

Jeff Garmany & Anthony W. Pereira (2018) *Understanding Contemporary Brazil*, Routledge, 254 pp. (ISBN 978-1138039339). Hardback/Paperback/Ebook.

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In *Understanding Contemporary Brazil*, Jeff Garmany and Anthony W. Pereira have compiled a welcome and distinctly post-modern synthesis of contemporary scholarship on Brazil. So, how does one understand contemporary Brazil? Garmany and Pereira, both based at King's Brazil Institute, King's College London (Pereira as Director and Garmany as Senior Lecturer) are quick to point out that their goal was not to describe current events but to explain the social contexts that give rise to the Brazil we see today and to anchor their university reading lists in a single text. Academic texts may not always seem so timely, when compared to the flurry of breaking news, yet it is often useful to take a step back to see the broader trends and narratives developing over time.

Readers will find a toolkit to analyse social, cultural, political and economic issues, and an extensive bibliography of Brazilian and non-Brazilian scholars, many of whom have been put into conversation with each other for the first time. These references alone provide an excellent starting point for future researchers and students but still point to the enormity of understanding any country and the main discourses surrounding any national issue.

How does this approach help us to analyse recent political events in Brazil from the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff to the election of Jair Bolsonaro? Do these events follow the emergence of populist right-wing movements that we have seen elsewhere? Do they signal a return to Brazil's authoritarian past?

Garmany and Pereira offer a balanced treatment of recent changes, arguing that Dilma Rousseff's impeachment can be best understood as a loss of a vote of confidence amongst her peers in congress and the senate. Brazil has more than twenty political parties represented in government and presidents thus require broad support to govern effectively. This system, with roots in a deliberate policy initiative from the Vargas era, forces collaboration and consensus building between parties rather than be dominated by a single one. This can also lead to specific interest groups with significant influence over the political process, as we see with the agricultural lobby with one third of the lower house, and one quarter of the senate, far more than any single party. Bolsonaro's rise can be seen in this same context of increasing dissatisfaction with the Workers Party (PT); that had previously won four consecutive presidential elections.

Brazil may indeed "not be for beginners" but if we are to have any chance of understanding events/issues in Brazil and their wider implications, scholarship must include multiple points of view. Garmany and Pereira thus draw on work from many

scholars including those whose work mostly exists in Portuguese. Caio Prado Júnior, Raymundo Faoro, Boris Fausto, Florestan Fernandes, Milton Santos, Marilena Chauí, Ermínia Maricato, Candido Mendes, Celso Furtado, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda provide a healthy balance to familiar names anchored in English reading lists.

Brazil takes its name from the pau-Brasil, a redwood that had been common to Brazil's Atlantic Forest (Mata Atlântica) and was quickly traded for its uses as timber and dye. Exports soon grew to include rubber, sugar and coffee, which dominated the economy until the Great Depression in 1929 when the US market crashed and Brazil was forced to diversify. Brazil has continued to play a central role in international trade ever since. It was one of the 23 founding members of GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) in 1947, founding member of Mercosur in 1991 and the WTO in 1995. Brazil's broad economic story in the late 20th century was one of boom with the economy quadrupling between 1965 and 1980 alone.

Today, the humble soya bean leads exports with \$33 billion annually, and is joined by a long diverse list from oil to minerals to computer parts to aeroplane engines. Brazil is still the world's largest exporter of coffee though sugar now accounts for a higher contribution to the national purse. The economy is buttressed by a strong and vibrant service sector, that forms more than two thirds of Brazil's GDP with strong robust domestic consumption.

Brazil has diplomatically navigated the emergence of China as a global power and is well positioned for a multi-polar world. China is Brazil's largest trading partner, with exports to China valued at more than double that of Brazil's exports to the US. Dependencies on both markets however mean that Brazil is susceptible to shocks in both. A slowdown in the Chinese economy in 2015 was one of the main contributing factors to Brazil sliding into recession and put further pressure on Dilma Rouseff's government. President Temer was equally unpopular yet initiated economic policies that assured markets.

Whilst Vargas is often credited with specific nation building policies, Juscelino Kubitschek played no small role in establishing the future direction of Brazil. Brazil's population and capital cities have historically been centred along the east coast, distancing itself from potential conflicts with neighbours, and allowing a relatively peaceful rise. Building an entirely new capital city in Brasília, the geographical centre of the country, sent a statement about Brazil's modernist intentions and a platform for further expansion. These lofty goals came with a price however, creating far higher levels of public debt and the leveraged public balance sheet that we still see today.

National symbols (e.g. carnival, capoeira, foro, feijoada, football) took permanent root in the 1930s under Getúlio Vargas' active support and funding. It wasn't until Rede

Globo (TV Globo) was launched in 1965 however, at the beginning of the military dictatorship, that Brazilians had a daily reference point for a shared Brazilian identity. Important novels such as *Casa Grande* have also played their part in helping Brazil take stock of its past but it is has been television, more than any other medium that has shaped contemporary discourse. Today, Globo has a daily audience of up to 85 million viewers, greater than all other public networks combined.

Brazil as a former Portuguese colony is still foregrounded in daily life and culture. Samba schools recreate images of life and hard toil on plantations. Daily protests call for redistribution of land, social reform and civic rights. The opening ceremony of the Rio Olympic Games provided an opportunity for Brazil to project itself to the world. Choreographers created idealised scenes of indigenous communities, the subsequent arrival of the Portuguese navigators, the flight of Santos Dumont, Gilberto Gil, tiered favela landscapes, classical dance routines combined with robotics and contemporary dance.

Archetypal images of Brazil, as with any country, fall away under close scrutiny. Visions of racial harmony/democracy do not represent the lived experience though other models do not fit the Brazilian mould either. With independence in 1822, Brazil's colonial period had lasted more than three hundred years, yet by the end of the 19th century Brazil had been a colony, Empire and republic. Currents of positivism that emerged in the 19th century led to the abolition of slavery in 1888 and an influx in immigration from Europe, as well as parts of the Middle East and Asia. Many Brazilians thus have relatively recent ancestral ties across a vast landscape.

Garmany and Pereira introduce far more of Brazil's history than one may expect, arguing that only by understanding specific aspects of recent history can we analyse contemporary social contexts that have arisen.

Writing from my home in Cambridge, after living in Brasília for several years, I'm conscious that there are more than 200,000 Brazilians living in London alone. Brazil is not some exotic distant land but lives through many actors, interactions and media that go well beyond the political and economic. Brazil can thus be understood through countless interwoven stories and Garmany and Pereira have given many a place to begin.