

**Our Lot**  
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*Seqüências Brasileiras [Brazilian Episodes]*. Roberto Schwarz. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999, 250 pp, R\$ 85.50. ISBN 8571649189.

If time is cruel to most, it has been only kind to the writings of Roberto Schwarz, whose clarity of vision is the result of a diagnosis developed in part thirty years ago. With a few hesitations along the way, he has unswervingly affirmed this point of view, which consists essentially of drawing aesthetic consequences from national impasses, themselves taken as signs of impasses endemic to contemporary capitalism.

His judgment found its feet at the end of an historical cycle in which accelerated industrialization in the periphery raised political expectations in the popular field, requiring a change in the system of relations between social classes and pointing towards a belated but democratic national integration — an integration which, until further notice, did not occur. According to the idea of those who sought this progress, it was the Sovereignty of the Peoples confronting Imperialism. In these decades the debate on our “duality” gained density — placing on one side a backward Brazil, to be overcome, allied with imperialism and consisting of huge landed estates, and on the other an industrial and modernizing Brazil of the bourgeoisie and the national working class.

The coup of 1964 and the crackdown of 1968 threw a wet blanket on the excitement and broke by force the promises of the earlier period, confirming Brazil’s subordinate position within the framework of the Cold War — which nonetheless did not prevent an accelerated rate of economic growth. The playacting of the forces of reaction, whose aim was to promote the

conservative modernization of the nation, included “the revenge of the provinces, of small proprietors, of sexual and religious prudery, of small-time lawyers, etc.,”<sup>1</sup> forming a *systemic* combination “of the most advanced manifestations of international imperialist integration and of the most ancient — and obsolete — bourgeois ideology centered on the individual, on the family unit, and on its traditions” (139). Juxtaposed with the presence of a semi-integrated, urbanized populace, these anachronisms cease to be mere residues of the previous process, instead coming to revolve in a different orbit, perhaps one of greater weight. An absurdity at first sight, “the disjunction reveals to the onlooker a real historical abyss, a conjunction of different stages of capitalist development” (140, translation modified). In this move, Roberto relied substantially on the studies of the sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who also had concluded, on the eve of the 1964 coup, that our duality was not merely a domestic issue. Recent history had demonstrated its relation to so-called dependency, understood, according to Paulo Arantes, as the development of the definite structural disproportion expressed by this duality — that is, “the reason for our dual nature lies in the advance of capital and not in some idiosyncratic local compartmentalization.”<sup>2</sup> Seen through this prism, backwardness is not mere backwardness, since it discredits progress as much as the latter in turn discredits it. This impasse in Brazilian history has implications beyond Brazil, since it finally demonstrated the rigid and immobile side of the extraordinary dynamo that is contemporary capitalism. Roberto’s accomplishment has been to work out the consequences for Brazilian culture of this fact, particularly in his analyses of Machado de Assis.<sup>3</sup>

After the brilliant slim book *Duas meninas* [*Two Girls*] (1997), Roberto Schwarz returns to the scene with *Seqüências brasileiras* [*Brazilian Episodes*], which brings together writings published between 1988 and 1998. His essays, enemies of preestablished hierarchies, unashamed before mythologies and fashions — always explosive, though discreet — tend to risk untraveled roads, bypassing techniques and manias common among specialists. In the disalienating territory of the modern, lively interest might lie in the diary of a girl, the novel of a popular musician, or the polemical book of a taxi driver — and in the consideration of these together or in the confrontation between them.

Take, for example, the analysis of Francisco Alvim’s uncommon poetry — poetry without metaphors! Before the most delicate of artifacts, a banal commentary would try to emphasize some personal tone, the virtuosity of reference or technique. Period. Without denying the significance of such dimensions, Roberto’s analysis adds others, bringing these poems down to earth and pointing out that in them “what is said is extremely easy and almost

nothing, but the whole, consisting of voices that speak over and through one another, bears the complexity of life itself and sketches out something like a fragmentary national comedy, private and public” (206), but always with possible contemporary implications of a worldwide scope.<sup>4</sup>

If the movements in these essays consistently astonish, we need to read them in reciprocal light in order to discern a constant both stronger and less palpable than their diversity: the coherence of the critical work they are based on. In *Seqüências brasileiras* this critical underpinning achieves a plenitude that provides Roberto’s critical activity with a significance that could only be guessed at in his previous books. We saw above that his point of view was armed by the revelatory power of an underlying historical movement which had hollowed out and redefined the previous experience of an entire society, encoding impasses that lay beyond itself. This fact sharpened a sixth sense in Roberto for other types of hollowings-out. Let us say that the author has focused his observations on the dissolution of mobilizations (economic, social, political, cultural) dating from the 1968 era and the period leading up to it — all progressive certainly, but today weakened or relativized by the course of contemporary capitalism — the whole comprising an *organized substance* at the disposal of its interpreter.

Analyzed in this spirit is Jean-Claude Bernadet’s fictional prose, which Roberto initially places squarely within a very French tradition, that of “confessions of the inconfessable, for which artistic value is inextricable from the risk — in a strong sense — incurred in the search for personal truth, above all on the terrain of sex” (189). Nevertheless, in traveling across the Atlantic the genre undergoes a refraction. If in Europe it sought to combat bourgeois hypocrisy (the carapace of the well-dressed and serious family man), in the tropics and above all “in a nation with a gregarious and highly public sexuality such as Brazil” (formed in the brutality of colonial life), the possible stridency gives way to a narrative sobriety unheard of among us.

The critic provides a detailed description of the novel and of the situations of the plot, connected to the discreet affirmation of a homosexual identity among French immigrants, dominated by the rigid figure of the Father. In the book, meanwhile, when all is said and done, “all kinds of energies, moral, intellectual and others, formed in the struggle against a fundamental prejudice, are exhausted in an untranscendent way. Along the same lines, note the parsimony and the near complete lack of consequence for the narrative when, here and there, references appear to the political history of the century. ... The summary treatment given to these intimations responds, from a distance, to the aforementioned modest effect resulting from the emancipation of homosexuality, together with which it composes a figure. Through this figure the book alludes to the times and tells us that

tremendous episodes, in which the greatest forces and hopes were unleashed, ended up being reduced to signs of private life" (197-198). Roberto seems to ask: would it be an exaggeration to add to the experience recounted in the book the greater part of what once upon a time confronted the establishment? The power of youth, hippie clothing, part of the ecological movement, alternative psychotherapies, marketable images of the revolution, drugs and freaking out today go peaceably hand in hand with the culture industry, ties, consumer rights, astrology, the aesthetic of the video-clip, the credit card, etc.<sup>5</sup> Transgressions in this situation do not transgress like they once had, or even to the limited extent they still do in the US or Europe; they do not add up to an overcoming that matters.

Since 1968 we have grown accustomed to relative conquests within the sphere of conduct. But *Seqüências brasileiras* also concerns a progress of quite different reach and complexity, which also concerns us but which was destined to remain incomplete: that of developmentalism on the periphery of capitalism. Its periodization, its problems, and its ramifications in the best of Brazilian culture are material for reflection in the greater part of these essays. Note that the author sidesteps debates concerning method and always describes with precision the structures of the works that he comments on, and of the authors' intentions — but both are always seen as though in negative.

During the month marking the thirtieth anniversary of the 1964 coup, Roberto could reaffirm the justice of his historical perception, identifying the illusions of our developmentalism by taking stock of the period ("Fim do século" ["End of the Century"]). However, the standard used to periodize and to comprehend the era was not limited to the usual sequence "democracy-dictatorship-redemocratization," within the internal space of the Rule of Law and of a nullified citizenship. The sequence did exist but circled in another orbit, still to be considered, since the dictatorship had suppressed whatever democratic features developmentalist nationalism exhibited. But developmentalist nationalism itself, "after a brief interruption — an initial moment of direct submission to North American interests — returned and was even intensified, now under the direction and with the characteristics of the Right — to such an extent that a fraction of the intelligentsia, more developmentalist and anti-imperialists than democratic, followed the generals' project of transforming Brazil into a great power with some sympathy" (158).

Today we know that on the periphery of capitalism various strategies — democratic and dictatorial, Left and Right — were pursued to achieve development. We also know that such development had objective limits which, despite this diversity of strategies, made themselves known through the two petroleum crashes, the debt crisis, and the dynamic of the Third

Industrial Revolution, "which together erected a barrier and transformed the landscape" (158).

Indifferent in part to open or closed political regimes, "developmentalism tore populations from their old social and geographic territories, in a certain way liberating them, in order to reterritorialize them within an occasionally titanic process of national industrialization which, at a certain point, facing new conditions of economic competition, could not be continued. Now having no place to turn, these populations found themselves within a new historical situation, that of *monetary subjects without money*, or of virtual ex-proletarians, available for criminality and all sorts of fanaticisms" (159-160). This is the balance that redemocratization and two "lost decades" sadly would not succeed in settling, despite the Constitution of 1988, Keynesian or neoliberal economic policies, etc. For those who do not place their bets on barbarism, the incomplete task of incorporating the excluded that never were included continues to be an imperative, more than a hundred years after the abolition of slavery. To make matters worse, the demands imposed by the present-day economy unfortunately "fit marvelously with our secular disregard for the poor. With their 'lack of training,' the latter are failing to attract interest even as a more or less free labor force" (162).

Whether we like it or not, the colonial legacy persists and remains the unavoidable given that conditions any project leading us toward modernity. Roberto points out that this fact is nonetheless almost always taken as an abstract norm, which greatly limits the exercise of critique. From this perspective, the problem would stem not from the "course of the world itself, but only from our relative position within it" (161). Confronted realistically, however, modernization has a history, it's not a kindly old lady, and within it "there may not be room for us, much less for everyone."

Facing contemporary social disintegration (which apologists call "creative destruction"), Roberto concludes his panorama by questioning the meaning of a national culture "that no longer articulates any collective project of material life," being rather only "a consumerist aestheticization of aspirations for national community" (162) — a real program of study for the next century, if the country insists on existing.

*Brasil: a construção interrompida* [*Brazil: The Interrupted Construction*] — the title of a 1992 book by Celso Furtado — is symptomatic, and perhaps points to the end of an historical line. In the past, when the modernization of the ex-colonial country promised a happy ending, the process inspired a veritable genre, with authors and publishers committed to serving a captive audience — books that introduced Brazil to Brazilians and tried to explain our formation, undergirded by colonial roots. Roberto notes the trouble with

taking up this genre in the present, faced with the changes we have seen since developmentalism reached its limit. But what then is the meaning and relevance of this collective process of intellectual accumulation, which for decades asked about our past and our future? The question is implicit in a good number of essays in the book, but the answers, as we shall see, vary widely according to the author analyzed. They bring into proximity authors as different as Alfredo Bosi and Paulo Arantes, who have recently taken up the “formation” genre again. They allow a critical view of *uspiano*<sup>6</sup> Marxism, which also sought to explain the country’s formation and was fundamental to Roberto’s own essayism. They also facilitate an evaluation of the highly characteristic and superior status of Antonio Candido’s work within the genre.

“Discutindo com Alfredo Bosi” [“Arguing with Alfredo Bosi”] is one of the highlights of the book and comments in detail on the relevance of *Dialética da colonização* [*The Dialectic of Colonization*] (1992), which attempts to produce a new interpretation of Brazilian history, from [José de] Anchieta to the idealizers of the Vargist<sup>7</sup> state. *Dialética da colonização* seeks to join Bosi’s erudition and democratic spirit to the broad movement of nonconformist Catholics, who since the 1960s have had a voice in national public debates. This special connection makes the book important, given the inclusion of the Church within the universe of the dispossessed: “Far from signifying the triumph of reason, which at some moment it might have been, the absence of the Catholic prism in the political-cultural debate is a failure, a sign of precarious representativity” (62).

There is no room here to comment extensively on the Roberto’s detailed reading of *Dialética da colonização*. There are explicit differences with regard to properly literary analysis, to the function of the liberal pantheon of ideas in our 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the positive contribution of popular culture in the construction of the nation, and to the Catholic appropriation of Marxism. Essentially, the major objection hinges on the return to a genre whose conditions of possibility seem, barring misunderstandings, no longer to exist.

Bosi’s book is anchored in a broad social movement that reached its height during the 1970s, taking solidarity with the oppressed as its principle within the framework of the dictatorship. The fundamental goal is a developed and more democratic nation. But Roberto does not limit himself to this side of the intellectual Left, and points to difficulties on the opposite pole, or of the materialist ivory tower, which is in good part derived from his own work. He notes that the “formation” genre also encounters difficulties in Paulo Arantes’s book, *Um departamento francês de ultramar* [*An Overseas French Department*], quite opposite in spirit to the ideal of the small church. In *Um departamento francês de ultramar*, published two years after Bosi’s

work, local experience encodes the impasses found at the center of capitalism. The inspiration comes from Antonio Candido’s classic *Formação da literatura brasileira* [*The Formation of Brazilian Literature*], which narrates the process of the creation of a literary system in the Brazil, which had begun to filter fashions coming from Europe. “Paulo adapted the formula and wrote a history of *Paulistas* in their desire to construct a philosophical culture. The process described by Candido however occurs between 1750 and 1870, a temporal distance that allows the author to treat the ironies of the situation with forbearance. The process Paulo studies is already more or less contemporary” (208) — a fact that requires Arantes to consider himself “part of the contradictions and alienations” he describes.

Another difficulty stems from the extremely uneven role played by literature and philosophy in national culture. As a formative process running parallel to and in relative disproportion with the others, philosophy perhaps yields less. See the analysis of Bento Prado Jr.’s ephemeral literary philosophy, in which blood is drawn from a stone, “in such a way that one might say that Paulo mobilized ideas and a perceptiveness of considerable scale in order to explain something that almost did not come to be” (211).

The genre to which Alfredo Bosi and Paulo Arantes recently returned was established during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the explanatory yield of the 1930s and 1940s, a second interpretive crop emerged in the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s. In it the limits of developmentalism are clearer, but even so its presence is strongly felt, as Roberto notes. “Um seminário de Marx” [“A Seminar on Marx”] can be linked back to “Digressão sentimental sobre Oswald de Andrade” [“A Sentimental Digression on Oswald de Andrade”], an invention of Antonio Candido’s that has the consistency of a literary form unto itself, combining “precise personal testimony and analysis,” but unsullied by any of the nostalgia and self-complacency common among sexagenarians. Roberto’s essay sums up in a critical way the intellectual trajectory of a group of professors at USP, from different fields, who in 1958, benefiting from the heterodox climate of the times, came together to read *Capital*. Roberto was finishing his undergraduate degree in Social Sciences, but participated precociously in the experiment. This went on to bear fruit in the following years and resulted in an “idea that is not an exaggeration to call a new intuition of Brazil.... In brief, the novelty consisted of combining that which was generally separate, or better, in articulating the nation’s sociological and political particularity with the contemporary history of capital, whose orbit was of a different magnitude” (93).

Although praising the remarkable inventiveness of the works by members of the group, including in relation to Marx himself, Roberto's basic objection is informed by the course of recent history, and he focuses on the developmentalism evident in the books written by his ex-professor Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The pepper in this broth derives from the links between the academic and the politician.<sup>8</sup> FHC's reasoning on the subject of dependency guided his trajectory as a public figure, including more recent episodes like his current term in office. However, despite accentuating in a remarkable manner the limits of developmentalism (FHC did not consider the history of nations was merely the history of nations, but rather the history of capitalism), "the local agenda, of overcoming backwardness by means of industrialization," made this Marxism somewhat "abstract and timid in regards to the effective course of the world," more preoccupied with the future of Brazil than with critiquing capitalism. After all, Marx did not write *Capital* in order to save Germany.

It is no secret that Roberto's trajectory was nourished by continuous reflection on the work of Antonio Candido, which is demonstrated here by the four essays devoted to the master. These form the first part of *Seqüências brasileiras* and they are crucial to understanding the book, as we shall see. The first, "Saudação *honoris causa*" ["*Honoris Causa Address*"], opens the book and has a simplicity that could only result from a constant reading of the master's work, tracing in it a sober intellectual biography, light-years from empty praise. The essays that follow focus on two points that had made Candido's work — always committed to discerning the (extremely varied and enlightening) relations between literary structures and socio-historical processes — unique.

"Sobre a *Formação da literatura brasileira*" ["*On The Formation of Brazilian Literature*"] was originally the afterword to an essay by Paulo Arantes,<sup>9</sup> but to call it an afterword is misleading, since here it is simply a matter of situating Candido's classic within the tradition of the other "formations," while nonetheless pointing out its definitive peculiarity, bound to the history of its object. Unlike the classics written by Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque, Caio Prado Jr. and Celso Furtado, those by Candido attempted to "narrate a formation that had already completed itself [with the emergence of Machado de Assis]" (18). Clearing up misunderstandings to which even today the book falls prey, Roberto demonstrates that in it "literary nationalism is understood as a force and effective end, to which the critic however, being a staunch internationalist, does not adhere. He recognizes a productivity in it up to a point, a dimension of relative progress, which does not prevent him from also noting and objecting to the role played in it by

ideological concealment, by the imposition of class standards, as well as by the indifference to aesthetic quality — 'defects' marked with a particular irony which is itself a literary discovery, the felicitous condensation of a substantive aesthetic-political prism. The point of view is differentiated and free of any myths: after having been an aspiration, the formation of the Brazilian literary system is a fact, with advantages and shortcomings to sort out. The local constitution of a field in which contemporary questions can be appropriately articulated represents an enormously significant step that does not however make the *total* difference imagined in the most emphatic conceptions of the national future" (18-19). In other words, to state the obvious not always taken into account, the periodizations of different "formations" (political, literary, economic, etc.) do not coincide. "Os sete fôlegos de um livro" ["*The Nine Lives of a Book*"] (46) also points to the peculiarity of *Formação da literatura brasileira* and its final part analyzes five possible meanings of the term "formation" today.

With "Adequação nacional e originalidade crítica" ["*National Adequation and Critical Originality*"] Roberto supplements his own "Pressupostos salvo engano de *Dialética da malandragem*" ["*Presuppositions, Barring Error, of Antonio Candido's Dialectic of Roguery*"] (1979).<sup>10</sup> Both comment on Antonio Candido's readings of two nineteenth-century Brazilian novels, *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* [*Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, by Manuel Antonio de Almeida] and *O cortiço* [*Slum: A Novel*, by Aluísio de Azevedo] — readings in which literary form is considered in a way that breaks away from commonplaces, neither being outside of the world nor simply reflecting it, but sharing with it structures that are not always perceived by the novelist himself and that fall to the critic to identify.

Attending to a dialectical ideal that until then had been rare among us, these essays by Candido complement and at the same time diverge from *Formação da literatura brasileira* (note that they were written after 1964 and after the abortion of the democratic aspirations of the previous period). They complement it because they comprise what Roberto calls the "subterranean landscape of *Formação*," processes that run beneath the "alliance between artistic force and national mission," pleasant up to a certain point but always conscientious and edifying. The divergence stems from not always creditable revelations (*O cortiço*, for example, promotes a very unpleasant patriotic point of view), present in the novels as if against the will of the authors, the unconscious outweighing conscious intention.

The analysis of Aluísio de Azevedo's novel, paralleling Zola's *L'assomoir*, proves that "the demonstration that even a naturalist text is the offspring of other texts and is not born of simple registration of the world does not exclude as false the moment of such registration itself. Against the

pre-modern idea (still in tune with mass media consciousness) that literary works are simply procreated by others in a kind of social vacuum without reference to extra-textual realities, Candido's argument suggests a kind of salvaging of contents and forms within the gravitational field of another historical experience — an experience that bears upon the imported model itself, potentially destroying or revitalizing it, transforming it properly or improperly, and in all cases reorganizing the model as if by remote control while leaving its own imprint on it" (26).

Contrary to what naturalism ordains, the narrative focus in *O cortiço* (on the ever-resentful "customer owing money to the local merchant") has an extra-literary existence and presupposes a functioning social system — of which it is an important part, in this case marked by slavery and the free Brazilian's relation to it. Up to this point, the same could be said of *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*. However, for Roberto the essential part of the essay lies in paying attention to the literary yield of this focus, in the complex relation between the movement of the novel and its system of ideas (both ideological and literary). Thus, the dynamism of the intrigue "not only does not confirm, but incisively and painfully gives the lie to the system of beliefs that foreground the novel. In standard appraisals of *O cortiço*, the novel subsists on naturalist stereotypes in matters of race and environment, and on nationalist stereotypes when it is a matter of portraying the former colonizer. Yet, consider that the respective polarities that organize and give a touch of 'science' to the narrative spectacle — those between black and white, tropics and Europe, Brazilian and Portuguese — are just as clearly disregarded and overthrown by the unfolding of the plot [which expresses the rhythm of the accumulation of capital in a peripheral country]" (37).

At first glance, this discrepancy might only be considered a defect of composition. "Discredited by the plot, the novel's naturalist and nationalist perspectives would seem to parade about as mere empty chatter, which in part they are. But they could also be understood as *ideology*, in which case the contradictory composition acquires critical functionality and *mimetic value* in relation to Brazil" (38). Antonio Candido therefore does not take literature, history, and literary theory as absolutes, but rather in their effective development. If at a moment prior to 1964 he described from the outside a formative process with a beginning, middle and end, in the period that followed, and by the suggestion of history itself, he went on to describe its underside — a fact that distinguishes it a great deal within the tradition of the "formation" genre. Incidentally, I believe that, together with Adorno's work, "De cortiço a cortiço" ["From Slum to Slum"] (much more complex than "Dialética da malandragem") inspired all of Roberto's books between 1973 and now. I believe this can be seen fully in *Seqüências brasileiras*; not only

in its consideration of the meaning of our formative process but also in the style of analysis, which first seeks to identify the authors' intentions so as to later follow their actual execution within the works, an execution that might bring about unexpected revelations, behind the backs of the authors.

If progressivisms within the sphere of conduct and in the national sphere were hollowed out by the course of history, the level of complexity rises when Roberto seeks to analyze the inadequacies of the Left itself, or of the class points of view that would, according to their own lights, bring about the turn toward an egalitarian society without classes, without State, and without national borders.<sup>11</sup> Apart from the practical level, the critical deficit is also an aesthetic question, above all when one discusses an artist who, more than subscribing to the theses of the Left, tried to respond with an art appropriate to them. Bertolt Brecht organized his work so as to overcome the formal impasses of bourgeois drama, opening up the theater to new possibilities of figuration which would take the century's burning questions — its crises, classes, and wars — into account. Thus, just as Marx had sought to denaturalize the laws of political economy, Brecht intended to challenge the theater that staged "human nature" as an immutable thing, using the estrangement effect as a weapon with which to de-automatize social behaviors, opening up a space for a future transformation.

However, Roberto notes that Brecht's precepts had suffered objections soon after being born, since the whole of the conservative social order, which it explicitly resisted, had already toppled to the ground in World War One. "The following years witnessed other equally 'unnatural,' and novel, cataclysms that exacerbated the shakeup. The list is well known: the Russian Revolution, hyperinflation, the crisis of 1929, unemployment, and the rise of Nazism" (116-117).<sup>12</sup> Passing through all of this, Brechtian theater is consecrated throughout the world after the author's death in 1956. Roberto witnessed its acclimation to the stages of São Paulo, where it was initially a somewhat uncomfortable part of the cultural updating undertaken by good professional companies. Next, national-developmentalism would facilitate a more creative appropriation of Brecht that was extremely revelatory, since it was actually undergirded by a socio-cultural formation quite different from the framework of European classes — a disjunction which brought about artistic results that were less incisive than their model, though advanced for Brazilian stages. After the coup of 1964, "the aesthetic-political turn to the people was reduced to the condition of a glorious and interrupted experiment, which would continue to feed the imagination of many, while at the same time, on another plane, it was transformed into successful material for the cultural market" (124).<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the world, in spite of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, the course of history froze the possibility of overcoming of capitalism, a possibility on which Brecht's art had wagered. Capitalism, in a partnership with science, gave an unprecedented leap and got the best of the socialist world, increasingly dispensing with the direct exploitation of labor. "The questioning of capital now no longer seems to be the business of the workers, but rather of its own contradictions, which evolved unchecked by a worthy opponent. The innovative impulse — blindly enough, and following the rhythms of a technology expo, in which denaturalization acquires a somewhat excessive quality, like that of a natural catastrophe — resides with money" (129). As if this were not enough, many of Brecht's methods are used widely today by advertising and by the media, making their innocent use impossible.

Yet the essay does not only follow the disconcerting high and low points of the Brechtian attitude throughout the century. Following Adorno, and without forgetting earlier objections, Roberto moves beyond them and prefers to bet on a formal analysis of the plays, whose truth "would not lie in the lessons passed on, in the theorems concerning class conflict, but rather in the objective dynamic of the whole, in which they and the didactic attitude itself would be a part of what is interpreted, and not the last instance" (133). Note here that, apart from the Adornian inspiration, Roberto's analysis of *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* is stylistically very similar to Antonio Candido's analysis of *O cortiço*. The Brecht that emerges from it, precisely from his masterfully satirical use of the best German lyric poetry, does not cease to be complex, to pose enigmas and to make one think, despite the passage of time.

Within the field of social theory, *Seqüências brasileiras* demonstrates that Marxism suffered damage but did not die. Several months before the coup that would mark the end of the Soviet Union, a debate at Cebrap [The Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning] brought together various intellectuals in order to discuss the fate of socialism.<sup>14</sup> Roberto had then pointed out that for the last twenty years the objections to capitalism, however well-founded they might have been, had become figures of fun, since the limitations of the socialist world were worse. However, he noted that in the "quasi-absence of socialism, with capitalism occupying the entire field, I think that the tendency to analyze societies separately — this capitalist society worked out, that one did not — will find itself in trouble. This tendency might dissolve, in favor of a once again global explanatory project. Not that it will be the same as classical analyses, but there will be reasons for seeing capital once more as a global form, as the global nexus of the contemporary world, of which societies that have gone horribly wrong are just as

much a part as those that have succeeded. We will go back to a totalizing vision of this process, which, as far as I can tell, is a more real way of confronting the present."

During the same period a book published in Germany, *The Collapse of Modernization*,<sup>15</sup> took up Marx once again (including the inspiration of his writing style), the Frankfurt School's pessimism, and globalizing analysis, all in line with a project that Roberto had been putting into practice on the periphery since 1970. Without having known each other's work, but allied via materialism, Robert Kurz and Roberto Schwarz have each contributed to the necessarily global critical constellation that capitalism requires. A comparison of their work would require its own study. Yet it is interesting to note that their fidelity to the most critical tradition of Marx's legacy gives them both the power to look at the experiences and alienations of the capitalist center and its periphery, as well as those of the socialist bloc, in a disabused and realistic manner. Although many people have turned up their noses at Kurz's book, today's world — including Brazil — has in many ways confirmed its diagnosis.

In Roberto's impressive array of observations, the stress falls on the hollowing out of the critical mood in practically every ambit, on a growing scale of complexity, a hollowing out whose counterpart would be the mobilization promoted/granted by conservatism. The contemporary world resounds in this book.

As with the great modern writers, Roberto's essayistic performance is anchored in and reveals an underlying broad historical movement. Whoever follows the changes in style between his first book and the most recent will certainly notice the considerable difference. A pedestrian explanation would mention the force of age, the mature man of letters succeeding the brilliant youth. Another possible explanation would say that Roberto's prose was becoming more like that of the master Antonio Candido, even though the prose of the latter, clear and light like some mineral waters, has a touch of orality that is not found in that of the former, which is more taut. In each case, however, the clarity and simplicity achieved, acquiring new attributes by the light of the present, are not merely matters of style. They seem to confront with maximum lucidity the enormous range of obstacles and alienations that the peripheral situation imposes on the intellectual of the Left.

In *A sereia e o desconfiado* [*The Siren and the Suspicious Person*], from 1965, the busy, nervous prose echoes the stridency typical of those years, in addition to the combative tone of the best texts of the Left. In these extraordinary analyses, which set out to demonstrate rationally the importance of art

as knowledge — a field which the Left could not consider its strong suit — the strictly literary dimension of the prose is foregrounded. The backlash of 1968 and the subsequent hollowing out changed everything (making Roberto more Adornian and less Lukácsian), requiring reflection, and seem to have schooled Roberto in another style of writing, different in tone and syntax. Equally applicable here is what Roberto himself wrote regarding Helena Morley's prose, which "brings together attributes that in our time have become incompatible: clear, without being arid; full of resonances, but foreign to diffuse or inaccurate connotations; pretty, without breaking contact with practical reality; further, refusing to gild the lily or poeticize the poem, so as to recall João Cabral's famous dictum: poeticizing and emphatic by the back door."<sup>16</sup> In short, a prose that invites the most sober evaluation possible of the subsequent disillusionments and impasses, and of present barbarism, systematically practicing the requisite "open distance"<sup>17</sup> in the lack of a material support for an historical turn that might have surpassed capitalism. In truth, Roberto's prose changed by historical necessity and, if I am not mistaken, it responds to the hollowing out it analyzes.

As if that were not enough, everything said above comes together in the sharp and concise analyses of two Brazilian novels that demonstrate predicament of our fin de siècle. The more than experienced critic casts light on *Estorvo* [*Turbulence*] (1991), by Chico Buarque, and *Cidade de Deus* [*City of God*] (1997), by Paulo Lins.

In these novels, each with its own dose of nightmare, we see or catch a glimpse of contemporary Brazil naked and raw: its ruling class, savage and always unpunished, drug trafficking taking hold of the favelas in a whirlwind of violence, the secular frustrations that seem to have no solution in sight, all under the sign of the media throwing confetti at the disaster. A historical periodization is presupposed in the characters' circular and blind trajectory, that of the cycle of promises of our failed developmentalism. "Thus, after the period in which ignorant poverty would be educated by the elite, and after another period in which the defects of the rich would be cured by the purity of the people, we arrive now at a quagmire from which no one wants to escape and in which everyone gets on badly" (180).

If Chico Buarque's book, which seems to describe the aleatory wanderings of a veteran of 1968 (with no place in today's Brazil), is literarily more "polished" than Paulo Lins' book *Cidade de Deus*, the latter is original in conception and point of view. Its point of departure being a university-based research project on "Crime and Criminality in Rio de Janeiro," the book avoids current fashions and brings to fiction "original artistic energies, which do not fit within the accepted notion of creative imagination that the majority

of our writers cultivate" (168). Hence its peculiar tone, which clashes a great deal with our criteria of what might be considered "well-made prose." Some pages read like a naturalist survey — some others scientific report — yet others pun like gangsterized concrete poetry — all in a tremendously agile prose. "With its burden of degraded and alienated modernity, the mixture is very thick and makes up a real part, as everyone knows, of the universe of its victims, who despite neglect have long lived within a territory worked, not to say improved, by progress" (169).<sup>18</sup>

The discursive material without a last word makes one think of the intimacy shared by the points of view in *O cortiço* (whose analysis by Candido is here taken up again and updated by Roberto), and attempts to predict new relations presently in progress, forcibly waiting for us in the near future. "Thus, the worker, the rogue, the fugitive "wild beast," the wealthy drug user, cool kids, and the police are not defined forever, each on his or her own; they are elements, partly old, of a structure in formation, to be investigated and deciphered" (169).

The action of both *Estorvo* and *Cidade de Deus* take place in Rio de Janeiro. Perhaps not coincidentally, since the significance of this city lives on (how and why?) for the imaginary of a democratic Brazil. Far from a São Paulo that has always flaunted its monstrous economic importance, or from Brasília, an island of politics in the open country of an economically and culturally peripheral Central Plateau. In relative contrast to these two emphatic figures of our failed modernization, São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro was, from 1763 to 1960, the seat of the Viceroy, the capital of the Brazilian Empire and then of the Republic — and for this reason the center of Brazilian economic, political and, with its cafes and taverns, cultural life. In it, Brazil was thought of as Brazil. Perfect for postcards, the city set in an amazing landscape has always been praised by travelers, by traditionalist and modernist poets alike, by popular music, and by Brazilians from every province who have chosen to live in it. But in Machado de Assis's time Rio also harbored the largest urban concentration of slaves since the end of the Roman Empire. Today its predicaments, violence and poverty are endemic. Last stop, Rio: the best portrait of the Brazil that could have been and never was.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Roberto Schwarz, “Culture and Politics in Brazil, 1964-1969,” *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. and trans. John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992) 136.

<sup>2</sup> Paulo E. Arantes, *Sentimento da dialética na experiência intelectual brasileira* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1992) 89. Although the diagnosis was correct, Robert was mistaken regarding the conclusions to be made from it (as he himself admitted soon thereafter), foreseeing a revolutionary outcome for the impasses at that time.

<sup>3</sup> In *Seqüências brasileiras* the analysis of Machado de Assis’s oeuvre are taken up explicitly again in “A contribuição de John Gledson,” “A nota específica,” “*Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo* (entrevista)” and “Conversa sobre Duas Meninas.”

<sup>4</sup> The essay “Orelha para Francisco Alvim” has been translated as “In the Land of *Elefante*” by John Gledson for *New Left Review* 22 (July-August 2003) 93-118.

<sup>5</sup> We can sense something of this in the beautiful invocation “Pensando em Cacaso” [“Thinking about Cacaso”]. Should the firepower of modern art and its derivatives also be included in this hollowing out? The question can be found in the challenge extended to Otília Arantes (204). [Cacaso is the nom de plume of Brazilian poet Antônio Carlos de Brito. — Trans.]

<sup>6</sup> Of or related to the University of São Paulo. [Trans.]

<sup>7</sup> The Jesuit priest José de Anchieta is considered one of the founders of Brazilian national literature and is thought to have converted more than a million Indians in the region of present-day São Paulo. Getúlio (Dorneles) Vargas, president of Brazil from 1930-1945 and 1951-1954, laid the foundations for modern, industrial Brazil. [Trans.]

<sup>8</sup> Cardoso was, until elected president of Brazil in 1994 (serving from 1995-2002), best known for his pathbreaking work on dependency theory in political economy, particularly *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina* (1971, with Enzo Faletto; *Dependency and Development in Latin America* [Berkeley: U of California P, 1979]). During his presidency he was referred to in the press as FHC. [Trans.]

<sup>9</sup> “Providências de um crítico literário na periferia do capitalismo,” *Dentro do texto, dentro da vida* [“A Literary Critic’s Providence on the Periphery of Capitalism,” *Inside the Text, Inside Life*], ed. Maria Ângel D’Incao (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992). Later published in Otília Arantes and Paulo Arantes, *Sentido da formação* [*The Meaning of Formation*] (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> “National Adequation and Critical Originality” has appeared in English translation in a special issue of *Cultural Critique*: see Roberto Schwarz, trans. R. Kelly Washborne and Neil Larsen, “National Adequation and Critical Originality,” *Cultural Critique* 49 (Autumn 2001). We have tended to use Washborne and Larsen’s translation of this chapter where Ohata cites the original. [Trans.]

<sup>11</sup> As regards political radicalism in Brazil, see “Nunca fomos tão engajados” [“We Have Never Been So Committed”] 172-77.

<sup>12</sup> The essay referred to here appears in the present issue of *Mediations*: “The Relevance of Brecht: High Points and Low” *Mediations* 23.1, 27-61.

<sup>13</sup> This period is also analyzed in “Pelo prisma do teatro” [“Through the Prism of Theater”], a commentary on *A hora do teatro épico no Brasil* [*Epic Theater’s Moment in Brazil*], by Iná Carmargo Costa.

<sup>14</sup> See “Adeus ao socialismo” [“Farewell to Socialism”], *Novos estudos* 30 July (1991).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung: Vom Zusammenbruch des Kasernsozialismus zur Krise der Weltökonomie* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 1991). Selections translated from this work will appear in *Mediations* 25.1

<sup>16</sup> “Outra Capitu,” *Duas meninas* [“Another Capitu,” *Two Girls*] (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997) 132.

<sup>17</sup> A good example can be found in the analysis of the episode describing the theft of eggs in *Minha vida de menina* [*My Life as a Girl*]; Schwarz, *Duas meninas* 117-121.

<sup>18</sup> The essay “*City of God*” was translated by John Gledson for *New Left Review* 12 (November-December 2001) 102-112.