



Brazil 2014 ... but first a Truth Commission

March 22, 2012
By Michael Uhl

On the flyleaf of a school notebook I'd purchased at a *papelaria* in Salvador, Bahia, where I was on assignment in Brazil to write a destination piece in 1984, I found the following stanzas from a 19th century poem by Casimiro de Abreu:

*Correi pr'as bandas do sul
Debaixo dum céu de anil
Encontrareis o gigante
Santa Cruz, hoje Brasil;
— É uma terra de amores
Alcatifada de flores
Onde a brisa fala amores
Nas belas tardes de Abril.*

It's a bit of sugared nation-worship for "*a land of passions, carpeted with flowers, where the breeze speaks of love on fair April afternoons.*" I suspect it was recited by most Brazilians in their primary school days.

I had already heard those lines in a slightly altered form twenty years before. It was 1964, in Rio de Janeiro. I remember waking up on April 1st and staring out a window at the presence of armed soldiers in the avenue below, a sign that the military overthrow of the Goulart government was well underway.



Michael Uhl, in April 1964, looking out a window on Copacabana Beach, which is shown at right circa 1960s.

A nearby building housing UNE, the National Student Union, would later be burnt out by the Putschists or their supporters. I had been there several weeks earlier to buy, *O Povo Canta* (The People Sing), a miniature LP featuring five catchy ballads with social content that UNE had produced in a campaign aimed at *conscientizcao* - consciousness raising – among the country's abundant urban and rural poor.

In one of those tunes, the Song of Underdevelopment, the satirizing lyricist borrowed Casimiro's famous lines, except, in his version the *gigante* mentioned in the poem's third line, a giant called Brazil, is found to be at rest, and when awakened, revealed to be not a giant, but a dwarf: *um pais subdesenvolvido*, an underdeveloped Third World country. It's really a national question. The students wanted to know why their country, in its enormity and exceptional natural wealth, had failed since colonial days to match the prestige, prosperity, and power of the real giant who dominated from the north, described in the song with a bitter witticism as *o pais amigo* – the buddy country.



The "O Povo Canta" album cover

All that student zeal and public questioning around inequality and neo-colonialism would be silenced in the years ahead, driven underground as the military regime tightened its repressive grip, not fully released until the late nineteen eighties when, after a quarter century of popular disgust and organized or passive resistance – not least the “stand with poor” of a significant faction of the Catholic laity, clergy, and hierarchy* - Brazil finally returned to democratic rule.

By some strange coincidence, the very building at the fashionable center of Copacabana Beach from which I initially watched the coup unfold, was where President Joao Goulart – known as Jango – democratically elected and now being unceremoniously deposed – also had a family residence. I was a guest in the apartment of a Georgetown classmate whose father held the third highest rank in the U.S. Embassy, Political Officer – aka Station Chief – and I was in Rio to spend a year perfecting my Portuguese at the local Jesuit university.

The political stuff, like the U.S. role in Goulart’s overthrow, would add up quick enough by the time I got back from Nam four years later. In ‘64, politically speaking, I was a sheltered naïf. But I was also a nineteen year old boy alone on foreign soil, my every pore open to the *bossa nova* of the world’s most sonically pleasing language, and to the countless fragments of Brazil’s sensuous, exotic otherness which, notwithstanding its romantic idealization, is what gives Casimiro de Abreu’s poem its patina of enduring authenticity.

I continued to study Brazil after that, but from a certain distance, and it was twenty years before I would actually return. For the fifteen years thereafter I visited frequently, traveling to the country’s most remote corners as a guide book author, telling tourists what to see, where to stay and what to eat. Although I never tired of being pampered with a five-star room and meal to match, my interest in Brazil far over spilled the confines of the hospitality industry.

With my knowledge of the country and competence in Portuguese I gained access to intellectual and political circles not unlike those I had traveled in at home among New York’s antiwar lefties. During one visit, when I was carrying credentials from the *Nation* magazine, I climbed onto the speaker’s platform in Rio with a writer friend and Worker’s Party (PT) militant, and was introduced to the already legendary Luiz Inacio da Silva, nicknamed Lula, at a demonstration for *Direitas Ja!*, a movement during Brazil’s prolonged period of *abertura*, the re-democratization phase, demanding presidential elections by direct popular vote versus senatorial appointment.

Since its founding in 1980, I have followed how the PT built its base from modest victories in municipal elections to the governors' mansions of Brazil's largest cities, and finally to the presidency itself, which Lula won on his fourth try in 2002. He was reelected in 2006, and his successor in 2010, Dilma Rousseff, is also a member of the PT, which, as a governing party has now adopted a center-left identity, advocating reform where it once spoke only of complete social transformation. Let's face it, capitalism has shown itself to be a more resilient historical force than either Marx or Engels ever imagined.

The PT's drift toward the center notwithstanding, the reforms in Brazil over the past 25 years have not been insignificant. The dwarf is finally growing into a giant. Brazil has undergone enormous development, and now approaches the status of a genuine regional power made possible, not just by its own exertions, but by the measurable decline in hemispheric hegemony of its ole buddy, the giant to the north. And while the Brazilian middle class has grown miraculously in the same period, the poor and landless are still very much among them. According to Brazil's 2010 census, in Rio de Janeiro alone, a city of almost twelve million, a quarter of the inhabitants remain *favelados*, slum dwellers living under sub-standard conditions where often the most basic services, like sanitation, are missing.



Two faces of Brazil: A jet aircraft manufacturing plant and a favela (slum)

Moreover Rio's slums are infamous as havens for Brazilian drug gangs. To make the city *safe* for the World Cup which Brazil will host in 2014, the hillside shanty towns in the *Cidade Maravilhosa* – the City of Wonder – are in the process of being pacified, in some cases dismantled, and the drug traffickers driven out. In the meantime, non-essential services – like satellite television – are rapidly being installed to create an atmosphere of egalitarian normalcy.

This effort to make the country more comfortable for millions of visitors expected to attend the World Cup by inflicting additional deprivations on Brazil's have-nots is an unfolding and important story. But what interests this writer for the moment is that 2014 also marks the fiftieth year since the military coup, and I have for sometime wondered what public space Brazilians will reserve to commemorate that dark anniversary.

I now have a piece of that answer. Over the next two years, assuming the government's plan doesn't go awry, Brazilians are about to experience their own 'Never Again' moment. The story goes like this:

Before leaving office at the end of 2010, President Lula proposed a new Ministry of Human Rights that would create a *Comissao da Verdade* – a Truth Commission to hear testimony on abuses by the military regime, the torture, kidnapping and clandestine murder – the “disappearing” – of the opponents, armed or otherwise, to its rule. A year later, after being approved by the Brazilian Congress, the new president, Dilma Rousseff, gave official sanction to the Truth Commission, presenting it as “a guarantee of the people's right to Memory and Truth. We cannot allow [the past] to be corrupted by silence,” she said. “Learning the truth will be essential to later generations in ensuring that this stain on our country's history will never again occur.”

Not surprisingly, this call to dig up the past stirred great alarm among Brazil's current and retired military leadership, who claimed – not without some justification – that the former opponents to the dictatorship, with the tables now turned, were bent on taking their revenge. In fact, when the proposal for the commission was first presented, it contained language to which the brass had immediately protested, and Lula, to keep the peace in his own coalition and to placate the generals, replaced the offending passages with more “generic language,” less harsh in its characterization of the military regime.



Leftist President Joao Goulart, deposed by the military in an April 1964 coup; and current President Dilma Rousseff

From the start, Lula, and then Dilma, has repeatedly ensured the Brazilian armed forces and public that the commission would have no power to impose punishment, because of the Amnesty Law of 1979. That official act of forgetting its crimes had been engineered by the Putschists to immunize themselves against future prosecutions, but it also established a status quo that allowed clandestine militants to resurface without facing criminal charges, and exiles, like Paulo Freire, to come home. What makes the military nervous today is a new political debate about whether the amnesty only covers political crimes, and not unsolved common crimes involving kidnapping and disappearing of bodies, so the generals aren't buying the presidential reassurances.

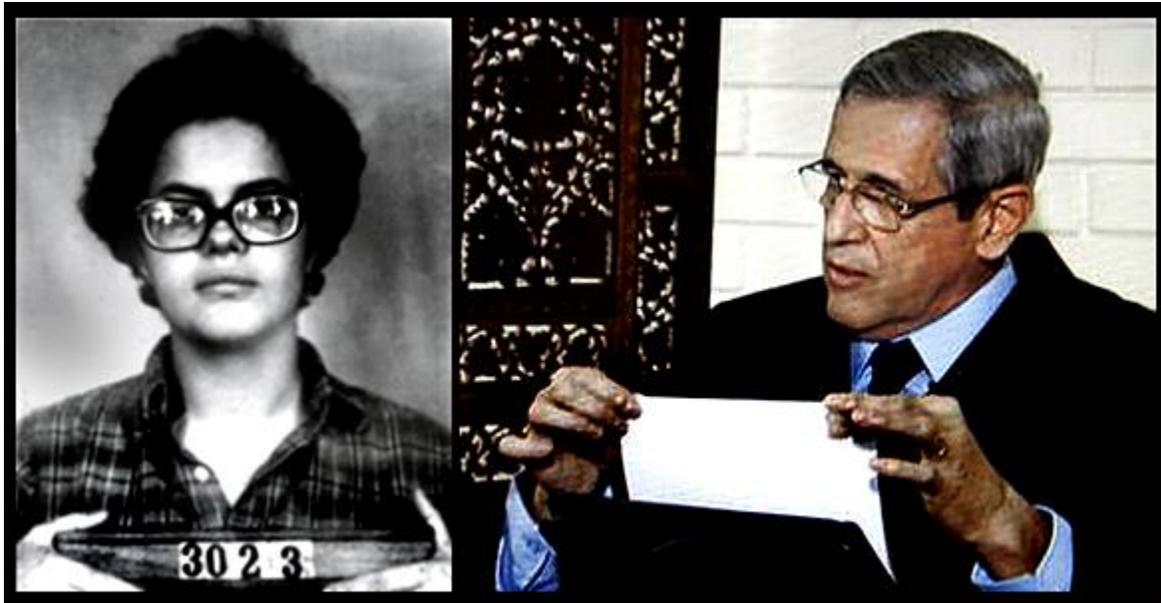
And, in fact, were the aggressive behaviors exhibited by Brazil's right wing flag officers – mostly elderly but still on the reserve lists – over the course of this policy debate to have occurred within the U.S. military establishment, the average American would have just cause to wonder if a Pentagon coup were not immediately in the offing. The U.S. military as a political force is hardly powerless, but its members have yet to contest, while in uniform or institutionally, for state power. When General MacArthur, a military mandarin by our standards who wielded unprecedented power, shot off his mouth toward the end of the Korean War, you'll recall Harry Truman canned him the next day for insubordination.

Now, I don't pretend to possess any deep insight into the complex social and political struggles being played out in Brazil these days; I'm just getting back to speed on the Brazil beat, so to speak, over the past six months. But from what I've been reading lately about what these generals are saying, and how they at times directly defy the elected leadership, suggests strongly to me that Brazil's armed forces are not yet fully reconciled to the constitutional realities of civilian control. And that means, as one Brazilian friend wrote me recently, that the country's "democracy is fragile, and needs to be exercised daily."

Part of that exercise also protects the generals' right to speak. But the brass haven't contented themselves with insubordinate speech alone. They've circulated a defiant manifesto in their own ranks, told a Defense Minister – who eventually resigned over the commission controversy – not to show his face on their doorstep, and then the very-much-active-duty chiefs of the various services refused to show for the ceremony when Dilma signed the Truth Commission into law.

In the audience that day were several of Dilma's former cell mates from her three years of imprisonment. Dilma was a member of the VAR-Palmares, the Armed Revolutionary Vanguard, to which the word Palmares was appended to honor a sizable stronghold of escaped slaves who resisted their Portuguese masters in 17th century

Brazil. The guerrilla Dilma Rousseff, dubbed by her captors the Joan of Arc of the armed resistance, was subjected to torture – “electric shock and beatings” – during the first twenty-two days of her confinement, according to her own accounts.



Guerrilla Dilma Rousseff in 60s arrest photo, and General Luiz Eduardo Rocha Paiva, her current detractor

One of Dilma’s main detractors is retired General Luiz Eduardo Rocha Paiva, now in the reserves, but whose service dates from the seventies, and who provocatively questions Dilma’s claim to having been tortured. In a rambling interview with a reporter from *O Globo* that chases its tail over seven printed pages, Rocha Paiva doggedly stays on message, demanding over and over that the Truth Commission must also hear about “the crimes of the terrorists,” not just those of the ruling juntas. The reporter points out that the military “held all the power,” and that many who resisted, like Dilma, were already punished. Moreover, and of great concern to their survivors, the fates of hundreds of disappeared victims, and the whereabouts of their remains, has never been revealed. Whatever arguments the reporter pitches the wily old martinet to justify the full and long overdue airing of the victims’ stories, is parried by Rocha Paiva with his insistence on accountability for “both sides.” That the general himself remains unrepentant about the past is best illustrated in this interview by his outlandish claim that the dictatorship was prolonged for ten years because of the resistance.

In the face of such intimidating push back from the country’s proud, patriarchal and powerful military, it is encouraging to see how firmly President Dilma is committed to the work of the commission, set to begin this April following the presidential

appointments of a bi-partisan panel of seven distinguished – and presumably disinterested – members, who will attend to this work of historical atonement for the next two years. That’s enough time, the Minister of Human Rights, Maria do Rosario points out, “to get back a report while Dilma’s government is still in office,” political capital, perhaps, for when Dilma runs for a second term.

The overall direction of the Truth Commission is in the hands of Maria do Rosario, and very good hands indeed it would appear, at least for those who favor sowing humiliation among former thugs and tyrants, and making them eat crow in public. The minister held a press conference earlier this month to lay out the commission’s “responsibilities,” and spoke unambiguously about one priority in particular, as if to rebut directly the polemic of adversaries like General Rocha Paiva. “We have to disabuse the public of the notion, that there were two sides,” she explained, a view that retains some grip “on popular fantasy, and has an impact on public opinion.” And while this question may remain a source of contention from the right, Minister do Rosario expressed confidence that the majority of Brazilian are strongly behind the government’s focus on the crimes of the regime alone.

Like so many of the heavies in the PT, Maria do Rosario, who has held a variety of public offices over two decades, cut her political teeth in Rio Grande do Sol – Joao Goulart’s home state on Brazil’s southern border with Uruguay. Dilma also made her mark there in the public energy field, but neither of them has been with Lula and the PT from the start. Dilma, when she abandoned armed struggle after prison, and until fairly recently, played a leadership role in a rival party of populist and progressive social democrats dating from the Goulart era. Maria do Rosario, born two years after the ‘64 coup, was first elected to the Porto Alegre city council on the ticket of the Brazilian Communist Party. Many militants-turned-politicians in Brazil, whether from principle or pragmatism, have “migrated” to the PT over the years. And many, like Lula’s successor and her minister, were politicized through involvement with various tendencies of the Marxist left, which in Brazil, as in much of South America, remains a viable intellectual and political tradition.

In the face of such incendiary resumes, there has been criticism from sectors beyond the grumpy friends of former dictators, neo-liberals, for example, that the resistance to the generals never intended to restore democracy, but to create a soviet-style socialist state. Of course, Brazilian militants in those years were hardly alone in supporting socialism as their political objective. Throughout the West the entire generation of 68er and New Leftists in a kaleidoscope of bickering tendencies, Leninist or otherwise, was heavily influenced by the political tools and ideology of the October Revolution. At the same time I can’t recall a single committed radical I knew from that era who would

have been keen to live his life in one of the Workers' Paradises as then constituted, with Cuba as the possible exception. What the Brazilian resistance did play a strong, perhaps decisive, role in accomplishing was the defeat of a demonstrably evil military regime, while helping to replace it with the democratic Brazil that exists today. A luta continua.

*For an eyewitness account of the emergence of the base communities from which a Theology of Liberation was codified, see my interview with Patrick Hughes, an Irish missionary priest who worked in Brazil from 1963-73 - www.veteranscholar.com under Essays.