

Tropical Truth: a reading of contemporary debate on Tropicália

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1. Commemoration

Since the end of 1997, there has been considerable attention paid in Brazil to Tropicália and its significance in Brazilian cultural history. Most of the more reasoned debate centered on the publication in November of 1997 of Caetano Veloso's *Verdade Tropical*. But there were more options available for those interested in Tropicália. It was the 1998 Bahian carnival theme; at least one televised concert and an academic conference were held¹; home pages were set up on the Internet and online chats and bulletin boards discussed Tropicalismo; and there was coverage of much of this in the newspapers.

Perhaps, as some have said, this was "hype" to sell books, records and package tours to Salvador. Certainly, much was repetitive, unreflectively laudatory or intended for the momentary pleasures of carnival, television watching, navigating on the Internet. But if many of the commemorations repeated what has already been said about Tropicalismo, that is the nature of the process of "calling to mind clearly" past events in the present. Such commemorations require some kind of consensus about the events' significance or at least the main image. Furthermore, repetitiveness is not without interest. To paraphrase Silviano Santiago (1982), writing in "Apesar de Dependente, Universal", of the use of canonical texts from abroad, the reiteration of such models highlights and gives special importance to modifications in the context, genre and narrative voice of new versions. The fact that discourse on Tropicalismo is repetitive is a sign of how it is becoming a way of speaking about other things. It is becoming part of the canon of Brazilian identity discourse, accepted as an essential point of reference. Canonization involves a process of dispute over evidence by specialists and broad, not necessarily informed, public recognition. How this happened with Tropicalismo will be discussed here.

History and its uses

Clearly, the range of evidence and ways of understanding Tropicalismo is not unlimited and the repertory of possibilities is determined still by the answers Tropicalismo gave in 1967-68, to basic questions. These questions can be arranged into two main blocs:

¹ "Tropicalismo: a explosão e seus estilhaços". Universidade Católica de Brasília/Universidade de Brasília/Funarte; 27-30 October 1997. Seminar topics were: Tropicalismo e Contexto Político; Tropicalismo, a explosão: como e por que?; Arte Engajada/Arte Alienada: Tropicalismo e Contracultura; Tropicalismo e Contemporaneidade: os desdobramentos históricos culturais.

- What response can be made to authoritarianism in politics (the military regime) and in esthetics (the imperatives of consumer society on the one hand and essentialisms of protest music on the other)? The answer, while it compared the pop music industry and its festivals at the time of the military regime to the Roman circus, was to reject the instrumentalization of culture for Left political ends and embrace an anarchism of identity whose most iconoclastic expressions were the adoption of kitsch and – as elsewhere in the world – the looks of black power and of androgyny.
- What is the part of the socio-economically and ethnically excluded Other in national identity and what can be made of the foreign Other's influence? In other words, how can the Brazilian self forge autonomy from the metropolis while recognizing internal differences? To this question, the original Tropicalista response was very similar to that of Oswald de Andrade's *antropofagia*: it one-upped the dominant foreign Other, in the Brazilian imagination, by flaunting a sophisticated but "uncivilized" popular taste for just about every kind of music.

It is possible to come to a consensus about the circumstances in which Tropicalismo arose, but that is less true about the ways it is read from the perspective of the present. Indeed, one of the recurrent themes in discussions of Tropicalismo is how continuities can be drawn between the 1960s and the current period and one of the key questions is how the movement's proponents may have lost their critical edge. Implicit here is a question of identity: how Brazil has changed over the last decades. What has become of the Tropicalista generation, in which most who write about it include themselves.

And what has? some possible answers are:

1. Contemporary esthetics and the structure of the market for cultural products have changed. Having emerged as a structure of feeling, expressing "something at the very edge of semantic availability" (Williams, 1977: 133), Tropicalismo now represents a full-fledged social formation, generally known and recognized.
 - 2.1 The political scene has changed, post-utopian sensibility is widespread and criticism of Left orthodoxy is now conventional wisdom, so Tropicalismo's political dimension can no longer be understood as critique from within the Left.
 - 2.2 The political scene has also changed in that divisions are less clear and authoritarian rule much more subtle: iconoclasm is no longer possible because there is no image of strong authority to offend. In any case, the fathers of Tropicalismo are now powerful figures in the cultural establishment, with access to the politically powerful.

3. Discourses on *Tropicália 30 Anos* - *Verdade Tropical*, reviews and opinions

The dispute over including Tropicalismo in the canon focused mainly on Caetano Veloso's book, *Verdade Tropical*. First, a word about the book itself and the difficulties of reviewing it. The title, much criticised as pompous, is wordplay on the song, "Vereda Tropical", a rhumba that was popular in the 1950s. The title both promises a Brazilian identity discourse and, with the reference to a path, a narrative of a journey; it may even suggest – certainly more distantly – the location of maximum Brazilianness: the *grande sertão: veredas*.

Verdade Tropical is a book of memoirs. Paradoxically, while it makes an authoritative statement on a Brazilian cultural phenomenon and was a bestseller there, its imagined public is American. Caetano is concerned to explain the place of US mass culture in Brazil. On this point, he continues to say that US culture, consumed naively, leads to conformism; framed by a comment or interpretation, it is fully part of the Brazilian cultural environment. In other words, not Marilyn Monroe of the movies and pin-ups, but Warhol's Marilyn.

Lush, abundant imagery and elusiveness from paraphrase are key aspects of Caetano Veloso's discourse. An example: following a description of Brazilian cultural politics right after the coup, Caetano writes a passage particularly dense, though coherent, on Brazilian pop's importance at the time:

Que a música popular centralizasse as energias [...] só reafirma a força de uma tradição que possibilitou a bossa nova: a música popular brasileira tem sido, de fato, para nós como para estrangeiros, o som do Brasil do descobrimento sonhado (e aqui já se vislumbra um outro descobrimento, mútuo, em que o coração tende mais para o índio, que subiu à nau alienígena tão sem medo que ali adormeceu, do que para o grande Pedr'álvares, que mal pôs os pés em solo americano). Ela é a mais eficiente arma de afirmação da língua portuguesa no mundo, tantos insuspeitados amantes esta tem conquistado por meio da magia sonora da palavra cantada à moda brasileira. (1997: 17)

The passage is heavy with subtexts, as it goes from political concerns to the Bossa Nova, to a fantasy of what Brazil might have been, had Portuguese and Indians met on the latter's terms, in the scenes described by Pero Vaz de Caminha, and on to the affirmation of Portuguese as musical in itself,. In order, the history of Bossa Nova, its relationship to socio-political dynamics, Pero Vaz de Caminha's description of the Portuguese landing in Brazil and what might have happened, if what did happen hadn't, and the international market for Brazilian pop make glancing appearances. Caetano's narrative is dreamlike in structure and logic, using overdetermination, dislocation, indetermination and, to boot, backward causation, though I'll leave examples of each of these out, for the sake of brevity.

Caetano's narrative is dreamlike in structure and logic, using overdetermination, dislocation, indetermination and, to boot, backward causation, as seen in the following examples:

- The many reasons given for and meanings of Brazil's discovery, eight years after the rest of the continent had been claimed by Spain implies that the discovery was overdetermined (p.13ff.);
- Elvis Presley's significance is dislocated from one social place to another, as he is made to represent all of American rock, with little reference to what he meant on the US scene; then João Gilberto is suggested to be a Brazilian Elvis, and then Elvis is finally recontextualized in the United States (p.23ff.);
- Raul Seixas is considered an heir to Tropicalismo even though he started his career at the same time, a kind of backward causation is invoked (p.48-49).

Another structure of argument is binary opposition. Preferring Brazilian racism to American, for example, he leaves aside the question of racism itself (p.505). This is a common narrative structure in the mass media, studied by Roland Barthes, so long ago, in *Mythologies*, of 1958.

Unlike rationalistic identity discourse in the tradition of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda or Gilberto Freyre and like Oswald de Andrade's manifestos, *Verdade Tropical's* images come before its lines of reasoning. This produces a similar effect to what is often called "superabundance of images" in debates over postmodernism and is part of the reason why reactions to *Verdade Tropical*, present in reviews and comment in the press, actually focused so little on his ideas. These reviews can be divided into three basic categories: those accepting Caetano's importance and generally laudatory about the book; those that, while admitting that Tropicalismo was a watershed, criticise its results; and a small number that use the occasion to reflect on themes of Brazilian culture.

The Caetano fans who review the book prefer to see it as a document about the past. For example, Eduardo Gianetti (1997), an economist cited by Caetano (Veloso, 1997: 501) and invited by the *Folha* to write a review, and Celso Loureiro Chaves (1997), who writes in *Zero Hora*, have in common their dislike for Caetano's reveries on Brazilian identity and modernity. Gianetti calls them the least convincing part of a book important as historiography and memoir.

But his importance is never questioned and even Caetano's "awkwardness" becomes "heroic" in Chaves, who recommends that the book be read "sempre e repetidas vezes". This is a reference book, a Bible or Little Red Book of Caetano's thought, to join the fan literature that reproduces quotations from interviews and articles by him.

As for Caetano's critics, they focus on the present. Articles in the "Mais" cultural supplement to the *Folha de S.Paulo* (Gonçalves, Gianetti, Vasconcellos, 1997) entitled "Tropicalismo do cárcere ao poder" attempt to reveal the reasons for the consensus and aura of power that surround Caetano. Marcos Augusto Gonçalves (quoted above) sees in

Caetano's success and the "victorious face" of Tropicalismo a result of Caetano's genius in exploiting the new market configurations of cultural production. In a diatribe whose ironic and allusive style one-ups even Caetano's most florid criticism, Gilberto Vasconcellos (1997) defends nationalist values, which he identifies with the romanticism of Villa-Lobos and Glauber Rocha, against Caetano's criticism of Rocha as "suicidal". He further takes Caetano to task for speaking well of TV Globo², underestimating the role of the CIA in the 1964 coup³, identifying folklore with political authoritarianism and nationalism with closing the country off to modernity. Returning to the present, Vasconcellos seems to think that Tropicalismo is part of what has gone wrong in Brazil.

I will leave out my more detailed criticism of the reviews to go to this last category. Luis Antonio Giron, in another critical review, compares Caetano Veloso to Gilberto Freyre, an association made, too, by Vasconcellos and, in 1977, by Glauber Rocha. In the scale that runs, conventionally, from Gilberto Freyre to Oswald de Andrade, where does Tropicalismo fit?⁴

Although Caetano affirms continued loyalty to antropofagia, he may now have an understanding of identity that consolidates Brazilianness, emphasising a positive proposal rather than a dynamic one, following a more Freyrean line. So it seems, in "Vereda", the concluding chapter of *Verdade Tropical*:

A grande movimentação que levou a chama civilizatória das áreas quentes para o frio Norte do hemisfério norte parece estar – depois de atingir o Japão e tigres asiáticos e China neocomunista – madura para fazer um desvio de rota. Ter como horizonte um mito do Brasil – *gigante mestiço lusófono*

² After the 1960s and 1970s, writes Caetano, "interessei-me pelo fenômeno de modernização das telenovelas brasileiras (e, em geral, pelo papel da TV Globo na educação das grandes massas)..." (1997: 495).

³ "Depois da revolução da bossa nova, e em grande parte *por causa dela*, surgiu esse movimento que tentava equacionar as tensões entre o Brasil-Universo Paralelo e o país periférico ao Império Americano. País esse que se encontrava sob uma ditadura militar em parte tida como fomentada pelas manobras anticomunistas da Agência Central de Inteligência daquele império." (Veloso, 1997: 16)

⁴ Vasconcellos (1997) also compares Caetano to Freyre:

Verdade Tropical. Título horrível, solene, pretensioso, metido, dando a impressão falsa de que se trata de um logos acerca do trópico úmido ensolarado, quiçá concebido por um mulato sociólogo na varanda videofinanceira da Casa Grande, espécie de aletheia de araque (o negro não é base da cultura popular) que a mim não me causa espanto algum, pois o romancista Chico Buarque de Holanda já foi alçado à categoria de sucessor do mestre Machado de Assis.

And neither Gonçalves nor Vasconcellos was the first. Glauber Rocha, on Tropicalismo's tenth anniversary, was quoted by *Veja* saying:

"Naquela época, nós não conhecíamos Oswald de Andrade. Nossos mestres eram baianos. Fui a Recife muito cedo e li o manifesto luso-Tropicalista de Gilberto Freyre. Achei engraçadíssimo mas ao mesmo tempo profundamente original todo o projeto sócio-econômico-sexual-modal do Gilberto Freyre. Foi Caetano quem criou o Tropicalismo, eu criei o cinema novo. Digamos que nesta transação mítica eu seria o Pai, Caetano, o Filho, Oswald de Andrade e Gilberto Freyre, o Espírito Santo. Caetano criou o Tropicalismo como forma original de comportamento psicossocial." ("O sol ainda brilha?", 1977: 69)

americano do hemisfério sul – como desempenhando um papel sutil mas crucial nessa passagem é simplesmente uma fantasia inevitável. (p.500-501) (emphasis added)

Caetano, like Freyre, affirms Brazil's important place in the map of the world's cultures. As seen by the route Caetano traces for the "civilizing flame", through places of rapid capitalist development in the postwar period, this flame is associated to participation in global markets. Freyre, especially in his later work (1960) saw geopolitics as the basic frame of reference for Lusotropical man as the solution, a non-communist, ecological proposal for the importance of Brazilian culture. In Caetano's contemporary terms geopolitics become geo-economics, or globalization.

- **Other discourses**

Of the other media for commemoration of Tropicalismo, the most important was carnival in Bahia, but a number of others are worth mentioning briefly.

Books:

Books recently published include those taking advantage of the moment to launch books of more general interest and books on Tropicalismo and its history.

- Carlos Calado. *Tropicália: a história de uma revolução musical* is the most complete history of Tropicalismo available.
- Rogério Duarte (trans., intro. and notes); introductory note by Caetano Veloso. *Bhagavad Gita: canção do divino mestre*. Published with a CD as Rogério Duarte's "verdade tropical". He said it was a continuation of his Tropicalista sensibility.
- Marina Alvarez Lima. *Marginália: Arte e Cultura 'na idade da pedrada'*. A "coffee table book" by an eyewitness, journalist and photographer.
- José Ramos Tinhorão. *Música Popular: um tema em debate*. The music critic most execrated by the Tropicalistas relaunched his book of 1966.

The Internet

The Internet was used as a place of record: newspaper articles, home pages by fans and by the principals themselves, the promotion of discussions by the Salvador city government. A poll of music critics, taken by the Internet cultural information service GuiaSP and *Jornal da Tarde*, on the most important Brazilian records of all time. *Tropicália ou Panis et Circensis* came in first ("O Melhor da MPB", 1996). The general public had its own on-line poll.

Music

The CD *Livro*, by Caetano Veloso can be understood as praise for the current "low" musical culture of axé music and other varieties of Bahian percussion. At the same time, it continues to use techniques of allusion and cultural reference, both musical and verbal, from the "high" end of the cultural scale.

In spite of the presence of respected artists like Tom Zé, Virgínia Rodrigues and Gal Costa, along with carnival bands like Banda Eva and Asa de Águia, the CD *Tropicália 30 Anos* is not so much an updated version of Tropicalismo as a new way of marketing old songs launched to accompany the Bahian carnival. Critics found it a travesty, defending the Tropicalista canon against the Tropicalistas' commercial concerns. Marketing the record included a television special.

Carnaval da Bahia

No aspect of the commemorations, however, took as much space in the media as the carnival of Bahia, at which Tropicália was the theme and the motif of street decorations. Gilberto Gil's *trio elétrico* welcomed first class artists. Caetano Veloso, Gil and some of their friends appeared in the box with Senator Antonio Carlos Magalhães, Governor Paulo Souto and Mayor Antonio Imbassaí, each dressed in a T-shirt emblazoned with a cartoon of a different Tropicalista. Carlinhos Brown used the stage of Gil's trio elétrico at the moment when the Tropicalistas took their place on it to sing the praises of ACM as the great man of Bahia whose advent was in the cards since 1500 A.D. The *geléia geral* fully took hold of the always culturally and politically hybrid phenomenon of carnival⁵ and Tropicalismo was launched in its lowbrow version.

4. Conclusions

To become part of a canon, a discourse must have a leader or ideologue and be recognized by intellectuals and experts. The debate over Verdade Tropical in the newspapers reveals that, for those in favor of Tropicalismo entering the canon, the past has become rather fixed, acquiring an aura of eternity: eternally in the past, eternally present in memory. For the book's detractors, what is at stake is the present and how Tropicalismo may be a signpost to understanding its evils. Like all established identity discourses, it can elicit a number of contradictory positions, but the hagiographers and the hardest of critics alike implicitly recognize the importance of Tropicalismo.

One may expect that, as in the case of Gilberto Freyre's Lusotropical man and Sergio Buarque de Holanda's *homem cordial*, the tropes of Tropicalismo will be simplified and distorted, according to the needs of the era. At the moment, Tropicalismo is emerging as an affirmation of Brazilian culture that is not – as it was before – based on a series of denials in a specific context (not protest music, not against American influence, not pure, not uncritical of the military regime, while not unaccepting of it as a mark of Brazilian nationality). It proposes an image of opportunity for Brazilian culture in a globalized world economy.

⁵ Bahian political culture and the special role of culture – both popular and pop – deserve further attention. Among the many thorny questions is the way the father figure of Antonio Carlos Magalhães is uncannily echoed in, among others, the now respectable paternity of Caetano. Both inspire awe, in different ways, and the role of the leader-priest of Freudian mass psychology.

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