

Politics as History and Literature

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The imposing figure of the lawyer, politician and diplomat Joaquim Nabuco almost conceals the writer of the first great synopsis of the Brazilian Empire. When he wrote the biography of Senator Nabuco de Araújo, Joaquim Nabuco simultaneously composed the history of the Empire, of the Emperor Pedro II and of his father.

Born in 1849 to an important family of politicians from Northeastern Brazil, Joaquim Nabuco, similar to most representatives of the imperial political elite, was a landowner's child whose wishes did not find any opposition from slaves or servants.¹ During the first years of his childhood, he was taken care of by his widowed great-aunt. He inherited her estate, which was immediately sold in order to finance his first trip to Europe, between 1873 and 1874. This trip left a deeply impression on him. His European style of dressing, speaking, thinking and writing is definitely established through his activity as an attaché for the Brazilian diplomatic legation, first in Washington and then in London.

Nabuco's European style, partly due to the urban culture influence of Recife,² partly due to the impact of his diplomatic life, has not gone unnoticed. He was accused of having his feet in Brazil but his mind in Europe. In the modernist generation of the 1920s, "Nabuco's disease" was a synonym for the Brazilian intellectuals' artificiality and Europeanization.³ Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, in the opening paragraph of his most influential book, *Raízes do Brasil*, summed up the phenomenon: "even nowadays we are expatriates in our own homeland."

Recent studies, however, have contributed for a better understanding of this polemical issue. Raymundo Faoro has stressed the cosmopolitanism of

the author of *Um Estadista do Império*, who was a critical reader of the historiographers of the nineteenth century: Ranke, Mommsen, Curtius, Taine, Burckhardt and Macaulay.⁴ In a relevant essay, Evaldo Cabral de Mello stressed that the modernist experience of the 1920s and 1930s, as a cultural phenomenon, has made impossible “our ability to understand the mentality of the average Brazilian of the ‘Segundo Reinado’ and of the ‘República Velha;’”⁵ the obsession with national identity would have prevented us from perceiving Nabuco’s true cosmopolitanism.

Taking advantage of Mello’s powerful insight, we can suggest that the reception of Nabuco’s works was decisively conditioned by the cultural discontinuity that occurred between the Monarchy and the Republic. More than a single substitution of political systems, what took place was indeed the questioning of the “place” of Brazil in the “civilized world.”⁶ If, after decades of a well-thought cultural program, the Monarchy had established a “place” grounded on the continuity with European civilization—a continuity that allowed Nabuco to feel at home in Rio de Janeiro, Paris or London—to the republicans the same “place” had been inexorably lost.

When Nabuco’s father died in 1878, his election to the Municipal Legislative Board was already settled among the old senator’s political allies. However, in 1879 when Nabuco became a deputy he surprised them by defending the abolishment of slavery. The fight for abolition soon left the Legislative Board, and in 1880 became the “Campanha Abolicionista,” the first organized movement of public opinion in the Empire. That movement had men such as José do Patrocínio, André Rebouças and Joaquim Nabuco as leaders.

The 1879 legislative body was dissolved. Therefore, Nabuco had to face election again in 1881, but he could no longer count on his father’s allies nor on his party members for support. His defeat then was not a surprise. He became popular with the campaign, but he also neglected the old political mechanisms. Moreover, none of the abolitionists were successful in the election that year.

Whether in his trips to Europe, where he made speeches and took part in international meetings, or in Parliament, to which he was elected in 1885 and 1887, or even as a journalist and writer, Joaquim Nabuco devoted himself, until 1888, almost exclusively to the cause of emancipation.

In 1888, even earlier than Nabuco’s most optimistic forecasts, the Legislative Board passed the abolition law. By means of the abolition, another

campaign grew stronger: the Republican Campaign. As a defender of Monarchy and parliamentarism and an admirer of the English political model, Nabuco opposed this campaign. He feared that Brazil would become another Latin-American Republic being overwhelmed by civil wars and having its political life ruled by military groups in constant uprising. When the Republic was proclaimed in 1889, Nabuco retired from parliamentary life for ten years, although he kept moderately active working on behalf of the monarchic restoration.

Nabuco returned to public life in 1899, when he promoted the Brazilian cause during the dispute with England over the frontier with British Guyana. In the following year, Nabuco took upon himself the task of leading the Brazilian diplomatic legation in London. The miscarried dispute with England coincided with the opening of the Brazilian Embassy in Washington, for which Nabuco was designated as the first Ambassador in 1905, a position that he held until he died in 1910. In the atmosphere of the Monroe Doctrine, Nabuco's enthusiastic and sometimes naive performance on behalf of Pan-Americanism⁷ would initiate the transfer of the Brazilian diplomatic center from London to Washington.

The Emperor died in 1891. One year after that, in a letter, Joaquim Nabuco mentioned the "old" project of writing about his father's life. *Um Estadista do Império* came out in three volumes between 1897 and 1899. The spirit of the book was already visible in its preface, where Nabuco writes: "I was engaged in this preliminary job from 1893 to 1894, mostly during the months of the Revolt when, immersed in the memories of our old peaceful fights, I heard outside the duel between sea and land artilleries in this bay."⁸ The book should be not only his father's biography, but also and above all the chronicle of an entire period.

Um Estadista do Império is divided into eight parts. The first six follow chronologically the life of Senator Nabuco de Araújo (1813-1878). The book mainly focuses on the ministerial cabinets, as if political life were the natural measure for organizing the history of the Empire. The seventh part breaks the linearity by introducing three thematic chapters, in which Senator Nabuco's activities as a jurist, lawyer, government adviser and writer of the Civil Code are studied. The general narrative thread is recovered in the eighth, final and privileged part, which deals with the period between Senator Nabuco's death and the end of the Empire in 1889, exceeding the old Senator's lifetime limits, since he died in 1878.

According to Nabuco, the history of the Empire was a picture of the individuals who built the nation. In addition, that account should include the biography of the man who was the center of national life:

When I write about the life of the Senator Nabuco de Araújo, I provide nothing but a partial view of his time. The main figure of the time is the Emperor himself. Only the one who would write about his life and illustrate it by means of the documents... could bring to a focus, in its convergence point, the *Great Brazilian Era*.⁹

In a letter dated 1894, he lamented not knowing the whereabouts of Pedro II's private archives: "I would like to entirely dedicate myself to the writing of *Dom Pedro II's Life* in the light of the documents he left."¹⁰ Repeatedly Nabuco comments on the privileged position of Pedro II, who, as the center of the political life, had access to all versions of the conflicts between different groups. Moreover, the Emperor had also received letters and documents from different parties and interests. Symbolically and materially, the Emperor stood at the center of the political life. The book, however, offers much more than a traditional political history. When he describes social life, Nabuco resorts to *mechanical* not to *organic* metaphors, as it was common in his time. More than a history book, *Um Estadista do Império* is a work of memory, focusing on an irreversible *temps perdu*.

Senator Nabuco de Araújo's life presents no surprises, for it portrays the imperial political elite: he graduated in Law from the college of Olinda, held public positions in the bureaucratic branches of the Government, became a prosecuting attorney in Recife, Province President, Senator and, at last, Adviser. The life of Nabuco de Araújo followed the standard of the Brazilian political elite, as José Murilo de Carvalho pointed out. According to Carvalho, this homogeneity in education and personal background was one of the main reasons for the political and territorial integrity of the Brazilian Empire, in contrast with the fragmentation that occurred in Spanish America.¹¹

It is based on such a background that Nabuco reconstructs the principal events in imperial history, always having in mind the general understanding of Brazil's "Great Era," marked by stability and continuity. Even peaceful ruptures, like the coup d'état that forced the abdication of Pedro I in 1831, are depicted in reconciling tones: "Deep down, the Revolution of April 7 was a friendly divorce between the Emperor and the nation..."¹²

The most troubled period in the imperial history, marked by several political and social uprisings, is thus advantageously changed in favor of the Monarchy. According to Nabuco, such revolts resulted from our first republican experience, namely, the period of the regency dating from Pedro I's abdication, in 1831, to the anticipation of Pedro II's full legal age, in 1840. In his opinion, "if Legal Age did not safeguard the nation... it would have been cast into an abyss."¹³

Nabuco explains that he intended to polish the Empire builders' image: "Maybe I have drawn a picture free of shades, I spoke as highly as I could of everyone, without speaking ill, as others could do."¹⁴ However, that does not prevent the author from having a deep understanding—maybe he was one of the first Brazilian intellectuals to be conscious of this—of the social dimension of some central events in political history. This dimension is perfectly developed in the understanding and analysis of the 1848 "Revolução Praieira," until then regarded as a mere revolt. Nabuco proves to know the social frame of the Revolution. The Praia "Party," after dominating the political setting, Recife, had its attempts to penetrate inward into the Province frustrated by the rural/patrimonial structure, where poor freemen (*"agregados"*) gathered around a great landowner by means of personal bonds and favors. The conflicts between the urban world and an inaccessible rural world, together with the retail supply problem in the capital (basically monopolized by Portuguese merchants), are identified as the causes of the popular rebellion: "the 'Revolução Praiera' was composed of these two elements—the foreign and the territorial; more than a political it was a social movement."¹⁵

However, it is in the description of human types that Nabuco excels. Regarded as a gentleman, Nabuco uses his genius to narrate the successive parliamentary generations occupying the Legislative Board during the nineteenth century. Elegance and politeness were more than simply social qualities because they demanded discipline and self-knowledge. Moreover they were taken as real social forces, a clear sign of the politician's career and importance. When he describes the arrival of politicians from the Province of Pernambuco at Court in Rio de Janeiro, Nabuco asserts:

The arrival of the so-called *leões do norte* ("Northern vehement politicians") had always been a social happening. They had a tradition of manners and noble treatment that set them apart from the others in the political world, who generally

were so careless and neglectful concerning lifestyle and indifferent to gallantry... Politeness and elegance together demand attention at every minute to every gesture, even when they become 'natural.' ... Apathy of manners easily becomes apathy of character and apathy of heart.¹⁶

The individual is one of the axis of the book. Each personality is part of the secrets of that history and registers, in his speech, his gestures, his clothes, the spirit of every generation, which composes the great panorama of the Empire. Although the figure of Senator Nabuco de Araújo is the one that naturally prevails in the portrayal, some of the most vivid lines are dedicated to other characters, often the Senator's political opponents, as the remarkable description of Ângelo Muniz da Silva Ferraz:

At the platform, he was a terrible adversary. His words came naturally, easily, abundantly, expressively, steadily, energetically; usually they were common; sometimes, they were fulminating. Because of his style of attacking deeply, exposing himself, he enraptured the spectators. As a passionate, impetuous, sometimes rude and always daring speaker, Ferraz was also of a generous nature and easy to understand.¹⁷

Nabuco often describes two characters together and outlines contrasts that are either divergent or complementary. Sometimes, using short sentences (which resemble formulas), he deciphers some social structures reflected in his characters. This happens with one of the greatest political leaders from Pernambuco: "Boa Vista was *the* diplomat, the *grand seigneur*, the adorning figure in his provincial Court, which comprised relatives, adherents, hangers-on."¹⁸

Through his father's eyes, he could revive the dying century that was the conclusion of an era. From the standpoint of the end of the Monarchy, the whole century seemed a progressive disintegration of political generations, although the material progress presumed the opposite:

The march, the enhancement of the country since 1822 is an unquestionable reality, but who would not feel... that habits present another integrity, life has a different dignity, society has other bonds, character bears another temper insofar as we refer to the past.¹⁹

Nabuco's nostalgic state of mind has two clearly distinct sources. Nostalgia appears when the liberal regrets the loss of a political system—the parliamentary monarchy—, which he believed to be the only model capable of mediating Brazilian conflicts. Another type of deeper nostalgia appears when he longs for an aristocratic society, whose social relations seemed to be based solidly on tradition. At times, it is almost impossible to dissociate these two types of nostalgia.

Few men are successful in withstanding the passage of time. The continuity between periods, whose generations decayed inversely to the growth of material wealth, is the greatest challenge that Nabuco met in his book. In most cases, the march of time devours the men who remain strongly attached to their own era. That is the case with Antônio Rebouças and Teófilo Ottoni. Regarding Rebouças, Nabuco writes:

Everything in him reminds one of another time, a past and God-forsaken period: spirit, manners, arguments; above all, however, he was a singular nature, that held aristocratic refinement as well as that spirit of equality peculiar to those who possess the same sense of honor and equity.²⁰

Regarding Ottoni, Nabuco wrote this well-known comment on the 1860 elections:

If he had not become, as in the words of Disraeli, 'an extinct volcano,' a worn-out man, from other times, who had not renewed his political means since 1831, a novice veteran, looking like a live anachronism in view of the generations educated in a modern way...²¹

In Nabuco's opinion, to think of "political history" was almost a redundant expression, for history and politics become synonyms. Writing the Empire's history was a way to remain politically active, not only through the defense of Monarchy, but mainly by means of the mission of providing the nation with a record of this "Great Exemplary Era." His narrative takes up the task of discovering the truth that survives the passage of time. Only feelings, ideas and lessons remained from that society, of which he was one of the hopes, and which had come to an end. In his autobiography, Nabuco shed light on the mission he took upon himself: "to polish images, feelings, remembrances that I desired to carry in my soul..."²²

Notes

- ¹ For the biography of Joaquim Nabuco, refer to Carolina Nabuco, *A Vida de Joaquim Nabuco*.
- ² See Mello, "O Fim das Casas Grandes."
- ³ Regarding the usage of this expression by Mário de Andrade, see Neves 278.
- ⁴ Faoro 23.
- ⁵ Mello, "No Centenário de Minha Formação" 13.
- ⁶ Regarding the imperial solution, refer to Mattos 80-101, especially 101.
- ⁷ See Prado, "O Cavaleiro Andante dos Princípios e das Reformas."
- ⁸ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 31.
- ⁹ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 32.
- ¹⁰ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 1318.
- ¹¹ See Carvalho, *A Construção da Ordem*.
- ¹² Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 66.
- ¹³ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 67.
- ¹⁴ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 1354.
- ¹⁵ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 114.
- ¹⁶ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 74.
- ¹⁷ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 175-76.
- ¹⁸ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 403-04.
- ¹⁹ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 184.
- ²⁰ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 406.
- ²¹ Nabuco, *Um Estadista* 422.

On the difficult process of modernization of the aesthetic, scientific and moral spheres in Brazil, see Costa Lima, *Terra Ignota*, especially chapters I and V. On the permanence of rhetoric instruction in Brazil, see Acízelo, *O Império da Eloquência*.

- ²² Nabuco, *Minha Formação* 220.

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