

BRAZIL SURREAL

Like a scene from a tropical zombie film, yellow clad barbarians chanting the fascist slogan 'god, family, and homeland', rampage through the three main institutions of Brazilian democracy, defecate on carpets, break windows, and smash precious works of art. It was my birthday, that in a cruel irony from now on will always be associated with an attempted coup and an attack on an icon of twentieth century modern architecture. I've spent a lot of time in recent months staring out over the picturesque Bay of Sao Vicente pondering the surreal popularity of Bolsonarismo. A small seaside town that lies in the shadow of Sao Paulo, and where my wife grew up, it proudly claims to be the first European settlement in Brazil, celebrated in a famous tiled fountain that depicts the native Tupi and Guarani gratefully receiving the sacrament. There is of course another version of events, in which the story of joyful discovery, is replaced by that of invasion, the violent arrival of sword and cross and the genocide of indigenous people. Such rival interpretations of Brazilian history continue to reverberate in contemporary ideological battles. History is a contested terrain, and as with all populist authoritarian movements, Bolsonaro's fanatical supporters have created an alternative reality in which history is rewritten to coincide with their prejudices. It is a narrative fuelled by a macabre and toxic combination of evangelical Christianity and intolerant far-right politics that borders on the edge of reason. Objectivity and truth have no place in this world, and as in the United States, social media has been pivotal in proselytising disinformation, conspiratorial ideas and 'alternative facts.' The attack on Brasilia like that on the US Capitol was organised by 'antifa-Marxist' infiltrators. The election was rigged, the electronic voting system can't be trusted, Lula is in fact dead and been replaced by a clone, and Bolsonaro is a virtuous defender of democracy determined to liberate citizens from the misery and corruption that plague their lives. But it gets far more scary. There was never any real dictatorship. What happened in the 1960s was about the restoration of order, and a righteous quest to rid the country of communists and radical trade unionists' intent on destruction. Nobody was tortured and the only real problem was that the Generals didn't finish the job despite the support of the North American ambassador Lincoln Gordon, who declared that future historians would recognise the 1964 coup as a decisive moment in the

realisation of liberty. This wasn't the first time in Brazilian history that the spectre of communism was used to legitimise a coup d'état. In 1937 the dictator Getulio Vargas seized power by exploiting the same fear of a communist conspiracy. When Bolsonaro dreams of tanks on the street then, he has much history to lean on, and his team went out of its way to promote the myth that the Partido dos Trabalhadores, Worker's Party, is a far-left party determined to transform Brazil into another Cuba. It was an effective strategy. For weeks on end, up and down the country, the Bolsonaro faithful gathered outside military barracks, prayed to God and plead in tears for a military dictatorship to save Brazil. This fanning of deep-rooted anxieties about socialism, alongside his preposterous claim that he is on the side of the people against a corrupt political elite, partly explains why he received over fifty million votes. However, his openly racist, misogynistic, and homophobic opinions make his popularity far more disturbing and difficult to understand. Somewhat inevitably, filmed footage of Bolsonaro telling a female deputy that she was too ugly to rape, that he would rather have a dead son than a gay son, and that the afro-descendent inhabitants of Quilombos, were lazy, fat unworthy citizens, is just fake news fabricated by leftist media. It is familiar territory. The denial of empirical evidence, the ideological inversion of reality, and hostility against perceived others, are hardly new phenomena and have a long literary and political history. We should have been more than prepared then for the attack on democracy and the dismantling of the idea of historical objectivity. But it seems we weren't, and the wave of authoritarian populism that has swept around the world has left many people stunned, especially those of my generation who were educated through the Anti-Nazi League, militant feminism, and the struggle for gay rights. It is as if Bolsonaro and his ideological allies like Putin and Trump harbour a deep-rooted grudge against social and environmental justice, minority rights and progressive causes. They prefer the myth of an idealised past, where men were men, gay meant to be happy, Africa was a post card ready for exploitation and workers knew better than to raise their concerns about inequality. The Bolsonaro vision of the future is truly morbid. It is a world inhabited by grotesque imaginaries in which dangerous myths and pernicious lies masquerade as truth, and irrationality reigns supreme. So, the surrealist play book unfolds. Bolsonaro's family bought fifty-one properties in hard cash to the tune of twenty-five million Reais, all of it the result of

hard work and judicious accounting. The rampant deforestation in Amazonia was just a few little fires that happen naturally every year. Opening new gun clubs and arming citizens is the best way to ensure the survival of democracy. COVID was nothing more than a mild dose of flu. Demonstrators blocking the roads, lighting fires, and demanding the arrest of judges, is freedom of speech in action. In the predominantly white southern state of Santa Catarina a photograph of Bolsonaristas at a rally clearly making Nazi salutes was reported as an attempt to emanate positive energy. No wonder that his most devoted fans refer to Bolsonaro as 'mito', myth. There was no end to the absurdities. The Partido dos Trabalhadores planned to infiltrate schools to make children gay. Lula made a pact with the devil, was in league with drug traffickers, and had squirrelled away millions into a secret Vatican bank account. But thankfully help was at hand. Fanatical Bolsonaristas discovered that if mobile phones were synchronised and held aloft, it was possible to send an SOS message to the armed forces with the added benefit of alerting nearby aliens of the danger to Brazilian democracy. No, you really couldn't make it up. It is a perversion of reason that would have exceeded the pessimistic imagination of Theodore Adorno and Guy Debord. So insane that Orwell, Philip.K.Dick and Margaret Atwood would have cut the narrative diversions as being too far-fetched. It would be comforting to dismiss the surreal world of Bolsonarismo as laughably unhinged, as something that belongs to the wild fringes of the irredeemable, but the threat to democracy is all too real and omnipresent. The ideologues who orchestrated Bolsonaro's campaign are motivated, well organised and have not gone away. That said, they were defeated and over half the population voted to end the nightmare of the last four years. The fear is, that like in the United States, the enemies of democracy are simply biding their time, waiting for the opportunity to once more murder truth and pervert the course of history.