

# DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES OF THE MODERN AGE

Eduardo Portella

The challenges of Brazil persist, amidst more or less enduring dilemmas. What happened to the promise of progress and to the development programs is now happening again, in undue proportion, to our current commitment to modernization. Both references were launched in the market with fatal flaws which seem almost impossible to repair. The first one, the idea of progress, was born under the sponsorship of unanimous rationality and suffered from overconfidence – above all, from excessive self-confidence. The second never managed to integrate its constituent elements, and to its name were added several surnames: social, durable, sustainable. Yet, no great changes occurred in the course of development for the world of the dispossessed. In some geographies, things actually got worse. Modernity, as ambitious as it is factious, arrives at our door overly stressed, precociously extenuated and distraught by the turbulence of postmodernity – or, as I prefer to call it, late modernity. Perhaps we should insist on talking about modernity in plural form.

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Our most radical challenge continues to be that of inequality. It is a simple tale, but increasingly monotonous and unbearable: few with much, and many with very, very little. The goal of equitableness remains distant, as the gap between eco-

conomic modernity and political modernity grows wider, leaving scant margin for the kind progress a.k.a. “social”. What we read in the electroencephalogram of Brazil’s arrhythmic society is the increasing frailty of the middle class, the disorganization of wage earners and casual laborers, the growing social exclusion, and the deepening anxiety of non-inclusion. To be sure, it is a transnational problem, distinguishable here and there by specific traits. In today’s turbulent Spain, for instance, the government of José Maria Aznar was reelected by conveying an image of honorability and competency in creating jobs. The ideological debate has practically vanished and people’s demands have now taken on a different tone. The campaign speeches of Mexico’s new president, Vicente Fox, opted mostly for this programmatic agenda.

The fact is that with the undermining or disappearance of ideological debate, and with the more and more excruciating quest for subsistence and survival, topical issues have gained a new body and a new soul, or rather, they lost the body but have yet to attain a soul. Equally left behind was the protocol of social capitalism, the version of globalization that Britain so confidently fostered without the European Community’s approval. The global economy – so far, at least, and until further notice – has been a reducing mechanism at the service of inequality. That is why no democratic, republican and transforming project must ever forget to take into account the visceral incompatibility between the fundamentalism of the marketplace (quite different from what is known as democracy of the marketplace) and social justice (where the State performs a crucial role). It is not enough to expand opportunities; one must redistribute the rewards. Globalization, as far as I can see, remains deaf and blind to these notions.

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I do not believe a legitimate democracy can adopt indifference, or abandonment, as its model for behavior. Nor do I believe that self-help, so bountiful and overflowing in mass literature, can replace, in any measure, the obligations of solidarity.

First and foremost, we must expand the spaces of legitimacy in our inconstant democracy and redress our political deficit, our want of qualified performance. We lack a well-grounded, legal and legitimate political agenda. It is not a matter of

bringing forth a finished project, a closed package – in all likelihood immutable and refractory to the richness of dissent. On the contrary, we must creatively manage our unfounded suspicions, our anachronistic obsessions, and place our wagers on diversity, on material and non-material interchanges. Such a void can only be filled by an updated political reform, conceived far from the party prostheses, from electoral mortgaging, from adulterated suffrages, from all these old pathologies that have made not the history, but the story of contemporary Brazil in a not-so-distant past. The constitutional factoid of 1988 did not prevent this perverse ancestry.

Without democratic legitimacy, emancipatory progress is compromised. The formerly future “country of the future” has once again been postponed. Until when? In spite of all we have achieved, of all the roads we have traversed, Brazilian democracy still has a long way to go. In addition, at times like this, even establishing a State of Law cannot evade recurrent questioning. Normative insufficiency and the inoperativeness and castling of our judicial/institutional apparatus further contribute to this adverse scenario.

Let us return again to the pressing, non-postponable requisite of reprogramming the State. This obviously involves the means to refinance it, the burden of which cannot be borne by our collection of debts. In fact, our justifiable concern with the country’s foreign debts is not always matched by an equally solicitous zeal for its internal public indebtedness, if only because the domestic partners, nurtured by the private interests of a fledgling federation, seem to see only the trees, not the forest. Taxes must be exacted from the more or less recidivistic partners, and not so much from production and labor. But this will only happen if the State is neither avaricious nor philanthropic, but judiciously regulatory – a far, far cry from the technocratic principle of undifferentiated treatment, or of horizontal cuts, which in the overwhelming majority of cases is at once false and inoperative.

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Yes, it is true that all this controversy set itself up on the de-centered center of our public space, and is being chiefly ruled over by the electronic media. As Peter Sloterdijk said, “We will have to content ourselves with delimiting the phases of paleopolitics, of classical politics and of hyperpolitics” (*Im selben Boot: Versuch über die Hyperpolitik*). Hyperpolitics, virtual but not virtuous, has acquired more

than a smattering of opinion making. And with surprising results, especially in the production of heretofore unimaginable truths, usually under the aegis of an extremely rigorous diet of intellectual slenderizing. Can the intellectual anorexia of public space in times of globalization be compensated, or rather, cured? I do not know if cultural medical science has any drug for this kind of dysfunction. One way or another, it is not for sale. Nonetheless, this did not prevent the public space from expanding.

Still, one is hard-pressed to ignore the more relevant side of mass media, namely, its public service disposition that also unfolds. In spite of serious blunders, either by fomenting persecutory paranoias or by caving in to the cinematographic role of the vigilante, the press, all over the world, has been exposing deviations of power, transgressions of citizenship, corruption of varied kinds, and not uncommonly electoral fraud – strangely ensconced amidst electronic precision. The penal responsibility of ruthless tyrants and unscrupulous public administrators would never have acquired worldwide resonance, nor exercised the ensuing political pressure, without the tenacious cooperation of networked images, disseminated minute by minute and creating unexpected social actors. This means that, with a requisite legal base and a much needed legitimacy, the *right to images* will perhaps provide democracy with a much sought-after consistency.

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The impression one has is that the job of developing qualitative indicators has been left on the wayside of history by slapdash politicians, amnesiac technocrats or fainthearted intellectuals. Or by all three in concert. From an exclusively patrimonial conception of culture bent on an apology of the past, from the guardians of the temple to the vandals of the stadiums and the partisans of heavy metal, from popular culture to a mass culture epitomized in electronic *feuilletons*, much was left undone while we waited for Godot. This pious or desolate waiting was disparaged in the vortex of apocalypse *now*, seeking the meaning it had lost, whereas what one ought to do is replace the old navigation instruments by more flexible and confluent ones.

Prevailing educational programs have followed other courses. Instead of reinstating values to history, most of them chose to proclaim the bankruptcy of history

in public spectacles we woefully remember. “Performance” was implanted in, or transplanted to, a place that should have been reserved for the invention of quality. The exaltation of performance became the most advanced, and most reductionist, stage of invertebrate meritocracy, and the expert came to represent the stupidity of recessive management, a means without end. Growth with no precedent, with no technical justification whatsoever, came to correspond to the prevailing economic rationality, opening the way for a “bank pedagogy” that uses and abuses, that mistreats, ill-treats and maltreats. The economic/monetarist perspective is, at best, historiographic – which, to say the least, is very little. Knowledge society was thrust into the dangerous freeways of cyberspace, without indispensable reflective safeguards. What I once called *education without culture* has advanced disturbingly. These indisputable changes owe more to the communication of the media than to the instruction of the school. But it is the latter that, with touching ardor and a discreet transforming disposition, preserves our habitual forms of socialization.

Thus, I find no compelling reason to go back on an old proclivity. I am inclined to presume that education is an advantageous mechanism for cultural transmission. A fast-moving and cursory mass society such as ours is fraught with an unbearable quantitative/qualitative insufficiency. We suffer from two modes of scarcity, I insist: one quantitative, the other qualitative – one less, the other more. Thus I spare myself an Enlightenment-wrought euphoria and, even if I stubbornly continue placing my hopes on it, never do I confer it unlimited powers. Education can do a lot, but it cannot do enough.

No matter what the statistical compass promises or the comfort brought by juggling official reports, if quantitative offerings do not fulfill the increase in demand, the effects will be bland and not very stimulating – regardless of eventual qualitative advances. This is fundamental. Even if ours is a mass society – with fewer qualitative demands, according to the tolerance of some – it is not possible to accept and resign ourselves to the proscription of quality. To be sure, this problem goes way back, and in bygone days I was even rash enough to announce, and perhaps formulate, a “pedagogy of quality”. I cannot say I have advanced, or that we have advanced, in the process of time. We might even have regressed, now that performance-based teaching has been prioritized to produce experts in detriment of a values-oriented education. Between the expert, who is competent at any price, and the citizen, who is socially incarnate, we never seem to vacillate: we always choose

the former. On the other hand, we cultivate a tendency to associate quality and abstraction – an unidentified utensil or object, and for this very reason of limited usage. What remains are leisure trips in the brigadier skies of meritocracy. The hidden, hushed up nation, not rarely silenced by the segregation devices of miserly elites, was left for later on. Later on, however, turned out to be *worldlization*.

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The degrees of compatibility between democracy and globalization are still not very clear, particularly in the economic and social realms. With political capital operating in the red, with inequality becoming more and more ostensible, with our tenuous federative vocation paralyzed, we are urged to reinforce the concept of governance and infuse new energy into deliberative will. This is only possible if we expand the horizons of legitimacy, by the nuanced comprehension of the dynamics of inter-subjectivity. The reign of the leading actor, that insolent and solitary protagonist, came to an end a long time ago; now a multifocal political scene of a belated modernity offers roles for all tastes, for all profiles of players. The overriding requirement, the differentiating trait will be negotiation skills – the new source and power of legitimacy. A judiciously regulatory State, more concerned with people than with things, will be founded on collective interests and on the ethics of public service. It will be cosmopolitan, for sure; but interactive, equitable, responsible.

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The ever-growing process of internationalization and the vertiginous irruption of communication networks create a new internationalism, with intimidating and/or promising repercussions in every area of human endeavor, in the most diversified geographies – so much so that Paul Virilio already foresees the “death of geography”. The fact is that relationships fomented by the globalized power and implemented through the internetization of the world carry within themselves a sophisticated mechanism of de-territorialization – akin to an unpredictable pacemaker in the body of history. One only wonders if this new internationalism, hobbling its way on the tightrope of globalization, will act in intimate tune with multilateral organizations,

especially those that compose the United Nations system. The seismic shocks caused by the financial markets not only ruined or terrorized defenseless economies; they also diffused misgivings that had never ceased to exist. Everything seems to indicate that the international commitment of national democracies will have to be renegotiated by post-national States. This is the root cause of the great resistance faced by the globalization agenda. Could this be a *tabula rasa*, a forced amnesia, a doing away with the past, a winding up of the national? Whereunto are we going? The prognoses we provided ourselves with over the last decades have shown themselves to be highly dissociative. And have thrown us into the arms of a fraudulent futurology. It is more than time to stop and think. Without further delay.

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