

Raymundo Faoro's Roundabout Voyage in *Os Donos do Poder*

Marcelo Jasmin

Translated by Ross G. Forman

There are two different editions of *Os Donos do Poder: Formação do Patronato Político Brasileiro* by Raymundo Faoro (b. 1925): the original, published in 1958 by Editora Globo in Porto Alegre, and the second edition, revised and expanded, published in 1975 by the same publisher in association with the Editora da Universidade de São Paulo. The two editions are physically different: the first comprises one volume, 271 pages, 14 chapters, and 140 notes. The second consists of two volumes, 750 pages, 1335 notes and many more bibliographic references. The presence of Marx and Engels in the notes of the 1975 edition, for instance, contrasts with their remarkable absence in the original edition. Two new chapters offer a detailed expansion of Faoro's argument into the Republican period, a subject almost ignored in the first edition. These additions, however, neither alter the basic structure of the work nor its principal ideas. True, the second version is more erudite and offers a more extensive grounding for its thesis based on the Weberian sociology of traditional domination, but the thesis itself remains unaltered. The revisions of the second edition have not always been viewed as improvements by academic critics. The alterations place additional weight on a vigorous and persuasive study marked by the simplicity of its interpretation, a weight that some critics find weakens the force of the original's concise style (see, for instance, Iglésias 142).¹

Nonetheless, the two-volume version enjoyed extraordinary success. It may have taken seventeen years for a second edition to appear in April 1975, but various reprints followed more quickly, one in January 1976 and another a year later. The edition's popularity, however, had little to do with the new form of

the text. A cultural atmosphere of resistance to dictatorship welcomed a book whose very title criticized authoritarian power and which proposed new ways to understand the persistence of the military's control over the Brazilian State.

The work's first edition, appearing at the end of the 1950s, situated itself within a cultural and political debate centering around disputed notions of such terms as nationalism and development. This may explain, in part, the book's modest reception by the intellectual community at the time, even though it received an award from the Academia Brasileira de Letras.

A history of the reception of *Os Donos do Poder's* has yet to be written. It could be argued with some truth that Raymundo Faoro's public activities in defence of the rule of law—either as prosecutor for the State of Guanabara or as a spokesperson for the Brazilian bar association, the “Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil” (a group that, together with the “Associação Brasileira de Imprensa” and the “Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil,” spearheaded civil society's fight against dictatorship)—brought attention first to the author and then to his work. And it is reasonable to suppose that the success of such a large and difficult book, in the form of an expanded second edition, owes much to the prominent position that Faoro occupied in the public eye.

It is also likely that the continuation of military rule and the radicalization of the dictatorship in 1968 stimulated sensitivity to an argument about the continuity of a patrimonial rule and a bureaucratic status group in Brazilian development. It became prudent to imagine once more that this status group (or an element of it, the military) reinforced the main trends of Brazilian history, giving the military coup a new sense of intelligibility through the interpretative frame of *Os Donos do Poder*. If facts seemed to confirm the book's thesis, in the 1970s this made it a tool in the battle against the military, expanding its reception beyond academic circles.

Yet it would be a mistake to attribute the book's status as a “classic” exclusively to the lawyer's renown or to those particular historical circumstances. Instead, its critical acclaim rests in a persuasive argument that offered a historical explanation to make sense of the nation's present, as well as in the alternative view it provided to the local intelligentsia's hegemonic conceptions.

The changes between the first and second editions of the book do not, as I have said, affect Faoro's principal thesis. From his perspective, the course of Brazilian history is marked by patrimonial domination, transplanted from Portugal to Brazil through the process of colonization. It concerns the

obstinate continuity of the structures developed during the consolidation of the modern Portuguese State, which—from the fourteenth century onwards—freed itself of feudal vestiges and promoted State centralization and a form of capitalism politically designed to benefit the monarchical State.

Faoro describes Portuguese history using Max Weber's categories of traditional domination. At first, there is a patriarchal system by which kings govern a kingdom "like their own households," directed by the regulations of a "natural economy." Thus "the nation is administered as part of the sovereign's household, limiting market action and almost eliminating the need for currency." A second stage begins at the moment when a monetary economy is implemented: an administrative staff is formed which—although originally "just the meeting of members of court with those they protect"—becomes a "body of domination" (*Os Donos* 11-12).² Here, as in Weber's theory, traditional domination goes from being patriarchal to patrimonial and estate-type through the way in which the administrative staff appropriates to itself judicial and military powers (as if it privately owned everything), and the economic potentials those powers imply.³

Faoro derives his central ideas from this initial premise. First, he accepts the idea that patrimonial domination, as it evolved in the Portuguese State and was transported to Brazil, involves a form of politically oriented capitalism that prevents the free expansion of a market economy. Controlled by a status group and for its own benefit, mercantile capitalism is dominated by monopolies and by royal intervention that "irrationally limit economic development" (*Os Donos* 11-12). A political capitalism (in which colonization is included) "springs up in the shadow of the royal household, making itself an appendix to the state." By contrast, a "rational economy, run according to its own rules, with a system of accounting for its operations, is strangled at birth" (*Os Donos* 12). The lack of a formally rationalized economy and of "market conditions" hinders the "stability of long-term planning" and, as a consequence, forestalls industrial enterprise that might provide a regular economic base and the rational capacity for planning. "Rational law, the field through which [industrial enterprise] expands, neither exists nor is able to develop" (*Os Donos* 13).

Faoro's explanation for the "reasons why [modern industrial] capitalism is prevented from flourishing" follow that described by Weber's ideal type:

... patrimonialism, be it patriarchal or with a staff, has the power to materially

regulate the economy, diverting it from its proper course and redirecting it to meet the goals of the State, [that is] utilitarian, military, socioethical, or cultural goals and values. This, in sum, is the principal, special circumstance; by virtue of it, economic activity is alienated from formal rational organization in order to subordinate it to the needs and the haphazard discretion of the prince. (*Os Donos* 13)

In other words: "Capitalism, prevented from being freely expressed, is diverted and subjugated to the political" (*Os Donos* 12). The bureaucratic status group, according to this scheme, opposes and prevents the development of autonomous social classes. Thus the absence of a "rational economy" corresponds to the lack of groups that can organize their interests according to impersonal and universal market rules and without depending on a privileged relationship with the State. As a result the development of a liberal political thinking, appropriate to the dynamic center of modern capitalism as established in Weber's ideal type, is obstructed. In the context of Brazilian history, the true center of activity can be found exactly where this interpretation of Weber's theory affirms it ought not to be: in the State.

This analysis thus elaborates a structure of domination that divides the State from the nation, making the first the exclusive pole for all social, economic, and political initiatives and making the second an unwilling witness of the deleterious consequences of politically motivated capitalism. Economic anemia is also political anemia, and if the failure of industrial capitalism is the cause of underdevelopment, the lack of autonomous classes explains the authoritarian and exclusionary character of national politics. As a result there is no independent civil society, liberal thought, or rational capitalism (the presumed signs of modernity), only patrimonial, estate-type, and bureaucratic domination.

Thus translated to Brazilian history, the theory of Weberian types of domination paints the picture of an "absence," of an impossibility, a picture that reveals something *other*, perhaps desirable, but that does not now and has never existed in Brazil. It is no accident that Faoro's thesis is better formulated through negation: estate-type and bureaucratic patrimonialism in Brazil made the modern conditions of a rational economy and the legality of a state of law inviable.⁴ Significantly, Faoro called this "diversion of capitalism" "the original sin of Portuguese development"—a sin which, like Adam's and Eve's, indelibly marked posterity and "still exerts a vivid and

powerful influence over Brazil in the twentieth century" (*Os Donos* 12).⁵

This connection between the absence of the thing coveted and original sin constructs the long *durée* of Faoro's theory of national history as a sort of "non-history" or of "dialectic without synthesis" in Hegelian terminology. In the 1958 edition, Faoro sought, by combining the theories of Leon Trotsky (*The History of the Russian Revolution*) and Arnold Toynbee (*A Study of History*), a philosophy of history that could explain the reasons why the "rise of a genuine Brazilian culture" was frustrated (*Os Donos* 269-71). From Trotsky's "law of combined development," he drew an understanding of cycles of development in the "backward countries" of the global economy. The need to protect their economies from competition regarding world economic powers obliged the governments of backward nations to "leap forward, skipping over the intermediate steps of normal evolution and provoking serious incongruities in economic and cultural spheres" (*Os Donos* 265). In opposition to this supposed pattern of "normal evolution," with its well-defined phases of harmonious economic development, one can see in the context of the inequality of economic rhythms, a "combination of distinct phases, an amalgam of archaic forms with the most modern ones" (Trotsky, cited in *Os Donos* 266). This gives rise, Faoro concludes, to "striking cultural incongruities," combining high technology (machine guns and radios, for example) with "strong cultural residues" ("folk remedies, with strong superstitious connotations, administered to the sound of prayers and blessings") (*Os Donos* 266).

This schizophrenic mixing of the modern and the archaic corresponds to the schism between State and nation as "different realities, alienated and opposed to each other and mutually distrustful of one another." Two societies are juxtaposed: "one, cultivated and educated, the other, primitive, unstratified, lacking in tellurian symbolism." Floating "like phantasms" between a European culture that "informs the intellectual layer of their thinking" and the culture "of the common people, that impresses their unconscious temperament," members of the status group are turned into "men without roots" whose calling is one of "an idealism superior to reality," one of "irrealism disconnected from the sources of imagination." On one side are the legislators and politicians, with their propensity for "jurism," seeking to "construct reality through the force of law"; on the other side are the common people, marked by a "primitivism," which makes no distinction between religious and political systems of value, and who survive "through a

confusion of undifferentiated impulses,” expressing their anxieties through a sort of “politics of salvation” while waiting for a thaumaturge (Faoro, *Os Donos* 268-69).

This schizophrenia does not resolve itself, but is supported by the patrimonialist State that gains strength from this discord and frustrates the possibility of a “genuine Brazilian culture.” Here, the explanation of these phenomena comes not just from Trotsky, but also from Toynbee’s theory of the birth of civilizations. At the end of the first volume of *A Study of History*, Toynbee elaborates a pattern for the emergence of what he calls “related civilizations,” that is, societies whose historical origins derive from a process of differentiation and internal secession from a previous civilization to which they retain ties of “apparentation” and “affiliation.”⁶ According to this pattern, a decline in the “creative power” that previously inspired voluntary allegiance from the whole of that civilization causes it to disintegrate into two opposite poles: on one side, a “dominant minority” that, remaining tied to the old society, seeks to preserve itself; on the other side, a “proletariat” (identified as a group by being “negatively privileged in relation to the dominant minority”) which, not finding in the dominant minority any real representation for itself, becomes “conscious that it has a soul of its own” and “mak[es] up its mind to save its soul alive.” Within this conflict between the preservation of the *status quo* by the minority and the desire to secede inscribed in the soul of the now self-aware proletariat, “we can discern one of those dramatic spiritual encounters which renew the work of creation by carrying the life of the Universe out of the stagnation of autumn through the pains of winter into the ferment of spring” (Toynbee 336; cited in Faoro, *Os Donos* 270).

However, in Brazil’s case the “secession” of the proletariat did not occur, and therefore did not bring about a “spring.” In Brazil, “the nation, the classes, and the people did not succeed in differentiating themselves,” squeezed as they were by the bureaucratic status group. The result was a “frail” civilization, “ailing from birth, as if it had been attacked by infantile paralysis.” “Toynbee’s lesson,” Faoro says, leads to the conclusion that “resistance from anachronistic institutions stymied the expansion of Brazilian society.” Such anachronism translated into a backward force, an impediment to historical innovation, preventing the realization of a (desired) modernity. Failing to follow the pattern of differentiation-secession created a civilization of “social monstrosity.” Vacillating between the modern and the archaic, between to be or not to be, Brazilian civilization according to Faoro deserves

the label of “fancy” (Faoro, *Os Donos* 271; Faoro, *Os Donos* [1977] 748).

Nonetheless, the book’s second edition revisited, without being explicitly self-critical, some of the terms of its historical perspective from 1958, which naively upheld a strongly linear notion of universal history. In 1975, criticizing the idea that capitalist society represented the “culmination of history,” Faoro affirmed that the “compatibility of modern capitalism with patterns of tradition wrongly identified as pre-capitalism” was “one of the keys to understanding the phenomenon of Brazilian-Portuguese history” (*Os Donos* [1977] 735-37). Yet this revision is made in order to reinforce his principal point about the “frustration” of Brazilian culture and the way in which it was weighed down by “the suffocating embrace of the administrative shell” (*Os Donos* [1977] 748).

The argument itself was maintained. Neither the growth of the national State and the inevitable bureaucratization which accompanied it nor the disappearance of the monarchy nor even the establishment of the “Estado Novo” (1937–1945) shook an analytic frame that reaffirmed an empire of bureaucratic order. As explained in the 1958 edition, the principal changes derived from the national economy’s inevitable involvement in the global dynamic of capitalism reinforced the structure of domination: “private capital, unable to stay in the race, is absorbed by the State, which controls, regulates, and protects it, strengthening the bureaucratic status group, which now has become the nation’s purveyor” (*Os Donos* 43).

Modernization, the principal method for historical change, is also the principal “cause of the continuance” of the “patrimonial and bureaucratic estate-type order” (*Os Donos* 265). Faoro’s theory of history expresses itself in this mechanism of self-reproduction: if there are changes over time, these changes reinforce the structure of domination, which remain fully intact, neutralizing all potential innovations. This historical dynamic implies a permanent updating of estate-type power (the manifestation of original sin), which corresponds to an eternal return to the absence of what is desired (unrealized secession, modernity). The final chapter of the 1975 edition, with its suggestive title “The Roundabout Journey: From Patrimonialism to the Status Group”⁷ carries with it an expression of the dramatic nature of this secular continuity: “From Dom João I to Getúlio Vargas, over a six-century long trip, a political and social structure resisted all fundamental transformations, all profound challenges and the crossing of the wide ocean”

(*Os Donos* [1977] 733).

Notes

¹ Explanations of Faoro's argument can be found in Iglésias (1976), Mendonça (1995) and Mello e Souza (1999). For an overview of Faoro's thinking, especially subsequent to the publication of *Os Donos do Poder*, see Mendonça (1999). An excellent discussion of Faoro in the context of Max Weber's reception in Brazil appears in Werneck Vianna (1999). For a critique of the notion of bureaucratic status group in Brazilian history, see Carvalho (1996) 129-53.

² All citations for Faoro's *Os Donos do Poder* refer to the first edition, unless otherwise noted.

³ "*Patrimonialism* and, in the extreme case, *sultanism* tend to arise whenever traditional domination develops an administration and a military force which are purely personal instruments of the master" (Weber 231). "*Estate-type domination* [*ständische Herrschaft*] is that form of patrimonial authority under which the administrative staff appropriates particular powers and the corresponding economic assets" (Weber 232). In the estate-type domination, "the appropriation of judicial and military powers tends to be treated as a legal basis for a privileged status position of those appropriating them" (Weber 236).

⁴ The view according to which the Brazilian nation lacked the positive attributes necessary to the development of modern life has a long tradition. See, for instance, Moraes' work on the "Portraits of Brazil" (60-67).

⁵ Patrimonialism, Faoro stated in a 1993 article, "is as deep as Brazilian history, and by that I include its Iberian origins. It extends from the patrimonial monarchy, which during the dynasty of Avis (in the fourteenth century) found its vocation in the maritime, to the fiscal plans of the '80s and '90s of this century" (Faoro, "A Aventura Liberal" 17).

⁶ For a summary of this system of classification, see Toynbee 130-31.

⁷ In the original, "A Viagem Redonda: do Patrimonialismo ao Estamento." (Translator's note)

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