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Brazil

Among the right-wing governments, Bolsonaro's is the one with most neo-fascist features

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Michael Löwy, the French-Brazilian sociologist and philosopher, has been one of Europe's most influential Marxists for the past 30 years. In this interview, translated from Portuguese, he discusses Jair Bolsonaro and the global return of the right.

In this interview, Löwy discusses the advance of the far right in Brazil, capped with the election of Jair Bolsonaro, and the similarities between the situation in Brazil and that of the classical European Fascism of the 1930s.

Michael Löwy spoke to Brasil de Fato at the launch of a new Portuguese translation of the book, *News from Nowhere*, published by Editora Expresso Popular, for which he wrote the introduction.

Brasil de Fato: To begin, I would like to know in which terms and how you would characterise the government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Michael Löwy: What we see in Brazil today is a dystopia. The opposite of utopia. For those of us who form part of the Brazilian left and have fought for many years to advance the ideas, struggles and conquests of the workers, of socialism and of progress, it is very sad to see how Brazil reached the point of having a government that I would characterise as semi-fascist at least.

It will not be completely fascist because it does not have the aspects of the totalitarian State, of the armed groups like Mussolini's "fasci" [Blackshirts]. But it has many of the features of fascism. I think that Jair Bolsonaro is comparable, for instance, to Mussolini in the 1920s. In those years, Mussolini still maintained the appearances of a parliamentary republic, there was opposition in parliament whose principal leader was a democrat, [Giacomo] Matteotti, and among the deputies was Antonio Gramsci. All this lasted until 1926, when he closed parliament, imprisoned Gramsci, who remained in prison until his death (1937), and ordered the killing of Matteotti. It finished there. I hope we do not reach that point in Brazil.

I see the figure of Jair Bolsonaro and a good part of his government as having fascist elements of authoritarianism, with that idea that the enemy must be "exterminated". The enemies being the left, feminists, indigenous, the MST [Landless Workers' Movement] etc. The hatred of "communism", which for him represents the whole left, is a characteristic of fascism, as is the idea that the only solution is repression.

Unfortunately, there are many extreme right governments in the world today, like [Donald] Trump in the United States, [Viktor] Orban in Hungary, [Narendra] Modi in India. But the one with the most semi-fascist or neo-fascist features is the government of Jair Bolsonaro.

Fortunately, he does not have total power, as the totalitarian States in Italy, Germany and Spain did. He has to negotiate with Parliament, with the Senate and even with the Armed Forces. That is a situation that differentiates him from the classic fascism of the 1930s. History obviously does not repeat itself, but it is very worrying.

Another difference in relation to fascism is that this figure was elected democratically by the population. There was no military coup, like we had in many Latin American countries in the 1960s and 1970s; it was a democratic election, and that is very sad.

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On the other hand, we see that the people who fell for his scam are waking up. Bolsonaro's popularity has fallen dramatically, there is mobilisation and resistance. One of these, which for me is very important, is the union mobilisation against the Social Security reform, an ultra-reactionary reform.

Of course, the ruling classes are happy. There is a consensus among the oligarchs, landowners and bankers who think that Bolsonaro is a solution because he is constructing a neoliberal programme in the most brutal way, as the dominant Brazilian oligarchy has wanted to do for a long time.

Another resistance that I find very important is that of the indigenous in Amaz nia, who are struggling to defend the rainforest and the rivers. The Amazon Rainforest is a good of the Brazilian people and of humanity. Without it, climate change will accelerate.

In Bolsonaro's government, it seems that socioenvironmental policies have lost importance. Since his assumption, licences for pesticides have been granted at an accelerated rate and deforestation has increased by almost 90% in the Amazon, for example. Even the progressive camp was late in understanding the importance of this issue. How do you view this problem today?

I am convinced that the question of the environment, or nature, or ecology, will become increasingly central in the 21st century. It is not just a question of defending the environment, our rainforests or animal species. It is a question of the survival of life on the planet. If the process of climate change and global warming surpasses a certain level, it will be irreversible.

At a certain moment, the question of whether there are still the conditions for human life on this planet arises. It really is a question of life or death. For that reason, it will become a central political question for any project of social change. It will be very important for the left, social movements, workers, rural workers, everyone, to take the environmental question as a fundamental political question and a central reason for fighting against capitalism. It is capitalism that is responsible for this.

It is very important that socialists understand this and assume this as something central, not as a detail in a list of 45 programmatic points. It is a central battle for the future of humanity. That is my "message": we must appropriate for ourselves the ecological question as a weapon in the struggle against capitalism.

What is there in common between the advance of the right in Europe and Latin America?

Liberal globalisation and the economic crisis that it caused from 2008 created a favourable context for the spectacular ascent not only of the classical neoliberal right but also of the extreme semi-fascist right with racist and authoritarian features, in many countries around the world. From Japan to India, a large part of Europe, the United States and Brazil.

I have no single explanation for why this is happening. There are various elements: the crisis of neoliberalism is one aspect; the weakening of the left is another. But, for me, it is still an enigma to understand why – just in the last years – we are experiencing this phenomenon, which is not exactly the same as the 1930s because history never repeats itself, but is the resurgence of neo-fascist or semi-fascist forms.

On hope, to finish. Do you see a way through? What would it be?

The way through for me are the struggles and the resistance. Here in Latin America, the indigenous and rural

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workers are on the front line. Another element that gives us hope is the youth. The youth that, around the whole world, will mobilise on 20 September for a large international general strike over climate change, against the governments that do not take the necessary decisions.

We know that the youth is the future. If the youth mobilises, if it struggles, if it becomes conscious and raises the banner, "change the system, not the climate", then there is hope.

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