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## The protests in Brazil; or How the bus fare became political contradiction

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It all began with 20 cents of Real (the Brazilian currency). The bus fare in São Paulo – the biggest city in the country – already expensive for its poor quality, was raised by twenty *centavos*, which triggered protests led by the group *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement, MPL). MPL, traditionally entwined with the Left, mobilized a group of people to show discontent with the fare and in the streets they were met by teargas bombs, rubber bullets and completely unjustified violence at the clubs and fists of the riot and military police. The disproportional aggression was contested by more and more people, and the protests started to get bigger and bigger. Soon, they spread through the whole country and beyond. Hundred thousands of people went into the streets shouting words of order every day, while thousands gathered in major cities in Europe, Canada and the United States to show solidarity to the demonstrators and denounce police ruthlessness and violence.

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In the span of two weeks, Brazil “woke up”, as protesters are saying. The discontentment with the 20 *centavos* fare increase became discontentment with the political system itself, and voices now shout over the poor quality of public transportation, lack of health and education, expenses allocated for the World Cup, corruption... every frustration with the Brazilian government became explicit, and every person on the streets now fights for his or her own cause. The riots are exploding in size, in causes and in hopes as the sole image of a country is mobilized. A collective image of demonstrators being beaten and repressed and the streets filling with green and yellow flags shows the average Brazilian that he can and should express himself politically. The resurgence of the feeling of belonging that took over the bus fare movement is the social glue uniting the people of Brazil. Even the mainstream press, like *Globo* or *SBT*, traditionally conservative, has swung to support the protests by becoming the main channel for calling people out into the streets. Brazil is making history, is living history, it is said.

Claims that Brazil is now changing forever may be an exaggeration. What has to be noted from all the riots and protests is the political and social exercise that the country is going through. With so many people out in the streets – and the rest following it via social networks – many contradictions were exposed. Media and demonstrators flow within the political spectrum, from the Left to the Right, without ideological concerns or consistency. The protests are now fertile ground for the growth of conservative thought and traditional Right Wing positions: flags of political parties are not allowed by the protesters themselves, with claims that this movement is a wakeup call for the people and by the people, hence segmented political interests should not be involved; the party in power nowadays, the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Worker’s Party, PT), is being

blamed for the endemic corruption and the bad administration that has scourged Brazil since the first days of its democracy; welfare measures became an element of disapproval, seen as a political strike against the tax payers of the Middle Class. As for the mainstream media, usually aligned with the *status quo*, the change in tone is striking: it went from calling demonstrators “vandals” and “rebels without cause” to “heroes” and “fighters for the democracy”. It is noteworthy that, while the protest itself went through a shift in its political position, the media decided that it was time to support, not denounce, it.

It also has to be said that, on one hand, the plurality of voices and positions within the riots create a lack of true focus. The meanings, the goals, the outcomes of this movement are unclear. The political tension it is creating between Left Wings and Right Wings has no clear boundaries either. It demonstrates, on the other hand, that Brazil is undergoing what could be its political maturation. The US-backed military dictatorship that ruled over the country from the 1960s to 1980s aborted the effervescent political panorama that was being created back then, and placed Brazil into a political slumber. The riots may not be the necessary and definitive wakeup call; they may not change Brazil in its core; but they indicate that its citizens are looking for political emancipation, that the structures of the old military junta are only now being shaken and contested by the average citizen.

Political emancipation, though, requires a focused effort, requires consciousness of the struggle between interests and requires a wide view over society and powers. The political emancipation that Brazil is now seemingly fighting for is still in an unclear future. The beginning and growing of the riots already showed that the country

acknowledged some kind of contradiction in its society, and that the political maturity has to be reached. The outcomes of it, though, will be decisive: Brazil can either start walking the path of emancipation and the exercise of politics or embrace the conservative voice, necessarily aligned with already-established powers and the maintenance of the *status quo*, and undermine the democratic maturation in favor of the old ruling structure. Either way, the protests are not the beginning of a new era, but a symptom of a society looking for political change.