

The uncertain future of Brazilian democracy

Book Review

Avritzer, Leonardo. 2019. *O pêndulo da democracia*. São Paulo: Todavia.

Luciana Ballestrin¹ 

At least since 2015, the international Political Science literature has diagnosed the democratic crisis around the world (Diamond, 2015). The discontent and questioning of liberal democracy as the hegemonic model of government in the West after the Cold War has multiple origins and causes, but its current crisis does not have easy explanations or solutions. The dimension of this crisis can be synthesized in the final sentence of the last Pzeworski's book (2019: 206) on this subject: "This crisis is not just political; it has deep roots in the economy and in society. This is what I find ominous". Indeed, the gravity and breadth of democracy's new crisis does not allow restricting it just to political and institutional aspects of social life, requiring that Political Science crosses off its own disciplinary frontiers.

In the last years, different expressions have appeared to characterize the "democratic death of democracies": post-democracy, democratic deconsolidation, de-democratization (Crouch, 2004; Tilly, 2007; Brown, 2015; 2019; Mounk, 2018). Supposedly, the distinguishing feature of the recent democratic ruptures refers to the

¹ Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Federal University of Pelotas. E-mail: luballestra@gmail.com.

institutional, legal, and even democratic manner in which they occur, throughout elected representatives or parliamentary and judicial institutions – “subversion by stealth” according to Przeworski’ definition (2019:172). The regressive and reactionary character of this phenomenon is related with the right-wing radicalisation, which supports intolerance and hatred speech against different social groups and minorities contemplated by the multicultural policies and liberal rights (Geiselberger, 2017; Stanley, 2018; Traverso; 2019). The context of political polarization and democracy’ distrust provides the rise of political leaderships generically treated as “populist”, who relativize or ignore the democratic game and its unwritten rules and norms.

In the global context, Brazilian case is one of the most striking examples of de-democratization, presenting general and specific features regarding other national experiences living the democratic regression. Thus, the deconstruction of the Brazilian democracy has several aspects in common to different processes observed by the international literature on the democratic crisis. Brazilian de-democratization process encompasses the use of democratic institutions to advance antidemocratic purposes; the emergence of the extreme-right in the public space; the increasing of democratic discredit; the deepening of social polarization; the persecution against researchers and teachers; and, the attacks against the press². Thereby, the publishing of Leonardo Avritzer’s book “O pêndulo da democracia” can be considerate as a part of the Political Science’ national literature efforts to provide authorial analyses on the specificities of the Brazilian case – see for instance, Santos (2017) and Miguel (2022).

Leonardo Avritzer is one of the most important Brazilian political scientists in activity, having an extensive academic and scientific production with national and international impact. His central research interest has been democracy and political participation since the 1990’s. In Brazil, he has an important contribution to the

² The current Brazilian political and democratic crisis has many causes and relevant episodes. In the context of the present book review, it is important to register some chronological political facts, such as: the establishment of the Car Wash Operation, which was dedicated to investigating corruption of public and private agents (in 2014); the contestation of electoral results that elected for the second time Dilma Rousseff (Worker’s Party) by the President of the main opposition party (Brazilian Social Democracy Party), even in the absence of any type of fraud (in 2014); Rousseff’s *impeachment* by a parliamentary *coup*, due to the fragility and selectivity of the political and administrative accusations (in 2016); the prison of the ex-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Worker’s Party), who was the favourite to win the presidential elections (in 2018); the stabbing against Jair Bolsonaro and his posterior electoral victory (in 2018); the annulation of the judicial process and condemnations by the Car Wash Operation against Lula by the Federal Supreme Court, which revealed the political and illegal character of his prison (in 2021).

construction of the participatory democracy and institutions study field, which is dedicated to the analysis of the interactions between the civil society and the state for the deliberation of local policies, mainly through the participatory budget. Avritzer also introduced a habermasian approach to the study of the public space/sphere in Latin America and Brazil, having a relevant contribution to democratic theory. His awarded book “*A moralidade da democracia*” (Avritzer, 1996) is a national reference to the debate on critical and democratic theory.

In the last years, Avritzer has dedicated his research to the understanding of the political and democratic crisis in Brazil, developing a special interest in the judiciary’s power role in such a process. “*O pêndulo da democracia*” (Avritzer, 2019) is his second authorial book on the current Brazilian political crisis, preceded by the book “*Os impasses da democracia no Brasil*” (Avritzer, 2016). The present book review concentrates on the potential of the book’s main thesis to advance in the comprehension of the democratic crisis in Brazil, presenting its key arguments and some critical points to discussion.

“*O pêndulo da democracia*” is a sociopolitical interpretative essay on the current democratic crisis in Brazil, structured in five chapters besides the Introduction, Conclusion and Afterword. The analysis offered by the book combines historical-structural and political-conjunctural elements, opening dialogues with Brazilian classical essayists and resorting freely to different approaches in the Political Science discipline, such as comparative politics, institutionalism, economic policy and political culture. The treatment of different themes is an effort to encompass the multiple aspects related with the Brazilian democratic crisis: judicial and institutional constraints, relationship between the State and the Market, resurgence of political violence, cultural sociability and “public religion”³ (Avritzer, 2019: 122). The range of such landscape confirms the need to incorporate different dimensions of social life and Brazilian history, trying to advance in the understanding of what has happened in the country since June of 2013⁴.

³ All translations are mine.

⁴ During the June of 2013, under the first Dilma Rousseff’s government (Worker’s Party), more than one million people protested in several cities in Brazil. In the beginning of the manifestations, the main claim was the decrease of the value of urban public transport. Posteriorly, different claims appeared in the streets, including the questioning of the system, parties and representation politics. The protesters criticized the Worker’s Party national government and the right wing joined the manifestation through the claim “fight against corruption”. The protests were important to the weakening of Rousseff’s government and, posteriorly, to the empowerment of right wing actors, organizations and discourses.

The central thesis of the book appears right from the start, that is, the Brazilian democracy follows a pendulum movement, which handles for the alignment among antidemocratic forces in determined historical conjunctures. In this setting, the Brazilian elites and middle class adopted together an antidemocratic view, while the popular sectors rejected the politics. Economic crisis, political divisions and disagreements regarding the course of the country are three elements present in such critical moments, which allow the author to establish an “analytical pattern” (Ibid.: 16). Avritzer claims that the period of the first democratic experience in Brazil from 1946 to 1964 was marked by political instability, and the critical moment of that period helps to understand the current one. According to Avritzer, the three elements mentioned before were observed in the 1954-1964 political crisis in Brazil – the time interval between Getúlio Vargas’ suicide and the *coup d’etat* conducted by military forces with civil elites’ support. For him, the regression of democratic experiences at that moment and now are highly connected, because they help to understand the “*longue durée*” of democracy in Brazil (Ibid.: 21), its swinging nature, and the survival of authoritarian elements in the national political order.

The political settings between 2013 and 2018 had moved the pendulum’s position again far away from democracy, putting an “end” to Brazil’s “New Republic” (Ibid.: 9) established with the Constitution of 1988. This period saw a “continuous institutional degradation” and “a middle class and elite’s movement against the popular sovereignty and democratic order” (Ibid.: 17), being featured as a time of “democratic regression” (Ibid.: 141). However, the author disagrees with the diffused thesis on the antidemocratic propensity of the Brazilian middle class, noting its capacity to covenant in favor of democracy and social policy in the two recognised Brazilian democratic experiences (1946-1964 and 1988-2018). Because of this perception, Avritzer argues for the need for a realignment between the middle class and the popular sector in defense of democracy and the rule of law in Brazil (Ibid.: 20).

Actors and institutions have a decisive role in observing democratic arrangements. The author highlights the fragility of the democratic commitment regarding some actors in Brazil; generally, those actors contribute to the break in the political consensus on democracy and begin the change in the pendulum’s direction. This historical behavior was expressed, for example, in the resistance against electoral results that lead to the non-electoral definition of national policies (Ibid.: 38). The non-liberal and non-democratic

character of Brazilian elites – whose historical origins were in colonial extractivism and in the labor’s overexploitation – involves the institutionalization of counter-democracy elements (Ibid.: 48), even under liberal constitutionalism. This is fundamental to understand the dynamics of the pendulum of Brazilian democracy. According to Avritzer, even in the democratizing moments, some structures remain intact and some of them hinder the generalization of individual rights. Judicial and military corporations have responsibility regarding the maintenance of corporate privileges and no respect for popular sovereignty. The major problem is the inexistence of a solid tradition of civil rights and equality – that reappears more evidently at critical moments (Ibid.: 27) – and the absence of institutions that stabilize democracy for a long term (Ibid.: 47).

On the contrary, institutional counter-democratic elements had preserved even after the last democratization: the impeachment law, the role of electoral justice and the military prerogatives. For Avritzer, the use of the impeachment law in Brazil does not follow the international pattern, serving as a political device to the parliamentary opposition and contributing to the weakening of the Presidency’s legitimacy. The Electoral Justice’s empowerment using the judicial logics for the suspension of electoral results harms sovereign elements arising from popular elections. In this sense, there is a delegitimization of the electoral – or democratic – process by these judiciary actors, mainly after the approval of the Clean Record Law in 2010. Moreover, there is a military conception of public security that is not compatible with a citizen’s conception of democracy. Other problematics related to military actors is their return to the political field in Brazil, by electoral and non-electoral ways, since 2018. All these aspects converge to form a fragile relationship between the political sovereignty and elections in the country. In the recent political crisis, different control institutions have contributed to question the popular sovereign principle – even if indirectly.

The Market and its economic forces also play an important role in producing a disjunction between electoral programs and policies, mainly the economic and social policies. Because economic liberalism and conservatism have always been associated in Brazil, Avritzer uses the “*jabuticaba*” metaphor to describe the singularity of liberalism in the country⁵. For the author, in the last years there has been a complete rupture among election, representation and policies (Ibid.: 67). Since 2015, the financial market has been

⁵ *Jabuticaba* is a fruit originally from Brazil. In Brazilian culture, the use of the *jabuticaba* metaphor alludes to a singular or unique national political manifestation.

working to destroy the industrial sector and to impose austerity to the State, disorganizing the public sector and the national economy (Ibid.: 66). Avritzer's interpretation of such a financial sector's behavior is associated with the confrontational position by the ex-president Dilma Rousseff against its agenda, through the fall of the interest rate in 2012 (Ibid.: 89). The attempt to implement a developmentalist policy by Rousseff provoked the reaction of the neoliberal and financial forces, being decisive to the change of the democratic pendulum. The oil policy was a strategic sector to put different groups in conflict against Rousseff's government, especially related to the *Petrobras*⁶ governance in the context of the Pre-Salt exploitation. There has been an important change regarding the State performance in the economy in the last two decades. The Brazilian State is not anymore a producer state, but a controller of many great enterprises (Ibid.: 83). This reverberated in the financing of electoral campaigns and in the relationship between the political system and great entrepreneurs.

Another important point to help explain the current democratic crisis in Brazil regards the political conflict around the State crisis. According to Avritzer, the Constitution of 1988 institutionalized conditions to maintain the historic "patrimonial State" and, at the same time, to construct the democratic "social State" (Ibid.: 74). Besides that, the Brazilian State would not have modernized the relationship between the state sector and economic groups, which had originated in the construction of a developmentalist State after 1930 by the ex-president Getúlio Vargas. During the 1990s, the process of the Brazilian State liberalization and privatization did not signify the end of the patrimonial and developmentist State, benefiting ancient and new contractors and entrepreneurs. The patrimonial, private and now also financial capture of the state's productive sector is also problematic regarding the scientific and technological development, as well as economic innovation and competitiveness (Ibid.: 85). In such a context, Avritzer notes the survival and the enlargement of a parallel structure in the public administration – created in the 1950s and controlled by the State –, which was responsible for a more direct approximation between entrepreneurs and State, mainly in the infrastructure sector (Ibid.: 80, 84).

At the same time, the Constitution of 1988 supported the construction of a structure of social protection in different areas – health, social assistance and security, and education. According to the author, the social State designed by the Constitution was an

⁶ Oil state-owned company founded in 1953.

important counterpart to the Patrimonial State. For Avritzer, the political conflict between both State models is at the center of the political crisis and the liberal reaction and radicalization. One of the most important marks of the current regressive setting is the option to dismount the national welfare programs and maintain patrimonialism.

Bringing to the crisis' analysis the importance of cultural aspects, Avritzer also stressed the return of political violence in the country after Bolsonaro's election, paying attention to the intolerance practiced by the Brazilian "common man" (Ibid.: 113). According to the author, the "egalitarian sociability" engendered by institutions or religion is fundamental to support democratic values (Ibid.: 118). He argues for the "informal tolerance" generated by Catholicism's predominance in the country's history (Ibid.: 128). Thus, his interpretation of the violence of the Brazilian common man is related with the rupture of the cordial man's Catholic religious basis, inasmuch the Neo-Pentecostalism has become popular in lower classes (Ibid., 114). The Neo-Pentecostal religiosity in Brazil has probably been providing the new right-wing social base (Ibid.: 146). The political problems and the public consequences of this new configuration is the conservative and intolerant view professed by Neo-Pentecostalism's moral understanding, as well as their crescent political representation.

The advent of social networks has also played a very important role in the dissemination of political intolerance. In this sense, social networks have allowed a disjunction between electorate and public opinion in Brazil, having a decisive influence in promoting fake news and private ways of electoral campaign – mainly through the messenger service WhatsApp (Ibid.:131). Avritzer noted that the last two presidential campaigns (2014 and 2018) were not normal electoral campaigns, presenting elements of political violence, disinformation and intolerance. Particularly, Bolsonaro's electoral victory can only be understood by considering a set of particular conditions, including the emphasis on the fight against corruption agenda and the spread of an anti-politics logic (Ibid.: 150). The Car Wash Operation was fundamental to construct this setting, adopting, with the media support, a political and partisan position against the Worker's Party and the ex-president Lula da Silva since 2014 (Ibid.:151, 164). Despite Bolsonarism being a "symptom of non-democratic elements of the Brazilian political order" (Ibid.: 20), it is not a hegemonic ideology in Brazilian society. However, it is notable that the support for democracy has decreased in Brazil since June 2013 (Ibid.: 141).

To Avritzer, the novelties of the present crisis are the legal element to the reversion of the electoral results and the attack against the political system (Ibid.: 165). According to him, the return of democratic normality in Brazil depends on the reinforcement of the democratic values and of the political system; the respect for the electoral results, popular sovereignty and the constitutional pact by the Judiciary, Armed Forces and the Market; the dialogue with the Market to construct a common reform agenda by respecting the popular decision. The author argues for the need for the institutionalization of democratic sovereignty and rights (Ibid.: 181).

The book presents an important contribution to help understand the Brazilian de-democratization process, using the pendulum metaphor to stress the fragility of national democracy since its first historical experience. However, Avritzer does not consider the global dimension and the critical literature on the democratic crisis in his analysis, which compromises a broader understanding of the phenomenon and its occurrence in the country. Since the 1990s, the “global turn” in political theory has been pointing to the limits of methodological nationalism to explain political processes in the globalization era. Besides that, the consideration of globality dimension and postcolonial inequalities to observe de-democratization dynamics in the Global South is a fundamental step in advancing democratic theory and to overcome its challenges. Without explicit intention, Avritzer’s analysis partially fulfills such a task, when he seeks to capture political contradictions (or “detours” in his words) to demonstrate the specificities of Brazilian social formation and its democratic construction.

The current democratic regression in several countries around the world exposes the limits of liberal democracy in the West to contain antiliberal and antidemocratic reactionary forces, as well as to ensure civil rights and social equality. Even liberal literature recognises the manifestation of an “antidemocratic liberalism” (“rights without democracy”) and “illiberal democracy” (“democracy without rights”) (Mounk, 2019: 30). Curiously, the dedemocratizing effects of neoliberalism did not appear in Avritzer’s analysis, nor the critical discussion about the role of neoliberalism to promote the disjunctive conflict between liberal and democratic elements. On the contrary, the author seems to remain believing in the democratic potential of liberalism even under neoliberalism, a belief increasingly contested by critical literature and grass rooted social movements.

While the interpretative exercise made by Avritzer is welcome to the political and academic public debate in Brazil, its final recommendations seem far from materializing themselves for the democracy's reconstruction in the country. Bolsonarism intensified and enlarged the political violence in Brazil and at the same time employs the democratic repertoire to promote authoritarian and post-fascist values – that is, Bolsonarism doubly challenges different democratic theories and their implications. There are original and unprecedented elements in the current authoritarian Brazilian experience and not all of them can be attributed to Brazil's political past. Unfortunately, the global democratic backsliding happens simultaneously alongside other broader crises – economic, environmental, humanitarian, pandemic, and epistemological –, showing typical uncertainties in transitional historical times.

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