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## BRAZIL LURCHES TO THE RIGHT

Jair Bolsonaro joins the club of reactionary populists rising to power.

The script has become familiar in this global season of far-right politics: A fringe politician peddling vitriol and promising order catches the mood of a nation yearning for change, any change, and rides it to the presidential palace.

A year ago, anyone who said Jair Bolsonaro could be elected president of Brazil would have been dismissed as a comic. A former artillery captain turned politician, Mr. Bolsonaro spent 27 years as an obscure congressman opposed to everything left-wing. In the campaign, he came to be best known for his outrageously offensive comments about gays, blacks, indigenous people and women and for defending the old military dictatorship, torture and guns.

His campaign platform, such as it was, was mostly about going backward — pulling out of the Paris climate accord, using strong-arm tactics with criminals (his favorite motto is said to be, “A good criminal is a dead criminal”), giving industry what it wants.

Mr. Bolsonaro has said he did not support equal pay for women because they already “get more labor rights than men.” He said he would rather his son die in a car accident than be gay. He said he favored torture and claimed the public agreed with him. He said in a 1999 interview he would disband the Congress if he were elected president. At a rally in October he vowed to jail his political opponents or send them into exile. And he promised to strip environmental protections from much land held by indigenous peoples.

Yet his angry rants caught the mood of a Brazilian electorate sick of an endless corruption scandal that has reached to the far corners of the establishment, rampant street violence and economic dislocation, all of it indiscriminately and often unfairly blamed by many Brazilians on the left-wing Workers’ Party, known as PT. The eagerness to repudiate anything PT — and the political class as a whole — overrode all other considerations, like Mr. Bolsonaro’s total lack of preparation. He came in first in the first round and got a resounding 55 percent of the vote in the second.

Not surprisingly, President Trump, with whom Mr. Bolsonaro shares views on many issues ranging from gun rights to China, was among the first to proffer warm congratulations along with a cheery tweet (“Excellent call, wished him congrats!”).

Mr. Bolsonaro poses a danger to Brazil’s democracy. Like Mr. Trump, he is a polarizing force — he was seriously wounded by a would-be assassin during the campaign, and even before the election Brazilian media reported that police were staging raids in universities, purportedly to stop illegal electioneering. He is expected to name several former generals to his cabinet, a troubling move in a nation with a dark history of military control.

Yet in the immediate wake of the election, Mr. Bolsonaro pledged to respect democratic rules. “This government will defend the constitution, democracy and liberty,” he declared. “This is a promise not of a party, not the empty words of a man; it’s an oath before God.”

So far so good. And if he does manage to bring Brazil out of economic crisis, a task likely to be handed to the University of Chicago-trained economist Paulo Guedes, and to bring the crime rate and corruption under control without undermining the rule of law, so much the better. The initial reaction of Brazilian financial markets was a frenzy of stock-buying in the anticipation of policies like selling off inefficient state companies, deregulation and a cut in social spending.

The question is whether Brazil’s still adolescent democratic institutions can withstand a far-right assault. Most of the measures Mr. Bolsonaro might attempt — whether expanding the authority to carry arms or classifying the movement of landless people as “terrorists” — would require either a law, which needs a simple majority in the legislature, or a constitutional amendment, which needs three-fifths. The new Congress is full of untried deputies, but, despite serious losses, the opposition Workers’ Party is still the largest party in the lower house, with the potential to block Mr. Bolsonaro’s more undemocratic initiatives.

Brazil’s left is badly wounded, with the once-wildly popular former president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in prison. But the opposition would do best to recognize the election of Mr. Bolsonaro as a cry of desperation rather than a declaration of war, and to support those actions that address the wrongs while blocking those that endanger democracy.

# The price of trans visibility

Thomas Page McBee

About a month ago, I was reading the new novel “Lake Success,” by Gary Shteyngart, when I came across a familiar trope.

The book follows the story of a straight, white hedge fund manager, Barry Cohen, as he abandons his life to take a trip across America via Greyhound bus. Along the way, Mr. Shteyngart’s narrator takes pains to point out — but not engage with — two visibly transgender women, but it’s not exactly clear why. It’s not until he gets to Texas, where Barry observes a young trans woman who is upset because she can’t afford the fare, that we learn why he finds these women so intriguing. “She was eating ice cream and crying,” Barry says. “But even in her tears she knew who she was.”

At some point between 2011, when I transitioned, and 2018, a curious thing happened in the relationship between trans people and popular culture. A certain subset of trans people — usually (though not always) palatable, sympathetic and conventionally attractive — became pervasive, appearing on magazine covers and in prestige dramas. Some even became full-fledged celebrities. And we took on — in some mainstream liberal circles, anyway — an often crude, if occasionally flattering, symbolism: Our presence in a project lent it an air of edginess, sometimes even glamour. Above all, as Mr. Shteyngart’s narrator alludes to, we were seen as authentic.

And yet all these narratives emphasizing our authenticity did little to

protect us last Sunday, when those in power appeared determined to strip us of our basic rights. Very few of the people who so enthusiastically celebrated our stories of “finally being ourselves” showed up at the rallies that took place across the country, in the wake of news that the Trump administration aims to define us out of existence. And even as trans people on television are increasingly beamed into living rooms across the country, we’re also seeing an uptick of violence

against the most marginalized members of our community. Trans and nonbinary people — by most estimates, not even 1 percent of the population — have come to hold an outside role in our cultural imagination, especially in the minds of film directors, journalists and television executives (who are still, with some notable exceptions, almost never trans themselves). And yet, it’s not exactly clear what this role has done for us.

It’s strange being trans in 2018. Everyone knows we exist, but very few people know one of us well enough to see us as complex, fully formed human beings. Trans people may be on more screens and magazine covers than ever before, but for the 84 percent of Americans who believe they’ve never met a trans person in real life, we still live in the realm of the imagination, theoretical at best.

We’ve made real progress in an

astonishingly short amount of time: from seven years ago, when, as one of the first out trans journalists in the country, I was still spending much of my time helping reporters and editors newly attuned to trans issues use correct pronouns, to today, when a transgender candidate has won the Democratic nomination for governor of Vermont, and shows like “Transparent” and “Pose” not only receive high critical praise but also feature powerful trans storytellers and actors behind and in front of the camera.

Which is why the backlash feels so painful — rooted, as it is, not just in the usual demeaning rhetoric from conservatives or the ignorant and uninformed, but also in decades-old talking points from women calling themselves feminists who argue that trans women aren’t women, and from those purportedly concerned about the ways social pressures may be leading children toward medical interventions too soon — never mind the lack of concrete evidence that this is any sort of widespread problem. Violence against trans people (and especially trans women of color) last year was the highest it’s been since it was first measured; over half of trans boys have attempted suicide. Erasure is a battle most of us spend our entire lives fighting against, which is why the memo from the Department of Health and Human Services suggesting that the existence of trans people is, itself, a matter of debate, opened old wounds. Despite all the attention on our stories, trans people almost invariably risk tremendous loss in endeavoring to be “authentically” ourselves. The triumph you see on television only happens if there is a welcoming world to greet us on the

other side. This past week, for me, raised the question once again: Is there?

It’s probably not coincidence that the surge in trans visibility has accompanied an era of precarious gender politics. Even before #MeToo, the boundaries of the old boys’ club that defined our political and economic structures for hundreds of years were being challenged. Women, trans and not, who resist the idea that men have an inherent right to their bodies — at work and at home — are upending conventional wisdom about gender roles. At the same time, a global “masculinity crisis” has spurred both a thoughtful examination of traditional ideas of manhood and a sometimes-violent, vitriolic backlash.

In these turbulent times, challenging gender norms is not just the territory of trans people. But whether or not you connect to the “authenticity” of trans stories probably says a lot about how you feel generally about gender in this moment. Even if you don’t know a single one of us, perhaps our existence encourages you to believe that gender is more expansive than you imagined and that progress is possible. Maybe it even reminds you that gender policing of any kind serves the status quo, whether it’s defining people by their genitalia, monitoring what women wear or telling boys that “real men” don’t cry.

That’s all true, and it makes sense that the trans person (for our new supporters, anyway) seems to hold a special place in this tumultuous new landscape — some combination of foil, role model and technological wonder. And this special place has meant that there is more space in the wider culture for our stories. But I’ve begun to wonder whether this sense of us as special, while it may help people who aren’t trans begin to see new possibilities for gender, also creates a kind of license for holding us apart when the going gets tough.

In 2014, Time famously declared that we’d reached a “trans tipping point.” In the years since, the magazine has come to look both prescient and wildly wrong.

“Visibility” for trans people was supposed to help humanize us, to give the broader culture a sense of the people behind our stories. And though that has been true, in part, the didactic, often body-focused framing of those stories and the gender-war timing of that visibility has also rendered us into symbols, metaphors, pawns and boogymen.

I believe that many people of all genders do want to see the rigid state of our gender politics improve, not just for trans people but for all of us. But reducing trans people into a symbolic vanguard is not only dehumanizing — it’s dangerous. True progress happens when all of us are released from the realm of “other” — which means allowing trans people to captain our own stories, where we can depict ourselves as fully fleshed-out people: not just brothers, mothers, neighbors and friends, but also reflections of an aspect of humanity as old as time. We’re not metaphors; we’re who you would have been if you’d been born trans.

THOMAS PAGE MCBEE is a journalist and the author of “Amateur: A True Story About What Makes a Man.”



Caitlyn Jenner, who is transgender, at the Vanity Fair Oscar party in 2016.

# U.S. economy is great, really, for now

Ruchir Sharma

Whatever one thinks of President Trump, it’s hard to deny that much of America is feeling great again.

Surveys show that consumers have been this confident only twice before, at the height of the economic booms of the 1960s and 1990s, and their mood is bright across income groups, not just among the rich. Small business confidence has not been higher since the surveys began nearly five decades ago. The misery index, invented in the 1970s to describe the agonizing combination of inflation and unemployment, is now just 6 percent, matching the lowest levels of the last half century.

This year in particular, the economy has performed exceptionally well. Among major economies, only the United States has accelerated significantly in 2018, while Europe, Japan and many emerging economies have slowed markedly. The Commerce Department reported Friday that the economy grew at a very strong pace of 3.5 percent in the third quarter, putting it on track for its best year in more than a decade. This raises a question: Why has the stock market, which normally rises when investors anticipate strong economic growth, been gyrating wildly?

Investors may now be expecting America to peak after a hot decade. Even with recent setbacks, the performance gap between the United

States stock market and the rest of the global markets is close to a 100-year high. Money flowing into the United States has also driven up the value of the dollar, which has never been more dominant as the world’s preferred currency.

Trump doubters say that this boom began before he took office, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, and they have a point. With its more flexible economic system, the United States responded faster than its peers to the debt problems exposed by the crisis. The United States forced households and troubled financial institutions to rapidly reduce their debt, and easy money provided by the Federal Reserve allowed them to start spending again. Money flowed into the giant tech companies that have underpinned the American economic surge.

Just as the 1980s belonged to Japan and the 2000s to emerging nations, the last decade belonged to America. Still, the gap in performance between America and the rest of the world has widened in the last two years under Mr. Trump, as his tax cuts and deregulation turbocharged the American economy and its markets. His policies have spurred consumption, and have incentivized companies to buy back more of their stock and bring home some of the money they had stashed overseas.

But economies that are hot in one decade rarely stay hot in the next. Every boom eventually creates excesses that sow the seeds of its own destruction, and the excesses that could end the American decade are

coming into view.

The United States economy has been expanding for nine years in a row and if this streak carries on until August next year it will be the longest economic expansion in the country’s history. Within a few years after the crisis of 2008, American companies had started running up debts again. It’s not unusual for companies to get overconfident and become saddled with heavy debts late in an expansion. But it is unusual to see the government follow suit, as it has this time. Owing in part to the Trump tax cuts, the United

States budget deficit is now around 4 percent of gross domestic product — the highest it has been outside the immediate aftermath of a recession or a war.

That will make it very hard for the government to keep stimulating the economy. Growth is expected to slow next year as the impact of the tax cuts fades and the strong dollar cuts into exports. The Fed has been raising rates, and the end of the long easy money party is starting to have an impact on the housing and stock markets, helping to explain the recent correction.

Nonetheless, the United States stock market is still swollen — and it seems unlikely to keep expanding from here. The stock market is now 60 percent

larger than the American economy, a scale it has reached only twice in the past century, during the manias of the 1920s and late 1990s. Moreover, the giant tech companies that have been driving the economy and markets now face a regulatory backlash that could cut into their extraordinarily high profit margins.

Trump haters may be tempted to conclude from all this that he is about to lead America into a sudden decline, but that is not the point. This American decade started under President Obama, continued under Mr. Trump and survived congressional gridlock throughout, showing that the economy often rises above politics. The economy is driven less by ideology than by its own internal cycles, and this cycle has been turning in America’s favor for so long that it is unlikely to last much longer.

While the excesses of corporate exuberance and government debt are rising in the United States, countries from France to Brazil are in the cleanup phase that often precedes an economic comeback. Most are a long way from working out the excesses of the last decade, and they may suffer further setbacks. But they are approaching the start of a new cycle, while the United States nears the end of an old one. If history is any guide, the next decade is less likely to be great for America than it is for the rest of the world.

RUCHIR SHARMA is chief global strategist at Morgan Stanley Investment Management.