

World War One and Brazilian Cultural Life

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Abstract

Addressing the repercussions of the First World War on Brazilian cultural life, this article highlights the conflictual relationship between Brazil and Portugal during the Brazilian First Republic. Rio de Janeiro's urban reform, which aimed at transforming the capital into a 'tropical Paris' (proof of the country's modernization and its accession to the *belle époque*), was seen to represent liberation from the colonial past. However, the War shattered these illusions and overthrew the trust hitherto placed in the values of European civilization, now considered decadent. New diagnoses and therapies began to guide nationalist political movements. Old struggles were brought up to date and the Portuguese legacy was once more reevaluated.

Keywords

First Republic; Anti-Lusitanian Nationalism; Pereira Passos Reform; *Carioca Belle Époque*; Reinvention of Brazil.

Resumo

Ao abordar as repercussões da Primeira Guerra na vida cultural brasileira o artigo destaca a conflituosa relação entre Brasil e Portugal durante a Primeira República. A libertação do passado colonial vai ser representada pela reforma urbana do Rio que pretende transformar a capital em uma "Paris tropical" – prova da modernização e do ingresso do país na *belle époque*. A Guerra destrói tais ilusões e derruba a confiança nos valores da civilização europeia considerada então como decadente. Novos diagnósticos e novas terapias passam a guiar movimentos políticos de cunho nacionalistas. Antigos combates são reatualizados e a herança portuguesa vai ser novamente reavaliada.

Palavras-chave

Primeira República; nacionalismo antilusitano; reforma Pereira Passos; *belle époque carioca*; reinvenção do Brasil.

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Cultural relations between Brazil and the other countries of South America have long been marked by a process of construction of identities and otherness that alternate over time. The evaluation made by monarchist historians of Latin America, for example, emphasized the difficulties faced by the South American Republics and the benefits derived from Brazilian independence having been achieved with the continuity provided by its monarchist regime. One can cite as an example Eduardo Prado and his book, *A Ilusão Americana*, written in 1893. For this author, Spanish America, when its independence movements adopted the North American model throughout the nineteenth century, had turned its back on its own traditions. While the United States was accused by Prado of having an aggressive, tyrannical, arrogant, and opportunistic foreign policy, the Republics of Spanish America were identified with militarism and authoritarianism. For Prado, it was the imperial regime in Brazil that warded off authoritarianism by then suffocating the other countries of South America.

The end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries witnessed an enormous wave of European immigrants who came to 'build America.' The United States was the principal destination although Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil also received large numbers of migrants. From Europe arrived not only immigrants but also ideas that proclaimed the superiority of pure over mixed races and of whites over blacks. Some segments of Brazil's intellectual class, influenced by these doctrines, began to ascribe greater importance to the biological, or racial, component of social relations. Brazil began to be regarded as a backward and even sick society, since it was largely made up of 'inferior' races and a miscegenated population, both identified as obstacles to progress and social harmony. As a result, the great wave of mostly European immigration was welcomed not only because it resolved the problem of replacing slave labor but also because it made possible the 'whitening' of Brazil, by altering the composition of the miscegenated population.

Relations with Portugal

Relations between Portugal, the creator, and Brazil, the creation, were always turbulent. At the start of the twentieth century, many Brazilian intellectuals viewed the two countries' common past as valuable, since it made possible the affirmation of their country's European origins. For others, however, the common past should not be emphasized, since it was imperative to overcome the experience of having once been a Portuguese colony. They believed affirming a national identity and rejecting the identification with Portugal was necessary. In other words, while for Brazil highlighting the

differences was necessary, for Portugal, emphasis was placed on a permanence and continuity that extended to the Portuguese colonies in Africa, as well, preserving them from conflict.

In Rio de Janeiro, then the federal capital, Paulo Barreto (who pen name was João do Rio) was one of the Brazilian intellectuals who set great store by the Luso-Brazilian tradition. However, the role played by the Portuguese in the city's press fed into the strong anti-Portuguese sentiment characteristic of Rio de Janeiro. In the 1910s and 1920s, *cariocas* poked fun at their Portuguese ancestors while *paulistas* exalted the *bandeirantes*, a unique combination of Renaissance-era Portuguese and indigenous Americans (Lessa, 2002).

1908 saw the inauguration of the Centennial Commemorative Exhibition of the Opening of the Ports² in Rio de Janeiro. The Opening of the Ports was presented as Brazil's certificate of economic independence, which had come about before the political independence attained later, in 1822. These commemorations should have been attended by King Carlos I, but his assassination in February 1908 put an end to the visit and, two years later, to the Portuguese monarchy itself.

The Exhibition demonstrated what Brazil had achieved over the course of one hundred years and what it hoped to achieve in the future to come. For three months, the state pavilions and the four sections – agriculture, livestock, industry, and liberal arts – exhibited their successes. Moreover, the Exhibition, as was typical of the age, was the site of sporting and festive activities such as a roller-coasters, shooting ranges, skating, hot-air-balloon rides, and fireworks. Visitors could also purchase the Exhibition's postcards, making the event better known across Brazil and throughout the world through their correspondence with family and friends. Reviews such as *O Malho* and *Careta* provided a rich report of the Exhibition.

The staging of the Exhibition was meant to consecrate, so to speak, a deep movement of modernization, wherein progress and civilization were symbolized by the modernization of cities. Urban reform, improvements, and embellishment were presented as alternatives to the chaos and backwardness of colonial-era cities.

The Modernization of the Capital

As the twentieth century began, new comparisons began to be made between Brazil, now a Republic, and other comparable regimes of Latin America. The progress and

² Exposição Comemorativa do Centenário da Abertura dos Portos.

wealth of Argentina both seduced and threatened Brazilians at a time when Buenos Aires began to be considered the continent's most European city. In 1900, President Campos Sales visited Argentina, accompanied by a delegation composed of ministers, politicians, and journalists. Among them was journalist and poet Olavo Bilac who, upon his return, could not hide his admiration for the "new Argentine capital"³ and began to campaign for reforms to Rio de Janeiro (Freire, 2003). In the first decade of the twentieth century, and with the strong backing of the city's press, which acted as a cheerleader for this "civilizational project,"⁴ the capital underwent a modernization process that helped to build the image of a country aligned with the imaginary of a civilized Europe. In Rio de Janeiro, this project entailed urban reforms aimed at transforming the city into a 'tropical Paris.'

Rio de Janeiro's urban reform, carried out under the stewardship of prefect Pereira Passos, was implemented over the space of three years and submitted the insalubrious colonial city to a standard of modernization that had as its ultimate point of reference Haussman's transformation of Paris. It was deemed necessary to overcome the lack of hygiene noted by health experts, putting an end to the habits which favored the transmission of diseases, and action was indeed taken. In 1903, the Port Works Building Commission,⁵ led by an engineer, Paulo de Frontin, was created; it was charged with organizing projects as well as negotiating compulsory purchases, sales, and exchanges of property. Another commission, charged with fiscal and administrative matters, included in its ranks various illustrious names, among them another engineer, Francisco Bicalho, who had earlier, in 1897, cooperated with Aarão Reis in the building commission charged with creating a new capital for Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte.

The capital's reform included the construction of a quayside avenue (Rodrigues Alves), linking Mauá Square with another avenue running alongside the Mangue Canal (Francisco Bicalho). The opening of Avenida Central, two kilometers long, was made possible by the demolition of some 700 buildings and the relocation of the population – street traders, shopkeepers, and artisans – who lived in tenements. In 1910, various buildings of a monumental or eclectic nature appeared on Avenida Central, among them the Academy of Fine Arts,⁶ the National Library, the Supreme Federal Court, and the Municipal Theatre. The opening of the Beira-Mar and Mem de Sá Avenues was also a

³ 'nova capital platina.'

⁴ 'projeto civilizatório'.

⁵ 'Comissão Construtora das Obras do Porto'.

⁶ 'Escola Nacional de Belas Artes'.

response to problems of public health. In addition, it facilitated the movement of goods and persons and created new urban social spaces (Bechimol, 2003).

The modernization of the city was carried out in accordance with a French pattern, giving rise to what is known as the *carioca belle époque*. Avenida Central began to function as the shop-window for progress, making possible the expression of an elite culture where fashion and décor were given prominence. This Francophile transformation of the capital can be traced through its illustrated reviews, department stores, theatres, cafés, and salons, where an upwardly mobile population learned new codes of conduct and displayed its optimism regarding what the future held in store (Needel, 1993). In this way, the project for the city's improvement, which had as its most prominent achievement the Avenida Central, synthesized the effort to rectify outdated customs and ushered the capital into the *belle époque*, as it was referred to by the magazines of the time. Pre-war cosmopolitanism permitted, as well, advances in the field of journalism, which allowed intellectuals, for the first time, to flourish independently of the State subsidies – one case in point being Olavo Bilac. *Kosmos* and *Revista da Semana* were the main organs for the dissemination of the new type of desired society; in other words, the project for the Europeanization of the Republic's capital. "Rio is becoming civilized,"⁷ an oft-repeated phrase at the time, embodied the effort to reform the city center, bringing light to the alleys, destroying tenements, controlling epidemics, and driving the poor away from the capital's central space.

This project of civility implemented by its elites lent the capital French airs, as has already been mentioned, leading to a rift with the society that existed not only in the surrounding hills but also in many of the city center's streets, deemed much closer to those of an 'oriental city.' Rio was thus divided between a worldly cosmopolitanism and ancient patterns of behavior that did not disappear, and that have not disappeared still, from many urban areas.

The Impact of War

The First World War, as is well known, brought about a reorganization of the modern world. It unleashed social tensions that resulted in the Russian Revolution of 1917. The war also marked the end of North American isolationism and brought about the collapse of backward empires – Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary. The Ottoman Empire, which aligned itself with the Central Powers, would lose, in the post-war

⁷ 'O Rio civiliza-se'.

settlements, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon to France and the United Kingdom; it would give way to the modern Turkish Republic, recognized by the Allies in 1923.

Military clashes and the terrible conditions endured by soldiers in the trenches provoked the death of some eight million combatants; there were also some 20 million wounded. Thanks to the war, the idea of international fraternity gave way to patriotic sentiment, love for one's motherland and for one's people. Declarations of war were received by the various peoples with demonstrations of support for their respective nations. The conflict also brought about changes to social and even familial relations. Women, for example, assumed positions in the labor market hitherto reserved for men and would also find themselves close to the battle lines through activities such as nursing.

Brazil only entered the conflict in its final stages as a result of attacks by German submarines against its merchant vessels. These resulted in protests on the streets of the capital in 1917 against the sinking of these ships and in favor of a declaration of war. The war on the other side of the Atlantic began to receive greater press coverage, with newspapers disseminating arguments both for and against intervention. One of the Brazilian government's initiatives, beyond the patrolling of the South Atlantic, was the dispatch of a medical mission whose members were badly affected by the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic, contracted while stopping over on the African coast. Although limited, Brazil's involvement in the conflict allowed it to be represented at the Paris Peace Conference and to see its complaints addressed. Of these, the most significant was financial compensation for all the coffee delivered to Germany before the war's outbreak but consumed during the conflict, as well as the confirmation of the ownership of seized German merchant vessels. In this way, Brazil joined the League of Nations, created by the Versailles Treaty.

Brazilian Intellectuals and the Conflict

The First World War's outbreak in 1914, bringing into conflict France and Germany, two of the main paradigms of progress and civilization, was a shock to the optimistic universe of *belle époque* Rio de Janeiro. The war would soon divide Brazilian intellectuals among those who defended pan-German conceptions and those who upheld their Francophile beliefs – a current that, it should be noted, had long-standing traditions in Brazilian culture (Carelli, 1994).

A period marked by trust in the achievement of mankind and in the liberal ideas dominant from 1870 to 1914 had come to an end. During the war and in the postwar years, space was created for other ideas, which questioned the way in which progress, or what was

viewed as progress, was measured. So-called avant-garde movements proliferated, as did the manifestos which sought to alter established standards in the various fields of art and culture.

Europe had been, from 1870 to 1914, Brazil's most important point of reference, but the country was also conscious of its own greatness in terms of territorial dimension, natural resources, and variety of populations. This made it imperative to think differently from many European countries, including Portugal, the old metropole. A new nation could only be built if Brazil's singularities, its potential, and also the obstacles it faced were recognized. If hitherto the climactic and racial characteristics of Brazil and its people had been understood as hurdles to the country's progress, reformists and nationalists of the period explained that this was because the elites saw themselves and the country as a whole through the prism of a European mentality. However, it was precisely this mentality that began to change as a result of the war, since it was increasingly thought that Brazilians could not and should not retain their subservience to decadent European values. It was imperative to struggle against the vice of imitation, the simple desire to copy, in order to create a more modern and more Brazilian Brazil.

In order to break with the mentality encapsulated in the term "mimicry,"⁸ attention had to be redirected to Brazil's own roots. The motto of the times was "rethink Brazil."⁹ Intellectuals gave themselves the task of finding the country's true culture wherever it may lie, whether in a historical past or even in times immemorial. Thanks to this spirit of reinvention, the Brazilian people themselves began to be seen as the starting point of the nationality; the 'popular' gained pride of place as the original source of Brazilian cultural authenticity.

In this same context, a great effort was made to study national problems, which gave rise to many different diagnoses and the prescription of therapies capable of bringing progress to the country. Each of these was produced and defended by groups who stood out in the intellectual panorama of the 1910s and 1920s. Writers, poets, journalists, doctors, and engineers were summoned to a crusade whose ultimate goal was the creation of a new nation. Alberto Torres, Oliveira Vianna, and Monteiro Lobate were some of the most prominent intellectuals who, beginning in the mid 1910s, began to denounce, each in his own way, the existence of an archaic Brazil; backward and led by an incompetent political class.

One common diagnostic was that of a lack of patriotism. This assessment could be found, for example, in the interventions of the already mentioned poet and journalist

⁸ 'mimetismo'.

⁹ 'Repensar o Brasil'.

Olavo Bilac, who campaigned for the introduction of obligatory military service. This measure was also defended by the Liga de Defesa Nacional, from 1916 onwards. In 1918, the Pro-Health League¹⁰ was founded to campaign for the carrying out of essential health initiatives, designed to root out disease. Among its members were counted famous doctors such as Afrânio Peixoto, Belisário Pena, and Artur Neiva (Lima, 1999).

Other intellectuals saw in the cosmopolitanism of the cities the source of the desire to mimic European standards. From this perspective, the culture of the coastal cities was seen as degraded, or corrupted, by foreign influences. Their counterpoint was the interior (*sertão*) and its inhabitant, the *sertanejo*; these were considered the true representatives of the nationality. There thus began a movement of rediscovery of Brazil's regions and their folklore, which went hand-in-hand with the growing nationalist movement and had in Catulo da Paixão Cearense one of its best known names.

A New Wave of Anti-Lusitanian Nationalism

After the First World War, new light was shed on the question of the construction of Brazilian national identity. New models of national identity came into being and began to compete with each other.

In Rio de Janeiro, the nationalism of Álvaro Bomilcar and the Nativist Propaganda¹¹ movement led to a rebirth of republican Jacobinism, now expressed as “anti-lusitanianism.”¹² In 1920, Bomilcar published *A Política no Brasil ou o Nacionalismo Radical* in which he asserted that one of Brazil's gravest problems was that it was a product of Portuguese colonialism. This was so, firstly, because of slavery; the Portuguese had devastated Asia and Africa, not just Brazil, turning the activity of seizing free men only to sell them as slaves into a legal branch of commerce (Oliveira, 1990). Secondly, according to this author, the Lusitanian influence could also be felt in the intolerance and hostility still manifested against those Brazilians who had the misfortune of descending from Africans or the dispossessed indigenous populations. As proof of his theories, Álvaro Bomilcar pointed to the progress experienced in Brazil's southernmost states, precisely those in which Portugal's influence was not as strong.

Bomilcar also railed against those intellectuals who could not, in the name of an ancestral linguistic inheritance, move on from philology and the debate surrounding a

¹⁰ Liga Pró-Saneamento.

¹¹ ‘Propaganda Nativista’

¹² ‘antilusitanismo’.

spelling reform. Brazilians had inherited a language – considered by Alexandre Herculano to be the tomb of thought – which then isolated Brazilians from global intellectual exchanges. According to this author, Brazil’s language was Brazilian, with its own syntax, prosody, style, and vocabulary, all different from Portuguese. Álvaro Bomilcar chose Portugal as the target of his attacks, following in the footsteps of a current that included Manuel Bonfim, and which refused to accept the Portuguese inheritance as beneficial to Brazil (Botelho, 2002).

This being the case the case, the debate over the ills, the shortcomings, and the problems of the Brazilian nation was reenergized in the years surrounding the First World War, with Portuguese colonialism once again denounced as responsible for the country’s backwardness (Oliveira, 2006; Ramos, Serpa, and Paulo, 2001). Nevertheless, at this precise moment the Francophile Olavo Bilac emerged as one of the authors who reaffirmed the positive aspects of the inheritance of the Portuguese world. While Bilac’s first trip to Europe, in 1890, was dominated by literary interests, his 1914 and 1916 trips saw primacy being given to his role as a nationalist ideologue. He was one of the mainstays of the nationalist cause, defending the integrity of language shared by Portugal and Brazil. During the First World War, Bilac placed himself at the forefront of the struggle for the defense of primary and practical education, as well as obligatory military service. Bilac, the “prince of the poets,”¹³ became the “worker of the nation,”¹⁴ involving himself in a number of civic campaigns for the above ends as well as the creation of the Liga de Defesa Nacional (Dimas, 2006).

It should be noted, however, that Manuel Bonfim, anti-lusitanian, and Olavo Bilac, supporter of the Portuguese world, joined forces to write a most interesting children’s book. *Através do Brasil* combines fiction and history and presents an “educational journey”¹⁵ in which the main characters mature as they travel across the country. The book functions as a type of civic catechism capable of nurturing a new national sentiment among all those who are being educated at school.

Manuel Bonfim and Olavo Bilac both defended education as the way to triumph over backwardness. They were preoccupied, and busied themselves, with the moral reform of society; the construction of the nation and the production of standard-bearers for the project of modernization. By presenting their work in this manner, they eventually defined a social identity for Brazilian intellectuals (Botelho, 2002).

¹³ ‘príncipe dos poetas’.

¹⁴ ‘operário da nação’

¹⁵ ‘jornada educativa’.

In other words, from 1910 onwards there began a great debate about the country's future, and against this background the Portuguese legacy was reevaluated once more. The Great War put an end to the blind cult of Europe and generated a sense of disappointment. As such, it allowed for the rereading of the former colony's history and the organization of political movements of a nationalist nature. As Compagnon puts it, the image of a European civilization crumbled (Compagnon, 2014). If at its start the war was often presented as a clash between French civilization and German barbarism, over time this was replaced by another interpretation – that of the collapse of European civilization in its totality. The models which had hitherto guided Latin Americans in general, and Brazilians in particular, in their search for modernity, lost their validity; radical optimism regarding the progress of humanity and boundless faith regarding the civilizing virtues of the Old World were abruptly interrupted thanks to the violence of the battlefields.

The war amounted to the eruption of the tragedy of a civilization and marked the definitive end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries. The “collapse of a civilization” and “dark times” were expressions frequently employed during this period. At the war's end, and with its wounds still raw, the world then had to face the Spanish Flu epidemic, which claimed nineteen million lives. It was as if one tragedy overshadowed the other (Brito, 1997).

It should be noted, finally, that many of the nationalist movements which marked the political and cultural realms of the interwar period had only an ephemeral existence. Others, busy with the (re)discovery of Brazilian roots, played a significant role in the 1920s. It is also important to recall the rebirth of colonial architecture that put a premium on traditional Luso-Brazilian inspiration. This trend, which in both Brazil and Spanish America was known as neo-colonial, was known as *casa Portuguesa* in Portugal itself.

The apogee of neo-colonial architecture, which had as its greatest exponent the doctor and historian José Mariano Filho (1881-1946), came in 1922 during the Brazil Centennial International Exhibition,¹⁶ which contained many pavilions built in the neo-colonial style (Pinheiro, 2011). 1922 also witnessed the staging of a Modern Art Week in São Paulo.¹⁷ And this was the decade in which the rediscovery of colonial cities took place, notably those of Minas Gerais, visited by *paulista* modernists in 1924.

All of these developments can be considered, from a wider perspective, as the unfolding of the First World War in Brazil.

¹⁶ Exposição Internacional do Centenário da Independência

¹⁷ 'Semana de Arte Moderna'.

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