CHAPTER 8

The Indignity of São Paulo*

Latifundia Manners

The strength of the latifundia system permeates many and varied aspects of Brazilian order. It also pervades the cultural sphere with perspectives, values, and habits engendered in the casas-grandes.\(^1\) The phenomenon became so widespread that it gained a sort of naturalness and mingled with what is currently considered Brazilian.

The country of sugar and alcohol, of coconut, coffee, commodities, and industry – even the aeronautical one – is, first and foremost, the country of latifundia. Hence, it is the country of slavery and super-exploitation – elevated to core principles, even of the ‘current republic-form’, said to be ‘for all’ (under the PT [so-called Worker’s Party] administration, 2012) – as was the principle of ‘the good’ and also the ‘light’ itself, according to the paradigmatic republic, in Plato’s philosophy.

Historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda warned about the issue in *Roots of Brazil* (1936) and the fundamental terms of his diagnosis remain valid.\(^2\) Frequently, even the manifestations apparently most distant from the rural order (like the implantation of modern architecture in Brazilian cities, as well as the semi-jazzy melody and the bossa-nova’s lyric – cool, urban and middle-class) despite everything, reproduce values – like class segregation, intra-peer conciliation, and aversion to work – deriving from the migration of the latifundia culture to the environment of the cities and liberal professions. The latter, often controlled by minds that see themselves as devoted to the free cultivation of forms.

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* I borrowed for the title a playful and sarcastic phrase, motivated by the recurring violations of social rights and ignominies of various kinds (‘incipiently’, ever increasing) brought forth as a matter of administrative routine at the University of São Paulo (USP). An administration, moreover, which is installed at the campus as a colonial authority appointed by the State Governor. The pun plays with the spoken similarity between the words ‘universidade’ (university) and ‘indignidade’ (indignity). Credit for the wordplay goes to a witty colleague from the USP’s Brazilian Literature department, José Antonio Pasta Jr.

1 This is the Portuguese term for the large rural houses of the latifundia. Until 1888, the landowner was usually also a slave owner.

2 Holanda 1969, p. 50; Holanda 2012, p. 43.
Even Brazil's urban fabric itself does not present anything but modes of occupation of the soil that are hybrid or derived from the rural environment. This is reproduced both in its richest forms (that of garden suburbs – increasingly protected by gunmen), as well as in the poorest, deprived of the city essentials. There, in the city periphery, stands out the memory of the disorder typical of the empire of money, based on the exclusion of all kinds of workers' rights, as dictated by the latifundia.

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The so-called University of São Paulo (USP) constitutes a greater example of the permanent power of the latifundia in the Brazilian order. It was founded in 1934 by sectors from the coffee agribusiness. These aimed to resume by other means the counterrevolution of 1932, that had been militarily defeated by the central government, derived from the 'Revolution of 1930'. Thus, such a university – the USP – was conceived with its back to the country and against it. Strictly speaking, it was founded according to ostensibly anti-national, anti-workers and anti-peasant perspectives – and thus, like the interests of export monoculture, it focused primarily on the values of the bourgeoisie of central economies.

The faculty of philosophy was supposed to function as the centre of human science studies, whose primary function should be integrating the university. However, when observing the process in retrospect, in view of the facts as seen from today's vantage point, the goal of the founding process appears to be to cut off – by hiring only foreign professors – all links with the terms and issues of the national cultural process – which, despite numerous obstacles and problems, had been taking shape in specific and distinct patterns, regardless of metropolitan cultures. The best examples of such cultural independence were the works of writers Machado de Assis, in the nineteenth century, and, at the time of the creation of the USP, Mário de Andrade, who was then fully active and productive not only in the field of literature, but also as a researcher of Brazilian popular culture and folklore. Mário, it can be said, had himself become a 'living university and museum', combining research in anthropology, ethnology, oral myths, popular cultures, colonial architecture, music and literature. In some ethnologic-anthropologic expeditions into the inland of several Brazilian regions, he recorded songs and collected ethnologic materials that would have completely disappeared without his intervention.

Notwithstanding this extensive contribution, neither he nor others among the São Paulo modernists – in spite of all their family ties and proximity to the