


BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

A Step Back and to the Right: Gendered Backlash, Partisanship, and Cynicism in Brazil's Recent Reactionary Turn

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This essay reviews the following works:

Women's Empowerment and Disempowerment in Brazil: The Rise and Fall of President Dilma Rousseff. By Pedro A. G. dos Santos and Farida Jalalzai. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021. Pp. 213. \$91.05 hardcover. ISBN: 9781439916179.

A Horizon of (Im)possibilities: A Chronicle of Brazil's Conservative Turn. Edited by Katerina Hatzikidi and Eduardo Dullo. London: University of London Press, 2021. Pp. 195. \$35.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781908857897.

Cynical Citizenship: Gender, Regionalism, and Political Subjectivity in Porto Alegre, Brazil. By Benjamin Junge. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 304. \$64.70 hardcover. ISBN: 9780826359445.

Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil. Edited by Benjamin Junge, Sean T. Mitchell, Alvaro Jarrín, and Lucia Cantero. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021. Pp. 238. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781978825659.

O Brasil dobrou à direita: Uma radiografia da eleição de Bolsonaro em 2018. By Jairo Nicolau. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2019. Pp. 144. \$23.04 paperback. ISBN: 9788537818886.

Dilma's Downfall: The Impeachment of Brazil's First Woman President and the Pathway to Power for Jair Bolsonaro's Far-Right. By Peter Prengaman and Mauricio Savarese. New York: Associated Press. Pp. 274. \$14.52 paper. ISBN: 9781735845999.

Gender and Representation in Latin America. Edited by Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xv + 352. \$38.95 paper. ISBN: 9780190851231.

Democracy against Parties: The Divergent Fates of Latin America's New Left Contenders. By Brandon Van Dyck. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021. Pp. 288. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780822946946.

Addressing Brazil's Senate in August 2016, President Dilma Rousseff insisted not only that the effort to remove her from office was illegitimate but that it constituted an implicit attack on the political empowerment of women in Latin America's largest nation.

Her powers had been suspended by the lower house of Congress three months earlier, while contentious impeachment proceedings unfolded in the Senate that would have the final say over her political fate. By late summer, with her ouster all but certain, some urged Dilma to resign to spare herself further indignity. She refused, citing the moral support of Brazilian women and warning of an impending backlash against thirteen years of Workers' Party (PT) governments: "Important achievements for women, blacks and LGBT populations will be compromised by a submission to ultra-conservative principles." Dilma could not have known how right she was about the reactionary storm brewing.

Like any major historical event, Dilma's impeachment marked both an end and a beginning. In 2002, former metalworker and union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the presidency after falling short three times. Lula was reelected in 2006 and remained popular enough to ensure victory four years later for Dilma, who had impressed him with her effective oversight of major public works during his administration. Indeed, he chose her as his successor over other more likely candidates, including women such as Marta Suplicy and Marina Silva, both of whom had developed their own political brands while remaining committed to the PT for decades. Dilma was then narrowly reelected in 2014 before being engulfed by a tidal wave of anti-PT sentiment that abruptly ended a period of uninterrupted progressive governance.

While an ascendant right-wing coalition reveled in Dilma's fall, they would not rest on their laurels. They shared a broader political agenda that began to be implemented as soon as Brazil's first female president was out of the way. As Lilia Moritz Schwarcz observes in her contribution to *A Horizon of (Im)possibilities: A Chronicle of Brazil's Conservative Turns*, "since the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the lid has been removed from the cauldron of resentment, which has resulted in a deliberate politics of hate and polarisations" (Hatzikidi and Dullo, 50). The idea of intentionality that Schwarcz invokes is key. With a presidential election looming on the horizon, Brazil's climate of intense partisan animosity is unlikely to let up anytime soon.

The various works considered in this essay grapple in some way with Brazil's recent reactionary turn. In different ways, they address a key question: if misogyny was not fatal to Dilma's political ambitions in 2010 or 2014, why was it by 2016? As Brandon Van Dyck argues in his book under consideration here, the PT is a remarkably enduring player in Brazilian politics because of its frankly disadvantageous origins and the stabilizing force of a central leader. Lula withstood crises during his time in office and handed power to his chosen successor. The party could not, however, weather the storm that sank Dilma. It is impossible to understand this history without considering gender. Misogyny was a weapon wielded against Dilma by her opponents, but it was not what sparked the broader revolt against her administration. Resting on frail premises, Dilma's impeachment was the tip of the spear for a reactionary drive to wrest national power away from progressives. One way of understanding Brazil's post-2016 history, therefore, is as an attempt to shore up a profoundly conservative vision of how society should be organized. The works assessed in this review contribute to our understanding of Brazil's dispiriting present while reminding us of the importance of contingency. While a right-wing agenda has prevailed in Brazil since 2016, its future prospects are hardly guaranteed.

This essay uses different scales of categorization for the purpose of organization. The first section discusses two books directly related to Dilma, her administration, and the specific circumstances of her ouster. The next section zooms out to examine three works on the stark reactionary onslaught in post-2016 Brazil. These works are united in their interest of how and why Brazil both bent to, and bowed before, the right, as the pun in the title of Jairo Nicolau's *O Brasil dobrou à direita: Uma radiografia da eleição de Bolsonaro em 2018* puts it. Finally, the third section steps back even further to cover books broadly related to the topic of political parties, representation, and systemic obstacles to gender parity and other aims generally associated with progressive parties like the PT.

The *presidenta* and her discontents

In framing their work on Dilma's abbreviated time in office, Pedro A. G. dos Santos and Farida Jalalzai assert that "the relationship between a woman president and women's empowerment is complex and sometimes counterintuitive" (139–140). In *Women's Empowerment and Disempowerment in Brazil: The Rise and Fall of President Dilma Rousseff*, they focus on two central questions: how Dilma used her position to empower women in Brazilian politics, by which they mean giving women more decision-making power over public policy, and how the issue of gender impacted her administration and influenced the impeachment process that brought her down. They use three metrics to judge how much a woman in the presidency advances women's empowerment. The first involves cabinet nominations. When Dilma took office, nine of thirty-seven cabinet-level positions were held by women, a number that increased throughout her time in office. In fact, dos Santos and Jalalzai maintain that Dilma's insistence on empowering women cost her possible political support. For example, she appointed ten women with no party affiliation, eight from the PT, and only one from another party. The authors speculate that, given the perception that women are less susceptible to corruption than men, increasing the number of women in government as corruption scandals erupted had a certain political logic even if it meant withholding high-level positions from the fickle power brokers who might have shielded her from impeachment later. By the end of her administration, Dilma had appointed eighteen women to her cabinet, the highest number ever recorded in the country. This felicitous milestone made the comparison with the all-male subsequent administration especially bleak.

The second way to gauge how much a president empowers women is to analyze her policies. In this regard, Dilma acted to expand and strengthen several initiatives established in the Lula government to explicitly favor women, especially mothers and low-income workers. The authors focus especially on policies related to violence against women and rights for domestic workers, linking politics and policy in ways that will appeal to those who are not political scientists.

The third way of judging the empowerment of women under a female president is at the symbolic level. Notably, from the earliest days of her administration, Dilma insisted on being referred to as *presidenta* as opposed to *presidente*, gendering a title that some critics noted was not exclusively male in the first place. Dos Santos and Jalalzai see this decision as a "symbolic move to empower women and to normalize the presence of women in masculine spaces" (48). Naturally, the implications of a woman head of state did not end there. When BBC Brasil interviewed several experts and activists about Dilma's efforts to bolster women's participation in politics in 2016, they credited her with advances in political representation, women's financial independence, and the fight against domestic violence, but criticized the lack of commitment to sexual diversity and reproductive rights.¹ One can understand the instinct to avoid certain topics. When Lula raised the idea of abortion in Brazil being treated as a public health issue rather than a criminal matter during the 2022 campaign, he was pilloried for bringing up a controversial topic that would only benefit his main opponent in the race. Of course, refusing to broach controversial subjects is the only sure way of ensuring that nothing will ever be done about them.

The question of symbolism—what priorities a woman in the presidency would put on the table—was one of high stakes from the beginning of Dilma's administration. Dos Santos and Jalalzai argue not only that a woman in the presidency can advance issues dear to Brazilian women, but that the absence of female perspectives at the highest level tends to relegate these urgent matters to the background. Dos Santos and Jalalzai recall the

¹ Ingrid Fagundes and Renata Mendonça, "Ter 'presidenta' fez diferença para as mulheres?," *BBC Brasil*, May 26, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-36384962>.

creation of Rede Cegonha in 2011, a program that sought to ensure health care for low-income women in rural areas, from the confirmation of pregnancy through the first two years of their babies' lives. Feminist critics lamented this early initiative, pointing out that for decades activists had sought to expand health-related demands beyond maternal issues. The authors also devote an entire chapter to analyzing the sexist tone of various attacks against Dilma during the impeachment process. Perhaps the most offensive examples of popular misogyny against the president were the infamous stickers of Dilma's face and open legs designed to fit over and around the gas tank of a car, transforming the act of filling up into a symbolic sexual violation of the president. Dos Santos and Jalalzai also analyze in detail the speeches of members of Congress during the vote to confirm her ouster, a spectacle in which Bolsonaro infamously dedicated his vote for impeachment to a dictatorship-era torturer. The authors argue that the impeachment process came down to a dispute over political space: "Misogyny, though not the sole motivator for President Rousseff's removal, was an important element in attempting to disempower her (by *putting Rousseff in her place*) and other women seeking to enter masculine spaces in Brazilian society" (13).

With attention to the interplay between political culture and institutions, dos Santos and Jalalzai have written a book that will lead to fruitful discussions not only about Dilma's contentious ouster but about Brazilian social mores. "The misogynist attacks Rousseff endured," the authors assert, "inspired women within diverse feminist communities to work together and rally on behalf of Rousseff" (142). This comes close to overlooking the virulently right-wing women who assumed prominent roles in the pro-impeachment camp and in the years since—women like Janaina Paschoal, Joice Hasselmann, and Carla Zambelli, among others—but it is correct in the sense that progressive women have not been cowed by the impeachment of the first female president. If anything, the emergence of young, combative left-wing politicians like Talíria Petrone, Natália Bonavides, and Erika Hilton—the first transgender woman elected to the São Paulo city council—signals an exciting renewal of female leadership.

The other book under consideration that focuses specifically on the last PT administration is *Dilma's Downfall: The Impeachment of Brazil's First Woman President and the Pathway to Power for Jair Bolsonaro's Far-Right*, by Peter Prengaman and Mauricio Savarese. As the title makes clear, the authors, both of whom are journalists at the Associated Press who covered the impeachment saga, argue that Dilma's ouster created the conditions for Bolsonaro's ascent. A desire "to explain how today's Brazil came to be" inspired the authors to write the book (xi–xii). The link between Dilma's fraught impeachment and the rise of a far-right extremist, in other words, is not incidental. This is an important point to underscore because the argument that hastily removing Dilma on flimsy grounds—what critics of the process refer to as a parliamentary coup—would embolden dangerously unpredictable reactionary forces was, at the time, largely confined to left-wing voices. To see that point made in a journalistic work by two authors who can hardly be described as committed partisans offers early evidence that the currents that opposed impeachment were right in their assessment of how the historical record would regard those events.

The story recounted in *Dilma's Downfall* is conventional but engaging. There are twenty-one chapters, the first entitled "The Stage is Set" and the last "Tristeza," that zip readers along more or less from the 2014 election to Dilma's ouster two years later. The authors devote special attention to the nine-month period during which the formal impeachment process unfolded. The authors understand points of dramatic tensions and which characters are worth dwelling on. Actors come and go, many quoted directly. Others are not cited explicitly but their perspectives shape the narrative in subtle yet intriguing ways. Prengaman and Savarese rightly center Brazil's economic travails in this saga, noting the simmering tensions between the orthodox finance minister Joaquim Levy and the heterodox minister of planning Nelson Barbosa, both of whom were appointed following

Dilma's narrow victory in 2014. "One year after Levy and Barbosa took office," however, "one question was a constant for them: Who was staying and who was going? Whoever stayed wasn't going to call it a win, though" (59). Barbosa was eventually named finance minister when the more austerity-minded Levy quit in December. Prengaman and Savarese conclude that "after one year trying to gain confidence among brokers and bankers, Rousseff appeared to be giving up. By then she had lost much of her base, Brazil's economy was in deep trouble and the country's elite were looking at alternatives" (61).

Prengaman and Savarese are not academics, but they refer to several. The book's lack of scholarly depth and disciplinary specificity makes it less suitable for most college classes than dos Santos and Jalalzai's volume. But Prengaman and Savarese present an accessible, concise, and engaging account of Dilma's impeachment, one that succeeds in balancing the specifics of the process as it unfolded with the larger history of the PT's experience in power between 2003 and 2016. They also clearly agree that misogyny played a central role in Dilma's ouster. In an article examining anti-Dilma internet memes made during the impeachment process, Georg Wink describes three broad categories of this modern form of political protest: image macros (pictures with superimposed text), exploitables (a common meme template in which an existing image is changed in some obvious way for comedic effect, like putting Dilma's head on a famous painting of Dom Pedro I), and side-by-side photo comparisons between the president and unflattering supposed doppelgangers meant to demean Dilma's appearance.² Discussing the various memes and other forms of viral anti-Dilma content that circulated in the heat of the polarizing impeachment battle, Prengaman and Savarese recognize that "no politician, actor, musician, athlete or institution is ever fully exempt" from the harsh glare of public criticism. They insist, however, that "during the impeachment process, some memes about Rousseff went beyond playful or even harsh and instead were dehumanizing and even violent" (162). And yet, as their narrative illustrates, Dilma's impeachment was not a simple tale of gendered divisions. After all, "many women deputies had not been moved by a feeling of gender solidarity when it came to casting their vote [for impeachment]" (163). In the end, twenty-nine of the fifty-one women in Congress favored her removal, twenty opposed it, one abstained, and one was absent.

A sharp right turn

Political scientist Jairo Nicolau is a noted scholar of elections and political parties in Brazil; in *O Brasil dobrou à direita: Uma radiografia da eleição de Bolsonaro em 2018*, he refers to Bolsonaro's election as "the most impressive achievement in the history of Brazilian elections" (11). He means this not in a fawning or enthusiastic way but in the sense that the victory of the former army captain and longtime member of Congress defied every convention about how elections are won in Brazil. Bolsonaro had very little television time to run his ads because he was a member of a very small party with very few allies and resources, and he had no political machine to speak of across the vast national territory. Nobody had ever won with such little institutional backing. Instead, Bolsonaro benefited from new electoral laws that shortened the official campaign window, a social media strategy more sophisticated and unscrupulous than his adversaries, and unified support from voters dissatisfied to one degree or another with the PT.

In *O Brasil dobrou à direita*, Nicolau closely examines the dynamics of Bolsonaro's election thematically in nine chapters that are schematic and sometimes too brisk. One gets the

² See George Wink, "Humor golpista: Memes sobre Dilma Rousseff durante o 'impeachment,'" *Veredas: Revista da Associação Internacional de Lusitanistas*, no. 27 (2017): 123–140, <https://doi.org/10.24261/2183-816x0727>.

sense that the author wrote the book quickly so as to capture the zeitgeist of a previously unthinkable outcome, which Bolsonaro's election certainly was as late as 2017. There are chapters here on how age, religion, social media, level of education, and gender shaped the electoral outcome. On the latter point, considering surveys and polls as much as his informed sense as a longtime scholar of Brazilian electoral processes, Nicolau notes Bolsonaro's overwhelmingly masculine appeal. Since 1989, he writes, winning presidential candidates fared more or less the same with voters of different genders—including contests in which women ran strongly. Thus, "the asymmetry in the votes of men and women is a particularity of the 2018 election" (57). What he finds is not that Bolsonaro lost women to Fernando Haddad of the PT, but that he won them by a much smaller margin than he won men of all education levels. Nicolau does not believe the anti-Bolsonaro feminist protests that broke out days before the first round of voting, which organized around the rallying cry of *Ele Não*, had much effect in swaying female voters. Nicolau raises many questions that will require future research. This sense of an analysis still taking shape prevents the book from being something close to the definitive study of the 2018 election that it might have been. Nevertheless, Nicolau's concluding chapter, in which he lists his findings in bullet form, is a useful distillation of defining elements of the 2018 race, including the fact that Bolsonaro's support concentrated overwhelmingly in cities, among men, and among Evangelicals.

While Nicolau offers an impersonal structural analysis of Bolsonaro's election, the collection *Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil*, edited by Benjamin Junge, Sean T. Mitchell, Alvaro Jarrín, and Lucia Cantero, presents over a dozen granular studies of individuals and movements contending with various specific aspects of Brazil's shifting political landscape from 2013 through 2019 in different parts of the country and the world. The breadth of the volume is remarkable. Indeed, it would be far too reductive to say that this is simply a work on Bolsonaro's 2018 victory. "While this volume's ethnographic panorama extends far beyond voting and elections, it will likely be looked to for insight into the rise of Jair Bolsonaro," the editors recognize early on (Junge et al., 4). But this is not the sole political development the authors engage with: "If there is a political sentiment most often expressed in these pages, it is less frequently one of right-wing ideological affinity than one of *ambivalence and disenchantment*" (Junge et al., 5).

The book is organized into four parts, each with an evocative title and four chapters. Contributions in part 1, "The Intimacy of Power," grapple with dynamics of class, gender, and race and their impact on personal, familial, and generational politics. Many of the subjects of the research presented in this section, and throughout the book, recount voting for Bolsonaro not because they supported his most virulent reactionary ideas but because they had come to distrust so deeply that the PT would be a better alternative. This is not to say, however, that there was not a real upsurge in right-wing, racist, misogynist, and homophobic words and deeds during the period under consideration. In her chapter, Patricia de Santana Pinho uses the metaphor of coming out of the closet to describe the increasingly open reactionary politics on display in Brazil across four "particularly shocking events that revealed the precariousness of Brazilian democracy" (Junge et al., 62): Dilma's impeachment, the March 2018 assassination of Rio de Janeiro city councilwoman Marielle Franco, Lula's arrest the month after, and Bolsonaro's election that October. For Pinho, a besieged sense of white privilege is a key factor in explaining the turn to the far right in recent years. Ultimately, she writes, "the reactionary wave unleashed during the PT era rendered untenable the long-established silence around the country's long history of racism and racial discrimination" (Junge et al., 68). Other chapters in this section discuss firearms and the performance of masculinity, dreams of economic mobility and consumption, and the tensions wrought by the divisive 2018 election for one family from Recife. Each contribution is sensitive and original and

sharpens the reader's understanding of the Brazil that enabled the emergence of a figure like Bolsonaro when it did.

Part 2, "Corruption and Crime," discusses the aggressive moralizing tone that Brazilian archconservatives used to delegitimize the PT and increase their own support and political power. In electoral terms, what Sean T. Mitchell calls the "affect of anticorruption" was probably the single most important political phenomenon of the past six years. If women politicians had once enjoyed a reputation as more trustworthy when it came to issues of managing public funds, as dos Santos and Jalalzai speculate, by the late Dilma years, anti-corruption in Brazil was defined by crusading male avatars like Judge Sergio Moro and Bolsonaro himself. The prevailing argument of the self-proclaimed anticorruption movement in this period was that the PT was uniquely immoral. Dilma, they argued, was either aware of all the graft taking place under her nose or was too incompetent to notice and stop it. Only a crude, tough-talking outsider like Bolsonaro, someone purportedly untainted by business as usual, could shake things up as needed. It was absurd to consider Bolsonaro a fresh face considering that he had been a member of Congress for almost three decades, but his unvarnished contempt for the political establishment spoke to millions of disgruntled voters. Anticorruption wasn't just about pilfered public funds, however. As Mitchell astutely notes, "corruption was used as a catchall explanation and language for why things did not work as [people] thought they should. Why were schools poor, roads mottled by potholes, [Guanabara Bay] filled with sewage, and the nation wracked by economic and political crises that just seemed to worsen each year? Because, the answer went, people in public office had stolen money" (Junge et al., 84). Karina Biondi's chapter, entitled "The Effects of Some Religious Affects: Revolutions in Crime," is a fascinating study of Evangelical Christianity, crime, and politics based on ethnographic research within prisons. Biondi's piece effectively makes the case that "it is not possible to understand this moment in Brazilian history without considering the fastest growing religion in the country," (Junge et al., 100) namely, the neo-Pentecostalism associated with celebrity pastors like Silas Malafaia.

Parts 3 and 4 deal, in some form, with the loss and reformulation of hope. part 3, entitled "Infrastructures of Hope," examines myriad ways that the civic optimism built up since the return of democracy, rooted in the idea that things were gradually, haltingly getting better, came apart, only to be scooped up by a figure who was its antithesis. In "Despairing Hopes (and Hopeful Despair) in Amazonia," David Rojas, Alexandre de Azevedo Olival, and Andrezza Alves Spexoto Olival focus on the relatively poor Amazon region to understand how PT investments over successive years were fatally undermined by the sharp economic downturn. Moisés Kopper covers similar terrain in "Withering Dreams: Material Hope and Apathy among Brazil's Once-Rising Poor." One gets the sense from these chapters that for many poor and working-class people willing to vote for Bolsonaro in 2018, the point was not to signal support for a right-wing culture war but to express some buy-in for an alternative economic agenda, one that might stem the losses of the post-2016 crisis period. In her chapter, "Bolsonaro Wins Japan: Support for the Far Right among Japanese Brazilians Overseas Labor Migrants," Sarah Lebaron von Baeyer examines this dynamic in a fascinating transnational context.

Turning from fading to defiant hope, part 4, "Old Challenges, New Activism," covers movements and individuals holding out against the rising tide of right-wing reaction headed by Bolsonaro. The reader encounters stirring, frequently moving ethnographies of LGBTQ+ people who, in many ways, were the earliest targets of Bolsonaro's reactionary outbursts. "Throughout our conversations," writes Carlos Eduardo Henning in his chapter "LGBTTI Elders in Brazil: Subjectivation and Narratives about Resilience, Resistance, and Vulnerability," "Marcelo made a point of putting into perspective and even neutralizing Bolsonaro's potential threat as just one of his many 'struggles for life'" (Junge et al., 199). There is a kind of sense to having this section last, pointing as it does to a day after

Bolsonaro. “Brazilian trans and travesti activists envision a shared political project that stares in the face of the Bolsonaro regime and does not despair,” Alvaro Jarrín concludes, “because in many ways they always expected disgust to operate in the way it does” (Junge et al., 214–215). The kind of activism discussed in this part of the book argues implicitly that there is a Brazil beyond the reach of Bolsonaro and his supporters, one that they won’t be able to extirpate, try as they might. Indeed, that is one of the key contributions of this section—offering several examples of organic networks of art, activism, mentorship, community, solidarity, and support undaunted by the hostility of the president himself. In this way, resistance to Bolsonarismo is joined with the broader history of social struggle in Brazil. This part of the book, like those that precede it, is not explicitly about Bolsonaro and the conditions that fueled his rise. As a whole, *Precarious Democracy* is one of the very best works one can read to understand how dynamics of gender, race, and class swung Brazil so precipitously from the progressive social reformism of the PT to the antipolitical authoritarianism of Bolsonaro.

Similar in many ways to *Precarious Democracy*—including the participation of Lilia Moritz Schwarcz—*A Horizon of (Im)possibilities: A Chronicle of Brazil’s Conservative Turn*, edited by Katerina Hatzikidi and Eduardo Dullo, offers several chapters on how the Bolsonaro moment came to pass and what to make of what comes next. In that sense, it focuses more on explaining Bolsonarismo than does *Precarious Democracy*. Unsurprisingly, the books cover much of the same ground, with chapters on the bases of Evangelical political engagement, impacts of social media (particularly for those who do not live in major cities), and resistance from Afro-Brazilian activists, who recognize in Bolsonarismo a repackaging of the traditional arbitrary state violence that has long prevailed in Brazilian society. There are excellent pieces in *A Horizon of (Im)possibilities*, including some that touch on matters not directly raised in *Precarious Democracy*. Almost all the contributors are anthropologists who have conducted original, insightful work. Camila Rocha’s chapter “From Orkut to Brasília: The Origins of the New Brazilian Right,” for example, is a particularly worthwhile standout, as is the piece by José M. Arruti and Thaisa Held on besieged *quilombola* communities. As a single volume, however, *Precarious Democracy* is the richer tapestry, the one readers should turn to for a deep, multifaceted ethnographic analysis of the disillusion and despair that produced the Bolsonarista moment and the hope and tenacity that fuels the resistance against him. Taken together, *Precarious Democracy* and *A Horizon of (Im)possibilities* offer undergraduates and graduate students alike a bevy of accessible and stimulating interpretations of Brazil’s variegated social landscape over the past decade.

Representation, institutions, and political parties

The final three books zoom out from the specifics of Brazil’s very recent history to consider structural questions about political parties and mechanisms of representation in different democratic contexts. In *Democracy against Parties: The Divergent Fates of Latin America’s New Left Contenders*, political scientist Brandon Van Dyck accomplishes the rare feat of convincingly making an argument that seems intuitive and obvious after the fact. Van Dyck posits that postdictatorial, or fully democratic, societies do not present ideal conditions for the emergence of strong new parties. This is because, as he demonstrates through several case studies of political parties across Latin America, conditions of adversity during, say, transitions from dictatorship to democracy force political elites to invest in serious organization and institution building. By contrast, “In the contemporary developing world, new parties born under full democracy typically do not face such adverse conditions; that is, they tend to have, or quickly to gain, access to mass media and the state” (6). Again, there is a kind of commonsense appeal to this argument, but in making it, Van Dyck is swimming against a current of scholarship that has long held just the

opposite—that democracy presents the most fertile ground for the growth of healthy, dynamic parties.

This is a book of ambitious arguments, “offering the most systematic analysis to date of left-wing party-building outcomes in contemporary Latin America” (13). Van Dyck’s case studies are diverse enough to give the reader a sense of the broad institutional, regional, political, ideological, and organizational diversity of parties in Latin America. He begins by discussing Argentina’s Front for a Country in Solidarity (FREPASO), which emerged in 1994 as an alternative to the Peronist Party and the Radical Civic Union of Raúl Alfonsín, who in 1983 became the first democratically elected president since the military seizure of power in 1976. Seven years after its creation, however, FREPASO collapsed in the wake of internal crises of the kind that had rocked other major parties several times before but never decisively. This is because, unlike its major electoral competitors, FREPASO existed mostly as a brand rather than a deeply rooted political organization bred under fire. It was “fragile because it only existed in Argentine voters’ minds” (78). Party elites had managed to access media and advertising spaces to create an image for the party, but not one solid enough to withstand the inevitable electoral setback. Once the brand was tarnished, defections mounted and became fatal for what little organization remained.

The next case study, Peru’s United Left (IU), stands in contrast to FREPASO. Whereas the latter is a case of “electoral collapse,” the former “died by schism” (79). Next, Van Dyck examines the sturdy PT, an enduringly successful political party that shows “that origins in adversity lead to the construction of strong party organizations, equipping new parties to survive electoral crisis; and that externally appealing, internally dominant leaders help to generate cohesion in new partisan contenders” (111). Lula, unsurprisingly, figures prominently in this analysis as a key stabilizing figure for the party through electoral travails and crises. The author only briefly touches on Dilma’s impeachment at the end of the chapter. One would have eagerly read Van Dyck’s discussion of this much more recent history of the crisis and reinvention in the PT, but, as he notes, “what is critical, for our purposes, is that the PT survived its formative period” (136).

The final main case study in the book is Mexico’s Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) which, like the PT, “is one of a handful of new left contenders in Latin America that survived the formative period and took root for decades as a perennial electoral contender” (138). Despite never reaching the heights of the PT, the PRD remained a viable contender for national office thanks to an “internally dominant leader,” Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and an internal organization strong enough to withstand pressure from the more powerful Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (161). Van Dyck’s book is firmly within the field of political science, but his questions are rooted in historical inquiry and will appeal broadly across disciplines for anyone interested in the recent political history of Latin America as a whole.

Less sweeping but equally generative is Benjamin Junge’s *Cynical Citizenship: Gender, Regionalism, and Political Subjectivity in Porto Alegre, Brazil*, a study of grassroots political organizing in a city open, in many ways, to bold progressive policy experimentation. Intriguingly, the book is based on fieldwork conducted over fifteen years before publication, raising questions of how the author’s findings have aged and what they reveal in a different historical context than the one in which they were formulated. Focusing on Porto Alegre, the capital of the influential southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, from 2002 to 2004, Junge does not attempt to make “a generalizable account of all or even most grassroots community leaders” but “to advance an ethnographically grounded, generative critique of dominant, idealist discourses—including governmental, activist, and scholarly discourses—of civic participation” (6).

The choice of Porto Alegre, of course, is not incidental. It is an internationally recognized site of innovative urban policy and civic engagement in governance, “the first and

one of the most iconic and representative cases of [participatory budgeting] in the world,”³ and the host of the first World Social Forum (WSF) in 2001. It is where Dilma Rousseff made her political home upon the return of democratic elections in the late 1980s. By the early twenty-first century, Porto Alegre, which had been governed by the PT from 1989 to 2005, had a firmly established progressive democratic brand. Junge argues, however, that this was not a universally empowering experience for organizers: “The citizenship ethos that emerged in Porto Alegre during the late PT years . . . was deeply cynical,” by which he means demonstrating “a certain disregard for the circumscribing logics of official discourse—an expression of ambivalence and reluctance to fully inhabit any particular vision of citizen participation” (7).

Junge’s work involves reading against prevailing discourses of democracy, accountability, and inclusion through deep engagement with activists unimpressed by the ability of Brazilian democracy on the whole to deliver meaningful structural change. This is prescient in ways the author could not have not known when conducting his original fieldwork. Indeed, the “cynical citizenship” he outlines here, along with the distance between official party rhetoric and the reality of on-the-ground grassroots organizing, were central features of the slow-motion crisis that gradually engulfed the PT over the past decade. Reading Junge’s work in light of the PT’s recent history is surprisingly illuminating. “Talk about politics,” he writes at one point in a chapter about the WSF called “Participation from the Periphery,” “of course, is often not *only* about politics . . . Such discussions can also lead to social performance in which one shows who one is—or, at least, how one might like to be perceived” (194). This dynamic, based on the mutability of political terminology and appeals, is explored richly at the individual level throughout the book but also institutionally: “These tensions point to the broader challenges the WSF faces—and they are formidable—of engaging a grassroots, transnational public without imposing a singular vision of ‘another possible world,’ without compromising the autonomy of active social agents through institutionalization, and without reproducing class-exclusion logics” (215). These are tensions, it should be noted, that the PT found itself completely unprepared to contend with as outbursts of popular discontent mounted during the Dilma administration, first in 2013 and then more virulently in 2015 and 2016. Balancing the vitality and distinctiveness of local grassroots organizing with a thoroughly bureaucratized and settled national infrastructure is a challenge the PT has yet to fully figure out.

The final work under consideration in this section combines elements of the previous two and is a fitting capstone to this essay. In *Gender and Representation in Latin America*, editor Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer has compiled over a dozen chapters from various scholars covering the obstacles, opportunities, mechanisms, and policies touching on gender equality in government across Latin America. The result is impressively comprehensive. The collection is divided into two parts, the first entitled “Arenas of Representation.” Contributions in this section deal with what dos Santos and Jalalzai broadly considered the realm of symbolic representation. That is, what effect does the very fact of there being women visibly in power have on the further political empowerment of women? Among the central questions this section deals with is the sudden emergence of various women presidents at the same time over the past decade and a half. As Catherine Reyes-Housholder and Gwynn Thomas point out in “Latin America’s *Presidentas*: Overcoming Challenges, Forging New Pathways,” “before 1990, no woman had ever democratically won the presidency, but between 1990 and 2000, two women did so. From 2001 to 2010, four more women won the presidency, and three successfully competed for a second term” (Schwindt-Bayer, 19). Their chapter surveys this historical dynamic and calls for

³ See Martin Calisto Friant, “Deliberating for Sustainability: Lessons from the Porto Alegre Experiment with Participatory Budgeting,” *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* 11, no. 1 (2019): 81–99.

more work to explain this gendered breakthrough in this particular elected role across the region. Other contributions in this section explore the shortcomings of female breakthroughs in other realms of politics, including legislative bodies, subnational government, and in the decisive ranks of political parties.

Part 2 then presents individual case studies of representation, institutions, reforms, and policies in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia. An unequivocal takeaway from these various countries is that political processes are susceptible to targeted demands for increased gender representation at various levels of government, but that progress in that regard is slow, halting, and uneven. There have been prominent women elected to office from across the ideological spectrum in recent years across Latin America, but this has rarely led to enduring structural shifts that make it easier and more natural for women to enter into political spaces historically reserved for men—their sons, brothers, nephews, godsons, and grandsons. This volume enables readers to understand the structures, expectations, and policies through which different countries with distinct political cultures and systems of government deal with a similar problem—how to increase the number of women at all levels of politics.

Conclusion

An examination of the literature on the Brazil's recent political crises—including that on gendered political backlash—reveals that the issue of women and politics is not discussed as an issue of profound social disorder, as it might have been in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Rather, scholars working on this matter from various angles demonstrate the more subtle ways that power works. When it comes to gender, negotiating agendas, dominance, victory, and defeat is a fluid process. Dilma's impeachment represented a historical defeat for the PT, but not a fatal one. As of this writing, Lula seems poised to win the 2022 presidential election, returning his party to power, but he is likely to do so by significantly downplaying Dilma's role in his campaign. As we look ahead to a new political cycle in Brazil and across Latin America, a passage from dos Santos and Jalalzai comes to mind: "While some may be convinced that empowering women is a zero-sum game, we know that empowering women empowers us all" (xii). One unfortunate lesson that emerges from their study, and from several of the works discussed in this essay, is that advances in the area of gender representation in politics can be remarkably fragile. With Lula and the incumbent far-right extremist Jair Bolsonaro currently leading the 2022 presidential campaign, the race will come down to two very different white men over the age of sixty-five.

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Cite this article: Pagliarini, Andre (2023). A Step Back and to the Right: Gendered Backlash, Partisanship, and Cynicism in Brazil's Recent Reactionary Turn. *Latin American Research Review* 58, 706–716. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2022.89>