

## The Federal Republic by Joaquim Francisco de Assis Brasil: A Bibliographical Note

Cristina Buarque de Hollanda

### **Cristina Buarque de Hollanda**

is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. E-mail: [cristinabuarque@gmail.com](mailto:cristinabuarque@gmail.com)

Joaquim Francisco de Assis Brasil was born in 1858 in the town of São Gabriel, Rio Grande do Sul. When still young, he moved to Porto Alegre, where he was involved in founding the Republican Club of Porto Alegre, in 1878. In the same year, he moved to the capital of São Paulo and began his Law studies at the Law Faculty of São Francisco [San Francisco Square] where he formed close ties with the Republican cause. Among other colleagues and fellow militants, there were compatriots who in the near future were to feature prominently in the scene of 'gaúcho' politics: Pinheiro Machado, Borges de Medeiros and Júlio de Castilhos. De Castilhos became a close friend and brother-in-law<sup>1</sup>.

In 1881, while still a student, he wrote *The Federal Republic*, a book which sharply criticizes the practices of the Monarchy and enthusiastically supports the new political regime. His work goes beyond the views of the student circles and represents an important piece of republican propaganda in that period. In 1882, he obtained his bachelor's degree in Law and returned to Rio Grande do Sul where he was involved in the foundation of the Partido Republicano Rio-grandense [Rio Grande Republican Party] together with colleagues of his from the São Paulo Law Faculty. In the same year, he published the first volume of the *History of the Rio Grande Republic*, an unfinished work which narrates the course of the Farroupilha Revolution. In 1885, Assis Brasil was the only provincial deputy elected by the recently-founded PRR [the political party of Rio Grande do Sul], which competed for political space with the Liberal Party of Gaspar Silveira Martins. He was re-elected to the same position two years later.

After the Republic was declared, he was appointed as Deputy of the National Constituent Assembly. The first Republican Constitution was only promulgated on 24th February, 1891, and Assis Brasil publicly diverged from Júlio de Castilhos over the question of the presidential succession. He declared in favor of Prudente de Moraes, in disagreement with Castilhos, the then governor of Rio Grande do Sul and supporter of the continuation of Deodoro da Fonseca. After being defeated, he resigned from his Office. Deodoro who was the object of fierce opposition, dissolved the Congress, even though he had been elected. This episode caused a serious crisis in the Gaúcho state and culminated in the overthrow of the governor, Castilhos and the setting up of a provisional junta, made up of Assis Brasil, Barros Cassal and Manoel Luiz da Rocha Osório. This group remained in power for twenty days even though it was the time of the dictatorship of Deodoro.

In 1892, he began his diplomatic career in Argentina. In the neighboring Republic, there were clear signs of a disagreement with the terms of the Rio Grande do Sul constitution which had been drawn up by Castilhos. Assis Brasil complained that there had been a serious drift towards authoritarianism in the new institutional design

of the State. Once the new regime had been inaugurated, the common cause of republicanism no longer supported the political alliance between the two. Now that the period of propaganda had been superseded, political practices brought to light deep divisions surrounding the types of organization of the Republic. The close friendship turned into a sharp ideological antagonism and political rivalry.

333

In the following year, it broke out into a public quarrel when Assis Brasil published his main work, *Democracia representativa. Do modo e da maneira de votar* [Representative democracy. Vote and how to vote], which served, almost forty years later, as the basis of the first Brazilian electoral code of 1932. In its text, which provides the core of the liberal criticism of *castilhismo*, the democratic paradigm is described as being the essential condition of the republican experience.

The career of Assis Brasil in the new regime combined diplomatic and parliamentary activities which were punctuated by reflections on the gaucho, national and international political scene. In 1895, he was appointed to a post in Lisbon and in 1898, to Washington. After 1902, in addition to his representation in the United States he was sent on a mission to Mexico (where he was involved in negotiations surrounding the question of Acre), on the recommendation of the Baron of Rio Branco. In 1905, he returned to the Republic of Argentina and, in the following year, was appointed Secretary-General of the Pan-American Delegation presided over by Joaquim Nabuco. In 1907, he resigned from his post in the Argentinian capital and abandoned his diplomatic career for twenty years.

During this long hiatus, he attempted to become engaged with gaucho politics again. He returned to Brazil and rose in the ranks of the dissident republican movement again with the foundation of the Democratic Republican Party in Rio Grande do Sul in 1908. However, his aim of uniting the political heirs of Silveira Martins<sup>2</sup> around the common opponents of Castilhos was unsuccessful. The disagreement about the parliamentary question, characterized by *gasparismo*, [movement of rebels who formed the Federalist Revolution in 1893 and led by Gaspar Siveira Martins. It opposed the provincial government represented by Julio de Castillos] ruined any chance of reconciliation. In the first 10 years of the 20th Century, he withdrew from public life and devoted himself to agriculture and ranching.

In 1922, he returned to active politics with renewed vigor, again moved by a desire to join up with the federalists and launched a campaign for the presidency of Rio Grande do Sul for the Federalist Party, a longstanding political rival. He was defeated by Borges de Medeiros, who was competing for a fifth mandate in the State government. A dispute about the result triggered the revolutionary movement which led to a federal intervention and culminated in the revision of the Gaucho constitution. Following a lawsuit however, the result was left unaltered.

In 1924, the politician presided over the Liberation Alliance which brought together the gauchos in opposition. However, the political instability forced him into exile in Uruguay, where he kept close contact with the country. Three years later, when still abroad, he was elected as a federal deputy. In the Chamber of Deputies, where there was a breaking up of the state parties, a new party was formed which sought wide-ranging national influence. This was the National Democratic Party which comprised, the Democratic Party of São Paulo and a small group of "anti-situationalists" from the federal capital. In 1929, the politician thwarted the federalist candidacy and supported Getúlio Vargas for the state government. The gathering of all the political groups around a single

candidate, which was unprecedented in republican gaucho history, was the prelude to the foundation of the Gaucho United Front.

334

Once the provisional government headed by Getúlio Vargas had been installed, Assis Brasil was appointed Minister of Agriculture in 1930. Two years later, he was made the rapporteur of the Subcommittee of Legal Reform and Electoral Process, the activities of which resulted in the already mentioned drafting of the 1932 Code. Without leaving his post at the Ministry, he returned to Argentina as Ambassador of Brazil. In a letter to his colleagues, dated 1933, he expressed dissatisfaction over the long period of the provisional government and attempted to retire from public life. However, in the same year, he was made a deputy in the Constituent Assembly and elected in accordance with the code that he himself had drafted. In 1934, he abandoned his mandate as deputy and retired to his castle in Pedras Altas, in Rio Grande do Sul, where he died in 1938.

The public biography of Assis Brasil was characterized by the question of the Republic, which was a constant object of his reflections and political practice. An active propagandist in the time of the Empire, he dreamt up the Propagandist Republic and later experienced (and resisted) disenchantment.

*The Federal Republic*, dated 1881, was the work of his youth and echoed the militant tone of republican students in the São Paulo capital. It was aimed at those who “nurture revolutionary aspirations”, even without knowing it and among them, would form a compendium of “theories and ideas that reflect the whole republican party”. The declared objective of the author is to raise awareness about the absolute needs of the Republic in the short term. Although the republican ideal already filled a significant place in the political imagination of the period where it had “penetrated the national spirit in all directions”, it had to endure the unjustified accusation that it was misguided (Assis Brasil, 1888, pp. VII and VIII). In other words, many people were convinced that the new regime was inevitable – even the monarchists – but thought that the current social conditions that prevailed were unsuited or inadequate for its advent.

Against this background, propaganda, “the single combat arm of the Republic” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. VII), would be the linchpin that could make an a bond between society and politics inseparable, as well as between the substance and forms of public life.

Only a radical renewal of the prevailing institutional scene could ensure that the decadent life under a misguided monarchy could be overcome. In the view of the author, “essence can be changed through form”. The case of France illustrates this premise: “France was driven to the abyss under a monarchical system; from one day to the next it acquired a republican system and when one looks from the heights of administration to the private lives of its inhabitants, everything has taken on a moral tone, regained strength and shown signs of progress.” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 4). Thus it is a question of altering the real basis of government and not just its surface which is harmless. The metamorphosis of appearance which is undertaken by monarchical governments does not alter the essence of a usurping regime, that is moulded in “lying institutions” and “scandalous nepotism” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. VIII). Thus Assis Brasil echoes Cervantes in speaking of his famous character: “they can dress me as they want, but in whatever way I’m dressed, I will be Sancho Panza”.

In Brazil, the Monarchy suffered from strong artificial tendencies: the signs of distinction between people are not grounded in tradition. According to the author, “no aristocracy

is possible here. Our nobility will always be caricatures. Only those who are poor in spirit take titles seriously that have no meaning – like a baron and marquis. The royal family in Brazil do not have any deeper roots than the aristocracy”. There was thus “a deep antagonism between the temperament of the country and the institutions that produced it” (Assis Brasil, 1888, pp. 84-87).

335

As a result of indefinitely reproducing the observed patterns in politics, without any institutional mediation that could allow “popular feelings to be expressed”, there were only two stark choices in the opinion of the author: the “stagnation” and “moral death” of the people or revolution – in other words, a worsening of the misery or a radical suspension of the basis of reproduction. The rational hypothesis of the ‘dissipation of the popular element’ was thus contemplated, only to be rejected: it did not feature as a real possibility unless there was an unlikely scenario in which the “subterfuges of the monarchy” performed the “incredible miracle” of “changing the course of history” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 192).

The agonizing history of the monarchy did not conceal the certainty of the republican future which resulted from the “evolutionary force” which “naturally pushes the active features of society to the fore” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 47). The purpose, par excellence, of this lively text by the young man, was thus not the means but the ends of revolution – that is the Republic itself. The clarity about this overriding obligation seemed to inhibit (or push into second place), thoughts about the direction of politics.

Throughout the text, the reader can find considerable tension in the assumption that men who are intelligent and free should, nonetheless, carry out activities that clash with the “natural forces of destiny”. From this standpoint, every legislator must restrain his fantasies and confine himself to the needs of the social body. In other words, he should not project politics onto society prematurely or be in a rush to put form above substance. A political act cannot avoid an awareness of social trends. Opportunism in politics involves making these two levels coincide. On the basis of this criterion, the monarchy could be proved to be misguided.

Hence in the first political impetus of his writing, Assis Brasil is devoted to the justification of the Republic in the country, in a federative form and with universal suffrage as being the modern condition of democracy. When viewed as the necessary conditions for the new political regime, they form an institutional thread that is necessary and indissoluble. In other words, the experiment of forming a Republic as a federation and with universal suffrage could not take place in isolation. One must be carried out from, and by means of, the other. Although the text of the *The Federal Republic* follows a narrative where the Republic is to a certain extent, the protagonist, it is not based on the assumption that it has an institutional priority or precedence. In other words, from a political standpoint, there is no Republic without a federative form and universal suffrage; there is no federation without a Republic and a universal competitive voting system and, nor is there an extended vote without a federation and republican government. Or at least, there is no coherence or institutional consistency in a system that dispenses with one of these forms. They are all intertwined in the paradigms of freedom and equality which constitute the moral basis of the political argument of Assis Brasil.

In the first book of the work which has the title *The Republic*, the political arguments are deployed in a new way to denounce the practices of the monarchy. The blemishes of the Monarchy are the obverse of the potential qualities attributed to the Republic. In this way,

the politics which 'ought to be' is much better understood in terms of the negation of the politics that 'is'. This contrasting strategy is structured around three opposing pairs which have reciprocal derivations and implications, and are as follows:

336

1. Privileges, "sophistries" and "distressing stories" of the Monarchy embedded in the "haughty infallibility" and "divine attributes" of the King versus the rational, egalitarian and scientific outlook of the Republic (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 26);

Derivation: perpetuity by heredity *versus* the sovereignty of each generation to deal with the matters that concern it

2. Stagnation of people who are apathetic and devoid of interest in politics versus the republican vitality of a people involved in politics;

Derivation: paralysis of politics and the apathy of the people *versus* the flexibility of a kind of politics that seeks to accommodate shifting opinions

3. Hostility between the people and the government versus complete convergence of interests with each other in the Republic.

a. Sovereignty of the King *versus* sovereignty of the nation

Thus, roughly speaking, a Monarchy is regarded as a degenerate political structure. In the genealogy of the forms of government outlined by the author, the original state of anarchy is succeeded by a despotic system which overcomes the upheavals of the primitive state. At this stage, the people tend to remain dormant for a long period of time until the "light of intelligence" makes them see that the "the prevailing political system is incompatible with the social system that has spontaneously formed in their breast". With a view to ensuring the preservation of his power, at this point the King negotiates with the people and "makes concessions" to them. Constitutional monarchy does not originate from the aspirations of the people but from an arrangement that mitigates the evils of submission. According to Assis Brasil, men "love accomplished facts" and tend "not to abandon the established order" (Assis Brasil, 1888, pp. 17 e 26). Hence, the spurious rhetoric of the monarchy makes use of this lethargic tendency. The monarchy is even glorified by the author in his English version and habitually shown respect. From this perspective, the real interest of the people lies in the act of governing itself – that is to establish a republican regime.

In Brazil the Letter of 1824 made "dangerous concessions to the Head of State" and left the people in a state of torpor and unawareness with regard to their own interests (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 94). Although the first people subjected to monarchical government may have been noted for their "passionate free spirit", the subsequent generations, downtrodden by practices of usurpation, hypocrisy and violence, showed signs of weakening and social apathy (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. VII). The "uninterrupted surveillance by the legalised invasive power" ended up "definitively fixing a yoke round the neck of the untamed bull" and "nobody has any more strength except to obey the goad of the master" (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 100). In the political climate in question, there was no common ground of interest between the government and the people. Even the well-intentioned liberals, whose careers were launched in parliament, were defeated by political circumstances and forced to comply with the *de facto* government of the Emperor. The same applied to the conservatives and thus both individuals and parties "succumbed" (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 103).

Assis Brasil believed the operatives of the damaging monarchy sought to prolong their power by a reversal of the natural – and hence observable – assumption with regard to the coming ‘opportunity’. Since the notion of a Republic was no longer being dismissed as a political daydream – and even its adversaries were compelled to recognize its superiority – the monarchists acted by postponing its formal onset.

337

In the second book *The Federal Republic*, with the title *The Opportunity*, the author takes stock of the allegations made by the monarchists who were opposed to the installation of the Republic in the short term which, were as follows: the lack of education for the people, the atrophied state of public opinion the shortage of public men for the undertaking, the potential state of anarchy implicit in the republican experience (the example of the Hispano-American Republics) and finally the ties between the President and a political party with its particular interests.

The author states that the fact that there were gaps or lacunae pointed out by the monarchical critics proves the relevance – or does not suggest the irrelevance – of the new political model. “Discredited by the tribunal of history”, with its obsolete belief in divine right, it had to give way to republican institutions (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 108). Since the racial features and natural constitution of the people are dismissed as the origin of the problems, only the shortcomings of the monarchical institutions can explain the deterioration of the political climate. Thus the regime in power at the time was responsible for the poor educational conditions of the people, the timorous expression of public opinion and even the scarcity – or complete lack – of politicians with the skills to cope with the delicate task of handling the institutional transition to the Republic.

With regard to “sister nations”, the author claims that there is a serious misconception in supposing that the disturbances found there are “due to their system of government”. The observation of circumstances does not reveal the essence of the political model. One must take into account the “fiery and turbulent” Spanish temperament, and even note that an undesirable situation does not provide an indiscriminate view of reality: Chile and Colômbia are important exceptions (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 150). This means that there is nothing inherently unstable about the republican system. The contexts of independence in themselves are accompanied by litigious procedures and even Brazil, in its monarchical form, did not escape serious violations of moral order.

Finally, with regard to the allegations of impropriety caused by the links between the President of the Republic and the political party in power, the author affirms the legitimacy of the principle of majority rule and points out that the nation itself will ensure that the political groups will take it in turns to wield power.

In the republican scene, the close relationship between the governed and the governors is extremely sensitive to shifts in public opinion. In other words, fluctuations of wishes and requirements find an echo in politics, unlike what occurred with the strict constitution of the monarchy. The malleable principle of the Republic, which is responsive to fluctuations of opinion thus contrasts with the autarchic dynamics of the Monarchy quia, which was oblivious to any signs of life beyond the frontiers of government. In the Republic, the representatives stick to the expressions of interest shown by those they represent. The political mandate, which is inseparable from universal suffrage, “is a real legal authority” that is “essential to democracy”<sup>3</sup> (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 297). It is again a question of finding the opportunity for a climate that involves turning the monarchical principles upside down.

The argument of the third book, *The Federation*, still resorts to making a structural contrast. Here the author notes the huge territorial extension of the country and its wide diversity of people and geographical conditions and finally addresses the particular needs of this vast and heterogeneous panorama. Only a federative form would be able to reflect the full range of features contained within the national borders. It is a question of suitably blending unity and diversity. In this political model, there is no “compulsory unity of diverse elements” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 208). The parts allow a greater degree of autonomy than is possible without threatening the integrity of the whole.

As a result, the federation is a desirable formula for large nations which want to escape the fate of Russia, “the wealthiest nation of the most indigent poor”. In protecting the mosaic of differences without dismembering its basic parts, the federation allows the ‘large’ to share the splendours of the ‘small’ like in Ancient Greece and Rome which “still light up the world today with their flashes of genius” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 214). The neglect of the diversified composition of the characters could result in “a fatal disintegration and inevitable disruption” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 219). This was the inherent danger of the Monarchy and its centralized government which was indifferent to particular local needs and “a social leveler of poverty” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 223). The atrophied monarchical system which failed to foresee the means of dealing with differences became a vulnerable country: the resulting discontent contained the potential risk of separation.

Finally, the argument towards the end of the work which covers the fourth and last volume is about universal suffrage, which is a means par excellence of expressing the “will of the people”, an indispensable tool of the Republic and by extension, of democracy. In so far as the nation has ceased to be the patrimony of a usurping government and belongs to the government itself, a way must be found which allows them to express their wishes. In the argument of the author, the allusion to the nation is indistinct. Everybody has the right to vote although not all of them are able to exercise it. However, since madmen, children and women,<sup>4</sup> lack a “certain degree of development which is indispensable to that end” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 249), they remain a part of the community that is not endowed with the legitimacy of the suffrage. But there is no exclusion of individuals for reasons of “caste, category, color or racial origin” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 274), as these are indeed inhibitors of the universalist principle.

In other epochs, the universal suffrage was rejected as a metaphysical digression. As time went by however, “the uncontestable truth” that “all men are free and equal and have a right to liberty” made this issue of suffrage an undeniable reality. The disciples of Augusto Comte, who thought the people were unfit to make decisions about politics – as well as about chemistry or astronomy – disregarded the fact that the common people are not summoned to “decide on some sociological question”, but simply to choose representatives, “men who deserve trust for their intrinsic virtues and previous experience of the procedure” (Assis Brasil, 1888, pp. 269-270). Assis Brasil believed that the defects of the people can be attributed to the system in use and not “the wisest and most virtuous of men” can escape from the activities of a decadent environment. The Republic could not overcome the difficulties of adaptation: only carrying out specific duties led to a particular skill for it. From this standpoint, “the people prepared themselves for the universal suffrage by exercising it”. In another way, it was like “wanting to teach a child to read by concealing the alphabet from him” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 299). People cannot escape Darwin’s principle of natural selection: however, they are

able to change it completely so that they can be in a better position to cope with the situation in which they are found.

339

Although the author foresees that inexperience and the fallible nature of men will lead to mistakes, even so the vote would be “the least likely means of bringing about any error”. Whenever people give up their rights, “nations fall into the abyss of misery” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 274). Political apathy provides “an open Road to the exploiters”. Assis Brasil thinks that, “it is time we put na end to the stupid prejudice which holds that the people should not be political” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 300).

Thus public life is not the exclusive preserve of the wise, nor of the wealthy. In the view of the author, the notion of interest involved in the census debate is “vulgar and unworthy”: “if all interest were only to come from money, how terrible for the country”. The “interest of course” is based on “higher and nobler fundamental principles” and is not attached to a particular and necessary kind of social belonging. The “public cause” binds together “every citizen to the same commitment” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. 283). The Republic supported by Assis Brasil is thus radically egalitarian. No signs of the distinction of the monarchical society must be allowed to survive in it. The whole asymmetry is inorganic and hence misguided.

Blinded by the “natural march”, the people and even public figures, feature as supporting operators of their own history at the same time as they are the object of a vigorous propaganda campaign run by the Federal Republic. The elation of the post-independence generation, by now immune to the indifference to civic life that characterized the period of the monarchy, shows the reader the kind of expectations that Assis Brasil had, with regard to the political activities of common men. The aim of the author in his work was to throw light on the republican spirit because “in our country there is a large number of people who don’t regard themselves as republicans although in fact they are” (Assis Brasil, 1888, p. XII). This is a text that is concerned with exhorting people to republican action. For this reason, there remains a significant ambiguity in determining the origins of the political movement: at times, it seems to be embedded in the course of events themselves, at other times it results from the deliberated actions of men. The sum of these “anti-ethical” principles is normative: men must take decisive action in harmony with the inexorable course of history, under the penalty of delaying the political process and making the cost of renewal unnecessarily burdensome.

### Notes

1. In Em 1885, following his return to Rio Grande do Sul (after the period of his studies in the São Paulo capital), Assis Brasil married Maria Cecília Prates de Castilhos, the sister of Júlio de Castilhos, and had three children.

2. Gaspar Silveira Martins died in 1901. He was the leader of the Liberal Party and in 1892, founded the Federalist Party. His political supporters were known as gasparistas.

3. It is worth noting that changed his mind about the kind of supposed authorization that existed in the politicalmandate. In his maturity, on the occasion of the publication ofteh fourth edition of *Democracia Representative Democracy: vote and how to vote do Voto e da Maneira de*

*Votar*, in 1932, the author corrected the opinion he had had as a young man and began to identify the autonomy of a representative's activities with the conditions required for carrying out his responsibilities well.

340

4. The female vote was also an issue that was revised by the author. In the fourth edition of *Representative Democracy: vote and how to vote*, which preceded the Electoral Code edition of 1932, Assis Brasil argued that changing times had required the question to be looked at afresh. Women had reached a stage of development and autonomy that was compatible with the exercise of the vote. However, there was no contradiction with the text of his youth which had already foreseen that with the progress of mankind this restriction could be removed.

### **Bibliographical References**

Assis Brasil, Joaquim Francisco de. *A República Federal*. Sao Paulo: Leroy King Bookwalter, 1888.

Brossard, Paulo. *Ideias políticas de Assis Brasil*. Brasília: Senado Federal, 1989.

Joaquim Francisco de Assis Brasil: *perfil biográfico e discursos (1857-1938)*. Porto Alegre: Assembleia Legislativa do Rio Grande do Sul, 2006.

Hollanda, Cristina Buarque de. *Joaquim Francisco de Assis Brasil: uma antologia política*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora 7Letras, 2011.