

The Specter of Liberalism: Notes on the Democratic Party of São Paulo and the Historiography of Twentieth-Century Brazil

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The Democratic Party of São Paulo (PD) occupies a curious position in the history and historiography of 20th century Brazil. Founded amid discontent with the machine politics of the so-called “Old Republic,” the party mounted an important if ultimately unsuccessful challenge to the state’s ruling Republican Party (PRP) during the years 1926-1928, shrilly calling for reform and running candidates in three statewide elections. Thereafter, having failed to bring about the renovation of state politics from within, PD leaders tied their party’s fortunes to dissident elites from other states, first in the failed presidential campaign of 1929-1930, in which they backed *gaúcho* Getúlio Vargas against PRP candidate and fellow *paulista* Júlio Prestes de Albuquerque, then in the successful “Revolution” of 1930, which placed Vargas in the Presidential Palace.¹ Expecting to be provided with stewardship over their home state, the *democráticos* were soon disappointed; as their disappointment gave way to a deep and abiding sense of betrayal, they broke with Vargas and made common cause with their former enemies in the PRP in the Constitutionalist Revolt of 1932. Following the failure of this revolt, the party limped along for a little over a year until its ultimate dissolution in February 1934.

This eight-year record of failure and disappointment, mitigated only by a few fleeting successes, has received a great deal of attention. Indeed, at first glance this attention, and the attendant historiographical controversies over the nature and meaning of the PD, might seem entirely out of proportion to the party’s

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actual importance. Brazilians and Brazilianists, participants and scholars, all have weighed in with an array of explanations for the party's emergence. The PD has been variously depicted as the awakening of a "progressive bourgeoisie," a younger generation attempting to wrest control of government from Republican leaders grown old in the holding of power, a response to the emergence of the labor movement and the attendant "social question" and a rearguard action by traditional planters against a progressive PRP committed to immigrant small-holding and industry. Each of these interpretations—which may be divided into three rough groupings, representing traditional, revisionist and post-revisionist explanations of the party's emergence—has added to the historiography of the period, yet a significant number of historical and historiographical questions remain. One question in particular has never been asked: why has a minority opposition party that existed for a scant eight years received such comprehensive attention from and provoked such intense controversy among historians of 20th century Brazil?

Turning to the literature, the first writers to take on the PD saw the party as the political expression of a "rising middle class," or at least a newly self-conscious middle class, usually in the early 19th century sense of an emergent *bourgeoisie*, but sometimes in the more recent sense of a *petite bourgeoisie* of smaller capitalists, liberal professionals and "white-collar" employees. This initial interpretation is most famously illustrated by Paulo Nogueira Filho's heroically titled *Ideais e lutas de um burguês progressista*, which recounted the author's enthusiastic participation in student politics at the São Paulo Law School, the founding of the PD and the atmosphere in the party *circa* 1930.² In his own account of his participation, the labor militant Everardo Dias described the PD as bringing together "the majority of the discontented *petite bourgeoisie*..., inclined to a transformation in the socio-political sense."³ The identification of the PD with a "middle class" has also been taken up by professional historians such as Edgard Carone, who argued: "The position of the bourgeoisie is strange. ... Only on February 24, 1926, does a more conscious group, composed of elements from finance, from the industrial sector and from the *petite bourgeoisie*, found the Democratic Party."⁴

A second, revisionist, interpretation emerged in the work of Boris Fausto. Fausto, a historian of 20th century Brazil, contested the traditional interpretation, arguing that rather than representing a dynamic middle class, the PD served as an expression of the nativism and anti-industrialism of discontented coffee planters and the "traditional middle class."⁵ Fausto's interpretation of the PD has received emphatic restatement—Fausto himself might consider it overstatement—in the work of Mauricio Font, a sociologist, who argues that the party represented the reaction of "Big Coffee" against a modernizing PRP attuned

to the interests of industry, small-holding and immigrants.⁶ Political scientist Renato M. Perissinotto's work might also be placed in this tradition. However, Maria Cecília Spina Forjaz, also a political scientist, "muddies the waters" considerably by briefly stating, in adherence with the orthodox approach, that the PD was one of a series of "political manifestations of the middle sectors." Elsewhere he argues at greater length and in proper revisionist fashion that the party was the "political expression" of "groups of coffee-growers" who were "unhappy with their political representatives" and who sought to maintain "a policy of permanent defense of coffee."⁷

A third approach, which rejects the narrow socio-economic determinism that predominates in both the traditional and revisionist interpretations, represents a post-revisionist take on the PD. This school of thought is best represented by Joseph L. Love's *São Paulo in the Brazilian Federation* (in which statistical analysis was employed to emphasize socio-economic similarities and generational differences between PD and PRP leaders and suggest that the PD was a vehicle for the political ambitions of a younger generation) and by Maria Lígia Coelho Prado's now-classic institutional history of the party.⁸ Anticipated after a fashion by journalist Plínio de Abreu Ramos's *Os partidos paulistas e o Estado Novo*, the post-revisionist position was ably summarized by Emília Viotti da Costa, who described *perrepista* and *democrático* leaders as "[o]ld and new politicians, whose disagreements... never represented structural differences, men who belonged to the same classes and often frequented the same social circles or were linked by business and familial ties."⁹

Turning from interpretations of the party to explanations for the proliferation of writings about it, a series of explanations emerge. Put briefly, the PD has attracted a relatively large amount of attention from historians and other scholars due to the availability of evidence, the relative ease of interpretation and the politics of historical memory in 20th century Brazil.

Most basically, the quantity and quality of evidence regarding the PD that is readily available to scholars is much greater than that regarding the PRP, making it a more attractive, or at least a more accessible, object of study. This holds true for archival sources, periodical material and memorial literature.

Although the archive of the Republican Party was destroyed in October 1930, having been burned in the street amid the rioting that greeted the party's downfall, the archive of the Democratic Party is still extant. It includes 44 bound volumes, 12 albums of press clippings and 72 bundled *pacotes* of documents, on an average about the size of one-and-a-half metropolitan telephone books, swaddled in newsprint and brown butcher paper. For scholars undeterred by dust, dirt and DDT, it is an amazingly rich collection.¹⁰

Complete or near-complete runs of the PRP's *Correio Paulistano* and the PD's *Diário Nacional* are available in libraries in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but the *Correio Paulistano*, like governmental or quasi-governmental newspapers the world over, tends to be the less reliable of the two, not to mention ponderously dull. As one observer, impartial at least in this matter, remarked of the two newspapers, the *Correio Paulistano* was "always conservative," "reserved" and careful not to say anything new, while the *Diário Nacional* "ha[d] among its editorial writers some of the most brilliant of the *Paulistas*" and "appeal[ed] to the liberal element and sometimes incline[d] more decidedly to the left."¹¹ Even in its coverage of the arts, the one area in which it could rival the *Diário Nacional*, posterity has not been kind to the *Correio Paulistano*, as its *verde-amarellista* writers are now seen as fascist or proto-fascist ideologues by right-thinking Brazilians while the *Diário Nacional*'s Mário de Andrade is still widely revered.¹²

In terms of memorial literature, there is a good deal more available material written by former members of the PD than by those of the PRP. In part this situation stems from the socio-cultural bases of the two parties' respective leaderships. As Joseph Love demonstrated, the PD leadership as an aggregate was better-educated and attracted a slightly larger number of members from the liberal professions, so one should not be surprised to see more of these self-styled intellectuals subsequently taking pen to paper.¹³ Turning to the most frequently cited memoir by a former *democrático*, Nogueira Filho's *Ideais e lutas de um burguês progressista*, one could go one step further. It may be argued that by writing a detailed, first-person account of his participation in Brazilian politics, Nogueira Filho guaranteed himself a much greater place in posterity than he would otherwise merit, simply because his life and times were rendered that much more accessible to later writers.¹⁴

Turning from the availability of evidence to the question of relative ease of interpretation, the PD (at least during the period 1926-1930) was, briefly stated, a *modern* political party—an interest group or set of interest groups organized along ideological lines in a more or less coherent party structure—and thus relatively easy for contemporary historians to grapple with. In contrast, the PRP was decidedly not a "modern political party" and has not been amenable to the same kind of easy analysis. Avowed ideology and formal party structure had little bearing on how the PRP functioned in its forty-year incumbency, which is one reason why attempts to analyze the party along these lines have proven unsatisfactory. Rather than a modern political party, the meaning and nature of which might be discerned relatively easily by looking at official pronouncements or party debates, when in power, the PRP was a cluster of competing cliques, best understood through a kind of neo-Namierite analysis of informal

structures and individual interests. Indeed, it would only be exaggerating slightly to paraphrase the old master and argue that “between the PRP and the politics of the present day there is more resemblance in outer forms and denominations than in underlying realities; so that misconception is very easy. There was no proper Republican Party organization about 1926, though the party name and cant were current; the name and the cant have since supplied the materials for an imaginary superstructure.”¹⁵

It is even more important—and more interesting, if less obviously demonstrable—that the PD has attracted the attention of Brazilian scholars because it has afforded them entry to a larger debate regarding the meaning and nature of Brazilian liberalism and reform. The importance and interest of this lies in the fact that although the preceding two sets of explanations may go some distance toward explaining the volume of historical writing on the PD, they do not satisfactorily explain the intense controversy to be found in much of this writing.

The larger question regarding Brazilian liberalism and reform was framed most clearly by Emília Viotti da Costa in her *The Brazilian Empire* (“Why did elites who called themselves ‘liberal’ lead the country twice to authoritarian regimes?”). This has not only colored her investigation of the 19th century, but has also influenced what little she has written regarding the 20th century and has continued to color her public pronouncements on contemporary Brazil at least up till the year 2000. In this rendering, Brazilian liberalism (including that of the PD in the 1920s) amounts to a cruel and self-serving farce grafted onto a society in which reform is futile.¹⁶

Between the 1960s and the late 1980s, some variant of this argument held the field among Brazilian interpreters of the PD and their allies, individual differences of emphasis notwithstanding. Thus, for Boris Fausto, the stated aims of the PD were a mask for the nativism and anti-industrialism of a fraction of the “plantocracy” and a “traditional middle class.”¹⁷ Maria Lígia Prado, for her part, sought to clear the field of Fausto’s explanation for the party’s emergence but continued to view the *democráticos*’ reformism as a mask for elitism, conservatism and the defense of vested interests.¹⁸ Indeed, in Prado’s case, the PD’s role as a stand-in for 20th century Brazilian liberalism was made nearly crystalline: as the precursor of the National Democratic Union (UDN), the anti-populist bugbear of the postwar republic, the PD could not have played any progressive role at all during the 1920s.¹⁹ Similarly, Plínio de Abreu Ramos traced a direct line from the PD to the Constitutionalist Party of the mid-1930s, the Brazilian Democratic Union (UDB) of the abortive 1937-1938 presidential campaign and the postwar UDN (1945-1965), damning all four groups for their roles in the rise of 20th century Brazil’s two most authoritarian regimes.²⁰

The relationship between interpretations of the PD and interpretations of Brazilian liberalism becomes most clear when one begins to detect cracks in the anti-liberal consensus from the 1960s through the 1980s. For example, one can see a softening toward the PD on the part of Fausto, who has come to a greater appreciation of the party's calls for public education and liberal-democratic procedure.²¹ This softening has occurred within a not-unfamiliar ideological trajectory that has taken him from Trotskyism, with its traditions of internationalism and anti-orthodoxy, to a cosmopolitan defense of what he calls "democracy, ...social justice and ...tolerance." In his case, such a trajectory meant support for the administration of Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso.²² One could trace a similar trajectory for political scientist Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, one that culminated in an even more dramatic *volte-face* in his eventually coming to view the São Paulo constitutionalists of 1932 in a very favorable, anti-authoritarian light. After stating in one interview that "the [Brazilian] Left should make its peace with the Revolution of '32," he accepted a cabinet-level position in the Cardoso administration.²³

In late 2002, of course, Cardoso's chosen successor was defeated at the polls. In what was widely seen as an indication of the strength of liberal-democratic institutions, Cardoso, a polished reformist, handed over power to the perennial candidate of the Workers' Party, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. This is a man who until relatively recently would have made the *petite-bourgeois* strivers of the PD's rank-and-file look like Old World royalty. At the time of writing, the new administration shows every intention of continuing the reform program of the Cardoso government. One can only guess at what sort of historiographical revisions this turn of events might prompt, to say nothing of where the events themselves will actually lead. It seems likely, however, that lurking somewhere in the resulting texts will be the PD and their allies, as straw men, stalking horses and stand-ins in debates regarding the cost, the opportunity and even the possibility of reform.

NOTES

These notes were originally presented to the Boston Area Latin American History Workshop as the introduction to a long — perhaps over-long — paper on the Democratic Party of São Paulo, 1926-1934. A subsequent work containing both was delivered to the 2003 conference of the Latin American Studies Association. Thanks are due to both audiences and my fellow LASA panelists, and also to Barbara Weinstein, for their comments and encouragement.

1. A *gaúcho* is a native of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, while a native of São Paulo state is known as a *paulista*.

2. Paulo Nogueira Filho, *Ideais e lutas de um burguês progressista: o Partido Democrático e a revolução de 1930*, 2 vols. (São Paulo: Anhembi, 1958). See also his sequel, *Ideais e lutas de um burguês progressista: a guerra cívica de 1932*, 4 vols. in 6 (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1965-1981).
3. Everardo Dias, *História das lutas sociais no Brasil*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Alfa-Omega, 1977 [1962]), p. 156.
4. Edgard Carone, *Revoluções do Brasil contemporâneo, 1922-1938* (São Paulo: São Paulo Editora, 1965), p. 76. Carone also noted the speed with which the party grew in the “*bourgeois and petite-bourgeois circles of paulista cities*” (ibid., p. 77). He later revised the first of these two passages to read: “...a more conscious group, composed of elements from finance, from the industrial sector and from the *petite bourgeoisie*, supported by agrarian groups...” See his *Revoluções do Brasil contemporâneo, 1922-1938*, 4th ed. (São Paulo: Ática, 1989 [1965]), pp. 58-59 (emphasis added).
5. Boris Fausto, *A revolução de 1930: historiografia e história*, 16th ed. (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997 [1970]), pp. 49-56, 62-65.
6. Mauricio Font, *Coffee, Contention, and Change in the Making of Modern Brazil* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990); idem, “Coffee Planters, Politics, and Development in Brazil,” *Latin American Research Review*, 22:3 (1987), pp. 69-90; idem, “Planters and the State: The Pursuit of Hegemony in São Paulo, Brazil, 1889-1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1983). In one of his later essays on politics and society in São Paulo, Fausto cautioned: “it is somewhat dangerous to quickly infer consequence[s] of a political order and of party structure [on the basis] of economic diversification.” Boris Fausto, “São Paulo na primeira república,” *Série Estudos*, 75 (December, 1989), p. 14.
7. Renato M. Perissinotto, “Estado, capital cafeeiro e crise política na década de 1920 em São Paulo, Brasil,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 80:2 (May 2000), pp. 299-332; idem, “Classes dominantes, estado e os conflitos políticos na primeira república em São Paulo: sugestões para pensar a década de 1920,” in *A década de 1920 e as origens do Brasil moderno*, eds. Helena Carvalho De Lorenzo and Wilma Peres da Costa (São Paulo: Ed. da Universidade Estadual de São Paulo, 1998), pp. 37-69; Maria Cecília Spina Forjaz, *Tenentismo e política: tenentismo e camadas médias urbanas na crise da primeira república* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1977), p. 29; idem, *Tenentismo e Aliança Liberal, 1927-1930* (São Paulo: Polis, 1978), p. 45.
8. Joseph L. Love, *São Paulo in the Brazilian Federation, 1889-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), esp. pp. 164-166; Maria Lígia Coelho Prado, *A democracia ilustrada: o Partido Democrático de São Paulo, 1926-1934* (São Paulo: Ática, 1986). See also Prado’s “O Partido Democrático de São Paulo: adesões e aliciamento de eleitores (1926-1934),” *Revista de História*, 117 (1984), pp. 71-85.
9. Plínio de Abreu Ramos, *Os partidos paulistas e o Estado Novo* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1980), pp. 133-170 (see esp. pp. 134-135); Emília Viotti da Costa, ed., *1932: Imagens contraditórias* (São Paulo: Arquivo do Estado de São Paulo, 1982), p. 10.

10. An introduction to the archive may be found in *Catálogo do Arquivo Histórico do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico de São Paulo* (São Paulo: n.p., 1976), pp. 169-187.
11. C. R. Cameron, Report no. 167, "Fascism in São Paulo," 29 Oct. 1928 and C. R. Cameron, Report no. 151, "São Paulo Press on the Kellogg Pact," 4 Sept. 1928, United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 84, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, US Consulate, São Paulo, Volume 90, 800 series.
12. Mário de Andrade is so revered, in fact, that there is a tendency in the literature to downplay or ignore his role as a major contributor to the PD's official newspaper. Two exceptions are worthy of mention: Antônio Candido's untitled preface to *Mário de Andrade por ele mesmo*, 2nd ed., ed. Paulo Duarte (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1977 [1971]), pp. xiii-xvii; Sérgio Miceli, *Intelectuais e classe dirigente no Brasil, 1920-1945* (São Paulo: Difel, 1979), see esp. pp. 24-26, under the sub-chapter heading "Mário de Andrade: líder intelectual do Partido Democrático."
13. See Love's data in *São Paulo in the Brazilian Federation*, pp. 164-165. Some *perrepista* intellectuals did write memoirs. For example: Menotti Del Picchia, *A longa viagem*, 2 vols. (São Paulo: Martins, 1970-1972).
14. If one takes the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil's *Dicionário histórico-biográfico brasileiro* as an illustration, one finds that it dedicates nine and a half columns, covering more than three pages, to Nogueira Filho, more than *O Estado de S. Paulo* publisher Júlio Mesquita Filho, more than President-Elect Júlio Prestes de Albuquerque and nearly as many as President Washington Luís Pereira de Sousa. See Alzira Alves de Abreu, et al., eds., *Dicionário histórico-biográfico brasileiro*, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. da Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2001 [1984]), pp. 3326-3329, 3789-3791, 4102-4105, 4768-4769.
15. Cf. Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1957 [1929]), p. x: "Between them and the politics of the present day there is more resemblance in outer forms and denominations than in underlying realities; so that misconception is very easy. There were no proper party organizations about 1760, though party names and cant were current; the names and the cant have since supplied the materials for an imaginary superstructure."
16. Quote from Emília Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1985]), p. xvi; also, her April 2000 interview in *Conversas com historiadores brasileiros*, eds. José Geraldo Vinci de Moraes and José Marcio Rego (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2002), esp. pp. 86-87; note 9 above.
17. See note 5 above.
18. Prado, *A democracia ilustrada*, pp. 16-28, 172-176.
19. *Ibid.*, see esp. pp. 139, 176.
20. Ramos, *Os partidos paulistas e o Estado Novo*, pp. 205-210.
21. Fausto, "São Paulo na primeira república," pp. 13-14; *idem*, "O Estado Novo no contexto internacional," in *Repensando o Estado Novo*, ed. Dulce Pandolfi (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. da Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1999), p. 19.
22. The quote is from a March 2000 interview published in Moraes and Rego, *Conversas com historiadores brasileiros*, p. 102. Fausto's support for the Cardoso administration

and its program was made plain in a weekly column published in the *Folha de S. Paulo* from June 1998 to December 2003.

23. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro's quote is from an interview featured in the documentary film 32: *A Guerra Civil* (1992). Cf.: "the liberalism, the radicalism, the *civilismo* [i.e., anti-militarism] of the middle classes [in early 20th century Brazil] does not make them agents of [socio-political] transformation but rather efficient collaborators in the modifications [i.e., reforms] that obligatorily have to be carried out by the dominant classes to maintain intact [their] rule of exploitation. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, "Classes médias urbanas na primeira república," in *História geral da civilização brasileira*, pt. 3, *O Brasil republicano*, vol. 2, *Sociedade e instituições, 1889-1930*, 4th ed., ed. Boris Fausto (Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 1990 [1977]), pp. 36-37.