
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

CULTURAL POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE NOVA REPUBLICA

Joan Dassin

Ford Foundation, Rio de Janeiro

Civilian rule was installed in Brazil in March 1985, following a gradual liberalization process that had been largely controlled by the military since the mid-1970s. Because no decisive rupture with the previous regime occurred, the first several years of the Nova República were marked by continuous debate about the extent to which the Nova República had broken with the authoritarian past or represented simply a continuation of the old "system."¹

Sociologist Florestan Fernandes, while serving as a federal congressman, contended nevertheless that the new civilian government was maintaining a conservative and elitist character. "The various lessons that were important . . . from the Estado Novo and the military dictatorship," Fernandes argued, "have been lost in the short-term memory of powerful individuals, and we see again that petty politics or, better said, the hollow 'politicism' and political movements of the greater and lesser figures of the dominant classes, have been totally reestablished. . . ."²

Mass demonstrations of civic spirit, such as the 1984 campaign for direct elections or the public outpouring of grief for President-elect Tancredo Neves, who died in April 1985 without ever assuming office, played a crucial role in the transition. But these popular movements were largely orchestrated by elite politicians. Moreover, even though these unprecedented acts of mass political participation resulted in a renewed, if temporary, sense of national identity,³ they gained adher-

ents and legitimacy only after being covered fully and favorably by TV Globo, the monopolistic Brazilian television network.⁴

In the Brazilian cultural arena in general, state policymaking has been controlled by traditional elites. Most often, state cultural initiatives have appropriated widely recognized national symbols for specifically political objectives. For example, the Ministério da Cultura has promoted debates about *brasildade*, or "Brazilianness," but has in no way sought to promote reflection about the authoritarian past. This ideological orientation derives from the official government position that the shared excesses of the military period, particularly human rights abuses, must be forgotten if civilian rule is to proceed peacefully. Fernandes's "lessons of the dictatorship," which might have been applied to the challenge of creating cultural policies for the new democracy, have been officially "forgotten." State cultural initiatives, and even artistic and intellectual activity outside the confined world of official events, have assiduously avoided the thorny questions raised by the authoritarian legacy. Nonetheless, the Brazilian public has demonstrated considerable interest in those artistic and documentary works that examine the political and moral dilemmas posed by the ambiguous nature of the transition.

Indeed, much of the cultural debate in Brazil since the 1985 transition has reinforced the government position that only "forgetting" the past can insure a peaceful democratic future. This position was codified in the 1979 Amnesty Law, which wiped clean the records of suspected "terrorists" as well as alleged torturers but in effect formalized the agreement between the military and their civilian successors that human rights abuses by security forces would not be investigated. Even in the face of these political constraints, however, some sectors have realized that cultivating national memory is an important task, one particularly appropriate for the cultural arena.

A brief account of the recently created Ministério da Cultura reveals the parameters of state cultural policy in the Nova República. Separated for the first time from the Ministério da Educação, the Ministério da Cultura was created by governmental decree on 15 March 1985, just as the civilian government was installed. Its tumultuous first year reflected the political instability of President José Sarney's government. Three ministers were named in succession. The first, veteran mineiro politician José Aparecido de Oliveira, left after a month to become governor of the Federal District. The second was Aluísio Pimenta, also from Minas Gerais, who served until the major cabinet reorganization of February 1986. He was succeeded by renowned economist Celso Furtado, who resigned as Brazilian Ambassador to the European Economic Community in order to take the post. Furtado resigned in July 1988 and was

replaced by José Aparecido de Oliveira, the original occupant of the position.

The ministry's credibility has been hurt by these changes in leadership and has also suffered from lack of funding and an undefined administrative structure. The ministry has less political importance—and therefore less access to limited state resources—than the influential ministries of education, communications, and science and technology, all of which might be said to deal with “culture” in the broad sense. Moreover, the ministry's internal chain of command was modified several times, as were its relationships to other federal entities like the Conselho Nacional do Cinema (CONCINE) and related entities like the Fundação Nacional de Arte (FUNARTE).

For example, a decree was passed on 19 June 1985 authorizing the Ministério da Cultura to “hand down decrees relative to the provisional organizational structure of the ministry, including defining or altering structures and areas of jurisdiction . . . , as well as supervisory functions and the coordination of related units and entities.” This decree remained in effect until 31 March 1986. As a result, the ministry was to be provisional in character for its entire first year.⁵ At the end of that first year, most intellectuals were still not convinced that the ministry was serving any real need. Writer Antonio Callado expressed a representative opinion when he stated: “A ministry [of culture] is superfluous—it will only spend money.”⁶

Despite these failures, the ministry became the focal point for many debates about what the role of the state should be in promoting and defining “culture” for the new Brazilian democracy. The first minister, José Aparecido, asserted that stimulating debate was precisely the function of the ministry. Speaking somewhat cynically, Aparecido also prepared the cultural community for the ministry's lack of financial resources: “More than material works, the ministry will be marked by debate. Musicians, artists, filmmakers and writers will formulate cultural policies. I will not rely on heavy-handed leadership or paternalism.” Aparecido also evaded the issue of whether the ministry should attempt to define Brazilian “cultural identity.” That, he claimed, was a “dangerous question in a continental country.”⁷

Aparecido had no time to pursue his ideas because he was soon replaced. Sarney next sought to appoint a woman to the post, a move that critics said confirmed their worst suspicions about both the value of the ministry and Sarney's views on women. The president's choice, popular actress Fernanda Montenegro, wavered but eventually declined the appointment. Although Montenegro had considerable support in the cultural community, her indecision about the offer sparked renewed attacks on the idea of creating the ministry in the first place.

By the time scientist Aluísio Pimenta assumed the post in late May 1985, the Ministério da Cultura had lost even more credibility.

For the first six months of his term, Pimenta concentrated on planning the national commemoration of Independence Week in September 1985, which was to have been the biggest popular celebration of the Nova República. The idea was to reawaken the civic fervor that had animated the campaign for direct elections. The result, according to one newspaper account, was a "fiasco." Many projects were designed, and private businesses had agreed to make financial contributions. But except for the debut of Brazilian composer Tom Jobim's "Sinfonia da Alvorada" and a commissioned art show entitled "Brasildade e Independência," the commemoration was badly managed and evoked little public enthusiasm.⁸

Pimenta nonetheless began 1986 with many plans for the Ministério da Cultura. He wanted to increase the budget and allot more funds to Embrafilme, the bankrupt state film board. He intended to form orchestras across the country, provide incentives for bookstores, and expand the schedules of public libraries. Pimenta planned to mandate the playing of more Brazilian popular music on radio stations in an effort to "end the domination by foreign culture." He also wanted to sponsor a national contest for the most creative T-shirt design by a Brazilian artist. These and other projects were intended to reaffirm brasildade, but not one of them was ever carried out because Pimenta, despite considerable support in the cultural community, was himself replaced.⁹

Many intellectuals concur that although they retain doubts about the necessity of such a ministry, economist Celso Furtado brought seriousness to the job.¹⁰ Furtado's support of the federal censorship of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Hail Mary* was greeted by a wave of criticism, but Furtado has not been subjected to further strong attacks.¹¹ He has meanwhile attempted to streamline the ministry. After one month in office, he sent a plan for administrative reorganization to President Sarney. He proposed a decentralized approach that would place more responsibilities on state and municipal units and private institutions. Under this plan, various associated entities like the Fundação Pró-Memória and the Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa would still be generally supported by the ministry but would function independently.¹²

Most important, Furtado coauthored with the president the so-called Lei Sarney, an earlier version of which had been presented in 1972 to the Brazilian Congresso. This law proposed tax breaks and other fiscal incentives for persons or businesses investing in cultural activities. It was signed by President Sarney in June 1986 and subsequently approved by the Congresso. Its intent is to transfer the economic responsibility for artistic and cultural activities from the state to

the private sector, which will receive in return considerable fiscal benefits. In addition, the Lei Sarney established a cultural fund to channel federal monies to activities that cannot find support in the private sector.¹³

Predictably, the Lei Sarney has met with mixed reactions. Artists like filmmaker Arnaldo Jabor heralded the plan as the "Funaro Plan of the cultural sector," a reference to the 1986 economic stabilization plan. Liberal Congresswoman Bete Mendes applauded the new independence from the state that the law will allow. Others, like civil rights lawyer and historian Raymundo Faoro, are worried that the law will simply provide more resources for elite culture while limiting its capacity for criticism. Faoro contends that neither a private nor a public patron will sponsor work that is directly critical of the patron's interests.¹⁴

It remains to be seen whether the Lei Sarney will stimulate cultural production, but the risk of both co-optation and manipulation by funders is evident. Artistic independence is not easily attainable under any circumstances, and quick infusions of resources—with or without strings attached—will have considerable impact on a sector beset by fiscal difficulties.

Debate over the Lei Sarney also raised again the question of national culture. In its early days, the Ministério da Cultura was embroiled in a semifacetious polemic about whether "cachaça" (sugarcane rum) and "broa-de-milho" (corn bread) should be symbols of national culture. The polemic began when FUNARTE President Ziraldo Alves Pinto sent to then-Minister Pimenta a thirty-page document spelling out plans for FUNARTE. The proposed projects were designed to promote cultural activities in the Brazilian interior. To sophisticated urban Brazilians, they sounded impossibly patronizing and provincial: forming musical bands throughout the country; starting an advanced school of popular music in the Minas Gerais town of Juiz de Fora; creating a mobile art exposition of the four hundred most important Brazilian paintings; starting twenty-five hundred bookstores in federal banking agencies; and designing a "museum of the face of Brazil" dedicated to photography and a cultural center for the study of Brazilian cuisine.

Ziraldo's plans were widely ridiculed by the ministry's critics. They seized the occasion to express indignation that the Ministério da Cultura had been created, in the words of the writer Roberto Drummond, "to take care of bands in the interior or typical Brazilian cooking," tasks that he felt would be better suited to a "Ministry of Oven and Stove." Poet Décio Pignatari sardonically commented that he thought it "fantastic" that anyone would publicly admit to such foolishness.¹⁵

Petty sniping aside, it is unlikely that either the Ministério da

Cultura or the debate provoked by the Lei Sarney will resolve the question of how to define national culture in Brazil. Essayist Franklin de Oliveira has traced this theme through more than three hundred versions.¹⁶ It is clear, however, that traditional political elites have dominated the discussion, as both defenders and critics of the government's cultural initiatives. The ironies were acute in the folkloric escapades under Pimenta's tenure. Under the urbane economist Furtado, in contrast, the emphasis appears to have shifted to administrative reform and solidification of the economic basis for cultural activity. Both the public and private sector are supposed to become involved in this effort.

These initiatives are being implemented from the top down and will favor—at least in the first instance—members of the so-called “cultural community” who are largely middle-class. The new undertakings may also eventually benefit middle-class consumers, who in recent years have expressed increased demand for various cultural products ranging from films to classical music and books of all kinds. Although Furtado has publicly stated that his objective is to “democratize” access to cultural goods and services,¹⁷ neither the policies nor the practices of the ministry indicate thus far that such a process is occurring. Political and cultural elites, which are often one and the same, have controlled the state's first concerted effort to articulate cultural policy in the Nova República. Indeed, the populist rhetoric and policies of the Ministério da Cultura are reminiscent of the state's manipulation of samba, soccer, and Carnival during Getúlio Vargas's Estado Novo.

What about artistic and intellectual activity beyond the confined world of official state policy? What issues have been raised in the general cultural debate? As part of the political transition in 1985, intellectuals discussed the question of how artistic activity should reflect and promote the new democracy. Although it can be charged that the talk far exceeded actual production, an effervescence in the arts resulted. In a year-in-review piece for the cultural section of Rio's *O Jornal do Brasil*, journalist Zuenir Ventura described 1985 as the year of “dissent, debate, and polemics: in a word, disagreement.”¹⁸

During the first year of the Nova República, the broad opposition front against the dictatorship, which had united most intellectuals for more than twenty years, fragmented as members of the intellectual and artistic class took divergent stands on partisan and aesthetic issues. Conflicting positions had been staked out even earlier, especially after the 1982 gubernatorial elections. The victories of the opposition party in Brazil's major states at that time had foreshadowed the final decline of the military regime. But after the transition to civilian rule, disagreements over cultural positions intensified.

For example, a massive international rock festival raised anew

the old questions about national culture versus imported culture. Augusto Boal's theatrical superproduction, *O Cosário do Rei*, stimulated discussion about what had happened to the "avant-garde" and regenerated tensions between former exiles and the artists who had remained in Brazil. At the same time, *cultura jovem*, or youth culture, became more important as writers like Marcelo Paiva and Eliane Marciel published thinly disguised autobiographies appealing to a new generation of consumers. Young dramatists satirized all facets of daily life, including the intellectuals' own polemics, with ironic irreverence. Their *teatro besteiro* (loosely connected satirical sketches) became a popular form. Diverse spontaneous expressions, such as impromptu poetry readings and open-air concerts, were also popular with young artists and audiences. A new era of cultural pluralism was initiated, reflecting the pluralism in the political arena.¹⁹

State repression during the military period was treated in a number of works, albeit as only one of many possible themes. Documentary essays and films, new scholarship on the military period as well as on the Estado Novo, and certain plays and films reminded readers and viewers that the security forces and the regime's opponents did not commit equivalent crimes during the dictatorship because the state was the true agent of repression.

Works of fiction, poetry, and autobiography dealing with the armed guerrilla movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s became particularly popular. Most of these accounts were published in the period immediately after the declaration of the 1979 Amnesty Law, which permitted many exiles to return to Brazil. These works recounted the young guerrillas' experiences of imprisonment, torture, and exile. The most famous example is Fernando Gabeira's 1979 bestseller, *O Que É Isso, Companheiro*, an ironic account of the romantic illusions of the youthful Brazilian revolutionaries.²⁰

Another notable work is the 1985 volume entitled *Brasil: Nunca Mais*, a documentary history of torture under the military regime. The book is based on more than one million pages of records copied by researchers associated with the Archdiocese of São Paulo. These documents included complete transcripts for more than seven hundred political trials, dozens of additional fragments, and over ten thousand publications of Brazilian leftist organizations that had been attached to the court records. The information summarized in *Brasil: Nunca Mais* proves that torture was an essential feature of the military justice system in Brazil.²¹

As would be expected, this book has attracted attention and produced polemics. It reportedly sold more copies than any other nonfiction book in Brazil's history.²² Public interest was further stimulated by a list of 444 torturers published separately by the *Nunca Mais* project.

The list included many individuals who still hold important posts in the civil police and in the military. In late 1986, a confession by former army doctor Amílcar Lobo about his role in “treating” torture victims received wide publicity.²³ Yet despite this and other implicating evidence, no alleged torturers have been brought to trial. On the contrary, the Amnesty Law has held firm. Moreover, civilian and military elites who agreed that the matter should be closed have accused the *Nunca Mais* project of promoting divisiveness and a vengeful attitude.

Like a wound that refuses to heal, the unresolved questions regarding abuses of human rights continue to resurface. Despite the official silence, some individuals and groups have sought closure on pending human rights matters. It also appears that these efforts are less isolated than they once were. For example, regional groups calling themselves “Tortura: Nunca Mais,” which sprang up alongside the “Brasil: Nunca Mais” project, have recently increased their memberships. These groups have spearheaded a campaign to have torture outlawed in the new Brazilian constitution, and they have also pressed for more information about political disappearances during the dictatorship. Amílcar Lobo’s confessions brought to light more information about the 1971 police abduction and murder of Federal Congressman Rubens Paiva, and other unsolved cases have been reopened.

More artists have joined the writers and scholars who are researching and writing about the period of repression, particularly the armed struggle of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, world-renowned architect Oscar Niemeyer has completed plans for a twenty-five-meter metal structure to honor torture victims. To finance the highly controversial monument, the organizers have proposed to sell works donated by distinguished Brazilian artists. Most tellingly, the fate of a former torture victim and her torturer were dramatized in a recent TV Globo’s prime-time soap opera, *Roda de Fogo* (Wheel of Fire). Such efforts, however, are still fragmentary. Reconstruction of the collective memory of the military dictatorship has just begun, and it is occurring despite considerable political pressure to forget the past.²⁴

NOTES

1. This paper was researched and written in 1986. Since then, political events have revealed even more clearly the “continuismo” of the Sarney administration.
2. Florestan Fernandes, “O politicismo burguês,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 26 June 1986, p. 3.
3. See Marlyse Meyer and Maria Lúcia Montes, *Redescobindo o Brasil: A Festa na Política* (São Paulo: T. A. Queiroz, 1985).
4. See César Guimarães and R. A. Amaral Vieira, *A Televisão Brasileira na Transição: Um Caso de Conversão Rápida à Nova Ordem*, Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro (IUPERJ), Série Estudos no. 44 (Rio de Janeiro: IUPERJ, 1985).
5. “Análise Estrutural do Ministério da Cultura,” Documento Preliminar, Ministério da Cultura, Secretaria Geral and Secretaria de Modernização Administrativa, Oct. 1985, pp. 9, 13.

6. Marília Pacheco Fiorillo, "Sem Eira Nem Beira Nem Gente Que Queira," in *Nova República: Um Balanço*, organized by Flávio Koutzii (Porto Alegre: L & PM Editores, 1986), 115.
7. "Muito Entusiasmo, Poucas Realizações," *O Globo*, 15 Feb. 1986, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. "Como Intelectuais e Artistas Vêem a Substituição," *O Globo*, 15 Feb. 1986, p. 1.
11. Regina Echeverria, "A 'Revolução Cultural' de Celso Furtado," *O Estado de São Paulo*, 22 Apr. 1986, pp. 1–3.
12. "Sarney Define Objetivos da Cultura," *O Estado de São Paulo*, 22 Mar. 1986, p. 18.
13. Antonio Carlos Prado, "Cultura Dada, Se Olha os . . . ," *Senhor*, no. 176 (1 July 1986), p. 43.
14. *Ibid.*, 44.
15. "A Cachaça e a Broa-de-milho," *O Globo*, 15 Feb. 1986, p. 1.
16. Prado, "Cultura Dada," 45.
17. Matinas Suzuki Junior, "Cultura É Qualidade de Vida, Diz Furtado," *Folha de São Paulo*, 21 Feb. 1986, p. 49.
18. Zuenir Ventura, "O Ano do Desacordo," *Caderno B Especial, Jornal do Brasil*, 29 Dec. 1985, p. 1.
19. Zuenir Ventura, "O Papel da Cultura Agora: Entrevista Joan Dassin," *Caderno B Especial, Jornal do Brasil*, 8 Dec. 1985, p. 12.
20. Joan Dassin, "Memoirs of the Generation of '68: A Case Study of Fear and the Political Text in Brazil," forthcoming in *The Culture of Fear in the Southern Cone*, edited by Juan Corradi, Manuel Antonio Garretón, and Patricia Weiss-Fagen.
21. Joan Dassin, "Introduction to the English Language Edition," *Torture in Brazil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), ix–xix.
22. Jaime Wright, "Torture Never Again," *One World*, no. 116 (June 1986):16.
23. Zuenir Ventura, "A Psicanálise da Tortura: Entrevista com Dr. Amílcar Lobo," *Caderno B Especial, Jornal do Brasil*, 14 Sept. 1986, pp. 6ff.
24. See J. L. Werneck da Silva, *A Deformação da História ou Para Não Esquecer; Brasil: Os Anos de Autoritarismo* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1985).