

Neo-fascism and the public university: the Brazilian conjuncture in the Bolsonaro government

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Abstract

The examination of neo-fascism, especially in Latin American countries such as Brazil requires the examination of some differences that make the expression of the phenomenon irreplicable in social backgrounds as different as in Brazil. Thus, the objective of this article was to problematize the contemporary socio-political configuration of Brazil under neo-fascism and reflect on the public university in this context. For this purpose, we opted for the textual modality of essay, due to the possibility that guidance is given not by the search for answers and true statements, but by questions that can guide the subjects towards deeper reflections. The text addresses the neo-fascistizing traits and their manifestation in the context of Brazilian higher education policy based on five characteristics that bring with them arguments to take stock of the current social scenario in Brazil under the Bolsonaro government.

Keywords: *Neofascism, College education, Conjecture. Brazil*

Introduction

We understand that making a critical Marxist interpretation of the higher education scenario in Brazil today is impossible without considering that, what

happens in Brazil, it is not just the old conservatism of a slave bourgeoisie but, rather, a new political formation of the ‘explicit fascist’ type (Carneiro, 2018).

In characterizing neo-fascism in Brazil, it is essential to point out that we agree with Konder (2019) when he warns that, in order to avoid the risks of a confucianist and unscientific use of the concept of fascism (obviously very real risks), we cannot admit its imprisonment in ‘history of interwar’ as what is being done today, forcing this concept to go into exile in the past. The conservative sense of this is clear: to avoid examining the transformations of fascism and, obviously, to contribute to confusing and disarming anti-fascist forces (Konder, 2009). Therefore, understanding the phenomenon is already an act of resistance in itself.

Giroux (2019b) describes important characteristics of Donald Trump’s neo-fascism, such as the fantasies of absolute control, racial cleansing and uncontrolled militarism. This is a dystopian social order caused by the political emptying of words, an imagination devoid of any substantive meaning, devoid of compassion, and used to legitimize the notion that alternative worlds are impossible to feed, which bears much resemblance to our current scenario as discussed below.

The examination of neo-fascism, especially in Latin American and sub-imperialist countries, such as Brazil, requires, however, to observe some differences that make the expression of the phenomenon unrepeatable in all its content for social formations as different as ours. Thus, we consider that neo-fascism, before being an expression restricted to institutional forms (political party form) or political regimes (which ascend power by democratic means), is a mass social phenomenon that channels inspirations and ultra-conservative

social projects that find fertile ground for their vocalization and, therefore, their action.

It is pertinent to remember that Bolsonaro's election itself demonstrated how the mobilization of the masses and the ratification of the neo-fascist discourse occurred even before the pre-election period (Marques, 2019). As the Dossier Bolsonaro report (2019) demonstrates, the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections is the result of numerous factors, especially antipetismⁱ (Griggera; Webber, 2019), but, also, the political action of fractions of the Brazilian business community, to ensure the presidency of the Republic. Many entrepreneurs/companies and deputies contributed to the election of the PSL candidate. These contributions were made through donations, coercion and release of *fake news* responsible for his growth in the campaign (Bortone, 2019).

For this reason, it is common for those who identify with neo-fascistizing practices to find in reformism the necessary opportunity to express their discontent. In turn, collective dissatisfactions have gained air of 'alternative way', by advocating for society a way out of the path of 'social regression' defined here as the expropriation of social rights (Boschetti, 2018) of which the right to education is one of them. In this sense, education and the attack on school institutions, especially the public university, in the Brazilian version of neo-fascism, has been a frequent target, or the 'scapegoat' of the 'malpractice' of reformism. Thus, it is part of that project to disqualify it, to leave it short of funds and, finally, to dismantle it.

Thus, the objective of this article is to problematize the contemporary socio-political configuration of Brazil and to reflect on the public university in this

context, discussing its challenges to confront/guarantee freedom and critical thinking.

For this purpose, we opted for the textual essay modality, due to the possibility that the guidance is given not by the search for answers and true statements, but by the questions that can guide the subjects towards deeper reflections (Meneghetti, 2011). Thus, as the objective of this essay is to ‘articulate concepts’, the classic methodological procedure does not seem to be the most appropriate to use. For this reason, we are inspired by Adorno (2003), when he argues that the essay is a moment of writing that favors the crossing of culturally demarcated borders.

Therefore, the text brings with it arguments, through five characteristics of neofascism so that we can take stock of the current social scenario in Brazil and the challenges for higher education in this context.

Neo-fascistizing traits and their manifestation in the context of Brazilian higher education policy

The neo-fascist project for Brazilian public higher education has manifested itself through some traits that, undoubtedly, can be found in other areas of the social world. However, it is possible to say that five characteristics are the most common: a) symbolic, psychological and physical violence in the educational field; b) use of the educational sector as a contradictory terrain of a kind of “pro-imperialist nationalism”; c) use of the cultural war against public education as a way to conclude the military project of imperialist domination of the central capitalisms over Brazil; d) ways of operationalizing higher education that can allow a qualitative leap in the dynamic of exploitation-oppression; e) the

repeated democratic paradox and disqualification of the public university in the face of progressive reformism. Let's look at each of them:

Symbolic and psychological violence in the educational field

In terms of what neo-fascism calls for symbolic, psychological and physical violence, we highlight the studies by Poggi (2012) and Caldeira-Neto (2018). Both are convergent in citing the use of violence and the search for conflict resolution through war. Like fascism in the interwar period, “neo-fascism is a response to the deep crisis in capitalism and a response to the exacerbation of the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system” (Poggi, 2012, p. 82), hence the need to ‘defeat’ the ‘other’, considered as a target of hatred, is essential.

In an effort to understand this discourse, Almeida (2008) argues that behind the violent attacks, or the mimetic political organizations, a powerful communication network is organized. For the author, neofascism has a peculiar character of power to be understood as the production of a ‘cultural substratum’.

In this “cultural substratum”, which seems to be a determinant dimension to the contours that neo-fascism gains in each local expression, in the Brazilian case, criticism of the university has been built on issues such as “defending the freedom of expression of ultra-conservative thinking”, “the criticism of American imperialism” or even the “communist contamination/Marxist indoctrination” that public universities would do, but, without the concrete proof of these facts. In order to illustrate, in a recent interview, Bolsonaro cursed Paulo Freire (Elected as Patron of Brazilian Education) for being stupid for his alleged ‘Marxist indoctrination’ in Brazilian education (Carta Capital, 2019). In this sense, society resentful of the economic crisis adheres to this

neofascist “culture broth” that, without much reflection, has led to the erosion of democratic values in social relations.

The National Union of Teachers of Higher Education Institutions (ANDES) quickly acted by organizing its legal nucleus in defense of "professors' freedom" to teachers who felt threatened. It is important to note that Bolsonaro's speech that refers to Marxist indoctrination to the study of Paulo Freire as the main theoretical reference in the area of education. However, Freire's recurrence to Marx and ‘Marxist authors’ does not make Freire a Marxist. Freire did not incorporate Marxism in his theoretical-practical conception of analyzing the pedagogical question, but he was influenced by authors with a Marxist tradition (Lukács, Gramsci, Kosik and others) in the explanation of certain aspects of the categories with which he worked. The philosophical inspiration that structures Freire's thought throughout its production comes predominantly from personalism, based on Christian solidarism, and from existential phenomenology, which is expressed through elements such as the analysis of dialogue and the description of human consciousness (Silva; Reis, 2020)

Other example of this in Brazil is what, in recent years, we have seen a series of attacks on public education. In the wake of the conservative governments that recently entered power, were the most obscure and backward ideas that exist in society. (Melo, 2019). One is in what underlies the use of the term “gender ideology”, for example. Moura (2019) emphasizes that the presence of obscurantist ideas is not a peculiarity of Brazil and that it is also present in several countries in the Latin American region, such as Peru, Paraguay, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica.

In the case of "gender ideology", the accusation that has been made by neo-fascists is that "gender ideologists" would defend the construction of gender as a vertical process, "from the inside" of the subjects, guided intentionally by "teachers" indoctrinators "who would seek to corrupt the natural inclinations of children and young people (Mattos, 2018). A municipality in the interior of the State of Goiás (Novo Gama) incorporated the "gag" to teachers through a Municipal Law in Novo Gama (Goiás) forbidding them to speak the word "gender" in the classroom. In other Brazilian municipalities the same happened. In Cascavel, in the state of Paraná, a similar law was passed. It is so absurd that if the term "gender food" or biological "gender" cannot be uttered. In the case of Novo Gama, the struggle of women and educators has legally pressured the Supreme Federal Court to vote unanimously on the right to gender education, creating national jurisprudence on the subject.

However, as Giroux (2019) points out, we understand that there is always resistance. Investing in critical formative cultures is essential for producing knowledge, values, social relationships and visions that contribute to nurturing and anchoring the possibility of critical thinking, engagement in political dissent, collective organization and the occupation of public spaces in which critical theories can develop alternatives. These processes express the essence of the so-called "*dangerous thinking*", which recognizes education as central to politics.

Use of the educational sector as a contradictory land of "pro-imperialist nationalism"

Another immanent characteristic of neo-fascism has been the use of the educational sector as a contradictory land of a kind of "pro-imperialist nationalism". In another sense as presented by Giroux, (2019), Trump, for

example, demonstrates a pro-imperialist nationalism with his “*America First*” speech and this makes sense because the USA represents the empire itself. However, when, in the critical studies referenced in this work on neo-fascism, it is admitted that Brazil presents a pro-imperialist nationalism, the ‘national’ dimension is restricted to the discourse of mobilization of the fascist masses only, whereas, the ‘pro-imperialism’ is configured in the deepening of the economic dependence in relation to the imperialist countries, that is, new terms in the submission to the order of the empire.

In other words, there is no real nationalism in the Bolsonaro government, and it can be described that this character is more like a foreman, a representative of the neo-colonizing forces. In this sense, Brazilian neo-fascism, with regard to its ‘angry nationalism’, has bet on a belief in the order and power of the state, in contempt for liberal parliamentarism and in opposition to communism and capitalism, concomitantly.

Rodrigues (2018) warns that the nationalist sentiment was already present in the educational sector, this characteristic being a remnant of educational policy in the military period. The author describes how educational policies were essential in building ‘nationalism’ in Brazil through two keys of interpretation. The first, in the construction of the idea of a unified and harmonious homeland. This idea was functional in the military dictatorship so that the nation would not periodically suffer convulsions, worshiping the aversion to the external. The second, due to the insistence on the reissue of the idea of ‘strong republic’ since the idea of the nation-state was essential to the *order* and *stability* that would guide progress. It is not by chance that such fear of disorder or instability also reappears in many neo-fascist discourses. It is a reaction to the insecurity brought about by postmodern life (Cruz, 2016) whose attachment to the stability

of “times of order” (dictatorship) is made nostalgic for neo-fascists. And yet, it is not without reason that a part of them (the neo-integralists) is marked by disappointment as a Western capitalist model and feels betrayed by the political openness that deposed the military regime.

Still, the neo-fascism experienced in Brazil sometimes embodies an alternative style/way of living, in which members seek to reject traditional culture and the mass media. It is important to recognize that this ‘alternative lifestyle’, also called ‘center rhetoric’, radicalizes itself to an ‘ultracentrism’ (Ali, 2019). This style can be found “in the wake of a crisis of the self, from the weakening of the pillars instituted about a universal, unified, intrapsychic, ‘individualized’ subject and in an atmosphere of unification and totalization” (Sales and Rocha, 2019, p. 254) that could guarantee a sense of stability and security in life.

Ultimately, neofascists pursue the demarcation/accentuation of differences with *all* proposals for the organization of life. It is an ideological operation that, in their social representation, would aim to restore ‘stability’ from the political-social point of view.

Psychoanalytically, Mascaro (2019) argues that this ‘stability fetish’ would boost an *organization of subjectivity through repressive libido*, typical in periods of capitalist structural crisis, such as the one that exploded from the 1929 crisis and, similarly to what happened in the 2008 crisis. These insecurities (which are real), brought about by the worsening of living conditions on a world scale, give rise to a predilection among the masses for repressive leaderships instead of postulating a political action invested in loving libido (promise to improve living conditions, care, protection). Thus, the masses organize and aggregate their individual drives towards the desire to submit to authority and threat (Mascaro, 2019, p. 31).

Cultural war against public education as a way to conclude the military project of imperialist domination

A profound cultural war in place has repercussions, especially with regard to policies in the field of education. The drastic cuts in the health and education budget promoted by Constitutional Amendment 95 are measures of ultra-neoliberal austerities constituting Bolsonarism (Mendes, 2016) that are in line with legal measures to restrict the freedom of the chair as suggested by the extreme right articulation around the slogan School “without” Partyⁱⁱ (Frigotto, 2017).

According to Frigotto (2017), the School “without” Party cannot be understood without due historicity. The author demonstrates several factors that constitute this articulation, mentioning some progressive social transformations that would have been considered ‘unbearable’ by the bourgeois fractions such as: the real increase in the minimum wage; the creation of almost two dozen new public universities; the policy of quota access to universities for blacks, quilombolas, indigenous people and low-income students; the expansion of income distribution devices such as Bolsa-Famíliaⁱⁱⁱ (which is conditional on families being obliged to keep their children enrolled and attending basic education); the freedom of organization of social movements, and; the freedom of schools to teach content beyond the World Bank’s “prescriptions”. Basically, these elements form the set of reasons why the coup business nucleus and its right-wing intellectuals nestled under the design of a School “without” Party. We can consider that, in fact, this set of elements has noticeable neo-fascist characteristics, as pointed out by Melo (2019):

First, it mobilizes itself based on a reactionary conspiracy theory that is obscurant and aims at a ‘popular movement’ against the public school and in favor of religious fundamentalism. Second, it has as a method procedures that undermine the rule of

law, with the help of the fascist portions of the judiciary and the leniency of the Supreme Federal Court that postponed a decision that could end this movement that aims to criminalize Brazilian educators (Melo, 2019, p. 10-11).

Therefore, cultural war crowns the ongoing counterrevolution (Klachko, Arkonada, 2017). In an attempt to redirect forces to the unfinished project of the military dictatorship in Brazil (which was never properly judged), neo-fascist forces try to kill education using its most conservative version. In this sense, Giroux (1983) has already warned us that education itself, both in its conservative version in a liberal approach, is firmly tied to the logic of necessity and efficiency and has been mediated by the political discourse of integration and consensus. In other words, the vocabulary of the left as conflict, struggle and confrontation represents the “absence present” in these theories (Giroux, 1983, p. 31). In other words, Giroux shows that:

[...] traditional theory offered no real basis for understanding the relationship between ideology, knowledge and power. That is, in this perspective, any attempt to reflect on historical development, selection, use and legitimation of what the school defined as “real” knowledge turns pale (Giroux, 1983, p. 32).

In this way, obscuring the resistance, or in other words, hiding the class struggle in defense of the right to education and the public university is imperative in this context. Media power in Brazil is a great ally for this type of maneuver. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that misinformation (before the appearance of *fake news*) was already caused by most news programs that vastly used the absence of spatial reference (absence of perceived space due to socialization via radio, TV, internet becoming the only space of the “real”) and the absence of a temporal reference (events are reported as if they had no past causes or future effects, that is, without continuities) (Chauí, 2019).

The most concrete expression of this tactic can be seen in the strike on May 15, 2019. This, just four and a half months from the beginning of the Bolsonaro government, occurred in 222 Brazilian cities in 26 states of the federation, bringing thousands of protesters to the streets to show their rejection of cuts in university education. Faced with this considerable manifestation, Bolsonaro in an interview classified the participants in the acts as ‘useful idiots’ and ‘fools’ (Marques, 2019) and that’s it.

In this context, we cannot fail to recognize, as expressed by Severino (2005), that “the place and role of education must be continuously and expressly retaken and resized” (p. 255). After all, “the ethical and political commitment to education is reinforced in the historical-social coordinates in which we find ourselves. This is because the forces of domination, degradation, oppression and alienation have been consolidated into social, economic and cultural structures” (Severino, 2005, p. 255).

Ways to operationalize higher education that allow a qualitative leap in the dynamic of exploitation-oppression

Brazilian neo-fascism also invests in operations that allow higher education to be a breadbasket for a qualitative leap in the dynamic of exploitation-oppression (Beinstein, 2019). This qualitative leap in the exploration of the teacher’s work stems from the insistence on hegemonizing the use of technological intermediation, extending and intensifying the teaching workday (exploration), in addition to accentuating social inequalities through the expropriation of rights with a clear classist, racist and sexist character (oppression). In other words, these are the excess and abuses of the use of technological intermediation in higher education, which allows us to express that the neofascist project wants to make it the main teaching-learning method in this sector. We agree with Giroux

(2019a) when he argues that it is about the complete withdrawal of autonomy and, therefore, of the power of the teacher and the student.

In this context, the substitution of human interactions for those excessively measured by technologies dehumanizes relationships and formally operationalizes a culture of competition. It is the emergence of a culture of auditing that produces a very limited notion of regulation and evaluation, and the narrow and damaging view that students are clients and colleges must operate as private companies (Giroux, 2019a). Now, this logic of an ‘operational university’, as Chauí (2003) points out, may be at the heart of the neo-fascist project. However, as the same author illuminates us, in order to arrive at this ‘harvest, we need to recognize how the land was ‘fertilized’.

Despite all the social relevance carried out by the ruling Workers’ Party (PT) (2002-2016), it is worth considering the argument of Moraes (1998), when dealing with neoliberalism and neofascism, that the option of insisting on social reforms (reformism) at the expense of structural changes (in the mode of production) is one of several elements related to the growth of fascistization, especially in the middle and popular strata. For this reason alone, it can be inferred that the Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) period, characterized by a reformist effort, failed to propose alternatives to the neoliberal developmental model (neodevelopment). Even recognizing that the PT had its success in converging such antagonistic interests (banking-rentier, industrial bourgeoisie, large and medium-sized business community, highly organized unions and social movements in a wide range of alliances), this articulation had a term to expire.

It is important to remember that the discovery of the pre-salt layer and the possibility of exploiting oil *royalties* gave new impetus to the agenda for financing the right to education. However, in a historic vote in the federal parliament, the financing of student credit for private higher education entities was considered ‘public spending on education’. This event, associated with a fall in the value of a barrel of oil in 2016, frustrated subnational governments and the community of public universities and guaranteed the joy of the general coordinator of the All for Education organization (main *think thank* in this sector).

The first trace of wear of this correlation of forces occurred in the days of June 2013, in which the masses (in a disorganized way)^{iv} called for more rights such as the right to education (at the time, called “Fifa-Standard”^v Schools, referring to the quality of the football stadiums built for the world cup based in Brazil). At that moment, the referral made by Dilma Rousseff was to bring together the business community (and not the working class) in an attempt to maintain “governance”, already in the process of rearticulation.

The course of this new correlation was taking shape towards the conservative portions of the legislative and judicial powers that, when denouncing the corruption schemes at state-owned Petrobras, consolidated the PT government’s political disqualification maneuver. This allowed the feeling of “antipetism” to emerge, polarizing the political-party debate and, secondly, reinforced the petty bourgeoisie’s disgust for the poor (or the ‘lowly ones’), an already constitutive mark of Brazilian social formation (Ianni, 1986), finding refuge in the neofascism latent in society.

It seems reasonable to recognize that this succession of facts is very similar to what Beinstein (2019) describes about neofascism in the light of the radicalization of exploitation.

Just like classical fascism, neofascism means the radicalization of the exploitation of human and natural resources, even though the former did not have a global application and the technological capacity of the latter. In both cases, it is a great qualitative leap in the dynamics of exploitation-oppression of capitalism, crushing democratic freedoms, social guarantees of the lower classes, cultural identities, etc. However, we continue to be impacted by the past atrocities of fascism without often realizing the much greater burden of barbarism, that neo-fascism bears. The great genocides of the 20th century are overshadowed by the possible consequences of the ongoing neo-fascist devastation, led by the Empire and its allies. [emphasis added] (Beisntein, 2019; p. 10).

Thus, after the construction of a strong correlation of conservative forces in the National Congress (expressed mainly by the BBB parliamentary group: Bible, Beef and Bullet), the institutional coup against Dilma was under way. Legally justified based on accounting maneuvers already carried out by previous governments (tax pedaling), the parliamentary inquiry was judged in votes that opened the hideous face of Brazilian conservatism, already in the process of fascistization (Silveira, 2016). This can be seen by the evocation of the majority of parliamentarians to words of ‘order’ such as ‘family, country and God’ referring to an alleged “glorious” military past, a phenomenon recognized in the studies of neofascism as “palingenesis”.

After the coup, Michel Temer’s coup-installed government was designated to make the necessary transition to the resumption of hegemony of the bourgeoisie in power. Already with a portion of the population adhering to the rhetoric of a neo-fascist center, he took the opportunity to pave the destruction of the right to

education. Constitutional Amendment 95 of 2016, which freezes education spending for 20 years, is the most severe austerity measure that finds no precedent in the world. In forging this scenario of asphyxiation of public resources, Temer aimed at distance learning.

It is pertinent to note that all this discussion of distance education, the use of technologies in education and the appropriation by the private sector of the discourses, methods and resources of educational policies are interspersed with technical aspects and interests of political and business groups, which can be detailed and analyzed in another opportunity. However, it is worth mentioning that the essential problem is not the technology itself, but the use that is made of it to serve the interests of the private market that has been moving more and more from the industrial productive sector to the service sector, seeking to expand for public education services.

One of the first clearly neo-fascist measures taken in education, already under the Bolsonaro government, was to appoint a military man as minister. Still at the end of 2018, in great harmony with the Brazilian Association for Distance Education (Abed, 2018), Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez, professor emeritus at the Army Command and General Staff College and also linked to the extreme right obscurantist ideologist Olavo de Carvalho, was appointed to lead the process of fomenting the hysteria of the middle classes (considered the ‘ideological mattress’ of the ruling class) to spread discontent with the public university.

It is essential to describe that Olavo de Carvalho is a self-proclaimed philosopher and astrologer, responsible for spreading extreme right-wing ideologies, obscurantism and ultra-conservatism in Brazil. The astrologer has been singled out as largely responsible for the resurgence of the ‘extreme right-

wing' in Brazil, being considered by the press as the 'guru' of Jair Bolsonaro (Calil, 2020). Thus, it is possible to confirm that the spread of those ideologies is also responsible for the growth of neo-fascism among the Brazilian "new right-wing". Alves-Cepêda (2018) problematizes this sector called "new right-wing" when it analyzes a manifesto published in 2012 entitled "Why I turned right: three intellectuals explain their option for conservatism" (Coutinho, Pondé and Rosenfield, 2012). ideological mattress' of the ruling class) to spread discontent with the public university.

In sequence, in less than three months in the ministerial office, and through questions, regarding the delay in conducting the actions, made by several deputies in the national congress (among them Tabata Claudia Amaral de Pontes – Democratic Labor Party – PDT), Minister Vélez was dismissed. These characters and their origins matter a lot in this debate. Tabata Amaral is a 25-year-old young federal deputy who gained prominence after a video she disseminated on the *internet* that showed her confrontation with former minister Ricardo Vélez Rodriguez. After gaining 'popularity' for her youthful role, a brief examination of her source of financial resources to study at Harvard University makes us realize that his intentions in the educational debate are supported by US imperialism.

To avoid any doubt about Vélez's neofascist character, despite attacking public higher education institutions, he spared no effort in defining Basic Education in his own image and likeness. Even though we cannot lose sight of our focus (higher education), it is worth mentioning that the height of tension over this minister occurred when he proposed to rewrite the history of Brazil in textbooks in a "revised" version that would highlight the glories of the military past with the denial of the dictatorship that lasted more than twenty years.

As a substitute for the Education Minister fired after three months in the government, Bolsonaro appointed Paulo Abraham Weintraub, a professor at the Federal University of São Paulo to take over the ministerial office. A controversial and very active figure on social networks has not spared the public university, reiterating the sum of attacks on this institution with several measures that reinforce the intensive character of the exploitation-oppression dynamic, especially through the ‘Futura-se Program’. Launched on July 17, 2019, this program has the official objective of giving greater “financial autonomy to universities and institutes by promoting the raising of own resources and entrepreneurship” (Brazil, 2019).

As Silva Júnior (2019) argues, this minister takes up the old discourse of the reorganization of the university under the guidance of the market, mainly linked to technoscience, which finds good receptivity among many of the professor-researchers who defend the new institutional model: the Entrepreneurial University. In this sense, the proposal of the Futura-se Program is based on three main drivers of the reform of the Brazilian public university: 1) Management, Governance and Entrepreneurship; 2) Research and Innovation and 3) Internationalization. Consequently, as this author also affirms, the proposed financial autonomy model is at the mercy of large national and global corporations, reorganizing public universities into Social Organizations, dependent on the private sector and selling services – which indicates the direction for maximum commercialization.

To better characterize how the dynamics of exploitation-oppression is expressed in higher public education, we can consider that the main policy measures of the current Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) administration, which roughly speaking, can be listed in:

- a) limit investments in research grants for academic master's and doctorate degrees in Brazil (reflecting the inability of students from the lower classes to support themselves in higher education due to personal expenses such as transportation, food, clothing, teaching material and, in some cases, housing, as many students move to another city to study in graduate programs in large urban centers);
- b) encourage public universities to depend on private funding for research (promoting public funding for university research, forcing self-sponsored research and restricting the spectrum of university professors to teaching only, in addition to opening space for the loss of intellectual autonomy together with the increased conflict of interest in research); and
- c) articulate with the Ministry of Planning, the reconfiguration of the career of the university teacher (making the career in higher education more flexible by providing exclusive dedication – with considerable salary loss – and intensifying the work in the light of the outsourcing of public university management with a focus on productivist performance goals). (Knobel and Leal, 2019).

In addition to the Futura-se Program, there are asphyxiating proposals for other educational levels, as in Basic Education: Connected Education reinforces technological intermediation through the transfer of R\$ 224 million to connect 100% of schools able to receive internet and R\$ 60 million to take access the web to 8 thousand rural people; and the National Civic-Military Schools Program, a Palingenetic trait, which in Brazil is associated with the “order” under military dictatorship, which aims to implement 216 civic-military schools by 2023.

Thus, we agree with Giroux (2019a) when he argues that the forces of free market fundamentalism are using the educational system to reproduce a culture of privatization, deregulation and commercialization, while assaulting social dispositions. However, even recognizing civil rights and that these must be guaranteed through political struggle, especially to improve the living conditions of the working class, expect the ‘Social State’ to lead higher education policy to prosperity in a ‘regular and automatic way’ is an honest mistake, as our scenario shows.

It is pertinent to explain that, when we use “Social State” we rely on Boschetti (2016) who seeks to capture economic-social regulation through social policies (including those of education), attributing to the capitalist state its objective determinations, explaining that the incorporation of these policies by the State does not extract its essentially capitalist characteristic.

Democratic paradox and the repeated disqualification of the public university in the face of progressive reformism

Critical historiography recognizes that the 1929 crisis caused disillusionment with classic liberal capitalism (Robert, 2016), however, little is reported that this same crisis served as an important element for the resentment and social dissatisfaction that helped to foster historical fascism (Konder, 2009).

Furthermore, it is important to remember that historical fascism has never denied democracy as a procedure (Hitler, for example, was elected), and, in the same vein, this happens in neo-fascism.

In neo-fascism, even more pragmatically, democracy serves as a demagogic element for democratic values to set guidelines against democratic freedoms.

Neofascism is much more pragmatic, it does not repudiate bourgeois democracy, but it tries to mimic itself in it, taking it demagogically in order to put it at the service of its racist and authoritarian flags. [...] In Latin America, we can find similar formal adherence to the rules of representative democracy in dictatorial and proto-dictatorial regimes such as in Honduras, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico or Paraguay, in some cases supported by the neo-fascist hysteria of the middle classes. [emphasis added] (Beisntein, 2019; p. 11).

Is it possible to say that there is democracy when it hosts anti-democratic agendas? This feature is important because the defense of democracy needs to be made very clear. After all, as Mathias and Salama (1983, p. 91), “[...] one can have a democracy. But this can only encompass a few class fractions”. In this sense, what view of democracy will public higher education defend?

For this question we can consider the analysis of Chauí (2001, p. 10-12) about the role of the university in society as a perspective to be pursued in the defense of the democratizing character of this institution. In this sense, we emphasize that the university must consider that:

a) society divided internally into classes establishes “social relations, values, symbols and political power from the determination of the just and the unjust, the true and the false, the good and the bad, the possible and the necessary, freedom and coercion”. Starting from this observation, the university must use this premise to tension the role of ideological reproduction that the university suffers in capitalist society;

b) the socio-political structure is defined by the principle of isonomy, equality of citizens before the law, and the rights of all to publicly expose their ideas, to see them discussed, accepted or rejected in public. In this sense, the university must provide the necessary environment for all perspectives of understanding the world, trying to provide openness for each scientific discourse to be the

object of analysis, acceptance and refutation, thus guaranteeing its penetrability in research and adherence by researchers;

c) the conflict is legitimate and necessary, after all “democracy is not a consensus regime but above all about the work *of* and *about* conflicts”. Facing difficulties and reconciling the principle of equality and freedom must be the horizon of the democratization process pursued by the university;

d) openness to temporal changes is essential, since it brings about the new as part of its existence and, therefore, temporality as constitutive of its way of being;

e) the popular character of power and struggles evidenced in class societies, insofar as rights only extend their reach or only appear as new rights through the direct action of the popular classes, of which the right to higher education is one of them;

f) there is a distinction between power and government, guaranteed not only by laws and the division of various spheres of authority but also by the existence of elections. Thus, the university must insist on filling the internal frameworks by democratically elected bodies, in an ascending and regular manner, by the entire university institution.

Therefore, “citizenship is constituted *by* and *in* the creation of social spaces for struggles and by the institution of the political form that creates it, recognizing and guaranteeing the equality and freedom of citizens, declared in the form of rights” (Chauí, 2001, p 10-12). Therefore, it is from this perspective that higher education institutions, as social institutions, must anchor their relationship with society and their core activities in order to form citizens, thinkers, critics and protagonists of social transformations that are opposed to social, political and social barbarism. inherent to the neofascism model.

However, how is democracy expressed in which neo-fascists are tied up? Let us see if the notion of ‘democracy’ evoked by the Minister of Economy of the Bolsonaro government (Paulo Guedes) doesn’t revive the threat of historical fascism:

Be responsible, practice democracy. *Or democracy happens only when your side wins?* When the other side wins, after ten months do you call everyone to break the street? What responsibility is that? So don’t be scared if someone asks for the AI-5. Hasn’t it happened once? Or was it different? (Paulo Guedes) (Filgueira and Cruz, 2019, p. 1).

It is essential to remember that Institutional Act Number 5 (AI-5), promulgated on December 13, 1968, was the fifth of seventeen great decrees issued by the military dictatorship in the years after the 1964 Coup D’état in Brazil. This act closed the National Congress and is considered the hardest in the process of restricting democratic freedoms in the history of the country.

This distinction about what is understood about the term ‘democracy’ is a very delicate and, undoubtedly, an essential agenda. The term is quickly captured by fascist rhetoric. Thus, we understand when Giroux (2019a) interposes that any viable attempt to develop a democratic policy must begin to address the role of education and literacy. But developing institutions for the functioning of a substantive democracy has limits, neofascists know this well, as Paulo Guedes’ speech illustrates. We agree with Giroux that one way to start this project is to address the meaning and role of higher education (and education in general) as part of the *broader* struggle for freedom (GIROUX, 2019a), in addition to institutions and recognizing the importance education *in* the struggle also as a learning space.

Still allied to the elements mentioned above, it can be said that the excessive emphasis on sectoral reforms, characterized as a certain social ‘reformism’, of an ultra-conciliatory character among the various fractions of class, forged the depletion of these so-called “progressive exits”. By not realizing the limit of conciliation and assumption that class confrontation is not desired, space is opened up for conservative mobilizations, which, in times of structural crisis of capital, unfold on extreme right-wing or, properly fascistizing guidelines. Moraes (1998) seems to synthesize with great fidelity the time that one lives today in Brazil:

Neoliberal politics is not that of neo-fascist mobilization, *but it can be the paver of this other route of counter-revolution*. Political apathy and disillusionment with conventional outlets, dismantling of political, social and cultural traditions that once sewed and safeguarded society, absence of *reliable progressive way outs (themselves steeped in disillusionment and demoralization)* all pave the way for the emergence of a crazy to have radical solutions, those that seem to be the only firm point in a world in which everything is shipwrecked, a cry that seems to have spirit in a world without spirit” [emphasis added] (Moraes, 1998, p. 125).

In the wake of ‘radical solutions’, especially in Brazil that is packed with anti-corruption discourse, they are fallacious. It is always good to remember that, in a Marxist perspective, the insistence on the debate on corruption, especially of public agents in the interior of the State, is dealt with great reservations. In addition to naturalizing supra-historical views of common sense about an ideal of universal moral values, this insistence disregards that the idea of justice varies according to the insertion of “citizens” in different ‘social class conditions’. In addition, the notion of corruption blurs the idea that the division between public and private is artificialized and, therefore, a historical, dated and ideological creation of the capitalist State (Boito, 2017).

After all these elements that characterize higher education policy as the ground for the rise of the neo-fascist project in Brazil, there is not much left to say about Bolsonaro except to agree with Melo (2019, p. 7) when he characterizes that

Bolsonaro is a fascist. He is not just someone with a fascist personality, with a fascist behavior. He is someone who professes a fascist ideology: xenophobic, prejudiced, sexist and militaristic. In addition, Bolsonaro engenders a movement based on a mobilization that challenges middle and subaltern sectors driven by great social resentment. He was not the candidate of a traditional right-wing, but he was also a charismatic-catalyst character of a mass party, structured around his candidacy that catalyzed the entire universe of the Brazilian extreme right-wing, from southern separatism to monarchism, from neo-Nazi groups, from wide ranges of the State's repression apparatus (from military police to portions of the Armed Forces), religious fundamentalism and the market. He is not only crazy, but he is giving life to one of the fundamental characteristics of fascism as a movement that is the existence of a party. His government seems quite committed to continuing mass mobilization. (Melo, 2019; 10-11).

Final remarks

In this article I argued that education is a strategic sector for experimenting and implementing neo-fascist practices. These tactical actions by the Brazilian extreme right are based on religious obscurantism linked to the interests of the bourgeois fractions that aim to dismantle public education. In fact, a catastrophic arrangement of proportions that are still difficult to predict.

Currently, the Minister of Education Milton Ribeiro (who was once vice-chancellor of Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie) avoids touching the controversies previously presented and points out that the school should “beat children” to educate them and avoid talking about gay marriage, creationism.

The public university must be operational, profit-oriented and the growth of paid and technology-oriented postgraduate courses. The arrival of this new character came in response to some sectors of the bourgeoisie who wanted a less controversial minister and one that would set in motion the destruction of public education, especially higher education. Bolsonaro pursued a profile that was ideologically aligned to his positions, with “academic authority” and some connection with a higher education institution.

In the face of these challenges, the anti-fascist struggle within institutions and, especially, outside it is essential. It is through the identification of these neo-fascist elements in the educational sector that we can carry out a well-directed and, in fact, strategic confrontation.

Notes

ⁱ“Antipetism” or “anti-PT” (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* – Workers’ Party) is a feeling against this party that found anchorage in a national movement of refusal of the political system in conjunction with the rejection of the institutions and the crisis of representativeness occurs in Worldwide. Even though the party did not appear on the list of parties that have the most leaders committed to corruption scandals, his 14-year stay in power together with some nuances of income distribution was enough to make him the target of disqualification after the involvement of some of its members in a corruption scheme linked to the state-owned company Petrobrás. However, it is important to clarify that the anti-PT feeling was historically forged. The hate speech against the PT was used in all presidential elections in which Lula ran – against Collor, in 1989, and against Fernando Henrique Cardoso, in 1994 and 1998. The antipetism was attenuated in 2002 due to the political wear and tear of his main opponent PSDB (*Partido da Social-Democracia Brasileira* – Brazilian Social Democracy Party, which it reconciled) and enters a new phase as soon as the party assumes power. This time, the speech is linked to the feeling of institutionalized corruption, from the media exposure of the case of Mensalão, from 2005 onwards this feeling of hatred grew. Allied to a social formation of the Brazilian bourgeoisie who has a strong contempt for democracy, whose adherence to democratic values has always been of a casuistic and conjunctural character, the PT quickly became the target of widespread discredit in the popular ideology, opening space for the displacement of the bloc in the power.

ⁱⁱSchool “without” Party is a political movement created in 2004 in Brazil and disseminated throughout the country by lawyer Miguel Nagib. He and defenders of the movement claim to represent parents and students who are contrary to what they call “ideological indoctrination”, mainly “Marxist character” and “gender ideologies”, in schools. The “sem” Party School program has been receiving support from politicians and personalities linked to the right, demonstrating that yes, it has “one” party. They are: the Free Brazil Movement (MBL), Rio de Janeiro senator Flávio Bolsonaro,

son of Jair Bolsonaro from PSL (*Partido Social Liberal* – Social Liberal Party) and São Paulo city councilor Fernando Holiday. An advocate of the movement, the elected state deputy of Santa Catarina, Ana Caroline Campagnolo (PSL), became the target of an investigation after suggesting that students record videos of their classes and denounce indoctrinating teachers. Most of the projects have been presented by parliamentarians linked to the evangelical bench. The National Council for Human Rights issued a resolution in which it repudiated all the initiatives of the School “without” Party. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights treated the bills promoted by the movement as threats to basic human rights. Several of these projects were questioned due to their unconstitutionality by the Brazilian Federal Public Ministry even before the rise of neo-fascism.

ⁱⁱⁱThe “Bolsa-Família” Program, created by Law No. 10,836/04, during the first term of the Lula Government, is a program of direct income transfer that benefits families in situations of poverty and extreme poverty throughout the country. It was used an income limit to define these two situations and through some conditionalities (among them the children of the family are attending school). This program was the main social investment mechanism that impacted the reduction of social inequalities in Brazil in the period from 2004 to 2014.

^{iv}The protests of June 2013 were initially organized by the *Movimento Passe Livre* in Brazil, which was contesting the increase in the price of public transport tickets. After that, There was an explosion of protests in more than 300 cities in Brazil. The movement became known as “The protests in Brazil in 2013”, also known as “Manifestations of 20 cents”, “Manifestations of June” or “June Days”. Initially, the movement started non-partisan and with a strong anti-political feeling, it was gradually attracted by right-wing parties. Approximately 170 public acts (days of protest in up to 70 simultaneous cities) were counted in about 300 cities, totaling 13 days of protests, and an average of 540 thousand participants in the 5 most popular days of cities – except on June 20 which totaled 1.5 million participants.

^v*Fédération Internationale Football Association.*

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