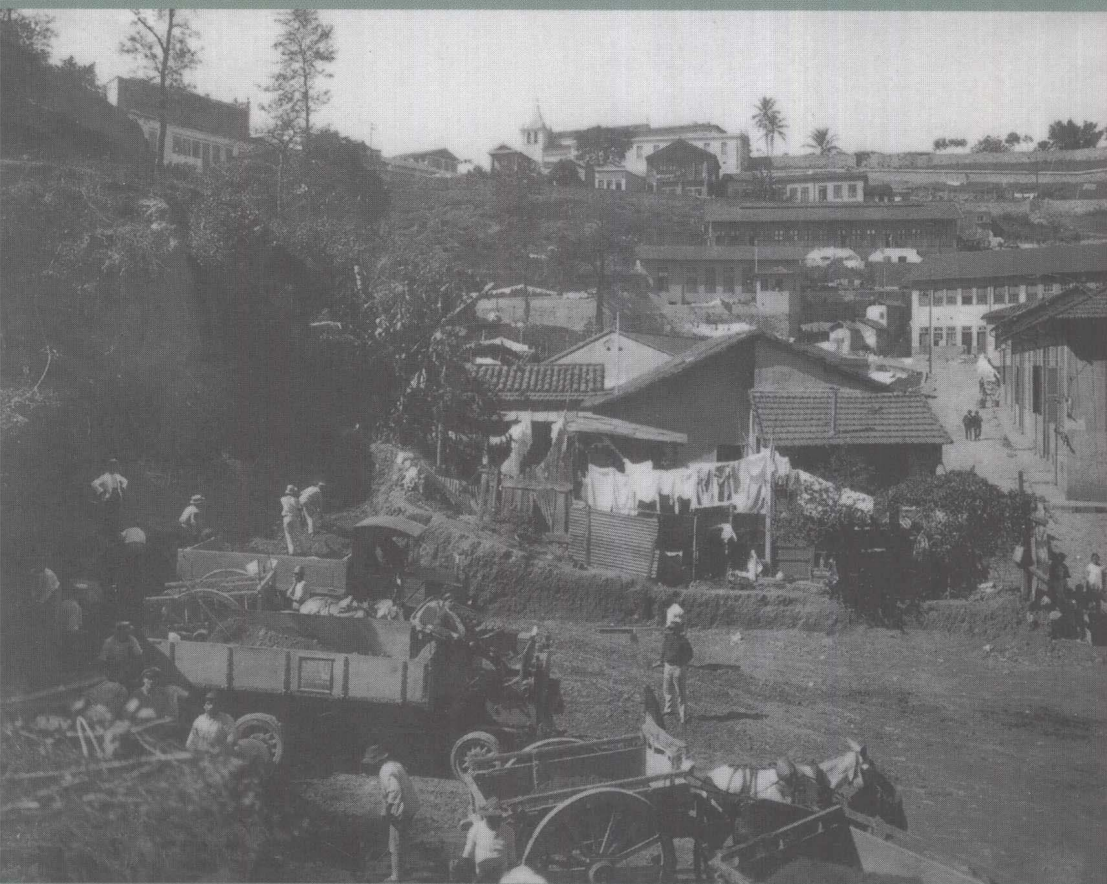
"Civilizing" Rio

Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City 1889–1930



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Introduction

In September 1893 "hundreds of agitators" marched down the main streets of Rio de Janeiro, the federal capital of Brazil's nearly four-year-old Republic. Rallying in front of a government building, the crowd attempted to take inside a petition demanding that the officials revoke a recently imposed federal tax on "essential goods." In the eyes of the demonstrators this tax was particularly unjust, not only because it added another burden to already skyrocketing prices on consumer items, but because it was one more cruel reminder of official Rio's disregard for the well-being of the city's residents. Prices were already high, the protesters complained, because speculators preyed on consumers during those times when the government was preoccupied with maintaining order in the distant reaches of the new Republic. In reference to a recent military expedition to the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, spokespersons for the crowd proclaimed that "when the government's attention is devoted to matters pertaining to the military order, the speculators are most active."[1]

The peaceful march turned ugly when the police prevented the crowd, including even the "respectable citizens" scattered among its ranks, from delivering a set of written complaints to the House of Deputies. What ensued was fairly typical of street demonstrations in those years: the police shoved the crowd; people fought back, hurling rocks at the rows of infantry and cavalry converging on them. In turn the mounted officers charged the gath-

1. *O Paiz*, September 12, 1893, 1, translated by the author, as are all further translations unless otherwise noted.

ering, their clubs swinging and horses' hooves tromping down on protester and bystander alike. Tempers flared, shots rang out, and the peaceful assembly of orderly petitioners turned to melee. Groups from the splintered gathering then rampaged through the downtown streets until nightfall, when exhaustion, hunger, frustration, and relatively indiscriminate incarceration brought an end to the disturbance. What was the outcome? By all accounts, the speculators went back to gouging the urban consumers, pushing food prices ever higher, and the federal tax stayed in place.

Although marches and protests occurred intermittently over the next decade, not until November 1904 did violence again envelop the metropolitan area and touch the lives of many of the city's residents. At that time Rio's residents took to the streets to protest a new law requiring universal vaccination against small pox. Beginning as sporadic rallies on the evening of November 10, the day before the law was to take effect, rioting disrupted the normal operations of the city for the next week, finally ending on November 18. In the course of the week, crowds comprising young and old, men and women, European immigrants and native Afro-Brazilians, hurled rocks from behind barricades and from the tops of buildings. The most militant protesters armed themselves with handguns and other weapons to defend their barricades against the police and army units that were attempting to restore order. Day and night, shouts of "Death to the police!" "Long live the working class!" "Down with forced vaccination!" and "Long live the Republic!" pierced the Rio air.[2]

Similar to the protest of 1893, the demonstration began as a peaceful assembly. On the night of November 10, 1904, as many as five thousand protesters gathered peacefully in the Largo de São Francisco da Paula, a traditional rallying point in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Although the organizers of the November 10 protest (a loose coalition of civilian and military Positivists, socialist trade unionists, and opposition politicians) directed the crowd to disperse and to reassemble in the same location the next day, a few gangs of youths headed out to get a head start on stoning streetlights and overturning public transport vehicles. Most, however, simply paraded about the downtown shouting condemnations of the government and the vaccination law. On the morning of November 11, the first day of the government's mandatory vaccination effort and the day organizers had called for total noncompliance with the new law, protests erupted all over Rio de Janeiro.[3]

2. *Jornal do Brasil*, November 11–12, 14–19, 1904, 1–2.
3. Ibid., November 11–12, 1904, 1–2.

When the riot finally ended more than a week later, the capital lay in shambles. The crowds had overturned and set ablaze streetcars, broken gas and electric streetlights, erected barricades to cut off access to the main arteries in the vital business districts near the docks and trading houses, invaded construction sites to tear apart newly erected walls and floors, and vandalized train stations on lines out to the rapidly expanding *subúrbios* on the outskirts of the downtown. Peculiar targets indeed for a protest against small pox vaccination! Logically, one assumes, in a riot against a health law, the offices of the public health department should have suffered the greatest damage, or the demonstrators should have sought out and tried to punish the doctors and medical personnel responsible for carrying out the vaccination. Instead, the crowds had destroyed the Republican capital's newly constructed downtown offices, government buildings, cultural landmarks, and transit system. Why, one asks, did a people opposed to a public health law set ablaze streetcars and newly renovated buildings? The answer seems to be that the riot had centered on more than vaccination and had unleashed well-grounded fears and hostilities from Rio's poor. Dying daily of malnutrition, dysentery, and tuberculosis, forced by an ambitious urban renewal project from their homes in the center city and out to the disease-infested suburbs, the poor, the working class, and even those struggling into the middle class simply did not believe that the vaccination law would bring them anything but more harm. In effect, the law was part of a general program that was increasingly marginalizing the city's poor geographically, to the distant outskirts of the city, and politically, far from the Republic's priorities.

In the years after the famous riot of 1904, popular protest, sometimes called "collective violence," less often affected the places of commerce and the centers of power in the eventually rebuilt center city of Rio de Janeiro, the heart of the newly proclaimed *cidade maravilhosa* (marvelous city). Nonetheless, protests continued, although in somewhat varied forms and in different places. Not uncommon were minor riots, such as that which erupted on May 4, 1916, on the Estrada de Ferro Central do Brasil (known as the Central), the rail line that in the post–urban renewal years brought workers from their neighborhoods on Rio's outskirts to their workplaces in the center city and South Zone. On the morning of May 4 adults gathered in the stations, ready to push their children past railroad attendants who were to enforce a new policy of charging children who rode during the morning and evening rush hours. Carrying signs demanding that train officials retain the customary free passage for children, adults and youngsters pushed sta-

tion attendants out of the way and boarded the trains in defiance of the new regulation. Those who attempted to stop the stampede, to collect the fares, or to prevent children from boarding were knocked down and trampled. All along the line, station masters reported to the railroad officers that it was "impossible to enforce the ruling."[4]

These three riots, or incidents of collective violence, that erupted in Rio de Janeiro over a twenty-three-year period appear on the surface as quite distinct historical incidents. They were, moreover, only three cases among many during the First Republic, a period noted for near constant conflict and upheaval. In this book I analyze many of those conflicts and attempt to explain why different social classes, organized in neighborhood groups, labor unions, and affiliated societies, quarreled and fought with the city and federal government from 1890 to 1930. They sparred over the ways public services and housing were allocated, over the continually rising cost of living, over the perpetual lack of decent job opportunities, for a productive and healthy life, and, in some cases, for simple peace and quiet.

On the one hand, this book is a study of the reasons why masses of people sporadically took to the streets in protest. They most heatedly disagreed in the decades at the turn of the century over the massive urban renewal and public health plan that was intended to transform Rio de Janeiro from a disease-infested port city of narrow streets and uninteresting architecture to a thriving metropolis of Parisian-inspired avenues and buildings. When by 1910 the first phase of the urban renewal was largely completed and the poor were removed to working-class suburbs and to the outskirts of the city, the locus of tension shifted to complaints over working conditions and wages, adding to ongoing grievances against high prices, inadequate and unsanitary housing, and the general substandard living conditions that continued to plague the urban poor.

On the other hand, this is a study of the overall outcome of the struggle, not just of what happened after each riot, orderly petition, or militant protest. Since rioting and protest are ubiquitous in history—in both urban and rural areas—what distinguishes the events in Rio from those in other places and times? What do we learn from the Rio case about the form and outcome of collective violence and urban development in general? Did the protesters in 1893, 1904, or 1916 have anything in common? Separated by years, the activities took place in different parts of the city; they were sparked by different events; they often drew together people from separate social classes, of dif-

4. Ibid., May 4, 1916, 1.

ferent ages, genders, and races; and they varied in their purpose (food prices and taxes, health reform and urban renewal, transit fares, living and working conditions). What effect, if any, did these protests have on the way the city developed? In this book I probe those commonalities.

In the first place, the protests took place in Rio de Janeiro, the capital and most important commercial city of Brazil during the Republican government that lasted from 1889 to 1930. To a large extent the social strife in the capital mirrored the broader tensions of Brazilian society. Rio stood at the head of a country in the midst of great social changes and political upheaval: the abolition of slavery in 1888, the massive influx of free immigrant laborers, the final demise of the Empire, and, on November 15, 1889, the declaration of the Republic.[5] But the capital also contained within it the forces that were pulling the country in different directions. It was the city the elite wanted to transform into a showplace of high culture, befitting the capital of an emerging great nation; and at the same time it was the place to which thousands of poor immigrants from Europe and former slaves from the plantations were fleeing in search of a better life. As a result, Rio de Janeiro was, during the First (or Old) Republic, more than a capital and more than an emerging commercial center; it was the site of tension between opposing social classes over the course of Brazil's future. At one pole stood the planter-dominated federal government, including a rapidly expanding government bureaucracy, the increasingly powerful urban manufacturing and commercial elite, and their allies among British financial and merchant groups. At the other pole were the popular classes, including the working class, the marginalized and unemployed urban poor, and a vast array of small shopkeepers, independent drivers, sellers, and street peddlers, a group sometimes called the middle class or, more precisely, the petty bourgeoisie.

Second, the riots and demonstrations in Rio involved more than an internal struggle between opposing social classes. As social conflict, they represented a moment in the collective struggle of a people over who would live in the city, where they would live, and how well they would live. In Rio de Janeiro this fight, over what Manuel Castells calls the "built form of the city" or "allocation of urban space," assumed a configuration that pitted the majority of the laboring poor and the petty bourgeoisie against the smaller

5. Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Da senzala a colonia* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1966); Robert Conrad, *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery, 1850–1888* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972); Octavio Ianni, *As metamorfoses do escravo* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1962); Thomas Holloway, *Immigrants on the Land: Coffee and Society in São Paulo, 1886–1934* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

group of Brazilian elites and their allies among the foreign merchants, investors, and bankers. The popular classes sought to make their grievances known in a number of forms: marches, street melees, often riots, and occasionally strikes. Although the poor and working people of Rio de Janeiro never managed to alter power relations in the city, to change the class structure, or to force a significant reordering in the government's social priorities, they persisted. In the end, their struggle was an attempt, if a mostly failed one, to intervene in the spatial molding of their city and to demand a better share of urban prosperity.

Stated another way, this was a conflict, not unusual in history, in which the popular classes threw at the ruling class all that they had: themselves.[6] In fact there were many similarities between the forms that protest assumed in turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro and the much analyzed riots that broke out in Europe and the United States during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Similar to what George Rude documented as the cause of riots in France, the Brazilian authorities' inattention to demands from the lower classes caused orderly petitions to escalate into riots and spread from isolated neighborhoods to districts throughout the city. Usually Rio's demonstrations began as reasonable petitions to municipal and federal authorities for redress of grievances: an end to exorbitantly high food prices or chronic shortages, a call for street lighting or improved sanitation, and, quite often, demands for resolutions to the ever-present housing crisis. When rioting did break out, crowds stoned streetlights, burned construction sites, and even tore up streetcar and railroad tracks, reminiscent of the "machine-breaking sprees" Charles Tilly described in France.[7]

But different from the crowds of Europe or the United States, Brazilians who took to the streets to protest unpopular taxes, price hikes, fare increases, economic and political regulations, and destruction of their housing came up against companies owned by foreign monopolists, taxes imposed to

6. The work here is vast; therefore I refer to only a few of the main sources, including Edward Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1966); idem, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (February 1971): 76–136; Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Random House, 1977); George Rudé, *The Crowd in History, 1730–1848* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), esp. chaps. 14 and 15; Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968); Charles Tilly, "The Changing Place of Collective Violence," in *Workers in the Industrial Revolution*, ed. Peter N. Stearns and Daniel J. Walkowitz (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1974), 117–37; idem, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); Charles Tilly and Louise A. Tilly, eds., *Class Conflict and Collective Action* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981).

7. Tilly, *The Contentious French.*

pay for loans from British banks, and urban renewal projects designed to make Rio look more like London and Paris. Thus, Brazil's dependence on foreign investment and export markets abroad for the vitality of its economy had a profound effect on the particular function of its capital city and on the nature of social protest that erupted in it. During the First Republic coffee planters of the center-south region enjoyed a close alliance with British capitalists, who in turn catered to the needs of the powerful rural oligarchs, miners, and planters, who supplied the coffee, minerals, sugar, hides, beef, rice, and other items for export overseas.[8] Furthermore, throughout the Old Republic, Brazil's urban elite failed to develop as an autonomous power. Urban manufacturers and commercial agents never forged a course at all antagonistic to the rural planters, as did their counterparts in Europe and the United States, nor did they oppose the domination of foreign capital.[9]

Politically, the work of managing the national government was an administrative task reliant on the economic power base among the planters and thus directly subservient to the export-oriented economy. Nine of the ten presidents who served during the Old Republic had direct planter backgrounds or were related by marriage to the oligarchy. Those politicians not related to the planters directly were chosen for political office because of their assurance that they would speak for the well-being of the planters. The result has been that Brazilian industrialization and commercial expansion have emerged alongside massive rural poverty, while agricultural labor relations have remained relatively untouched by the admittedly few democratic reforms affecting urban workers.[10]

This relationship between the city and country, as well as the particular political configuration it engendered, stretches back to the earliest days of Brazil's history as a plantation economy based on a slave labor force im-

8. Edgard Carone, *A República Velha: Evolução política* (São Paulo: DIFEL, 1964), 158–84; Florestan Fernandes, *A revolução burguesa no Brasil: Ensaio de interpretação sociologica* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores, 1976), chap. 3; Richard Graham, *Britain and the Onset of Modernization in Brazil, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Nelson Werneck Sodré, *História da burguesia brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1976), 210–43.

9. For a fuller discussion of the debates over the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Latin America, see Teresa Meade, "The Transition to Capitalism in Brazil: Notes on a Third Road," *Latin American Perspectives* 5 (Summer 1978): 7–26. The classic debate among Maurice Dobb, Paul Sweezy, and others is in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, with an introduction by Rodney Hilton (London: NLB, 1976).

10. Boris Fausto, *Trabalho urbano e conflito social* (São Paulo: DIFEL, 1976), 59–61; Thomas E. Skidmore, "Workers and Soldiers: Urban Labor Movements and Elite Responses in Twentieth-Century Latin America," in *Elites, Masses, and Modernization in Latin America, 1850–1930*, ed. Virginia Bernhard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 80.