

A Concise History of Brazil

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By official decree, Brazil celebrates its 500th anniversary in 2000: the modern history of the country dating from April, 1500, when a fleet commanded by Pedro Alvares Cabral anchored at Porto Seguro on the north-east coast of Bahia. To borrow a phrase used by historians of the Imperial period (1822-1889), for the last five hundred years scholars have sought to discover the real Brazil in the official Brazil - the latter a formal entity, depicted in largely European terms, the former an exotic place, for centuries ill-defined by cartographers, a mix-of Amerindian, African, Mediterranean and Asian cultures struggling to forge an identity and determine its place in the world. Pin-pointing the distinctness of Brazil continues to confound.

The most distinguished historian of Brazil of his generation, Boris Fausto has chosen a broad-brush historical narrative approach, punctuated by a discussion of key controversies in the historiography. He charts Brazilian development from the arrival of the Portuguese to its present position as tenth largest economy in the world and the country with the highest degree of recorded income inequality. Writing a survey of Brazilian history is to engage with many controversies - confronting analyses that present history as moments of abrupt change or 'missed opportunities', as constant progress versus inertia, as ethnic diversity and a culture of tolerance against enduring inequity, poverty and violence. Are these the legacies of Portuguese colonialism, of the endurance of slavery until almost the end of the nineteenth century or of rapid industrialisation in the second half of the twentieth?

Colonial Brazil was shaped by European expansion overseas from the fifteenth century onwards. It was a product of Portuguese long-distance trade and defense of national identity. Commercial engagement with Genoa and Venice, confronting the challenge of Islam in the peninsula and the Mediterranean, fear of a unifying Spain, the experience of settling the Atlantic island (Madeira, the Azores, Cape Verde and São Tomé) and ventures in Africa and Asia (not least displacement by the Dutch and British) all influenced initial contacts with Brazil and, later, the place of the colony in the Portuguese world. From these emerged the major 'Brazilian' institutions of the colonial period and beyond - monarchy, settler oligarchy, landed estate and slavery. Were these influences also responsible for characteristics such as a search for adventure, racial tolerance and authoritarianism?

In writing about the colonial period, Fausto attempts to recapture the 'silent presence' of Amerindians and

incorporates new approaches to the study of family and society. Inevitably, however, the narrative concentrates on the story of the administrative organisation of the country and state formation, on social institutions, on commercial ventures (Brazil initially disappointed in that precious metals were not discovered until the end of the seventeenth century) and on sugar. Sugar, much more than brazil wood, tobacco or gemstones and gold (discovered in significant quantities in the 1690s), was the great colonial staple and configured economy and society for centuries. This said, one of the peculiarities of late colonial Brazil was the prevalence of the institution of slavery. It was not a markedly rural phenomenon. On the contrary, slaves were as likely to be found in a wide range of occupations - engaged in construction, petty trading and even workshops - as toiling on sugar plantations. Slave ownership permeated much of society and would become even more diffused in the immediate post-Independence decades.

The longevity of the Portuguese colonial state in Brazil surprised many contemporaries and continues to excite the interest of scholars. It successfully confronted determined Dutch efforts to carve out an empire in the north-east in the seventeenth century and periodic threats from other European powers, particularly France. Moreover, trailblazers from Brazil settled regions technically falling within the control of Spain, pushing the frontier outward to the west and south. Possibly, the colonial system survived due to distance and size, (Brazil was too large and too far away to be administered effectively from Lisbon), to a degree of pragmatism in official commercial and administrative policy, to the emergence of regional oligarchies who looked to the Crown for the preservation of order in a society where slaves and blacks massively outnumbered whites and, by the eighteenth century, to the association with England, in part cemented by the gold boom of 1695-c.1750.

The connexion with England also explains the peculiar nature of the transition from colony to independent Empire. Brazil is unique in the Americas in that independence from the mother country was 'presided' over by the heir to the metropolitan throne. Perhaps this also accounts for the survival of 'colonial' institutions - monarchy, plantation and slavery - and national unity. While Brazilian resistance to Portuguese rule had been provoked in the latter part of the eighteenth century by administrative reforms designed to strengthen metropolitan authority and may have been exacerbated by the decline of the mining sector, the defining event was the transfer of the Portuguese Court to Rio de Janeiro in 1807, under the protection of the Royal Navy, with the French invasion of Portugal. At a stroke, Brazil became the centre of the Portuguese world. Concurrently, mercantilist commercial regulations were lifted, soon to be replaced by a commercial treaty with Britain that virtually imposed free trade on Brazil. In 1821, when João IV was forced to return to Lisbon, he appointed his son, Pedro, as regent in Brazil. Independence followed in 1822 when Pedro I was acclaimed Emperor of Brazil.

Having charted more than three centuries of colonial history in the opening chapter, Fausto devotes the remainder of the book to the post-Independence period, following conventional 'watersheds': independent Imperial Brazil, 1822-89; the First (Old) Republic, 1889-1930; the Vargas ascendancy, 1930-45; 'guided' democracy, 1945-64; the military government, 1964-84/5. In describing the formative period of the Empire, he stresses internal challenges to statehood and unity, in part to correct over-drawn contrasts with Spanish America. While Brazil survived as a single polity, in the face of the Balkanisation of other parts of Latin America, the transition from colony to nation (and the continuity of monarchy) was far from peaceful and unity far from inevitable.

Examining the political structure of the Empire, Fausto provides an illuminating comment on the 'moderating power', the peculiar arrangement that established the Crown as a fourth, 'neutral' element in the constitutional constellation alongside the judicial, legislative and executive branches of government. Whether this device, or the realisation of contending regional elites by the 1840s that provincial challenges to central authority were economically damaging and threatened popular rebellion, secured the unity of the country is a moot point. Certainly, both contributed to a renewed impetus in favour of political centralisation.

Coffee made the Empire, it also undermined the monarchical system. By the 1840s coffee had become the principal export. During the 1860s production spread beyond the region around Rio de Janeiro to the interior

of the province of São Paulo. With the movement of the coffee frontier came slavery, at least initially. Coffee and slavery financed the Empire and bound the elite together. However, with the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 1850s and a flourishing internal slave trade in the 1860s and 1870s, when labour was transferred from sugar estates in the north-east to dynamic coffee regions, slavery became less of a 'national' institution. Moreover, even the internal trade could not satisfy the labour demands of coffee - subsidised immigration became the preferred alternative by the 1880s. Mass immigration in the 1880s was, in part, responsible for challenging prevailing social attitudes and changing society. Regionalist sentiments grew, especially in São Paulo, as the central government was perceived as treating the province, which was politically under-represented, as a cash cow, a view that intensified as coffee prices weakened and government in Rio de Janeiro seemed deaf to planter pleas for assistance. In differentiating between long-term and immediate causes for the substitution of a centralised Empire by a federal republic, Fausto does not neglect other factors such as the increasing presence of the Army in politics (after the Paraguayan War), disputes with the Roman Catholic church and the identification of younger army officers and important sections of the urban bourgeoisie with the cause of republicanism. By 1888 the monarchy was no longer necessary for unity or order.

As radical contemporaries remarked, the Republic was declared in the year in which the centenary of the outbreak of the French Revolution was celebrated. Yet the republic that emerged was positivist and oligarchic. It was also unstable. Differing models of republicanism were on offer, traditional politicians resented the enhanced presence of the military, there was social protest in the backlands and coffee prices weakened further. Establishing a new order was associated with the settlement of intra-regional oligarchic conflict and constructing a central mechanism capable of arbitrating intra- and inter-regional disputes - possibly the emergence of a political class. It also required support for the coffee sector. Fausto shows how, by the early 1900s, these arrangements were in place. The disintegration of that balance of interests between the two most powerful state oligarchies (Minas and São Paulo) in 1929 and a further crisis in coffee proved the undoing of the Old Republic. However, by this stage Brazilian society and economy have become much more complex. New actors (thought not necessarily new classes) were clamouring for access to power, notably urban groups and those who saw the future of Brazil as less connected with export-agriculture. Perhaps, like the Empire, the Old Republic died of a hardening of the arteries. It was more effective when ordering dispute from within than without. Yet, as Fausto has written elsewhere, and emphasises here, in 1930 the nature of the break with the personalities and the institutions of the past was far from clear.

Not until some years after the 1930s coup did it emerge that the Vargas regime was going to preside over the formation of a new, centralised state that enjoyed greater autonomy from sectional and sectoral interests than its predecessor. Economic interventionism, particularly the promotion of manufacturing, and attempts to maintain social control through co-optation gradually became the defining characteristics of the new system. (This is not to say that cruder methods of repression were not frequently deployed.) Economic interventionism and social action were grafted on to an existing authoritarian tradition, a tendency fostered by the ideological rivalries of the time and growing tension in the cities. All these features were encapsulated in the 'New State' (Estado Novo) established in 1937 following a government sponsored coup designed to extend the Vargas regime. For Fausto, commenting on a theme that he has made his own, the Vargas regime was authoritarian, centralist and pragmatic, a combination essential to further a national project of technocratic modernisation. This stance also explains Vargas' return to power in 1950 as a democratically elected president.

The experiment with 'open' democracy between 1945 and 1964 owed much to the 'urbanisation' of politics, thought not necessarily the urbanisation of political institutions. In the major cities, political participation grew after 1945 and electoral politics became more competitive. By 1950, debate about the model of manufacturing - in an 'open' or a statist economy - became clearer. Not in doubt was the developmentalist option to industrialise, a programme supported by the industrial lobby, part of the old political class, some sections of the rural elites and state-controlled organised labour. This alliance was undermined by inflation, worker unrest, capital flight, in-fighting amongst the political classes and external pressure. With organised unrest in the countryside, arguably for the first time in the history of the country, urban worker protest about

the cost of living and the radicalisation of sections of the Roman Catholic church, the democratic experiment was depicted as fostering revolution from below. All political actors seemed to be of the opinion that a democratic solution to the problems confronting the system was impossible.

The 1964 golpe inaugurated twenty-one years of military rule. Not that the regime was unchanging nor, at the outset, expected to last so long. Purportedly staged to free the country from corruption and Communism and to restore democracy, by the end of the decade the regime had evolved into an altogether more technocratic-authoritarian arrangement committed to industrial deepening and embedding the required institutional setting. Nevertheless, the Brazilian regime did not embark on a course of systematic violence similar to that observed in the Argentine and Chile. There was torture, summary executions, 'disappearances' and violent repression (especially in the countryside), labour organisations and the universities were intervened and the political rights of many were suspended. Yet the media remained relatively free, there was a degree of judicial independence, the anti-government stand of sections of the Roman Catholic church was tolerated and, though shorn of much of its power and highly regulated, Congress continued to function. Having intensified around 1968, state terrorism became less acute by the early 1970s as the so-called economic miracle became manifest. Forced savings, relatively low inflation, an inflow of foreign capital, export promotion and a growth in domestic credit account for the miracle. There was rapid growth and economic diversification. There was also a widening 'social gap', environmental degradation and increasing external exposure.

Buffeted by the second oil crisis, growing popular mobilisation, the withdrawal of support by a business community resentful of the stasis of the economy and a loss of confidence in its ability to manage, the Armed Forces were able to negotiate a return to the barracks during 1984. A 'new reality' awaited: the principal problems confronting the country had been identified - poverty, social inequality, and authoritarianism. Finding solutions may prove more problematic.

A Concise History offers the non-expert reader a broad panorama of Brazilian history. The expert will appreciate efforts to capture issues and controversies in the historiography and to present them in a digestible fashion. Fausto is at his best when examining processes such as state formation and the operation of political institutions and organisations. Here there is detail and informative, interpretive comment. There is also informed comment on major social development. Fausto is less confident when dealing with economic policy and external relations. On occasions, these topics appear as an after-thought, included at those points where they cause least disruption to the flow of the main narrative. This impression may be due to problems of translation. There is an excessive recourse to colloquialisms and less subtlety in the language - for example, Kubitschek's *Programa de Metas* becomes 'Program of Goals' rather than the more usual (and accurate) 'Programme of Targets'. Moreover, in following too closely a conventional periodisation, Fausto underplays some of the continuities hinted at in the narrative, not least in economic institutions and policies.

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