

Renewal of Democracy in Brazil's Protests

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Despite the diversity of the proposals and preferences of the groups on Brazil's streets, it is possible to identify a common trend among all the types of protesters—the need to make the population the protagonist of public policies, and not just their adjutant. These protests are democracy itself. All citizens, rich or poor, conservative or left, feel disenfranchised, and they do not see it as unreasonable to voice their complaints about this together. They are pushing to achieve the possibility of public deliberation on policies and a leadership that will truly pursue national development.

Introduction

In March 2013, with the government's popularity riding high and 63% approving of President Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's prospects seemed bright both domestically and internationally.¹ The occurrence of the country's largest protests in the last 20 years in June 2013 surprised analysts abroad and even a vast number of Brazilians. The surprise indicated some alienation, but it was understandable considering that Brazil's situation is far from hopeless despite some oscillations in economic performance, and its high potential for economic growth is recognised worldwide.

But the protests rage on and pressure state institutions even after local and central governments have agreed to some important concessions. To try to understand what is happening, we start with two aspects of the reductionist approach that now holds sway in analysing society, which essentially ignores its real complexity.

First, any analysed event goes beyond the dimensions measured by large surveys on the government's popularity. This sort of evaluation mainly uses statistical methods and considers each person interviewed as a voter, which itself is a reduction of a citizen to only one aspect. An individual's answers to fixed and homogeneous questions do not sum up his or her aspirations and feelings. The surveys obtain simplified and codified information that does not coincide with what the interviewee would express spontaneously. So comes the surprise, because the people have not revealed dissatisfactions related to not only the performance of the regional and national governments, but also the survey system as such. Many of the opinion poll companies are directly connected to Brazil's big media

corporations, which have been at the centre of the protestors' complaints.

The effect of the opinion poll phenomenon is that it reinforces the misinterpretation of social problems and encourages disregarding them, especially because governors use these statistics as guidelines for their actions. Even now, after the gaps in the picture painted by statistics have become clearer than ever, media and polls companies persist with the same kind of measurement to try to understand the profile of protesters and to recalculate the prestige of politicians.

The second aspect, also related to a failed way of analysing the complexity of society, is the technocratic and "economicist" approach used in social analysis worldwide. This reduces societies to their economic dimensions, as if the people's prosperity and satisfaction depends on economic and technical improvements alone, as pointed out by Jacques Levy (2008). As with the large surveys, other aspects of the people's daily lives are not considered with the seriousness they actually deserve. What is worrying is that the efficiency of this reified economic dimension is evaluated by its practitioners. Those who assess if society is growing are the companies that contribute to maintaining a technocratic lifestyle, making it a self-evaluation.

So the power to evaluate the general prosperity of a society has little to do with its own people, and ignores their complexity and diversity. Governors, the media, and major analysts in Brazil act from this perspective, building images of the country in accordance with it. This is now falling apart. Maybe one of the most valuable gains of the protests will be a review of this way of interpreting society, leading to more openness and new ways of expressing and understanding the complexity of social life.

Images of the Movement and the Media

No discussion on contemporary identity can ignore the role of the media, as pointed out by philosopher Jean-Marc Ferry (1991), at least as an important agency that builds public opinion. The Brazilian mass media has dealt negatively with social movements for decades, indirectly influencing the views of a significant number of citizens. The media's intolerance of social movements can in part be explained by the positions its elite owners occupy, and in part by its anomalous behaviour while pretending to voice what it considers are "social concerns."

Whenever a social movement stands out, the local media tend to treat it as something outside society—as if there are, on one side, some groups touched by the issues raised by the protestors, and, on the other side, ordinary citizens leading regular lives. Since the media likes to pose as "a representative of society" and considers social movements to be apart from it, it condemns the inconveniences caused by these movements "in the name of society." During the first and smaller wave of protests (initially focusing on the increase in urban bus fares), the media declared that the police had to strongly put down its leaders. Youths belonging to an organised movement that for 10 years has been demanding better

public transport policies were treated as social outsiders, as jobless middle-class troublemakers. So most governors responded with repression in the name of “restoring public order,” believing that almost all of society had the same opinion as the media. The police used weapons that would otherwise be used against those trying to overthrow the government, which was very far from the minds of the very pacific and ordinary protesters in the streets.

In only a few days, the protests spread across the country, showing the gap between the media’s representations and reality. The protests grew precisely because they were reflecting real public opinion, which was not necessarily that established by the media. The antagonistic stand of the media may also have fuelled the expansion of the protests. When their point was no longer sustainable, the main TV channels and newspapers had to undergo some self-criticism. Less than two days after their animosity, these organs began to soften their stand and gradually sell a discourse of support to the protests—some even making their space available to voice the protesters’ demands. Suddenly, those who were previously isolated from “society” were seen as belonging to it. Yet, the protestors became even more suspicious about the real intentions behind the media’s sudden sympathy for the movement.

It is possible to say that the media is acting in this way to try to disperse the demands that initially led to the wave of protests. Or it could be to wrongly characterise the protests, or to soften their ideological and political zest, and to gradually make it all look innocuous. What is remarkable in the media’s new behaviour is its insistence that the protesters operate within the establishment’s rules, which reveals how alienated it is from reality. It believes that protests criticising the existing order should operate within the limits of the same order.

Polyphony and its Challenges

The protests in Brazil do not cease to astonish because they are being continuously reframed and redefined, adding new issues and following new paths. They initially had a clear organisation and some specific goals (the leading group dealt with public transport and urban mobility), but the course of events has led to its fragmentation and the adding of new aims, some of which are even contradictory to the original ones. Many demands have become more abstract, general, and vague, lacking a clear-cut point. Demonstrations such as those “for peace”, “for a better Brazil”, and “against corruption” fall under this category.

At the heart of the main protests is what could be called a new social character, something unusual in street protests until now. It is similar to Eder Sader’s diagnosis (1988) in “When New Characters Entered the Scene,” a book on the 1970s and 1980s in Brazil and the role of workers in social struggles against the dictatorial regime. The title points to a remarkable trend in the recent protests because there are now new characters on the scene, and they have rarely taken to the streets against the established order. They are a section of middle-class youth who were averse to public movements and commonly thought to be

conservative. Their demands are now mixed with the ones on the street. So there are calls to improve urban security alongside punishing the police, and to cut taxes alongside increasing public investment.

The insurgency of the middle class, which is historically seen as more conservative, seems to be connected to the convenience provided by online social networks to express dissatisfaction that had been contained in the class till now. In Brazil, this big group could not find a comfortable setting to protest as a movement, to organise themselves, and find common demands, and the social networks seem to have facilitated this. Occupying the streets was previously almost a monopoly of left movements, and there was a dose of ideological rejection, and also a dose of cultural estrangement to it among other groups.

However, with the recent protests, these factors seem to weigh less. The new social actors have started to add their demands to those already on the street, enlarging the movement to the largest ever seen in contemporary Brazil (there were more than 400,000 protesters in Sao Paulo and even more in Rio de Janeiro in a single evening). But by embracing so many diversities, the movement faces the challenge of choosing legitimate representatives to negotiate with the authorities for concrete solutions to the complaints presented. It will not be simple to identify reasonable leaders from among the many different groups that have come together.

In this sense, the demonstrations have a multiplicity of voices, sometimes even making disparate and contradictory assertions. Some new opportunistic and even undemocratic aims have been added to the serious and justified demands, blurring the whole process. A part of this has been criticising and humiliating members of political parties joining the protests, asking them to get out and to put away all party flags. This tendency has worried some analysts about undemocratic trends coming to the fore. But if the present polyphony opens the space for such distortions, it can also be seen as the reflection of a crisis in the current system of political representation, which should be reevaluated. These lines of interpretation analyse the process in a macro and global perspective, and it is also guiding some on the orthodox left, who tend to consider these events as part of a historic process on the rise and fall of the working class movement.

But we think it would be more suitable to follow a more modest and focused path, as indicated by Carlo Ginzburg (2012), because it is difficult to identify clear goals while we are still experiencing the phenomenon. Thus, instead of trying to frame the movement in a specific category or trying to locate it in a historic trend or cycle, we will follow this more unpretentious path of indicating some of the main political motivations that seem to impel it.

Major Complaints and Failures in Representative Government

Despite the diversity of the proposals and preferences of the groups on the streets, it is possible to identify a common thread among all types of protesters. Starting with the initial complaint of top-down modifications to the public transport system, the second biggest

complaint (which appeared shortly after) was on excessive state spending for the World Cup and the Olympic Games. The demand common to these was the need to make the population the protagonist of public policies, and not just their adjutant. They seemed to say that the people should be consulted by the government before it sets priorities.

If we take this main demand into consideration, the claims of the poor or rich, of conservative or left protesters, do not seem contradictory. Even with its diversity, the movement signals the intention of the demonstrators to lead their country's development and not just watch it as spectators. These people reject that so many huge investments not decided by the population are being made at the cost of more urgent needs. Brazil still has serious deprivation to deal with in many areas—such as in health and education, and even in urban mobility. They also reject assessments of the country's condition on economic factors alone, which sometimes generates a sense of nationalism that loses meaning when confronted with social reality. Another point seems to be political actions taken with their effect on governors' prestige in mind than their effect on the daily lives of the people. All in all, Brazil faces a struggle to guide the course of its development along a path that benefits the majority.

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Among the main complaints is criticism of the way political actions ignore immediate and daily life, focusing more on abstract, macro, and future gains when basic conditions have to be improved and everyday needs met. Brazil's big cities are unfriendly to its inhabitants, more clearly to the poor (with serious social segregation), but even the rich are not satisfied with security, crowding, and traffic. In this context, the economy seems more than ever an abstraction, because the urgent problems of Brazil's urban areas remain despite growth.

Considering all this discontent, Brazil seems to be entering a new phase in which representative government and democracy will have to be strengthened and readapted. Some of the protesters reject political parties as an affront to democratic institutions, and others as intruders trying to weaken the movement. But we can see that some part of the protesters are truly dissatisfied with the current political parties, not feeling themselves

represented by these groups or even in general by the current political dynamic.

But it is crucial to note that the people are not challenging democracy, it is democracy that is challenging the people. These protests do not threaten democracy, they are democracy itself. They show that society has democratic vigour and that this vigour is being threatened by a political regime that is losing its efficacy and being paralysed by alliances that wreck party programmes and turn political representation into a farce. Hence, all types of citizens, rich or poor, conservative or left, feel disenfranchised, and they do not see it as unreasonable to voice their complaints about this together.

The simple act of them getting together on the streets expresses the immanent power that democracy has to be guided by the citizens themselves. They will not simply delegate power to a representative but they will join political processes and debates on their own, as Claude Lefort (1979) says. That political regimes are necessarily bureaucratic and institutional seems to have obscured this strength within democracy, in such a deep way that it is not easy to reverse. It is this reversal that is the key at the moment, and that it has happened means there is already an innovative openness in Brazil.

Some Gains and New Perspectives

The protests have produced important responses from the regional and central governments as well as from public sector undertakings—urban bus fares have been lowered; construction for the automobile sector has been cancelled; the congress has speeded up voting on some proposals that were stalled for years; it has also rejected a project that was intended to change a constitutional provision and was seen as a possible loophole for political corruption; it has passed a bill that severely punishes work similar to slavery, which was previously paralysed by the agricultural business lobby; the supreme court has ordered the arrest of a congressman convicted of corruption; and most important of all, President Rousseff has proposed a national referendum on reforming the country's political system. These actions in such a short period of time are extraordinary. They indicate that the new "protagonism" of citizens, even though diffuse, had led deaf governors and political parties to finally make some important concessions.

It is important to remember that this protagonism will not present consensual proposals, and the governors will be challenged with distinct demands. But diversity is not a problem if it is seen as the freedom to express differences, which is fundamental to a democracy effectively representing its citizens. We see once again the need for a constant and open discussion about politics, as well as the need for improving political practices. It also includes overcoming the automatic association of politics with corruption, a cliché that is widespread in Brazil but not discussed deeply enough. In that sense it is important to remember that this revival of the political sense has not passed through the forms of institutionalisation in political life today.

Therefore, rethinking forms of political organisation is healthy if democracy is to be

revitalised. The leaders of political parties need to let in some fresh air so that they will not repeat the failures that are criticised now. All this implies the end of obsolete coalitions and their diversionary political games, which have transformed political representation in Brazil to a show full of scandals that does not allow a space for policies produced by the people's deliberation. The protests are exerting pressure to achieve this possibility of deliberation and a leadership that will truly pursue national development. What will come of it is still not known. But they already have the very significant achievement of having woken up Brazilians from their lethargy.

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1. Poll conducted by CNI/Ibope, one of Brazil's biggest opinion poll companies, in March 2013. Available at <http://www.ibope.com.br/>.

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