

# Caio Prado Júnior's analysis for Brazilian Colonization<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The purpose of this project is to introduce the book *Formation of Contemporary Brazil—Colony (Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo—Colônia)*, by Caio Prado Jr., as a fundamental work for those who seek to understand the colonial past of Brazilian society. The book was published in 1942, definitively marking a new analytical approach, ignored by the various Brazilian thinkers until then: a Marxist reading of Brazilian colonial history.

Unlike the positivists, the Paulista thinker constantly oriented his analyses based on a vision of totality, that is, ontological, holistic. The chronological perspective, along with the author's focus on an overall perspective, made possible the execution of a work of interpretation, which fled from any schematization or from a structural, mechanistic or linear economicism, on time. His concern in describing and defining the movement of the parts (regional conjunctures) throughout the whole of the national formation, resulted in a masterly manifestation concatenating it before global history. Such an undertaking challenges the forces of our thinkers to this day, especially those dedicated to rebuilding expressive totalities of Brazil's past.

For each chapter of the book, the author sought to synthesize as an overall aspect definite moments of the settlement process, with successive attempts to synthesize the formation of nationality, as they were on the eve of independence: the mixing of races, as well as the state of distribution of whites, indigenous and Afro-descendants throughout the country; the various and main nuclei of plantations for export; the main subsistence farms, the landscape of manioc, rice,

beans, corn; mining, cattle-raising, extractive productions, the arts and industry precariously aborted by imposition of the metropolis; commerce, as well as the set of communication routes and their articulation in itself. As a guiding principle for the conceptualization of his work, the author intended to retrace the past, to discover the becoming of Brazil's social formations, whether under international relations of subsumption or in the national context, internalized in regional subordinations that consisted in an interpretative proposal of the tendencies and tensions of the colonial geographical and economic forces.

### **Book Division**

One may say that the book is divided into five parts: the first is the Introduction itself, where the author stresses that the beginning of the 19th century is actually the concluding assessment of three centuries of colonization, during which the constituent elements were forged over time and which established our nationality in an unequal and combined way. He points out, however, that because our economic activity was geared towards the foreign market, and that within the colony there was no solidly founded and organized domestic market, there was a subsumption to the Portuguese metropolis, which, even after the process of independence up to the time of publication of the work, had not been able to complete the evolution of our colonial economy towards a national one.

The second section consists of the first chapter of the book: The Meaning of Colonization, where the author demonstrated that from the expansion of European maritime trade in contrast to the predominant English colonization by

settlement in temperate America, Brazil was a colony of exploitation subject to Portuguese domination whose labour force was slaves. Nevertheless, it demystified the climatic factor that supposedly determined the distinct meaning of the two colonizations.

The last three sections are respectively: Population, Material Life and Social Life, which thicken, crystallize and solidify the propositions presented in the first chapter. According to Fernando Novais:

From a simple reading, one perceives the sequence: after indicating the theme and formulating the problems (Introduction), the author tries to define what he called 'the meaning of colonization' (Chapter I); then there follows the analysis of the various sectors of historical reality, that is, the various spheres of existence in a given period, grouped into three sets: 'Population', 'Material life' and 'Social life', each subdivided into chapters. We note, subsequently, that the initial considerations ('meaning') return at the end of each chapter, and may then be considered 'key' to the understanding of the whole; for this reason, this text—the first chapter, 'Meaning of colonisation'—is an always-quoted classic. A more in-depth enquiry thus reveals the movement of discourse; object clipping, apprehension of its meaning, reconstruction of reality, beginning from this 'meaning'. And its dialectical tracing is becoming apparent: the 'meaning', that is, the essence of the phenomenon, explains its manifestations, and at the same time illuminates new sectors of reality. It is not, therefore, a matter of the constant recurrence of the initial point, of mere emphasizing: once the essence of the phenomenon has been affixed, it disposes of the basic explanatory category for the reconstruction of reality, giving it intelligibility: hence, the permanent return to the starting point. It is, in short, this category which explains the various segments (gives them 'meaning'), while also explaining themselves, that is, the analysis of the various segments enriches and proves the fundamental category. Once the object is cut out, the analysis unfolds, therefore, in two movements: from appearance to essence and from essence to reality. And the book of Caio Prado Jr. begins to appear as a successful example in the practice of dialectics.

This movement confers upon the text an extraordinary force of conviction, for it moves towards a growing movement of persuasion, where each chapter constitutes a new way of convincing us that the idea is correct. Its force derives, realistically, from the dialectical procedure of apprehension of meaning, that is to say, on reaching the essence of the phenomenon, explaining to us its segments, which, in turn, explains itself. Synthesized, the apprehension of the essence renders the segments intelligible by capturing them, and that apprehension itself is explained through these segments.<sup>3</sup>

We understand, therefore, that the guiding idea for the colonial period can be summed up with the existence of the Colony in relation to Europe, and more specifically with the provision of products for the international market. This grand principle conditioned others: the existence of a minoritarian ruling class, the existence of slave labour, the formation of *latifundiums*<sup>4</sup> to produce goods for export, and the submission to Metropolitan interests. With these general principles, Caio Prado Júnior explained the colonial system depicting the relationship established between Metropolis and Colony. It is what we call the colonial system of mercantilism, which provides direction and meaning to his works. The purpose of mercantilism is clear: to foster the accumulation of capital in the metropolis and to subordinate the colony to these interests. This colony was not simply a simple commercial *feitoria*,<sup>5</sup> but retained, however, a marked

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3 NOVAIS, Fernando. **“Caio Prado Jr. na historiografia brasileira” [Caio Prado Jr. in Brazilian historiography].** In: *Inteligência brasileira*, Reginaldo Moraes (org.), São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1986, p. 15-17.

4 T. N.: large-scale plantations, that is, immense farms where slave labour was employed for monoculture production, focused particularly to supply international supply chains.

5 T. N.: “The Portuguese community, which the factor ruled, was called in Portuguese a *feitoria*, and it was self-contained even to the point of being assigned a parish church and a burying place.” (DIFFIE, Bailey W. **Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580.** vol. I, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 313). “This is frequently translated as «factory», but this translation lends itself to confusion with the modern

mercantile character, it was the white colonist's enterprise that brought together: 1) the prodigal nature in resources usable for the production of commodities of great commercial value; 2) slave labour recruited from indigenous or black Africans. The colony took on the aspect of a vast commercial enterprise, more complete than the old *feitoria*, yet always bearing its characteristics, destined to exploit the natural resources of a virgin territory to the advantage of European commerce. This was the meaning of tropical colonization according to the author.

Besides being divided into five parts, the book is constructed around two main axes interrelated in a permanent relationship of structural opposition, although quite distinct for their formal content and the elaboration of their specificities: the first axis is that of colonial dependence, leading to the thesis of the anomie of the oppressed and their incapacity for political articulation. It was elaborated in the chapters "meaning of colonization," "large-scale farming," "mining," "social organization," "administration," and "social and political organization." There, the historian deepened the contradictions of the productive system as a pole of the international capitalist system. The last chapter, "Social and political organization," is representative of this axis, where he analysed the system's forces of decomposition and the anomie, which threatened the marginalized sectors. It represents, to some extent, a final balance sheet or a synthesis of the contradicting forces of the system addressed throughout the book.

The second axis developed by the book concerns the formation of Brazilian

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sense of «manufacture», which the «*feitoria*» was not." (ibid., p. 313, note 9). The system of *feitorias* constituted the fortified colonial posts of the colonial process, whereby both trading and settlement were safeguarded with castles and interwoven through a web of roads.

nationality and the relationships of internal dependence. It includes chapters on settlement movements, races, subsistence farming, cattle raising, communication and transport routes, since they elaborate the gestation of social mediations with possibilities of transforming the country: settlement articulation, racial amalgamation, formation of the national territory; communication and internal roads system, and internal market potentiality of reorganizing society. The national assumes an economic connotation, the eventual satisfaction of the basic needs of a people and, therefore, refers to a future organization that, in open opposition to the colonial system, would have as its main goal the well-being of the Brazilian population. The generative forces of nationality are documented through a certain regionalism, described according to the possibilities of forming an internal market and a proper national bourgeoisie, rooted in the centre-south region of Brazil, after the demographic displacement caused by the decadence of mining. This is what was initially developed in the chapter on cattle-raising, transport and communication routes, and it is, above all, a process that translates into the apprehension of a trend, an outline of practices and facts that suggested the possibility of its realization in a remote future: the occupation of the national territory and its internal articulation into a communication system, which made internal supply activities possible.

### **Concreteness within the book**

From the very first chapter, the author begins by defining the central concern and the precautions that the researcher should have when studying the evolution of a specific people in human history:

All peoples have in their evolution, perceived from afar, a certain 'meaning'. This is noticed not through the details of their own history, but rather through all the essential facts and events which constitute that history over a long period. Anyone who observes this complex, thinning it out from the cipher of secondary incidents which continually accompany it and often make it confusing and incomprehensible, will never fail to notice that it is formed from a main and uninterrupted line of events which follow one another strictly, and always directed towards a determined course. It is this which should first be sought when one approaches the analysis of the history of a people, whatever moment or aspect may be of concern, for all moments and aspects are not by themselves incomplete parts of a whole which must always be the historian's ultimate goal, no matter how particular it may be. Such an enquiry is all the more important and essential because it defines, whether in time or space, which individual part of humanity interests the researcher: people, country, nation, society, whatever the appropriate designation appears appropriate to suit the situation. Only there will he find that unity which allows him to detach such a human portion so that he may study it separately.<sup>6</sup>

Although Caio Prado Jr. does not employ the term, this passage underlies dialectics so as to explain the connection between the one and the multiple, the singular and the universal mediated by the particular.<sup>7</sup> Thus it seeks out

6 PRADO JR., Caio. **Formação do Brasil contemporâneo—Colônia [Formation of contemporary Brazil—Colony]**. São Paulo, Brasiliense, 11th edition, 1971, p. 19.

7 "The dialectical movement of reality, as it is reflected within human thought, is thus an uncontrollable impulse from the singular to the universal and from the latter, again, to the former. [...] The movement from the singular to the universal and vice versa is always mediated by the particular; it is a real intermediary member, both in objective reality and in the thought which reflects it roughly in an approximate manner." (LUKÁCS, Georg. **Introdução a uma estética marxista [Introduction to a Marxist Aesthetics]**. Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 1968, p. 110 and 112).

"It is therefore understood as the point of view of totality—dialectics—being a thought that proceeds through determinations (ever richer and more complex, ever more concrete), places itself in radical opposition to a method that proceeds by definitions (considered, moreover, as the scientific activity par excellence) and privileges the difference between the place of contradiction. Contrary to this, it does not castrate the need 'to reach the object itself' (Hegel), and the possibility of saying the thing as it is in



diversification factors and defines social relations specific to the milieu.

It delighted in describing the scenery in a concise and detailed way, with the eyes of a connoisseur, feeling in him, a travelled man, who personally explored from a very young age each region of Brazil, without considering the “advantage” of being able to personally attend to “the most vivid scenes of his past”<sup>8</sup> in the present, as a foreign teacher once told him. Antônio Cândido had thus expressed the strength of concreteness in the Caiopradian work:

[...] several times he told me gladly not to know history, in the sense of ignoring several dates, of wrapping himself up in dynasties, of

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itself. Only (and this 'only' is everything), it does not take it in a naturalistic or objectivistic sense, but, instead, in its historical sense, namely: the recognition of the objectivity of things independently of consciousness, and the approximate character of the intellectual apprehension of the object's intensive and extensive infinitude and its relations, an intellectual apprehension whose rigour, depth and multilateralism are also a historically determined objective possibility. [...] We can say, it is complex, but not composed. Employing Lukácsian terminology, it is a complex of complexes. Thus, its apprehension in a Cartesian or empirical way is an impossibility. Indeed, in its own sense, it is truer, more 'real' than mere empirical reality, without therefore being absolutely external to it. On the contrary, it only exists and can be grasped through the parts and the relationships between them. In the process of this apprehension, it is undoubtedly necessary to decompose, to differentiate between its various moments and 'the activity of separating is the strength and the work of understanding' (Hegel). However, it is not possible to dwell on the abstract figure of each of them in isolation, as if the truth had already been found in itself. The abstract one-sidedness of the separate moments demands their overcoming (that is, their critique, absorption and elevation to a higher level): they partake of totality as overcome moments. Hence, the totality is concrete: totality is a prerequisite for understanding the empirically developed. That is why totality is immanent to itself: immanent is not the development of the part by itself, but the development of the whole of significations. So to speak, it is the plot, the fabric of contradictory mediations and determinations that constitutes the totality within which the parts, structures, levels and functions are subject to their development: it is totality in process.” (BRANDÃO, Gildo Marçal B. **“Totalidade e determinação econômica” [Totality and economic determination]**. In: *Temas de Ciências Humanas*, n. 1, São Paulo, Grijaldo, 1977, p. 158-159).

8 PRADO JR., Caio. *Op. Cit.*, p. 12.

forgetting dates and giving little importance to battles and details. What interests him is everyday life, production, the business movement, planting techniques, the customs, the mechanism of property transfer, and suchlike. [...] This remarkable historian is therefore someone who is focused on concrete reality, interested in researching the fundamental aspects of society, moving away from those that surface towards the forces that actually govern it. That is why he has always been so attached to the physical body of Brazil, knowing it hand in hand, and sweeping it across all quadrants. Hence, his knowledge was not formed indirectly, but by the primary and irreplaceable contact of personal experience. When he compels a regulation, analyses a productive statistic or studies the settlement, he does not proceed as the scholar who starts from the abstraction and then looks for receipts. He is already drenched in water and performs the abstraction in a productive way as a ripe fruit.<sup>9</sup>

If on one hand Caio Prado Junior's statements were substantiated on concrete elements, on the other we cannot confuse Caiopradian descriptions with positivist empiricism. In this sense, Florestan Fernandes enlightens us:

[...] his work is indeed based on documentation explored with systematic rigour and reminiscent of the work of positive history. For many, this is not a dialectical history, as if it were not necessarily based on facts. Those who have read *Capital* will find literal transcriptions of information extracted from various kinds of reports, some of which are still poorly explored today, including those on public health programmes, labour, etc. Caio Prado Jr. had, therefore, this intellectual and objective curiosity to reach the facts and extract from them their deepest meaning. And that is where the dialectical method was important. His story was distinct inasmuch as he did not seek a pure and simple reconstruction of the past. It was an attempt at a fruitful materialistic historical interpretation. In France, that famous debate about 'traditional history' and 'interpretive history' took place. Caio inaugurated the most advanced mode of interpretive history in Brazil, which was based on historical materialism. In

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9 CÂNDIDO, Antonio. **"A força do concreto" [The Strength of the Concrete]**. In: *História e ideal—Ensaio sobre Caio Prado Júnior*. Maria Ângela D'Incao (org.), São Paulo, Brasiliense/UNESP, 1989, p. 24.

confrontation with Varnhagen, who was also a lover of documentation, but who succumbed to descriptive history. Therefore, Caio was one of the great innovators in explaining the slave society and its fundamental peculiarities. He highlighted that, in a disorganized society, slavery was the only thing that had been organized; neither colony nor manorial world would exist, which extracted its reproduction and growth from the economic surplus generated by slave labour. The colony was therefore a mercantile enterprise. This major, pioneering, classic work in the social sciences in Latin America represents a new moment. [...] It opened up new perspectives and helped to instil within it the creative impetus of historical materialism. And it should be noted: without writing those dull stories, which several authors who consider themselves Marxists published and which, in fact, were nothing more than catechisms.<sup>10</sup>

Through his close relations of learning and friendship with the geographer Pierre Deffontaines, he will consolidate his studies on the integration of social forms within landscapes. Apart from him, Caio Prado will have contact with Rubens Borba de Moraes, Pierre Mombeig, Luís Flores de Moraes Rego and other scholars from São Paulo, thereby founding the Association of Brazilian Geographers and the magazine *Geografia*, of which only eight issues were published, including reviews and analyses of the settlement and land structure in the State of São Paulo.<sup>11</sup> To write the book *Formation of Contemporary Brazil-Colonia*, he used several primary printed sources. The two most revealing are *Recopilation of soterapolitan and Brazilian news*, from the end of the 18th century—possibly completed in 1802—written by Luís dos Santos Vilhena, a professor of Greek in Bahia; and *Route from Maranhão to Goiás through the Captaincy of Piauí*, published last century by the *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*

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10 Fernandes, Florestan. **"A visão do amigo" [A Friend's View]**. in: *História e ideal...*, op. cit. p. 31-32.

11 Andrade, Manuel Correia de. **"As rebeliões no período regencial" [Rebellions in the Regency Period]**. In: *História e ideal...*, op. Cit., p. 358.

and of unknown authorship. They are the most used sources: the Recompilation provides news or quotes 51 times and the *Route*, 25 times. Beyond these two sources, he also used the work by Capistrano de Abreu as well as the texts written by European travellers who were in Brazil after the arrival of D. João VI: Hercule Florence, Koster, Luccock, Martius, Prince Maxiliano, Pohl and Saint-Hilaire, as well as Eschwege, Mawe and others. He was also influenced by the geography and history courses at USP that he attended after graduating from the French School of the Annales by the likes of Fernand Braudel, Arbrousse Bastide, Roger Bastide and Pierre Monbeig.<sup>12</sup>

### Politics in the Colony

An important aspect of the book is the way Caio Prado Jr. apprehended the de-structuring process of the colonial system, never losing sight of its connections with the international capitalist system, together with specifying the evolution of the unequal and combined formation of the internal market. Evolution as Caio Prado explains:

A cyclical evolution, both in time and space, which successively witnesses strictly localized phases of prosperity succeeded, after a greater or lesser yet invariably brief, period of total annihilation. Process currently still undergoing its full development and which will continue to do so in the future.<sup>13</sup>

In this cyclical evolution, the large slave farming as a stable and organic

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12 Iglésias, Francisco (org.). **“Um historiador revolucionário” [A revolutionary historian]**. In: *Caio Prado Júnior*, São Paulo, Attica, Coleção Grandes Cientistas Sociais no.26, 1982, p. 25-26.

13 PRADO JR., Caio. Op. Cit., p. 127.

factor of the colonial system, concentrated its income into the hands of a few, marginalizing the majority of the population, who vegetated outside the production system. Expelled from large plantations, households and small tenant farmers took refuge in the hinterland of cattle raising. They vegetated alongside the poorest areas, cultivating for their consumption, without generating a significant economic organization. They were also at the side of urban or rural disaffected people, in the hinterland riots or local uprisings, brought on by prosperity crises and the most critical moments of supply and dearth of essential commodities. However, they remained limited to the regionalisms and localisms of racial and social nativist conflicts, at the margins of the determinant, always ultimately frustrated in their needs and without any political articulation. Concerning local power, the analysis of the overlapping spheres of public and private power in the case of municipal ordinances is also shrewd. By scrutinizing the delegation of administrative functions to the ordinances, it exposes the different levels of power in colonial Brazil and the importance of rural landowners, to whom the public authorities of the metropolis delegated most of their powers, to strengthen and institutionalize the local bosses that would later become known as Colonels.<sup>14</sup> Therefore the political unfeasibility of the oppressed populations and their inability to develop alternative forces to propel a new kind of social organisation. In the concluding chapter, he developed arguments concerning the degree of submission, of clientelism, of lack of moral connection and of anomie in social relations in the Colony, discerning traces of decomposition in the rears of decadence that the cycles of impoverishment by large-scale farming and mining brought about, giving rise to new social types

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14 See in this respect: Leal, Victor Nunes. **Coronelismo, enxada e voto [Colonelism, hoe and ballot]**. Rio de Janeiro, Nova Fronteira, 3rd edition, 1997, p. 39-78.

who were far more victims of the prevailing social formation and who were incapable of organizing themselves collectively to fight. The aggregated, the small-scale miners, the prospectors and the hinter-landers who were typical figures of the areas of decay in the system.

In his first work, *Evolução Política do Brasil [Political Evolution of Brazil]* (1933), he conducted his first materialistic study of the Brazilian colonial reality and concentrated his investigations much more on conflicts and the opposition of class interests. To better unveil these, he sought to concentrate on the historical process of socioeconomic formations, rebutting the theses of feudalism in Brazil and pointing out the capitalist character of colonization:

The Portuguese kingdom was not and could not be a colonizing power akin to Ancient Greece. The maritime upheaval which filled its 15th century history was not the result of any overpopulation, but was only prompted by a commercial bourgeoisie thirsting for profits, which could not satisfy its disproportionate ambition within its limited national borders.<sup>15</sup>

In *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo—Colônia*, he emphasized the economic and social foundations underlying the national formation, from which certain passages on independence attach little importance to the superstructural as politics. He carefully elaborated the subject of social contradictions, that undermined colonial society and that the historian tried to define as clearly as possible: the mismatch of interests between indebted rural landowners and Portuguese lender merchants; the uneasiness caused by a slave population that was a majority; the racial prejudice that aggravated social class conflicts; the work disqualification that imposed inertia, indolence and laziness, typifying a

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<sup>15</sup> Prado Jr., Caio. Op. Cit., p. 11.

social structure lacking vitality and energy of its own. Independence would, in fact, disregard society's contradictions, stirring them up without resolving them, since the working classes did not participate actively in the process, thus shaping the political liberation from Portugal "from above" and economically maintaining the slave labour force until the penultimate year of the empire. Consequently, at first the indigenous people and then black people were employed either as a labour force or as an element of sexual satisfaction for the white man. Thus, slavery created a totally negative trail, for it represented the only organized aspect of our society throughout the first three centuries of colonization, engendering labour inefficiency, production inefficiency and the castration of a solidified internal market.

### **Background for the book's emergence**

As a sign of recognition by the greatest Brazilian intellectuals, Antonio Cândido wrote—at the 1967 preface to the 5th edition of *Roots of Brazil* by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda—that men, during the 1950s, learned to reflect and take an interest to Brazil, particularly concerning the past, thanks to three books: *Casa-grande e senzala*, by Gilberto Freyre, *Raízes do Brasil* itself and *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo*, by Caio Prado Júnior. Furthermore, he noted, these books were published whilst he attended primary school, secondary school and university, respectively. Thus, he added:

These are the books that can be considered the keys, the ones which seem to express the mentality linked to the breath of intellectual radicalism and social analysis that erupted after the Revolution of 1930 and was not, despite everything, stifled by the New State.

Together with these books, Oliveira Viana's penetrating and anticipatory work already seemed outdated, full of ideological prejudices and an excessive willingness to adapt relations to conventional purposes.<sup>16</sup>

Writing at a special moment according to Antonio Cândido, José Albertino Rodrigues further commented:

The major historical works are those that not only choose a historically expressive moment as their target, but are realized at the appropriate moment. This, to me, seems to be the case of FBC, by Caio Prado Júnior. It concentrated, as we have seen, on the turning of the 18th century to the 19th. At that moment, the colonial cycle was coming to an end, i.e., the colonial pact agreed upon by the imperialist countries of Western Europe reached its end and prospects for political emancipation were opened up. Caio Prado was fortunate enough to experience a crucial moment in his analysis: the end of the coffee oligarchy and the beginning of the country's modernization process. The conjunction of two dates—the crisis of 1929 and the Revolution of 1930—allowed an intellectual openness whereby the nation develop its own self-consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

When authors such as Alberto Torres, Azevedo Amaral, Guerreiro Ramos, Nestor Duarte, Oliveira Vianna, Tavares Bastos, and others asked: “what is Brazil?”, they thought of answers to politically organize the country, to define the State's role—whether authoritarian, democratic or liberal—in the emancipation and establishment processes of the Nation, while, simultaneously, the continuous reference to the European paradigm, past and present, underpinned their concerns. Dislocating the problem to the comprehension of what Brazilian

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16 Cândido, Antonio. “**O significado de ‘Raízes do Brasil’**,” [The meaning of 'Roots of Brazil']. In: *Raízes do Brasil*, São Paulo, Cia das Letras, 7th reprint, 1999, p. 9.

17 José Albertino Rodrigues. “**O Brasil Contemporâneo**” [Contemporary Brazil]. In: *História e ideal...*, Op. cit. p. 316.



society was or is, Caio Prado Júnior, on the contrary, sought the roots of a specific economic and social formation and encountered a reality, external to the colony which conditioned and emasculated the gestation of its own internal market, so it could loosely develop an autonomous capitalist. According to the testimony of Maria Cecilia Naclério Homem:

Self-aware regarding the new historical dimension and the rupture with previous historiography, Caio would register on his notes: 'In Brazil, Silvio Romero, Alberto Torres and Oliveira Vianna... have not attained anything...'. For him, everything had yet to be done, and he would not measure efforts accordingly.<sup>18</sup>

Vera Lucia Amaral Ferlini continued:

In the year 1942, with 'Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo', Caio Prado once again emphasized the decisive character of the 19th century in the history of Brazil, indicating it as the exhaustion of the colonial system vis-à-vis the expanded demands of capitalism. Instead, he began from the colonial system's profound determination regarding the history of capital in order to dissect why Brazil had not taken shape yet, hampered by an already very old reality: its colonial past. Thus, the debate on capitalism and feudalism resurfaced, albeit under a new context: the modernization of the country. For Simonsen, an advocate of the fully capitalist origin of the colony, and for Nestor Duarte, who highlighted the feudal aspects of the period, the issue was progress, modernization. For Caio Prado, however, it was already a broader one: the necessity of a profound revolution, of radical changes. His thoroughly grounded Marxist outlook led him to perceive the specificity of colonization, its dialectical sense, as a fundamental element propelling the mercantile accumulation of the Modern Era, on one hand shaping self-sustained development, and, on the other hand, its permanence, seen as archaic, directing the realization of capitalism in Contemporary Brazil.<sup>19</sup>

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18 Homem, Maria Cecilia Naclério. **Do palacete à enxada [From the palace to the hoe]**. In: *Historia e ideal...*, Op. cit. p. 48.

## The book and the Brazilian reality

From *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo—Colônia* onwards, Caio Prado Jr. oversaw the process of nationalizing Marxism in Brazil—just as Lenin had done in Russia, with his *O Desenvolvimento do Capitalismo na Rússia* [*The Development of Capitalism in Russia*]; Gramsci in Italy, with *Cadernos do Cárcere* [*Prison Notebooks*]; and Mariátegui in Peru with *Sete ensaios de interpretação da realidade peruana* [*Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*].<sup>20</sup> Nationalization here understood as seizing upon the concrete reality of one's country and seeking to understand it through its own reality: materially and historically, apprehending it dialectically, that is, articulating abstract categories with detailed descriptions of the concrete social conditions in Brazil. This entailed a break with the Stalinist apriorist models prevalent until then, under the Third International, which were used as a basis for analysing Latin American reality. The Brazilian case, one can note such 'nationalization' beginning from the relation between Colony and Nation within Brazil. According to Bernardo Ricupero:

We can say that, broadly speaking, the Colony represents, for our author, 'the past that made us', while the Nation stands as the future to be built. One can identify, therefore, in Caio Prado's thought, both an analytical element, evident in the colonial study, and a normative one, due to the defence of what constitutes Brazil as a true Nation. It is not simple, however, to precisely delimit when the Paulista historian finalizes one and initiates the other. That is because he defines Colony and Nation not from a temporal delimitation, but, above all, from several structural characteristics. Furthermore, from a

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19 FERLINI, Vera Lucia Amaral. "**A fidelidade à história**" [**Fidelity to history**]. In: *Historia e ideal...*, Op. cit. p. 229.

20 RICUPERO, Bernardo. "**Existe um pensamento marxista latino-americano?**" [**Is there a Latin American Marxist thought?**]. In: *América Latina—História, ideias e revolução*, São Paulo, Shaman/NET, 1998.

dialectical perspective, the relationship between Colony and Nation is not seen simply as one of opposition. On the contrary, despite making a frankly negative assessment of Brazil's colonial past, he acknowledges that it 'constituted the basis of nationality'. That is, despite not liking colonial times, Caio Prado Jr. is not naive or dishonest to the extent of imagining the Nation, to be established, could disregard the previously accomplished work. Indeed, he is well aware that, whether one wants it or not, the Colony is the genesis, and one cannot therefore 'propose to revoke the colonial system by decree', since 'it is with it that Brazil reckons itself—and must do so—if it is to proceed counter to it.'<sup>21</sup>

As a Marxist, Caio Prado pursued specific diversities of the Brazilian process of colonization and societal formation, along with its historical origins, for better indicating a program of future action, even though the book contains no partisan program of immediate action, much less any reference to “classical Marxists:” Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci etc., not even to Marx himself. It is well-known that the historian is recognized as one of the most illustrious thinkers, whose work mainly analysed our past. However, his goal was to understand contemporary Brazil, and he focused on Brazilian history to dialectically understand its genesis, its unfolding—as a historical process—and its prospects for the present.

Diametrically contrary, since the Political Evolution of Brazil, his analysis of Brazilian reality differed from the III International and the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) since he insisted on the non-existence of feudalism in Brazil, a thesis that was never absorbed by left-wing forces and only obtained recognition after the military coup of 1964, especially when the Brazilian Revolution (1966) was published, which was nevertheless a settling of accounts between the militant

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21 Ricupero, Bernardo. “Caio Prado Jr.: o primeiro marxista brasileiro” [Caio Prado Jr.: the first Brazilian Marxist]. In: *Revista USP*, n. 38, São Paulo, EDUSP, jun/jul/ago 1998, p. 69-70.

Caio Prado with that PCB that ignored him. Already 33 years had passed, during which the historian struck the same note: no feudalism existed in Brazil, while over the decades the PCB remained faithful to Moscow's guidelines struggling for the "agrarian and anti-imperialist revolution" to allow Brazil to become modern and capitalist. But on the other hand, Caio Prado recognizes extremely particular traits within Brazilian capitalism and devoted much of his research to identifying them and discovering their genesis.<sup>22</sup> With the publication of *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo—Colônia* he presented us with the fundamental constitutive elements of Brazil's colonial reality, supplanting the intellectuals who had studied Brazil thus far. According to Ricupero:

Hence, even the brilliant interpretations of Caio's 'generational companions'—Gilberto Freyre and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda—whereby the 'essayist' approach persists in providing grand explanations of Brazil, nevertheless fail to articulate satisfactorily those parts on which they organize their analyses. Therefore, the most important criticism to be levelled at these two authors is that although they had identified central issues for our formation—namely, the development of an entire civilization from the patriarchal family and the action of a specific human type within the Colony, the adventurer—they neglected a central aspect of colonization: its meaning. The one who did not neglect it was Caio Prado Jr., showing the way Brazilian society began to be formed starting from the Colony, which was organized to produce some tropical genera required by foreign markets. From that moment on, it can be noted that it is neither the patriarchal family nor the adventurer who explain the Colony, but, on the contrary, the meaning assumed by colonization in Brazil which led to the development of a particular type of family and human being.<sup>23</sup>

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22 Coutinho, Carlos Nelson. **"Uma via não-clássica para o capitalismo" [A 'non-classical' way towards capitalism].** In: *História e ideal...*, Op. cit. p. 115-116.

23 Ricupero, Bernardo. **"Caio Prado Jr.: o primeiro marxista brasileiro" [Caio Prado Jr.: the first Brazilian Marxist].** Op. cit. p. 71-72.

Caio Prado Jr.'s work blends with his own political militancy. Dialectically unveiling the secrets of Brazilian reality starting with colonial Brazil represented the Marxian paradigm he had adopted for apprehending the real and subsequently unleashing a struggle to transform society. As for the theoretical part, Caio Prado uncovered the meaning of the capitalist colonization in Brazil. Concerning the practical side, it sank insofar as the PCB did not theoretically understand Caio Prado. However, this does not mean that a possible incorporation of the Caiopradian theory by the party would mean the realization of the Socialist Revolution and/or the frustration of the '64 military coup, because, although men make history, they do not make it according to conditions chosen by them...

Nevertheless, we can be sure of one thing: left-wing politicians like Caio Prado Jr., whose ideological firmness, probity and dedication to the dispossessed are more and more rare nowadays. And, paradoxically, as long as a revolutionary vanguard is not forged, with political cadres of the carat and stature of a Caio Prado Jr., socialism will continue being a utopia.