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Special Section: Towards a Sociology of COVID-19. Epidemics, biorisks, and the society of the coronavirus

Brazil: the real dystopia project. Disjunctures, pandemics, and politics under Bolsonaro

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Abstract

Brazil under President Bolsonaro is an extreme case of multiple system failures that bring the country to the brink of collapse. It has a tremendous heuristic potential as a prefiguration of what the "post-pandemic world" could be like. It is "good to think with". Experimentally, the article submits current events to a disjuncture analysis that gathers various perspectives and fragments into a literary montage.

Keywords

disjuncture analysis; pandemic; Bolsonaro; Brazil

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Brasil: el proyecto de la distopía real. Descoyunturas, pandemias, y política bajo Bolsonaro

Resumen

Brasil bajo el Presidente Bolsonaro es un caso extremo de múltiples fallos sistémicos que llevan al país al borde del colapso. Tiene un potencial heurístico tremendo como una prefiguración de lo que podría ser el "mundo postpandemia". Es "bueno pensarlo". Experimentalmente, el artículo somete acontecimientos recientes a un análisis de descoyuntura que reúne varios fragmentos y perspectivas en un montaje literario.

Palabras clave

análisis de descoyuntura; pandemia; Bolsonaro; Brasil

GRAF (*Gabinete de reflexão antifa*) is a collective of sociologists and political scientists in Rio de Janeiro of variable geometry.¹ Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, we have met every single week on two-hour video calls to analyze the political and sanitary situation in Brazil. The GRAF is also an experiment in applied relational sociology. While we've been in lockdown, physically distanced from each other, yet interconnected via digital media (Zoom, Gmail, and WhatsApp), over the months, we have succeeded in creating a thinking-and-feeling collective, and kept it going. While Brazil entered a state of advanced collapse, prefiguring the possibility of a post-pandemic world in all its brutality, we have actually done something constructive during the pandemic. By thinking and talking single-pointedly about the current conjuncture, by commenting weekly the multiple crises that have ravaged (and continue to ravage Brazil), we have maintained our organic solidarity and strengthened our resilience. In good hermeneutic fashion, through extroversion, by talking and thinking about the pandemic and politics rather than about ourselves, we have created a "contexture" that interweaves life and death, ideas and affects, text and persons into something that is perfectly "ecstimate", external and intimate at the same time.

In the process, as we invited some colleagues from abroad to join our Real Dystopia Project in writing, we have also made some new friends from across the oceans. Indeed, in homage to Eric Olin Wright's Real Utopias Project (2010), we adapted his progressive narrative to the new times and asked our friends to envision real dystopias.² Reverting thirty years of democracy with its utopian project of full inclusion of everyone into a just society, the dystopias of president Jair Messias Bolsonaro embody dangerous reactionary ideals that hark back to the darkest days of the civic-military dictatorship (1964-1985) in Brazil; they are not only dystopian, they are

also real because they attempt to destroy the institutional design that is ensconced in the democratic constitution of 1988.

Although the worst is still to come and the pandemic is only the opening shot of a decade of decay and corruption, at the time when we were exchanging the textual fragments that we have gathered in this article (between July and September 2020), the country was actually going through a lull. The highest intensity had been reached in April, May, and June 2020 when Bolsonaro used the pandemic as a pretext to stage a *coup d'état* (GRAF, 2020). He failed and did not send in the troops to close down the Supreme Court, but no doubt, he will try again if the opportunity presents itself. Since the relations between his family and the mafias of Rio de Janeiro have been exposed, he has kept relatively quiet, actively corrupting the political system to avoid impeachment. Against all odds, in spite of everything, his popularity has remained steady. In a non-dramatic fashion, by reverting to its shady business, as usual, the country has entered a phase of corruption - *corruptio* in the classic Aristotelian sense of the term as progressive structural "de-generation" (Negri and Hardt, 2000: 201). We're experiencing the collapse of the institutions in real time and slow motion.

The article consists of a montage or collage of textual fragments of the Real Dystopia Project. Like in Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, we transpose the technique of "literary montage" (Benjamin, 1999: 460) into history and society. If the fragments do not make up a whole, it is not only because we analyze the current events from different sites (Brazil, Europe, India, and the United States) and different disciplinary perspectives (sociology, political science, economics, and comparative literature), but also because society is in ruins and history is incomplete. The article is divided into four parts and contains 9 textual fragments (by different authors). The first part opens up the intercontinental dialogue with a lead piece that

1. At the time of writing, Sara de Andrade, António Canha, Fernando Carvalho, Paulo da Costa, Marcelo Lopes, Miguel Mendes, Yago Paiva, Cesar Teixeira and Frédéric Vandenberghe were regular members. Vittorio Talone joined us as a collaborator. We are much obliged to our friends and colleagues from Europe, India and the USA for having played the game and sent us their reflections on the Brazilian case.
2. This is the caption we used to invite our foreign correspondents: "Brazil under Bolsonaro is an extreme case of multiple system failures that bring the country to the brink of collapse. As a prefiguration of what the "post-pandemic world" could be like, it has a tremendous heuristic potential – it is "good to think with". With Max Weber, one could say that Brazil represents an "ideal type" – a conceptual dystopia that exists somewhere and shows in all its brutality what can happen when everything goes wrong. As a tribute to Eric Olin Wright, we call our exercise in collective thinking The Real Dystopia Project. This is also an experiment in writing. Wherever you are, please join the conversation and think with us against Bolsonaro, Trump, Modi and others who're wrecking our lives and fracturing our societies. If you can, please loop your reflections through the Brazilian prism".

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introduces the notion of “disjuncture analysis” (GRAF) to investigate the “conjuncture of disjunctures” (Gupta) that affects Brazil. Radicalizing the pessimism of the state of the union, the second part proposes a sociological exploration that complements a pragmatic approach to “real dystopias” (Talone) with a cybernetic analysis of “systemic clusterfucks” (Fuchs). The third part shifts the analysis from sociology to political economy, with one text looking at precarity capitalism (Azmanova) while the other follows the exuberance of the stock markets (GRAF). In the final part, the economy and politics are submitted to a more literary analysis of the tropes of the economy (Gupta) and politics (Schuller). A short conclusion wraps up the promises of disjuncture analysis with a premonitory warning about the Brazilianization of the world.

1. Conjuncture or disjuncture?

1.1. Disjuncture analysis

GRAF, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

What happens when a politically unstable, economically fragile, and completely neurotic country is hit by a global pandemic of unprecedented proportions and consequences? A short and ambiguous response would be: “It happens all over again”. “All over again”, because, at a stroke, everything that happens is new, but everything that has happened before happens again. The old ghosts of the past, who used to move in succession, now present themselves together, dancing in synchrony in a *marche funèbre*: death, *coup d'état*, and a hyper crisis broadcast without interruption on all channels. A scenario like this can in no way be called uninteresting or monotonous, but the problem is that anguish and terror are directly proportional to the speed of events. As professional social scientists, we are accustomed by trade to interpreting history in real-time. Now, as spectators of the “new normal”, we have become both hyperactive and unproductive.

Joining work and therapy, we form a group of friends who meet weekly on Zoom to analyze the conjuncture. In the beginning, we worked with “pre-texts” to meet and talk about the pandemics and the pandemonium. Like everyone else who wants to get a grasp of the pandemic, we started with reflections on biopolitics and epidemics (Foucault, 1977), the permanence of the state of exception (Agamben, 1998), necropolitics in the post-colony (Mbembe), postcolonial democracies in the global South (Chatterjee, 2011), the pedagogy of the virus (Santos, 2020) and the military coup of 1964 (Santos, 1962). But what changed everything was reading an English manuscript called *Social Analysis and the Covid-19 Crisis: A Collective Journal* (Gupta et al., 2021), which Routledge India had sent for evaluation. The manuscript, coordinated by Suman Gupta of the Open University, UK, was the result of a collective reflection of a group of people scattered around the world (Delhi, New York, São Paulo, Munich, London, Birmingham, and Plovdiv) who reflected on contagion, social distancing, lockdown, the suspension of politics, protests, etc. during the first two months of the pandemic. The manuscript was unpretentious, creative, and quite informal. Each one in lockdown sent in their observations, throwing them in the air, trying them out like balloons. We wrote an enthusiastic review for Aakash in Delhi, and he promised us we would all get a copy when the book comes out.

More importantly, we discovered a template to begin our experiment. We formalized the group, which we named GRAF (*Gabinete de Reflexão Antifa* – Cabinet of Antifa Reflexion, a cabinet of love that we oppose to *Gabinete do ódio* – Cabinet of hate – a fake news propaganda office on the third floor of the Presidential Palace in Brasília). In the meantime, we stopped reading “pretexts” and began to share newspaper articles and blogs on current affairs that had marked us during the week. In any case, the reality was so exhilarating and distressing that we barely managed to read them. The group morphed into a weekly talk show – like a talk show on Globo News or CNN Brazil, but instead of watching passively, each of us became an interpreter and an analyst, who tests his or her lines of interpretation and develops his or her own thesis.

Here are some of our reflections. What matters is not so much the content, which does not resist time, but the form of the experiment, the sheer fun of trying out loose and free ideas, sketched out in the heat of the hour. What matters is not the product, which is already dated, but the process of relating people and fragments into a text. When the test of time falsifies a prediction and overturns a thesis, its value does not end. The thesis becomes a document, the record of a specific moment of a chain in collective thinking. And, as we all know, now is the time to bring down monuments and statues. What matters are not the stones or the past but the civilizational principles and the convivial practices that guide the analysis, the diagnosis, and the critique of the present.

As social scientists, we seek to build up a more comprehensive, relatively stable, yet flexible framework of interpretation to accompany the events that disorganize the system and lead us to an explosive, contingent, open, relatively unpredictable situation – what Michel Dobry (2009) calls “a fluid conjuncture”. Every week we have to revise our scenarios for the imminent future and retroactively adapt our current interpretation schemes and explanation to the present. What interests us is no longer the relationship between agency and structure, but that between events and structure – what we call “disjuncture analysis”.

To make an analysis of the conjuncture, as we call “situational analysis” here in Brazil, one must put the events on the Timeline, indicate the actors, analyze the discourses, test the correlation of forces, distinguish cycles and establish the connection between the conjuncture and the structure (Vandenberghe, 2020). When the events directly attack the system, and the very structure of society starts to unravel, the analysis of the conjuncture is transformed from within into an analysis of the disjuncture. Our reflections should be primarily on the pandemic, but each time the provocations of President Bolsonaro have stolen the momentum and diverted us from our task.

1.2. A conjuncture of disjunctures

Suman Gupta, New Delhi, India.

The intensity of living through a near collapse in the social fabric and trying to conceptualize it as it happens can perhaps only be grasped from within. This is the experience of those living and working and being taken to the brink at this time in Brazil, caught in a juncture that is more aptly thought of as a disjuncture. Perhaps there is some advantage to bringing dislocated perspectives to enter into exchanges with those in the eye of the disjuncture.

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This binary of inside/outside has, in any case, a doubtful purchase in critical reflection at/on this disjuncture. The binary is premised on some notion of anthropographically stable zones. The line that distinguishes a geopolitical inside from the outside is usually constructed in terms of the shared predicates of, for instance, citizenship, culture, history, and imagined community. Then the given field can be described as such from inside and outside, offering different vantage points. But a disjuncture comes with spiralling instabilities – the fissures inside seem to radiate and multiply outwards. At such a disjuncture, the more insistently a narrow conception of a nation is pushed, the more the cracks inside the nation widen, and the more forcefully the state claims its monopoly, the less legitimate it appears.

So, why might the analysis of the disjuncture in Brazil have something to gain by being in conversation with the analysis from other vantage points? Without beating around the bush: because nothing happening in Brazil is a singularity, nothing is peculiarly Brazilian, nothing is Brazilian in some ineluctable and essential way. In parts and pieces, each aspect of the disjuncture is refracted through surfaces that are not especially local; in some measure, each of them can be found elsewhere, at least potentially. The disjuncture in Brazil is noteworthy mainly because it is also a conjuncture – a disjuncture that is a conjuncture of disjunctures. In their general form, some aspects therein are variously found wherever the analysis might extend from the present.

The pandemic offers a framework within which the disjuncture concentrates into an acute tension, on the verge of somehow blowing up. If the political crisis seems to overwhelm even the Covid-19 crisis, then this is an extreme impasse. Moreover, if Covid-19 morbidity and mortality, therefore, intensify and overwhelm the social structure, exacerbate social fissures, they become an expression of political malaise. But the factors that converge into this frame are obviously of prior provenance and wider import. The Covid-19 frame serves to bring these factors together, or, more accurately, to reveal their linkedness as a venal and brutal system. In their general form, some of the factors that converge in Brazil in this period are the following:

1. One of the most devastating and deliberately engineered ecological disasters in the world is unfolding there at present, driven by corporate and gangster greed backed by recent government policy.
2. Income inequality in an already widely divided population (the richest 5% have as much as the remaining 95%), after a period of slow reduction, has reversed and grown steadily since 2015 – poverty has grown by 33% in the last three years.
3. A searing racial divide (black/white) – tensor for seldom having been publicly confronted and only indifferently analyzed even in academic terms. That it is emerging painfully into a public discourse now is because racial prejudice is seemingly endorsed from the top of late – the thin veil of bare civility in this respect seems to be removed.
4. The removal of protections for indigenous peoples from 2019 onwards, unabashed expropriation of their livelihoods and environments, leaving communities exposed to decimation by disease.
5. An openly misogynistic and homophobic leadership.
6. A flip within a decade from a socialist public- and compensatory investment-based ruling structure to a fascist ruling dispensation enacting a blitz of disinvestments and privatizations. Therein is the decisive destruction of public healthcare and the hollowing out of investments in education, research, and cultural institutions from 2016 onwards.
7. A presidential system that enables one person to acquire power based on a minority following which can undermine parliamentary prerogatives, regional governmental prerogatives, and challenge the separation of powers between judiciary and executive.
8. As social deprivations mount, there's a steady exacerbation of violence: killings in poor areas, confrontations between drug factions and militia, prison massacres, and so on.
9. The burgeoning of a relatively recently established evangelist organization, conning the poor and bolstering the elites with 'prosperity theology', encroaching tentacles onto all levels of commercial, governmental, and media apparatuses.
10. The normalization of corruption at all levels is probably not new, but it is now especially visible at the top. Growing disenchantment with the political class in all ideological folds is an unsurprising consequence.
11. There's the systematic and open instrumentalization of social media platforms for propagating misinformation and for intimidation by the ruling dispensation and correspondingly top-down attacks on diversity in mainstream media.

Though each of these factors could be characterized distinctively in terms of the nuances of Brazilian history, none of these, as observed above, are specific to the territorial state formation and its demography. Each has its counterparts or strong resonances elsewhere; in most instances, a factor can be traced through multi-faceted colonial histories and international networks and ideological crosscurrents; some can be grounded in the currently dominant form of global capitalism.

However, that all these factors have converged and become foregrounded so explicitly in Brazil now – are thrown forth vividly amidst the ongoing Covid-19 crisis – is a noteworthy situation. Arguably, this situation suggests that though all these factors are seldom foregrounded with such concurrency, they are in fact of-a-piece. These are possibly all intricately intermeshed through a concatenation of rationales that work together. If some are evident in any context, the others are not far behind – they may be at work already but shrouded, or they may emerge in due course. If that's the case, it is critically important to examine and disaggregate the rationales, which link them not only so as to understand the current disjuncture in Brazil but to grasp their broad, general implications. It is incumbent on all who are involved in the social analysis to engage with these rationales so as to confront the overarching ideology that holds them together, which may well become – or might well already be – the dominant ideology of our time. So, it is necessary for all who recognize and are concerned about any of the factors enumerated above to attend to the current Brazilian disjuncture – from inside, outside, and in-between.

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2. Real dystopia?

2.1. Dystopian realities

Vittorio Talone, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

In an interesting and voluminous book on the “natural history of dystopia”, the historian Gregory Claeys (2016) not only considers representations of dystopia in literature and cinema but also seeks to account for some of its manifestations throughout history. The author refutes common-sense understandings of utopia, where the prefix *u* of negation is linked to *topos*, an imaginary place that presently does not exist in reality. For the author, dystopia is not just the opposite of utopia. Instead, it refers to mundane realities that have already existed in past, exist in the present and will continue to exist in the future. The word “dystopia”, he recalls, is derived from two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, meaning a sick, bad, defective or unfavourable place; but not necessarily intangible or unreal.

Linked to the secular pessimism and other dark phenomena typical of the modern era, the elements shaping it today seem to be evident for many of us. A quick search on Google brings up several visions of the dystopian present – in the news, on YouTube, in blogs, and in everyday life: the ascendancy of the far-right (represented by figures such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Rodrigo Duterte, to name a few); the worldwide contagion by the Sars-CoV-2 virus; the extreme economic recession, its causes, and consequences; the extraction and destruction of natural resources all over the world by the human species. In all cases, we’re facing phenomena that trigger the worst fears and dangers highlighted for ages by literature and cinema.

Dystopias are real. Not only do they exist at this very moment; for different groups throughout history they have been the objective reality. In general, though, they would be “local dystopias”, for certain groups, brought about by others who are seeking their own ideal lives. The economic and social growth of European powers over the past centuries, for instance, has been based on the crude exploitation of human and material resources from other regions of the world. The progress and the “evolution” (the utopia, therefore) of some can generate, and have generated, according to Claeys, the destruction of cultures, the separation of families, and countless deaths – elements that would be identified as dystopian by the first ones had it happened to them.

But if we bring the “dystopias” of literature into political philosophy and do with them what Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) did with conceptual utopias, the so-called *Cités* or Commonwealths they extracted from classical texts, I think we can open up an interesting path of reflection on the “culture wars” of today. If we view dystopias both as comprehensive worldviews and blueprints for world-making, the scale changes. If we conceive of them as general moral and political frameworks that guide and direct certain forms of action by social actors in their lives, they potentially take on a universal dimension. As comprehensive worldviews, dystopias touch all elements of life. To the extent that they are plural and in competition with each other, utopias also introduce an agonistic element into the analysis that complicates it. Not only can the actions of one group bring about the “worst-case scenario” for others; but there are also disputes over what is to be considered the most urgent, the most menacing, or even the most real dystopian scenarios. We are

not only frightened, for example, by the realization of a “dystopia” concerning the environment and/or a general contagion, enhanced by the vile actions of people, large corporations, and governments that disrespect the lives of many; but we are also startled by the fact that, symmetrically to our dystopias, these actors disseminate their own views of the “worst possible world” and produce their own dystopias, invoking the spectres of “communism”, “gayzism”, “globalism”, “totalitarianism”, among other multiple possibilities.

The identification of a dystopian reality is proactive and performative – it aims to mobilize people and resources to fight it. When “communism” and “political correctness” are pointed out as the real dystopias, people and resources are mobilized to reverse and destroy many of the achievements of progressive struggles for respect and a dignified life for all, especially for those who carry a history of violation and dehumanization on their shoulders. Envisioning real dystopias, therefore, understood as the coming into existence of a dystopian reality, indicates two relevant paths of analysis:

1. We are currently facing what were future and potential projections of what was once considered the “worst possible world”. Note that they are plural and that there is a dispute to demonstrate which one is most real, most urgent, the one that we should mobilize all of our resources against to fight it.
2. To prove the “validity” of a dystopia implies that the actors mobilize different means of communication/information along with official data, scientific studies, statistics, fake news, folk philosophies, YouTubers’ speeches, etc. In short, dystopian realities are in dispute and we need to understand how they become tangible and real (or not) to people, as they suffer the consequences of their becoming real even if they do not believe in a given “dystopia” – as unfortunately, we have seen with people dying of Covid-19 in a “contagion dystopia”, not believing in it and not taking the necessary measures to protect themselves from it.

2.2. Systemic clusterfucks

Stephan Fuchs, Charlottesville, USA.

The idea of systemic clusterfucks is rooted in the sociology of organizations, studies of disasters, and the idea of society as differentiated into independent and autonomous systems conceived as autopoietic observers observing themselves and their environment (Fuchs, 2001). In functional differentiation, what matters to a system is settled by and within the system (Luhmann, 1990). This makes them blind to that which is observed in other systems. Systems are chronically and constitutionally blind to all that which they cannot observe in their own accustomed terms and habitual modes, or trans-late somehow into their own communications, culture, and semantics. Systems do boundary work to distinguish between what concerns and belongs to them, and what doesn’t. But boundary work can fail, putting a system in danger of being invaded by another system, where different distinctions matter, and where what is being observed, the object, appears in different frames of reference and signification. What is considered “real” varies from function system to function system and from code to code. Each of them enacts a reality that corresponds to the major distinctions drawn through the

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different codes of the various systems. No system “controls” any other, even less all of them. While there are and may be interactions and relations between systems, say politics and science, politics cannot *do* science. But politics *can* destroy science – a catastrophic event, in that a mode of worlding is then and thereby extinguished, the world in which the difference between true and false *matters* and makes a difference, so much so that *only* this distinction matters – in and to science. Functional differentiation ensures and assures and insures that doctors are concerned about health, lawyers about law, and that scientific truth is true because it is scientific.

While functional differentiation may be constitutive of modernity, the actual degree to which systems are autonomous in their workings, and protected against outside interference through strong boundaries, is variable. A bad but rare scenario is one system and its code invading other systems or even all of them. Politics interferes in science; the economy enters education and health care. The cultural apparatus is both political and economic. The worst scenario is the utter and complete collapse of a system, as its work and operations are being reduced to and become those of the conquering, or even “total”, system.

Systemic clusterfucks occur when disturbances and failures in one system of society move across the boundaries into other systems and enter that system in a “raw” state, a state that the system objected to invasion fails to reconcile with its own states, by translating or assimilating the foreign into itself by way of decomposition and recombination (Perrow, 1984). Systemic clusterfucks are multiple and interacting systems and systemic or structural failures. This makes them difficult, if not impossible, to repair, or even localize. Normal accidents cannot be attributed to a single source or cause, or at least not for a very long time after they occur. Who or what shall eventually receive or assume most or even all of the blame and responsibility for the clusterfuck depends on how quickly the dust settles.

An example of a systemic clusterfuck is a pandemic. Pandemics come in many forms and guises; the current type is not the only one. Gossip, for example, is a more local and ongoing epidemic. As it spreads, it is being explained and understood by many observers in many different ways. Each observer insists on itself and its own way of making sense of what is happening, suspecting each other as being ideological. Those who look to science as the cure will have to wait longer for a credible, let alone “consensual”, scientific response than expected. Most experimental trials take years and produce uncertain results. The pandemic appears as a political problem, or an economic one, a problem for health care as well as corporate education. It might be caused by bats or globalization. What causes an epidemic as systemic clusterfuck? The possibilities for culprits are almost unlimited.

Systemic clusterfucks spread from one system to another, and they trigger unexpected and unanticipated consequences as they do. They quickly overload a system’s capacity for dealing with surprises. Since they are non-linear, interactive feedback effects worsen the initial problem by turning multiple failures into an even bigger or unknown problem of a different sort altogether, one for which no protocol exists. They are prone to end in disaster, a disaster that no system is equipped to handle, and a disaster that can no longer be managed and contained, least of all by a central and centralized bureaucratic hierarchy.

3. Precarity Capitalism

3.1. A metacrisis of capitalism

Albena Azmanova, Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

Nestled at the periphery of the European Union and at the margins of Europe’s self-awareness lies Brazil’s little sister, Bulgaria – a similarly “politically unstable, economically fragile and completely neurotic country” (and one with comparable intellectual intensity and a sense of *joie de vivre*, one might add). Like Brazil, Bulgaria is nominally democratic but governed by an autocratic brute at the head of an oligarchical economic structure that penetrates the state. It is here, in the summer of 2020, that I compose my reflections on the disjuncture fostered by Covid-19.

As I write, the country is awash with anti-government protests against the oligarchs’ social privileges and political power that have turned Bulgaria into a textbook case of ‘state capture’ (i.e., the capture of state institutions by the mafia). This leads me to discern an element that might be useful to disjunction analysis, focusing on events that disorganize the system and its interest in the relationship between event and structure: an apparent anomaly should serve as an empirical entry point of analysis. At the same time, critique pursues the structural drivers of a social system’s crisis and transformation. The anomaly I have currently in mind is this:

Not only here, in Europe’s geographical and political periphery, but also in the infamous ‘core’ – Western Europe and the U.S. – the death and economic devastation that the pandemic has generated did not trigger protests about such bread-and-butter issues as impoverishment and job loss – like the Yellow Vests had done in France, as a reaction to the austerity policies of the post-2008 financial meltdown. Such a reaction could reasonably be expected. The European Central Bank announced that Europe has entered its biggest economic crisis in peacetime, while the Federal Reserve Bank reports the worst decline in output and employment in 90 years. The World Bank warns that the world is on the precipice of the deepest slump since 1945 with up to 60 million people pauperized. And yet, the eruption of popular discontent amidst the Covid pandemic took a noneconomic shape, ‘bread-and-butter’ concerns, but of ‘human dignity issues’ – racism and police violence in the U.S. and Western Europe, and corruption and privilege in Europe’s Eastern periphery (Azmanova, 2020a). Before these protests erupted, there had been much talk about growing inequality. Yet the current insurrections do not question the distribution of wealth, but something less tangible – the nature of political rule. To understand how unusual this is, we might recall the equanimity with which the inhabitants of liberal democracies reacted to the economic crisis that followed the 2008 financial meltdown. Even in its most remarkable iterations (the Occupy movements in New York and elsewhere, the Indignados upheaval in Spain, the Yellow vests protests in France) these movements expressed frustrations with the existing order, but were decidedly non-radical: as the famous slogan of the Spanish Indignados put it, “We are not against the system. The system is against us”. This was a plea for a more inclusive, fairer system, not for its total overhaul.

The moderate nature of public protest during the decade that will be remembered as the Great Recession is an element of what I have called a “metacrisis of capitalism” (Azmanova, 2020b) – a

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condition of inflammation, a prolonged low fever, and persistent anxiety which is not a veritable crisis as it entails neither of the three typical exits from a crisis: death, normalization, or radical transformation. A decade into the financial collapse of 2007-2009, the capitalist economy had recovered. Yet, our societies had not restored their sense of normalcy and discourses about crisis abounded, without however tangible prospects for a radical transformation. By way of explaining the phenomenon of metacrisis, I had suggested that the massive economic insecurity (precarity) that globally integrated capitalism had inflicted upon the 99%, combined with the lack of plausible utopias, is triggering conservative, even reactionary instincts – fear of freedom rather than the desire for radical change has been the prevailing mood in capitalist democracies. Could it be that Covid is putting an end to the meta-crisis and opening a path for genuinely emancipatory mobilizations of the sort we are witnessing now? Why are people taking a risk with their lives (as public gatherings increase the likelihood of contamination) to protest the failures of liberal democracies to live up to the standards of decent political rule? Could this be interpreted as a revolt against neoliberal capitalism beyond frustrations with its unfair distributive outcomes? Note that protestations against inequality and calls for redistribution are not anti-systemic in nature because they tacitly endorse wealth, and hence the process of wealth generation, because wealth is not created in a vacuum).

Suppose there is a causal connection between the current protests and neoliberal rule. In that case, it might be this: global neoliberal capitalism, with its intense competitive pressures, thinning social safety net, and shrunken public sector has trapped everyone – rich and poor, well-educated and low-skilled workers, men and women alike – in the ‘always-on economy’. This economic entrapment into an economically precarious busyness has forced us to focus mainly on the short-term considerations of becoming employable and staying employed, sapping up the creative social energies, and overpowering our sense of injustice with conservative cravings for stability. The lock-down set us free from the ‘always on economy’. At the same time, it became clear that the great economical price our societies are paying for coping with the pandemic has much to do with the failures of political rule – with the fact that self-serving political elites have long abandoned the precepts of accountable rule in the public interest. These elites resorted to facile autocratic measures (from ordering the lock-down to lifting it for the sake of rebooting the economy), which were more of a way to feign leadership without assuming responsibility – the responsibility to build public healthcare capacity and make it available to all, to shield science from the profit imperative, to make the economy work for all citizens and to provide for life in dignity. Maybe this is what the current protests are about – a call for socially responsible rule and a call for ending the pandemic of precarity (Azmanova, 2021).

3.2. Looking good: a pathetic perspective on the economy

GRAF, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Though sometimes tragicomic and lost, and at other times very well structured as an authoritarian regime, Brazil under Bolsonaro should not be perceived as a country on the verge of collapse. For some, the collapse happened a while ago, and what we experience

today is yet to be described. In any case, Jair Bolsonaro should not be underestimated because of his (lack of) manners or pegged as the clinical case that he certainly is. Another look is that though Bolsonaro loves chaos, his aides know how to manage his interests while the tropical Duce runs his pantomime. As mentioned by the filmmaker João Moreira Salles (2020),

“Obtuseness does not mean lack of strategy. Bolsonaro knows what he wants. Moreover, he knows what he likes. So do his followers. They want what they like”.

Some might say that the recent good results of the Brazilian economy are connected to Bolsonaro’s shift to “peace and love” behaviour. Indeed, this is partially true. The unexpected imprisonment of the family’s henchman, progress in the Congress and Supreme Court’s probe into the dissemination of fake news, combined with the negative side-effects of his flamboyant appearances during anti-democracy demonstrations might have encouraged a more introspective behaviour. But it is hard to say how long this will last.

However, the other part of the truth behind the “good results” – an expression merely related to the results that matter to financial capitalism, global investors, rentiers, and other entities – of the Brazilian economy are not necessarily connected to Bolsonaro’s direct actions.

The stock market is returning to pre-pandemic performance, though Brazil proudly holds its 1,000 daily death toll and Covid-19 is still at its first wave in the country. Since God punishes with one hand and forgives with the other, as Sars-CoV-2 spreads, Brazil expects record harvests of soybeans and corn. As far as luck goes, record productions are also benefited by the currency devaluation and high external demands. Though brick and mortar shops are suffering, big retailers are also harvesting fantastic profits online, partially due to lockdowns and partially benefited by the BRL 600 (USD 120) support that the government is providing to approximately 60M deprived people. Though initially planned to last for three months, it is still unclear if Bolsonaro will push his economic team to scrape the reserves to garner popularity and make it last longer.

As ironic as it is to see from this Finance Ministry, Chicago Boy Paulo Guedes – who is proud of his role in supporting the Chilean economy during the Pinochet days – is defending minimum income policies and celebrating a –5% GDP forecast (which is definitely better than the –9% forecasted by the IMF). However, one must never forget that Guedes found fame and fortune as a banker and hedge fund manager – not as an economist. He knows that realpolitik does not follow textbooks and investors follow profits, not ideologies.

Behind the pantomime, the family scandals, and the authoritarian drive of the government personified in Jair Bolsonaro, there is a silent and efficient machine that, in close connection with the Congress, is moving an agenda of “disinvestments” from state-owned companies like Petrobras. Labour laws are being altered hitherto with the excuse of saving jobs and companies during the pandemic, but some changes are here to stay. The pandemic has forced schools and universities to close – and we should not underestimate the neglect of education in Brazil whilst distance-learning moguls are moving significant volumes of investment to create “solutions” for the country. Brazil is for sale, and there are buyers.

The current crisis is moral, for sure. It is a disgrace for democracy, and it is exposing more and more the inequalities in the country. From a political and social perspective, it is hard to predict if the

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bridges that were burned will ever be reconstructed. Unfortunately, financial capitalism does not seem to bother with any of this as long as assets are cheap, contracts are respected, and opportunities abound. Brazil might as well be the country of the future, for the wrong people.

4. Tropes of Politics and Economics

4.1. A capitalist story and a protagonist

Suman Gupta, New Delhi, India.

Let us think of this in terms of ways of telling a story. The financial capitalist's story focuses on some broad indicators: growth (GDP is often the misconceived centrepiece), volume of trade (in commodities, manufacture, services), share-market performance (especially of big corporations), FDI, consumer index, currency exchange value (indexed to inflation/deflation). The story also has a rhetoric, a dramatically upbeat rhetoric: any 'downturn' or 'recession' is usually a portent of 'rebound', 'recovery', 'resurgence'; any slight momentary 'upturn' from a bottomless pit of 'downturns' can only be 'good news', a 'silver lining'. Any indicator which is not of those broad indicators but serves the upbeat rhetoric can be recruited to this story opportunistically (like 'falling unemployment', 'financial inclusion', 'debt reduction', etc.) or otherwise forgotten. This story has a fourfold impetus.

- It promotes the financial capitalist's perspective for public consumption. The constant upbeatness is a kind of publicity discourse – it doesn't simply present a perspective, it sells it.
- It also draws working people into the game of financial speculation, as an invitation to play the market, to invest in stocks, to consume more, to let the bank invest your savings without quite telling you, to let your pension agency do that too, to help you quietly accept changes to your agreed pension deal, savings interest rate, insurance terms and conditions ...
- The story doesn't tell what the really big financial speculators know and the small scale investors don't need to know – there are muffled subtexts of 'insider information' or 'price-setting accords' and the like which are suggested by not being told, aporia.
- And, of course, this story doesn't tell the other story – let's call this other story the welfare capitalist's story.

For financial capitalists: Brazil's good economic performance is good in an abstract way, for the country as an abstract entity, as an idea; it is good irrespective of those social measures that welfare capitalists push – or rather, it is good at the expense of those social measures that welfare capitalists push. The abstract good that this story promotes for Brazil has been of late persistently at the expense of those social measures that welfare capitalists speak of in their stories (yes, the collapse has already happened) – so much so, that it has become a matter of life and death. All those pre-text concepts mentioned earlier in the opening GRAF text – bare life, necropolitics, disposable people, precarity – come alive because the financial capitalist's stories cannot cover up the fact that people are dying violently and in concentrated numbers to generate this abstract good for Brazil. That can't be good for too many people in Brazil if

so many are dying. Maybe it's good for a very small number, those who are telling this financial capitalist story. The Covid-19 crisis is the perfect frame for this contestation of stories, for the financial capitalist story paradoxically giving life to the welfare capitalist story and hollowing itself out. There really are people dying, not as a slow by-product (collateral damage) for the abstract good of the nation, but in surges of numbers to actually keep that financial capitalist story going against all odds.

There are literature scholars who spend lifetimes trying to infer what kind of person the author was and what she thought about works of fiction. For them, all protagonists in a story become reflections of the author's life, mind, and reality. At present, it seems that all of Brazil and all in the world who follow things Brazilian are doing something similar – but they are only interested in one protagonist for all Brazilian stories of the moment, someone called Jair Bolsonaro. In an extraordinary way, Bolsonaro is both becoming the core meme for Brazil-now and the inferred author of Brazil-now. One can't open one's mouth with regard to any issue without saying 'Bolsonaro' – Satan, demon, saviour, villain, hero, trickster, cartoon figure, mafia don, president...

Perhaps that's a narrative strategy of the story that financial capitalists tell – for this story to work, one needs such a strategy. Maybe it's the same for other stories that need to be consistent with this story. Every contradiction in this story can be allocated to that character, every subterfuge can be glossed by the distraction of this character. The fictional figure Bolsonaro appears constantly by/in a simulacrum, talked about constantly as someone's name, used as a framing device for anything so that the rationales of the story and the interests of the storytellers are obscured. Everyone is so bemused by the antics of this character that they can't see the wood for the trees, or rather they can't tell illusion, fiction and reality apart. The social contradictions that feed the Covid-19 crisis in Brazil can't be addressed or engaged sensibly because Bolsonaro keeps popping up like a recurring blot on a rolling film.

So, what if we can talk about the current disjuncture in Brazil without talking about Bolsonaro? Let's just say: there's a rhetorical device (personification or iconization) that some people call 'bolsonaro' but we prefer to call 'X' which is intended to blind us. We will get to the logic of the stories and storytellers' interests that constitute this current disjuncture by putting X in its empty place and looking to the structures of power and the logic of political economy. Is that possible?

4.2. The Drama of Democracy

Sebastian Schuller, Munich, Germany.

I think there is more to be learned if we take at face value an expression that struck me and use it as a lens through which to observe our subject closely: "the drama of democracy". Yet let me start with some remarks on conspiracy theories. One aspect will be the performative quality of complots: the conspiracy believer and especially the conspiracy propagandist does not, at least this is my theory, simply believe. Instead, his belief is only true if he enacts, or even *performs* it. From posting on imageboards to prepperdom, to professionals like Alex Jones with his own internet TV channel and webshop: they all work, here is the term again, as actors performing a conspiracy theory on different levels and with different means.

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We tend to limit this form of political performance to the fringes of society and the political spectrum (Alexander, 2017). Yet we also know that this kind of play has “entered” the mainstream, becoming hegemonic: Bolsonaro for example, with his erratic manoeuvres, his crazy speeches, his behaviour when it comes to masks, etc. could very well be one of these fringe performers of conspiracy ideology, if it were not for the fact that he is not on the fringes of society but the president of the largest country in South America.

I am convinced that many people feel contempt for our president-clowns, from Trump to Bolsonaro. It is agreed upon by liberal media from The Washington Post to The Guardian, that Trump somehow desacralizes the office precisely by performing his little plays, directed at his personal audience. What seems so scandalous for these critics (or better said this line of critique) are not only the concrete actions of the president, nor the exact expressions, but that they are to be perceived as a performance, a play: Trump, by being rude, by not accepting certain standards of communication, shows that he does not care for the people, that he ignores democracy, that he does ignore the dignity of his office.

Thus, we might say that the implied base of this line of critique is the assumption that democracy is not exactly a play, or a show, or a performance, but has some essential dignity and truthness that is at least endangered by the performative clownery. Now, my claim would be that if we think this through from another perspective, we might find a totally different play performed before our eyes.

The German language has some expressions (interestingly enough coined by the Nazis, as Victor Klemperer (2013) showed) that are used even today and reveal a certain theatrical moment of the modern state. First and foremost, the term *Staatsakt*. It is relatively vague but means any kind of public display of the state as such or certain ceremonies connected to the state and its offices: when a foreign head of state is welcomed or a new head of state is introduced to office, the media and even the state in its press releases may use this term. The term itself is interesting insofar as it connects two different terms that originate from different fields, the state and the act as in an act of a drama. In the “Staatsakt” we are confronted with the symbolism of the state, and yet the term in the cynical openness typical of Nazi-Germany, denotes that it is exactly that: a play.

And here comes into play (sorry for the play on words) what struck me about the expression “the drama of democracy”. My claim would be that all the state is a stage: the presumed dignity of office, the idea of a national union of free subjects enjoying quality time of freedom and democracy – all these ideologemes are performed through and in the “Staatsakte” of our democratic drama. Maybe one would even go so far as to claim that elections are but forms of such a dramatization of politics. I think this understanding of the performative quality of democracy illuminates the central plot twist in our situation today.

By playing the clown, the fool, the erratic conspiracy theorist, by being rude, showing all forms of deviancy, the ultra-right clown-presidents of our time indeed make fun of democracy. This means that their performance interrupts the performance of the solemn “Staatsakt” of neoliberal governance, functions as a kind of twisted “estrangement effect” (may Brecht forgive me) that reveals the void and the idiocy of the whole play. Of course, this does not happen in order to undermine the capitalist state, but it is directed

at the establishment. The attack against “liberal elites” could then be read as a struggle between different fractions of capital itself, yet nonetheless, this play disrupts, estranges and thus shows the dramatic (aka performative) character of the state that is no longer to be taken seriously.

If an analysis or critique of the current predicament focuses on this performative moment in the way liberal media does, it will miss the whole play. Or better still, it will pose the old performance of the democratic *Staatsakte* against the clownery of the president, ignoring that both are intertwined: Without the democratic drama we would not have the fascist clown, the alt-right estrangement effect. In other words, a critique that attacks the clown-president for being a clown will prove unable, in my eyes, to address (and attack!) the structures that form our current predicament and that need to be reformed as they will inevitably lead towards autocratic neoliberalism.

Conclusion: *de te fabula narratur* GRAF, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

In a regular situation - or, one might say, in the “old normal” – a conjuncture analysis would typically be done by identifying the way in which the relevant fragments of reality come together to form a singular situation. We sustain, however, that to follow the unravelling of social structures that marks the “new normal”, disjuncture analysis is more appropriate. In a disjuncture, one needs to grasp the way in which fragments of reality contingently come apart, dismantling a former singular situation, and come together to form a new unstable one. As an entanglement of multiple crises, a disjuncture demolishes the long established borders between the realms of reality: the economy, politics, culture, metaphysics, subjectivity become fluid and lose their autonomy. How to analyse such a “liquid conjuncture” is the epistemic challenge that disjuncture analysis takes up.

Its very mode of expression exposes the bafflement of a democracy that falls apart. The montage of textual fragments aims both to express and to protest against the *démontage* or dismantling of society and the arrest of history that brings the “dialectics to a standstill” (Benjamin, 1999: 865). The disjuncture of the analysis is both a method and a socio-historical condition. Although we thoroughly enjoyed thinking and writing together in fragments, the disjuncture itself is rather painful. The mediation that is lacking in society is also lacking in the method. Without mediation, the negativity cannot be turned into positivity.

To analyze the disjuncture, one must first acknowledge its multiple strands and accept that the whole has fallen into irreconcilable parts. If the first step of disjuncture analysis is realistic and deconstructive, the second one is more constructivist, however. To address the multiple fractures, one has to multiply the approaches to reality: Literature, linguistics, systems theory, economics, history, politics, and sociology. But as a disjuncture is a de-differentiator in its very nature, we must destabilize the terrain in which each of those disciplines work. Can democracy be interpreted in dramaturgical terms (Schuller)? Can the economy be illuminated by figures of speech (Gupta)? Can the pandemic be a useful epidemiological model for systems theory (Fuchs)? And what happens when we invert the background and figure of the usual paradigms? Is the metacrisis the

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rule and has the state of exception become permanent (Azmanova)? And is dystopia nothing more than the real conditions of existence for most people (Talone)? In fact, this relational experiment was not just about building connections around the globe during the most acute phase of isolation. It was based on the principle that only by relating and processing, by intermingling and mixing the most different interpretations of reality, we can draw a picture that makes sense (from what doesn't make any).

Brazil? Perhaps, it is just a pretext. Though it might well be a prediction and a premonition. For many years, the Brazilian right has conjured up neighbouring countries as the omens of a dystopia that it does not want to see realized: "We will not be the new Cuba" was the motto of the military coup of 1964; "We will not become a Venezuela" was the motto of the presidential elections in 2018. But the reality is that Brazil itself is becoming the real dystopia that haunts the world. It's too early to decide if there will be a "Brazilianization" of the world, but, if there is one, disjuncture analysis is the method to deal with the new constellation.

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The GRAF (*Gabinete de reflexão antifa*) is an anonymous collective of friends in Rio de Janeiro. Formed during the pandemic around Frédéric Vandenberghe who teaches sociology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, the collective meets on a weekly basis on Zoom to analyze the political situation and the accumulation of crises inflicted by the Coronavirus and the Bolsonaro-virus. This is their second text. "Análise da disjuntura ao longo da pandemia: Um experimento de escrita sem partitura" was published before in Portuguese in the journal *Dilemas. Reflexões na pandemia*, 2020, no. 66, pp. 1-17. [Online]. <https://www.reflexpandemia.org/texto-66>

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