

Brazil's Battle Lines: Fighting for Democracy Amid a Pandemic

An interview with Marcos Reigota, Patrick Dupriez

October 9, 2020

Already facing a crisis of democracy, the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown a tug-of-war between states and the central government of Brazil into the mix. For the majority of the population, this has meant a high death toll, poor access to health care, lack of trust in government and grimmer future prospects. In this interview, Marco Reigota explains where battle lines are being drawn and where glimmers of hope lie.

Patrick Dupriez: The Covid-19 crisis in Brazil has been alarming: over 130,000 deaths and a government that denies the gravity of the situation. How can we explain the handling of the pandemic in Brazil today?

Marcos Reigota: It's been disastrous. Early in the crisis, people recognised the role they had to play with social distancing measures. But President Bolsonaro went out onto the street insisting that people return to work and that the virus posed little danger. As a result, lockdown compliance fell drastically.

São Paulo is the city hardest hit so far in terms of the pandemic's death toll. The region's governor, until recently an ally of the central government, has had to take measures that go against Bolsonaro. A lockdown was in place until June and schools were closed, but the social pressure against them is enormous due to Bolsonaro's and the central government's actions. We're facing a political crisis and we don't know how it will end.

So, there's a tug-of-war between the states and the central government?

Exactly. But state governments are independent of the central government. In São Paulo, a scientific committee of leading experts provides guidance to the regional government, which is listening to these experts and implementing a lockdown. The data and figures available to us show that the virus will remain with us for a long time to come.

At a national level, we've had two health ministers resign. Although ideologically similar to the central government, they were both doctors who clashed with President Bolsonaro because of his refusal to follow their recommendations. Now a soldier has taken over as health minister, installing several other army officers in key positions in the ministry. We now have an institution that is being militarised.

Now a soldier has taken over as health minister, installing several other army officers in key positions in the ministry.

In the state of Manaus, where lockdown and social distancing measures haven't worked, the number of deaths is especially startling. There is no medical assistance in isolated and remote regions. This means that when people from rural areas arrive in the capital, they add to the city's number of patients, which fills up the hospitals. This situation is seen elsewhere too: healthcare facilities are full. Private healthcare centres exist, but they are unaffordable for the vast majority of the population. A psychiatrist told me that, for a visit to a big hospital and a

simple test, he had to pay the equivalent of the monthly minimum wage. If the state doesn't help, only a small section of the population can access private hospitals.

Are indigenous populations also facing many hardships?

Yes. Local accounts from the Amazon region, near French Guiana, reveal that the hardships and consequences of the pandemic are terrible. What's more, the central government is completely indifferent to these populations. The central government is supposed to look after these areas, but it couldn't give a damn. Communities are disappearing and nothing is being done. And data on deaths and infections is not at all reliable.

Communities are disappearing and nothing is being done.

How has this pandemic laid bare the way Brazilian society works? Has it resulted in greater collective awareness?

Having an education and a steady job has allowed me to cope with lockdown and doing everything at home. There's an upper class that doesn't think twice about protesting in support of the central government in their big SUVs, even outside hospitals, with no regard whatsoever for other sections of society. They claim to be exercising their constitutional rights and that the freedom to come and go must be defended. There is little thought for victims of the virus, given the lower infection rates among the upper class. The question is: how did Brazil reach this level of cruelty shown by one social class towards others? It's mostly whites, but it isn't just them.

In Rio, in the absence of the state in certain areas, public health decisions are taken by gangs, who ask people not to leave their homes.

In Rio, in the absence of the state in certain areas, public health decisions are taken by gangs, who ask people not to leave their homes. Elsewhere, in other favelas, we are also seeing experiments in self-governance set up. It's still hard to see concrete results, but these groups are showing a desire for political autonomy from a central power that rejects them and denies their existence. A political reorganisation is underway that is not being led by parties but by something else. It will be very interesting to see how it turns out.

Could this crisis bring opportunities for change, for societal transformation?

In the sense of micro-politics, yes. How are groups positioning themselves in terms of what's happening? If we take the education system for instance, this has been turned upside down. In-person classes moved online to keep pupils and students connected. However, problems in using the technological tools that allow these connections to take place persist. What's important is understanding how people experience these moments. A situation occurred that we hadn't anticipated and there remain huge question marks for the future. Many students don't have a computer or a mobile phone at home. Given this fact, how are they going to manage in their future careers? How will they adapt and earn a living in the ensuing economic crisis? Other sectors, like the cooperative and solidarity economy, may present opportunities for work. What's more, we see that students respond positively to this possibility. But this is just a micro context in São Paulo specifically.

A political reorganisation is underway that is not being led

by parties [...]

Collective creativity is one positive development in my opinion. Here it comes down to the responsibility of institutions, like schools and universities, to bring generations together and enable the sharing of experiences. I stress the responsibility that teachers have towards the values of democracy, solidarity, ecology, etc. which are universal values that must be emphasised.

In Europe, we're hearing a chorus of individual and collective voices insisting on the need for a new post-coronavirus world. In Brazil, is there also an idea of a different, fairer world that could emerge following this public-health crisis?

Since the far right succeeded the Dilma Rousseff's administration, there is a growing idea that we need to come together, act together and do things collectively. Culture is helping to spread this idea: Poetry, essays, photography, cinema, etc. can be found on social media today. People have been driven to express themselves and, on social media, have found an opportunity to make a name for themselves. There is new cultural output that is reimagining politics. We are creating other ways of doing politics. It's positive and it's a huge change. We're seeing a break with the established order. Is it too intellectual? Maybe. But if this environment is a "school" that enables the creation of alternative political and educational processes, that's a step forward.

Could the pandemic accelerate this movement?

Yes because concrete things are happening. The debates around climate change haven't managed to change things whereas the pandemic has because it confronts us with impermanence and the inevitable.

The pandemic has made us face up to the life that we are living and the life that we want to live. This brings us back to dignity, to the very ethics of our own mortality. I don't know whether the idea of a "post-coronavirus world" is just a fashion among European intellectuals. But here, in a certain way, a world has ended around the idea of democracy and greater justice, especially following the betrayal that progressives have suffered. So, what strategies should be adopted when faced with people as cruel as those in power today? Creativity helps us think outside of the box.

In this context, has a specifically environmentalist political and intellectual expression taken root?

Some thinkers and artists have reached an international audience by drawing attention to the situation in the Amazon and what indigenous peoples are living through. Sometimes, symbols are important. So, for example, there was the influence of Pope Francis, who received indigenous chief Raoni at the Vatican in 2019. What struck people in Brazil was that Raoni and Pope Francis embraced one other, which was a departure from usual protocol. The political importance of the Pope in Brazil can be forgotten and this has focused discussions on the Amazon and the environment. The UN is an important institution. But the Vatican has a powerful symbolic influence. These global institutions now have rhetoric and practices that speak to Brazil. But there are questions to be asked about the responsibility of Brazilians in the face of these challenges. The meaning of the rhetoric has changed slowly and culture helps in responding to and participating in these debates. It has taken 30, 40 years to emerge, but it's also the result of a daily fight.

If there are lessons to be learnt from the Covid-19 crisis that's swept the planet, what would be the main political or collective decisions that you consider indispensable?

I think that we need open, educational debates and processes to understand what's happening. We also need to end the hegemony of English in intellectual debates to finally give voice to other communities, who also have things to

tell us. We have ways of living and thinking that are completely different. But the collective challenge is shared. How do we start a conversation about it?

I don't know if the major international institutions can do this, but, as citizens of the world, we can do it and come together around this idea. This is what we have to put our effort and energy into. I'm not interested in what's predictable. It's what's still to discover that's important. We all have personal and institutional stories that should be told. From these shared stories, what can we think up in the way of dialogue, a meeting of minds, the cross-fertilisation of ideas, the next steps to take?

This article was first published in French by *Etopia*



Marcos Reigota is a professor at the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Sorocaba in São Paulo.



Patrick Dupriez is the president of Etopia, a think tank on political ecology.

Published October 9, 2020

Interview in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/brazils-battle-lines-fighting-for-democracy-amid-a-pandemic/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.