

RECOLLECTIONS OF DESPOTISM

Francisco de Oliveira

The Brazilian State is almost 200 years old, if we take the coming of the Portuguese royal family and the entire Portuguese state apparatus to Rio de Janeiro¹, from whence it radiated to all points of the immense territory, as the landmark event that inverted the relationship between the ancient metropolis and the fledgling American colony. More rigorously, by the mid-1800s the Brazilian State was already fully constituted, with its legal monopoly of violence remaining undisputed both internally and abroad. A monopoly that, incidentally, has been exerted with the most implacable determination all over the national territory and also in the few international ventures the were successful from the viewpoint of its interests: the war with Paraguay and the annexation of Acre, for instance.

The paradox is that, with well-known exceptions, the regime of domination by the State has remained constitutional since the Independence (in 1822), arguably one of the most precocious and longstanding constitutional regimes in the world. But it is then that all exceptions spring forth and practically become the rule – to such an extent that another inversion is essentially ratified, namely, the regime becomes steadfastly despotic, with only brief periods of political openness or re-

1. When Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1807, the royal family fled to Brazil. Upon their arrival in Rio de Janeiro in 1808, the city became the capital of the Portuguese empire.

laxation (periods that only the foolhardy would call properly democratic, even if the mainstream formalism in the sciences of politics and sociology does not shy away from doing so).

Our two hundred years of solitude – with excuses to Gabriel Garcia Márquez – have been compacted in the last sixty years of national history, from the Revolution of 1930 to our present days. The Old Republic² has already been thoroughly studied as a period of oligarchic hegemony that we would do well to leave it alone for now. The inversion is much clearer in the last sixty years, 35 of which have been brazen dictatorships: the 15 years of Getúlio Vargas’ first dictatorial mandate and the military dictatorship of 1964 to 1984. This period, which saw the stability of the exception and the instability of the so-called democratic form, was a period keenly *à la Brazil*, because even during the 1964/84 dictatorship, except for the short time that the Institutional Act No. 5 [suspending political freedom] was in force, both houses of Congress remained open and functional, unlike what occurred during the Vargas dictatorship.

In these sixty years, Brazil has seen fully executed coups or partially frustrated attempts once every three years on average, all of them carried out by the military but suggested and warranted by civilians, consummate representatives of the prevailing dominion. Only on two occasions – in 1935, with the National Liberating Alliance that went down in history as the Communist *Intentona*, and in 1937, with the Integralist³ putsch – were notoriously minority military factions involved.

There is a further characteristic of exception as rule: the armed forces, usually a last resort resource for those in power to maintain the legal monopoly of violence, are always used as the first resort. To wit: the Revolution of 1930; São Paulo’s Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932; the “indirect” election of Getúlio Vargas in 1934; the revolt of the National Liberating Alliance in 1935; the Integralist putsch of 1937; the *Estado Novo* (the Vargas dictatorship) in 1937; the deposition of Vargas in 1945; the outlawing of the Communist Party in 1947/48; Vargas’ second deposition (by suicide) in 1954; the attempted coup to avert the investiture of president Juscelino Kubitschek in 1955; the frustrated coup in Jacareacanga in 1956; the frus-

2. The period from the proclamation of the Republic in 1889 to the Revolution of 1930.
3. *Integralism* was a short-lived (1932-1937), right-wing, fascist-inspired political movement.

trated resignation plot of president Jânio Quadros in 1961; the parliamentary system instituted as a middle ground solution for vice-president João Goulart to become president in 1961; the definitive military coup of 1964, giving rise to the second military dictatorship of the period; the Institutional Act No. 2 dissolving all political parties that existed before 1964; the thwarting of vice-president Pedro Aleixo inauguration and the investiture of a military junta in 1967; the Institutional Act No. 5 that shut down Congress; the barring of Ulysses Guimarães as a temporary successor of Tancredo Neves⁴; the solution of investing José Sarney as president in 1984. If we divide the 60 years by the 18 coups or attempted coups, we have an average of 3.3 years. This arithmetic of “permanent exception” will vary from author to author, from interpretation to interpretation, and some of the events listed above might even not be listed elsewhere, but the endurance of extraconstitutional solutions, to use an understatement, can hardly be denied.

There certainly is historic ballast to sustain this “permanent exception”, this “anti-democracy in America”, too well-known to be summoned here: from the essential status of slave labor in the economy and social reproduction to the patriarchal bias in social formation to the prebendal patrimonialism. These formulas, from the classics of the 1930s – arrangements that did not arise by chance when the very same forms began to lose their ability to process the conflicts of an increasingly complex society witnessing the advent of a new social class at the center of the social structure, the industrial worker – should be reinterpreted under the keynote of “passive revolution”, or as an underdeveloped modality of the “Prussian Way”, or still, as suggested by Werneck Vianna, as “Iberianism”.

Although historians strongly resist accepting “accelerations” in history, one must forcibly agree that the last 60 years of Brazilian history condense such intense transformations that political structures could be hardly expected to remain unscathed. Even if we disavow a mechanical interaction between movements in the social structure and political institutionalism, it is almost impossible to conceive such a plastic functionality of patterns through which institutional politics may adjust themselves to massive changes in the modes of production and in the material reproduction of society.

4. Who died on the eve of his investiture as president.

In brief, the fact is that Brazilian society shifted from being agrarian to industrial, and from industrial to a service society (electronics included). This is expressed in the make-up of the GDP, where the share of primary activities is currently less than 15%; industrial output accounts today for not more than 25% (its share peaked at 34%), while services comprise the other, greater part. Place of residence and activities have also changed dramatically: from a society that was 80% rural and 20% urban we have arrived at its antipode: 80% urban and 20% rural. But today's rurality is also urban, because farm activities have become almost entirely commoditized through the interference or mediation of urban procedures: banks, stockbrokers, commodity exchanges, supply centers, agribusiness and so on, to spare readers of monotonous descriptions.

It must be taken into consideration that, in the century from 1870 to 1980, the Brazilian economy displayed the highest and most persistent long-term growth rates of the capitalist world. Since then, however, it has begun to oscillate and deaccelerate, with no clear perceptible direction in sight. This growth was attained "from the top", so to speak. That is, the changing role of the State in the economy, whose visibility has been noteworthy since the 1930s, was decisive for such a performance. The period from 1870 to 1930 began with an intervention by the State, *à la* American far-west, implacably promoting primitive accumulation, something that has gone largely unreported by our economic historiography and by economic theoreticians. The effort was outrivaled by the golden age of liberalism, under the aegis of a foreign exchange policy that benefited coffee growers with abundant foreign currency and free trade – a disaster that could have already been foreseen in the Taubaté Agreement, which inaugurated the unsustainable policy of maintaining at all costs the price of what was then practically our only export product.

Since the 1930s, as part of a worldwide transition from competitive to oligopolistic capitalism, primitive accumulation by the State enters a new upward cycle, opening the way for the industrial economy. Its most noted interpreter was Celso Furtado, whose theorization is charged with all the dramatic vigor of Marx's *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. A powerful and regionally diversified rural ruling class is banished to a secondary status. In its place, the new industrial bourgeoisie takes on the leading role; a shift of such proportions cannot but discredit the forms of representation. But this shift is in the style of Giuseppe Lampedusa, because the new power framework cannot be resolved in a revolu-

tionary fashion: cronyism is their trademark. The party of the industrial revolution, the Social Democratic Party, is agrarian. The state-owned productive sector continues to grow non-stop until the deathbed days of the José Sarney administration and the rise of the great buffoon, Collor de Mello, to finally begin to decline with prince [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso.

Stuck between the pincers of imperialist subordination and the new dissent emerging from the entrails of the “social question”, our home-brewed capitalism resolves itself in a “melancholia of impotence” and must recurrently resort to sheer brute force. The long arm of domination loses its revolutionary/hegemonic capability because it is permanently harassed by the “Sisyphean labors” of the oppressed – who, through *fortuna* and *virtú*, seek access to public, and therefore political, means to complement their own reproduction. The whip hand of domination then seeks refuge in a simulacrum of constitutionality that ill disguises the fact that it is once again reversing the Gramscian formula of 80% consensus and 20% violence to the opposite ratios.

Surely, the consequences of all this on sociability could not be insignificant. Logrolling as a means of exchange and patriarchy as a means of social organization around the nuclear family are incapable of processing the new relationships. Traditional society, whose reproduction followed the regularity of the time cycles, had been considerably shaken at its core since the coffee boom even if it still preserved itself in the periphery. Suddenly it saw itself buffeted and battered by new symbols and signs of the masses, by cultural industrialization, by a simulacrum of possessive individualism, by the new primacy of consumption, by anonymous massmen, by a fierce dispute for jobs, by the new status of women in the labor market, by the rise and fall of the nuclear family, by the opprobrium of *Capitu*⁵ as much as by sexual liberation. The doors had been opened for finally giving merit and choice a chance.

However, the concurrence, in another historical scope, of the needs of accumulation sustained by the new forms of the public fund casts a shadow cone upon the relations between what is public (by no means constituted) and what is private (equally unformed). The displacements within the precincts of bourgeois forces

5. Enigmatic and possibly adulterous character in Machado de Assis' novel *Dom Casmurro*.

carry the full charge of all the bombs that were not thrown during the Cold War: a staggering 30% of the assets of the bourgeoisie changed hands in the last five years. No institutionalism can resist this. Corruption as an endemic form of this shadow cone and the Eduardo Jorge⁶ have become the birthmark of this peripheral, unlawful capitalism that is incapable of raising and sustaining its own institutionality and incapable of enforcing the legal monopoly of violence. The permanent exceptions have made exception permanent. We are shifting from regulation, from the possibility of a swift hegemony constrained by the new cycle of the third industrial revolution to utter *ad hoc-ism*.

In the realm of sociability, the effects can be no less than disaggregating. Torn away from the traditional rhythms and tempos and thrown into the vortex of powerful transformations it has no control over, what could have been the emergence of the private realm in society becomes sheer privatism, a desperate flight from informality, from chance and hazard, from the fear of others – the iron rails and the armored cars of the upper bourgeoisie attest to this. In the ghettos of the rich there is isolation, derived from an anti-public sociability. In the ghettos of the poor, we find hunger, dearth and violent crimes.

I have called this neoliberal totalitarianism. Less rigorous Gramscian scholars might call it a “regulated society”. The epitaph for a despotism that was rarely, if ever, enlightened.

Francisco de Oliveira, retired full professor of the Sociology Department of the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo, is director of the Center for Studies on the Rights of Citizenship at the same college. He is the author of *Os Direitos do Antivalor: A Economia Política da Hegemonia Imperfeita – The Rights of Antivalue: The Political Economy of Imperfect Hegemony* (Vozes, 1977) and *Sentidos da Democracia: Políticas do Dissenso e Hegemonia Global – Meanings of Democracy: The Policies of Dissent and Global Hegemony* (Vozes, 1999), among others.

6. Former presidential secretary involved in corruption scandals.