The importance of Carlos Rodrigues Brandão's ideas: To understand the actions of the Authoritarian North

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An Authoritarian North

I must begin by acknowledging that I am writing these reflections from a country determined to turn these days we live in into dangerous and dark days. Perhaps it has become common to hear this phrase, but what has been happening in the world, and especially in the United States in recent months, has been terrifying to witness. At the same time, I must acknowledge that I am writing from the ire generated by witnessing how the fundamental rights of people and the land we inhabit, which had been won through years of social struggle, being cynically eliminated by far-right groups that build social consensus to naturalize fascism as the guiding form of the social organization in the United States because, apparently, the Western values that promotes that ideology will improve the living conditions of white people in the country. Nonetheless, not only white people live in this country.

The most worrying aspect about what is happening is that it is a history we are repeating, and that we already lived through it during the first half of the 20th century. However, it is resurfacing now with force and acceptance by nationalist and far-right groups within the population, as happened in Nazi Germany. The philosopher Santayana (1905) expressed that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it, and unfortunately, we are repeating the past. Similar strategies that Hitler used and the actions he committed before starting World War II are being experienced in the United States with Trump's second presidential term, and in some other countries such as Argentina with Milei, Hungary with Orbán, and previously Brazil with Bolsonaro, whom fortunately the democratic vote of the Brazilian people removed him from power, and now he will be soon in jail.

To a certain extent, it is disconcerting to know that the actions being implemented by the neo-fascist politicians in power affect the fundamental rights of people and our land, especially because they do so by manipulating the laws to "legalize" what they do. Americans believed that their country was one of freedom and justice, where law and order were respected and, principally, that no one was above the

law. For this reason, they considered themselves “authorized” to call developing countries “banana republics,” using it as a derogatory adjective for those countries. However, with Trump’s actions, the United States is now a “banana republic,” acting according to fascist principles, manipulating the legal system to achieve its objectives.

Trump’s rise to the presidency of the United States again, and the policies he is now implementing, is not a phenomenon that occurred spontaneously. Tom Hartmann (2025) points out that since the 1960s, the oligarchy began laying the groundwork for this to happen. Since the establishment of the anti-communist discourse during the Cold War against Russia and Cuba, they have been investing in expert groups, the so-called think tanks, to provide them with arguments and strategies to convince people that any demand or struggle for economic and social justice and equity was tantamount to leading the United States toward communism/socialism. These days, Trump is using the same rhetoric. If any struggle or demand for economic and social justice and equity is equivalent to leading the country toward communism, then why give people those freedoms? Why give people the tools to fight for economic and social equity? The United States will never be a socialist country, Trump (2019) continues to say, just as the oligarchs have done since the 1960s.

The work of the far right, oligarchs and think tanks, has clearly been to end the civil and social liberties of the population. In his second administration, every executive order Trump has signed goes against the civil rights of historically marginalized groups, such as people of color, women, LGBTQ+ communities, and the Constitution itself. This is why Licata (2025) clearly points out that the vision of this presidency is to end diversity, equity, and inclusion. Even though the United States historically has lived systemic racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023), social struggles have leveled, albeit slightly, the landscape of employment, educational, and social opportunities for populations that have suffered discrimination. Trump ordered the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools, workplaces, public administration, and all government offices. A significant number of universities and public schools, for example, have eliminated offices supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Support for people needing special education has disappeared or been drastically reduced. Another executive order decreed that there are only men and women in the country, so people who do not identify as such have been excluded from any legal documents, research projects, or community services.

In 2022, the United States Supreme Court, with a conservative-Republican majority

supporting the policies of Trump and his allies, eliminated the right to abortion (a ruling known as Roe v. Wade), which since 1973 had made abortion legal and a woman's right to decide about her body. Since its elimination, states have made abortion illegal again, eliminated support for paternity and birth control clinics, and threatened doctors who perform them with jail time. Furthermore, in this landscape of darkness, immigrants were characterized by Trump as the main threat to the United States, just as Hitler did to the Jews in World War II. To the extent that he strengthened Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to identify, capture, and expel 20 million immigrants who, according to Trump's narrative, entered the country illegally during the previous administration. ICE now has a budget seven times larger than the FBI and CIA until 2029. ICE's new funding was so large that its budget is larger than the combined funding of the Swiss, Brazilian, and Dutch militaries (Cole and Feng, 2025).

With such a high budget, although the Trump Administration has not officially confirmed, ICE set a quota for its agents of 3,000 people arrested per day to accomplish the objective of 1,000,000 deportations per year; upon achieving this goal, they would be awarded a bonus ranging from $1,500 to $5,000 dollars for being "productive." (Brisbin, 2025; Judd, 2025; Olivares, 2025) At the same time, this has led to the de facto elimination of the legal rights of all detainees in order to achieve the established goal. This means the de facto elimination of the right to a hearing and the right to have an arrest warrant clearly indicating the crime committed in order to be detained, to name just a few. When the raids intensified in workplaces, on the streets, at schools where parents were waiting for their children, and outside of stores, it was heartening to see that the communities affected by the raids against immigrants, not only Latinos but Anglos as well, took to the streets and protested. However, the president mobilized the National Guard and soldiers to the streets to control those protesting against ICE agents. As Hartmann (2005) says, even though the army was created to protect the Republic, it is now being used to dominate and subjugate it. Recently, the army was deployed to take over the nation's capital and the city of Chicago to combat street crime. It is particularly striking that the cities that have been taken over by the army are governed by Democrats. I know very well that the United States has not suffered the unjustified detentions, torture, disappearances, and murders at the hands of the army that Latin American countries historically have. This is the first time that the army has been used within the country, in three cities: Los Angeles, Washington, DC and Chicago, to subjugate citizens. Perhaps this is a test by the president to test the limits and then establish a totally authoritarian and violent regime, especially in

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anticipation of the legislative elections next year (2026), so as not to lose the total control he currently holds, because the republican party controls the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Supreme Court of Justice, and that gives carte blanche to Trump to do what he wants to do.

Another civil and social right being demolished by this administration is the right to education. One of the first executive orders Trump issued was directed to close the federal Department of Education, apparently returning decisions about education to the states and, consequently, to parents. However, several states across the country lack sufficient economic resources because they depend on the federal budget. States like California, Texas, and New York support many states because they send to the Federal Government abundant federal taxes. Thus, in the “poor” states, support for children with special needs and resources for after-school academic programs would be lacking. Support for children from low-income families would be eliminated, and classrooms would be overcrowded because the same number of teachers cannot be hired. The quality of education in schools, already low, will be further affected. At the same time, the curriculum has been modified. For example, nearly 20 states have passed initiatives prohibiting the inclusion of content that the president has labeled as “anti-American ideology.” That is, the curriculum contents that address, from a historical perspective, the systemic racism that existed and continues to exist in the United States, issues related to diversity, especially gender identity, and topics related to multiculturalism. This leads to the superficialization of culture that dumbing down the critical reasoning of students who would be easily domesticated and manipulated. It is the purpose of not developing critical thinking, because in that way minorities won’t unite to fight for their rights. Democracy, equity, and social justice are gradually being destroyed.

Recently, Secretary of Education declared that schools that implement a new civic curriculum will receive grants for their application. That civic curriculum is written and promoted by PragerU, Hillsdale College, America First Policy Institute, and Turning Point USA, two right-wing oriented institutions. As Prager (2025) mentions, the “Trump administration redirected $137 million initially meant for programs aimed at minority students toward what it described as ‘American history and civics education’.” The goal of this civics curriculum is to stop teacher to teach a “defamatory history of America…” (Prager, 2025). Now, after the assassination of the founder of Turning Point USA, Charlie Kirk, this organization through the Trump Administration would aim to implement a “God-centered virtuous education in the US public schools.” (Prager, 2025. Authoritarianism is walking openly in each of the

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Trump Administration’s actions.

A North that doesn’t listen

The recent meeting between Trump and Putin in Alaska marked the first time a US president applauded excitedly the arrival of another president, let alone a war criminal dictator like Putin. Three days later, Trump met with European leaders and the president of Ukraine to discuss peace terms for ending the Russia’s war against Ukraine. Trump, in his admiration for authoritarian leaders, favors Putin’s actions. He has never stated that Putin invaded Ukraine and has consistently refused to impose sanctions on Russia for starting the war. While it is encouraging to see the resistance of people in the streets and the critical alternative press on the internet analyzing the president’s actions, Trump still has control of the entire apparatus of power in the United States: the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, via the Supreme Court.

There is still a considerable number of Trump’s followers that value his ideas and refuse to respect and recognize people’s civil and human rights. They continue to claim that America, as they call the United States, is for Americans, as they call themselves; obviously, the majority of those followers are Anglo, far-right people who value patriarchy and colonization as their right. They constantly promote their respect for Western values and call themselves Christians without actually following any of the mandates of their own religion. This is the worldview they are seeking to implement in the public schools in the United States, with the idea of educating people with ahistorical and uncritical thinking, so that they won’t question, for example, why Trump applauded Putin’s arrival, even though he is a war criminal, or why civil rights that seek to provide justice and equity to historically marginalized populations facing systemic racism and discrimination, which is only getting stronger today, are being eliminated. The goal is to miseducate generations of citizens that won’t hear the cries of despair of the oppressed people, that won’t see or feel the injustices, so that they won’t empathize with others and thus won’t try to create the solidarity that is so necessary to raise their voices against the injustices, for example, the genocide being carried out in Gaza against the Palestinians by Israel with the support of the United States. In this campaign of extermination, the majority of those killed have been women and children, which has already reached the figure of almost 100,000 people dead in Palestine.

In other words, it is a North that does not listen to diversity, equity, inclusion, or social justice. An authoritarian North that wants to continue saying that America

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(the United States) is for them. A North that, linked to neoliberal capitalism, prefers to destroy nature and affect people's lives than to lose economic gains, even though those economic gains are exclusively for a few who own everything and nothing for those without capital. A North that has become fascist and denies its own nature because, as Díez Gutiérrez (2022) says, it denies being fascist because it has not built extermination camps as Hitler did in World War II. A North that clings to so-called Western values that are used to continue marginalizing large minorities who are different; Western values that continue, in a subtle but direct way, favoring colonization and patriarchy that are closely linked to original capitalism (Iborra Mallent, 2023; Issar, 2021; Beckert, 2017).

Carlos Rodrigues Brandão: A south that illuminates

Amidst this fascist and authoritarian madness in the United States, sensible and wise voices are sorely needed. Giroux (2025) mentions that we desperately need a new language that can capture the fascist tide engulfing the world. A language that frees itself and us from the narratives controlled by far-right media, which have provided fertile ground for fascist ideals to flourish unchecked. To achieve this, it is necessary to reclaim clear and powerful voices that offer us a language of political and moral clarity, one that fills us with hope of continuing fighting so that this darkness does not become permanent and we can bring back the ideals of justice and equity for all, which authoritarian fascist-oriented governments are trying to destroy.

One of those clear and powerful voices that fills us with hope is the voice of Carlos Rodrigues Brandão. Even though he recently passed away, July 2023, his voice continues to resonate, and we must listen to it. Listening to him from the North is complicated because Rodrigues Brandão was not well known in the United States. Very few of his articles were published in English. The voice of his mentor Paulo Freire is much better known in the United States than his own, because most of his written outputs and his personal influence through interactions at conferences and workshops focused on Latin America. Nevertheless, the value of his contributions is very important to understanding and unveiling the assault that the fascist vision is carrying out on people's human and civil rights.

Rodrigues Brandão, like Paulo Freire and other critical educators in Latin America, was nourished by religious experiences linked to liberation theology. He studied at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, where he was also an activist in the Catholic university youth movement during the 1960s. He later joined the

Grassroots Education Movement, where he worked on popular culture. He also had to go into hiding due to political persecution in 1969. It was in the Grassroots Education Movement that he encountered the work of Paulo Freire and wrote a short book, as he called it, “What is the Paulo Freire’s Method?” Following in Freire’s footsteps, Rodrigues Brandão conceived of education as culture and culture as politics. To do education is to undertake a political, alternative, insurgent, Latin American, an act of responsibility for the creation of another world, another society, other systems, other life destinies. That is to think of education as culture. Carlos didn’t meet Freire until 1980, when he returned from exile and was given a job at the University of Campinas, where they worked together.

Through his work on popular education and participatory action research, Rodrigues Brandão explored themes related to diversity, equity, and social justice. These ideas would allow us to develop a more nuanced understanding of how to denounce the fascist acts that oppress minorities in the United States and around the world— who are actually the majority of society, since very few have much, and the vast majority have little. They are a vast, disadvantaged and powerless majority, but they must learn the power they have.

Rodrigues Brandão promoted Freire’s proposal and defended an education that initiates from the reality of the oppressed and fosters critical awareness. He upheld the idea of dialogic education, which respects the knowledge, contexts, and culture of participants, and cultivates mutual learning. When he developed his vision of participatory action research, which shared many similarities with Fals Borda’s perspective, he also focused on the democratization of knowledge, questioning and breaking with positivist, elitist academic logic. He always sought to enhance popular, local knowledge to dignify and rescue marginalized cultures.

Contrary to the authoritarian North worldview that seeks to eliminate diversity, equity, and social justice, Rodriguez Brandão points out that education must recognize and value the multiple cultures, languages, and ways of life that are present in the communities. It must be open to the plurality of knowledge, not only valuing knowledge derived from Western traditions, but especially including community’s and ancestral knowledge. Diversity should never be considered an obstacle but rather a pedagogical asset, because we all educate ourselves together in our differences. This provides the foundation for an intercultural pedagogy, where marginalized voices—Indigenous, peasant, women, and workers—are an active part in the construction of knowledge.

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Equity is a concept that this authoritarian North wants to eliminate and uses it as what has been called “reverse racism,” because it justifies the failure of institutions, allowing minorities—women, people of color, or those with special needs—to enter as a quota to be met, leaving out the best persons— that they consider to be the Anglo whites. However, Rodriguez Brandão relates equity as giving everyone what they need to achieve dignity and live with dignity. We must, therefore, focus on compensating for the historical inequalities that affect excluded minorities through a liberating education that leads them to become aware of their reality in order to transform it together. This highlights the important influence of Freire in his thinking. Now that the United States is closing the federal Department of Education, significantly reducing the budget allocated to cover the tax cuts given to the country’s wealthiest people, Rodriguez Brandão’s strong and clear voice takes on even more meaning because, for him, equity implies the redistribution of power and knowledge, not just access to school. Education is a human right, a collective right, it is part of a democracy-building practice. That is why democracy is always at risk when authoritarian leaders take control of countries.

If education respects, values, and strengthens equity and diversity, then it must be one of the pillars of the social struggle against oppression and exclusion. Thus, we must constantly insist on considering the struggle for social justice as the capacity to transform unjust social and systemic structures, with the goal of building more solidary societies, based on valuing the knowledge of communities and respect for nature. Following Freire and liberation theology, we must say that, while education is never neutral, it is always compromised because its preferential option is for the poor and the construction of an emancipatory project. This remains a challenge for both educational systems and the Church itself, but the challenge continues to be the constant effort to build, and above all, maintain, social justice in the world.

The North must start listening to the South

I find it necessary to close this article with the personal and professional resolution that it is essential to insistently and decisively promote, in the authoritarian North, the project of the world and education outlined by Carlos Rodriguez Brandão. Paulo Freire is an author recognized in the United States as one of the pillars of the critical pedagogy from the United States, even though his original writings, beginning with the book that gave him worldwide fame, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, were not written with critical pedagogy as a disciplinary field in mind, but rather with popular culture and education, which was the pursuit of building a liberating education from

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the South. The North continues to embrace, often unwittingly or unintentionally, a colonizing vision in academia, in the sense that authors from the North are the most internationally recognized. It is important to note that this is not about downplaying or ignoring the critical approaches they contribute, but rather about opening academic spaces to authors from the South who illuminate the North that do not want to listen. Authors who lived a praxis amidst blood, fire, persecution, exile, and murder, yet whose voices continue to resonate strongly. In addition to Paulo Freire, we must consider authors such as Carlos Rodriguez Brandão, Ignacio Ellacuría, Frei Betto, Orlando Fals Borda, Marco Raúl Mejía Jiménez, Alfonso Torres Carillo, Rolando Pinto Contreras, Fabián Cabaluz Ducasse, Piedad Ortega Valencia, Lola Cendales González, Ignacio Martín-Baró, among many others who have paved the way for interpreting the reality of OurAmerica (nuestramerica) and proposing alternatives for its transformation.

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Notes

[1] This article reviews the importance of Carlos Rodrigues Brandão's ideas in the context of neoliberal fascist capitalism, focusing on the current situations that are happening in the United States.