

Brazil is leading world against fascism and became an example by arresting Bolsonaro, says American philosopher

Jason Stanley, an expert on authoritarianism self-exiled in Canada, says Brazilian institutions proved solid

For the scholar, Trump wants the US to be a country internationally known for cruelty, hatred, and racism

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SÃO PAULO – US President Donald Trump and former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro have much in common. They are anti-establishment right-wing leaders who came to power unexpectedly in polarized elections and, having been defeated in reelection attempts, acted to try to overturn the ballot results —culminating in violent invasions of public buildings.

The aftermath of these episodes, however, was radically different in the two countries. In Brazil, Bolsonaro was first declared ineligible and later convicted in the coup plot trial and arrested. In the US, Trump spent four years rebuilding his influence in the Republican Party until winning the 2024 election and returning to the White House.

For experts, Bolsonaro's arrest marked an outlier among leaders considered authoritarian in the 21st century. One of the scholars who paid attention to this was American philosopher Jason Stanley, one of the world's leading experts on fascism and author of the book "How Fascism Works."

Stanley was a professor at Yale University until he decided, in March of this year, to leave the US with his family out of fear that the country would soon become a fascist dictatorship. The intellectual self-exiled to Canada, where he arrived in September of this year to work at the University of Toronto.

In a telephone interview with Folha, Stanley says he considers Brazil a leader in the fight against global fascism, talks about Trump's attempts to redefine what it means to be American, and speculates on what the next steps of his government might be.

FOLHA: How did you decide to leave the US?

Jason Stanley: At first, it was a political statement against the Trump regime. It sort of didn't fully occur to me that I'd be moving until I left. And then it ceased to become a political statement and became a kind of a very jarring reality.

I had lived in the New York area since 2004 and had many friends. When you change countries, you lose your friends, you have to get new papers, it's hard. But here in Canada, I don't have to worry about whether the things I say will affect the institution where I work.

And how do you evaluate that choice now? What have you done since leaving your country?

Well, I've traveled the world. I think the fight against fascism is a global fight, and Brazil is at the center of that fight. Brazil set the example and sent its authoritarian leader, Jair Bolsonaro, to jail for trying to remain in power [after losing the election].

Despite enormous obstacles, despite your Supreme Court being targeted with sanctions, Brazil led the fight against fascism. Its institutions stood firm. And the world now wants to understand how did Brazil do this, how did it defeat this enemy. Everyone loves Brazil right now and wonders: how did you manage to do it?

If you had to guess, how do you think Brazil did it?

I don't know. Your justices [of the Federal Supreme Court] were brave, your institutions were solid, perhaps your authoritarian leader couldn't mobilize public opinion effectively or wasn't very competent as an authoritarian leader.

But I believe the answer lies in the institutions: the press remained critical, including Folha and journalist Patrícia Campos Mello, who didn't allow herself to be intimidated despite being attacked by Bolsonaro. The people weren't intimidated. The judges and journalists weren't intimidated.

There was an impression that American institutions were solid, and that Trump would have difficulty eroding them, but what we see is something else: the Supreme Court, universities, and part of the press sought to accommodate the president. Why?

Was there really that impression? You know, I like talking to Brazilian journalists because you are much more realistic about the US than Europeans. European journalists say: my God, America, the land of milk and honey, the land of freedom, what's happening? But Brazilians ask me: how long will the dictatorship last over there? You're Latin Americans, you don't believe the US is a champion of democracy and freedom, do you?

It's hard to believe that when the 1964 coup was supported by the US.

Exactly! We overthrew governments and, when you become too democratic, that bothers us. So, to answer your question, the US is a corrupt country. Just look at the oligarchs and billionaires and how money plays such a huge role in our politics.

Explaining the scandal that [made Bolsonaro ineligible for economic and political power abuse] is impossible in the US: we don't have campaign finance laws!

The reality is that we are a very corrupt country that somehow sold the propaganda to the world that we are not.

So you're not surprised to see institutions yielding to Trump.

No. Institutions always look at each other to see who is resisting and who is yielding, and that happened in the US. Additionally, the Trump regime attacked one at a time: one law firm at a time, one university at a time. Each institution that wasn't attacked thought it was escaping. It was a very clever strategy.

There's also the fact that pro-Trump oligarchs have a lot of power. They're buying more and more media outlets, they're on more and more university boards. The US structure, for decades, has worked to put everything in the pockets of these oligarchs. This way, all it takes is for an autocrat to

appear to control these oligarchs, and they do whatever he wants to get money from the government.

You've written extensively about fascism and propaganda. Do you believe Trump's ultimate goal is to establish a fascist dictatorship in the US?

Trump is aging, and there should be a succession dispute soon. The world is lucky that Trump is 79 years old. So, more important than asking what Trump wants is asking what the machine behind him wants.

This machine is composed of different groups: one of them is openly white supremacist, xenophobic, and fascist, without a doubt. Another orbits the manosphere. Another consists of oligarchs and billionaires who manipulate these people, who say: give me your money and in return we'll destroy your enemies. This happens in the US and in Brazil, by the way.

But these groups don't have the same objectives; what unites them is Trump's figure. The question is: which of them will lead the MAGA movement? We don't know. J.D. Vance is the obvious successor, and he seems to desire a Christian dictatorship in which he has all the power. Will he succeed? There are powerful forces opposing that.

At the same time, Trump hasn't acted in that direction yet. There is an independent judiciary in the US, and there will be elections next year.

He hasn't managed to consolidate his power, no. But the Republican Party seems to believe it will stay in power forever. Trump gave Republicans the feeling that there will never be another Democratic Party president.

Additionally, I believe the US Supreme Court acts with the exclusive intention of keeping an extreme right-wing party in power and ensuring that oligarchs continue to get richer—another reason why what happened in Brazil was so important, because you have an independent Supreme Court.

Thus, there is strong support for a dictator to take power in the US in the near future. But there is also great resistance from American civil society.

When I say Trump hasn't consolidated power, I mean voters aren't intimidated. Institutions are, but not voters. And there are politicians like Zohran Mamdani [mayor-elect of New York] and Gavin Newsom [governor of California] who confront Trump in a way that the press, universities, courts, and law firms don't.

So, there is opposition. But Vance, if he manages to succeed Trump, would be ruthless and very efficient in consolidating power and creating a dictatorship and one-party State.

What is the role of agencies like ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement] in this project, in your opinion?

It's about white supremacy and explicit cruelty. ICE agents are normalizing in the US the tactics that violent dictatorships use: kidnappings, shoving people into cars... and they're announcing to the world: "The business of the United States is cruelty. The US is a country of hatred. This is what we are."

They want to change the definition of what the US means to the rest of the world. What does it mean to be American? It's to be cruel, hateful, merciless, and racist. That's the message. Being an American patriot is taking small children from their parents. It's treating non-white people like garbage. It's throwing them in a place with no beds and almost no food and leaving them there, without family contact, for an indefinite period.

The historical analogy for ICE is the SA [Sturmabteilung, or assault division, the brown shirts of Nazi Germany]. The government tells anyone who wants to hear that, in this organization, you can be as cruel as you want. It's a redefinition of the US. ICE is the new face of the country.

You mentioned Nazi Germany. Historically, fascism gained strength in Europe after major crises and in the scenario of devastation from World War I. There are no comparable crises in the developed world today. What fuels contemporary far-right movements?

That's the big question. In Sweden, in Germany, there is no economic despair, there are no bread lines. And yet fascist parties in these and other countries are increasingly popular. It's a mystery if we think about the classic history of fascism in the 20th century. What happens is that these parties today invent crises, such as the cultural crisis, the immigration crisis. They are largely invented crises, but they seem to have an effect as if they were real.

We, scholars of fascism, thought that an economic crisis and the rise of a charismatic leader were necessary for [the movement] to gain strength, but that no longer seems to be true. By exacerbating fear of the other, by investing in Christian nationalism, homophobia, patriarchy, it's possible to create a crisis.

The great enemy, then, becomes woke ideology. The calling card of fascism today, anywhere in the world, is being anti-woke—being against trans people, for example. From Russia to Brazil. And somehow, this has worked.

Trump seems to be having difficulties with the economy and his approval ratings in polls. What can we expect from his administration in the coming months?

We are already seeing authoritarianism accelerate as Trump's popularity wanes. My hope is that the Republican Party realizes it can no longer use Trump because he is too old.

Then there will be a dispute, as we discussed, and I think it will become increasingly public, and we will see panic from figures trying to keep Trump's coalition united. From there, who knows what will happen? Perhaps some Republicans will decide it's time to return to normal.

What needs to happen for you to return to the US?

What I'm trying to do here in Toronto is create a hub of resistance to authoritarianism. Canada, I believe, is the ideal place to do this today. I see the problem as international, which is why Brazil is so important too. I don't want to just talk about the US. Not everything is about the US. Brazil proved that.

Profile

Jason Stanley, 56, is a philosopher and professor of American Studies at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, Canada. Born in New York state to a Jewish family, he holds a doctorate from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and is the author of the books "How Propaganda Works," "How Fascism Works," and "Erasing History." He has two children with cardiologist Njeri Thande.