# Introduction

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Unlike many books written about historical events, the idea for this book arose in June 2022, months before the event we discuss in this collection actually materialized. At that moment, the violent and nefarious attack on the United States Capitol in January 2021 was still unsettled. Also, the similarities and connections between the extreme right's coordinated efforts in the United States and Brazil led us to believe that if Jair Bolsonaro lost the 2022 presidential elections, the transition of power would not be peaceful.

What eventually culminated in a coup attempt by *Bolsonaristas* (as Bolsonaro’s supporters are called) on January 8, 2023, in the Planalto Esplanade in Brasilia, Brazil’s capital city, had in fact been brewing for nearly a decade. In the years following the so-called ‘Journeys of June’ 2013 student protests against an increase in public transportation fares, public demonstrations regarding political dissatisfaction were gradually taken over by extreme right-wing groups and their agendas. Since then, several figures from the extreme right's political underground have been elevated to the status of political celebrities, supported by a well-coordinated digital communication structure.[[1]](#footnote-2) One of these figures was Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a rather obscure federal deputy from the state of Rio de Janeiro and a former military officer,[[2]](#footnote-3) known for his controversial views on human rights, democracy, and gender and race equality, to name only a few. Bolsonaro went from being a caricatural political figure who was a frequent guest on comedy and talk shows on television to becoming a presidential candidate in 2018.

In the years leading up to the 2018 presidential election, Brazil went through what is now commonly referred to as a parliamentary coup orchestrated by the Federal Congress with the collaboration of then-Vice President Michel Temer, who impeached leftist President Dilma Rousseff (2012-2016) on fiscal administrative misconduct charges. In parallel with the investigation into irregularities in Dilma Rousseff's government finances ('CPI das Pedaladas Fiscais'), the Federal Police conducted 'Operation Carwash’' (‘Operação Lava Jato’), whose proceedings uncovered a massive corruption scheme in the Brazilian federal government, particularly in state-owned companies. As a result of 'Lava Jato’, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva[[3]](#footnote-4) was sentenced to prison in 2018. Coincidentally, when Lula da Silva was imprisoned, he was leading the opinion polls for the upcoming presidential election. After Lula's imprisonment, the Worker’s Party (PT) failed to promote Fernando Haddad (a former mayor of São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, and former Minister of Education under Lula da Silva’s previous governments) as an alternative to Jair Bolsonaro, who by then had the support of a powerful segment of the Brazilian business community, evangelical church leaders, and a well-oiled social media mobilization apparatus.

After his election in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, supported by a conservative-majority congress, was responsible for setbacks in various political fields, including environmental and human rights. Political commentators have argued that Bolsonaro governed for four years (2018-2022) as if he were still campaigning, always aiming to reach a small but significant group of staunch supporters who would be able to expand support during election periods. However, the Bolsonaro administration’s irresponsible handling of the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022 had a negative impact on Bolsonaro's approval ratings. Even with a decline in approval during the pandemic and many other questionable actions by the then-president and his associates (including his four sons, three of which are elected officials), Lula da Silva's victory in the 2022 general election was not easy. He won in the second round with just over 51 percent of all valid votes.

In a political landscape of crisis and inequality where a few private media conglomerates concentrate all media power in the country and where legislation does not keep pace with the rapid development of digital media,[[4]](#footnote-5) the direct and simple communication style of the extreme right in Brazil (and around the world) gained enormous strength. In contrast, social movements in Brazil have a long tradition of grassroots popular mobilization, also in forming political parties during and after the re-democratization process in the late 1980s. It has been argued that in the 2022 general elections, this mobilization capacity was able to reestablish the weakened connection of the Workers' Party with its popular base. In addition, an alignment of the leftists with some democratic elements of the center and center-right is believed to have ensured Lula da Silva's narrow victory.

However, in an era of post-truth, disinformation, and fake news, it cannot be expected that the results of such turbulent elections would be accepted without friction. The fragility of the victory and the threats to Lula da Silva’s new government was evident in the coup attempt on January 8, 2023, which brought the political imagination, narratives, and characters of the extreme right to the forefront of the Brazilian and international public spheres.

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Given this political context, we, Lou Caffagni, Isabel Löfgren, Paola Madrid Sartoretto, and Gizele Martins gathered for an international conference on media and governance in Latin America during a hot Swedish summer in 2022 as the COVID-19 pandemic was subsiding. In conversations about future collaborations and concerned about the upcoming general elections in Brazil, one of us mentioned the book *The Capitol Riots: Digital Media, Disinformation, and Democracy Under Attack* (2022)[[5]](#footnote-6) which discusses the 2021 attack on the US Congress.[[6]](#footnote-7) We decided, with equal parts seriousness and sarcasm, to start a similar book as quickly as possible, so that it would be ready if and when similar events occurred in Brazil.

Brazil's insertion into the global wave of threats to the civilizational pact of democracy that culminated in the attack on a peaceful transition of power that respects the results of democratic elections deserves a sober discussion of this troubled period. The book does not aim to be a journalistic document but rather an analysis of the attack from its communicative and symbolic aspects. More importantly, we do this from a decolonial perspective that carefully avoids interpreting the attempted coup in Brazil as a reflection of events in the United States.

On 30 October 2022, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was elected for a third term, defeating the incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro, who was running for re-election. In the week following the second round of the election, protests rejecting the election results took place on various roads across Brazil. Demonstrators demanded, among other things, a military intervention to restore power to Bolsonaro, who they believed was defeated due to election fraud. As such, one of the main arguments of the extreme right was contesting the use of electronic voting machines, which have been used in Brazil since 1996. After a few days of road blockades and intense protests that nearly stopped the country, several militant Bolsonarist groups continued to mobilize, arranging protests and camping in front of military barracks for the following two months.

Surprisingly, the presidential inauguration on 1 January 2023, took place without major incidents. Like in the United States in 2021, it did not have the presence of the then-president in the symbolic ritual of handing over the presidential sash and the presidency to their successor. However, one week later, on Sunday 8 January 2023, around 4000 people marched in the streets of Brasilia to reach the Three Powers Square (‘Praça dos Três Poderes’) and invade the Planalto Palace, the seat of the Brazilian government, the Supreme Federal Court, and the National Congress buildings. During the coup attempt, participants vandalized the buildings and damaged significant artworks, documents, and furniture posting the events continuously on social media. When compared to the June 2013 protests mentioned earlier, more than twice as many protesters occupied Brasilia. In addition, they were not prevented by police from entering public buildings. At the time, several commentators and the press considered the possibility of complicity by city authorities opposed to the new government.[[7]](#footnote-8) Nonetheless, Lula da Silva, who was not in Brasilia during the riots, acted quickly and a government intervention detained many participants in the act.

As we finish this book at the end of 2023, several participants in the 8 January events are being investigated and prosecuted. In September, the first three individuals investigated were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 14 to 17 years. Investigations to identify the financiers and organizers of the events continue. Former President Jair Bolsonaro is the target of seven charges referred to the Federal Court, including incitement to a coup d´état, still under investigation. He has already been convicted for electoral crimes which have make him ineligible in the next presidential race of 2026.

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We live in a time when digital communication is characterized by its connectivity, speed, and often extremism that brings with it a certain detachment from material reality. The dynamics of digital communication platforms in late capitalism contribute to the aggregation of extremism while actors with significant economic power support and facilitate mobilizations like those in Washington in 2021 and Brasilia in 2023.[[8]](#footnote-9) Communication as a form of social interaction and construction of meaning can be understood as a fundamental aspect of extremists' agency that aim to contradict and threaten important civilizational milestones such as respect for the results of democratic elections.

Using media and communication as a guiding thread, we can follow two lines of interpretation of the coup attempt in Brasilia on 8 January 2023. The first is to analyze the communicative processes that enable the organization, coordination, and mobilization around an extreme right-wing ideology that excludes and dehumanizes others. Following this line, we can understand the events of 8 January as the culmination of processes of meaning production and circulation. The second line is to analyze images and meanints that circulate, aggregate, and mobilize a significant number of people to commit criminal acts around anti-democratic ideas. Here, it is not a matter of separating the message from its context but analytically separating otherwise empirically inseparable aspects to understand how the political, economic, historical, communicational, and aesthetic contexts relate to the phenomenon we are experiencing.

Our goal in *The Planalto Riots: The Making and Unmaking of a Failed Coup in Brazil* is not journalistic – there are better sources for this type of approach. Also, the guiding thread of this book is not to report what happened before, during, and after 8 January 2023, but to cast a critical eye on symbolic and communicational practices surrounding the event in a broader sense. Moreover, the fact that all contributions are about the same event gives the reader the impression of looking at a cubist painting, in which the same element is seen from different angles and perspectives. Some information may be repeated between articles, however, each approach is unique. Lastly, some articles in the book are written in Portuguese and others in English. In this way, the reader of texts in Portuguese will read a different book than the reader of texts in English and vice-versa. We have included summaries of all articles in both languages ​​at the end of the book to satisfy readers' curiosity about its contents.

We begin by discussing the mobilization and circulation of meanings in the period leading up to the coup attempt. In the first part, *Media Practices Before the Storm,* Lou Caffagni identifies and discusses the traces of paranoia in the production and circulation of memes and fake news using philosophical concepts of rhetorics and simulacra. Viviane Borelli and Isabel Löfgren discuss the intersection of humor and politics using the emblematic case of the 'Truck Patriot' meme, an anti-Bolsonaro internet phenomenon that challenged the extreme right dominance on social media on one hand but fueled more hatred from *Bolsonarists* on the other. Isabel Löfgren created a visual essay based on the meme. Apoena Canuto Cosenza identifies narrative and political continuities between fascism and Bolsonarism, comparing the 8 January 2023 insurrection to Mussolini’s *March on Rome* in 1922. Closing the first part, Aline Roes Dalmolin and Maria Eduarda Mathias discuss Bolsonarist mobilizations on social media platforms that led to the events of 8 January.

In the second part, *The Attempted Coup*, we move on to discussions of various experiences of the 8 January events intersected by media communication. Eduardo Ruedell resorts to Walter Benjamin in an auto-ethnographic account of his experience as a television spectator of a coup attempt that had barbaric and bizarre elements. Camila Hartmann, Ada C. Machado Silveira, and Gabriela Schneider identify and discuss the contradictions between the festive and optimistic sentiment that dominated Lula da Silva's inauguration on January 1 and the threat to the democratic pact that was loud and clear a week later through the lens of mediatized warfare. Gizele Martins reminds us that the extreme right's coup plot that came to the fore in 2023 had been present and active in Brazil for at least ten years when seen from the perspective of popular struggles and the militarization of conflicts in Rio de Janeiro’s *favelas* that could serve as a blueprint for potential military interventions, such as the one desired by 8 January protesters. An artistic contribution by Gustavo Speridião and Leandro Barboza’s collective *Faixa Protesta* shows how their‘painting-manifesto’ voiced out people’s demands for justice for the antidemocratic acts the day after the coup.

The chapters in the third part *Art and Architecture: Brasilia* explore art, design, and architecture as cultural expressions with political relevance connected to the architecture and experience of the modernist city. Alecsandra Matias de Oliveira draws a parallel in the history of Brazilian art between the repression and censorship of artistic expressions during the dictatorship of the 1960s and 70s, up to the attacks on the artworks inside the government buildings during the attempted coup. Next, Oscar Svanelid gives voice to vandalized objects and artworks during the Planalto riots to discuss the relationship between art, design, history, and politics in Brazil. Laercio Redondo's artistic contributions raises questions about the impact and consequences of utopian ideologies related to the construction of Brasilia in the late 1950s. In a letter to Oscar Niemeyer, the architect who designed Brasilia, Tatiana Letier Pinto locates the city’s architecture in Brazil's political history.

In the fourth and final part *The Image and the Other,* the texts address a traumatic aspect of Brazilian identity concerning our (self-)image, our complicated and problematic relationship with Indigenous peoples, and how this relationship came to the forefront during and after the attempted coup. Clementino Jesus Junior analyzes the polarization of narratives about the events of 8 January 8th in an analogy with the game of chess and how front page images in newspapers frame different narratives connected to the failed coup. Bartira S. Fortes highlights the paradox between Indigenous visibility at Lula da Silva's inauguration on 1 January and the negation and silencing of diversity in the events of 8 January. In a similar vein, Ana Paula da Rosa discusses another contemporary paradox: the narcissistic omnipresence of images of the coup participants on social media during the event in contrast to the invisibility of the humanitarian tragedy concerning the lives and existence of the Yanomami people in Brazil, who only a few days after the 8 January failed coup attempt garnered national and international media attention.

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2. Bolsonaro was ousted from the military in the early 1980s after attempting to stage an internal coup against the military command, in a failed plan involving bomb attacks on army barracks, as part of a faction in the military that was dissatisfied with the process of re-democratization of the country at the end of a 21-year military dictatorship (1964-1985) and the ensuing loss of privileges for the military. He then started a political career as a local politician, in collusion with former members of Rio de Janeiro’s military police force that through the years formed a parallel political power called the ‘milícias’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Lula da Silva has previously served two presidential mandates from 2003 to 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Cecilia M. Krohling Peruzzo, 'Comunicação Comunitária E Educação Para a Cidadania,' *Comunicação e Sociedade* 2 (August 29, 2000): 651–68. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Sandra Jeppesen Michael Hoechsmann, Miranda McKee, iowyth hezel ulthiin and David Van Dyke, *The Capitol Riots: Digital Media, Disinformation, and Democracy Under Attack*, New York: Routledge, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Carolina Ricardo, 'A Democracia Não Pode Ser Considerada Garantida No Brasil,' *openDemocracy*, 10 October 2023, https://www.opendemocracy.net/pt/democracia-nao-pode-ser-considerada-garantida-brasil-policialismo/. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Giuliano da Empoli, *Os Engenheiros Do Caos*, Vestígio Editora, 2019, and Christopher Wylie, *Mindf\*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America*, New York: Random House, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)