

# THE STORIES OF AN INSURRECTION: JUNE 2013 AND ITS DILEMMAS OF INTELLIGIBILITY

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes the theoretical and methodological challenges that underlie the conversion of the Brazilian Spring of 2013 into an object of systematic social analysis. It reviews two controversies that marked the event and that were later transposed to the academic debate: the indeterminate nature of the political confrontation in the streets and the framing of the protests in the left-right spectrum. It argues that the intelligibility challenges do not stem from methodological deficiencies or lack of proper sources, but mainly from certain dynamics of the event that deserve analysis.

**Keywords:** June 2013; collective action; political crisis; Brazilian politics; historicity.

## **As histórias de uma insurreição: Junho de 2013 e seus dilemas de inteligibilidade**

**Resumo:** O artigo analisa os desafios teóricos e metodológicos que subjazem a conversão das jornadas de junho em objeto de análise social sistemática. Revisa duas controvérsias próprias ao contexto de junho de 2013 que se transpõem posteriormente para o debate acadêmico sobre o evento: o caráter indeterminado do confronto político nas ruas e o enquadramento dos protestos no espectro esquerda-direita. Argumenta que os desafios de inteligibilidade não resultam diretamente das escolhas metodológicas ou da carência de fontes, mas principalmente de dinâmicas próprias ao evento que merecem atenção específica.

**Palavras-chave:** Junho de 2013; ação coletiva; crise política; política brasileira; historicidade.

By losing its original background, language becomes something confusing, so that a word spoken by one person may not be understood in the same sense by another, although both have a similar cultural background. When this happens – when different languages begin to be spoken in a community even though the language is the same – an ideological schism emerges that marks a profound social shift: the rulers isolate themselves in that empty phraseology known to all; the poor mutter things about their ‘struggle’ and their ‘need’ in a context that is hardly grasped by intellectuals; the young adopt their own slang that widens the gap between generations even further; priests

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gesticulate from their pulpit without managing to reach the minds of their parishioners; many teachers fail to awaken the talent of students, whose real universe lies beyond the imagination of ordinary preceptors. And the same happens in other manifestations of social life (Fals Borda, 1979, p. 16).

## INTRODUCTION

In a brief essay on the challenges of periodization in the study of history, Reinhart Koselleck (2014) supported a peculiar and provocative argument. He contends that pinpointing a milestone in contemporary (or present-day) history proves elusive,<sup>1</sup> as the present is inherently reference-dependent and, to an extent, relative. The task of narrating contemporary history involves a delicate composition of coexisting temporal layers, encompassing both ongoing processes and recurring elements (a "present past") and a nuanced horizon of expectations (a "present future"). In essence, as the contemporary transforms into history, it moves beyond the immediate duration of the present. This dilemma becomes particularly nuanced when scrutinizing the events of June 2013, which stands as a key challenge for the history of our time. While such events serve as a decisive divider in Brazilian history, the internal dynamics of this separation remain shrouded in ambiguity. Certainly, the June Days represent a pivotal moment in history. However, even for those who were actively engaged in the events, certain facets of the reality remained unclear.

This challenge manifests in a language characterized by the ambiguity that surrounds the accounts and analyses of the June Days. The repetition of terms such as "ambivalent," "contradictory," "multiple," "fragmented," and "heterogeneous" indicates a deliberate effort to emphasize an indeterminate and irreducible margin in the description, as if the episode staunchly resists clear characterization. Despite attempts to convey the intensity of the lived experience through words like "uncertainty," "vertigo," and "contingency," the text never quite captures the depth of the encountered reality. A retrospective gaze dispels catharsis, accomplishing this feat in its own right. The act of chaining, explaining, and systematizing imparts a level of order that is inherently alien to the subject. To what extent do uncertainty, ambiguity, and multiplicity represent intrinsic attributes of the social process, and to what extent are they a consequence of our inability to properly grasp or decipher it? Furthermore, are issues of intelligibility inseparable from a social uprising of such magnitude? Can the challenge of comprehension faced by analysts be equated with that experienced by individuals who participated in the June Days on the streets, or even those who observed from offices, barracks, or editorial rooms?

In a frequently cited excerpt discussing the fragmented nature of subaltern history, Antonio Gramsci (1999) asserts, in contrast, that the State serves as the unifying principle for the history of dominant groups. The guiding thread of the historical narrative for princes, ministers, or generals is the history of the State, encompassing its formation and inflections. Affirming this does not imply an exclusively nationalist historiography but rather suggest a subtler insight. The State provides the reference for connecting and attributing significance to individual episodes and characters, thereby enabling the narrative. In isolation, the history of daily life and sporadic struggles of subaltern groups lacks this trans-factual reference. Strictly speaking, as these fragments are projected onto a broader stage, forming a mosaic of the lives of the governed and the challenge to instituted authority, the narrative shifts to a panoramic perspective, once again referencing the State.

It is worth noting that the most cohesive and unambiguous interpretations of June 2013 precisely concentrate on the State as a focal point, be it perceived as a foreign conspiracy for regime change, a revolutionary spiral, or a fascist turn by an electorally frustrated right wing. There exists a totalization premise that links the protests through the common thread of their national significance, streamlining their complexities to integrate them into the "present past" of Brazilian history. Implicitly, this premise assumes that the most relevant aspect of the protests is what they share on a national scale. Part of the challenge in understanding June 2013 lies in the automatic activation of this totalization premise. In the attempt to eliminate the ambiguity surrounding the object, making it less fragmented and contextual, it inadvertently negates precisely what was essential to the lived experience on the streets.

This article does not aim to meticulously systematize and analyze the various interpretations of June 2013 found in the specialized literature. Among other reasons, because there are other people who are better positioned to undertake such a comprehensive review. Nor could this text offer a detailed account of the course of events throughout the cycle of protests, explaining their stages, ramifications, and local and regional nuances. The essay's purpose lies in a preliminary discussion, addressing the challenges inherent in transforming June 2013 into a subject of systematic analysis. Specifically, my focus is on two controversies that were integral to that particular conjuncture: (1) the challenge of categorizing the diverse contention that emerged in the streets, and (2) the interpretation of the protests along the left/right axis. This perspective is but a snapshot of the broader controversies in that context, including issues such as the relationship between violence and democracy or the tension between strategy and performance in street protests. It represents a partial effort, capable of providing only certain insights into evaluating the June Days as a history of the present time. Of particular note are the dilemmas of intelligibility that permeate this process—whether experienced by the demonstrators grappling with their own encounters, by specialized analysts navigating the complexities of the insurrection, or by the political elite attempting to control, guide, and potentially quash it.

## 1 THE CONFRONTATION ON THE STREETS

In the introduction of a collaborative work published in 1975, Charles Tilly likened the relationship between history and theory to a dog on a leash tied to a tree (Tilly, 1975). The theoretical exploration of the social world can traverse various directions and rhythms, yet it cannot persist obstinately on one path without the taut leash drawing it back within limits set by historical experience. While the metaphor lacks strict precision, it encapsulates something illustrative. The analysis of social movements in Brazil since the 1990s has increasingly emphasized studies on the dynamics of "civil society" and "social participation" (for an evaluation of this trend, refer to Alonso, 2009; Gohn, 1997, Ch. 8 and 9; Gurza Lavalle, 2011). Aligned with the democratic opening and institutionalization of sectoral forums, movements began organizing to influence the formulation of public policies, leading to impacts on their internal structures. Civil society acquired knowledge of effective methods to assert its demands in democratic arenas. Because of this practical trend, the explosive events of June 2013 appeared inconceivable until their occurrence. Like the pull of the leash, they compelled a redirection of attention to the imponderable aspects of political confrontation on the streets, involving movements lacking acronyms, headquarters, or statutes.

Moreover, a fundamental characteristic of June was its relative illegibility to the authorities. The concept of "illegibility" draws from James Scott's thesis in "Seeing Like a State," where he argues that the State intervenes socially to establish conditions of *legibility*. This involves ensuring that spaces, people, and social practices align with standards conducive to administrative processing (Scott, 1999). While the government can manage an enormous volume of information, it is restricted to processing only specific types of information. Consequently, society and nature must be organized in a manner that aligns with the suitable types of information.

Likewise, the actors identified within civil society embody associative structures that are legible to the government. The manner in which they organize, the language employed to articulate demands, and their pressure tactics are theoretically legible to the relevant public authorities. While their demands may be dismissed and their actions possibly penalized, their engagement constitutes an integral aspect of the broader political process. There exist established procedures recognized by both parties for the interaction between the State and civil society, stemming from the routine nature of these engagements. Additionally, legibility plays a strategic role as these actors can strategically manipulate levers and mechanisms within the State apparatus to achieve their objectives.

The street protests of 2013 exhibited a distinctive character, reminiscent of the "Arab Spring" or more recent *estallidos*<sup>2</sup> in Latin America, such as those in Chile in 2019 and Colombia in 2021. A significant portion of what was labeled as "diffuse" demands or protests "lacking a clear objective" were, in fact, responses to a form of revolt that eluded processing and negotiation within the political system. The absence of identifiable leaders capable of representing the movement at the negotiating table, the inability to predetermine the route of demonstrations in

the city, the persistence and retaliation against police repression, along with contentious incidents like graffiti, *quebra-quebra*, and looting, constituted a social eruption immune to the customary mechanisms of negotiation. Something defied the performative script typically ascribed to street demonstrations within the democratic framework.

As widely recognized, during the surge of street confrontations in 2013, protests against the public transport fare hike evolved into a diverse amalgamation of grievances. This included calls for the suspension of sports mega-events, renegotiation of contracts with bus companies, the end of the military police, condemnation of the "Ato Médico"<sup>3</sup>, halting evictions related to the FIFA World Cup infrastructure projects, rejection of legislative projects such as the "gay cure" bill (PDC 234/2011), the "Estatuto do Nascituro"<sup>4</sup> bill (PL 478/2007), the transfer of indigenous land demarcation to the Legislative branch (PEC 215/2000), and the PEC 37 (the so-called "Impunity" amendment), among numerous others. This aggregation can be attributed, in part, to the dynamic articulation on the streets, where each placard, slogan, or graffiti can evoke a distinct cause<sup>5</sup>.

The compelling nature of this decentralized dynamic has been acknowledged as a prominent aspect of June 2013, but it is crucial to emphasize its deliberative dimension as well. The street confrontations gave rise to numerous meeting spaces, taking the form of street assemblies, neighborhood gatherings, and occupations within Municipal Councils across various cities. These spaces served as platforms for the formulation of agendas and proposals, with the most organized political forces present during the protests coming together. Within such an environment, there was minimal inclination to impose limitations or strategically prioritize demands; instead, they naturally converged.

The broadening reach of the demonstrations further underscores their illegibility to the government. Despite the proliferation of popular demands, primarily contingent on State actions such as legislative measures or public policies, there was no mechanism to seamlessly transition these expressions from the fervor of the streets to the administrative routine. In her televised statement on June 21, Dilma Rousseff outlined five public policy pacts that ostensibly aligned with the sentiments expressed in the demonstrations, parsing these legible themes from what was framed as vandalism, violence, and criminal activity. In a subsequent meeting with mayors and governors in Brasília a few days later, the president used phrases like "the streets are telling us" or "it is very good that the people are saying all this." Essentially, unable to negotiate or quell the protests, the federal government opted to interpret the demonstrations in its own terms, framing them in its language and establishing questions to which it could provide answers. The recurring argument that Dilma Rousseff was ineffective in handling the protests is reasonable in light of subsequent events. On the other hand, it is not straightforward to pinpoint which governor or mayor exhibited adeptness in that challenging context. When an insurrection takes to the streets, there is no longer a virtuous path for those who rule.

The political system experienced a decision-making paralysis typical of moments of crisis (Nobre, 2013). The nature of this crisis manifested as the breakdown of institutionalized conflict processing routines, obscuring the boundaries regarding who the protagonists are, the methods employed, and the conventional languages used. One way of condensing this idea of deinstitutionalization of political life is through the concept of societal "opening" or "overflow"<sup>6</sup> (Bringel & Pleyers, 2015; Bringel & Domingues, 2018). In more recent writings, Breno Bringel (2021) emphasizes the term's significance in unlocking emancipatory possibilities, whether realized or not. While somewhat interconnected, I now want to emphasize the idea of societal opening as an overflow of political activation beyond institutional routines and established collective identities. The term denotes the

mobilizations of 2013 as a cycle of protests characterized by high-intensity mobilization that spills over from previously organized political groups and social movements, opening up to society as a whole, coinciding with the crisis of a broader political cycle (Bringel & Domingues, 2018, p. 94).

Chronologically, the irrevocable turning point for this societal opening occurred with the unrestrained repression by the Military Police of São Paulo on June 13 near Avenida Paulista –

an incident extensively documented, shared, and discussed on the internet. The ensuing spiral of the movement tapped into various latent dissatisfactions. Even those who did not directly experience the police repression in São Paulo reacted as if it had affected everyone, creating a division, an antagonism. This, in turn, led to a spontaneous solidarity with the protesters. Despite being instigated by law enforcement, the police violence gave rise to a spontaneous articulation effect, forming a self-claimed citizenship that evolved into an open collective extending far beyond the confines of São Paulo.<sup>7</sup>

In a seminal work for Latin American critical thinking in the 1960s, Pablo González Casanova (1975, p. 144) asserted that "facing political Mexico, there is an impolitical Mexico." He emphasized the existence of a mass of people not organized within trade unions, parties, or formal organizations. According to him, understanding dissent in the country necessitated observing this segment outside conventional civic instruments, devoid of mobilization experience, and lacking a discernible electoral voting pattern. González Casanova's perspective was rooted in a predominantly rural Mexico, distinct from 21<sup>st</sup>-century Brazilian society, and the notion of circumscribing the "political" may appear somewhat outdated. Nonetheless, it is plausible to consider the contagion of the 2013 protests as a sudden activation of the "impolitical" stratum within Brazilian cities. The overflow effect precisely propelled these individuals to the streets without institutional connections or prior political engagement. It is unsurprising that those on the streets, when queried, paid little heed to the institutional mediations inherent in the democratic process, as noted by Mendonça (2018). To some extent, the protests were a reaction against these mediations. González Casanova's insight cautions us that political analysis should not be confined to "interest groups," their parties, or official institutions; otherwise, it risks overlooking those situated at the margins of the political landscape.

The reality is, during the height of the protests or in their aftermath, a number of experts simply asserted that the only proper way to express discontent was through periodic elections, critiquing the demonstrations for presenting unclear and contradictory objectives, mixing up federal, state, and municipal jurisdictions. Some even contended that public indignation was, in fact, a sign of the government's success. Consequently, part of the dilemmas of intelligibility of the protest cycle stems from a fundamental distrust of experts that there was merit to any protest at that time in history. Strictly speaking, there is not even a dilemma of intelligibility in this case, as the proposed solution predates the perceived problem.

Examining the explosive impact of Brazil's "impolitical" forces prompts consideration of what happens to social conflict when it transcends existing institutional mediations. On the one hand, there is the oft-repeated path back to the presumption of the masses' irrationality, explosive emotivity, or predisposition to violence. As demonstrated by George Rudé, this perception of irrationality is "a myth that has been sanctified by repetition" (Rudé, 1991, p. 271). On the other hand, there is the utilization of revolutionary rationalism, assuming the existence of a vanguard capable of strategically realigning the previously distorted conflict. However, as evident from the preceding discussion, both approaches fall short of addressing the uncertainties surrounding the June uprising. Therefore, I would like to explore two compelling concepts related to extrapolating social conflict beyond the conventional "political" channels in Brazil.

Firstly, societal opening has led to a disconnection between people's references and past experiences (their "present past") and their expectations for the unfolding events (their "present future"). The street confrontations showcase not only individuals, signs, and masks but also a multitude of expectations regarding what should change and what might transpire in the coming days, months, or years. Given that past experiences do not offer sufficient guidance for interpreting the current situation, there is a corresponding inflation of expectations. In essence, everything appears possible in a scenario perceived as unprecedented. The realm of possibilities, marked by competing and incompatible futures, overwhelms the present moment, contributing to the tension of lived experiences. From this perspective, the immediate social conflict is characterized by a sense of vertigo, stemming temporally from the imbalance between inflated and volatile future expectations and the limited grounding in past experiences. This perception of indeterminacy constitutes a component of the June social explosion, resisting systematic narrative and hindering the conversion of the "present" into "history."

Secondly, we must consider the imbalance between experiences and expectations arising from the escalation of demands. On one hand, mediated social conflict channels the energies of the dispute toward a horizon limited by what is deemed achievable. For instance, a strike typically demands a wage readjustment that is considered feasible or, at the very least, negotiable, without including the abolishment of wage labor in its claims. Similarly, a proposed law outlines its conditions of feasibility within the scope of public administration. However, the broadening of demands during the June Days has disrupted these established limits. Expectations such as the end of the military police or the cancellation of the World Cup, which would typically fall outside the realm of the achievable, were brought into the forefront. While the revocation of the bus fare increase could be considered feasible, the notion of a universal free pass was beyond consideration. What does this detachment of expectations signify about the nature of the uprising?

At first glance, this would simply support the inconsequence of unorganized demonstrations. However, what is particularly intriguing is the potential of these seemingly impractical demands to eventually expand the scope of ordinary political dispute. Consider that universal suffrage was once considered an impractical demand. What an event like June 2013 has the potential to accomplish, beyond the perceived chaos of tear gas and molotov cocktails, is a subtle shifting of the boundaries of what is deemed achievable. Roberto Andrés provides a compelling example of this phenomenon by tracing the adoption of zero fare in public transport across several Brazilian cities over the last decade, a policy that had no precedent in the country in 2013 (Andrés, 2023). From this perspective, it becomes impossible to predict which aspects of the issues addressed in June will be redefined in the future. For instance, if an institutional process leading to the demilitarization of ostensive policing in Brazil gets on track, the June Days might be recounted with this "future past" as a fundamental axis. In this scenario, the history of police reform could be traced back to the seemingly impractical claims made in 2013. As it remains uncertain which threads from this intricate narrative will be pulled, it is challenging to comprehensively define the contours or the chain of causes and effects surrounding the event.

This brings us to the central question of delimiting June as a unit of analysis. On one hand, it is certain that the June Days paved the way for a sequence of popular struggles, as seen in Rio de Janeiro, where mobilization arose due to the disappearance of Amarildo in July 2013<sup>8</sup>, along with the strikes of street cleaners and state teachers in the second half of that year (Reghim *et al*, in press). The bus drivers' strike in Porto Alegre, organized by the opposition to the union, is part of the same context. In São Paulo, the urban occupations of the MTST<sup>9</sup> gained momentum, as did the movement in shopping malls called "rolezinhos"<sup>10</sup>, symbolizing the irreverent enjoyment of peripheral youth. As a chain reaction, the subsequent years saw the emergence of protests against the Cup ("Não Vai Ter Copa"<sup>11</sup>), occupations in schools by secondary school students, the civil servants' Days of Struggle in various states against wage delays and attacks on social security, and protests against the Constitutional Amendment Proposal of the "spending ceiling," culminating in the general strike of 2017. A "feminist spring" between 2015 and 2016 also took to the streets and networks in opposition to violations of reproductive rights and women's autonomy (which at the time were being dealt with in various bills in Brasília), associating itself with the cultural backdrop of June 2013.

In this context, June emerges as part of a broader temporal arc, suggesting the extension of the unit of analysis to encompass the formation of political subjectivities from social struggles in a new historical cycle in Brazil, challenging the notion that June begins and ends with the month itself (Bringel, 2013; Bringel & Domingues, 2018; Reghim *et al*, in the press). While this approach has its merits, it introduces challenges by downplaying the significance of discontinuity, specifically the extraordinary nature of the 2013 protest cycle compared to preceding and subsequent struggles. Expanding the unit of analysis risks blurring the distinction between the process and the event. From a conceptual standpoint, it appears reasonable to view these social struggle reconfigurations as a process, akin to the formation of political subjectivities or the transition between political and economic cycles (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). However, June 2013 remains a critical event, intertwined with these ongoing processes but essentially irreducible to them. This event has different impacts and derivations, but it is not to be confused with its consequences. The fundamental unit of analysis, therefore, should focus on the scale of the event itself (Mendonça and Simões, 2022).

However, it remains unclear whether this kind of cut-off is adequate for establishing a unified analysis. Ultimately, the event takes on distinct features and rhythms when recounted in each locale. In Porto Alegre, for instance, the event's progression unfolds uniquely: the activism of the Bloco de Luta pelo Transporte Público<sup>12</sup> gains momentum on January 21, reaching an unprecedented fervor and scale by April (Gomes, 2018; Dal Sasso & Bernardo, 2016). In Goiânia, the timeline of the struggles against fare increases also diverges from June (Tavares, Roriz & Oliveira, 2016). In numerous capitals, the protests only commence later, during the nationally coordinated mobilization on June 20 and 22. The framework could potentially undergo infinite subdivision and complication. It is not just a matter of synchronicity, but rather a heterogeneity of actors, agendas, and narratives in each context. In essence, they represent distinct narratives, and the critical event emerges from the circumstantial interweaving of these narratives.

The question persists: To what extent does an overarching narrative of the protest cycle coexist with other localized or individual narratives? In the majority of analyses, the central narrative is crafted from the experiences of the southeastern capitals and then projected onto the broader canvas of "Brazilian politics." The other narratives orbit around this central axis. While acknowledging the arbitrariness of any selection, the question arises: how arbitrary is it? Could the political significance of the protests in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro not warrant granting them greater relative importance? This query is nuanced and demands exploration of its implications for a comprehensive answer.

The trajectory of June in the Southeast played a pivotal role in shaping the course of the Brazilian political crisis, defining the power struggle within the State. Its impact extends beyond the cities where these events occurred. Echoing Gramsci's argument, the premise is that the State provides a framework for the sequencing and prioritization of the historical narrative of the uprising. If this narrative is unified by the State, the ordering of events follows a corresponding hierarchy. More than Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo, a sharper spatial focus emerges from these metropolises, highlighting their central sites of manifestation, such as Avenida Paulista or Avenida Presidente Vargas. As detailed in the next section, the dynamics of the protests in these centers significantly differ from those observed in other locations. Their significance in the history of June 2013 does not stem from being a representative sample of nationwide protests but rather from their specific effects that were pivotal for the historical narrative centered around the State. The cut-off is not arbitrary if the premise is explicit.

What remains arbitrary is the act of simplifying and encompassing the uprising within the framework of national political history, including its underlying context and repercussions. The reality is that there are numerous perspectives to examine June, stemming from territories and mobilized groups, each with its corresponding "present future." The event, manifested in countless protest instances, unfolds into distinctive narratives. These diverse plots should be acknowledged without assuming an automatic alignment, be it in terms of synchronization or homogeneity, with the broader history of the Brazilian political system crisis. The unyielding nature of these narratives to easy generalization stands out as a key characteristic of the event as a decentralized social upheaval. The "intense now" of street confrontations is not easily reducible to the historicity dictated by the State, as per Gramsci's concepts, much like the illegibility inherent to the State, as originally articulated by Scott, remains a fundamental feature of this confrontation.

## **2 LEFT AND RIGHT ON THE MOVE**

One of the primary challenges in interpreting the events of June 2013, even as they unfolded, lies in placing the protests within the left/right political spectrum. Given the inherent heterogeneity, various typologies emerged to categorize the groups participating, labeling them at times as "patriotic," "liberal," "autonomist," "revolutionary," "libertarian," "authoritarian," and more. While each classification has its rationale, collectively, they revolve around the left/right axis. Furthermore, the left-right positioning proved dynamic, shifting over time and across various locations. Initially dominated by left-wing groups, the manifestations saw an increasing presence of right-wing elements, especially in the Rio-São Paulo axis. There are many signs of this shift: Arnaldo Jabor's retraction on the news program *Jornal Nacional* on June 17, inverting the significance of the demonstrations and calling them "a new and beautiful historical moment"; the

publication on June 18 of the video made by the Collective Anonymous Brasil stating the five allegedly consensual agendas on the streets, electing the struggle against corruption as the compass; the records of physical and verbal assaults against militants of socialist and communist parties as soon as June 17; and lastly, the nature of the national demonstration of June 20, when the green-and-yellow, the national anthem, the deference towards the police, among other indicators are already clear, although not absolute.

The idea that a shift of this kind actually happened contradicts two generic arguments. Firstly, the notion that the protests were *in nuce* reactionary and fascist. Secondly, the understanding that the categories “left” and “right” were outdated to deal with the novelty on the streets. Both arguments have lost much of their validity, to a great extent, because they are theories built outside the demonstrations, while observing them from windows and screens. The diagnosis that there was, in fact, a shift to the right does not offer a conclusive reading, but it is a reasonable starting point if contextualized. Three facets of this process deserve scrutiny: (1) the conditions that facilitated, in one week, the massification and nationalization of protest cycles, along with the displacement of their political priorities; (2) the reasons behind the shift towards the right as part of the protest cycle; and (3) the immediate consequences of this inflection for the interplay between left and right as mutually referenced ideological realms.

As mentioned earlier, the societal opening introduces a degree of ambiguity concerning the current actors, agendas, and practices unfolding on the streets. In this sense, the insurgent nature of June 2013 diverges from the pattern of major popular mobilizations during Brazil’s redemocratization cycle (Nobre, 2013; Tatagiba, 2016; among others). An illustrative example is the coverage by the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* on August 26, 1999, during the *Marcha dos Cem Mil*<sup>13</sup> in Brasília (Madueño; Gondim & Zorzan, 1999a; 1999b; 1999c). In the style of a screenplay, the text meticulously outlines all preparations for the demonstration that would occur. Seven political party acronyms involved in the preparation are listed, alongside a series of entities that will be present (CUT<sup>14</sup>, MST<sup>15</sup>, UNE<sup>16</sup>) or absent (OAB<sup>17</sup>, ABI<sup>18</sup>). CUT offers an exact estimate of protesters (93,420) and the budget allocated (R\$ 120 thousand) to the logistics of the march. A scheduled speech by Lula marks the conclusion of the activities, but with “foreseeable delays, the organization of the demonstration established a limited timeframe for the conclusion of the demonstration: 4 P.M.” (Madueño; Gondim & Zorzan, 1999a). Throughout the coverage, there is a shared concern with ensuring a peaceful protest, free from violence or damage. According to *Folha*, the organizers themselves would distribute a “handbook to participants, instructing them, among other things, not to respond to provocation, report problems to the organization, and remain calm in any situation” (Madueño; Gondim & Zorzan, 1999a). To assemble this run of show, reporters interviewed pertinent sources from entities, political parties, security bodies, and the government. To a certain extent, there is a script on how to cover the protest, because there are performance conventions on what constitutes a protest. While the coverage is written from the standpoint of the press, which knowingly does not have sympathy towards the protest, it portrays the protagonists, agendas, and forms of action aligned to the left, positioned against a right-leaning government. Ultimately, the *Marcha dos Cem Mil* took place on August 26 without major incidents, standing as the largest mobilization until the events of 2013.

It is a fact that an equivalent journalistic coverage in June 2013 was unattainable due to a discontinuity in established performance conventions. There were no relevant journalistic sources to provide insights about the direction or objectives of the demonstrations. During the redemocratization there were internal conflicts or heterogeneity in popular struggles, but what comes to the forefront is “a strong work of political negotiation and articulation led by the main oppositional partisan leaderships” (Tatagiba, 2016, p. 41). The same is true for the *Marcha dos Cem Mil*, as documented by *Folha de São Paulo* (Madueño; Gondim & Zorzan, 1999c).

The eruption of protests on the streets was a confounding phenomenon. While the movement has been retrospectively rationalized, we do not know exactly how the opposition to bus fares hikes escalated to a nationwide insurrection. The rightward shift observed during the demonstrations is contingent upon a sudden acceleration that surpassed the organizational basis of the pre-existing social movements. The challenge in categorizing the protests as right-leaning or left-leaning relates not only to their evolving profile, but also to the presence, in the critical



week of June, of different left and right movements on the streets with perspectives that could not be easily aligned with one side or the other. (Nunes, 2022). Certainly, this phenomenon is not unprecedented, as historically street crowds have always contained a degree of ambivalence, amalgamating conflicting forces, blurring distinctions, and fostering a sense of disorientation. The ascendancy of the right in June 2013 was only possible because the protests transcended the limits of what the left was capable of organizing.

According to Rodrigo Nunes, the right effectively shaped the post-June political landscape in its own terms, steering and defining the still-undetermined antagonisms. This does not imply that the left was doomed to defeat, but rather suggests that “there was a dispute whose outcome could have been different” (Nunes, 2022, p. 141). The ascendancy of the right was only feasible because the left was not alone on the streets. However, this fact alone does not imply an inevitable loss of control over events in 2013 for the latter.

In retrospect, it is possible to consider some explanations for this outcome. Primarily, the effectiveness of political mobilization depends on resources, and there was a considerable disparity between left and right in this aspect. Today, there is prolific literature that reviews the reorganization of the right throughout the Worker’s Party (PT) governments, which occurred outside the institutional political arena but thrived in the realm of intense digital contention (Miguel, 2019; Nicolau, 2020; Nunes, 2022; Rocha, 2018; Solano, 2018; Velasco and Cruz; Kaysel and Codas, 2015). This accumulation of strengths involved not only the establishment of political frameworks supported by corporate and international funding but also the shaping of public opinion through traditional and digital media. Upon this foothold was the consolidation of discursive triggers that mobilize the right, framing the situation within a conservative worldview. There was no single corresponding party or leadership; instead, the right manifested as a diffuse presence within State institutions (armed corporations, legislative, and judiciary branches) and “civil society” entities (churches, press, social networks). In its own way, the Brazilian right executed the “pincer movement” conceived by the left in the 1980s, combining advances in institutional structures with grassroots mobilization.

The political crisis of 2013 was only its initial spark. The occupation of the streets by the right was still incipient and pulverized, yet it demonstrated strength in numbers and coherence. Strictly speaking, the June protests were not right-leaning. However, at a certain point and within specific spaces, a discrepancy emerged in terms of organization and resources, leading to the right effectively absorbing groups from the left that remained on the streets.

A secondary explanation is the impact of police repression, which discouraged and deterred the left’s presence on the streets. Broadly, the primary setback of the June 2013 cycle was precisely the disintegration of the autonomist political nucleus, the driving force behind the protests. These collectives had been gradually coalescing since the turn of the century, including the foundation of MPL at the 2005 World Social Forum. They gained momentum with the international experiences post-2008 in Egypt, Turkey, Spain, the United States, and Rojava, solidifying the Internet as a horizontal tool for mobilization, information, and organization. Within this frame of reference, elements such as cyberactivism, independent media, self-defense tactics, direct action, occupations, and popular assemblies emerged as prefigurative practices. This autonomist nucleus, criminalized in unison by both the right and the institutional left, ended up losing a lot of strength as a result of the confrontations in 2013. Overall, the crisis not only revealed a discrepancy of resources in the moment of the crisis but also unequal political opportunities for the right and the left regarding physical and legal repression.

Lastly, a third explanation has to do with the relative success of the right in executing what literature recognizes as the articulation of the various subjectivities from a chain of equivalent positions (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015). In other words, this involves the creation of a political construct through which individuals, from diverse contexts, establish a shared understanding of the situation that validates and rejects their collective protagonism. The process is subtle and diffuse, and it becomes increasingly clear as the political crisis unfolds. Yet, the idea of articulation helps the understanding of how the right effectively gained traction amidst uncertainty.

It is nonetheless iconic that Arnaldo Jabor, in his broadcast on *Jornal Nacional* on June 17, chose the following words: “Brazil seemed to be politically disabled. And along came the

people!” The construction of the term “people” as an antagonism of what is the anti-people represents an articulation maneuver *par excellence*. The opposition between self-claimed citizenship and the “system” was a means to detach progressive slogans from their original context and reframe them within the right. The outrage towards the political system’s closure and its alignment with corporate interests, notably in issues like public transportation and mega-events, could shift to a general fight against corruption. This broader narrative had its backdrop in the televised trial of the *mensalão*<sup>19</sup> in the previous year. Likewise, the deterioration of public services and education could be considered a consequence of systemic corruption. The advocacy for the right to political demonstrations, initially in opposition to police brutality, could be reinterpreted as a stance against criminal “vandalism,” thus forging a new alliance between the lawful protester and the protective police force. The reservations of anarchists towards the hegemony of left-leaning parties in demonstrations transformed into sheer hatred towards political parties. Even the public outcry against Grupo Globo’s media monopoly, a quite specific and symbolic emblem, would undergo a rightward shift in the subsequent years.

These changes in meanings are not devoid of conflicts and do not happen in a generalized manner. They emerged subtly during the widespread protests in June, creating a divide that widened in the following years. The capacity for articulation highlights that the right did not only gain strength through figures and resources but also through a reorientation of politics in terms of symbols and language. This understanding aids in recognizing the transition from a contingent conflict with open possibilities to a partial and temporary outcome. As observed, it is clear that the left did not vanish from the streets. Movements advocating for equality and dignity, alongside struggles against the advancement of the right persisted in the years that followed. Essentially, it was the initiative on the streets that fundamentally switched sides.

In terms of its repercussions, this shift to the right may be misconstrued when considering the recent history of the country. Here, I would like to highlight a specific aspect: a sort of “performative inversion” between the right and the left during the political crisis unfolded in June 2013<sup>20</sup>. To contextualize this, it is crucial to try and grasp how extraordinary and surprising it must have been for the conservative forces in Brazil to witness their experience prevail on the streets, even if fleetingly (on days 20 and 22) and localized (particularly in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo). For the generation that experienced the redemocratization cycle, this was unprecedented. For many, it was the first dose of the intoxicating sensation of being part of the people on the streets, of seeing themselves in the crowd, of challenging the authorities. For some, it revealed a strength on which the right had not anticipated they could rely on.

With this precedent, an offensive was orchestrated in 2014 with the goal of wearing down the PT government aiming at the presidential election, or depending on the electoral results, to oust it at any cost (Tatagiba, Trindade & Teixeira, 2015). It is noteworthy that the demonstrations for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff exhibited the type of orchestration typically associated with the left-wing opposition activities during the redemocratization cycle. Contrary to June 2013, the protests in 2014 and 2015 were characterized by previous negotiations among leaders, logistical planning and structured budgets, cars with professional sound systems and pre-defined speakers, a visual identity, itineraries, coordinated publicity and repercussion in social networks. While the right was still fluid in the June outbreak, in the following years it occupied the streets as a movement ingrained within subsidiary social actors. With the purpose of executing the basic program of opposition parties, specifically removing Dilma Rousseff from the presidency, the movement on the streets also seemed to align with the conventions of institutional politics, resembling the *Marcha dos Cem Mil*, albeit with a reversed stance. As the left has historically done, the right now aimed at using the pressure coming from the streets to disrupt a power dynamic that did not seem to favor them within institutional frameworks.

The radicalization of the right in the subsequent years further highlighted this inversion of roles, with its peak in the attempted *coup d’état* on January 8, 2023. In its narrative, the right takes on the role of main antagonist of the Republic’s *status quo*, while the left assumed a stance of moderation, clairvoyance, and legality. The right engaged in a conflict with the judiciary because its intentions could not fit in current legal frameworks. Tensions increase against the mainstream media through the use of social networks, alternative outlets, and the spontaneous engagement of sympathizers. The right incited an internal conflict within the State apparatus, as its project is

inconceivable for the civil service and State careers. Until the putschist onslaught on January 8, the right executed the pincer movement both within and outside institutions, opting for confrontation and appropriating from the left the role of challengers to the established order. It is noteworthy that Eric Hobsbawm described the Italian fascists as “revolutionaries of the counterrevolution” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 121). The historical novelty of fascism lays precisely in the repositioning of the right as a popular and extra-institutional movement, favoring mobilization over oppression, strength over authority, and numerical prowess over the breed of its members.

The left found itself with the containment weapons, which it learned to deploy with remarkable dexterity. Its responsibility shifted towards defending the rules of the electoral game, the separation of powers, due legal process, constitutional control, bureaucratic ethics and, as tragically emphasized during the pandemic, the impartiality of the scientific research method. In essence, the left became the anchor of moderation within the political dispute. To fulfill this role, it needed to soften its critique of the limitations of neoliberal democracy, the impartiality of the law and the axiological neutrality of knowledge – themes once dear to left-wing ideologies.

This performative inversion was not overtly declared in June 2013 but gradually unfolded as conservative leaders managed to organize groups on the streets and translated this mobilization into institutional gains, reshaping the country’s political agenda from 2014 onward. Although the evolution was incremental, it was only possible because, in a specific circumstance in 2013, the right was able to surpass the mobilization capacity of the left on the streets. Initially, imitation was a notable strategy, with the right clearly appropriating and displacing symbols from the left, such as watchwords (“*vem pra rua!*”<sup>21</sup>, “*o povo unido jamais será vencido*”<sup>22</sup>, etc.) and organizations (MPL<sup>23</sup> to MBL<sup>24</sup>, Anonymous BR, etc.). After this extraordinary achievement, it was the right’s very progress that encouraged its radicalization. Unlike the left, as it is used to struggle from a disadvantaged position, the Brazilian right seemed unwilling to accept anything other than victory, or at least, the reasonable belief of imminent victory. Perhaps the most crucial question about January 8 is not how extremist groups had the audacity to breach into the headquarters of the three branches of the Republic, but rather how the civil-military coup could have failed when it had been encouraged for years within the government and amongst the public opinion, complete with a detailed plan of the operations by its perpetrators (Bonin, 2023; Costa, 2023).

In summary, certainly using the left-right spectrum as a lens to understand the June Days of 2013 is a treacherous undertaking. Some consider the movement predominantly driven by the right, attributing a naïve and irresponsible participation of certain left-wing agitators. This perspective suggests a clear line of continuity linking the patriotic protests against Dilma, the parliamentary coup in 2016 and the election of Bolsonaro. Conversely, others see June as the epitome of popular aspirations for enhanced democracy, dignity, and justice. In this case, all emancipatory struggles that followed, mobilized by secondary school students, street cleaners, feminists, and teachers, can be traced back to June, establishing a demarcation to avoid tainting the memory of the June Days with undesirable by-products. Both interpretations entail some degree of arbitrariness. As observed, identification is not straight-forward because both the right and the left coexisted on the streets in 2013. Such coexistence was facilitated by an expressive proportion of protesters that blurred the references both sides use to distinguish themselves. Moreover, in June, right and left began a curious inversion of roles in their political practices, yet maintaining their fundamental values unchanged. The fact that it occurred in the timespan of one month, or perhaps in a single week, is what defines the singularity of the event in our history.

## CONCLUSIONS

This essay delved into typical challenges in understanding the critical events from June 2013. When transforming lived experiences into objects of social analysis, certain dimensions of reality prove elusive. Due to the need to address the political context, the analysis of the insurrection tends to confine the indecipherable or indescribable aspects of the phenomenon to fit them into a coherent historical sequence. While we can systematize the background and the consequences of the insurrection, the image loses focus as we get too close to the event itself. Throughout the text, I highlighted some reasons why intelligibility issues do not stem from deficiencies in our methodological tools or our access to sources. Instead, they arise from the very nature of the

protests. The accelerated pace in June was such that disorientation became inherent to the lived experience and the decisions made in that context. Moreover, what we refer to as “days” (in the expression June Days) actually does not conform to the conventional meaning of the word; it evokes an entanglement of various situations of social conflict, with different rhythms and colors across the country, almost like a chain reaction. There was no singular direction that pertains to all actions and reactions in that context, and the dilemmas of intelligibility emerge as hierarchies of priorities established to generalize, explain, and define a context like this one.

That said, we can summarize four main arguments throughout the text. The first argument is that “June 2013”, beyond being a timeframe, a name, a process, or a state of mind, represents a critical event with a highly specific temporal significance. While this significance draws from preceding trends and examples, it undeniably radiates concentric effects that reverberate in various ways. Yet, it is crucial to emphasize the exceptional nature of the June events as a point of no return. The story of this rupture may be told based on the broader context of Brazilian politics, democracy, and its political elites, assuming a unity granted by the State. Alternatively, it may be told from countless other perspectives situated in territories, political movements or specific experiences of conflict and transgression that orbit around the same critical event. There is no reason to expect a coincidence among these stories.

The second argument posits that the defining characteristic of the event is the dismantling of the mediation channels in the political dispute, challenging established conventions regarding methods, protagonists, arenas, and even the limits of feasibility in the dispute. This aligns with a societal opening in which various forms of outrage and dissent erupt on the streets, lacking clear roots in the pre-existing organizations and identities. Protests, by their very nature, were illegible from the perspective of the State, which was not capable of including them in the political process. Whether on the left wing or on the right wing, the entire political elite was confronted and taken aback by this illegibility, having to improvise strategies to navigate in a context of upheaval.

The third argument is directly tied to the left-right binomial, which appeared confounded in the face of an outrage that did not consistently align with the established frameworks of the right and left in Brazilian politics. The interaction among right-wing and left-wing groups, and a cloud of ambivalent positions – typically processed by the representative political system – was overtly exposed in the public sphere. Consequently, we witness a dynamic profile where the importance of the right and the left varies depending on the moment and location of observation. Such mobility and lack of definition do not invalidate the recognition of a shift to the right happening in a specific segment of the cycle, albeit with broader consequences. The importance of this shift lies not in its unambiguity, widespread, or nationally uniform nature, but in its improbability given the circumstances. It opens up a pathway for the right to reposition itself as a force of action on the streets.

The fourth argument asserts that this repositioning would lead to a peculiar performative inversion between the left and the right in subsequent years, with the latter increasingly taking the lead in street mobilization. If, during the redemocratization cycle, the left transformed the streets into its auxiliary line to exert pressure on the political system, the right now had the opportunity to mobilize its own mass movements. Spontaneously and chaotically in 2013, strategically planned in 2015, and with a radical and officialist stance in 2019, the right appropriated the imagery of people congregating on the streets as a direct expression of sovereignty. The left needed to retreat to the defense of rules and the institutional balance, employing efforts to neutralize the reactionary surge.

It is easy to transform the analysis of June 2013 into a chronicle of defeat. After all, there was an effective dispute where the right succeeded in shaping the outcome of the political crisis on its own terms. Given that critical theory acknowledges the influence of political agency on the process, there is no reason not to assess the decisions that led to this outcome. However, increased attention is necessary when discussing defeat within the context of emancipatory social struggles, guarding the risk of a certain type of “myopia of results” (Bringel, 2013). The success of these movements is not always immediately measurable or strategically evident. Social accomplishments often follow non-linear trajectories, not necessarily crowning the movement that claimed them. Even struggles deemed inglorious in their time may be eventually reclaimed as examples, inspiration, or precedents. The memory of social struggles is populated with alleged

defeats. It is natural that those advocating for a fairer and more humane world adopt a less instrumental relationship with their objectives, or even embrace more diffuse, comprehensive, and overlapping aims. In contrast, those who seek to preserve the status quo and nestle privileges tend to have more specific goals. If the left persists in this assumption that the world can be different, any defeat it faces will always be inherently temporary.

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## EXPLANATORY NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The particularity of the expression "contemporary history" in German (*Zeitgeschichte*), which results from the combination of *Zeit* (time) and *Geschichte* (history), is not considered here. Koselleck strives to show that (the present) time would be an insufficient condition for delimiting a historical period, since history is in itself temporal.
- <sup>2</sup> T.N.: Social outbursts.
- <sup>3</sup> T.N.: "Ato Médico" refers to two legislative proposals, Senate Bill (PLS) 268/2002 and Bill (PL) 7703/2006, aimed at regulating the work of physicians in Brazil, affecting negatively the professional autonomy of other healthcare specialities.
- <sup>4</sup> T.N.: Statute of the Unborn Child.
- <sup>5</sup> T.N.: PDC or "Projeto de Decreto Legislativo" means "Draft Legislative Decree." PL or "Projeto de Lei" means "Bill of Law." PEC or "Proposta de Emenda à Constituição" means "Proposed Amendment to the Constitution."
- <sup>6</sup> T.N.: Opening and overflow are free translations from the terms coined in the referred original works, in Portuguese.
- <sup>7</sup> Tavares, Roriz, and Oliveira's (2016) argument regarding the Days of Struggle in Goiânia is noteworthy, suggesting that police violence had the effect of not only inhibiting but also dismantling the mobilization, rather than provoking a reaction that would intensify it. This observation is intriguing, particularly because it prompts the exploration of comparative research across diverse contexts encompassed by the June narrative. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that the repercussions of the violence in São Paulo extend beyond the city itself, given that social networks played a pivotal role in its dissemination.
- <sup>8</sup> T.N.: Amarildo de Souza, a 43-year-old bricklayer from the Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, went missing after being questioned by Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora (UPP) officers during Operation Armed Peace on July 14, 2013, and despite police claims of his release, his whereabouts remain unknown to date. Source: Wikipedia.
- <sup>9</sup> T.N. Acronym for Homeless Workers' Movement
- <sup>10</sup> T.N.: A "rolezinho" is a social phenomenon originating in Brazil, characterized by spontaneous and large gatherings of predominantly low-income and marginalized youth in shopping malls, challenging social and economic inequalities. Source: <<https://rioonwatch.org/?p=18600>>.
- <sup>11</sup> T.N. "There will be no Cup," in free translation.
- <sup>12</sup> T.N.: Group of Struggle for Public Transport, in free translation.
- <sup>13</sup> T.N. March of the One Hundred Thousand, in free translation
- <sup>14</sup> T.N. Acronym for Unified Workers' Central
- <sup>15</sup> T.N. Acronym for Movement of the Rural Landless Workers
- <sup>16</sup> T.N. Acronym for National Students' Union
- <sup>17</sup> T.N. Acronym for Brazilian Bar Association
- <sup>18</sup> T.N. Acronym for Brazilian Press Association
- <sup>19</sup> T.N. A corruption case involving the Worker's Party (PT) in 2005.
- <sup>20</sup> The thesis of an inversion between left and right is featured clearly on the argument by Felipe Catalani (2019), but with a slightly different meaning than the one developed here.
- <sup>21</sup> T.N. "Come to the streets!" in free translation.
- <sup>22</sup> T.N. "People united will never be defeated," in free translation.
- <sup>23</sup> T.N. Acronym for Free Fare Movement
- <sup>24</sup> T.N. Acronym for Free Brazil Movement

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