Violent Anxieties: Brazil on the Rise of Overlapping Contradictions

One year ago, Amarildo de Souza was illegally detained in a Unit of Pacifying Police (UPP) in the Rocinha shantytown, Rio de Janeiro. On the hands of local Military Police (MP) officers, for days he was submitted to cruel and degrading treatment, including several modalities of torture. Eventually, he was killed within the UPP dependencies. His body, allegedly thrown (in a plastic bag) in a nearby forest, was never found. For weeks, authorities denied his forced disappearance, denounced by local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International. When atrocities were finally admitted, even then the official MP statement accused Amarildo (and his family) of engaging in drug trafficking – a claim proven to be false.

Where is Amarildo?

By then, in the streets of major Brazilian cities (including Rio de Janeiro) millions of Brazilian citizens manifested their disapproval of public policies, an
ever-growing agenda. Initially, public transportation taxes on the rise, coinciding with mammoth investments for World Cup 2014. The fast and steady repression by MP (controlled by local state governors, not by President Dilma Rousseff’s federal government) enhanced the public acrimony.

Anxiety

Hundreds become thousands, eventually millions. Police violence and political corruption become rally calls. Public buildings were occupied (including the Houses of Congress and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sometimes with blows, stones, Molotov cocktails thrown in the mix). By then, President Rousseff and Minister of Justice José Eduardo Cardozo joined local governments, approving the use of force against protestors. Even the use of federal forces was suggested to support repressive efforts.
Occupy

The government was puzzled. Citizens jumped from social networks to the streets, lacking a central organization. Unlike strikes spearheaded by trade unions, the mobilization was decentralized and for most of times, spontaneous. Unlike social movements, the streets did not claim or benefited from privileged interlocution with the (left-wing) government; they provided harsh criticism. Rousseff’s popularity fell from the skies – from the highest levels of approval (higher than former President Lula did) to uncomfortable disapproval.

The ensuing MP violence (on mostly disarmed protestors) met with different attitudes. For the first time in Brazil, Black Bloc tactics from anarchist collectives took the streets, providing physical interposition between MP and protestors – as in alterglobalization movements that had erupted elsewhere since the Battle of Seattle (1999). Others (usually small groups of young masked men) resorted to symbolic depredation of major World Cup sponsors (bank companies, car revenues and major media companies), also an occasional scene in alterglobalization manifestations (targeting globalized capitalism). The majority of protestors (including those illegally detained by MP) resorted to local advocacy groups, NGOs and alternative media to convey their messages and to denounce illegal detentions.
President Rousseff and major media vehicles tried to disentangle manifestations from MP repression. Two stereotypes were provided during the major representative crises in Brazil since redemocratization: “pacific protest” should be funneled through officially sanctioned channels of dialogue with authorities or displayed in further elections; “violent protest” was courtesy of terrorist groups attempting to destroy democracy.

In July 11, Brazilian trade unions, social movements and the ruling federal coalition tried to catch up with the streets – which, until then, they considered amateur protestors lacking an agenda and political relevance. The “national day for mobilization” was a dismal failure. The scale of June protests (13th-25th) amounted to millions. Trade unions gathered less than a hundred thousand in major Brazilian cities. Not sanctioned but standing still, “fragmented” protests remained sources of government criticism. MP violence increased. Pathologic homogenization disregarded pacifist/violent stereotypes. For a couple days, Rousseff (at war with polls) promised a new constitution and political reform, followed by crushing repression. By then, the Amarildo case had become known among Brazilians. Eventually, President Rousseff adopted an ambivalent tone (during her United Nations General Assembly opening speech in September): she condemned the use of violence (in generic terms), stressed that manifestations are democratic features and highlighted her disposition for dialogue\textsuperscript{vi}. 
Dilma Rousseff at the UN, stressing democratic credentials

Among the contradictions that gathered one year ago, one was astounding in its eloquence – MP violence simultaneously denied, supported, and resisted. Denied, in its relation with Amarildo’s detention, disappearance, degradation and demise, and in the harsh treatment of disarmed multitudes. Supported, politically by authorities and symbolically by media and sectors of academia, against manifestations. Resisted, for a while in the streets and for most of times, in shantytowns and “forgotten” corners of Brazil. The plethora of attitudes display the recent politicization of violence in Brazil.

Another mounting contradiction regards Brazil’s profile. According to the UN, Brazil was one of the few countries that made huge progresses in the Human Development Index since 1990, especially in terms of curbing inequality (for decades, the country had the world’s largest Gini index). At the same time, Brazil remains a country torn by gendered, ethnic and social asymmetry – a violent one. In 2013, 53000 Brazilians died due to violent causes.

In this context, the streets of 2013 provide a sense of perspective. They mirror, up to a point, the cleavages of a contradictory rising power from the Global South.
Responses from Rousseff’s government are not one-sided responses from an authoritarian ruler (unlike other emerging countries). Dilma was a left-wing militant persecuted by the 1964 civil-military dictatorship. Eventually, she joined an armed group and tried to put an end to dictatorship by violent means, something she never regretted. She was fighting, in her words, for democracy.

The failed attempt to topple the dictatorship meant Dilma was captured by her authoritarian foes. She was submitted, alongside her companions, to cruel and degrading treatment by civilian and military authorities. She was tortured, and then imprisoned for years in subhuman conditions. The shadows of cruelties and degradations inflicted on a generation of the disappeared loom larger, at the feet of Amarildo’s killing in 2013.

Dilma Rousseff, in a political trial during the civil-military dictatorship

Dilma’s duty increases, as her government broke the ice on the crimes of the dictatorship by creating Truth Commissions. Rousseff’s government is not
ready for sinister affiliations with dictatorship legacies – much to the contrary. Which, by the way, turns all the more tragic that fatal contradiction (probably, against Dilma’s will): authorities in Brazil continue displaying and deploying violence in an unsurmountable scale.

As it has been just displayed in the streets again, in the day the World Cup 2014 ended. Two hundred activists got sieged in the metro station leading to Maracanã stadium. They could neither go further, nor retreat. Encircled by a chunk of Rio de Janeiro’s largest ever security operation (26,000 heavily armed effectives including MP, the military and national security agents), the small group (criticizing the multibillion World Cup and controversial interventions in urban space) was told they should remain as they were: tear-gassed, bombed, threatened, lacking legal assistance and the wounded, medical support. The group resorted to S.O.S. On the day before, 20 activists have been illegally detained and accused of taking part in a criminal anti-Cup organization – in terms depressingly similar to Amarildo’s.

\[image\]

S.O.S. in the streets
Inside the stadium, among 74,000 affiliates who paid small fortunes for tickets, many booed President Rousseff during the game. Stakes got higher afterwards: as she delivered FIFA’s trophy, she was offended in sexist terms.

Dilma delivers the trophy and the audience, offenses

Another contradiction rears its head: Dilma’s offenders were precisely those contemplated by her controversial financial/security policies, for whom stadiums (including Maracanã) were remodeled or built from scratch overpriced, “white elites” allegedly “protected” from manifestations outside.

Certainties of traditional modernity do not apply to such complex context. Zygmunt Bauman’s liquid modernity, on the thresholds of anxiety, are more adequate for the overlapping Brazilian contradictions. Brazil provides a striking case of shifts in traditional modern sovereignty and in techniques of “disciplining” populations in a liquid world, amidst political anxiety.
Sovereign Ethics in an “Anarchic” World

Modern conceptions of sovereignty as the legitimate monopoly on the use of violence accrue a distinctive ethical status for the state. Violence lies in the background of this ethical specificity, often conflated as the provision of security against enemies and non-human threats. Non-violent means play a decisive role in the political life under sovereignty, but violence infrequently rears its head through control over bodies, be them “enemies” or “citizens”. Such control modalities frame political possibilities in space at the state’s image – a sovereign space. Cracks in the mirror are already visible.

Amidst a “global war on terror”, when presumption and preemption take hold, in a political climate of state-fueled “terrorist hysteria” no difference is made between the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes in London 2005 and the manhunt of the Tzarnaev brothers in Boston 2013.

The notion that the state acted in the best interest of citizens by killing “terrorist suspects” on spot is an ethical notion, one that presumes the state’s legitimacy to evade from public scrutiny and to deny any right of defense. Apart from casting a shadow over selective killing by state agents, readiness to support state violence (within civil society) confers those framed as “terrorists” (irrespective of their terrorizing credentials) compulsive, a priori guilty sentences quickly executed. Shock and awe tactics make no distinctions. Divergent reactions of alleged “terrorist suspects” in 2005 and 2013 were conflated into a single terrorist stereotype. “Terror-ness” as a matter of theoretical inquiry gets detached from the kind of inquiry that takes place under the sway of emergency – the political act of producing suspects in real time. Naming, authorizing that any reaction to “fighting terrorism everywhere” be settled under the gun.

Under the aegis of harassment by security forces, 21st century global waves of manifestations were met with shock, less for their amount of violence against state property and state agents, more due to the ethical dimensions they bring to surface as states label such movements terrorists in potential. The
network logic of contestation movements (puzzling against the background of the states’ own discontinuous net of sovereign bonds) facilitate attempts to frame movements as terrorists operating through cells and networks. A formal semblance becomes, through sovereign framing, a single sign of threat.

Demonizing and demoralizing protesters become, through violence, a state technique. More than repressing violently political manifestations, state violence and “terrorist tattooing” reiterate an ethical divide that locates the state above citizens and beyond any meaningful form of democratic control. Contestation, which opens new political highways, is anathema for a sovereign space at risk.

As state agents resort to violent action to silence protesters-as-“terrorists” the ethical preserve of the state is under siege. Violence attempts to control protesters’ bodies at the pace of attempts to confine possibilities. State demarcation attempts, through terror labeling and violence, to imprint on those (indocile) bodies the guilt already framed to spare the state from any excess and from any responsibility for the violent means employed. State violence against “terrorists” renders invisible the violent traits of sovereignty. Ethical-moral imperatives of the state and the “terrorness” of suspects mask aggression as protection.

Current political manifestations are not (only) framed in terms of taking the streets to get hold of the state or to partake in the workings of the state or to resist government by the state in terms of vital impulses against what is unacceptable. By bringing to surface what is actively hidden in state practices (violence by the hands of its agents) manifestations take the state beyond the presumed boundaries of its own morality. In outer realms, state violence becomes undistinguished from other violences (to which the state usually pays indifference).

Manifestations bring about a moral rupture – not simply counter-violence but counter-conduct in a Foucauldian sense. This applies for a wide range of groups with different motivations, including those that explicitly question state’s regulation on grounds of ethical resistance to violence. Active since the Cold War, made notorious in late 1990s manifestations, such movements become political actors as they politicize state ethics through nonconformist unveiling of
violent state practices (use of alterglobalization tactics; resort to alternative media outlets; happenings and street performances, as those that recently brought remembrance to atrocities committed by dictatorship in cities hosting the World Cup\textsuperscript{xxx}). Contestation brings new political possibilities to the fore.

Against the backdrop of Brazilian daily life (routinely interrupted by holidays and mega-events), manifestations – political contestations – seem violent. They break into comfort zones, breaching the tissue of symbolic power\textsuperscript{xv}, halting the unreflective, monotonous reproduction of force relations underneath language. Contestation brings symbolic violence to the fore. The ensuing anxiety gets filled by violent attempts (physical and symbolic) by state agents to fix unveiled scars.

Public refusals – to engage contestations, to provide justifications – place repression on ethical terrain. Repression brings normalizing violence. It attempts to manifest the abstract legitimacy of (what) modern states (used to be). Repression, thus, seeks to preserve the ethical status underpinning the political existence of sovereign states by delegitimizing contestation. Shutting down, detaining and demoralizing those critics before the eyes of public opinion.

Contestations of ongoing political arrangements open gates for immanent possibilities – as seen in 21\textsuperscript{st} century, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street through Indignados and alterglobalization. State repression disguised as “war on terror” or fighting religious fundamentalism had already become a cliché. Days ago, the (left-wing) French government banned from public spaces any manifestation of solidarity to Palestinians after Israeli raids in Gaza\textsuperscript{xv}. Such non-democratic measure was justified on grounds of “preserving public order” and downplaying radicalism.

By putting aside any public scrutiny in inscribing “terrorism” into those bodies, the killing of “suspects” on spot by state security forces erases political complexity, pays only lip service to anxiety and ontological security\textsuperscript{xvi}. The boundaries of sovereignty migrate from bodies subjected to violence to discourses on other bodies as a priori terrorists, reiterating state prerogatives by turning state violence legitimate (in otherwise questionable grounds).
Our contribution focuses challenges to sovereignty in liquid modernity framed on ethical terms by recent waves of manifestations in Brazil (connected to elsewhere) that brought state violence to surface, in a context of controversy over politics. Whereas a “global war on terror” takes hold, new political spaces are promoted through contestation. Aggressive state responses to manifestations are not only attempts to preserve sovereignty but also its ethical prerogatives. The right to say what politics is about and where should it be.

Instead of providing answers to questions, our focus is the violent dialectics of anxiety in contemporary Brazil, how ongoing events on the ground contribute to a broader reflection on modernity, politics, agency, possibilities.

Overlapping contradictions in the Brazilian political landscape open gates for anxiety. On the one hand, anxiety regarding “dangers that could strike unannounced” kicks in. Anticipating fears and circumscribing their impacts become cornerstones of state responses to citizens’ manifestations. On the other hand, ambivalence regarding future events rings early on. Uncertainty and ambivalence marks the encounters between state agents and citizens on streets and shantytowns – the latter framed as vandals and threats. Lacking certainty on those others’ mind-sets (not to mention their own aspirations and interpretations), state answers about those others’ behaviour are provided a priori. Protective measures are taken beforehand, barriers erected. A paranoid drive to fix the system quickly and to produce order on the spot follows waves of manifestations. Resistance to violent state responses, by their turn, mobilize collective memories and traumas from the civilian-military dictatorship to demand that a democratic state behaves accordingly. Violent answers to anxiety justify and propel resistance and political alternatives.

Political anxieties in Brazil are dealt with in violent ways, too frequently unacknowledged or underestimated. Such array of violent responses had proved remarkably resilient to shifts in the formal political system, from authoritarianism to democracy, in the revolving door of parties and coalitions since 1985. In no way such violence can be resisted without critical reflection on its conditions of possibility and reproduction techniques. Thinking is coetaneous with resisting.
Reverse Prophecies: Homogenization as nostalgic State-Crafting

_We are tired of your abuse
Try to stop us it's no use
We'll rise above_

(Black Flag, _Rise Above_, 1981)

Taking the streets to manifest a different opinion, facing acquiescent choruses that emanate, from time to time, from spaces tolerated by public authorities, is a political act imbued with vital provocation\(^{xvii}\). Lives that offer diffidence, contesting places allotted for their voices to be heard, are echoes of deterred silences – presumed represented voices meet representative monologues.

The manifested presence of different voices constitutes a challenge to political representation. In Brazil, a quasi-monopoly falls in the hands of political parties, averse to contestation by civil society\(^{xviii}\). The challenge to this monopoly of political representation at the image of the sovereign state is an ethical one.

Repression as the sole response for violent anxieties, repression of such anxieties in symbolic terms (that also amounts to a violence) grab our eyes. The way state agents manifest anxiety calls attention to the _depersonalization_ of the state in tandem with the _pathologic homogenization_ of protests\(^{xix}\).

Contesters are forcibly unified under the sign of threat. Their singular postures\(^{xx}\) are reduced to the _minimal common denominator_ that satisfices state narratives. In a rump analogy with coalitions of political parties, activists become members of a vandal group. All the same, with or without masks. By providing stereotypes, media vehicles often trigger this pathologic homogenization process, employed for the sake of containment and deterrence.

In an allegedly post-sovereign world of governance without governments and overloaded governmentality, the state is no longer visible as an integrated, cohesive, homogeneous entity identical to itself in ethical terms (in both Hegelian and Schmittian versions of the state narrative as a Modern foundation).

By framing protests (through symbolic and physical acts of violence) at the image of _what the state used to be_, the invisible state gets new outlines. Its
purveyors frame its political authority by bordering, creating the semblance of something else homogeneous, cohesive, integrated – something attempting to occupy the symbolic space “of” the (idealized) state. Protests become the rearview mirror of a state – both an anachronism and a political figure intended to confine, to discipline political imagination to the realms of nostalgic statecraft.

The sketching of state parodies – *armed movements about to take territories by force* – provides momentum for restoring credentials of a liquefied *corps politique*. Surveillance, repression become state-building techniques by reverse prophecies, enemies/targets provided *avant la letter*, re-enacting sovereign tropes in post-sovereign landscapes, preserving correlate mythologies.

The illusion of a collective identity of protestors is compulsorily produced by violent state repression and get even more reified in media representations – as shown by the incarceration of activists in October 2013 (after the unfolding of a pacific occupation of Rio de Janeiro’s House of Representatives). Through the public attribution of guilt (repression, incarceration, demoralization) state agents project into others the violence often used.

More than convenience, there is anxiety going on. Constantly invoking sovereign tropes in order to convey the semblance of a rationale to violence provides no safeguards before (often, paralyzing) fear. Results may vary.

Schmitt’s certainty in the resort to exceptional measures as the core of sovereign statecraft underestimates the ambivalent craft that made states violent entrepreneurs in the first place. Despair and fear run in-between lines. Oriented to neutralize political possibilities as they present themselves. The political figure of the state gets lost amidst political alternatives with which it is unsure of what to do. Functions of a state in a liquid world may be feigned and denied. Standstill states rely on the constant reiteration of ancient prerogatives. New events must be thrown in older mixes.

Repression reaches a vanishing point as ethical frontier-stands fail to correspond to expectations; repression becomes even more questionable, questioned, as contestations do not lie in apathy, tiredness and demobilization.
As repression takes hold, a tragic irony reaches full dialectic circle. The state becomes visible at the cost of its legitimacy – always suspended, deferred in abstract formulations, in promises of fulfilling revocable duties, in the partition of the sensible\textsuperscript{xxvi} which, in Rancière’s terms, separates and excludes by simultaneously accruing participation (symptomatically, he calls this simultaneous conjunction “police” instead of “politics”). Entanglements of manifestations and repression tear the semblance of balances apart. Anxious politics hangs on.

The necessity of dealing with other kinds of public/private lines represents a threat to nostalgic statecraft. Interestingly, this time in Brazil news were delivered from the so-called margins of society. Social agents until then invisible, not bearing a position\textsuperscript{xxvii} in politics as usual, become political entities – disarmed multitudes in the streets, in shantytowns, Indigenous nations, feminist collectives, Black movements, others that have silent voices.

We can estimate the effects of this violent revival. By targeting silent voices (entitled to protection) agents of a state in anxiety justify resistances, which deny foundational partitions as well as disciplined modes of participation. Physical strands of violence calls into question the democratic status the state cloaks in; democracy becomes a pathologic monologue, the king gets naked.

As violent tropes become tiresome and less efficient, as last resorts become commonplaces, sudden visions of a renewed state become blurred, less steady. It gets clearer: those are transient images lacking power and confidence, emptied by attrition. Margins become more evident, their lack of representation unveiled through constant uses of violence to suit a political projection. Incidentally, MP under pressure are no political guides of anxious violent responses, rather the tail-end, responsibility more political than policial. The emphasis on state agents rather than on anxious state ethics masks violence as a phenomenon peculiar to Brazilian police or Brazilian society writ large (by the way, this is the semantic terrain where HDI are made to fit in).

Uses of violence get politicized. Not only as bulwarks, but also as specific techniques to project images of what is deemed the possible in politics upon human diversities. During this process, those on margins get their specificities
erased, are considered uniform masses without a particular face. Desperate attempts to frame all protesters as vandals mirror the treatment conferred to inhabitants of shantytowns (as Amarildo), which get a priori biopolitical tattooing\textsuperscript{xxviii} as criminals. Creating this kind of common denominator is the easiest way to discipline many into one.

The events of World Cup 2014 deployed such techniques abundantly. In order to remove (200,000 people) from future stadiums, parking lots and media centers. Shantytowns on the way to tourist attractions were “pacified”, “cleansed” of “criminal elements” beforehand\textsuperscript{xxix}.

As tourists were welcomed by new facilities densely occupied by police forces, a handful of disarmed local activists were treated as a terrorist cell – illegal detentions, overtly police violence and a harsh media campaign\textsuperscript{xxx}. Such targeted violent responses are hard to disentangle from attempts to deter and to undermine criticism of full-fledged state occupations of societal spaces allegedly “left behind” in the hands of criminal rackets during decades of social inequality. As “white elite” activists get incarcerated by state agents and receive cruel and degrading treatments regularly employed by authorities in shantytowns, a securitizing discourse projects a haunting semblance of totality, not to mention \textit{exemplary} treatment, for those in the bottom of the social pyramid.

Violent tropes confuse the perception of (the image of) the state as order, as an assurance that the will of legitimate government will be answered by other means. Ignoring the consequences of violent acts, the state machinery seems to be forcing unfeasible projections upon a world that no longer holds them. A world in which state certainties (from traditional modernity) become less so.

Countering violent acts presuppose the refusal of a singularity – the one voice mobilized against the echo of a state (in the June 2013 manifestations, one of the rally calls was: “The giant was awaken” – a reference to the Brazilian national anthem, which includes the couplet “\textit{Giant by its own nature/eternally laid in a splendid cradle}”). The more plural, diverse and decentralized protests become, the better their critique. The more plural, more diverse a political act is, the harder it is to control.
Thus, to start thinking about changing something it is, firstly, necessary to ensure that it will be a plural and open act, involving many of the unheard.