# Experience and Barbarism in Brasilia: a Savage Journey to Understand the Heart of Brazilian Conservative Rioters

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If you were in Brazil or checked the social media profile of Brazilians over the past four years, you would probably hear or read that future historians will find it difficult to explain to people what happened during Jair Bolsonaro's government (2019-2022). For me, that phrase has always been rich in meaning but poor in signification. In less semiotic terms, I perceived its abstract dimensions and the ideas it conveyed, but its materiality always seemed hard to grasp. At least until I witnessed the events of Sunday, January 8, 2023, which forced me to perceive other nuances of what that sentence means and reassess my role as a social scientist.

When I watched the first images of the Planalto Riots on television that Sunday afternoon, I realized that historians would indeed have difficulties explaining what we had experienced over those years, particularly on that day. However the difficulty of this task would not be related only to psychological effects.

The images I saw that Sunday and in the following days and weeks left me intellectually immobilized. I couldn't find anything that would help me understand the events I witnessed in theoretical frameworks. At that time, I was finishing a dissertation about a French anti-vax movement that I had observed and analyzed from emergence to dusk,[[2]](#footnote-3) and yet I felt intellectually impotent to face what was happening in my own country. But it was precisely the perception that I was experiencing those events that made me realize that one of the possible ways to understand them had been paved 80 years ago by Walter Benjamin.[[3]](#footnote-4)

This (short) essay is a personal account of the savage journey in trying to understand the Planalto Riots and the motivation of the Brazilian conservative rioters. I am not a historian, and I do not intend to be one even in my wildest dreams. My discussion on Walter Benjamin’s understanding of History, experience, and barbarism is a humble attempt to assess this moment in Brazilian history.

## ‘And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us’[[4]](#footnote-5)

I do not remember the exact time of the first live broadcast of the riots that I watched on TV. I remember being at my mother-in-law's house and walking past the TV room, on my way to the kitchen, to get another piece of pie. It was windy, and the temperature was almost 40 degrees Celsius. On my way back to my fiancée's bedroom, I felt goosebumps when I heard the opening tunes of the breaking news jingle of Brazil’s main television channels. That alarming song had already anticipated the announcement of so many tragedies before, that listening to it always puts me on the edge.

Moved by curiosity, I stopped in front of the television set, and when I saw what it was about, I sat glued to the screen next to my mother-in-law for the next few hours. At that time, in the early afternoon, the rioters had just broken the last barrier set up by the police, which had failed to prevent them from reaching Praça dos Três Poderes.[[5]](#footnote-6) I remember watching a green-and-yellow-clad mob running towards the National Congress Palace at the center of the square and expecting them to eventually begin to disperse.

It was then that things got weird. The rioters did not seem to face much resistance from the local police, and when they reached the government buildings they began to smash glass doors, windows, and walls. Rally cries gave way to shouting and roaring amid whistling and drumming – sounds that were picked up by the television microphones – and were immediately replaced by the sounds of breaking and smashing glass. We now know that military and police officers helped the rioters first enter the buildings and then escape.

The images and the sounds from the television shocked me but did not surprise me. The Planalto riots seemed like just one more attempt to shake Brazil's young democracy in the last six decades.[[6]](#footnote-7) Shortly after the results of the second round of the presidential election were announced on the evening of October 30th, 2022, bolsonarist militants began gathering in front of military headquarters across Brazil to protest election results. Over time, these gatherings turned into organized camps, constantly supplied with resources provided by powerful Bolsonaro supporters. It can be said that the events of January 8th began in the camp set up in front of the army headquarters in Brasilia. The slogans of the hundreds of people who marched on Brazil's capital city on that Sunday were the same as those heard in the camps since months before and in demonstrations since at least 2016:[[7]](#footnote-8) there were calls for a military coup, for the return of the military dictatorship, for the reinstatement of AI-5,[[8]](#footnote-9) for the imprisonment of Supreme Court judges, and for the closure of the National Congress.

On Twitter, many of my friends said they were surprised to see people from different generations among rioters and that they could not tell whether the majority was made up of elderly or young people. My late grandfather, who was part of the *Legality Struggle*[[9]](#footnote-10) against the military coup in 1964, once told me that his generation had almost no experience dealing with democracy and that the foundations he and his contemporaries had built would have to be strengthened in the future. My parents' generation tried to build their monuments on these fragile foundations, and even my generation was not afraid to add another level - all without having yet mastered the art of democracy building.

But what would Benjamin say? Three possibilities came to mind, but I do not regard any of them as definitive. The first is that the rioters wanted to destroy what we had been building since the end of the military dictatorship in the mid-1980s to live among the ruins of a military past they glorify. On the other hand, they could also destroy this monument, which is still under construction, to rebuild the one they evoke. However, as I write this text, another scenario seems more appropriate: they tried to take advantage of their kairos, the opportune moment.

When I think about the rioters, I imagine them as subjects of an attempted coup, but these people saw themselves at that moment as actors in a revolution, trying to take advantage of the opportune moment to make the changes that would lead to their vision of a better future. For them, the ruins of the past from two decades of dictatorship represented Brazil's salvation from communism, and these ruins were buried by the fragile democratic foundations that my grandfather talked about, and which therefore had to be removed – symbolically by destroying the government palaces, and de facto by a coup. So, yes, there was an intention to rebuild a past from its ruins, but the moment in which they would do so would be crucial. To better understand how and perhaps even why this happened, I think it is crucial to interrupt my story to finally bring Benjamin closer to the fire.

The idea of a ruined past, of kairos, and even the danger of glorifying the past are things I learned from Benjamin and are directly related to his complex meditations on History.[[10]](#footnote-11) For the German philosopher, History cannot be understood as something progressive and linear, in which the future is guaranteed, and it is enough to move on. And if the future is not given, the past is not over either: it is in ruins, recognizable in the present. But this doesn’t make it something broken – the past possesses a messianic force that can manifest itself in each new generation, and that awakens hope and an expectation of happiness based on this idea of the past or on looking at it.

However, this does not mean that the past should be looked at with nostalgia. Rather, it should be re-signified in our instances of recognition, so that the present can be the kairos or the opportune moment to make the changes that still need to be made in the present. In other words, the teleological idea of a given future must be broken, so that it can be built from the now.

However, making history is not easy. For Benjamin, this is only possible if we first manage to secure the material conditions for our survival (which in a liberal democracy is linked to exploitation in class conflicts) and when we claim the spiritual aspects (i.e. culture, knowledge, and even art).[[11]](#footnote-12) The reason why this is so important for Benjamin is that spiritual elements are constructed out of experience and are devices of re-signification that also refer back to that past in ruins. The past shines through in the present and if we do not catch its brief sparkle, the truth about it will escape us. How can we catch this truth? How can we make it easier to grasp? Through storytelling.[[12]](#footnote-13)

According to Benjamin, experience is made up of complex relationships established between subjects, time, space, history, and memory. It is made up of a subjective dimension and a practical dimension that relate to an individual experience dimension and to the subject's relationship with the world, or the collective dimension. Thus, experience, in addition to being singular, cannot be contained in a limiting concept that defines it as an accumulation of information or knowledge. And for it to be properly transmitted (or narrated) there must be a shared context between those who speak and those who listen.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Benjamin saw the end of the experience as the consequence of traditional storytelling’s failure, which at the time he wrote had been replaced by other more ephemeral forms of narrative that did not inspire deep reflection, such as the novel and the newspaper.[[14]](#footnote-15) What we have noticed in the last decade all over the world is that collective experience has suddenly been replaced only by its individual dimension due to a deepening of the ephemerality, individuality, and personalism of new narrative forms, mainly through the use of social media and instant messaging apps, which are highly individualized. Social media have profoundly changed the way we consume information – including journalistic information – and how we relate to other people, and as a result, it drastically affects our worldview. We now live under the logic of novelty, where the ephemeral nature of information that reaches us is highly valued.

A good example is the information feeds in Telegram and WhatsApp that mobilized groups of Bolsonaro supporters for the Planalto Riots. Immediately following election results, high volumes of fake news circulated daily in these groups, many informing that military intervention would occur ‘within 72 hours’, changing the course of the country's political situation to Bolsonaro’s favor. However, at the end of the first 72 hours, nothing happened, and a new message was sent and replicated thousands of times rumoring that, ‘now yes!’, all they had to do was resist for another 72 hours, and so forth. There is no need to state the obvious – no one in those Telegram and WhatsApp groups was questioning the origin of these messages, who produced them, and what meanings they triggered throughout Brazil. It was enough that Bolsonaro's supporters believed in them and stayed calm for another three days at a time. And for many of them, these 72 hours are not yet over.

None of this is surprising. The use of fake news as a communication strategy is not exactly unique to the Brazilian political scene, but the Bolsonaristas seem to have mastered this practice with the creation of bot farms and the bombardment of alarmist information since before the presidential elections that brought Bolsonaro to power in 2018. One of the most notorious and bizarre cases was the so-called cock-pacifier memes, in which a video of a Bolsonaro supporter denounced the alleged distribution of penis-shaped feeding bottles in daycare centers across Brazil by the Workers' Party (PT), Bolsonaro's main opposition party. The video had millions of views, and thousands of shares with people showing they believed in the video content. This kind of action and reaction based on fake news is one of the main engines of Bolsonarismo, and what lies behind the looping 72-hour wait. This corroborates Benjamin's idea that people have indeed become less enlightened.[[15]](#footnote-16) This is not a personal judgment but an observation that people's sense of their place in the world is increasingly diffuse. The small material progress that societies have made (and in very heterogeneous ways) can sometimes give the illusion that ‘we have progressed’ and that things are ‘better’.

I remember attending a social history class some years ago when the professor raised the question of people's lack of enlightenment in Benjamin’s view and gave the following example: Many Brazilian families have been able to acquire flat-screen televisions in recent years, but who in the family uses this television to watch films, and who is at the same time in the kitchen preparing dinner and doing the dishes? Does the person sitting in front of the new TV set think that his family has progressed socially? Probably yes. The same lack of enlightenment about the patriarchal structures in family structures can be seen in the political positions of those involved in the attempted coup of January 8.

During the Planalto Riots, one of the buildings most damaged by the vandalism of the rioters was the Federal Supreme Court Palace, especially the office of Federal Judge Alexandre de Moraes. The actions of the Supreme Court, and in particular Judge Alexandre de Moraes – and his judicial actions to combat fake news, to ensure respect for the results of the 2022 elections, to defend the integrity of government institutions, as well as the opening of investigations against Bolsonaro, his family and supporters – motivated the destruction of the Federal Court's headquarters, the vandalization of national symbols, and even the recording of videos of grotesque scenes with people defecating on Morae’s’ office desk.

But why destroy and attack the Supreme Court Palace itself? Because the Supreme Court and its judges are symbolized by the physical structure of its headquarters, it is a monument that evokes, in general terms, a recent past of democracy and the more recent fight against Bolsonaro’s electoral crimes during the 2022 elections. According to Benjamin, monuments are erected with the intention of illuminating a past and are linked to historical, cultural, social, and even economic relations that are established and consolidated so they can be passed on to the next generations.[[16]](#footnote-17) But let us not deceive ourselves: the transmission of a monument, as Benjamin has shown us, always involves the transmission of barbarism. And barbarism is a condition resulting from the end of a connection that existed between humanity, its inner essence, and nature. Barbarism is not an organic dimension of societies and can be understood much more as a stage reached by modern societies marked by violence and oppression, which relates to how these societies organize themselves as an effect of their economic relations. For Benjamin, barbarism is a real threat to humanity that can only be fought against through social revolutions and the vindication of spiritual elements.

How does all this relate to what happened in Brasilia on January 8th? The answer is not simple, but here is my attempt.

## ‘There was madness in any direction, at any hour’[[17]](#footnote-18)

The time it took me to write this text was the same time it took the rioters to invade, ravage and loot the buildings of the Brazilian Federal Government. It all happened very quickly, and at the same time, it never seemed to come to an end. It was the most sophisticated manifestation of barbarism I had ever seen. The violence and symbolic repression of this attempted coup can be understood as the result of breaking those bolsonaristas’ connection with what was most human in its essence.

In Experience and Poverty,[[18]](#footnote-19) following the discussion of the impoverishment of experience mentioned above, Benjamin affirms that this impoverishment, when linked to the overvaluation of technology, leads to galvanization, a phenomenon that drives people away from experience. Galvanization creates a ‘layer’ over people that blinds them to reality, creating a new barbarism. Benjamin writes that this new barbarism prevents galvanized people from having access to knowledge, so they are only moved by what is reproduced by the media, mass media in Benjamin's time, and digital media today.

I see these rioters as ‘galvanized people’, driven to barbarism by a dangerous combination of glorification of the past, an extreme conservatism that has been latent for years, and an abundance of fake news. I cannot verify that all of them were supporters of the military dictatorship when they lived during those years. Some of them could even have been part of opposition movements at the time, but they lost their sense of reality because of these mediations promoted by fake news. The bombardment of false information and the value of the ephemeral, which prevents them from critical thinking, when combined with the idealization of false progress, drives them away from the truth and from their own experience. The ruins of the past have disappeared, the truth shone for a moment but was not perceived.

On the other hand, it is important for us to never forget that in their view we are wrong since we don’t perceive the truth as they do. It does not matter that there was never a communist threat in Brazil, that what happened in Brasilia on January 8 was a tentative coup d'état, or that the majority of the population voted for Lula da Silva in a democratic movement. Those rioters, and hundreds of thousands of other people, truly believe that they were seizing the kairos.

It is necessary that we vindicate spiritual elements in a process in which social scientists play a very important role. But for some time now there seems to have been an estrangement between society and social scientists, which is our own barbarism, affecting us by making us lose the ability to locate ourselves in the world in which we live. Simply accepting that we are enlightened by knowledge, without recognizing our role as agents of social transformation, leads us to galvanize ourselves in our own way. And there is nothing more academic than a galvanized scientist, oblivious to her/his surroundings. The only way to resist is to recognize ourselves and reclaim our role in our societies, not only as scientists but also as subjects.

And let us not forget that the ruins of that past are already glistening in our present. Indeed, it will not be easy for historians to explain what happened in Brasilia on January 8, 2023. Notwithstanding, we must catch this truth before it escapes us. It is necessary to break with individualism so that we can reconstruct experience from its collective dimension, and then think of new ways of building narratives. We cannot deny modernity, but we can ‘brush history against its grain’.[[19]](#footnote-20)

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It was about 8 PM when I got up from the sofa when my fiancée came through the front door Five hours had already passed, and I remember that my mother-in-law had been in the same position all the time: sitting on a chair with her elbows on her knees and hands covering her mouth, stunned – a position that she interrupted only occasionally to smoke a cigarette to relieve her anxiety from seeing the city that had welcomed her in her youth destroyed by the rioters. I took a bite of the pie that was left on my plate that afternoon. It was hard to digest.

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3. Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938 - 1940, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Hunter Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, 1998, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Praça dos Três Poderes* is a public plaza in Brasilia that concentrates the headquarters of the three branches of the Brazilian government: the Palácio do Planalto (headquarters of the executive branch), the National Congress Palace (headquarters of the legislative branch) and the Supreme Court Palace (headquarters of the judicial branch). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Throughout Brazil's existence as a nation-state, since the Proclamation of Independence from Portugal in 1822, the country has suffered at least nine coups d'état, most of them perpetrated by the military. The most recent, in 1964, resulted in a military dictatorship that would last for 21 years, ending only in 1985, when a process known as "Redemocratization" began. Redemocratization would culminate in 1988 with the promulgation of a new federal constitution that is still in effect, marking the beginning of what is often considered the country's first truly democratic period. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. In 2016, the then-president of Brazil, Dilma Roussef (PT - Workers' Party), was removed from office following a parliamentary coup supported by her then-vice president. Public demonstrations against President Dilma had been observed since 2013, when a wave of protests broke out across the country, intensifying with the 2014 presidential elections. Throughout 2016, especially during the period when the process of impeaching Rousseff was being articulated in Congress, orders of protesters wearing the jerseys of the Brazilian national soccer team took to the streets of Brazil's major cities, using the slogan ‘first we'll remove PT, and then we take out the rest’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. AI-5 was a decree promulgated by General Costa e Silva in 1968 that removed from their ranks and positions the politicians who opposed his government and established a system of direct federal intervention in the states and municipalities. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. This term refers to military personnel, mainly from the state of Rio Grande do Sul, who opposed the 1964 military coup that overthrew the then president, João Goulart (1961-1964). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Walter Benjamin, ‘Experience and Poverty’, Atlas of Places, January 2018, https://www.atlasofplaces.com/essays/experience-and-poverty/. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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15. Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Thompson, 1998, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Benjamin, ‘Experience and Poverty’, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)