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'The middle classes hate the Workers' Party.'

Sociologist Esther Solano on the first round of the Brazilian Presidential Elections this Sunday.

Read this interview in German.

Jair Bolsonaro represents the far right – and is currently topping the polls ahead of Fernando Haddad of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT). He is essentially deputising for Lula, currently incarcerated, and would currently come in at second place. What do you think the election result will be?

I assume that this first round will lead to a run-off between Bolsonaro and Haddad. Who will win this second round, though? In my estimation, the number of people willing to vote for Bolsonaro in the run-off will decline: his campaign is simply too unstable, too wobbly. For instance, he purports to stand on a neoliberal economic programme, yet he himself is not really a neoliberal at all; even the Brazilian press, which has for years been against the PT and did a lot to strengthen Bolsonaro's candidacy, is re-orientating itself. Some of the latest op-eds in mainstream press outlets are already labelling him as a risk.

At the same time, strong public opposition to Bolsonaro has developed, led primarily by women who are challenging him on his macho views. They have coalesced into a very diverse, very audible movement including academics, members of other political parties, lawyers and legal experts, and a range of representatives from civil society. As such, protest against Bolsonaro is now tightly organised and rooted in broader society.

Will this benefit the Workers' Party?

If it comes to a run-off with the PT candidate, there will also be a lot of opposition to the party. Although Haddad stands on a moderate policy platform and is generally trusted as someone who could heal

the nation's divides. This is positive inasmuch as the PT now looks like a party which can offer stability and a degree of order in terms of economic and social policy – the party still faces a lot of rejection which correlates strongly with social class. Whether voters would consider supporting PT or not depends on their stance vis-à-vis the inclusive social policies introduced by Lula and the PT. Haddad is not the perfect candidate for the middle class because he runs for the PT, a party hated by the middle class.

Overall, however, my impression is that those who oppose Bolsonaro are much better organised; as such, I think that Haddad can carry the day, but it will be a close-run thing. Whoever wins, it won't be by much of a margin.

Bolsonaro is very popular with young voters. How would you explain this in view of his reactionary politics?

This new far-right group is not in any way a uniquely Brazilian phenomenon – just look at President Trump in the US! We're not talking about the usual hate-filled tirades here, though, but rather of a new kind of extreme right which is partially the offspring of social networks and whose rhetorical tools and style of communication are adapted to virtual situations in those networks and on the web more broadly. I term their discourse 'pop extremism' because it appears so youthful and so uncomplicated; it's playful, digestible, and has something almost folkloristic, or at the very least infantilising, about it.

Could you give us some concrete examples here?

Part of it is the 'meme-ification' of politics in which internet memes become protagonists in the debate. In other words, we're dealing with a far-right which is talking a hard-line, racist, patriarchal, LGBT-phobic discourse, but is putting it out there in a quite playful format like a meme, which can get a laugh – or at least a chuckle – out of many. This youthful 'pop' approach can be seductive and has the effect of trivialising and normalising hate-speech. What is interesting is that in the case of Bolsonaro – who makes intensive use of social media to mobilise support – polls poorly among the youngest of voters, who in fact reject him quite strongly and of whom the majority is pro-PT. It's a strange contradiction: the pop extremists talk a youthful, childish language, but do so to address an adult audience. So what they are doing is infantilising adult voters.

How is the serious economic crisis affecting the political climate and, by extension, the elections?

Since the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, the economic crisis has made itself felt. In the preceding years of economic stability, neither the middle classes nor the elites had anything against the PT government: after all, the administration was actually able to reach a settlement between the classes. The subsequent economic crisis is a key factor in understanding why the middle classes supported and indeed legitimised the coup against President Rousseff. In essence, economic crises inevitably lead to uncertainty and a feeling of vulnerability; as a consequence, during such periods, people tend to support candidates who take a strong, populist stance.

Moreover, democracies sometimes have trouble producing an adequate response to serious economic crises. Voters look for a 'saviour of the nation' to whom they can give their vote, and this is particularly the case in Brazil with its strongly personalised politics. In addition, the economic crisis has renewed the intensity and urgency of the class question in Brazilian society. When the lower classes begin to make their way up the social ladder, the middle classes feel an immediate threat to their status. In my view, both factors play a role – i.e. the wider tendency to vote for a Great White Hope as a protector against the crisis and the question of socio-economic class, indeed of class war. Unfortunately, the PT is very much the victim of class hatred.

Can you make out any similarities between Brazil and other countries?

Yes, I think there are clear parallels between Brazil and other countries inasmuch as the whole world is being affected by the right-wing extremist insurgency – the whole American continent, for instance, and Europe, too. It is an unfortunate fact that the left-wing cycle is passed and I don't know whether it will return in the near future; this leaves right-wing and far-right movements as the political protagonists. As such, the Brazilian political situation must be viewed through the prism of an international resurgence of right-wing extremism and of the politics of hate – against immigrants, refugees, Mexicans, Latinos. We are facing a political weaponisation of the discourse of division which encourages hatred and rejection of 'them' as opposed to 'us'.

What are the effects of this discourse of hatred in Brazil?

Brazil has some specific issues: its democratic system is undoubtedly less robust than that of European countries, meaning that the influence of right-wing initiatives is substantially greater than in countries with a more stable institutional structure, for instance Germany. What is more, Brazil is a country with an enormous social

divide – a country in which the state has essentially renounced responsibility for millions of its inhabitants. We're talking about a country in which more than 60,000 people die violent deaths every year: if, in a state facing these kind of issues, a candidate is of the opinion that the police must be prepared to kill, then the practical results of this hard-line policy will be immediately and drastically evident. Brazil is a country in which the LGBT population faces serious physical violence: Bolsonaro is a trenchant homophobe, and in what is already a very violent society, this will have direct consequences; the same is true of violence against women, too.

What differences do you see compared to Europe and the US?

One thing that strikes me is that in Europe and the United States, extreme right-wing movements are heavily dependent on the votes of the poor and the unemployed; in the US, the Rust Belt is particularly important political territory for the far right. Bolsonaro's voters, meanwhile, are exclusively from the middle classes; in Brazil, the lower classes haven't been abandoned – they have the PT. It is the middle classes who feel let down, unsupported, and marginalised. As such, it is Brazil's middle classes who have taken on the role of the political victim, lacking as they are a political voice to back them up like the PT does for the poorer sections of society.

The interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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