

PART I

Familial Politics

Marking the Starting Point

Readings of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda

Since the preface to the fifth Brazilian edition of *Roots of Brazil* in 1969, where Antonio Candido (b. 1918) reinforced the importance of Max Weber in understanding the book, the discussion of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's German influences has remained a central one.¹ We would do well to recall, however, that the German theorists to which Candido refers are not limited to the heirs of the modern hermeneutics, with Max Weber, the author of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as an illustrious representative. Candido argues that, in bowing to the softening of Buarque de Holanda's "dialectical" inspiration, the Weberian streak in *Roots of Brazil* has lost much of its original rigidity. It would take until the early 1990s, however, for a sharp-eyed reader of Antonio Candido to elevate that dialectic to the level of sentiment, casting it as a constitutive part of the Brazilian intellectual experience.² And only in the decade to follow would Candido's work be understood in terms of the influence of the German tradition of Romance studies, and Auerbach in particular—an author who would leave deep marks on Buarque de Holanda's imagination.³

If there is a "sentiment of dialectic" in Buarque de Holanda as well, the issue will demand a painstaking investigation, one that over-spills the scope of this book. For now, I will simply register the idea that after the 1970s, *Roots of Brazil* is virtually inseparable from Candido's reading. Hence the *boutade* from Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos (declaring that the Sérgio Buarque de Holanda "of the book

Roots of Brazil is an invention of Antonio Candido's"⁴) is somewhat illuminating: the preface's questions have left an indelible mark on the text, with all subsequent readers working under the sign of that interpretation. This becomes even more ironic when one is aware that Candido himself, in another important preface, would declare provocatively that "the common denominator amongst most prefaces is their lack of necessity."⁵

The reading sketched out in that preface is often reproduced in academic environments in Brazil and abroad, sometimes in the form of the hypothesis of ideal types built in pairs—broadening the old dichotomy in Latin American thought, stretching back to Euclides da Cunha and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento.⁶ The observation that *Roots of Brazil* apparently lacks the rigidity of the framework that unyieldingly pits civilization against barbarity opened up a modernist territory in the critical imagination. From this view, European heritage and all its associated values would receive the impact of something beyond local color—the very possibility of reimagining the order of that heritage. It is as if from the entrails of an "other" (being none other than "we" Brazilians, in the perspective constructed by the modernists in the 1920s and transformed into an allegory by the tropicalists in the 1960s), there emerged a new reading and the formidable rediscovery of the modern. Here we have the new forms of modernity in the tropics: the "million-dollar contribution of all our mistakes," in Oswald de Andrade's avant-garde phrasing from the 1920s, or the "advantages of backwardness," in the formulation that was so key for the Brazilian sociological imagination.⁷

In terms of Buarque de Holanda and his imagination of Brazil, this was a matter of turning a skeptical gaze on the imported formulas of a liberalism that continued to justify itself ideologically and which by 1936 was evoking dreams of an economic thrust that might finally cast out the specter of social dissolution from the political horizon. This phantasm was not merely the communism that had been prowling around Europe since the previous century, but also, and more importantly, the specter of the debacle that had shaken New York in 1929, and which in Brazil, with the crisis in coffee prices on the international market, had revealed the deep fissures in

a venerable, prodigious political and economic structure. The 1930s brought a widespread renegotiation within the Brazilian elites, forcing the coffee heavyweights offstage or at least into new roles, they having been the first patrons of the young vanguard and those who would also help to shape the modern Brazilian university, sprung of the illusion of a still-mighty São Paulo.⁸ In the heat of the period, national and international politics were discussed with a focus on the debate over the virtues and vices of capitalism, an advanced capitalism that Buarque de Holanda had seen and studied in his German years. In the twilight of the Weimar Republic, from 1929 to 1930, the late Weber's name still shone as an insuperable reference for the new generations of academic intellectuals around the young Brazilian journalist in Berlin. This is the background to the conception of *Roots of Brazil*—a half-German book, as we tend to put it.⁹

Antonio Candido's preface both validated and suggested a reading that, after the late 1960s, would highlight method in *Roots of Brazil* (ideal types ordered in dialectical pairs), while it also underscored the magnitude of the political problem: with the nation's Iberian roots revealed, how to seek out practical solutions for Brazil? In other words, which resonate some of the preoccupations that would keep so many generations of Latin American economists and sociologists busy, one might ask: how to imagine and propose the development of a country of Iberian origin?¹⁰

In his preface, Antonio Candido sketched out a veritable map of interpretative possibilities. Hence posterior studies from researchers of a number of generations, who although they may at times seem to distance themselves from or simply steer around his concerns, ultimately provide responses to questions that appear, albeit in embryonic form, in that preface. The preface does not stand alone in this regard, however. The critical reception of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's work cannot be understood outside the framework of an editorial effort where Antonio Candido's name must be cited, although not exclusively. In the late 1980s, Maria Amélia Alvim Buarque de Holanda, Sérgio's widow, discovered a trove of unpublished material that Candido would evaluate, edit, and publish under the title *Capítulos de literatura colonial* [Chapters of Colonial Literature].¹¹

The “Introduction” to this posthumously published book painstakingly details the story of the recently discovered manuscript: this was Buarque de Holanda’s contribution to a failed project from Álvaro Lins, who had planned to publish a *História da literatura brasileira* [History of Brazilian Literature] (through Rio publishing house José Olympio) in fifteen volumes, with Gilberto Freyre and a number of other intellectuals as collaborators. Buarque de Holanda himself would take on the seventh volume, dedicated to colonial literature. The story of the book’s conception and the planning of the collection—which would produce just two volumes, one on oral literature by Luís da Câmara Cascudo and another on prose fiction from 1870 to 1920 by Lúcia Miguel Pereira—is symptomatic, providing us with a rare map of the intellectual field that demonstrates the indissociability of literature and social studies in the critical imagination of the time.

The collection, perhaps overly eclectic to our contemporary eyes, was first proposed (as Candido tells us) in the early 1940s, which brings up two important issues in our understanding of Buarque de Holanda’s thought.¹² First of all, the studies for the volume on colonial literature, which would be written for the most part in the following decade, reveal that the project came to stand as an important and perhaps even an essential part of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s research, which by then had grown beyond the investigation of the westward push from the highlands of São Paulo—this vein had already produced the 1945 book *Monções* and would later lead to *Caminhos e fronteiras* [Paths and Frontiers] in 1957, while it also took in the Italian Renaissance, Luso-Brazilian *arcadismo*, and the Iberian baroque. This would lead Candido to speak of an “Italian phase” in Buarque de Holanda’s work from 1952 to 1954, namely the years he spent teaching at the University of Rome, an experience that bolstered the conception and composition of the thesis behind his 1958 masterwork *Visão do paraíso* [Vision of Paradise], as well as a “German phase,” covering his time in Berlin from 1929 to 1930.¹³ Second, beyond the story of Buarque de Holanda’s research, we can imagine what it might mean to compile a “history of Brazilian literature” in the 1940s and 1950s with such a wide array of collaborators. This was a highly specialized

field (a specialization that Buarque de Holanda himself, a fixture in newspapers' literary sections, could speak to with great competence and refinement), but one that also demanded a critical imagination with a vast scope. We contemporary readers frequently reject this vastness, given our stockpile of qualms around grand theories. But these syntheses, generally viewed with distrust, when not scorn, and which would be nearly inconceivable today, anchored an intellectual horizon that could resist academic departmentalization and the fragmentation of knowledge, engaging with the public sphere in ways that we are hard-pressed to understand today. The notion of the *public*, or at least the reading public, was entirely different, as it presupposed an audience thirsty for interdisciplinary work—this, much before our current quest for interdisciplinary studies, which can be understood as a reaction to the compartmentalization of knowledge that has shaped contemporary disciplines and fields.

The scene described by Candido in his "Introduction" to Buarque de Holanda's posthumous book is itself an intervention that refers to and rues the specialization of the field of literary studies but also recalls a taste for synthesis that, we may imagine, serves as a profound link between the two authors: the one who left the manuscripts and the one editing them. In this sense, we can better understand the brilliant phrasing of the title: "I proposed *Capítulos de literatura colonial*," Antonio Candido writes, "with the famous book by Capistrano de Abreu [*Capítulos de história colonial* (Chapters of Colonial History)] in mind, but particularly recalling a less systematic work, by Alfonso Reyes: *Capítulos de Literatura Española* [Chapters of Spanish Literature]."¹⁴

The reference to Capistrano de Abreu (1853–1908) suggests the fertile presence of historical studies within literary reflections, exposing the very intersection that produces Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's reflections.¹⁵ Evoking Alfonso Reyes (1889–1959), on the other hand, is an indication of a more complex relationship, one that Candido may well have had in mind. Not only did the Mexican writer play a role in the invention of the cordial man, as we shall see, but we must also recall that the "non-systematic" nature of this "too-disperse work," the *Capítulos de Literatura Española*, mingles in Reyes's oeuvre with a profound sense of the organic nature of the *latinoamericano*.

The same year that Buarque de Holanda published his *Roots of Brazil*, three years before the appearance of the first volume of *Capítulos de Literatura Española* in Mexico, and after six years spent as Mexican ambassador in Rio de Janeiro (then the nation's capital), Alfonso Reyes presented his "Note on American Intelligence" in Buenos Aires. Here, the organic imaginary stands out emphatically:

To speak of American civilization would be, in this case, inappropriate: that would take us to archeological regions outside of the topic at hand. To speak of American culture would be something of an error: that would make us think of a branch from a European tree transplanted in American soil. We may, however, speak of American intelligence, the American vision of life and action in life. This will allow us to define, albeit provisionally, the tone of America.¹⁶

This American "tone" or hue may be less a clearly established quantity than a speculative finding, the precarious nature of which comes through in Reyes's prose, in his "provisional definition," which is all that any interpreter of "America" can aspire to. Not only do both succumb to the allure of organic metaphors, but in both cases the train of thought also runs into the same doubt as to America as an entity. In the cutting terms of *Roots of Brazil*, "Inside, we are still not American."¹⁷

A reading of Antonio Candido's introduction to *Capítulos de literatura colonial* allows us, in short, to understand that we are standing before a vast map on which the broad lines of the imagining of the new American space can be sketched, this place at once *ciudad letrada* and *carte de Tendre* for the ranks of Brazilian intellectuals—or Latin American intellectuals, from a wider angle.¹⁸

The late 1980s would bring yet another attempt to reconstruct the critical memory of Buarque de Holanda—to wit, the book edited by Francisco de Assis Barbosa, *Raízes de Sérgio Buarque de Holanda* [Roots of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda]. A partial collection of the articles published prior to *Roots of Brazil* (up until 1935, that is), it includes two studies, true prefaces, by Barbosa ("Sérgio antes de

Berlim” [Sérgio before Berlin]) and, once again, Candido (“Sérgio em Berlim e depois” [Sérgio in Berlin and Afterwards]).¹⁹ The former provides a firsthand testimony of the early years of the restless, immature critic—Buarque de Holanda’s “apprenticeship,” as Barbosa puts it—based on the recollections of friends and colleagues, revealing from the start that this world cannot be understood outside one’s circle of personal and emotional ties, ones which join the prefacers and the prefaced in ways that are often quite complex. Barbosa’s study and editorial work are thus one of the first serious attempts at a critical mapping of what might be called a prehistory of *Roots of Brazil*. Or, to recall George Avelino Filho’s astute turn of phrase, a search for the “roots of *Roots of Brazil*.”²⁰

This interest in the early history of *Roots of Brazil* lets us imagine an investigation in which the very making of thought takes center stage, where the scholar seeks both that which is revealed and that which the thought-in-progress hides from view. In the case of such procedures, Walter Benjamin’s metaphor of a move “against the grain” is always welcome.²¹ To put it in terms that may be more familiar to our contemporary sensibility, we might evoke the need for a genealogical effort in analyzing thought, recalling that the coherence of a discourse is ultimately constructed after it, and that its meaning is always, inescapably, up for debate. The search for that which lurks beneath the more visible, refined part of discourse is something of an archaeological task, which prefaces both can and should undertake.²² This genealogical mission, however, with its furious drive to discover the power dynamics implicit in the interpretations of a body of thought, is not itself a neutral procedure. This may be the meaning of Baudrillard’s well-known diatribe: Foucault is the “last of the dinosaurs” because his investigation is still indebted to the very conceptual constellation that he seeks to destroy.²³

I wish to address just a part of the controversy: the reminder that the dismantling of a thought in the attempt to comprehend it may still retain the elements that the critical imagination seeks to break down and which resist despite all attempts to subdue them. Within my investigation, an uncomfortable question abides: Doesn’t the very attention paid to the organic aspects of imagination in Sérgio

Buarque de Holanda reinforce the imaginary that we ultimately wish to free ourselves from? What to do with the contemporary critiques of “foundations” when faced with a book in which “roots” are an inevitable signifier? Or should we twist the sense of the word and, à la Deleuze, seek out the “rhizomes” where experience yokes the man to the landscape? But are these “roots” simply the sign of an anxiety around unmooring and drifting, as if expressing an unspoken desire to return to the ward of authority, when the Law stood supreme and explanations found definite endings?²⁴

Let us return, however, to the terrain where *Roots of Brazil* situates itself, so as to formulate other questions that will pursue us throughout this book: Isn't the organic imaginary developed in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's essay precisely part of the secret of Antonio Candido's critical undertaking? Aren't Buarque de Holanda's coherence and his progressive political attitude already part of a desire to detect exemplary personalities—to wit, the “radicals” that Candido studies and admires?²⁵

If we examine the preface to *Roots of Brazil*, but also Antonio Candido's other prefaces (to *Capítulos de literatura colonial* and the “German” part of *Raízes de Sérgio Buarque de Holanda*), we can glimpse the gradual construction of a field of interpretation around Buarque de Holanda that takes *Roots of Brazil* as its jumping-off point and argues for (or constructs) a profound political and conceptual coherence on the part of the author.²⁶ The question that pursues me is the following: isn't this “radical” Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, which we are used to seeing, a character that emerges from Antonio Candido's interpretations? An author who looked right and left on the political spectrum, only to move resolutely straight ahead with the writing of *Roots of Brazil*? Let us see.

After identifying Buarque de Holanda as the stylist who, à la Spitzer or Simmel, could extrapolate from an empirical fact with an illuminating touch, Candido recalls that, while in the Germany of the Weimar Republic, the future author of *Roots of Brazil* was exposed to the still-recent legacy of Weber, which itself retained something of that “mental attitude” able to meld utter scientific rigor to an incredible literary audacity. But Candido recalls that an attraction to types and

a use of broad, culture-defining characteristics could also lead, and had indeed led, to a dangerous fantasy: there bubbled the literary and scientific stew that would produce Nazism, with its “‘cultural morphology,’ the dualism of ‘blood and earth,’ race-differentiating psychology, and the appeal to ‘obscure forces.’”²⁷ Buarque de Holanda, nevertheless, is seen to have reacted correctly to the negative aspects of this cultural environment, the breeding ground for the nightmare of the Third Reich:

But the rectitude of his spirit, his young but solid formation, and the correct orientation of his political instincts led him to something surprising: from this cultural broth, which could go from conservative to reactionary, from mystical to apocalyptic, he extracted the elements of a personal formula for a progressive interpretation of his country, forging an exemplary combination of a demystifying interpretation of the past and a democratic sense of the present. The “empathy,” a trust in a certain mysticism of “types”—all this was purged of any vestiges of irrationality and ground up in his peculiar fashion, and [then] flowed into an open, extremely critical and radical interpretation.²⁸

The great Enlightenment battle rears its head in this scene of reading: the young critic shedding the uncomfortable burden of irrationality.²⁹ Even so, it would be rash to seek out in Buarque de Holanda the opposite of what Candido sees in him. And my own intentions are very far indeed from aligning the author of *Roots of Brazil* to any conservative thread of Brazilian social thought. My aim, which I hope to make clear over the course of this book, is to revisit, or perhaps simply imagine, the tension that hums acutely in the writer’s consciousness as the writing is conceived and brought about.

At the moment when *Roots of Brazil* is being produced (and I hope to make it clear over the following chapters why I often turn to the book’s first edition, from 1936), the prediction of a democratic route for Brazil is not guided by a fearless vision of some Western democratic future, nor by any sympathy for the socialist model, which Buarque de Holanda would, incidentally, make an unsuccessful attempt to see in

place.³⁰ On the contrary, here we see the intimate and turbulent space of his consciousness, which is also the place where the writing is conceived, shot through with profound and brutal doubts. What I read in *Roots of Brazil*, as I seek to suggest, is more the torment with which the critic approaches politics than the clarity with which he addresses its challenges and dilemmas. I am drawn to the waverings and the sinuous questions that must have torn at the writer rather than the answers and the coherence of a perfectly correct political posture.

The political realm is not, for the author of *Roots of Brazil*, a field of unequivocal options able to unlock the paradise of some final solution for the collectivity (and Candido is with him on this count). Rather, for Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, politics is the realm in which the individual is reduced to debating impotently, faced with alternatives whose promises seem inevitably insufficient, if not utterly terrifying. In our secularized modernity, we often forget the religious roots of torment. In Buarque de Holanda's case, one cannot say that the trope of "demons" is a metaphor like any other. He knew what he was talking about when, at the end of *Roots of Brazil*, he suggested that a "perfidious and pretentious" demon appears to cover our eyes whenever we seek the political order that will save us in the end.³¹

It is against the eschatological and finalist horizon of the authoritarian imagination that Sérgio Buarque de Holanda will rise up. But the alternative horizon that he envisions is not a rational solution nor a well-organized alternative to the dilemmas of the collectivity. Rather, it is wracked by doubt, and ultimately by the affliction of knowing oneself to be abandoned by precisely the figure who ought to bear the solution. After all, behind the authoritarian solution on the political scene, Latin America was incubating the long-term phenomenon and the specter of populism. It is above all in this sense that *Roots of Brazil* is a creature of the 1930s.

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For Buarque de Holanda, the clarity of reason, whether more or less tinged with liberal colors, cannot be enough. To make things worse, from a somehow Nietzschean angle, hopes of a final, peaceable