

HISTORY

# A break in Brazil's history

Bicentenary of the arrival of the royal family demands a historiographic reflection

CARLOS HAAG

Published in January 2008

**ROGER BASTIDE'S PHRASE MAY HAVE BEEN CHASTENED WITH TIME, BUT NOTHING HAS DETRACTED FROM ITS WISDOM: BRAZIL, A NATION OF CONTRASTS. FROM SOCCER TO HISTORY, EVERYTHING OBEYS THE INFAMOUS "ALL OR NOTHING" RULE; AS DID THE ARRIVAL OF THE**

Portuguese royal family in Brazil in 1808, for example. How long has this journey been talked about in jesting terms, this adventure of King Dom João VI, the "fleeing king," with his "mustachioed" wife and their provincial court? Today, as the bicentenary of the arrival of the Portuguese in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro draws nearer, huge celebrations are being prepared and the monarch who "carried chickens in his coat" is being reassessed as a skillful statesman. What is the true facet of this journey and what were its consequences for Brazil, not yet a nation at the time?

"Without ignoring the role of the arrival of the royal family in the formation of Brazil as an independent nation, it might be useful to look at the phenomenon from a different point of view. It seems opportune to me, purposely and momentarily, to try and dissociate the phenomenon itself from its results. Analyses from 1808 were almost invariably underscored by reflections on the formation of Brazil, which led to a series of value judgments and often teleological relationships," comments historian Laura de Mello e Souza, from USP, who since 2003 has been studying the flight of the Braganças to Brazil from a comparative aspect, which forms part of a thematic project supported by FAPESP, entitled *Dimensions of the Portuguese Empire*. "The fact that 1808 is associated with the rise of the nation has meant that the memory of what happened was constructed in an almost farcical way, empirical evidence often being hidden under pure ideology," she warns us, add-

ing that historiography has frozen 1808 in opposing perspectives that, she states, "have not been properly equated".

"In the case of the unequalled uniqueness of this event (for many people the homeland dates back to 1808 and not 1822), in order to highlight the extraordinary fact, one tended to lose sight of the historical process. A broader stretch of time was overlooked to focus only on that singular expression of one point in time, i.e., 1808, as if it hovered, like a sort of bubble, over other expressions of the same circumstances. As the anecdotal and unusual were recorded, without realizing it, this reverted to an old tradition of prejudice that was particular to Northern European countries when, starting in the 18th century, they looked at countries in the South." At the other extreme, that of the general crisis in the former colonial system (as witnessed by the independence of the New World colonies, when for the first time the subjection of a colony to its metropolis was broken), with its strong Marxist roots, evaluates the historian, they were wrong for opposite reasons. "With their eyes on an extended time span, the general lines of phenomena that had much in common, but were also unique, stood out and the logic of structures came to the foreground while that of events became almost opaque," she evaluates. Thus, she continues, "everything was diluted between the might of a capitalist England in control of subordinate countries or the weight of the Napoleonic steam-roller that was substituting the revolutionary ideology of the Great French Nation. Per-

haps this tension between extended time and specific moments is insoluble. But without analysis, history is a chronicle; with analysis, a certain margin of anachronism is unavoidable".

"This is a permanent debate in historiography, stretching back to the times immediately after independence. It has an obvious political bias, which colors both those interpretations that attribute great importance to the presence and actions of Dom João VI in the Brazilian political emancipation process, and those that play down the importance of the King, to the point of putting forth the notion that independence happened 'despite' and 'notwithstanding' the actions of the sovereign," says historian Jurandir Malerba, from Unesp, the author of *A corte no exílio* ['The court in exile']. "The historiography about 1808 is constructed from those rectifications that happen from generation to generation, but the *leitmotif* of historical reconstruction and political struggle is anchored firmly in the present." Even so, as Mello e Souza notes, past prejudices remain. "There's a lapse of time between the end of the Renaissance and the start of the Age of Enlightenment, in which a relationship, based on ambiguity and contradiction, was established between the 'rich' (North) and the poor' (South), a time when the lens of prejudice and detraction were active. Reports on the arrival of the court were contaminated by this preexisting detracting tradition and, very possibly without knowing it, by the liberals who conducted the independence process in Brazil and included



Embarkation  
of Dom João,  
Prince Regent  
of Portugal,  
for Brazil on  
November 27,  
1807



Foreign view: royal procession on the Maracanã Bridge, surrounded by tropical nature

the detracting traditions of foreigners from the North. In Brazil, the nation, the former ended up winning over both the cultured elite as well as those of more popular extraction.”

This occurred right after the transfer of the court: in 1809, for example, the *History of Brazil*, by Andrew Grant, was already calling the episode the “flight of this imbecile court”. In 1900, the *História do Brasil* [History of Brazil], by João Ribeiro, stated: “If in coming to Brazil Dom João VI brought us the prize of autonomy, albeit in the form of absolutism, in the meanness of his spirit there was not, however, sufficient talent to create a ‘new empire’, as he immediately called it. It was he who demoralized the monarchic institution, which was in itself unsympathetic to American aspirations”. Time has not helped provide us with a precise picture of the arrival of the royal family. In the *História Geral da Civilização Brasileira* [General History of Brazilian Civilization], organized by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, the court’s presence is somewhat pallid and the highlight is the recurring idea of moving the seat of the monarchy to America, an obsession of all the kings and ministers of Portugal, from the Prior of Crato to Rodrigo de Souza Coutinho, head of the Royal Treasury who, in 1803, gave

the Prince Regent an assessment of the precarious political situation in Portugal, in which, in a war between France and England, the “independence of the Portuguese monarchy would be at risk,” advising Dom João that the creation of a new empire in Brazil could give the Portuguese a base from which the heir to the throne could reconquer everything that had been lost in Europe and “punish the cruel enemy”. As early as 1580, when the Spanish king, Felipe II, claimed the Portuguese crown for himself, Brazil was already being considered as a place of refuge for the exiled court.

Decades later, strategic reasons were transformed into a messianic vision in the words of Father Vieira, for whom the king could be the head of an eternal empire on American soil. In the reign of Dom João V (1706-1750), in the face of Spanish expansion and the start of Lusitanian decadence, in a secret memorandum that preceded the forecast of Montesquieu of the ongoing inversion in modern empires, a Portuguese courtier, Luiz da Cunha, almost convinced the sovereign of the need to move the court to Brazil in order to guarantee its future and preserve its nobility within European nations. “The transfer of the court was, in fact, an old

idea. At the end of the 18th century it was explicitly advocated by Souza Coutinho, who clearly perceived the limitations of the metropolis,” says UFRJ historian, José Murilo de Carvalho. “The history of the politics and political culture of the transfer of the court begins long before the Prince regent left Portugal and landed on Brazilian shores. The decision to transfer the center of the monarchy, made in the midst of a merely apparent chaos and short-term planning, was firmly rooted in a vision of the potential of Brazil, which was already in focus in the 18th century,” notes Brazilian scholar Kirsten Schultz, the author of *Versalhes Tropical* (Tropical Versailles).

In 1972, with the collected writings 1822: *dimensões* [1822: dimensions], edited by Carlos Guilherme Motta, a new tone surfaced, guided by the crisis of the Old Regime, especially in the chapter written by historian Fernando Novais. The year 1808 begins to acquire new hues. In this secular historiographic interregnum, in which the event went through prejudicial devaluation, uncritical apology and reduction to anecdote, when faced with the structural changes in the economic and political system of the Old Regime, there is an important epigone, recalls Mello e Souza: *Dom João*

*VI no Brasil* [Dom João VI in Brazil], by Manuel de Oliveira Lima (now republished by Topbooks), 1908. “We need to go back to it to rethink the course of the future historiography of 1808, and in this sense, despite its antiquated style, it is still modern and stimulating, since Oliveira Lima deals simultaneously with extended time and points in time, with the structure and the event and with the general context and the particular personalities involved.”

To complicate matters further, within the historiographic debate there is another, even more burning, element, which despite the 200 years that separate us from what occurred, generates exasperated controversies. “This thing of celebrating Dom João VI is a plot by people from Rio de Janeiro to promote the city,” said the historian from Pernambuco, Evaldo Cabral de Mello, for whom there is “an insistence on reinforcing the common place view, according to which the king was responsible for the country’s unity, which was nothing more than a fabrication by the crown, and not with the objective of creating an independent country from such unity”. Does Valeria, therefore, celebrate the bicentenary of 1808? “As far as celebration of the event goes, I stick with the warning of historian, François Furet, who said that it’s necessary to be passionate about what one celebrates in order to avoid taking stock. In other words, excessive celebrations run the risk of pushing many issues under the rug,” ponders historian Mary del Priore. Among these issues is the debate about how the country acquired its independence, a controversy that again splits historiography into two camps: those who defend the choice of the centralization of Brazil, which was achieved by the permanence of the Braganças in the country, versus those who blame it for suffocating a federalist movement, along the lines of the American movement, preferably called “separatism”.

Let us go back in time, however, to analyze the departure or the flight of the Portuguese court to Brazil. The movement’s catalyst was the rise, in 1799, of Napoleon Bonaparte to first-consul and the start of a French military campaign, with overtones of the French Revolution, an action that transformed the terror in European courts into panic. “The main

powers were defeated, with the exception of the English. Dom João, therefore, saw himself faced with a “Sophie’s choice”: either he surrendered to the French, running the risk of being deposed, of seeing Lisbon demolished by the British and of losing the colony to them, or he fled, submitting to Great Britain and incurring the wrath of his abandoned Portuguese subjects,” analyses Murilo de Carvalho, according to whom, for Portugal, leaving meant the preservation of the monarchy and the prolonging of the colony for some time, although without the benefits of colonial exclusivity, which had been overturned with the opening of the ports. Remaining might have meant what happened in Spain: the king deposed and imprisoned, and after the fall of Napoleon, possible annexation by Spain. “We do not know, however, which was the main argument that led the Crown Council to vote for leaving,” reiterates Murilo de Carvalho.

**A**ncedotes about the journey and the flight of the court apart, the arrival of the royal family brought changes and dilemmas to the incipient nation. “The ‘accident of the presence of the royal family’ completely changed the game. The king is not just the political institution that avoids the country being broken up at the time of the separation from the metropolis, he is also the person who makes feasible the hegemony of Rio de Janeiro over local and regional powers,” observes political scientist Gildo Marçal Brandão in *Linhas do pensamento político brasileiro* [Lineages of Brazilian political thought]. “The nefarious independence of the State vis-à-vis civil society (the birth

of the State vis-à-vis civil society, its abusive predominance and the fatality of individuals and social groups who live on and for the State) is based on the internal history of the metropolis, on the oceanic transmigration of the Portuguese State and on the severe and jealous reiteration of the culture of its origins,” he continues. This is the dividing line between the unitarists and the federalists. “There are those, like Brother Caneca and Cipriano Barata, both from Pernambuco, who insisted on the federal form and on greater independence of the provinces from the capital. But those who saw the greatness of Brazil’s territory as its strength and wanted to keep it united at any cost alleged that the federalist model had worked in the USA because it preceded the formation of the State. If it had been implemented here it would have ended up causing disintegration and led us to the same destiny as the Spanish colonies, wracked by revolutions,” assesses USP historian Isabel Lustosa.

“The tradition of historiography, for those for whom the history of our political emancipation is just the construction of a centralist State, tends, therefore, to ignore that if the New World kingdom of Dom João VI can be considered a cornerstone in the construction of the future imperial edifice, it is no less true that he was on the verge of destroying its fragile possibilities, precisely because of his incompetence in overcoming the rhetoric of the vast empire, updating it and carrying it out,” criticizes Cabral de Mello, for whom, as for Murilo de Carvalho, the imperial construction did not go beyond a figure of rhetoric with which the Bragantian crown tried to undo the painful impression created in Europe by its leaving, presenting it as a “measure of major revelation, destined to rehabilitate Portugal and to readapt itself in the New World in order to return to the Old World as a power of the first order”. This “Sophie’s choice” would determine whether Brazil’s future would lie in a monarchic centralism that left the Braganças in power until the end of the 19th century, or with federalism along the lines of that achieved in the United States, as was already being preached in 1817 by the leaders of the independence movements in Pernambuco and Bahia.



Commemorative medal of the acclamation of Dom João VI



The departure of the Queen back to Portugal on April 21, 1821

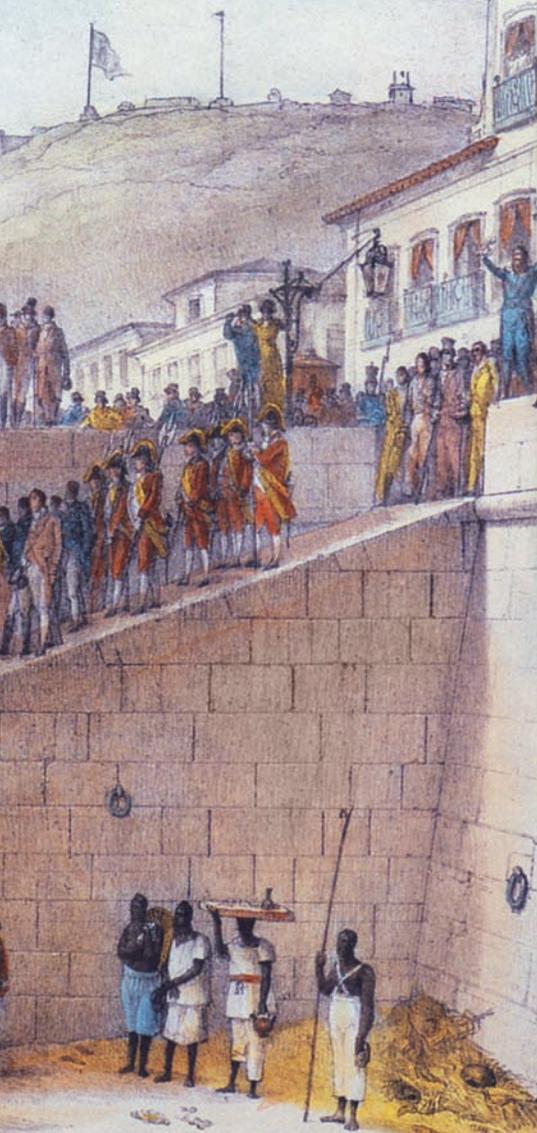
For Evaldo Cabral de Mello, there was another possible form of independence, other than that of a “unitary, conservative and naturally monarchist nature, which makes us neglect other possible ways for developing the nation or of forming the State”. “Those movements were grouped under the deceptive amalgam of ‘separatism’, so much so that the constructors of the Empire, when they left Rio de Janeiro, passed into history with the fine image of unitarists and nationalists,” he observes. “Since the unitary forces, the ‘unitary pack’, as Brother Caneca called it, beat the centrifugal forces, above all those of Pernambuco and Rio Grande do Sul, one can ask oneself whether the arrival of the court helped to shape Brazil because of the weight (rather than the determination) it brought to bear in conserving the monarchy, and above all in maintaining unity. The response is positive. Monarchy and unity (unity

partly because of the monarchy) meant inheriting one of the most backward cultures in Europe and favored the prevention of social, cultural and economic ruptures and an excess of political centralization and social conservatism,” assesses Murilo de Carvalho.

Also according to the same author, what might have been a colony transformed into several countries can be glimpsed by analyzing what happened in the Spanish part: a lot of instability, civil war, and a dictatorial orientation, but also more political mobilization, more self-government, more reformist boldness. “Would it have been better? That depends on one’s point of view. For those who dreamt and still dream (not my case) about a great empire or Brazil as a major power (oil?), the maintenance of unity was essential. For those who are concerned with prosperity and the population’s living conditions,

fragmentation might have been better, above all for the richer provinces.” Is there unanimity in this controversy? “I believe that most historians think that the preservation of Brazilian unity was something positive. However, until federalism was adopted, the discussion about its advantages was on the agenda and lasted throughout the Empire, the debates about the first Constitutional Assembly (1823) and the Republic. The practical application of federalism with the ‘politics of the governors’, of the Campos Salles government, however, ended up strengthening ‘coronelismo’ [oligarchic patron/client power of the landed gentry in rural areas] and served to increase national social inequality,” notes Isabel.

Nevertheless, it is also necessary to return to the criticisms of Cabral de Mello against the Dom João period in Brazil and its consequences. “Any discussion about political reform was always



REPRODUCTION FROM THE BOOK RIO DE JANEIRO CIDADE MESTIÇA, JEAN-BAPTISTE DEBRET

short-circuited in palace circles by the objection that the French Revolution also started with reform. The period of Dom João was characterized by extreme conservatism, which reduced the activities of public authorities to administrative issues to be solved in accordance with the practices of the former State.” According to de Mello, as from independence, a territorial notion was imposed that Brazil had been destined to be one country. For those from Rio de Janeiro the concept was of a big country, with its corresponding tax collection potential, under a centralized regime”. Furthermore, idealization of the Dom João kingdom was born and developed in Rio, making the seat of the court the great beneficiary of the immigration of the Braganças, while the provinces were taxed further to finance beautifying the capital, in order to make it acceptable to the courtiers and civil servants who came from the realm. “This intertwining

of the interests of the native elite with those of the immigrant elite marked the pace of the independence process, as the elite from the Center-South drew close to the Crown during the Brazilian years of Dom João,” says Malerba. “Here, I agree with Cabral de Mello: this winning and centralizing project that co-opted the prince of Brazil, after the return of the king to Portugal, fighting to impose both regional (or even provincial) interests as well as those of the so-called ‘separatists’ from Rio Grande do Sul or Pernambuco, which makes me wonder what the advantages for Brazil would have been if any one of these regional projects had imposed itself on the others.”

**F**or Malerba, however, what matters is that it was in Dom João’s Brazil that the embryo of the elite that would build the imperial State and the Brazilian nation throughout the 19th century was generated “And this elite was from the Center-South,” he points out. Malerba also notes that in coming to Brazil, the patriarchal configuration of the State in the Portugal of the Old Regime accompanied the configuration of the sacred character of royalty. “One of the principles of this form of government, the absolute monarchy, was based on the liberality of the sovereign, on his capacity to grant favors. The distinctive feature of the Portuguese monarchy in Rio was its abuse of the use of this characteristic,” writes the historian. “The monarchy that arrived in Rio de Janeiro, at a time when it was crumbling in its place of origin, transformed itself into something new, or at least different. However, the weight of this dying time was strongly rooted in the minds of the elite and particularly in that of the heir, Dom Pedro. Without the experience of a radical rupture, Brazil was born as a Nation-State, the child of two ages. This ambiguity marked the imperial period and certain aspects of it are noticeable to this day.”

“What we cannot know is: if this centralizing, monarchist and conservative project had historically not been the winning project, what type of federation might have arisen from the rubble of the colonial world? The political bias is clear: those interpretations that bemoan the aborting of federalist projects tend to attribute the social ills of Brazil to

our conservative revolution, the Prussian path followed by the Brazilian elite. But in history we do not have proof,” says Malerba. “Would a federalist experiment have led to a better country? Our republican experience does not allow us to answer this question with any degree of certainty.” Laura de Mello e Souza prefers to choose a “third way”. “What in fact was tried in 1808 was the configuration of a new Empire, and not just Portuguese for the people in the New World, who wanted it to be Portuguese-Brazilian; perhaps it was from this that the tension that would explode soon after happened, and as the inhabitants of the metropolis (because it continued seeing itself as such) insisted on continuing to qualify the relationship. In short, it was no longer the same Empire that the Portuguese and Portuguese-Brazilians cogitated: the former wanted it to be Portuguese and the latter Portuguese-Brazilian.”

“A happening only becomes memorable to the extent that, in some way or another, it is exceptional and that it creates, in addition to its ephemeral development, a durable reality that ends up stamped on areas of the collective memory, becoming a type of exemplary experience,” wrote the French historian Charles Mozaré. “In this sense, celebration and construction of the memory are fundamental when it comes to constituting a political body. How did this entity we call the Brazilian nation begin? The recall of events, like the permanence of the court in Brazil between 1808 and 1821, had a social cohesive function and contributed to keeping societies organic,” notes Malerba, who advises that good use be made of this “joint remembering” and that advantage be taken of the date to debate our path (“from that event or because of that event”), our current reality and its impasses. “To do so we need to think about the more general historical connections while also showing how and why they are not random. And to stop seeing the arrival of the royal family as a grotesque anecdote or a random occurrence,” says Mello e Souza. “Let us celebrate historical dates like the birthdays of our parents, the people from whom we are descended and whom we did not choose, but who begot us and with whom we are inevitably associated,” adds Isabel Lustosa. ■