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Portrait of one of Latin America's most original sociologists, and the zoography of his native habitat. The calm iconoclasm of Francisco de Oliveira's thought under military dictators and workers' president alike.

FRANCISCO DE OLIVEIRA

In a national culture of notable variety and depth, the sociologist Chico de Oliveira has been one of Brazil's most original thinkers. A North-Easterner, he was born in 1933, in Recife, and educated there. At the age of 24 he joined sudene, the regional state development agency, working as deputy to Celso Furtado, the country's most famous economist. Both were driven into exile by the military dictatorship which came to power in the coup of 1964. Abroad, de Oliveira worked for the un in Guatemala and Mexico, before returning to Brazil in 1970, where he found employment with the social-science foundation cebrap in São Paulo. He later held chairs in sociology at both State and Catholic universities. In 1972 he published an iconoclastic reassessment of accepted theories of Brazilian economic development, under the title *Critique of Dualist Reason*. In this he took his distance from Furtado's legacy, as well as more generally the intellectual tradition of cepal, the un's Economic Commission on Latin America, whose presiding spirit was Raúl Prebisch.

Politically, de Oliveira had been a militant of Brazil's small, but not uninfluential, Socialist Party before 1964. Under the gradual 'opening' of dictatorship in the late seventies, he helped to found the Workers' Party (pt), in which he remains active to this day. With democratization, his mordant analyses of the political scene and the forces manoeuvring across it attracted increasing attention. Roberto Schwarz has described his essays of this period as 'always surprising'—'trenchant, yet unsectarian', disconcerting both those who felt that sharp formulations were incompatible with social negotiation, and those for whom any level-headed analysis of opposing interests was an invitation to lukewarm compromise. Pointing out how accurate his prognoses of the ill-fated stabilization plan of the Sarney government (1985–90) and of the leprous Collor Presidency (1990–92) proved to be, Schwarz remarks that this kind of far-sightedness has come from an intellectual independence, and distaste for the vulgar and authoritarian strands of Brazilian tradition, that is all the more notable in 'a gregarious culture like ours'. Today, de Oliveira has displayed the same courage, with an acerbic depiction of the aberrant social reality of his country, of which—he argues—his own party now forms an

integral part. The essay in question, ‘The Duckbilled Platypus’, has caused a fierce controversy in Brazil. We publish it below, with the preface by Roberto Schwarz that has accompanied it.

ROBERTO SCHWARZ

PREFACE WITH QUESTIONS

*Venceu o sistema de Babilônia
e o garção de costeleta*
Oswald de Andrade, 1946

The epigraph condenses, in caustic mode, the historic disappointment of a libertarian modernist at the postwar outcome. The defeat of Nazism in Europe and the end of the Vargas dictatorship in Brazil had been moments of unusual hope, but they had not opened the door to higher forms of society. So far as we were concerned, victory went to the Babylonian system—that is, capitalism; and to the *maître de*—that is, kitsch aesthetics. The social and artistic ferment of the 1920s and 30s had ended in this.

Another historical cycle later, the essays of Francisco de Oliveira—differences of genre aside—trace an analogous anticlimax: the exhaustion of a ‘developmentalism’ that is now ending without having fulfilled its promise. Written thirty years apart, his ‘Critique of Dualist Reason’ (1972) and ‘Duckbilled Platypus’ (2003) represent, respectively, moments of critical intervention and sardonic observation. [\[1\]](#) In one, the intellect clarifies the terms of a struggle against underdevelopment; in the other, it identifies the social monstrosity we have become, and will remain until further notice. The title of the former, of course, alluded to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in which Sartre had recently attempted to bring Marxism, revolution and the dialectic itself up to date under the sign of a philosophy of freedom. Today the comparison of our realities with the duckbilled platypus—an animal belonging to no familiar species—underlines the incongruities of Brazilian society, viewed rather as result than as what it might be changed into. The zoographical spirit of the allegory, conceived by a long-standing member of the pt at the very moment when the party has won the Presidency of the Republic, gives cause for reflection. The parallel with Oswald brings to mind the long list of our historic frustrations, from the nineteenth century on, springing from the persistent discrepancy between Brazil and its chosen country-models; and from our continuous hopes of being able to bridge that gap through a visionary social turn.

According to de Oliveira, Brazil's transformation into a social platypus was completed by the forward leap in the forces of production we witness today. Accomplished by others, this has not been easy to replicate. The Third Industrial Revolution is a combination of capitalist globalization with scientific and technical knowledge that is sequestered in patents and subject to accelerated obsolescence; any attempt to acquire or copy it piecemeal is rendered futile. From the national point of view, the desirable course of action would be to incorporate the process in its entirety; but that would require investment in education and infrastructure seemingly beyond the reach of a poor country. In conditions of neo-backwardness, the inherited traits of underdevelopment undergo a supplementary deformation which gives the platypus its particular form.

In the camp of labour, the new balance of forces has eroded rights won in earlier periods. The extraction of surplus value meets less resistance, and capital loses what civilizing effect it might have had. An increasing informalization of work is taking place, as occupations replace jobs and the wage relationship is dismantled. The link between downsized labour and external dependency, tightened by the semi-exclusion of the country from scientific-technical innovation, implies a defeated society.

A reconfiguration has also occurred in the camp of property and power, which casts new light on its previous character. Rather than relying on mechanical deductions from immediate material interest or social tradition, de Oliveira's stress here falls on the conscious aspect of class decisions, taken with a certain degree of freedom that only made their tenor worse. In the period of underdevelopment, he insists, the dominant bloc *chose* a division of labour that would shore up its rule, even at the price of mediocre international standing. He cites the view of Fernando Henrique Cardoso who argued, shortly before the coup of 1964, that the industrial bourgeoisie in Brazil actually preferred to be a junior partner of Western capitalism than to risk an eventual challenge to its hegemony. In the face of this historic renunciation, the task of continuing the country's economic development would fall to the organized urban masses: 'Ultimately the question will be: sub-capitalism or socialism?' [2] Forty years later, de Oliveira finds an unexpected grain of optimism in that elite renunciation—but an optimism cast back into the past and which, by contrast, clouds the present. If such choices and decisions had existed, then the 'door to transformation' once stood open. Even if ignored, or deliberately refused, break-outs in the period of the Second Industrial Revolution—when science and technology were not yet monopolized—were still possible. It is a line of thought that warrants a certain nostalgia for underdevelopment and its struggles, viewed from the petrified present.

Outcomes of underdevelopment

The most polemical and counter-intuitive thesis of 'The Duckbilled Platypus' is that a new social class has emerged in Brazil. Starting from the 'recent points of pragmatic convergence between the pt and the psdb' and the 'apparent paradox that Lula's government is executing Cardoso's programme,

and radicalizing it', de Oliveira remarks that:

this is not a mistake, but the expression of a genuinely new social stratum, based on technicians and intellectuals doubling as bankers—the core of the psdb; and workers become pension-fund managers—the core of the pt. What they have in common is control over access to public funds, and an insider's knowledge of the lay of the financial land. [\[3\]](#)

The irony of this formation is evident. To the disappointment of socialists, the Centre-Left that emerged in the struggle against the military dictatorship of the 60s and 70s did not survive the re-democratization of the 80s. With Cardoso's ascent to power in 1994, the division of the political landscape crystallized into an electoral antagonism between Centre-Right and Left, accompanied by the corresponding flurry of epithets. After ten years of Centre-Right government, Lula's victory might seem to have marked a climax in this confrontation. In the light of the pt regime's first measures, however, de Oliveira reckons that the nuclei of each of the two adversaries in reality constitute two faces of the same class. The allies who fell out over the tasks of repairing the ravages of the dictatorship and its economic miracle in the 80s have, in current straits, reunited once more. This second confluence, amid much mutual contestation and antipathy, is an effect not of the good old tasks but of a new agenda, dictated by the latest anti-social needs of capital as it deepens its dominion over society. As de Oliveira notes, the fact that the country's main investment funds are owned by workers might lead an unwary spectator to imagine this was a socialist society. But it turns out that the platypus is not endowed with ethical or political self-understanding: the workers' economy functions as if no order existed beyond capital—which, in turn, is also a choice. The parallel is completed by the conversion of psdb intellectuals—veterans, it is worth recalling, of social struggles against the military regime and years of earlier militancy on the left—into so many technocrats.

The platypus, then, has now ceased to be underdeveloped, since the openings provided by the Second Industrial Revolution—which made the advances needed for Brazil to catch up with the metropolises seem possible—have been closed off. Not that the country can enter the new regime of capital accumulation, for which it lacks the means. What it is left with are transfers of assets, especially privatizations, which are not true accumulation and do nothing to lessen social inequality. The picture that emerges is of a 'truncated accumulation', whose economic mechanisms remain to be studied. The country has thus become defined by what it is not: that is, by an underdevelopment that no longer obtains, and by a model of accumulation that is out of reach.

This form of non-being nevertheless characterizes a society that still palpably exists, even if its inner workings have yet to be identified; hence the comparison to an enigmatic sport of nature. Yet there is no established (let alone paved) route from a backward to an advanced—or rather, a losing to a winning—position within the world economy. If such a path does exist, it does not conform to any universal notion of progress, whose principles it

would suffice to respect. On the contrary, in its present form, progress is reduced to precepts of the market, driving global inequality. One of the qualities of de Oliveira's study is a dialectical conception of progress, without providential illusions, doctrinaire convictions or attempts to conceal its regressive consequences; merits which separate the essay from the half-naive, half-ideological faith in progress of so much of the Left and former Left in Brazil.

This is an analysis whose categories are subject to unexpected and dizzying shifts—they are 'in gestation'; already out of date; abortive; mutable; inapplicable, etc. A key class loses its relevance; a 'shocking' successor arrives on the scene; the development of productive forces degrades a sector of humanity, instead of saving it; underdevelopment disappears, but not its disasters; informal labour, a heterodox and provisional resort of accumulation, becomes a mark of social disintegration. In the style of a dialectic of enlightenment, the threshold of changes is not determined by any doctrinaire construction but plotted within a provisional and heuristic totalization that seeks to track the actual course of events. This is a rare example of a Marxism closely allied to empirical research. The present defines its agenda, in a strong sense—'the critic needs to grasp reality firmly by the horns', as Walter Benjamin put it. But there is no inclination here to adhere to the dominant order, or to ride the crest of the wave. If anything, de Oliveira is closer to a sociological Quixote. His commitment to contemporary reality reflects both a theoretical rigour and the will of thought to be effective—an aspect of its modern dignity. In this light, to disregard the appearance of a new tendency or the desuetude of old beliefs would be sheer ignorance. That does not mean the present and future are palatable, let alone better than forms or aspirations that have lost their basis. The mutual denunciations of the political scene should be studied dispassionately, as elements of knowledge. This contemporary gaze, without optimism or illusions, offers a deep and complex realism.

On one level, to define Brazil by what it is not is the symptom of a period of decomposition. In place of the deadlocks of underdevelopment, with its familiar and socially contested national moorings, the emerging subsystems are notable rather for their negation of former expectations than for what they reveal of the new order. But this is also a situation conducive to a kind of immediatism that is the opposite of any national concerns, or memories of lived experience; these have now fallen into historic discredit. De Oliveira's enterprise, energetically seeking to identify the new order of things, will have none of this curtailment—one that might reasonably be labelled positivist, despite its postmodern trappings. 'The Duckbilled Platypus' expresses a spirit of resistance that is poles apart from the roseate kitsch and *suivisme* of an unruffled progressivism. Deepening our awareness of contemporary reality by a sustained consideration of its terms, it typically locates their origins in other areas, other times, other social sectors, other lands. It is not a matter of indifference that capital is financed with workers' money, that financial managers are trade unionists, that bankers are intellectuals, that the new fragmentation is precipitated by the coherence of the system elsewhere. These are our real determinants, whose suppression produces a social unconsciousness close to that 'indistinction' which Marx considered a service

rendered to the establishment by vulgar economics. By insisting on these relationships, and the social irrationality they embody, de Oliveira raises our consciousness to the level required for a critique of the ruling order—giving us both a disturbing sense of remorse, shame, dissatisfaction, and clear reasons for revolt.

Within the increasingly dense global network in which Brazil is now inserted, de Oliveira notes the stamp of ‘Permanent Exception’ on our everyday life. *Pace* those of our compatriots who think us part of the First World, how can one fail to see that shanty-towns do not accord with a modern urban order (although in local practice the two go very well together); that informal labour is at variance with a commodity regime; that patrimonialism is not compatible with inter-capitalist competition? It is an unequivocal achievement to have highlighted the systematic nature of the contrast between our daily existence and the supranational norm—which we deploy, of course, in our own self-regulation. Our advance is turning us (who would have thought it?) into contemporaries of Machado de Assis, who over a century ago identified the Brazilian slave-trader as the exception to the Victorian gentleman, the voluble retainer as the exception to the solid citizen, the wiles of the poor girl next door as the exception to romantic passion, the advice of a frock-coated parasite as the exception to the counsels of enlightenment. Dynamism is less incompatible with stasis than it might seem. That said, there are many ways of confronting this pervasive disjunction, which resumes the position of the country (or ex-country, or semi-country, or region) in the contemporary order of the world.

Past prospects

Conceived in a spirit of conclusive revision, ‘The Duckbilled Platypus’ does not reject the perspectives of ‘Critique of Dualist Reason’ but suggests the causes for their defeat. The publication of both essays in a single volume represents a new diagnosis of the epoch. It also records the current state of the author’s hopes, in a theoretical rendering of accounts and a self-historicization. Once this difference is clear, it must be admitted that the ‘Critique’—written with great combative verve at the height of the military dictatorship, in the midst of its economic miracle and slaughter of the armed opposition—was fighting a battle already half lost. Its description of the barbarism of the process under way in Brazil only averted the image of a monster because it held out a promise of its supersession.

The famous thesis of ‘Critique of Dualist Reason’ redefined not only the primitive character of Brazil’s agriculture at the time but also the peculiar persistence of subsistence-economy forms in urbanized settings, and the demoralized swelling of the tertiary sector. For de Oliveira—and contrary to received wisdom—these were not remnants of the past but functional parts of the country’s modern development, contributing to the low cost of labour on which our accumulation depended. This was a dialectical masterstroke on two fronts. On the one hand, the precarious life of the popular classes was traced to the new dynamic of capitalism—that is, the contemporary workings of society—and not to the archaic legacies we trail behind us. On the other hand,

that very precariousness was essential to economic accumulation, and there could be no greater error than to treat it as if it were a plague visited upon our organism from the outside. On the contrary, it was necessary to recognize it as part of an accelerated process of development, in the course of which the destitute could be raised to decent employment and citizenship, and the country gain a new international standing. *Poverty and the task of overcoming it were our historic opportunity!* Without going into the factual merits of the hypothesis, what is striking is the political will it expressed: a resolve that the poor could not be abandoned to their fate, for if they were it would make progress impossible. In place of the murderous dichotomy of civilization and barbarism, which treated the poor as so much human waste, here was a generous notion that the future depended on a national integration—miraculous, perhaps—in which an informed, social-historical consciousness would triumph over short-term calculations. In its time, this was an idea that graced the writings of Celso Furtado and the Cinema Novo's visions of suffering, as well as Dependency Theory.

With a conceptual originality and sense of popular life that perhaps came from the North-East, and were at the opposite pole from the progressivism of the dictatorship, de Oliveira imagined a modern scheme for national development which conceived the country as a conscious whole—the necessary precondition for its self-transformation. He criticized the cepal dualism that differentiated modernization from the traditional sectors of society, if conceding that an ethical version of the former could furnish humanitarian aid, remedy and tuition for the lethargy of the latter. In passing—this was not an opponent that deserved much respect—he refuted the regime's economists, who claimed that it was necessary to enlarge the cake of the advanced sector first, and only then distribute slices to the backward layers; a cynical argument no one believed.

At a theoretical level, 'Critique of Dualist Reason' derived from the undogmatic appropriation of Marxism at the University of São Paulo before 1964, which acquired a fresh political relevance at cebrap, a refuge during the leaden years of the dictatorship. Politics, economics and social classes should be analysed in articulation with each other—contrary to the thinking of the specialists in these disciplines. In the wake of Dependency Theory, de Oliveira defined underdevelopment as a disadvantageous (ex-colonial) position in the world division of labour, cemented by an internal articulation of interests and classes—which, in turn, was cemented by this subordinate international position. Hence the importance he attributed to the clash of ideas and ideologies, which could help destabilize not only the country's iniquitous internal equilibrium but also its location in the global system; making possible the struggle for a better one. This was also the source of de Oliveira's habit, unusual in Brazil, of criticizing his closest allies—at that time, Celso Furtado, Maria da Conceição Tavares, José Serra, Fernando Cardoso—in the service of impersonal objectives. A little unexpectedly, class struggle features somewhat similarly. De Oliveira is not a Bolshevik, and his idea of class confrontation has less to do with the seizure of power by workers than with a self-enlightenment of the nation which would free it from prejudice, and provide a knowledge of its own anatomy and potential that would allow it to take its fate

into its own hands.

Nothing could be further from de Oliveira's thinking than dreams of a Brazilian superpower or a wish to get the better of neighbouring countries. Still, it is possible that, in sublimated form, his *découpage* remains tributary to the competitive side of developmentalism. For how could it be otherwise? In a world system that reproduces inequalities, how could one not fight for a better placing, one that is less impaired and closer to the victors? How can one escape a disadvantageous position without taking one's seat among those who put others at a disadvantage? Reflection on the impossibility of a competition without losers—or on an equally impossible 'levelling from the top' (from which top, exactly?)—compels one to call into question the order that creates such a dilemma. Here, having spurred political will within the ambit of the nation, dialectical thought would leave it paralysed—were it not to invent a new kind of politics, for which the nation would be only a relative horizon. Such thoughts have a likeness to de Oliveira's bold idea that social iniquity is both task and opportunity, and his meditations on de-commodification. [4] One of the axes of 'The Duckbilled Platypus' is the opposition between Darwin and Marx—the contrast between natural selection, as an immediate interplay of interests, and conscious solutions to the problems of the nation and of humanity. As did Marx, de Oliveira always insists that nothing happens without the intervention of consciousness. Yet . . . present everywhere, but bewitched by economic interest, consciousness functions in a 'natural' fashion, enduring the calamities that it might oppose, were it to grow—and, so to speak, mutate.

[1] Published in one volume as Francisco de Oliveira, *Crítica à Razão Dualista—O Ornitorrinco*, Boitempo: São Paulo 2003.

[2] Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Empresário industrial e desenvolvimento econômico no Brasil*, São Paulo 1964, pp. 186–7.

[3] See below, pp. 55–6. The psdb is the Social-Democratic Party (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira), led by Cardoso.

[4] Francisco de Oliveira, *Os direitos do antivalor*, Petrópolis 1998.

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