

The Theater of Politics: The King as Character
in the Imperial Brazilian State—A Reading
of *A Construção da Ordem: A Elite Política Imperial*
and *Teatro de Sombras: A Política Imperial*

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Originally presented in December 1974 as a doctoral dissertation at Stanford University, *Teatro de Sombras: A Política Imperial* [*Elite and State-Building in Imperial Brazil*] is actually the second part of a more extensive work by José Murilo de Carvalho. In the collective work, which offers a veritable x-ray of the Brazilian Empire, the historian reviews the foundation of local political elites, their relationship with imperial political parties, and their paradoxical ties to the State itself.

In the first part of the study, *A Construção da Ordem: A Elite Política Imperial*, Murilo de Carvalho argues that the choice of a Monarchy for Brazil—a country surrounded on all sides by Republics—, the continued political unity of the former colony, and the construction of a stable civilian government mainly resulted from the type of political elite existing at independence in 1822. The configuration of the Portuguese colony itself generated this elite, which was characterized, above all, by ideological homogeneity and by a type of breeding that involved a form of socialization passed on through education, occupation, and politics.

In this way, Murilo de Carvalho resists limiting himself to more traditional explanations that credited the Monarchy alone with the task of centralizing an Empire of continental proportions. Instead, he focuses on the formation of Brazilian elites, subject to a common and homogenous political training, and traces the character of the State inherited from the absolutist and patrimonial Portuguese tradition. Out of this narrow but ambiguous communication between the State and the elite, there arose some of the more

obvious traces of the imperial political system, such as Monarchy, unity, centralization, and low levels of political representation. Implicated in a relationship that, to some degree, fed itself, the State-produced elite was quick to strengthen itself and guarantee its role in social control.

Such is the pattern traced by Murilo de Carvalho in the first part of his work. In an effort to explain the multiple facets of this imperial elite, *A Construção da Ordem* considers bureaucrats, judges, priests, soldiers, and politics: “a veritable island of literates” (74) in this sea of illiteracy.

The goal of *Teatro de Sombras* is similar to that of *A Construção da Ordem*, but the route to it is even more direct. This time, Murilo de Carvalho seeks to analyze the new levels of activity of the elites and of the Empire following the conservatives’ return to power in 1837. The year 1837 was a moment when the storms of the Regency period gave way to an attempt to consolidate control—an attempt that was centered in the alliance between the sovereign and the higher levels of the judiciary on the one hand, and big business and larger landholders (above all the Fluminense coffee growers), on the other.

As a result, the Regency rebellions of the 1830s and 1840s offer the starkest examples of the problems in establishing a national system of rule, based on a model of Monarchy. There were two basic cycles of resistance. The first began after the abdication of D. Pedro I and lasted until 1835. The second began shortly after the “Additional Act” was passed and continued into the Second Reign, until the “Revolução Praieira” (“Praieira Revolution”) in Pernambuco in 1848. The force and geographical distribution of these movements served to clarify an increasingly defined political course: the slowly growing conviction that the Monarchy served the proprietors, who were preoccupied with a system of order subject to constant disruption, even today.

Murilo de Carvalho thus uses the experiences of the Regency period (which vacillated between greater and lesser political centralization) and of the decade of 1850—which saw the end of the slave trade and the passage of both the “Lei das Terras” (“Land Bill”) and the Reform Bill for the National Guard—as a backdrop for a close study of the fluctuations in the relation between the Crown, the political elite, and the landowners. D. Pedro II, who nationalized the monarchy to a much greater extent than his father Pedro I, relied on the political elite to mediate his relationship with the coffee planters, who were completely dependent on slave labor.

Turning the court into a great “barony of coffee,” the king transformed the distribution of titles into a token of the bonds and closeness between the

landowners and their sovereign. In reality, the Court sought to pay in status symbols for that which it recouped in material gains. This is the reason why Murilo de Carvalho rigorously analyzes not only the monetary and distribution policies of the State, but also the evolution of abolition and the land question. These latter issues were close to the hearts of the great landowners and formed the backbone of imperial politics. Yet although they became nobles of the Empire, the great coffee growers still saw their capital fluctuate according to the Monarchy's policies. In the end, as historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda has noted, "the empire of the landowners only began in Brazil with the fall of the Empire" (4: 87).

It is in this vein that Murilo de Carvalho also invokes the terms of Guerreiro Ramos, who characterized the dynamics of the relations between the imperial bureaucracy and rural landowners as a "dialectic of ambiguity." Such "ambiguity" installed itself between the king and the barons with respect to budgetary policy, but also and especially with respect to the Land Bill and the abolition of slavery. An analysis of the tense relationship between the State and the local elite further breaks down the simplified image of the Empire either as a period of quiet domination by landowners or slaveholders or a period of calm, autocratic bureaucracy. In fact, the existence of a moderating power—a sort of fourth power wielded exclusively by the king—suggests that the function of the Emperor was clearly crucial. Just as the remains of absolutism—in a tropical reading of Benjamin Constant's model—gave the Emperor powers of intervention over the Legislative and Executive branches and influenced the formation of political elites, so did it favor competition between different factions of the dominant groups and their alternation in power.

Murilo de Carvalho also shows that this same line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that the fall of the monarchy began in 1871, shortly after the passage of the "Lei do Ventre Livre" ("Law of Free Birth"). The act opened up the first major breach between the Emperor and the barons, who, distressed by this measure, saw it as a kind of "dynastic madness." Then followed the law of 1885 (which freed slaves over the age of sixty) and finally the abolition of slavery in 1888. Through these steps, the Crown undermined its legitimacy with the landowners (who believed their interests were being attacked) and left the Emperor increasingly isolated towards the end of the 1880s.

Yet the disagreements did not stop there. As Murilo de Carvalho shows, the ideas and values—as much as the institutions developed by the same

elite—also suggest an “ambiguous” relationship of agreement and disagreement between D. Pedro II and the elite with respect to political and social realities: “a slave-based society governed by liberal institutions; an agrarian and illiterate society run by a cosmopolitan elite according to a European model of civilization” (202).

Between the “constitutional Monarchy” and the discretion of the moderating power, between the stability of the Council of State (“the brain of the Monarchy,” according to Joaquim Nabuco) and the tedious changes of government between imperial parties that, despite representing different coalitions, maintained a rather predictable course of action (the Conservative Party represented an alliance of big business and the major export trades, while the Liberal Party represented the alliance of liberal urban professionals and farmers for the internal market and from recently colonized areas), there persisted a monarchy that oscillated between semblance and substance. As a result, the country was governed by a model of “formalism”—or more exactly, by a model of the discrepancy between the norm and the reality. Rather than reflecting an attitude of alienation, the process of adopting ideas and institutions from abroad (articulated as the world of origins or reference) was, according to Carvalho, a strategy for social mobility. The model to be followed was that of “civilized” countries, with constitutional governments and efficiently organized administrations that inspired local “copies,” which were at times ill-advised.

Gradually, this formalism made power extremely visible, centered as it was in the figure of the Emperor and in the moderating power, thus also obscuring the process of mutual obligation inherent to the political system. By means of this process, nearly all political weight fell on the Crown, which, through pomp, ritual, and the personal charisma of D. Pedro II reinforced political centralization.

Yet, as Murilo de Carvalho clearly demonstrates, this power was in part illusory: “the State bureaucracy had a big head with short arms” (211). Here was yet another “ambiguity” distorting contemporary political analyses, not to mention innumerable later interpretations. This ambiguity involved the complex mechanism through which fiction became reality and reality fiction, as the theatrical side of the imperial game of politics staged it—in the aspect of representing and of “pretending.”

Whether through the cruel and critical picture of Ferreira Vianna—who, in the play *Conferência dos Divinos* (1867), depicted a tyrannical and despotic

emperor of Imperial Rome—or whether through the complimentary image of Joaquim Nabuco—who, in the book *O Abolicionismo* (1833), depicted D. Pedro II as having devoted 50 years to trying to govern a free people—the metaphor of a “game of appearances” and of dissimulation imposed itself as one of great theater. Yet this theater was not just any theater, but a “theater of shadows,” given that the government was the shadow of slavery, in the same way that politicians had transformed themselves into the shadow of imperial power. Above all, it was a theater in which the different actors confused their roles.

Thus, through the metaphor of the theater, Murilo de Carvalho highlights the (good) side of interdisciplinarity and of the work on disciplinary margins at the exact moment in which he introduces an anthropological perspective and offers an analysis of the ritual and symbolic dimensions of political power. The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, with his study of the nineteenth-century Balinese State called *Negara: The Theater-State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, evidenced the close relationship between reality and representation and the importance of political rituals. Ritual and symbolism (along with charisma), he argues, form part of all modern means of exercising power, a notion which Carvalho’s metaphor of the theater underscores. Political representation resembles theatrical representation, with their similar rules for action, actors, platforms, scenes lighted to a greater or lesser extent, and their use of fiction. If monarchy seems to make this ritual element more obvious—cropping up even in the body of laws passed and in the iconic status of the king—it must be remembered that representation usually assumes a central role in politics. Carvalho makes this point skillfully—he shows himself to be an excellent stage director, so to speak.

And what better image to conclude the final drama of the Monarchy could there be than the huge ball at the “Ilha Fiscal” to honor the arrival at court of officials from Chile that took place about one month before the fall of the Empire? The ritual seemed to heal—if only momentarily—all the conflicts of the evening. All the principal actors appeared on this richly decorated set: “the Liberal hosts, the Conservative guests; there were the Emperor and his court” (389). As always, the general populace milling outside the ball celebrated the occasion by dancing *lundus* and *fandangos* in a square just in front of the Ilha Fiscal: it was a demonstration, albeit an entertaining one, of how leisure was leagues away from traditional politics.

As the sun set on the Empire, as Murilo de Carvalho puts it, all the conflicting parties came together to dance a waltz by Strauss, played in the heat of the tropics.

However, this was to be the last act of the Imperial drama. The fragile and isolated Monarchy was more or less a shadow of its former self. Far from demonstrating the Monarchy's symbolic efficacy, the ritual proved ridiculous and became the subject of spoof. The fall of the Monarchy came from an unexpected source, one which even seemed to surprise the officials of the new republican regime. Yet this is surely another story, albeit one discussed in other books by José Murilo de Carvalho, including *Os Bestializados: O Rio de Janeiro e a República que não foi* (1987) and *A Formação das Almas: O Imaginário da República no Brasil* (1990).

It is now time to finish this brief presentation of *Teatro de Sombras*. In the end, Murilo de Carvalho's works engage in a dialogue with each other, as if each new book were responding to the one before it or asking questions for the following books to answer. At the same time, *Teatro de Sombras* has become a crucial work for Brazilian historiography because of its rescue of the political profile of the Brazilian Monarchy and of the trajectory leading from Empire to Republic, with all its scenes, actors, and dramatic tensions. Murilo de Carvalho sheds light on a period that has been poorly covered by local historiography. Local historiography generally focuses on the exotic nature of colonial Portuguese America, on its baroque richness, as interpreted by the modernists in the 1920s, or even on the ups and downs of the Republican period and the "Estado Novo" (1937–1945). Moreover, it views the Brazilian Empire as a kind of intermission, a temporary moment, a replica of models produced elsewhere. Labeled a "big mistake," the period of the monarchy often gets discounted, as if it had no role in the modern republican legacy or in the analysis of more recent Brazilian traditions.

Teatro de Sombras, by contrast, devotes itself to uncovering the structure of the Brazilian Monarchy, with its contradictions and ambiguities, and also to explaining the force of a model which made the Emperor the principal player on a stage beyond his control. Or more accurately, beyond anyone's control. Indeed it was a time when it was difficult to tell the difference between representation and reality. It was the theater of politics that imposed itself in a different way and imposed itself as fiction.

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