

Macalester International

Volume 5 *Landscape, Culture, and Globalization:*
Views from Brazil

Article 10

Fall 12-31-1997

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Recommended Citation

Gitahy, Maria Lucia and Hardman, Francisco Foot (1997) "Brazil in the Global World: Five Centuries of Lost Memories," *Macalester International*: Vol. 5, Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol5/iss1/10>

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BRAZIL IN THE GLOBAL WORLD: Five Centuries of Lost Memories

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and
Francisco Foot Hardman

I. Brazil: Land of Contrasts

To anyone crossing the 8.5 million square kilometers of Brazil, the image used thirty years ago by Roger Bastide,¹ “land of contrasts,” would still be apropos. There are contrasts of every sort: geographical, historic, cultural, economic, social and regional. The idea of the existence of “several Brazils” — or at least the dualism of an “archaic” nation and a “modern” other—is an old one in the tradition of Brazilian studies. The sources of this idea can be traced back to nineteenth-century Romanticism. A little earlier than Bastide’s consecration of the image of “contrasts,” another French Brazilianist, Jacques Lambert, formulated the famous thesis of “two Brazils.” One of them was predominantly urban, coastal, White, Europeanized, and relatively developed; the other was rural, technically and economically backward, non-White, and attached to non-European cultural traditions.

Brazil reproduces in itself the world contrasts: we find in it aspects which recall those of New York or Chicago, besides others which evoke those of India or of Egypt.²

This overlapping of epochs, this hybridism of diverse cultures has perplexed travelers, artists, writers, and scientists for hundreds of years. From the Bavarian naturalists Spix and Martius in their famous *Journey across Brazil, 1817–1820*, to the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss in his classic essay *Tristes Tropiques* (1955),

these enormous historic-cultural polarities have been repeatedly chronicled. Roger Bastide concluded his introduction to *Tristes Tropiques* by stressing the inability of traditional social science concepts to deal with these contrasts. For him, such a situation involved constant metamorphosis, fusion, and ebullience. He even went so far as to say, "The sociologist who wants to understand Brazil not rarely needs to become a poet."³

In order to gain a comprehensive, accurate, and up-to-date understanding of Brazil today, the travelers need to become poets. For it is only with a poet's eyes that we are able to reconcile such drastically different situations and experiences, from the lyric to the epic, from the tragicomic to the dramatic. The sublime emotions we feel before the Amazonian forest, whose compact vegetal mass covers nearly 60 percent of the nation, are at odds with our horror at the unequal history of land occupation. The open skies of the *cerrados* (savannas) in the Central-West and Northwest contrasts with the conflictive saga of the agricultural frontier expansion and mining activities. The beauty of Pantanal or of the 9,000-kilometer-long Atlantic shore, which alternates between beaches and wind-swept cliffs (*falésias*), contrasts with the realized dreams of artificial cities built in the midst of the *sertão*.⁴

The generosity of the ecological and topographic environment contrasts with the violent integration of the survivors of native cultures to the civilizing process. When the colonizers arrived in the sixteenth century, the native inhabitants totaled between 5 and 10 million. Today only about 300,000 remain, most living in miserable conditions.⁵ In vital and modern metropolises such as São Paulo,⁶ Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, and others, we find acute hunger, unemployment, homelessness, abandoned children and adolescents, crime, and extreme violence (including that committed by police officers). And this urban violence is rivaled in atrocity only by the daily violence in the countryside. The Sem Terra Movement (MST),⁷ under these conditions, has turned out to become the main organizer of rural dissatisfaction with the society and the policies of the central government.

At present, a preliminary count of the Brazilian population found a total of 156,804,333 inhabitants.⁸ Nearly 75 percent of this total lives in cities, and only one-fourth in the countryside.

The relationship between the rural and urban populations began to change in the thirties, but the first significant reversal occurred in the sixties and seventies, when the urban population became the majority. According to 1993 data, Brazil is still a country of great internal migrations: 40 percent of people do not live in the cities in which they were born, and 16 percent live in states other than their native ones.⁹ We have to remember that nearly 46 percent of the almost 5,000 Brazilian *municípios* (counties) are small (less than 10,000 inhabitants) and that the rate of demographic growth in the large urban centers is currently falling. This fact suggests that future public policies for health, education, and employment will need to be decentralized.

In this picture, great differences persist among classes and regions. Brazil continues to be the “champion” of income concentration among the developing nations. The wealthiest 10 percent earn almost 50 percent of the national income, while the poorest 10 percent earn only 0.8 percent. This inequality has grown over time: in the sixties, the income of the richest 10 percent was thirty-four times that of the poorest 10 percent; in the nineties, it is seventy-eight times greater! Income per capita fell from nearly U.S.\$3,000 in the eighties to U.S.\$2,900 in the nineties. Infant mortality, on the other hand, fell significantly, from 65.8 per thousand in 1980 to 51.6 per thousand in 1990. However, when looked at region by region, a great disparity emerges: the rate is only 30 per thousand in the Southeast, compared to 88.2 per thousand in the Northeast.¹⁰

Although literacy and school attendance are on the rise, children are still being abandoned at alarming rates, especially in the big cities. In 1990, almost 60 percent of children and teenagers lived in families with a per capita monthly income of U.S.\$50 or less. The Brazilian labor market employs 7.5 million people below the age of 18, representing almost 12 percent of the economically active population. The majority of them earn less than one minimal salary (around U.S.\$110 per month), working at hard labor such as harvesting sugarcane and extracting natural resources (e.g., mining, rubber tapping, sisal collecting, etc.), work that adversely affects their school performance. Brazil has a high dropout rate, especially in elementary schools. In addition, we know that out of this statistically measurable picture, a few million children and teenagers are urban margin-

als—homeless and surviving by engaging in criminal activities such as drug trafficking and prostitution.

However, only by mapping poverty, with its unequal contours, can we come close to a picture of the Brazilian reality. Brazil is one of the fastest growing countries of the twentieth century; between 1945 and 1980 alone, its GNP multiplied 11 times and industrial production multiplied 16 times. Despite this, the 1990 census registered nearly 58 million Brazilians—almost one-third of the total population—living below the poverty line (with a monthly per capita income of less than U.S.\$60), 16 million of whom live in absolute misery or indigence (i.e., not even earning enough to buy basic food necessities). More than half of the impoverished live in the Northeast, mostly in the rural areas.¹¹ Further, a perverse effect of the accelerated urbanization of the last decades is that more than two-thirds of the Brazilian poor are urban.¹² The household survey completes this dramatic picture: for every three urban households, at least one is below the poverty line; and in the rural areas the proportion is nearly half.¹³

Further, although Brazil's industrial, cultural, and technological resources integrate the country with the globalized world, it is also a society of social exclusion. The question remains: Are there two Brazils, or just one? Is Brazil an integrated and constitutive part of the modern Western order, or just an aberrant periphery? The "poet traveler," still perplexed, should perhaps look back a little to the history of the modern world to uncover aspects relevant to the understanding of the present situation.

II. The International Dimension in Brazilian History

Globalization is often presented as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon and as the only possible future. Strictly speaking, globalization is not new. The landscapes, cultures, and societies on this side of the Atlantic were shaped in the context of an important movement of globalization that began in the sixteenth century. Brazil was born as a territory chosen by the Portuguese as a place to establish a modern colonial enterprise—the cultivation of sugarcane for the international market. The sugarcane plantations, and especially the *engenhos* (sugarcane mills), factories *avant la lettre*, were very advanced at the time they were

built.¹⁴ Slavery was reintroduced to solve the “labor problem” caused by the conquest and incorporation of a new continent (exigencies of globalization aren’t so recent, after all). Conquest, slave trade, and the extermination of native populations could all be justified ideologically as a means to bring all the peoples of the world to Christianity.¹⁵

Emphasizing this constitutive feature of our formation should not, however, obscure the complexity of the historic change that took place in each epoch and the enormous differences this sort of generalization unavoidably misses. Obviously, globalization in the sixteenth century was very different from the present globalization. In the sixteenth century, globalization tended to consolidate the power and prosperity of the recently unified or unifying European nation-states. In colonial Brazil, the Metropolitan Administration and the Catholic Church were the pillars of the domination that the White elite exerted over the Afro-Brazilian and native populations in order to assure the definition and relative control over the territory and the viability of the colonial enterprise.

“With broadax and firebrand,” as described by Warren Dean,¹⁶ the Portuguese appropriated and modified a whole territory. Previous environments and cultures were mercilessly destroyed and condemned to oblivion. Over three centuries of colonization, an entire civilization sprang up from the harsh realities of cultural shock. More pervasive social and cultural institutions, such as the patriarchal family, Catholicism, and the Portuguese language, also provided an important basis for colonial society. Slavery organized the whole fabric of social life, and violence became a fact of life. The structure of the metropolitan-colonial pact almost prevented the formation of an internal market. However, administrative and port functions allowed for the establishment of a supplies commerce and an urban environment.

The weight of the international dimension posed even the very question of nationalism and of the construction of a nation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The presence of separatist movements, popular rebellions, and regional protest before and after the Declaration of Independence shows that Brazil was not oblivious to the so-called Age of Revolution. When Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1808, the British Navy

moved the Portuguese Royal Family and the court to Brazil, which elevated the colony to *Reino Unido* (United Kingdom of Portugal and Brazil) and made it the head of the Portuguese Empire.

In Brazil, the local elite, fearful of social upheaval and territorial disintegration, conducted a hesitant independence process. Haiti's fate echoed as a threat to the White Brazilian elite, which made up less than 30 percent of the population.¹⁷ They waited until they convinced the crown heir himself, Dom Pedro, Regent of Brazil, of the opportunity for political independence for the kingdom. Supporting the Crown, the elite managed to keep robust all the economic, social, and cultural institutions forged in colonial times and to postpone deeper political and social reform.

The constitution of a predominant nucleus of agricultural exporters, mostly engaged in coffee,¹⁸ the main product of Brazilian export, was the most important social and historical fact of the first half of the nineteenth century. Consequently, the southeastern region became the center of an independent nation, with the affirmation of Rio de Janeiro as the new capital of the country and as the commercial *entrepôt*, which Lisbon had been in the past. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the broader rearrangement of capitalism, normally referred to by economic historians as the Second Industrial Revolution, defined a "new international order" (Hobsbawm, among others).¹⁹ Brazil had to face difficult challenges in order to win a role as an acceptable partner in the "new" international system. In many aspects, that historic moment recalls the challenges that we are living in the present: dealing with another important productive rearrangement at the international level.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the emergence of a mass market and production for it brought new problems, even to an exporter of crops such as Brazil. Among the problems to be solved, two were imposing: to face the question of slavery²⁰ by creating a free labor market, and to promote the construction of networks of urban transportation and utilities able to better connect the increasing coffee production to the international market while also redefining the country's position in the world system. Abolition of slavery (1888) and the establishment of the Republic (1889) provided the political landmarks necessary for this

redefinition. The republican regime invested in the creation of a free labor market and in a constructive effort designed to turn the territory into one organized according to the modern economic, social, and cultural standards of the time.

Requalifying the relationship between the city and countryside and the productive spaces within both, as well as Brazil's role in the international division of labor, was not just a question of physical infrastructure but also of the construction of institutions capable of remaking social relations. A comprehensive social diversification effort took place: it was necessary to create superior *cadres*, intermediary "officers" and a large army of labor able to build a Brazilian form of "modern" society. Many of the scientific, professional, and cultural institutions founded in that context provided the basis for much of the Brazilian intellectual production up to the present.²¹

In the state of São Paulo, where the agricultural frontier advanced fast with its coffee plantations, a politically articulated elite cohered, lending a federalist character to the republican regime. During the next forty years, they assured both the control of the federal government and the autonomy of political authority in its own state. A century later, many regret the human and natural costs of the way this leadership proceeded. However, one is forced to acknowledge that, from their viewpoint, the elite were successful in offering solutions to the two urgent and difficult problems they faced in order to keep up with their period's version of globalization.

The expanding coffee plantations badly needed cheap labor to substitute for the slaves. The São Paulo state government subsidized immigration on a large scale, changing the demographic pattern of the state and favoring *branqueamento*.²² In order to keep the immigrants and to modernize the cities, sanitation programs became a priority at the beginning of the twentieth century. A network of railroads and the modernization of the port of Santos not only connected the coffee plantations to the international market but also reorganized the territory, redefined the relationship between the city and countryside, and guaranteed the capital of the state (the city of São Paulo) the role of centralizing pole of a productive hinterland.

Urbanization and the presence of wage laborers, however ill paid, provided a work force and market for such industries as

foodstuffs, textiles, sawmills, and construction. São Paulo reached the peak of its urban growth between 1890 and 1900, increasing 3.7 times (from 65,000 inhabitants to 240,000).²³ During the twenties, the industrial production of the city of São Paulo surpassed that of Rio de Janeiro, although São Paulo's population was still smaller.²⁴ In São Paulo, an active labor movement grew at the beginning of the century along with the twin processes of urbanization and industrialization. Urban protest and political dissatisfaction were not restricted to workers. Military revolts and middle-class grievances gave a new texture to the modernist cultural production in the second decade of the century.

At the end of the twenties, the São Paulo oligarchy that controlled so completely the Brazilian political arena during the First Republic saw the end of its hegemony. Fissures came from other regional elite, military discontent, and middle-class critics. A front of disparate interests supported the so-called Revolution of 1930. The crisis that shook the world in 1929 made clear to everyone how frail was Brazil's position in the world system as an exporter of coffee. President Getúlio Vargas favored centralization over federalism and, during the early thirties, politically mediated several different interests, including external pressures.²⁵ After the coup d'état of 1937, the government adopted an authoritarian profile characteristic of the epoch. A significant group of policies regulated the labor market and industrial relations. Labor associations became subordinated to the Ministry of Labor, Industry, and Commerce. The law fixed the minimum wage in 1940, meaning an immediate material benefit, and the propaganda of the regime portrayed Vargas as the "Father of the Poor." The corporative structure mounted at the time deeply influenced Brazilian labor organization.

The government adopted decisive measures in order to promote the substitution of imports and the establishment of a production-goods industry (including metallurgy, cement, electrical, etc.). Industrialization, it seemed, would allow for the change of course imposed by the international crisis and by the imminence of a world conflict. Contrary to common perception, the campaign for industrialization did not begin under the nationalistic flag. Vargas negotiated the establishment of a steel industry with United States Steel. The company eventually

decided against investing, alleging the “great uncertainty of Brazilian affairs.” The solution of state control was the result of an agreement between the U.S. and Brazilian governments celebrated in 1940. Finally, credits of Export-Import Bank plus Brazilian government resources financed the Volta Redonda steel plant.²⁶

The democratic interregnum between 1945 and 1964 was the historic moment in which the debate over nationalism versus alignment with the United States became most evident, including a discussion within the armed forces. The nationalists thought the Brazilian State should defend industrialization, regulating investments in strategic sectors and controlling the role of foreign capital. Adversaries of nationalism defended less intervention of the state in the economy, demanded rigid control of inflation, and placed less importance on industrialization. They allied clearly with the American crusade against communism. In his second administration (1951–54), Vargas adopted a nationalist course in the economic area—shocking foreign companies and the Brazilian elite. In addition, he announced a 100-percent increase in the minimum wage, preventing workers’ salaries from being eroded by inflation. In 1954, in the midst of a tempest of accusations and political crisis, he lost the support of the armed forces. His suicide and the letter to the nation that he left provoked an enormous popular commotion, postponing for ten years the coup d’état of his adversaries.

Compared with the turmoil of those years, the government of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956–61) looks not only stable, but optimistic. A combination of public and foreign investments pushed forward an industrialization focused on the internal market. A new capital, Brasília, was built in the center of the country to integrate the national economy. Modern architecture was symbolically identified with modernization, and the construction of new highways emerged as one of the most powerful elements of a developing program. Both the construction of roads and the urban planning emphasized the distribution of goods, and in São Paulo, foreign companies created an automobile industry. The national market developed quickly in those years, essentially shortening geographical distances and making the landscapes and cultures more seemingly homogeneous.

The political confrontation of the early sixties involved approximately the same social agents as did the former dispute. Here, social movements were more vocal, and for the first time the oppressed people of the countryside demanded land reform. In addition, the labor movement learned to rebuild parallel organizations broader than the official syndicalism; and the significant pull of urbanization gave more political weight to the middle class. Students, by the sixties, became a voice on the political scene. When the military coup arrived, the regime attacked all the forces that supported Goulart's populist and nationalist government. The military rulers—although the scale was grander and the politics authoritarian—returned to the economic model sketched during the Kubitschek years.

While the strong presence of the state in the economy endured (and grew significantly), foreign loans and protection of foreign capital became constitutive aspects of the national economy. This model privileged the big companies—foreign and national, private and public alike. Although exports had been encouraged, most of the industrial production was directed to the internal market. The labor movement, the students, and other social movements—rural and urban—were strongly repressed by the state. Congress and other political institutions lost their function. In sum, the high military sphere, the intelligence agencies, and the technical bureaucracy of the state ruled the country. On this basis, Brazil came to be the eighth most industrialized economy in the seventies.

The effort of controlling and integrating a huge territory included policies for the modernization of telecommunications and electronic media. The cultural and economic impact of these means contributed to the completion of the formation of a national market. Here, their political importance must also be emphasized in a country where the construction of a basic educational system has been always overlooked. The national market, which attained a considerable size, never truly became a mass market because the purchasing power of the minimum wage fell dramatically. A significant part of the Brazilian population was "integrated" into this market only by a "desire" to consume, having access to but a few commodities from the astonishing diversity advertised. While geographical distances shrunk and landscapes and cultures turned out to become even

more homogeneous than before, the untouched demons of social exclusion, disregard for human and natural life, and acceptance of violence as normal had grown frighteningly during the decades of the dictatorship.

The profound international productive rearrangement, which some have called the Third Industrial Revolution, or Technological Revolution, was already felt in Brazil during the seventies. The diffusion of the new technologies associated with new forms of management took place during the crisis of the military regime model of industrial relations. The economic crisis, democratization, and the emergence of a "new" labor movement brought these questions to the forefront. The process had a tentative character in a moment of retraction of the national market and reordering of international markets.²⁷ Diversification and smaller scales of production, exploring specific market niches, and quality instead of quantity — are the new slogans adopted worldwide. An important consequence of this rearrangement is the intensive use of skilled, flexible, cooperative labor instead of the extensive abuse of unskilled, limited, replaceable labor. The Brazilian elite's traditional neglect of education became a serious economic obstacle at this point.

While throughout the world old productive structures are rapidly abandoned and the scientific ability to create new technologies and new products become fundamental, the modernization of industry in Brazil continues in a context of crisis and unemployment that accentuates the authoritarian bias of the culture and makes difficult the introduction of more democratic and participatory management systems of industrial relations. Although the educational system did expand during the past few decades, it currently faces the urgent challenge of attaining both quantity and quality. A comparison with the last broad rearrangement of the world economy a century ago is suggestive. Again, the country has to deal with the labor problem, the constructive effort involved in the production of a territory organized in accordance with the economic, social, and cultural standards of our time. Once more, requalifying the relationship between the city and the countryside, the productive spaces within both, and Brazil's role in the international division of labor is not a question of physical investment, but one of the construction of institutions capable of dealing with changing

social relations. Of course, international subordination persists, but under new terms. In the late eighties, the fall of the so-called real socialism brought the Cold War world to an end. Neoliberal ideology has restored the old idea that the invisible hand of the market, with minimal state intervention, is the appropriate strategy to deal with economic and even social problems.

Brazil faces these challenges from a difficult position. Economic growth brought about devastating social effects. In the scenery of the huge, disorganized cities, pollution, noise and congestion, crime, and abandoned children are exposed crudely. Retirees line up for hours in order to receive a meager monthly retirement of U.S.\$110 or less. A state that never took up its social assignments, including the guaranteeing of the basic rights of citizenship, is now under the threat of breaking down. For, in these circumstances, it is easier to rhetorically recommend a decrease of public policies.

A redefinition of the state's role in the economy as well as in the society is on not only the Brazilian agenda, but also the world's. Apparently, humanity learned very well how to produce. Now the time has come to think about ways to distribute. For Brazil, leader in income concentration and social inequality, it is imperative to deal with this problem.

Social fragmentation, new forms of exclusion, diaspora, destruction — what is specific in the globalization process as seen from the South Atlantic? The anthropologist Lévi-Strauss once said that our cities became ruins before they were built. For many centuries, people in Brazil have lived the sensation of precariousness and instability said to be characteristic of post-modernity. In Brazil, as well as in the other Latin American countries, time has produced mostly ruins in a space without memories. In the midst of the endless contradictions in which human interchange has occurred, was there also a process of construction of a world culture?

III. Between National Unity and Sociocultural Differences

In 1822, with the political independence of Brazil, nationality and nationhood became important references in the elite's social thought. Political and juridical discourses—beginning with that pronounced by the imperial bureaucracy—forged the myth of

national unity based on an imagined community of language, territory, and religion. Literature performed an important role in this identity-building process.²⁸ Indianism,²⁹ in the context of the Romantic Movement, offered the legitimacy of a mythical and genuine origin. This myth obscured the persistence of Black slavery and the actual exclusion of the native from the process of constructing Brazilian citizenship. This was the reason why the Romantic authentication of Brazil's past matched so well with the centralization of the state and with the repression of social and federalist movements in the provinces.

The Catholic Church, organically tied to the state during the Empire, contributed to the unification of "national spirit" by the "formation of the souls." At the end of the nineteenth century, however, certain scientific doctrines, such as evolutionism, naturalism, and racial theories, played a decisive role in the design of "Brazilian identity." With the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the declaration of the Republic in 1889, the positivist ideology gained enormous influence in social and political thought. Authors like Graça Aranha and Euclides da Cunha, who in 1902 published formative books about the impasses of modern Brazil,³⁰ inquired about less traumatic ways to integrate the Brazilian backwoods into the civilizing process radiating from the cities and shaped by European values. It seems that in Brazil as well as Europe, three "cultures," or discursive fields, competed in the search for the explicative keys to the "unifying interpretation" of the country: the literary field, the scientific-naturalist field, and the sociological field.³¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, several projects and conceptions about modernization competed in the political and cultural spheres of Brazilian society over the best way to insert the country into the world of modern nations. With the incremental growth of urbanization and industrialization, a significant labor movement developed. Directed by socialists, anarcho-communists, and, above all, anarcho-syndicalists, this labor movement believed that reform, or an anticapitalist social revolution, would be the best strategy—always in an internationalist perspective—for creating a "modern civilization" in Brazil. The truth is that, in general, from revolutionaries to conservative nationalists, most of the authors adhered to the ideology of progress.

Exceptions to this standard — such as the historians Capistrano de Abreu and Manoel Bonfim, poets Cruz e Souza and Augusto dos Anjos, and writers Gonzaga Duque and Lima Barreto — stand out from their contemporaries exactly because they raised serious doubts about a “national identity” singularly based on the idea of progress at any price, and according to European or North American models. For instance, the North-eastern poet Augusto dos Anjos³² says in his poem “Os doentes” (The Sick Men) of 1912:

*E o índio, por fim, adstrito à étnica escória,
Recebeu, tendo o horror no rosto impresso,
Esse achincalhamento do progresso
Que o anulava na crítica da História!*³³

New attempts at “rediscovering Brazil” arose with the São Paulo Modernism of 1922 and the rise to power of a nationalist-positivist military, bureaucratic, and intellectual group led by Vargas in the so-called Revolution of 1930. The intellectual generation of elites, including Paulo Prado, Gilberto Freyre, Oliveira Vianna, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Caio Prado Jr., and Fernando de Azevedo, among others, searched using different theoretical and ideological frameworks, although with a similar question in mind: the roots of a possible “Brazilian culture.” Elaborating a diagnosis of the causes of our historic failures, they each identified the virtual agents of change as well as the potential conditions for modernization. Sometimes they favored the role of a centralized national state, sometimes the role of corporate organizations. They mentioned either the role of adaptive plasticity of the culture or the role of revolutionary parties and movements. Some of them proposed a relative national isolation while others proposed a complete integration into the world capitalist system.

A paradox remains in this strong essayist and interpretative tradition that continues today: the successive identifications that art, thought, and political practices have projected toward “national identity” come in turn to obscure the real weight of historic, regional, and cultural differences in Brazilian life. Ignoring or absorbing the social alterities in the identitarian game, these discourses, even the most libertarian, commit the

same violence—identity, a trace of blood, silence, and exclusion persists. This signals—even in the garrets of memory—the destiny of the “wretched of the earth” to exile in their own land; to the end of their languages, beliefs, and hopes; or simply to physical elimination.³⁴

Given the chance, can Brazilians gather scattered resources, knowledge, and will to make an inclusive community marked by autonomy and pluralism? The major challenge of the next century (and the millennium as well) will be to invent in the daily practice of our societies new forms of economic distribution, technological management, and political representation, not only in Brazil but in all the countries that constitute this “globalized” humanity.

IV. The Promised Land

At the time of this writing, a photographic essay about the Sem Terra Movement (MST) by Sebastião Salgado is being disseminated in Brazil and ninety other countries.³⁵ It contains a presentation by the Portuguese writer José Saramago and a compact disc with songs composed by Chico Buarque and Milton Nascimento. In these same days of April 1997, nearly 60,000 landless workers arrived in Brasília. They marched in concentric circles from several regions of the country, crossing thousands of kilometers toward the federal capital. They aimed to call the attention of the central authorities, including the president, to the unresolved situation of agrarian crises and conflicts in the Brazilian countryside. One of the songs written by Chico Buarque, named “Assentamento” (Settlement), which comes with the photographic album referred to above, says the following:

*Zanza pra aqui
Zanza pra acolá
Fim de feira, periferia afora
A cidade não mora mais em mim
Francisco, Serafim
Vamos embora
(...)
Quando eu morrer
Cansado de guerra*

Morro de bem
Com a minha terra:
Cana, daqui
Inhame, abóbora
Onde só vento se semeava
outrora
Amplidão, nação, sertão sem fim
Oh Manuel, Miguilim
Vamos embora³⁶

In the “Age of Globalization,” the active presence of these “wretched of the earth” wandering in an endless displacement found a faithful portrait in Buarque’s composition. Their nomadic destiny and suffering is touchingly captured by the photographer-artist. Here is a vivid and concentrated tale about exclusion and citizenship, and the abuse of human beings and the environment. Such distinctive forms of resistance and political practices show how relative is the idea of homogeneity formed by inheritance from the modern civilization of the West.

Perhaps one should clarify that in Portuguese *assentamento* (settlement) means a portion of land taken by the government from expropriated unproductive large estates or from public land and distributed to the dispossessed workers. However, it also means attachment to the soil and stable occupation of the land through agriculture or cattle. Culturally, it can mean the search for or discovery of roots, the design of an identity based on a concrete and collective historic-geographic experience.

Sebastião Salgado’s photographs and Chico Buarque’s poetry and music talk about the same excluding forces of the globalizing process promoted by technological-industrial modernity. We recognize the remote descendants of the native population in the agonizing and leathery faces portrayed by Salgado. Most of them are nomadic; they draw trails and itineraries in their long marches by *sertões*³⁷ and forests, creating a truly “savage cartography” in the constitution of the future Brazilian territory.³⁸ We recognize also the centuries-long diaspora of the African slaves and their Afro-Brazilian heirs. They learned early to survive the sharp tearing of roots and to resist in the *quilombos* (common territories that served as hiding places against slavery).

In those images, sounds, and words we can also see the Italian rural poor who immigrated en masse during the peak of the coffee economy. We may even find the European immigrants who cultivated small land properties in the South, later pushed out by the new land concentration process linked to the advance of urban-industrial capitalism. They are all characters depicted in the Brazilian literature, from José de Alencar and Euclides da Cunha to Graciliano Ramos and Guimarães Rosa.

Viewed from other Latin American countries — or from the vantage point of any other country that had known the violence of the modern colonial process in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania — the situation would not be so different. The so-called global age accelerated in this postcolonial world the shock of encounters with others more powerful. In these circumstances, these questions arise: How does one forge a unified world around the values of democracy, peace, and human rights that does not mutilate whole cultures or expel entire populations from their locales? How is it possible to make technological and industrial development effectively human and social? How can humanity continue to live and to grow without threatening the very survival of life on the planet?

These challenges — despite the declarations of states, politicians, and bureaucrats — remain highly problematic, contentious, and open questions. Brazil, for its significant dimension,³⁹ no doubt has an important role to play. To begin the task, perhaps it is necessary to invert the terms of the dilemma as normally presented by the media and government authorities. Instead of the usual neoliberal slogan “globalize or perish,” we should ask seriously and urgently what should be done so as not to perish globally. Brazil, champion of inequality, knows how to produce and reproduce exclusion and death in a centennial routine. Paradoxically, with its hybrid culture and amazing diversity of formative experiences, Brazil could find less dogmatic and more complex answers as a contribution to a postcolonial and global world.

Notes

1. French sociologist, one of the pioneers of social sciences in the University of São Paulo in the fifties. He coined this expression in the title of his classic synthetic essay. Roger Bastide, *Brasil, Terra de Contrastes* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1959).
2. Jacques Lambert, *Le Brésil* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953).
3. Roger Bastide, *Brasil, Terra de Contrastes*, 2d ed. (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1964), 15.
4. The main example is the capital, Brasília, founded in 1960, as a landmark of a developmentist project of modernization in the interior of the country.
5. Victor Leonardi, *Entre árvores e esquecimentos: história social nos sertões do Brasil* (Brasília: Ed. UNB/Paralelo 15, 1996).
6. According to data from the United Nations Habitat World Conference (Istanbul, 1996), with nearly 16.5 million inhabitants, the metropolitan region of São Paulo is already the second largest urban conglomeration on the globe, second only to Tokyo.
7. MST — Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers' Movement).
8. "Pesquisa Nacional por Amostragem de Domicílios" (Brasília: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 1996.)
9. *Folha de S. Paulo* (March 21, 1996): 1/4; and *Jornal da Tarde* (March 21, 1996): 15/A. The following data are based mostly in the "Relatório Brasileiro sobre o Desenvolvimento Social" presented by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the World Summit for the Social Development, Copenhagen, March 1995. Amélia Cohn et al., "Dossiê dívida social" in *Estudos Avançados* (São Paulo, IEA/USP), 24 (May/August 1995): 7–156.
10. It is worthy to point out the impressive differences concerning the territorial dimension and demographic profile of the several regions of the country. While the northern region accounts for 45.26% of the total area of the national territory and only 5.9% of the population (demographic density of 2.39 hab./km²), the southern region makes up only 6.76% of the country's area, but comprises 15.2% of the population (density of 41.28 hab./km²). The Central-West, also relatively less populated, embraces 18.86% of the total area and contains only 6.8% of the population (6.62 hab./km²). The Southeast, the most developed region and relatively most populated, has 10.85% of the territory, 43.5% of the population, and a density of 76.61 hab./km², a significant figure considering that the national average density near the 20 hab./km². Amélia Cohn et al., "Dossiê dívida social."
11. *Ibid.* Representing 22.7% of the total of the rural population, 9.4% of the urban population, and 8% of the metropolitan population.
12. *Ibid.* Sixty-three percent of the Brazilian rural poor and 32 percent of the total number of the country's poor are located in the northeastern region.

13. Ibid. There are more than 8.6 million urban poor households in Brazil, 2.8 million of which are at the level of absolute misery, while there are nearly 3.2 million rural poor households.
14. Antônio Barros de Castro, *Sete ensaios sobre a economia brasileira* (São Paulo: Forense, 1971).
15. The role of the Catholic Church, especially the Society of Jesus, cannot be stressed enough.
16. Warren Dean, *A história e a devastação da Mata Atlântica brasileira* (With Broadax and Firebrand: The Devastation of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest) (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996).
17. Emília Viotti da Costa, "1870 – 1889," in *Brazil: Empire and Republic: 1822 – 1930*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
18. By the 1840s, almost fifty years after gold mining had practically disappeared, coffee was defined as the main export, surpassing sugar for the first time. The plantations used slave labor, guaranteed by the internal commerce of slaves, even after the abolition of the slave trade in 1850. The areas suffering economic decadence exported slaves to frontier areas, where coffee plantations were located. See Bóris Fausto, *Pequenos Ensaios de História da República* (São Paulo, Brasiliense, *Cadernos CEBRAP*, n. 10, 1972) and Emília Viotti da Costa, "1870–1889."
19. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *A Era dos Impérios: 1875 – 1914* (The Age of Empire, 1875–1914) (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1988), 57–83. Several authors and contemporaries called that period the "new imperialism." See H. Wright, ed., *The "New Imperialism": Analysis of Late Nineteenth Century Expansion* (Lexington, Mass., and Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, 1976).
20. Brazil has the dubious honor of being the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. Maria Lucia Caira Gitahy, "The Port Workers of Santos, 1889 – 1914: Labor Movement and Urban Culture in an Early 20th Century Brazilian City" (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1991), 128.
21. Tamás Szmrecsányi observes that São Paulo state counted only one institution of higher education (the Law School, 1827) and two research centers still being installed (the Geographic and Geologic Commission, 1886, and the Imperial Agronomic Station of Campinas, 1887) when the Republic was declared in 1889. Four decades later, at the end of the First Republic, the state of São Paulo exhibited a significant group of research institutes of national renown (including the Agronomic and Butantã) and a net of professional schools that, joined by the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences, and Languages, would give birth to the University of São Paulo in the thirties. At present, the State Universities of São Paulo are responsible for 75% of Brazilian scientific production. Tamás Szmrecsányi, coordinator, research project in development, "As Instituições de Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo na Primeira República, 1890–1930," Grupo de História Econômica e Social da Ciência e da Tecnologia, DPCT/IG/UNICAMP, 1996.

22. Among several racist theories of the late nineteenth century, Brazilian elites chose an “optimistic” one. For them, miscegenation with the European immigrants would make the population “whiter” (*branqueamento*).
23. Maria Irene Szmrecsányi, “Rio e São Paulo” in *Revista USP*, no. 17 (São Paulo, USP) (March/April/May 1993): 204.
24. *Ibid.* The population of São Paulo surpassed Rio only in 1960.
25. Bóris Fausto, *História do Brasil* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1994), 369–70.
26. Thomas E. Skidmore, *Brasil de Getúlio Vargas a Castelo Branco (1930–1964)* (Politics in Brazil, 1930–1964: An Experiment in Democracy) (Rio de Janeiro: Saga, 1969), 68.
27. Leda Gitahy, “Inovação Tecnológica, Subcontratação e Mercado de Trabalho” in *São Paulo em Perspectiva* 8, no. 1 (1994): 144–52.
28. About this process, see Octavio Souza, *Fantasia de Brasil: as identificações na busca da identidade nacional* (São Paulo: Escuta, 1994).
29. Indianism incorporates the idea of the native population as the noble ancestors of the so-called Brazilian race.
30. Respectively, *Canaã*, a novel about the immigration of Germans to the backward state of Espírito Santo; and *Os sertões*, about the repression of the messianic movement of the Bahian peasants of Canudos at the end of the nineteenth century. About this subject, see Francisco Foot Hardman, “Between Ruins and Utopias: Veteran Modernists in Brazil (1870–1920)” in *Travesia: Journal of Latin American Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 84–113.
31. Wolf Lepenies, *As três culturas* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1996).
32. He published only one book, titled *Eu* (1912).
33. “And the Indian, finally, adscript to the ethnic scoria / Received, with horror printed in his face / This mocking progress / which nullified him in the critique of History.” Literal and not literary translation.
34. We regret to verify that this process continues nowadays. The historian José Murilo de Carvalho wrote a bruising article about the practice of torture and death by policemen against unarmed, poor “citizens” in the naval slum Diadema, south of the city of São Paulo. José Murilo de Carvalho, “500 anos de tortura e repressão” in *Jornal do Brasil* (13 April 1997): 8.
35. Sebastião Salgado, *Terra* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997).
36. “Wandering here / Wandering there / End of the fair, out of periphery / the city doesn’t live anymore in me / Francisco, Serafim / let’s go / (...) / When I die / tired of the struggle / I’ll die in love / with my land / Sugar cane, persimmon / Yam, pumpkin / Where only wind was sown / in olden times / Wilderness, nation, endless sertão / Oh Manuel, Miguilim / let’s go.” Sebastião Salgado, *Terra: Struggle of the Landless* (London: Phaidon, 1997).
37. The *sertão* refers the peculiar, rough landscape, both natural and cultural, of inland Brazil.
38. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, “Veredas do pé posto,” in *Caminhos e Fronteiras*, 3d ed. (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1970).

39. Be it in geo-economic, regional, demographic, urban-industrial terms, or from the viewpoint of the important tradition of diplomatic policy in international affairs.

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