

Apocalypse in the Tropics: A limited analysis of religion and politics in Brazil

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Petra Costa's documentary *Apocalypse in the Tropics* has drawn significant international attention by examining the relationship between a segment of the evangelical movement tied to "dominion theology" and the fascist far right personified by former president Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. In the first two weeks after its July 14 premiere on the Netflix streaming platform, the documentary was the seventh most-watched non-English-language title worldwide.

Without a doubt, *Apocalypse in the Tropics* has attracted such interest by taking up a Brazilian political question that has significant international parallels. Across the world, ruling elites have used various forms of religious fundamentalism—Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist—to promote fascistic movements as part of their turn toward authoritarian forms of rule. That is certainly the case in the United States under President Donald Trump, a close ally of Bolsonaro who counts among his base the same fundamentalist evangelical movements depicted in *Apocalypse in the Tropics*.

Costa gained international prominence with her Oscar-nominated 2019 documentary, *The Edge of Democracy*. It dealt with the political crisis that erupted beginning in 2013 in Brazil, leading to the trumped-up 2016 impeachment of Workers' Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff in the midst of one of the most severe economic crises the country had experienced in a century.

Apocalypse in the Tropics is a continuation of Petra Costa's earlier documentary. In an interview on the "20 Minutos" program, she explained that *The Edge of Democracy* was produced with the aim of understanding democracy "at risk" in Brazil with Dilma's impeachment. According to her, "Overnight, the ground I stood on was no longer there. So where were we going? [In] *Apocalypse in the Tropics*, that ground cracked, opened up. I see the precipice and at the end of that precipice I see this possible theocratic path [in Brazil]."

Costa's latest film portrays political events that followed Rousseff's impeachment. Among them are: the jailing of current Workers Party President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2018; Bolsonaro's political rise to power in 2019; the political relationship between Bolsonaro and evangelical pastor Silas Malafaia; and the fascist attack on the seats of the three branches of government in Brasília during the January 8, 2023 coup attempt.

Despite addressing such critical events, *Apocalypse in the Tropics* does so from Costa's subjective and pessimistic point of view. This perspective is rooted in the political sensibilities of a petty-bourgeois milieu enthusiastic about the PT and the countless variants of postmodern philosophy dominant in the universities.

Explaining why she chose to narrate her own films, Costa said in the "20 Minutos" interview that she studied anthropology in the United States, and "in the '70s, '80s" it went "through a movement of self-critique ... for preaching an objectivity that does not exist." She continued: "So many ethnographers began to speak in the first person, because they thought that was the most honest way, that ... it was above all a point of

view. It was not the naked, raw truth. That truth does not exist."

As a consequence, the documentary offers no objective explanation for the crisis of what she calls Brazil's "fragile democracy," ignoring the PT's political role as a pillar of the bourgeois regime in Brazil since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, and its role in Bolsonaro's political ascent.

Apocalypse in the Tropics' theological explanation for Bolsonaro's political rise

The central figure of *Apocalypse in the Tropics* is evangelical pastor Silas Malafaia, whom Petra Costa interviews numerous times throughout the documentary. A typical "entrepreneur of faith" who built a profitable media and religious-merchandise empire, Malafaia is one of Brazil's leading representatives of the neo-Pentecostal movement and the so-called "prosperity gospel."

The film portrays the political relationships cultivated by Malafaia since the start of the century, when he supported Lula's presidential bid in 2002, up through his active engagement in Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 election campaign. Malafaia became a close adviser to the former president, backing his coup plots and, as the documentary shows, fervently urging Bolsonaro to call on the Armed Forces to remain in power after his electoral defeat in October 2022.

Malafaia and Bolsonaro are the most notable recent exponents in Brazil of the merging of evangelical fundamentalism and anti-communism. In *Apocalypse in the Tropics*, Malafaia appears at various moments of his "culture war" against the left. He vigorously attacks the "Frankfurt School" and "cultural Marxism," which, according to him, "wage an ideological war on religion."

Explaining his relationship to politics, Malafaia says: "I regret to say one thing ... a great many pastors stayed on the mountain of religion ... they alienated themselves from what is happening, and I didn't."

Costa characterizes Malafaia and Bolsonaro as representatives of dominionism, or "theology of dominion," "an ideology that preaches that Christians should control every aspect of society." As an example, *Apocalypse in the Tropics* shows Malafaia's influence over Bolsonaro's appointment of the evangelical minister André Mendonça to the Supreme Federal Court (STF).

Like *The Edge of Democracy*, the documentary is shot through with Costa's astonishment at the events she narrates. After showing powerful footage of the Bolsonaro government's wholesale negligence during the COVID-19 pandemic, she says: "At first, it seemed strange to me that the same Jesus who preached love and forgiveness could be used to justify a government with so little empathy."

To try to understand this, Costa says she turned to the Bible, particularly

the final book of the New Testament. “The Book of Revelation is a key text for the fundamentalist evangelical movement,” she argues. “Here, war leads to peace, war leads to freedom, war is a necessary evil to fight a greater evil.”

In this way, *Apocalypse in the Tropics* attempts to explain the origins of the acute social and political contradictions in capitalist Brazil as a crisis of narratives.

This false political thesis—anchored in the director’s postmodernist conceptions—is accompanied in the film by a forced correlation between the growth in the number of evangelicals in Brazil and Bolsonaro’s rise to power. In what Costa describes as “one of the greatest religious changes in the history of humanity,” the documentary notes that “over the last 40 years, evangelicals have grown from 5 percent to more than 30 percent [in fact, 27 percent] of Brazil’s population.”

A similar explanation is shared by Lula and the PT, who attribute the growth of the far right to the aggressive use of social networks and to “fake news”—such as the lie spread during the 2018 elections that the PT intended to create “unisex bathrooms,” which is mentioned several times in *Apocalypse in the Tropics*.

This version of events, which corresponds to the self-indulgent excuses offered by a party that watched its base among workers plummet, reduces the population to a passive mass infinitely manipulable by political and religious charlatans.

Totally absent from this narrative are the objective material conflicts existing in society. It omits the class interests represented by PT governments, which served as the preferred vehicle of the national and imperialist bourgeoisie to manage a regime of social injustice and to impose escalating economic attacks on the working class.

The mass rejection of the PT, portrayed by Costa as an untarnished left-wing party, is, according to this narrative, to be explained by a pathological deviation of the working class’s political consciousness to the right.

The political use of evangelical fundamentalism by U.S. imperialism

A section of *Apocalypse in the Tropics* portrays the influence of evangelical fundamentalism in US political life during the second half of the twentieth century, and its repercussions for Brazil.

Costa has addressed the parallels between these movements in the US and Brazil in several interviews she has given about her documentary.

In one of them, the director drew an analogy between the partnership of Malafaia and Bolsonaro and the association between Pastor Peter Wagner, a key figure of American neo-Pentecostalism, and former president Ronald Reagan. In 1980, Reagan was supported by the right-wing evangelical “Moral Majority” movement, which counted Wagner and Jerry Falwell among its main leaders.

From the 1960s onward, with an emerging crisis of global capitalism amid the Cold War, the anti-communist agitation of evangelical leaders was increasingly employed in the operations of American imperialism, both in the US and in Latin America.

Washington watched with apprehension the increasing radicalization of workers’ and peasants’ movements in Latin American countries. In the rural areas and urban peripheries of the region—the most Catholic and the most socially unequal in the world—the influence of liberation theology grew, which, as *Apocalypse in the Tropics* recounts, “evoked a Jesus who defended social justice and challenged power structures.”

This movement was propelled by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which developed the social doctrine of the Catholic Church and helped forge tens of thousands of Base Ecclesial Communities

(CEBS), many of them influenced by liberation theology.

The growth of this sector of Catholicism, to the detriment of the church’s more openly reactionary legacy, led Washington to question the Catholic Church’s capacity to contain socialist influence in Latin America. The State Department and CIA began to intensively promote fundamentalist evangelical movements.

Apocalypse in the Tropics shows documents from the 1950s and 1960s from the International Council For Christian Leadership. The organization “sponsored English classes taught by American missionaries for Brazilian congressmen, who could thus be converted in one fell swoop to Christ and to capitalism,” the film says.

A document dated May 12, 1965 states “...what Brazil desperately needs is a group of dedicated Christian leaders,” and, to that end, proposes a “Missionary Task” to reach “15,000,000 non-Protestant families” and a “Missionary Force” of “3,000 foreign missionaries, 60,000 Brazilian pastor and lay leaders, 3,000,000 Protestant church members.”

Apocalypse in the Tropics features scenes from the anti-communist “crusades” of Billy Graham, the most well known representative of the evangelical fundamentalism promoted by American imperialism in the twentieth century.

The Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985) promoted the American evangelical leader’s fascistic mass rallies. The film shows Graham speaking at Maracanã Stadium in 1974 to “the largest crowd ever gathered in North and South America, and one of the largest in the world,” according to him. His five-day tour brought together about 615,000 people in Rio de Janeiro, and he was welcomed by the military dictator Gen. Ernesto Geisel.

The Workers’ Party and religion

Apocalypse in the Tropics sheds light on one particular aspect of Lula and the PT’s trajectory: their relationship with religion.

In one segment of the film, Lula explains the rise of neo-Pentecostalism in Brazil by emphasizing the limits of the unions and the Catholic Church in solving workers’ problems. According to Lula, an unemployed person:

...comes to the prosperity gospel and there are two words: ‘The problem is the devil and the solution is Jesus.’ It is very simple. ‘You are unemployed because the devil entered your life and the way out is Jesus.’ ... I have a thesis that what led socialism to failure was the denial of religion.

This confessed rejection of socialism and embrace of deceiving workers through religion exposes the deep political corruption of Lula and the PT.

Such a conception goes back to the PT’s very political origins. Founded in 1980, amid a mass social upsurge of the working class that would lead to the overthrow of the military dictatorship, the PT was a product of the convergence between Catholic sectors linked to the Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBS), the “new unionism” represented by Lula, and Pabloite renegades from Trotskyism.

By the late 1970s, there were more than 80,000 CEBS spread across Brazil. These Catholic organizations influenced by liberation theology were embedded in rural movements for agrarian reform and in union and social-reform movements in the cities.

Catholic intellectuals such as Leonardo Boff and Frei Betto, who remain central influences on the PT and the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), systematized an anti-Marxist ideology based on an amalgam of

reformist critiques of capitalism and imperialism together with the promotion of religious faith. But perhaps the most influential author associated with liberation theology and the PT was the educator Paulo Freire—one of the favorite targets of Bolsonaro and Malafaia’s “culture war” against supposed left-wing indoctrination in schools. A “Christian socialist,” Freire eclectically assembled diverse anti-Marxist philosophical currents, combining aspects of Hegelian idealism, existentialism, and the Frankfurt School.

The political role played by “liberation theology” in the PT’s genesis was to consciously divert the explosive struggles of the working class and the impoverished masses of Latin America from the path of the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system.

Today, the consequences of these conceptions are even more exposed. Attacks on workers and the poor in Brazil continue in the current Lula administration, his third, as he seeks to strengthen the very Armed Forces responsible for the 1964 coup and that supported Bolsonaro’s dictatorial-fascist conspiracy.

By contrast, there is growing opposition in Brazil and internationally to attempts by fascist leaders, like President Donald Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil, to employ religious fundamentalism in their drive to install dictatorial regimes of the capitalist oligarchy.

Apocalypse in the Tropics touches on important political problems and draws attention to relevant historical and contemporary figures and episodes. Its explanations of these phenomena are, however, muddled, mistaken, or outright reactionary.

The growing layers of workers and youth who are being radicalized by the deepening social and political crisis, by the advance of fascism and of world war, need a scientific understanding of these political problems. Above all, it is necessary to understand this turn by the ruling classes toward barbarism as a direct product of the crisis of the global capitalist system. Confronting it requires building a revolutionary mass movement of the working class for world socialism.



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