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The Challenges for Anti-racists in Bolsonaro's Brazil

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Abstract

What should we make of the recent neo-racist turn in Brazil—the eruption of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous hate-speech on the part of senior government officials, including President Jair Bolsonaro, combined with institutional attacks on the multi-culturalist consensus of the last two decades? While symptomatic of *Bolsonarismo*'s determination to reverse the previous forty years of social justice reforms, the far Right's attacks on multiculturalism and the collapse of consensual models of "race" and nation have both exposed a deeper underlying continuity in the racialisation of Brazilian society, above all its class character —something the Black movement's contemporary focus on the affirmative action agenda has failed to address. The new racism should really be understood as the Neoliberal project's reassertion of the particular historical form of racial capitalism that *Bolsonarismo* was appointed to reinstate, which routinely disposes of Brazil's Afro-descendant majority as an "edge population" straddling the frontiers between inclusion and exclusion. If there is to be any prospect of rebuilding an opposition to Neoliberalism that can speak to that Black majority, the anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles must be integrated, and anti-racism must become a priority for the Left, not merely one among many "social justice" causes, but Brazil's *national question*.

Keywords

Affirmative action, *Bolsonarismo*, Brazil, class racism, Neoliberalism, neo-racism, racial capitalism, racial democracy

Word count: 11,416

The Challenges for Anti-racists in Bolsonaro's Brazil

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1. *Bolsonarismo* and Neoliberalism: ideological and class racism

Brazil seems to have entered a distinct, new phase in its history of racist thinking and practice. As the second decade of the twenty-first century drew to a close, the ugly realities of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism were thrust to the forefront of the nation's political and social life with a virulence and starkness that shocked many, both inside and outside the country. These realities were thrown into sharp relief in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic and the latest international wave of Black Lives Matter protests following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. And on November 20, Black Awareness Day, nationwide demonstrations were triggered by the death of João Alberto Silveira Freitas, a 40-year-old black man, after he was beaten by security guards at a Carrefour retail unit in the southern city of Porto Alegre.

Only ten years previously, voices within some academic and activist circles had ventured to suggest somewhat optimistically that, with Brazilian democracy having supposedly "passed the point of imminent or even imaginable return to authoritarian rule" (Mitchell 2010: vii-viii), the mythology of Brazil's racial exceptionalism safely consigned to history, and the Black movement's flagship programme of affirmative action in full swing under a progressive social democratic government, the way was clear for the country to re-think its national narrative and invent a new way of imagining itself (Reiter and Mitchell 2010: 8).

But then, in October 2018, Brazilian voters elected to the Presidency retired army captain and neo-fascist Jair Bolsonaro,² an unapologetic misogynist and homophobe who, in the previous year, had been convicted by a Rio de Janeiro court of racist offences against the Black population.³ Notorious since at least 2011 for insulting the beneficiaries of affirmative action programmes and for denigrating interracial relationships as "promiscuity", in April 2017

Bolsonaro gave a speech in which he promised to do away with all state protection for Indigenous lands and *quilombola* communities (the descendants of rebel slave strongholds) if he were elected to the Presidency. Unashamedly adopting the voice of a latter-day slave trader, Bolsonaro equated Afro-Brazilians with livestock, adding: “I went to a *quilombo*. The lightest Afro-descendant there weighed seven *arrobas* [a colonial measure for cattle]. They don’t do a thing. I reckon he’s no use any more even for breeding.”⁴ Along similar lines, in a video statement released in January 2020 the President argued for the Indigenous peoples’ “integration” into the national society, claiming that “The Indian has certainly changed. He is evolving. The Indian is becoming more and more a human being like us” (Uribe 2020).

Such uninhibitedly offensive statements, issuing from the lips of an elected head of state, certainly gave neo-racist opinions public legitimacy—for example, Bolsonaro’s dual attacks on the Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous communities were echoed in November 2019 by Pará state attorney Ricardo Albuquerque, who claimed that the country owed no debts to its *quilombola* populations, and that if Black slavery had happened, it was because “Indians don’t like to work”.⁵ Reforms of the key government departments concerned with Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian affairs also left no doubt that this ideological neo-racism was to go hand in hand with a state-level strategy to undermine the institutional and policy advances won by Blacks and Amerindians since the return to democratic rule in 1985. In July 2019, Bolsonaro appointed as the new president of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) Marcelo Xavier da Silva, a federal police officer with strong connections to agribusiness and known for his hatred of indigenous people. Measures such as putting an ex-missionary in charge of vulnerable, isolated communities, and easing the way for economic activities on demarcated lands, were described by Xavier da Silva’s predecessors as a reversion to colonial policy that would lead to the destruction of environments and of ancestral cultures (Magalhães 2020).

In the following November, to the outrage of the Black movements and their supporters, Bolsonaro's Culture Secretary Roberto Alvim (who later resigned after appearing to paraphrase the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in an online video) appointed ultra-conservative Black journalist Sérgio Nascimento de Camargo to the presidency of the Palmares Cultural Foundation, a public body named after the most celebrated of the historic rebel slave strongholds, the Quilombo dos Palmares, and created in 1988 with the aim of promoting and supporting the cultural, social, economic and political integration of Afro-descendants and their participation in the country's socio-cultural development.

Camargo's hostility to the very constituency that the Palmares Foundation was supposed to represent was laid bare during the months preceding and following his appointment. In a series of audio leaks and social media posts he argued that, while terrible, slavery was beneficial for the slaves' descendants, who supposedly "led better lives than the Blacks of Africa"; he denied the existence of true racism in Brazil; he described Brazil's Black movements as "damned scum" and "a bunch of left-wing ideological slaves", and called for their abolition along with Black Consciousness Day; and he personally insulted prominent figures from the spheres of Afro-Brazilian religion, music and politics (Soares 2019).⁶ Although initially suspended following public expressions of outrage and a legal challenge, Camargo's appointment was later ratified at Bolsonaro's insistence,⁷ but by June 2020, after four months in the post, he had not met a single representative of the country's Black movements. Instead, he sacked several Black officials known for their contribution to implementing public policies supportive of Afro-Brazilian culture, closed down seven of the Palmares Foundation's committees, including that responsible for managing the Quilombo dos Palmares Memorial Park, and removed from the organisation's online list of Black personalities no less than 27 respected political and cultural luminaries (Batista 2020; Fioratti 2020).

The state's commitment to anti-racist reform also came under attack from the Bolsonaro administration. The Special Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality (SEPPIR), created in 2003 as a federal body linked to the Ministry of Justice, was targeted for possible closure by the President-elect's transition team. Following an open letter of protest from the Black movements, SEPPIR was saved, but effectively downgraded by being incorporated into the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights under the leadership of Bolsonaro appointee, arch-conservative Damares Alves (da Silva 2018). In August 2020, Alves sacked seven Black activists from the staff of the Secretariat in retaliation for their part in an impeachment charge against Bolsonaro. According to Workers' Party parliamentary veteran Benedita da Silva, the move was directly calculated to undermine the country's anti-racist institutions and transform them into a mere façade, and it confirmed that racism was the "official ideology of the Bolsonaro government" (Mazieiro 2020). The key pillar of SEPPIR's public policy agenda, the affirmative action programme, also came under threat from the new administration. Law no. 12.711 of 2012, which introduced socio-racial quotas for access to higher education institutions, aimed at Black, Brown, Indigenous and disabled students as well as candidates from public secondary schools, had already been attacked by Bolsonaro as a form of "victimhood" and was up for review in 2022 (De Oliveira 2019). Anticipating this, in June 2020 the outgoing Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub revoked an ordinance in force since 2016, which stipulated quotas for the same categories of students on postgraduate university courses (Moreira and Saldanha 2020).

What should we make of these developments in state discourse and policy, that is to say, the unconstrained eruption of a startlingly demeaning, dehumanizing racist language as voiced by senior government officials, combined with institutional attacks on indigenous and black interests and on the anti-racist cause? Do they mark a definitive break, both with the multi-cultural anti-racist politics that had become hegemonic in the public sphere over the previous

two decades, and with Brazil's longer-standing traditions of mild-mannered, "cordial" denialism, which used to idealise Brazil's special status as a racial "paradise"?

One interpretation would be to view these phenomena simply as a consistent ideological expression of *Bolsonarismo* and its Fascistic instincts, and as part and parcel of its mission to reverse what had at least appeared to be an unprecedented historic shift since the turn of the century towards addressing the interests of the country's poor, underprivileged and neglected majority. Certainly they are the crudest, most starkly racialised symptoms of the Bolsonaro administration's broader determination to roll back the previous forty years of progress in social justice and human rights as a whole, whether in the spheres of women's equality, labour rights and conditions, poverty reduction, freedom of expression, LGBT+ rights, or environmental security. The prosecution of this retrograde strategy involved conducting an ideological battle, that of the so-called "culture wars", in the name of conservative, patriotic values ("Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos" or "Brazil above all, God above everyone" was Bolsonaro's slogan) against all centres of critical, progressive thinking and activity. In that sense the multi-culturalist and anti-racist causes were natural, priority targets for the new Right, and insubordinate darker-skinned, poorer Brazilians needed to be "put in their place" once more.

But while that immediate political agenda is indubitably meaningful, there was nevertheless a deeper continuity in the lived social experience of racism in Brazil that was not seriously disturbed, either by the ideological shifts described above or by any of the public policy initiatives of the last three decades. This is that, as Jessé Souza puts it, far from being a case of peripheral exceptionality, Brazil shared with societies of the "centre", as it always has done, the same racist system of moral classification and exclusion that determines access or not to material and cultural capital (Souza 2018: 33-34). The collapse of consensual models of thinking about "race" and nation (*mestiço* nationalism and racial democracy) since the late

1990s, and the most recent attacks on multiculturalism from the far Right simply exposed this underlying continuity in the racialization of Brazilian society.

To understand what this means in concrete terms, the IBGE's 2019 report on *Social Inequalities by Colour or Race in Brazil* (IBGE 2019) makes compelling reading, detailing how darker-skinned Brazilians (according to the national census categories, *pretos* and *pardos* or "Blacks" and "Browns" now officially account for 55.8% of the country's population) were everywhere severely over-represented in the negative statistics for income distribution, violence, policing, education and health. Just as striking, especially to anyone who has studied previous such reports over the years, little changed across the very same period that saw such remarkable institutional and policy innovations in state-level action on anti-racism.

So the IBGE's figures for income levels showed 15.4% of whites but 32.9% of black/brown Brazilians living below the poverty line (i.e. earning less than US\$5.50 per day), while 3.6% of white and 8.8% of black/brown Brazilians lived in abject poverty (i.e. earning less than US\$1.9 per day). As a subsequent survey observed in 2020, "Besides being considerable, the [14%] differential in female incomes according to skin colour has increased in relation to 2012, when it was 11.5%" (Fraga 2020). In the sphere of education, illiteracy rates comprised 3.9% for white and 9.1% for black/brown Brazilians, and while 76.8% of whites completed their secondary education, only 61.8% of black/brown Brazilians did so. In the labour market, 18.8% of whites as against 29% of black/brown Brazilians fell into the "underemployed" category (combining the unemployed and those precariously employed), while of managerial posts, 68.6% were occupied by whites and only 29.9% by black/brown Brazilians. Another independent study claimed its data suggest that "discrimination in the labour market due to race prejudice is a predominant phenomenon in Brazil."⁸

As for violence and policing, whereas the annual homicide rate among white men between 15 and 29 years old was 63.5 for every 100,000 inhabitants, among Black or Brown men of the

same age range the number was nearly three times this, at 185 per 100,000. Eight out of ten people killed by police in 2019 were Black, and deaths of Black youths and children in the context of state policing of low-income urban communities were commonplace (Dias and Adorno 2020).⁹ Far from chance occurrences or “stray bullets”, for Black activists such as Bianca Santana of Uneafro Brasil and the Black Coalition for Rights (Coalizão Negra por Direitos) these killings were the result of a deliberate policy on the part of the Brazilian state.¹⁰ In other words, the already racialised policing of Brazil’s working-class urban neighbourhoods had become increasingly militarised, too, with their predominantly black residents being treated as a hostile enemy to be suppressed. Afro-Brazilian Rio de Janeiro councillor and activist Marielle Franco had been researching and speaking on this very issue when she was shot dead in March 2018, along with her driver Anderson Pedro Gomes, by militia members closely connected to the Bolsonaro family (De Souza and Serra 2020: 205-27).¹¹

In the sphere of political representation, 42.1% of municipal councillors in 2018 were Black or Brown as against 57.9% who were White or from other colour categories, while for state deputies the ratio sank to 28.9% x 71.1%. Out of the total number of candidates elected to the Federal Congress in 2018, only 24.4% were Black or Brown while 75.6 % were White or from other colour categories. A press report in August 2020 noted that, even after the international proliferation of Black Lives Matter protests following the police killing of George Floyd, Brazil’s political parties were reluctant to stand Black candidates in that year’s municipal elections. The Workers’ Party (PT) was the only large opposition party to run black candidates in three state capitals, and to earmark a quota from the electoral budget for its black candidates in 2020. At 3%, this was an improvement on the zero figure allocated for the 2016 elections, but given that 32% of the Party’s 2020 candidates were black, it was still woefully inadequate, as the head of its National Fight Racism Secretariat, Martvs Chagas, was obliged to admit (Bragon 2020).

As in the United States, Europe and elsewhere, during 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic exposed a shocking disparity in the health impact on darker-skinned Brazilians. An analysis of deaths according to race published on 27 May by the Nucleus of Health Operations and Intelligence, based on health service data about 30,000 patients diagnosed with Covid-19, who had either recovered or died by 18 May, found that 55% of the Black and mixed-race patients died, compared to 38% of White patients. It noted that an illiterate black patient was nearly four times more likely to die than a White university graduate, “confirming the enormous disparities in access to and quality of treatment in Brazil”. Researchers, doctors and health specialists agreed that factors including poverty, poor access to health services, overcrowded housing and high rates of health issues such as hypertension were some of the reasons that Covid-19 killed proportionally more Black Brazilians—to which we could add the disproportionate numbers of Black men incarcerated in Brazilian prisons: in the fifteen years up to 2019, the proportion increased by 14% to 66.7% of the total, while the proportion of White prisoners fell by 19% (Acayaba and Reis 2020).

The Coronavirus pandemic also drew attention to the triple oppression of class, race and gender as experienced by the single biggest category in Brazil’s workforce: the country’s 7 million domestic workers. Workers in this sector, which includes housemaids, nannies and cleaners, are overwhelmingly Afro-Brazilian, and their often humiliating and negligent treatment at the hands of their middle-class employers is widely seen as a direct legacy of slave-master relations in the colonial household. While they gained some rights in recent years, with the country ratifying the International Labour Organization convention on domestic workers in 2018, legal loopholes left many still working without any protective status. Earning on average less than the minimum wage and with only around 30% having a formal contract, they remained vulnerable to abuse and violations of their rights, and were among those most exposed to the risks of contracting Covid-19, as they were obliged to use public transport, were in regular

contact with others and did not enjoy the option of home-working (Griffin 2020).¹² 63 year-old Black housekeeper Cleonice Gonçalves, working in the upmarket Rio de Janeiro neighbourhood of Leblon, became the first person to die of coronavirus, which she was believed to have caught from her employer, who failed to inform Cleonice that she was ill and did not offer her the option to stay away. As journalist Eliane Brum put it, in the social *apartheid* of the coronavirus pandemic

[i]t is quite explicit which part of the population has the right not to be infected and which part of the population can apparently be infected. . . . That first death in Rio is the portrait of Brazil and of the relations between race and class in the country, laid bare in all their criminal brutality by the drastic nature of a pandemic (Brum 2020).

So does this stubborn continuity in the racialisation of social inequality, across a period that has variously seen the disintegration of *mestiço* nationalism or “racial democracy”, an emerging multi-culturalist consensus, anti-racist public policies and institutions, and the outbreak of neo-racist hate-speech under Bolsonaro, mean that class racism and ideological racism somehow operate independently of one another, in parallel universes?

While the resurgence of racist hate-speech and the accompanying attacks on state institutions and policies promoting social justice should indeed be taken very seriously, denounced unequivocally and actively opposed, it would be a mistake to stop at characterising them in purely ideological terms, as no more than a retaliatory backlash in the battle of ideas and an aberrant regression to modes of thinking that a modern, “multi-cultural” Brazil should somehow have transcended. Rather than taking the shifts in official and intellectual discourse on racism and anti-racism at face value, as reliable weather-vanes of some decisive political sea-change, we need to examine how racialised thinking *and* practice actually interact in the lived experience of inequality, prejudice and violence as a function of the historically constituted class-and-race based stratification of Brazilian society.

Beyond its ideological function in the war on liberal-democratic values, neo-racism should be understood, more essentially, as a reassertion by the Neoliberal project of the particular organizational socio-economic form that characterises Brazilian capitalism, and which *Bolsonarismo* was appointed to reinstate. *Class racism*—by which I understand, not the crude reduction of “race” to class, but the fusion of anti-working-class and anti-Black/indigenous hostility—far from being merely an epiphenomenon, a secondary effect, instrument or even rationalization of the capitalist division of labour, is first and foremost a necessary, structural condition of how the organization and exploitation of labour operate in Brazil. As writer Valério Arcary reminds us,

Here the middle classes are socially and racially separated from the working class. It's not only that we don't have a fraction of the bourgeoisie that is black. Even in the middle classes black people are an extreme minority, although the majority of the country and in some provinces a huge majority of the country is descended from the Afro-slave working class. This has not only huge political consequences—it's more than consequences. You can't understand the country if you don't understand the racist frontiers that isolate the working class and the majority of the people from the middle classes (Arcary 2018).

That isolation, and the particular brand of class racism it has engendered in Brazil, became crucial in the crisis that brought Bolsonaro to power, and they are fundamental to explaining Bolsonaro's appeal to his core electorate. In order to sustain the democratic-liberal regime of the previous thirty years, in particular under the Workers' Party-led coalition administrations of 2003-16, capital made limited concessions to Brazil's working class through poverty reduction programmes (Fome Zero and Bolsa Família), the extension of labour rights to the country's army of predominantly black female domestic workers and widening access to state higher education through affirmative action quota schemes. Those concessions were not paid

for by the country's very small but rich bourgeois elite, however, but by its tax-paying middle class. While it lost comparative position, rank and status, this middle class saw the most indigent 24% of the population shrink to 7%, with 30 million people lifted out of poverty between 2002 and 2014 (if only temporarily) (Singer 2018: 78). As economic expansion gave way in 2014 to a four-year recession and mass unemployment and under-employment, the limited but significant advances that had been gained by poorer, darker-skinned Brazilians were therefore met with a resentful class racist reaction on the part of those who felt that their sense of relative advantage and status was being undermined. It was these aggrieved, middle-class or aspiring, upwardly mobile "second-class" citizens who felt most represented by Bolsonaro's hate-speech, as they believed that their privilege in such a stratified, racialised society was threatened by conceding rights and benefits to those whose citizenship was even more precarious.

2. Racialising capitalism and class in post-slavery Brazil

At the same time that it expressed those class interests, neo-racism in practice was also a necessary element in the continuation of the Neoliberal project in its more radically punitive guise under Bolsonaro. If one of the aims of Neoliberalism from the 1990s onward was to maximise capital's capacity to exploit workers by deploying labour "flexibilisation", mass unemployment and a huge "informal" labour sector with few if any trade union rights (Saad-Filho and Morais 2018: 76), then now, as at every previous time in Brazilian history, the racialisation of labour, consumption and citizenship remained the key mechanism for determining the extent and boundaries of inclusion or exclusion, and for deciding who was to be deemed worthy of value or respect as a productive member of society. The Brazilian case therefore constitutes an example of Gargi Bhattacharyya's characterisation of *racial capitalism* as

a process by which capitalist formations create by default the edge-populations that serve as the other and limit of the working class. This move . . . becomes the basis of racialisation of one section of the population. Being cast out or pushed to the edge itself becomes the occasion of racialising discourses and practices (Bhattacharyya 2018: 5).

Bringing the race-class, anti-capitalist argument, indeed the Marxist framework of analysis, to the discussion of Brazilian racism, is not without its challenges, since for many in the Black movement such an approach has become discredited since the 1980s. This is largely understandable, since in Brazil that argument has often been badly served by a reductive, economistic version of the Marxist method which, as we shall see below, many activists experienced in practice as a tendency by would-be left-wing allies to relegate anti-racist struggle altogether as secondary to, or worse still, a distraction from, class politics. This negative experience coincided with a period when the Black movement was shifting the emphasis of its activities away from a politics of mass mobilisation towards lobbying state institutions for the implementation of affirmative action policies via professionalised NGOs.

But with the defeat of the progressive liberal-democratic project and the Left by *Bolsonarismo*, the scale of the challenge has been thrown dramatically into relief once again. As the limits of anti-racist public policy reform have perhaps been reached, the realities of class racism remain unaltered for most of Brazil's 120 million Afro-descendant and Indigenous people. For there to be any prospect of rebuilding a viable opposition to the Neoliberal project, the Black and Indigenous movements and the Brazilian Left will stand in equal need of each other, and anti-racism and anti-capitalism will have to be brought together as a single, united cause. This requires the case to be made for a nuanced, non-mechanical approach to class and "race" as "inflections within a unitary system of capitalist social hierarchy", not ranking them but rearticulating them as relatively distinct but overlapping vectors of oppression and agency (Roediger 2017: 8).

One of the legacies of a certain kind of Left analysis of Brazilian racism that emerged in the 1950s, that of the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo based generation of academics sponsored by Unesco, was to explain it as a residual after-effect of the country's late emergence from the slave economy (as Abolition only came in 1888) and the delayed onset of bourgeois modernisation.¹³ Once capitalist development fully eliminated the material foundations for race thinking, they claimed, integrating Afro-Brazilians as workers and consumers, then the only remaining challenge for anti-racists would be to address the outmoded traces of prejudice at the level of social attitudes. However, in Jessé Souza's words, "it is not the persistence of the past inertially into the present that is at stake, as a reality destined to disappear with economic development, but the modern redefinition of the Black (and of the free rural and urban dependent of whatever colour) as unfit to exercise any relevant, productive activity in the new context, which constitutes their new condition of marginality" (Souza 2018: 231-32). Far from being incompatible with the development of Brazilian capitalism, as Carlos Hasenbalg's pioneering 1978 doctoral thesis counter-argued, "racial domination and the subordinate status of blacks would persist because racism had acquired new meanings since abolition and would continue to serve the material and symbolic interests of dominant whites through the disqualification of non-whites as competitors" (Telles 2004: 9).¹⁴

In order to understand how racism has persisted rather than "withered away" in the contemporary world, we need to recognise that there was not a break but rather a continuity between the colonial and modern orders in their racialisation of labour, as the work of Balibar and Wallerstein has shown (1991: 9). Under slavery, the concept of superior and inferior "races" served to naturalise the hierarchical representation of an aristocratic master-class and the enslaved African populations (Balibar 1999: 324-25). In the post-industrial bourgeois era the "ethnicization" of the "worker race" was the "magic formula" that minimized the costs of production and of a politically disruptive labour force (Wallerstein 1991: 33), while resolving

the contradiction between capitalism's universalist ideal of equality between employer and worker "freely" entering into the wage contract, and their real, material inequality. Whereas a difference in nature between individuals had become juridically and morally inconceivable, that ethnicised construction of difference

was, however, politically indispensable, so long as the "dangerous classes" (who posed a threat to the established social order, property and the power of the "elites") had to be excluded by force and by legal means from political "competence" and confined to the margins of the polity—as long, that is, as it was important to *deny them citizenship* by showing, and by being oneself persuaded, that they constitutionally "lacked" the qualities of fully fledged or normal humanity (Balibar 1999: 327).

Balibar's description aptly defines the condition of Brazil's Afro-descendant and indigenous populations in the First Republic (1889-1930) who, stigmatized by the elite as dark-skinned "barbarians" and a reminder of the country's colonial past, were denied any place in their post-Abolition vision of the nation (Dos Santos 2015: 161). This was the period when "scientific" racism and eugenicist notions of "whitening" flourished, as immigrant labour was favoured instead as the key to reshaping twentieth-century Brazil along European lines.

Only when Brazil's capitalist modernization entered an aggressively industrializing phase of growth in the post-1930 period, did the demands of an expanding labour market begin to absorb black workers in limited numbers (Silva Araújo 2014). From that moment onward, we can say that the Afro-Brazilian population began to take on the intermediate, ambiguous class profile that still characterises it today, neither completely outside or inside the productive economy but straddling its formal and informal sectors, shifting across the employed, underemployed and unemployed categories according to the demands of the labour market at any given time. If, in 2018, Black and Brown Brazilians represented just over half (54.9%) of the total labour-force, they also constituted nearly two-thirds (64.2%) of the unemployed and 66.1% of the

underemployed. 47.3% of all Black and Brown Brazilians over the age of 14 (compared to 34.6% overall) worked in the informal sector (IBGE 2019), which is typically associated with precarity and a lack of access to social security and basic rights such as the minimum wage and a state pension.

To be clear: it would be misleading to equate the Afro-Brazilian population as a whole with a sub-proletarian precariat or underclass outside the system (pejoratively termed the *desclassificados* “disqualified” or *ralé* “rabble” in Portuguese); the point is rather that they fluctuate between, or move across the frontiers between, an “accumulation economy” and a “need economy”,¹⁵ between inclusion and exclusion. As a “marginal” population, then, but only if we follow Rufino dos Santos’s preferred use of the term: not the common usage of “that which lies outside”, but the sociological understanding of the concept, as “*what is on the edge*, at the outer boundary of society, but *on the inside*, articulated with what is commonly understood to be the centre” (Rufino dos Santos 2015: 152).

And it was here that an ideological explanation was needed to account for the Afro-Brazilians’ role in the country’s modern order, as a partially incorporated but racially differentiated “edge population”, marking the fluctuating contours of the working class. If they could no longer be viewed as the constitutive “outside” of the nation, its racial Other, they must also not threaten the privileged interests of the “unraced” dominant elite, but must nevertheless still be held in reserve as an available but dispensable source of labour. Brazilian raciological thinking required a new way of legitimizing this limited, controlled regime of incorporation. The solution—“racial democracy”—remained the core of Brazilian nationalist ideology from the 1930s to the 1990s and it became the key focus of the Black movement’s struggle to expose and deconstruct the state’s denialist discourse.

“Racial democracy” brought together three spurious claims in its justification for Brazil’s imagined racial exceptionalism: first, that the country’s slave regime had been more benign

than elsewhere in the colonial world; second, that the Portuguese colonisers' supposedly adaptive, flexible character and propensity for cordial coexistence with darker-skinned peoples prepared the way for a "harmonious" regime of race relations, and, finally, that the key mechanism in promoting this consensual order, free from segregation and violent conflict, had been *mestiçagem* or miscegenation, a liberal openness to interracial sexual relations and intermarriage, whose result—a predominantly mixed, *mestiço* population—was held up as both evidence and promise of Brazil's socially democratic destiny. Miscegenation was celebrated as the antidote to class struggle, as a buffer or lubricant of otherwise antagonistic social relations.

It was one thing to rewrite a colonial history of dehumanisation, exploitation and sexual violence as a kind of consensual love-affair between its protagonists, something that has long since been soundly and incontrovertibly refuted (Araújo and Araújo 2017). In reality the progressive discourse of mixture and integration typically went hand in hand with the outright suppression of any attempts by black or working-class organisations to represent their interests independently of the state, or against its rhetoric—the country's first black political party, the Black Brazilian Front (FNB), was outlawed in 1937, and from 1969 the National Security Council declared it an illegal act of "leftist subversion" to write or speak about the issue of racial discrimination (Alberto 2011: 249). But promoting the *mestiço* as the central symbol of the country's modern, integrated, "deracialised" social order was a powerfully compelling ideological manoeuvre, for it drew on popular recognition of an identifiable fact—Brazil's mixed, heterogeneous and relatively mobile social fabric. In that sense, while racial democracy is often referred to as a "myth", a more appropriate term is probably *ideology* since, in order to become the dominant "common sense" of a given society, ruling ideologies must offer *at least* a partial, if *only* a partial, representation of people's lived reality. As Antônio Sérgio Guimarães suggests, rather than viewing "racial democracy" simply as mystification or mendacity (as its

detractors commonly do) or as a positive, anti-racist civilizational impulse (according to its defenders), it should instead be seen as the expression of

*a political and social compromise on the part of the modern Brazilian republican state which, alternating between coercion and conviction, remained in force from Vargas's New State to the end of the military dictatorship. Such a compromise consisted in the incorporation of Brazil's Black population into the labour market, the extension of formal education, in short, the creation of the infrastructural conditions of a class society that would undo the stigmas created by slavery. The image of the Black as the People and the banishing from Brazilian social thought of the concept of "race" in favour of "culture" and "social class" are the chief expressions of that compromise (Guimarães 2001: 121).*¹⁶

In this historic, but only ever provisional and partial, compromise "race" was not, though, definitively banished from public discourse, as we have already seen, just as 'racial democracy' has perhaps not yet been permanently superseded, either; for both retain their *raison d'être*. One contributor to a 2010 volume on the new racial politics in Brazil argued that "The hegemonic position of the ideology of racial democracy may have been challenged, but it still remains the dominant understanding of race relations for the majority of Brazilians" (Treviño González 2010: 137). Indeed, alongside the hate-speech of his aggressively anti-black and anti-indigenous neo-racism, President Bolsonaro was equally capable of reverting to the key tropes of *mestiço* nationalism when this was convenient in attempting to defend his democratic credentials. For example, in a speech to the media on 7 September 2020 (Independence Day), while celebrating the military coup of 1964, Bolsonaro invoked a familiar, idealized narrative of Brazilian history as a harmonious, conflict-free melting-pot of peoples and ethnicities:

Brazil developed a sense of tolerance, in which the different became equal. The legacy of this mixture is a set of cultural, ethnic and religious gems that have been integrated into national customs and proudly embraced as Brazilian (Machado and Carvalho 2020).

Along with his Vice-President Hamilton Mourão, Bolsonaro reacted to the killing of João Alberto Silveira Freitas by denying the existence of racism in Brazil, even though the Carrefour group's international spokesman had admitted the racist motivation for the murder (Camazano 2020).

Meanwhile, as the racialized character of Brazil's social stratification intensified rather than diminished over the course of the twentieth century, class racism remained the mechanism, both material and symbolic, for regulating the Afro-Brazilian population's fluctuating status between exclusion and inclusion, according to the vicissitudes of the capitalist economy and its cycles of expansion and crisis. In the late 1970s and 80s, following a period of debt-fuelled industrial growth and hyper-inflation, the military dictatorship was forced to make reluctant concessions to the growing pressures to liberalise the regime. Working-class militancy, the new unionism and an array of emerging social movements, including the recently founded Unified Black Movement (MNU), injected a strong mass-based and left-wing character into the democratic transition that ensued. The consensual ideal of the socially integrated, *mestiço* nation disintegrated in the face of indigenous demands for the protection of their land rights, the denunciation of racial inequalities and the claim of Black emancipation as, no longer a minority cause, but as that of the *Brazilian people* (Guimarães 2006: 277). *Mestiço* nationalism therefore gave way to a multiculturalist politics and the idea of a *pluri-ethnic* nation, something enshrined in the 1988 Constitution, along with the criminalization of racist practices; in 1995 the Brazilian state went so far as to officially acknowledge the existence of racism in the country.

However, the new post-1990s cycle of anti-racist public policy reforms, spurred on by Brazil's participation in the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, unfolded against a rather different background, as the country embarked on an economic transition to Neoliberalism, first under the openly centre-right administrations of Presidents Collor, Itamar Franco and Fernando Henrique Cardoso and, from 2003, under a series of coalitions headed by the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party) of Presidents Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. Tensions between the construction of democracy, social justice and an inclusionary welfare state, on the one hand, and the Neoliberal system of accumulation, on the other, soon became apparent, as high unemployment, precarity and rising relative poverty were its deliberate outcomes. "During the 1990s, 11 million jobs were created; 54 per cent were either informal or unwaged" (Saad-Filho and Morais 2018: 76)—that is to say, in those sectors disproportionately occupied by Afro-Brazilians. And in the sphere of political activity, the violent police repression that greeted the Black and Indigenous movements' alternative demonstrations in 2000, marking 500 years of Brazilian history since the European Conquest, was an ominous symptom of the fragility of the state's commitment to the anti-racist cause (Herschmann and Messeder Pereira 2000).

3. Anti-racism, the Black movement and the Left

How did the Black movement and anti-racist activism engage with this new conjuncture from the 1990s onward—that is to say, a state agenda promising progressive policy reform combined with regressive economic measures, which tended to deepen rather than challenge the class racism that had historically structured labour, citizenship and society as a whole?

For many anti-racists who had begun their activism following the 1970s struggles led by the Unified Black Movement (MNU), and whose thinking was therefore shaped by a race/class

and anti-capitalist perspective, the shift to an emphasis on public policy formulation and its institutionalization posed a critical dilemma. In the words of Gomes Soares: “would the acceptance of special public policies tied to race mean relinquishing a project of social transformation?” (Gomes Soares 2012: 42) The argument for the need to articulate race *and* class, and to integrate black liberation into the broader socialist struggle for working-class emancipation, had been defended prior to 1978 within the MNU’s founding discussions by members of the Trotskyist Núcleo Negro Socialista.¹⁷ Indeed, it was this perspective (reflected in the MNU’s original title, the Unified Movement Against Racial Discrimination (MUCDR)) that led many such activists to identify with the socialist Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party) when it was founded in 1980. As early as 1982, however, it became clear that the PT’s orientation would in fact privilege the class struggle *over and above* the anti-racist agenda:

We understand the Workers’ Party as one in which Blacks should participate in terms of its class composition, as it consists of workers, civil servants, students, doctors, engineers, in short, workers in general. And also on account of its programme, which clearly poses the struggle against the bosses’ regime, and further on account of its commitment to the struggles of workers and of the oppressed in general, put their demands on the order of the day.¹⁸

The growing insistence on the primacy of class, and the relegation of race to secondary importance, or even its disqualification as a legitimate issue, was experienced by Black activists attempting to intervene in party fora and within the trade union movement (Domingues 2008: 112). A crucial, symbolic turning-point came in the PT’s internal debate regarding the selection of Lula’s running mate as Vice-Presidential candidate in the 1989 elections: Black activist Benedita da Silva, already a prominent and respected congresswoman, was passed over in favour of the Party’s coalition alliance candidate, José Paulo Bisol, of the PSB.

This marked the exodus of many activists from the ranks of PT militancy in the direction of a politics of Black separatism: ‘Many Black leaders went on to conduct their political activism in alternative, one-off, pragmatic and identity-based ways whether via social networks, the voluntary sector, or alternative and independent collectives. But they didn’t abandon the anti-racist banner of struggle’ (Vaz Silva 2020: 159). For other activists and their organisations, the prospect of implementing concrete changes in the legal and institutional spheres posed an attractive alternative to the previous focus on workplace, community- and street-level consciousness-raising, rights-based agitational politics, and the denunciation of discrimination. This shift was encouraged by the phenomenon of *NGO-isation* during the same period, in other words, the replacement of volunteer-run campaigning organisations by increasingly professionalized, core-funded institutions staffed by full-time officials who were often university-educated lawyers, anthropologists or sociologists. Such non-governmental organisations enjoyed a new-found credibility and effectiveness as lobbyists and policy-makers, who were doubtless key actors in getting onto the statute books those reforms which, for example, created the Special Secretariat for Policies Promoting Racial Equality (SEPPIR), making the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture a compulsory component of the national curriculum, and formalising procedures for the demarcation of *quilombo* territories,¹⁹ not to mention the affirmative action legislation to widen access to higher education, considered below. Furthermore, the transformation of the federal administration under the post-2003 Lula government, with the appointment of large numbers of progressive political, trade union and NGO cadres, seemed to usher in a new relationship between citizens and the state, believed by some to be a “democratic revolution” (Saad-Filho and Morais 2018: 89). Well established Black organisations, such as CONEN (National Coordination of Black Organisations), founded in 1991, now became open government supporters and interlocutors on behalf of the wider movement.

However, as Domingues and Treviño González argue, this process of institutionalisation and the integration of the NGO-based movement into the state administration had other implications, too; many activists worried that, as they became increasingly bureaucratized and distanced from their grassroots constituencies, the organisations were becoming less representative of mass interests, while a dependence on foreign funders risked compromising their political autonomy and integrity (Domingues 2008: 109; Treviño González 2010: 134-45). Gomes Soares suggests that the adoption of the affirmative action agenda was not the result of any mass mobilisation of the black movement around a political project as such: “It started to be raised in particular situations, by this or that activist, appearing in this or that ministerial action, in this or that policy proposal, without representing a consensus within the Black movement, and without the movement being organised around its implementation” (Gomes Soares 2012: 65). Most significantly, the new orientation on state institutions and laws, and away from engagement with society at large, served to detach anti-racist activity from the political and ideological struggles against structural racism and its sources.

Other commentators questioned the extent of the reformist governments’ real commitment to honouring the partnership with the Black movement, through the intermediary of the NGOs. On the eve of the National Conference for the Promotion of Racial Equality (Conapir), in 2005, Jurema Werneck (a co-founder in 1992 of Criola, an organisation promoting black women’s rights), wrote an excoriating assessment of the progress in addressing racial inequality under the Cardoso and Lula administrations of the previous decade. Drawing on various sources of data (from the UN Development Programme to the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Ipea)), Werneck judged that no significant improvements had occurred since 1995 in the indicators for poverty, destitution, general educational achievement, infant mortality, life expectancy or employment (Werneck 2005: 57-59). Of SEPPPIR, the great promise of the Lula government’s commitment to anti-racist action (despite giving a wide berth to any ideological

confrontation with racist thinking), she concluded: “halfway through Lula’s term of government, we can say that its stated objectives have not been and will not be achieved, except in a partial and fragmentary way” (Werneck 2005: 64). The prominence given to the racial question was at best a matter of self-congratulatory rhetoric, while the black movement’s own achievements went unrecognised:

There is nothing new about this attempt to erase the social struggles and about this self-promotion, but the claim already made is taking place under an administration that defines itself as springing from, and in partnership with, civil society. Undervaluing the black movement in this way has marked not only the Cardoso governments, but has also characterised the Lula government, and it needs to be unmasked (Werneck 2005: 64).

Werneck was speaking from the perspective of an activist who believed in the capacity of a strong, egalitarian and universalist state to break with the power of white supremacy and to “betray racism”, engaging in new, inclusive social pacts in the name of justice and citizenship. Nevertheless, she also understood that the Lula administration, no less than its predecessor, had instead opted strategically to prioritise the interests of a Neoliberal programme whose consequences were the widening of social disparities, the narrowing down of the role of the state, and a massive shift of resources from public policy budgets into the financial sector (Werneck 2005: 57, 64, 65). Meanwhile, those activists and organisations who accepted the invitation to become partners or members of the new administration risked colluding in a politics of shallow tokenism, as the anti-racist cause became materially subordinated to the priorities of the economic agenda. As Saad-Filho and Morais put it, “the personnel changes aligned the material interests of the leaders of the most combative social movements and NGOs with the government’s neoliberal policies and the interests of the state bureaucracy: effectively, *the PT government nationalised the organised left*” (Saad-Filho and Morais 2018: 89).²⁰

In one particular area, however, the implementation of public policy reform had an undeniably dramatic, transformative impact, and that was in the application of affirmation action measures, specifically the Quotas Law no. 12.711/2012, which set out to raise to at least 50% the proportion of Black, Brown and Indigenous students in federal higher education institutions. By 2017, the full implementation of the Quotas Law meant that just under 40% of students were entering the sector via affirmative action measures (as compared to 13% in 2012) and, of these, 46% were Afro-Brazilian or Indigenous. As a result, in 2018, Black and Brown Brazilians comprised 51.2% of the total number of students attending public universities. This still did not match their overall profile in the population (55.8%), but it represented a massive advance over the period following the transition to democracy, from a figure of 3.6% in 1988, and 16.4% in 2008 (Dias Silva 2020). In absolute terms, this meant that, in the space of 15 years, affirmative action measures increased the number of Black and Brown graduate students nearly four-fold, from 160,527 to 613,826.²¹

Besides the direct material benefit to those hundreds of thousands of Black students themselves, this achievement was a politically significant and popular victory for the anti-racist cause, despite vocal resistance from some academic and media quarters. As successive surveys demonstrated, a large majority of Brazilians supported the quota programmes; the approval ratings diminished, however, the higher the income and educational levels of those interviewed, suggesting that the opposition to reparatory measures for widening university access was coloured by class interests (Domingues 2008: 106-07). On the basis of the programmes' political significance alone, therefore, Treviño González argues that “increasing the social acceptance of university admission quotas for Afro-Brazilians should be one of the primary aims of Afro-Brazilian organizations, regardless of how effective these policies may be in terms of the broader goal of achieving a reduction in racial inequality” (Treviño González 2010: 129). A further progressive benefit, for commentators such as Seth Racusen, was the

possibility that such policies enabled a positive subjective reevaluation of their racial identities on the part of those whose experience of prejudice had previously discouraged them from acknowledging their blackness: “Affirmative action on the basis of race directly counters the absorptionist aspects of racial democracy by providing the first material incentive to identify as black or brown. In so doing, affirmative action also communicates that racial identity can positively affect life chances. I argue that this ideological aspect of affirmative action is critical in the sense that the right to have rights precedes the actual use of any right” (Racusen 2010: 98).²²

Finally, the influx of so many young Afro-Brazilian (and Indigenous) women and men into the university sector brought about a radical, generational renewal of the Black movement, injecting into it a youthful, powerfully motivated intellectual and political energy and opening up new spaces for theoretical study and debate, and for practical organisation and mobilisation. Hundreds of Centres of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous Studies (NEABIs) and related institutes and laboratories proliferated across university campuses and, under the coordination of a national Consortium, they revitalized the membership and structures of the Brazilian Association of Black Researchers (ABPN), founded in 2000.²³

It could be said, therefore, that the wholesale shift towards a state-centred focus of activism, prioritising the implementation of affirmative action programmes, came to define the Black movement of the last twenty years. But what were the limitations of this public policy agenda, and what were its implications for the future of anti-racist politics? Where did it leave the 120 million Black and Brown workers and Indigenous people who continued to face the realities of Brazil’s class racism? Writing in 2020, sociologist and race theorist Howard Winant warned that, while acknowledging the gains of the reform programme, it was important to recognize that “their promise for accomplishing real social mobility is relatively small in a country where only about 11% of the population holds a university degree. Like every other racial reform,

the *Lei de Cotas* is at best incremental. To say that it does not challenge the Brazilian racial regime is to state the obvious” (Winant 2020). As Treviño González argues, increasing inclusion in higher education does not offer an automatic path to the elimination of racial inequality, as the experience of the United States demonstrates. Such a goal is in any case entirely out of the question for a large proportion of Afro-Brazilians, who barely have the opportunity to attain a secondary education: “. . . there is the appearance that this is a program mainly aimed at benefiting the already relatively privileged members of the Afro-Brazilian middle classes; more importantly, the objective of this focus for more broad-based equality does not appear to be clearly articulated” (Treviño González 2010: 123).

What is more, beyond its failure to address the racial inequalities endured by Brazil’s Black majority, the focus on achieving access for a minority of individuals to places where they are under-represented—“to get blacks into the upper reaches of the country’s decision-making elite” (Lehmann 2018: 213)—is likely, at best, to end up with the creation of a Black bourgeoisie as its key outcome, as in the US. At worst, the movement’s “corporatist” strategy (Lehmann’s term), using the public universities as key agencies of reform to incorporate previously excluded or neglected social sectors into the state, may end up demobilising its more radical political energies and absorbing them into the Neoliberal project. Becoming an individual beneficiary of social mobility or “uplift” on the universalist basis of “equal opportunity” will tend to encourage an acceptance of, and adaptation to, capitalist values rather than a questioning of them (Gomes Soares 2012: 54). Liberal-democratic societies are quite capable of accommodating a recognition of “difference” and diversity, even institutionalizing them within the multi-culturalist framework or marketing them as a consumer commodity, without challenging the structures of inequality that organize that multi-culturalism hierarchically (Bhattacharyya 2018: 102).

Looking back at an earlier moment, that of the formation of the first generation of university-educated Black activists in the 1970s, Joel Rufino dos Santos emphasised the need to understand its dynamics, and its limitations, in terms of capitalism's ongoing racialisation of the labour market as, by turns, it absorbed or disposed of Black workers as a cheap, expendable option:

Even without considering the gap between the educational boom and the labour market, which would broadly frustrate the expectations of the new generation of graduates, there was the specific frustration experienced by Black graduates. The market indeed awaited them, but as an equally competent, affordably priced labour supply. The veil of the temple, as in the Bible, was torn asunder: instead of correcting racial inequalities, capitalist growth maintained or accentuated them (Rufino dos Santos 2015: 21-22).

Today, we can see the same logic at work within the university employment sector itself as, even after two decades of affirmative action policies brought thousands of poorer Black students into the system, academic staffing remains woefully unrepresentative. In 2018, the Ministry of Education's Higher Education Census revealed that, of the 214,224 lecturers teaching in Brazilian universities, only 65,249 or 30.5% were Black or Brown. Only seven private universities and only five public institutions had a majority of Afro-Brazilians on their teaching staff. An even lower proportion, 14.3%, was represented among research staff, and in 76% of private faculties and 37% of public universities no Blacks at all were employed in this category (Sallit 2019).²⁴ An interview-based survey conducted in the same year identified a disparity between the formal adherence to inclusion and pluralism on university campuses, and a reality characterised by routine racist incidents involving students and staff, the absence of serious discussions of racism, and the marginalization of Black bibliographies and epistemologies (Martins et al 2018: 130).

If this was the picture within Brazil's universities, then how was anti-racist struggle to be taken forward in society at large, where the challenges remained even more formidable? For Petrônio Domingues, a historian of Brazil's Black movements, the most promising future lay in the possibility of

emerging from its relative racist sectarianism and fostering an arc of alliances with those progressive sectors of civil society—particularly with the popular movements—which are committed to attacking the structural inequalities in Brazilian society. Hence the need to incorporate the racial question into the agenda of concerns of the political struggles of workers, women, gays, students, in short, all the subaltern sectors of society. Whenever the Black movement—while safeguarding its autonomy—has acted with its demands on political fronts in conjunction with other popular movements, the results have been encouraging (Domingues 2008: 119).

Domingues's reference to "racist sectarianism" was a warning as regards the limitations and dangers of identity politics, Black separatism or Afro-centrism and their exclusionary, divisive effects, just when the anti-racist cause, not least in a country such as Brazil, called for the most inclusive, broadly democratic unity possible, based on political and not phenotypical categories of self-identification: "For the majority sector of the movement, being Black is above all a matter of taking a political position. More important, therefore, than the degree of melanin in your skin, is to identify who is prepared to take on the clashes against racial iniquities. This is perhaps the most appropriate criterion, but it is still out of step with Brazilians' level of racial consciousness" (Domingues 2008: 116).

Notwithstanding all the reservations outlined above, the last two decades of cumulative activity, experience and intellectual work, galvanised by the immediate neo-racist onslaught of *Bolsonarismo*, nevertheless created the conditions for a re-energised and confident Black movement, characterised by a great diversity of actors, led especially by a new generation of

women activists. One important expression of this was the Black Coalition for Rights, established in November 2019, which brought together approximately 150 organisations, including cultural, religious, legal, community, academic, research and women's groups, the single biggest category.²⁵

On 12 August 2020, the Coalition lodged an impeachment process against Bolsonaro, holding the President criminally responsible for the violation of individual and social rights in his negligent failure to take measures to fight the pandemic and to protect the most vulnerable victims, including black families, domestic workers, informal workers, *quilombola* communities, and black rural populations and those living in poor urban communities and suburbs. The more than 100,000 deaths recorded up to that time, the Coalition argued, were overwhelmingly Black in their phenotype, social class and territorial location: "The social impacts of the pandemic, the unemployment and abandonment inflicted by the government excessively affect the poorest. The majority who depend on the government's emergency aid to satisfy their families' hunger are Black, just as the thousands whom have been refused access to these benefits are Black."²⁶

The specific context here was the Covid-19 crisis but, in identifying the "colour" of class oppression in Brazil as quintessentially Black, the validity of the Coalition's argument went much further, and as such it should arguably form the core of any serious anti-racist and anti-capitalist analysis and strategy for the future. It is not just that, in quantitative, demographic terms, the official Black/Brown figure of 55.8% now officially confirms Afro-Brazilians' objective majority status within the national society. Qualitatively and symbolically, too, the Black working-class experience is the most representative expression of class oppression in Brazil.

Two interconnected implications follow from this: (a) the Marxist analysis of racism and of the articulation between race and class deserve to be reclaimed and re-elaborated by Brazilian

anti-racists, and (b) the anti-racist struggle should become a priority for any serious anti-capitalist Left movement in Brazil, not merely one of several “minority” social justice causes, but *the problem of Brazil, its national question*. As historian and activist Joel Rufino dos Santos put it:

Set before us once again is the central question: the Black problematic is the problematic of the Brazilian nation. In that perspective, Blackness is surely the great and awful national repression. What sets us apart among the nations of the World is that we are rendered absolutely incapable, and hence our alienation and our neurosis, of seeing our essential, Black being. At the level of political strategy, there follows from this a path to organised struggle against racism: to nationalize the Black problematic (Rufino dos Santos 2015: 17).

That challenge cannot be a task for the Black movement alone—it will have to be taken on by the Left as a whole, and by all progressive Brazilians, regardless of colour or ethnicity.

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² Judged on the basis of his violent anti-communist rhetoric, petty bourgeois social base and appeal, authoritarian nationalism, irrational anti-intellectualism, cult of militarism and of popular and state violence, and his politicising of misogyny, homophobia and racism. For a discussion of the characterisation of Bolsonaro as “neo-fascist”, see Michael Löwy, “Neofascismo: um fenômeno planetário – o caso Bolsonaro”. *A Terra é Redonda* 24/10/2019. See also Federico Finchelstein and Jason Stanley, “The Fascist Politics of the Pandemic”. *Project Syndicate* 04/05/2020; Federico Finchelstein. 2020. *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, and Jason Stanley. 2018. *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*. New York: Random House.

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⁵ “Procurador de Justiça do Pará diz que ‘problema da escravidão no Brasil foi porque índio não gosta de trabalhar’”. *Globo* 26/11/2019.

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¹³ The most influential exponent of this approach was Florestan Fernandes, *Integração do Negro na Sociedade de Classes* (1964).

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¹⁶ See also Guimarães 2006.

¹⁷ The Núcleo Negro Socialista was affiliated to the Liga Operária, a forerunner of Convergência Socialista, which participated in the creation of the PT. See Gevanilda Santos’s intervention in Octavio Ianni, Benedita da Silva, Gevanilda Gomes Santos and Luiz Alberto Santos. 2005. *O negro e o socialismo*. São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 26-28. See also Vaz Silva 2020.

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¹⁹ Laws 10.678/2003 and 10.639/2003 and Decree 4.887/2003, respectively.

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