statements, often rooted in the religious ultra-conservative fundamentalist spectre, that runs contrary to the acknowledgement of diversity and plurality in society. These changes in “ways of thinking” and in social and political “aspirations” bring about constant tension in the public sphere, revealing the power that circulates, not only in the political elite but also in organised civil society, as both attempt to influence the direction of society.

In regions of the world where the extreme right has been gaining force, it has proved to be very successful in channelling certain aspirations. “Defending the traditional family” seems to have been a tricky point for progressive forces who constantly have to explain that their projects for society and collective political agenda do not compromise recognition of the place of the family in society. In fact, “family” has become a fundamental aspiration in many concrete situations in which precarisation, insecurity and the gap left by capitalist society present daily challenges in the lives of millions of people, principally those living in the peripheries.

### 3 • Reconfiguration of power in Brazil

Therefore, the world has changed and so has “power” in the world. At least the way in which power is articulated and manages to establish limits, show direction and centralise reactions and counter-reactions. One example of this is the close relationship many candidates for executive roles in Brazil (particularly for president) have with the evangelical sector of the country’s population. Up until the 2010 and 2014 elections, the dialogue between presidential candidates and evangelicals was mainly carried out through the principal evangelical leaders in the country.

The presidential contests of Dilma Rousseff and José Serra (the second round of 2010) and Dilma Rousseff and Aécio Neves (the second round of 2014) circled around the most powerful names in the large Brazilian churches, among them, Edir Macedo, Silas Malafaia, José Wellington, Manoel Ferreira, Valdemiro Santiago and R. R. Soares. The rationale of this political communications strategy involved speaking to the people who held positions of religious power within the evangelical churches.

It was believed that the support and approval of the powerful leaders of the country's largest denominations would automatically mean the universal support of their respective flocks. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva also used this strategy in two of his presidential campaigns. However, the religious power of these leaders proved to be paradoxically fragile. The appropriation of power based on the idea of the maximum level of representation – in the case of a pastor who occupies a central position and attempts to be the voice of evangelicals<sup>3</sup> from all regions of national territory – underestimated the complexity and many nuances of the role of religion in the public sphere, where individual believers exercise their decision-making power through personal choices that are made and justified in the light of local needs and scenarios. Social technology networks that arise within local churches exercise more power than the histrionic yelling of the millionaire evangelical leaders.

So, Bolsonaro fought for the support of the evangelical sector of society not only with the help of religious leaders and their economic, religious and media power but also, or principally, by means of the explicit defence of ultra-conservative Christian supremacy, publicly disdaining any commitment to the secular state. He would quote the verse from the bible, “and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32) as a personal commitment and transformed the slogan “God above all else” into a symbol that was one of both civic virtue and faith. This public defence of the conservative Christian faith was a vital connecting link for Bolsonaro. He appeared to have consciously understood, strategically or otherwise, where “power” actually lies, in order to get the evangelicals on his side. Clearly, his political victory came about with the approval of fundamentalist evangelical leaders, but another movement was built from the bottom up, in other words, irrespective of the persuasion and pressure of the leaders of the large churches. A large sector of the evangelical community identified with a candidate who vigorously and forcefully defended “Christian values”. He publicly affirmed the superiority of Christianity and said that non-Christian minorities would have to accept the moral standards of the conservative Christian majority.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4 • The distance between the progressive movement and the disorganized society

According to Ariel Goldstein, in recent years we have witnessed a loss in the legitimacy of institutions and the democratic system in Latin America, this situation having been exacerbated by the pandemic. Goldstein claims that intense criticism by elite governors has led to a distrust of democratic systems. He goes on to say that this is because “when elite governors and officials are seen as cut off from the reality of the majority of the people, the democratic system loses legitimacy and authoritarian solutions and/or external ones become more acceptable”.<sup>5</sup> This is partially true. For some time now, elite leaders and officials (military) have been detached from the majority of the population in Latin America.

In fact, in Latin America people have always had to live with this reality, particularly the poorest most vulnerable populations. There has never been a *Macondo* moment in

the history of any Latin-American country, not in Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, Guatemala or even in Colombia. *Macondo* being the town created by Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Nor has there ever been a town built by the people in the middle of the desert, distributing roles and occupations so everyone can participate, like the one depicted in David Toscana's *Our Lady of the Circus* about a circus troupe. In other words, we are the legacy of an unequal, colonial and deeply hierarchical society. These are societies forged in countries founded on the kind of system that emerges when the reality is one in which some work and fight for their very survival and others enjoy the privileges of deciding the paths the country will take, share wealth and establish the morality and behaviour of a society.

A change is unlikely in the governing elite's detachment in relation to the popular classes, so focus should turn to the organised progressive forces. Despite their principles of defending human rights and democracy they too have shown a limited level of connection with 'disorganised society', fighting to survive the demands of daily life. This line of argument may seem unreasonable given that many organisations, collectives, social movements and networks of social actors in the progressive democratic sector are active and entrenched in the areas where living conditions are precarious. But it seems quite reasonable when we look at the complex relationship of these movements with progressive governments, for example. When some leaders in the field of human rights found dialogue and above all a space in the governments of Lula and Dilma, the risks concerning what could emerge from the resentment of the conservative middle class and the neoliberal ultra-right, a minority, but an articulate one, was underestimated. The aforementioned sense of distance has been growing and becoming increasingly tangible.

Progressive leaders, left-wing parties and human rights organisations have certainly noted the advance of the right and the extreme right in the cooption of the collective imagination of the popular classes, principally in the use of religion to radicalise the conservative stance which exists in many of these communities. This may certainly have been the gap filled by fundamentalists. It is true that conservatism and fundamentalism are at the genesis of Brazilian evangelicalism, both Protestant and Pentecostal. It is also true that Brazilian society is a conservative society, whose legacy of colonialism and slavery still tinge our many shades of inequality and structural injustice. However, the level of ultra-conservative reactionary radicalisation experienced in the last ten years in Brazil has occurred on the backdrop of this sense of distance and the left's loss of the ability to converse with the popular classes, as well as a lack of effort on the part of many organisations and leaders in the progressive democratic field to make coherent, and above all respectful, assessments, leading to better understanding, regarding the peripheries, principally the urban ones. Furthermore, although this sense of distance has not led to a lack of activity, it has been a very real obstacle to effective communication and to strategic action in the face of the urgent serious threats experienced in recent years.



## 5 • Conclusion

Popular forces and other expressions, both individual and collective, of organised civil society that have been working to keep an explicitly authoritarian project out of Executive power in Brazil, are not guaranteed. The forces in favour of democratic stability are not at an advantage with Lula's victory. This is still insecure and uncertain. The way ahead may not be simply to reconsider getting closer to and becoming more curious and interested in the different forms of survival and resistance of organised society, although this is very important, but also to take a fresh look at the structures of power.

Democratic stability and the path to consolidation of a fairer, inclusive, plural and egalitarian society will still depend greatly on the debate, the capacity to convince and stimulate engagement with different sectors of society, based on the values and impact of human rights, including civic and political freedom, racial justice, gender and of course democracy itself. It will also greatly depend on the extent to which we understand as a society that this is not a matter of a dispute between political models but instead concerns the urgent need for a social pact to protect the aforementioned concepts.

This way of understanding the human rights cause and democracy makes political dispute at the very least more complex and diffused. Because institutions, organisations and mobilisation networks – whether emancipatory or reactionary and fascist – will continue to be active and present. They will continue to be in movement. It is important to acknowledge that actors who were previously dispersed and of little consideration in this dispute – except when called upon to vote in elections – are also present, bringing their own interests, demands and forms of engagement.

Although there is a synergy between these forms of popular engagement and the international reactionary networks that tap into this, this synergy is only successful because it has found a place and resonance in the wide variety of situations in which large numbers of people are forced to live. These range from the fear that someone may violently take their lives, to the idea that a project of power ignores the value of family or removes parents' right to bring up their own children. It also resonates with fears that are the product of the social panic that has set in and is overblown. Nevertheless, these messages are repeated and shared, not by the creators of fake news, but by people in one's own intimate, emotional, support network. In practice it is difficult to associate fake news and the creation of organised moral panic to the figure of your friendly pastor who has welcomed you and helped your family in times of difficulty, sometimes even sharing their own food.

Defeating the project of the extreme right in Brazil and other Latin-American countries, is going to require much more than reinforcing arguments and old models of addressing the matters that are threatening our future. The self-important sector of the population, anxious to topple the recently elected government in Brazil, following some weeks on the streets, did not spring from an organised international movement that encourages radicals to act and disturb democratic order.

## NOTES

1. Moisés Naím, *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022)
- 2 • Moisés Naím, *O fim do poder: nas salas da diretoria ou nos campos de batalha, em Igrejas ou Estados, por que estar no poder não é mais o que costumava ser?* (São Paulo: LeYa, 2013): 17.
- 3 • Still treating the most recent data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) as official, this is 22% of the population, around 42 million evangelicals (it is thought that the 2022 census will reveal an updated figure of around 60 million).
- 4 • See, for example, "We are a country with a majority of Christians, we will not admit any regression in this area, because we have the people and God on our side," in: Eduardo Simões, "Bolsonaro diz que não aceitará retrocesso em maioria cristã no Brasil". Yahoo! Notícias, September 2, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://br.noticias.yahoo.com/bolsonaro-diz-que-n%C3%A3o-aceitar%C3%A1-152746970.html>; and, "O Estado é laico, mas nosso governo é cristão", diz Bolsonaro no Twitter", *Diário de Pernambuco*, September 16, 2020, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.diariodepernambuco.com.br/noticia/politica/2020/09/o-estado-e-laico-mas-nosso-governo-e-cristao-diz-bolsonaro-no-twit.html>; also, "Bolsonaro diz que o Brasil 'está condenado a ser cristão'", *Carta Capital*, August 14, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022,, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-diz-que-o-brasil-esta-condenado-a-ser-cristao/>.
- 5 • Ariel Alejandro Goldstein, *La reconquista autoritaria: Cómo la derecha global amenaza la democracia en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Marea, 2022): 13.


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