

# What is the place of the PSOL in the national crisis?

Via [Fundação Lauro Campos e Marielle Franco](#)

We are in the midst of the most serious crisis in the history of Brazil. It is possible that we will end 2021 with 800,000 or even a million deaths from Covid-19. The demographic statistics already registered, in May, not only the 400,000 official deaths, but 600,000 more deaths than could have been expected without the pandemic. Poverty grows rampant and hunger resurfaces in the country. The average life expectancy of the population has already dropped by two years. The Amazon forest is on the verge of a collapse that could impact all of humanity. Jair Bolsonaro, an extreme exponent of the neo-fascist right, promotes the destruction of life as a policy.

The former captain arrived at the Palácio do Planalto as the catalyst of a vast coalition of interests, promising an ultraliberal escape route to a national crisis. This far-right “anti-establishment” critique of neoliberal cosmopolitan globalism was from the beginning animated by Trump and thrived in his wake thereafter. It is now weakened by the defeat to Joe Biden

The picture of decadence and crisis in Brazil goes back a long way, as well as the malaise it generates, which allowed the election of the current president. Its framework is global: the financialized capitalist civilization produces superfluous goods and fails to produce the essential ones, compromising the processes of social reproduction. This civilization aggravates social inequalities – class, gender, race – regional and international, deepens everywhere political authoritarianism, and continues to lead us towards a climate hecatomb, with a sixth mass extinction of life on the planet. There seems to be no doubt that we are currently experiencing

tectonic shifts, changes of secular scope, only analogous to those that occurred in the great wars of the first half of the 20th century. The case of Brazil is, in any case, extreme, and the struggle to defeat Bolsonaro organizes, today, the political dispute in the country.

Crisis is a term so often repeated that it seems to become banal, synonymous with systematic or recurrent retrogression and deconstruction. But everything indicates that we are being led, at least in our country, to a time of a different quality, of explosive accumulation of conflicts, indeterminations, and choices, a time that the Greeks – as opposed to *chronos* – called *kairós*. A time that, if it can quickly swallow what was patiently built, also opens opportunities for new beginnings.

The country advanced in the neoliberal globalization after 1990, with the opening of the economy by Collor, maintaining a strong oligarchic domination. Lacking a national project, these layers prioritized their landowning, extractivist, predatory, primary-exporting and authoritarian roots, represented by the Center and defended in policies executed by both the PSDB and PT governments

The question we cannot escape is: what is and will be the PSOL in the midst of all this? Created 15 years ago as a tool of resistance, but also with great strategic ambitions, it seems, today, to let itself be carried away by the waves of a great storm. Playing a routine policy, even with the most sensible justifications, is, in a very extraordinary situation, foolish.

### **Decadence, national crisis and malaise**

Much of the critical left in Brazil shares a diagnosis: Bolsonaro and Bolsonarism express deeper determinations of ongoing national and international processes. The former captain arrived at the Palácio do Planalto as the catalyst of

a vast coalition of interests, promising an ultraliberal escape route to a national crisis. He did this as part of a global project – a nationalist response by bourgeois sectors in many parts to the new era of stagnant productive accumulation and geopolitical reorganization of the world market, whose center of gravity shifted, after 2008, to the Pacific. This “anti-system” critique of neoliberal cosmopolitan globalism by the extreme right was from the beginning encouraged by Trump, prospered in his wake after 2016, and is now weakened by his defeat by Biden. It was the inability to respond to the pandemic that quickly hit Trump’s popularity and accentuated the weaknesses and contradictions of the project and the bloc that supported it.

However, Brazil, unlike the US, is experiencing a much deeper and more acute crisis, which has become apparent to everyone at least since 2013. Then, the perception of the long process of decay of its productive structures, disarticulation of the State’s capacity for action, escalation of social precariousness and insecurity, lack of meaning for participation in collective projects and environmental crisis, manifested itself as uneasiness of broad sectors facing the absence of perspectives and projects of all political forces on the scene.

The constitutive framework of this national crisis is extensive. Brazil was able to transform itself in the second half of the 20th century into an urban-industrial country, with manufacturing production (excluding mining and construction) reaching 21.6% of GDP in 1985. Brazilian industry was then one of the most modern in the world.

The fifth largest country in the world in terms of territory and population, Brazil seemed destined to become a major capitalist hub, and restructured its left-wing from the struggles of the Fordist working class. But the country advanced in the neoliberal globalization after 1990, with the opening of the economy by Fernando Collor de Mello,

maintaining a strong oligarchic domination. Lacking a national project, these layers prioritized their landowning, extractive, predatory, primary-exporting and authoritarian roots, represented by the Centrão and defended in policies executed by both the PSDB and PT governments.

Thus, the country's insertion in the international division of labor declined and the economy became reprimarized: in 2004 industry's participation was 17.9% of GDP; and in 2015 it had fallen to only 9% – a colossal burden of the PT governments' bet on the commodities boom. Brazil went from the seventh to the 12th economy in the world and went back to being an agro-exporting country, with few islands of industrial and technological excellence. From the 1990s on, the country passively handed over the digital and pharmaceutical sectors – to mention just two – to North American corporations, at a time when all the “middle powers” sought to dominate these technologies. Agribusiness, mining, and oil extraction became much more capital-intensive, but in a society where 85% of the population is urban and the service sector only became more sophisticated in association with techno-scientific innovation. In parallel and as a result of this decadence, the social structure has again simplified and the horizons for social mobility have closed.

These regressive changes are not only a reflection of the global reorganization of capitalism or of imperialist domination (although they are too), but the result of choices made by political actors. They arose internally, on the one hand, from “coalition presidentialism”, consecrated with the 1988 Constitution and a new “policy of governors”.

On the other hand, of the neoliberal economic policy, kept intact in the eight years of PSDB's government under FHC and in the almost 14 years of PT's governments, under Lula and Dilma: the maintenance of the neoliberal macroeconomic tripod of floating exchange rate, inflation targets and fiscal austerity.

Celso Furtado spoke, in 1992, of the interrupted construction of Brazil. This was not a rhetorical formula, but a shrewd diagnosis of what was going on; this construction was never resumed, because this would require a “re-industrializing” policy. And all these governments also shared the extractivism and the predation of the environment, which derive from the country’s place in the new international division of labor – that today places Brazil in the epicenter of the climate crisis.

The result of the transformation of the Brazilian population into consumers without active citizenship was the neoliberalization of society as a whole, the “destruction of the collective structures capable of barring the logic of the pure market” (Bourdieu’s definition of neoliberalism).

Of course, the Temer and Bolsonaro governments have taken regressive tendencies to a suicidal point – which is not negligible – but they had already been actively built by FHC, Lula and Dilma with the “insertion through consumption.” The uncontained malaise, growing for two decades, manifested itself in 2013, under Dilma, when it became evident that Brazil was “losing the train of history.” Brazil appears to the people as a country without a future in the currents of history that has been imposing itself in the 21st century.

This regression and lack of perspective created by neoliberal policies affects the entire social fabric. The precariousness of life in the last decades is not only linked to the legacies of the past (of slavery, authoritarianism...), nor only to the comings and goings of the formalization of labor relations – which advanced under the PT governments, only to recede later. They are linked mainly to the nature of the activities performed after the exhaustion of Fordist industrialization, when the generation of urban jobs began to take place in a growing, amorphous and impoverished tertiary sector.

It was the generalized commodification of life that resulted

in a crumbling society of helpless, “entrepreneurial” individuals thrown into the market without brakes, that became neo-Pentecostal (following the destruction of Liberation Theology by John Paul II), welcomed Bolsonaro, and praises social Darwinism because it expresses their living conditions. Bolsonaro, like other neo-fascist leaders, does not discuss social policies, he defends – against cosmopolitan liberalism – a world conception organic to this new reality of ultraliberal capitalism. No other has been up to the task of countering it!

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The Brazilian economy has followed in the last thirty years a path contrary to the one it had followed between 1930 and 1990, and also to that of many East Asian countries. The texture of Brazilian society today is almost unrecognizable in comparison to the 1980s, which formed the last great political generation of the left in the country – the one that failed to present a way out for Brazil from neoliberalism and ended up creating the conditions in which a recycled extreme right prevails. This is the root, for any structural and materialist analysis, of the deep malaise that afflicts all the popular classes in Brazil, that sets them against what they collectively perceive as the “system” and the politics institutionalized in it. It is for this crisis that the left still needs to present, at least, a horizon of exit.

### **Bolsonaro deepens the crisis of perspectives**

The Bolsonaro government, promising a way out of the national crisis, has worsened it, accelerating the dismantling and isolation of the country. The combination of ultraliberalism

and neo-fascism has not only affected the working classes, but has also contributed to deteriorate the business environment for big capital under the conditions of global capitalism. What is growing under its rule is a lumpen-bourgeoisie incapable of establishing its hegemony within the dominant class, but whose leaders aim at a permanent mobilization of the popular revolt.

In the coalition installed in the Planalto in January 2019, everyone was watching everyone else. With the departure of Sergio Moro from the government, in April 2020, it was Rodrigo Maia who began, from the presidency of the House, to fulfill the role of limiting the damage that the president and his circle promoted to the business of the great globalized bourgeoisie. However, seeking to get rid of Maia's tutelage, Bolsonaro allied himself and had to hand over a large part of his government to the Centrão – victorious in this year's elections for the presidencies of the House of Representatives and the Federal Senate.

A month later, in March 2021, former President Lula had the convictions against him lifted by Justice Edson Fachin, until then one of the active defenders of the lawfare headed by Moro. Lula's return to the scene was an admission of defeat for the neoliberal center, of its inability to deal with the extreme right on its own.

The enabling of the former president's political rights by the STF – the same one that sanctioned his conviction in 2018 – redefined the political picture, which has been becoming critical for the big bourgeoisie. This initiative seeks to channel the energies of the opposition to Bolsonaro toward the 2022 electoral process. What moves the upstairs is not an identity with Lula, but an attempt to embarrass Bolsonaro, shuffle the game, and try to dig a space that makes a candidacy from the traditional right feasible. It is an initiative to organize the political game, also focusing on popular aspirations for electoral institutionality.

## **The dispute of 2022**

Now, all institutional politics is positioning itself for the 2022 electoral contest, working to “bleed Bolsonaro.” Pragmatic calculations begin to reign among the leaderships that consider themselves to have electoral density. On the left, everything seems to revolve around Lula’s presidential candidacy, which emerges strengthened by the recognition of the partiality of his conviction. But the instability will worsen and not cool, as we have already seen with the dynamics of the Senate CPI on Covid and the worsening of the pandemic. The very presence of Bolsonaro in the presidency is, after Trump’s coup attempt in the US, an invitation to adventure. To take the institutional process for granted is foolhardy.

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The key question to decode the current political entanglement is: can Brazil continue another 18 months in this situation? All over the continent, with the same pandemic problems as Brazil, the answer is being the impatience of the masses that are taking to the streets.

## **The pandemic produces an unprecedented trauma in our history**

Without underestimating the importance of the fight for vaccines, which are essential to fight against Covid-19 in a lasting way, the reality that we see around the world is that there are still no lasting solutions on the horizon for the current health crises

Whether in the dimensioning of the crisis and the social struggle, the fight against Bolsonaro, or the institutional articulation, the pandemic issue is key, conditioning the

others. And it has an urgency and a defining impact, analogous to that of a civil war of great dimensions by the number of deaths.

The disease is radically aggravated in our country by the social apartheid and inequalities amplified by forty years of neoliberalism. It establishes a perverse synergy with the economic and social crisis and with a deliberate policy of genocide. How many deaths will we have in October 2022 if Bolsonaro remains in the palace?

Without discounting for anything the importance of the fight for vaccines, essential to permanently combat Covid-19, the reality we see around the world is that there are still no lasting solutions to the current health crises on the horizon. They seem increasingly complex, with virus variants and shortages of immunizers, damaging social divisions and small business desperation, vaccine nationalism and the fight to suspend patents, geopolitical disputes, and signs of an aggressive production transition led by Washington. In addition, there are the problems of the novelty of the disease: we have indications that a portion of those who contract the disease are left with significant sequelae. The disease is affecting more and more young people, and reinfections are possible. The case of Chile shows that the vaccine reduces the number of deaths, but is much less effective in stopping the transmission of the virus.

The left needs to break with the common sense (that the media and the government inoculate) that immunization would be enough to contain the pandemic and "return to normality". Brazil is not an island (like England or Australia), or a total surveillance society (like Israel or China).

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genocide.

There is no way for the country to contain the waves of contagion that will follow in the open and close of business and the sequel of deaths. We would need a combination of vaccines and nationally articulated policies of social distancing – which is proving impossible under the Bolsonaro government. The probability that the pandemic will end in Brazil in 2021 is zero. How many deaths will we have in October 2022 if Bolsonaro remains in office? How many millions will carry the scars of the disease for the rest of their lives? This is also why the tactic of letting Bolsonaro “bleed out” until the 2022 elections is a profound mistake.

### **The Party, a rebellious project and its weaknesses**

In 2022 Brazil will complete 200 years of existence as a formally independent state, with sovereign nation-building still to be undertaken. The place of the PSOL in Brazilian politics will be defined by what it has to say about this, by its capacity to intervene in the critical time that we are living

The PSOL emerged to welcome the socialist left that rebelled against the framing of the Lula government by the neoliberal order. It was a small but important space of resistance for socialist ideas and practices when most leftists were moving towards a pragmatic social-liberal reformism. This was not only true for the PT and the popular democratic camp in Brazil, but also for Latin American progressivism, although the Bolivarian current unfolded more contradictions with the prevailing geopolitical order.

The role of the PSOL became clearer in the global context of popular uprisings against austerity policies after 2011 and its expression in the 2013 mobilizations. The PSOL also knew how to move in the conjuncture of the 2016 institutional coup, understanding the threat to democracy in the country

The PSOL was, with the Left Bloc in Portugal, a reference of a broad and pluralist socialist party, able to converge the essentials of what the press usually calls the extreme left for synergistic processes of common construction. And it was capable, like the Bloc and different from other experiences (like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain), of resisting the temptation of reformist government projects. At least until now.

The PSOL's place – as the party of the rebellious lefts on the Brazilian scene – became sharper in the global context of popular uprisings against austerity policies after 2011 and the expression here in the 2013 mobilizations. The party became more in tune with the manifestations of feminist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic youth. The PSOL also knew how to move in the conjuncture of the 2016 institutional coup, understanding the threat to democracy in the country, sometimes with more coherence than the PT itself, defenestrated from the government.

The Socialism and Freedom Party was formed as a federation of tendencies, organizations, and currents – a boat capable of harboring all socialists – while seeking to offer militancy spaces to activists not affiliated to any of them. The currents aligned and realigned themselves to the flavor of the disputes of the conjunctures. However, we were not able to advance at all in the democratization of party life.

The party was thus able to welcome political dislocations from other parties and, in 2018, under the impact of Marielle Franco's assassination, make a leap as a space that welcomed social fighters from various spheres. If with Guilherme Boulos it dialogued more fluidly with Petist social bases, with Sonia Guajajara, the PSOL began to assume, in practice, a more consistent ecosocialist critique of developmentalism and the progressive vision of society. The result was the current profile of the party's parliamentary representation, with the election of 10 federal and 18 state deputies, besides Edmilson

Rodrigues as mayor of Belém – more than half of them women with a large number of black and LGBT people.

However, this trajectory happened empirically, without debating and facing a series of decisive problems for any political project with an anti-systemic character.

I list some of them below:

1) The classic “parliamentary question”, debated since the times of German workers’ social democracy (19th century), has gained everywhere much more decisive contours in the last decades, with the hijacking of politics by the market and the loss of credibility of party representation in liberal democracies. But beyond this, in a social structure as absurdly unequal as the Brazilian one, parliamentary intervention is completely insufficient as an agenda for disputes. It needs to be linked to the most dynamic sectors of the social and political struggle, to the burning contradictions and decisive actors of the Brazilian social formation, to the unresolved historical tasks sharpened by the national crisis.

In the framework of the Brazilian political system, in which the vote is nominal, mandates have always been elements that have weakened the autonomous dynamics of political parties. In the PT, these autonomous centers of power already sowed the ground, in the 1990s, with state and municipal executives, for the cooptation of the party by the State apparatus. But after 2013, with the self-protection reflex of the oligarchies housed in the party system and the proscription of corporate financing of campaigns, we had a great expansion of the use of public funds by the parties.

Party funds, electoral funds, funds for the Party Foundation, leadership offices at each level, television time, and funds, sometimes very large, for offices turn any party with significant party representation into a machine that seeks to

self-reproduce itself from election to election. Compounding the pressure for institutionalization and nationalization of politics is a barrier clause that pressures for increased electoral performance. Parliamentarians sometimes project themselves above the party, particularly when strengthened in majority contests, something not at all strange to the caudillesque traditions of Latin American politics.

But let us not create misunderstandings: none of these observations should be understood as anti-parliamentarianism; parliamentarians assume a central role in the visibility of agendas, in the political initiative with the state, in media access, in contemporary public dialogue. We need a strong, democratic and politicized party to enhance the intervention of our best parliamentarians. But each of the problems pointed out and even more all of them together carry questions for the current "party form" that we cannot naturalize in an anti-systemic project. That this is not thematized in the PSOL shows how much we are navigating on autopilot.

2) The PSOL has agreed, in its trajectory, to successive variations of an antineoliberal project. From the presidential candidacies of Heloísa Helena, Plínio Sampaio and Luciana Genro, we followed a trajectory that, with comings and goings, was cumulative.

Later, we entered the successive conjunctures of sharpening national crisis and the brutal acceleration of history – and not only in Brazil: platform corporations took the place of the great Fordist enterprises; financialization scaled up; China is running for hegemon of global capitalism; the climate emergency and the loss of biodiversity go to the center of the progressive agenda, inequalities of all kinds also deepen, and a neo-fascist project disputes the discontent with cosmopolitan globalism. Analytically, this means changes in the morphology of classes, social identities, the relationship between society and the state, the relationship between the national and the global, and the very idea of a society that

“dominates” nature.

Everywhere socialism is metamorphosing into ecosocialism, but what would be an ecosocial transition in Brazil? How can we re-qualify the meaning of progress in this critical phase of our history? In the world where platform corporations disqualify labor and promote global data colonialism, how to guarantee income and employment, cooperatives and reduction of the working day? How to limit the impact of international trade without falling back into the old autarkisms? How to take up again the project of alterglobalization and structure today a practice of internationalist solidarity – increasingly decisive – from Brazil, in a Latin America in flames? Since the social conflict is escalating everywhere, with the struggle of women and racialized populations occupying a strategic place and galvanizing the movement as a whole, how to boost the intersectional popular subject? How to promote social change from popular self-organization?

These and similar questions will not be answered in the disputes of encounters dominated by “bottle counting.” They require articulation between theory and practice by a party that has political openness, pluralistic life, and moral authority with broad social segments. Here, as in the previous point, we continue, for now, navigating on the course previously set by the automatic pilot.

3) The PSOL was formed, correctly, as a federation of tendencies, organizations, and currents – a boat capable of holding all socialists -, at the same time that it sought to offer militant spaces to members not aligned to any of them. The currents aligned and realigned themselves to the flavor of the disputes of the conjunctures. In the face of polarization, there were always positions capable of mediating between the poles and offering partial syntheses. But in 2016/18, with the distinct tactical positions in the face of the institutional coup and, later, with the PSOL integrating an electoral alliance with other components, this dynamic changed. New

sectors joined the party and internal tensions deepened, intending to gain strategic airs.

However, we were not able to advance at all in the democratization of party life; the PSOL is not, as such, an organizing space for social activists who want a welcoming space for fraternal debate and organization, of strategic scope. The digital world is also transforming the way contemporary socialist activism informs, acts, and organizes, but the party has so far not succeeded in either dynamizing horizontal access to information and debate among militants or in setting up an intervention in the social networks beyond that of mandates and candidacies. The PSOL is, now more than before, a party of internal currents of great weight that need to coexist in this difficult critical juncture in Brazil.

But a party structure centered on the dynamics of the currents and the dispute between them limits our capacity to have great strategic debates and collectively build a vision for the medium and long term. We need to strengthen party structures focused on concrete struggles, such as territorial nuclei and sectorial tools, which have demonstrated much more capacity to articulate social struggles and permeability to constructions other than those of the dispute over the correlation of forces. We need to democratize a plastered structure that cannot be naturalized.

### **The road ahead is arduous**

We have before us the critical struggle against Bolsonaro, but also the confrontation of the pandemic, the forwarding of a way out of the national crisis, and a PSOL with an enormous strategic importance, but which has also accumulated critical weaknesses. "What is the place of the PSOL in the national crisis?" is an open-ended question.

The road to what many see as the next rallying point in the class struggle in Brazil, the 2022 elections, is an arduous

one. We don't deny its importance, but taking it for granted is foolhardy; for that to happen, Bolsonaro would need to have already been defeated.

We will have, in any scenario, to articulate the social dispute, the institutional intervention and the search for protagonism from our spokespersons, including candidates for the central posts at stake, or risk disappearing from the political scene, dominated by the polarization Bolsonaro and Lula. The PT, disputing alliances in the center and on the right, certainly has no interest in opening the door to a programmatic debate; we will have to break it down, in the dialogue with broad sectors. We have the task of leading our party and the strategic project for the post-2022 conjuncture, in the heat of the moment, facing our weaknesses.

None of the real problems faced by the militants of a leftist organization that proposes to change society will be solved by the games of fleeting majorities and minorities in congressional disputes, even more so in the exceptional conditions of the pandemic.

One can argue: how to face such challenges in such an adverse conjuncture? But it is precisely the adverse conjuncture that forces us to face these questions, as was the case with every party formation that knew how to fulfill the role it set itself in history. Invention, as the saying goes, arises from necessity! What are we going to propose to those who have accompanied us in the trajectory of the construction of PSOL until now? That they read a thesis notebook for the party's Congress?

We have defined a Congress process that will probably face many operational difficulties because of the pandemic. We are, at the end of the first semester, at a plateau of two thousand deaths per day, and soon we will enter winter, discouraging any form of face-to-face meetings (remember that the countries of the northern hemisphere are now in spring heading towards

summer...).

The vaccination process in Brazil – which doesn't solve the problem, but already helps – will only gain scale at the end of the year, when the central countries finish immunization. It is not what many would like, but it is what reality is imposing on us.

In any case, none of the real problems we face in the PSOL will be solved by the games of fleeting majorities and minorities in Congressional disputes, even more so in the exceptional conditions of the pandemic.

In 2022 Brazil will complete 200 years of existence as a formally independent state, with sovereign nation-building still to be undertaken. The place of the PSOL in Brazilian politics will be defined by what it has to say about it, by its capacity to intervene in the critical time we are living through. The challenges posed require a response that combines political dislocations with debate and internal pacting between currents, blocks and camps that allow the construction of a strategic project and a legitimate political hegemony, which do not yet exist.