

A DILEMMA AND THE CHALLENGES FACING BRAZILIAN SOCIETY

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Dilemma

The word *dilemma* refers to situations whereby someone is placed before the need to choose between two equally forbidding and painful alternatives. According to this concept, Brazilian society, as a historical entity, is rigorously facing a dilemma. The planet-wide economic and political changes that have occurred over the last two decades are compelling us to choose between two equally difficult alternatives, both with high social costs.

Naturally, the debate on the factors that led Brazil to such a predicament is highly controversial. Everyone, however, from the right and from the left, agrees on one point: the determining factor of the situation we are currently facing was the growing unfeasibility of an economic model that began to be implemented during the first decades of the 20th century – a direct result of major shifts in the capitalist system and in the international political order in the final decades of that century.

The country's social and territorial integration depended on the dynamism of its economic model. When this model became unfeasible, the mechanisms that had enabled us to advance in building the national State were rendered null and void. It must be stressed, however, that such advance was always ambiguous and wavering, founded as it was on combinations of backwardness/modernity, inclusion/exclusion, concentration of income/incorporation of the masses, and political elitism/

enhanced popular participation – all of which imposed huge sacrifices on most of the population and made the nation extremely vulnerable to the flows of international capital.

“What enabled Brazilians to inure striking social injustices was the intense dynamism of the economy. Many observers (from privileged social segments, surely) found in this very dynamism a source of legitimacy for a power system that generated extreme injustice” (Furtado, 1992:12).

The Ruling Elite’s Option

After the many comings and goings that marked Brazil’s political course from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1980s, the ruling elite, when placed at last before the dilemma, simply and completely gave up the idea of pursuing the construction of its nation-State – the very same elite that had been preparing itself for this event since the time of the military dictatorship.

“The various strata of the bourgeoisie learned to change the quality of their perceptions and explanations of the world, and strove to adjust themselves to ‘pragmatic assessments’ that consider underdevelopment a self-correcting ‘natural fact’, and to adopt as their fundamental tenet the US-radiated principle of ‘development with security’. The last step in cleaning up the attic was thus taken. The Brazilian bourgeoisie established new bonds with ‘modernization’, forsook its historical libertarian gewgaws of European origin, and replaced them with much more prosaic convictions that helped to harmonize their role with the ‘unity of the hemisphere’, the ‘interdependence of democratic nations’ and the ‘defense of Western civilization’” (Fernandes, 1976:314).

Cornered by the need to either face up to the dominant forces of the capitalist system and continue building its State or relinquish it, the elite lost the ability to respond and had to accept the impositions from the central nuclei of the economic and political system of the world capitalist order. It abandoned any hope of autonomy and desperately sought some form of insertion into the international market. With this in mind, it did not shy away either from alienating an important share of the country’s assets, from denationalizing the country’s industry, from opening the Brazilian market to predatory speculative capitals, or from watching, unmoved, the pauperization of the people and the worsening social situation.

The elite's expectation is that by "doing the homework" dictated by the agencies of the Washington Consensus foreign capitals will flow into the country, invigorating the economy (that has remained stagnant for two decades) and creating conditions to placate the social situation and re-legitimize its sway within the realm of a restricted democracy.

This expectation is groundless. As Celso Furtado (1992:13) explains, "According to the logic of the emerging international economic order, the growth rate pertaining to Brazil seems relatively modest. Therefore, the process of forming an economic system is no longer naturally inscribed in our national destiny".

The economic evolution of the last ten years only confirms this prognosis. By renouncing the national project, the ruling elite also relinquished having a civilizing role in the country. It became instead a parasitic segment, obsessed with preserving its money and privileges at any price – as attested by the wave of corruption that followed the denationalization of the economy, the dismantling of the State and the people's loss of self-esteem.

The war of all against all, an all-out war all that has now spread through the whole country, threatens to disgorge in a long period of chaos and barbarity, or in inevitably authoritarian forms of controlling popular dissatisfaction.

Thus, the first alternative the Brazilian dilemma propounds our society is full of hardship and suffering.

False and True Dilemma

Analyses of the Brazilian situation, made with the purpose of rationalizing the interests of the ruling elite, invariably conclude that there are no other alternatives for the country except insertion into the emerging world order or barbarity.

The ideologues of the elite state purport to have made the "realist" option for the first alternative.

But this manner of presenting the Brazilian dilemma does not correspond to reality and leads to the fallacious belief that non-subordinate insertion into the world order being contrived under the framework of the Washington Consensus is possible. This alternative does not exist: non-subordinate insertion is a delusion.

The new order of the capitalist system forced a reformulation of the international division of labor that prevailed during the expansion phase of industrial

capitalism. According to the parameters established by the forces in charge of the transition from industrial to globalized capitalism, peripheral economies must specialize only in the production of goods and services for which they possess “comparative advantages”. Pooh! Such re-specialization is incompatible with economic independence because it increases the restraints that, in the past, prevented the development of countries that were then peripheral: disproportionate dependence on exports, difficulties to introduce modern technology in the economy, foreign exchange crises. The currency crises that severely hit the Asian and Latin American countries in 1997/98 are a clear indication of what specialization means in a globalized world. That is why insertion into the world order according to the terms of the Washington Consensus will always be a subordinate insertion – no matter what name is given to it.

One might object to this reasoning saying that the Brazilian ruling elite would never opt for subordinate insertion if this alternative goes against its own interests and places it in a subaltern position vis-à-vis the forces that will control the national economy. The contradiction, however, is only apparent, because this option allows the elite to attain two major objectives: maintain its internal hegemony of political power, and modernize its consumption pattern. Therefore, subordination to external command does not upset the elite, even if it implies keeping the country in a state of underdevelopment, increasing the gap between Brazil and more technologically advanced nations, and furthering our “social apartheid”.

In truth, it is the elite’s alternative that has been leading the country towards barbarity.

The signs of which can no longer be concealed. One has only to see the violent struggles for land and its daily fare of dead and injured; the explosive increase both in diffuse criminality and in organized crime in the cities; the multiplication of situations of dual power in the outskirts of the large urban centers; the fact that violent death is the main *causa mortis* for young people aged 16 to 25; the proliferation of shantytowns and of homeless people; the resurgence of diseases caused by poor sanitation and deficient hygiene, such as dengue and cholera; the staggering deterioration of public education.

All these social evils derive from the “model of subordinate insertion” and are a direct consequence of unemployment, of a disseminating culture of consumerism, of concentration of income in the upper strata of the social pyramid, of

a “fiscal austerity” that draws resources away from public services to service the State’s internal and external debts.

Within this context, the “non-subordinate insertion” unabashedly proclaimed by the elite’s ideologues is no more than an expression to “save face” or to deceive social groups that still nurture the hope of building an autonomous nation without paying the price of it.

For those who do not wish to be deluded, another alternative exists, one that does not represent barbarity and that has the potential of safeguarding the values of civilization: to resume building the nation.

By choosing to build the nation, the Brazilian people would certainly not evade hardships and suffering, because no society facing a dilemma can hope to escape them. But at least we would be marching toward becoming a civilized nation, free from the social evils that have become our trademark.

The Option to Build the Nation

Building a nation has always been an ambiguous and contradictory process. Hence, it would be wise to explain first that, in the current circumstances, to resume building the nation absolutely does not imply replicating the economic and political models of the past, when the building process was masterminded by the current ruling elite.

For there to be genuine advances in the long transition from Brazil-colony to Brazil-nation, the building of the nation must be based on other foundations and have another direction. This requires a different power structure and a different political program.

In an essay on “Impasses in the Formation of Brazil”, Plínio Sampaio Jr. dealt with this question from a new vantage point. It would be worth our while to quote his reasoning at length:

“Instead of conditioning the emergence of our nationality to the appearance of a new race resulting from miscegenation, to the control of a vast territory rich in natural resources, to the unlimited potentialities of its economy, to the framework of a State apparatus capable of imposing the authority of order, and to self-complacent patriotic dreams of a hypothetical Brazil as a great power (chauvinistic concepts that obscure the hierarchic and authoritarian nature of our social formation),

democratic thought understands that the assertion of nationality is the necessary crystallization of a homogeneous society, bearer of Western civilization's humanist values, and based on moral nexuses between social classes and on the existence of organic bonds between the various regions of the country.

In this approach, the national space is no more than an instrument to protect the community from the destructive effects of transformations radiating from the center of the world capitalist system and to plan the internalization of the structures and dynamics of Western civilization in a manner that is consistent both with a progressive enhancement of society's autonomy and creativity, and with increases in the wealth and well-being of all the people. Seen as a power center that condenses the political will of the community, this national formula is nothing but a means that enables societies living under the field of force of the world capitalist system to control their historical time. Therefore, we are dealing with a historically determined instrument that ought to be superseded by superior forms of social and political organization, with a supranational scope, as soon as the world's historical context allows. That is, as soon as the world order manages to evade the stranglehold of the logic of intercapitalist competition and of the rivalries among imperialist States (Sampaio Jr., 1999:46).

Some analysts of Brazil's situation believe it is no longer possible to resume the project of building the nation. According to them, the globalization of the economy has so undermined the State's regulatory power that it has become impotent to control its economic space. Furthermore, with the end of the bipolar international political system, the elbowroom for political bargaining by underdeveloped countries has been narrowed to such an extent that henceforth these countries cannot count on this resort to assert themselves as nations, in the sense this word acquired in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Their argument may be summed up as this: it is truly naïve to attempt to strengthen the national edifice, which was structurally skewed and remained unfinished, precisely at a time when the political form of the nation-State is being corroded all over the world from within and without – from within because of ethnic, regional and religious secessions that gnaw away the very marrow of the nation, its feeling of identity; from without because of the growing power of supranational organizations that restrict its sovereignty.

To refute this fallacious mode of thinking, one need only mention the exacer-

bated nationalism of the seven nations that, notwithstanding the United Nations, today comprise the “steering committee” of world politics. A few recent examples should suffice to show that, for these nations, the nation-State is not “historically outdated”. To this day, the International Penal Court created by the United Nations remains inoperative because the United States refuses to allow American citizens to fall under its jurisdiction. Not long ago, France blocked the ratification of the MIA (Multilateral Investments Agreement) arguing that it affronted French sovereignty. And what to say of the conflict between the United States and the European countries concerning the liberalization of the international trade of agricultural products?

It is fatuous to speak of the obsolescence of the nation-State. What other form of political power might we, underdeveloped people, establish to resist the aggressive nationalism and the stark reality of an international division of labor that prevents underdeveloped countries from organizing production systems that would eliminate the absolute misery that victimizes most of their population?

Therefore, unlike what some of the elite’s ideologues would want, the real choice our society must make is not between insertion into the emerging international order (in an inevitable subordinate status) and a plunge into barbarity (in an impossible attempt to accomplish an anachronistic organization of political power). The real choice is between subordinate insertion into the world order and a historical endeavor to complete the building of the nation and so avoid the inglorious fate of re-colonization.

We must not think that this course means choosing to isolate ourselves from the international community. On the contrary, it is a new mode of relating with this community, so that the absorption of technologies spawned in other parts of the planet is in keeping with the interests of our people as a whole and with the country’s sovereignty – and not, as today, aimed exclusively at modernizing patterns of consumption.

Brazilian society meets all the requirements to follow this course. First, because a national sentiment has by now thoroughly penetrated all layers of the population and many of the institutions that would have strategic roles in forming a national State. Second, because the development of production forces has already reached a level that enables the country to produce the goods and services needed to assure an adequate standard of living for everyone. And, finally, because, as Celso

Furtado (1992:12) said, “Few are the regions in the world where the ratio man/natural resources, including soil and water for agriculture, is as favorable as ours”.

On the other hand, however, the building of the nation undoubtedly implies difficulties and hardships, because resuming this process involves making some pressing decisions that will affect very powerful interests.

The first of these decisions concerns the redistribution of wealth and income, now extremely concentrated in the upper rungs of the social pyramid. Without such a redistribution, it will be impossible to transform the domestic market into the dynamic nucleus of the economy – and, without a dynamic economy, it will be impossible to produce, with the quality and in the quantity required, the indispensable goods and services to fulfill the basic needs of the entire population.

But we must not confuse fulfilling the basic needs of the population with the rampant consumerism that characterizes industrial capitalist countries. Our economy does not command all the resources needed to provide 170 million people with such a high standard of consumption – and, even if it did, catastrophic damage to the environment, one of the traits of this wasteful type of consumption, would be unavoidable. Thus, when we speak of fulfilling the basic needs of the population, we mean a somewhat frugal consumption compatible with the goal of satisfying the needs of every inhabitant without imperiling the environment. Frugal consumption need not be an impediment to provide everyone a standard of living that would place at the reach of every Brazilian citizen the means to access the comforts and the intellectual, moral and spiritual advances of civilization.

A dynamic internal market is an essential prerequisite to give stability to the economy. As mentioned above, if the dynamism of the economy depends on external demand, there will be an increased vulnerability to price fluctuations determined by movements beyond the control of internal decision centers.

The second crucial decision that must be made to reactivate the process of building the nation concerns ridding ourselves of the fetters of external dependence, a dependence that subordinates the accumulation of capital to the control of corporations that seek nothing but profits – and, consequently, guide their investments to those sectors best suited to provide them. Thus, until this kind control is suppressed, it will be impossible to channel economic surpluses to expand the country’s capacity in producing the goods and services that are needed to satisfy the basic needs of the population as a whole.

“In truth, Brazil’s economic development, being embedded in the capitalist system (as was intended, and is currently being actualized, by those securing the support of imperialist enterprises), will necessarily be guided by the interests of trusts that have already established themselves here. These trusts are now the major element and the decisive factor in our economy – and will increasingly become even more so. They will set the norms, the pace and the limits of our development, which will naturally be determined by how much profit the Brazilian economy is able to provide them. And what are these limits? We find them in the residues of the financial surpluses that Brazil obtains from its external accounts, namely, the results of our transactions with other countries.

“The fact is that profits gained by imperialist enterprises in Brazil can only be redeemed (and thus be accounted for as actual profits) from the surpluses of our foreign trade, inasmuch as our normal sources of foreign currency are our exports. After we deduct the amount allotted to pay for imports, it is from the remaining balance, and from nothing else, that will come the profits of the enterprises established by the trusts in Brazil. Hence, based on what they expect this balance to be, the trusts will determine the limits of their activities and, indirectly, also the limits of our development – which, in the current system, is entirely disposed by them” (Prado Jr., 1987:88).

This long quote from a text written 30 years ago helps us to understand why development must be based on a country’s own resources. It also provides us with elements to understand why Brazil will never free itself of external indebtedness if its economy continues to depend on foreign capitals.

Development of the national economic space presumes the existence of a State capable of controlling how advances in production techniques are introduced in the country. If such control was already difficult in the previous stage, when transnational capital flowed toward the peripheral economies to try to overmaster these countries’ markets, so much more difficult is it now, when capitalism is concentrating both capital and technological innovation in the central economies at breathtaking speed.

The mere mention of the measures needed to fulfill these two prerequisites to resume building of the nation makes us see how difficult and painful the process will be.

The extraordinary resistance of the elite to even a travesty of land reform shows how intractable the struggle to redistribute wealth and income will be to

actually promote the homogenization of Brazilian society in a relatively short period of time. It is whimsical to believe that redistribution may be achieved without boycotts from businesspeople, offensives by the media and the diffuse resistance of everyone who might lose their privileges to help the country forge ahead.

The reactions of the central nuclei of the capitalist system and of the great world powers to an economic policy intent on resuming the building of the nation are likewise quite foreseeable: closing of credit lines, obstacles to exports, flight of capitals, refusals to transfer technology. A policy to break off dependence means putting an end to the privileges that transnational corporations were granted – inciting, without a shadow of a doubt, their most adamant reactions. Seeing the apprehension that the so-called “domino effect” causes among the dominant powers, we must not discard the possibility that to economic pressures will be added diplomatic and even military pressures – common episodes during the age of the *Pax Britannica* and of the gunboat diplomacy, but also today, under a new guise, in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Libya, Sudan and Cuba.

Obviously, these reprisals will cause pain and hardships to the Brazilian population. Nevertheless, although some may not believe it, we have every condition to resist them.

After this realistic appraisal of the present and the future, we may now point out the challenges that will stem from the alternative that, as Caio Prado Jr. has taught us, corresponds in the deepest sense to our historical evolution: the transition from Brazil-colony to Brazil-nation.

“That is how we should approach Brazilian reality today, as a transient condition between, on one hand, our colonial past, i.e., the moment Brazil entered history as a settled and colonized geographical area where the overriding purpose was to extract products to supply the European trade and markets, and, on the other, a now not-so-distant future when this same area and its people, finally structured on a national basis, will behave as an organization and economic system concerned essentially and fundamentally with satisfying the needs of the population that occupies it, and with assuring this population a level and plan of existence compatible with the standards of the civilization and culture that we partake of” (Prado Jr., 1987:88).

Challenges

When examining the challenges that the current situation poses for Brazilian society, we must first determine who is actually being challenged. As the Brazilian elite forsook the project to build the nation, quite logically the challenge does not pertain to the country's wealthier cadre. Rather, the challenge is directed toward a much larger group that includes very diverse social segments, which nevertheless have in common the fact that they are all aggrieved by the current "model of subordinate insertion".

Given the difficulty of applying to our present-day society the classical definitions of social classes, we might call this group "the popular classes".

Conceiving Brazil and the World Outside the Mainstream Framework

The first challenge facing the popular classes is to conceive Brazil and the world with freedom of thought, as averred by Celso Furtado (1992:76): "The challenge posed at the gateway of the 21st century is no less than to change the course of civilization, shifting its axis from the short-term logic whereby means avail accumulation to a logic whereby ends avail social well-being, the exercise of freedom and cooperation among peoples".

It is not at all easy to think outside the orthodox framework erected by institutions set out to rationalize domination by the elite – including the academy, the media and the public administration. This orthodoxy has so pervaded the culture and the consciousness of our people that it has acquired the status of a veritable "common sense". In order to think outside this framework, the popular classes, through its organizations, movements and struggles, must create autonomous forums for insightful reflection, where organic and capable intellectuals can be prepared to only provide new diagnoses and strategies for overcoming underdevelopment, but also to courageously take up the ideological struggle to undo the "common sense" imbued by the ruling elites.

Only through a process with these goals and characteristics will the popular classes manage to enhance their awareness of the domination to which they are submitted. From this awareness, and only from this awareness, will issue forth the

elements of force and might required to defeat the elite, attain power and carry out their program of social transformation.

The challenge also includes the ability to engender the movements, institutions, leaderships and political parties that will organize and guide the political struggle, unite the people and decisively smite the domination of the ruling elite. The greatest difficulty in achieving these goals lies in refusing electoral skullduggery and in adequately combining political action within the institutional fabric created by the elite with the direct pressures from the masses clamoring to have their demands met and to strengthen democracy in all spheres of society.

Florestan Fernandes summed up the tasks for the organizations of the popular classes in three brief caveats that may be thus summarized: they must not allow themselves to be co-opted by the order and rationalizing thought of the elite's interests; they must not allow themselves to be vanquished by foolhardy and recklessly venturesome movements; and they must be able to obtain victories for the people. An entire ethics is contained in these recommendations, an ethics that compels the front lines of the popular classes to not to hide the reality from the people and to never demean the goals of the popular revolution.

Defeating the Colonized Mindset of the Elite and of the Segments it has Contaminated

The second challenge correlates with the previous one and involves rooting out the colonized mindset that thrives among the upper echelons of the social pyramid and contaminates the popular segments. This colonized mentality leads to feelings of inferiority and to the deceitful idea that we don't have the gumption to overcome underdevelopment without the aid of more advanced modes of thinking engendered abroad, without the technical resources concentrated in the central countries, and without the moral virtues and psychological skills of these "superior beings". As long as this kind of consciousness prevails, not only among the elite but even among the popular classes, it will be impossible to "think outside the established mainstream" and overcome another great obstacle to our development: rampant consumerism.

Conspicuous consumption is a mental attitude that has taken hold of the classes in the upper echelons of the social pyramid, that the media has turned into an ideal to

live and die for, and that prevails even among those who will never have the income needed to sustain such a high level of consumption of goods and services. Consumerism is the other face of the colonized mindset because it derives from a fascination with consumption standards that are typical of the medium and upper strata of the developed countries. These standards, disseminated by the cinema and by television, represent today the greatest expression of human happiness for the masses.

As long as feelings of inferiority and unbridled consumption inhabit the consciousness and the subconscious of people, even of those from the popular classes, it will be impossible to organize a system to produce scientific and technological knowledge well-suited to our needs and our possibilities. It will be likewise impossible to use this knowledge to give shape to an economic organization capable of supplying the goods and services that are needed to provide an adequate standard of consumption for the population as a whole and to assure the sovereignty of the nation.

Attaining Political Power and Establishing an Effective State

The third challenge concerns the movements and, more specifically, the political parties that represent the interests and worldviews of the popular classes. It involves attaining power and transforming the State into an instrument of democracy, economic development and social equitableness.

This State will have the task of providing land and means of development for the rural population, productive work, adequate compensation, proper housing for urban dwellers – in short, land, work and shelter. But this will never be achieved without quality education and health services for the entire population.

To attain these goals, the State must be present throughout the national territory. It must have institutions equipped to guide economic development and to regulate the domestic marketplace nationwide. It must assure the full exercise of democratic citizenship to each and every inhabitant. It must provide basic public services. It must be militarily prepared to defend the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of the nation.

Conclusion

Obviously, the knowledge that the Brazilian society faces a dilemma does not

allow us to foresee rose-colored scenarios for the coming years. On the other hand, neither does it justify an attitude of disheartenment or despair. Once gain, history places us before a crucial decision. This is a positive fact, because if the popular forces manage to overcome these challenges, the future inhabitants of Brazil might live in a more equitable, much more democratic and much more pleasant society than today's. It is up to us, in these arduous times, to display grandeur and fight to achieve this objective – an undertaking that will give meaning to the existence of all those engaged in it.

“In half a millennium of history, from a constellation of trading posts, of disperse indigenous peoples, of slaves transplanted from another continent, of European and Asian adventurers in search of a better fate, we have become a people of extraordinary cultural polyvalence, a country unparalleled for its territorial vastness and linguistic and religious homogeneity. However, we lack the experience of crucial ordeals, such as those known by other peoples whose survival was once threatened. And we also lack a true awareness of our possibilities and, mainly, of our weaknesses. But we do not ignore that historical time is speeding up and that the counting of this time works against us. It is a matter of knowing if we have a future as a nation that matters in the construction of the human future. Or if the forces that strive to interrupt the historical process of our becoming a nation-State will prevail” (Furtado, 1992:35).

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