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Telenovelas and National Identity in Brazil

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Telenovelas and National Identity in Brazil

Mauro Pereira Porto

In 1981, the Brazilian military government was facing one of its most important political crises. Divided by a struggle between “hard-liners,” who wanted to oppose the growing opposition by force, and those supporting the political opening started by General-President Ernesto Geisel in the mid 1970s, the leaders of the dictatorship were discussing the most appropriate strategy for overcoming internal dissent and for consolidating their power. General Golbery do Couto e Silva was one of the most important members of the political establishment of the authoritarian regime and he was also a key strategist of the process of political opening. Nevertheless, because of disagreements with General-President João Batista de Figueiredo (1979-1985), Golbery¹ resigned from his position in the Presidential Cabinet. Asked by journalists about the reasons of his withdrawal from the government, the General responded: “Don’t ask me anything. I have just left Sucupira” (cited by Fadul, 1993, p. 146)

The General’s statement is revealing of the links between television melodramatic serials and national identity in Brazil. Sucupira was the imagined city in which the story of the telenovela *O Bem Amado* (The Well Loved, 1973) took place.² The successful telenovela of Dias Gomes portrayed a traditional political leader in a small north-eastern town. The character Odorico Paraguaçu personified the traditional political class which dominates through archaic methods and rhetoric, and which is contrasted to new social processes and groups shaping the country in the 1970s (urbanization, modernization, the press, the new middle class, etc.). With his provocative reply to journalists, General Golbery was ironically recognizing the appropriateness of the parallel between Sucupira and the “nation” and between Odorico and the military regime. His comment shows how very early on telenovelas were presenting a specific representation of the nation and how Brazilians recognized themselves in such a representation.

¹ In this paper, I follow the Brazilian tradition of designating individuals by their first name.

² Unless otherwise stated, all telenovelas discussed in this paper were produced by Brazil’s dominant network, TV Globo. This emphasis on TV Globo is related to the limited scope of this essay, but it is also a result of its dominant position in Brazil’s communication landscape.

The centrality of television series for the formation of national identities has been highlighted by several authors (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Estill, 2001; Fadul, 1993; Hamburger, 2005; Lopez, 1995; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990; Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996; Tufte, 2000). Nevertheless, the dynamic nature of these processes is not always recognized. What happens when media representations of the nation shift, challenging traditional ways of thinking and imagining? How to explain those shifts and how are they related to broader political, economic, and social changes? This paper seeks to contribute in these debates by investigating the relationship between telenovelas and national identity in the last four decades of Brazilian political history. In particular, it examines main trends in telenovela representations of social and political realities, arguing that telenovelas have become a central “mass ceremony” in which images of nationhood have been negotiated in Brazil. Moreover, the analysis shows that this image of the nation presented by telenovelas has shifted across time by incorporating emergent meanings that originated from civil society and from the general process of democratization that has characterized Brazil since the mid 1980s.

Telenovelas, hegemony, and national identity

One of the central aims of this paper is to analyze telenovelas’ role as a central space in which shared collective identities are negotiated in contemporary Brazil. But before advancing in this direction, this section presents the theoretical framework on the basis of which the analysis will be carried out. In particular, it is important to clarify the concept of national identity. As Schlesinger (1987) notes, national identity has become an all-purpose catchword that rarely is presented within a coherent and clear theorization of cultural processes.

To advance in the examination of the role of telenovelas in shaping collective identities, Benedict Anderson’s (1991) influential study of the origins of nationalism offers a good starting point. Anderson defines the “nation” as particular type of cultural artefact, as an “imagined political community.” According to the author, “mass ceremonies” play a significant role in the construction of nationhood. These ceremonies refer to the consumption of a cultural product by a mass audience in which “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he (sic) performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson, 1991, p. 35). Among

the cultural products that were central in the creation of this sense of symbolic membership, Anderson focuses on newspaper- and novel-reading as key rituals in the formation of the modern national identities.

By emphasizing the symbolic construction of nationhood and the role of communication technologies, Anderson offers important analytical tools for the analysis of telenovelas. Nevertheless, his framework has some important limitations that need to be addressed. For the purposes of this paper, two central questions are particularly important. First, there is a neglect of popular culture and audiovisual technologies in Anderson's analysis of nation-building. His approach has been criticized for insisting upon literacy as the basis for national sentiments and for neglecting the role of popular culture (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996, p. 12; Rowe & Schelling, 1991, pp. 24-25). He has also been criticized for ignoring the role of other communicative practices that go beyond print media. As Schelesinger (1987, p. 249) notes, it is odd that Anderson does not take into account post-Gutenberg media technologies.

These lapses are particularly significant in Latin America, where the penetration of the print media has been historically very limited and where sophisticated film and broadcasting industries have incorporated oral and visual traditions from popular sectors to build compelling images of the "nation." We need therefore to investigate the role of audiovisual spheres in general, and of television fiction in particular, in processes of nation-building.

In the case of contemporary Brazil, television has established mass ceremonies much broader and significant in scope than the public forums created by the print media. Since the late 1960s, television in general, and telenovelas in particular, have provided a common platform that allows citizens from different social backgrounds to engage with a variety of social and political problems. Several studies have shown that telenovelas generate a unified national public space that provides diverse audiences with a common vocabulary that cuts across regional, class, and other social boundaries (Hamburger, 2005; Kottak, 1990; La Pastina, 1999; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990; Pait, 2005). This can be clearly seen in the realm of everyday life conversations, where telenovelas spark intense flows of gossip, rumours, and public debate (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 79; Page, 1995, p. 447).

It is therefore important to recognize the role of telenovelas as a central mass ceremony that allows disparate audiences to share a communicative experience and a common vocabulary.

Nevertheless, the notion of a unified “public forum” tends to downplay the contradictory and complex struggles that characterize the formation of collective identities. In this context, it is important to point out a second shortcoming of Anderson’s framework. Although he recognizes the power struggles and conflicts that shape the formation of sentiments of national identity, the concept of “imagined political community” tends to imply a relatively homogenous cultural configuration. In particular, Anderson’s approach does not consider “how a national culture is continuously redeveloped and the contours of national identity chronically redrawn” (Schlesinger, 1987, p. 250).

In order to understand nationhood as a cultural artefact that is both shared and contested, as well as to investigate how and why it changes across time, I rely on Antonio Gramsci’s (1997) concept of hegemony. Gramsci’s approach directs our attention to the processes by which dominant groups justify and keep their domination and still obtain the active consensus of those governed. According to Gramsci, the political and cultural leadership that is exercised in the realm of civil society is an essential component in struggles for political power in more complex societies. By defining hegemony as an active process that is permanently created and re-created, Gramsci allows us to understand national identity as a cultural construct that is both dominant and contested, shared and opposed, effective and unstable.

The British Cultural Studies tradition has relied heavily on Gramsci and his concept of hegemony to identify the contradictory and complex nature of cultural and communication practices. Raymond Williams (1990), in particular, offers important analytical tools to overcome traditional functionalist approaches that define culture or media representations as mechanic reflections of society. Williams proposes to replace the concept of “reflection” by the concept of “mediation,” which designates a more active process in which distinctive realms of social life (culture, society, media, etc) are connected, but not over-determined. Mediation also designates a dynamic relationship that frequently affects the original meanings exchanged in cultural and communication practices.

Williams can also help us overcome one of the limitations of Anderson’s approach, namely the tendency to conceive of nationhood as a relatively homogenous cultural configuration. Williams insists on the need to recognize the complexity of any culture and the dynamic nature of the interrelations between its parts. This is accomplished by the identification

of “dominant,” “residual,” and “emergent” cultural elements (Williams, 1990, pp. 121-127). According to the author, the residual refers to elements of a culture’s past that are still active in the present, while the emergent designates new meanings and values that are continually being created.

Based on Gramsci, the British school, and many other sources, a rich cultural studies tradition has emerged in Latin America, providing sophisticated frameworks for analyzing the connections between cultural identities and communication technologies (see Escosteguy, 2001; Schlesinger & Morris, 1997, for more comprehensive reviews). The works of Jesús Martín-Barbero, in particular, offer valuable analytical tools that will be applied in the analysis that follows. In a path-breaking book about communication and cultural practices in Latin America, including popular culture and telenovelas, Martín-Barbero (1993) further develops the concepts of hegemony and mediation. By moving the analytical focus from the media to the cultural mediations of everyday life, Martín-Barbero sheds new light on the place of television in Latin American societies.

In the analysis that follows, I apply these conceptual tools (hegemony, mediation, dominant/residual/emergent, etc) to discuss the role of television in the construction of an imagined and compelling sentiment of national identity in Brazil. Based on these assumptions, it is possible to consider television as the most dynamic “private apparatus of hegemony” in the building of representations about the nation in Brazil. This perspective allows us to consider the television institution no longer as “an apparatus that manages one-dimensionally the social and ideological reproduction of the existing social order” but as “a contradictory space where meaning is negotiated and cultural hegemony created and re-created in the play of mediations” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 149).

As I show next, telenovelas construct a compelling idea of nation through “microcosms,” the imagined locations in which the telenovelas’ stories take place. Through metaphors and analogies that refer to the elements of the general system, the telenovelas focus on the changes and conflicts in the social relations (Carvalho et al., 1980, p. 56). In the next pages, I investigate how such localized representations of the nation have shaped and been shaped by processes of political and social changes in different phases of Brazil’s political history.

Telenovelas, modernization, and the authoritarian state (1964-1973)

In this section, I analyze the role of telenovelas in the construction of nationhood during the first decade of daily television melodramas in Brazil.³ This first phase was deeply shaped by military dictatorship. According to Straubhaar (1988, p. 64), several constraints were imposed on telenovela content in this period, including:

the need to restrain political or economic criticism; the need to maintain conventional social behavior and morals; the need to create or reinforce a Brazilian identity conducive to capitalist development; and the need to present a positive image of the regime, particularly the “economic miracle.”

Censorship was especially severe during the dark period that followed the 1968 Institutional Act number 5 (AI-5). This Act eliminated the few remaining civil and political liberties, opening a dark phase of torture and political assassination of members of the opposition, especially those from leftist groups who had decided to fight the dictatorship by organizing urban and rural guerrilla movements.

Besides censorship, telenovela representations of this period were also shaped by the close alliance of interests between media owners and the military dictatorship established by a coup in 1964. The authoritarian regime’s project of “national integration” is one of the most important points of convergence between the policies of General-President Emílio Garrastazu Médici (1969-1974) and the expansion and unification of TV Globo’s programming (Carvalho, Kehl, & Ribeiro, 1980, p. 24). The “integration” of the nation demanded the standardization of aspirations and preferences and the creation of a specific consumer culture that supported the unequal model of development of the so called “Brazilian Miracle” (1968-1973), a period in which the country experienced very high rates of economic growth and a simultaneous concentration of the wealth in the hands of the upper classes. Thus, the national identity formed in the period was linked to the market, a national integration which is achieved through the integration of the market (Ortiz, 1989, p. 165).

During the initial period of the military dictatorship in Brazil, the main problematic of telenovela plots was the conflict between the “old” and the “new,” between rural traditions and

³ The first telenovela broadcast on a daily basis was *2-5499 Ocupado* (2-5499 Engaged), aired by TV Excelsior in 1963. For analytical purposes, I do not consider daily telenovelas broadcast before the military coup (between June 1963 and March 1964).

the modern processes of industrialization and urbanization (Carvalho et al., 1980; Kehl, 1986). Television in general, and telenovelas in particular, played an important role in “re-educating” the population in a rapid process of urbanization (Kehl, 1986, pp. 286-287). This is a common aspect of the construction of the idea of nation in marginal societies. As several authors demonstrate, the desire to achieve modernity has defined the construction of national identity in Latin America (Garcia Canclini, 1995; Ortiz, 1989; Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996; Rowe & Schelling, 1991). In the specific case of Brazil, Ortiz (1989) argues that the tendency has been to highlight modernization and development as central elements of national identity. Ortiz argues that even though in some instances this pattern has had a progressive role, it also led the country to adopt a non-critical view of the “modern” world.

The authoritarian regime’s optimistic and nationalistic discourse (“This is a country moving ahead” and “Brazil: love it or leave it” were some of the official slogans of the period) was also a reaction to the national identity being shaped by progressive and radical movements in the period preceding the 1964 coup. Thus, the national identity established by the military between 1964 and 1973 can be seen as a form of “official nationalism,” a kind of nationalism based on a fear of the political mobilization of the popular classes, a conscious, self-protective policy (see Anderson, 1991). Politically conservative and with an emphasis on economic modernization, this national identity was fundamentally marked by the repression of popular movements and all alternative ideas of the “nation.” Not surprisingly, there was a tendency to eliminate trade-unions and other forms of collective mobilization from telenovela representations of the nation in this initial period (Vink, 1988, p. 206).

No other social group expressed such aspirations of consumerism and modernization better than the “new” middle class which was born out of the economic expansion that took place during the “Brazilian Miracle.” It is the values and expectations of this middle class that will dominate the plots of the telenovelas. In the representation of the nation based on the views of middle-income, urban sectors, the working class usually appears as a caricature. As author and director Walter Avancini puts it: “The *novela*⁴ continues to follow the language codes, the tastes, and the ambitions of the middle class, even if class conflict is more manifest in some hourly slots than it was in the past. But the working class continues to be represented as a caricature” (quoted

⁴ In Brazil, telenovelas are known by the shorter designation of “novelas.”

by Mattelart & Matterlart, 1990, p. 80). In TV Globo's telenovelas, the working class settings are never really poor, as they exhibit a certain comfort and a lot of furniture. For example, author Manoel Carlos complained that, in spite of his instructions in relation to the homes of working class characters, the settings were frequently embellished (Vink, 1988, p. 177).

Two telenovelas aired by TV Tupi represent key moments in this initial period: *O Direito de Nascer* (The Right to be Born, 1964/1965) and *Beto Rockefeller* (1968-1969). The first was an adaptation of Cuban writer Félix Caignet's well-known melodrama, which had already been successful in radio. Set in the Cuba of the 1920s, the plot tells the story of a single mother, whose son Albertino Limonta is threatened by her tyrannical and morally conservative father Don Rafael.⁵ The family's black maid Maria Dolores runs away with the child and raises him to become a successful doctor. The telenovela was the first daily melodrama to galvanize the country, becoming a huge success in terms of popularity and audience ratings. The episode in which "mammy" Dolores revealed to Don Rafael the true identity of his grandson was seen by 1,5 million viewers (Araújo, 2000, p. 86). According to press accounts of the time, even religious ceremonies and sessions of the Senate changed their schedule as not to coincide with telenovela (Ortiz, Borelli, & Ramos, 1991, p. 62). The Cuban melodrama's popularity pushed TV Globo and other television channels to increase the airtime devoted to telenovelas, leading to the genre's dominance of prime time scheduling, which continues to this day.

In the case of *Beto Rockefeller*, it inaugurated a faster narrative rhythm and the use of colloquial language, with characters that became closely associated with the national ethos (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 15). Beto, the protagonist of the telenovela, is a charming, cunning, and deceptive middle class man that is able to enter the world of the upper classes by faking his identity as a wealthy member of the elite. The adventures of this anti-hero illustrate some of the main themes of the period, including urbanization and the rise of the middle class to positions of affluence. *Beto Rockefeller* also marks a transition from more traditional melodramatic texts to a focus on realistic depictions of national themes.

⁵ When describing telenovela plots, I rely heavily on Fernandes' (1997) comprehensive compendium of telenovela stories.

Telenovelas and political opening: reconstructing the imagined nation (1973-1985)

The previous section has shown that telenovelas' representations were initially constrained by censorship and by the regime's "official nationalism." Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that the image of the country constructed by telenovelas during the military dictatorship was fixed and free of contradictions. In this section, I examine the ways in which telenovelas contributed to build a hegemonic view of the nation in a period of economic and political crises by incorporating emergent demands from civil society.

The "official nationalism" of the authoritarian regime started to face severe legitimacy problems after 1973. The end of the economic expansion and the international oil crisis helped erode the "Brazilian Miracle" and threatened the new middle class. Political opposition grew and in 1974 the only opposition party allowed by the military (MDB) achieved its first electoral victories. In response to this shifting political scenario, General-President Ernesto Geisel (1974-1980) established the project of *abertura*, a process of political opening that was supposed to be "slow, gradual and safe." In her excellent history of TV Globo, Maria Rita Kehl (1986, p. 259) argues the following about this period:

The moment demanded TV to fulfil this role: the 1973 "oil crisis" contributed to accelerate the end of the economic expansion, here, and the middle classes, until then unconditional allies of the trans- and national bourgeoisie's projects for the country, started to show the first signs of dissatisfaction. Globo tried to face emergent issues, in an attempt to contribute in the building of a new social consensus (from which most of the working class has been excluded) or to the renewal in reformist terms of the consensus created between 1964 and 1968 (my translation).

Thus, in the new context of political and economic crisis, TV Globo's executives recognized the need to reform the regime's official nationalism (the "consensus created between 1964 and 1968," in Kehl's words). TV Globo contributed to establish a new social consensus that incorporated new demands and issues, as to maintain the hegemony of the same "historical bloc" or class alliance of which the network was part. TV Globo realized that instead of hiding the problems and demands of the social reality it would be better to incorporate them under its protection (Carvalho et al., 1980, p. 17).

The idea of the "nation" built by the authoritarian regime faced a crisis after 1973 not only because of the economic difficulties, but also because of an important social change: the

growth and consolidation of civil society in the late 1970s. This period witnessed a remarkable expansion of collective movements and the rise of new and influential actors. One of the most important emergent social movements of the period was the “New Trade Unionism,” formed by a new brand of independent trade-unions that mobilized the most advanced sectors of the working class, challenging the dictatorship through massive strikes in 1979/1980.⁶ Society was now more organized and politically active and telenovelas had to deal with its new demands.

The liberalization promoted by the military in the final stages of the dictatorship affected the representation of the nation constructed by the telenovelas. Joseph Straubhaar (1988) argues that the prime time melodramas reflected the process of political opening, but were seldom among the leading actors in the promotion of political liberalization. Due to official and internal censorship, pressures from advertisers, corporate interests, as well as to collusion between media owners and the government, Straubhaar argues that TV Globo’s telenovelas contributed to delay support for the process of political opening. Although Straubhaar is right at pointing to key factors that constrained television fiction in the period, it is still important to stress the key role played by some telenovelas in eroding the regime’s legitimacy and publicizing new, emergent meanings. In particular, I argue that some telenovelas helped to give meaning to and to shape the political process by incorporating new demands coming from a stronger opposition and from a more organized civil society.

The telenovela *O Bem Amado* (The Well Loved), first aired by TV Globo in 1973, and thus before the beginning of General-President Geisel’s political opening, illustrates this active role of prime time melodramas. As we have seen, the main character of this telenovela, Odorico Paraguaçu, personified a traditional political boss who is contrasted to modern processes and groups that were shaping the country in the early 1970s. In the telenovela, Odorico decides to run for mayor of Sucupira with a single-issue platform: the promise to build the city’s first cemetery. Odorico is elected, builds the cemetery, but soon runs into problem when he cannot inaugurate it because nobody dies in Sucupira. He then gets involved in several attempts to cause the death of one of the city dwellers. He even invites a bandit, Zeca Diabo, to come back to the city, with the

⁶ The leader of this movement, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (or simply “Lula”) launched a new political party in 1980 (PT, Workers Party) and became a key protagonist in Brazilian politics. Lula was elected President in 2002 and re-elected in 2006.

hope that he will kill someone. The author of *O Bem Amado*, Dias Gomes, explains in his autobiography how he used the telenovela to build a specific representation of the nation:

In these stories, I always looked for inspiration in political facts, satirizing and criticizing the “system,” in a period when censorship did not allow that. *O Bem-amado* was a small window opened in the big wall of obscurantism built by the military regime. It does not mean that censors did not notice or did not mutilate the texts, but they had some difficulty doing that, since they were never known for their intelligence. And when they acted, they made their stupidity evident. The novela was already half way through when they prohibited calling Odorico as “colonel.” Later, they forbade calling Zeca Diabo as “captain” (Gomes, 1998, p. 276, my translation).

The author reveals his clear intention of offering audiences a subtle critique of the military dictatorship, despite the limits imposed by direct government censorship. The result was a clear association between Sucupira and the nation, as well as between Odorico to the military, which contributed to further erode the legitimacy of the regime. *O Bem Amado* offered a humorous satire of the military dictatorship and its megalomaniac projects.⁷ At the end, Odorico is the one who inaugurates the cemetery. He is killed by Zeca Diabo, the bandit that the mayor had lured back to the city.

Brazilians strongly identified themselves with the representation of the nation built by *O Bem Amado*, as demonstrated by the episode of General Golbery’s resignation from the government. Thus, by incorporating emergent demands and oppositional perspectives, *O Bem Amado* not only reflected political opening, but also contributed to accelerate it.

O Bem Amado represents an audacious and brave experiment on the part of TV Globo and author Dias Gomes, but the incorporation of emergent and critical representations by telenovelas remained limited during the 1970s and early 1980s due to several reasons. First, government censorship frequently prevented authors from incorporating political and social commentary. Second, even when state control was loosened during the period of political opening, TV Globo established self-censorship mechanisms which eventually blocked issues deemed controversial (Carvalho et al., 1980, pp. 60-63; Kehl, 1986, pp. 271-274; Mattelart &

⁷ The military was known for its ambitious infrastructure projects, including: a highway crossing the Amazon rainforest (the *Transamazônica*); the biggest electric dam in the world (*Itaipú*); the biggest bridge in the world (linking the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Niterói); and the construction of two atomic reactors near Rio de Janeiro. Odorico’s cemetery was a subtle critique of this megalomaniac projects.

Mattelart, 1990, pp. 46-47; Porto, 2003b, pp. 39-39; Vink, 1988, p. 139). Author Lauro César Muniz, for example, described how TV Globo's "text editor," José Leite Otati, functioned as an internal censor. According to Muniz, Otati prevented his telenovela *Os Gigantes* (The Giants, 1979-1980) from discussing the monopolization of the economy by multinational corporations (Kehl, 1986, p. 272).

Despite the constraints imposed by government and internal censorship, critical views about the development model adopted by the military started to emerge in TV Globo's telenovelas during the process of political opening. In this period, the previous emphasis on national integration through the market and consumerism was not abandoned, but a more critical and pessimistic view of the process of modernization emerged. The telenovelas *O Espigão* (The Skyscraper, 1974) and *O Grito* (The Scream, 1975-1976), for example, discussed the negative consequences of Brazil's fast and chaotic process of urbanization, portraying big cities as a world in which alienated individuals are oppressed by powerful forces, including real state companies.

Telenovelas and the initial period of democratization (1985-1993)

The inauguration of the first civilian president after more than two decades of military rule in 1985 opened a new phase in the role of telenovelas. The end of censorship and the rise of a democratic political context allowed telenovela writers to comment more freely on contemporary political and social problems. Because of these and other reasons, the role of prime time melodramas in shaping nationhood was strengthened after redemocratization.

The transition to democracy in Brazil was a slow and difficult process. As we have seen, the military attempted to control the process of liberalization with a "gradual" and "safe" form of political opening. To maintain a democratic façade, while assuring control the executive, the military created an "Electoral College" to choose presidents for a six-year term.⁸ Nevertheless, several factors -- including the rise of a more organized civil society, the electoral growth of the opposition, and the problems in the economy -- contributed to further erode the regime's legitimacy. The final blow came in 1984, when *Diretas Já*, a national campaign calling for presidential elections, mobilized millions of Brazilians in huge demonstrations around the

⁸ The Electoral College was made up of Congress members and representatives of state assemblies. The military manipulated the rules to assure the control of the College by the official party.

country. Even though the movement failed to approve a constitutional amendment that would have restored presidential elections, it had a devastating impact on the support basis of the dictatorship. Several politicians left the official party (PDS by its Portuguese acronym) and launched the *Partido da Frente Liberal* (PFL; Party of the Liberal Front). These dissidents decided to join forces with the main opposition party (PMDB by its Portuguese acronym) and to launch a ticket with the names of Tancredo Neves for President and José Sarney for Vice-President in the Electoral College. The resulting “Democratic Alliance” was successful, electing Neves, a moderate member of PMDB, and Sarney, a dissident of the regime’s official party, PDS.

The nation was caught by surprise when Neves fell ill the night before he was supposed to take office. In a dramatic turn of events, José Sarney, the former president of PDS, the official party of the military dictatorship, is sworn in as the president who would be in charge of leading the new democracy. Although Sarney was successful in promoting the transition to an electoral democracy, his Presidency (1985-1989) was plagued by accusations of corruption, economic crisis, and several failed packages aimed at controlling high inflation rates.

During all these traumatic events, telenovelas played an active role in helping Brazilians make sense of fast processes of political change. In particular, the telenovela *Roque Santeiro* (Roque, the Saint Maker, 1985-1986) presented an allegory of Brazil’s new “democratic” government and criticized in subtle ways the type of political transition that was unfolding in the country. The fictional city of Asa Branca became another “microcosm” of the nation, allowing viewers to build compelling associations between media representations and contemporary political events (Fernandes, 1997, p. 310; Johnson, 1988; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 91; Pait, 2005; Vink, 1988, p. 179).

Roque Santeiro had been completely censored by the military dictatorship in 1975, after TV Globo had taped more than 30 episodes. But the return of democracy ten years later allowed the network to finally produce and air Dias Gomes’ text. The telenovela tells the story of the popular myth surrounding the figure of Luís Roque Duarte, or simply Roque, a former artisan known for making sculptures of Catholic saints (thus the designation of “saint maker”). According to the myth, Roque dies just after marrying the unknown shop steward Porcina while defending the city from the band led by thug Navalhada. The hero becomes a saint in the eyes of

the local population and several miracles are attributed to him. The prosperity of the city and its elite, including widow Porcina and local boss “sinhozinho” Malta, is based on the commercial exploitation of the myth. Problems emerge when Roque, who had in fact not died, returns to the city 17 years later, thus threatening the existence of the entire social order of Asa Branca. Nevertheless, nothing changes, since the truth about Roque remains hidden. Due to the suspense built around Porcina’s final choice of partner, the last episodes of *Roque Santeiro* were seen by almost 100% of the households with television sets (Vink, 1988, p. 179). TV Globo intentionally sparked curiosity about who Porcina would choose as her partner, the violent and corrupt sinhozinho Malta or the honest hero Roque. Several scenes were taped with the different possible endings.⁹ At the end, Porcina chooses Malta and his empire of lies. *Roque Santeiro* reflected and gave new meaning to a scenario of disillusionment with the country’s transition to democracy, reinforcing cynicism and a negative representation of the nation. While Malta was clearly associated to the military dictatorship, Porcina and the entire social system of Asa Branca was implicitly linked to the troubled democracy that was established during José Sarney’s Presidency (Johnson, 1988).¹⁰

In the first years of the “new democracy,” telenovela representations of the nation became more complex and diversified. One of the most fundamental aspects of this change was the introduction of discussions about social problems that used to be absent from television, including corruption and social inequality. The shortcomings of the process of modernization became so serious in the 1980s that telenovelas began developing a general attitude of cynicism and pessimism about the country. Besides *Roque Santeiro*, another example of this trend was *Vale Tudo* (Anything Goes) aired between 1988 and 1989 (Lima, 1993; Rubim, 1989; Weber, 1990). *Vale Tudo* tells the story of Maria de Fátima, a young woman who looks for social

⁹ According to Vink (1988, p. 179), two alternative endings were taped, one in which Porcina chooses Malta, the other in which she chooses Roque. Nevertheless, a third possibility was considered by TV Globo. In this third alternative, Porcina would stay with Rodésio, her black and faithful foreman. In “Denying Brazil,” Joel Zito Araújo’s excellent documentary about the representations of the blacks in Brazilian telenovelas, actor Tony Tornado, who played Rodésio in *Roque Santeiro*, revealed that the third ending was also taped. In fact, all three men are present in the final scene where Porcina takes her decision.

¹⁰ The subtitle of the telenovela was: “The saga of Roque Santeiro and the incredible history of the widow that was without ever having been.” As widow Porcina, President Sarney also “was without ever having been.” As we have seen, Tancredo Neves, not Sarney, was supposed to be the President. Moreover, just like Porcina, Sarney also had a history of association with the authoritarian past. He had been the president of PDS, the official party of the dictatorship.

ascension and enrichment by all possible means, in a clear contrast to her honest and kind mother. *Vale Tudo* also tells the story of unscrupulous corporate executives, such as villains Odete Roithman and Marco Aurélio. The question “Who has killed Odete Roithman?” galvanized the country, building a suspense that further boosted the telenovela’s ratings. In the end, businessman Marco Aurélio, who was involved in the assassination of Roithman, flees with millions of stolen dollars. Before boarding the private jet that will take him out of the country, he turns to the camera and gives the “banana sign”¹¹ to the entire national audience, highlighting the general impunity for those involved in corruption, as well as a sense of powerlessness for ordinary Brazilians.

Some authors have argued that the telenovelas *Vale Tudo*, *Que Rei Sou Eu?* (What King Am I), and *O Salvador da Pátria* (The Savior of the Country) played a central role in building a specific political scenario for the first presidential election of the new democracy in 1989 (Lima, 1993; Rubim, 1989; Weber, 1990). According to these studies, by emphasizing the corruption and the inefficiency of both the state and the political establishment, television fiction contributed to a scenario that allowed the rise of outsiders. Candidate Fernando Collor de Mello, who was then a relatively unknown governor of a small and impoverished state, adapted his campaign strategy to this scenario. Collor won the presidency with a moralist campaign that focused on the need to modernize the state and to clean the country of corruption.

Collor soon run into trouble in May 1992 when his brother Pedro gave an explosive interview to the newsmaganize *Veja* exposing a corrupt scheme in the federal government led by Collor’s former campaign treasurer, Paulo Cesar Farias. After months of intensive investigations and exposés, Congress concluded that the President was directly involved in the corrupt scheme and opened a process of impeachment, forcing Collor out of the Presidency in August and voting his impeachment in December. In this turbulent period, television fiction played again an active role in giving meaning to current events and political realities. The telenovela *Deus nos Acuda* (God Help Us, 1992/1993), in particular, was a humorous parody of the events unfolding in the period. *Deus nos Acuda* was a comic melodrama that told the story of Celestina, the Guard Angel that was put in charge of protecting Brazil. Played by veteran and irreverent comedian Dercy

¹¹ In Brazil, “giving a banana” (*dar uma banana*) is the gesture of crossing both arms, one in horizontal position, the other in vertical position, basically signifying "screw you!"

Golçalves, Celestina initially tries to refuse the new job, arguing that the country had no salvation due to widespread corruption, violence, and other social illnesses.

The political critique of current affairs was evident in the telenovela's opening, which Brazilians watched for almost seven months. *Deus nos Acuda*'s opening started with disembodied hands filling checks with huge sums of money.¹² It then showed a party with well-dressed and affluent people. A liquid substance, appearing to be mud, then starts to rise in the room of the party, almost drowning everyone. Several symbols of wealth that are frequently obtained through corruption, including U.S. dollar bills, expensive cars, and luxury boats, are also shown sinking the dirty liquid. Finally, a map shows the whole country going down the tube in a sea of mud.

Deus nos Acuda was another example of the active role of telenovelas in reinforcing a critical and pessimistic representation of Brazil's identity in a period of political turbulence. In all this period, which that starts with the inauguration of Sarney and ends with the impeachment of the first elected president of the new democracy, telenovelas played an active role in building specific sense of Brazil-ness. In this representation of the nation, politics and politicians were always associated to corruption or inefficiency.

Telenovelas and the deepening of democracy in Brazil (1993-?)

After Collor's downfall in 1992, Vice-President Itamar Franco became the new head of government and he formed a new cabinet based on a broad political coalition. In a context of continuing economic instability and high inflation rates, Itamar invited Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1993 to become his Finances Minister. Cardoso then launched a new economic plan, *Plano Real*, which succeeded in controlling inflation and in bringing the long-desired economic stability. Based on the success of the plan, Itamar launched Cardoso as the official candidate in the 1994 presidential election.

Telenovelas contributed to establish a specific scenario for the second presidential election of the democratic period in 1994 (see Porto, 1998). The telenovela *Pátria Minha* (My Homeland, 1994-1995), in particular, presented a renewed sense of national identity that went

¹² There is a clear parallel between the telenovela's opening and the "Collorgate" scandal. Checks issued by members of the corrupt scheme involving PC and president Collor were one of the most common forms of "evidence" presented by Congress investigators and by the media to prove allegations.

beyond the traditional tendency of representing the nation in cynical and negative ways. A key feature of the telenovela was the instilling of a spirit of optimism and confidence in the country's future. Such representation was built mainly by the story of the couple Pedro and Ester. Living in the United States, they face a dilemma: Pedro wants to go back to Brazil and believes that the prospects in the country are good, while Ester is against returning, arguing that the country is in chaos and that the living conditions are rather poor. After the couple returns to Brazil, Ester gradually overcomes her pessimism and finally joins the atmosphere of patriotism built by the story. This new patriotic representation of the nation, in turn, played an important role in the 1994 presidential election, since it resonated with *Plano Real* and with policies associated to incumbent candidate Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Porto, 1998).

One of the important changes in telenovela images of the nation in this last phase is the rise of new modes of representation of subordinate groups. The focus on the world of the middle class continued and the representation of the working class remained a caricature. Nevertheless, the notion of “Brazilian people” became more complex and diversified. On the one hand, subordinate groups are not recognized as social classes, but are defined instead in terms of the general category of the “poor people.” On the other hand, the country’s unequal social and economic structure has become an important theme in Brazilian telenovelas. The only dream of a miserable character like peasant Tião Galinha in the telenovela *Renascer* (Revival, 1993) is a piece of land, but he fails and, in desperation, kills himself in one of the most dramatic moments of Brazilian television fiction (Porto, 1998).

If the tendency in the previous years was to eliminate civil society from the screen, non-governmental organizations started gaining more space in telenovelas. For example, the national campaign against hunger developed by a network of civic organizations led by the charismatic sociologist Betinho was highlighted by the telenovelas *Renascer* and *Pátria Minha* (Porto, 1998). In a newspaper interview, Betinho praised *Renascer*’s character Tião Galinha for putting social problems in the national agenda, especially the fight against hunger (ibid.).

One of the most striking examples of the inclusion of social movements and subaltern groups by telenovelas was *O Rei do Gado* (The Cattle King, 1996-1997). This telenovela focused on one of the most important social movements in Brazil, the Landless Movement or MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra*). The MST has been struggling for an

agrarian reform since its foundation in 1984 in close alliance with the Workers Party (PT). The basic strategy of the movement has been to move a cluster of families onto government-owned or unproductive private land and stay there until they are granted title to the land (Hochstetler, 2000). *O Rei do Gado* tells the story of two families of Italian immigrants who came to Brazil in the 1940s, the Berdinazzis and the Mezengas. Because of disputes over land, the families develop a strong rivalry and become enemies. After an accident, one of the Berdinazzi, the beautiful Luana, loses her memory and becomes a manual labourer in sugar cane plantations. She joins the landless movement led by Regino, who decides to invade one of the farms of the powerful Bruno Mezenga, the “cattle king.” Not knowing that they belong to opposing families, Luana and Bruno fall in love.

O Rei do Gado built a new type of representation about the MST, especially considering the fact that news coverage of the movement has been traditionally critical or even hostile (Hammond, 2004; Porto, 2003). In contrast, the telenovela presented MST members as human beings who just aspire to have a piece of land to grow their crops. Despite the fact that the leaders of MST criticized some aspects of the telenovela, they praised it as a positive contribution to the struggle for agrarian reform in Brazil (Hamburger, 2000; La Pastina, 2004).

O Rei do Gado also played an active role in discussing Brazilian politics. One of its main characters was Senator Caxias, an honest politician who devoted his life to the struggle for agrarian reform in Brazil. After “real” senator Darcy Ribeiro praised the fictional character in the press, an intense blurring of fiction and reality took place in the telenovela. In the climax of this fusion of media representations and national identity, two senators of the Workers Party (PT), Benedita da Silva and Eduardo Suplicy, appeared in the telenovela episode portraying Senator Caxias’ funeral, which was taped in the building of Congress, in the national capital (Hamburger, 2000, 2005; Hammond, 2004; La Pastina, 1999, 2004).

Some conclusions

Telenovelas have become a central mass ceremony in which compelling images of the nation have been negotiated in Brazil. These images, in turn, have been deeply shaped by a middle class perspective and by hegemonic forces of Brazilian society. As a result, television fiction has contributed to build a new social consensus that, in spite of being always challenged,

was able to sustain social, economic, political, and cultural hierarchies in a deeply unequal society. However, the complex nature of telenovela representations has to be recognized. It would be a mistake to assume that they have presented a monolithic view of Brazilian reality that only reinforced dominant cultural elements. Because they had to face a more complex environment, characterized by the deepening of democracy and by a more organized and politically active civil society, telenovelas incorporated new themes and demands, giving visibility to emergent actors and demands.

Brazilian telenovelas have contributed to renew and reinforce hegemonic values by re-signifying emerging representations in terms of the perspectives of dominant groups. As Martin-Barbero (1987) notes in a study about Colombian telenovelas, television melodramas frequently incorporate demands from the audience, but they also re-signify them in terms of a hegemonic social discourse. In the Brazilian case, television fiction has played a key mediating role, allowing accommodations in the class alliance of which TV Globo has been an essential part.

I would be a simplification, nevertheless, to interpret the role of telenovelas solely in terms of the maintenance of a hegemonic image of the national that reflected the basic interests of the dominant power bloc. In response to the deepening of social and political democratization, telenovela authors and producers incorporated emergent meanings in the fictional plots. As a result, telenovelas have frequently allowed viewers to encounter contradictory and compelling representations that offered new opportunities for the expression and mobilization of oppositional ways of imagining the nation. In interesting ways, television fiction reflected, but also gave new meaning to, Brazil's recent process of democratization.

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