

## Authoritarian thinking in Brazil: origins and actuality

## O pensamento autoritário no Brasil: origens e atualidade

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**Abstract.** *This article aims to describe the presence of authoritarian thinking in the Brazilian's Republic. Authoritarian thinking in Brazil has to be understood in its origins and history by considering it as a long-term process that maintains its actuality. There is a set of questions that we tackle in this paper around which we organized the connection between the origins and contemporary relevance of Brazilian authoritarian thinking: 1) how authoritarian and conservative thinking relates; 2) how conservative and liberal projects will approach each other in Brazil, a dependent economy, in which conservatives originally were constituted as anti-liberals and had a clear national agenda based on a centralized State?; 3) How does conservative, authoritarian and liberal thinking blend together during this process?; 4) Is authoritarian thinking important in our democracy?*

**Keywords:** *Authoritarian Thinking. Brazilian's Republic. Democracy.*

**Resumo.** *Este artigo tem como objetivo descrever a presença do pensamento autoritário na República Brasileira. O pensamento autoritário no Brasil precisa ser compreendido em suas origens e história, considerando-o como um processo de longa duração que mantém sua atualidade. Há um conjunto de questões que enfrentamos neste artigo com as quais organizamos a conexão entre origens e atualidade do pensamento autoritário brasileiro: 1) como o pensamento autoritário e conservador se relacionam?; 2) como os projetos conservadores e liberais se aproximaram no Brasil, uma economia dependente, onde os conservadores originalmente foram constituídos como antiliberais e tinham uma agenda nacional nítida baseada em um Estado centralizado?; 3) Como o pensamento conservador, autoritário e liberal se misturam durante neste processo?; 4) O pensamento autoritário é importante na nossa democracia?*

**Palavras-chave:** *Pensamento Autoritário. República Brasileira. Democracia.*

## 1. Introduction

The actuality of authoritarian thinking during the second half of 2010's is a phenomenon that has opened a vast research agenda among social sciences authors. As Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine pointed out "inescapably we live in both interesting and disturbing political times (BOFFO, SAAD-FILHO & FINE, 2019). These are times, which, since election of Donald Trump, yield daily experiences of new political extremities bordering between the unimaginable and farcical" (BOFFO, SAAD-FILHO & FINE, 2019). In Brazil this experience has been tremendously intense and gave birth to a new wave of authoritarian arguments that grew in the public debate and were victorious in the last presidency and parliamentary elections.

Historically, political extremism tends to be a mark of societies in crisis. Depending on the internal conjuncture of the power dispute, the level of technological development and the general economic situation both within and beyond national frontiers, the transitional process connected to the crisis can take different forms. Transformations may assume exclusively juridical forms, but they can also spread to political ground. Nevertheless, it is possible, and moreover probable that more profound changes have been occurring in social historical formations and in methods of social production, provoking all these other questionings. Historically, there is no record of big transformations in material life without a set of ideas presenting itself as a new form of social consciousness and contesting general comprehension of the social organization process.

However, it is fundamental to our proposition in this article to understand how authoritarian thinking becomes a important matrix of our social thought being able to structure the politics and the economy of governments in the Brazilian Republic for at least 37 years in a 130 year-old republic. With this aim it is important for us to know: 1) how authoritarian and conservative thinking relates; 2) how conservative and liberal projects will approach each other in Brazil, a dependent economy, in which conservatives originally were constituted as anti-liberals and which had clear national agenda based on a centralized State?; 3) How does conservative, authoritarian and liberal thinking blend together during this process?; 4) Is authoritarian thinking important for the development of our democracy?

In a recent interview to a big mainstream Brazilian newspaper one of the most important Brazilian historian and political scientists still living, the 87 years-old Boris FAUSTO, told that "Conservatism has always existed [in Brazil]. We were one of the last countries to extinguish slavery and we never solved this problem. But conservatism has taken a virulent form now. It was submerged and came out with enormous momentum because the country had been promoting a very large customs revolution. There is [in Brazil] a total misunderstanding of what human rights means (...)." (FAUSTO, 2018, in O Globo interview with Silvia Amorim, 8/10/2018, brackets added by the authors). In the same direction, but 30 years earlier, another important Brazilian interpreter, Antônio Candido (1988) pointed out that it was essential to begin to write about radical thinking in Brazil "by mentioning its opposite, conservative thinking, because as time goes by it turns out that one of the fundamental traits of mentality and political behaviour in Brazil is the persistence of conservative positions, forming an almost insurmountable barrier"(MELLO E SOUZA, 1988, p.4). Highlights made by Antônio Candido de Mello e Souza (1988) and Boris FAUSTO (2018) lead us to the necessity to understanding the roots and origins of a thought

that persists and presents itself as an option in different conjunctures in Brazil, even today. There is, however, a differentiated path regarding the economic marks and social bias of conservative thinking in Brazil.

Historically, Brazilian conservative thinking has moved away from liberal thinking either because of its nationalist trait, or by the ever-present need in its content to mark strong and centralizing governments referring to a powerful State. This way it approached authoritarian thinking. It is important to be said that this presence is not exclusively Brazilian. It is possible to observe it in peripheral countries in which the economy developed from a dependent colonial insertion, being even more present in the colonies whose production was a fundamental axis of support of its respective metropolis. It can also be found in countries that currently are part of the capitalist centre, but were not so at the beginning of the 20th century, as in the case of Italy and Germany (HOBSBAWN, 1995).

## **2. Origins of authoritarian thinking and the national question**

When we refer to authoritarianism it is important to define its characteristics in our conception. As Boris FAUSTO (2001) points out, authoritarian regimes are characterized by a low investment in social life at all levels. There are restrictions regarding popular mobilizations, parties are neither strong nor well organized and have no structural connections with the State. The State is the centre of the political organization but relative independency from official doctrine is preserved among some institutions, especially, religious ones. Authoritarianism is conservative and connected to traditions from the past. With those respects they are very different from the so-called totalitarian regimes which emerged during the 20th century, because, these had a very strong connection between party and state, important popular mobilization usually with emotional ties to the party-state, they argue for changes in the system and rely on a charismatic figure that search for heroes and legends from the ancient past for inspiration but without being traditionalist<sup>1</sup> (FAUSTO, 2001).

The emergency of authoritarian ideas in Brazil during the 1920's happened in the context of a liberal oligarchic regime that rose with the proclamation of the republic in 1889. Liberalism was seen as oligarchic based, connected with fraudulent practices regarding elections and a nation controlled by just some of the states, just the most powerful ones – São Paulo and Minas Gerais. The central State had a very fragile national power structure especially because the 1891 Constitution was so strongly based on the federalism of the United States of America, so that even the same of the first Republican name of the country was Federative Republic of United States of Brazil (FAUSTO, 2001).

A matrix of authors can represent well the origins of Brazil's authoritarian thought. Brazil was already self-declared as a nation able or intending to define its development project autonomously. Alberto Torres, Azevedo Amaral, Francisco Campos and Oliveira Vianna form the original group that discusses the social and economic issue of a Brazil that is

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<sup>1</sup> In the Brazilian case, the distinction between totalitarianism and authoritarianism was distinct, both with regard to ideas and action. It was very important to authoritarian thinkers to make that distinction not only to differ Vargas' regime from the Fascism and Nazism that were growing in Italy and Germany but also ~~and~~ to draw a strong line between their authoritarian nationalist thinking and the movement more xenophobic and fascist that Integralist Brazilian Alliance (AIB) was putting forward.

different from Portugal, but recognizes its origins in the Portuguese, native American and African peoples. They also recognize that there is fundamental to face the problem of nationality formation in colonized countries, the formation of a nation, the identity of the Brazilian people and a conception of State that is strong and hierarchically organized. Their contributions on these themes are essential during the first three decades of the 20th century, years of great discussion about the country project in an already Republican Brazil. It is also crucial to know that most of them took part on the 1930 Revolution that developed into an authoritarian regime in 1937 self-denominated as the New State (FAUSTO, 2001).

It is also central to notice that 1929 crisis was crucial to give space in the political arena to authoritarian thinkers (CHAUI, 2013). The crisis seemed to demonstrate the failure of capitalism and of liberal political regime. The revolution of 1930 wanted to be the answer to all this trouble. In these conditions the authoritarian Brazilian dictatorship, was born, considered by its leaders as the regime most appropriate to the characteristics of the country, rather than merely an expedient dictated by the circumstances. Even though, in political discourse and intellectual formulations, authoritarianism was presented as true democracy, a regime that frees Brazilian people and the State from the paraphernalia of parties and elections, typical of liberal regimes. An interesting question arises from that argument: can a democracy be authoritarian? Florestan Fernandes (1975) develops the concept of restricted democracy<sup>2</sup> to discuss this kind of possibility.

In the 1940s arose a specific reinforcement in the economic debate that culminated in the public discussion between Eugênio Gudin and Roberto Simonsen about whether the Brazilian international insertion should follow the path of agrarian vocation or open the agenda to a necessary investment for national industrialization of the country as a route to the formation of a solid national economy (MALTA et alli, 2011). The reconciliation of interests contained in Simonsen's argument seemed not only to win the debate, but to give voice to a class fraction that had gained increasing importance in the republic: industrialists. The conservative and authoritarian thoughts began to adopt a line that always included the dimension of economic strategy in its speeches and projects, seeking to keep distance from liberals until the end of World War II and the establishment of the Bretton-Woods agreement (HOBBSAWN, 1995). In 1945 a coup d'état was put forward, to end the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas and reorganize Brazil as a democratic country committed to US influence area and arguing the importance of industrialization and planning to reach national development (FAUSTO, 2001).

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out that a controversy about the Brazilian social economic formation that involved many of more liberal and labor developmentalists and also the left wing thinkers has built a consensus that in Brazil, as in most of others Latin American countries, even though they ended their bourgeoisie revolution during the 1970s through an industrialization dependent process and the formation of a class society they still have institutions and values from colonial origin on use inside state apparatus, and in political society, intrinsically connected to the economic interests of dominant sectors. One of the biggest consensus of this controversy is that those institutions avoided the consolidation of the same kind of democratic integration existing in countries of the capitalist center, on the contrary, they have maintained an authoritarian character into the culture of Latin American countries and in particular regarding the type of democracy they developed. Florestan Fernandes defined it as a restricted democracy. A kind of democracy open to coups d'état whenever the power of the bourgeoisie is threatened and only people who have property or regular contracts of work have voice.

### 3. Authoritarian thinking and the development question

From this period on the approximation of conservative thinking with liberalism has suffered progressive inflections towards a more recent greater encounter. In the 1950s and 1960s, developmentalism enters the debate and authoritarian thinking takes part in it. As far as the theme of economic development is concerned, authoritarian thinking supports the idea maintaining the mark of state centralism. This perspective was reflected in the specific contents of the economic policies of the military governments of the 21 years after the 1964 coup. The authoritarian and dictatorial government was justified as necessary to guarantee a good manner of development and was presented to people as fighting for democracy against communism. However, the national issue becomes relativized regarding the finance and ownership system on the productive enterprises. Since the end of World War II, there has already been an inflection to open the door to international capital in strategic sectors of the country, as well as to allowing the participation of foreign agents in fundamental commissions for the planning of national project, such as the Brazil-United States Joint Committee (MALTA et alli, 2011).

Our second experience of an authoritarian dictatorial government was in the context of the apex of the Cold War, in which the defence of the capitalist order was the core of politics throughout the continent. The dominant ideas were those of the dominant classes of the hegemonic country in the world order and were imported by the dominant classes of the peripheral countries. It is no wonder that abstract values such as "solidarity of the hemisphere" or "defence of Western Christian civilization" have been defended by overlapping even the interests of each particular country as a nation. It was about the submission of national interests and, therefore, democracy as something essential for freedom (FERNANDES, 1975; NETTO, 2014).

By assuming such a reactionary attitude, the bourgeoisie and fractions of Brazilian bourgeois class abandoned bourgeois ideologies and utopia as established in the classic cases of the English, French and American revolutions (HOBBSAWN, 1995). The former cases were based in different historical and social reality, in which the bourgeoisie was the revolutionary class and not the class that sought to remain in power. In Brazil, they chose a solution that reinforced the character of restricted democracy, establishing two antagonistic revolutions: one of acceleration of historical time that promoted the modernization of the economy, indispensable for the legitimation of its domination; another of a counterrevolutionary nature, making permanent the economic, social, cultural and political contradictions within bourgeois society through a "preventive dictatorship of class". Generally speaking, the formation of the nation in democratic, national or popular ways was taken off the agenda. Florestan Fernandes (1975) denominates this process as the "bourgeois consensus" and characterizes it as to the unity of Brazilian bourgeois with international capital against the working-class interests to maintain itself as the dominant power in Brazil. This mark is not a simple thing to wipe out in the history of a country.

In a complex way, bourgeois domination was still camouflaged appearing to be coincident with the interests of the nation, this was an assumption of the bourgeois ideology of dependent capitalism: giving a great emphasis to productive modernization and for the economic growth, but sweeping under the carpet the intensification of social inequalities and intense oppression and popular repression. The gravitational axis of the political relationship

between the ruling classes, national interests and political-economic stability were shifted to the interior of the bourgeois classes and their control over the whole society (FERNANDES, 1975).

Intensification of bourgeois domination caused the increase in military and technocracy impregnation in the State as processes of preservation and consolidation of the order, including excessive demonstrations of force. The state became, therefore, a very strong political entity that centralized the controls of political, legal domination and promoted the economic acceleration of society. Reinforcing the already demarcated colonial political traditions. The national state became a syncretic national state, because in appearance it still defended the order as if it was democratic, representative and pluralistic, but in reality, it was an instrument of authoritarian oligarchy full of contradictions (FERNANDES, 1995).

A fundamental element of the contradictory character of democracy in Brazil resided in that the very option of bourgeois consensus (restricted democracy in the autocratic form) contained the seeds of its destruction, or at least its weakening and replacing it with a new form of democracy. The contradiction was that although this agreement gave bourgeois class fractions the possibility of openly managing new forms of class struggle with an autocratic state, it did not give to them autonomy as the ruling class of a country and limited their own internal horizon of solidarity between the bourgeoisie and the other classes (NETTO, 2014).

The choice for "consensus" was also the option to give up the material basis of self-propelled development, as it expanded external dependence in a growing way and deepened social segregation by seeing the dispossessed classes as mere enemies or social sectors that should be guided (NETTO, 2014). The 1964 coup paralyzed the national project.

#### **4. Authoritarian thinking and neoliberalism: stability approaching the opposites**

From the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s, we can find a series of very acute movements of transformation in Brazilian conservative and authoritarian thinking (NETTO, 2014). It is possible to observe a transformation of arguments that leave the nationalism aside and start to justify adherence to the idea of receiving international capital to finance strategic actions and begin to defend a lower participation of the State in the direction of structuring investments and direct actions on the economy (Roberto Campos' works stand out in this profile). It is interesting to notice that the idea of planning starts to be criticized and substituted by a free market perspective. The conservative and authoritarian thinkers begun to fight for a State guaranteed market society (NETTO, 2014).

The importance of the development of the financial system gained centrality mainly in the beginning of the 1970s and opened the eighties as the fundamental theme to be approached to simultaneously ensure economic growth and monetary stability, within a high inflation context. Regarding this aspect the transition between the military dictatorship and the new republic democratic period was very smooth (NETTO, 2014).

This is the crucial moment of observation of the process that definitive approximation between liberals and conservatives in Brazil. In this period projects of development and transformation of world and local financial markets arose with the argument of urgent

flexibility of capital control in the entry and exit of the capital account of the balance of payments by the State. At the same time it was pointed out as very valuable to monetary stabilization entry of international capital for shorter-term actions and for the purchase of Brazilian state assets in a beginning privatization scheme that was going to be axis of the government's actions during the 1990's. A very important senator and soon to be candidate to presidency, Mr. Mario Covas said, already at the end of the decade, in the Senate session on June 28, 1989 " Brazil needs more than a fiscal shock. It also needs a shock of capitalism, a shock of free initiative, subject to risks and not only to prizes" (COVAS, 1989). Covas' speech went down in history as a milestone in the country's process of change in political, economic and ideological terms.

It is from this period on that the trajectory of approximation between conservative and liberal thought in Brazil is more defined. The study of national projects that are expressed in economic policies, produced by different craftsmen in the ministries of Finance and Planning, but also in the last texts of interpretation of Brazil formulated by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Mario Henrique Simonsen and Roberto Campos are the initial pieces to understand the movement that gave rise to the current formulations of Brazilian social thought that gave up formulating a nation project to build a profitable form of participation in the world market and leaving aside the political discussion of it (MALTA et alli, 2011). At this point in Brazilian history conservative and authoritarian thinking converge with the liberal perspective pointing out that nation project has to be a technical economic question, an "there is no alternative" but the market international insertion proposed by them. It is what Boffo, Saad Filho and Fine (2019) referred to as the authoritarian perspective of neoliberalism.

Brazilian authoritarian thinkers used to gather around definite messages. In the first period they were brought together by defining a nation: the Brazilian Nation. After the war development was the motive to get the power from the labour party and make Brazil a big Developed Nation. From the end of the seventies on the symbolic flag of authoritarian and conservative thinking begun to be stability (MALTA et alli, 2011).

## **5. Economic failure of neoliberalism and its authoritarian face: actualities**

Monetary stability was reached during the 1990's. We were the last high inflation underdeveloped nation to join the Washington Consensus based stability. We did it completely during governments that privatized all the public enterprise that they could, implemented economic austerity and very high interest rates monetary policy. Brazil adopted all neoliberal receipts and was able to guarantee a decade of very low rates do growth, high unemployment and the pretension of solving this problem thought market flexibility of workers' rights (JINKINGS et al., 2016) .

During the 2000's some people argue that we could see a turning point when Lula won the election in 2002. There were some indications that policies would be changed in favour for the labour class. But From the election on the economic policy was maintained, the reform of pensions that their party had been fighting against the whole previous decade was implemented, alongside the development of various focalized policies in favour of the poorest. This last point made a big difference in terms of eradicating the hunger and the extreme poverty, but this kind of policy belongs to neoliberal stream of thought as well as

the economic policy that was continued, showing the authoritarian aspect of neoliberalism as supposedly the only way to rule social life (BOFFO, SAAD-FILHO & FINE, 2019).

At the beginning of the decade it was possible to profit from China's rhythm of growth and reach better levels of economic results, but from 2008 international crisis onwards, Brazilian economy came back to its 1990's status (BOFFO, SAAD-FILHO & FINE, 2019). The year 2013, with the so-called "June Journeys", exploded like a powder keg, which PT's own policies and public opinion instruments lit up. The failure to resolve the social question and increasingly evident, participation or collusion with, cases of corruption, especially those involving PETROBRAS, signaled in this direction. In this context a crisis of accumulation also became a crisis of representativeness and youth, demonstrating its disgust with the parties of the order, took to the streets to protest (JINKINGS et al., 2016).

The ruling classes did not hesitate to demonstrate their intolerance against conflict as a form of resolution of social struggles and used public opinion against any demonstration against the established order (JINKINGS et al., 2016). The hegemony apparatus such as the press and conservative movements tried to take the lead of the demonstrations and managed to mobilize much of the population against the PT government. At the same time conservative organizations such as neo-Pentecostal churches linked to "theology of prosperity" have also expanded within the popular classes, strengthening a moralist discourse. The ruling classes manipulated the situation as if the demonstrations that initially began as specific and clearly political protests, were nonpartisan and as if they did not have a clear political agenda. Again, as at so many times in Brazil, the demands of popular movements were reduced to the agenda of corruption. It is worth remembering, however, that on the other side, youth sectors organized to speak out against the neoliberal policies of the Dilma Rousseff government and groups such as black blocks agitated the streets (JINKINGS et al., 2016).

The manipulation of public opinion transformed the initial multitudinal discontent into hatred of the middle class against the party that represented, for the ruling classes and for the middle sectors, the social changes of recent years: the PT (JINKINGS et al., 2016). Thus, the crisis of representativeness of the type of policy that marked the culmination of the democracy of co-optation had reached its moment of final rupture: the impediment of Dilma in 2016. The advanced agendas against the rights of workers in the Temer government and the election of Jair Bolsonaro of the Social-Liberal Party (PSL) in 2018 point to the exhaustion of that political form and with it the end of the New Republic.

## **6. Conclusion**

Authoritarian thinking is not a novelty in Brazil. It is the driving force of our bourgeois revolution. It is always there to limit changes that would go further than the Viscontian Gatopardo's paradox "we have to change just enough to maintain things as they are". The only novelty on the horizon is the religious connexion of today's authoritarian politicians that are in power. The main problem is that they don't have intellectuals to represent their thought. They are just interpreters of gospel.

The recent events are not very new in Brazil either, since the liberal police based governments don't seem to present good results to economic development and at the same time we were becoming more liberal regarding social traditions, corruption matter was pointed out as a big



issue and was the basis of an impeachment process that even if many of congressman and senator believed that there was no crime of responsibility perpetuated by president Dilma they vote in favour for the impeachment “because they thought there was no more grounds of trust for her to rule the country”. We ended our new republic period the way our old republic period started: with a *coup d'état*.

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