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Robert M. Levine

Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
VARGAS AS ENIGMA

Getúlio Dornelles Vargas, the most influential Brazilian of the twentieth century, held the posts of state legislator, federal congressman, cabinet minister, governor, revolutionary chief of state, interim president, dictator, senator, and popularly elected president. The simplicity of his private life contrasted distinctively with the careers of many of his contemporaries, although he was more earthy and colorful than people suspected. His calculating nature enabled him to rationalize contradictions that would have brought down lesser politicians. He cultivated an image as a homespun family man but he also could be cold-blooded and heartless. Although the explanation is insufficient, it was popular to attribute Vargas's character to his origins in Rio Grande do Sul and a *gaúcho* heritage characterized by a tenacious independence. *Gaúchos* were proud of their tradition. "If it had been all Portuguese who came [to our state]," one of its governors remarked later, revealing his nationalistic arrogance, "we'd have been as backward as Uruguay."

A realist and master at hiding his intentions, Vargas was difficult to decipher, even by his friends. To mask his personal earthiness, he cultivated blandness. He disliked to respond immediately, claiming that he preferred to think things out. As a result, people learned not to trust him. During every stage in his career, he remained a mysterious figure, enigmatic and inscrutable, a man who represented different things to different people. Yet he understood power and always dreamed, perhaps quixotically, of propelling his nation forward until it could control its own destiny.

Vargas displayed a morose side, as well. "How many times have I longed for death to solve the problems of my life," he wrote describing his guilt at having to send, soon after taking power, the members of the ousted gov-

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ernment into exile.¹ He never spoke out against the ugly and dangerous behaviors of some of his subordinates. During the 1930s, Ciro Freitas Vale, his ambassador to Hitler's Germany, openly hated Jews. Vargas gave wide berth to his brutal police chief, Felinto Müller, and he offered no comment when his justice minister, Francisco Campos, referred to refugees from Nazi Germany seeking haven in Brazil as *rebotalho branco* ("white trash"). He charmed his American suitors, lobbying hard to secure Brazil's support for the Allied effort, but he also negotiated, more discreetly, with the Reich's ambassador. Always the pragmatist, as a gesture to the Allies in 1943 Vargas abruptly removed both Müller and propaganda head Lourival Fontes as the authoritarian façade of his dictatorship started to crack.

Vargas always seemed to have a knack for being in the right place at the right time. His career started precisely at the point when his state's powerful machine needed new blood. He entered national politics when the old regime was disintegrating from within, and when dissident elites from outlying regions of the country were seeking allies among urban and military counterparts.² There were about 30 million Brazilians in 1930, a number that would jump to 41 million in 1940 and 52 million in 1950. Coming to power in a military coup, he mobilized urban Brazilians into a future base of personal political support, even though most of his reform measures were designed to maintain (and often increase) state control. He crafted a new role for government and a drive for industrialization, economic development, and national integration. In a very real sense, we can say that modern Brazil was born in 1930 and came to maturity on August 24, 1954. On this date, in the early morning hours, Vargas shot himself to death as he waited in the presidential palace for his generals to remove him from office.

It is uncertain to what extent Vargas was influenced by the fascist ideologies of the 1920s and 1930s. Brazilian corporatism, which borrowed from European fascism, also was influenced by the New Deal. On the whole, though, even though Vargas was a nationalist, he relied on pragmatism more than ideology, thus contributing to his characteristic unpredictability. Vargas frequently shifted directions, like his contemporary, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Vargas was, as was another Roosevelt, Theodore, an orthodox heretic and a conservative reformer.

1. Getúlio Vargas, *Diário*, vol. 1, 1930–1936 (Rio de Janeiro: Siciliano/Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1995), entry for October 20, 1930.
2. Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 108–110.

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Whereas the United States preserved its democratic framework throughout this period, Brazil had none to save. It had no modern tradition of national political parties, making it easy for Vargas to govern by patronage and negotiation. His tenure in power was propped up by two military coups, in 1930 and 1937. Another coup removed him, in 1945, and the imminent threat of still another led to his suicide. Coups and near coups continued after his death, resulting in the harsh military dictatorship imposed in 1964 and lifted some twenty-one years later.

The 1930s transformed Brazil and opened it to the outside world. Vargas oversaw significant growth in government at all levels. Most of his programs were social and economic; prior to 1930, only a handful of states – notably Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo – had paid attention to these issues, and then only on a very limited scale. Vargas organized regional agencies to deal with drought, electric power, and commodity production. Decrees prepared the way for civil service reform and a national minimum wage. Professions and crafts were regulated; new government bureaus systematized the collection of statistics and set out to improve municipal administration. The government awarded pensions to selected workers, as well as job protection and workers' compensation. A federal university system was started. Radio, professional soccer, and the movies not only drew Brazilians into the national culture but linked the country to the outside world. Few Brazilians knew the names of Vargas's cabinet ministers but millions knew Tom Mix and Mickey Mouse. They also knew that the country's new roads led to jobs, leading to massive migrations of population, whereas decades earlier few ventured beyond their birthplace except when driven by famine.³

Since for Vargas governing was chiefly a question of administration, he invited a succession of foreign experts and commissions to visit Brazil and propose measures to further its modernization. He negotiated impressive economic aid from the United States, though at the same time he feared that alliance with the United States would force Brazil into long-term dependency. Brazil's economy diversified and expanded. Coffee exports, once half of Brazil's agricultural output, fell to a 16 percent share between 1939 and 1943. Vargas's government invested in hydro-

3. The administrative reforms are examined in detail by Beatriz M. de Souza Wahrlich, *Reforma Administrativa na Era de Vargas* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1983).

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[More information](#)

electric power, improved ports, drilled for petroleum, and created a model industrial city, Volta Redonda, to produce steel. Influenced by positivism in his youth, he believed that “order” was a precondition for “progress.”

WATERSHED YEARS

Vargas’s regime ended the political culture of the oligarchic First (or Old) Republic (1889–1930), which was characterized by a federal system under which the wealthier states – all in the Center-South – ran the country, leaving crumbs for the poorer units of the federation. A tiny minority of Brazilians lived in comfort. The vast majority lived in poverty. Millions of Brazilians could not afford shoes. But although Vargas knew this, his era was about politics and economics, not the human condition.

Even though the 1930s were a time of hardship for most, for those with skills new opportunities presented themselves. Brazil needed statisticians, broadcasters, electricians, architects. Youths (mostly young men) went from small towns to larger cities seeking to make their fortunes. Impoverished rural families migrated south, lured by the promise of urban jobs. Overall, the apex and base of the social pyramid stayed largely the same: the wealthy “good families” at the top and millions of illiterate, destitute rural poor, roughly half of the population, at the bottom. In 1930, skilled industrial workers numbered fewer than 300,000; most worked long hours in dirty, unsafe factories for pitiful wages. There was an acute shortage of technical and administrative workers. Many firms preferred to hire immigrants for these positions, disparaging the work ethic of nonelite Brazilians. Society, after all, had always divided people into *gente decente* (decent people) and the *povo* (the masses), and there was little incentive to do things differently.

Some of Vargas’s officials sought to change this, but after 1935 the repressive atmosphere drove out the progressive reformers who had been attracted to the promise of the 1930 Revolution. Still, Vargas’s government, imbued with a mission to achieve national regeneration, included officials who shared his vision. Many of them who knew the countryside firsthand were shocked at its widespread poverty, at the de facto Argentine control of southern border areas, and at the lack of basic federal programs. They came away contemptuous of the way landowners and their clients ruled as local potentates – Góes Monteiro called them

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[More information](#)

“greedy pigs” – and of how much of Brazil was ignored by the central government.⁴

Few rural Brazilians attended school for more than a year or two, and some never went at all. As sharecroppers, they fell into debt to the local stores and went through their lives undernourished. Families coped by seeking favors from their patrons, usually the landowners on whose properties they worked in exchange for loyalty and unquestioned obedience. Rural people were considered by their more cosmopolitan countrymen to be guileless and lazy. They were called by a variety of names – *caipiras* and *jecas* in São Paulo, *tabaréus* in Bahia, and *caboclos* in the Amazon and generally.⁵ The terms conveyed different cultural meanings but, on the whole, disparaged their unschooled mannerisms and their mixed-race origins.

Vargas, himself born into the oligarchy, although from its geographic periphery, believed that Brazil could be modernized rapidly through industrialization and social engineering. A ruse or not, from the start of his political career he showed sympathy for ordinary people, and as a positivist he felt that they could be taught how to live in the modern world, much as one instructs school children. On occasion he was moved by their plight: he commented in his personal journal on the squalid housing conditions he found during visits to the North.

Vargas’s supporters trumpeted the coup that brought him to power as the “Revolution of 1930.” The victory was accompanied by what critic Antônio Cândido called, with some hyperbole, a “gust of intellectual radicalism and social analysis” that not even the banality of state propaganda was able to quench. Curiously, the Depression stimulated domestic intellectual production: the devaluation of Brazil’s currency caused a sharp increase in the price of imported books. This made Brazilian books competitive in the local market for the first time since the early nineteenth century and spurred publishing of Brazilian authors as well as translations of foreign authors.⁶ Sociologists like Gilberto Freyre

4. See Todd Diacon’s excellent “Bringing the Countryside Back In: A Case Study of Military Intervention As State Building in the Brazilian Old Republic,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 27 (1995), 569–592. See also Captain Pedro Aurélio de Góes Monteiro’s reminiscences of the Paraná campaign, 1925, *The Brazilian Army in 1925*, ed. Peter Seaborn Smith (Miami: Florida International University Latin American and Caribbean Center, 1981).

5. Charles Wagley, *Introduction to Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 109–110.

6. Randal Johnson, “The Dynamics of the Brazilian Literary Field, 1930–1945,” *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 31:2 (Winter 1994), 12.

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probed the roots of Brazil's racial heritage; historians like Sérgio Buarque de Holanda explored provocatively the roots of the nation's distinctiveness; others, influenced especially by French social scientists, founded the University of São Paulo and sustained a generation-long search for explanations of Brazil's singularity under the gathering storms of war in Europe.

LIMITED CITIZENSHIP

In 1889, Brazil's government changed from a constitutional monarchy to a secular federal republic based on orthodox principles of economic liberalism, ruled dictatorially for much of its first decade, and whose civilian presidents after 1896 lived under the threat of military intervention. Things stabilized after 1898 under the rule of the *paulistas*, and the national government grew under the Republic. From 1900 to 1930, central government expenditures grew annually at more than 5 percent, triple the 1930–1945 rate despite all of Vargas's new agencies.⁷

Still, Brazilians enjoyed neither democracy nor opportunities to improve their lives. The year 1930 saw upheavals throughout the region: incumbent governments fell not only in Brazil but in four other Latin American countries. The coup that brought Vargas to power implanted a military-backed provisional government, which consolidated its control further in 1935 by declaring a state of siege and which instituted an authoritarian dictatorship between 1937 and 1945, at which time Vargas overstayed his welcome and was ousted. Five years later, voters returned the old dictator to power, only to endure further instability after Vargas's death in 1954. The next decade saw another military coup, which suppressed individual rights until the mid-1980s. Only then were representative democratic institutions restored, buffeted by vast economic disparities, hyperinflation, corruption, impunity, and uncertainty about the country's political future, despite the tenacious survival of basic democratic institutions.

During most of these decades, citizenship in practice extended only to the elite. Human rights abuses were commonplace. Even during periods without formal censorship, newspaper editors instinctively downplayed or altogether excluded news about strikes, especially against large landowners (as in the case of the 1931 strike against the Albuquerque

7. Steven Topik, *The Political Economy of the Brazilian State, 1889–1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 20–21.

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Lins coffee plantations), and against foreign-owned railroads.⁸ Military authorities ran concentration camps for political prisoners, one of which, in Clevelândia do Norte in distant Amapá, revealed decades later graves filled with cadavers of prisoners who had been injected with morphine or had been forced to ingest quantities of broken glass.⁹ Except for religious activity, society saw little associability. Village life, overshadowed by the power of the landowning class, lacked the tradition of autonomy enjoyed by villages in Mexico or Peru.

Vargas sought acknowledgment that his programs would influence future generations but he never coveted personal wealth. Abelardo Jurema, who visited the palace days before Vargas's death, commented later that when he saw the president's bedroom, he was struck by its bareness. Among the sparse furnishings was a plain bureau holding bottles of patent medicine, just like his grandfather's in the interior. On the other hand, Vargas permitted members of his family to take sinecures and sometimes positions of power, such as when he named his despised brother Benjamim ("Beijo") to be Rio's chief of police during his presidential term. And he shut his eyes to violence committed by agents of his government against citizens.

POPULISM AND CORPORATISM

Care must be taken to separate general definitions of terms describing political thought and practice applied in Latin America from the ways these terms were understood elsewhere. The term "populism," for example, has been used to characterize a wide variety of political styles, including, in the United States, the racist People's Party (1892–1900), an antiurban movement in farming communities in the South and Midwest as well as in mining communities in the West that led, in the Deep South, to the Jim Crow laws of the early twentieth century. In Latin America, populism has encompassed many forms, but all have shared qualities of being urban-based, multiclass coalitional, hierarchical, co-optive, ad hoc, and nonrevolutionary, led by ebullient (if not charismatic) figures who promised to redress popular grievances and to build social solidarity. Argentina's Juan Perón (1943–1955) and Chile's Car-

8. Left-wing newspapers in and outside of Brazil did report at great length. See, for example, Bryan Green, *Brazil* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), published by an arm of the American Communist Party.

9. *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro), February 1, 1996, 1, 8.

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los Ibañez (1927–1931 and again in 1952–1953) represented variations on strong-man populist regimes. Colombia's Jorge Eliéser Gaitán, whose assassination in 1948 provoked violent civil insurgency, and Peru's Haya de la Torre were populist leaders whose political fortunes were less successful. Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) was another successful populist, although his was a variety of political leadership inherited from an older ideology, that of the Mexican Revolution. Overall, Latin American populists tended to sidestep democratic niceties. They disputed the vested interests of the region and, although they spawned bureaucracy, they often opposed the authoritarian-technocratic regimes that follow them.

Populist political movements are nationalistic in character but often have no consistent ideology or agenda; rather, they adopt a range of issues to fit the needs of the times, and often express themselves in a distinctive political style centered on leadership by a single figure. Latin American populist politicians tended to use labor organizations for their own ends, refusing to challenge the prevailing understanding among elites that strict control over workers would preserve social stability, provide industrialists with disciplined workers whose wages could be kept low by competition from a large reserve pool of workers, and preserve the rate of capital accumulation.

The Great Depression set in motion political events that brought populist governments to power – in Latin America, ones usually propped up by the armed forces. The vast changes in economic life after the end of World War I and the collapse of the postwar economic boom, after 1929 taking the ominous form of the Great Depression, touched the lives of everyone in the Western world. In Europe, the aftermath of war led to the rise of Mussolini in Italy, to the flaunting of Versailles, and ultimately to the rise of Nazism in Germany. In Portugal it led to the rise of António de Oliveira Salazar and his fascist *Estado Novo*, and in Spain to civil war. In the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal launched massive relief programs that Republicans called socialist and that intellectuals on the left derided as state capitalism. By any name, this was massive governmental recapitalization for purposes of economic development; it involved state cartelism (less aggressive than state capitalism because it does not seek growth). Roosevelt sponsored dozens of sweeping legislative packages, addressed major areas of social and economic need, waged war with Congress, and threatened to tinker with the Supreme Court. In comparison with Vargas's Brazil, for example, the New Deal was not enacted by decree; there were no military interven-

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tors in the states, and Roosevelt never suspended the rule of law under any state of war or state of siege. In common with the United States, Vargas and his fellow corporatist-populists endorsed the notion of sweeping government welfare programs addressing social needs, although nowhere except in the United States and Canada were there conscious efforts to create long-term domestic markets by building infrastructure in undeveloped regions of the country.

Brazil's experience with populism was complicated by the fact that there were two significant populist movements, both of which changed over time. The first was the *tenente* movement, which erupted in 1922 when a handful of idealistic young officers revolted against the federal government over a question of military honor. This nationalist movement ultimately divided sharply into factions on the far right and far left. The right-wing *tenentes* themselves branched off, their main body becoming Plínio Salgado's fascist Integralist Party, a populist movement of a sort. Left-wing *tenentes* and their civilian allies split in 1930 into one camp made up of social democrats active in Rio de Janeiro and in the Northeast (Pedro Ernesto, Anísio Teixeira, João Café Filho) and another comprising the Communists, to which the *gaúcho* hero of the Long March of the mid-1920s, Luís Carlos Prestes, was recruited.

Vargas's populism differed, and it changed as he adapted it to his political needs. It started out in the 1930 Liberal Alliance platform as a broad-based appeal to recognize workers' needs and to regenerate the nation. Under the provisional government it took on a more corporate coloration, culminating in the Estado Novo dictatorship in which Vargas's public appeals in favor of the work ethic and patriotism took the form of a propaganda campaign advanced by the Propaganda Ministry, or DIP. A more authentic populism emerged during the mid-1940s, when Vargas responded to rising calls for democracy, and culminated in his 1950 presidential campaign, which shared much in common with the campaigns of other Latin American populists, including Peru's Haya de la Torre.

Unlike the United States and Mexico during the 1930s, where populist goals were accompanied by massive state intervention, in Brazil, efforts at economic reorganization stopped far short of channeling public resources to create jobs or to make vast regions productive. Corporatist populism was a vehicle for holding political power, imparting autonomy and influence to the central state, and never relinquishing real control. As far as Brazil was concerned, Vargas's social legislative programs were essentially manipulative, carrot-and-stick techniques to channel the en-

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[More information](#)

ergy of emerging groups – mainly the salaried urban middle and working classes – into government-controlled entities. Brazilians welcomed Vargas's initiatives because it promised them better working conditions, job security, and opportunities for subsidized housing. We will discuss how many actually benefited from these promises. Still, from the outset, we should note that Vargas's goals differed from Roosevelt's and were much closer to the goals of the European heads of state in Lisbon, Madrid, and Rome, if not Berlin. At home, reactionaries advocated aggressively negative policies: combating communism, feminism, cosmopolitanism, labor militancy; resisting immorality; fighting liberalism and individualism. To Vargas's credit, except for ferocious police repression of the left, he stressed the positive: building the nation, erasing regional inequities, promoting unity.

REVOLUTIONARY PROMISES

Vargas's legislative programs derived from two main sources, both dating from well before 1930. One was the Rio Grande do Sul experience with social legislation carefully controlled by a disciplined political machine; the other was the idealistic (but no more democratic) *tenente* movement of the 1920s. The *tenentes*, joined later by mainstream military officers, shared the conviction that republican politicians had selfishly neglected the needs of rural Brazil and the peripheral regions of the vast country that many of them saw in their outposts and during the Prestes Column trek through the hinterland, which was aimed at mobilizing popular support for the *tenente* cause. The Liberal Alliance coalition in 1930 focused on the need to reach out to new groups, to recognize the needs of industrial workers, to extend the government's presence to the hinterland, and to enlarge the electorate to enfranchise women.

The reforms were paternalistic and rooted in a firm sense of moral and patriotic responsibility. Vargas called on intellectuals to come down from their ivory towers and to participate actively in the task of nation building – but within his guidelines. One of Vargas's main goals was to teach Brazilians to take pride in their nationality, to discipline themselves, and to learn the proper values of self-reliance, the sanctity of marriage and the family, and the value of work. The state took steps to regulate the sale of liquor, to restrict smoking in the workplace, and to provide bathrooms in factories. "The mouth is a cavern of microbes," one Estado Novo poster declared, and in the 1950s the national gov-