

INTRODUCTION: BRAZIL

The homeless can be found in virtually every country of the world. But perhaps nowhere have they become a mass movement as significant as in Brazil. There, in the country's largest city, they have found a leader of national impact in Guilherme Boulos. Running for president in 2018, he came tenth with less than 1 per cent of the vote. Running for mayor of São Paulo just two years later, he came second with over two million votes. A charismatic speaker and organizer, Boulos—aged 39—belongs to a generation that has not produced many examples of dynamism on the left in the North, where figures like Iglesias in Spain and Ruffin in France remain exceptions. He owes his ascent to the combination of his own gifts with the gravity of the plight of the 'roofless' and the cataclysm of health care in Brazil, under a ruler presiding over the second highest number of deaths from COVID on the planet. Politically, the debacle of Bolsonaro's tenure has redrawn the institutional map of the country. The alarm of middle-class layers who earlier supported the hard-right President is now turning normal bastions of the establishment into a disaffected fronde. The same Supreme Court which mandated the imprisonment of Lula has suddenly reversed itself to release him. Under threat of impeachment Bolsonaro, who once excoriated the marshlands 'Centre' of Congress, has turned to it for protection. With Lula currently holding an overwhelming lead in opinion polls for the 2022 presidential election, his former arch-adversaries of the PSDB—Cardoso in the lead—have announced that their long-time bugbear is, after all, preferable to the incumbent, presaging the dangers of an embrace of the PT by the centre-right. The PSOL, of which Boulos is now the leading representative, has always been to the left of the PT, often fiercely so, but in this conjuncture is standing with no sectarian reservation firmly by Lula. The stakes in the outcome are high. Latin America has started to roll back the gains of the right of recent years, with the victories of López Obrador in Mexico, Alberto Fernández in Argentina, Luis Arce in Bolivia, Pedro Castillo in Peru, and the rise of Gustavo Petro in Colombia and of Gabriel Boric—of Boulos's own cohort—in Chile. Lula's return to power, and to his roots in working-class radicalism, on a popular crest could make the region a beacon of non-conformity once again.

GUILHERME BOULOS

STRUGGLES OF THE ROOFLESS

Interview by Mario Sergio Conti

As a coordinator of Brazil's homeless workers, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto, you are also a leading figure in the Party of Socialism and Liberty, one of the most dynamic sections of the Brazilian left outside the PT (Workers' Party). As PSOL candidate in the November 2020 São Paulo mayoral election, you won over 40 per cent in the second round—some 2 million votes. Could you start by telling us about your background and political formation?

I WAS BORN in São Paulo in 1982, into a middle-class family. My father's family background is Lebanese, my mother's family is from Brazil's Northeast. My parents are both doctors and teach at the University of São Paulo. They were political, with progressive ideas—they work in Brazil's public-health sector, the SUS, and always vote for the left—but not militants. That background gave me opportunities that most Brazilians lack. I didn't have to start working in my teens; instead I was able to dedicate myself to my studies, to have access to books and, later on, to get a good university education.

My militancy began at a pretty young age. I would say it sprang from two sources. First, from my sense of indignation: in Brazil, it is enough to have eyes to be indignant about the gaping inequalities here. São Paulo, in particular, is a deeply segregated city, full of contradictions—on the one hand, a city of extreme wealth, where the bulk of Brazil's GDP is concentrated; and on the other, of extreme poverty, of people living on the

streets, of millions out of work or under-employed. This troubled me, it was like a call to action.

And second, my militancy came from reading, which led me, like many young people, to the left. I joined the youth wing of the Brazilian Communist Party when I was sixteen, while still studying at a fee-paying school. Then I moved to a state school, as a political choice, feeling that my commitment would make more sense in a working-class environment—it would be more coherent in terms of the positions I was coming to defend. At the new school, I worked with the other kids to fight for better teaching conditions. We organized groups—study groups, groups to demand a voice for students in the school board's decisions. One time we organized a strike, when the school tried to impose school uniforms, but without giving the students the means to buy them—their families had no money. One day, the school barred entry to those not wearing a uniform. So we organized a student strike and succeeded in getting the rule reversed.

Could you describe how the Communist Party functioned?

When I joined, in 1997, the PCB had just been through a devastating split. It was founded in 1922, and for decades, up to the military coup of 1964, it was the hegemonic force on the Brazilian left. From the coup through to the 1980s, it was still an important reference point. With the restoration of democracy, it began to adopt increasingly moderate positions, until eventually the leadership changed the Party's name and, in effect, refounded it as a different party altogether. A minority of members tried to maintain a formation in the tradition of the PCB. By the time I joined, it was a small organization, and the youth wing, the UJC, was even smaller. We were trying to rebuild a fighting party.

Why did you leave?

I began to see the contradiction between the doctrinal position of the Party, speaking in the name of 'the people', and its not being willing to build something with the workers themselves. It was a vanguardist idea, detached from reality. I began to understand that if we wanted to work towards a broad social transformation, it was more coherent to build something that directly involved the popular layers. It wasn't just my decision. There was a group of us in the UJC and we left it together. We had a period of discussion about what to do next—not everyone took the

same path. Some of us made the decision to join the MTST, the struggle of the *sem teto*—those without a roof—because it expressed the extreme of Brazilian poverty: those without even a place to rest their head.

Did you help to create the MTST, or was it already in existence?

It was already in existence—we joined in 2001. The MTST had been set up in 1997 by a group of militants from the Movimento Sem Terra (MST), the rural landless workers' movement, who saw the need to go beyond the countryside and organize in the cities—today, 87 per cent of the Brazilian population is urbanized. From that grew the work of the MTST. I first got involved by going along to one of the MTST occupations and helping to carry out political education sessions there, having discussions with the militants. And from that time on, I got more and more involved, to the point of living in one of the occupation sites. I was twenty years old at that point.

At the same time, you started studying philosophy at the University of São Paulo, where you took part in a study group on Hegel. Why was that?

I decided to study philosophy because it was the discipline I found most difficult to master autodidactically. I had read quite a bit in the social sciences, politics and economics, and I was interested in philosophy, partly due to my father's influence. But I had great difficulty in reading philosophical texts because of their density and felt I would need support in order to study them. That was one of the reasons that led me to the Philosophy Department. Another was that I was thinking of becoming a teacher. For me, philosophy was not just a positive discipline, or a form of knowledge detached from the world: it meant the possibility of broader reflections on questions of life, ethics and practice.

It was through Marx that I came to Hegel. I had read Marx when I first became a militant. It was a major theoretical inspiration and is still a reference point for me today. I felt the need to study Hegel in order to understand Marx better. For the first two years I was able to dedicate myself almost entirely to my studies, but after that I was living at an occupation site, so I couldn't study as much as I would have liked. Hegel is still a touchstone for me, for his historical and dialectical perspective: analysing each political, social, economic and cultural fact from the perspective of its historical construction. To understand our

reality involves comprehending the processes of transformation that brought us to it. To overcome the reality we live in now, we need to turn our eyes both to the past and to the future. Of course, many Brazilian thinkers have been important to me. In order to understand Brazil and Latin America, you can't take a Eurocentric approach, or apply Marx mechanically. One author in particular whose work deepened my understanding of Brazil was the sociologist Florestan Fernandes.

How would you compare being a militant in the UJC and in the MTST—in practical and theoretical terms?

They were radically different. As a party militant, at least as I experienced it at the time, the main task was to convince people of the justness of the party's programme. There was an extreme, almost idealistic, valorization of theory. You could even call it naive: thinking that you already have the answers, and that producing social transformation is just a matter of making the whole working class aware of these truths. In the popular movement of the MTST, militancy comes from people's practical experience, from their concrete struggle for housing—which, from a doctrinal party perspective, might be seen as a corporatist, purely economic struggle, without the potential to transform social and political structures. In this respect, a great lesson that I learned in the MTST is that any transformation has to start from concrete objective conflicts, and that the practical, organizational construction of social and political coexistence is more important than an abstract programme. No matter how successful a programme may be, the building of a movement is subject to the contradictions of real life, and the programme changes in interaction with a community.

How is the MTST organized?

It is both fluid and centralized. In this sense, it is quite similar to the MST, the Landless Workers' Movement. Fluid because, to the extent that the movement consists of occupying land, militants get their training through practice, in discussions that result in immediate actions. The movement is open to those who get involved in it. There are countless people who are now in the leadership of the MTST who at first were only fighting to have a place to live. They join the occupations with their little bit of tarpaulin, and they quickly turn into militants. It's a degree of organizational openness that's inconceivable in a centralized party. At the

same time, because it is a fighting organization, it needs centralization and discipline. The MTST lives in a daily confrontation; it is constantly up against the police, the government, the owners of land earmarked for real-estate speculation. There are risks of infiltration by provocateurs, by people who want to occupy a piece of land and then resell it for profit, people linked to organized crime, by militia members. It is a direct confrontation, which requires planning and organization because we are up against an array of local and territorial power structures.

How are tactical and strategic decisions taken? For example: 'Let's occupy here and not there', 'Let's support such-and-such a party and such-and-such a candidate in the elections'.

These decisions are taken at meetings of the participants. The movement holds a planning conference at the beginning of each year to discuss what to do. Each state elects representatives to the national coordinating group, which in turn formulates the MTST's overall plan—regarding elections, for example. There are around thirty national coordinators, of which I'm one. We held election seminars to discuss which parties to support, and to decide on our candidates for the proportional lists. So, my PSOL candidacy for President of the Republic, in 2018, and then for Mayor of São Paulo, in 2020, were subject to the agreement of the MTST. As an MTST coordinator, I am not authorized to take the decision to be a candidate individually.

You enter the leadership of the MTST by being elected to it from one of the occupations—when we take over tracts of land that are not fulfilling a social function. They involve thousands of people, perhaps 3,000 shacks on a piece of land. To an outsider, it seems chaotic: a busying crowd without anyone in overall control. But internally we divide the occupation into smaller groups. In an occupation with 2,000 families, we create ten groups of 200 families. Each group paints its shack a different colour, and each gets a name: G1, G2, G3 and so on. Within each group, the initial meetings are organized by more experienced militants, and the new occupiers elect coordinators from among those who volunteer, by putting their hand up and saying, 'I can coordinate.' Each group has four or five coordinators. They organize daily tasks and take charge of the collective spaces. Each group has a communal kitchen, organized with a rotation of tasks. Everyone takes part in building the kitchen and the shared bathrooms. The coordinators have both practical and political

tasks. They have daily meetings with participants from earlier occupations, discussing events and getting practical guidance drawn from past experience. The coordinators also attend political education courses, and the backbone of the MTST emerges from these.

There are also people who join the movement that don't come directly from the struggle for a home, but through political and ideological affinity. The entry point for them is through the brigades, which are opened up on an annual basis to people who are not without a roof but who identify with the movement and want to contribute to it. There is the Education Brigade, teachers who run literacy courses at the occupation sites. The Gardens Brigade helps to create community gardens. The Architecture Brigade is made up of professionals who help with the construction of homes. All the brigades are voluntary.

As well as this political work, you went on to study psychology and became a psychoanalyst. Did you have personal motivations for doing so? Do you think there is a correlation between mental-health issues and the material deprivations suffered by working-class people?

There was a personal interest, since I'd had depressive symptoms in my early youth. But what led me to psychoanalysis was my experience in Argentina with the *piquetero* movement in 2001–02. I spent a month there, during the upsurge of the *piqueteros*—a movement of the unemployed, organized territorially, a bit like the MTST. Their slogan was, 'The *barrio* is the new factory.' The *piqueteros* were among those responsible for the overthrow of three Argentine presidents and two interim ones within the space of a few months. I was in Argentina just after the Pueyrredón Bridge massacre in Buenos Aires, where two militants were murdered at a blockade. I went to a neighbourhood on the periphery of Buenos Aires where there was a meeting they called a 'reflection group'. It was coordinated by two psychoanalysts who brought people together in a circle and created an environment for listening—listening to people who had never been listened to before. They had just lived through traumatic situations, like being made redundant and evicted from their homes; or they had lost their partners, or seen their families destroyed. I will never forget that: for the power, for the strength that was present there. It was a catharsis that brought forth all the experience of suffering, of humiliation, of every sort of oppression and violence that people had lived through. I left convinced of the potential of psychoanalysis for the

transformation of people, of their bodies. And of the need for procedures like this to reach the base of society, the excluded, to help them take their destiny into their own hands, with the support of the community. It was a tool for those who couldn't afford to pay for psychological treatment. I came back from Argentina and started studying psychoanalysis.

Another thing that intrigued me, when I went to live in an MTST occupation, was something that I heard said again and again, in different ways. I remember the first time, listening to a comrade who was coordinating a community kitchen. She said that this was a space for sharing, for coexistence, for taking root. It was the type of space that had been lost in the overwhelming dynamics of urban capitalism. In the occupation people talked, recounted their cases, their stories, explained how they had ended up there, took steps of their own. She said that, before coming to the occupation, she had been living with relatives, dependent on their hospitality. She was diagnosed with severe depression and ended up taking several psychiatric medications—she couldn't even get out of bed. She was driven to the MTST occupation by economic conditions, the precarious situation in which she lived. But once there, she told me, 'I threw the medicines away because I didn't need them anymore.' That might sound naive. But, no—at different occupations, from different people, I heard the same narrative.

Through study and research, I tried to understand what this meant. My master's thesis in psychiatry is about the correlation between mental suffering, poverty and collective organizations. I could begin to understand, with psychoanalysis, how far situations of humiliation, of material and social deprivation, helplessness, unemployment, family breakdown, an environment of violence or loneliness, how all of this is linked to psychological suffering, especially depression. Depression does not only affect the middle class, far from it. It hits the dispossessed. Yet on the other hand, when these people feel part of a group, when they are no longer alone, when they feel important to others, acts of solidarity serve equally as acts of healing. Commitment and collective projects are good for people on a psychological level. There is no doubt that unemployment, homelessness, violence and humiliation are causes of psychological and subjective breakdown. And coexistence, bonds of community, can help rebuild subjectivities that have been ravaged by barbarism, by the urban dynamics in which people are isolated and lost in the middle of an anonymous crowd.

How does the MTST deal with drug trafficking, banditry and alcoholism? For example, the MST at one point prohibited the consumption of alcohol at its occupation sites.

An occupation is not an island. It is conditioned by all the social and political influences that predominate on the urban peripheries. Some rules of coexistence have to be established. A basic rule is that you cannot sell an occupied lot of land. Upholding this is extremely difficult, because it challenges powerful interests, even mafia groups, who want to take advantage of the occupations to make money and exploit people. Every occupation has its own internal rules, which are voted on in an assembly. I understand the MST's prohibition, but in a camp in the countryside you have almost complete control over the territory. In the city, someone only has to cross the street and they are in another community. So, our rules are based on collective decision-making and participation. The community itself sets limits in relation to drinking, hours and conduct. That's the only way to deal with these situations.

Does the fight for housing remain limited to that one goal?

Our struggle has several levels. The most immediate is the struggle for housing, for occupied land to be shared out in allotments and the construction of new buildings. The struggle does not stop there, because it isn't enough to have a housing estate if there are no public services, infrastructure or transport. In the central city districts, these are often there already. But on the urban peripheries, where there are pockets of irregular housing, the state is only precariously present—or else it arrives through the violent form of the security forces.

The objective of the MTST is not to reproduce this logic, but to combat it. Fighting urban segregation means, on the one hand, fighting for housing together with public services and infrastructure, on the peripheries; and on the other, demanding the expropriation of unused property in central city districts, to create social housing in areas that already have services and infrastructure. In other words, we have to fight against the segregation of centre and periphery, which means confronting the real-estate speculators. We need to exercise the right to the city and organize around the public budget, to demand investment in the districts where the poor live and to rethink the question of food in the cities. That is why we are creating organic gardens and public spaces. When we bring the

place where we live closer to the place where we work, we're contesting the vehicle-based model of city planning—so often, the commute is from the periphery to the centre. The MTST is fighting for an alternative type of city; that is why it is resisted so bitterly. It is demonized because it threatens real-estate capital, confronting the speculators and their segregated city. This was a live issue during my campaign for Mayor of São Paulo. There are people from rich neighbourhoods who don't want to *see* the poor. When you take up the cause of social housing in a central district, an area of high property prices, it touches the interests of a small but wealthy layer—and that stirs up their prejudices.

What is the social composition of the homeless movement, in terms of class, gender and race?

There was a survey undertaken by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE), in one of the MTST's largest occupations, the Povo Sem Medo (People Without Fear) encampment in São Bernardo, a city in the industrial belt of São Paulo where the PT was born. It was very illuminating, and broke down all kinds of preconceptions. The view that has been built up of the movement—in order to attack it—was that it is made up of people who don't want to work, who don't want to have to buy their own homes. The research showed that the enormous majority of the people at the occupation are workers. In general, they are informal, precarious workers, people who, even after working all their life—in construction, recycling, the service sector—weren't able to keep hold of their houses. That's why they are in the movement. A majority of people in the MTST are black, and a majority are women. The same is true of the MTST's leadership, which reflects that composition. In the case of women, this has to do with their role as protagonists in the struggles of their communities. The struggle for housing and services in the periphery has historically been driven by women, to a huge extent. And the internal organization of childcare, of welcoming new people, of handling issues of behaviour and food security—all of this has been led by women in the occupations.

How does the MTST relate to other organizations? Are there activists in the movement from political parties, religious groups or NGOs? Is the MTST part of any international alignments?

The movement seeks to have the broadest possible relationship with the left. There are people from various parties working in the MTST, from the Workers' Party to the PCdoB, and people who do not necessarily identify ideologically with the left. Today, the strongest relationship is with the PSOL, due to a shared political conception, a common analysis of the conjuncture and position in relation to the dominant class. There are Catholic priests and nuns, and evangelical pastors. The movement values autonomy and doesn't want to become a mouthpiece for any party, because that would sap away its strength. But we don't shy away from common actions. Right now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we have expanded the activities of the MTST's solidarity kitchens, to meet the worsening crisis of hunger by distributing food to those who need it. This was done with the help, for example, of the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), which is passing on food from family farming to the kitchens, and the Oil Workers Federation (FUP), who have donated gas canisters for the kitchens. The MTST is also part of the Frente Povo Sem Medo (Front of the People Without Fear), a coalition of dozens of black, feminist and youth movements.

Internationally, our closest relations are with other urban movements in Latin America. We have built Resistência Urbana Latino-Americana, a coalition which brings together movements in Argentina, Colombia, Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador. We also have contacts with the European left. In Spain, with Podemos; in Portugal, with the Left Bloc; in Germany, with Die Linke. We had an exchange with housing movements in South Africa, whom we contacted through the mediation of some sectors of Caritas, from the Catholic Church.

What were the economic and political factors that led to so many people being homeless in Brazil?

The overall dynamic of the economy—the shift from productive investment to asset speculation—has precipitated a real-estate boom in the big cities. In São Paulo, the value of a square metre of land rose by over 200 per cent between 2007 and 2014. There was a huge influx of capital to the cities, public-works projects were carried out, and there was a credit-fuelled real-estate boom. But none of this was met by urban reform. There was a lot of market speculation, which was reflected again

in rising land values and—very directly—in higher rents. Many urban workers in Brazil pay rent, which kept rising, to the point where families were spending 80 per cent of their income on it. In the end, the choice was between eating or paying the rent. This generated the social conditions for the growth of occupations, because people had no other alternative. There was also a political factor: the population's growing lack of faith in institutional politics. Fundamentally this is a crisis of the model set up by the Constitution of 1988, which promised to reduce inequality, but didn't deliver. It promised people greater participation in politics, but democracy has never been fully realized. The MTST, in common with a whole generation of social movements, is an expression of frustration with the limits of the Brazilian democratic model.

Finally, Brazil is experiencing a crisis in workplace organizing, caused by the technological revolution and deindustrialization, especially intense in Latin America. A category of precarious workers has been created, itinerant labourers who live off intermittent work outside the protection of the labour laws, doing a spell of work here, another over there. For them, it's hard to build a collective identity around the workplace. The formation of the urban peripheries may bear a certain analogy to the processes of nineteenth-century industrialization that Marx analysed—creating the conditions for workers' self-organization by concentrating thousands in big industries, under the same conditions of exploitation; they developed forms of class consciousness and methods of struggle. Twentieth-century capitalism, especially its Latin American model, uprooted millions of workers from the countryside and from industry, relocating them on the peripheries of the big cities, where they face the same conditions of exploitation and experience similar problems. This has generated local neighbourhood movements. In the last twenty years, we have seen various movements emerging outside the dynamics of industrial work and union organization.

In the peripheries of the big cities, PT governments often benefited contractors, including gangster companies like Odebrecht, which had on its payroll politicians and executives in eleven countries, from Angola to Peru, Guatemala to Argentina, Mozambique to Mexico. How did the PT's urban policy benefit the homeless?

The main programme the PT developed in this area, Minha Casa, Minha Vida—My House, My Life—illustrates the situation. It was launched in

the wake of the 2008 crisis to avert bankruptcies in the construction sector, which had been hit by the subprime-mortgage crisis in the United States. It was an injection of public resources into construction, and at the same time a popular housing programme. But it was shaped by the interests of the construction companies, which was reflected in the urban environments it produced. *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* maintained the logic of peripheralization—because it was in the interest of the developers to build on faraway land, which was cheaper. It resulted in tiny, poorly built flats—because the financing received by the construction companies wasn't conditional on the quality of the housing built. There was a permanent struggle between the government and social movements, including the MTST, and through tremendous pressure we achieved some improvements in the third phase of the programme. But then came the 2016 coup against Dilma. Michel Temer took over the government with the support of the ruling class and ended the programme.

That said, it is worth adding: the MTST worked hard to prevent Dilma from being ousted from the presidency, to prevent Lula being arrested and disbarred from the 2018 presidential election. This was because her removal and his arrest came about through a manipulated and illegal process, as has since been proven. The MTST activist base in São Paulo turned out in force at the Metalworkers' Union headquarters in São Bernardo when Lula took refuge there, on the eve of his arrest, and I made a point of visiting him in jail, in Curitiba. His imprisonment was a violation of democracy and of popular sovereignty. One does not have to be a Workers' Party supporter to recognize this.

To explore this further: the great growth of the MTST took place under the PT governments, from 2002–16, during Lula's two terms in office and Dilma Rousseff's one-and-a-half. In other words, more Brazilians became homeless during the governments led by a left-wing party. What did the PT do right, and what did it do wrong, in your opinion?

The successes of the PT include its programmes to combat poverty and hunger, and expand access to education and the university—and a foreign policy that placed Brazil in a less subordinate position in relation to the United States. The main problem, or limit of the PT governments, was that the party flinched when the moment came to go for broader structural transformations. After Lula's arrival in government in 2003, PT policies—the growth of the domestic market, expansion of credit,

Bolsa Família, increase in the minimum wage—helped to stimulate economic growth, though this was also due to external factors: commodity prices were high, China was growing at double-digit annual rates, there was strong international demand for Brazilian raw materials. But the fact is that, under Lula, the economy grew 4 per cent per year from 2003 to 2010. This allowed these policies to be implemented without the need to change anything structural—that is, without disturbing the privileges of the ruling class. It was possible to make concessions to those at the bottom of the social pyramid without taking anything away from those at the top, in what was often described as a ‘win-win’ situation. While there was economic growth, the public budget could grow too, and a large part of that could be earmarked for social policies. Conflicts over distribution were circumvented. But a policy of this kind is based on a favourable economic cycle; this cannot last forever. When that cycle ended in 2013, as an after-effect of the 2008 international crisis, the PT government was at a crossroads. A choice had to be made. It chose not to confront the bigger structural problems, which would have required increased popular mobilization.

In my opinion, the conditions existed in which the government could have won that confrontation. They would have had the political and social support to carry out progressive tax reform, to settle the distributive conflict in a way that would have been fairer to the majority. They would have needed to provide stronger incentives for industrialization and infrastructure projects, such as basic sanitation and mass transportation. These investments would have lessened inequality in Brazilian society, where the wealthiest 1 per cent of the country’s population receive 50 per cent of the overall national income. They also should have regulated the financial market and the banks, which had profited enormously under the PT government. And finally, they should have implemented political reforms, so that the country could not be held hostage to the metrics of ‘governability’ of a political establishment that arbitrarily removed Dilma from power. The coup against her was carried out by the same parties that had previously supported her—the same political establishment that today supports Bolsonaro. In short, there was a lack of audacity and popular organization. A left-wing government accommodated itself to a situation in which there were some gains for the poorest. But when the crisis came, it had no strength to resist the pressures for economic retraction, which resulted in political regression.

Another limit was summed up by José Mujica, former president of Uruguay. In a kind of self-criticism of the Latin American left, he once said that our governments have created consumers, not citizens. The popular masses had access to some consumer goods, which is fine. But there was no simultaneous contestation of social values. In other words, the Bolsa Família was created, the minimum wage was increased, some were able to buy their own homes with financing from public banks—but that came with an endorsement of individualism, of the logic of meritocracy, and people who were able to improve their lives a bit went on to vote for Bolsonaro, not understanding how much those policies had been linked to a social and political project.

What do you think of André Singer's analysis of 'lulismo'?

André Singer's books—*Os sentidos do lulismo* (2012) and *O lulismo em crise* (2018)—are indispensable reference points. He described the 'meaning' of *lulismo* as a 'feeble reformism': a set of public policies that reduced poverty but avoided mobilizing for structural reforms and confronting the ruling class. I believe Lula himself adopted this characterization, up to a point. The big question is whether the conditions of possibility for this model still exist. Now, with the international crisis aggravated by COVID-19, with China no longer growing so fast, and the Brazilian economy stagnating since 2015—it is impossible to imagine any augmentation in workers' rights that does not come at the expense of the privileges of those at the top of the social pyramid. This question is crucial, and should guide Brazilian politics in the post-Bolsonaro era.

When did you decide to involve yourself in party politics, and why did you choose the PSOL?

I joined the PSOL in 2018. But this was the culmination of a long process of change within the party itself. The PSOL emerged from a dissident fraction of the PT's parliamentary caucus, which resisted a social security project for public servants that had been defended by Lula in his first term. This meant that, in its early years, the PSOL's brand was its anti-PT line. From 2016, with the right-wing coup against Dilma, things began to change. The party has remained very critical of the PT, and defends the project of creating a new left; it is against the alliances that the PT is making with the right—we think that the coalition to transform

Brazil must grow out of social movements. At the same time, however, since 2016 we have been battling tirelessly to unite against the right and against the coup. These changes of PSOL's were very similar to those of the MTST. Hence we grew closer.

The MTST took the decision to align with the PSOL because we came to the conclusion that social-movement activity, while fundamental to any process of transformation, was not in itself sufficient. This was at the point when the political crisis had worsened, with the coup against Dilma and Lula's imprisonment in 2017. We understood that we needed to take our battle into the realm of institutional politics. The convergence with PSOL came about because we agreed there was a need for a left-wing project that had breadth and unity, in order to combat the nascent growth of the extreme right. A project that would be non-sectarian, but would continue to raise those demands that had not been realized by the PT governments. The PSOL is the party which today is most in tune with the new social movements and critical layers of the youth.

What was your experience as the PSOL presidential candidate in 2018?

On a personal level, the 2018 campaign was very important. I travelled all round the interior of Brazil; I encountered realities of which I knew nothing. I got to meet the regional leaderships—I went to many very different communities and learned how different social classes live. It was an apprenticeship that taught me a lot and I will always cherish that memory. At the same time, 2018 was a toxic election, marked by hatred and fear. Bolsonaro managed to steer the campaign, not just with 'fake news', but using the language of the engineers of chaos of the international far right. He managed to capitalize on the discourse of anti-politics and turned it into a weapon of hate. There was no space to discuss projects, ideas—it was a proscribed campaign.

How did your run for mayor of São Paulo in 2020 differ from the presidential campaign?

Although the MTST is a national organization, my political activity has always carried more weight in São Paulo because this is the city in which the housing crisis is concentrated. The strength of the MTST in São Paulo, which lay behind my 2 million votes, was anticipated by very few people. Those of us in the movement, however, knew we could count on

our grassroots. Not only that, but by 2020 the Bolsonaro government was worn out, and we had a position of strength, socially. Because of this we were able to have the discussions that had been banned in 2018.

The mayoral campaign mobilized hope and engaged people from below. São Paulo politics had been seen as the prerogative of professionals or those with economic interests, but that changed through the PSOL campaign: politics was seen as an instrument of transformation. There was also a generational divide. The youth were the dynamic centre of our campaign, and they expressed themselves through social media. On the eve of the second round, an electoral poll by Datafolha showed that among those over 60, we lost by 70 to 30 per cent. But among voters under the age of 25, we won by 65 to 25 per cent. And, our campaign managed to break out of the bubble of middle-class progressives in the universities, which is where the Brazilian left has tended to grow. This time, our best vote came from the outskirts of the city, where we won in seven major districts. In other words, our message reached the popular areas.

What have the Bolsonaro government and the COVID-19 pandemic meant for the homeless?

Both have been tragedies. At one of the biggest rallies of his 2018 election campaign, when he was already through to the second round, Bolsonaro declared in São Paulo: ‘I will wipe out the MST and the MTST.’ He explicitly identified the social movements as enemies to be destroyed. In power, he put a stop to whatever remnants still existed of the social programmes. Today there is no federal policy for the construction of social housing—at a time of abysmal and persistent economic crisis. We have 15 million unemployed people, the highest rate on record. This means more people needing support of all kinds, starting with not having a place to live. The homeless population of Brazil have been abandoned to their fate by Bolsonaro, who is still threatening them with repression and with the criminalization of the MTST.

When the pandemic began, the situation worsened catastrophically. The main public-health guideline was for people to stay at home. This recommendation ignores the fact that millions live in atrocious conditions, with five or six members of the same family in a single room. With schools closed, children stayed at home all the time, with no computer and no online education. How can one practise social distancing,

in houses without the basic preconditions of hygiene, such as running water? It is simply not possible to defeat the virus under these conditions. To top it off, Bolsonaro has refused to take part in vaccine procurement, which has slowed to a trickle.

The MTST has organized a series of initiatives. One was to demand through the courts that a part of the nation's hotel capacity be made available to house the street population. Another was an action in the Federal Supreme Court: we managed to get a moratorium on evictions during the pandemic. This barbarity was already underway: about 12,000 families were evicted from their homes in the middle of the pandemic. A few months ago, together with PSOL and the Despejo Zero (Zero Evictions) campaign, we managed to get the Federal Supreme Court to put a stop to it. We also managed to get Congress to approve a law preventing evictions, but it is now in the hands of Bolsonaro. We filed another lawsuit in court to prioritize the vaccination of homeless people, due to their being at increased risk. The federal government—and a large number of the state governments and municipalities—had no policy in place to help the homeless during the pandemic.

The MTST, and you personally, are leading demonstrations calling for Bolsonaro's removal from office. A significant part of the left, especially sectors of the PT linked to parliamentarians and governors, think it is better to wait for the election in 2022, hoping that Bolsonaro will wear himself out in the meantime. What is your view? Is the ouster of Bolsonaro a priority, given he's so far down in the polls? Is impeachment a realistic possibility, given the make-up of Congress?

The idea of leaving Bolsonaro in power to wear himself out—draining his support, to weaken him before the 2022 election—is not only immoral, but tactically idiotic. First, because the Brazilian people are bleeding: already more than 550,000 have been killed by COVID. Bolsonaro isn't about to change his approach to the pandemic. On the contrary, he is still campaigning against masks, against tests, against vaccines. How many deaths will there be by the end of 2022? And second, leaving him in office means assuming that there is a normal political environment in Brazil: that the PT will be able to win the election and take power, without any problems; that Bolsonaro will abide by the Constitution. It isn't like that, and it won't be like that. There are real, everyday risks of a putsch in Brazil. Bolsonaro relies on the armed forces, the state police and their

gangster militias. Moreover, he is brazenly paving the way for a coup d'état. His government is packed full of generals; he has been doling out pension packages to soldiers and police officers, and encouraging his civilian supporters to take up arms. Yes, he has lost a part of his base; he isn't the favourite to win the election. Knowing this, he is claiming that the vote will be rigged and that they should use printed ballots rather than voting machines. He is aiming at something more serious than the invasion of the US Capitol, with more time to prepare, banking on the influence he can wield in the Armed Forces and among the states' police forces, and the much lower degree of democratic stability there is in Brazil, compared to the US.

The situation in Brazil is critical and urgent. We need to do battle precisely because Bolsonaro is weaker now, and we have to prevent him regaining strength. Impeachment is the first priority of Brazilian politics. There are objective, legal and constitutional grounds for it. We need to build the broadest possible popular mobilizations for impeachment, of all the parties and social movements. Obviously, we have a political problem with Congress. Bolsonaro has allied himself with the dregs of the corrupt Brazilian political system, venal Congressmen happy to block impeachment in exchange for posts and cash. They are known as the *Centrão*—the Centre—and they always act this way. But the situation is not immutable. If popular pressure increases, if the congressional committee investigating the Bolsonaro government's handling of the COVID crisis reaches any concrete and intelligible conclusions, the situation will change. The rats will flee the sinking ship. It is vital, therefore, to go for Bolsonaro now. It won't be easy, but it is a necessary task and a feasible one for the Brazilian left.