
Becoming Brazil: An Interpretive Essay

¶ Gail Triner

Professora Emérita de História,

Rutgers University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9398-068X>

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Brazil achieved Independence from Portugal a little more than 200 years ago. Such an anniversary would normally be cause for nation-wide celebration and reflection. Instead, the anniversary year's Independence Day was marked by controversy and relative silence. The nation narrowly avoided a large military parade, which was replaced with uncharacteristically campaign-style events and the public exhibition of Dom Pedro I's heart. Perhaps uncertainty in the polarized realms of politics, economy, epidemiology, and security leave Brazilians in a collectively un-celebratory mood. The government hijacked 7 September, the formal date of Independence, to project a populist strongman image.

Nevertheless, it is a shame to pass up an opportunity to reflect on the effects of the previous two centuries on shaping Brazilian society in the early twenty-first century. This essay offers an historical interpretation for the question: How have the legacies that Brazil inherited at Independence shaped the Brazilian state in early twenty-first century? While touching on social relations, the focus here is on the political-economy of constructing a unified nation-state (a União.) The short answer offered here is that colonial legacies of inequity and authoritarian tendencies are deeply 'baked into the cake.' Institutional changes have fundamentally affected the lives of all Brazilians over these two centuries; they have also continually tugged-and-pulled against the consistent threads of inequity and authoritarianism. Efforts to lessen inequity and moves towards democratization have arisen, increasingly through the twentieth century; but their ascendance has been more cyclical than linear. The tension between change and tradition is not surprising for any nation. But outlining its trajectory can develop an appreciation of the enduring power of the challenges that have shaped Brazilian society across two centuries and into the twenty-first century.¹

COLONIAL LEGACIES

Political independence in September 1822 resulted in remarkably little political change for Brazilians. Not only did Brazil remain a monarchy, but the head of

¹ By necessity, this broad synthesis covering two centuries is highly stylized and selective. The author is a foreign historian with long experience in Brazil. Hopefully, the foreign perspective offers slightly different insights for Brazilian readers. Because this is an overview, rather than academic, essay, it focuses on an interpretation of outcomes and sacrifices the usual academic standards of citation and evidentiary detail.

state (Dom Pedro I) was the son of the colony's ruler and he relied on the same cast of supporting characters as previously. Governance remained highly centralized in form, even if not in practice. Socio-economic hierarchies defined the possibilities for individual Brazilians and were as deeply entrenched as monarchical rule. The institution of African slavery consigned more than 40% of the population to the category of 'property' on whom non-slaves relied, which did not reconcile well with their status as human beings. As a result, concepts of property preoccupied the state. The small indigenous population was forgotten. The initial purpose for African slavery and indigenous subjugation had been to extract wealth from the abundant resource base of the two enormous colonies that comprised independent Brazil (Pernambuco and Brazil.) The defining physical characteristics of Brazil were its size and attention to extracting wealth from natural resource abundance. Distance, hindered by transportation and communication constraints, meant that daily reality for inhabitants of the territory was governed by local practices and overlords. Independence did not change these essential features of Brazil.

Interactions of these basic characteristics have been sources of dynamism and tension for the subsequent two centuries, and their progression has been non-linear. Defining the centralized state around the person of the Emperor mirrored the highly local patriarchal organization of the stereotypical slave plantation. Local power centers both reproduced idealized hierarchical organizing principles and presented strong barriers to consolidating a coherent nation-state. Hierarchical personalistic governance prevailed at all levels – nation, province, town, church, workplace, family. Slavery and subjugation were sufficient to explain inequity and inequality as defining characteristics in racial, social, economic, and cultural realms. Hierarchical personalism provided a powerful mechanism for their perpetuation. Many individual elite Brazilians counter-balanced efforts to sustain their own wealth with perceptions of Brazil as backward and impoverished in contrast with the rich, modern, and industrializing world (northern Europe, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.) Over the next two centuries, the tensions between wealth, modernization, and development continually motivated competition for political-economic institutions.

Personalistic governance, attentiveness to commodity-derived wealth, and inequality and inequity are the colonial legacies that have threaded their way through political-economic change since Independence. These legacies gave rise to strong competition to different ideas about how Brazil could change and modernize during the early years of Independence. Each of these characteristics remain relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They have not been static; their tensions and changing manifestations are important for understanding the effects of history on the Brazilian state in 2022.

HISTORICAL INFLECTION POINTS

The Constitution of 1824 was an early expression of classical European liberalism transmitted to Brazil and it codified the governance arrangements of the newly independent nation. In the short-term, political Independence had important limitations: Not only did Brazil remain a monarchy, but the same family retained the monarchy, and political independence can be interpreted as a strategy to maintain the personalism of Bragança family governance. Formally, centralized governance continued and the Emperor retained important powers in adopting policy and appointing his

counsellors and legislators. The exclusionary and unequal personal relations that resulted from slavery and the commitment to a commodity-based economy continued unaltered. Everyday life did not change. At the same time, the Constitution did offer important change by defining limits to monarchical powers with respect to such concerns as fiscal arrangements and specifying electoral procedures. In the following years, constitutional constraints became important elements in managing the mechanisms of public debt and expenditure, money, tariff policy, the regulation of slavery, etc.

By 1850, highly selective influences of liberalism coalesced into widespread legal change. The final abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is the best-known of these changes. The coming extinction of slavery combined with the desire to modernize the population (with white immigrants) and economy (with extensive land settlement and industrialization) required stronger articulation of the rules governing property and control of the general population. The Land and Commercial Codes, also of 1850, established the means to certify ownership of land and to conduct business for the small share of Brazilians with significant property. For other Brazilians, most notably the growing number of former slaves, the Civil Code of 1850 began to shape the public behavior of individuals, with the criminalization of the unemployed and unprotected poor as well as vagrancy laws to regulate the flow of labor. These Codes offered a new layer of legal provisions to structure public life. The new laws projected the semblance of law and order, fairness, and equal treatment. In reality, they were mechanisms to enhance existing economic and political interests. Applying the new standards uniformly to encompass all Brazilians has taken much longer.

The legal expansions of 1850 gained velocity and the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870) hastened the formation of the national military, slave emancipations, and increasing local rebellions. These dynamics culminated with the national abolition of slavery and end of the monarchy in 1888 and 1889, respectively. National Abolition expanded a basic human right to the African-descended population. However, two considerations mitigate that interpretation. First, national-level laws had gradually limited the scope of slavery since 1871 and the traditional slave-holding provinces in the Northeast had ended slavery prior to May 1888; the enslaved population at Abolition was only one-half its level in 1872 (and slaves accounted for only 5% of the total population.) Second, despite the long-term necessity of abolition for racial equality, much of the underlying motivation rested with elite efforts to sustain their privileged position in social and governing hierarchies and to benefit from new economic growth. Abolition was not accompanied by expansions of voting rights, literacy and numeracy education, or economic rights. Literacy laws restricted voting rights and political participation to levels lower than during the last years of the Empire.

Establishing the First Republic to replace the Empire in the aftermath of Abolition, was a substantial attempt to decentralize the political system, even if it was instituted with a military government. Ultimately, the Republic demonstrated the continued weakness of a coherent nation-state. The federal system that emerged relied upon regional political parties, defined at the state (formerly provincial) level and headed by local strongmen exercising personal control over their constituents. Any ideological affiliation of political parties aligned with the economic interest of the local oligarch. The rotation of the presidency among the three economically strongest states – São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Minas Gerais – earned its own name, ‘café com leite.’ Tensions over defining the realms of public and private, and the responsibilities of different levels of government

were not resolved. Finally, late-Imperial changes to the Commercial Code, in 1882, attempted to finance industrialization through modifications to commercial practices, such as business formation, share-trading, and bankruptcy practices. This change combined with expansive monetary policy to ignite a short burst of modernizing financial activity, which culminated with an economic crash of the early 1890s, the *Encilhamento*. Financial markets did not re-emerge strongly until the late 1960s and re-organizing commercial practices was not a policy of re-distribution. In the final analysis, the First Republic saw important institutional reforms, but equity and equality among Brazilians was not on the menu.

While 'Ordem e Progresso' was a fitting slogan for the First Republic, the language of nationalism served the Getúlio Vargas regime (1930-1945 and 1951-1954). Joining with the military to interrupt a chaotic election, the Vargas regime began with a strong show of authoritarianism. The years of the *Estado Novo* (1937-1945) most strongly served to integrate disparate regions and groups into a single cohesive political unit. The Vargas regime's authoritarianism also invoked highly personalistic populism. Extension of voting rights to women, labor organization under the aegis of the state (and limited to urban industrial settings), the extension of many social welfare and education facilities tied the national government to material well-being and a sense of citizenship for an increasing share of the population. At the same time, Vargas retained the tinge of personal patriarchy in the Presidency. He was identified with the broad provision of benefits and he cultivated an aura of being involved in solving the personal problems of his constituents. New forms of popular culture – such as organizing Carnaval, building a film industry, and supporting the spread of radio communication and magazines – promoted the identification of individuals with the Brazilian state that the Vargas regime was building. The state did not shy away from repressive measures when the more benign tools did not work. Giving the populace a voice in the state had the long-term effect that oligarchs and patriarchs had always feared; the *povo* became increasingly forceful and unruly.

Populist culture targeted all Brazilians, while labor, education, and social welfare improvements were primarily limited to urban industrial settings. This concentration revealed the Vargas regime's motivating objective: to promote large-scale industrial development. Vargas's strong hand with respect to the general population contrasted with the negotiation and accommodation accorded to producers and emerging industrialists in order to achieve this ambition. Friendly industrial policies, federal subsidies and selective state-ownership in basic capital goods kick-started new industry. The national government supported large-scale commodity production in order to contribute to its industrial ambitions by feeding the increasingly urban labor force and earning hard-currency revenues. Large-scale production of agricultural goods and industrial minerals continued the colonial legacy of plantation production into the mid-twentieth century, in altered form and applied to new products. In contrast with the clientelistic practices in other fields, a professionalized bureaucracy began to organize economic and monetary policy. Extending the economic role of the state to providing human development services, the beginning of professionalization, and support for primary commodities and basic industry signaled the emergence of the developmentalist ideologies that animated much debate and policy for the second half of the twentieth century.

The military had been instrumental in the formation of the First Republic, and its support helped to maintain the authority of Vargas's regime – until it did not, in 1945 and again in 1954. From the

end of the Vargas regime (with his suicide) in 1954 until the introduction of the explicitly military regime in 1964 seven presidents (including four acting presidents) demonstrated the prolonged political instability of early efforts to institute popular democracy. Competition between political-economic conservatives and left-wing groups focused on large-scale economic development. The policies of developmentalism attempted to address deeply entrenched poverty through state-directed industrial, monetary, fiscal, and financial mandates, which operated at large scale. Small-scale actors relied on uneven local support. The ideology underpinning development policies (variously labeled structuralism or import-substituting industrialization) emphasized the dynamics of social class to explain deep-seated economic inequality; the racial-inequity legacies of slavery attracted little attention. The patience of political-economic conservatives with the ideas of class struggle and state-directed capitalism reached their limits in the early 1960s. Geopolitics of the Cold War and domestic dynamics provided the opportunity for the military to coalesce with other conservative actors to take control of the State.

Military governments from 1964 through 1985 endured through five presidents (excluding short-term placeholders.) Each presidency enacted different economic, labor, and internal security policies. Their commonalities included: a reliance on hierarchical military authority for legitimacy, a rhetorical commitment to classical liberal economic policy over state-led developmentalism (almost always compromised in practice) and attempts to tightly control labor movements. Ambitions for large-scale modern industrialization, motivated by the related ambitions for wealth and a visible position in the modern world, survived changes in political regimes and competed with the motives for traditional authoritarianism. When expanded social welfare or education programs served a regime's purposes, new programs became available to some citizens, allowing for some expansion of social benefits to the rural population. Efforts for racial and indigenous justice remained at the grassroots level.

Uncontrolled inflation resulting from domestic and global economic crises, increasingly restive labor, international opprobrium, and a dearth of policy ideas contributed to the military regime giving way to a new expression of republican democracy in 1985. Economic contradictions prevailed at the beginning of the new civilian regime and delayed stability. Daily life for Brazilians was governed by the need to cope with deepening poverty and high (and institutionalized) inflation. Sequential governing coalitions under the political-intellectual leadership of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Lula da Silva from 1995 through 2010 began to resolve these insecurities and they brought a short period of relative stability. The intellectual weight of Cardoso's core role in building developmentalist theory in Brazil and Lula's history of labor activism afforded them the credibility to accommodate their backgrounds to the pragmatic realities of governing. Unique combinations of developmentalist and orthodox economic policies helped to lead the way to political stability with economic growth. Business privatizations, fiscal, monetary, and tax reforms, and a wide expansion of the social safety net were among the important institutional changes to the economy. For the first time, economic inequality diminished, based on the availability of social welfare programs more than the democratization of business practices.

By the end of Lula's Presidency, economic stability with more widespread citizen participation and re-vamped governance appeared to establish the groundwork for the modernity and cohesion that many Brazilians had been chasing since Independence, even if undercurrents of corruption

remained. Wealth from a newly developed primary commodity, the offshore pre-salt petroleum deposits, provided the platform for industrial and technological sophistication. Exploiting the massive new oil deposits appeared to be bounded by debate on the distribution of petroleum wealth and by uniform regulatory standards. Maintaining these dynamics relied upon two conditions: (1) the functioning of modified institutions to oversee regulatory practices, commerce, and business ownership norms and (2) as always, favorable global commodity prices. Neither of these occurred. The profitability prospects of petroleum suffered from global recession and additional global sources of supply. Further, highly personalistic governance and business structures resulted in opaque ties between State and business, which favored a small number of actors and circumvented the intent of the laws. Privatization gave way to the dominance of *grupos econômicos*, which concentrated a few huge conglomerates in the hands of a small number of politically connected owners and exerted a strong grip on the economy. Patriarchal inequities had re-asserted themselves. The circumstances of the Lava Jato and Odebrecht corruption scandals brought together many of the characteristics that had often emerged within the Brazilian state since Independence: small groups of elite business actors (rather than the previous small groups of planters) and cynical uses of the political system created crises that led to President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. Even so, loud public disapproval prevented quiet acquiescence and an active judicial system that applied existing anti-corruption regulations resulted in harsh outcomes for some of the participants.

Jair Bolsonaro's political regime came to office manipulating the fraught atmosphere of the scandals and impeachment. Governance has revived personalistic and militaristic practices, and it has been propelled by displays of populism. Dismantling policies in public health, environmental, infrastructure, and social spheres, which had extended the benefits of citizenship to an increasing share of Brazilians, demonstrated the fragility of social inclusion and political democracy. The current election campaign has hinted at the incumbent's continuing ability to engineer social welfare programs in order to garner votes and display personalistic political control. The expectations that a second Bolsonaro term could lead to increased concentration of presidential authority echoes the hierarchical authoritarianism and military-police presence that the political system has periodically tried to erase. Counter-balancing this harsh assessment, continuing protests from large swaths of Brazilians, the noisy judiciary and press, and a hotly competitive election season in which a previous presidential incumbent strongly challenges the current incumbent demonstrate how far the Brazilian polity has come from its constricted and intensely personalistic nature that prevailed two centuries ago.

CONCLUSION

Defining the Brazilian state across two centuries of independence has encompassed a constant set of variables that represent competing ambitions. Becoming a 'modern' liberal society and economy propelled the broad reorganization of Brazilian legal strictures as slavery phased out through the nineteenth century, with only a crushingly slow and compromised opening of political, economic or social participation of former slaves or their descendants. Consolidating governance at the level of the nation was similarly slow and compromised. A centralized state with highly personalized leadership has tugged against attempts to create a federalized national polity, most notably during

the First Republic and Vargas regime. The Vargas years were successful at consolidating national-level governance, while also maintaining traditional personalistic identification with a single leader.

Efforts to create modernity were a key component in defining a large role for the state in the economy. However strongly industrialization proceeded, reliance on the large-scale exploitation of primary commodities has remained at the core of the economy. Defining land settlement, developing new sources of mineral or petroleum wealth and deforestation of indigenous lands, as a colony or in the early twenty-first century, demonstrate the centrality of both primary commodities and constricted political and economic participation in the evolution of the state.

Durable democratic practices have evolved at an uneven pace. Defining the scope of federal governance and diversifying sources of economic well-being have continually challenged the primacy of existing hierarchies. Through two centuries, the strength of personalized political hierarchies compromised the uniform application of laws and blurred the boundaries between favored and corrupt forms of creating wealth. Addressing inequality and inequities across the universe of Brazilian citizens has occurred sporadically in various forms; these included the attenuated emancipation of slaves, expansion of rights, benefits and political participation to specific groups who could contribute to Vargas's project of economic nationalism, the slow expansion of social welfare benefits, defining the beneficiaries of natural resource wealth, the establishment of an independent judiciary, and an increasingly discordant public sphere. These changes may have had cynical origins and may have occurred very slowly; they also remain incomplete. Nevertheless, while recognizing the difficulty of sustaining these goals, it is worthwhile to note the distance traveled towards them.

Using 7 September as a day to celebrate the Bolsonaro regime, rather than political Independence, as has occurred, may have the effect of minimizing the sense of Brazilians' ability to structure their own state. From an historical perspective, it also serves to demonstrate the continuing, but complicated, pull of the past on the present. Repeated attempts to expand political inclusion, social and economic well-being continually have faced the constraints of incrementalism and the fragility of change. This essay does not answer the question of how Brazilians can break the holds of authoritarianism and inequity; it illustrates their repeated efforts and difficulties.

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