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***The Struggle for Democracy in Brazil:
Possible Lessons for Nigeria***

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THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL: POSSIBLE LESSONS FOR NIGERIA*

INTRODUCTION

It was with some fear of misunderstanding that I accepted a suggestion to add the second part to the title of this conference. I would like to make clear that I do not mean that Brazil can offer any lesson to Nigeria in the sense of examples to be followed. What I do mean is that I believe that our countries share some characteristics that go beyond the fact that part of the Brazilian population descends from slaves the Portuguese brought to Brazil from the Bight of Benin. Both countries have large populations, plenty of natural resources, and they went through the experience of European colonialism. In the last half-century, they have both experienced long periods of military dictatorship and they still face severe problems of poverty, inequality, political and civil violence, extensive corruption and impunity.** A comparative look at our history can be helpful in improving the understanding of our common evils and in clarifying the paths that may be open to us. That is what I mean by lessons: they include both positive and negative examples and they work both ways.

LAND OF INEQUALITY

To begin with, I would like to offer you a brief overview of the Brazilian history stressing the features that seem to be more relevant for the discussion of today's difficulties in constructing a stable democracy, both political and social.

It is widely acknowledged today, by Brazilian and foreign observers alike, including the World Bank, that the major obstacle

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** Reading the book *The Trouble with Nigeria*, by Chinua Achebe, I was struck by an amazing and unsuspected (to me) similarity between Nigeria and Brazil in many aspects. Except for the chapters on tribalism and on the Igbo problem, all the others could apply to Brazil with minor adjustments.

in the way of consolidating a democratic system is the appalling level of social inequality that can be found in the country. A few figures will help to illustrate the point. Data from 1998 show that Brazil is the 8th economy in the world in terms of the size of its GDP. But it is only the 34th in GDP per capita. The Gini index of inequality in 1995, according to the World Bank, was 0.63, the highest in the world. The Nigerian Gini for that year was 0.45. Data from the same source for 1995 show that the 10% poorer got 0.7% of the national product, while the 10% richer got 51.3%. In Nigeria, these figures were, respectively, 1.3% and 31.3%. If we put the poverty line at a monthly income of US\$70.00, following the criterion defined by the World Health Organisation, 54% of the Brazilian population would be placed below that line in 1997. This means that 85 million Brazilians would be considered poor in a total of 160 million. The high level of inequality is made worse by regional differences. In the Northeast of the country, the percentage of the poor reached 80% of the population in 1997, as compared with 39% in the Southeast. The colour line also affects economic inequality. In 1997, whites earned an average of 4.9 minimum salaries, blacks 2.4 and 'pardos' (mixed blood) 2.2.

Education is very poorly distributed, too. As of 1998, 15% of the population for 15-year-old or over were illiterate. For the Northeast, the figure was 29%. In rural Northeast, 46%. In the Southeast it was 9%. Functional illiteracy, defined as less than four years of schooling, reached 32% in 1997, 49% in the Northeast. Colour again is an important factor of educational inequality. Illiterates represented, in 1997, 9% of whites and 22% of blacks and 'pardos'. Whites had an average of 6.3 years of schooling as compared with 4.3 years for blacks and 'pardos'.

A final and important remark is that inequality has remained constant in the last 20 years, 15 of which under a civilian and democratic government. According to data from the Brazilian Census Bureau, the Gini index was 0.62 in 1977 and 0.60 in 1998. The stabilisation plan of 1994, called the Real Plan, had an initial effect of reducing poverty and inequality. But subsequent financial crises eliminated good part of this effect. The 50% poorer appropriated 12.7% of the national product in

1990. In 1998, their share was 11.2%. Conversely, the 50% richer had 62.8% in 1990 and 63.8% in 1998.

BRAZIL'S ORIGINAL SINS

The persistence of inequality, which survived periods of high economic growth under the military dictatorship and periods of mild growth under political democracy, indicates that it is deeply rooted in the fabric of Brazilian society. To explore these roots, it may be useful to go back in history. I will argue that inequality in Brazil derives from three original sins: slavery, latifundium and patrimonialism. I will comment briefly on each of these sins.

Slavery was introduced soon after the conquest of the land by the Portuguese, which took place in 1500. Originally its victims were the natives, called 'indians'. But they began to die by the thousands due to war, diseases and forced labour. The Jesuits opposed their enslavement. When sugar production got under way, requests for importation of African slaves began to arrive in Lisbon. The first African slaves arrived in 1550 and a regular traffic was under way by 1568. It lasted for 300 years, until 1850, when the already independent country stopped it, under strong British pressure. It has been calculated that around four million slaves were brought to Brazil during these three centuries, which makes 34% of the total African slaves transported to the Americas. Many of them came from the Bights of Benin and Biafra.

The slaves were, as a colonial writer put it, the feet and hands of the masters. They made the colony economically viable for the Portuguese by producing sugar, a commodity that was becoming widely accepted in the international market. Sugar dominated the whole XVII century. Then gold was discovered in the XVIII and finally coffee became the major export product in the XIX. In all these activities, as well as in food production, cattle raising, and urban services, the presence of African slaves was pervasive. The independence of the country from Portugal in 1822 changed nothing. Despite British pressure, slavery was preserved. It was only abolished in 1888, Brazil being the last Christian country to get rid of it.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of slavery in Brazilian society. The number of slaves was great and slavery permeated all economic activities in all parts of the country, in all social classes. Everybody that had the means to buy a slave would do it. Landowners owned slaves, but also did widows in the cities for whom a slave was often the only means of livelihood. The pervasiveness of slavery was such that even freedmen would buy themselves a slave if they could afford it. There can be no stronger, and more discouraging, evidence of the deep-rootedness of slavery than this. Slavery was rooted in the social practice and in the value system. Individual freedom was not seen as relevant social value. The fact that Catholicism was the religion of the state went a long way in explaining this situation. Neither Catholic theology nor the Catholic hierarchy ever opposed the enslavement of blacks. Catholic priests practiced slavery and kept slave women as their mistresses. There were no Quakers in Brazil to argue for the incompatibility between slavery and Christianity.

This 'democratic' aspect of slavery, coupled with the lack of legal discrimination against freed men and a vast process of racial miscegenation, due mostly to the scarcity of Portuguese women, was responsible for what an abolitionist, Joaquim Nabuco, referred to as the mixed nature of the Brazilian citizen. Master and slave live together inside him. When occupying positions of power he exhibits the arrogance of a master, when outside power he oscillates between servility and rebelliousness. A true citizen conscious of his rights and mindful of the rights of others did not develop. A real democratic personality, as a consequence, also did not materialize. This cultural trait may help to explain the persistence of inequality whose major victims are the descendants of the former slaves.

The second sin is the unequal distribution of land best exemplified by the plantation. The process of distribution and occupation of land was unequal and irregular since the beginning. The colonial power distributed land to reward services and according to the capacity of the beneficiary to cultivate it. Cultivation meant to produce sugar and tobacco for the external

market, including to trade for slaves. There was no family farming in Brazil, in contrast with what happened in the colonies of North America. Landowners were slave-owners. Outside of the sugar producing areas, which were restricted to the coast, land appropriation took place according to the law of the strongest. The natives were expelled from their lands and chased farther and farther to the interior. Huge amounts of land were thus appropriated without any legal registration.

In 1850, for the first time after independence, a land law was introduced inspired by the Australian model. The idea was to survey all public land and sell it in order to finance the importation of free labourers from Europe. The law was a complete failure. European immigrants, mostly Italians, did arrive to work on the coffee fields of São Paulo but for reasons alien to the law. As far as the unequal distribution of land is concerned, not much changed. To-day, 150 years after the law, Brazil still does not have a reliable national land survey and registration. The federal agency in charge of promoting agrarian reform has been caught more than once selling plots of land which proved to be inaccurately surveyed or simply inexistent.

A huge country with less than 20 inhabitants per square km finds itself, on the eve of the XXIth Century, in the embarrassing position of having to face a social movement of thousands of peasants asking for a peace of land. The Movement of the Landless (MST) is an articulate national movement that promotes occupation of illegal and non-productive farms as a means to force the government to expropriate them. Despite the justice of its plight, the government is becoming impatient with the movement on account of its methods. A rather strange reason if one remembers the centuries of arbitrariness and violence sustained by the rural workers.

The social and political impact of latifundium cannot be overlooked. Up to 1940, Brazil was a rural country. Close to 70% of the population lived in rural areas. Socially speaking, this meant that a majority of the population lived in very poor conditions, unprotected by labour legislation, uneducated, dependent on the arbitrary power of the landowners. The important changes that

took place after 1940 were not due to transformations in the distribution of land but to massive migration to the cities. The changes were dramatic. The situation of 1940 has been reversed. Today Brazil is 80% urban. This huge migration had political and social consequences. Politically, it coincided, in the 40's and 50's, with the introduction of the increase in political participation. This was a perfect recipe for the development of populist movements. When the system proved itself incapable of absorbing the increase in participation, the army intervened inaugurating a 21 year long dictatorship.

The negative social consequences have to do with the incapacity of the urban economy to absorb the millions of migrants. These consequences can be seen in the swollen cities plagued by poverty, marginality and, more recently, high levels of criminality. Twelve cities have over 1 million inhabitants. São Paulo is close to ten million, Rio de Janeiro has more than five million. These metropolises are dotted with slums. Rio has more than 600 slums in which one fifth of the population lives. The introduction of drug traffic in the 1980's resulted in the dramatic increase of police corruption and homicides, the latter affecting mostly the population 15-25 years old. In Rio and São Paulo, part of the homicides were due to the action of the police itself.

The third original sin is patrimonialism. I mean by that the lack of a clear distinction between the public and the private and, particularly, the use of public goods for the benefit of privileged citizens. Patrimonialism was, of course, a major aspect of the Portuguese state and society at the time of the conquest. The lack of differentiation between the public and private spheres was strengthened in the colony due to the fact that colonization was an affair of the state and the Portuguese state lacked the manpower to rule and explore the immense empire it had conquered. Co-optation of the ruling class and its involvement in the administration of the colony became a characteristic of the colonial government. The landed aristocracy that developed in the colony never reproduced the opposition between king and barons that we can find, for instance, in British history. The difference was even more striking if we compare the Brazilian situation or that of the

Spanish colonies, for that matter, with the formation of the North American colonies where the presence of the state was negligible and a strong society developed from the beginning.

Portuguese patrimonialism was inherited by the Brazilian independent state. In fact, it was part of the explanation why Brazil made a rather smooth transition from colony to nation. Many Brazilians had been incorporated into the colonial bureaucracy. They were willing to accept a peaceful transition and even a federation with Portugal. The maintenance of the monarchy in the new country was another consequence of the close link between the state and the dominant class. The lack of a strong civil society made possible the survival of patrimonial traits up to the present day, compounded with its correlates clientelism and nepotism. As I write this paper, the media is full of reports on countless cases of corruption and venality practiced by deputies, senators, governors, mayors, judges, policemen, and businessmen. It is no consolation to say that this is an indication that there exists a free and investigative press. The persistence of corruption, in good part a consequence of patrimonial and clientelistic practices, after 15 years of democratic rule, indicates rather the high degree of impunity due to a generalised tolerance of and complicity with the phenomenon.

THE FIRST STEPS TOWARDS POLITICAL DEMOCRACY (1930-1964)

It was against this background that Brazil entered, in 1930, what could be called the modern phase of its history in 1930. In that year, an oligarchic republic was overthrown by a movement involving both civilian leaders and young army officers. The major political goal of the movement was to brake down the power of state oligarchies and enhance that of the central government. In substantive terms, the new leaders, helped by the crash of 1929, were concerned with the industrialization of the country and with the social question. The first World War had taught the military the importance of industry for national defense. The labour movement had called the attention of the civilian leaders to the need

for a social policy. As a consequence, extensive labour legislation was introduced immediately after the victory of the movement in sharp contrast with the previous regime that did not consider the social question a matter of concern for the federal government. Also, for the first time, national political movements emerged inspired by the examples of Italian fascism, German nazism and Soviet communism. Political mobilization was short lived, though. A civilian dictatorship, backed by the military, was imposed on the country in 1937. Political centralization, industrial policy and social legislation were pushed ahead with greater energy. Inspired by the fascist corporatism, the government introduced a vast collection of social benefits winning the support of good part of the working class.

The defeat of Nazi-fascism in the Second World War made it difficult for the dictatorship to survive, despite the fact that Brazil had joined the Allies and sent a division to fight in Italy. The president, Getúlio Vargas, was overthrown in 1945 by the same military that had brought him to power. Ironically, one important reason for the overthrow of the president was the support he had won from the working class due to the implementation of the labour and social legislation. This legislation is in good part still in effect.

From 1945 to 1964 the country lived its first authentic experiment in democracy. There was reasonable freedom of the press and of organization, national political parties were organized, elections were held at all levels, municipal, state, and federal. Most important, electoral participation that had been kept at a level below 5% of the total population for more than 60 years, began to increase rapidly. It rose to 16% in 1950, and to 18% in 1960. In the presidential election of 1945, 6.2 million people voted, in 1950 8.2 million, in 1960, 12.5 million. Not only more people were voting but the voters were moving slowly to the left of the political spectrum, increasingly supporting populist and centre-left parties. At the same time, other forms of political participation and new political actors began to emerge. Workers, students, and even peasants began started to organize themselves and make political demands. A national movement in favour of

the nationalization of oil prospection, production and refining resulted in the creation, in 1954, of Petrobrás, the state oil company. Petrobrás became a symbol of Brazilian nationalism.

The forces responsible for the status quo, namely, land-owners, businessmen, the military, the Catholic Church and the middle classes, became wary of the direction things were going. A cry against the danger of a communist take-over of the country was soon heard. In 1964, with the open support of the United States government, the conservative forces reacted to the political mobilization with a military coup. The democratic experiment had lasted only 19 years. What had been learned in terms of political organization and participation was in great part lost.

A STEP BACKWARD (1964-1985)

Initially seen as preventive and temporary intervention, the military movement radicalized in 1968 and a full dictatorship was imposed on the country. Although less bloody than similar regimes implanted in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, it was violent enough to arrest, torture and kill hundreds of opponents. Close to 5,000 people were punished. Politicians lost their mandates, union leaders were deprived of their political rights, thousands of public employees lost their jobs, hundreds of officers, including 43 generals, lost their commissions and were expelled from the forces. The issue of torture, death and disappearance of political prisoners is still alive in public debate today, the armed forces refusing to assume their responsibility and to release incriminatory documents.

At the same time, censorship of the media was introduced, constitutional guarantees were suspended, unions and other organizations were closed down or deprived of their influence. The Brazilian touch to the dictatorship was the decision to keep the Congress open and functioning, albeit purged from its more vocal elements. The party system was revamped but not abolished. Elections were maintained, except for the presidency and state governments. The result was a farcical political system in which the paraphernalia of representation was in place without its

substance. What is more ironic, during the military dictatorship electoral participation not only continued to grow but did it at a faster rate. The 18% of participation of 1960 had become 47.5% in 1986, one year after the end of the military government. In absolute figures, this means that more than fifty million new voters, the equivalent of the country's total population in 1950, were incorporated in the political system, an average of about two million a year.

Political repression was accompanied by an economic policy centred on capital investment in road construction, energy production, including nuclear energy, telecommunications, and industrialization. The seventies saw a period of rapid economic growth, reaching 13% in 1973. At the time, the phenomenon was called the Brazilian miracle. Dramatic changes were also taking place in the labour market. From 1960 to 1980, 50 million people moved from rural to urban areas and from the primary to the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. Women entered the labour market en masse. Analyses made with the benefit of hindsight showed that the miracle was in good part an illusion. Due to the massive expansion of the labour market, household income was kept stable, while the minimum salary dropped drastically. Inequality in fact increased during the period. In 1973, the first oil crisis slowed down economic growth. Brazil depended heavily on oil imports, its local production accounting only for 20% of consumption. The second oil crisis in 1979 stopped the growth altogether. In 1983 there was decline of -3% in the GDP. The country entered a long period of economic stagnation, coupled with high inflation.

A last characteristic of the military government was its concern with welfare policies. Copying the first dictatorship of the thirties, the military tried to compensate for the removal of civil and political rights by promoting social rights. Social legislation was extended to the rural population, to domestic workers and to the self-employed. Repression for the opposition, paternalism for the poor, support for and alliance with the business community. To use Barrington Moore's expression, the

military tried to modernize the country from above. They tried to introduce capitalism by means of political authoritarianism.

The decrease in economic growth, the end of the 'miracle', reduced the support of the middle classes for the military. The dictatorship was also having a high cost for the military corporation. Many officers were appointed to civilian positions of power and prestige, both in government and in public and private enterprises. Ambition and greed, soon followed by corruption, began to corrode professional morale. Furthermore, the repressive apparatus, also under the control of military officers, became almost independent from the hierarchical channels, threatening the very backbone of the military organization. Beginning in 1974 the military began to give indications of a willingness to slowly step down.

Political and social organizations hastened to take advantage of the fact. New political parties emerged, the most important one being the Worker's Party. This party was an outgrowth of a renewal of the working class movement, now based mostly on the modern industries of capital goods and car production. Less dependent on the state, less corporatist, more aggressive, the new working class contributed to the modernization of social and political practices. The Catholic Church also had gone through a radical change. From a constant ally of the state, it had become an important opposition force to the military government and a staunch supporter of human rights. Thousands of Base Ecclesiastical Communities spread throughout the country as a grassroots movement combining religious and political struggle. Other social movements, usually urban based, popped out everywhere. They were about 8 thousand at the beginning of the eighties, encompassing both middle and working class neighbourhoods. An important role in the process of democratization was played also by artists and intellectuals. Popular singers helped by the expansion of the sound industry and TV channels managed to evade censorship with songs impregnated with political protest.

Following huge street demonstrations in favour of direct elections, some of which gathered more than one million people,

the military stepped down in 1985 transferring the government to a civilian president elected by a special electoral college. The country entered a phase of civic enthusiasm, which lasted until the 1988 when a new constitution was voted. Soon afterwards disappointment began to be felt with the apparent incapacity of political democracy to reduce the deep social inequalities described at the beginning of this talk.

A NEW EXPERIMENT IN POLITICAL DEMOCRACY
(1985-2000)

The history of the last 15 years has been the struggle to show that political democracy can be an efficient instrument to promote social democracy. In fact, the country seems to measure up to the highest standards of political democracy. There is freedom of the press, freedom of organization, free elections, extended franchise (including the 16-year-old), political parties, independent powers. The army has maintained a low profile. In all likelihood, Brazil is a political democracy.

Nevertheless, the persistence of inequality, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, affecting a majority of the population show that political democracy has weak roots.

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