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Entre rearticulações e resistências, Brasil buscou caminho para modernização.

Preventing or criticizing the process of modernization? The case of Brazil

*Otávio Velho

Abstract

In international literature, it is common to discuss resistances to modernization by the people. It is argued that in many cases these so-called resistances express a practical criticism of certain forms of modernization. This may represent embryonically alternative modes of modernization are a counter modernity not necessarily incompatible for example with the presence of the sacred or in a general way with the rearticulation of elements normally associated with tradition this line of argument is exemplified by the present debate on parliamentary monarchy in Brazil stressing the differences in perception by the elite and the common people.

Keywords: Modernization; Modernity; Society; Resistance.

Resumo

É comum na literatura internacional discutir a resistência à modernização por parte de grupos populares. No artigo, argumenta-se no sentido de que seguidamente as supostas resistências expressam críticas in acta a determinadas formas de modernização que podem representar embrionariamente modos alternativos de modernização ou uma contra modernidade não necessariamente incompatível, ou, por exemplo, com a presença do sagrado ou com a rearticulação, em geral, de elementos normalmente associados à tradição. Exemplifica-se com o debate atual sobre o parlamentarismo monárquico no Brasil, acentuando-se as diferenças de visão entre grupos de elite e grupos populares.

Palavras-chave: Modernização; Modernidade; Sociedade; Resistência.

Long before the actual term came into use, one could say that the Brazilian elite had always been fascinated by “modernization”. At least in the sense of taking some countries considered to be more advanced as models, especially (in varying order) The United States, Great Britain and Germany. In the realm of politics, some main events (such as the proclamation of the Republic of Brazil in 1889 and the revolution of 1930) can be seen as changes in the hegemonic models. Although this did not exclude coexistence, friends for example maintained a more or less permanently privileged position at the level of “culture” and social customs. At the present time, there is an embryonic movement to appoint Japan and the so-called “Asian tigers” as new references in the economic field and Spain as an example of a successful political transition.

Several episodes of Brazil’s political history show how time and again the elite perceptions have not been shared by large sectors of the population. This is clear for example in the case of the proclamation of the Republic, which used the United States as a model and whose ideas

were derived from Comtean positivism. As the political scientist and historian José Murillo de Carvalho [1] shows, the process was witnessed passively by the people and during the following years was the object of important popular resistance (considered “fanatical” by the elite). Up to the present day, the elites have been unable to produce ideas and symbols, which could fire the imagination of the country.

Thus, it could in a certain sense be said that “resistances to modernization” in Brazil are not incontestable fact. It has a long history, often provoking the indignation and perplexity of the elite and refueling its convictions as to the necessity for change and overcoming our “backwardness”.

In the previous study [2], I analyzed an important and recent example of the continuation of this “resistance”, namely the presence in the interior of the country of biblical images taking mainly from the Book of Revelation (such as the beast and the idea of captivity). They were (and are) used to characterize figures and initiatives involved in the government’s attempt to promote changes

and the introduction and/or generalization of the money economy, wage labor, etc. I tried to show, following the work of Paul Ricoeur regarding the symbolism of evil [3], that far from being simple manifestations of ignorance they were in fact symbolic reactions whose reference was a concrete historical experience. This helped to explain how rather “unmodern” cultural resources were mobilized, such as distinct notions of good and evil not necessarily the irreversible nature of time and history etcetera.

What does one react to? Which values are at stake? These are complex questions; but in order to answer them, first of all it is necessary to qualify the initial idea of the reaction to modernization. In many ways — and especially in comparison with other cultures — the Brazilian population is reasonably open to change, such as that proposed for example by communication media. In many situations the common people seem to be reacting more against certain elements of change insofar as they signify something not openly expressed in the projects of the elite but which the common people see

as a real threat giving their deep-rooted suspicion of underlying intentions and meanings. Thus, at a certain level, one could say that “epistemic” issues and the actual concept of the person more than substantive discreet values are at stake. The presupposition for example of the necessity for transparency and the univocalization of the subject that political modernity tries to impose (although its supposed agents do not always act accordingly) does not find support. This coincides curiously with the data that psychoanalysis tries to present; they are ironically normally considered “resistances”. This coincidence can be illustrated in several ways. By the belief for example in the evil eye, through which evil is caused independently of the will [2]. Such representations suggest that the resistances to the recognition of the determination of the subject are less universal than psychoanalysis tend to suppose, being perhaps more typical of dominant modernity.

Thus, at a moment when the modern project itself is under review, many of these supposed “resistance to modernization” and strategies to resist may paradoxically join the most “advanced” and as yet undigested elements into a diagnosis of the “crisis of modernity”. To give another example could it not be that “resistances” (when they occur) to the money economy impersonal bureaucratized relations etcetera in fact coincide with the verification of the profound ethical crisis to which we have been led by almost absolute dominion of instrumental reason and utilitarianism, and which have been the object of a vast

and growing literature? Seen in this light what we could be witnessing is a cry in defense of gratuity even when expressed in the contingent form of “pre-modern” modes of domination whose signification though access points in this direction already detected in the form of reciprocity as the foundation of social life itself by Marcel Maus [4].

If this is so scholars must perhaps reexamine these “resistances”. They should view them not so much as problems but as symptoms for whose existence we should be grateful to the extent that they review questions with an otherwise impossible clarity which are camouflaged and concern ourselves the essence of our social life our values our anguishes.

Seeing in this fashion, these “others” we are examining — the supposed agents of symbolic strategies to resist modernization — could be leading us in a roundabout way to question ourselves. And on the other hand, this could also lead to changes in emphasis in the way we view these symbolic strategies. These would then appear not at all unfamiliar to us. We should verify for example up to what point in many cases the main fact would not be the avoidance of modernization tout court but a practical critique of a version of modernization, not excluding it as such.

In this case, what could be this revised modernity to which we are led by our meeting with these “others” based on a (modern) relativization of oppositions as well as fusions between “us” and “them”? Certainly that of the actual

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recognition (in the strict sense of the word) of the importance of symbolization and which is not foreign to all those exercises of the rediscovery of the ontological dimension of language that have been mounting among scholars of various fields since the beginning of the century. This in its turn signifies a re-encounter with gratuity through the opening and offering contained in the idea that we do not possess language, but we are possessed by it. It also means as our “others” teach us more respect for and acceptance of the essential mystery of life constantly expressed by them in the form of what to us are “superstitions”; which perhaps hides their deeper existential message. For example, contrary to what many people in the interior of Brazil still believe to this day, Saint George did not prevent men from reaching the moon. We are not inclined to abandon this conviction, a privileged representation of the passage from a conception of a “close it world” to that of an “infinite universe” to which Alexander Koyré [5] referred. However, we are left with a very important alert against hybris — here contained by Saint George! — to which we must learn to listen as if to a Greek chorus.

Isn't it exactly this for example that the ecological movements sophisticated and not at all "pre-modern" are trying to do today?

It is thus clear that the beliefs in the evil eye are that the moon belongs to Saint George are not in themselves "the fundamental values". Fundamental values being fundamental are not immediately given. When reduced to the immediately given they take the perverse form of fundamentalism; but apart from this case they possess their own dynamics and history, and this can also include their modernization. They are like a text, which must not be confused with any specific context, even though manifesting itself through the latter. They required an interpretation. But an interpretation which recognizing that "the other" it's the bearer of a "truth" allows and in fact can only take place through a dialogue — this dialogue being a guarantee against two forms of monologue: that of arrogant instrumental reason when confronted with "superstitions", and that of populist reason which is subservient to them.

But can respect for the mystery of existence and the alert against hybris take form without joining with the sacred so important for our "others"? This should also be pondered upon.

Gratuity the sacred recovery of the value of symbolism critique of utilitarianism recognition of the determinations of the subject — all these teams have far-reaching implications. Not arrived at by the simple idealization of these "others" but by the recognition of something that inhabits us as well as them but which needs to be awakened. And for whoever

is alert, this could perhaps be achieved exactly through this encounter.

We mentioned the concept of the subject above. It is certainly a challenge for us to reflect on a society in which the myth or the utopia of the wholly autonomous and univocal subject is abandoned. I'm missed from which that product of modernity our social sciences themselves may have originated. This was as it happens the object of a recent analysis in the theological field [6]. Concentrating mainly on the notion of the social contract. It is possible that these "others" in dialogue for example with anthropology psychoanalysis and theology could have something to tell us in respect? Having their miss could they perhaps help us to rethink ours? And together with the elements described above could this lead us towards other notions of society (and politics) and even to a refoundation of our social sciences?

Obviously, it is impossible to do much more than pose the question. Perhaps only a few clues which allow us to transform the question into a reasonable bet, opening up a space for new attitudes.

Beginning strategically with politics, it is worth pointing out the growing frustrations with utilitarian social engineering. Apparently — at least in cases like Brazil — there is even an insurmountable gap between the analyst's actual conception of politics and that of the mass of the population. Perhaps here the time has also come for a dialogue to the extent that we transform the question of the barriers which resist modernization into that of a modernizing

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potentialities following the dynamics and capacity to react to their environment and embedded in cultural traditions themselves — analogous up to a certain point to Max Weber's efforts to investigate processes of rationalization in the most varied cultures.

This evidently would oblige us to have an enlarged and pluralistic view of what constitutes modernity. And on the other hand, recognize that such a process would probably lead — to use an expression dear to the Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta [7] — to our domestication of certain substantive aspects of the cultural tradition (da Matta mentions *familism* and *nepotism* amongst others). This domestication should contrast with an illusory suppression which eventually leads to a "return of the repressed" similarly to that which we are witnessing in Eastern Europe in the shape of disturbing and intransigent fundamentalism (secular and religious). However, — to use metaphorically and expression borrowed from psychoanalysis — perhaps we

could speak here of sublimation; an eminently symbolic operation which suggests more the idea of transformation (“upwards”) than control (“downwards”). And in this operation the deepest and most permanent messages of the tradition — the fundamental values — can be recovered beyond their contingent historical manifestations. This obviously does not mean underestimating the importance and the resistances offer by this historic manifestations, but seeking — for this very reason — not to reify them nor to contribute to their reification, especially in the shape of crystallized fundamentalism.

There is a notorious tendency in Brazilian politics (and in that of other countries) for particularistic criteria to predominate. For example, in the form of systems of patronage which encourage dependence and inhibit the expression of citizenship a kind of iron law of patronage has been created from which even its most modern opponents are seemingly unable to escape. It would be interesting to consider whether there might even here be some underlying message with these practices perverse from the viewpoint of a modern political system would be at the same time revealing and covering up. I would suspect this to be the case.

Modern hybris tended to take the idea of the subjects’ autonomy to extremes. In this sense, the image of the “death of God” sings to represent a fundamental rupture with the notion of limits. What we are suggesting is that the notoriously infamous tendency towards dependence in the political and social field could be pointing

— in a so to speak “idolatrous” form — to what from a more ontological viewpoint could be considered the necessary recognition of a notion of limits established by a center outside ourselves.

Evidently, this perspective stands the usual interpretations on their heads. This does not mean that there is disagreement on the more immediate effects of the manifestation of the phenomenon, but it begs for displacement of the question, putting it in a new light. In such way, what was exclusively seen by means of a diabolical manifestation regaining a higher status? Thus, if this is the case we should not intend to suppress the dependence but displace it discuss its possible and appropriate locus accentuating symbolic aspects whose effective and transcendental importance could then be fully appreciated and not treated as an epiphenomenon or as a simple “lesser evil”. In fact, in this case the image of sublimation is quite close to his psychoanalytical reference, which usually associate it exactly with the overcoming of a primeval dependence.

In any case, the “irrealism” of this suggestion is not any greater than that of the attempts to enter into direct confrontation with dominant practices. These seem more like — to use a Brazilian expression — “punching the point of a dagger” when they are not mere rhetoric. Or like living with one’s vices in the hope that one day they will transform themselves into virtues. That this may not be simply a case of intellectualizing seems to be borne out by the surprising and spontaneous interest shown in the possibility of a new

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installation of the monarchy in the country. This hypothesis has arisen in the context of the plebiscite should be held in 1993 which will decide on Brazil’s future form of government and which sinks to reignite an imaginary as if dormant for 100 years are expressed only in the realms of fantasy (Figure 1).

At the present moment, I take this to be simply an instance worth developing of the more general question, which is explicit in the title and content of this text. In this sense, the hypothesis of displacing the dependency side of our ambiguous social coin towards a fundamentally symbolic plane would signify a kind of clearing off the ground. Making way for political competition the full recognition of differences and the unshackle dispute for social equality on other levels where the crucial separation from the structure of primeval dependence would be carried out without paying homage to fragmentation. Because the yearning for freedom and equality are also present [2], this complex dialectic cannot simply be ignored, as if by doing so one were able to exorcise it. In fact, we seem to be closer to the Pauline idea that freedom does not go beyond

the choice of the Lord. A crucial choice, however, that scandalizes the dominant modern mentality incapable even of recognizing the encounter between this popular imagination and the presence and significance of the monarchy in the contemporary world including Spain, which is being heralded as a model of successful political and economic transition.

Continuing our exercise there is clearly no guarantee that this link of dependence will not be reproduced at other levels, only the eventual success of this collective sublimation from which "ritual processes" could not be absent. In this case this would in fact involve giving up the effective consummation of the dependence, transferred to the no less crucial plane of desire of he who after all "reigns but does not govern". All this would in turn depend on the political dynamics then spreading far beyond the domains of the utilitarian conception of politics. Though paradoxically, this widening is accompanied by the development and/or recuperation of other not strictly political languages. And this

movement contrary to what appears on the first impression would represent a real advance in the struggle for autonomy.

It is as if following on from this position (which the debate about the installation of the monarchy serves to make more vivid and provocative) one were to recognize that the absence of symbolism (and of desire) in discourse signified first and foremost the exclusion of ethics itself from politics. This would suggest once more that the popular "resistance" detected (to the Republic for example) is to a specific narrow and elitist conception of modernity which the nice primeval realities. Its agents in their turn themselves resist other possibilities of development, which judged according to different parameters could even be considered more modern. Or, who knows, "post-modern" time (as for many popular groups) being seen as not advancing in a linear and reversible form. Or even more, these possibilities could in a profound sense be considered more ethical.

An alternative modernization does not

suggest a strategy based exclusively on rupture, but on rupture accompanied by what we metaphorically called sublimation. The possibility for sublimation being opened up by rupture itself, but not as an automatic consequence of it. Implying (and thus guaranteeing the rupture) the transformation of essential aspects of our human condition as expressed culturally. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for us to recognize our own resistances and blind spots, and this can perhaps only occur through a profound dialogue in which these others are accepted as valuable parts of ourselves. We need to listen to them in order that we may touch what is most fundamental in modernity as it has presented itself since its first manifestation in Greece [8]: a reflexive position which is not to be confused with the simple acceptance of given conditions which our social sciences time and again have considered "normal"; nor with an estrangement which exclude us from social life and to which we have often been led by social engineering schemes of all kinds or by the nihilist resulting from their frustrations.

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* Otávio Velho é um antropólogo brasileiro, professor emérito da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) e pesquisador da área de Antropologia da Religião.



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Figura 1. No plebiscito de 1993, Brasil disse não à monarquia e sim ao presidencialismo.

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