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The environment, human rights and democracy in Brazil under Bolsonaro: dispatches from an academic symposium

Meio ambiente, direitos humanos e democracia no Brasil sob Bolsonaro: relatos de um simpósio acadêmico

Medio ambiente, derechos humanos y democracia en Brasil bajo Bolsonaro: informes de un simposio academico

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Abstract
In this article, we report on the process and outcomes of the symposium "Burning Issues: the Environment, Human Rights, and Democracy in Brazil under Bolsonaro". The symposium initiative was an attempt to make sense of a *new* Brazil that has puzzled scholars and citizens alike in recent years. The main findings from our convening efforts include: 1) the emergence of new subjectivities and political identities forming and transforming the Brazilian social fabric; 2) processes of policy and institutional dismantling in crucial areas for Brazilian human and sustainable development; and 3) attempts to resist those developments, some having been more successful than others. Finally, the article introduces and reflects upon questions on the role of *Brazilianists* in shaping the country's present and future.

Keywords: Brazil. Democracy. Human rights. Environment. Brazil studies. Jair Bolsonaro.

Resumo
Neste artigo, relatamos o processo e os resultados do simpósio "Questões críticas: meio ambiente, direitos humanos e democracia no Brasil sob Bolsonaro". O simpósio representou uma tentativa de se entender esse *novo* Brasil que tem intrigado observadores e acadêmicos em anos recentes. Os temas que emergiram como achados de nossas discussões incluem: 1) o

surgimento de novas subjetividades e identidades políticas que tem formado e transformado o tecido social brasileiro; 2) processos de desmonte institucional e de políticas públicas em áreas cruciais para o desenvolvimento humano e sustentável no Brasil; e 3) tentativas de resistência a essas mudanças, algumas delas com mais sucesso do que outras. Finalmente, o artigo apresenta reflexões sobre o papel da comunidade acadêmica de Brasilianistas ao buscar entender e influenciar o presente e o futuro do país.

Palavras-chave: Brasil. Democracia. Direitos humanos. Meio ambiente. Estudos brasileiros. Jair Bolsonaro.

Resumen
En este articulo, hacemos un informe sobre el proceso y los resultados del simposio "Cuestiones criticas: Medio ambiente, derechos humanos y democracia en Brasil bajo Bolsonaro". El simpósio ha representado un intento de comprenderse el *nuevo* Brasil que ha intrigado a observadores y académicos en los últimos años. Los temas que han emergido como conclusiones incluyen: 1) el surgimiento de nuevas subjectividades y identidades políticas que han formado y transformado el tejido social brasileño; 2) procesos de desmonte institucional y de políticas públicas en temas cruciales para el desarrollo humano y sostenible de Brasil; y 3) intentos de resisténcia a estes cambios, algunos de ellos con más éxito que otros. Por fin, el artículo presenta reflexiones sobre el rol de la comunidade académica de *Brasilianistas* en comprender e influenciar el presente y futuro del país.

Palabras clave: Brasil. Democracia. Derechos humanos. Medio ambiente. Estudios brasileños. Jair Bolsonaro.

INTRODUCTION

Those around the world who have an interest in Brazil may be familiar with the—by now, probably overused—quote in which the late composer, Tom Jobim, claims that the country is "not for beginners" (see, e.g., Garmani and Pereira 2019; Schwarcz and Starling 2020). But the last couple of years in Brazilian history—marked by a persistent economic recession, mass protests, a judicial anticorruption crusade, a questionable presidential impeachment, the incarceration of a former president who led the electoral 2018 contest, and the victory and rule of the far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro—may have proven that the country is no longer for the versed either. Since 2013, many of the working premises solidly held by scholars and analysts to make sense of Brazil seem to be "melting into thin air" (Marx 1954).

Political and economic stability, which took decades for Brazilians to build after the country redemocratized and enacted the 1988 Constitution, now seem to be distant hopes on the horizon. Future presidents will have to work hard to rebuild interbranch relations, tame inflation, manage the fiscal deficit, and generate GDP growth and jobs. The achievements in social inclusion through programs like *Bolsa Familia,* which made Brazil become an exporter of policy solutions and innovation (Morais de Sá e Silva 2017), have been almost entirely undone. The country is now back to the UN's *hunger map* and newspapers tell stories of poor people in major cities begging for cattle bones in grocery stores to cook their meals. International headlines have denounced the

burning and reckless destruction of the Amazon Forest, with the president putting the blame on NGOs and indigenous peoples. What had been globally recognized as one of Brazil's institutional gifts—a universal health care system with a strong record in preventive policies and vaccination—was politically undermined when the country needed it the most. As the country was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, its leadership did not offer evidence-based, nationally-coordinated solutions, but rather the denial of the problem and the promotion of ineffective drugs as a panacea for people to "keep up with normal life". The resulting tragedy is reflected in the high number of Covid-19 deaths (over 616,000 by the time of this publication) and the findings from the Senate Investigative Commission, which proposed the indictment of the president, high-level government officials, and private entities for acting with negligence, engaging in misinformation campaigns, and carrying out unethical health experiments to "prove" the curative properties of hydroxychloroquine and medicines alike (Senado Federal 2021).

It was amid this context that, in the Fall of 2019, we, the authors of this article, were given the task to put together an academic symposium on Brazil. The symposium was an initiative of the Department of International and Area Studies (IAS) and the Center for Brazil Studies at the University of Oklahoma. In addition to this article's authors, the symposium counted on the support of Dr Emma Colven, Eduardo Campbell, and Aline Rocha, who were on the frontlines of helping organize what was meant to take the form of three intense days of making sense of Brazil in the Norman campus of the University of Oklahoma.

Enters Covid-19: only a month before the symposium dates, the World Health Organization declared the Covid pandemic. This produced an even more challenging context for those seeking to understand Brazil and even more so for those literally struggling to survive in the country. The president's initial recognition of the seriousness of the virus and later consistent denial of it; his supporters' attacks on lockdown measures; the official promotion of drugs with no proven efficacy; and the death of over a half million people have further transformed political, economic, and societal relations in Brazil. Amid the impossibility of an in-person meeting in Norman, the symposium was taken online, a year later than originally planned. In March 2021, over three consecutive weeks, the IAS Symposium "Burning issues: the environment, human rights, and democracy in Brazil under Bolsonaro" gathered engaging—and engaged—figures in academia, politics, media, and the arts (see Box 1 and Figure 1).

Box 1. *Symposium's agenda.*

IAS 2020/21 SYMPOSIUM

Burning issues:
The Environment, Human Rights, and Democracy in Brazil under Bolsonaro

Opening musical performance:
Cacá Nascimento, Brazilian Artist

Keynote speeches:

February 26
10AM CST 1PM BSB Environment
Speaker: Eloy Terena
The first indigenous lawyer to argue—and win—a case before the Brazilian Supreme Court

March 5
10AM Human rights
Speaker: Monica Benicio
The widow of Marielle Franco—a Rio de Janeiro Congresswoman tragically assassinated in 2018—also elected to the Rio City Hall in 2020

March 12
10AM 10AM CST 1PM BSB Democracy
Speaker: Kennedy Alencar
The journalist who directed the BBC documentary "What Happened to Brazil?"
Paper Presentations (by registration only)

Presenters:
Leonardo Barros Soares (UnB) and Stephen Grant Baines (UnB)
Luís Smith (UCLA)
Pedro Rolo Benettii (USP) and Marcos Cesar Alvarez (USP)
Gustavo Rodrigues Mesquita (CEBRAP)
Deborah Silva do Monte (UFGD) and Matheus de Carvalho Hernandez (UFGD)
Danniel Gobbi Fraga da Silva (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Tayrine Dias (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), and Marisa von Bülow (UnB)
Michel Gherman (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) and Misha Klein (University of Oklahoma)
Giulia Sbaraini Fontes and Francisco Paulo Jamil Marques (UFPR)
Ana Claudia Farranha (UnB), Ana Paula Paes de Paula (UFMG) and Murilo Borsio Bataglia (UnB)
Paulo Moreira (University of Oklahoma)

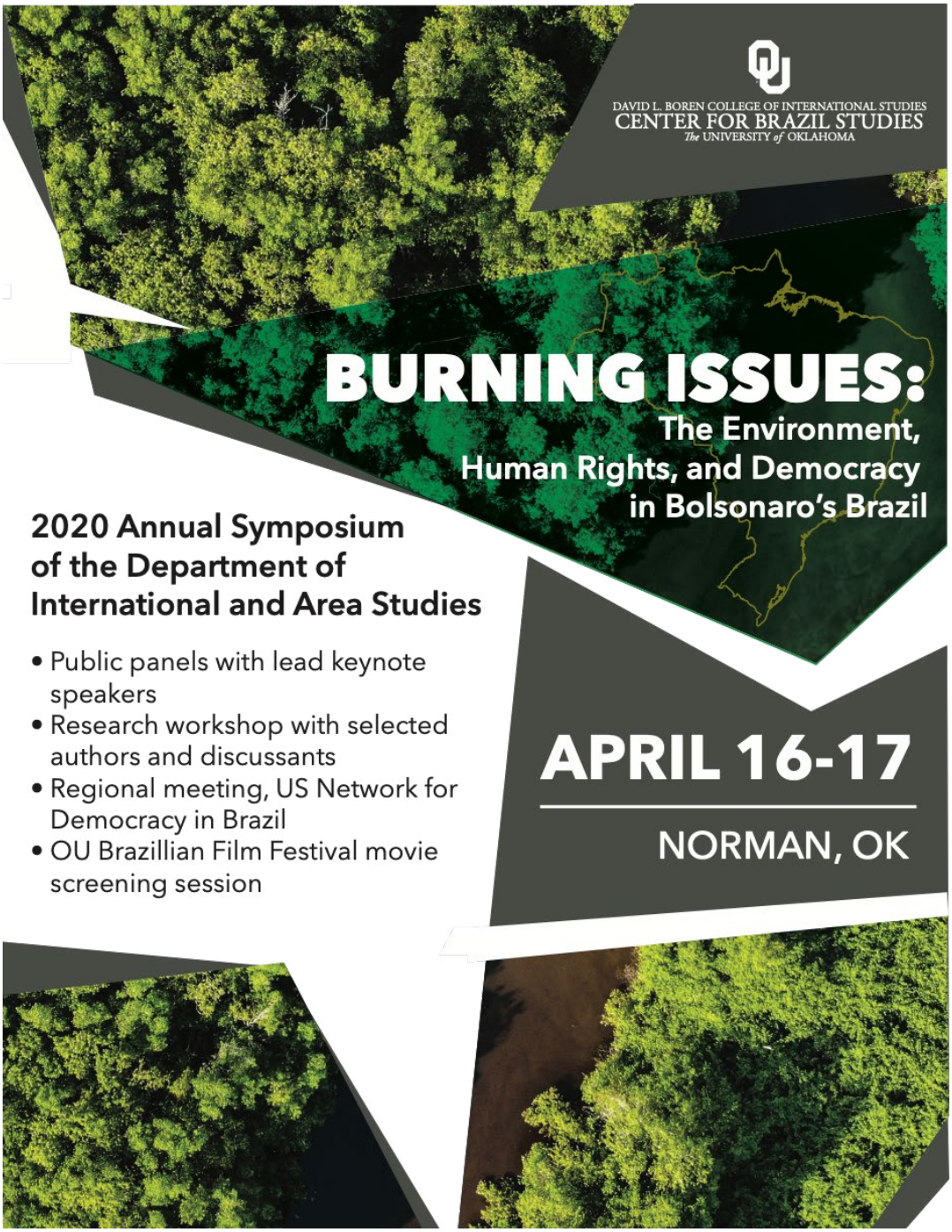

Figure 1. *Symposium's poster.*

But even if the pandemic had not happened, the challenge before us was already enormous: How could we take proper account of such a fast-changing landscape? Where should we start and how could we make sure that our initiative would produce a meaningful contribution to efforts to better understand, and maybe to help transform, the country we love so much? In this article, we report on our process of organizing the symposium and the ways in which this helped us make *some* sense not only of this new Brazil, but also of the role of *Brazilianists* in shaping the country's present and future.

The article proceeds into four sections. Section 2 includes information on the preparation of the symposium and how we chose our themes and format, which included an open call for papers released in the Spring of 2020. Section 3 reports on the main "findings" from our convening effort—the main themes that emerged from the papers we received and eventually selected for presentation, some of which are included in this special issue. The section expresses some of the features of Brazil's current critical juncture, some of which go well beyond Bolsonaro. These include: 1) the emergence of new subjectivities and political identities forming and transforming the Brazilian social fabric; 2) processes of policy and institutional dismantling in crucial areas for Brazilian human and sustainable development; and 3) attempts to resist those developments.

1 SYMPOSIUM PLANNING I: NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY, GRAPPLING WITH A NEW BRAZIL

While this varies across disciplines and traditions of inquiry, academic work usually involves two moves with respect to 'reality'. For one, academics can make predictions of how things will unfold, based on knowledge that has been accumulated in their respective fields. For example, if certain economic reforms are undertaken, some may predict that an inflow of capital and the creation of businesses and jobs will follow, while others may predict lessening levels of social protection for workers and communities. In both cases, their predictions would be anchored in theories about how economic agents behave and react to changing policies and institutional circumstances. For another, academics may seek to describe and explain events or processes that happened, testing hypotheses, or inductively seeking the causal mechanisms that account for certain outcomes. For example, if similar economic reforms are adopted by two countries but in only one of them positive outcomes are observed, scholars may want to understand the historical, sociological, or political reasons for why this happened.

Critical contexts like the one experienced in Brazil present academic work with a cruel irony. On the one hand, it is during these contexts that academic work is needed the most, to shed light on the sweeping, dramatic societal transformations that are underway. On the other hand, these contexts also deprive academics from our main tools. Our working theories may do little to predict how things will unfold, as they were developed based on a world that no longer exists as such. In addition, it is not clear what we need to be explaining—things around us are too contingent and, while we can discern what is no longer part of 'reality', it is harder for us to discern what 'reality' looks or may look like. To quote Gramsci (1971, p. 275–276), these are times when "the old is dying but the new cannot be born" .

To navigate the shifting and uncertain landscape of Brazil was, therefore, a difficult task. But we could not 'wait and see'; we had to take our chances and begin somewhere. We decided to focus on what was most apparently collapsing. While many things could fit this criterion, three were more obvious. The Amazon—and later the Pantanal—was burning at a record pace, with alarming photos and op-eds being published every other day in the international media. Brazil was also taking a sharp turn in its human rights policies. High-ranked government officials, including the President and the Human Rights Minister, were embracing regressive stances on issues like gender, race, and police brutality locally and siding with human rights violators internationally. Lastly, the democratic consensus and apparatus were under attack. In his first speech after the electoral results were released, Bolsonaro said loud and clear that he would 'put an end to all forms of activism', that 'minorities would have to conform to the will of majorities', and that those who did not conform would be sent to the 'beach end', a reference to a place where the dissidents to the civil–military government (1964–1985) were disappeared with[1].

We picked these three domains, theming the symposium after 'the environment, human rights, and democracy in Brazil under Bolsonaro'. But we did not want to merely track changes and continuities in each of these domains. Rather, we wanted to take them as entry points to make sense of Brazil more broadly. Based on what could be documented – or even explained – in each of the domains, we wanted to derive insights to understand: What was happening to the country? What forces and mechanisms were enabling or constraining the kinds of change we were all uncomfortably observing? Moreover: were these changes definitive or where they being resisted? If the latter, what forms of resistance could be noticed and how effective could they be?

Once our themes and ambition were defined—and for the strategic reasons we indicate in section 4—, we issued an open call for papers that was broadly circulated among Brazilian Studies community and on social media. The response to the call for papers, both in Brazil and in the United States, was extremely encouraging. In total, the symposium academic committee received sixty-six proposals, of which twelve were approved. Proposals covered a large breadth of topics, from diverse disciplinary homes, many of them interdisciplinary in nature.

The following sections take stock of symposium discussions and of research paper findings, seeking to advance a synthesis of new crosscutting issues that are central to understanding the new Brazil. The symposium was planned and organized during Bolsonaro's government, but findings herein presented are meant to inform reflections on the reconstruction of a post-pandemic Brazil, hopefully post-Bolsonaro.

1 Guilherme Amado, Bolsonaro sugere lugar de execução da ditadura para servidores públicos, O Globo, 11/01/2019, available at: https://oglobo.globo.com/epoca/guilherme-amado/bolsonaro-sugere-lugar-de-execucao-da-ditadura-paraservidores-publicos-1-24056200, last access 7 Dec 2021.

2 MAIN 'FINDINGS' STEMMING FROM THE SYMPOSIUM

2.1 Identities

Most of those who follow Brazilian politics and policy more closely and who were troubled by the rise and rule of Bolsonaro tend to focus on the 'grand scheme of things' and the most noticeable facets of this shift. This does not exclude important criticisms to individuals and institutions in both the government and the opposition since 2013. The PT made key mistakes in economic policy (Singer 2020) and, despite having promised to change politics, engaged in business as usual—trading control over parts of the government for political support in the legislature and developing promiscuous relationships with businesses. The PSDB did not accept its electoral defeat and, long before Bolsonaro would imitate Trump and allege that Brazilian elections are rigged, cast doubt on the vote count and file a claim that the 2014 elections had been defrauded[2]. Higher courts, especially the Supreme Court, were pusillanimous and let *java jato* go all out in an anticorruption crusade based on power abuses that intended to bring the political system down (de Sa e Silva 2020a). Important party leaders went along with a baseless impeachment process led by a notoriously corrupt Speaker of the House. The Brazilian mainstream media threw fuel to the bonfire, overlooking—when not actively supporting—these caustic processes (Feres Junior and Gagliardi 2021; Dammgard 2019). Maybe some in the media hoped that these processes would enable the return to power of a 'moderate right' along the lines of what Fraser (2017) calls "progressive neoliberalism"—although when the electoral contest was set between a PT candidate and Bolsonaro, important news outlet contributed to 'normalizing' the far-right candidate and/or to reinforcing the idea that Brazil's 'functioning institutions' would be able to tame him (Feres Junior and Gagliardi 2021).

These systemic interpretations of the rapid transformations observed in Brazil are valid and should continue to be pursued by Brazilianists. However, they focus on high-level dynamics and actors and, accordingly, they miss some other 'deeper' phenomena—which not only may have supported those high-level dynamics and the moves of high-level actors, but which can also sustain the country's far-right shift much beyond Bolsonaro. In our symposium, a gateway to understanding such phenomena was open through systematic references to changes in subjectivities and political identities, all of them with the possibility of long-term impact on Brazilian social and political relations.

2 Lucas Borges Teixeira, 'Aécio pediu auditoria em 2014 para justificar derrota em MG, diz Toffoli', UOL, available at: https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2019/08/31/aecio-pediu-auditoria-em-2014-para-justificar-derrota-em-mg-diz-toffoli.htm, last access 7 Dec 2021.

The debate about subjectivities and political identities in Brazil is anything but new. In studies of Brazil's transition to democracy, for example, Pinheiro (1991; 2002) famously coined the idea of "socially implanted authoritarianism". He argued that while Brazil was proving capable to building democratic institutions—e.g.: free and fair elections, separation of powers, accountability bodies—there still existed in the country a fair share of authoritarian predispositions whose roots ran more deeply in the country's history and the social, economic, and political hierarchies that constitute it. Yet, though there are more and more exceptions to this (Pinheiro Machado and Scalco 2014 and 2020; Feltran 2020; Almeida 2020; Cesarino 2019; Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021; Klein, Mitchell, and Junge 2018; Junge et al 2021; Kalil 2018 and 2021; Castro Rocha 2021), efforts to track the changes and continuities in social/political values and identities among Brazilians became more and more scarce—when they were not coopted by political discourse that, for example, attempted to collapse the experience of a large and diverse group of Brazilians under the attractive label of a 'new middle class' (Neri 2011).

The papers submitted, selected, and presented in our symposium demonstrate both the importance of studies on political identities and the breadth with which they must be conceived, if we wish to remain *relatively* on top of a rapidly changing society and polity. Authors documented the emergence of various new forms of subjectivity and political identity that turn Brazilian Studies—and any prospective analysis of Brazil's future – into a murky and puzzling arena. For example, Benetti and Alvarez (in this issue) examine the discourse shared by federal legislators elected in 2018 and who identified with the 'bullet caucus'—a group that cuts across several political parties and that advocates for hardline solutions in public safety and criminal justice policies—, based on Twitter publications. In the discourse they find, state violence against 'criminals' and the expansion of police and military power are legitimized and glorified in a needed 'war on crime' plot—while the political establishment, human rights advocates, and the media are denounced as supporters of 'criminals'. One can argue that the identity these legislators claim—the cleaners of a morally-decayed polity—is not new: it is a mere reiteration of Pinheiro's "socially implanted authoritarianism", its contempt for due process rights, and its emphasis on 'law and order'. But there are ways in which those old authoritarian traits are being transformed and giving rise to new political demands. An example is the emphasis on flexibilization of access to firearms, which became one of the pillars of Bolsonaro's candidacy (Kalil 2021) and of the bullet caucus's policy platform, which is framed in terms of a right to 'self-defense'. This seeks to transfer some of the authoritarian response to 'crime' to the hands of private individuals, weakening the state's monopoly of violence even further. It also remarkably reflects an international circulation of right/far-right ideas and frames, with the United States serving as the main source of inspiration in proposals for facilitated access to guns.

The (re)construction of subjectivities and identities appeared in even more intriguing terms in studies of other groups – from young activists to Jews—and scales—national versus local. Silva, Dias, and von Bülow (2020) documented the agenda and frames advanced by the Free Brazil Movement – *Movimento Brasil Livre* or *MBL*—based on an analysis of the movement's Facebook posts. They conclude that the movement adopts a 'fusionist' approach, combining neoliberal economics with social conservatism—framed around 'moral decay' and 'corruption'—which enabled it to mobilize a broad constituency. Bolsonaro also adopted the same kind of 'fusionism', which, in the view of the authors, helps explain his success. The 'fused' identity documented by the authors also owes to global linkages: they claim it results from connections between the MBL and its United States counterpart *Students for Liberty* and reflects an international circulation of ideas initially developed in the Mont Pelerin Society with participation of intellectuals like Hayek and von Mises.

While the mechanisms leading to this 'fusionism' are clear, its appeal to a 'broad constituency' is not intuitive. Why would so many Brazilians—especially the youth where the MBL had deeper penetration—buy into the promises of neoliberal economics and free markets? The relative place of markets and the state in emerging political identities has driven some important research efforts but more needs to be done. Brazil's economic performance under Bolsonaro and his financier pick for the Ministry of the Economy Paulo Guedes has been a fiasco, while the pandemic brought about the importance of governments, shaking the neoliberal consensus. As the duo delivered high inflation and unemployment, high interest rates, and low—if any—GDP growth, will the MBL/Bolsonaro 'fusionism' remain influential and capable of mobilizing a broad constituency in 2022 and beyond?

Klein and Gherman (in this issue) write about another puzzling instance in such construction of new identities that has characterized our 'new' Brazil. Klein and Gherman notice that, while there is no shortage of racism and Nazi-sympathy in the Brazilian right/far-right, Israeli symbols abounded in right/far-right demonstrations (not carried by Jews!) and the 'Jewish community' (sic) developed much proximity to Bolsonaro, as epitomized by the speech—full of racist remarks—he gave, still as a presidential candidate, at the Hebraica Club in Rio de Janeiro in 2017. They argue that this is a mutually constitutive process in which many Jews have become *Bolsonaristas* while *Bolsonaristas* become quasi-Jews. Key in this process is that the meaning of Judaism gets defined in a particular way—as a bulwark against Islam expansion and in defense of Western civilization—which the authors astutely call an 'imaginary Judaism'. The construction of this new identity serves two pernicious consequences. For one, it enables the exclusion of Jews who are pro-Palestine, left-wing, and liberal Zionists from the Jewish community—a *disconversion* process that turns them into 'non-Jew

Jews'. For another, it helps 'sanitize' Bolsonaro, who is given a trump card—no puns intended—against accusations of racism and Nazi-sympathy he otherwise would have a harder time denying. All of this happens amid changes and resulting tensions in the Brazilian racial, religious, and socioeconomic structure—sometimes in line with global processes—to which Jews respond and in which Jews come to participate.

These processes happen not only at a national or group level but also more locally. A working paper submitted by Luis Smith (2020)[3] based on ethnographic work in the Amazon region shows, for example, that local oligarchies and entrepreneurs mobilize a 'populist discourse' to sustain deforestation. They frame protectionist policies as being a creation of elites (foreigners, NGOs, Southerners, the rich) against the interest of 'the people'. According to the author, this (re)construction of identities is key to the building of an organic support basis for Bolsonaro in his fieldwork site. Yet these insights certainly have implications beyond the Amazon and across 'central Brazil', where we see, for example, a new identity emerged after around the 'Agro' mantra, represented in large trucks with Bolsonaro stickers and expensive billboards with his photos—and especially in the wake of the pandemic, when agricultural exports became the primary driver of the Brazilian economy.

In sum, our symposium conversation invites new, deeper research on emerging political identities, their local and transnational roots, their sustainability, and their ability to shape Brazil's future. We hope that researchers in Brazil and abroad will pick up some of these pressing issues and that, sooner rather than later, we will have much more clarity about them.

2.2 Systematic policy and institutional dismantling

The field of public policy has grown significantly among Brazilian scholars, along with the interest of Brazilianists in institutions and policies designed and implemented in Brazil. Such interest dates back to classical comparative works by Peter Evans and Kathryn Sikkink, who sought to understand Brazil's development (or lack thereof) by comparatively looking at the Brazilian state, its institutions and society (Evans 1995), and the values and ideas cultivated by the bureaucracy (Sikkink 1991). Brazilian policy scholars have also organized themselves in new academic associations such as the National Association of Teaching and Research in the field of Public Policies (ANEPCP) and have become very active in international

3 *Luis Smith* is a pseudonym adopted by a researcher who was still conducting fieldwork in the Amazon region and thought that, if their identity was publicized, this might compromise his ability to collect data and endenger his personal safety. For these reasons, we are still referring to them as *Luis Smith*. We hope that their research outputs will be made public soon and under better conditions for scientific work in Brazil.

scholarly societies such as the International Public Policy Association (IPPA) and the International Political Science Association (IPSA). Such growth of the policy studies field was possible due to a combination of factors since the early 2000s: the expansion of public universities with the hiring of new faculty; the provision of increased public funding for research; the availability of public funds that allowed Brazilian scholars to travel internationally and even supported the residence of international scholars in Brazil; and the important growth (in size and impact) of Brazilian public policies, especially at the federal level.

The golden years of Brazilian public policies, which began timidly with Cardoso (1994-2002) and saw significant expansion under Lula (2003-2010) and Rousseff (2011-2016) were reflected in the growing involvement of Brazilian scholars and Brazilianists studying Brazilian public policies. In fact, some scholars became specialized in studying the export processes of Brazilian "best-practices" to other national contexts, in the framework of the international literature on policy transfer, policy diffusion, and related concepts (Morais, 2005; Porto de Oliveira, 2017; Milhorance, 2018). Brazilian public policies became the central asset for Brazilian official cooperation with other countries of the Global South. Instead of providing large sums of financial resources, Brazil rather collaborated with other developing countries by sharing the country's policy practices and models (Morais de Sá e Silva, 2021a). Such growing scholarly engagement with Brazilian policies produced critical analyses of their shortcomings, as well as important records of their "nuts-and-bolts" (Lindert et al. 2007).

As democratic backsliding began to ensue in Brazil, initially with the highly controversial 2016 impeachment and later with the election of far-right Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, practitioners and scholars began to grapple with a new phenomenon: institutional and policy dismantling. The literature that was then available to support this line of research had begun in Europe to help explain policy reduction in the context of fiscal constraints. Michael Bauer and colleagues had coined the term "policy dismantling", which was defined as "a change of direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or lowers their intensity. It can involve changes to these core elements of policy and/or it can be achieved by manipulating the capacities to implement and supervise them" (Bauer et al., 2012, p. 35).

Current processes of policy dismantling taking place in Brazil have tested the limits of the existing literature, pushing it to consider their authoritarian nature (Morais de Sa e Silva, 2021b). Research papers presented at the symposium identified institutional and policy dismantling occurring across various fields of federal policy: race and racial equality (Mesquita 2021); indigenous rights (Barros Soares and Baines in this issue); foreign policy and human rights (Monte and Hernandez in this issue);

and participatory policymaking (Farranha et al in this issue). Running across all those works is the identification that the expectation that institutions were functioning was, in fact, an illusion, as Bolsonaro set course to erode federal institutions and the federal policies implemented by them.

The initial targets for attacks are well represented in the group of papers presented in the symposium, some of them published in this special issue. Bolsonaro came to the presidency with a clear anti-human rights agenda, contempt for the environment, and reckless anti-democratic means. For some institutions and their policies, that meant a wholesale attack on their core business. As highlighted by Barros Soares and Baines in this special issue, dismantling of policies for indigenous rights provide an exemplary case. Inclusive indigenous protections had been built since the 1988 Constitution and albeit being far from perfect, Bolsonaro had an open, explicit and proud intention to dismantle them. Barros Soares and Baines are able to present the reader with the many instances in which Bolsonaro openly manifested his racist stance towards indigenous populations and his clear intention to end policies meant for their protection. The authors identify that policy dismantling has occurred through three main processes: "(1) the dismantling of the land claims recognition policy and institutions; (2) the dismantling of the protection of indigenous lives due to the increasing violence against indigenous peoples and the Covid-19 pandemic; and (3) the dismantling of the integrity of traditional territories related to government plans to open indigenous lands to large-scale agricultural and mining operations" (Barros Soares and Baines in this issue). In this case, policy dismantling has happened by means of a complete deconstruction and replacement of the rationale that used to inform policy, namely indigenous policy. Bolsonaro's views and discourse towards indigenous populations go as far as to proclaim that "they are becoming more and more human like us"[4], a sentence for which there used to be no room in the framework of Brazilian indigenous policy since 1988.

Mesquita (2021) identifies a similar track of policy dismantling in the field of federal policies for racial equality. Bolsonaro's denial of racism is a major setback in Brazil's recent history of recognition that the State ought to intervene, through public policies, to reduce structural inequalities marked by the remnants of slavery (Souza 2017). The story told by Mesquita coincides with that of Barros Soares and Baines: since the campaign trail, Bolsonaro has been vocal about his racist views. Rather than taming his racist inclinations, Brazilian institutions and laws have rather succumbed to his views and those of his appointees. The result is a combination of demoralized institutions—Funai for indigenous policies, SNPIR for racial equality—weaker federal policies, and the undoing of the rather small and insufficient progress that had been

4 UOL (2020) cited in Barros Soares and Baines in this special issue.

achieved by previous administrations. Fast-forward to 2021, ENEM, the national university entrance exam, had the most elite and white group of students taking the exam in the past decade.[5]

Policy dismantling has not been limited to domestic policies. Monte and Hernandez highlight the reversals in Brazilian foreign policy since Bolsonaro took office in 2019. Those reversals are particularly acute in the field of international human rights, with Brazil undoing its historically progressive position towards women's reproductive rights, gender, and LGBTQ rights. Although one might expect that consolidated policies may be harder to dismantle, especially in traditional and long-existing institutions such as Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Itamaraty), Monte and Hernandez find that the reversal of Brazil's position towards human rights issues was not only possible but also rational in responding to the ideological preferences of Bolsonaro's electorate. If, on the one hand, Itamaraty still stands as an institution and Brazilian diplomats are still showing up for work, the consequences of such reversals in Brazilian foreign policy are extensive. Brazil's international reputation has been damaged, as observed in Bolsonaro's isolation by world leaders during multilateral meetings, be it in the OECD, the G20, or COP26.[6] Additionally, Monte and Hernandez identify how Bolsonaro and his Human Rights Minister legitimized conservative civil society groups, granting them access to multilateral fora where international human rights norms are built. Those processes mean that not only has Brazilian foreign policy become less committed to human rights, it has contributed to weakening human rights consensus at the international level.

If the above three papers may give the impression that dismantling may be exclusively symbolic or limited to discourse, Farranha, Bataglia, and Paes de Paula present the evidence of how dismantling has affected the very methods of Brazilian policymaking. The authors explain how different policy fields had marked at the federal level (although not exclusively) by participatory bodies that were expected to inform policymaking and monitor the implementation of policy goals defined with the participation of civil society. All federal participatory bodies were extinguished by Bolsonaro with the strike of a pen in April of 2019, four months into his presidency. Even though some of those participatory bodies have been recreated, Farranha and colleagues highlight how the recreation process has been erratic and non-transparent. Even the recreated bodies seem to have been hollowed out of their democratic character and purpose. Consequently, unlike in the past, federal policies are no longer checked or informed by civil society perspectives that could greatly contribute to bridging the gap between bureaucratic structures in Brasília and social needs around the country.

5 Folha (2021), "Enem é o mais branco e eleitista em mais de uma década", available at https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/educacao/2021/09/enem-2021-e-o-mais-branco-e-elitista-da-decada.shtml

6 Correio Brasiliense (2021), "Com agenda à margem da cúpula, Bolsonaro fica isolado no G20", available at https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/politica/2021/11/4959641-brasil-fica-isolado-no-g20.html.

In sum, symposium papers and discussions were convergent in identifying that policy dismantling in Brazil has not been exclusive to the dismantling of a couple of federal policies in specific fields. It has taken a systematic form, one that originates in the president's conservative views—as well as in those of his electorate—and then produces deep-running effects that lead federal agencies to contradict long established positions, to weaken or undo laws and regulations, and to produce policy without the participatory means they could count on in the past. The result is a less democratic Brazilian state with eroding capacity to face the old deep-rooted inequalities and the new challenges of a changing climate, a global pandemic, and a Whatsapp-divided society.

2.3 Resistance

Overall, the picture of our 'new Brazil' painted by the contributions to our symposium is a somber one: Brazil's far-right shift is grounded in—and supported by—new political identities and the Bolsonaro era is characterized as an era of policy and institutional dismantling. Yet their submissions also helped us *begin* to envision the terms and pathways in which we can think of resistance to Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo. Broadly speaking, two are such pathways: the *institutional* and the *non-institutional*. The institutional pathway involves government branches and actors like the mainstream media. The non-institutional involves direct mobilization by civil society groups and others.

Four general observations can be made about resistance. First, while initiatives of resistance can be documented, we still lack information on whether and to what extent they are working—which is understandable since the processes of policy and institutional dismantling that each of them are confronting are still unfolding. For example, Moreira (in this issue) analyzes how the works of Brazilian artists, such as the films *Bacurau* and *The Edge of Democracy,* have conveyed powerful political statements and served as means of resistance. These works, says Moreira, have "galvanized people's imagination and punctured the version of recent events tailored by the media," which, as he understands—and we agree—enabled Brazil's far-right turn. Cultural policy is, indeed, one of the main sectors weaponized by Bolsonaro and there is no doubt that artists are at the forefront of resistance to Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo; yet further research is needed to determine whether/under what conditions such resistance 'works' and can cut across the layers of Brazil's reconfigured social fabric and the new political identities highlighted above. In a similar direction, Farranha, Bataglia, and Paes de Paula (in this issue) highlight the campaign in defense of participatory institutions such as public policy councils carried out by civil society organizations

and academics, entitled 'Brazil needs counsels'. The campaign produced videos and several digital materials—but further research is needed to determine its effects and the effectiveness of its strategy. This kind of knowledge will be of key importance in the future even when Bolsonaro is no longer in power.

Moreover, even though initiatives of resistance can be documented, it does not always follow that they are feasible or successful. Limits to resistance or to successful resistance owe to both societal and institutional causes. An example of the former is in resistance to Bolsonaro's dismantling of racial equality policies, analyzed by Mesquita (2021). Simply put, the author documents the construction of racial equality policies since the 1988 Constitution—with emphasis on the creation of a government unit dedicated to this matter in the Lula da Silva administration—which Bolsonaro began reversing based on a denial of race and racism. As part of this crusade, tells Mesquita, in 2020 the President of Palmares Foundation, Sergio Camargo, published a series of articles on the Foundation's website detracting the former slave Zumbi as a made-up character, forged by the left to radicalize Blacks and to forcibly racialize social relations in the country. At some point, he notices that a judicial decision was issued that forced the removal of these articles from the Foundation's website, yet "those texts are now available on right-wing cultural websites". As Bolsonarismo grows as a movement that taps on these different groups and identities available in our 'new Brazil', achievements in Courts, Congress, and the 'public opinion' are insufficient to constrain Bolsonaro's policy and institutional dismantling, suggesting that a broader and longer political battle needs to be fought by those seeking to resist him and his rule.

Examples of the latter—institutional shortcomings limiting resistance—provided by symposium contributors are also telling and should illuminate future efforts to reconstruct Brazilian democracy. For example, the paper by Monte and Hernandez (in this issue) deals precisely with the difficulty of progressive civil society organizations to resist reversals in Brazilian foreign policy. They claim this is due to two reasons. For one, foreign policy is theatrically used by Bolsonaro to incense and radicalize his political basis domestically. But for another, foreign policymaking has been an insular domain in which participation of non-state actors is subject to strict control by the powers that be, which enabled the Bolsonaro government to selectively admit its interlocutors: it opened doors to Christian and conservative groups while foreclosed channels of participation to progressive NGOs.

Just as intriguing were the provisional conclusions of Fontes and Marques (2020) when looking at the media, with emphasis on 482 editorials of the major newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* in 2020. They found that, although in this timeframe Bolsonaro launched several attacks on the media, *Folha* hardly used its editorials to react. They

recognize that there may be strategic reasons why newspapers may not engage in such kind of open confrontation with presidents and that there are other ways in which they can confront presidents besides editorials; however, the troubling conclusion remains that, in such a critical time, a major newspaper would not make an open defense of journalism.

Third, the contributions to our symposium show that Courts occupy a special place in resistance strategies. Black movements, as stated above, looked for help from Courts against the dismantling of racial equality policies. Barros Soares and Baines (in this issue) also show that indigenous groups engaged in high-level litigation against Bolsonaro's attacks on indigenous and environmental policies. Farranha, Bataglia, and Paes de Paula (in this issue) similarly highlight the role of Courts in resistance to Bolsonaro's attacks on participatory institutions. Sometimes the results of mobilizing Courts are positive. In the defense of participatory institutions referred to by Farranha, Bataglia, and Paes de Paula, the Supreme Court issued an injunction that forbade the Bolsonaro administration from shutting down bodies that had been created by statutory law. But there may be several problems with this strategy. To begin with, despite having been widely idealized during *lava jato,* Brazilian Courts are far from committed to basic rights and the Constitution's social-democratic project (de Sa e Silva 2011, 2017, and 2020b). In addition, Courts—especially the Supreme Court – must calculate carefully how they will spend their limited political capital; they cannot block all the measures by the Executive (Rosenberg 2008; Helmke 2002). Lastly, while Courts can slow down the policy and institutional dismantling that characterizes the Bolsonaro government, they may not be able to fully stop it. Farranha, Bataglia, and Paes de Paula tell us this loud and clear. While in response to the Court's injunction the government maintained several bodies, it also—to the extent that it legally could do so—reconfigured these bodies to radically curb popular participation, hollowing out their democratic content.

This leads to our fourth observation: the most promising cases of resistance combine the use of both institutional and non-institutional means. The resistance of indigenous groups that Barros Soares and Baines write about stands out. According to the authors, it involves the use of media and digital means and the mobilization of transnational networks of advocacy and denunciation—in addition to litigation.

In this context, we enthusiastically suggest that Brazilianists dig deeper into and begin to unpack experiences of resistance in our 'new Brazil', mapping their tactics, explaining their successes and/or failures, and perhaps even facilitating dialogue and mutual learning between different groups in Brazil and—why not?—between those groups and their counterparts abroad.

3 SYMPOSIUM PLANNING II: RENEWING BRAZIL STUDIES

It is correct—yet insufficient—to say that the difficulties involved in making sense of this new Brazil are due to the shifting character of the country. Part of them is, too, related to deficiencies in the research agendas and approaches that predominate in the field of Brazilian studies. While we are still lacking more systematic studies of the literature produced by Brazilianists since the 1988 Constitution was enacted, as consumers and producers of this literature our sense is that it approached Brazil's contemporary history with incredible optimism. With few exceptions, such as some works examining public safety and racial inequality, most books and articles on Brazil —particularly since the 2000s—published in the Anglo-American world portrayed the country as a functional democracy, with consolidated institutions, and which had managed to produce successful policies leading to economic stabilization and social inclusion. If in the twentieth century Brazil was 'the country of the future', there were now many voices claiming that 'the future had come'.

None of this was completely incorrect—otherwise, we would not be talking of some of the processes experienced post-2013 in terms of 'dismantling', 'backsliding', or 'erosion'. But our focus on and enthusiasm with the successes that Brazil achieved seems to have come at the expense of attention to more persistent problems that the post-2013 crises would unleash and expand. From this viewpoint, the surprise that came with Brazil's failure was our failure as well. Despite our investment in studying the country, we did not make an accurate sense of what it was, nor could we accurately anticipate what it could become.

While there can be many reasons for this failure—including an inevitable bias that leads most academics to study what they like and neglect what they dislike—we argue that it is at least in part due to structural deficiencies in the field of Brazilian studies. Like other branches of 'area studies' in the United States, Brazilian studies were born out of intellectual curiosity as well as foreign policy interests. High-level decisionmakers in the United States found it strategic to amass information on the social, economic, and political structures in what was then called the 'Third World', to navigate the Cold War context and ensure capitalist hegemony. No 'area studies' community was ever confined to these boundaries and, in many areas, our knowledge of 'Third World' countries—which back then also lacked strong university systems—owe significantly to foreigners who devoted their careers to studying them: Thomas Skidmore's (2005) studies on racial relations in Brazil and Werner Baer's (2014) studies on Brazilian economics are but some examples. But the field of Brazilian studies that these and other scholars helped create and inhabited had an inherent point of vulnerability: it relied upon and reproduced itself based on elite connections with

the—back then—small cadre of English speakers in the country, usually all located in a handful of universities in the Brazilian Southeast. These elites were sophisticated and informed but—as Bourdieusian political sociology teaches us—they also shared a common habitus and common predispositions (Bourdieu 1977). Global North scholars are thus bound by the worldviews of their close-knit circle of sources—especially if they do not speak Portuguese—while some pressing themes and questions pertaining to that 'deeper Brazil' are ignored (Bourdieu 2002).

Nowhere this limitation in the field of Brazilian studies became more evident than in the reaction of the Anglo-American academia to *lava jato,* the anticorruption initiative that burst in 2014 and became entangled to all relevant political events in the 2014–2018 timeframe: Rousseff's impeachment, Lula's arrest and barring from the 2018 electoral process, and the election of Jair Bolsonaro—who ran, in part, as a 'law and order' candidate—to the presidency. While *lava jato* uncovered a true and serious corrupt scheme in the Brazilian oil company Petrobras, scholars were timid to question the operations 'big bang' approach to anticorruption and its violations of law. Instead, the United States academia contributed to glorify the operation and its agents, embraced the discourse that *lava jato* represented the working of virtuous and functioning institutions, and—as many colleagues and graduate students from elite universities shared with us—turned criticisms to *lava jato* into a taboo. Not even the disclosure of leaked messages showing judicial and prosecutorial misconduct in the operation were sufficient to change the minds of some US scholars. In Brazil, in the meantime, the scenario was different. Unmitigated support to *lava jato* did prevail in the media, but in social and behavioral sciences departments—which, unlike in the early days of Brazilian studies, were now fully institutionalized and operational in the country—serious and sophisticated empirical studies on the methods and consequences of *lava jato* were leading to more nuanced and skeptical evaluations (Rodrigues 2020; Pimenta 2020; Bello, Capela, and Keller 2020; Carvalho and Palma 2020).

Why did, then, US academia seem to have approached *lava jato* with more passion than reason? The answer is likely multipronged, including stereotypical understandings of developing countries as corruption dens—even if at the heart of *lava jato* was the same cooptation of politics by money that the United States Supreme Court made completely legal in FEC *v.* Citizens United—or a well-documented enthusiasm with judicial crusades and the global expansion of judicial power (Garth 2014; Gordon 2010; Halliday, Karpik, and Feeley 2007 and 2012; Tate and Vallinder 1995). But part of the explanation owes to the pattern of international circulation of ideas that we wrote about above and elsewhere (de Sa e Silva 2019a and 2019b) and that, to a large extent, has sustained the field of Brazilian studies, if not area studies in general. Many United

States scholars rely on close-knit elite networks in the media and academia that, in turn, hold positions in local struggles for power and to whom a certain story about corruption/anticorruption mattered. It was one in which corruption was widespread, powered (if not invented) by the Left, and in which *lava jato* represented the country's redemption by disinterested judges and prosecutors. Without a doubt, this is a good story. But good stories are rarely true and this one leaves out much more important questions such as: How does growing party fragmentation contribute to resource misallocation? How did loopholes in places like Petrobras persist, regardless of an overall history of modernization in governance? How did the social and institutional organization of legal careers create unaccountable political agents and what dangers does this entail? How did the judicial abuses in *lava jato* build on and expand a history of 'socially implanted authoritarianism'? Brazilianists would help advance a more significant understanding of Brazil by raising these questions than by quickly embracing the simplistic accounts that rest at the surface of Brazilian media debates and elite discourse.

Of course, this 'thin' embodiment of Brazilian Studies, based on superficial contact with elites and focused on easy stories rather than the more difficult ones, is not there by chance. Instead, it is enabled by the hierarchies and systems of incentive established in the United States academia and aggravated by its ongoing neoliberal turn. United States scholars have no incentive to develop deep engagement with their Brazilian counterparts since, as a rule, their tenure and promotion decisions will be made based on peer-reviewed articles or University-press books published in English and in United States venues. Outreach efforts like seminars or talks, where Brazilian voices could be heard and incorporated in the making of Brazilian studies scholarship must be kept under control not to take up much of a scholar's research time and compromise her/his productivity. The same goes for collaborations with Brazilian universities and the Brazilian media, as well as publications in Portuguese that could engage Brazilian peers and students.

Yet some conditions to reverse this were put in place in the last few decades. To begin with, the field of Brazilian Studies gave rise to several scholars who did come to develop the kind of deep engagement we are advocating for. They learn Portuguese, conduct extensive fieldwork in Brazil, and develop not only professional but also community ties in the country. It is true that most of these scholars come from Anthropology or rely on qualitative/mixed-method research approaches. In other words, their identities as Brazilianists and positionalities regarding Brazil may have been a contingency of their disciplinary training and ethos. Be as it may, they are contributing to reshape the field in interesting ways: cultivating and expanding a diverse set of ties with Brazil and Brazilians and working to create and expand opportunities for their students and mentees, which in turn extends their own networks.

Adding to this are investments made by individuals or organizations that provide these scholars with good infrastructure to pursue their work. The University of Oklahoma rose as one such enablers. In the 2010s, the University hired three Brazilian Studies faculty—two of them from Brazil—and a Portuguese language faculty —also from Brazil. In addition, OU created a physical study center in Rio de Janeiro to host faculty and students in study abroad and fieldwork—which unfortunately was closed in 2019—, and supported the creation of a Center for Brazil Studies that we co-direct on the Norman campus and in which we collaborate with other key faculty from other OU departments—Misha Klein (Anthropology), Paulo Moreira (Portuguese), Leticia Galizzi (Portuguese), Lara Souza (Biology), Xiangming Xiao (Biology), and Carolina Arlota (Law). Our Center has programs designed to foster exchange between Brazil and the United States: hosting Brazilian graduate and undergraduate students as visiting scholars/researchers and interns—many of whom are black/brown, women, LGBTQ, and/or fist-generation college students[7]; disseminating cutting-edge knowledge on Brazil originally produced in Portuguese via a *One Pagers* publication series[8]; educating students and faculty on our campus on Brazilian affairs through courses and events[9]; and seeking large grants for convergence, transdisciplinary, and transnational research projects with partners in Brazil and the US on pressing issues like environmental preservation in the Amazon and responses to Covid-19.

These investments are further potentialized by the degree of globalization and technological development we currently experience—which was not a given in the early days of Brazilian Studies. The pandemic, which forced us to hold the symposium virtually, made this clear. Not only could we carry on the event with no need for long-distance travel, but we could also do it bilingual—with Portuguese/English interpretation being provided and accessible at a mouse click. These solutions are here to stay and can further facilitate intellectual and educational exchanges between Brazil and the United States. Students can take courses, faculty can host meetings, interviews and other forms of primary data collection can be conducted, all online. But these solutions also have costs. Many Brazilian universities, for example, do not have Zoom licenses that they can use to promote events, which should be understood as an addition to, not a replacement for, quality time and interactions across these two contexts.

Here is a domain where the *aggiornamento* of Brazilian Studies can be also affected by the regressive changes in policy and politics that Brazil has undergone: these changes can make Brazil a less interesting place for institutional and individual

7 https://ou.edu/cis/sponsored_programs/brazil-studies/visiting-scholars-program

8 https://ou.edu/cis/sponsored_programs/brazil-studies/research-and-publications

9 https://ou.edu/cis/sponsored_programs/brazil-studies/events-and-outreach

investments in the United States and can even directly affect plans by those who are willing to work across the United States/Brazil borders. Examples can be seen in Bolsonaro's mishandling of the pandemic, which affected Brazil's image in the United States and culminated with the closure of the borders between the two countries, or in the collapse of scholarship policies by the Brazilian federal agencies CAPES and CNPq, which had sustained an unprecedented flow of graduate students and post-docs from Brazil to the United States in the 2000s.

Although our symposium was not about the shortcomings and the need to reinvent Brazilian Studies, we did take the event as an opportunity to stage a new way of doing that job. An easy option for us to organize the symposium would be to mobilize our networks and a few 'big names' in the field, commission drafts, hold a closed meeting to workshop the drafts, and publish them as an edited volume or special issue of a journal in the Anglo-American world. Yet we eventually went the exact opposite direction. First, we issued an open 'call for papers', understanding that there are many voices critically studying Brazil that deserve to be heard and given a space. Second, we held a public event that included an open cultural performance and keynote speeches from local activists and a journalist (see Box 1 above), to exercise and foster the kind of deep engagement with the country that we believe is needed for the field going forward. Third, we did the event in partnership with other scholars and institutions in the United States—including the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona, which covered the costs with English/Portuguese online interpretation—, emphasizing collaboration over competition[10]. Fourth, we decided to publish some of our proceedings in this emerging Brazilian journal so that we could engage in a conversation that could truly bridge between the Anglo-American and the Brazilian worlds and audiences. Fifth, we will be investing in post-publication initiatives—online videos and follow up events—to broaden the impacts of these studies in Anglo-American debates about Brazil. These are obviously small steps in what must be a longer journey. But without the former, we do not get to accomplish the latter. We hope that our symposium and its tangible outputs can push others to walk this walk as well.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, we reported on our effort to organize an international academic symposium on the 'new Brazil' that has been revealed to the world since the election

10 Our panel and workshop discussions were led by key Brazilianist scholars in the United States: Gladys Mitchell-Walthour, (University of Wisconsin Milwaukee), Erika Robb Larkins (San Diego State University); Victoria Langland (University of Michigan), Antonio José Bacelar da Silva (University of Arizona), and Sean Mitchell (Rutgers University).

of Jair Bolsonaro. We started this venture in 2019 but, given the disruption caused by the pandemic, could only hold the symposium in 2021 as an online event. Yet, even before the pandemic, organizing this symposium was challenging enough. The shift represented by Bolsonaro's rise was so overwhelming that selecting the symposium themes was an already a difficult task. We eventually decided to focus on "the environment, human rights, and democracy", but took these as entry points to understand the country's transformations and the pressing research agendas that these transformations give rise to.

As noted above, the submissions to our symposium highlight three main topics that we encourage other Brazilianists to examine in the future: 1) the (re)configuration of the identities that make up the Brazilian social fabric, 2) processes of policy and institutional dismantling, and 3) efforts to resist these changes, including their tactics and effectiveness. We also notice that to pursue meaningful research on these topics, Brazilianists and their institutions must seek 'deep engagement' with Brazil and Brazilians, avoiding simple stories and excessive reliance on close-knit elite circles. We recognize that this is not easy, as the existing structure of incentives predominantly pushes us to do 'business as usual'. But we also notice that tranformations have appeared in these structures, which we encourage Brazilianists to become more aware of and expand.

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