



# The citizen who smelled like a king

Profiles show that Pedro II was more interested in the essence than the appearance of power

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**W**hen a major figure from the Republic stated that his party wanted to stay in power for 20 years (a phrase, in fact, repeated by another important figure who is in power today), Brazil shuddered. Two decades in office really is too long. Brazil, however, has already had a leader who was the head of State for 49 years, 3 months and 22 days. “Because of the length of government and the transformations that occurred, no other head of State has ever had a deeper impact on the country’s history”, says historian José Murilo de Carvalho, who has just launched a profile of Dom Pedro II (1825-1891). His capacity to remain in office is, unfortunately, proportional to the academic and popular ignorance about his reign. A few years ago, when both appeared on banknotes, it was common (and still is), because of the son’s white beard, for people to see Pedro II as the father of Pedro I.

“In Brazil in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Pedro II is everywhere and nowhere at all. For the majority he was a real being, a governor

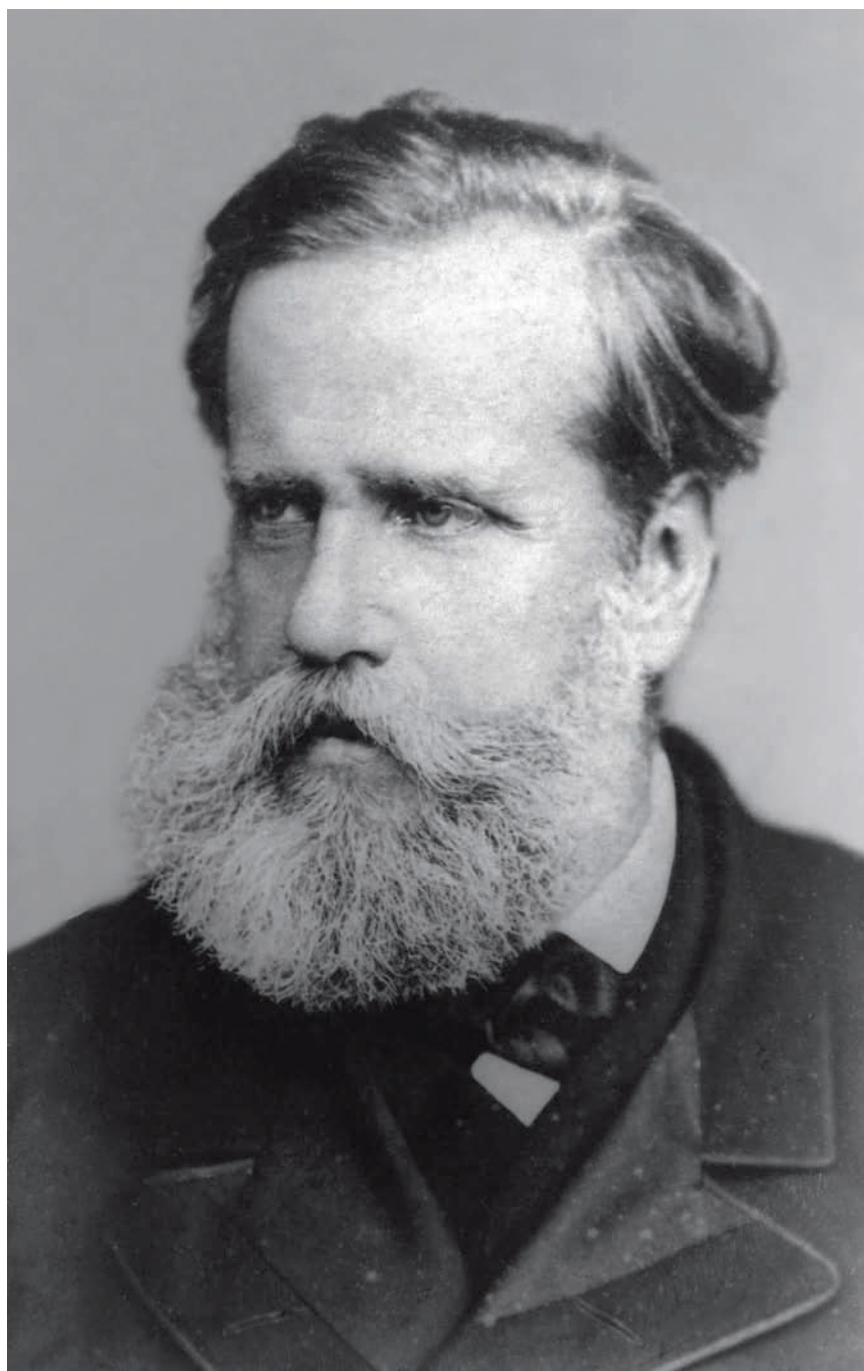
whose actions, for good or evil, forged the modern Brazilian nation. What he did and his limitations have been totally forgotten”, observes Brazilian expert, Roderick Barman, from Columbia University, the author of another profile of the king, *Citizen emperor* (to be translated in 2008 by Unesp), and who has just completed ‘Brazil: the Burdens of Nationhood, 1852-1910’, a study about the weight of the Second Reign in national consolidation. “The monarchy guaranteed the country’s unity, which was in danger during the Regency, when rebel governments declared the independence of three provinces. It was a school of civilized political practices, especially if we compare it with neighboring republics. But it was slow to introduce social policies, such as the abolition of slavery and popular education for the people and it was bogged down in political reforms, such as political decentralization and extending the vote”, explains Carvalho. Who was its creator?

Neither “Pedro Banana”, an epithet created by republicans, nor the enlightened monarch, the good old man, an im-

age cultivated by the monarchists of both yesterday and today. Despite this he had a profound effect. “The successes of Pedro II, the creation of a political culture and of an ideal of citizenship, not only survived his fall in 1889, but continued as the norms and directives of public life in subsequent regimes (the Old Republic, the Vargas Era and the Liberal Republic). Even the military regime of 1964 was profoundly influenced by Pedro’s vision of Brazil as a Nation-state. Only in the 1980s was this set aside”, says Barman. Pedro II reigned, governed, administered and gave orders for five decades. “As a consequence, without the elite understanding/appreciating what he did, day to day and by example he molded the expectations of the elite and of the people as to the conduct of a Head of State, the style of the Brazilian political process. These expectations endured even after the advent of television. Anyone who doubts this should compare the appearance and the election propaganda of candidate Lula in 1992 and the new Lula of 2002 and 2006. The young radical transformed himself into a facsimile of the second emperor.”

**Foreigner** - With Pedro II and other republican “monarchs” Barman notes an uncomfortable Brazilian insistence on pointing out that “he doesn’t look Brazilian, he looks like a foreigner”, or, as Carvalho notes, in the case of the emperor, “a Hapsburg lost in the tropics, blond and blue eyed, in a country with a minority white elite, surrounded by a sea of blacks and half-castes”. “It’s almost like not wanting/being able to accept that one can be a good head of government and at the same time a typical Brazilian.” Hence the somewhat ‘hick’ admiration for the culture of the monarch who seemed to know everything. “I already know, I already know! The wise man, *par excellence*, knows everything. He knows more than science and more than the law. The Eternal Father, envious of such vast knowledge, said to him, excusingly: ‘Dom Pedro, succeed me! I deliver the universe to you!’ But the wise man firmly and scornfully replied: ‘I already know. I already know!’”, went a poem of the time about how Pedro II reacted when they tried to tell him something.

Those who see in the emperor a man with almost no pomp and who wore a coat, someone who was not concerned



PHOTOS COURTESY

**A Hapsburg lost in the tropics.**  
“It is almost like not wanting/being able to accept that one can be a good head of government and at the same time a typical Brazilian”





Rare photo of the King in formal attire. "What he wanted was the essence and not the trappings of power. Above all he wanted to have control!"

with power, are mistaken. "What he wanted was the essence and not the trappings of power. Above all he wanted to have control. The trauma of his troubled youth (his mother died when he was 1, his father when he was 9 and he was emperor at 14) left him terrified of being protected", notes Barman. "For him, losing control meant being manipulated. The intensity of Pedro II's desire to control everything and everybody was masked by his distancing himself from the spotlight and by his self-discipline. So it was easy to underestimate the man and the extent of his authority. He always likened the regime and the country to his own person." Carvalho notes, however, that Dom Pedro had no appetite for politics as a power game. "He did not measure the political cost and benefit of his actions and neither did he plan the future of his reign. I do not praise him as a governor but as a man of great public spirit. He did not hate power; he exercised it jealously, but fulfilled an obligation of his position as emperor."

**Citizen** - According to Barman, his absolute control over affairs of State was used "to conserve and perfect society", not to remake it. Pedro II had a notable capacity for allowing problems to solve themselves, as far as the Moderating Power helped him. "He was concerned less with promoting actions that he coveted than preventing others from being able to implement policies he did not want." Even though the emperor boasted of his condition as a citizen he never ceased being emperor. "Pedro II never asked himself if Brazilians wanted him to be the 'first citizen', nor if they wanted a type of progress and civilization, *a la francaise*, which he wanted for HIS nation", notes the American. In the words of one of his contemporaries, "despite being likeable, there is in him the odor of king, of someone who believes he is superior to others". So his "advisers" were not people, but books, especially French dissertations. "He was respected by almost everyone, but was loved by almost no one", notes Carvalho.

He missed a great opportunity to free slaves before 1888, because of his daughter, at the time regarded by the elite and the people as the "blessed one", the one married to "that Frenchman", but someone unfit to succeed him. Since the 1850s the slave market had declined and the Brazilian elite had realized that the days of slavery were

numbered. “Pedro II shared this view and, like a good civilized person, disapproved of slavery. But it was one thing for the emperor to express his views on the future of slavery to his cabinet and quite another to pressure the politicians into taking a stance against it. He liked to imagine that he was incapable of initiating change”, says Barman. With the end of the American War of Succession, Brazil was the only country in the Western hemisphere with slaves. This did not fit in with his success as an enlightened king *vis-à-vis* his European contemporaries. “But anyone who studies the struggle surrounding the Free Womb Law [of 9/29/1871, freeing children born to slave women] cannot say that his posture was merely intellectual. He paid a high price for it. By the time he restrained his abolitionist impulse the damage to the dynasty had already been done”, says José Murilo.

The conduct during the Paraguayan War, another controversial issue, also bears the hallmark of the monarch “who thought he was Brazil”. “In the war, Brazil fought against the wrong enemy and this was undoubtedly thanks to the megalomania of Lopez. The emperor’s justification for continuing the fight until Lopez was expelled were always the Triple Alliance Treaty and defense of Brazil’s honor, but these do not seem to me to be sufficient. His insistence on not negotiating is still an enigma”, observes Murilo. “He took the aggression against Brazil as a personal insult. They speak of peace on the Prata River but I will not make peace with López”, wrote Pedro II to his mistress, the Countess of Barral. The emperor’s insistence on destroying López was excessive”, agrees Barman. Finally, the Republic.

Republicanism sprang up around this time, in the 1830s, and was regarded with contempt by the elite and with benevolent indifference by the emperor and, notes the Brazilian expert, as the movement was unable to establish itself after 1870, this attitude was not completely wrong. It was the new generation that was its downfall: given the union of Brazil and its consolidated status as a Nation-state they no longer feared the collapse of political order. Nevertheless, until the final years of the regime the phrase, “I love my august Emperor” was normally used by Brazilians. “In Pedro II the elite found someone who suppressed the fanaticism of the masses, a skilful monarch who

brought together liberty and order, internal peace and development of the country (provided it was under his strict supervision and with no excesses). He became, therefore, a natural part of the lives of Brazilians.” This “house in order” gave republicans the calm they needed to grow. “Given the lack of a credible successor (Pedro II did not see Isabel as such), and because of the monarch’s illness, everything seemed to guarantee transition to a Republic. Brazil could, therefore, have removed from its history the period of terrible militarism that started in 1889”, notes Barman. “But his initial achievements and his refusal to cede a little to the politicians and to open up the system, as well as his disregard for the interests of the army led to his being removed from the throne in a pathetic way.” The image of the group of nobles led hurriedly into exile caught the national imagination more than the power he had exercised for half a century.

Pedro II, who intellectually tended towards a Republic, was however self-centered and confident that the world revolved around him. Although he saw the direction that Brazil was moving in he insisted on maintaining the *status quo*, the

eternal mistake of monarchs since the English cut off their king’s head in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The weak point of the Empire was precisely this confidence in exaggerated centralization, the desire to control everything personally. “The life of the Empire was prolonged by the abolitionist campaign that drew attention to the paradoxical fragility of such a consolidated regime.” With the end of the monarchy Brazil suffered for years under a military dictatorship, including Canudos, the actions of “a regime without strong roots and almost without legitimacy”, notes Barman, for whom the origins of the Brazil of today do not extend back to 1889, but to the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was Vargas, who was responsible for overthrowing the regime that had overthrown the emperor, who brought Pedro II back into fashion in Brazil along with his mortal remains. “The majority of Brazilians believe that their forefathers were innately Republican and the monarchy was an external imposition”, a strange alienation of the importance, for better or for worse, of someone who, whether as king or as a “citizen”, had ruled the country for 50 years. ■

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