

# On “misplaced” concepts, historiography and ideas

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IN AN INTERVIEW given to The *Estudos Avançados* Journal, historian Carlos Guilherme Mota – emeritus professor at the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo – discusses some of his works, while taking the opportunity to reflect on Brazil’s historical moment: the Bicentenary of Independence. He also takes stock of his work *1822: dimensões*, an important counterpoint to the official narrative on Independence, which was published 50 years ago. He also comments on historiography and “misplaced” concepts, a classic formulation by Roberto Schwarz. And affectionately, while pertinent, he narrates his relationship with Alfredo Bosi and what led them to meet in Yan de Almeida Prado library at Pensão Humaitá between the 1920s and 1930s.

*Estudos Avançados* – The book *1822: dimensões*, organized by you, was published 50 years ago.<sup>1</sup> At that moment, the book offered an important counterpoint to the official narrative about the Independence of Brazil. Five decades later, is it possible to take stock of the main contributions of the work – as well as the potential shortcomings – when thinking about the 200 years of the Independence of Brazil?

Carlos Guilherme Mota – Yes. The book *1822: dimensões* is anti-commemorative, despite the title. It is contemporary to the impactful and referenced work *Brasil em Perspectiva*, also coordinated by me and published in 1967 in the Collection *Corpo e Alma do Brasil*, which was directed by sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso for Editora Difel, by late editor Paul Monteil. In that work, the preface by Professor João Cruz Costa signaled the opening of the field of the history of ideas, ideologies, and mentalities. At that time, these fields of knowledge were not very prestigious. Several new authors appear in that book, alongside renowned historians, such as my master Jacques Godechot, a discreet though combative *doyen* of the School of Literature and Human Sciences of Toulouse and a former participant of the French Resistance against Nazi-fascism. Joel Serrão is another one, a humanist leftist, a militant critical of Salazarism and a notable Portuguese scholar who coordinated the essential *Dicionário da História de Portugal*.<sup>2</sup> Both brought new perspectives to analyze the Independence of Brazil: Godechot introduced the controversial understanding (less than a concept) of the “Atlantic Revolution.” And Serrão presented, in a backdrop of Portugal’s history, “the whirlwind of Independence”. Curiously,



*Professors João Cruz Costa, Lourival Gomes Machado, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Celso Furtado on a thesis committee at the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo (USP), on November 8, 1961.*

the excellent subeditor Plínio Martins made, in a single page, a panel with six images of Pedro I, all different, breaking the autocratic myth. Which Pedro stayed, after all, in the imagination of readers?

The book collection also contained a careful and unofficial analysis of the Patriarch of Independence, José Bonifácio, authored by the late Emília Viotti da Costa, absurdly impeached “for political reasons” (according to the litany) by the mediocre trio of right-wing professors from USP. I wrote their abominable names in our *História do Brasil: Uma interpretação* [History of Brazil: an interpretation].<sup>3</sup> José Bonifácio was unconventional and rugged, but also bold, and, besides being a professor and scientist at the University of Coimbra, he excelled in the fight against the French invasions in Portugal. He, a revolutionary aware of the latest news in Sweden, France, Freiburg, etc., defended the integration of natives and the abolition of the slave trade in Brazil, always recalling that “indigenous peoples have the right to the lands because they arrived here long before us, Europeans”. He was exiled to France (in Talence), with his two brothers and family, where they survived with difficulty. Upon his return to Brazil, he became the preceptor of young Pedro, later Dom Pedro II.

Besides that, our book also analyzes various regional aspects of the vast territory consolidated as “Brazil”.

In the end, we included a commented bibliography. Some critical comments in the bibliography at the end of the collection hurt the sensibility of my dear former teacher Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. As a coordinator of this book, I received a harsh but fair, elegant, and sophisticated response from him, as expected. He softened the blow when it came to me, “a historian of merit,” as it initially appeared in the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*... Unlike the crude and insulting comments made towards Nelson Werneck Sodré, as was also expected. About this controversy, the late historian José Roberto do Amaral thought we provoked a healthy “rupture in the pact of historiographic silence” that dampened and silenced historiographic criticism in the country. Answering criticism by Professor Sérgio Buarque, I used a text of Carlos Drummond de Andrade: “Os fazendeiros do ar”.<sup>4</sup>

Fifty years later, we observed that this work enabled opening the floodgates in the stagnant fishing pond of Brazilian Historiography... But it did not promote a profound conceptual review, as we would expect. After all, as historian José Manuel Santos Perez – from Centro de Estudios Brasileños of the University of Salamanca – recently pointed out about the concept of Independence: “*la independencia no fue una revolución, sino más bien una contra-revolución*”. Santos Perez deepened his comment by stating that the Independence was neither a popular movement because “*la liberación: excluyó la gran parte de la población, sobretudo a los esclavizados, indígenas, población pobre, mujeres y a todos que cuestionavam la ideología dominante del proceso*”. And concludes: “*La independencia no fue un relato inevitable de hechos.*”

After 50 years, we notice that such articles carry a lot of unequal values and criteria. Nevertheless, they stated new theoretical concerns, such as studies about class, ideology, independence (and dependence!), decolonization, civil society, the State, and especially of a society (of *Stratums?* of *Classes?* of *Castes?*); and the concepts of Process, System and Structure, which guided the advisory work given by this coordinator. Similarly, regional analyses have been investigated more caringly and rigorously.

In those years, the clashes between structuralists and Marxists were so intense they reached paroxysm. To the point that Darcy Ribeiro, with imbatable humor, even said in a fun *blague* that “Claude Lévy-Strauss did not like indigenous people: what he really liked were ‘Structures...’”

In summary, we find both extraordinary and secondary texts. But is that not natural in a collection with historians of such different generations, places, and constitutions?

**EA** – *Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the industrialization of Brazil seemed to be the political bet to ensure full national economic sovereignty, or, in other words, a “full Independence” of Brazil. The promises made by the industrialization project, however, were not accomplished; first because of growing inequality in the country, and second because the evidence suggested the country would face an economic crisis in the following decades. That is why, Celso Furtado (1974), in O Mito do Desenvolvimento, defended: “The conclusion that arises from these considerations is that the hypothesis of generalization in the whole capitalist system – of the forms of consumption that currently prevail in countries of the center – has no place within the apparent evolutionary possibilities of this system [...]. Thus, we have definitive proof that economic development – the idea that poor people one day could enjoy the ways of life of today’s rich people – is simply unachievable [...]. Therefore, it is worth stating that the idea of economic development is simply a myth.” Is it possible to affirm that, nowadays, this project of economic sovereignty of decades ago – following the pessimistic diagnosis of Celso Furtado –, is completely anachronistic and unachievable? What would be a possible way to produce this “full Independence”?*

**CGM** – I do not think it is excessive nor inopportune to seek to understand “the historical present as superposition and recombination of historical layers”. There was a time when economic, biological, geographical, etc. determinisms, seemed to carry “certainties” for research. Oh! The past, the past... Anyways, the reconceptualization of what should be the past should no longer be (nor is it) work only for historians and scientists to do, but also the labor of philosophers such as Michel Foucault, ethnographers like Roger Bastide, and economists like Celso Furtado, and to scholars. We should note that the problem of inter-, trans-, and multidisciplinary caused the epistemic implosion of the various disciplines.



*Caio Prado Júnior, 1956.*

As I wrote some time ago, “reality came to be regarded as the synthesis of multiple determinations.” However, the great writer William Faulkner solved this issue better – he was in São Paulo in the 1950s and stayed at Hotel Terminus on Avenida Ipiranga – when he wrote: “The past never dies; it is not even past.”

The History of Brazil and the problems associated with the country’s past and vast territory – therefore its historicities – were remarkably synthesized by Caio Prado Júnior. He was a historian from São Paulo, a geographer and philosopher. This day, he and Cecília, his wife, were at my house, sipping an excellent Chilean wine (Concha y Toro) when he hopelessly pointed out, a few months before he died: “Brazil is so underdeveloped”, he said... his eyes looking at me and, bleakly, proceeded: “So much”. And he said nothing more...

I kept talking: “Dear Caio (so I called him (democratically)), and the History of Brazil, what do you think about it?” His gaze crossed me, fixating on a distant point: “History of Brazil?” It has always been *something*.” “All of it, Caio?”, I asked. “Yes, all of it...” and nothing else.

**EA** – *Do you consider reality as superposition and recombination of historical layers?*

**CGM** - In historical realities, yes. Note that, especially in the case of the history of contemporary Brazil, the colonial and imperial Brazilian system of social organization remains – such as heavy slavery, for example. Not only that, but also in the modes of urban, familiar, economic, and political organization, etc.

**EA** – *The questions that begs to be asked: what do you think of Misplaced Ideas?*

**CGM** – This concept was a brilliant finding of my friend Roberto Schwarz. It detached Humans Sciences research from that schematic worldview: the dichotomy that “*explained everything*”, that is, superstructure and base. The first one is a mere reflex... This reductionist mechanism sequestered any initiative, rapture, or reverie that led to reflection and research for less identifiable or tangible spheres of reality, such as ideologies, paintings, dreams, mentalities, ideas, etc. It was the end of “sociological imagination” as put in Wright Mills’ classic work, but also the end of the historical and literary imagination. By the time – and with Gaston Bachelard’s contributions –, we found out that the word “*reflex*” (still used nowadays) is inoperative, serving only as the base understanding (less than a concept!) for the frozen “structures of thinking” (in Karl Mannheim’s sense).

**EA** – *In the essay “Por que ideias fora do lugar” [Why Misplaced Ideas], Roberto Schwarz argues that not only local experience can be evaluated according to the world’s present time – as is the practice in Brazilian academic and intellectual production – but also the opposite, that is, that the evaluation of the world’s present time can be considered according to local experience. We would like you to explore that second possibility. What paths do you consider the most fruitful for an original and relevant contribution about global present, based on the Brazilian experience?*

**CGM** – Misplaced ideas? Maybe we should take a step forward and consider that, perhaps, is “the place is what is misplaced.” It takes one to read just some books or even articles by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, and all the philosophical development that emerged after Jean-Paul Sartre. (By the way, *Search for a Method* was translated to Portuguese by the brilliant and late philosopher Bento Prado Junior, which was Schwarz’s best interlocutor).

The term “influence” (*influenza*), adopted by liberals, deserves the same exclusion (or erasure wherever they arise), in philosophical texts that intend some rigor, just like when the understanding “reflex” occurs, appreciated by dogmatic Marxists.

EA – Published in 1992, *Brazil and the Dialectic of Colonization* is a central piece of Alfredo Bosi's work and thought (1936-2021). This book marked the history of Brazilian thought, like the classics by Celso Furtado, Raymundo Faoro and Florestan Fernandes, among others. As a historian, which elements of this book would you highlight as the most important?

CGM – Well, a personal short story with Alfredo Bosi. We finally arrived at Pensão Humaitá library, owned by “doctor” Yan de Almeida Prado, on Brigadeiro Luís Antônio street, a meeting point of a portion of São Paulo's aristocratic elite in the 1920s and 1930s. There, they savored fine delicacies and *grand cru* wines and benefited from the good jobs of a bookmaker, father of forthcoming USP professor, and remarkable intellectual, Alfredo Bosi.

Once, when we were already intimate, I asked him how he had built such a sophisticated vision of Literature and multidisciplinary Literary History, in addition to an excellent sociological and psychological background, not to mention his mastery of the Italian language. And with such a solid education, he fed his worldview sharply – or, at least, progressive. Bosi wrote a large, critical and brave preface to my book *Ideologia da Cultura Brasileira [Ideology of Brazilian Culture]*. This book, part of the countercurrent historiography, criticizes the oligarchic views on Brazilian culture. He answered me simply.

Just before I defended my post-doc thesis to the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences – and considering that there were good reasons for disapproval, non-acceptance or, (at least) a bad mood with the committee –, I looked for Alfredo in the shallows of the slippery administration restaurant. He was having lunch: rice and two fried eggs. I told him about my fears, to which he answered with a gentle soul and a fraternal gaze: “Carlos, you have come this far. Your thesis is controversial, and you know it. Be true to your moment!”

At another moment, Alfredo told me something that affected me: “My father was the bookmaker who visited the mansion and library of Dr. Yan de Almeida Prado on Saturdays, seeking books to bind or to work on his noble craft in Dr. Yan's library. Because we entered through the back door with other servants, my father guided me, hand in hand. And, like that, I familiarized myself with the authors and some titles of the works of Camões, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Montaigne... Naturally, they were not cataloged on the shelves from A to Z, but then, yes, from Z to A. And like that I acquired cultural history knowledge – mostly literary – essentially seeing the books from back to forth. That is, Alfredo told me, “I acquired the taste in these first, more serious, contacts with books bound affectionally by my father”. More than that: it was a historical-bibliographic perspective contrary to – or at least atypical – the commonplace mortals.



*Florestan Fernandes, 1960.*

Resuming my idea: we go back again to *misplaced ideas*. In a way, Bosi, like his fellow scholar and critic Schwarz, would be only a carrier of the misplaced ideas if he did not deepen further to “Brazil-Unsolved-Problem” and built the tools to hoe this row!

Before we look *for where the ideas are misplaced*, we should point that “Brazil is and was the misplaced one”. Or, as Caetano Veloso wrote, “alguma coisa está fora da ordem mundial” [something is misplaced of the global order]. Certainly, referring to *Pátria amada Brasil...* (“the beloved motherland Brazil.”)

Let us continue now with Schwarz. Though my relationship with him was less frequent, it was very fraternal. One day, my friend Emilia Viotti asked me if I still had my father’s spacious Kombi wagon. I told her “yes”, and she quickly asked me to help her transport Schwarz’s books, many in German, from his apartment to hers, where I was staying. It was a situation where the ideas contained in so many books were, in fact, misplaced. I helped her transport them with some pleasure because it was a request from a high-quality teacher. And friend.

**EA** – About your book, *História do Brasil: uma interpretação* (2008), you declared “our goal then clarified itself, that is, to understand the present as the result of a superposition and recombination of historical layers”. According to you, the main point of the work is the bourgeois autocracy model (concept coined by Florestan Fernandes), that is, the confrontations and pacts of the elites, in which the “*Transação*” (“transaction”) of José Justiniano da Rocha prevailed over the possibility of reforms. Could this be considered the long-lasting element of our history? And that now we abandoned “the apparent modernizing advances” of the past for full realization of “disturbing regressions”?

**CGM** – Such concept was conceived previously by sociologist and historian Florestan Fernandes, part of his book *A Revolução Burguesa no Brasil* [*The Bourgeois Revolution in Brazil*]. This model is ruling, but it was not discussed nor debated (therefore analyzed) in FHC’s, Lula’s or Dilma’s administrations. We have critical studies of this enlightened work, which is fundamental to comprehend Brazilian impasses and recent governments. Particularly, I suggest the *Estudos Avançados Journal* n.10, v.26, from 1996, in honor of Florestan Fernandes.<sup>5</sup> It includes reviews by Alfredo Bosi and Antonio Candido, among others, and my article “Presença de Florestan no IEA” [Florestan’s presence in IEA].

## Glossary

*Bourgeois autocracy model* – A concept coined by Florestan Fernandes, which encompasses various dimensions of reality, without prioritizing some of them. Interconnections have no special value or weight, nor is there a predominance of one sphere of reality over another. There is, however, a greater role of political level of coordination, marked by authoritarianism. It is a *bourgeois autocracy*, and not a bourgeois democracy model.

*Historiography* – Discipline that goes hand in hand (sometimes ahead of the production of) Historical Studies (or any other field that contemplates the *historicity* of the object studied), analyzing its works, contents, theories and methodologies used. Simply put, it can be understood as “the History of History.” Frequently appears in introductions of studies which analyzes authors who wrote “before”... and in previous bibliographic surveys.

*Reflex* – An understanding (not an analytical concept) borrowed from the so-called hard sciences and widely used in studies marked by dogmatic and mechanistic Marxism (or optometry, physics photography, astronomy, etc.) Epistemologically, it has little or no endorsement, because it is not useable in processes analysis, systems and structures in human sciences.

*Influence* – It is another understanding (and not an analytical concept) widely used in markedly liberal studies, being often confused with the word *influenza*.

## Notes

- 1 The first edition is from 1972, by Editora Perspectiva.
- 2 Edited in several volumes by Editora Figueirinhas, Portugal.
- 3 Organized with Adriana Lopez, for Editora 34.
- 4 Published in the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 2 Sep. 1977.
- 5 Available in open access in the electronic library Scielo - Scientific Electronic Library Online.

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*ABSTRACT* – Interview granted by historian Carlos Guilherme Mota to *The Studies Avancados Journal*, in which he addresses conceptual aspects of his own work and those of Roberto Schwarz and Florestan Fernandes, including facts about their relationship with writers such as Caio Prado Jr., Alfredo Bosi and Emilia Viotti da Costa concerning cultural issues of Brazilian reality. At the end, the researcher presents a small glossary with significant terms of his thought and work.

*KEYWORDS*: Counterpoint to the official narrative on the Independence of Brazil, *1822: Dimensões*, Anti-celebration, Misplaced ideas, Alfredo Bosi.

*RESUMO* – Entrevista concedida pelo historiador Carlos Guilherme Mota à revista *Estudos Avançados* em que o historiador aborda aspectos conceituais de sua obra e das obras de Roberto Schwarz e Florestan Fernandes, bem como fatos de sua relação com escritores como Caio Prado Jr., Alfredo Bosi e Emília Viotti da Costa, tendo em vista as questões culturais da realidade brasileira. At the end, the historian presents a small glossary with significant terms of his thought and his work.

*PALAVRAS-CHAVES*: Contraponto à narrativa oficial sobre a Independência do Brasil, *1822: dimensões*, Anticomemoração, *As ideias fora do lugar*, Alfredo Bosi.

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