

The June protests and politics in contemporary Brazil: an invitation to a debate

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Scores of political manifestations drew millions to the streets in several Brazilian cities in June 2013. Their initial motivation was to protest against an increase in public transportation fares, but swiftly became broader and diversified.

The magnitude of the protests caused astonishment. President Dilma Rousseff was quick to issue a statement declaring she had an ear turned to the voices from the streets. But what were these voices about? Journalists, intellectuals, politicians and militants entered the public debate trying to explain the phenomenon. Why were people mobilizing? What were their grievances? How would the wave of protests unfold?

As ruas e a democracia [The Streets and Democracy] is a contribution to the debate. Political scientist Marco Aurélio Nogueira interprets the recent protests building upon an analysis of the conjuncture of Brazilian politics during the last decade, a period marked by the election of the Workers' Party, the PT, to the presidency.¹

A tenured Political Theory professor and the director of the *Instituto de Políticas Públicas e Relações Internacionais* [Institute of Public Policies and International Relations] at the São Paulo State University (UNESP), Marco Aurélio Nogueira mobilizes in his new books subjects he has been studying for years: politics, state reform, democracy, civil society, globalization and modernity. Although it focuses on recent events, the work reflects the results of a matured reflection on these subjects.

The texts were produced at different moments. The first two chapters are a collection of articles written between June and July 2013, during the heady days of the protests and thus assume a descriptive tone. They were initially published in magazines, newspapers, blogs or presented at seminars. The other four chapters include manuscripts produced in the last few years for seminars, conferences, debates, book articles, magazine and newspaper pieces. The texts approach the political conjuncture of Brazil, yet were rewritten in light of the recent wave of protests, thereby conferring them originality and connectedness to recent events.

In the first two chapters, the texts focus on the protests and their repercussions in the governmental sphere. The reader will find an overview of the main events of June: the context of the conflagration, its trigger, determining factors, the grievances and the traits of some of the actors involved. This account links the events to a detailed political analysis in the light of political and sociological theories.

Already in the first chapter, Nogueira situates the protests in Brazil's economic and political context. For him, the protests are the expression of a systemic crisis that had been forming. According to the author, the crisis was systemic because it unveiled not only a political failure – that of representation and legitimacy, but also of deeper economic social, cultural, ethical, institutional and governmental shortcomings. In this context,

the crisis of political system, in its strict sense, was only the tip of the iceberg. The June protests expressed the exhaustion of the Brazilian people concerning the exercise of politics. This exhaustion is exemplified by the unending stream of corruption scandals, and the failures at all levels of government in terms of policy management and communication, and finally with the lack of vitality and ideas of political parties.

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Nogueira situates this systemic crisis in the context of the governance and growth model adopted by Brazil since 2003. He explains that the country followed a “transformist” model of development – within the Gramscian concept – with the distinct trait that this model was advanced by a party that seemed to embody the very opposite of the “passive revolution”. Development in Brazil leaned on the expansion of credit and consumption, yet did not forego elevated interest levels and abuses by the banking system. With low real income growth, consumers were induced into debt. Yet with the charismatic figure of Lula as ballast, the model benefitted from the boom of capitalist economies between 2003 and 2010, slowed down only by the 2008 financial crisis. The bulking up of social policies also benefitted from increased exports, spurred by Chinese commercial and economic expansion. The progressive policies of the government indeed created a new Brazil, improving the lives of the poorest. Yet these changes were not enough.

The transformations undergone by the international economy in the wake of 2008 led to the end of a cycle, and the economy assumed a slower growth rate. At the same time, the demands of the population expanded: better public services, more rights, more government transparency, less corruption and improved criteria for public expenditure. This outlined the general mood of disappointment and dissatisfaction spilt into the streets in June 2013.

Thus the author interprets the protests of 2013 as the expression of the emergence of a new way of life and of a political format that had run into a dead end. This is related to the perception that society is excluded from the public arena at demands participation and recognition.

The author thus translates the June protests as the result of the desire to participate coupled with dissatisfaction regarding the government is acting at all levels. This is a particularly strong argument in the book and is articulated to the author’s reflection on the gap between the State and society. The political system has become distant from civil society, stuck in the past. Meanwhile, society is flowing in the same liquid currents of hypermodern digital life.

Other authors have underlined that one of the most distinct aspects of the protests were the demands for better public services. Renato Janine Ribeiro, in the book’s preface, states that the main challenge posed by the streets is to assure quality transportation, education, health and security. This argument is not at odds with Nogueira’s point of view, yet he considers these demands relevant among clamors that give rise to what he calls polyphonic voices. The emphasis placed on this or that aspect depends on the perspective of the analysts. Nogueira’s views incline towards an analysis of the protests that touches upon its relationship to the political system, the desire to participate and the dissatisfaction with politics.

In the following chapters, Nogueira centers the analysis on the effects of the protests on the government and in the first chapter discusses the limits of president Dilma Rousseff’s reactions. In his view, Rousseff offered several measures in response in order to administrate the conflict and dampen the outrage against government, but did not offer a solution to the problems raised in the streets.

In the following chapter, still considering this context, Nogueira enters the debate regarding political reform, which is approached in greater detail in the fourth chapter. At this point, the author draws attention to the need to assess the role of political parties based on their strength, discourse, and agenda. This means pursuing a much-needed reconciliation between what the author calls citizen politics and party politics in order to carry out a democratic political reform.

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In the second chapter, the author discusses governability, analyzing the government's proposal for the health system, one of the subjects of the demands of those who protested in June. For Nogueira, the government's difficulties to implement these changes are a reflection of the challenges faced in governing in general.

The author underscores some of the main aspects of the first years of Dilma's government – the third PT term in government – highlighting some of the main developments, such as the instability of the ministry composition and the effects of Lula's legacy, here cast in an ambivalent light. On one hand, it helped the new president as she inherited a stabilized currency, while misery decreased and the domestic market expanded. On the other, the looming figure of the ex-president also hampered Dilma during the initial phase of her government.

The third chapter offers the reader a chance to have a clearer comprehension of the Brazilian political conjuncture since the election of Lula, but mainly that of Rousseff's government. A few discussions stand out: governability (associated with "coalition presidentialism"), the 2012 municipal elections, the development model currently in trend and Brazilian foreign policy.

The three final chapters of the book deal with, respectively, political reform, the media, and corruption. The choice of the subjects was not random. Not only are they topics studied by Nogueira, but they also were present in the demands of the June 2013 protests.

The discussion on political reform is the main axis of the fourth chapter, despite scattered appearances earlier in the book. It focuses mainly on the proposal put forth by the president of a popular plebiscite concerning political reform. It is the main topic discussed by the author as it is both connected to the motivation of the protests and can also come to be the answer to the demands. A new political format that achieves greater inclusion of society in the public arena is a way to acknowledge the demands and further participation.

Political reform arises in Nogueira's argument as a necessary change in the current political scenario, which is, in his words, "in a state of dire suffering". It is important to point out that he is referring to institutionalized politics, encompassing the systems, rules, the organization of democracy, laws, parties, in addition to "party politics" focused on the acquisition and maintenance of power. Political parties are the expression of this situation: they participate in elections not as ideological forces or as cohesive groups guided by agendas, but rather only as instruments in the struggle for power.

The author thus confers a central role to political reform in the establishment of a democratic agenda that must go beyond a simple change of electoral rules. It must promote deeper reform, modifying the system as a whole and impacting political culture and government. In order to succeed, all social forces must be included, from within and without the State, stresses the author. The political reform must therefore bridge the gap between state and society.

The media is covered in the fifth chapter. The media, as conceived by the author, includes not only the press, but also digital media, and advertising networks and agencies. The June protests added momentum to an argument that social movements have been trying to make for a long time: mass communication must be democratized. Alternative media covered the events and used the internet to disseminate information the traditional media was neglecting. This serves as backdrop for the author to discuss the role of the media in contemporary societies. Nogueira emphasizes that the media as whole have significant political functions in contemporary societies and its capacity to set the agenda is a constant. The massive amount of information generated by electronic media in the hypermodern world ultimately furthered the power of the media, which now have an even more crucial role in the construction of hegemonies in contemporary society. The role of the media must therefore be central to political analysis.

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Nogueira chooses to approach the media from a Gramscian perspective, that is, as a “private instrument of hegemony”:

The media has replaced the traditional agents of hegemony, political parties, in the mediation between candidates and voters, in the definition of the agenda of the public debate, in the transmission of political information and the channeling of social demands and the critique of public policy (Nogueira, 2013: 183-184)

Two topics stand out in this debate: the regulation of the media and of new formats of social communications. The author considers regulation necessary and expressly distinguished regulation from control. The regulation of the media must seek to increase democratic competition in the field of communication, reducing the risks that arise from the one-sided expression of opinion. This debate is to a certain extent related to the voices that were heard in the streets, given that the democratization of communication was one of the demands.

Regarding the second point, the author underlines the changes brought about by the new digital technologies – the widespread use of smartphones and internet applications. This has caused a shift in the process of opinion formation and in the dynamic of democracy. This is epitomized in the case of the June protests by the *Mídia Ninja* collective. Notwithstanding the limitations of this process, the author brings attention to these changes.

Nogueira’s most detailed insights into contemporary society are found in his discussion of the media, which is used to understand the role and profile of the media today. In his view, the media has occupied the political and ethical void entailed by hypermodernity.

In his description of contemporary society there are recurring references. Nogueira, for example, quite frequently cites Manuel Castells and his conception of society based on networks. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is also mentioned in order to recall the “liquid” character of society.

Network society is defined, among other factors, by individualization, the lack of central coordination, fluidity and fluctuation, in addition to high doses of connectedness and digital forms of life.

The term hypermodernity is employed frequently throughout the book in order to characterize contemporary society as a kind of synthesis of all the attributes that characterize contemporary society.

Here Nogueira’s interlocutor is French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, an author he has discussed in previous works. Building upon Lipovetsky, Nogueira employs the idea of

hypermodernity. However, the Brazilian version of hypermodernity is a peripheral one, characterized not only by the radicalization of modernity, but also by a deepening of social misery (Nogueira, 2007). This scenario is important in order to understand the context in which the protests were conflagrated, especially in the large metropolises of Brazil.

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Lastly, the sixth chapter of the book deals with the topic of corruption, which the author defines more broadly than the embezzlement of public funds. Nogueira is aware of the complexity of the issue, especially given the lack of studies and definitive analytical aids. Nogueira shows how corruption has been increasingly perceived as a serious problem. Although some passages suggest that corruption might have escalated during the PT government, in this chapter Nogueira avoids attributing corruption to any specific group, party or entity, seeking to comprehend it as a problem that acquires new dimensions in hypermodern times.

Despite how citizens view corruption, Nogueira highlights the initiatives and mechanisms that have been created to control and prevent corruption. Furthermore, he brings attention to the need to strengthen the research agenda on the topic encompassing systematic studies investigating corruptions, its determinants and vagaries. Clues as to these elements can be found in *As ruas e a democracia*, in which the debate on corruption intersects with a discussion of the press, political parties, "coalition presidentialism", market, among other aspects. The agenda is set. And the actuality of this phenomenon is proven by the demonstrations of June 2013.

It can be said that to a certain extent Nogueira's interpretation was more focused on an analysis of the State – evaluating how the protests affected the government – than the protests properly. This aids to understand the crucial position the author confers to this argument in his interpretation of the protests as a demand for greater participation and changes in the format of politics. Hence the equal importance attributed to political reform as one of the possible paths to change. The model this reform however is a work in progress: it must be elaborated in cooperation with social sectors and seek to bring about effective change in politics, incorporating citizens in the public arenas, as stressed by the author.

Nogueira does not explore all the analytical possibilities opened up by the subject. New studies are necessary to form a more detailed perspective of the June protests. A view more focused on the protests can seek to analyze the submerged networks and their recent experiences, as suggested by Bringel (2013). A proposal, in short, more focused on society than the state.

As ruas e a democracia opens up several routes of interpretation. Based on a collection of new and older texts, the book organizes the thought of an intellectual on the subject and provides the reader with a better grasp of the events that took place in the country in June 2013. It is not a finished view of the process, but rather a perspective that attempts to locate connections with the broader political conjuncture. It is a reference for those who might come to study the subject and understand contemporary Brazilian society.

Just as the voices rising from the streets in June 2013 were polyphonic, so were the interpretations as to what happened during the period. *The streets and democracy* is an important contribution to the discussion that analyzes the protests and at the same time raises new questions, further enticing readers to enter the debate.

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Quote this book review

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Notes

1 Uma relação de algumas das principais análises sobre o tema pode ser vista no Dossiê “Conjuntura Política Brasileira”, organizado pelo Núcleo de Estudos de Teoria Social e América Latina do Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Políticos (IESP) da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (NETSAL, 2013).

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