

# The Challenge of Traditions in Brazil Today

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## THE CHALLENGE OF TRADITIONS IN BRAZIL TODAY

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### *Abstract*

The formation of Brazilian culture is relatively new in the world history. With just over five hundred years of existence, Brazil was created from several different cultural sources: indigenous, European, African and Asian. This situation created a rich and complex situation, which makes many believe a genuine Brazilian civilization, with its own characteristics. However, after 1989, with the apparent end of the Cold War, the political situation in Brazil has changed significantly. Without the conflict “Capitalism x Socialism”, it created a vacuum in Brazilian politics: what options the Brazilians would have to reorganize their society? The search for cultural origins seemed an excellent substitute for this: Brazilians began to use religious or cultural theories as forms of political thought, invoking the traditions to solve social problems. But, what traditions? In a multifaceted country, which traditions can guide the future? And again, which is the concept of “traditional” in Brazilian mentality? In this paper, I will try to present this complex scenario of the current Brazil; a field of struggle between conflicting traditions and religions in search of political and social space.

*Keywords:* traditions; Brazil; religious dialogue.

### **Introduction**

Nowadays, Brazil is evidently on the international scene. The country has achieved significant levels of economic growth; their participation in geopolitical issues has achieved international prominence; as a result, it will host a World Cup Soccer (2014) and the Olympics (2016).

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However, these apparent achievements have charged a very high social price. The Brazilian population is dissatisfied, mostly with the current situation in the country. Heavy taxes; an extremely unequal division of money; very poor social services; serious education problems and a large increase in violence which determine society to question the “development” of the country. There is a widespread feeling of frustration and conflict. Economic growth is not being directly accompanied by an improvement in the quality of life. There is a big debate about intellectual and human values that drive the policy in the country.

Brazilians are engaged in a great debate about their policy options for the future. And these policy options are resorting to discourse of traditions to rebuild the society. For a long time, Brazilian governments argued that his reforms were made to build a promising future. Like an old Brazilian saying tell us: “Brazil is the country of the future”. But, the feeling among Brazilians is that “this future never arrives.” (Ventura, 2000)

To make matters worse, the promise of a better future was accompanied by a decadence of moral and spiritual values. Thus, there is a widespread feeling that Brazilians should rescue the cultural values of an idealized past.

But, which past the Brazilians are seeking? Brazil is still a new country in world history. It does not have an ancient culture. The Brazilians have great difficulty in understanding the concept of “tradition”. Likewise, the Brazilians - in general - cannot even define what “being Brazilian”, or what constitutes the Brazilian culture. Therefore, when referring to the ideal past, and the idea of “tradition”, Brazilians are in a new stage of conflict. It is this complex context that we will briefly examine, in this presentation.

### **“Liquid Modernity”**

The Polish thinker Zygmunt Bauman (2010) properly pointed out that the contemporary world is undergoing a phase of “liquid modernity”. With the apparent demise of socialism in Eastern Europe, and the supposed victory of capitalist theory, the promise of a new world, more balanced and economically rich, did not materialize. Instead – and

in the case of Brazil – the victory of capitalism was a step back in working relationships, a deepening economic crisis and rising inequality. From 1964 to 1984, Brazil was ruled by a military junta that has kept increasing levels of development, artificially grown (Ventura, 2000). This caused a devastating economic crisis in Brazil after the military government, although clear signs that this could happen were already seen before the return of full democracy. The “defeat” of socialism was understood as the end of a historical context in which the concessions made to workers could be abolished after all and it was no longer necessary to keep them from the “danger” of the labor system of socialism. This created the opportunity for groups that dominated the country’s economy to scramble for profits and capital accumulation, causing the crisis of the social compromise established between workers and employers over the period of “cold war”.

The desolation caused by the abandonment of the disruption of this compromise launched entire societies, such as Brazil, in a reflection on the moral and cultural values. After all, if the capitalist world appeared to be a bad option, which would then be the alternatives? Let us, then, return to Bauman. We live in a historical context in which human relations are governed by uncertainty, lack of a deeper commitment by ‘liquidity’ in relations: impossible to control, and they break up with incredible rapidity, seeking only immediate benefits and possible profit. This would occur because some societies without cultural paradigms are set to respond to this values crisis. There are no major systems, such as the ones during the time of “socialism x capitalism” dualism to guide us. So what can we put in place of these “big absences”?

The readings of Bauman are quite appropriate for the case of Brazil, who also had a difficulty with the building of their cultural identity. Countries like China, India and Russia have ancient traditions that serve in building a solid cultural reference. The case of Brazil is quite different: their cultural traditions are relatively recent, and are usually imported from the civilizations that colonized the country, forming a non- cohesive and inconsistent identity. Stuart Hall’s analysis (1997) is appropriate here to guide us in our understanding of the

difficulties of building a Brazilian cultural identity – especially now, in the context of modernity.

### **“The Myth of the Three Races”**

But, in order to understand this point, we need to explain the myths of composition of Brazilian society (and the derivative idea of “social Order”). Brazil is composed of a multi-ethnic society, with predominant Portuguese, Indian and African origins. There is a large contribution of other civilizations in the Brazilian culture: Europeans from different countries, Arabians, Japanese and Latin Americans.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the theory that Brazilian society was formed by the “harmony of the three races” emerged. These three main groups have built a culture of tolerance and integration. Important Brazilian intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre (1935) and Darcy Ribeiro (1995) defended this thesis for decades.

However, this argument was used by Brazilian political dictatorships to mask important social crises. As we said, in two periods of political dictatorship in Brazil (1937-1945 and 1964-1984), the idea of “social harmony of the three races” was promoted in education, in order to combat the presence of Communism in Brazil. According to this discourse, there could be no necessary acceptance of the discourse of “Communist equality” if, in Brazil, the Brazilian culture would naturally promote the “equality of races”.

This theory hid the fact that Brazil was a slave nation during hundreds of years. Blacks and Indians were enslaved and subjected to the worst forms of social treatment. The end of slavery in 1889 was not accompanied by a policy of social inclusion. The Brazil remained a racist and prejudiced country. Brazilian dictatorships promised a full social and economic integration, but it was always directed to the future time.

In 1989, the apparent end of Communism, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and after the disintegration of Soviet Union, provided a new political context for Brazil. The Brazilians were orphans of policy options. The “end of Communism”, and “Victory of Capitalism” did not bring the promised social improvements for Brazilian society. The

promise of “social harmony of the three races” did not end racism, and did not help build a solid growth of equality.

### **The Emergence of New Politic-Traditional Discourses**

After two decades, Brazilians are still seeking to build new policy options. The speeches were redirected. Not advocating a future prosperity – there is a quest in the past discourses that can redeem moral, social and cultural values to reconstruct society. This discourses are obviously idealized, but have gained more strength in Brazilian government elections (Burity 2001; Gruman 2005).

A key point in these discourses is the rescue of a possible founder tradition of Brazilian society. However, as the Brazilian culture is relatively recent, the search for traditions makes the concept of “tradition” vague and confusing within the Brazilian mentality. Brazilians have a great tendency to confuse “Tradition” with “Old”. Not distinguish exactly what can be classified as “obsolete, outdated or delayed”. Likewise, they are able to classify as positive something old, based on the simplistic argument that “the older is better, because it lasts longer...”

### **Catholic Christianity**

The first line in this thinking of the ‘return to traditions’ is the resumption of Catholic traditions. Brazil is the largest Catholic country in the world, and a part of Brazilian society currently believes that the resumption of Catholicism is an important way to reorganize the life of Brazilian society.

Christianity would be an ancient religion (millennial), and thus qualified as “traditional”. For proponents of this proposal, Catholicism would be able to reorient society in moral and intellectual values. Catholic politicians must be elected to government positions, to defend projects and public policies based on principles of Catholic Christianity.

This view sees Catholicism as the “true founder tradition from Brazil”. But, this same view is been opposed by many sectors of society.

It excludes African and indigenous cultures, advocating the imposition of a worldview classified as “extremely European”. The Catholic view is also accused of promoting social prejudice, because it is against the recognition of minorities (as the Gay community, for example), and argues that any social integration could only be done through religious conversion to Christianity.

### **The Evangelical Christianity**

Evangelical Christianity follows the same line of Catholic Christianity, but an increasingly strong public action in Brazil (Santana, 2005). Evangelicals are close to the underprivileged communities by promoting alternative forms of economic and social integration. Its political action is even stronger than the Catholic; many candidates for government positions openly declare their evangelical condition, and that will only defend the interests of their churches. Evangelicals argue two different points of Catholic Christianity; a) they represent the original Christian Church, and that Catholicism is an artificial institution, created over the centuries; b) that the Christian tradition has been better understood by the churches of the United States: therefore, Christianity must also be capitalist and liberal in economic and political terms.

The Evangelical churches therefore support an interpretation of Christianity that should combine the “original Christian tradition” with the inspiration of American culture (considered as “brother” of Brazil in historical and regional terms). Thus, evangelicals stand against Communism, against African religions, Indian and Asian. They are assiduous critics against the policies of racial and social integration. They also propose a complete revision in methods and theories of science and technology, and the complete adaptation of all scientific hypotheses to a “biblical thought interpretation”. For them, there is only “religious integration” through conversion - and this worldview would be the seed of a “new tradition” for the Brazilian Culture.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Recently (July, 2014), the “Universal Church of the Kingdom of God” (one of the most important evangelical churches in Brazil), in a demonstration of strength

### **Cultural Diversity**

The current Brazilian government admits a “Socialist” policy orientation. Interestingly, this policy line absorbed the theory of “social harmony of the three races”, and included in its project the building of a new Brazilian society. This new society could have as a base the rescue of the “tradition of cultural diversity” of Brazil. Public policies and the Brazilian laws should be appropriate to the moral and cultural values of all cultural matrices that form Brazil (Candau, 2008).

This line, however, argues that the “true cultural tradition” of Brazil was constructed by integration of different peoples, and that this process should continue. Only the inclusion of all cultures and minorities can build a true and authentic “Brazilian culture”. Because of this, proponents of this line are in favor of public programs for racial and social inclusion.

However, the consolidation of this vision of “Brazilian tradition” has been undermined by a series of mistakes in government policy in the field of economy and social services. The internal social crisis has withdrawn the support of the government, which is the major promoter of these integration policies. In the same way, the concessions made to the social groups are viewed with suspicion of favoritism. Not so rare the fact that the proposed integration of cultures is criticized: it is accused of promoting prejudice among all groups of society through a political game division.

### **Conclusion**

As we have already seen, Brazil is divided into three major groups. Each advocates a political action based on traditions. But, as the country incorporates many different cultures, seeking a decisive “original tradition” caused a deep social and intellectual conflict.

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and power, inaugurated the “Temple of Solomon” in the major city of Brazil, São Paulo. It is one of the largest centers of Christian worship in the world, surpassing in size the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican.



Religiosity has been the greatest support of the idea of a “tradition” in Brazilian culture; but in the Catholic and Evangelical visions, Brazilian culture must be Christian. Naturally, it tries to exclude the participation of other cultural views (African and Asian) the formation of a “Brazilian culture”.

Otherwise, it will be then that we can only speak of a “Brazilian culture”, as long as we admit the integration of several different cultures, as proposed in the “Myth of the three races”? Would it be the time to build a “Myth of various ethnicities”? And is that an authentic Brazilian Culture which might arise from the realization of a myth?

The big challenge in Brazil, at that time, is its reinvention. And the reinvention of Brazilian Culture is accidentally connected to the search for an ideal past, and will be based on “tradition” which will have to come out victorious in this conflict.

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