

PARALLELS

by Erico Verissimo

Translated by Harriet C. McGuire

"Parallels", in the last part of *The return of the black cat*, 1946 (yet unpublished in English), answers Fernanda's question as to what held Brazil back while the United States, founded much later, surged ahead – and says it is the responsibility of the novelist to call attention to social ills, not because the writer can prescribe the cure but rather to create the need for a cure. Written as a letter to Fernanda – one of the main characters in *Crossroads* – back in Brazil, the structure of this passage – in extremely long paragraphs encompassing several topics – obscures the various "parallels" that Verissimo delineates. I have taken the liberty to break up monologue to make the interior dialogue more obvious.

Parallels

Fernanda, now you are the one asking me embarrassing questions, and not my imaginary [colleague] Tobias. "How did the United States reach its present stage of development, and we remain so far behind, when it was settled so much later than Brazil?" Surely this enormous question deserves an answer from a far greater man than a simple story teller, but – be that as it may – let me sketch out the parallel lines.

Starting in primary school we are told that Brazil is the biggest and best naturely endowed of all countries in the world, that our economic possibilities are unlimited, our rivers plentiful and our soils most fertile, and our underground treasures fabulously rich. We are also assured that our forests hold more life and our life more love in our motherland's bosom.

How we spend years and years rocked to sleep by this lullaby! But I think we are now grown up enough to face the truth: Yes, in many ways Brazil is a privileged country, but this idea is not enough. If we contrast the physical reality of Brazil against that of the United States we'll find ourselves in a clearly visible position of inferiority. This explains a good part of Brazil's material underdevelopment.

To start with, most of the U.S. territory is within the northern temperate zone which offered favorable conditions for immigrants from northern

Europe to settle and consequently led to the flourishing of a European type of civilization.

Meanwhile, the biggest chunk of Brazilian territory is in the tropical and subtropical zones. This includes the states of Amazonas, Pará, Maranhão, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba and a good bit of Pernambuco – over 4 million square kilometers in all – in the torrid zone. If you think climate can't play an important part [in development], I'll ask you: What did the English accomplish in their tropical colonies in Africa and Asia? What did French, Dutch and British ingenuity accomplish in the Guyanas?

Caio Prado Júnior, in his admirable book *The Making of Modern Brazil*, observes that an entirely new form of society developed in the tropics in contrast to the American continent's temperate zone which recreated on this side of the Atlantic a society based on the European model where its settlers, the population overflow of the Old World, originated. What grew in the tropics was, in the last analysis, solely dedicated to exploiting the virgin territory's natural resources to benefit European trade. This understanding of tropical colonization goes a long way in explaining where we find ourselves today.

Europeans coming to Brazil did not find the generally flat and fertile plains that colonists found between the Allegheny and Rocky Mountains in the U.S. Our topography is much more irregular and less favorable to agricultural and infrastructural development. Granted a large part of our land is a high plateau, but it is a plateau very difficult to reach, starting at elevations 300 to 1000 meters above sea level.

What's more, this is a plateau without flood plains, being sliced up by deep canyons and cut by cascading, serpentine rivers. (These serpentine rivers are wonderful for poetry, but the worst sort for transportation purposes.)

Speaking of rivers, let's recall that the semi-desert North East region has rivers of the strangest character. We can call them "temporary rivers" because they disappear precisely in the epoch when their people need them most. Gilberto Freyre called our rivers "untrustworthy partners" because they only partially, never completely, fulfilled their civilizing roles of facilitating

communication. The inland people were poorly served by the plateau's rivers whose course to the sea was filled with obstacles in the form of rapids, waterfalls and cascades. Even the San Francisco, our "river of national unity", is not navigable for nearly the extension that one might imagine, only 1000 plus of its 3000 kilometers.

And what can we say about our floodplains, so well suited to agriculture? Let's look at the Paraguay River basin. We'll see that only a tiny part, way at the top, belongs to us!

And the Amazon? Ah! how my fingers start dancing, eager to fill up the paper with fascinating, wonderful sounding adjectives that can describe the vitality of the Amazon wilderness, the grandeur of that river sea, the marvels and horrors of that region which Humboldt says could feed all of humanity. But to fall into this patriotic literary claptrap would be adolescent indulgence.

Nobody denies that the Amazon valley is a fabulous region, and that the Amazon floodplain extends across more than 2,000,000 square kilometers of Brazilian territory. But what good has all this splendor done us? To compare the Amazon basin with the Mississippi is to see how much better the North Americans were treated by physical geography.

The settler in the Amazon valley faces an equatorial climate, swampy terrain with the ever present threat of "falling lands", an impenetrable tangle of tropical forest, not to mention the fevers, the floods and the enormous distances. This is a region where any man, be he of any race, would end up being done in by nature (and I don't say this as a literary cliché.)

When contemplating the Mississippi valley, it would be hard to find in all the world a more extensive region that offered so many, so varied and easily accessible natural resources. The valley is fertile throughout, with a predictable climate and flat surface - all of which contributes to easy and relatively low cost agricultural development. From Pennsylvania on out to Wyoming one finds bituminous coal, petroleum and natural gas. These oil fields keep going down to the south, toward the

Gulf of Mexico. Minnesota has rich iron deposits. The Mississippi's tributaries offer cheap and accessible transportation, and the flatness of the valley facilitated the construction and maintenance of the railroads. The nearby coal mines helped the exploitation of the iron, and together iron and coal provided the base for the tremendous industrial capacity the Americans have built, financed in large part by the gold mined in Montana, Colorado, Texas and California.

The American soil is not only fertile, it has been worked since the beginning by trained farmers. They planted corn, wheat, cotton, tobacco, all sorts of grain, and these products were easily shipped to market on the Mississippi river system which could carry them to the Gulf. We ought not to forget the boost which steamboats gave to life in the Great Lakes as well as the valley. Practically every region of the U.S. was suited to agriculture and ranching. Over a half of its territory, a billion acres, is covered with farms, ranches and plantations. Rainfall over a great deal of the land is adequate for agriculture. The Mid West has a corn and wheat belt that developed a curious cycle transforming corn into cooking fat, via the pig – the “corn-hog cycle”. Dairy farms are centered around the Great Lakes. The south has the Cotton Belt. The western zones have vast prairies dotted with cattle and flocks of sheep; these are also areas with extensive cultivation thanks to efficient irrigation systems. Then we come the citrus region of California. The southern part of this western state has the same climate as Florida and produces the same fruits, so if a parasite damages or destroys the crop in one region, there's a good chance that the other will be saved. And often when drought hurts the harvest on the western side of the Missouri, there is compensation in the high prices for grain on the eastern side of the same river.

And what has happened in Brazil along these same lines? For many long years we depended on only one crop, coffee, which hardly has the importance of wheat. Only recently have we built up cotton production. What do we find across the huge surface of Brazil? Deserts. Even if in some regions they appear a lovely green, color and beauty do not shield them from desert qualities. About 4,800,000 of our total landmass of 8,511,118 square kilometers has less than one inhabitant per square kilometer which is the population density of a desert. Our agriculture is poor, primitive and scattered.

"We have the richest iron in the world!" exclaim our patriots. No one denies that affirmation of course. But this iron is found in the mountains of Minas Gerais, 600 kilometers from the sea and far from the coal mines of Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul – coal which in any case is of poor quality and in insufficient quantities to meet domestic needs.

And our soil is not nearly as fertile as *Pero Vaz de Caminha* and so many countrymen continue to proclaim. A geographer from the University of California, professor C. Sauer, gave me a full day disputing the dreamworld where Brazilians live with regard to the agricultural potential of their soils. Our land is not rich in nitrogen and phosphates like the famous black earth of Russia. It quickly wears itself out and we do nothing to regenerate it.

Just think, Fernanda, of the wonderful transportation and communication networks in the United States – and then of the isolation that our inland cities, and many along the coast, feel for lack of the same. We try to shrug off these differences with, "The Americans are richer than we are". But this stupid phrase doesn't explain a thing. It's the equivalent of saying "João enjoys good health and I don't just because I happen to be sick and João isn't".

Summing up: The European settler found in the United States a physical geography offering good working and living conditions that in many ways

recalled where they had emigrated from. The soil was fertile and, once they crossed the Allegheny, the pioneers found the Mississippi valley. When they were mining iron, they were able to count on abundant coal nearby. Already by 1775 the 13 American colonies along the Atlantic coast had more ironworks than England and Wales. This was the start for the steel industry which has served as the base for America's industrial powerhouse. All these factors have produced railroads, locomotives, wagons, farm implements and all sorts of machinery. The railroad, mining and shipping companies, and the real estate business, produced great fortunes and made millionaires who invested their time and money in the creation of new industries, multiplying commercial and industrial undertaking by the hundreds. In 1859 they struck oil in Pennsylvania, creating new companies and new millionaires and making possible the development and expansion of the automobile industry and the road system. From that day forth, nothing could stop American progress. Everything else has sprung from this beginning. This tremendous economic prosperity has enabled the United States to give its people a better life, healthier living conditions and more comforts.

Up till now we have left out the one thing without which all of these economic possibilities would have stayed forever sleeping in the ground: the human element. I'm not, of course, going to raise the question of racial superiority and join the chorus of those who lament that we had to stay a Portuguese colony instead of a Dutch one. That would be as silly as braying that "I oppose the French Revolution!" But in spite of all my tender feelings for the Portuguese, I have to confess that I do not believe the United States, regardless of all its natural gifts, could have reached its present stage of development if it had been blessed with the type of

immigrant who came to Brazil. Whether they wanted to or not, the Portuguese sent to our land had to follow the monopolistic economic policy that Portugal insisted upon for Brazil. Limeira Tejo writes, "The lack of commercial freedom during the colonial period was, without a doubt, the most important obstacle to industrial development".

And he continues:

If we had been as free to develop foreign trade as the North American colonies were, we could have generated the same conditions of wealth and economic progress that led to the industrial revolution. We would not have been a century behind the United States if we had not been forced in this way to start everything for ourselves after independence.

We know that the U.S. economic prosperity is based on its industry, industry which runs by machinery, with engineering and with mechanical ability. Frankly, it's been proved that Iberians are not particularly gifted when it comes to machines in quite the same way that Germans and Anglo-Saxons are.

We also have to compare our penetration of the interior with the American pioneers' conquest of the West. One cannot say that the "bandeirantes" were in any way inferior to the pioneers in courage, bravery or physical strength. Consider the exploits of one Pedro Teixeira who in 1637 left Pará to mount an expedition up the Amazon River to its northern stream into Equator, reaching Quito. And the "Paulista" Raposo Tavares made a spectacular entry into Peru and perhaps saw the Pacific Ocean. No one can insinuate that the Portuguese and Paulistas were less intelligent or less skillful than the frontiersman.

There are, however, a series of factors that have to be considered. Our explorations were flavored with Portuguese romanticism and improvisation in their disorderly execution. The immediate goals of these trailblazers (to capture Indians, discover precious stones and metals) were such that they have forever

cursed their descendents. I would even add that the bandeirantes encountered physical obstacles much harder to overcome than those which blocked the way for the pioneers.

The United States was colonized in the Anglo Saxon style, methodically and in accordance with established practices.

Portugal was only interested in two things: to extract the riches of its fantastic colony for its own treasury and to repel the Spanish conquistador. The bandeirantes filled these dual purposes marvelously. I would even say that the word "frontier" has additional meaning in Brazil; the pioneers called it the advancing line of civilization, in our bandeirantes' penetration of the backlands they not only sought Indians and riches, but also beat back the Spanish and thereby physically expanded our frontiers.

One other circumstance that gave American colonization a different character than our own was that the European immigrant brought women – white women, most often literate, educated women – not only for his colonization of the coast and also on his march to the west. This has overwhelming importance for me.

In this way, families formed the base of pioneer communities, while the bandeirantes were rolling Indian women in every which corner, according to their whims, with such result that their passage through the interior was littered with living markers, their mixed race descendents who afterwards remained abandoned. The outposts founded by the bandeirantes were left to their own destiny, forever isolated due to lack of transportation and communication networks.

Meanwhile the Americans' rustic, miniature copies of European colonies were in constant communication with each other, thanks to the gentler terrain and the strategically placed rivers which offered natural highways.

Likewise we cannot forget that the 13 North American colonies established along the Atlantic coast were settled by people who left Europe due to political and religious conflict; people who voluntarily started a new life in a land where they could practice their religion and live their lives as they chose. Among these Founding Fathers were over a hundred graduates of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Sure there were plenty of fortune hunters among the early colonists, but even these were organized in companies set up according to established Anglo-Saxon practices. The first thing the Pilgrims did upon setting foot in the New World was draw up the famous "Mayflower Compact", a sort of mini-Constitution which laid out the plans for the new community as well as the civic responsibilities of its members. The Compact carried the seed for the democracy found today in the United States.

Another factor of capital importance was the extraordinary quality of men who graced the North American nation in its colonial period, the likes of Jefferson, Washington and Hamilton – they were no phenomena explicable in climactic or economic terms, nor even by that catch-all phrase of "racial superiority".

If you had visited Philadelphia or Boston in 1775 you would have found newspapers, theaters and libraries in these cities.

Meanwhile we only got our first printing press after the Portuguese Court moved itself to Rio in 1808. (Remember the Portuguese thought the French were corrupt because they had so many newspapers.) Our doors were also closed to foreign trade until that time. We were not permitted to plant cotton, distill alcohol or manufacture soap because all these products were the Crown's monopoly. Everything reached us late. Pedro Calmon writes, "We waited 30 years for the locomotive, 40 for spinning mills and even longer for steamboats, gaslights,

agricultural machinery and the industry which transformed England in 1800 and Europe in 1820".

You might say that these things are only evidence of material progress, but I'd reply that they represent wealth that can be translated into health and well-being. I'll grant that the Portuguese gave us a handful of admirable human qualities: a lyric soul, a romantic nature, a tolerant spirit and an almost total lack of color prejudice. I'll also grant that the Brazilian is inherently good, there is something admirable in who we are and what we have done in spite of the miserable circumstances in which the great majority of our population lives.

We have a basic kindness, a horror of violence and a loveable kind of common sense, and I'm sure Black and Indian genes have also contributed to this combination of qualities. We are blessed with a sense of human solidarity, which comes from our sentimental nature, but we lack a sense of social responsibility which can only come from education. If the first allows us to show compassion and charity to the suffering of our neighbor, the lack of the second keeps us from organizing our lives in such a way that our personal desires and self interest should not upset the common good; it also keeps us from working to better living conditions for the lower classes to be able to wipe out once and for all the depressing and unworkable system of begging for alms.

Sometimes our focus on the here and now leads us to give more importance to the quick blow than to persistent and slow, organized work. The North American has an unshakeable faith in the future and lives his life convinced that he is on the right road, headed toward a beautiful and noble future. We also have a "sense of destiny" but it leads us to a fatalism that, in the short run, can be pessimistic, even if things might turn out ok in the indefinite future. Look at some of our popular sayings:

God is a Brazilian.

Leave it as it is and see how it turns out.

All will be right in the end.

God's help is worth more than rising at dawn.

As Afonso Arinos de Mello Franco has accurately observed, we believe in salvation by chance, and ever faithful to

this belief, live our lives waiting for miracles – either from a stroke of luck or by grace of a sinecure in the form of a secure public service career.

With only the rarest of exceptions, we have always been governed by coup makers, believers in immediate profit or ones centered on their own career – men without public spirit who never looked out for the future. They were moved by insatiable desires, never-ending gluttony: desire for huge, immediate profits, vanity for command positions to wield power on whim. Our Christianity has been false-fronted, a fact which I mention because I still believe that an honest application of Christian principles could help us get out of the chaos that we are discussing.

At times our democracy hasn't even had the false front. We don't have plans, we improvise. The work of one high civil servant is never continued by his successor; each one has to have his own plan, which always turns out to be just another improvisation. Paternalism has always predominated: we are been governed by classes, group and families.

Our production is low, Brazil is a country of middlemen. As a result, everything is more difficult and more expensive for us.

(A skilled blue collar worker in the U.S. lives more comfortably than a bank worker or small trader in Brazil. He can buy a good car, an excellent refrigerator and a top of the line radio because all these are three, four or five times cheaper than for a Brazilian.)

Our country has such excessive bureaucracy that a manufacturer must often conclude that governments were created to build obstacles to the distribution and sale of his products. We spend more money on the police than on teaching, as if we thought that jails were more useful than schools. Sometimes we try to solve our social problems by force, recalling the crazy doctor who gagged his patient to keep him from screaming, in order to create the illusion that he was no longer suffering.

I don't think that a writer, and especially not a novelist, must be responsible for offering solutions, specific plans and remedies for national political and economic salvation. (A fiction writer rarely knows what he is talking about in this terrain.) There is, however, one responsibility that he must not evade: to look at reality with clear eyes, and portray it factually and unequivocally in his stories, pointing out social evils either directly or indirectly, "to create the need for a cure", as Arthur Koestler has said.

I don't believe that the answer to right-wing or centrist dictatorship is a left-wing dictatorship for the simple reason that I don't believe in dictatorships not even when they are called "technical" or "temporary". It seems to me, Fernanda, that we ought to seek the cure to our problems not only by examining our illness, but also what has caused the illness, because there are cases where the patient has died from the cure.