

# Marielle Franco

1979–2018

‘BECAUSE SHE TOLD the poor the truth / The rich had her hunted out of this world.’ Brecht’s epitaph for Rosa Luxemburg might stand for Marielle Franco as well. A Rio city councillor—and frontline campaigner against Temer’s recent decree of Federal military takeover of public security in Rio de Janeiro state, aimed not least at subduing the favelas—Marielle was shot dead, along with her driver, Anderson Gomes, on 14 March 2018. The bullets used to kill them were part of a batch that had been sold to Federal police in Brasilia. But while Luxemburg was demonized—not only by the ruling class, but by the Bernstein wing of German social democracy—after the proto-Nazi Freikorps murdered her in 1919, Marielle has been beatified by the Brazilian media oligopoly, the Globo conglomerate in the lead. The operation is comparable to what happened to the Amazon labour organizer Chico Mendes, another socialist militant who was converted into a ‘friend of the Forest’ after his assassination by the rubber barons in 1988. Marielle’s death provoked an uproar in Brazil, passionate, angry crowds marching and grieving in Rio and other cities, soon matched by a swell of outrage around the world. It was in response to this that Rede Globo TV and the rest set about aestheticizing and commercializing Marielle’s image, with prime-time coverage—the very media co-responsible for the anti-democratic ousting of Dilma Rousseff, Workers Party president, which Marielle had denounced as an act of authoritarianism, suffocating the democratic process.<sup>1</sup> The media strategy has a dual purpose: it aims to neutralize the left, in the face of genuine popular anger, by falsifying Marielle’s image and transforming it into something more palatable for the system; and it serves to varnish the media’s own image as one of liberal tolerance, against an even more authoritarian right.

Marielle was born and raised in Complexo da Maré, a sprawling set of shanty-towns in northern Rio. Her father was an administrative employee; her mother a lawyer. Marielle’s initial formation was through the Catholicism of the favela. A teenage Church activist, she won a place on a newly launched pre-college course at CEASM, the Maré’s Centre for Studies and Solidarity Action, in 1999.<sup>2</sup> Here the history teacher was the charismatic left-PT militant Marcelo Freixo, an assistant to the left-Catholic historian and Federal deputy Chico Alencar. By her own account, Marielle’s political radicalization had come the

year before, when a girl friend was killed in a police shoot-out with drug dealers; her primary motivation henceforth was the defence of poor and black human life against the armed ferocity of the state-security forces and their extra-legal, gangsterized and paramilitary avatars. Single motherhood—her daughter Luyara Santos was born the year she started at CEASM—radicalized her as a feminist, too: as she wrote, it ‘helped me to become a fighter for women’s rights and to contest those issues in the favelas’.<sup>3</sup> Juggling political engagement, studies and childcare, Marielle entered Rio’s Pontifical Catholic University in 2002, on a full scholarship, graduating with a degree in sociology. She would go on to take an MA in Administration at the Fluminense Federal University, where her dissertation analysed the social impact of the security forces in the favelas.<sup>4</sup>

For the PT left, the compromises of the Lula government’s first term in office from 2002 were a bitter draught. Though the PT repeatedly won the popular presidential vote—2002, 2006, 2010, 2014—it could barely penetrate the dense clientelist arrangements of local power and patronage that shored up Brazil’s parliamentary oligarchy. In addition to implementing a neoliberal economic programme in its first four years, Lula’s aides were accused of buying deputies. In 2004 a left fraction broke away to stand as the Party of Socialism and Liberty in the 2006 elections, Freixo running as a PSOL candidate for the Rio State Legislature. Marielle joined his campaign team and became his parliamentary assistant in 2007, their work focusing above all on using the platform of the parliamentary investigation commissions to tackle police violence.

Tall, exuberant, educated, articulate, hard-working and extremely brave, Marielle became a forceful political figure, intervening against the BOPE troops and their armoured trucks in the favelas, supporting the families of those killed by the police. A Maré leader recalled her at a neighbourhood women’s meeting, writing down everything that was said.<sup>5</sup> With Luyara, she set up home with her companion Monica Benício, an architect, also from the Maré, and wrote more widely—blogging for example with #AgoraÉQueSãoElas [now it’s their turn], an initiative for Brazil’s 2015 ‘feminist spring’. By then the right-wing offensive against PT rule was well

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<sup>1</sup> See the piece below: Marielle Franco, ‘After the Take-Over: Mobilizing the Political Creativity of Brazil’s Favelas’, NLR 110, March–April 2018.

<sup>2</sup> CEASM was part of an NGO programme rolled out across Brazil’s urban outskirts, on the initiative of the social movements, to redress the abysmal inequalities in access to education.

<sup>3</sup> See her website: [mariellefranco.com.br](http://mariellefranco.com.br).

<sup>4</sup> Her Masters dissertation on the Police Pacification Units (UPP), titled ‘UPP: The Reduction of the Favela to Three Letters’, is available online.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Brisola, ‘Marielle Franco viva! Presente! Os ideais da vereadora persistem’, *Jornal Empoderado*, March 2018.

underway, helped on by a severe economic recession. In retrospect, we can trace Brazil's cycle of left-right re-politicization back to the spontaneous demonstrations of 2013, reflecting a diffuse social malaise that manifested itself in slogans against the municipal bus-fare increases, police violence, the poor quality of public services, and the waste of public money involved in staging the football World Cup. The protests coincided with the largest number of strikes recorded in the country's recent history.

Even before the 2014 recession began, the rising cost of living had brought to the fore the limits of the PT governing model, based on reducing extreme poverty and stimulating consumption, while keeping the socio-economic structure intact. By the time the downturn hit—GDP growth fell by 9 points—Dilma's government was locked onto the defensive. This set the scene for a prosecutorial offensive against corruption, pervasive throughout the system; the attack, however, was highly politicized, aiming at the parliamentary-judicial impeachment of Dilma herself, despite the absence of any evidence of personal corruption. Between March 2015 and March 2016, huge right-wing demonstrations took place on a weekly basis, calling for her head, with benign media coverage. By August, Temer had been installed in the presidential palace. While the image of the 2013 protests is of young people resisting repression, that of the pro-impeachment demonstrations of 2015–16 is of well-off families taking selfies with police officers—a new populism of the right emerging in Brazil.

This was the context for Marielle's run as a PSOL candidate for the Rio city council in October 2016. It was a resounding result: she won over 46,000 votes, placing her fifth among the 51 city councillors. Heading the women's commission, she brought forward a flood of propositions and bills on housing, childcare, transport, health, LGBT rights, prison conditions, sexual violence and abortion. Above all, she used the political stage to fight back against Temer's despatch of the military, under Gen. Braga Netto, to 'impose order' in the state of Rio de Janeiro in February 2018. Marielle was appointed chief reporter on the city council's commission to monitor the Federal military intervention. On March 14, the day she was killed, the PSOL had filed a court action against Temer's decree as disproportionate and largely political in intent, aiming to influence the 2018 elections, in which Marielle had planned to run as PSOL candidate for Deputy Governor.

Much has been said about what Marielle symbolized as a union of identities: young, black, bisexual, *favelada*, proud. Yet Marielle was singular, both in her political militancy and as a person. She was undoubtedly one of the most gifted leaders of the new Brazilian left, willing to take on the multiple layers of wealth and power that constitute the oligarchy. Since her assassination, the corporate media has tried to appropriate her symbolic power. In their representations, Marielle's image has become opaque. There have even been attempts to exploit her killing to legitimate Temer's state-terror decree—

supposed 'evidence' for a Rio de Janeiro crime problem for which military repression supplied the solution. As Marielle's companion Monica Benício has said, the 'security' such an intervention produces may be felt in the richer districts of southern Rio, but for those in the favelas it only means more fear, more terror, more pain, more death, more blood.<sup>6</sup> To use Marielle's death to justify that was a betrayal of everything she had stood for.

The combination of the economic crisis, the ideological reaction manifest in the emergence of a new right, and the reality of a federal government constituted by the moral dregs of the traditional political caste betokens a dark outlook for Brazil, a future in which favelados, blacks, the landless and Indians suffer higher levels of coercion, which also works against forms of organization on the left. It is in this context that the execution of Marielle took place, which does not mean, in a society as violently unequal as Brazil, that it could not have occurred before. Two weeks after Marielle and Anderson's death, landowners' militias, applauded by right-wing political leaders, fired shots at Lula's electoral cavalcade. Soon after, on 7 April, he was arrested; lacking any actual evidence, his conviction was based solely on newspaper articles and the allegations of a crook turned state's witness who has received, in return, a generous reduction of his own sentence. Thirty years after Luxemburg's death—and in the wake of the catastrophe the Freikorps' state had brought about—Brecht wrote another epitaph for her and for Karl Liebknecht, as their remains were reinterred in the GDR:

Here lies buried  
Rosa Luxemburg  
A Jewess from Poland  
Champion of German workers  
Killed on the orders of the  
German oppressors. Oppressed,  
Bury your discord!

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<sup>6</sup> See the interview Monica Benício gave to Júlia Dias Carneiro, 'Rejeição da família, pedido de casamento e luto: a história de amor interrompida de Marielle e Monica', BBC Brasil no Rio de Janeiro, 30 March 2018.