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# The age of reaction: Retrenchment populism in India and Brazil

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## Abstract

Two of the largest democracies in the global south – India and Brazil – have witnessed a dramatic turn to right-wing populism. Careful historical comparison reveals that the form of reaction is markedly different from other recent cases of democratic backsliding. In both cases, reaction has been driven by elites in response to a previous expansion of democratic rights and social inclusion. This form of retrenchment populism is rooted in very similar class realignments that are configured both by economic and socio-cultural interests. Globalization has played a role, but not through the conventionally identified pathways of neoliberalism or modernization. Instead, reaction has been driven by an expanded middle class's efforts to hoard opportunity and public resources and preserve traditional status privileges.

## Keywords

Democracy, development, political sociology, populism, welfare state

## Introduction

The list of democracies recently displaying authoritarian tendencies is as long as it is diverse (Przeworski, 2019; Rodríguez-Garavito and Gomez, 2018). Across all the continents of the world, elected governments in consolidated democracies, riding a tide of what might most broadly be labeled right-wing nationalist populism, have sometimes by stealth and sometimes more openly sought to weaken the basic legal and institutional conditions that support a constitutional democracy. Not since the interwar period have we been able to speak of an age of reaction.

Most of the literature has focused on the crisis of democracy in the OECD world and identifies three specific regressions: an assertion of executive power that actively undermines the independent functions (check and balances) of representative, bureaucratic

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and juridical institutions, a discursive assault on independent civil society (media, universities, NGOs and social movements) and discursive and sometimes legal efforts to redefine citizenship along narrow ethnic or nationalist lines. Levistky and Ziblatt (2018) interpret these regressions as, in effect, a normative-institutional crisis in which right-wing populists are willing to push democratic practices to their limits.

In this article I argue India and Brazil share all these features, but that the assault on democratic institutions and practices is much more severe because they are not just a response to perceived failures of liberal democracy but also concerted efforts to reassert traditional configurations of elite power. If regression in OECD countries are the result of well-documented electoral realignments (Prezworski, 2019), Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) election in 2014 (and resounding re-election in 2019) and Jair Bolsonaro's election in 2018 have been driven by a reconfiguration of class and social power and can best be characterized as cases of what I call retrenchment populism. Beyond an erosion of democratic institutions and norms, retrenchment populism has included open efforts to repress civil society, policies to de-certify specific socio-cultural groups and the use of state-sponsored vigilantism. The severity of the reaction and the existential danger it poses to democracy can be located in the traditional tension between democratic empowerment and social exclusion that underlies all populisms (Roberts, 2007). But if the reaction in Brazil and India takes a particularly acute form this is because it is a direct response to a previous cycle that saw a significant expansion of the welfare state and social rights that fundamentally endangered the interests and social dominance of elites.

## Retrenchment populism

The term populism has been used to describe a dizzying array of regimes almost to the point of losing any conceptual utility (Weyland, 2001). Most challenging has been the fact that classic populism, especially of the Latin American variety, has been associated with working class mobilization and redistributive economic policies, whereas a second wave of populisms, sometimes branded 'neo-populism' (Weyland, 1996), have had much broader and more diffuse class bases and have been associated with neoliberal reforms. Given the shifting economic logics that populism has been associated with, I follow Roberts (2007) and Wayland (2001) and use a more specifically political definition, emphasizing populism as a style and strategy of politics and situating it 'in the sphere of domination, not distribution' (Weyland, 2001: 11). At its core then, populism is defined as 'the top down mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge elite groups on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo, or "the people"' (Roberts, 2007: 5). Such a definition easily encompasses a number of OECD ethno-nationalist populisms (Trump, Le Pen, Erdogan, Orban) as well as Duterte in the Philippines (Garrido, forthcoming), Zuma in South Africa (Hart, 2014), Modi and Bolsonaro.

But one clarification and two qualifications are in order. First, we have to be clear that even while it may be the case that democracies are being undermined by democratic means (Levistky and Ziblatt, 2018), the populist style and strategy of directly linking leaders to the 'masses' implies a deeply illiberal logic of bypassing institutions and civil society (Varshney, 2019). Second, if the definition of 'the people' in populist regimes is

malleable and ultimately a political construct, much is also true of what constitutes 'elite groups.' If under classical populism this was elite socio-economic classes, in the age of reaction it has become a motley construction of 'others,' namely religious, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities, immigrants, intellectuals, secularists and human right activists. Third, in Brazil and India I qualify the type of populism as retrenchment to underscore its distinct social base and the fact that it has a relatively well-defined project of rolling back expansions of social rights and asserting traditional socio-cultural hierarchies. This distinction in turn is shaped by the historical specificity of retrenchment populism in the global south:<sup>1</sup> in both cases it comes in the wake of the deinstitutionalization of party politics and the relative success in the prior political cycle of a left-reformist alliance. More than anything, it is the political expression of an expanded and anxious middle class threatened from below. How the interests of the various factions that constitute this class have been formed and politically constructed cannot moreover be understood independently of how India and Brazil are incorporated into the capitalist world system.

To the extent that populism is a style and strategy of politics marked by plebiscitarian and personalist forms of leadership (Wayland, 2001: 5), then Modi and Bolsonaro are classic incarnations. Modi has carefully honed his image as a pious and even ascetic man of modest social origins, whose life mission has been the cause of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organization he claims to have joined at age six. Bolsonaro has proudly projected himself as rabble rouser and rogue politician, willing to confront gays and feminists, as much as leftists and gangsters, a disposition neatly embodied in his signature pose of winking at the camera and pointing his hands as cocked guns. In classic populist style, both represent themselves as the 'people incarnate' standing up to cosmopolitan elites and liberalism run amok. They have asserted the primacy of the electoral verdict and their people-given right to exert power against the core principles of liberalism: that is, the checks and balance of differentiated institutions and the countervailing power of civil society. Their rise to power and efforts to reconfigure democracy moreover have required redefining the 'people' in national-cultural terms. For Bolsonaro this has meant elevating virtuous and deserving Brazilians against *bandidos* – criminals (connoting young black men from poor backgrounds) – he routinely lumps together with leftists, gays, feminists and intellectuals. For Modi this has taken the form of demonizing Muslims and redefining India as a Hindu nation (*Hindutva*), as well as castigating rights activists as 'urban naxalites' and anti-national.

Populist leaders with highly performative and demagogic styles that are hostile to liberal democracy and determined to redefine the 'people' in essentialist cultural terms characterize many of the recent reactions (Trump being the most obvious parallel). What distinguishes Modi and Bolsonaro is that populism has been marked not only by democratic regression (assaults on civil liberties, civil society organizations and independent institutions) but also by concerted efforts at retrenchment. I define retrenchment as policies and programs designed to specifically exclude designated groups from recognition and access to public goods. These take three general forms: rationing the welfare state for those who deserve it, state support for a dominant identity built on the cultural exclusion of others, and the valorization of traditional social relations and institutions, specifically the patriarchal family, the military, religion and the traditional caste/race status orders. Welfare retrenchment takes the form of replacing universal and rights-based benefits with

more targeted interventions. In contexts where being pro-poor is an electoral necessity, this is not a simple roll-back of the state, but rather a patrimonialization of welfare, as euphemized in the BJP's language of moving from 'entitlement' to 'empowerment.' Cultural closure is secured through state sanctioning of a dominant identity (especially curricular reforms in public education) and demonization of an 'other,' including the use of the police and vigilantes to enforce dominant cultural codes and contain the dangerous actors who threaten national values. In Brazil, Bolsonaro has encouraged paramilitary groups within the police, including factions tied to his son, to fight crime and reassert control over favelas. He has also sought to systematically dismantle the wide range of cultural and social programs that emerged under the previous regime to support Afro-descendent and indigenous groups. In India, the organizations of the *Sangh Parivar* (the group of voluntary associations that are the mass base of the BJP) have long aggressively promoted Hindu culture, but under the Modi government they have escalated their efforts, including sponsoring 'cow protection' associations that have lynched accused beef eaters and launching a notorious campaign dubbed 'Love Jihad' to combat the alleged scourge of Muslim boys seducing Hindu girls. These state-sponsored cultural practices of exclusion have now been legislated in India with the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which recognizes all refugees from neighboring countries as citizens if they are of any religion *except* Islam. Both regimes have also targeted liberal rights and secular values as corrosive of traditional social and cultural practices. To the social contract rooted in the constitution they counterpose an organic contract embedded in traditional social structures. In this article I propose that all these elements of retrenchment are specific reactions to the advances made in the two prior decades of deepening democracy and specifically the expansion of individual rights (liberalization of social relations) and growing the welfare state (the socialization of life chances).

## Retrenchment populism in comparative perspective

What makes Brazil and India similar to the larger set of reactions, yet also fundamentally different? As early as 1997 with Castells' publication of the *Power of Identity* and Habermas's (2001) essay on the post-national constellation, observers have pointed to the politically destabilizing effects of globalization. The causal chain begins with the weakening of the traditional national state as the monopolistic supplier of identity, security and economic inclusion. As capital, jobs and identities have become more global, the traditional nation state has lost much of its capacity to secure what Castells calls 'legitimizing identities' (those of modern, civic nationalism), to provide security in a world of increasingly networked forms of insecurity (terrorism, cartels) and finance the social protections and basic redistributions of the welfare state. This in turn has triggered movements of political closure such as Trumpism, the Front National and Brexit, as threatened and vulnerable populations 'close the floodgates against uncontrolled waves breaking in from the outside' (Habermas, 2001: 81).

These patterns linking globalization to reaction are sequentially correlated – with populism growing steadily but slowly over the past two decades and ramping up after the 2008 crisis of hyper-globalization – and hold up across a range of cases from the US to Italy. Yet Przeworski (2019) warns against oversimplified causal claims arguing that

even as global dynamics of austerity, immigration and job casualization have impacted all advanced capitalist economies, the impact, as measured by the electoral success of 'radical right' parties, varies significantly. As Przeworski (2019) neatly demonstrates, the effects of globalization are clearly refracted through national-level institutions and social alignments.

The relationship between globalization and reaction is even more complicated when we turn to India and Brazil. The most immediate trigger of closure and the most distinct and politically exploited point of opposition to globalization in OECD democracies – immigration – is a marginal factor in India and non-factor in Brazil. Ethno-nationalism in both cases has been essentially inward looking. Second, there is no direct, mechanical link between the economic effects of globalization and reaction in India and Brazil. Indeed, in the two decades that led up to the reaction the Indian economy grew at a record pace and the Brazilian economy, at least until 2014, enjoyed its longest period of sustained prosperity. Poverty declined significantly in both countries and Brazil's notoriously high income inequality actually declined. Third, in contrast to Brexit and Trump, neither Modi nor Bolsonaro have sought to leverage opposition to economic globalization and both have in fact been closely aligned with domestic economic elites that have a strong stake in globalization. Yet, having said this, neither reaction can be understood independently of globalization. The forces at work are however quite different than those highlighted in the OECD literature. If reaction in the OECD has been electorally fueled by working class discontent with the adverse distributive effects of globalization (Rodrik, 2018), in Brazil and India I propose that we are witnessing elite revolts that are tied both to the ways in which increased global economic integration has reshaped emergent middle class interests and by how previous left-reformist efforts to manage global integration by expanding social protection fundamentally challenged traditional social hierarchies and privilege. Resurgent cultural nationalism in India and Brazil is as such of a fundamentally different type than in the OECD.

The specificity of retrenchment populism is captured in an electoral analysis of the social base of reaction. OECD reaction has a very clear socio-economic foundation. Factions of traditional economic elites – the wealthy and small businesses – have aligned with disaffected elements of the working class. The mass base of OECD reaction is a rearguard action. It is the last stand of an economically precarious but culturally privileged group, especially concentrated in regions adversely impacted by global competition. A pivotal group, the professional middle class, concentrated in coastal cities and the prime beneficiaries of globalization, opposes reaction.

In India and Brazil the dynamics of shifting economic opportunities and changing social status hierarchies are also at play, but the underlying configuration is markedly different. Table 1 underscores this point. Electoral data (discussed in detail later) suggest that the main constituency of reaction is rooted in the upper class, the professional middle class, and neo-middle class, though both Bolsonaro and Modi did also make inroads into the ranks of the poor (especially through evangelicals in Brazil and Dalits and Adivasis in India). The middle-upper class base of the coalition is reflected in educational patterns, with the more educated being more likely to support Modi and Bolsonaro. As with many cultural closure movements, appeals to religion have played an important role, especially in mobilizing the neo-middle class, as have appeals to strengthening the

**Table 1.** The electoral base of reaction in Brazil and India.

|                           | Bolsonaro 2018                               | Modi 2019                                    |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Class                     | Upper middle+<br>Precarious new middle class | Upper middle+<br>Precarious new middle class |
| Status group/<br>identity | White  | Brahmin and aspiring middle castes (OBCs)    |
| Religion                  | Conservative (Evangelicals)                  | Conservative (Brahminical Hinduism)          |
| Gender                    | Male (+18 gap)                               | Male (+3 gap)                                |
| Region                    | South  | North  |
| Education                 | Upper  | Upper  |

Sources: Indian data are from Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy (Varshney, 2019) and India Today-Axis Poll (2019). Brazil data from Lero (2019) and various media reports.

patriarchal family. In Brazil, the gender gap in 2018 was enormous, reflecting, as in the US, the crass appeals to rejuvenating emasculated patriarchs that Bolsonaro revels in. Modi has been much more circumspect on gender issues, but his embrace of religiosity clearly plays to traditional Hindu conservative views on the patriarchal family. There is also a clear regional pattern to reaction. Most striking is that the BJP has limited electoral traction in India's South, long a bastion of anti-Brahminism and the region of India that has made the most progress on social issues, notably challenging traditional caste power and expanding the welfare state. The Brazilian pattern is less clear cut. On the one hand, the South, which was Bolsonaro's electoral bastion, is generally more developed and less marked by the legacies of race and landed power than the North. The North and especially the North East, remains a preserve of Workers' Party (PT) strength. The paradox is explained when we are reminded that PT welfare policies and especially those that directly impacted the poor, probably had their greatest net effect in the North, creating a solid base of lower class support for the PT. In both cases, reaction had far less traction in areas where the more traditional left still had an organizational presence.

These regional patterns become even more pointed when one considers global cities. The BJP in India has long been a mostly urban party, with roots in the urban trading classes (the *baniyas*). In the past decade it has made inroads into rural areas largely through targeted charity programs and selective appeals to lower castes and Adivasis (Thachil, 2014), so much so that by the 2019 election its support was evenly balanced across rural and urban. But if one looks at how cities voted, a striking pattern emerges. All of India's most globalized and most cosmopolitan cities – New Delhi (the capital), Mumbai (home to Bollywood and finance) and Bangalore (IT) all voted overwhelmingly for the BJP. This pattern of globally connected and socio-economically dynamic cities voting for reaction is reproduced in Brazil. The most economically developed cities of the country, including Sao Paulo, long a bastion of the PT, along with Rio and Florianopolis all voted in support of Bolsonaro.<sup>2</sup>

I believe this difference reveals the particular nature of retrenchment in Brazil and India. Upper class groups who are concentrated in cities and especially those who have benefited the most from globalization, that is professionals and those who occupy management or strategic organizational positions in global commodity chains along with

ancillary white collar workers, feel threatened by the progress that subordinate groups made in the past two decades especially with respect to expanding the welfare state and gaining access to historically class-rationed institutions, most notably schools and health services. These elites are determined to hoard opportunities that they have historically monopolized, opportunities whose returns have been amplified by globalization. Those opportunities have been threatened not only by the expansion of the welfare state, but also by increasingly vociferous subordinate groups demanding rights. The basis of elite privilege is narrow, fragile and predicated on blocking broader socio-economic inclusion. The huge inequalities that mark India and Brazil, which, if anything, are amplified in its global cities through spatial segregation and the confinement of large swaths of the poor to slums, present an existential threat to the middle class and to the neo-middle class that, as explained below, have joined the reaction coalition.

### **From restricted democracies to democratic deepening**

The transition to democracy in both India and Brazil were marked by limited ruptures with colonial social structures. Brazil cycled from a period of elite-dominated electoral democracy with a limited franchise (1945–1964) to authoritarian rule by the military (1964–1984) to holding its first direct presidential elections based on universal franchise in 1989 (Skidmore, 1967). India is unique in the democratic world of having moved directly to universal suffrage at the time of independence but political parties were monopolized by upper caste elites and the rural poor never organized on their own terms (Frankel and Rao, 1989). As I have argued elsewhere (Heller, 2019) well into the 1980s, in both Brazil and India, class/caste power continued to thwart genuine political, not to mention social inclusion of the popular sectors. The class configuration of exclusion was strikingly similar. Liberal and professional middle classes aligned with import substitution industrialization (ISI) interests (a nascent state-dependent bourgeoisie) to dominate politics all the while protecting landed interests from genuine threats from below. There were periods of lower class mobilization, but throughout this period of restricted democracy, dominant social and economic class interests, including the social dominance of whites in a majoritarian non-white society in Brazil and the dominance of ‘forward castes’ over backward castes, Dalits and Muslims, in India were never seriously challenged (Frankel and Rao, 1989; Heller, 2019; Skidmore, 1967). Elite-led nationalist discourses of constitutionalism and modernity systematically misrecognized social hierarchy, suppressing the daily realities of racial and caste exclusion. The net effect of this dominant socio-cultural bloc was twofold. First, the limited incorporation of the masses into the political arena preserved what Dagnino (1998) has called social authoritarianism: that is, local social hierarchies rooted in deep-seated categorical inequalities of caste in India and race in Brazil. In retrospect, it is remarkable that outside of the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, lower caste mobilization in India remained episodic and did not disturb the political dominance of upper castes (Jaffrelot, 2003). In Brazil, the myth of racial democracy went largely untouched throughout this period, even as patterns of deeply racialized economic inequality worsened (Paschel, 2016). Second, limited mass incorporation underwrote a disarticulated developmental trajectory defined by a massive informal reserve army of labor sustaining a regime of

labor squeezing accumulation. Restricted democracy in other words preserved social and economic exclusion. The exclusionary pact began unraveling in the 1980s as both democracies experienced an upsurge of lower class mobilization that threatened the dominant pact and that by the new millennium had given birth to a welfare state.

In Brazil, a broad-based coalition of the middle class and the popular sectors brought the authoritarian cycle to an end in 1985, ushering in not only a return to electoral democracy but also a sustained period of democratic deepening (Baiocchi et al., 2001). The 1988 constitution significantly expanded social rights and institutionalized participatory democracy. The 1990s saw the emergence of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or PT), a programmatic party firmly rooted in the labor movement but with broad ties to a diverse and densely organized civil society. Luis Ignacio da Silva's (known as 'Lula') election in 2002 marked the beginning of a 14-year period of uninterrupted rule by the PT during which the welfare state was significantly expanded. This expansion had four distinct characteristics. First, increases in minimum wages (rising 75% between 2003 and 2013) and direct transfer programs such as *Bolsa Familia* fueled a dramatic rise in working and lower middle class incomes. Between 2002 and 2014, the lowest incomes of the bottom 70% grew faster than the top three deciles (Gethin and Morgan, 2018). Extreme poverty was cut in half between 2003 and 2013 (Lero, 2019). Second, with new constitutional provisions for decentralization and devolution of resources, municipal governance improved dramatically (Heller, 2019). The result was a significant improvement in the quality of basic urban services, especially in urban peripheries. Third, concerted efforts to formalize informal labor sectors such as domestic workers and sugar cane workers pushed up wages but also gave large segments of the working class new collective bargaining rights and some social protection. Fourth, this period was marked by a dramatic expansion of public education and the universalization of basic health care. This included aggressive affirmative action policies that significantly desegregated higher education. Overall, expansion of the welfare state not only socialized basic opportunities but also resulted in a decompression of institutional spaces. Spaces of traditional upper middle class and largely white privilege, including political institutions from the center to the local, universities, shopping malls and central areas' urban neighborhoods became more inclusive and more diverse. In sum, mass electoral incorporation translated into social incorporation and a degree of improved economic incorporation, though inequality remained comparatively high. But just as dramatic and essential to explaining the reaction, was the challenge to 'social authoritarianism' (Dagnino's [1998] term). Not only was this period marked by very real and substantive gains in social opportunity, but the language of rights saturated the political culture, fueling a wide range of movements throughout civil society, including around race, gender and sexuality. The creation of new political subjects (to borrow from the title from Paschel's [2016] book on anti-racism movements) directly confronted the legacies of social authoritarianism and Brazil's rigid status hierarchies.

During roughly the same period India underwent a parallel process, though not marked by such sharp disjunctures. Aside from a short authoritarian interlude (1975–1977), the electoral dominance of the Congress as the party of national liberation underwrote democratic stability. But the combination of a stagnant economy and little or no social reform triggered various forms of social mobilization that challenged Congress domination (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000). In a first, classic expression of populism,



Indira Gandhi asserted her independence from Congress Party bosses by directly mobilizing the masses with her famous *Garibi Hatao* (abolish poverty) campaign, only to be undone by her resort to authoritarianism (the Emergency 1975–1977). By the 1980s new political competitors were emerging, expressing both regional and lower caste aspirations. In what Yadav (2000) has famously called the ‘second democratic uprising,’ lower castes and in particular other backward castes (OBCs) started to mobilize on their own terms, supporting co-ethnics as politicians. The regional thrust of these pressures from below preempted the emergence of a national-level party like the PT, but nonetheless did destabilize the traditional dominant pact. The emergence of the BJP as a significant electoral force at precisely this time has been widely interpreted as an ‘elite revolt’ and specifically an upper caste response to mobilization from below (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000). When the Congress returned to power in 2004 it was a shadow of its former self, more an assemblage of opportunistic rent-seekers and assorted political scions, than a party with a program. A powerful faction of the party’s leadership however was close to leading figures in civil society, which itself had increasingly coalesced around demands for rights-based social reforms. This faction pushed through a remarkable set of rights-based laws that included the right to information (RTI), but also legislation and policies designed to universalize access to education, food and work (Chiriyankandath et al., 2020; Jenkins and Manor, 2017). Most notably, the second United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government pushed through National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), a rural right-to-work program that guarantees government employment to all rural households. The program has benefited over 100 million workers making it possibly the largest anti-poverty program in history. A large body of research has clearly demonstrated not only that the program has pushed up rural wages (Jenkins and Manor, 2017), but that in some parts of India it has clearly disrupted traditional relations of labor domination (Veeraraghavan, 2017). Despite corruption scandals and a lack of party discipline, the Congress managed to get re-elected in 2008 in part on the popularity of NREGA (Jenkins and Manor, 2017). Though the Indian state still suffers from significant deficits in capacity and accountability (Evans and Heller, 2018) there is little doubt that the UPA period saw an unprecedented expansion of a rights-based welfare state and marked a deep rupture with the elite-dominated clientelistic politics that had long defined India’s restricted democracy.

## The reaction

The PT’s tenure in power came to an abrupt end in 2016 when President Dilma Rousseff (Lula’s successor) was deposed through a constitutional coup. Supported by pro-business parties, right-wing elements in the judiciary and a corporate-dominated press that had become rabidly anti-PT, Rousseff’s impeachment was a naked power grab by an ‘alliance of elites’ (Saad-Filho and Boffo, 2020) empowered by a series of corruption scandals and middle class protests in 2015. The new president (Temer) immediately pushed through a draconian austerity package, including a constitutional provision that in effect blocked future increases in social expenditures. In a pattern reminiscent of the reactions of 1946 and 1964, a threatened elite had taken command of the state in order to roll back lower class empowerment. The project of reasserting naked class power was

however shortlived. Shorn of any intrinsic legitimacy or popular support, Temer's popularity plummeted to single digits. In the 2018 presidential elections that brought Bolsonaro to power, the centrist, neoliberal parties that has supported the roll-back of the welfare state (the MDB and the PSDB) were decimated.

Bolsonaro's electoral coalition did what no elite party in Brazil has been able to do, namely develop a broad populist following. In a moment of severe crisis Bolsonaro rose like an avatar, a rallying point for all those disaffected by the double blow of economic implosion and a discredited party system. With no program and not much of a party (his Social Liberal Party – PSL – was cobbled together for his presidential run) it would be easy to slot Bolsonaro into the broad category of a right-wing populism. But this would obscure the degree to which his stylistic and strategic brand of populism (direct and bombastic appeals to 'the people' with no political organization and an inchoate economic ideology) has resonated with a deeper project of retrenchment. On the one hand, Bolsonaro has rallied conservative social elements against the dangerous classes, or as he puts it the *bandidos*, a category that conveniently lumps together criminals, the poor and leftists. Brazenly attacking feminism, indigeneity, environmentalism and all forms of leftism, Bolsonaro has rekindled a powerful tradition of rabid anti-communism that has long animated right-wing nationalist politics in Brazil. Railing against the forces of secularism and political correctness, Bolsonaro's 'politics of resentment' (Saad-Filho and Boffo, 2020: 5) has rallied support for the traditional family, the church, the nation and the military and played on widespread concerns about rising criminality to empower the police and paramilitaries to use violence to quell "anti-social" elements. On the other hand, Bolsonaro has capitalized on and consolidated a new class alignment. The traditional middle class of professionals and small businesses that had seen its relative economic standing eroded through higher taxes and higher wages for unskilled work and its schools and neighborhoods opened up to subordinate (and mostly black) groups, was willing to support anyone who could displace the PT, however quixotic. This included elements of the urban poor, especially those affiliated with the evangelical churches that rallied to Bolosonaro. But what carried Bolsonaro over the finish line was the electoral support of the new middle class. This was the class segment that through a combination of increasing wages and easier access to credit, saw its standard of living rise the most in the 2000s. But as Lero (2019) and Saad-Filho and Boffo (2020) note, while they have been lifted out of poverty, they still live in constant insecurity, most employed in the informal sector. And this is precisely the class segment (2 to 5 times the minimum wage) that broke most dramatically from the PT, voting 23 points in favor of Bolsonaro compared to the next category in the income distribution (2 times the minimum wage) that voted 10 points in favor of the PT (Lero, 2019).

If this new, but clearly insecure middle class has a clear stake in breaking with the pro-poor politics of the PT at a time of economic crisis, the broader middle class coalition that brought Bolsonaro to power was soldered together through a discursive shift from the language of solidarity and social rights that had propelled the PT to a language of middle class achievement. The virtuous middle classes were counterposed to the *bandidos*, and the gospel of prosperity that has spread in Brazil with the rise of evangelicals and debt-fueled consumerism, especially in favelas, began to displace the calls for a 'preferential bias for the poor' that has long served as the rallying cry of the Catholic

social justice discourse of liberation theology. In counterposing the virtuous middle class to the undeserving and criminal poor Bolsonaro has clearly played the race card, exploiting the racial fears of the white middle class. This has played out regionally – with the whiter South rallying to Bolsonaro and the blacker North remaining loyal to the PT. These shifting patterns of class identity and class striving help explain why elements of a highly precarious middle class nonetheless embraced neoliberal policies and aligned themselves with elites.

If the crisis and turning point in Brazil was sharply demarcated by Rousseff's ouster, the reaction was less well defined, hurtling from unadorned dominant class capture (Temer's draconian neoliberalism) to Bolsonaro's opportunistic populist nationalism. In contrast, the crisis and turning point in India is less sharply demarcated but the reaction has been longer in the making. Modi's *Hindutva* project has deep historical roots, is clearly defined, supported by a highly organized and programmatic party and movement, and is being, as we speak, ruthlessly advanced by deploying every tool in the arsenal of democratic authoritarianism.

The Hindu right has always had a project of building a Hindu nation, but it was not until the late 1980s that this project took political form. In building a viable electoral majority, the BJP faced two formidable challenges. On the one hand, it had to overcome its identification as a party of the forward castes. On the other hand, it had to marry its project of nationalism and social harmony with growing support among its most critical class supporters for more market and globalization-friendly policies. Modi resolved both tensions as Chief Minister in the state of Gujarat (2001–2014) by completely communalizing the movement. He in effect unified the Hindu vote base by systematically demonizing Muslims and directly appealing to what he himself labeled the 'neo-middle class' that comprises aspiring and mostly rural OBCs (Chacko, 2019: 400; Jaffrelot, 2019). He also championed Gujarat as a pro-business state attracting large-scale investments from Indian corporates and multinationals and providing an outlet for class interests that had supported the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s. As Chacko has argued, Modi in effect overcame the inherent tension between the market and the social by 'marketizing *Hindutva* with the positioning of the state as a facilitator of the creation of a middle class of consumers and entrepreneurs who are also disciplined by *Hindutva* values' (2019: 398). The 'Gujarat model' as it came to be known produced high levels of growth but a dismal social development track record, with Muslims and Dalits largely excluded (Jaffrelot, 2019). Building on his success in Gujarat and with the full-throated support of the business community, Modi rode to power at the national level in 2014 largely by portraying himself as Mr Development (*Vikas Purush*). As the 2019 election approached and it became clear the economy was sputtering, Modi reverted to the anti-Muslim playbook both by stepping up nationalist rhetoric against Pakistan and doubling down on traditional *Hindutva* issues (Varshney, 2019). The electoral victory was resounding. During the first BJP government (2014–2019) Modi was cautious in pushing his ethno-nationalist agenda, franchising the *Sangh Parivar*'s local cadres or sponsored vigilante groups to exert extra-legal power, but refraining from direct use of state power (Jaffrelot, 2019). Since the BJP's return to power in May 2019 there is no longer any pretense. The state has been directly and quickly repurposed as an instrument of desecularization. First, the government revoked Kashmir's special status and took direct control over India's

only Muslim-majority state. Second, a Supreme Court widely seen as increasingly subservient to Modi then ruled that India's most disputed religious site where a mosque was torn down in 1991 was Hindu, all but sanctioning the violent tactics of *Hindutva* forces. A third and final blow to India's pluralist, secular and constitutional order was delivered in December 2019 with the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which introduces 'religion as a marker of citizenship' and 'creates categories of citizens with differing pathways to citizenship based on religious identity' (Aiyar, 2019).

## Explaining the reaction

Modi's election in 2014 and re-election in 2019 and Bolsonaro's sudden rise to power represent elite responses to democratic empowerment from below. In India, democratic deepening was led by the rise of lower castes and a range of new social movements that coalesced into a loose but effective coalition under the UPA. In Brazil, the PT forged a broad-based alliance of lower classes that spanned the rural and urban poor and drew together varied strands of a vibrant democracy movement that included organized labor, the base communities of the Catholic church and a range of rights-based social movements. In both cases, these coalitions expanded the welfare state and social rights in general, threatening the economic and status privileges of traditional elites.

In power, both the PT and the Congress led diverse and undisciplined coalitions. In both these democracies, a highly fragmented party system makes programmatic rule difficult. As coalition leaders the PT and Congress engaged in horse trading and targeted patronage to secure parliamentary support. The Congress was itself highly disorganized, lacking any ideological cohesion and supported reform only out of electoral expediency. The PT was more internally programmatic, but its electoral coalition in Brazil's extremely weak party democracy was unruly. Following a vote-buying scandal, Lula distanced himself from the party organization during his second presidency and invested increasingly in cultivating his own populist image as the champion of the poor. With this deinstitutionalization it was almost inevitable that massive corruption scandals (giddily publicized by pro-business media) would undermine the legitimacy of both parties and push an increasingly anxious middle class that had long supported the PT and the Congress into new electoral alignments.

Class interests are not given and building electoral coalitions is a messy and indeterminate affair. When and how coalitions produce electoral majorities is highly contingent. As Gramsci (1971) emphasized, historic blocs are formed of dominant classes that can exert hegemony over allied groups by actively coordinating interests. In both cases, the dominant interests were traditional economic and social elites. In India and Brazil the opposition of business interests to the PT and Congress was resolute, particularly in the latter years of their respective rights-expanding and welfarist regimes. In India the business class was increasingly frustrated with the Congress Party's reluctance to support more market reforms and its focus on expanding social programs. NREGA in particular invited widespread attacks as a wasteful, anti-market policy, especially from landed elites who resented government interference in local labor markets they had long dominated. In Brazil, Lula carefully managed the interests of capital, more or less supporting macroeconomic policies favored by finance and heavily subsidizing key business sectors

(Singer, 2018). But as an economic recession set in, Rousseff's efforts to double down on the politics of class compromise became fiscally unsustainable. More broadly, a heavier tax burden on the middle class fueled increasing resentment. A rural coalition of extractive interests opposed to the PT's support for environmental sustainability and large farmers opposed to the formalization of agrarian labor markets was virulently anti-PT. But economic interests alone cannot explain the reaction nor its specific form.

Going back to Weber and Du Bois, but especially since Bourdieu (1984), sociologists have long argued that the cultural and the economic are inextricable. The durable categories through which inequalities are reproduced are rooted in class practices that marshal cultural and social resources to protect privileges and hoard opportunities, as in Du Bois' (1935) famous theory of the 'psychological rents' of whiteness (now rendered simply as 'white privilege'). This intertwining is sharply revealed in the similar discourses of retrenchment in India and Brazil. In both, the reaction has been framed by a new discourse of forming a reinvigorated nation based in an essentialist and singular identity, a nation of virtuous citizens standing in opposition to the undeserving poor, criminality/corruption and the coddling or 'appeasement' of minorities. The merits of an achieving and aspiring middle class have displaced the language of universalism and social rights. Traditional institutions of church/temple, the military, the nation and the patriarchal family have been resurrected. National capital and businesses are celebrated as champions of progress and the *elan vital* of a renewed national spirit is held up against the corrosive effects of human rights and a vaguely defined 'globalism' as carrier of anti-cultural materialism and secularism.

The discursive shift has been critical to redrawing the boundaries and the self-identity of the middle class. The upper middle class of professionals has always had a fickle relationship to democracy, but lent significant support to both the PT and the Congress in their early years (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). The professional classes had a clear stake in the expansion of the developmental state and secular nationalism. If this class has defected, it is because the expansion of welfare policies to include the poor has threatened its privileged status position, especially with respect to educational institutions. In both cases, upper middle class opposition to affirmative action has been fierce.<sup>3</sup> Economically, the upper middle class has grown and has come to depend less on the state than on globalization for its economic well-being, hence the pattern of global cities supporting reaction. But the upper middle class can hardly sustain a winning electoral coalition. The pivotal shift has been the realignment of the neo-middle class. In Brazil, economic growth coupled with a massive expansion of consumer credit fueled new expectations of upward mobility for the lower middle class. When the economic crisis hit, a bloated state and a corrupt political class became easy targets of discontent. The wave of middle class protests in Brazil in 2015 were directly targeted at a state that was seen as having provided too much largesse to the undeserving poor. As Bourdieu (1984) has remarked, the fiercest class prejudices are always between the most proximate class factions.

The pattern of middle class reconfiguration in India is just as sharp, clearly delineated by caste boundaries. Historically, the electoral limits of the BJP were always its upper caste identity. Yet by 2019 the BJP support base was resolutely and comprehensively Hindu, with every major caste category favoring the BJP over the Congress. The point spread went from a massive 41 for upper castes favoring the BJP over the Congress, to

29 for OBCs and 13 for Dalits with almost no Muslims (8%) voting for the BJP (Varshney, 2019). In class terms, the income data are unreliable, but a survey that included occupational categories shows solid support for the BJP from white collar groups (services and professionals), shop keepers and farmers, with unskilled rural and urban laborers clearly aligning themselves with non-BJP parties (India Today-Axis Poll, 2019). In cultural terms, the BJP has mobilized the OBC neo-middle class by uniting Hindus against Muslims and by appealing to the social conservatism of a class that is 'look[ing] away from agriculture and towards the towns and cities' (Kaur, 2014: 18). In the northern states in particular, the BJP assiduously cultivated caste groups that aspired to forward caste status tapping into the deep aspirations of cultural distinction and upper caste/class emulation (sanskritization) that have always animated aspiring groups in deeply hierarchical societies (Bourdieu, 1984). And it reconfigured the welfare state from universal entitlements such as the right to work to a series of discrete welfare programs, often directly linked to Modi himself, that amount to the public provisioning of private goods (e.g. subsidized toilets and home cooking fuel). Arguing that the neo-middle class 'needs proactive handholding' (as quoted in Chacko, 2019: 401) the BJP government launched new welfare programs that included an array of micro loans, subsidies and labor deregulation to promote small business and reward entrepreneurship. As Kaur (2014) has argued, this 'emerging' middle class saw Modi's policies that emphasized economic growth over 'entitlements' (coded as handouts for Dalits and Muslims) as opening the door to their aspirations, in contrast to the welfare policies of the UPA that largely benefited the poor (and Dalits/Muslims). The reconfiguration of the welfare state was also clearly tied to a project of cultural transformation. As Chacko shows, a range of financialization schemes – including incentives for brothers to use a traditional religious ceremony as an occasion to open seed insurance schemes for their sisters – in effect marry neoliberalism to Hindu nationalism by conjoining the family, the individual and the state in the advancement of the nation (2019: 403).

## **So what's globalization got to do with it?**

In explaining reactions in OECD countries, commentators have pointed to how neoliberalism has fueled the politics of austerity, which in turn have triggered right-wing populism. But if anything, Brazil and India defied neoliberal globalization and witnessed an expansion of the welfare state in the run up to reaction. The protagonist of the reaction has not been an ethnically and economically endangered working class (the rural and urban poor on balance remained more loyal to traditional left parties in both India and Brazil), but rather an urban middle class that in fact has benefited most from economic globalization and an aspiring middle class hoping to ride its coattails.

On the economic front the impact of globalization has had much less to do with neoliberalism and austerity than with impact of a post-Fordist economy. The displacement of manufacturing by services and of nationally organized production by global value chains has fundamentally reconfigured class relations. Increased informalization (especially in India) and the decline of relatively stable occupational categories (including public sector employment) have led to both fragmentation and precarization. This in turn has only increased the stakes of providing social protection and some compensation for job

insecurity. The new services and information economy has also massively ratcheted up the returns to educational and organizational resources. The new premium on educational capital has fueled new hoarding strategies, which has made global cities – where high end educational institutions are concentrated – especially contested spaces. Simultaneously, and more directly linked to neoliberalism, global commodification of urban land markets has driven up housing prices. The middle class's reproduction strategy is one of opportunity hoarding (Tilly, 1998). When the welfare state is well developed and extensive the middle class has a stake in it, and is less inclined to ration social provisioning including access to education and health. Across Europe, resurgent ethno-nationalist parties have only pushed for denying welfare to immigrants and have not challenged the welfare state as such. Urban class compromises forged in the Fordist era have for the most part been preserved in the post-Fordist cities that have benefited most from globalization. The pattern of reaction in Brazil and India is reversed. In rapidly growing cities where access to good neighborhoods and good institutions is the key to economic success in an increasingly information-driven and networked global economy, an upper middle class and its newly minted neo-middle class allies feel increasingly threatened by the encroachment of the Muslims/lower castes or black masses. Hansen's (2015) description of the retrenchment zeitgeist of urban elites in the gated communities of India could just as well have been written to describe Bolsonaro's urban supporters: 'it in inside such upper caste and middle class colonies, carefully separated from the other parts of society, that one finds the deepest mistrust and resentment of popular politics, the government and democracy – generally denounced as the root of all corruption in the country and dominated by undeserving men and women who have risen above their station because of reservations [affirmative action] rather than talent and merit.'

This sense of threat has been further heightened by the second dimension of globalization that has directly contributed to the destabilization of the traditional social order, namely the overlapping of domestic and global political fields (Evans, 2020; Paschel, 2016). Over the last three decades, international governance institutions (Held, 1997), a new global human rights eco-system (de Sousa Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito, 2005), an expanding global public sphere (Habermas, 2001) and transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) have universalized the legitimacy of human rights and provided domestic groups with significant points of global leverage to advance their claims (Sikkink, 2017). The linkages are very clear for Brazil. Paschel (2016) has shown how anti-racism movements in Brazil strategically mobilized international discursive and political resources to advance significant affirmative action and welfare policies for the black majority in Brazil, and Keck and Sikkink (1998) point to a similar capacity of Brazilian environmental movements and informal sector workers to leverage transnational ties.

In India, such alliances exist, but are less common. Nonetheless, the democratic and rights-based normative and policy repertoires of Indian civil society – including women's groups, gay rights activists, right to the city movements, transparency movements, right to food campaigns and environmentalists – have strategically leveraged resonant global frames to make their demands on the Indian polity (Mander, 2018; Roychowdhury, 2020). Even if the political effects are heavily mediated at the domestic level, in a world where communicative structures of traditional and social media are increasingly globalized (what Evans [2008] calls 'generic globalization') these frames have become inescapable points of cultural and political reference that interrogate nation-based identities and social

hierarchies. These frames are clearly perceived as existential threats by the BJP which has aggressively repressed civil society organizations with international ties as ‘anti-national’ and has been especially hostile to international human rights and environmental movements (Mander, 2018).<sup>4</sup> In this respect, both the BJP and Bolsonaro are, in Castells’ sense, quintessential reactive movements that ‘build trenches of resistance on behalf of God, nation, ethnicity, family, locality, that is the fundamental categories of millennial existence now threatened under the combined, contradictory assault of techno-economic forces and transformative social movements’ (1997: 2). Because Modi and Bolsonaro represent a social class that is by and large better educated, more globally-oriented and celebrates itself as self-motivating and aspirational, it is clear that the cultural nationalism they cultivate has much less to do with ‘culture’ in the sense of some deep primary identity, than with protecting accumulated privileges threatened by the destabilization of traditional social structures (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). It is striking that while Modi and Bolsonaro have cheered global technologies and global capital, both have displayed skeptical attitudes towards science and international human rights. When they denounce globalism, it is liberalism, not capitalism, that they are attacking.

### **The future of democracy**

Both Modi and Bolsonaro have shown themselves willing to use any tools in the democratic toolkit to secure their power and push their exclusionary projects. Most notably they have made concerted efforts to politicize independent institutions including the military and the judiciary, two institutions that displayed remarkable neutrality in the period of democratic deepening. But they have gone further than just violating norms or pushing the limits of democratic institutions. They have launched a broad-based assault on civil society including the media and universities, made concerted efforts to curtail the rights of those who do not fit their dominant national identity and outsourced intimidation and violence to surrogates.

But as dramatic and alarming as the current conjuncture might be, a full unraveling of democracy is unlikely. Electoral democracy will likely be preserved for four general reasons. First, both leaders came to power through the ballot box and have invested their legitimacy in the expressed ‘will of the people.’ Second, unlike during the period of restricted democracy, the popular sectors have tasted the benefits of political participation and are unlikely to accept a full reversal. Third, in these highly diverse and pluralistic societies, even elites understand that democratic contestation is necessary to preserving the social order. Fourth, the global norm of democracy is now so entrenched that the costs of forgoing basic electoral democracy would be extremely high.

If there is unlikely to be a full reversal, what is at stake is the capacity of subordinate groups, both lower classes and historically marginalized racial/ethnic/caste identities, to effectively pursue their interests. The danger at hand is a contraction of the participatory and substantive spaces of democracy, that is a hollowing out that would return Indian and Brazilian democracy to their respective traditional states of restricted democracy and exclusionary development. What pathways are possible depends less on institutions than on how always volatile and malleable historic blocs get organized and reorganized. Viewed comparatively, democratic backsliding looks far less likely to be sustained in Brazil. First, unlike Modi, who has the support of disciplined and organizational



structures and dedicated cadres who have fully colonized state apparatuses, Bolsonaro's ability to mobilize mass support is more personalistic and his leadership more demagogic than ideological. Second, through nearly three decades of organizing, civil society groups in Brazil have not only nurtured a new rights culture but have fundamentally transformed national and local institutions. Not least of the changes has been the strengthening of local municipalities and the importance and independence of local political and civil society configurations. In India, civil society groups did play a critical role in the UPA period and drove significant legislative successes but did not transform state institutions in the way that nearly two decades of PT rule have. State institutions in India remain largely in the hands of political and bureaucratic elites who are now increasingly subservient to the forces of *Hindutva*.

These differences aside, it is important to underscore that the historic bloc that has underwritten reaction is highly unstable in both cases. The middle class has always been a fickle political actor, and the neo-middle class in particular has aligned itself with reaction on terms that are inherently precarious. At the economic level, the problem is that populists promise much to the people, but hubris is no substitute for programmatic and sustained coordination of class interests. And on the ideological level, preserving right-wing populist blocs requires nurturing a socio-cultural unity that is in constant tension with the very exclusions it thrives on. Such exclusions are difficult to sustain in any democracy, much less in ones that have long histories and powerful repertoires of subaltern claim-making.

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### Notes

1. In the roll-back of the welfare state, there are significant parallels here with what Stuart Hall (1985) labelled 'authoritarian populism' in describing Thatcherism. As with current OECD populisms, the electoral swing towards Thatcher came from a disaffected working class.
2. Bolsonaro got 68% in Rio and Sao Paulo, 70% in Federal District and 76% in Santa Catarina (Hunter and Power, 2019: 77).

3. Though upper caste mobilization crystallized around opposition to affirmative action policies in the 1980s, the BJP has supported 'reservations' since the 1990s as a pragmatic concession to incorporating OBCs (Chacko, 2019). But practices in institutions dominated by upper castes remain resolutely exclusionary (Vithayathil, 2018).
4. The BJP leaked a report in 2015 by the Intelligence Bureau that claimed the foreign-funded environmental movements in India were costing the country 2–3% annual growth.

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## Résumé

Deux des plus grandes démocraties du Sud global – l'Inde et le Brésil – ont connu un revirement radical vers le populisme de droite. Une comparaison historique minutieuse révèle que la forme qu'y a prise la réaction se distingue nettement des autres cas récents de recul démocratique. Dans les deux cas, le mouvement de réaction a été mené par les élites à la suite d'une expansion antérieure des droits démocratiques et de l'inclusion sociale. Cette forme de populisme de repli est ancrée dans des réalignements de classe très similaires, qui obéissent à la fois à des intérêts économiques et socioculturels. La mondialisation a joué un rôle, mais pas par les voies conventionnellement identifiées du néolibéralisme ou de la modernisation. Au contraire, ce mouvement de réaction a été motivé par les efforts d'une classe moyenne élargie pour accumuler les opportunités et les ressources publiques et préserver les privilèges traditionnellement associés au statut social.

## Mots-clés

démocratie, développement, État providence, populisme, sociologie politique

## Resumen

Dos de las democracias más grandes del sur global (India y Brasil) han experimentado un giro dramático hacia el populismo de derecha. Una cuidadosa comparación histórica revela que la forma de reacción es marcadamente diferente de otros casos recientes de retroceso democrático. En ambos casos, la reacción ha sido impulsada por las élites en respuesta a una expansión previa de los derechos democráticos y de la inclusión social. Esta forma de populismo de repliegue se basa en realineamientos de clase muy similares que están configurados tanto por intereses económicos como socioculturales. La globalización ha desempeñado un papel, pero no a través de las vías convencionalmente identificadas del neoliberalismo o la modernización. Por el contrario, la reacción ha sido impulsada por los esfuerzos de una clase media creciente para acumular oportunidades y recursos públicos y preservar los privilegios de estatus tradicionales.

## Palabras clave

Democracia, desarrollo, estado del bienestar, populismo, sociología política.