

***The Bolsonaro Paradox. The Public Sphere and
Right-Wing Counterpublicity
in Contemporary Brazil. Camila Rocha,
Esther Solano, Jonas Medeiros.
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***La paradoja de Bolsonaro. La esfera pública
y la contrapublicidad de la derecha
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The reviewed book is an exciting and in-depth analysis of the New Brazilian Right, precisely the Bolsonaro phenomenon. We are dealing with a well-written book that provides us with an essential dose of information and boldly delves into a complex and very topical issue.

It is a must-read if one wants to learn about the rise and consolidation of the New Brazilian Right, especially the phenomenon known as Bolsonarism, which is masterfully and eloquently described by the authors. As Marcos Nobre states in the preface, “this book is simply one of the most successful attempts to explain the phenomenon of Bolsonaro and what he represents in Brazil today” (p. xii).

The book’s theme is within the studies on the right wing, political activism, and publics and counterpublics in the public sphere. Starting from the concept of public sphere conceived by Jürgen Habermas (1989), through a historical analysis of the bourgeois public sphere’s development in key Western European countries, which produced studies on publics and counterpublics, authors approach the study of the discursive strategy, called right-wing counterpublicity, that Bolsonaro and his supporters employed to explain Bolsonaro’s victory in the struggle to restore traditional hierarchies, values, and ways of life. From this point of view, the authors propose a new explanatory framework to examine the rise of the New Brazilian Right, Bolsonaro’s victory in 2018, and his first administration. The authors seek to escape alternatives of the “populist explanation” in the “crisis of democracy” framework or “reductio ad fascinum” in the “fascist regression” framework.

The book is divided into five chapters, preceded by an introduction. It begins by pointing out that few political analysts took Bolsonaro's 2018 presidential candidacy seriously. The vast majority of them tried to explain his victory by referring to the unique circumstances surrounding his election.

The authors do agree with the thesis that these factors contributed to Bolsonaro's rise to power. However, they believe that it is necessary to go back in time, since the election of Bolsonaro was not the fruit of historical chance but rather the unprecedented result of certain political and social processes.

To understand Bolsonaro's phenomenon, the authors take us on an exhaustive journey, reconstructing the activity of the Brazilian right since 1940 until Bolsonaro's rise to power. In this historical journey, we must highlight the detailed study that authors have carried out, especially in chapters two and three, of the trajectory of the Brazilian right, where they provide relevant keys to understand its ties with the new right wing that would appear years later.

The second chapter, divided into three parts, reconstructs the trajectory of the right, which began with networks developed over time by national and international pro-market think tanks that were closely linked to the expansion and promotion of neoliberalism based on the ideas of the Austrian economist Hayek amid a strong anti-left and communist campaign. The second part shows how the right wing articulated in the think tanks founded in the 1980s and 1990s, expanded through a young militancy that acted on social networks in student movements and street protests. It started to constitute itself as a new right during Lula's first administration, based on the idea proposed by the philosopher Olavo do Carvalho about the existence of a "left-wing cultural hegemony". This new right adopted a counter-hegemonic strategy.

The third chapter reconstructs how this new right began to take shape during Lula's second term (2006–2010) and how it found a fertile ground for flourishing during Lula's successor Dilma Rousseff's first term (2011–2014) as a result of a series of events that took place during these years. Moreover, the authors describe how – as a result of the institutional advances and demonstrations of women and the LGTBT+ community – a reaction by the conservative parts of the Brazilian society, called "progressive shock", was triggered, serving as a trampoline for the rise of the new right. The chapter also analyzes how this new right started to spread its ultraliberal writings and ideas through the internet and a social media platform Orkut and how the discourse expanded towards a process of institutionalization of the counterpublics.

The fourth chapter explores the actions orchestrated by the Brazilian right during the massive campaign for Rousseff's impeachment and shows how the new right was able to redirect the energy of the street into institutional politics through the figure of Bolsonaro. The chapter includes a set of interviews and testimonies from Bolsonaro supporters that contribute to explaining how Bolsonaro, through violent and aggressive discourse, was able to inspire confidence in his electorate by creating himself as a leader who offered the best solutions to the problems of Brazilian society and who best represented the values of Brazilians.

In the final chapter, the authors reflect on the characteristics of the Bolsonaro phenomenon, highlighting the effect of Bolsonarist counterpublicity that aims to destroy the 1988's Democratic Pact and disintegrate Brazil's post-bourgeois public sphere to restore a new bourgeois autocracy inspired by the military dictatorship.

The result is a well-founded work with extensive research on the right-wing counterpublicity and the dominant counterpublicity that allow to explain contemporary Brazil politics and the rise of the new right and Bolsonaro to power. In addition, the selection and use of qualitative methods such as interviews with members of Brazil's right and Bolsonaro supporters allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations of Bolsonaro's voters and what lies behind the Bolsonaro phenomenon.

However, after this brief description of the book's contents, it is convenient to make a few general remarks. Firstly, the title of the book incites us to think that we will find a more extensive analysis of the Bolsonaro Paradox, beyond what is established in the book's conclusions. Secondly, even though the book's objective is to explain the Bolsonaro phenomenon through the reconstruction of the Brazilian right's trajectory, the study of Bolsonarism lacks a more detailed analysis of its political discourse and performance. Thirdly, the vast empirical knowledge about the phenomenon under study may have allowed for more theoretical conclusions than indicated. What is lacking, for example, is an academic perspective that would have made it possible to situate the Bolsonaro phenomenon within the current debate on the far right and establish some comparisons.

In any case, these considerations do not affect the excellent academic and intellectual work of the book reviewed, which is an outstanding contribution to the study of the rise of the new right in Brazil, the Brazilian public sphere and the Bolsonaro phenomenon.

References

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