

# The Enigma of Liberalism in Imperial Brazil, 1822 to 1889

---

Roderick J. Barman

Professor Emeritus, Department of History

University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC Canada<sup>1</sup>

On December 31, 1861, after some twenty years as ruler, Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil, began a new diary. The opening entry, an exercise in self-explanation, contained the passage: “I have sworn the Constitution and, even if I had not sworn it, it would be for me a second religion”.<sup>2</sup> This quotation by Pedro II goes far to explain why I entitled this presentation “The Enigma of Liberalism in Imperial Brazil, 1822-1889”. This talk has four parts. It first considers those attributes of the ideology of Liberalism which constituted its greatest strengths and its principal weaknesses. The second part discusses, in the context of those aspects, the rise of Liberalism in Brazil. It analyzes, thirdly, the complex relationship of Liberalism and Monarchy in Brazil during the thirty years after Pedro II’s majority in 1840 and, finally, it identifies the factors that caused the parallel decline and fall of Liberalism and Monarchy from 1870 to 1889.

The North American saying, “you can’t nail Jell-O – that is jelly – to the wall”, seems appropriate to any attempt to analyze Liberalism of the nineteenth century, the protean nature of which gave it a very diverse appeal and meaning. Despite these obstacles, I want to suggest that

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Deborah Toner for inviting me to give a presentation on February 10, 2012 as part of the ISA series on “Liberalism in the Americas”. I am grateful for the questions and comments made following the presentation which have enabled me to fine tune the text.

<sup>2</sup> Entry for December 31, 1861 in H. Vianna, ed., “Diário de 1862,” *Anuário do Museu Imperial* xvii (1955): 15.

three key elements existed in Liberalism, no matter what its transmutations. The three are, first, the Constitution, both in and of itself and for its broader significance; second, the nation state, and third, the citizen.

As Pedro II's diary entry reveals, the Constitution was for Liberals the keystone to their belief system. To function properly a country had to possess a constitution and, when Liberals gained power wherever they did so, the election of a constituent assembly was the first priority. A constitution, once promulgated, served as a talisman. It would of itself right all wrongs, prevent abuses of power and protect established rights. Liberals revered it, treated it as sacred. It was the ark of their covenant. It was not just Pedro II who viewed the constitution as his "second religion".

At the same time the constitution possessed a larger significance. It embodied Liberalism's concern for what may be termed "right process": all relationships within the public sphere had to be conducted in accord with established rules and given procedures. Those rules and procedures had to be rational, deriving from first principles.

In other words, Liberalism was concerned with the world as it ideally should be and not with the world as it was with all its imperfections and contradictions. The appeal and the power of this vision should not be underestimated. It inspired a host of influential books and tracts. In the hostile world of the early nineteenth century the vision generated the revolutions in Europe of 1820, 1830 and 1848 and more arguably the independence movements in Latin America. On the other side, the evident weakness of Liberalism lay in the fact that the constitution existed only in and as print. It had nothing to do with the lived, non-literate experience in which most people then existed. Without the capacity to read and a command of the culture generated by the printed word or what is now termed "text", it was not possible to understand and so to obey the

constitution. It is important to realize that Liberalism by its very nature was an arcane, alien system for the many people who did not meet its criteria.

The second key aspect of Liberalism lay in its identification with the nation state. Liberals viewed the nation-state as a natural entity, uniting as it did every one sharing the same language, ethnicity and culture, and as the norm for political organization. A constitution demarcated the nation-state's frontiers, established its language and dealt with religion and education. Liberalism contributed powerfully to the creation of Belgium as part of the 1830 revolution and of Romania as part of that of 1848. Far more importantly for our purposes was the role of Liberalism in the establishment of the nation-states of Latin America. Where long-standing symbols of identity and loyalty were lacking, Liberalism could and did supply them, as happened in Belgium in 1830 and in Romania in 1848. Since these symbols, such a national flag and national anthem, were, in contrast to the constitution, visual and lived, the nation-state attracted far more support and commitment than Liberalism could do by itself. The drawback to this identification of Liberalism with the nation-state was that any groups within the country who did not conform to the designated language or ethnicity could be subjected to discrimination, sometimes amounting to persecution. Xenophobia, particularly when directed against perceived enemies (such as the former colonial power) could lead to internal conflicts and external wars.

The third key aspect of Liberalism was the citizen, who stood at the centre of society as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of August 26, 1789 attested. For Liberals absolute equality had to exist between citizens, eliminating all inherited privilege and distinctions by birth. The political order in general and the national government in particular existed for the protection and benefit of the citizen just as citizens as a whole assured the security and the prosperity of the nation-state. The citizen, as Liberalism defined that being, was the

literate, cultured, politically conscious and active male, gainfully employed and owning property. Liberals believed that any male could by force of determination, self-instruction, and industry achieve these qualities. Any man who did possess them could aspire to occupy the highest posts in the government of the country. The concept of the citizen gave autonomy to and legitimized the aspirations of ordinary men, particularly those skilled in commerce or letters. Liberalism thus attracted the support of those who sought a political status equivalent to that they enjoyed in the social, economic and cultural spheres. The emphasis that Liberalism placed on the absolute right to property, protecting the citizen from confiscation or uncompensated expropriation by the government, appealed strongly to the newly wealthy.

The weakness of this focus on the citizen was that it excluded as much as it included. Women were relegated to the private sphere. Men who were illiterate, poor or disadvantaged were not just excluded but were held responsible for their own condition due to their lack of initiative and self-help. Liberalism denied to such men the right to vote and therefore any voice in the political community. The distinction between active and passive citizens, introduced in the French Constitution of 1791 and widely adopted elsewhere, meant that only well-to-do males were involved in the actual electoral process. Liberalism can be said to have been as much elitist as it was egalitarian. To make the same point in another way, there existed in Liberalism a tension, almost a contradiction between a commitment to equality and individual autonomy and an insistence on social stability, indispensable for the protection of property rights. Social stability could not exist if a strong political order did not.

It is in this context that the relationship between Liberalism and Monarchy should be considered. For many, perhaps most adepts of Liberalism, a republic was the ideal form of government, to be adopted either immediately or at some future moment. On the other hand a

considerable minority of Liberals viewed the monarchy as the necessary keystone for a secure political order that alone could guarantee social stability. Several European monarchies possessed constitutions – Norway and France in 1814, the Netherlands in 1815, Baden in 1818, and Belgium in 1831. The Norwegian and Belgium monarchical constitutions, admittedly much amended, endure to this day. During much of the nineteenth century therefore Monarchical Liberalism was not and should not be viewed as exceptional. Imperial Brazil existed within this context rather than being an oddity as compared to the natural and inevitable Republicanism of Spanish America.

I now turn to the second part of this presentation, which analyzes the rise and triumph of Liberalism in Brazil in the years before 1840. The social, cultural and economic conditions existing at the start of the nineteenth century in the territories now constituting Brazil were, it can be argued, entirely unfavourable to the establishment of Liberalism there. Nineteen separate colonies then existed in Portuguese America, functioning largely in isolation from each other, in good part due to the difficulty of communication between them by land or sea. The colonies had the sole purpose of supplying precious metals and raw materials to Portugal. They could trade only with Africa and Portugal. Slaves, imported from Africa, supplied the necessary labour, so much so that they constituted the majority of the inhabitants in Portuguese America. No printing press was allowed. The educational system was minimal so that literacy was unusual. No autonomous institutions, save for the town councils and the Catholic Church, were permitted. In sum there existed no autonomy and no sense of a public sphere.

These conditions made it unlikely that an independent nation-state would come into existence. If it did, it would more likely be monarchical than Liberal. During the late colonial period, there existed no sense of separate identity, of potential nationhood, encompassing the

entirety of the territories now known as Brazil. What then prevailed in Portugal and in its overseas possessions was not nationalism as we understand the term but rather a binary identification with and loyalty to the monarch and the *pátria*. While the term “monarch” needs no explanation, the *pátria* does. In brief, the *pátria* was the individual’s “native land”, the physical locale into which an individual was born, grew up, was familiar with, usually worked in, procreated in and would die in. Loyalty to and identity with the monarch and the *pátria* were interwoven and virtually inseparable. The concept of the *pátria* was not incompatible with that of the nation as Liberalism defined that term but it could not, in the early nineteenth century, exist alone, separate from the monarch.

The Napoleonic invasion of Portugal and then Spain in 1807 had totally different consequences in respect to the two countries’ New World colonies. Rather than submit to Napoleon, as did the Spanish Crown, the royal family and government in Portugal fled across the Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro and there re-established itself, basically a replica of what existed in Lisbon. Brazil’s ports were opened to all foreign trade, the printing press was introduced, and later two medical colleges and a military school were founded. The consequence was the establishment over a period of fourteen years, from 1808 to 1821, of the institutions of a national government, a development that was both recognized and legitimized when in 1816 Brazil was raised to the status of a kingdom, equal and united to that of Portugal. By then Rio de Janeiro had become in effect the capital of the Portuguese world.

It was during these fourteen years that Liberalism became established as the predominant if illicit ideology in Brazil. The opening of the ports in 1808 gave entry to foreigners – merchants, artisans, artists and others – and to books and periodicals in various languages. Equally important as a vehicle for the spread of Liberal ideas was the founding of Masonic

lodges in the port cities. The creation of the kingdom of Brazil along with the apparatus of a state fostered the emergence of a sense of common identity and a rejection of colonial status. The inefficiencies of the royal government, the fiscal demands it made, the economic slump in the late 1810s and the oppressive rule in the localities generated discontent. In March 1817 a revolt, inspired by Liberal ideas, broke out in the port city of Recife and for a few weeks a Republican regime existed in the Northeast of Brazil.

Two major social elements supported this revolt. First were the local plantation owners and major landowners. They found in the tenets of Liberalism, particularly its emphasis on representative government, on the citizen and on the rights of property, justification and so legitimization of their dominance of the local scene and their ownership of slaves. The second were minor bureaucrats, junior clergymen, skilled artisans, merchants' clerks and the like, all of whom were literate, politically conscious and often of mixed racial descent. Liberalism appealed to them because it offered an independent state founded on the premise of equality between citizens with open access to all government positions. What made the 1817 revolt distinctive was that it based itself solely on the *pátria*, rejecting both monarch and rule by Rio de Janeiro. This narrow appeal explains in part why the uprising failed. The royal government was able to re-establish its rule, but with shaken legitimacy.

What did disrupt the status quo based on rule by Rio de Janeiro was a further rising in April 1820, this time in Portugal. There army units successfully demanded the election of a constituent assembly and the return of the king to Lisbon. The immediate reaction in Brazil to this new Liberal order in Portugal was entirely favourable. It was this same Liberal order that would be principally responsible for the breach between Portugal and its former colonies in the New World and for the emergence of Brazil as a nation state.

For Liberals, as I have stressed, a constituent assembly was the embodiment of the people and so of the nation. The assembly's authority was absolute: it alone spoke and decided for the nation. Any challenge to its decisions was unacceptable and, worse yet, insulting to the assembly members. The assembly that was elected, known as the Lisbon Cortes, conformed exactly to this model. Confident in their own righteousness the Cortes deputies embarked on the task of reshaping the Portuguese possessions to conform to the Liberal model – a single national government with no intervening authority between it and the people. By the time the first deputies from Brazil took their seats, the Cortes was fully engaged in abolishing all the institutions created in Brazil since 1808. By depriving Rio de Janeiro of its status as a capital these measures understandably caused open defiance which in turn made the Cortes all the more determined to assert its supremacy.

The opposition in Brazil to the Cortes and its actions was in essence conservative, determined to preserve the status quo created since 1808, but the case was presented in the language of Liberalism: Brazil was by natural right an independent nation-state with its own culture and with a government based on the people. The appeal to Liberalism both legitimized the opposition and mobilized popular support, particularly among the minor bureaucrats, junior clergymen, skilled artisans, merchants' clerks and the like. For this group independence as a new nation-state signified more than self-government, it meant a purging of the colonial heritage and the ousting of those born in Portugal.

The circumstances of the time meant that little disagreement existed as to the form an independent government should take. When the king of Portugal returned to Lisbon in May 1821, he left his elder son and heir, Prince Pedro, behind in Rio de Janeiro, to serve as regent of the Kingdom of Brazil. It was the young Prince Regent's decision in January 1822 to defy the

Cortes' order to return to Europe that sparked and given viability to the struggle for independence. For Brazilians of traditional views, and they were numerous, the Prince Regent embodied legitimate authority, given that they viewed his father as being the Cortes' captive. Those of Liberal outlook realized that the Prince was indispensable to the success of the rising against Portugal. Accepting the theoretical superiority of a republic, they remembered the fiasco of the 1817 rising. Only the presence of a monarch could ensure that the very diverse geographical areas making up Brazil continued united as a single nation state. On the other hand, the adepts of Liberalism did not perceive the future monarch of Brazil as being, once independence was secured, other than a figurehead with power residing in a government representative of the people.

The supporters of Liberalism acted as the shock troops of the Independence movement, constantly pushing for a total break with Portugal. They first secured the calling of a separate constituent assembly for Brazil and then achieved a formal declaration of independence with the prince being proclaimed Emperor Pedro I. There was a momentary setback for the Liberals in October 1822 when they attempted to make the town councils' recognition of Pedro I as Emperor conditional on his accepting the constitution that the forthcoming assembly would produce. The conservative elements controlling the new government used this manoeuvre to disrupt by arrests and exile abroad the existing Liberal leadership.

The appeal and resilience possessed by Liberalism can be measured by the ability of its adepts to overcome this setback. When the new Constituent Assembly convened in May 1823, deputies identifying with the Liberal cause took control of its proceedings. The Assembly's debates which were recorded and published give a clear picture of the dominant currents of Liberal thought prevailing in Brazil in the era of independence. The first, which may be termed

mainstream Liberalism, was supported by those who held university degrees, made their careers in the royal service and occupied secure social positions. They espoused a constitutional government, dominated by an elected assembly, assuring the rights of citizens whom they equated with men like themselves. They identified, above all else, with the new nation-state of Brazil. The second current, less numerous, was composed of men who had had to make their way in the world, often priests or those with little formal education. For them equality, regardless of origin, social or racial, was important. They detested the Portuguese born whom they identified as the agents of colonialism and absolutism. The Nativists, as they may be termed, identified with their own *pátria*, believing that it should be largely autonomous. The national government's role, as they saw it, was to guarantee social order and prevent foreign aggression.

The proceedings of the Constituent Assembly were compounded of prolixity, lack of focus, endless meddling in peripheral matters and aggressive self-righteousness. Of the major issues that were debated two are significant for our purposes. The first concerned the distribution of power between the central government and the localities in the new nation-state. At independence elected *juntas* replaced in the provinces the captains general who had wielded absolute power during the colonial period. The performance of the *juntas* proved so incompetent as to necessitate their replacement. Moreover, their very existence contradicted the mainstream Liberal belief that no institution should intervene between the national government and the citizens. Despite strenuous opposition by the Nativist minority, the Assembly passed a law, one of the few it did enact, creating the post of provincial president, an official appointed and removable at will by the national government.

The second issue debated concerned the distribution of power between the assembly and the monarch. The deputies lost no opportunity to claim that the Emperor did not hold any independent authority from the people and that he was subordinate to the Assembly and its decisions. The opponents of this stance, while not numerous, did not reject Liberalism as such but drew on the writings of two sages, the Abbé Sieyès and Benjamin Constant de Rebecque, to urge a very different concept of the political order. These deputies postulated the existence of a fourth power, in addition to the executive, legislative and judicial. What they termed the “regulating power” gave control of key aspects of the constitution to the monarch who could thus both assure the smooth functioning of the political system and guard the supreme interests of the nation. Napoleon Bonaparte had used this concept along with that of the providential man to legitimize his rule. The Napoleonic system still exerted a considerable appeal. For all the faults of his regime, Napoleon had made real several of Liberalism’s goals, above all the Code Napoleon. He had provided the strong stable government that many desired.

The majority of the assembly’s deputies made no concession to the Napoleonic system in the constitution that was slowly taking shape. The new charter was, however, never to be completed. The confrontation between the assembly’s majority and the emperor became ever more intense. What rendered it irresolvable was the majority’s unwise decision to take on the military officers in the Rio garrison. In November 1823 the troops were marched into the city and dissolved the assembly. Whatever the provocation, and it had been considerable, the emperor’s action in authorizing the coup was baleful for his own future as monarch and detrimental for the prospects of a regime that combined Monarchy and Liberalism. In the short term Pedro I triumphed. He defeated a Nativist rising in the Northeast against his rule. The revolt made impossible his promise to summon a new constituent assembly. Instead the newly

appointed Council of State took the constitution left unfinished by the Assembly and produced a revised draft that was sent to the town councils for suggestions and approval. On March 24, 1824, the new constitution was promulgated, unchanged from the draft presented to the town councils.

The Constitution which lasted until the overthrow of the monarchy in 1889 was in content a profoundly ambiguous, in fact contradictory, document. In one respect it established a fully Liberal political order. The executive, legislature and judiciary were made separate and independent. There was a long list of citizens' rights. The rights of property were declared to be absolute with expropriation to be by due process and fully compensated. The basic franchise was extensive although elections were held on a two-tier system, as was the case in France until 1848. On the other side, the 1824 Constitution adopted the idea of a fourth power, terming it "the key to the entire political organization", which was "delegated to the Emperor as the supreme chief of the nation and its first representative".<sup>3</sup> The monarch was not accountable for his use of the regulating power which included, among other attributes, appointing and dismissing ministers, naming new members to the life Senate and dissolving the elected chamber of deputies. If the monarch employed these prerogatives judiciously, he could control the political system regardless of the popular will.

During the remaining seven years of his reign the Emperor Pedro I showed himself to be incapable of managing the political system. His birth in Portugal and his dissolution of the Constituent Assembly had permanently alienated a good part of the political community while his dependence on a limited, mostly Portuguese-born, circle of advisers and his erratic style of governing did nothing to win over moderates. His handling of the legislature, which first met in

---

<sup>3</sup> Articles 98 and 99; see José Antônio Pimenta Bueno, *Direito público brasileiro e análise da constituição do império* 2nd ed. (Rio: Ministério da Justiça, 1958), pp. 483, 492.

May 1826, was simply inept. The deputies devoted their energies to passing laws that dismantled the institutions of the colonial period, restricted the authority of the Imperial government and wherever possible devolved powers to elected officials. That Liberalism became the hegemonic form of political belief was due in part to the deputies and in part to the appearance of a periodical press devoted to the cause. The conflict between the Emperor and deputies intensified when the second Chamber of Deputies convened in May 1830. The confrontation of 1823 was repeated but, when the flashpoint came in April 1831 over the Emperor's right to appoint whom he chose as ministers, the outcome was very different. Faced with a popular insurrection and abandoned by the Rio de Janeiro garrison, Pedro I abdicated in favour of his son, then aged five, rather than yield any of his prerogatives under the Constitution. The former Emperor departed for Portugal where he died three years later.

The events of April 7, 1831 created a vacuum in authority which the Liberals were swift to fill. The first decision they had to make was whether to retain the monarchy or to declare a republic. Given the intensity of the crisis and the need not to alienate moderate opinion, the infant Pedro II, left in Rio by his father, was maintained as nominal sovereign. The 1824 constitution gave the Chamber of Deputies the right to elect three regents to serve during the monarch's minority and to define their powers. The deputies withheld from the new regents all the prerogatives pertaining to the "regulating power". The effect of that decision was to make Brazil for the time being a republic. The legislature enacted laws designed to entrench the new Liberal order. The most significant of these measures was the passage in 1834 of an amendment to the constitution that introduced a single regent, popularly elected, abolished the Council of State and – most importantly of all – created in the provinces elected assemblies. To these assemblies the *Ato Adicional*, as it was known, transferred many of the powers of governing.

The effect was to implement the Nativist vision of the country. Brazil changed from a unitary nation state into a confederation, a grouping of largely autonomous provinces with the national government in charge of foreign relations and the maintenance of internal order. The president of the province continued to be appointed and removable by the national government but he played a subordinate role to the new provincial assembly.

The most kindly evaluation of this new system of government is that it did not work, the most critical that it was a disaster. The provincial assemblies became the locus for ruthless struggles between contending factions for the control of local power. The struggles weakened both the mechanisms for social control and the culture of social deference. Civil unrest and open resistance grew across the country. A major revolt broke out in the far north, the Cabanagem, and a second in the far south, the Farroupilha. The best the national government could do was to contain these uprisings. It failed to repress them.

The consequence was a general reaction against the Nativist vision of the Liberal order. It is important to note that the foes of the 1834 reforms did not reject Liberalism as such. The advocates of *O Regresso*, or “The Return” as it was known, gave priority to the maintenance of good order in society and to the protection of established rights, above all that of property. In their own words they favoured *uma liberdade bem entendida*, “a properly defined liberty”. The supporters of the *Regresso* gained control of the national government in 1837 and sought to suppress the revolts and restore good order and obedience. These efforts provoked strenuous resistance by the Nativist groups entrenched in the provinces. The sole promising element was the slow but inexorable passage through the legislature of a bill introduced in 1837 which, under the guise of “interpreting” the provisions of the *Ato Adicional*, in fact gutted them. It restored to the national government control of the judiciary and of the police. It would, however, take some

years for the new law to be promulgated and enforced and it was not clear that the existing order in Brazil would endure that long. As the British envoy reported in September 1839, “Some of my colleagues here, and some persons for whose opinion I have much respect, think that this Empire is on the eve of Dissolution, or at least of a crisis, of which the result cannot be but most fatal”.<sup>4</sup> The Liberal order, engendered between 1808 and 1822, entrenched during the late 1820s and dominant after 1831 had reached the end of the road.

Let me now turn to the third and probably the most complex and hopefully the most distinctive part of this presentation. In a situation so desperate and threatening as that existing in 1839 it was understandable that Brazilians looked for a saviour – a person innately superior to themselves, someone of uncontested authority and unquestioned legitimacy who would manage the existing political system and maintain good order within the framework of the constitution. Brazilians had only to look to France, where Louis Philippe had since 1830 ruled in precisely this fashion. The “Citizen King” was, a leading newspaper declared, “a strong monarch who curbs the ambitions of the discontented and suppresses the fanaticism of the masses, an able monarch who reconciles liberty with order, with internal peace, with the development of the country, with its artistic and literary glory”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, this vision of the monarch and of his own future role was being inculcated into Pedro II then aged ten. One of the lessons he had to copy survives and begins: “Happy the people who are ruled by a prudent prince. They live content, prosperous, and love the man to whom they owe their good fortune”. “Love your peoples as

---

<sup>4</sup> National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office 13/154, William Gore Ouseley, British minister, to Viscount Palmerston, Foreign Minister, no. 71, Rio, September 18, 1839.

<sup>5</sup> *O Chronista* June 21, 1838. The article was probably written by Justiniano José da Rocha.

your children and acquire the knowledge to be loved by them”.<sup>6</sup> Without much or any justification, Brazilians perceived Pedro II as already possessing the very qualities they most desired in a citizen monarch.

The flaw in this perception was that when the Emperor celebrated his birthday on December 2, 1839, he was only fourteen years old. By the terms of the Constitution he would not be of age and assume full powers as monarch until 1843, four years thence. Understandably the exigencies Brazilians faced meant that pressure grew for Pedro II to be declared of age at once. As early as July 1839 the British envoy reported, “From the best sources of information, I am almost led to think that the Minority of the Emperor will not, under any circumstances, last beyond the year 1841, if it last so long”.<sup>7</sup> His prognostication proved correct. A short and swift campaign achieved that goal in July 1840.

What is surprising is not the swift success of the campaign but the reality that its principal organizers were politicians identified with Nativist Liberalism. A longing for political stability may in part explain their willingness to violate the Constitution. More probably their action reflected their fear that, with the law interpreting the *Ato Adicional* finally passed in May 1840, only an immediate majority would prevent their exclusion from power for the foreseeable future. In fact two Nativist Liberals were included in the first cabinet appointed by the young Emperor. The sacrifice of principle for profit rapidly turned sour. After a few months in office the cabinet was dismissed to be replaced by a ministry which systematically purged the adepts of Nativist

---

<sup>6</sup> Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro CI Caixa 9 Pacote 3 Documento 127. The exercise is signed: D. Pedro 2º, São Cristóvão, 22 Setembro 1836.

<sup>7</sup> National Archives, Kew, Foreign Office 13/154, William Gore Ouseley, British minister, to Viscount Palmerston, Foreign Minister, no. 56, Confidential, Rio, July 20, 1839.

Liberalism from their existing posts in the lower judiciary and the police. There followed the 1842 revolt in São Paulo and Minas Gerais, the two provinces most identified with Nativism. Easily suppressed, the revolt acted as the catalyst for the emergence of formal political parties. The supporters of the sitting cabinet organized its supporters into what was first known as “the party of order” and later as the Conservative party. Early in 1844 the Conservatives, having offended the young emperor by trespassing on his prerogatives, found themselves in turn dismissed from office. They were replaced by a new cabinet that used all the means of coercion and enticement available to it to enrol the Conservatives’ opponents into a Liberal party and to win the ensuing elections to the Chamber of Deputies.

I have gone into this detail to make two points. First, no profound ideological convictions divided the two political parties. They are best viewed as national coalitions of provincial factions based on family clans competing for dominance at the local level. On the critical issue of slavery and the African slave trade, for example, both parties contained supporters of the African trade, banned by law since 1831 but never suppressed, and of the slave system. Contrary to what might be expected, however, it was the Conservatives, not the Liberals, who in 1850-51 finally suppressed the illicit slave trade. On the other hand, those of Republican belief or Republican sympathies were to be found only in the Liberal Party but in such politicians an appetite for influence and office took precedence over those beliefs. On my second point, it was the Emperor’s actions as holder of the regulating power that brought the two parties into existence. It was his grant of a dissolution to the sitting cabinet in 1842 that had triggered the ensuing Nativist revolt and enabled the new Conservative party to fix the ensuing elections. Similarly it was his grant in 1844 of a dissolution to the cabinet replacing the

Conservative ministry that brought the new Liberal party into being and secured it a majority in the new Chamber.

If Pedro II's use of his prerogatives as holder of the regulating power in 1842 and 1844 indicated a certain highhandedness and lack of political judgment, the faults can be largely ascribed to his immaturity. A long visit in 1845 to the far south, where the Farroupilha revolt had just ended, transformed Pedro II as ruler. As a contemporary described the emperor during the visit, "he is affable with everyone, speaks to anyone, asks questions, and tries to be informed about the smallest things. He has gone about on foot like a simple citizen, accompanied only by those who want to be with him with no ceremony whatsoever".<sup>8</sup> These comments explain the emperor's success as ruler. His restraint, invariable courtesy and fair-mindedness kept discontent at a minimum. His eschewal of the visible trappings of power and privilege made him appear to be ideal "citizen" in the Liberal mould. Indeed, such was exactly how he perceived his role. In October 1862, when considering the possibility that he might be dethroned, he wrote in his diary "I will never flinch from fulfilling my duties as a Brazilian citizen".<sup>9</sup> As a citizen should be, he was grave, cultured and devoted to the public well being, the protection of personal liberties and the advancement of Brazil's interests. By the 1850s he had acquired a reputation in Europe as the model constitutional monarch, a reputation that enhanced his standing in Brazilian eyes.

While not remarkable in terms of intellect, the emperor possessed energy, iron determination and marked political skills. He was adept at managing affairs, so that during the

---

<sup>8</sup> José Antônio Saraiva to Henrique Garcez Pinto de Madureira, São Paulo, Mar. 4, 1846, cited in José Wanderley [de Araújo] Pinho, *Política e políticos no império: contribuições documentaes*. (Rio: Imprensa Nacional, 1930), pp. 25-26.

<sup>9</sup> Entry for October 17, 1862, in H. Vianna, ed., "Diário de 1862," *Anuário do Museu Imperial* xvii (1955): 233.

1850s politics functioned smoothly and seemingly of their own accord. The leading politicians and the ruling circles in general wished above all to avoid a repetition of the traumatic experience of the 1830s. They accepted the emperor as supreme arbiter. They avoided confrontations with Pedro II and the dread that he might employ against them and their party his prerogatives under the regulating power kept them deferential and subordinate. What also made possible this stability was Brazil's prosperity and growth including the railroad introduced during the 1850s, driven by in good part by the boom in coffee production.

The very successes of the era created its own problems. As memories of the troubled 1830s faded and as a new political generation reached maturity, faith in Liberalism revived along with a longing for provincial autonomy and a preference for a Republic. Expectations that the political, economic and social advances occurring in Europe would be matched in Brazil were not fulfilled and so fed discontents. The supporters of a revived Liberalism proved, however, unable to outmanoeuvre the emperor, take power and enact structural changes. The Liberals' aggressive nationalism contributed to the outbreak in 1864 of war with Paraguay. The conflict led to the suspension of all internal reforms. Pedro II's determination to secure total victory in the war led him in July 1868 to an overt use of the regulating power. He replaced the sitting Liberal cabinet with a Conservative ministry and granted to the new cabinet a dissolution of the chamber of deputies. That election, which returned only Conservatives, revealed the utter falsity of the electoral system and demonstrated the Emperor's ability to manipulate the political system as he pleased. The founding in 1870 of a Republican Party was a warning signal that constituted no immediate threat to the regime but it did mark both the era of post-legitimacy for the monarchy and the end of Liberalism.

Let me begin the fourth and final part of this presentation by analyzing the causes for the decline of the Monarchy. Victory in the Paraguayan war which lasted from 1864 to 1870 required the unprecedented mobilization of both men and resources. The conflict acted, in Pedro II's own words, as "a powerful electric shock to nationhood".<sup>10</sup> Men from all parts of Brazil who served together for long periods at the war front no longer thought in terms of a conjoined monarch and *pátria*. The *pátria*, by now identified with the nation, sufficed, making the monarch unnecessary, a relic of the past. In respect to resources, the war spurred considerable growth in the Brazilian economy, requiring in turn an expansion in the structures of government. Pedro II's style of ruling, involving personal oversight and control of every facet of administration, became stultifying and self-defeating. He himself, now in middle age, became outdated in his dress, manners, outlook and expectations. The gender and lack of political skills of the Emperor's heir, Princess Isabel, deprived her of credibility as his successor. By the 1880s the regime had lost all momentum, surviving simply because it was there. It was, oddly enough, one final upsurge of Liberalism, the Abolitionist movement, bringing slavery to an end in May 1888, which sealed the monarchy's fate.

The decline and fall of Liberalism in Brazil can be traced to several causes, external and internal. In respect to external influences, the death of John Stuart Mill in 1873 symbolized the supersession of classical Liberalism by the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer in England and by the secular Positivism of Emile Littré in France. Herbert Spencer in particular presented an all encompassing philosophy of existence that acquired hegemonic standing. It explained and

---

<sup>10</sup> Pedro II to the Condessa de Barral, Rio de Janeiro, February 7, 1866, in Raymundo Magalhães Jr., ed., *D. Pedro II e a condessa de Barral ...* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, [1956]), p. 68.

justified the changes being wrought by the second industrial revolution – the extremes of wealth and poverty, the inevitability of rapid technological and economic change, the necessity of rule by an enlightened minority. Educated Brazilians were very much aware of these developments. The transatlantic cable opened in 1874 brought news immediately from the outside world while advances in marine engineering multiplied the steamship lines that took Brazilians to Europe and to North America and brought foreigners to Brazil in growing numbers.

What made Social Darwinism and secular Positivism so attractive to the ruling circles in Brazil was that the new doctrines allowed them to abandon those aspects of Liberalism which threatened to undermine their dominance of the political system. A key aspect of Liberalism, as stressed in the first part of this presentation, was the citizen whom Liberalism defined as the literate, cultured, politically conscious and active male, gainfully employed and owning property. As the second part showed, originally few Brazilians met the criteria of citizenship. The mass of the population remained subordinate and excluded. By the 1870s, however, literacy and its concomitant culture expanded among the urban male population, a popular press spread political consciousness, and increasing numbers held gainful employment. What this social stratum desired principally was a reform of the electoral system that would, through an end to the existing two-tier voting system, give full and free participation in the political process. The Electoral Reform law of January 1881 did indeed abolish the two-tier voting system and enact measures to prevent electoral fraud. The law also defined the franchise so narrowly as to exclude from the electorate the overwhelming majority of those who, by the standards of Liberalism, did qualify as citizens. It was a Liberal cabinet, not a Conservative ministry, that introduced and passed this measure.

If the 1881 law could and did deprive many Brazilian males of their right to vote, it could not and did not deprive those excluded of their political consciousness and their determination to achieve structural change in their country. It was the excluded who provided the mass support that made viable the campaign to abolish slavery. That campaign dominated politics during the 1880s. The Golden Law of May 13, 1888, was a final and triumphant expression of Liberalism in Imperial Brazil. Abolition asserted the supremacy of the individual right to freedom over property rights. Freedom for slaves was, however, a negative act that did not, contrary to what Abolitionists promised and anticipated, serve as the catalyst for transforming social, economic and cultural structures in Brazil. No such radical reforms followed on the Golden Law which had distanced the plantation owners from the regime. The army coup overthrowing the Empire on November 15, 1889, marked the end of Liberalism in Brazil. The new regime was meant to achieve the reforms that the Empire could not accomplish but such expectations quickly vanished. The Old Republic, itself overthrown in 1930, displayed most of the faults of the Empire and few of its virtues.

In conclusion, let me briefly remind you why I entitled this presentation, “The Enigma of Liberalism in Imperial Brazil, 1822-1889”. The social, economic and cultural conditions in Brazil at the start of the nineteenth century were not conducive to the establishment of Liberalism as the dominant political creed. The existence of a double loyalty to and identification with monarch and *pátria* meant that Liberalism could not triumph during the independence era in the absence of Monarchy. The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in 1823 revealed the incompatibilities between Monarchy and Liberalism. However, the traumas of the 1830s demonstrated the inability of Liberalism on its own to maintain order and to give prosperity to Brazil and so forced the political community to turn to the monarch as

indispensable if Liberalism were to survive. It was the political skills of Pedro II, the citizen emperor *par excellence*, which made Brazil during the middle decades of the nineteenth century the epitome of the Liberal state in Latin America. Yet it was the emperor's control of the political process that thwarted the structural changes necessary for the regime to flourish and for Brazil to develop. Lastly, when the Empire and Liberalism ceased to serve the interests of the ruling circles, both were jettisoned in favour of a republican regime that, as time was to show, proved not one whit more suited to Brazil's needs.