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I dont trust myself | 2015 | Carla Cabanas (courtesy of the artist)

THE (RE)USES OF THE PAST

Roberto Vecchi

The October 2018 Brazilian elections will interest analysts and researchers for a long time to come. For many reasons, Brazil appears to be a political laboratory in whose experiments we can glimpse traces of our own futures. The determining features of these experiments include: the unexpected weight of social media compared to the traditional media; the abuses of 'fake news'; the politicization of the judiciary; the concealment of government intentions; and the discontent and insecurity that permeates forms of citizenship of all kinds. In broad terms, Brazil's darkest past – the tragic experience

of the 20 years after the military coup of 1964 – has been recycled in remarkable ways. This reusing of the past requires us to reflect on how traumatic histories are collectively absorbed, and on how histories can be revised, even distorted, when they are reread. When the past is reused, its image is reinscribed through the prism of a particular, usually other, ideology with the intention of evoking a particular past and creating its counter image. This manoeuvre often has hegemonic ambitions, and aims to impact public opinion.

Jair Bolsonaro, the president-elect, a reserve soldier with a mediocre track record in uniform, has for many years included Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra in the delirious heroic pantheon of his public discourse. Ustra was the head of DOI-CODI of the Second Army during the most bloody period of political repression from 1970 to 1974. Ustra was also the first Brazilian soldier to be convicted in 2008 of crimes of torture. Bolsonaro paid homage to Ustra on several occasions before and during the presidential campaign. The most vociferous occasion was in April 2016, during the impeachment vote against the elected president Dilma Rousseff, who was arrested and tortured during the dictatorship. In a dramatic rehabilitation of an abject past, Bolsonaro attacked the left that had “lost in 1964 and 2016” and praised Ustra, who had died the year before, as “Dilma Rousseff’s terror”. On another occasion, on the *Roda Viva* talk show program during election campaigning, Bolsonaro declared that his bedside book was *A verdade sufocada* (The Suffocated Truth), one of Ustra’s two memoirs.

The immediate question is: how is it possible to use such a dark history, that many people can still remember, to characterize a political personality and a way of thinking? How is it possible for such a radical revision of the past to take place? To launder the image of a torturer with a long list of summary homicides and affronts to humanity to his name? One example of Ustra’s well-known excess of cruelty is the case of the Teles family, in which the children of political prisoners, aged 4 and 5, are known to have been coerced into participating in attacks against their mother.

To think critically about the barbarism of recent history – barbarism dressed up as State policy – we must address the inherent fragility of the ways the past is reused. These present-day appeals salvage and strengthen the past. If you search the internet for Ustra’s two books, *Rompendo o silêncio* (Breaking the Silence) (1987) and *A verdade sufocada* (2006), the obvious analogies between them and the president-elect’s speeches are shocking. We see this in a certain rhetorical tone and pseudo-religiosity, and in ways arguments are constructed, in the calls to founding a proud new Brazil, in the

invocation of a sweeping divine justice, and the figuring of the army as the embodiment of a new form of civil heroism.

The renewed force of this repeated appeal to the past – a systematic reuse – reflects the naturalization of a once-intolerable history that, in becoming public, has become accepted and consensual, and conceals the process of ideological purging it has undergone. There are notorious examples of this diminished awareness – and even passive acceptance – of the historical gravity of the barbarities that occurred during the dictatorship. For example, in 2018, the carnival block “Porão do DOPS” (an allusion to the Department of Political and Social Order) sought to celebrate Ustra and the torturer Sérgio Paranhos Fleury, another symbol of the unbridled violence of the authoritarian state. This was banned at the last minute on the grounds of apology for the crime of torture, but there was a debate, during which some people suggested it would be an assault on freedom of opinion to ban it. This shows the ethical weakness of public opinion on the subject.

A few years ago, in his book *Les abus de la mémoire*, Tzvetan Todorov reflects on the uses of the past (1). He makes an essential distinction between, on one hand, discovering a memory in pieces – that is, one that is dispersed into a shared space – and, on the other, using a memory in ways contrary to its foundation in fact. Preserving a memory does not guarantee it is used correctly: there is no automatic relationship between the two. On the contrary, preserving a memory can deepen the abuse of the past. The debatable reuses of memory do not occur because of a lack of sensitivity to the past: as Jacques LeGoff noted, Nazi and fascist regimes celebrated a (mythological and reused) past more than most.

We can see the intrinsic weaknesses of traumatic memories in the National Truth Commission, which from 2011 to 2014, during President Dilma Rousseff’s mandate, investigated the crimes of the military dictatorship. These exemplary memories (to deploy another of Todorov’s categories) do not necessarily lead to a positive or socially useful processes of generalization, in which analogies are drawn with other traumatic cases. On the contrary, in this case, it fuelled a resentful reuse of history, and so turned on its head an institutional project intended to illuminate a dark past. It opened the door for executioners, not victims, to rewrite the past. In a deeply improper semantic inversion of the narrative of the dictatorship years the perpetrators claimed the mantle of victimhood for themselves. The past is made of fragile stuff.

Thus Walter Benjamin's hesitation about appeals to the past. In his theses on the concept of history, Benjamin notes that for Robespierre, ancient Rome represented a past freighted with the present. In a fragment of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin notes that the materialist historian is only interested in the past "for its quality of being completely past, finished, finally dead." That is why it can be cited. But in this hesitation lies the rub. The reuse of, and appeals to, the past would present fewer risks if that past were definitely past rather than still part of a discussion in which ideologies and reuses can profoundly alter or even reverse the ways it is evoked.

As the recent elections have shown, the still-open and malleable traces of Brazil's authoritarian past are destined to colour the future horizon.

(1) This book appeared in the wake of Pierre Vidal Naquet's *Les assassins de la mémoire*, an important meditation on possible revisionism.

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