

D. João VI no Brasil

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Originally published in 1908, *D. João VI no Brasil* was republished only in 1945. It would be no exaggeration to say that its real merit began to be recognized only after the third edition in 1996. Two factors seem to be responsible for this delay: first, the author's restlessness, his quarrelsome attitude and hot temper. In spite of being a diplomat, Oliveira Lima (1865-1928) was scarcely diplomatic. His temper earned him the animosity of prestigious politicians and of eminent intellectuals at the time of the so-called Brazilian First Republic (1889-1930), namely, Rio Branco and Joaquim Nabuco. This, in a country lacking an established academic and intellectual tradition, could only plunge him into obscurity. Due to intrigues, Oliveira Lima gave up diplomatic service, which had enabled him to conduct research for his works. Having become the subject of satire in the country's capital because of his "corpulent Quixotic body" (Gilberto Freyre), Oliveira Lima preferred to teach at the Catholic University of Washington, to which, in a sort of vengeful act, he donated his library. Finally, he retired to his native city, Recife, in the Northeast, a region that had already lost the economic importance that sugarcane had brought it as well as the political power it had wielded during the reign of Pedro II (1840-1889).

Gilberto Freyre, who claimed to be Lima's "close disciple," was one of the few to defend him, without, however, noting his unique intellectual qualities. As to his foremost work, *D. João VI no Brasil*, Freyre compares what Oliveira Lima had done for the Portuguese King's rehabilitation to "a feat of a Quixote: a Quixote who was ahead of his time in rehabilitating an apparent Sancho Panza" (Freyre 53). In reality, D. João was frequently associated with

a caricature figure and a foolish monarch that only the quirks of history could have transformed into the pivotal figure pivotal for the singular manner in which Brazil achieved its political independence. It may be said that for someone interested in defending the historian's work, Freyre could have done more.

There was a second reason for Oliveira Lima's oblivion: between 1950 and 1980, Brazil experienced great political and economic change and at the same time a burst of intellectual activity. The industrialization of the country, which during the Juscelino Kubitschek's administration (1955–1960) made its way through the so-called developmentalist cycle, led to the emergence of populist politics, only to be quashed by the coup d'état of 1964. On the intellectual side, change occurred with the systematic study of Marxism, performed above all by a group of young intellectuals linked to the Universidade de São Paulo. This group, although suppressed (they were expelled from the University and exiled), sharply influenced the national intelligentsia. However, the Marxist approach did not find any affinity with the narrative and political history in which Oliveira Lima excelled. In earlier decades, his greatest book was ignored because of its author's "shortcomings," but later because it offered little aid to economic inquiry, which at the time was highly privileged. Only in the foreword to a recent edition of another of his books, *O Movimento da Independência, 1821–1822* (1922), did Oliveira Lima receive the long-denied praise for his "narrative history in the best sense" and for his "history based on the similarity of the formation of several colonial centers," which encompass the Deep South of the US, the English and French possessions in the Caribbean and in the Brazilian Northeast, and the highlands of Mexico and Peru, among others (Mello 11, 14).

This praise from the historian Evaldo Cabral de Mello also includes the 1908 book, since its theme, which focuses on the Portuguese king's stay in the Brazilian colony (1808–1821), is developed in a similar comparative fashion. More specifically, it is approached through examination of a large number of intrigues: the fight between Bonaparte and the English interests on the Iberian Peninsula, the new triangulation between England, Brazil and Hispanic America established after his departure, and the role of the Holy Alliance with regards to the slave trade.

Oliveira Lima's comparative approach, however, is not limited to the wide range of fronts on which the author had to operate. It has a more specific

outcome: if *D. João VI no Brasil* can be taken as a biography about the central period of the Portuguese king's life, it also has to be seen as a plural biography of not only the prince regent, but an entire epoch, its noblemen and bourgeoisie. The text is a biography and yet also constitutes a heterogeneous and multiple repository of invaluable sources that Oliveira Lima was the first to research systematically: the French consul Colonel Maler's notes, the North American Thomas Sumter's travel diaries, the journals and notes of researchers like Martius, Mawe, Tollenare, Luccock, Koster, Mary Graham, and Luthold, not to mention the data on schemers and gossip mongers such as Filipe Contucci and Luiz Joaquim dos Santos Marrocos. Their reports and letters are considered as precious as the official or unofficial documents written by Portuguese and foreign diplomats about the decisions made either in Brazil or on Brazil and kept in the archives in London, Paris, Washington. The historian, needless to say, did not limit himself to the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

And even that extended circle of concerns does not offer the slightest idea of Lima's book. By calling it a multifarious biography we understand that it is so mainly because it proposes to analyze a plurality of subjects. For the sake of brevity, let's confine ourselves to highlighting the following: 1. the situation of Portugal on the eve of the transfer of the royal court; 2. the daily life immigrants faced in Rio; 3. the international situation; 4. the return.

1.

The years that preceded November 29, 1807, the date on which the Anglo-Portuguese fleet departed from Lisbon carrying the Queen Mother, the Prince Regent and his large court, reveal the deplorable situation at which Portugal had arrived. The country had been reduced to the status of "a British trading post," in Oliveira Lima's fine expression, and was threatened by yearning for Iberian unification, which Spain had never abandoned. The meteoric ascension of Bonaparte had left Portugal in a state of calamity. The small and impoverished kingdom had to defend itself against three enemies, two of which, France and England, wished to dominate both Europe and the colonies. Moreover, a series of rather conflicting treaties were signed. The treaty signed in London in September 1793 not only required the Portuguese kingdom to provide ships to reinforce the British armada, but also obliged Portuguese auxiliary divisions to join the Spaniards to confront the French.

Besides the “routine” expenses involved in both of these measures, as a result of the agreement the French corsairs caused damage in excess of 200 million francs “to almost everything in the way of cargo coming in from Brazil” (Lima 25). Two years later, in 1795, Spain made peace separately with France. While Portugal attempted to get along with the “Directoire” in France, Spain, a former ally, threatened to punish the little kingdom if it did not declare war on England. In 1797, Portugal succeeded in signing a treaty with France. Nonetheless, alleging the delaying tactics of the Portuguese, the French “Directoire” annulled it, and Portugal was threatened with invasion by Spain. That situation forced Portugal both to turn to the English, accepting the garrison of six thousand British soldiers, and to gather its own squads. Together, they defeated the Spaniards at Cape St. Vincent.

These fluctuating circumstances constituted a blatantly dangerous game, however unavoidable. If, on the one hand, the Napoleonic armies were gaining ground across Europe, on the other it was not new to British policy to undermine rival merchant navies, especially to the detriment of Portugal, which had forged ahead in the conquest of foreign trading posts. No matter which side it might have opted for, Portugal had to face up to a much more powerful enemy. A permanent triangulation was thus formed whereby defeat or loss was only a matter of time. The Portuguese government could do no more than bide its time until the arrival of the conqueror.

In 1806, the situation came to a head. Victorious in the Prussian campaign, scarcely able to bend the English armada, France had decreed the continental blockade. It thus hoped to bring the sea trade of its great rival to a collapse. Not to respect the blockade would, for Portugal, be tantamount to a mere annexation. By the terms of the “Fontainebleau Treaty” of October 1807, the Portuguese kingdom was divided into three parts, with its overseas colonies distributed between France and Spain, and with the Spanish Emperor holding the title of Emperor of the two Americas. However, Spain was no longer a simple pawn in Bonaparte’s chess game. In a move that soon would not favor him, Bonaparte invaded Spanish territory, arrested the king and, thus, indirectly triggered the revolt of the Hispano-American colonies. What works to his detriment naturally benefits British commercial interests. No matter how you look at it from the Portuguese point of view, the French invasion of Spain meant that Portugal could no longer afford to waver. The postponement achieved by submission to the English proposal, viz., transferring the kingdom to the American colony, had to be accomplished in

the shortest possible period. It is within this critical framework that the court, the Mad Queen and the Prince Regent found themselves rubbing shoulders aboard the Portuguese ships, which, escorted by the British, left for Salvador, and subsequently for Rio de Janeiro. Portugal lost its king in order to keep the sovereignty of the kingdom. In exchange, though of course without the Prince Regent being aware, he arrived in America to lose it. Among the rivals of the moment, France had never been close to conquering it. British trade, on the contrary, seemed to go on comfortably in the midst of the distressed Portuguese noblemen.

2.

First and foremost, *D. João VI no Brasil* is a remarkable diplomatic history. Second, it is a forerunner of what might be described today as an everyday life story. It aims to describe day-to-day living in Rio as experienced by the itinerant court entourage. In both cases, the historian excels as an investigator of archives, a detective out to get reports, official rulings and rare or unpublished papers. The historian uncovers the manner in which court music was organized and how opportunity was given both to musicians brought from Portugal and to local talent, with whom the Prince Regent tried to satisfy his megalomaniacal taste. Considering the human landscape of the streets, Oliveira Lima turns into a verbal Debret, depicting the smells, noises, and shades of nature, and uses travelers' accounts in order to reconstitute the period. Although all of this is valuable (and Gilberto Freyre has been able to explore it better than anyone else), it still lacks the interpretative force of this seminal passage:

The inordinate distribution of titles was in fact one of the most efficient means used by D. João to involuntarily democratize the royalty, or perhaps to take away its prestige and to weaken it, thus opening that fountainhead and allowing it to run dry in a land where business chiefly hinged upon the favor of the one who called the shots, and where D. João patriarchally ran court society by dragging along within his sphere of influence an entourage of sycophants. (Lima 60)

Although Oliveira Lima sees in D. João an astute and pragmatic character, the historian was unwilling to entertain the notion that making it easy to grant titles was part of some calculated act. Nor was it easy for him to interpret the meaning of D. João's decision. Whence both his description of D. João as "involuntarily" having democratized the royalty and, upon

reconsideration, his expression of serious doubts about that same description: “or perhaps took away its prestige and weakened it.” D. João’s cunning would have consisted of putting an end to the separation of the nobles of the kingdom from the inhabitants of the colony whom, for some contingent reason, he sought to flatter. But with that he would have achieved what he did not foresee, viz., involuntary democratization. With an even less foreseeable result, he took away from the royalty its prestige and weakened it. Thus, in his attempt to get closer to the inhabitants of the colony and, therefore, in a pragmatic fashion, to facilitate his ability to govern under unexpected conditions, he adopted a practice he would already have been familiar with: peddling favors, which resulted in an “entourage of sycophants.”

The manner in which the historian grounds his interpretation indicates that the result could not be explained as merely a calculation of the ruler, since the interpreter himself has doubts as to whether the lavish distribution of titles was positive for society. But just as D. João would have to pay a heavy price for his magnanimity (since, without anyone to support him at the moment when he had to return to Europe, he hesitated and lost control of the political situation), so in the same fashion will Oliveira Lima’s work come up short, since the historian is not fully aware of where his intuition might have led his interpretation. Is it not this same hesitation that is transformed by Gilberto Freyre into the principle of flexibility, with which the sociologist will interpret the colonial man’s behavior vis-à-vis the black man? Is the breaking down of borders not related to the masterful cordiality with which Sérgio Buarque de Holanda saw that a traditional public space in Brazil did not exist? If the term “cordiality” does not appear in Oliveira Lima’s work—and this no doubt because the specific sense that the term will assume in Sérgio Buarque depended on a source, Carl Schmitt, non-existent for Oliveira Lima—in him the element that serves as an articulating source is quite explicit: influence peddling. It is influence peddling that underpins the experience of the “cordial man,” as described in Holanda’s *Raízes do Brasil*.

Regardless of its adequacy, this speculation is based on unquestionable data. Oliveira Lima notices that, through an act of cunning, D. João introduced into the colony a certain confusion as to how people should be treated—inequality coupled with affection, ascending the social ladder without the assistance of a social dynamics. This is something that would become deeply rooted in our social life and something from which, almost two centuries later, we are still not free. Our aim is simply to point out a

source that has been overlooked regarding one of the most complicated subjects Brazilian society still faces.

In the same vein, there is another observation. While the historian did not mention the Baroque—which was not a well-understood phenomenon at the time when he wrote his book—it is legitimate to think that, in the religious scene described below, he marked the transformation that the Baroque underwent at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Rio:

The procession of *Corpus Dei*,... with St. George on horseback, the iron man (*o homem de ferro*), riders and horses richly bedecked from the Royal House, black musicians in scarlet vestments, rocket shooters: a palette of opposing colors on skins and fabrics, a gallery of attires of varied styles and materials, an amazing combination of satins and velvets, gold and silver ornaments, rare brocades and garish ribbons. (Lima 597)

What in the seventeenth-century Baroque was a feast for the eyes aimed at both fascinating and disciplining the amazed and stunned subjects, was in Rio at the beginning of the nineteenth century an almost daily theater. What in the Baroque was ostentation and artifice put to the service of absolutism, became in that nineteenth-century society a stimulus to carnival. The rich and spectacular is maintained in sharp contrast with poverty, while also being superimposed upon it. One has the contrast and simultaneous superimposition of wealth and poverty, the overabundance of titles and swarms of slaves. There is no cunning that can explain that outcome.

3.

If, on the home front, D. João's politics surpassed any known form of rationality, there remained the stage of international politics as a means to get him to return to expected attitudes. The fact of being safe from Napoleonic expansionism only made him more desirable for British interests. Thus, if one of his most active collaborators, the count of Palmela, dreamed of taking advantage of D. João's marriage with the Spanish woman Carlota Joaquina and of thereby fostering Iberian unity in America, upon arriving at the signing ceremony for the treaty that recognized the rights of the queen to the throne of Spain (1810), not even England could be blamed for devising such plans. Later Palmela would acknowledge that he had dreamed too loudly: "[The] Lady of the seas... wanted for England to open markets galore"; "the

southern continent” was reserved “for the economic expansion of the Anglo-Saxon people” (Lima 188-89). To understand the failed dream as the fantasy of a Portuguese nobleman was no reason, for Oliveira Lima, to be moved by patriotic indignation for his country, although he did explain that, before acceding to independence, Brazil was doomed to future colonization. The same analytical coldness that he assumes in this particular instance does not prevent him from commenting on the Portuguese decision, which would favor the Brazilian merchants. In connection with the opening of the (Brazilian) ports to friendly nations (that is, to British ships), he observes that the decision of the Prince Regent above all favored the Brazilians or those who had settled there. With the decision both the English and the Brazilians would stand to gain, given that “the worst consequence of that measure worked against Portugal since she was not a manufacturing country and consumed relatively few of the colonial goods,... and lived economically off commissions from the freights and the profits from warehousing for other countries” (Lima 137). The objective conditions under which the regent’s decisions were made could only harm his own people. This does not in any way mean that they were always favorable to the inhabitants of the colony. On other occasions, the results of such decisions were ambiguous, when not clearly negative for the future of the colony. This is what happened with the public institutions that were transplanted, i.e., “the judiciary, the military, and the schools, which were created with the same drawbacks and problems” that had already been revealed in the metropolis (Lima 136). Likewise, the medical schools did not do well because they were not well staffed and the Military Academy failed to arouse any enthusiasm in a people without a martial past (Lima 163). In a more general manner, the economic initiatives came to nothing. And economic *rationality* did not seem to play a part in the Portuguese court’s reckoning. Even the “Banco do Brasil,” one of the royal initiatives, was almost ransacked “to help the royal family to return to Portugal” (Lima 245).

4.

Let us reduce the fourth point to a brief reference to D. João VI’s return to Portugal. However satisfactory or even pleasant his long stay in Rio may have been, the truth of the matter is that the king was no more than a relatively insignificant pawn on a chessboard commanded by foreign players. So long as Bonaparte was opposed to British interests, D. João would still enjoy

certain prerogatives. With the “usurper” defeated, the king more than ever became a subject of England. Thus, when the Congress of Vienna meets, Portugal, just like Spain, will play a very secondary role. The Iberian voice only rants and raves against the idea to abolish the black slave trade. England and her allies emerge as the great champions of human rights. Resorting to the *Correio Brasiliense*, which had always been among his most frequent sources, Oliveira Lima laces his comment with a caustic bite:

The Congress that led to the Holy Alliance showed keen interest in the natural freedom of the blacks, but failed, in the incisive sentence of Hipólito [da Costa], to show any interest in the natural freedom of the whites of Europe, who were already or were soon to be deprived of the freedom of the press, the freedom to discuss, the freedom of worship and other civil and political freedoms. (Lima 276)

The Iberian reaction was to delay as much as possible the prohibition of the slave trade. As for D. João, he would be pressured to return to Lisbon. Shortly afterwards he would die. The crown prince he had left in his stead soon found it preferable to proclaim the country's independence, rather than bow to the demands of the Portuguese courts that were calling for a return to the old *status quo*. A short time later, he decided to abdicate and fight his brother in order to gain the Portuguese throne. The question of slavery was to continue to live on in Brazil for another sixty-six years (until 1888). The abolition of slavery was to culminate in the decline of the monarchy, which fell the following year, without those freed truly obtaining real freedom. That precarious freedom was to proceed along the same lines as the involuntary democratization and carnivalized Baroque that had been latent since D. João's times. A pawn on the chessboard of international politics, he remained one in the history of the country that would soon become autonomous.

In sum, this is but a brief presentation of an important book, one which our social scientists could, until recently, afford to ignore.

Works Cited

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