
INTRODUCTION

THE “COUNTRY OF THE FUTURE” REVEALS ITSELF

I FIRST TRAVELED TO Brazil in September 1972, and like most new arrivals, I had very little idea of what to expect. In those days, I was a graduate student in modern Chinese history and politics and a part-time employee in the New York bureau of Brazil’s largest media conglomerate, Rede Globo, so I was thrilled when I got an invitation to visit headquarters in Rio de Janeiro and work on a music festival there. At the New York office, I was surrounded by Brazilians who spoke yearningly and nostalgically of the soccer rivalries, samba, Carnival, delicious food, and beautiful beaches and women they had left behind; “saudade,” I eventually learned, is the evocative Portuguese-language word for that kind of bittersweet longing. To hear them tell it, I was about to get a taste of something very close to paradise.

My strongest initial impressions, though, were of the repressive military dictatorship that ruled the country and the backwardness of the economy, then still dominated by agricultural products like coffee and sugar. At the airport, I could not help but notice the walls covered with “wanted” posters showing photographs of “terrorists” the government was hunting, many of them earnest-looking long-haired students not that different in appearance from me. The press was censored, as I discovered when I attended my first mid-afternoon editorial meeting to discuss the main nightly news broadcast and found a military officer at the table, telling editors which stories would be

permitted and which would not. At night, heavily armed police stopped the cars in which I was riding with my Brazilian colleagues, brusquely demanding identity papers from all of us who were passengers.

The chic Zona Sul of Rio, where my hotel was located, felt less like a Third World country, repressive and underdeveloped, and much more like Fifth Avenue or Rodeo Drive. Walking past the fashionable boutiques that lined the streets of Ipanema and Copacabana, I saw the tanned beauties, on their way to the beach, who had been made famous by the lilting bossa nova songs I knew from the radio in the United States and noticed the striking locally produced jewelry and fashions in the windows. But I also could not avoid observing the knots of beggars sitting on the sidewalks in those chic neighborhoods, pleading for alms while keeping an eye out for the police whose duty it was to run them off, with beatings if necessary. Some of the mendicants were groups of street urchins, while others consisted of entire families who had obviously spent the previous night huddled together in the cardboard boxes on which they now clustered. Their ragged poverty offered a stark contrast to the gracefully designed sidewalk on which they sat, a work of art with a colorfully abstract, undulating stone mosaic that extended unbroken for the entire length of the beach. It was discomfiting to see these poor people, almost all of whom were black, in the midst of so much affluence and yet so removed from it, and to note the indifference of well-dressed passers-by to their plight.

And at a noisy, stiflingly hot Sunday fair outside a half-finished coliseum whose construction had been abandoned, I listened as migrants from the northeast of Brazil, a drought-ridden region that has traditionally been the country's poorest, sang songs that spoke of their suffering and frustrated hopes with a plaintiveness that reminded me of the blues I had heard growing up in Chicago. They sang of the arduous trip south, standing for 1,500 miles on the back of a truck, exposed to the tropical sun. They sang of the poverty of the sharecropper's existence and the abusive landlords who profited from their labors. They sang of the political bosses who made promises they never kept. They sang of the poor-paying jobs they found in factories or as maids and janitors when they arrived in the south, of the slums in which they had to settle because they were poor, of the prejudice against them because of their distinctive accent and "hillbilly" appearance.

But the city had an enormous energy, or exuberance even, that was both immensely attractive and contagious. Listening to jokes and gibes at the government's expense, watching Brazilians walk with the jaunty, rhythmic self-confidence that, I later learned, they call "ginga," it became clear that no matter how bad the situation, Brazilians refused to let it get them down or submit to a defeatist attitude. Always there seemed to be an internal space, a core, that poverty and somber political circumstances could not penetrate, and that was where optimism and the true Brazilian spirit resided. I was smitten, on both an emotional and intellectual level. It was as if there were two separate Brazils, one official but unreal, the other real but hidden behind subterfuge. How could a society function with such a sharp contrast between outer and inner realities? I hungered to know more, and that is what drove me to return to Brazil as a correspondent, first in 1977 for an assignment that lasted five years and then again in 1999 for a nine-year stint.

When I first visited Brazil, my acquaintances there called my attention to the national flag and what it represents. The green that dominates the banner, I was told, symbolizes the vast lushness of the Brazilian countryside and the fertility of its fields. The yellow diamond-shaped figure near the center stands for gold and, by extension, the country's great natural wealth. At the very center, written across a blue globe, is the national motto, "Order and Progress." The sarcastic joke I sometimes heard at the time was that because Brazil's rulers had never been able to impose the first, the country would never be able to achieve the second, and that a more appropriate and realistic slogan would be "Disorder and Backwardness." Brazilians were accustomed to seeing things through that kind of skeptical prism, and it was difficult for them, with the built-in cynicism acquired through a history of extravagant ambitions and dashed hopes, to imagine that circumstances could change.

Over the past four decades, I have watched a very different Brazil come into being. Vestiges of the bitter realities of the past still linger in the form of pockets of poverty and authoritarian behavior on the part of some public officials. But today's Brazil can also boast of being the world's fourth-largest democracy and eighth-largest economy. Of developing countries, only China receives more direct foreign investment. But unlike China or India, Brazil is a robust producer and exporter of both manufactured goods and foodstuffs

and raw materials. That includes growing large amounts of energy, thanks to major discoveries of oil and gas beginning in 2007 and the coming to fruition of a 30-year effort to develop a renewable fuel industry based on ethanol made from sugar cane.

This book is an attempt to trace and explain that transformation. In its early chapters, it offers a glimpse of Brazil's history and examines the society that Brazilians have constructed during their nation's five-hundred-year history—both its positive and negative aspects. But the principal focus is the extraordinary changes that Brazil has undergone since I first came in contact with the country in 1972, back when the Cold War was still going on, the Beatles had just broken up, and a gallon of gasoline cost only 36 cents in the United States. In purely historical terms, 40 years is barely the blink of an eye. Yet over the last four decades, Brazil has arguably experienced deeper and more profound changes than it did during some of the centuries when it was a Portuguese colony.

Part of Brazil's rise is explained by sheer good fortune, such as being blessed with vast expanses of fertile land and abundant supplies of minerals, water, and other resources. Circumstances that it does not control, such as the emergence of China as the fastest-growing market for Brazilian exports, have also played a role. But Brazil's political leadership, both the current civilian regime and even the earlier military autocrats whose rule I still find repugnant, deserve some credit too, as do the business community and the people whose sweat and toil continue to be exploited. In a country where long-term planning has always been anathema, which loves to improvise and has traditionally expected eleventh-hour miracles to resolve its problems, those in charge have finally realized the advantages of trying to act with forethought, and the country is now reaping those benefits.

After all, the land and the resources were always there, and their potential was obvious to everyone from the moment the Portuguese first arrived in 1500. But it took more than 450 years for Brazil to begin to put all the pieces together, to develop both the discipline and the perspicacity required to make the country start to live up to its extraordinary promise. Having achieved at least a modicum of order, though it may not seem that way to someone stuck in a traffic jam in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, Brazilians can now focus on

progress. Has that hard-learned lesson been fully absorbed? That is one of the central questions of the twenty-first century for Brazil, and if it can be answered in the affirmative, there is almost no limit to Brazil's continued growth and advancement.

Because of its great natural beauty and the warmth of its people, Brazil inevitably makes a powerful first impression. Those incredible sea- and landscapes, with their vivid hues of green, blue, and white! The beaches, the pulsing music, the year-round sunshine, the easygoing tropical vibe! Everything about Brazil seems designed to provoke wonderment at the presence of so much splendor and abundance. The fifth biggest country in the world, Brazil is larger than the continental United States, with some states that are bigger than any country in Europe, and it also ranks fifth in population, with nearly 200 million inhabitants. As a people, Brazilians blend European, African, Amerindian, and Asian backgrounds and values in a way found nowhere else on earth, and their vibrant culture also reflects that intermingling. Where is the largest population of Japanese descent outside Japan? In São Paulo, Brazil's most populous city and state. Where is the biggest concentration of people of Italian descent outside Italy? Also in São Paulo.

Brazil has always been a country of extremes of generosity and selfishness, compassion and cruelty, in which things tend to be, as a Brazilian expression puts it, "either eight or eighty," and attitudes oscillate from excitement to disappointment, with little middle ground. It remains so. Great wealth exists alongside misery, almost literally in the case of cities like Rio de Janeiro, where slum dwellers live and die in shacks on hillsides overlooking elegant seaside neighborhoods such as Ipanema and Copacabana. The annual bacchanal of Carnival, with its uncontrolled Dionysian outbursts, immediately gives way to the austerity of Lent. The parched severity of the northeast backlands, still the country's poorest and most backward region, abuts the lushness of the Amazon, driving peasants from desert to jungle in a doomed search for an El Dorado.

Yet for a nation that is so dynamic and occupies such a large piece of the earth's landmass, including the biggest chunk of the Amazon, the world's largest and most endangered rainforest, Brazil remains relatively unknown beyond its borders. What are the images that come to the minds of most foreigners when Brazil is mentioned? Soccer, samba, and beaches lead the list, the

Brazilian government has found, to its dismay, when it has commissioned polls abroad. A couple of other items round out the inventory: “The Girl from Ipanema” and perhaps some other bossa nova songs, and the Amazon jungle, of course. Those who consider themselves cognoscenti may also be aware of trendy novelties such as the Brazilian body wax, the Havaiana sandals that the Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bündchen has made popular, the caipirinha cocktail, and power drinks like açaí and guaraná.

But the deep, authentic, and serious Brazil is much more than glitz, fashion, and sensuality, and so “Brazil on the Rise” aims to show the country in another, more substantive light. While the rest of the world has been distracted by images of soccer players with fancy footwork and beauties in skimpy bathing suits, Brazil has without much fanfare become an industrial and agricultural powerhouse. Its leading exports now include airplanes and automobiles, its farms and ranches now feed much of the world, and downtown São Paulo, shown on the cover of this book, is the center of the largest concentration of banks, wealth, trade, and industry in the Southern Hemisphere.

Recognizing this recent economic boom, Wall Street analysts and investors have designated Brazil as the initial letter in the so-called BRIC group of emerging economies, which also includes Russia, India, and China. For a Latin American country used to having to operate in the shadow of American economic and military might, that is heady company to be keeping. Membership in the BRIC group confers both prestige and responsibility, for it is the BRIC group that is seen as symbolizing the transformation of the global economy in the twenty-first century, with the torch of dominance passing from the hands of the United States, Europe, and Japan and having to be shared with these new powers.

The next few years offer Brazil an unusual opportunity to bask in the world’s attention, remind the rest of us just how far it has come, and stake its claim to belonging to the first rank of nations. In 2014, the World Cup of soccer, which the Brazilian national team has won a record five times as of the June 2010 competition, will be held in Brazil for the first time since 1950 and will be played in nine or more cities. Two years later, Rio de Janeiro will become the first South American city to host the world’s biggest sporting event,

the Summer Olympics. Thanks to their experience each year at Carnival, Brazilians really know how to throw a party, and they conceive of the two coming events as a sort of giant coming-out celebration, announcing Brazil's arrival as a player, not just in athletic competition but also on the global stage.

Brazil, however, accedes to this new status with a special burden, a kind of curse, really. Seventy years ago, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, a refugee from the Nazis who had settled in the cool, tranquil mountains above Rio de Janeiro because they reminded him of the Alps in his native land, wrote a global best-seller called *Brazil: Country of the Future*. In his book, he praised Brazil for creating "quite a new kind of civilization" and forecast that the country was "destined undoubtedly to play one of the most important parts in the future development of our world."

Ever since, that slogan has been a cliché, impossible for Brazilians to live up to, inevitably brought up in any discussion of the country, and thus as much "a stigma as a prophecy," in the words of the Brazilian writer Alberto Dines. This will be the only mention of Zweig's phrase in this book, and I do so here only to indicate the unattainably high expectations that Brazil has had to confront and the inferiority complex that has resulted: No matter how much Brazil achieves, it always seems to have fallen short of fulfilling the destiny predicted for it. As first Japan and then China and India zoomed by on their way to global prominence, and even South Korea and the "tigers" of Southeast Asia won praise, attention, and investments, Brazilians have responded with a mordant counter-cliché of their own: "Brazil is the country of the future and always will be."

But maybe, just maybe, the future has finally arrived. The Brazilian national anthem has a verse describing the country as "an intrepid colossus, beautiful and strong," but one that is "eternally recumbent in a splendid cradle." That high-flown language evokes the image of a Brazil that is indolent, too contented and infantilized, too satisfied with its great good fortune, and too confident that it is favored by God and destiny to be bothered to work in any sustained or disciplined fashion to achieve greatness. In moments when their country seems to fall short of its outsize potential, Brazilians often throw up their hands in disgust and recite those lines.

Today's Brazil, however, has clearly awakened from that comfortable slumber and has left the cradle behind as it strides with vigor toward full maturity. It is not just Brazil's substantial material achievements over the last generation that are worthy of attention, it is also the manner in which the country got to its present state, so full of promise. Brazil has had unpleasant brushes with authoritarian rule during its nearly two-hundred-year history as an independent nation, some of them quite recent, but none of those episodes compares to the totalitarianism that both Russia and China have had to endure. Brazil has come a long way in a short time, with its people debating and approving every step and change in policy, ratifying their choices at the ballot box: Since a right-wing military dictatorship fell in 1985, the country has been transformed into a democracy that, though fractious at times, is exemplary, with peaceful transfers of power, at least a nominal respect for the rule of law, and a sense of chagrin when politics or conduct fall short of what is desired.

As Brazil becomes more prosperous, powerful, and capable of exercising leadership, its engagement with the rest of the world grows, and there are more reasons for the rest of us to care about how Brazilians think and what they do. Yet there are many aspects of Brazilian behavior that are baffling to outsiders. Why does Brazil permit the wholesale devastation of the Amazon, whose health as a functioning eco-system is vital to all of us if we are to avoid global warming? Why does it so strongly resent suggestions as to how to reduce that destruction, especially when they come from the United States? Why is there such violence in its large cities? Why does a society built on notions of cordiality appear to turn a blind eye to terrible inequities based on class and race? Why has it sought to thwart U.N. Security Council efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program?

For years, friends and relatives visiting me in Brazil have asked me these and other basic questions. Since that first trip of mine in 1972, I've been fortunate enough to live in Brazil for more than fourteen years, longer than I've lived in any other place as an adult. One of my favorite Brazilian artists, the Grammy Award-winning bossa nova composer and pianist Antônio Carlos Jobim, used to warn newcomers that "Brazil is not for beginners." Witty and sardonic, the expression made me wonder if it would ever be possible to feel

confident that you know the country. I've had ample time to think about responses and to test my ideas on Brazilian friends and my Brazilian relatives by marriage. I don't claim to have all the answers, and at times my explanations may seem overly critical or even harsh. But I write with a deep and abiding affection and sense of admiration for Brazil and its people. Their society is one of the most richly humanized I have ever experienced, both in terms of its many flaws and its equally plentiful virtues.