

## The USA and Brazil: Capitalism and Pre-Capitalism According to Oliveira Vianna

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The work of Oliveira Vianna appears today, unquestionably, as a classic of Brazilian social thought. The link between his analyses and his proposal for an authoritarian State, highlighted by his political engagement with the *Estado Novo* (“New State”) machinery (1937–1945), for a long time hindered the debate regarding his work—branded, simplistically, as racist and reactionary. Today, however, these characteristics are being transformed into an initiative to reevaluate his work. At last, along with Francisco Campos, Cassiano Ricardo, Almir de Andrade and others, he represents the intellectual who proposes to escape the limits of academia, thinking that only through participation in government he could implement his ideas. This renewed interest explains the 1987 reprinting of an unedited text by this historian and sociologist who died in 1951: *História Social da Economia Capitalista no Brasil* (*The Social History of Economic Capitalism in Brazil*).

This two-volume book was never finished—certain chapters remained incomplete, while others were merely outlined. However, this does not matter. In it Vianna effects a re-vision of his entire work, obliging the reader to accompany him. To survey this rereading would necessarily be a difficult task, one that we cannot accomplish fully in these introductory remarks.

Throughout the book, Oliveira Vianna addresses and develops themes that are already central in his earlier works. The principal theme is the “social problem” found in the world and in Brazil, viewed as a sign and product of the development of modern capitalism. To understand and resolve the “social problem,” the common approach in the 1930s was to start with the analysis of the social formation of Brazil. The resolution of problems like the

representation of modern conflicts between capital and labor appeared to Vianna to be something that would merit an investigation that dealt specifically with the characteristics of a nation and its people. It is not by accident, however, that the book begins with a reference to *Direito do Trabalho e Democracia Social. O Problema da Incorporação do Trabalho* (1951), and often refers as well to Vianna's first book, *Populações Meridionais no Brasil* (1920), which also has a strong historical emphasis.

The initial aim of the book is expressed in its title: it tries to be a social history, not a history of the capitalist economy of Brazil, which would analyze the facts of the country's technological production and evolution. The author himself notes in the preface that it is one thing to acknowledge and accompany the material development of capitalism, and another to analyze the social consequences that unfold from the beginning of these new conditions. This in turn would warrant a study of the uses, the traditions, the mentality and the social types found in the country.

Nevertheless, if this is the aim that organizes the book, the author confesses that he was obliged to alter its framework significantly. This is because his assumption that the "capitalistic economy had dominated all of Brazil" was false. From this new perspective there emerged two Brazils, and capitalist culture was limited in fact to a small fraction of the people. The vast majority of Brazil's regional populations were shielded far away from the influence of supercapitalism, and "maintained themselves close to its primitive structure and pre-capitalist mentality, the same that had been formed from the early days of Brazilian civilization and history" (1: 20). And this would in turn be the central thesis of the two volumes.

In order to ground his analysis, Oliveira Vianna retraces an immense and diversified number of sources. First of all, there are the "modern historians and sociologists of the more recent European and American economies," such as Werner Sombart, Max Weber, Henri Pirenne, Gaetan Pirou, among Europeans; and Lewis Mumford, Edward Ross, Thorstein Veblen, A. Berle and J. F. Normano, among Americans. What is important to point out is that the whole work has, in fact, a remarkable comparative perspective that includes the experience of European countries and, especially, the United States. Secondly, there are sources on Brazil, including accounts of European travelers (such as Johann Baptist von Spix, Karl Friedrich von Martius, Johann Moritz Rugendas and John Luccock); texts of chroniclers and Brazilian historians (such as Antônio Vieira, André João Antonil, Afonso

Taunay, Joaquim Nabuco, Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão, Joaquim Francisco Lisboa and Manuel de Oliveira Lima); the censuses from 1920 and 1940; and even references from the literary works of past and contemporary writers, such as José Lins do Rego and Jorge Amado.

Besides the theoretical orientations that define the work and the conclusions it reaches, there must also be stressed the originality and sensibility with which Oliveira Vianna understood certain cultural characteristics of what can be called “our peoples” and from which he provided a fascinating bibliography for the study of Brazil.

The initial section of the first volume is a general introduction. In it there is a definition of what Sombart calls modern capitalism. In the last decades, this has transformed into supercapitalism. The author’s goal is necessary: there has to be a clear understanding of this new capitalism, so that it will enable an evaluation of its presence and duration in Brazil and, more specifically, in order to analyze its social repercussions (in the sense of the sociological school of Frederic Le Play). Among these questions, one concerns him the most: the effects of supercapitalism on labor conflicts and therefore on the government’s orientations towards a new social policy. His reflection on “the social problem” is always determined by what he sees as the singularity of Brazil’s historical and geographic formation insofar as it regards both “our sentiments and traditional attitudes” towards workers and the new political directives adopted in Brazil after the 1930 Revolution.

Oliveira Vianna also systematically turns to the work of Mumford and Ross, considered by him as exponents of the modern North American social sciences. Together with Sombart, they allow him to analyze three aspects of capitalism—the technical, the legal and the psychological. These aspects may or may not overlap in time and space, although each has an independent emergence and development.

“Technological capitalism” is marked by technical modernization, especially in the phenomenon of multiple concentrations (capital, motor power, production, work force, industry profits, etc...). “Legal capitalism” is characterized by new techniques of investment and companies with new legal structures. These are the immense societies that the author calls *mamutes*—the cartels and German *konzerns*, the French *ententes*, the North American trusts and holdings.

No other country exemplifies this new type of capitalism and its complex mastery of technical organization better than the United States of America.

And it is also there that the psychological dimension of supercapitalism most manifests itself. This “psychological capitalism”—coined by Sombart—would be, according to Oliveira Vianna, entirely dominated by the unlimited spirit of profit. It constitutes not only North American businessmen, but also the entire population that works and lives with the expectation to participate in the “economy of profit.” In societies in which this “drive” (*estado de espírito*) predominates, man is what he has; if he doesn’t have anything, he doesn’t know anything and is nothing (1: 41). In its psychological aspect, however, modern capitalism corresponds to a society exclusively attached to profit.

For the author, the “primitive elements of this spirit of profit” were transmitted to the North Americans from old Europe through the cycle of the great marine companies and their mercantilism. This cultural inheritance or legacy would have been exacerbated in American lands by what Mumford calls the mineral complex. No other people of the new continent were so affected by a tradition of getting rich quickly and easily. Therefore, they ended up transferring everything to the areas of productive activity. It is this element that distinguishes the economic and social trajectory of the United States from that of Brazil, for instance. Brazilian periods of financial prosperity, as in those of mining and of coffee cultivation, did not have the recurrence or the intensity that occurred in the American experience. For this reason, the spirit of profit did not persist in Brazil, nor did it radiate, having been up to a certain point engulfed by a different cultural tradition.

Meanwhile, to understand the specific *ethos* of a society, it is necessary to analyze its historical trajectory as well as its distinguishing elements, such as the dynamic of different economic factors and the construction of a cultural heritage. However, the domination of a certain social mentality would not be permanent. For Oliveira Vianna, the social history of North American capitalism suggests distinct periodizations. Until the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, the North American agricultural civilization was frankly pre-capitalist. It was only in the short interval between 1890 and 1905 that “the spirit of capitalism” burst in and dominated without retreat. Afterwards, it was felt that an “ethical reaction” to its material excesses was needed, “which culminated in the corporatist and anti-capitalist policies of Roosevelt’s New Deal” (1: 41).

Nonetheless, the situation was different in Brazil. The country was still struggling in the pre-capitalist mentality, when there appeared “islands” here

and there of capitalistic culture. Indeed, this is the thesis that *História Social* tries to demonstrate. In the first phase, the author analyzes the social history of agriculture and the commercial and industrial economy in order to make evident the characteristics, the force and the permanence of the "pre-capitalist spirit." In the second phase, he examines the development of supercapitalism and the obstacles that it encounters in Brazil, insisting on the predominance of the mentality of the "economy of maintenance" over the "economy of profit."

However, if Brazil's society was still "pre-capitalist," this was not due, for Oliveira Vianna, to social stagnation. Brazilians were and are capable of mercantilist forms of acting and thinking. But among Brazilians these forms return to mix with the pre-capitalist mentality, or are blocked for being judged inadequate. In *História Social* he gives special attention to the Brazilian industrial regime and to the leaders of the industrial class, abandoning the customary emphasis on the territorial aristocracy. He treats this choice, nevertheless, only as a question of emphasis, since the beginning of Brazilian history lay in the cultivation of lands through the plantation system.

A historical survey of the colonial period and the Empire reveals the system of the agrarian nobility, the characteristics of which the author labels the "economy of maintenance," as much in life (subsistence), as in social position (status). All Brazilian economic activity over the centuries had two basic motivations: nobility and abundance.

But this picture is also not static. One identifies this landlord mentality and its persistence throughout time; Oliveira Vianna recognizes a certain permeability in Brazil's rural society to the styles of modern capitalism. He points out the sugar industry and the coffee culture as agrarian experiments that were able to be penetrated by "technical capitalism" as much as by "psychological capitalism." From this, having as a reference the "territorial nobility" (1: 99), Vianna analyzes the evolution and the role of the commercial and industrial middle class in Brazil. Underlying this work is the study of the formation of Brazilian society, which was "grounded on slavery, which disqualifies not only the manual work but also any type of occupation in profitable professions" (1: 180). In relation to commerce, he shows that, on the one hand, the upper middle class only began to develop in southern Brazil, and much later than the "coffee civilization." On the other hand, the commercial activity itself never reached a level to be considered. In relation



to the industrial middle class, the picture is not much different, while the craft industry is disqualified even more so since from the beginning it was practiced by Africans.

But, even with these obstacles—especially foreign competition, protected by free capitalists—the evolution of Brazilian industrial capitalism did not cease. Using census statistics, the author argues that a constant though discontinuous increase in the rhythm of Brazil's industrial progress can be observed (1: 211). The important moment in this ascension is the period after World War I, when a nucleus of modern industrial capitalism emerged in a triple aspect in São Paulo—technical, legal and economic.

Thus, after noting the late and localized appearance of the focal points of this supercapitalism, especially in the technical and legal dimensions, Oliveira Vianna shows that a series of economic, social and political contingencies brought harsh resistance to this tendency. This was also the reaction articulated by the very same corporatist “National State.” Therefore, the examination of the conditions of the historical development of certain productive activities of the classes that were responsible for them shows that modern capitalism did not fully develop in Brazil.

Vianna then comes to the conclusion that the pre-capitalist economy in Brazil is predominant, and especially so in the permanence of the “spirit of the classes that are not engaged in commercial activities” (1: 52). This path, distinctly anti-Enlightenment, does not appear to be regression or a return to the past, once a “historical as well as a sociological law” is revealed through the dynamics of Brazilian society (1: 92). It is natural that, in opposition to a historical cycle like that of supercapitalism, there will be reactions that express at the same time the boredom, the fatigue, and the repulsion of men to this specific cycle, and that they will then attempt to articulate alternative historical experiences. If the new economic cycle—involving a directed economy, corporatism and socialism—should appear to restore the old pre-capitalistic civilization, it would not be simply a repetition of an earlier already overcome cycle but its recreation. The occurrence of the phenomenon in the very core of supercapitalism, namely the United States, would be an undisputed proof of this “law” (1: 105).

If, in the “material aspect,” supercapitalism in Brazil encountered obstacles to its expansion, even greater difficulties would result for its “psychological aspect.” While admitting that, in the distant future, the “spirit of supercapitalism” might be able to dominate industrial companies,

especially those of São Paulo, Vianna considers that even these companies for a long time continued to be the “basis of living for their owners, directed by the good and traditional pre-capitalist manner—in a spirit of pure economy of maintenance and status” (2: 63).

The diagnosis is made without ambiguity. If, from the point of view of material development, it can be said that in Brazil there is modern capitalism,

... nothing of this, however, affects the general conclusion: from the psychological point of view, we still have much of the pre-capitalist phase. Not only are spiritual values very important but also money is not everything in these two capitalist centers; university degrees are here and there [Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo] still the better chance for the communication of individuals in elite positions. Our enriched superindustrials, making themselves papal counts, truly reveal that they do not feel that in itself money is enough; but also Christian virtues are needed. (2: 196)

Happily, concludes the author, the “spirit of capitalism” in Brazil is the exception that confirms the rule of the predominance of the pre-capitalist mentality. Cultural reasons grounded on moral origins—born in the mentality of Brazil’s agrarian aristocracies—, and political reasons—expressed in the neo-corporatist directives of the social politics of the National State preserved in the Constitution of 1946—make one believe that for a long time the country was free from the “spirit of greed and violence,” protected by the “old pre-capitalist mentality, that so much nobility, justice and dignity were spread in the life and traditions of our people” (2: 197).

In the end, Vianna’s book proposes a conservative project—updated and coherent—for a modern and moral economy, in which the technological improvement would coexist with the ethical responsibility of the richest for the poorest. In short, a classic project in which the traditional and the modern would interact in a synthesis both necessary and possible. Moreover, according to Vianna, such a synthesis would be entirely Brazilian.

### Work Cited

- Vianna, Oliveira. *História Social da Economia Capitalista no Brasil*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia/Niterói: Editora da Universidade Federal Fluminense, 1987.