Foreword

Why Read *Roots of Brazil* Today?

An English translation of this book has been long awaited and finally comes at an important juncture, now that Brazil’s economy and culture have become so prominent in the world. And yet, in one’s urgency to understand that country, why read a book written almost eighty years ago?

On the one hand, *Roots of Brazil*, first published in 1936 and substantially revised in subsequent editions, is one of those works that shapes its readers’ imagination, a book that in a certain sense “invents” its country, serving as a mirror in which, while seeking their own image, Brazilian readers have also found their own attitudes and inclinations. On the other hand, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s book functions not only as a fixed portrait that preserves a scene from the past but also as a bright surface that can reflect each new historical moment. It is true that its vocabulary is dated and that the author’s imagination is often guided by broad questions about national and regional identity that were typical of the early decades of the twentieth century in Latin America. Even so, this book retains its freshness, as if it contained the secret to the unresolved impasses that are still so provocative whenever questions are raised about Brazil’s place in the family of nations—that is, whenever Brazil is thought of as a country that might represent the “future,” its own future and perhaps the future of all countries.

But what can the international reader expect from this book? A simple and yet equivocal answer would be that readers outside Brazil
will find in it everything that distinguishes Brazilians from other nations, as if the national traits that the book postulates were irreducible features that one should grasp in order then, and only then, to understand the unique complexity of Brazilian society. In that case, the book would contain the keys to an understanding of that strange entity known as “the Brazilian.”

However, another way of answering the question about the readability of *Roots of Brazil* would be to suppose that it is precisely outside of Brazil that a reader less haunted by notions about national identity could break free of the tautology that Brazil is understandable only on the basis of Brazilian experience. As Tom Jobim is claimed to have once said, “Brazil is not for beginners.” Perhaps that quip by the great musician of the bossa nova is valid, but the fact is that “beginning” to understand Brazil (since whenever we begin we are beginners) is also a way of seeing the shortcomings in all theories of national identity. The reader will soon discover that the “roots” in the title, unlike what one might suppose at first glance, do not point toward a single origin or even toward a necessary beginning. Quite the opposite: these are loose, contradictory, multiple roots that may point toward different figures that are sometimes closer and sometimes more distant, as the book proceeds to analyze how Brazilian history has been shaped: by the Portuguese, the Spanish, the European, the Hispanic American, the North American, the Native American, the African, the Asian, and so on.

But what does *Roots of Brazil* focus on? Proceeding on the basis of a concept that itself is rather fluid—the “European frontiers”—Sérgio Buarque de Holanda suggests a basic paradox: certain forms of life and political association brought from Iberian Europe encountered in America a terrain very different from the one where they originated, which has produced the sensation that, on the level of culture, “we remain exiles in our own land,” according to a formula and a feeling that run through Brazilian literature from the nineteenth century on. We should not take for granted such a feeling of displacement, which might remind a Brazilian reader of the anthropophagus metaphor of Oswald de Andrade (for whom it was better...
to devour the European Other than have it serve us as a mirror), and may remind an English-speaking reader of the transatlantic character of the fiction of Henry James, for example.

While interrogating the country, Roots of Brazil also leads the reader’s imagination to work on a transatlantic level, because the more the search is for Brazil, the more one glimpses the Iberian Peninsula, or even Africa. Iberia is a peninsula that Sérgio Buarque de Holanda sees as a “transition zone” between Europe and Africa, echoing the initial thesis of another book fundamental for an understanding of Brazil: The Masters and the Slaves by Gilberto Freyre. From this border region that is the Iberian Peninsula—a “contact zone,” in the words of Mary Louise Pratt—come two of the great colonizing forces of the modern era, the Spanish and the Portuguese, whose empires mark the history of an America profoundly different from Puritan America.

Like Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda takes North American society as a reference for understanding Brazil. But unlike Freyre, who actually visited the United States in the 1920s and came to see a reflection of his Brazilian Northeast in the “Deep South,” Buarque de Holanda was working, in the 1930s, with an entirely imaginary country: the United States he sets in counterpoint to Brazil derives from various readings, many of them suspicious with regard to the civilizing example set by North American historical experience.

The reader of Roots of Brazil will see that the “cordial man”—the most important concept in the book—is a kind of anti-American, not because he hates the United States, but because he is the exact opposite of the person who, in protecting his private life, sees it as inviolable, hiding all torments and secrets within the sacred inscrutable space of his status as an individual. In contrast to the North American, the cordial man is the person who refuses all restraints, as well as all protective mechanisms, with regard to society and to the Other. In the Brazilian case, the public sphere would instead be the place for possible celebration of the proximity of bodies and souls. Intuitively, who can fail to recognize, in this kind of celebration, the alegria [joy]
repeatedly attributed to Brazilians, backed up by an endless string of stereotypes? It is true that stereotypes always answer to real experiences, and it is no accident that the land of the cordial man is also the land of soccer and Carnival—essential experiences that, in their own way, question the limits of the pacts of civilization, exalting, in the final analysis, the porosity of the social body.

The “cordial man,” as concept and as metaphor, has its origin in a dialogue between the Brazilian modernist poet Ribeiro Couto and the Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes, who was his country’s ambassador in Rio de Janeiro in the 1930s and whose _Monterrey: Correo Literario de Alfonso Reyes_ contains the first mention, made by Ribeiro Couto, of the “cordial man.” But we may suppose that, beyond any strictly Latin American debate, this concept of cordiality arises from a problematical encounter with the United States, a country that had already provided a similar matrix for Max Weber’s thoughts about the modern world. It is well known that _The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism_ would be inconceivable without the proverbs of Benjamin Franklin and their guiding spirit, based on a restriction of mundane pleasures and a severe adherence to a lay work ethic.

So here we find, in reverse, the traits of the cordial man, who never lets himself be taken over by such a work ethic. It is as if, when faced by the imperious need for endless extenuating labor, Macunaíma—the anti-hero created by Mário de Andrade in 1928, in a novel of central importance in modern Brazilian literature—were to step forth and exclaim, with utter shamelessness, _ai, que preguiça!_ (Oh, how lazy I feel!). From the “cordial” point of view, it is not a question of merely setting up an ethic refractory to work, but rather a question of creating a social pact based on the possibility of a space for games and ludic interaction. Here we see that Carnival and soccer can be much more than simple escape mechanisms, because they function as markers for the play of society, creating a space where the rules of coexistence are governed in a new way, though strictly respected within that field. If the “cordial man” can bring something of importance into contemporary debates, it would be the reminder that all political pacts are also games, and that their rules may change.
without causing any setbacks in civilization. In short, *Roots of Brazil* can suggest the possibility of other political pacts that have no basis in values dear to North American liberal traditions.

Even so, the cordial man is not simply a “contribution to civilization,” as stated in Ribeiro Couto’s celebratory remark, which Buarque de Holanda imbues with deep ambiguity when he refers to it in *Roots of Brazil*. The shaping of public space is problematical and precarious wherever the values of cordiality prevail and whenever the political ethic is based on the well-being of a small family nucleus that serves only a circle of friends and beneficiaries instead of some abstract “collectivity.” The obstacles to the establishment of public space in Brazil (which may reflect similar problems in Hispanic America, of course, and not be unique to Brazil) are illuminatingly formulated in this book. Drawing on Hegel’s reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Buarque de Holanda sees in the conflict between Antigone and Creon a clash between family values and civic values, between a circle of acquaintances and the abstraction of the polis, and, in short, between the cordial man and the citizen. This impasse is still unresolved today and may remain so for a very long time to come: in Brazil, the politician, as representative of larger groups, is not always able to free himself from personal commitments. In other words, the man does not yield to the political *persona*, and the very idea of *representation* loses a great deal of its complexity, because, when the cordial man prevails, no masks (good or bad) can be maintained. Like Antigone when she was forbidden to bury her brother, the cordial man is always ready to violate the needs of the community, remaining an individual loyal to his family, but never a good citizen. In this tragic conflict, as read by Hegel, loyalty to family is the obverse of betrayal of polis.

When discussing traits that might be defined as “psychological,” Buarque de Holanda is in fact enabling a discussion of a political kind, because his problem—so pressing during the period between the two World Wars—was the position and role of the individual when faced with the imperious demands of the collectivity. *Roots of Brazil* was written during the rise of *populismo* in Latin America (a term whose semantic field is rather different from that of “populism”
in English), and in that sense it is interesting to think of paradigmatic cases such as those of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Perón (later) in Argentina, while noting how, in both these cases, political models are forged that short-circuit the processes of representation. After all, such models presuppose a certain degree of commitment between leader and people that, in the final analysis, relegates to a secondary level all the mediations of liberal politics and the whole chain of representations rendered sacred by that tradition.7

So, it would be no exaggeration to claim that the “cordial man” is also a way of dramatizing political impasses in a world divided between the phantoms of totalitarianism, which Buarque de Holanda strongly rejected, and the values of liberalism, which he did not completely support, either—particularly in 1936, when, in the first edition of Roots of Brazil, he still criticized the “fraudulent” character of the liberal mythology, an adjective that significantly disappears in later editions after the Second World War.8

In stressing here Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s “anti-American” side, I do not mean to imply that he resisted all suggestions coming from the North. Furthermore, it is well to recall that the historiographical field into which he would venture in the 1940s has to do precisely with the idea of the frontier, which is so central to Roots of Brazil. Also, in his later essays, the figure of the bandeirante who advances into the sertão becomes more prominent, whereby the Brazilian historian enters into a clear dialogue with Frederick Jackson Turner’s theses concerning the conquest of the North American West.9 Similarly, while writing in newspapers up to and throughout the 1950s as an accomplished literary critic, Buarque de Holanda entered into a productive debate with the Anglo-American New Criticism, as well as with the great European critics who had contributed to the creation of modern Romance studies, without which the present departments of Spanish and Portuguese in American and British universities would be inconceivable.10

There was no simple resistance to the North American liberal model, but, even so, it is interesting to read Roots of Brazil today as an anguished and perhaps still valid question about other possible models for the political pact. It is as if, in portraying the cordial man...
and his incomprehension of the impersonality of modern politics, Buarque de Holanda were dreaming, albeit ambiguously, about that noble lineage in Latin American thought that, starting in the fin de siècle with the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó and the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, defended the idea that the future of civilization lay in the South and not in the North. With all due recognition of the differences among the countless authors included in that lineage, it is clear that all of them were enchanted with the proposal that the dwelling place of the Spirit would not be the land of “Yankee utilitarianism” but rather Iberian America—not just Hispanic America but also Brazil. In the Shakespearian terms as renewed by Darío and later by Rodó, Ariel, spirit of the air, would triumph over Caliban and reign supreme in Iberian America. And we know how that same reference would produce, in the 1960s, a series of Calibanesque rereadings that postulate the unsuspected superiority of the “savages” of the South over the arrogance of the North: those were the times of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, in the context of the French Caribbean, and of Roberto Fernández Retamar in Fidel Castro’s Cuba, all of whom were involved in a broad debate concerning the supposed advantages of a model for civilization that might develop on the margins and in the shadow of the so-called “developed” world. The threads for disentangling this enormous skein, which also includes *Roots of Brazil*, can be found in Richard Morse’s polemical book *Prospero’s Mirror*, where the suggestion becomes unequivocally clear: “For two centuries a North American mirror has been held aggressively to the South, with unsettling consequences. The time has perhaps come to turn the reflecting surface around. At the moment when Anglo America may be experiencing a failure of nerve, it seems timely to set before it the historical experience of Ibero America, not now as a case study in frustrated development but as the living out of a civilizational option.”

It is important to note the triangulation that makes it possible to read *Roots of Brazil* not only as a question about Brazil’s position with regard to North America but also as an inquiry into its similarities and differences with regard to Hispanic America. Ultimately, as the reader will see, the initial postulation of an “Iberian” individual will
yield, throughout the book, to a string of differentiations that culminate in the contrast between urban planning in Hispanic America and the desleixo [laxity] of Portuguese colonial cities—a theme, furthermore, that will return, broadened by a luxuriant erudition, in the analysis of Edenic motifs in the colonization of the tropics, in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s masterpiece, Visão do Paraíso.13

One last word about method and mode of writing in Roots of Brazil. While it is true that Buarque de Holanda incessantly sets up broad categories—such as the “Puritan,” the “Spaniard,” the “Portuguese”—thus inviting the reader to imagine lines that join large social groups, at the same time he blurs those lines, like a Penelope tying together the threads of explanation only to untie them immediately, so that at each step a new design may take shape and a new identity be revealed, in fleeting illustrations. It will be clear, however, that these great theoretical constructions (beginning with the “cordial man”) are only precarious approximations of complex historical realities that remain irreducible to clear and conclusive patterns. The indebtedness of the author of Roots of Brazil to Max Weber’s “ideal types” is obvious, particularly when we recall that, like all good fictions, ideal types condense the traits by means of which we gain access to what lies beneath the visible surface of human actions, whose cultural and historical meaning will elude any descriptive or cumulative summation. It is well, however, to recall that for Buarque de Holanda, these ideal types take on a very special charge in their “dialectic interaction,” in the words of the great critic Antonio Candido, whose preface to Roots of Brazil has been added to all Brazilian editions of the book since 1969 and which the English reader will also find here.

Finally, and returning to the botanical, organicist metaphor that lends the book much of its flavor, it is no exaggeration to suppose that this formative essay by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda may now coincide with the sensitivity in our time to a world that cannot be reduced either to clear origins or to explanatory “centers” that allow us to imagine fixed identities. If the critique of the idea of a stable center or origin pulses at the heart of contemporary intellectual adventures, then the reader of today, whether more or less “postmodern,” “postcolonial,” “deconstructionist,” and so on, may here rest assured, since
he or she will feel quite at home, even while reading a book whose title features the outmoded word “roots.”

Pedro Meira Monteiro

*Princeton University, May 2011*

Translated from the Portuguese by James Irby

**Notes**


7. Even though this is not the place for a discussion of the theoretical intricacies of “populism,” it is important to remember that the idea of a
“populist” as a sort of demagogue is not complex enough to explain a phenomenon like this. In any case, for the purpose of reading *Roots of Brazil* it is useful to note that populism is quite often regarded by theorists as an answer to a lack of stability in the political order: “Populist practices emerge out of the failure of existing social and political institutions to confine and regulate political subjects into a relatively stable social order. It is the language of politics when there can be no politics as usual: a mode of identification characteristic of times of unsettlement and de-alignment, involving the radical redrawing of social borders along lines other than those that had previously structured society. It is a political appeal that seeks to change the terms of political discourse, articulate new social relations, redefine political frontiers and constitute new identities.” Francisco Panizza, “Introduction,” *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 9.


12. Curiously, Morse’s book, originally written in English, has been published in Spanish in 1982 (México, DF: Siglo XXI) and in Portuguese