

Brazil: an overview

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In the course of a revealing essay, published in 1961, Albert Hirschman observed that political experimentation is a distinctive trait of Latin-American political life. We, Latinos, he suggests, preferred to engage in formal political redesigning of formal institutions, thus “innovating” the framework of our political systems, instead of pragmatically approaching the problems directly — having to deal with social problems and cultural practices.

One of the most important consequences of this formal way of promoting change through State redesigning is the idealization of general rules issued by the state and, the realization that the new laws or institutions do not work, because as incredible as it may seem, in Brazilian history and society, most of its major changes came from above. That is to say from government and the State, not from society.

Brazil, I must remind, was the only colonial country in the world that received a King who run away from his enemies

(Napoleon troupes and leveling ideas) and came to the “colony”, Brazil, by 1808. This flee or strategic voyage (it depends on the point of view) transform Rio de Janeiro in the center of the Portuguese Empire, putting Lisbon in the a periphery — a major, if not formidable social historical inversion which, to my mind, was not sufficiently evaluated by students of colonial processes and by social historians of Brazil.

Here we have a historical movement that is equivalent to a revolution that did not have any participation of the local population made of slaves and illiterate people. This movement produced an aristocratic style of power and behavior with which Brazil was governed up to the advent of the Republic (again “declared” by a military coup) in 1889.

It no wonder than, that one of the central points of Brazil’s social and political history is the firm belief that social problems and deeply entrenched cultural behavior can be changed by general laws issued by some enlightened (or good hearted) leader.

Thinking of these complex processes of formal political change that has been part of the Latin America and the Brazilian social history in the last century or so, two points could be made:

First, that this formal approach to social issues is a reflection of the idealized view of the elites, according to whom all that is

“foreigner” is always good and would wonderfully fit our needs. Sheer imitation of foreign legislation seems to be the guideline here.

The second point speaks of the paradox of changing the formal structure of the State in order to prevent or not to change at all the order of society. Thus, by changing legislation and not touching on the values and agents of that change, society remains as it always was and everybody is generally happy.

This leads to suspicion and to a negative relationship with “the law” in general. Indeed, laws are usually so removed from the Brazilian social practices and daily life that when we hear about a new “Code” people used to tremble with fear and preoccupation. We know that new laws are usually so absurdly alien to our daily routines that they are made not to be followed; that they exist to be broken up by some people and that, worse still, that they are produced not as a formalization of old habits or as a reasonable regulatory device of some well know problems, but were created against society: to correct, perfect, and educated it, as Sergio Buarque de Holland, the Brazilian historian said by 1936 in this classical book, Raizes do Brasil.

No wonder, than, that in Brazil as well as in Latin America, exist a sort of fundamental separation between society (with its values and traditions that are always there) and the State (with its

iron fist and its indifference to real life and instability). Just thing of how many kinds of currency Brazil has had in the last 30 years, and little Carnaval, religious festivals and family life has changed, to realize this profound schism between State and Society.

[My work]

Another consequence of this easiness with which we change and reformulate our State institutions, is a recurrent negative reading or perception of Brazil.

In relationship to this question, we tend to think in the following fashion: if the Brazilian State is so bad, the system as a whole is also terrible. The result is the inability to make a non-negative reading of Brazil. And by “non-negative reading” I am not thinking of mere nationalist trivial praises, but referring to the impossibility (or even inability) to formulate a neutral or positive view of Brazil as a nation-state and as a social system or society.

A model of evaluation that, without excluding the constraints and circumspection required by a critical perspective would, however, consider some trends, mechanisms, solutions and values as positive. A model that will produce awareness of what has to be changed, without forgetting what has to be preserved.

I must say, however, that the Real Plan of financial stabilization and the world ecological and economic crises is changing this perception.

In other words, I want to reflect on a topic that used to be a taboo many of us. Namely: on the ideological advantages of Brazil read as a culture or value system before the very theme of this conference: the management and challenges for a new world: that is to say, a world in deep crises.

Maybe this is a basic exercise due to the fact that we tend to reduce Brazil to some of its dimensions, taking them as the only reality of the system. Indeed, we talk so much about our corrupt political practices and about our shameful concentration of income that we are unable to separate just and necessary criticism from self-flagellation and cultural suicide.

— II —

Brazil entered the 20th century with a left foot but, despite the pessimists and the brazilianists, it could leave it with in the right direction. Better prepared than many other countries to face the challenges that lie ahead in a global world facing the ecological and the financial disaster.

Indeed, at the turn of the last century we were viewed as a sick society, a bundle made of inferior races that did not have the least capacity to manage its immense wealth and to forge a destiny. Our biggest defect was to be what nobody could ever correct by means of copied ideologies, institutional arrangements and

legislation: we clearly were a hybrid society, a undoubted mestizo system inside of which biological unreached forces had their own logic. It was useless to imagine a political change in a region of the world that had against it a bad biological formation plus a tropical nature.

If our elites had a common denominator, so divided as it has always have been by its political and economic interests, this unanimity was this extreme negative reading of Brazil as a sick collectivity. As a system made of things out of place. The Brazilian elite could disagree on just everything, except about this “naturalistic” or “essentialist” view of the country as a society doomed to failure and disaster. We were all “upside-down Narcissus” to use the well-known expression of the famous and influential pundit Nelson Rodrigues.

This self-depreciation — increased by the frustration of the Republican experience, a movement that had the intention of radically changing the system by means of formal modernization — is clearly expressed in the sadness of Monteiro Lobato’s *Jeca Tatú* (criated around 1918; ; in Olavo Billac’s cosmopolitanism that viewed Brazilian institutions and practices as things out of place (1889); in the shadowed pessimism of Sylvio Romero [who werot, among other books, a *History of Brazilian Literature* in 1888, in which he says that Brazilian really need not only a

political regime but a new diet] and, above all, in the equally negative and epic perplexity of Euclides da Cunha's Os Sertões [1902].

To all these intellectual giants, Brazil could only escape from historical failure to which it was geographically, racially, and sociologically doomed, by an extraordinary effort of self-awareness, an effort that was social diagnostic, political program, and an exercise in self-flagellation all at once.

For this group of elite writes, Brazil was defined by what it did not have and was. By social and historical absences that made this elite to feel sorry even for the lack of civil war and bloody revolutions in our midst.

At that time, the different, the diverse — indeed the heterogeneous in relationship to European countries and the United States, perceived as the very opposite — represented “disease” and “backwardness”.

In a moment of consolidation of the capitalist nation-state and of the triumph and routinization of individualism and racist segregation, of the market, of industrialization and technology, nothing could be dearer to the so-called “civilized” or “advanced” world than the idea of uniformity, purity, and compartmentalization. To this mentality, the conviviality of several cultural codes and ethnicities within the same society was

a sign of primitivism and savagery. To this modern mentality that believed in the existence of only one truth, that was sure that history had laws, and that was unable to perceive that uniformity and universalism also have its repressive side and a deep monotony — as once was said by Isaiah Berlin (in his essay on Vico), nothing could be worse than this radical diversity that framed deep social differences and hierarchies, this physical hybridism (mulatismo) that was taken as a living (and immoral) proof of the sensuous appetite of the “lower races”.

How then could this elite deal with Brazil in a moment in which the prestigious and exemplary West was preaching racial purity and ethnic compartmentalization? How to individualize in equal basis, this Brazil made of masters and slaves of regular and exceptional noble persons? How to conciliate the liberal ideal of political equality in a social universe marked by inequality? How to harmonize the mass of illiterate blacks and mulattos (ex-slaves and members of a complex social hierarchy) with a cosmopolitan and sophisticated elite — foreigners within Brazil — whose model of life was a royal imperial family that was white, spoke with an accent and was above the law?

In the beginning of the 20th century Brazil had the most serious problem of conciliate the diversity of models, values and codes that were part of its historical and sociological experience

with a “civilizing” and civic model that would not contemplate diversity as a positive experience. A model, indeed, that had no place for diversity at all and that offered to colonial and peripheral countries, a paradigm of progress that would simply follow its own. For this paradigm, it was enough to repeat the history of France, England and the United States. But how to be like those countries if the Brazilian experience had paradoxically mixed America and Africa in one hand and Europe in the other? How to bypass the fact that Brazil had slaves and nobles and had witnessed the presence of the King of Portugal himself and, at the same time, had also deep links with the ideals of the French and American Revolutions?

The program of “whitening” and control of that was taken to be inferior ethnic groups could be put into practice in countries with small Indian and black populations, but not in Brazil. The magnitude of the mixture made it impossible to deny the ethnic multiplicity that in fact permeated Brazilian society. Indeed, how to legally separate what secular social practices had put together above all in daily life, inside our homes, churches, believes, and personal relationships? How to eliminate all those betwixt in between that depolarized a system jurally and politically divided if the mediators were in fact the basic referents of the system?

If, as Tocqueville has said, the American “habits of the heart” were individualism and equality, in the case of Brazil, they were made a multitude of betwixt in between, ambiguous social spaces and institutions: plazas, church yards, processions, carnival parades, syncretic believes (such as the animal game) that made possible to integrate local values with the novelties imported by the elites and imposed by the logic of the market, industrialization and world power.

Finally, football.

Given this cultural history, it is no wonder that Brazilian cosmology contemplates ambiguity as a value founded on the fact of life (not of science or education) that every human action was simultaneously good and bad and also that, depending on the point of view, all human action could be saved and/or condemn. If the American Calvinist cosmic space is dual: hell or heavens, salvation or damnation, black or white, in or out. We, Brazilians, tend to propose a third way — a mediating space. From the Purgatory (the typical place of passage and inclusion relatively under our control) to a series of social practices and institutions aiming at creating social bridges. From the hard “do you know who you’re talking to?” to the “jeitinho” and the “favor” as ways of circumnavigating public laws and rules theoretically valid for all.

Unable to follow the purging-segregationist program proposed by the civic agenda of the central powers, Brazil invested in a strong set of counter-hegemonic values. Ambiguous and anti-bourgeois values that sustained, despite of the wishful thinking of its elites, important cultural experiences. The civic-bourgeois model continued to be present but it was historically and culturally appropriated and transformed into a singular code of public behavior. A code that adopted the ideal of individualism and equality without, however, abandoned its old fascination for hierarchy and intimacy.

To the point that to promote the integration of equality, individualism and universalistic rules with relational, personalistic and a hierarchical style of life is, I think, the center of the Brazilian dilemma and the critical political task before us in this new Millennium.

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Today, when the process of globalization shrinks the world and bringing back ethnic and religious differences. Now that we are facing an ecological as well as economic disaster, I think that we can read the Brazilian cultural experience as potentially positive. For in many countries where national consolidation was achieved under the aegis of individualism, the market and by means of civic

culture administered by the State, we observe the difficulty to articulate the ethnic and the national. It is as if there were a combat between the nation-state and the ethnic groups (largely organized by private or local values) and a State based on public institutions.

If, then, the 21st century will be a world marked by voyages, by population movements, and by all sorts of ecological, ethnic and cultural combinations and reformulations, Brazil as a society at the verge of yet another process of modernization has some advantages.

For three basic reasons:

First, because Brazilian society is not so glued to the State, nor to civic values and bureaucratic institutions. To the contrary, as the last 20 years demonstrated, Brazil has an incredible capacity to survive disasters created by the State. It is the power of society that allowed Brazil to survive hiper-inflation, rampant corruption, and scandalous public impunity. The Federal Reserve Bank can go to hell but society with its networks of friendship and mutual support continued to work.

In Brazil, therefore, we still have the time to ask: where do we want the State to operate? Do we want the State to penetrate every domain of our lives?

Second, because in Brazil a certain level of contradiction is a value. This contradiction that could be transformed into a tolerance

that enrages us when we blame the elasticity of the people vis-à-vis the election of populist and corrupt politicians, is the value that sustains a vast system of social differences and ethnic diversity. One does not produce full equality. But its is open for respect, friendship, consideration and empathy.

The fact that — among other things — we have Afro-Brazilian cults groups based on possession is a sign of civilization, not a proof of ignorance or primitivism. The counter-hegemonic values presented by Umbanda, for example, show that in Brazil one is used to move from individualism to holism with the speed of a song. Today we are dealing with the expansion of computers and Pentecostal Churches and Umbanda Centers. Possession goes hand in hand with an increased awareness individual rights. We have prejudice and its is shameful that we sometimes are not even aware of our system of race discrimination, but we do not have racial hatred. The experience of Jim Crow laws of the Ku-Klux-Klan or of lynching as ritual is foreign to us.

In other words, multiple cultural codes have coexisted without panic, hate or intolerance.

Finally, it is worth while emphasize that at times of disasters and crises are more apt to be prone to ambiguity. To a social cosmos in which multiple and contradictory ethnic, religious, and moral choices and values will be omnipresent. It will be a universe

market by uniformity and also by diversity. A world certainly much more Brazilian than Calvinistic as our old social ideologues liked to imagined.

In this globalized universe, the most successful citizen will not be the rigid monolithic and monoglot “redneck” ultra specialized in the manipulation of only one language and set of cultural values or codes, but the “cultural mulatto” able to understand and tolerate differences and to take for granted diverse motivations, gestures, and languages. This will be a world more close to mixed mulattos than to Aryans and WASPS. It will be a universe of intense differences, marked by a multitude of moral choices and possibilities. The key concepts of this system will be tolerance, control and understanding. Explanation will give away to comprehension and interpretation as a fundamental fact of social interaction; and it will be a basic issue in conflict resolution. To learn how to translate will be a crucial exercise. And translation here is not a one track street, but a double road process. An adventure in which the hegemonic language will have to open to new terms, concepts and reformulation. Here, translation is a relational process: one language enriches and is enriched by the other.

Now, the Brazilian experience with its classical historic indecision and dilemmas, with its questions of “mestiçagem”, and

the belief that virtue lies in the middle, with our implicit ideal of taking advantage of everything and decide not to decide, could very well be more than suitable as a source of sociological and political wisdom in this new global scene.

Of course it can nor be transformed into an easy recipe and prognostic. But who cares about prognostic and linearity when the flow of finance capital and finance speculation is revealing that men's creatures can be more powerful than its creators?

Except perhaps in a land that still takes miracles seriously because it instituted relationships as values and, by doing so, never lost sight that to be human is to learn how to navigate the world within uncertainty and paradox.

These to me are some of our potentialities.

These are the basic points of this failed attempt of an overview.

Many thanks!