BOOK REVIEW

Between Mirrors, Medusas and the Mass Media: Race, Resentment and Status Panic in Brazilian Cultural Backlash

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(PORTO, Mauro. *Mirrors of Whiteness*: Media, Middle-Class Resentment, and the Rise of the Far Right in Brazil. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023)

Regarding one of the founders of Political Communication in Brazil, this praise may seem only a protocol compliment. But the recently published book 'Mirrors of Whiteness: Media, Middle-Class Resentment, and the Rise of the Far Right in Brazil', by Mauro Porto, a professor and researcher at Tulane University, in New Orleans, is both an urgent and welcome work. The book is pedagogic regarding the differences of class, race and geographic origin in Brazil, and serves as a document both for national researchers and for foreign Brazilianist colleagues. His refined discussion about the resurgence of conservatism and the far right in Brazil in the last decade is part of the best traditions of Brazilian social thought and conjuncture analysis at one time, and combines critical whiteness studies with Marxist and Weberian theoretical frameworks in a particularly successful way, not to mention the scathing critique of contemporary definitions of middle-class politics.

The book comprises two case studies, both anchored in textual analyses, one of them concerning the telenovela 'Cheias de Charme', aired by Rede Globo between April and September 2012, which featured three maids as protagonists, two of whom were white and one was black. The other one had to do with the coverage of 'Veja' magazine, one of the most widely circulated weekly news magazines in Brazil and of great political importance, about the affirmative action policies that allowed black people to access

public universities in Brazil. These are two cases, by the way, not only exemplary, but very much opportune, since both the legislation that guarantees labor rights to domestic workers, and the so-called 'Quotas Law', which established racial and social affirmative action mechanisms to enter federal universities, completed their first decade in 2022.

In addition, a few months ago, the US Supreme Court restricted the adoption of quota systems by universities in the United States, which revived the debate and once again stimulated comparisons between both countries. Although it was not his original plan with the book, Porto eventually contributed to American academia as well, by offering an important document on the actions of the Workers' Party (PT) governments in Brazil aimed to change middle-class social closure devices. When it was implemented, the Brazilian press criticized the adoption of public policies imported from the American racialized context. Today, ten years later, the conservative composition of the American Supreme Court has revoked similar devices, while Brazil has become a peculiarly successful counterpoint. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), between 2010 and 2019, the number of black people in higher education grew by almost 400%.

Porto (2023) is very happy to build his analysis based on resentment. While resentment is a very obvious constituent of this far right backlash, it is often very hard to actually demonstrate this link. The book also deals in a very skillful manner with the concept of status panic, rather than moral panic, which represents an epistemological turn for political sociology. The concept is inherited from C. Wright Mills and it designates "a type of anxiety that emerges when the historical bases of prestige become infirm, turning it more difficult for middle-class individuals to honor their claims" (PORTO, 2023, p. 70). But the book also develops an original contribution with the concept of mirrors of whiteness, in order to cope with how the mass media provides representational subsidies for the white middle-class to understand itself as a hegemonic standard. In the very first pages, Porto (2023) presents the concept and draws attention to the interpretation of the mirror not just as an artifact that reflects social realities, but also as an armor that shields the middle-class from perceiving itself as oppressive. Using an allegory that goes back to the classic figure of Medusa, in Greek mythology, a character marked by a curse and transformed into a monster who turned to stone everyone who looked at her, the author introduces the concept of mirror. He compares the mass media with the shield carried by Perseus, which allowed the warrior to confront and decapitate the gorgon. In turn, blacks and browns were to be the Medusa, against whom White

Brazilians could not look directly "without being reminded of their own implication in that unwarranted and brutal history" (PORTO, 2023, p. 17). Therefore, the book scrutinizes with precision and analytical rigor the relationship between the media and the constitution of a white and middle-class cultural identity, essential for the rise of right-wing backlash in the last decade.

In general, the author's endeavor is divided into five chapters, in addition to an introduction and an epilogue. In Chapter I, he discusses the key concepts. Freyre's myth of racial democracy is deconstructed, and gives place to the almost complete overlap between race and class divisions in Brazil. At this moment, Porto (2023) begins several criticisms of the definition that economist Marcelo Neri coined regarding the category of 'new middle-class'. According to Porto (2023), the use of income to define class presents important incongruities and does not take into account the Weberian notion of status. Thus, by defending the use of this category and maintaining that the public policies of their governments were responsible for leveraging more than two-thirds of Brazilian domestic workers to the middle-class, PT leaders "failed to grasp the incompleteness and fragility of the process of social inclusion and to realize that the formerly poor remained trapped by structural conditions that prevented their full incorporation into the middle-class" (PORTO, 2023, p. 149). Simultaneously, this boast generated a racial and status panic among the ruling classes, which was, at least in part, responsible for PT's own demise from power. The author is not unaware of the fact that, most of the time, the middle-class takes on an ambiguous posture in relation to political episodes. And, he attributes this loss of ambiguity in recent years to a climate of opinion, greatly fostered by the mass media's cultural and social stereotypes. He then recomposes the role that the middle-classes played in the 1960s, in support of the military coup suffered by then President João Goulart, and compares it to the episodes that culminated in the parliamentary coup suffered by President Dilma Rousseff, in 2016. While his interpretation of the overlaps between whiteness and the middle-class is perfectly correct, the reader is left wondering why the issue of race was not as central in 1964 as it was 50 years later. In this sense, despite the possible parallels, the historical context seems to demand more nuances, as for example regarding the very emergence of the black movement in Brazil. Even so, the author is surgical in his criticism, which ultimately spares no one: neither the neoliberal elites nor PT.

In Chapter II, the scholar presents a deep contextualization of the democratic decay in Brazil, going back to the period of re-democratization, but focusing on the last decade, and reviewing remarkable episodes such as June 2013, the 2015 and 2016 pro-impeachment demonstrations against Dilma Rousseff, and the rise of Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections. Porto's argument (2023) is that the redistributive and affirmative action policies led by the Workers' Party fueled middle-class resentment, especially aimed at race issues. Porto's argument (2023) regarding the 2013 demonstrations could perhaps be confronted with that of Angela Alonso (2023), for whom the protests did not take place due to the focus of PT in redistributive policies, but to the morals and good manners agenda, which is indeed responsible for the resentment of part of the population. And, although both dimensions are intrinsically and inextricably linked, Porto's thesis (2023) is in fact not able to fully explain the adhesion of the popular classes to the reactionary movement that has taken Brazil by storm in recent years. By focusing his observation on the middle-class, his thesis clashes at least partially with the conjuncture analyses that show a significant support of the less favored classes for Bolsonaro. With regard to education, for example, Jairo Nicolau (2020) observes that Bolsonaro performed better among voters of all levels of education, and particularly among those who have only completed high school. And Datafolha polls (FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO, 2022), carried out in 2022, crossing income and electoral preference, suggested that even the so-called 'Class C', a stratum that would have benefited from the PT's redistributive policies, massively supported Bolsonaro to the detriment of Lula. This mystery, therefore, still remains to be clarified. Nevertheless, Porto's argument (2023) is sufficient to support the status panic thesis, which he himself seeks to develop in the next chapter.

Therefore, Chapter III of the book lays the groundwork for the emergence of this backlash. Porto has no interest in doing so, but could very well maintain a dialogue on this point with American literature, starting from Norris's and Inglehart's thesis (2019) on cultural backlash. The chapter as a whole is strongly anchored in providing a historical contextualization that would allow the author to subsequently launch his analyzes in the following chapters. Although there is not much methodological detail regarding the case studies, Porto's analysis is indebted to his previous works on telenovelas and representations (PORTO, 2011, 2007) and also on media framing (PORTO, 2004). However, this specific chapter only provides a resumption of the

arguments that he had already launched in previous ones, so that this ends up becoming the least innovative of all chapters, and works only to open the discussion that follows, around the case studies. If there is something that has not been addressed before, it is the discussion about the role of humor. In this particular case, perhaps the discussion could be richer in examples and arguments. I myself would be extremely happy if we could build a dialogue on this matter.

The final chapters account for the empirical segment of the book. The Tulane University professor even justifies himself, at the epilogue, arguing that he intended to carry out a field visit to Brazil in order to interview some subjects to increase his analyses, but the pandemic prevented him. As a result, Chapters IV and V of 'Mirrors of Whiteness' focus on presenting the reader with two case studies, respectively on the telenovela 'Cheias de Charme' and on 'Veja' magazine, both of which support his thesis.

The textual analysis of the telenovela 'Cheias de Charme' is exquisite. Porto (2023) comments in great detail on some excerpts of the narrative, shown in different episodes. Unlike other commentators and scholars had previously observed, his conclusion is that while the telenovela presents three maids as protagonists, it is far from being an ode to the 'new middle-class', and, on the contrary, it reinforces racial and social stereotypes on many levels. For instance, by presenting two of its protagonists as white and by painting the image of a benevolent employer, the telenovela would distance itself from possible social criticism. In the epilogue, Porto (2023) compares the telenovela with the movie 'Que Horas Ela Volta?' (2015), directed by Anna Muylaert, who also portrays a maid, but this time with a critical eye, calling attention to the difference in the treatment given by her bosses to her daughter in relation to the way they treat their own son. The author resents that the same actress who played the domestic worker in the film in an extremely sensitive way, Regina Casé, plays a character in the telenovela who complains about the social and economic rise of her own maid.

'Veja's' analysis manages to cover a long period of time, between 2006 and 2012. The author analyzes reports and interviews published in the magazine, regarding both affirmative action and racial quotas for higher education. He discusses the publication's strongly conservative biased position. Here, Porto (2023) proposes to combine a textual analysis with an incipient content analysis. From a strictly methodological point of view, it does not present very transparent classification criteria and does not recover the long debate on valence analysis that has recently taken place in Brazilian academia (see

articles by Miguel (2016, 2015) and Feres Jr. (2016) regarding this subject). But his qualitative analysis properly highlights other events, such as the publication of books by journalists Ali Kamel ('We Are Not Racist', 2006) and Demétrio Magnoli ('Uma Gota de Sangue', 2015), which give substance to the 'Veja' editorial line. Reviewed, the conservative discourse of the magazine does not come as a surprise at all, but the way in which the author reconstitutes the facts makes everything more striking.

The book ends with an epilogue, which is less personal than the introduction. Its conclusions are in line with many other recent works regarding the relation between resentment and the rise of the far right. In general, the book makes a good contribution in terms of an expanded understanding of the role played by the Brazilian media in reproducing values and representations in tune with the hegemonic classes. Especially with regard to the concept developed by the author of 'Mirrors of Whiteness', Porto's book (2023) sheds light on the importance of considering the racial component for a better understanding of this cultural backlash. However, some few elements must still be clarified.

First, 'Mirrors of Whiteness' focuses, perhaps deliberately, on a period prior to 2013. In both cases that the author observed, both the telenovela and the magazine coverage, the period dates back to 2012, with few subsequent episodes commented by way of historical contextualization. While it is possible to understand his research strategy, it is equally important to draw a distinction between the right-wing that emerged from June 2013 in Brazil and the far right that effectively came to power in 2018, with Bolsonaro. In this sense, the book seems a little dated, and perhaps it could invest in an expanded discussion on Bolsonarism, which, in many ways, radicalizes the dimensions that the author analyzed, especially regarding open and declared racism. The literature that the scholar reviewed is proof that a closer dialogue with colleagues who have been analyzing Bolsonaro and his supporters over the last half decade could make the book even more welcomed.

Furthermore, as Porto (2023) himself admits at the end of the book, the gender component is largely neglected in his investigation. Despite starting from the observation that domestic workers are, in their absolute majority, not only black, but women, the author refrains from investigating the resentment in relation to the rights conquered by women and the advance of the feminist movement in Brazil, as in other parts of the world. Thus, an essential component of the rise of the far right is not brought up in the book,

which leaves the role of masculinist groups, incels, and the like in support of Jair Bolsonaro unexplained. In recent years, something that, by the way, resonates strongly in the patriarchal identity of the middle and popular classes in Brazil.

Similarly, far from using the analogy from the theatrical show that Chico Buarque created at the height of the Brazilian military dictatorship, 'Ópera do Malandro' (Scoundrel's Opera), and claim that criticizing media conglomerates 'Globo' and 'Veja' would be throwing stones at 'Geni', that is, stoning a prostitute or condemning what is already socially condemned (in this case by scholar production). I understand that there is still space to inquiry what responsibilities lie with other similarly powerful media conglomerates, such as Record TV, whose television audience is clearly different from that of Globo and is directed not only at the less favored classes, but presents a neo-Pentecostal orientation. And also, what is the role of the growing ecosystem of hyper-partisan media in this turbulent scenario.

Last but not least, Porto's book (2023) also seems to miss the role of digital platforms in this whole scenario. Although the author himself refers, in personal passages in the introduction and at other moments in the book, to conservative memes exchanged in family groups, there is no greater investment in the analysis of the contents that circulated in social media and not even on the role platform managers play in Brazilian politics. The result is a panorama that correctly blames the mass media, but is silent about the digital media, a dimension of the highest relevance to explain the political culture of Bolsonarism.

These four open issues in no way detract from the masterful work of Mauro Porto. On the contrary, perhaps they constitute precisely the point from which a suite is assembled. The author is a notably prominent scholar and deserves all the recognition earned by this release. The book certainly sheds light on Brazilian political and social identities and represents a great contribution to analyses that help us better understand the accelerated course of recent years.

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