

The Media: The Past and the Years to Come

Eduardo Neiva

On May 20, 1653, when Brazil was no more than a draft in the Portuguese empire, Padre Antônio Vieira writes to D. João IV, then ruler of Portugal. The relationship between the king and the greatest classical prose writer in the Portuguese language is close enough to qualify Vieira as the preeminent advisor in matters concerning Brazil and its inhabitants. In many ways, Vieira's attitude to the Native Brazilians is similar to any other priest of the new colony: his goal is to save the souls of the unChristian people. In his letter, Vieira's majestic and glittering prose bristles against the Portuguese landowners living in Brazil. The barbaric violence of the colonizers horrifies him and, worse, sends the natives running away to inaccessible regions. Then how could he convert them? Vieira asks D. João to stop the enslavement of the Natives. No one should be forced to work like that. No one should be allowed to use them to labor the tobacco plantations.¹

Vieira's requests were not fulfilled. D. João died and Vieira's dreams, not only of fair treatment of the Natives, but also of a European Catholic revival led by a Portuguese monarch, never came true. Vieira would endure banishment from the Portuguese court, exile, and the charge of unorthodox beliefs by the Inquisition. In 1691, near the end of his life, then living in Bahia, Brazil, Vieira was still writing to another Portuguese king, D. Pedro II, complaining of abuses of the natives by a Portuguese sergeant major. Nothing had really changed.

It is quite true that, since the colonial days, there have been radical transformations in Brazilian life; however, it is also true that, in dealing with many of the issues of today, Brazil sticks to archaic mechanisms that were at

the core of its colonial past. To solve the pressing questions of social life, Brazilians still look for solutions that come from the top, not so very distinct from Vieira writing to a monarch with whom he was personally acquainted and who would listen to him. What should be impersonal and common to all social actors is in fact personalized. The law may be hard, but one can soften it through personal ties, if one has relations with the rulers, or else with anyone in authority (Barbosa). The result is a widespread value given to informal relationships,² though at an enormous social price: social justice, and with it a general sense of legitimacy, is torn apart. Society becomes a stage for selfish means for empowering individuals who feel uncommitted to other individuals.

Ever since the Portuguese colonial experience, Brazilians have been used to regarding some modes of accumulating private property as a governmental donation, as the outcome of personal influence and liaisons. This is how the colonizers split the country in 1532. The monarch selected well-born and well-connected individuals to receive the *capitanias hereditárias*. The donation was made on a perpetual basis, as it was supposed to be a privilege extended to the families of the *donatários*. There would be no other law of the land than the will and the discretion of such favored individuals. In spite of his powerful acumen and courage in many issues, Antônio Vieira did not notice that the logic of such donations easily entailed the use of a slave labor force. The country was divided into strata: one privileged, existing side by side with another lacking rights. Discipline and respect ought to be imposed with all due brutality. By the same token, a group of individuals hovers above all and their members can dismiss and disregard what is imposed as norms to the rest.

The law of the land in Brazil can easily suffer from the actions of predatory individualism. Rules have not been established as the clear interplay of rights and duties reciprocally shared by all individuals of the group. Rules are made into tools of dominance, instruments of oppression, and are used to discriminate if not to humiliate. It is not as though equally distributed rights for all of the community could create autonomy and respect for all. The individual whims of the happy few determine the social frame. Brazil seems to oscillate between the fearful implementation of order and rampant anarchy. The country is neither rigidly authoritarian nor anarchically fluid. It foments rituals emphasizing order, like the military parades mandatory on the holiday reserved for celebrating national

independence from Portugal, as well as the orgiastic and unruly partying of carnival (DaMatta). Order and its inversion are the extremes around which one lives the Brazilian experience.

In this social environment, the promiscuity of individual interests and governmental action is appalling. Since its beginning, the Brazilian press has been essentially an extension, because a concession, of the central government (Sodré 23). In his analysis of our press, Nelson Werneck Sodré notes that, as early as the nineteenth century, the dominant issues in a publication such as *A Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro* are either official notes, or else praise and adulation of the Portuguese Court and European nobility. Recent research (Sá and Neiva, Neiva) shows that the Federal Government is the main subject of television coverage. The trends of early colonial times are still present today. The main advertiser, and therefore sponsor, of the Brazilian press has been for a long time the government (Mattos).

The implementation of modern Brazilian media was not the result of the actions of private entrepreneurs. A federal agency, the “Empresa Brasileira de Telecomunicações” (EMBRATEL), put together the satellite system that was then used by a small band of private companies. Furthermore, the technological infrastructure that enabled color broadcasting were implemented by the military administrations after the coup of 1964 (Mattos 218).

The partnership of governments and entrepreneurs must not be considered an exclusive phenomenon of Brazil, and can be found in many moments of world history. In England, for example, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the production of textiles could find markets beyond English boundaries thanks to the tentacles of colonial bureaucracy spreading themselves throughout the British Empire. But, when one compares England in early industrial times with the expansion of the media in Brazil during the two decades of military dictatorship, one sees that, contrary to what happened in the Brazilian case, the English industrial revolution followed the upheaval in the property system of its pre-industrial economy. Facing a shortage of laborers to work in their unfragmented properties, the English landowners had to drop their prior economic model, based on the dominance of masters over serfs renting the property of the aristocrats and bound to the dominant class by ideas of obligation and ideological submission. The landowners began to pay wages to their laborers, thus creating an incipient market of consumers. The transformation of the rural class system in England eventually created the conditions for an internal

market that would expand, and therefore stimulate the growth of the industry during the Industrial Revolution (Brenner 51). A revolution in technology was matched by a transformation in social structure.

Nothing of the sort could occur in the impressive expansion of the media during the 1960s in Brazil. The military coup d'état, which orchestrated the development of Brazilian mass communication, was a joint operation with the business elite to keep labour unrest and social demands at bay (Dreifuss). If the point of the coup was an alliance with the military to take over the governmental apparatus, the class system of the country had to remain unscathed. Subsidies and fiscal policies were implemented with the purpose of promoting wealth for those who either articulated or supported the coup. In fact, the conservative nature of what could have been a major social revolution is nowhere more clear than in the legal definition of ownership of the electromagnetic spectrum through which broadcasting ventures would be transmitted. The spectrum was dictatorially kept in the hands of the Brazilian federal government, which could then control its licensing.

How can it be a surprise that the creation of broadcasting ventures was mainly the result of political influence and bargaining? The media market has been split in a manner not altogether different from the ancient *capitanias hereditárias*. If in the United States, for example, the role of media legislation is to restrict the power of individuals or economic groups in specific market areas, in Brazil, up to today, all attempts to legislate and reshape the control and the management of the media have failed miserably (Festa 17). Without control from the bottom, without legitimate democratic representation, the outcome of any media expansion in Brazil leads to social distortion. Between 1985 and 1988, during the tenure of President José Sarney, there was an expansion of 62% in the number of new television stations. However, at the time of the expansion, José Sarney was negotiating, with the Brazilian Congress, an extension of the presidential mandate that would make him the direct beneficiary of the constitutional change. Everything was just political plundering and the granting of economic benefits.³

Political minuets of this kind may not be obvious to the common Brazilian viewer. Yet, when the public sphere is so brashly assaulted by personal interests, with utter disregard for democratic participation, the media tends to be hopelessly conformist. In any case, as was so patent in the intentions of the military governments, if politics exclude democratic participation, one has an anemic media incapable of incorporating the

vitality of social life. Criticism is muffled. The images on the screens are reduced to promoting a dreamlike social Eden, detached from the conflicts and the contradictions of civil society.

Over the future lies the burden of our past. Is that a reason for complete despair? I am not sure how to answer this question. I would like to believe that things will be different. In the age of internet networks, individuals are more empowered than ever. The action of central governments over media interaction could be drastically reduced to mere regulatory oversight. In fact, what we now see is a set of individuals communicating as free agents without any decisive restraint. But what will happen to the masses of individual Brazilians that have been systematically kept at the margins of social progress? Will we have still a Brazil divided into privileged haves and absolutely deprived have-nots? The task of bridging this gap is big enough to give anyone facing it dizzy spells. My optimism tells me that sooner or later the country will have to wake up to it. A docile, cheap, conformist labor force is not very attractive in the post-industrial world. In the years to come, sheepish and uncreative social actors will be less and less valued as economic agents. The post-industrial revolution in the productive sphere will demand critical, autonomous, and creative social participants. The pressure may be such that Brazil will have to deal seriously with the challenges and the demands opened in the new millennium.

Notes

¹ See Vieira 84-90.

² A recent article by Jair Ferreira dos Santos (1999) analyzes this trend with great insight.

³ The Brazilian weekly *Isto É* of July 31, 1991, reported that the Fernando Collor's administration handed out cable TV licenses as political payoffs. A year later, Mr. Collor de Mello was impeached under the generalized accusation of corruption. The law remains the same, as does the monopolistic trend of the Brazilian media.

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