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978-0-521-12601-4 - A Tropical Belle Epoque: Elite Culture and Society in Turn-of-the-Century Rio de Janeiro

Jeffrey D. Needell

Excerpt

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Rio de Janeiro: Capital of the Brazilian nineteenth century

The *belle époque* in Rio can be dealt with as both the culmination of specific long-term trends and as a new phenomenon, signaling a unique phase of Brazilian cultural history. The present study will discuss the period in both senses. Still, I have found that the discussion and analysis of any aspect of the *belle époque* touches on matters that have long, matted roots in the general Carioca past. It seems important, then, to begin by introducing the historical and urban context which will inform so much of what follows. As elite social and cultural history in Rio will be the stuff of the latter, I take the opportunity here to sketch the national and urban realities with which the Carioca grappled.

1. The Empire: change and challenge (1868–88)

The institutions of the Empire of Brazil had been elaborated in the second quarter of the nineteenth century; by the end of the third, realities were obviously quite different. Independent Brazil's first political edifice conformed to terrain shaped by a planter society, mainly confined to a thin, coastal strip of port cities and their immediate hinterlands, with the vast interior barely known or populated. It was a society divided between masters and slaves, plantations and ports, a society defined by two strata. One, big with wealth and power, made up of white planters and merchants; the other, big in numbers, made up of black and mulatto slaves and freedmen and their descendants: plantation workers, house servants, artisans, plantation "hands," urban workers, impoverished sharecroppers and small farmers. These strata made up the two great weights that pressed between them a thin, generally urban-based stratum of middle sectors: liberal professionals, petty bureaucrats, clerical workers, and small shopkeepers.¹

From the decadent gold and diamond works of Minas Gerais and the old sugar region of the Northeastern provinces, the center of export

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dynamism had moved to the South-central coffee plantations in the provinces of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais. But this was more a shift in the location of the predominant socio-economic structures, not in their nature. Changes in the pace of work, in the level of technology, and in the degree and complexity of entrepreneurial activity might occur, but the old social order of a small agro-export elite, a servile mass of workers, and a thin stratum of middle sectors, an order derived from a plantation society producing a crop for the international market, remained.²

The Brazil that emerged from the war with Paraguay (1865–70) was already different. Three changes were fundamental. First, the urban entrepôts had grown as population, cultural, and infrastructural centers – which made them political centers in a new way. Now they were no longer primarily the meeting places of a rural-based elite and its commercial allies. They were also much more the bailiwicks of urban-based liberal professionals, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, and students, people with readier access to European thought and examples, free of the direct influence of the great landowners who ruled the countryside and who had thus far imposed their will on the nation. The political challenge nascent in the towns from late colonial times, with their urban conspiracies and revolts and their taste for European models for change, was taking on greater weight.³

Second, slavery, identified with Brazil since its beginning, was doomed. The end of the transatlantic slave trade between 1850 and 1852 and the inability of the slave population to reproduce itself sufficiently assured the planters that slavery must inevitably die. Yet, as only the expanding South-central coffee region was in dire need of labor, and the internal slave trade from the decadent Northeast seemed adequate for the time being, the immediate danger was seen to loom elsewhere. From the 1860s on, the political threat of abolition flickered with increasing insistence, a fundamental challenge to the old order.⁴

Third, while the monarchy's established political organization and circles continued to serve the old elites of the Northeast and the hinterlands of Rio de Janeiro, the appetites of newer elites went unattended. São Paulo shouldered more of the burden of the State as its phenomenal westward coffee expansion generated increasing tax revenues. Though the plantation areas tied to Rio began their decline in coffee production in the 1880s, the Province of São Paulo would, by that time, begin the climb to leadership. But, while they observed the growth of their relative economic strength and share of the tax burden, *paulista* planters also knew their political power remained small. They

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chafed at the disproportionate advantages, favors, and spoils going to the once-great provinces, while the hand of the Crown in their affairs seemed mostly to grasp and interfere.⁵

Another source of dissatisfaction among the newer elites derived from State recruitment. The two traditional parties, Liberal and Conservative, as well as the Empire's upper bureaucracy, had traditionally been dominated by men from Portugal, the old Northeastern provinces, and the more recent elites in the coffee region first established in Rio de Janeiro and the edges of São Paulo and Minas. The older generation, important up to and beyond the mid-nineteenth century, were trained in Coimbra or among the first classes of the newly established law faculties of Recife and São Paulo. The younger generation were men trained exclusively at the Brazilian faculties. The group as a whole tended to be interrelated within and across the generations, and such nepotism naturally blocked the advance of an increasing number of eligible *bacharéis* at a time when the absolute number of places grew very slowly.

The region whose sons were most likely to suffer from this was São Paulo, where the number of families newly able to support sons through the local faculty was bound to be disproportionately large, and where the number of fathers and uncles able to pull the proper strings was bound to be disproportionately small. Moreover, the locale likely to focus this *bacharel* frustration most severely was the urban one. There, the sons of planters who no longer could, or no longer would, try to maintain their traditional status on the land sought to make a way for themselves in the bureaucracy. This gave an edge to the political partisan struggles over places and to the increasingly bitter attacks on the entrenched establishment of the monarchy. In either case, this particular elite interest in successful promotion within the imperial hierarchy, left unattended, had dangerous results. It added fire to the dissatisfaction of the new *paulista* elite and the growing number of urban-based *bacharéis*.⁶

It was against these broad changes, then, that the institutions of the monarchy were pitted after 1868. The challenge was to be formulated in two political movements: Republicanism and Abolitionism.

The date traditionally associated with the beginning of the end, 1868, derives from a political crisis originating in the debilitating circumstances of the Paraguayan War. The Emperor, forced to choose between supporting the general on whom his hopes of victory rested and the president of the current ministry, chose to back the general. The latter, Luís Alves de Lima e Silva, Marquis, and later Duke, de

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Caxias, long the favorite of the monarch, was a stalwart Conservative. He led the Emperor to believe that he would resign his command if he had to continue in obedience to the Progressive Liberal ministry in power, a ministry whose confidence in himself he doubted. The leader of the ministry, seeing the direction of Pedro's nod, found a way to resign that made the contradictions of the monarchy's constitutional powers dramatically clear. He left when the Emperor, in consultation with the Conservative-dominated Council of State, chose to exercise his usual right to select from among the usual three proposed senatorial candidates for a vacant seat in an unusual, and quite provocative, manner. The Emperor picked as senator the candidate who had neither the plurality of the provincial vote nor the approval of the Progressive Liberal ministry.

The Chamber expected that the Emperor would follow the usual custom after the ministry's resignation, and summon another Progressive Liberal chieftain to organize the next ministry, in conformity with the party represented by the Chamber's majority. Instead, the Emperor, seeking to ensure the happy conclusion of the war, broke with the usage. He called a Conservative to the palace, hoping to secure a ministry which would enjoy solid relations with Caxias. The Chamber, naturally, voted no confidence in the new ministry; the Emperor then followed through, dissolving the Chamber and allowing the ministry to "arrange" the next election and the inevitable return of a loyal, Conservative majority. The Progressive Liberals were indignant, termed the maneuver a *coup d'état*, and, in a rage, attacked the basic institutions of the regime.⁷

This event galvanized all Liberal factions; over the next ten years of exile from ministerial power many bound themselves together and attacked the Conservatives and the Emperor. One faction, though, went further. While most Liberals drew the line at reformist proposals for limitations on the Emperor's constitutional powers and championship of the new cause of Abolition, this faction issued a Republican Manifesto (1870) calling for an end to the monarchy. Later (1873), *paulista* republicans organized a party apparatus for their province. That the Manifesto and the *paulista* organization did not embrace Abolition and that the *paulistas* quickly organized their province is suggestive of two crucial characteristics of Republicanism. First, its leadership, largely divided between Rio and São Paulo, was interested in the success of its political goals and, to reach them, eschewed divisive socio-economic ones. Second, only one of the two poles of the new movement was based on a well-organized party with province-wide membership. While the

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Rio ideologues were largely urban-based until the late 1880s, the *paulista* Republicans had early support among the rural-based elite.⁸

Men drawn from the new planter elite of São Paulo saw in the Republic a redistribution of power more amenable to their regional interests. They envisioned a decentralized federation, with each unit enjoying its respective revenues and ruled by its local elite-elected representatives. The weight of such men among the party's founders probably accounts for the opportune evasion of the Abolition issue.⁹

The other basis for Republicanism was quite distinct. It was that pool of urban-based men caught up in a passion for a new Brazil, one opposed to the agrarian realities with which the *paulista* elite was quite content. This concept of a new Brazil varied among its proponents, but a common hope involved the nation's regeneration according to political models provided by the US and French republicans. Even more common were proponents of a Brazil impelled forward by the same engines of modernity proven in the industrializing countries of the North Atlantic. Such men would count among their numbers place-seeking *bacharéis*; students in the law faculties, medical schools, and the Carioca military and polytechnic schools; graduates of such places who had found positions in the State apparatus or in professional careers; and many of the entrepreneurs who started emerging in the century's third quarter. All of these resented the restrictions traditionally imposed on business, industry, and mobility by a conservative, agriculturally-minded political establishment.¹⁰

If the *paulista* group provided the weight of men of substance, its link to elements in the nation's agro-export elite, the second provided many of the ideologues and conspirators, located in the strategic urban center of the nation. Thus, the impetus among the Republicans often came from Rio during the conspiratorial and revolutionary phase of the movement, but the Republic itself would see São Paulo move inevitably to take command. Only the *paulista* Republicans possessed the links to the preponderant class strength represented by the elite, a socio-economic base for power the urban-based middle-sector elements in the movement necessarily lacked.

The movement for Abolition, though preceded by precursors as early as the Independence period, and both awakened and temporarily contained by limited imperial reforms (1871), really began its career in the last decade of the Empire. The movement for the Republic was one which joined urban middle-sector and both rural and urban-based elite elements against the relatively recent institution of the monarchy. Abolition was quite different. It attracted, until the last moments (and

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then for the most blatantly opportunistic reasons), almost exclusively urban elements (from all strata, though primarily from the same middle sort), because it struck at something much more deeply rooted than the monarchy. It struck at the very basis of the centuries-old rural structure over which the planter elite, new and old alike, presided.¹¹

The Abolitionists of the 1880s, after seeing their hopes of parliamentary success apparently blocked, organized into what were effectively two distinct, complementary wings. One sought reform through propaganda, going outside the Chamber to the theaters and the streets, appealing to the urban middle sectors and masses. The other coupled propaganda with illegal activity, from putting together an underground railroad to calls for slave resistance and rebellion. But even the legal wing, in its rhetoric at mass meetings, its court actions, and its radical socio-economic analyses calling for electoral, social, and land reform, threatened the established order. French constitutionalist Eclecticism of the Second Reign, which had served elite consensus by smothering the ideological fervor of the First Reign and the Regency with decorous drapery, now wore thin. It shriveled with the Romantic fire of the journalists and poets of Abolition. It crumbled before the materialist arguments of critics reared in the newest European thought at the law faculties or in the charged intellectual milieu of the schools and periodicals of the Côte.

By the latter part of the 1880s, Abolition loomed, the triumph of a galvanized urban movement over increasingly splintered planter elites. Elite division derived from varying regional circumstances. The older coffee areas in Rio de Janeiro and Minas, with their soil exhausted, their coffee quality inferior, and their financial situation ominous, were headed by staunchly pro-slavery elites, desiring to protect their living collateral and unable to finance a shift to free labor. The planters of the Northeast, the North, and the province of São Paulo were less single-minded, albeit for varying reasons.

The Northeast, with its depressed economy, generally depended less on a thriving slave supply and could count on holding what labor it might need in other forms of bondage after abolition. Indeed, the area had been selling its slaves south for some time. Except for Bahia (whose elite still defended large investments in slaves, the legacy of a relatively recent prosperity), the movement for Abolition made great inroads there. The North was considerably more divided. Amazonas, never greatly dependent on African slavery for its economy of extraction, was least threatened. The Indian dependants who brought their *patrões* forest products would remain in local forms of bondage, after all; the elite

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could afford idealistic gestures. In Maranhão and Pará, however, fierce opposition reflected the entrenched interests of an elite whose precarious rural investments were identified with slavery. Yet again, in Ceará, poverty and sales had reduced slavery to negligible importance and it, like Amazonas, would lead the Abolitionist trend. Finally, São Paulo, riding a cresting wave of coffee expansion, drove its slaves hard and fought Abolition until the last year or so, the firm ally of the powerful “slavocratic” forces of Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, and Minas. However, when the militant actions of radical Abolitionists succeeded in reaching the plantations themselves, the *paulistas* began to shift tactics desperately. The traditional fear of social upheaval was always wonderfully persuasive.

Free immigrant labor, disdained since the failure of mid-century experiments, suddenly became palatable as slaves began to abandon the fields and talk of revolts and an attack on *latifundia* began to gain force. Pressed to the wall, the *paulistas* abandoned the *fluminense* and *mineiro* slavocrats, and turned Abolitionist. They apparently hoped to contain the movement’s revolutionary potential by acceding to its most prominent demand, which was, in any case, increasingly a *fait accompli*. Some hoped to retain many of their former slaves by granting manumission *en masse*, others struggled indignantly for abolition with compensation. Most called for State subsidization of immigration.

It was this pattern of elite division and surrender in an ambience electric with the threat of social upheaval and charged by the throne’s undisguised pro-abolitionist sympathies that made Abolition possible in 1888. But it was only a partial victory. The next step contemplated by many, that of larger socio-economic reforms, would be another matter. Reformers would find that elite landholdings, political domination, and agro-export orientation were much more strongly defended.

2. The Republic: the coup (1889)¹²

The Brazilian army, relatively weak before the Paraguayan War, was thrust by the conflict into bloody sacrifice and a new strength and national prominence. Afterwards, the officers were reluctant to resign themselves to their service’s previous insignificance. They feared the Army’s being neglected, and not without reason. Years of mismanaged, bloody grinding away at the Paraguayan military machine had instilled resentment and contempt for the representatives of the elite in Parliament. Veterans felt strongly that they had paid dearly for the indifference and incompetence of a self-satisfied, corrupt civilian elite. They

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blamed that elite for Brazil's material "backwardness" and its consequent military weakness.¹³ Such veterans occupied the higher ranks by the 1880s. The lower ranks were even more restless, for they were made up of officers recently graduated from noted centers of socio-political criticism: the military schools of Rio.

Children of the urban-based middle strata or the rural small proprietors generally had only two ways to secure a superior degree and the prestige and position generally consequent upon it. They might enter the seminary (more common in the century's earlier years) or the Army's technical schools (a common choice in the century's later years).¹⁴ The Escola Militar, founded by João VI in 1808, divided into two schools in 1858 – the Escola Militar and the Escola Central (which was renamed the Escola Politécnica in 1874) – both of which continued to teach the sciences integral to both military needs and material progress. Indeed, many of the students were probably more interested in such studies than military service; they were the medium for anyone seeking a degree in engineering or in other fields integral to the new opportunities made plain in the advances of Europe and the United States. The schools were the training ground for many of the most ambitious, committed, urban-based "modernizers."¹⁵

These students, whether under the direct influence of such positivists as Benjamin Constant [de Borelho Magalhães] (1837–91) or not, absorbed the scientism diffuse in contemporary European thought and commonly saw themselves as scientifically trained servants of their nation's future – selfless, embattled agents for the *pátria's* "modernization." They often perceived the established ruling class as their natural opposition: a force holding Brazil back and keeping it weak merely to continue promoting elite agro-export interests and providing sinecures for elite members and their creatures. It seems superfluous to say that such officers were generally Republicans. The Monarchy, bastion of the old order, had no place in their hopes for a "modern" Brazil.

Though prestigious senior officers, such as [Manuel] Deodoro da Fonseca (1827–92) or Floriano [Vieira] Peixoto (1839–95) were of older generations, they did share a sense of antagonism toward the established elite's political representatives. This, as suggested above, sprang from their devotion to the Army, which Paraguay had shaped and tempered with a sharp resentment and suspicion of politicians. This would be the key to their politicization. After 1883, the so-called Military Question arose, unifying the generations as officers, despite disciplining, repeatedly asserted their right to take public positions or question the judgment of their civilian superiors. They organized into Military

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Clubs, put Deodoro at their head, protested, and took a belligerent stand against the Emperor's ministers. It would take the Republican ideologues of Rio, however, to hurl them against the Emperor himself.¹⁶

Though Republican moderates had discarded the idea of an alliance with the Army initially, both radicals and moderates soon embraced it. At first, they only increased the tensions, playing on the officers' sense that their honor was impugned, their rights scorned, and the like. Then, however, thinking beyond the mere creation of problems for the regime, they began, in conjunction with Republicans among the younger officers, to consider a military coup.¹⁷

The time was propitious. The planter elites, by the end of the 1880s, had seen slavery eliminated under the auspices of the throne and the Conservative Party (which had held the ministry presiding over Abolition in 1888). They had also long come to see both of the old imperial parties, the Crown, indeed, the constitution itself, as abused, abusing, and generally discredited.

I have noted how members of the most dynamic force among the elites, the *paulistas*, had begun to see the centralized monarchy as an institution favoring older regions; by the late 1880s, they also viewed it as a parasite which strengthened the established Rio-based financial interests which were successfully exploiting the expanding *paulista* economy. In addition, the most conservative force in support of the Crown, the older regions' planters, was now terribly weakened. They had not only lost their slaves and, thus, collateral, but, as mentioned earlier, did so in the midst of the marked decline of their coffee. Moreover, even to such people, the future of their anomalous American monarchy, headed by a sick old man and to be taken up by a reformist heiress and her unpopular foreign consort, seemed dubious. Finally, new political reforms and the explicit threat of further socio-economic reforms, possibly under Crown patronage itself, were far from dubious.¹⁸

Thus, precisely at the time the Army completed its swing into opposition and the radical younger officers and civilians began to plan a Republican coup, the natural support of the Monarchy was vitiated. When the last ministry attempted to disarm the Republican movement by embracing many of its reforms, it was too late to co-opt the radicals and too early to win over the reactionaries. The Chamber voted no confidence and was in turn dissolved by the ministry.

In brief order, the Military Question erupted, the Republicans exploited it, rumors of blows against the Army and its leader, Deodoro,

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were spread, and the latter was finally won over to a Republican conspiracy. In a confused series of events on 15 November 1889, the ministry and, then, the throne were toppled. A Provisional Government headed by Deodoro and noted Republicans was quickly formed, and the imperial family shipped to Europe.

Some few monarchists cast about futilely to make a counter-revolution or waited vainly for the signal. Many soon went into exile, political seclusion, or useless conspiracy. But most in the traditional elites adhered to the new order and bided their time. For the moment, power in the capital had passed from their hands and into those of the Army and the radical Republicans, who had joined together to make a new Brazil.¹⁹

3. The Republic: the challenge of the radicals (1890–4)

Beneath the confusion of the next several years, a revolutionary struggle was fought. New urban-based groups tried to wrest away direction of the State from the regional planter elites and their allies. Simultaneously, elements of those elites began building new local political machines and a new national consensus which would respond to changed decentralized regional circumstances and still ensure their national domination.

The record suggests the violence resulting from such crossed purposes. In 1889, a Provisional Government was proclaimed after the military coup. In 1891, a Constituent Assembly created a federal constitution and obediently elected Deodoro and Floriano President and Vice-President. Later that year, Deodoro, attempting a coup against the first Congress, was foiled in a counter-coup by Floriano, who took over the presidency. In 1893, a civil war in Rio Grande do Sul was followed by a naval revolt in Rio's harbor, two struggles whose leaders allied and fought the Republic bitterly until 1895. In 1896, a local rebellion in the Bahian backlands, blown up by repeated Republican defeats into a major threat, required the best efforts of the Army to be put down, finally, in 1897. In that same year, the first civilian president narrowly escaped assassination by a petty officer. And, from beginning to end, all these events were marked by the debilitating impact of a tremendous economic "boom and bust" cycle, initiated by a period of inflation, investment, and speculation known as the *Encilhamento*.

Rio, Brazil's financial center, had known such oscillations before. The *praça* had seen a new surge of credit and capitalization in banks, infrastructure, and manufacturing in the mid-1850s; a crisis in credit