Neoliberal student activism in Brazilian higher education
The case of ‘Students For Liberty Brasil’

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the growth of neoliberal student activism in Brazilian higher education, considering the role of organisations called neoliberal think tanks. The following questions are addressed: why and how do these think tanks operate in the field of higher education? How do they articulate and promote student activism? The study provides a historical and contextual review of the origin and performance of the neoliberal think tanks in Brazil, identifying organisations that significantly operate in the higher education field. The case of Students For Liberty Brasil is examined in detail. The results of our study indicate that these think tanks seek to challenge hegemony in the teaching, research and higher education policy agendas and consider students as an important source of neoliberal political leaders.

KEYWORDS
Brazilian higher education, Brazilian New Right, neoliberal activism, neoliberalism and higher education, neoliberal think tanks, student activism

Over the past ten years, neoliberal and conservative activist organisations have been growing in Brazil, shaping the New Right movement in the country. In the Brazilian context, the neoliberal agenda refers to a series of policies that target the privatisation of public services and the application of harsh austerity policies as well as subjectivity that encourages individualism and competition. Along with this, we observe conservative parties and movements (right and extreme right) that, agreeing with the neoliberal line, have also been acting in political opposition to movements for human rights, the anti-racism struggle, movements for gender equality and environmentalism,
among others. Moreover, they see the left and socialism as common enemies, placing the fight against them as a primary aim. Some of these organisations are called neoliberal think tanks – some literature, especially from the United States of America, calls them conservative think tanks (McDonald 2013; Pautz 2018; Stahl 2016; Thunert 2003). Bringing together intellectuals and experts in their ranks, these organisations have been acting in the ‘battle of ideas’ (Abelson 2021; Pautz 2012), defending a relentless agenda of privatisation as well as the expansion of the values of a free market society, such as competitiveness, entrepreneurship and individualism.

This article aims to analyse how and why neoliberal think tanks, especially between 2010 to 2020, have been acting in the field of higher education in Brazil, with an empirical focus on student activism. The following questions guided the study: why and how do these think tanks operate in the field of higher education? How do these think tanks mobilise politically undergraduate students towards neoliberal activism?

To answer these questions, the study started from the need to characterise and track them within the so-called neoliberal intellectual movement (Andrade 2019; Birch 2015; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). In addition to allowing a general characterisation of this type of organisation, the theoretical and historical review provided a series of insights about the role of think tanks in academia. Then a broad description of the neoliberal think tanks in the Brazilian context identified the main organisations and the constitution of a network of neoliberal think tanks within a context of strengthening neoliberalism and conservatism in Brazil over the last ten years. In this step, the study identified the organisations that significantly operated in the field of higher education.

After this, a case study was carried out, constituting the focus of the article: We discuss the case of Students For Liberty Brasil (SFLB), whose focus relies on promoting neoliberal and conservative activism among undergraduate students. In this case study, we describe the creation process of SFLB, the link with Students For Liberty (United States) and the main projects and actions carried out in the field of higher education and student activism, seeking to analyse how SFLB engages students in liberal activism through their political education projects. Academic sources about international and Brazilian liberal think tanks as well as documentary sources from think tanks’ official archives and social media were used throughout the study.

Our research seeks to contribute to an interesting debate about the relationship between neoliberal think tanks and the field of education and
higher education – for more about this general debate, see Antoni Verger et al. (2016), especially chapter 9 (Haas 2016). Also, our study seeks to contribute and add to the existing studies that focus on this issue William L. Boyd (2007), Lauren McDonald (2013), Erik C. Ness and Denisa Gándara (2014) for the United States; Geo Saura (2015) and Antonio Olmedo and Eduardo Santa Cruz Grau (2013) for Spain; Francisca Corbalán Pössel and Patricio Corbalán Carrera (2012) for Chile; Ian Bruce (2020) for New Zealand; Lester Thompson and David Wadley (2017) for Australia; and Sonia Exley (2014) for English education. In the Brazilian context, this debate is still incipient and little documented, even though our political and economic context is marked, mainly from 2016, by the resurgence of a conservative and neoliberal agenda within the State and society in general as well as the emergence of a New Right political movement. This exploratory article describes and analyses the intersection between neoliberal think tanks and the field of higher education in the Brazilian context.

Contextualising the neoliberal think tanks

Think tanks are civil society organisations characterised by the mobilisation of expertise – mainly in the fields of human and social sciences – to propose public policies and influence public opinion. They bring together specialists, academics and intellectuals to produce knowledge and act as an expert voice in the media and the political spheres (Bruce 2020; Hauck 2017; Medvetz 2008; Pautz 2012).

The history of neoliberal think tanks is traceable within a specific twentieth century intellectual movement to renew liberal thought. This movement has its roots in the Lippermman Colloquium (1938), held in Paris, and the creation of an international association of neoliberal intellectuals, whose first meeting took place in the mountains of Mont Pelerin in Switzerland and was called the Mont Pelerin Society (1947) (Dardot and Laval 2014; Djelic 2014; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Salas-Porras 2017; Turner 2008). Facing a broad context of political and academic distrust of liberalism and considering the strengthening of welfare state policies, Keynesianism and socialism, the aims of Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) were to rethink and renew classical liberal thought as well as related political and economic practices. Intellectuals, journalists and businesspeople have gathered at MSP meetings and have been working, since 1947, to build knowledge to help shape a free market social order within the values of individualism and competitiveness.
Brazilian neoliberal think tanks have direct and indirect links with this movement (Gros 2002; Onofre 2018). Some of the founders of this type of organisation in Brazil, especially from the 1980s, were members of the MPS and had direct communication channels and networks with other members of the association and with members of think tanks from other countries. The process of creating liberal think tanks in the country was also based on international experiences, notably the British organisation Institute of Economic Affairs. Today these Brazilian organisations are linked to international networks of neoliberal think tanks, notably North American organisations.

One of the main leaders of the MPS was Friedrich August von Hayek, an Austrian economist and philosopher, considered one of the main exponents of one of the theoretical currents of neoliberal thought, the Austrian School of Economics. Hayek was also a politically influential liberal activist, for example, in advising Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Hayek believed that liberalism was failing because, among other reasons, it was not able to act efficiently in the battle of ideas (Hayek 2001). More than that, the environments of production and circulation of ideas were dominated by leftist thinking, generally identified with socialism and ‘collectivism’. For Hayek, socialist intellectuals were highly capable of transmitting and disseminating values and worldviews from their points of influence, shaping public opinion and the general direction of politics.

In the view of John Blundell (2005), president of the British neoliberal think tank Institute of Economic Affairs from 1993 to 2009, Hayek’s argument pointed to the need to consider the long-term political importance of the dissemination of free market utopias. Eamonn Butler (2010), co-founder of the British liberal think tank Adam Smith Institute, states that the liberals gathered at the first meeting of the MPS wished to construct and develop a new intellectual environment that could undermine the socialist and collectivist project through the elaboration of what they perceived as adequate theories about history, society and economics. The initial composition of the MPS and the neoliberal think tanks that emerged later as well as the arguments of exponents of liberal thought cited show that two spaces were considered particularly important in this battle: the media and higher education (Fischer and Plehwe 2017). More specifically, these spaces were considered important for engaging in intellectual disputes as well as for building academic expertise.

Broadly speaking, neoliberal think tanks were constituted as private research institutions, normally financed by businesspeople and by conservative
political parties and groups, focused on the widespread dissemination of neoliberalism’s theoretical strands, the formation of new intellectual and expert cadres and the proposition of public policies (Gros 2008; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Plehwe et al. 2020; Turner 2008). Neoliberal think tanks encompass a complexity of different theoretical perspectives, such as the Chicago School of Economics, the Austrian School of Economics, Ordoliberalism and Public Choice. In addition to these currents, it is possible to observe political-ideological perspectives, such as anarcho-capitalism and libertarianism. Broadly speaking, different currents were articulated in the MPS with the aim of renewing classical liberal thought. Beyond the agendas and the consensuses built, these currents diverge on aspects such as to what extent and how the state should or should not act, questions about the nature and functioning of the free market, criticism of leftist thought, and how a truly liberal society should be constituted. For further discussion of these currents and their articulation in MPS, see Dieter Plehwe et al. (2020), especially parts 1 and 2.

The process of the creation and spread of neoliberal think tanks has been conducted by an organised and coordinated network effort that took global proportions from the 1970s, in the context of economic and political crises that opened the door to the implementation of neoliberal policies in many countries (Djelic 2014; Harvey 2005; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Globally, we can mention the American organisation called Atlas Network, founded in 1981 by the businessman Antony Fisher. Under Hayek’s direct influence, Fisher created an organisation with the purpose of stimulating and supporting (in the form of training and material sources) the creation of neoliberal think tanks around the world. In the view of Marie-Laure Djelic and Reza Mousavi, the Atlas Network ‘was responsible for the globalisation of the neoliberal think tank model’ (2020: 159). In 2020, Atlas Network reached the number of 502 officially linked partners, with the following geographic distribution: 204 neoliberal think tanks in the United States and Canada; 135 in Europe; ninety-seven in Latin America and the Caribbean; forty-two in Asia; twenty-eight on the African continent and the Middle East (Lips 2020). In Brazil, there are thirteen organisations affiliated to Atlas Network, following the agenda of the North American think tank in a subordinate way (Vidal et al. 2020).

The Latin American think tanks organise themselves to build bonds that will strengthen and coordinate their activities in the region. Spanning Latin America, the neoliberal think tank network called Red Liberal de America Latina (RELIAL) was created in 2004. This network has twenty-one member
organisations, two of them are Brazilian think tanks. RELIAL has been conducting conferences and congresses in Latin America, and it maintains a library, edits and publishes books and articles, including economic and political primers and collections of liberal thinkers works, and coordinates activities for the dissemination of neoliberal ideas at the regional level.

The Brazilian think tanks have a direct link with MPS and Atlas Network (Faria and Chaia 2020; Fischer and Plehwe 2017; Gros 2008; Rocha 2018; Vidal et al. 2020). Our research identified about forty-five active neoliberal think tanks in Brazil in 2020. In the last ten years, this type of organisation has been expanding quickly, following the growth of the New Right movement in the country. In 2016, due to the intense cooperation and partnerships between the main Brazilian neoliberal think tanks, a national network called Rede Liberdade (Freedom Network) was created with the aim of coordinating and enhancing liberal and conservative activism in Brazil and has been working to propose privatisation policies.

The first Brazilian neoliberal think tank was created in 1983 in the city of Rio de Janeiro, called Instituto Liberal do Rio de Janeiro (Liberal Institute). The initiative was attended by some Brazilian business executives from the financial, commercial, industrial and agricultural sectors. who also acted as neoliberal activists in political organisations and in media spaces and had a direct connection with members of the MPS, notably with the founder of Atlas Network, Antony Fisher (Casimiro 2018; Gros 2002; Onofre 2018). The initial idea was to establish, in Brazil, an organisation like the British Institute of Economic Affairs, in terms of composition, organisation and mode of action. The initial idea, in this sense, was to bring together a body of experts to produce content with a view to influencing public policy. For the founders of the Instituto Liberal, it would be necessary to educate strategic segments of Brazilian society, those considered as opinion makers such as students and teachers, journalists, businesspeople, politicians and lawyers in the principles of a free market society (Gros 2002; Rocha 2017b, 2018).

At the end of the 1980s, Brazil faced economic crisis as well as a process of political transition from a military dictatorship to a democratic regime. The Instituto Liberal sought to influence the process of drafting the new Brazilian Federal Constitution, published in 1988 (Gros 2002). Also, the 1990s were marked by the implementation of neoliberal policies in Brazil. The existing neoliberal think tanks tried to participate in this process, seeking to influence political and intellectual groups that worked in the constituent debates (Casimiro 2018).
Neoliberal think tanks in Brazil have grown since 2004 in political opposition to the government of the Workers’ Party in Brazil that took office in 2003 (Rocha 2017a, 2018). Considered a centre-left government overall, the Workers’ Party sought to rescue, albeit with limitations and preserving to a certain extent an inherited neoliberal macroeconomic policy, the role of the State in some sectors of society (especially the fight against hunger and poverty) and the economy. The neoliberal think tanks, in this scenario, oriented their activities to oppose the policies carried out by Workers’ Party governments.

With the emergence of an economic and political crisis in the country after 2010, the political influence of the neoliberal think tanks began to increase, new organisations emerged at a rapid pace, and networking and collaboration among them grew stronger, proposing an ultraliberal and conservative agenda. In fact, there was a political coup in 2016 against the country’s president, Dilma Rousseff of the Workers’ Party, followed by a set of fiscal adjustment policies as well as austerity and liberalising reforms conducted by the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party. In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro was elected, bringing with him a more aggressive conservative political movement and a neoliberal agenda, represented by the current minister of the economy, Paulo Guedes, a businessman and economist aligned with the Chicago School of Economics.

The political New Right in the country consists of a series of political actors (movements, parties, think tanks, and other groups and associations) that gained prominence over the decade. They brought an aggressively conservative agenda with some far right and neofascist elements. They oppose gender equality and feminist movements, anti-racist struggles, movements for human rights, and left-wing political groups in general. This New Right also pursues an ultraliberal line, demanding widespread privatisations, flexibilisation or extinction of labour protection laws and a ruthless fiscal austerity that undermines public policies on education, science, health and social assistance (Cepêda 2018; Chagas-Bastos 2019; Chaloub and Perlatto 2016; Cruz at al 2015; Goldstein 2019; Santos and Tanscheit 2019).

Among the think tanks that have emerged are Instituto Liberdade (2004), focused on conducting courses and publishing articles and studies; Instituto Millenium (2006), founded by economists, and which today has on its staff figures from the media and from the academic, political and business worlds (especially from the financial sector), including the current Brazilian Economy Minister, Paulo Guedes; Instituto Ordem Livre (2007), dedicated to
the dissemination and popularisation of liberal and conservative thinking in Brazil; Instituto Mises Brasil (2007) carries out a wide range of research activities, publications and training of liberal intellectuals aligned with the Austrian School of Economics: Students For Liberty Brasil (2010) works to promote liberal activism among undergraduate students; Instituto de Formação de Líderes (2011) acts in the formation of liberal and conservative political leaders; Instituto Atlantos (2015) is focused on the dissemination of articles and text about economics and politics; Mackenzie Center for Economic Freedom (2016) is a research laboratory officially linked to a private Brazilian university; and Burke Instituto Conservador (2017) is focused in offering courses and training on the main authors of conservative and (neo) liberal thinking.

Most organisations have a body of experts, an administration team, and leaders who can also play the role as experts. Some of them are large to medium organisations (considering in terms of the number of experts who produce content), for example: the Instituto Millenium has around 150 specialists (including economists, political scientists, journalists, among others); Instituto Mises Brasil has thirty-six specialists directly linked and a staff body that works integrally in the organisation; the Instituto Liberal do Rio de Janeiro has about twenty content producers. In most cases, it is not possible to access data related to financing and resources, but in the case of Instituto Millenium, the organisation’s accounts reveal a budget, in the year 2020, of R$1,310,501.52 Reais (at about USD$251,590.00 obtained through donations (IMIL 2021).

To summarise, the literature we consulted (Baggio 2016; Casimiro 2018; Gros 2008; Onofre 2018; Rocha 2017a; 2018; Vidal et al. 2020) as well as our empirical research identified that these organisations operate on three major axes:

1. ideologically influencing segments considered important in the formation of public opinion, such as higher education institutions (students and teachers), media, politicians, military, judges, lawyers, and business executives;
2. production of content (opinion texts, memes, blogs), carrying out editorial activity and researching in social sciences; and
3. formation of political and intellectual cadres for the liberal and conservative political field in Brazil.
Evidently, at the end of the day, they seek to influence public policies. They are usually composed of businesspeople, politicians, specialists (economists, political scientists, philosophers, among others) and obtain resources from donations from individuals and legal entities (mostly businessmen-activists) as well as from American think tanks. All the organisations mentioned have been acting aggressively in defaming left-wing thinking, especially Marxism. Our empirical research identified that they have inserted themselves into social media, creating networks and groups on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp, among others.

**Neoliberal think tanks in Brazil and the field of higher education**

The field of higher education is one of the main targets to neoliberal think tanks in Brazil. The neoliberal think tanks, in general, advocate the following agenda for higher education policy: the maximum possible privatisation of higher education institutions and tuition fees for students in public institutions. Such policies, combined with advocacy of homeschooling without state regulation and the provision of vouchers to help some families pay private school fees, bring an individualistic and competitiveness-based perspective, characteristic of neoliberalism to education, as pointed out by Jakob Krause-Jensen and Christina Garsten (2014). At the same time, neoliberal think tanks also consider undergraduate and graduate students as well as researchers and professors, as ‘potential shapers’ of public policy and public opinion. As a result, these neoliberal organisations have been working inside higher education institutions to influence the teaching and research agendas, questioning the use of theories and perspectives they consider leftist and seeking to defend the insertion of theories and perspectives they consider aligned with their political-ideological position. They also seek to recruit and train potential intellectuals, experts and political leaders among students, researchers and professors. In the last five years especially, student political activism linked to neoliberal think tanks has expanded into contesting student political representation spaces in universities.

Neoliberal think tanks in Brazil generally advocate the privatisation of the basic and higher education system. It is argued that public schools and universities are very costly to the State and that they are compulsorily financed through collective taxes. For think tanks aligned mainly with the Austrian School of Economics, social rights financed by public spending
violate the principles of a free market society. In addition, state regulations on the education system are harmful to the quality of education because they inhibit free competition between educational institutions.

Not only do the institutes defend an education model that encourages competition among students but they also advocate the competition principle even for the scientific production of knowledge. Researchers must design their research according to the interests of the market to increase their chance of financing and corporate sponsorship. In this sense, both education and science are seen as commodities in themselves. They must align, almost without filters, with the demands of a free market. In higher education, particularly, as long as public universities are not privatised, students should be charged monthly fees and the higher education institutions must stimulate, as much as they can, private investment and research in partnership with companies.

Neoliberal think tanks have also been advocating homeschooling as an alternative to what they call ‘state education’. This homeschooling, ideally, would not be regulated by the State. For them, state education, from basic to higher education, ends up indoctrinating children and young people in left-wing and collectivist perspectives aligned with the political groups, especially unions and social movements, that participate in educational political arenas. Neoliberal Brazilian think tanks rely deeply on the arguments about the prevalence of the political left in educational and intellectual environments.

Indeed, these organisations seek to build an image that Brazilian higher education institutions and public universities are spaces of leftist indoctrination. Often, they argue that many teachers and researchers are left-wing ideologues who seek to use their educational and knowledge production posts to indoctrinate students. It is even said that they apply the ‘cultural Marxism’ strategy, based on equipping educational and cultural institutions to, through Marxist ideology, lead Brazil to socialism. In particular, they listed the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and the pedagogue Paulo Freire as two of the main minds behind this strategy (Knijnik 2020; Miguel 2016; Mirrlees 2018).

Historically, the first Brazilian neoliberal think tank developed specific activities in the field of higher education. According to Denise Barbosa Gros (2002), Instituto Liberal do Rio de Janeiro argued, from the 1980s onwards, that Brazilian higher education – and particularly the teaching of economics – was dominated by Marxism and Keynesianism. They dis-
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Seminated the idea that Brazilian higher education was outdated in the face of the new demands of the labour market and in the face of a globalised world and more open economies, mainly because it was ideologised by leftist thinking and outdated economic theories. Under this justification, the think tank developed a series of projects to influence economics and business courses. It sought to give visibility to undergraduate and graduate programmes and courses based on neoliberal theoretical perspectives, especially the Chicago School, the Austrian School of Economics, and Public Choice (Gros 2002). Instituto Liberal do Rio de Janeiro started to arrange academic events and seminars at public universities, create study centres and distribute pamphlets, texts and other materials in educational institutions. From 1989 to 1997, one of the branches of the organisation held contests, sponsored by Nestlé, in which economics students competed to produce studies that used the neoliberal framework as an analytical vein. Besides that, both think tanks Instituto Liberal do Rio de Janeiro and Instituto de Estudos Empresariais sought to undertake projects in partnership with faculties and universities to promote the integration between universities, companies and the labour market.

In higher education policy, the existing neoliberal think tanks tried to influence the educational policy agenda of the Brazilian Constitution established in 1988, defending arguments close to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund’s recommendations for education in Brazil, such as tuition fees in public higher education institutions, vouchers, and the deregulation and privatisation of the sector (Casimiro 2018; Gros 2002).

This pattern of action continues today. Many neoliberal think tanks have been active in colleges and universities, promoting their political and ideological agenda for students and teachers through events, congresses, seminars, study centres, research and projects in general (Rocha 2018). Two of the projects specifically aimed at higher education were the Liberdade na Estrada (Liberty in the Road) project, created in 2009 by the think tank Instituto Ordem Livre; and the project called IMIL na Sala de Aula (IMIL in the Classroom), created by the Instituto Millenium in 2011. In both projects, these neoliberal think tanks have been sending their members to higher education institutions to organise events and lectures dedicated to the dissemination of neoliberal thinking, especially aiming at undergraduate students (Ferreira 2018). As Camila Rocha (2018) points out, such projects also function as a bond between the students, teachers and think tank members who identified themselves with the theoretical and ideological perspectives.
of neoliberalism. In many cases, the links made possible by the meetings stimulated the creation of liberal student groups at colleges and universities. Rocha (2018) also estimates that the Liberdade na Estrada project reached, in its initial years, about fifty higher education institutions in Brazil and the IMIL na Sala de Aula project had organised at around 147 academic events by 2018. Such initiatives include public and private higher education institutions in all regions of the country.

Another interesting case is the Instituto Mises Brasil. Inspired by the American Mises Institute, one of the objectives of this Brazilian neoliberal think tank is to create the University Mises Brasil and constitute itself as the main research and teaching centre for the Austrian School of Economics in the country. Especially since 2014, the institute defined the field of academic knowledge production as a strategic space in which to operate (Dal Pai 2018). To this end, Instituto Mises Brasil has been publishing an academic magazine called MISES: Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy, Law and Economics (officially recognised by national scientific councils in Brazil), dedicated to creating an epistemic community in economics, political science, philosophy and law based on the Austrian School of Economics. The Atlas Network officially supports the magazine, and its editorial board is composed of members from different neoliberal think tanks around the world. In addition to the magazine, in 2016, IBM created the ‘Postgraduate Course in Austrian School’, to train professional, academic and political leaders aligned with this perspective. This commercialised course is two years long, has a body of subjects that address debates in economics, law, political science and philosophy and is recognised by the Brazilian educational laws and accreditation system. Besides that, Instituto Mises Brasil holds a series of academic events, such as conferences, seminars and lectures with the objective of reaching, among other audiences, the academic public.

In 2016, the first neoliberal think tank officially linked to a university in Brazil was created: the Mackenzie Center for Economic Freedom (CMLE). Set up as an official research laboratory in a Brazilian private university called Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, the institute is focused on debates about the economic consequences of intervention and regulation and the role of the market in society. The institute operates in the fields of postgraduate education, research, and university extension courses. CMLE is also an affiliate of the Atlas Network and one of the main partners of the Instituto Mises Brasil. As a think tank officially linked to the aforementioned university as a research laboratory, the organisation has a management
committee of seven members, nine associate researchers and two visiting researchers – most of them researchers and teaching staff officially employed by the university, teaching undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Another significant example of neoliberal think tanks’ activity in Brazilian higher education is the creation of neoliberal and conservative student activism. Before moving to the case study of Students For Liberty Brasil, other organisations can be mentioned. One of the student activism projects was created by one of the main political movements of the New Right in Brazil, called Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL). In 2018, MBL set up MBL Estudantil (Free Student Movement Brazil), with the objective of combating what they call ‘leftist indoctrination’ in educational institutions in general and, in the context of higher education, undermining the performance of traditional student organisations and representative student unions. MBL Estudantil was created to offer political training to students who wish to form activist groups, offering courses and study materials. In addition to these training activities, an online platform was created where students could send denunciations of teachers who, in their view, are practicing ‘leftist indoctrination’ in schools and universities to the MBL team for publication. Due to a change in the group’s strategy, the project was cancelled the following year, and we were unable to access more project data. This project was part of the persecution of teachers and professors at all levels of education, accused of spreading ‘cultural Marxism’. Another movement that aims to denounce teachers for teaching gender equality, debating issues such as to homophobia or discussing politics in the classroom is called Escola Sem Partido (Knijnik 2020; Miguel 2016).

Students For Liberty Brasil: Producing liberal student activism in the Brazilian higher education

In addition to the examples mentioned, there is an organisation whose focus is specifically on the field of Brazilian higher education: Students For Liberty Brasil (SFLB), founded in 2012. First of all, to understand the role of the SFLB, we need to identify it as a subsidiary of the American organisation called Students For Liberty (SFL). This American neoliberal think tank, founded in 2008 by university students, calls itself as ‘the rapidly growing network of pro-liberty students from all over the world. We are the largest libertarian student organization in the world’ (SFL n.d.). In other words, they stand out as an organisation that works through the construction of
neoliberal student networks, espousing what they call the ‘philosophy of liberty’, or more specifically, the currents of thought present in the debate at the Mont Pelerin Society, namely the Chicago School, the Austrian School, Public Choice, the Virginia School, and libertarian and anarcho-capitalist strands. In the words of SFL themselves:

We work with a variety of student organizations across the many ideological positions within the philosophy of liberty. These include Young Americans for Liberty chapters, Students For Liberty groups, College Libertarians, free speech clubs, small ‘l’ libertarian associations, economics clubs, Objectivist societies, Austrian Economics reading groups, Students for Individual Liberty groups, and any other group that supports an idea or cause of liberty. (SFL n.d.)

In that regard, Students For Liberty aims to professionalise student liberal activism. Paul Gottfried (2020) and Liana Gamber-Thompson (2016) argue that SFL represents a young generation of libertarian activists who gained momentum in the context of Ron Paul’s candidacy for the presidency of the United States in 2008 and 2012. (Ron Paul is a libertarian politician who already occupied a seat in the US Congress). Gamber-Thompson (2016) highlights that this new generation of libertarians maintains a close connection with other neoliberal think tanks, such as the Cato Institute, Foundation For Economic Education, and Atlas Network, among others. The origin of the SFL is linked to student meetings promoted by the Institute for Humane Studies, a think tank that works in partnership with George Mason University and has on its board of directors’ businesspersons such as Charles G. Koch (mega-entrepreneur in the oil industry and libertarian activists). Indeed, in the words of Gamber-Thompson (2016), in a study on youth political activism in the United States, including conservative and libertarian activism:

The SFL has relationships, of varying degrees of strength, with well-established political groups, think tanks, and policy organizations, as well as with funders like oil magnates Charles and David Koch; the Kochs, in turn, have ties to the Cato Institute and FreedomWorks, both strongly identified with libertarian advocacy, and a range of other conservative groups and causes. These funding sources have been so aggressive at recruiting and supporting young conservatives that it would be hard to find any conservative youth group that does not benefit from their largess. (Gamber-Thompson 2016: 232)
Considering this context, SFL supports undergraduate students to develop liberal activism in higher education institutions. This support involves education and training initiatives, whose objective is to teach the main principles of liberalism to students interested in working for the organisation; in addition, the think tank seeks to develop leadership and management skills in order to form student leaders. As they say, ‘The goal is to help them be more effective organisers, managers, writers, speakers, and overall better leaders today and tomorrow’ (SFL n.d.). In addition to political education and leadership skills training, the SFL offers financial and organisational resources, online platforms and connections within the networks of neoliberal think tanks. Many SFL and Atlas Network events also seek to connect neoliberal and conservative think tanks or student groups with entrepreneurs willing to finance them.

The SFL has been expanding their student body associates in the United States and trying to become an internationalised movement (Sahd 2019). Also, considering Fábio Bacila Sahd (2019), since the creation of SFL, the participation of young people from all continents has been registered, culminating in conferences carried out in Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. According to the organisation’s website (SFL n.d.), in 2020, worldwide, a total of 2,571 events were held, reaching a total of 125,548 students as well as engaging 3,429 volunteer students. Also in 2020, the North American organisation declared a total income of US$5,003,234.

In Brazil, in 2012, the Estudantes Pela Liberdade (EPL) was created as a subsidiary of SFL, as the Brazilian organisations has started to feature prominently in SFL's annual reports. According to Flávio Henrique Calheiros Casimiro (2018), it was also in 2012 that the EPL joined the other Brazilian neoliberal think tanks network and became one of the main organisations. It is worth noting that, in 2016, the name Estudantes Pela Liberdade was replaced by Students For Liberty Brasil (SFLB), in a process of greater alignment with the projects of the North American matrix. Indeed, the SFLB directly carries the flags of SFL, reproducing the idea that the SFL network is ‘the largest pro-freedom student organisation in the world in terms of the number of leaders, events, and countries with representatives’ (SFL n.d.). This highlighted text exemplifies the main objective of SFL and SFLB: to organise students to act in the promotion of liberalism in the academy as well as to train them with the purpose of forming political leaders who dedicate themselves professionally to liberal activism inside and outside higher education institutions.
Along these lines, the SFLB emulates the actions of its North American headquarters. The Brazilian organisation develops leadership training programmes at national, regional and local levels; holds diverse events (congresses, seminars, lectures), promotes study groups in higher education institutions, offering teaching materials for this purpose, and maintains blogs and social networks with posts on liberalism and on the harms of state and leftist intervention. Rocha (2018) says that since the foundation of the SFLB in 2012, more than 650 events have been held in public and private higher education institutions in Brazil as well as the creation of about two hundred liberal study groups among undergraduate students. These groups, in addition to leadership training, normally promote political debate events among undergraduate students, create reading and study groups, and politically organise students to act in the context of university politics. It is noted that, often, such study groups become neoliberal think tanks, expanding their activities outside the academic environment.

According to Casimiro (2018), in research on political organisations created by the bourgeoisie in Brazil since the 1980s (which includes the network of neoliberal think tanks), the creation of Students For Liberty Brasil was directly related to members who already worked in neoliberal activism, with the support of Brazilian liberal institutes (such as the Instituto Liberal do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto Millenium, Instituto de Estudos Empresariais and Instituto Liberdade, among others). The SFLB was conceived – as an idea and project – in 2009 by a liberal activist named Fábio Ostermann after visiting several neoliberal think tanks in the United States in 2008 (Rocha 2018). Today, he is part of a Brazilian liberal-conservative political party called Partido Novo (New Party), as well as acting in several other organisations of the New Right. However, the project started to become truly active in 2012, with the entry of new members interested in acting particularly in the student movement and universities, officially marking the foundation of the organisation.

So, it is possible to state that Students For Liberty Brasil is inserted in the networks of neoliberal think tanks in Brazil, as well as being connected to global networks through Atlas Network and Students For Liberty in the United States. Thus, the SFLB has been acting as one of the main neoliberal think tanks in Brazil, serving as a bridge between Rede Liberdade (a network of neoliberal think tanks in Brazil formed in 2016), Atlas Network and SFL and Brazilian higher education institutions.

In addition, we would like to point out that the SFLB was connected to the origin of the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL, Free Brazil Movement)
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itself (Rocha 2018; Baggio 2016; Davis and Straubhaar 2020). According to Casimiro (2018), the MBL can be characterised as a branch of the SFLB, formed by students to act more directly in national politics. The MBL is a liberal and conservative political movement that has grown since 2013 in Brazil, strongly opposing the governments of the Workers’ Party and other leftist movements. In addition to a strong presence in social networks, the MBL contributed to the legitimation of the political coup against Dilma Roussef in 2016, organising several national demonstrations. These protests demanded the impeachment of Dilma Roussef and mixed several agendas, such as allegations that the Workers’ Party was the most corrupt in Brazil, demanding more liberal policies (e.g., privatisations), and a political ‘renewal’.

From now, we can detail how the Students For Liberty Brasil is structured to operate within higher education institutions in Brazil. The organisation has an official staff, composed of ten selected student leaders and two members of SFL itself; in addition to the staff, the central command of SFLB has a group of advisers and alumni (usually prominent New Right political leaders who were trained by the SFLB) composed of six members. Both staff and advisers are responsible for coordinating and implementing SFLB projects nationwide. In addition, the organisation selects students from several higher education institutions to act as regional (South, Southeast, Midwest, North and Northeast in Brazil), state and local ‘coordinators’. These coordinators are considered leaders at the local level, promoting and organising student activism. In other words, from the central command of the SFLB, the neoliberal think tank branches across the country through its students’ coordinators. Such coordinators, especially local coordinators, work within public and private higher education institutions, taking SFLB activities to university students across the country. According to the organisation’s website, in 2019, SFLB promoted 444 events (among lectures, seminars, studying groups, etc.), engaging 332 volunteers (including its coordinators or students who voluntarily organise and participate in activities promoted by the organisation), reaching a total of 27,264 students.

The SFLB is organised to offer to the coordinators the materials, resources, training, know-how and other skills they need to set up a support structure for their leaders. Indeed, in order to compose the staff of coordinators, the SFLB opens regular annual and semi-annual selection processes. These processes are part of the organisation’s Coordinator Program, which selects interested students and trains them, offering opportunities
for professionalisation within liberal activism - in other words, students can continue within the field of political activism beyond higher education, becoming leaders of political movements, joining political parties, founding new think tanks, and more. To participate in the selection process to become an official member of the organisation, it is mandatory to be an undergraduate or graduate student, between seventeen and twenty-nine years old, be available to carry out training and execute the organisation’s projects in the higher education institutions.

We identified that the undergraduate student coordinators of SFLB belong to a diverse range of colleges and universities in all Brazilian regions (at around thirty public and private higher education institutions), such as: University of São Paulo (Southeast), Pontifical Catholic University (several regions), Federal University of Paraná (South), Federal University of Santa Maria (South), Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Southeast), Federal University of Pernambuco (Northeast), Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (Northeast), University of Brasilia (Midwest), Federal University of Amazonas (North), and Federal University of Minas Gerais (Southeast), among others.

From this base, *Students For Liberty Brasil* develops pedagogical actions of education and training. Most of these initiatives are identical to the projects designed by *Students For Liberty*. For example, they carry out the political and intellectual training projects shown in Table 1.

Indeed, the neoliberal think tank offers a series of educational projects – and network opportunities – to enable students to become political activists within their colleges and universities and, as pointed out, to launch themselves as political leaders in the national political scenario. About this, we can highlight the formation of several study groups. Such study groups bring together, in addition to local coordinators, students not officially affiliated with the SFLB. Generally, they hold frequent meetings to debate liberal and conservative authors, organise events and lectures, as well as undertake different projects within universities and colleges. Some of these groups are engaged in contesting official student representation seats within higher education institutions as well as forming political groups to contest elections in student representative organisations. Believing that Brazilian higher education is dominated by leftist indoctrination, such student groups contest the legitimacy of the established student unions, accusing them of long-term institutional co-optation by student leftist groups, and seek to dispute these spaces.
Table 1. Main SFLB projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SFL Academy</td>
<td>Main training platform for SFL and SFLB. Through this platform, the think tank offers a series of courses and training for its members to become liberal activists, including topics about economy, law and leadership skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn Liberty</td>
<td>Video platform (YouTube) with lectures and interviews about liberalism, mobilising specialists from different parts of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Campaigns</td>
<td>The SFL runs some political awareness campaigns encouraging entrepreneurship and in favour of further deregulation of the carrying of firearms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty Lab</td>
<td>Programme aimed to develop new SFLB projects. University students can submit projects in three areas: promote ideas of freedom; educate, develop, and empower freedom leaders; generate social impact from a liberal perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>SFL’s text platform. Students can write and post about contemporary economic and political issues in Brazil and in the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertycon Brasil</td>
<td>One of the biggest events of the Liberal Network in Brazil. It brings together the main think tanks, intellectuals, politicians and entrepreneurs related to Rede Liberdade in Brazil. The event is dedicated to debating economics and politics as well as defining strategies and agendas for neoliberal organisations in the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Groups</td>
<td>The SFLB organises, from its students scattered in several higher education institutions in Brazil, liberal study groups. In a decentralised way, such groups develop reading activities and debates and organise events and projects in their colleges or universities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration based on each organisation’s official website.
Final considerations

Throughout this article, we discuss how Brazilian neoliberal think tanks have been acting in the field of higher education; mainly, how they work inside universities, challenging the prevailing teaching and research agenda.

The field of higher education has always been targeted by neoliberal think tanks, given the strategy developed at the Mont Pelerin Society related to the intellectual dispute against the theoretical left-wing perspectives; Hayek’s (2001) arguments on the issue stand out in this process. In Brazil, we have observed the same: since the creation of the Instituto Liberal do Rio de Janeiro in 1983, higher education has been defined as a strategic space, since teachers and students are good ‘opinion makers’ (Gros 2002). In addition, the rapprochement with universities and colleges occurs because neoliberal think tanks want to recruit many members from these spaces to compose their staff of experts and leaders.

Indeed, Students For Liberty Brasil has been operating in higher education, organising and training student political activists. More than that, the SFLB has been creating a network of liberal student activism across the country. In other words, through their coordinators, study groups and various events, the neoliberal think tanks have been creating niches in several Brazilian higher education institutions (public and private), acting as branches of the North American Students For Liberty and Atlas Network. Also, SFLB had a political impact on the national scene, contributing to political movements of the New Right (Casimiro 2018).

Finally, over the past ten years in Brazil, the number of initiatives aimed at the field of higher education has grown substantially. In terms of public policy propositions, neoliberal think tanks have been defending projects that seek to add to the marketisation and commodification process of higher education and public universities in Brazil. The study of the performance of Brazilian neoliberal think tanks in the field of higher education is still little explored. In that regard, the article has pointed out initial elements for the deepening of the debate. Especially, the possibility of understanding the mechanisms – values, motivations, strategies, among others – that operate within the mentioned study groups (in a micro-level analysis) as well as better tracing the connections, in an analytical scope, between the New Right, these neoliberal think tanks and the field of Brazilian higher education.
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