

The Four Worlds of Brazilian Educational Reform

A Comparative-Historical Analysis

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Section 1

Introduction

Research Question

Why does the Brazilian educational system differ so markedly from other OECD countries?

- Astonishingly high share of students in private institutions (~80% at tertiary level)
- Tracking is formally nonexistent
- Post-secondary education attainment is one of the lowest and markedly unequal

Goal: Explain Brazil's educational lag and institutional characteristics through comparative welfare state theory and historical institutionalism

Paper's Contribution

Long-run perspective on Brazilian education:

- Trace education lag and its reforms from the colonial era to recent decades
- Applying comparative welfare state theoretical framework to education
- Analyzing three interrelated dimensions:
 - ① **Expansion** of educational attainment
 - ② **Commodification** of educational provision
 - ③ **Stratification** through state regulations

Central argument: *Brazil's hybrid educational system results from gradual institutional change through layered reforms inspired by distinct regime logics, leading to Brazil's "platypus" educational system.*

The Brazilian Educational Puzzle

Why does Brazil's educational system differ so markedly from OECD countries?

Distinctive Features:

- Astonishingly high private enrollment (80%)
- No formal tracking system
- Lowest post-secondary attainment in OECD
- Extreme educational inequality

Data Sources:

- Lee and Lee (2016): Enrollment 1820-2010
- Paglayan (2021): Primary education 1828+
- Kang, Paese, and Felix (2021): Brazil 1930-1964
- IBGE & INEP: Official statistics

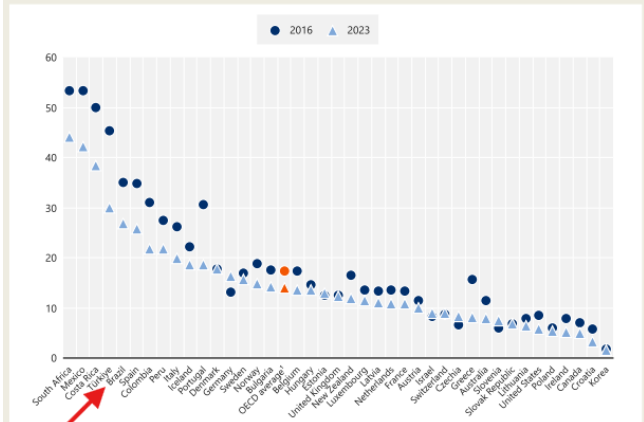
Brazil's Educational Position in OECD Context

Education lag:

- Brazil has the **lowest education attainment rates** among OECD countries
- Only 21% of adults (25-34) have tertiary education
- OECD average: 48%

Figure A1.1. Trends in the share of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary attainment (2016 and 2023)

In per cent

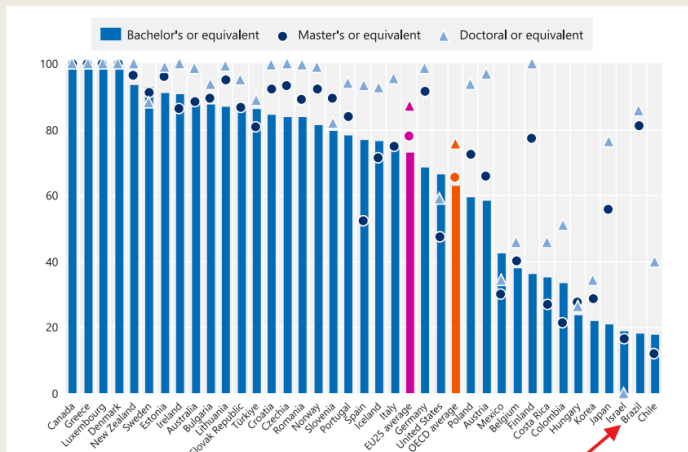


Brazil's Educational Position in OECD Context

Extreme commodification of tertiary enrollment:

- Brazil has the **highest share of graduates in private institutions among tertiary graduates** among OECD countries
- 81% of enrollments are in the private sector
- OECD average: 37%

Figure B4.1. Share of graduates in public institutions among tertiary graduates, by level of education (2022)



Brazil's Educational Lag

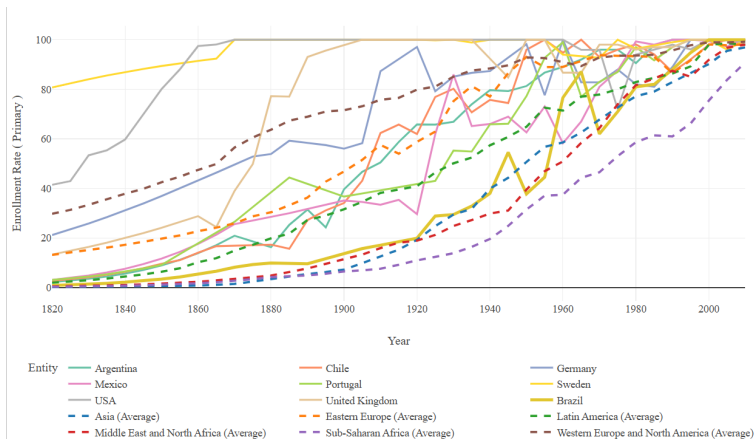


Figure 3: Primary Enrollment Rates for selected countries and the average of each major world region

Brazil's Educational Lag

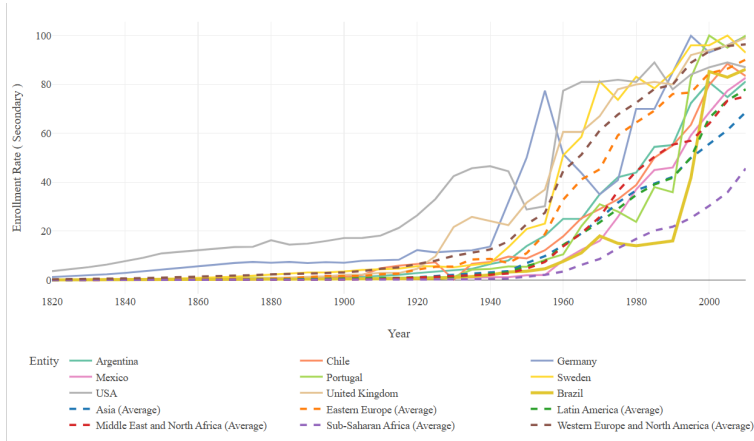


Figure 4: Secondary Enrollment Rates for selected countries and the average of each major world region

Brazil's Educational Lag

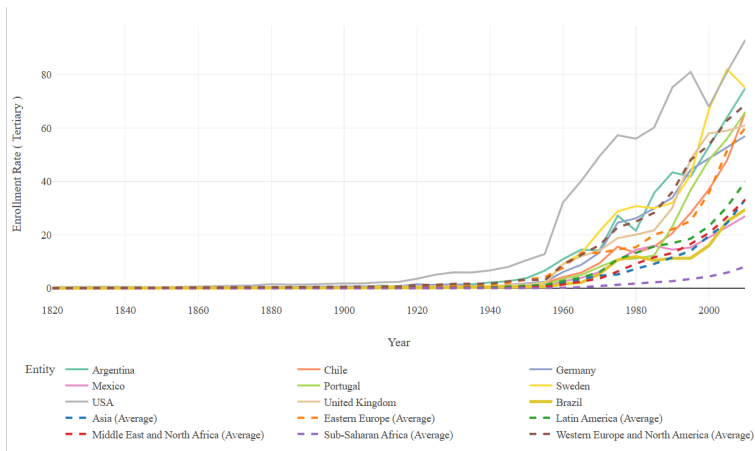


Figure 5: Tertiary Enrollment Rates for selected countries and the average of each major world region

Theoretical Framework

Analytical Approach:

- Historical institutionalism (Mahoney & Thelen)
- Comparative-historical analysis
- Gradual institutional change framework

Comparative Welfare State Analysis Applied to Education

- Drawing on Busemeyer (2014): Education regimes are related welfare state models
- “Worlds” framework from Esping-Andersen (1990):
 - **Social Democratic:** Universal, de-stratified (Sweden)
 - **Conservative-Corporatist:** Tracked, occupational (Germany)
 - **Liberal:** Market-based, commodified, residual protection (US/UK)

Section 2

Colonial Roots

Portuguese Colonial Legacy and the Hierarchical

Brazil “Born Old”: Inheriting Hierarchical Institutions (Barbosa 2018)

Institutional Features:

- Extreme land concentration
- Slavery (60% of Atlantic trade)
- Export-oriented monoculture
- Patrimonialism
- Extractive/Mercantilist political economy (Mahoney 2010)

Educational Consequences:

- Deliberate gatekeeping
- No universities (vs. Spanish America)
- Education as elite privilege
- Active blocking of mass access
- Education was used to block political rights

Comparative Context

Brazil vs. Spanish America

- **Spanish colonies:** Universities from 1538 (Santo Domingo, Lima, Mexico)
 - ~150,000 graduates 1772-1872
- **Brazil:** No universities until 1920
 - Only 1,242 Brazilians at Coimbra 1772-1872

Result: Brazil began 20th century with Portuguese *ancien régime*-like institutions

The Pombaline Reforms (1759)

Enlightened Despotism and Educational Collapse

Reforms:

- Jesuit expulsion (1759)
- Administrative centralization
- Economic reorganization

Consequences:

- Fragile educational structure collapsed
- No secular replacement
- Deliberate gatekeeping

Ribeiro Sanches' Logic:

Schools in small towns would teach peasants to read, causing rural exodus and threatening hierarchy

Educational Gatekeeping as Political Strategy

The Saraiva Law (1881)

- Electoral reform linking education to voting rights
- Prohibited illiterates from voting
- **Result:** Electorate collapsed from $>10\%$ to $<1\%$ of free population

No corresponding literacy expansion policy

→ Education used to legitimize exclusion, not enable participation

The Story by the numbers

Extreme Educational Lag

- **1872 Census:** 16.9% of free children (6-15) enrolled
 - Overall literacy: 15.5% (including enslaved)
 - 99.9% of enslaved people illiterate (prohibited from school)
- **1890 Census:** 17.6% literacy (5+ years old)
 - Minimal improvement despite 44% population growth
- **1920:** 20% enrollment (6-14 years)
 - Marginal gain over 50 years

Comparative Lag

Brazil vs. United States (1870)

United States:

- Free population literacy: 88.5%
- Enslaved population literacy: 20.1%

Brazil:

- Free population literacy: ~16%
- Enslaved population literacy: <0.1%

Brazil lagged even compared to other Latin American countries

Brazil's Educational Lag

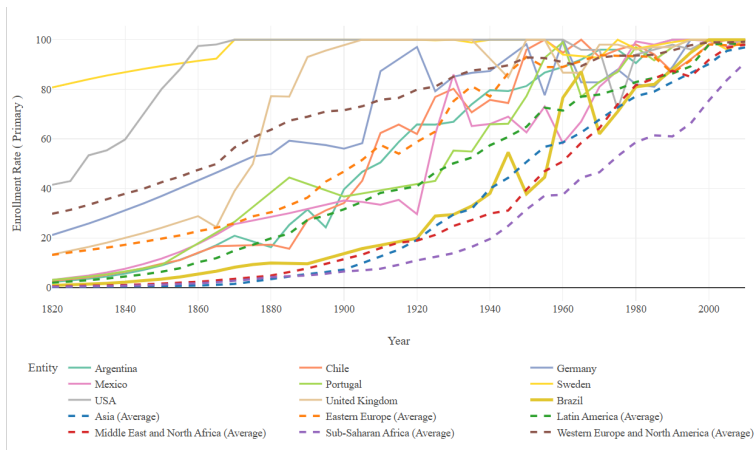


Figure 6: Primary Enrollment Rates for selected countries and the average of each major world region

Section 3

Vargas Era Reforms

The 1930 Rupture

Revolution of 1930: Partial Institutional Break

Political Changes:

- Coup led by Getúlio Vargas
- Challenged rural oligarchy hegemony
- Centralized power
- Industrialization project

Social Policy Model:

- Bismarckian inspiration
- Corporatist logic
- “Regulated citizenship” (Santos 1994)
- Urban workers incorporated
- Rural workers excluded
- Division between *insiders* and *outsiders*

Regulated Citizenship

Corporatist Social Protection

- Rights based on **occupational categories**, not universal citizenship
- Insider/outsider division:
 - **Insiders:** Urban, formal sector, regulated professions
 - **Outsiders:** Rural workers, informal sector

Vargas's Logic (1932 speech):

"Transform the proletariat into an organic force of cooperation with the State... guarantee capital by extending rights to labor"

Educational Reform: Tracking Introduced

Francisco Campos Reform (1931-1932)

Institutional Changes:

- Ministry of Education created (1930)
- National guidelines for states
- Federal centralization

Two-Track System:

- ① **Academic track:** Elite pathway to university (Law, Medicine, Engineering)
- ② **Vocational track:** Commercial education, terminal cycles, no university access

Result: State-led stratification institutionalized

Estado Novo: Radicalization (1937-1945)

Gustavo Capanema's Educational Policy

Four vocational branches established:

- 1 Industrial
- 2 Commercial
- 3 Agricultural
- 4 Teacher training

Plus: Academic secondary track (elite pathway)

Logic: Formation of capable elite + industrial workforce for accelerating industrialization

The S System: Practical Training

SENAI (1942) and the Birth of the S System

Institutional Design:

- Private management
- Public financing (payroll tax)
- Multi-stakeholder governance
- Firm-based apprenticeship

Teutonic Influence:

- German vocational traditions
- *Auslandsdeutsche* (Roberto Mange)
- Adapted to Latin American context
- Lower apprenticeship volumes than Europe

The “S&I Formula”: Distinctive Latin American VET model (Schrank 2025)

Tertiary Education: Importing the Humboldtian Model

From Professional Schools to Research Universities

- **1920:** University of Rio de Janeiro (nominal merger of professional schools)
- **1934:** University of São Paulo (USP)
 - New Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences, and Letters (FFCL)
 - European professors recruited (France, Germany, Italy)
 - Humboldtian model: Teaching + Research integration
 - Research becomes primary function

But: Traditional professional schools (Law, Medicine) resisted integration

Limited Impact: Elite Institutions

Tertiary Education Remained Minuscule

- Until 1960s: <1% of Brazilians had any tertiary education
- Extremely elitist institutions
- Regional concentration (Southeast)

Layering, Not Displacement:

- FFCLs added new institutional layer
- Traditional professional schools continued largely unchanged
- Hybrid university model emerged

Section 4

Military Dictatorship

Context: Military Dictatorship (1964-1985)

Political-Economic Orientation:

- Anti-communist regime
- Developmentalist ambitions
- Rapid industrialization
- Intense repression
- U.S. influence and Cold War alignment

“Economic Miracle” (late 1960s-early 1970s):

- High growth rates
- Urbanization acceleration
- Middle class expansion
- Followed by: oil shocks, debt crisis, stagnation

Policy Diffusion: MEC-USAID Agreements

1965-1968: Transfer of American Educational Models

Twelve agreements signed between MEC and USAID:

- Technical and financial support
- Part of Alliance for Progress (Cold War strategy)
- Restructure education at all levels
- Rationalized, efficiency-oriented administration
- U.S. governance structures

Key shift: From Continental European to Anglo-American model

The 1968 University Reform

Dismantling the European Model

Institutional Changes:

- End of *cátedra* (chair) system
- Departmental organization
- Credit systems (vs. rigid curricula)
- Specialized research faculties
- FFCL dismantled

U.S. Influence:

- Administrative rationalization
- Efficiency metrics
- Managerial governance
- Research productivity emphasis

End of Formal Tracking

Major Structural Change:

- Formal vocational/academic tracking system abolished
- Work-oriented training integrated in the public system (under funded due to economic crisis)
- Private schools could keep academic training

But: Inequality mechanisms didn't disappear—they transformed

→ From **state-coordinated stratification** to **market-led dualization**

Strategic Dualization: The Political Calculation

Oliven's Argument: Military regime pursued **dual strategy** (Oliven 2002)

Public Sector:

- Continued investment in research
- Graduate education expansion
- Techno-scientific apparatus
- **But:** Universities = opposition nuclei
- Solution: Persecution, expulsion of oppositionists

Private Sector:

- Liberalization and rapid expansion
- Isolated colleges (*faculdades isoladas*)
- Teaching-focused, not research
- Less space for organized opposition
- Absorbed enrollment demand

Convenient for the regime: Expand access while containing political opposition

First Tertiary Education Boom

Explosive Growth: 100,000 → 1+ million (early 1960s to mid-1970s)

Drivers:

- Economic miracle
- Middle class expansion
- Urban migration
- Demand for credentials

Character:

- Predominantly private
- Low-quality private teaching institutions
- High-quality public research universities
- Inverse public/private stratification established

Tertiary education growth

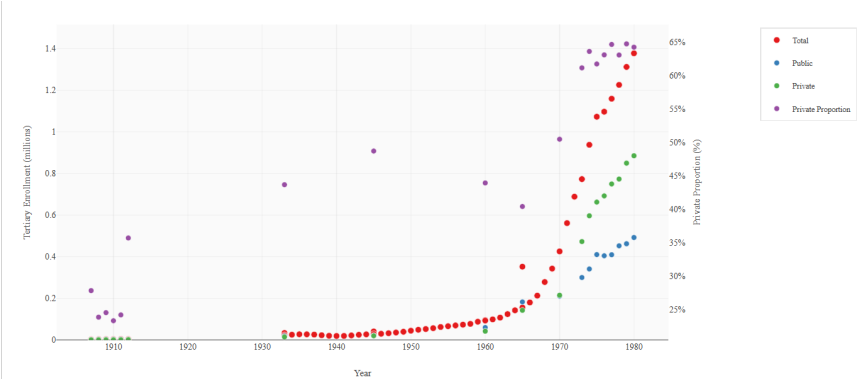


Figure 7: Number of tertiary enrollments discriminated by public and private institutions (1907-1980)

Indoctrination and Primary Expansion

Why Did Primary Education Finally Expand?

- **Paglayan's state-building logic** Paglayan (2024): Authoritarian regimes expand education for indoctrination
- *Educação Moral e Cívica* (Moral and Civic Education) compulsory
- Nationalist, pro-regime, education
- Discipline for industrial workforce

Primary enrollment rose, but **secondary education stagnated**

→ Mass indoctrination vs. elite tertiary education for ISI industrialization

The Secondary Education Crisis

Brazil Falls Behind

- Secondary enrollment remained extremely low
- Brazil fell below sub-Saharan African averages (Lee and Lee 2016)
- Reflected priorities?: Elite tertiary > mass secondary
- Bottleneck for educational attainment

The “lost decade” (1980s):

- Economic crisis and stagnation
- Educational expansion stagnates
- Fiscal crisis at state level (Kang, Menetrier, and Comim 2024)

Path Dependence Created

Long-Term Consequences of Military-Era Choices:

- ① **Public university corporatism:**
 - Expensive, research-intensive model
 - High per-student costs
 - Faculty unions resist reform
 - Limited expansion capacity
- ② **Private sector dominance:**
 - One of OECD's most privatized systems
 - Path initialization for future booms
 - Market-driven stratification mechanisms
- ③ **Dualized structure:**
 - Public = elite, high quality, free
 - Private = mass, low quality, expensive

Result: Layered hybrid with liberal features atop corporatist foundations

Section 5

Redemocratization

The 1988 Constitution: Education as Right

Redemocratization and Social Rights

Constitutional Framework:

- Education as fundamental right
- Duty of State and family
- Universal access mandated
- Free and compulsory basic education

Article 205:

“Education, which is the right of all and duty of the State and of the family, shall be promoted... with a view to full development of the person, citizenship, and qualification for work”

Universalist orientation: Health, education, pensions, social rights

Incremental Implementation

Not Rupture, but Layering (Arretche 2019)

- Constitutional principles vs. implementation constraints
- National systems gradually constructed
- PSDB governments (center-right): Foundations
- PT governments (center-left): Deepening
- Budget constraints and inherited institutional arrangements limit pace

Political coalitions: Progressive elements within broader coalitions advance universalist agenda

Economic Opening and Educational Expansion

1990s Context:

- End of “lost decade” (1980s stagnation)
- Economic liberalization (Collor, FHC)
- ISI replaced by more economy (deindustrialization)
- Constitutional mandate + economic recovery
- Explosion in educational provision

Target: Poor areas and previously excluded populations

Secondary Education Catch-Up

Remarkable Expansion (1990s-2010s)

Starting Point (late 1980s):

- Below sub-Saharan African average
- Lagged all world regions

By 2010:

- Surpassed Latin American average
- One of fastest regional expansions
- Universalization of primary → demographic pressure for secondary

The Public Sector Dilemma

Why Couldn't Public Universities Lead Expansion?

Constraints:

- High per-student costs
- Institutional rigidity
- Faculty corporatism
- Regional concentration (South/Southeast)
- Competitive entrance exams favor elite

Inequalities:

- Elite private secondary schools prepare students for *vestibular*
- Public universities = elite capture
- Poor students in public K-12 → excluded from public universities

Second Tertiary Boom: Private Explosion

Late 1990s - 2000s: Private Sector Expansion

- Lower per-student costs
- Flexibility to open campuses quickly
- Market responsiveness
- Profit-driven expansion

Third Boom (2010s): Distance Learning Revolution

- EaD (*Educação a Distância*) explosion
- Overwhelmingly private sector
- Massive scale economies
- Regional penetration

Result: Brazil reaches ~80% private enrollment (tertiary)

Second Tertiary Boom: Private Explosion

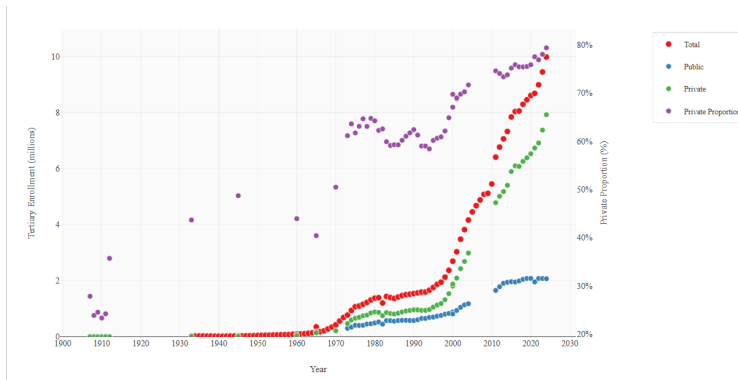


Figure 8: Number of tertiary enrollments discriminated by public and private institutions (1907-1980)

The Lula Government's Redistributive Dilemma

How to expand access without reproducing inequality?

The Problem:

- Public expansion too slow
- Public universities benefit privileged
- Regional disparities
- Faculty/student resistance to reform

The Solution:

Three major policies:

- 1 **ProUni** (2004)
- 2 **Quotas** (2012)
- 3 **FIES** expansion

ProUni: Market-Mediated Redistribution

Program University for All (*Programa Universidade para Todos*, 2004)

Design:

- Tax exemptions for private institutions
- In exchange: scholarships for low-income students
- Target: Public K-12 graduates below income threshold
- Voluntary participation

Effects:

- 2+ million scholarships (2005-2024)
- Rapid access expansion
- **But:** Concentrated in low-prestige institutions/fields
- Financed private sector consolidation
- Vulnerable to policy reversal

Quotas: Affirmative Action

2012 Quota Law

- 50% of federal university places reserved
- For public school graduates
- Income and racial criteria
- Addresses admissions inequality directly

Logic: Intervene in selection mechanism, not just financing

Controversy: Public university resistance, debates over meritocracy

FIES: Student Loans

Student Financing Fund (*Fundo de Financiamento Estudantil*)

- Subsidized loans for private institutions
- Expanded dramatically under PT governments
- Enabled access for middle/lower-middle class
- **Crisis:** High default rates, fiscal costs
- Retrenchment under Bolsonaro (2019-2022)

Debate: Public subsidies for private profit? Redistribution or commodification?

Dualization Persists

Inverted Inequality Structure:

Basic Education (K-12):

- Mass public, lower quality
- Elite private, higher quality
- Wealthy families pay for advantage

Tertiary Education:

- Elite public universities (free, high quality)
- Mass private institutions (expensive, low quality)
- Public spending on tertiary = regressive

The wealthy capture free public universities after private K-12 preparation

Partisan Differences in Regulation

Left vs. Right Approaches to Commodification

Right Governments:

- Liberalize markets
- Relax quality controls
- Favor corporate profits
- Deregulation

Left Governments:

- Quality improvement emphasis
- Equalizing agenda
- Market regulation
- **But:** Regulatory capture still occurs

Hypotesis:

Following Gingrich (2011)'s patterns in advanced democracies?

Section 6

The Four Worlds

Gradual Institutional Change

Each regime added layers:

- ① Hierarchical foundations (colonial)
- ② Corporatist tracking (1930s)
- ③ Liberal privatization (1960s)
- ④ Social-democratic universalism (1988+)

Result:

- Hybrid configuration
- Institutions designed for contradictory goals
- Path dependence from earlier choices
- Constraints on equalizing reforms

Main points

Beyond Methodological Nationalism:

- Brazil not exceptional weird case, but can be understood in a historical-comparative framework
- Cross-national policy transmission are important
- Teutonic, French, U.S. influences in distinct periods reforms
- Each regime left durable legacies constraining subsequent reforms
- Beyond too-pessimistic persistence narratives dominant in Brazilian scholarship

Acknowledgments & Next Steps

Early, incomplete draft:

- Quantitative and qualitative analyses remain preliminary
- Two main sections still in outline form
- Intensive work planned for coming months

Feedback especially welcome on:

- ① Framing coherence?
- ② Argument strength and weaknesses and potential empirical tests
- ③ Data presentation alternatives
- ④ Accessibility for international audiences

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