

# Ferreira, Jorge.

## *João Goulart: uma biografia*

Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta\*

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João Goulart, or Jango, is one of the most controversial figures in Brazilian history and also one of the most tragic. He presided over a government which raised the hopes of thousands of people with the promise of reforming the country and mitigating its social ills, projects that caused fear and insecurity in other social groups – notably the ones that overthrew him in 1964. Owner of an inevitably controversial image, which evoked as much admiration as contempt, the importance of Goulart in the context which led to the coup is unquestionable, because his actions and projects, and especially the way they were interpreted, played a key role in the process.

The book, *João Goulart: uma biografia*, written by Professor Jorge Ferreira, is an extensive and careful analysis of the former president and makes an invaluable contribution to the study of this controversial leader, as well as the political context in which he worked. It is a wide-ranging work, based on comprehensive research including interviews, memoirs, personal documents, press records and the consultation of large bibliography, resulting in a work with over seven hundred pages. In view of the scope of the work, reviewing it properly in a few lines becomes a challenge. Being realistic, I would rather highlight here some of its strong points, as an invitation to the reader to read the book and make their own judgment.

Motivated by the perception that Jango's memory is tied to the events of 1964, Ferreira tried to focus on other points of the former president's political career, to allow a broader picture emerge. In addition, the author also wanted to go beyond the critical assessments of the *Gaúcho* politician that are dominant in the literature and memoirs. Ferreira, thus, tries to reveal the positive qualities of the leader which can also explain his rise. The intention was to produce a more balanced analysis on Jango, escaping from the criticism that labeled him as a populist and weak, or accused him of being responsible for

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the crisis that led to the coup. This does not mean that the author has concealed criticisms of Goulart, rather he mentions mistakes made by the former president, especially in 1964, but he tends to highlight more positive traits such as loyalty (to *Varguismo* in particular), a talent for negotiation and social sensitivity. Goulart was indeed a skillful politician, true to the style of his master, and therefore able to rapidly build a career for himself in the *Varguista* and *trabalhista* fields, with the added detail of defending a social project much more advanced in comparison with those of Getúlio. The book offers an excellent analysis of Goulart's initial trajectory, essentially because this is the least well known stage of his life, beginning with his first contacts with Vargas, who was his neighbor in San Borja, and continuing with the alliances built by Jango with the unions and the left. Noteworthy is the analysis of the construction of relations between Goulart and trade unionists in the early 1950s, thanks to his role as Minister of Labor in stormy second half of Vargas' constitutional mandate, as well as the analysis of his activities as president of the Party Brazilian Labor (*Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro* – PTB) in the same period, which laid the foundations for his entire political career.

Naturally, the biography contains personal data about Goulart's life, such as the explanation for the defect in his leg, as well as his love affairs with women. Incidentally, the two events were related, the sexual adventures and the physical problem. However, Ferreira does not let himself get carried away by the easy attraction of scandal and spectacle, and, although he does not omit useful information for understanding Jango's character, he treats his private life with sobriety. Another aspect of Jango's private life that Ferreira analyzes properly was the former's entrepreneurial talent. Goulart inherited his father's rural business, but considerably expanded the family's fortune, developing remarkable talent for making money, a characteristic that would be very useful in his future life as an exile. However, the biography focuses more on aspects of Goulart's public life, his role as a leader who began as the political godson of Vargas and ended in exile, where he met his death after an inconclusive and tumultuous period as president.

Along this way, Ferreira analyzes the major events and political processes experienced by Jango in the 1950s and 1960s, a decisive phase in Brazilian history. In the book, we can find careful narratives of some important moments, such as Goulart's time in the Ministry of Labor, the crisis of Vargas' government and his suicide, Quadros' resignation and the 'legality' movement (in other words, for the inauguration of Vice President João Goulart), the rally of March 13, 1964 and other events on the eve of the coup. The book of-

fers essential information and analysis for the understanding of our recent political history, which, incidentally, is little known by the general public. In relation to the period between the aftermath of 1964 and Goulart's death in late 1976, the biography shows us the sufferings of life in exile, both his own and his family, who saw the bitterness of exile join the anguish of uncertainty, since Uruguay and Argentina, countries chosen by Goulart because of their proximity to Brazil, would soon be convulsed by violent politics similar to what had been experienced in Brazil.

The author demonstrates some sympathy/empathy for his subject, which allows him to analyze the political objectives of Jango in a comprehensive way, though not in an indulgent manner. Even though he does point to some authoritarian attitudes on the part of the president, especially the control of PTB, and does not overlook the Gaúcho politician's personal project for power, Jorge Ferreira shows us a Goulart sincerely committed to the causes announced in his speeches. He wanted to improve the lives of the poor people and reduce foreign dependence (or emancipate the nation, in terms of that time), and intended to achieve this through negotiations and agreements, in order to avoid revolutionary disruptions. He did not want to question the foundations of the capitalist system, after all he was a large farmer and merchant, but wanted instead to build an economic model that was less unfair and more 'national.'

The author's analysis is convincing in showing that the principal impulse of Goulart's political projects was to implement reforms, and not to use them to become a dictator or overthrow institutions. Indeed, there are very few indications that Jango wanted or had planned to establish an authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, the president accepted and adopted a strategy of pressuring Congress for reforms, using rallies and other forms of pressure, tactics that contributed to create doubt and insecurity about his real intentions and sowed confusion and unrest in the political field. His leftwing allies made stronger movements in that direction, especially Brizola with his aggressive speeches to the Congress which could be interpreted as a threat to the liberal institutions. Personally, Goulart rejected suggestions of closing Congress, however, among his allies not everyone thought that way.

In Jorge Ferreira's correct evaluation, Goulart's major errors were committed in relation to the military, and were decisive in his downfall. He trusted in less than capable officers whom he brought into his inner circle, and, in the episode of the Sailors' Revolt (March 1964), he imposed a solution to the crisis entirely favorable to the rebels, a decision that was even considered a

mistake by communist officers linked to the government. With the release of the sailors, the president allowed the officers imagine that he was favorable to breaking the military hierarchy, and this threw the majority of the military against the government, officers who until then had been neutral towards the government, waiting to see what would happen. Another serious mistake by the president in the military and political field was his attitude in the episode of the request of a state of emergency in October 1963. He accepted the suggestion of the military ministers to ask the Congress to allow this extreme measure, a decision still incomprehensible today and surprising in view of the president's political savvy. How could he agree to a measure that had no support from any significant political force, and that left him isolated on both sides, the left and the right, by leaving insecurity and anxiety everywhere?

Finally, it is worth mentioning Jorge Ferreira's analysis of the reasons why Goulart abdicated from armed resistance to the coup, which resulted in many accusations and much criticism. Rather than weakness, the author saw in episode a manifestation of the Jango's care to preserve the country from a civil war, which could possibly have resulted in U.S. intervention. The collapse of military support and the weak capacity of the leftist groups to rally against the coup, albeit with honorable and courageous exceptions, showed that the chances of victory in the event of a civil war were low, so Goulart's decision may well have saved the country from even greater violence. However, it is also possible that, more than the violence of the civil war, the president wanted to avoid another split: armed resistance could have created a leftist radicalization far beyond his political project.

In short, this is a book, supported by solid research and consistent analysis, which constitutes an essential text for researchers, and also for the wider public. It is a mature product of an experienced historian who has entered the list of required reading on the recent political history of Brazil.

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