Review: Getulio Vargas and the Estado Novo: An Inquiry into Ideology and Opportunism

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# GETÚLIO VARGAS AND THE ESTADO NOVO: An Inquiry into Ideology and Opportunism

*BRAZIL AND THE GREAT POWERS, 1930–1939*. By STANLEY E. HILTON. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975. Pp. 304. $9.95.)

*THE BRAZILIAN-AMERICAN ALLIANCE, 1937–1945*. By FRANK D. MCCANN, JR. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973. Pp. 527. $15.00.)

*BRAZILIAN ECONOMIC STUDIES: GOVERNMENT POLICY AND THE ECONOMIC GROWTH OF BRAZIL, 1889–1945*. By ANIBAL VILLELA and WILSON SUZIGAN. (Rio de Janeiro: IPEA/INPES, 1977. Pp. 393.)

Stanley Hilton and Frank McCann have written two masterful books on the Vargas years. Hilton, in his clear and precise monograph, traces Brazil's responses to the challenge and opportunity of rivalry in trade between the United States and Germany. McCann follows with great style and breadth the international affairs of Brazil during the Estado Novo. Both accounts are indispensable for understanding these two important topics in Brazilian history. Hilton and McCann conclude that Getúlio Vargas was an opportunist par excellence. From the perspective of foreign policy, they find that he lacked a well-thought-out and coherent ideology; in fact, they both make this interpretation a principal theme in their narratives. For the historian of Brazilian intellectual life, however, foreign affairs (especially trade policy) seems a curious field from which to judge this. No country during the thirties acted solely out of ideological considerations, so it is not surprising that Hilton and McCann find this to be true of Brazil under Vargas as well.

The United States' confrontation with Brazil centered on the German ASKI (Aüslander-Sonderkonten für Inlandszahlungen—Foreigners' Special Accounts for Inland Payments) trading system and bilateral trade in general; from the American perspective, these were practices of the "forces of darkness." Yet, in 1931, the U.S. engaged in the same type of bilateral commerce with Brazil, trading wheat for coffee (Villela and Suzigan, p. 176); Roosevelt, himself, almost agreed to barter exchange practices with Germany in 1934. Finally, the British blockade ended the options for Brazil and assured a dominant position for trade policies favored by the United States. On the surface, the record shows that trade policies of nations reflect economic necessities; stated simply, foreign policy does not lend itself well to studying the social thought of national leaders during times of economic troubles. The social ideology of Vargas and the Estado Novo were rooted in the apprehensions and insecurities of the twenties. This complex, comprehensive, and concrete intellectual reality can only be reconstructed after a wide-ranging investigation into the social history of the period.

It is difficult to portray Vargas as nonideological if the historian looks at the internal affairs of the nation. In the study of foreign affairs, however, one is

left with the record of foreign observers who tended to see the liberal nature of the Vargas regime. McCann and Hilton never question the political thought of the men who were then serving in the State Department; in many cases, however, we are forced to rely on their evaluations of the Brazilian scene. The observation of a special assistant at the American embassy, that Brazilians were more like children than knaves (Hilton, p. 142), calls for a degree of caution in using official government dispatches to judge Vargas and the Estado Novo.

Beyond this particular problem lies another of importance for the study of ideology through foreign policy: analyzing the types of questions asked by foreign observers. Because of the international situation, Getúlio Vargas was asked repeatedly whether there was any direct Axis influence on the Estado Novo. When confronted with this by Ambassador Caffery, Vargas appeared surprised and told the ambassador that it was foolish to think that the Nazis or Integralistas had any connection with the coup of 1937 (McCann, p. 54). Only the question of direct foreign influence seemed important; for the purposes of the Good Neighbor Policy it was best to support the nonideological Estado Novo as long as it was useful to and cooperative with the United States. Did Vargas feel that if observers asked the wrong questions he did not have to worry about the answers he gave? No one asked him about police chief Muller's activities or about widening the franchise to include the vast majority of Brazilians in the political process. In an exchange with President Roosevelt, Vargas said that his fascist-sounding speeches were only for domestic consumption (McCann, p. 187); this is reminiscent of the classic Chaplin film, *The Great Dictator*, in which Hynkel preaches domestic hatred and international love.

Hilton and McCann add to this almost Kafkaesque picture; they seem caught in a time warp, standing and listening to Vargas and Caffery at the American embassy in Rio. Why must historians continue to judge the Estado Novo along these same narrow lines? Their histories never touch Vargas, the master politician; they only reach the cadres that aided him in the creation of the Estado Novo and the execution of its policies. For the historian of ideas in Brazil, the ideological innocence of Vargas and the Estado Novo, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, poses a problem of considerable import. I wish to discuss this because it is central to the texts under review here and also because the interpretation of McCann and Hilton is in harmony with most of the current literature on the Vargas period.

Alzira Vargas, Getúlio's daughter, characterized the new regime in the following manner: "A timocracy, led democratically by an enlightened despot with the aid of a legitimate constitution" (p. 260). The cigar smoke of the master politician billows over the mumbo jumbo of this apologia. Robert Levine maintains that Vargas "imposed an authoritarian regime, but that the Estado Novo lacked either ideological unity or totalitarian perseverence. Instead, the new regime simply institutionalized Vargas' personal rule" (p. 182). Boris Fausto also claims that the Estado Novo lacked an ideology. In his view, what appeared was a "mentality" that could best be defined as "anti-political and nationalistic." Unlike Levine and Fausto, Hélio Jaguaribe came to the conclusion, in an article written in the fifties, that the Estado Novo created a fascist form of government.

Carlos Guilherme Mota, in his most recent text on Brazilian political culture, spends considerable time discussing Jaguaribe's interpretation.

Jaguaribe sees the Estado Novo as an instrument of the dependent middle classes, and Vargas' speeches aimed at striking a chord in their lives: "The right to vote can not stifle hunger, nor can the right to assemble educate your children" (McCann, p. 333). The Estado Novo served this group's interests by granting its members jobs in an expanding state apparatus. "National" interests become those of the bureaucrats, exporters, and capitalists. The Estado Novo, through repression and some welfare legislation, also protected these interests from the rising demands of the working classes. At the same time, Vargas created bureaucratic control over labor by means of a corporate structure based upon state-directed unions. By the thirties, the size of the dependent middle class exceeded the "possibilities" within the private sector of the economy. They could maintain themselves as a class, but only as bureaucratic creatures of the state. It was this stratum of society that sought to further its interests through "fascist forms" (Mota, p. 150). Hilton confirms this interpretation indirectly. He holds that a convenient alliance formed between 1934 and 1937 among the export sector, urban consumers, and military planners (p. 180), and that national interests in the thirties were, in short, their interests.

The political importance of Brazil's distended civil service sector is recognized by McCann (p. 313). Vargas ensured their continued loyalty to him and to the Estado Novo; he did not need a large political party as long as he could offer positions and paychecks to members of the middle and lower middle classes. In November 1937, the Estado Novo granted wage increases to all public functionaries; the following June, Vargas brought all state and municipal civil servants under federal control. At the same time, he created an agency that provided health and retirement benefits for journalists and teachers (McCann, p. 317).

Alzira Vargas pointed to articles 159 and 177 of the 1937 constitution as having the most "moralizing" effect on the nation. The first prohibited public servants from holding more than one job; the second allowed the government to rid itself of employees who were "detrimental" to the interests of the nation. In combination, these articles gave Vargas control over thousands of men and women. While Alzira saw these acts as moralizing, one can easily understand that Vargas had created a massive patronage system, one that served, in fact, as a state-controlled political apparatus. Levine points out that the "no-party" situation in Brazil cannot be compared on equal terms to the "one-party" state of European fascists. Yet, Vargas in a sense transformed bureaucrats into partisans.

When, in 1942, Vargas found it impossible to meet the federal payroll, he turned to the treasury's printing presses; concomitantly, he levied a 3 percent tax on functionaries' monthly income. As a result of the issue of paper currency, the purchasing power of the bureaucrats fell drastically. The cost of living rose 110 percent between 1939 and 1945, 75 percent of which occurred between 1942 and 1945 (Villela and Suzigan, p. 203). During the last years of the Estado Novo, feelings of insecurity and anxiety once again characterized the middle levels of society; certainly, the threatened position of the middle class must be central to

any explanation of the Estado Novo's demise. However, McCann insists that the return of the Febianos and the rise of democratic feeling at the end of World War II are the central themes in explaining the fall of Vargas. He does state that in the chaos of 1945, "the middle classes hoped to use the disguise of liberalism to hide continued repression of the Brazilian masses" (p. 471). In 1937, the middle class placed its hopes in the Estado Novo's "fascist forms." After the war they turned on Vargas in defense of their position of privilege; inflation, once again, had frightened them. Vargas had gained their support through repression of labor and the manipulation of fear; the Estado Novo had, in fact, become a victim of its own ideology.

It has been held that the economic nationalism of the Vargas period entailed an all out pursuit of industrialization (see Wirth). Industrialization, however, remained a low priority of the Vargas regime (McCann, p. 306); security and hegemony of the South American continent headed the list of national goals. Villela and Suzigan, in their excellent survey of governmental economic and financial policy, point out that the basic economic goals of the Vargas administration remained quite traditional: salaries and maintenance of the public sector, balancing the budget, and protecting the export sectors. Hilton discovered that military interests (armaments and provisions) were of an immediate nature rather than long-term industrial projects. Because of these basic military needs, trading policies became an integral part of military strategy; this is, of course, one of the important insights to be found in his work. That economic nationalism best characterized the Vargas ideology must be seriously questioned.

Edgard Carone, in his fact-filled narrative, tells us that the ideology of the 1937 coup had been thoroughly thought out in advance by Francisco Campos, Plínio Salgado, Goés Monteiro, and Getúlio Vargas in secret meetings in 1936 (p. 376). Carone brings into sharp focus the counterrevolutionary direction of this group, calling those responsible for the brutality of the regime the "classes dirigentes." However, Getúlio still seems to elude him and is rarely quoted directly. In one case, Vargas praises Felinto Muller in the following terms: "He has been tireless, and no excesses have occurred" (Carone, p. 345). Nevertheless, Carone interprets Vargas' ideological innnocence and "jeito-like" maneuvering as reflections of opportunism. That he acted as an opportunist gets Vargas off the ideological hook and opens the door to many ambiguities. Like most historiography on the period, Carone fails to get at the core of Getúlio Vargas. Was it not possible for Vargas and his cronies to come up with their own brand of tropical fascism, or are we still locked in the battle over labels that took up so much of American observers' time during the thirties and forties?

If one chooses, the roots of Brazilian antidemocratic thought can be traced to her colonial beginnings. The immediate causes of the eruption of radical rightist political practices during the Vargas period, however, are to be found in the reaction of the middle and elite classes to the communist revolt of 1935. Throughout the rest of Vargas' stay in power, he would refer to this revolt to create an ever-growing sense of fear. In response to the revolt, he pushed through the senate and congress a national security law, which reflected the militant anticommunism of Vargas and the Estado Novo. It also represented

Vargas' solution to the rising cost of living that, in part, was responsible for the discontent that fed the revolt. The law called for severe repressive actions against those who did not support the regime or the legitimate aspirations of the nation and its "good customs."

In December 1935, Vargas, through his many aides, conducted a brutal police action that included arbitrary arrests and torture on a wide scale (Carone, p. 345). In defense of family, religion, and tradition, Vargas unleashed a campaign of violence, hatred, and fear. Yet, in presenting the case for a nonideological Vargas, both Hilton and McCann stress the importance of Getúlio outlawing the Nazi party in 1938 and engaging in a feud with the German ambassador. Shortly after, however, the rift was patched and Vargas revealed to the German ambassador his personal sympathy for authoritarian states (McCann, p. 187). In McCann's view, this particular incident is yet another example of Vargas' lack of ideology and his tendency to fall back on certain practices so characteristic of Brazlian political and social life. Hilton actually defines Brazilian political culture in terms of the paralegal and informal practices of the jeito. Of course, this interpretation is consistent with the notion that Vargas was ideologically in neutral. Vargas, speaking to the Brazilian people, proclaimed that he would prefer "death to ceding a single line of the Estado Novo's program" (McCann, p. 95); but in discussing his program with Americans, he stated that he cared nothing for nor did he understand the ideologies of the right (McCann, p. 55). Vargas had no difficulty telling Americans whatever he thought they wanted to hear.

It would be naive to think that Vargas had not pondered deeply the question of the political forms best suited for his country. Vargas shared the concerns of the political cohort that formed the leadership of the Estado Novo. The assumption that the elite must prevent the racially mixed lower classes from entering the political process became ingrained in the conservative political theory of the twenties and thirties. In his study of Oliveira Vianna, the major political theorist of the Estado Novo, Evaldo Amaro Vieira reveals the racism within Vianna's corporate philosophy. In Vianna's works, men of color are seen as not suited for political life because of racial and cultural factors. Vieira concludes that the corporate structure advocated and institutionalized under Vargas aimed at preventing any transformation within Brazilian society. Lévi-Strauss gives some evidence regarding the Estado Novo's concern with race. Relating his near arrest by government plainclothesmen, he recalls being informed that he had committed an unfriendly act towards Brazil by having photographed a couple of Brazilian blacks. He was told that his picture might be used to give credence to the legend that "black-skinned" people lived in Brazil (Lévi-Strauss, p. 34). Vianna and Francisco Campos, Candido Mota Filho, Pontes de Miranda, and Azevedo Amaral were the political theorists who shaped the counterrevolutionary ideology of Getúlio Vargas. From the 1930 revolution onwards, Vargas spoke of the urgent need to regenerate Brazil both morally and physically. His rhetoric contained a code of metaphors that were clearly understood by Brazilians nurtured on the social and political discourse of the twenties.

Vargas' concern with antidemocratic forms of government went beyond

the general world-wide disillusionment with democracy in the thirties. He had thought about these questions since his early days in Rio Grande do Sul. Joseph Love tells us that Vargas was part of the generation of 1907, and participated in the Castilhista student bloc (p. 84); Goés Monteiro and Gaspar Dutra also came from that student organization. The Castilhistas were avid fans of Comte; Brazilian youth, according to Love, found Positivism to their liking because of its conservative tone and its emphasis on the family. Positivism in colonial Brazilian, Mexican, and Bolivian societies blended with a particular kind of racism and elite rule that justified a politics of exclusion and repression. In short, the anti-democratic political theory of the twenties became the ideological cornerstone of the Estado Novo.

In this essay I have attempted to look critically at the commonly held notion that Getúlio Vargas was no more than an opportunist who lacked any firm ideological conviction. Before this interpretation can be accepted as accurate, Vargas must be studied in depth and from a nonpartisan perspective. Vargas must also be approached from many sides if he is to be understood; there is a real need for historians to tackle him in a more comprehensive and holistic fashion. On the surface of foreign affairs, the main dimensions of culture and ideology remain hidden. In the future, historians must pass over the slippery ground of Getúlio's political maneuvering and examine at close range the substance of his thought. When they have done this, historians will be forced to ask a different set of questions about him and the Estado Novo.

Alzira relates her own misgivings about the direction that her father had taken in 1937. She was distressed with the fascistic solution that he had come up with in the new constitution and finally asked him what he was up to. Getúlio proceeded to lecture her on the failure of Brazilian democracy; he explained to her that the ends justified the means, and that the Estado Novo was a temporary but vitally needed step. In anger she replied: "Why didn't you say so before?" Vargas smiled through his cigar smoke and said: "No one asked me" (Vargas, p. 252).

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