

Horizonte do desejo

Instabilidade, fracasso coletivo e inércia social

(Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2006)

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A sombre title for sombre prognostics. A book that begins by refuting dogmas and carries on, announcing at the end of each chapter a new dogma to be refuted in search of an understanding of two permanent questions in the analyses of Brazilian social scientists: the absence of rebellions against a status quo of cumulative inequalities and the non-fulfilment of the expectations aroused by the exercise of democratic practices in Brazil. Firstly, it shows that representative democracy is far from exhausted and that the threats to democracy in Brazil are not the same as in the rich democracies. Secondly, it shows that the causal relationship between inequality and extreme poverty, on the one hand, and Brazil's notorious political instability, on the other, is spurious. Thirdly, by resuscitating Marx his way, the author situates societies' objectivity in their infrastructure, the raw materials they are made of: people, populations on the move, migrating, growing, distributing themselves in line with the new tasks determined by the social division of labour. Fourthly, the book explains why the understanding of the social and political processes of peripheral societies has been partly obscured, leading them to interpret their singularities as pathologies and/or backwardness. And in fifth place, it shows how social inertia acts a powerful vector of stability in social interactions and government policies, making very difficult the simple task of avoiding a deterioration of the status quo. In this perspective, conservatism would be the iron cage of contemporary governments. This summarised and incomplete evaluation of the author's iconoclasm carries but a few of the elements of what, in my understanding, is a new theory of change — accompanying this (non-narrative) macro-history — in Brazilian society, grounded on its historical-material objectivity. And by way of what, after all?

His central issue is the centuries-old conformism with our inequalities. Why aren't the deep and intense economic and political transformations matched by the correction of inequalities? Why hasn't democracy and the amazing growth in electoral mobilization

from 1945 to 2006 produced here, as in other countries, a subversion of the status quo and of the structure of inequalities?

“The difficulty in expressing the present in the form of concepts, a characteristic of extinct languages, results from the Babel-like stammering of multiple pasts, all of them simultaneously true, although incomplete and concurrent” (: 13). The epistemological provocation challenges the reader to the refutation of his/her macro-history, a history not narrated but told, measured, accompanied in the time and rhythm of processes that develop at the level of the infrastructure and their effects on the superstructure, which will lead to the sombre prognostic that the concentration of wealth at the top of the Brazilian social structure tends to maintain itself indefinitely and that the ‘clientelistic’ vote is the only power resource of the poor. It does not involve costs, losses or erosion of value. Its price may even increase if electoral competition intensifies. The ‘clientelistic’ vote is a self-preservation strategy that does not involve the risks of insubordination. The failure of transformational behaviours that involve the making of demands produces costs that cannot be paid by people who cannot go even lower in the social scale. This is the cost to be paid by the “failure of collective action” of the poor in Brazil. The author also resuscitates Hobbes, for whom the greatest of human passions is fear. If for the more favoured groups failure does not cost anything, for the poor it is not payable. The cost of failure and, in this sense, of fear, leads them to adopt as a survival strategy a relatively inertial behaviour in the face of their own neediness. On the other hand, the extraordinary material progress of the last century, in which the growing social division of labour differentiated interests and groups exponentially, made unthinkable the indifference of the State in the face of the complexity of the multiple and necessary new connections. However, the resources required in ever larger quantities to perform its tasks well become exhausted in the costly task of ensuring the non-deterioration of the status quo (: 162 *ff.*). Therefore, thinking about distributive policies may be just a dream.

This prognostic is authorised by an examination of the last fifty years of our history, based on statistical series on which the author constructs indicators to follow up and compare the infra-structural movements of Brazilian society from 1950 to 2000: population growth, urbanisation, sector differentiation of the economy and reallocation of the economically active population. For the same period, he calculates the variation of the coefficient of the social division of labour, accurately pointing out the very substance of the social differentiation and ‘complexification’, and the effects of this raft of material processes on the superstructure. To be more precise, the effects on the narrowing or widening of the horizon of human aspirations, of consumption and/or of political participation.

Doing without centric, self-focused lenses, the author re-equates the terms of the debate about democracy. Here, the threats do not originate in the loss in density of representation that de-stimulates participation, nor in the mismatch between the interpretation that the representatives of the population make of its wishes, nor in the evaluation that the population makes of the policies chosen and conducted by its representatives. The issue of democracy in Brazil is another one, and derives from the non-fulfilment of the

effects expected from its exercise and practice. Contrary to the trajectories observed in other capitalist societies, in which social mobility is constituted by the “constant dialectic between economic expansion, on the one hand, and distribution of wealth, on the other, via broadened political participation, among us there has established itself a stubborn divergence between the directions of material progress and the nation’s social state.” By showing that the expansion of representative democracy was a condition for the possibility of expansion of workers’ rights and political power, he destroys the argument that democratic tools have been exhausted and converted into obstacles to new conquests. His ironic evaluation is that, it being so, we are being convinced that democracy is being threatened by the citizens who have benefited and who do benefit from it (: 29).

The understanding peripheral nations have of themselves absorbs interpretations gestated in the central nations which, self-referenced as they are, register differences from themselves as pathologies. Now, says the author, societies are physical histories of historical-material aggregates, made up of the same primordial elements (‘materialities’) that nonetheless combine with one another differently. And however much they aspire to a change (‘modernisation’) towards the central standard, they fail due to the simple fact that they are constituted by different combinations, also by different proportions, of the common material (infra-structural) elements. The author highlights the fact that they do not manage to reproduce the original model because it self-reproduces in a continuous process of self-transformation, as noted by Engels. Views from the centre transform everything that is seen into something eccentric. Only by looking from the periphery is it possible to identify the similarities and differences, ruptures and continuities in the movement of societies. This is why, strictly speaking, there are no countries behind others, for in fact there is no real behind, since all are, at the same moment, in the same instant in time.

Brazil has changed, yes, but the (relative) rates of change of the main social indicators have remained practically uniform over the last ten or more years. The weight of the “social inertia” is shown by the variations in the rates of economic activity by sex, by schooling levels, by the variations in the average incomes of economically active people and families, all of which preserve socio-economic distances. The author goes deeper into the first issue, advances, displaces the problem, as if displacing planes in a wide-angle picture, questioning theories, methods and the more common knowledge about society and politics in Brazil.

The numerical and proportional description of the material universe of things and people will serve the analysis of the mismatch between the breathtaking speed of the material growth and the slowness of the social progress in a society in which “adult life begins for two-thirds of the population through the obligation to work before the right to vote.” By following up the comparative speed of the process of division of labour and of other infrastructure indicators, he shows how Brazilian society has been permanently subverted by the specialisation of labour, with its infrastructure in permanent ebullience since the 1950s. Change at a vertiginous pace challenges the consolidation of responsive institutions. Neither the economy nor politics escape the logic of permanent instability (: 46

ff.). Since 1950, the growth in the electorate has consistently surpassed that of the population. Between 1950 and 1991, for every 1% growth in the population, the electorate grew by 4% (: 57 *ff.*). This movement of “civic conversion” as the author calls it, is not strictly owed to the compulsory nature of the vote, given that from 1945 to 1950 the vote was also compulsory and yet the registration coefficients and proportional size of the electorate were smaller. “An electoral conversion of such magnitude constitutes an unheard of phenomenon in the world of representative democracies” (: 79 *ff.*). How can one explain that such electoral mobilisation has not resulted in alterations in the structure of inequalities?

He arrives at the reasons for the inexistence of transformational movements by measuring the feeling of relative deprivation after having captured its logic by calculating the costs of the failure of collective action. Relative deprivation is the perception of the needs that relate to others who do not suffer them — needs that should not exist or that can disappear (: 148). Such feeling settles in the perceived distances between what one has and what one would like to have, between real daily life and what’s desirable. The rate of relative deprivation will determine the horizon of the desire, narrowed in Brazilian society as a result of centuries of neglect and deprivation. It is astounding that despite the continued build-up of inequalities (income, gender, colour, education, training, social position and regional discrepancies), measured and counted in terms of relative deprivation, the human aspirations of Brazil’s peoples are incredibly small. The strange familial tie between desire, lack and need is dramatically and dialectically summarised by the revelation that almost 60% of the population, even describing their own life as between average and very bad, regardless of their occupation or income, establish as the line demarcating the border of what is considered a “bad life” an income of five hundred *reais* [US\$233] a month. The distance between “bad life” and “good life”, on average, lies between R\$500.00 and the R\$1,500.00–R\$2,000.00 monthly income level. The threshold of the “good life”, both for those who earn the highest average salary in the sample examined (R\$1,471.56) and for those who earn the second lowest (R\$171.30), does not surpass four times the amount of the threshold of the “bad life”. Maybe, the author frighteningly concludes, the changes need to overcome a certain threshold of social sensitivity for the hiatus of relative deprivation to be noticed (: 174).

The process of political instability cannot be explained by the parallel process of amazing stability of the cumulative imbalances in the distribution of goods and of extreme poverty, as they are generated by different material sequences and by different determinations. The former results from infra-structural pressures and has no direct connections with inequality. The latter may be explained by super-structural pressures and is connected to the trajectory of representative democracy in Brazil. The explanation for the phenomenon of permanent, unchallenged accumulation is the cost of the failure of collective action (: 179 *ff.*). The assumption of the theories of collective action that failure does not alter the participants’ previous situation does not apply to Brazil. Here, the costs are rather high, with a significant deterioration in the participants’ status quo. It makes sense,

therefore, that the scheme of unchallenged accumulation, ensured by the diabolical arrangement of the 'clientelistic' vote, should remain and tend to do so indefinitely (: 180). Sombre prognostics grounded on the revelation of mechanisms for stabilising extreme poverty that remain in action to this day. This is the horizon of our democracy.

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