



THE HISTORY BEHIND THE RECENT PROSPERITY OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

Social psychology is currently thriving in Brazil. Yet just 45 years ago, social psychology was virtually absent as a viable discipline in Brazilian universities and in public life. This paper presents a brief commentary on the development of social psychology in Brazil in recent history. Examples are given of relevant courses presented in Brazil prior to this period by physicians, anthropologists and sociologists—none by social psychologists. The influence of journalists and novelists is cited as well in the provision of groundwork for social psychology in Brazil. The first graduate programs in social psychology were established in the early 1970's. The Brazilian Association of Social Psychology was established in 1980, and its flagship journal at the same time. The political turmoil surrounding the military dictatorship (1964-1985), and the audacious founding of Brasilia (1960) provided conditions for the development of social psychological analyses of an important major nation in the process of transformation.

Keywords:

Social Psychology, Brazil

Resumo

A psicologia social está atualmente prosperando no Brasil. No entanto, há 45 anos, a psicologia social foi praticamente ausente como uma disciplina viável em universidades brasileiras e na vida pública. Este artigo apresenta um breve comentário sobre o desenvolvimento da psicologia social no Brasil na história recente. Existem exemplos de cursos relevantes ministrados no Brasil antes desse período por médicos, antropólogos e sociólogos mas nenhum por psicólogos sociais. A influência de jornalistas e escritores é citada, bem como o fornecimento de bases para a psicologia social no Brasil. Os primeiros programas de pós graduação em psicologia social foram estabelecidos no início dos anos 1970. A Associação Brasileira de Psicologia Social foi fundada em 1980, e sua principal revista no mesmo período. A agitação política em torno da ditadura militar (1964-1985) e a audaciosa fundação de Brasília em 1960 forneceram condições para o desenvolvimento de análises psicológicas de uma nação importante em processo de transformação.

Palavras chave:

Psicologia social, Brasil

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Today social psychology is thriving in Brazil. The biennial meetings of the Brazilian Association of Social Psychology (ABRAPSO) are thronged with multitudes of participants and feature a rich array of speakers, symposia, and programs. The journal of ABRAPSO (*Psicologia e Sociedade*) is of manifestly high quality. Courses in social psychology are popular throughout the Brazilian university system and many post-graduate degree programs are offered. If we think of a cross-cultural comparison, this is not surprising. In the United States, in Europe, and throughout most of the developed countries in the world, social psychology is also full of vitality and draws much interest and support. But a longitudinal comparison is surprising, for I can attest that a little over forty years ago, social psychology was a stranger in Brazil. There were few social psychology courses in Brazilian universities, there were no graduate programs, and precious few Brazilians who identified themselves as social psychologists. To be sure, there were some important precedents for the establishment of social psychology in Brazil, provided by anthropologists, economists, and social historians—as well as literary and journalistic commentators on Brazilian life and culture. But of social psychology, properly speaking, there was virtually nothing in Brazil in 1968.¹

Social psychology has emerged in a dramatic way in Brazil over the last generation. My objective in this paper is to provide a brief descriptive commentary on this transformation. The last generation in Brazil has also been one of massive social, economic, and cultural changes. It is as if the great giant of South America has awakened. This provides a context for the development of social psychology.

Of all the major areas of contemporary psychology, social psychology is among the most strongly connected to applications to problems in everyday life. Social psychology helps us to understand conflict on an individual as well as collective level; it provides a language for understanding the power and influence of social roles—of the drama of everyday life (see Scheibe, 2000). It provides an essential perspective for the understanding of language and communication, of persuasion, of prejudice and the operation of social stigma. Social psychology is congenial to the idea that such things as race and class and national identity are matters of social construction—not given in nature, but produced over time by a process of the progressive evolution of categories and concepts within our species. The psychological problem of identity is unintelligible outside of a social context.

If we can accept the relevance of social psychology to all of these matters, we can see immediately that the field is bound to be highly controversial, and subject to judgments that derive from political, religious, and ideological traditions. Surely one can conceive of a social psychology that is pure as opposed to applied—where theory and practice are allowed to develop in a way that is detached from the regnant values and standards of the surrounding social host. This simply has not happened and will not happen. Rather, when we view the development of social psychology in any particular place and at any particular time, we will see close connections between characteristics of the dominant social and political order and ways in which social psychology does or does not flourish.

I wish to present reflections on the development of social psychology in Brazil over the last 45 years as an illustrative case study for this thesis. As a social psychologist, I had the privilege of visiting Brazil for the first time in 1967-1968—my first sabbatical year. I had the objectives of writing my first book (on a topic that had nothing to do with Brazil), of writing a series of research reports deriving from research in state mental hospitals in Connecticut, and of learning Portuguese—for peculiar family reasons. Near the end of that year, I had learned enough Portuguese to be able to give the first courses in social psychology ever offered at the Federal University of Brasilia. Later, I returned to Brazil under the auspices of the Fulbright Foundation to participate in the founding of the first post-graduate course in social psychology to be developed in Brazil—at the Catholic University of São Paulo in 1972. Since that time, I have had the opportunity to return to Brazil many times, to participate in professional meetings there, to visit many universities, and to observe at first hand important developments in social psychology in that country (see Scheibe, 1996). To be sure, my view of things is partial and incomplete—for despite what I have seen and read, I am aware that much has escaped my prolonged and assiduous attention and that the peculiarities of my own formation as a social psychologist predispose me to see things in a way that is limited—certainly not universal.

Preconditions for Social Psychology in Classical Brazilian History

Several features of the early history of Brazil are of relevance to these reflections about recent developments in social psychology. The story of Brazil's independence from the colonizing Portuguese is the first

¹I have a journal entry from a visit I made to the Biblioteque National in Rio de Janeiro in late 1967. I looked in the card catalog under "Psicologia" and "Psicologia social". The holdings were sparse to non-existent. Few of the books were in Portuguese, most were in French, a few in German, some in English. There was not a single Portuguese-language text on Psicologia Social. I felt quite alone.



such feature. The royal family of Portugal, the Braganza dynasty, fled Portugal for their Brazilian colony in the early 19th century as a way of escaping the turmoil of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, which had reached the Iberian peninsula. In 1821, Don Pedro I declined the invitation from his father to return to Portugal, now that the wars were over. He simply declared, “I remain” (Eu fico!), and thus was independence achieved. Dom Pedro abdicated after a decade in power and turned over the throne in Rio to his son, the native-born Don Pedro II, then but five years old. He then returned to Portugal. Don Pedro II—able, learned, agile, and popular, remained in power for 58 years, until 1889. In the penultimate year of his regime, he abolished slavery throughout Brazil, a movement aided by his able and enlightened daughter, the Princess Isabela. He was forced to abdicate by a small group of revolutionaries in the military, who favored the establishment of a republic. Don Pedro refused to oppose the coup with force. He simply capitulated and allowed himself and his family to be banished to Europe, where he lived the last few years of his life, dying in France, consoled only by a package of Brazilian soil which he had brought with him into exile, as a display of his enduring love for the land of his birth.

Brazil provides the only example of a successful and enduring monarchy in the Western hemisphere. Because of the success of the empire, Brazil retained territorial integrity and a unity of language and culture. Since the Portuguese were the major traffickers in the African slave trade from the 15th century onward, Brazil’s population from the outset became strongly African as well as European, and of course it incorporated native Indian tribes as well. Brazil became and remains the country with the largest population of African-origin people outside the continent of Africa. It includes the largest number of indigenous peoples of any country in the western hemisphere. In territory, it comprises about half of South America. It is the largest country in the world where Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, even as syncretisms with other religious traditions have emerged there. Racially diverse, huge in territory, rich in natural resources, relatively stable in terms of politics and culture, with a unique record of non-violence for its major political and social transformations, Brazil would seem to provide a unique laboratory for exploration of social psychological problems.

Positivism: A Point of Common Origin for Social Psychology and for the Brazilian Republic

Gordon Allport (1954) begins his history of social psychology by stressing the importance of Auguste Comte’s Positivism as a philosophical foundation for the emergence of the social sciences. Positivism was a 19th century extension of the Enlightenment, centered in late 18th century France. By eschewing religion and superstition as ways to truth, the grounds were established for empirical social science. In Comte’s hierarchy of knowledge, La Morale, or the moral science of the social order, was placed at the pinnacle—based on an undergirding structure provided by the natural sciences and mathematics. While Comte’s account now seems simplistic and wrong-headed in its reductionist character, it cannot be doubted that empirical social science would not have been possible without this articulation of its very possibility and promise.

Positivism provided a rationale and a justification for the republican ideals of the group of militants who overthrew the monarchy in Brazil. One of the major leaders of this movement was Benjamin Constant Magalhães (1833-1891), who was named for the famous progressive French thinker of the early 19th Century. He was a teacher and a military man, who in his youth was strongly attracted to the works of Comte, in particular because of its anti-clerical and progressive stance. It was Benjamin Constant who suggested the phrase, “Ordem e Progresso” to be emblazoned on the new flag of the Republic of Brazil.²

One could imagine that with this kind of philosophical impulse, social psychology might have taken root in Brazil and flourished. Alas, the slogan was to be a lesson in irony—for order was difficult to achieve by newly powerful republican leaders, and progress for economic and social development was slow and halting for the first 65 years of the new republic. “Order and progress” may have been on the flag, but “chaos and stagnation” was more descriptive of the state of the nation, even though the generous tropical climate, the fruitfulness of Brazilian soil, the richness of racial and ethnic diversity, plus the emergence of samba and futebol gave the country high romantic standing. The deeply Catholic birthright remained present at the core of Brazilian identity. This combination of influences also made Brazil the world’s center for carnival celebrations—but social psychology would have to wait.

Social Psychological Contributions that Precede Social Psychology

² The original positivist slogan was, “Amor por principio, ordem por base, progresso por fim.” “Love as a beginning, order as a foundation, and progress as an end.” Perhaps it seemed overly sentimental to include “Amor” on the national flag. Be that as it may, Brazil is the only flag in the world displaying words, and the words are a straight adoption of a Positivist slogan.

Before social psychology was established in Brazil as a legitimate and secure field of inquiry and knowledge, several university courses in the early part of the 20th century certainly had social psychological content and flavor. Elizabeth de Melo Bomfim (2004) has identified four such courses.

- 1) Raul Briquet, was a gynecologist and obstetrician, who in 1933 presented a course in “Social Psychology” at the Free School of Sociology and Politics in São Paulo, later integrated with the University of São Paulo. Briquet read quite broadly, was involved in the foundations of psychoanalysis in Brazil, and was strongly influenced as well by Marxist ideas of dialectical materialism and class conflict. He was a strong opponent of racism, in particular the discrimination that was being exercised against the Japanese colony in Sao Paulo.
- 2) Artur Ramos, who had recently published several works about the Brazilian Negro, presented a course in social psychology at the School of Economy and Law at the former Universidade do Distrito Federal in Rio de Janeiro, in 1935. Like Briquet, Ramos was trained as a physician, and like Briquet as well, was strongly influenced by psychoanalytic ideas. He promoted and illustrated a strong connection between anthropology and social psychology, suggesting a set of methods for achieving a combining of these two fields.
- 3) A third course was presented by the American sociologist Donald Pierson, who came to Brazil just before World War II and stayed for a number of years. His course was also offered at the Free School of Sociology and Politics in São Paulo, in 1945. Pierson was a student of the Chicago sociologist, Robert Park—and brought the perspective of the Chicago school to bear upon the reality of Brazilian life, with special emphasis on the singular history of racial relations in Brazil, particularly in the city of Salvador, the original capital of Brazil and the center of the slave trade. Pierson’s course was strongly sociological in its flavor, but from a survey of his bibliography, extremely broad in scope.
- 4) The fourth and final course reviewed by Bomfim was given by Nilton Campos, whose doctoral degree was awarded by the National Faculty of Medicine and who introduced and promoted “The phenomenological method” to Brazilian medical and psychiatric practice. His course in social psychology at the old University of Brasil in Rio was described in a 1952 publication. His emphasis was apparently on the use of phenomenological methods to achieve an understanding of social phenomena. No bibliography was included in the description of his course, but it appears to have been more narrowly focused than any of the three courses that preceded it.

A summary observation by Bomfim emphasizes the fragility and provisional character of these early course offerings. None of the professors was trained in psychology. None of the courses appears to have been repeated beyond their initial offerings. Another common feature of these courses is their evident concern with issues of social justice and the elimination of prejudicial social attitudes. The professors of these courses demonstrated without doubt considerable courage, initiative, and intellectual range. But it is not obvious that any progeny came out of these bold beginnings.

A number of other Brazilian authors might be cited as having provided important contributions to the cultural climate that ultimately permitted the blossoming of social psychology in Brazil. The physician and anthropologist, Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906), produced a number of works descriptive of the unique racial climate of the Northeast in Brazil. Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909), trained as an engineer but working as a journalist, provided a profoundly influential account (*Os Sertões*, or *The Backlands*) about religious and cultic movements in the Northeast of Brazil and their fatal military conflict with the government. Machado de Assis (1839-1908) is Brazil’s most famous novelist—and his many novels are replete with psychological insight and commentary.

As a social psychologist, I find myself reading these and other Brazilian authors for observations and insights about Brazilian culture. They furnish, without doubt, a rich body of materials for the curious social psychologist—while it is equally clear that no viable social psychology emerged out of these scattered efforts.

Applied Social Science: The Example of Brasilia

The most significant event in the recent political and social history of Brazil might be seen as an example of applied social science. The new capital city of Brasilia was formally opened, even as construction proceeded, in 1960. This new capital city was constructed in a newly created federal district that was not initially accessible by highway, carved out of the state of Goias. The city was completely planned—with a north wing, a south wing, and a fuselage, comprised of a vast mall, with government buildings, a cathedral, a travel center and various sporting fields located along its length. The city was planned in the form of a jet airplane, and initially had no traffic signals to regulate the flow of traffic. Residential areas were planned as large super blocks—self-contained residential communities were meant to contain markets, schools, medical facilities, and easy access to public transportation.



The plan for the city was radical and audacious—the crowning achievement of the government of President Juscelino Kubischek. The designers and planners of the city—Oscar Niemeyer, Lucio Costa, and Burle Marx—were implementing in their design a certain social ideology—certainly leftist in its political leaning. The planning and construction of the city of Brasília in its early phases can be seen as an example of applied social science—an effort to create a futuristic and progressive example of modern life—a life created in the image of travel and rapid movement, in a high plateau landscape and climate that was beautiful and salubrious, even as it was isolated utterly from the clutter and chaos of urbanism and the enervating tropical lassitude of the Atlantic coast.

Of course, reality soon came to overtake the dreamy utopian vision. Satellite cities quickly grew up around the meticulously planned center city. These came to resemble the favelas of the large urban cities—Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Salvador. Huge waves of new settlers (candangos) followed the initial invasions of construction crews, and they made do as they could—outside the scope of well-ordered superblocks. Soon there came to be plenty of traffic lights in Brasília—and all of the urban problems that the original planners had thought to avoid. Brasília now has a population of over 3.5 million inhabitants—perhaps an order of magnitude greater than what was initially anticipated.

When I visited the University of Brasília in 1968, to offer there the first courses ever presented in the area of social psychology, the city was still being constructed—even though celebrations were organized to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the beginnings of the city. The national cathedral existed only as a set of vertically set ribs of reinforced concrete, shaped in the form of a crown. It will be remembered that 1968 was a time of great political conflict throughout United States, Europe, and Latin America. Shortly after my course was completed in April, 1968, the Federal University in Brasília was forced to close for a time as a result of strikes and manifestations against the government. Prior to offering my courses in social psychology, I had to submit to interviews with a group of student leaders, who wanted to be sure that I was not an agent of the CIA or some other reactionary force.

The head of the department of psychology at the time was Robert Berryman, a Skinnerian behaviorist, who had studied with Fred Keller and Nat Schoenfeld, two famous American Skinnerians, both of whom had visited the university in Brasília before my arrival. Berryman was bold to invite a social psychologist to teach in Brasília and was pleased to note the great interest in my topics among the students of the time. It was instructive for me to see how Skinner's behavioral psychology was so powerfully implanted in Brasília. But it was also gratifying to note how receptive that program was to the introduction of new approaches. Social psychology became established in Brasília and flourishes there to this day.

The Period of Military Dictatorship (1964-1985) as a Stimulating Force for Social Psychology

Four years after the capital was moved to Brasília, the elected president of Brazil, João Goulart, was overthrown by a military junta which installed their own government—fearing that Goulart would allow Brazil to become a communist state. Brazil was ruled by a succession of five military presidents, until the reestablishment of free and open presidential elections in 1985. Once again, these major changes in the governing structure of Brazil were accomplished with a minimum of bloodshed, even though the 21-year period of military dictatorship was marked by state-sponsored violence, torture, censorship, limitation of personal freedoms, kidnappings, assassinations, and over 300 documented violent deaths. During this period, many Brazilian politicians and intellectuals who had been identified with leftist causes were exiled from their country. But the campaign (Direitos Ja!) to restore free presidential elections was concluded successfully in 1985, and without carnage. The first president to be elected, albeit by an indirect process, was Tancredo Neves from the state of Minas Gerais. Unfortunately, he died before he could be inaugurated. Jose' Sarney, the Vice-Presidential running mate of Neves, was the first president to be elected and installed in Brazil since 1964.

But despite the political tensions and pressures against leftist and liberal causes, the period of military dictatorship was one of enormous cultural, economic, social and even ideological change for Brazil. Brazilian music became a major success on the world stage during this period—with such figures as Tom Jobim, Elis Regina, Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, and Chico Buarque de Hollanda achieving prominence. Major economic advances were enjoyed in Brazil during this period—sometimes called the “economic miracle.” Particularly great advances were made in the development of major manufacturing facilities in Brazil, in agricultural development, in the construction of highways and infrastructure, and in the diversification of exports for international trade. Brazil was engaged all during this period in maintaining a façade to the outside world, particular to the United States, of a country that respected democratic principles and human rights, while systematically destroying internal democratic processes and flagrantly abusing the rights of the domestic opposition.

It was during the period of military dictatorship that social psychology became firmly established within Brazilian universities, and effectively became a coherent and vital discipline. The first post-graduate program in social psychology was established at the Catholic University of São Paulo in 1972, under the leadership of Professor Silvia Lane, a social psychologist with Marxist leanings and a loyal following among students (see Rey, 2007). The Brazilian Association of Social Psychology (ABRAPSO) was established in 1980, and soon their journal (*Psicologia e Sociedade*) was launched. Social psychology courses became standard fare through Brazilian Universities at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The first comprehensive textbook written in Portuguese was published by the American-trained, Brazilian social psychologist, Aroldo Rodrigues (1979).

Conclusion and Final Comments

Certainly not because of the military regime, but rather despite it—and stimulated in large part by the evident necessity of reforming the dominant social and political structures in Brazilian life, social psychology literally came into its own during a dark period in Brazilian history. The election of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1995, who has a Ph.D. in Sociology and was a Professor of Sociology and Political Science, can be seen as clear evidence of a definitive resumption of the connection between Brazil's political leadership and the principles of positivism embraced by the founding fathers of the Republic. The subsequent election in 2003 of Luis Ignacio da Silva (Lula), who was a trade unionist and a member of the workers party (PTB) can be seen as definitive evidence the collective fear of progressive political policies no longer dominates Brazilian life. Lula was succeeded in 2010 by Dilma Rousseff, his former Chief of Staff. The massive public protests in 2012-2013, directed toward the regime of President Rousseff provide evidence that the social climate in Brazil remains unstable and yet orderly. The demonstrations were measured and non-violent—consistent with the Brazilian history of social change. Rousseff's reelection in 2014 was strongly contested—but her claim to authority seems clear and is widely accepted—even as myriad challenges confront her regime.

I close by making two observations about social psychology in Brazil. First, it would be difficult to find a country where the insights and understandings provided by social psychology are more needed. Brazil is finally emerging as a major world power and is in a position to provide a compelling example to other developing countries in the world about how to be a leader in the modern world. Hosting both the World Cup in soccer and the Olympics in within a span of two years, the country will be front and center in the attention of the world—and has an opportunity to demonstrate its quality as a world leader. In order for this to happen, the self-crippling policies and the mentality of inferiority that have characterized previous eras will have to be overcome. Social psychology is in a position to help guide this new self-confidence in a productive way. Secondly, partly because of its lack of an extended and confining history within Brazil, the discipline is free to develop methods and concepts that are truly relevant and can be instrumental for genuine progress. Much of social psychology in the United States is still confined to the tradition of laboratory experiments, the use of deception and manipulation, and a disdain for practical applications. Social psychology in Brazil is free to develop methods and concepts that are not so confined or constrained by the dead hand of the past, but are response to the urgent needs of a society in the process of transformation.

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