CHAPTER

3

All Bubbles Must Burst

I was born in my grandmother's house in Rio de Janeiro on June 18, 1931, into a world that was rapidly collapsing. The city still clung to its dreams of tropical splendor and middle-class insularity, and long, breezy afternoons were spent at cafés or in the surf. When I was very young, I took gym classes on Copacabana Beach, and my friends and I would run and play up the green mountains dramatically jutting up from the city, which were still free of the *favelas,* or shantytowns, that have climbed their slopes ever since. Back then, the problems that haunted Brazil beyond the Sugar Loaf Mountain remained just a rumor to many of Rio's residents. It was an idyllic, slightly delusional existence, but reality would come barging into our lives soon enough.

In the meantime, the middle class happily preoccupied itself with a vibrant cultural life. Rio had always looked to Paris as its guiding light, and its citizens engaged in a painstaking, often amusing imitation of

the Old Continent. When my aunt took my sister and me to the opera during Rio's tropical "winter," she and the other women insisted on donning ostentatious fur coats. They would nearly sweat to death, of course, because the temperature only rarely dipped below 60 degrees Fahrenheit—a reality accented by the fact that, during the summer, the coats were stored in specially made icehouses to keep them from disintegrating in the tropical heat. Rio was not quite Paris, but that didn't stop it from trying.

Just beneath the surface, however, Rio was starting to suffer the same problems as the rest of Brazil. The Great Depression broke the backbone of the Brazilian economy, sending the global price of coffee plummeting by 65 percent. At first, farmers elected not to sell their crop at such abysmal prices, and by 1930, more than 26 million sacks of coffee laid untouched in Brazilian warehouses, a staggering amount equivalent to the entire world's consumption the year before.

While the powerful landowners waited in relative comfort for a recovery that never came, hordes of suddenly desperate, jobless souls roamed Rio's streets. Widespread hunger in rural areas fed Brazil's first great wave of urbanization as peasants sought refuge in the cities. But they found little relief in a country that lacked any semblance of a safety net and was unwilling to help new arrivals become part of a productive society. In the 1930s, more than half the adult population still did not even know how to sign their names.

This reality surrounded me at all times, but I have to admit that I first understood poverty from books. I remember that John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* had a particularly deep impact on me. This might seem shocking—that a Brazilian who grew up in Depression-era Rio needed to acquaint himself with poverty through a tale about California, told by an author from the United States, no less. But it is the truth. I knew there was poverty in Brazil—but to feel it, to really understand it, was very difficult. To draw a modern-day, North American parallel, a privileged child on Manhattan's Upper West Side might be aware of poverty just a few blocks away in Harlem, but does he know

what hunger really feels like? Probably not. For me, literature was the best available portal into this world. We also had marvelous Brazilian authors, such as Jorge Amado, José Lins do Rego, and Graciliano Ramos, whose books illustrated the hardscrabble life of hunger, droughts, and revolts in the arid northeastern plains of Brazil. Their vivid accounts of rural poverty were instrumental in fostering a social awareness, however incipient and generalized, in a generation of young people like myself.

Of course, as I grew older and more aware of my surroundings, the legacies of Brazilian poverty started materializing before my eyes, and their links with the past became obvious to me. Some of the signs had been there all along. In my parents' house, there was a woman named Alzira. She was the daughter of my great-grandfather's former slave. It is difficult to describe the role she played in our home. She was more of a nanny than a servant. She lived with us, almost like a member of the family, but not quite.

The relationship between us was complex, straddling two very different eras in Brazilian history. It embarrasses me a great deal to admit this, but when I was very young, and I wanted Alzira to get me something to drink, for example, I would loudly declare, "I want water!" I would not look at her, or anyone, as I said this. I simply expected that she would be present and that she would hear me and comply. That was how things were done back then. On the other hand, Alzira often sat at the dinner table and ate with us, as an equal. In some houses, this would not have been allowed. But in our family's, it was.

I was the eldest child, and under the tutelage of my mother and grandmother, I learned to read by the time I was three years old. Later, I had a private French tutor. It was, in sum, a perfect upper-middle-class existence. But as I grew older and started paying attention to the conversations at the dinner table, I began to realize that a much harsher, more dangerous world lurked just beyond our front door.

A year before I was born, Brazil had finally succumbed to the revolution that my grandfather had yearned for. The tenentes had failed in

1922 and 1924 to bend the country to their vision, but their moment finally arrived in 1930, when the Old Republic brazenly attempted to rig a presidential election. The outraged lieutenants joined forces with the apparent loser of the vote, Getúlio Vargas. A band of his supporters rode triumphantly into Rio, hitched their horses to a monument in the middle of downtown, and declared Getúlio the president of Brazil. This dramatic bit of gaúcho showmanship was the boldest challenge yet to the frail and discredited power elite. After a halfhearted flurry of skirmishes, President Washington Luís glumly declared that he had no desire to start a civil war, and off into exile he went. The old Republic was over.

Getúlio filled the ranks of his government with the tenentes and their sympathizers, among them my father, who left our house every morning for his job at the war ministry to guard against the constant threat of new revolts. After the infamous palace siege at the hands of the integralistas, when my father hurried off to Rio in the middle of the night, I immersed myself in the adult world—the world of politics, violence, and Getúlio Vargas—determined to anticipate the next threat to my father's existence. There would certainly be no shortage of palace intrigue in the years to come.

Our dinner table was a staging ground for all the great debates that divided Brazil. A steady stream of intellectuals and politicians held court in our family home. They allowed me to sit in and participate as they argued the future of the country into the early morning hours, drinking coffee after coffee. I liked our discussions, and I also discovered that I immensely enjoyed winning debates. I triumphed in a fair share of them with some of Brazil's greatest intellects—at least, in my seven-year-old mind, I did. In retrospect, it is far more likely that they just grew weary of bantering back and forth with such a precocious little boy. In the end, my father would just smile, with a certain measure of pride, and gently urge me to go to bed.

My father, General Leônidas Cardoso, was a fantastic storyteller, a handsome and dignified Renaissance man who held the center of at-

tention at any dinner table. Refined and soft-spoken, liberal and tolerant, he was the antithesis of the commonly held stereotype of the brutish Latin American soldier. He never wore his military uniform at home, and he did not encourage me to follow him into a career in the armed forces. Instead, he only expected his children to be as intellectually curious as he was—and that was a challenge in itself. Being an officer in those days was not a full-time job, so my father earned his law degree and became a practicing lawyer. He wrote political columns for the newspapers in Rio. He also briefly attended medical school, apparently just for the hell of it. Drawing on this knowledge, every winter he gave my siblings and me injections of codfish oil, believing it would protect us from sickness.

By the time I was born, my father had the air of a man who had lived a full, sometimes contentious life, and he took great joy in aspects of domestic life that his peers might have considered mundane. He often helped my mother clean the house, which was absolutely scandalous in an era when it was considered inappropriate for men to so much as enter the kitchen. I think his long bachelorhood, spent in postings all over Brazil, must have mellowed him a bit; he had not married until age forty-four. Because of his age, he often seemed more like a grandfather figure, and he was wonderful with children. With his own hands, he made us kites and spinning tops that we shared with other kids in the neighborhood. My childhood friends absolutely adored him. He went by the somewhat whimsical nickname of *Sapo,* or "Frog," derived from his birth in the southern state of Paraná, where frogs are quite literally everywhere in the spring. I loved and revered my father; his influence on me was immeasurable.

His legendary charm had been born partially out of necessity, a product of troubled times. He had been imprisoned twice during revolts against the Old Republic in the 1920s. In both cases, he developed a good rapport with his jailkeepers, which allowed him to communicate with the other prisoners, including his brother. My father's good-natured demeanor, plus Brazil's rapidly emerging capacity for forgiveness,

meant that his punishment was always light. After the 1924 revolt, he was removed from Rio and posted to Óbidos, in the northern state of Pará. From there, they sent him to the Amazon city of Manaus, where he met my mother. He often teased her that she was his punishment for having been a rebel.

Like most jovial men close to power, my father could also turn deadly serious at the drop of a hat. He distrusted big business, financial markets, or any kind of profiteering, as he believed that money corrupted people. He had no tolerance whatsoever for idiots, and if a dinner conversation turned overbearing or dull, he would turn his bad ear toward whoever was droning on. My father never drank, and he exercised regularly, believing that a healthy body equaled a healthy mind. An agnostic in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, he could be a bit defensive when the topic turned to religion. Whatever gulf existed in his spiritual life he filled by reading voraciously. I still have some of his books. He enthusiastically consumed French literature, enjoying authors such as Victor Hugo and Anatole France. He also devoured philosophers such as Herbert Spencer, a principal proponent of the theory of evolution, and Auguste Comte, the father of the positivist creed the tenentes held so dear. Politically, he took after my grandfather, passionately believing in the construction of a strong, centralized state that existed to do good for Brazil.

My father was an intelligent man, but I think my mother, Nayde, was even smarter. She was fiercely independent; in an era before feminism, she was determined to live life her own way. She was much more perceptive than my father was about other people's intentions; she could always tell the good from the bad. Later on, when my father went into politics, my mother was the driving force. At one political meeting, when another politician was speaking ill of my father, she went after him, swinging an umbrella. Most of the time, luckily, she was a bit more reserved, although she always wore her emotions on her sleeve. She could not read French, but she still pored over translations of romance novels that were fashionable during the era. Even by

today's exacting standards, my mother was a modern and formidable woman.

Even under my parents' enlightened watch, however, a midnight coffee at the Cardoso house could still turn ugly. As I approached my teenage years, scars still ran deep in our family over a revolt that had transpired in 1932, when Paulistas took up arms against the federal government, afraid their region was losing influence in the inner circles of Rio and that Getúlio was taking Brazil ever more distant from democracy. This kind of regional revolt is almost impossible to comprehend in the modern era, but it shows just how tenuous federal power remained in Brazil deep into the twentieth century. Local factories in São Paulo produced their own tanks, and rich housewives sold jewelry to fund the rebellion. Combat raged for three months, and the death toll ran into the thousands. Families were torn apart, including our own. Some of my cousins took up arms in sympathy with São Paulo, and my great-uncle, the war minister, found himself in the awkward position of having to imprison a few of his relatives. As a result, the extended Cardoso family splintered for good. Some family members never spoke to each other again.

Other families close to us suffered much more serious consequences from the constant turmoil. In 1935, the Communist Party mounted an armed revolt against Getúlio, marking the first time in the Western Hemisphere that Communists directly funded by Moscow attempted the violent overthrow of a government. The leader of the coup was Luís Carlos Prestes, who a decade before had been the hero of the eponymous Prestes Column, the group of tenentes who had tormented the Old Republic and evaded authorities with their long march through the countryside. Prestes was an old friend of my father's, although their ideologies had diverged by the 1930s, when Prestes went into exile in the Soviet Union. When Prestes decided to return to Brazil, determined to spread Stalinism in South America, he was assigned a beautiful female bodyguard named Olga Benário, a German Communist Jew. On the boat sailing for Brazil, they fell in

love. When the revolt failed, Prestes was sent to prison. Getúlio's police captured Olga and deported her to Nazi Germany, where she was killed in a gas chamber in a concentration camp.

As I heard such stories, and the names of Hitler and Mussolini began to echo in the ears of the world, I began to wonder what kind of man my father was charged with defending. But, although Getúlio was capable of shocking brutality, he preferred to co-opt his enemies and rule through alliances rather than terror. That, more than anything, allowed him to stay in power for fifteen years, from 1930 to 1945.

By that point in Brazilian history, the threat of violence colored every decision in political life. No one wanted to see a repetition of incidents such as the Canudos Massacre or the regional wars and revolts. The country's leaders' priority was to avoid such ignominious events. Thus, a penchant for compromise became perhaps the most glorified and necessary trait among Brazilian politicians. Getúlio was probably the first president to appreciate this and to implement consensus-building as the main philosophy of his government. With the two extremes of communism and fascism locked in a death struggle, each attempting coups against him at different times, Getúlio was able to stick around by navigating squarely down the middle.

Like all dictators, he knew how to play the good guy. Short, handsome, and somewhat plump, always with a cigar in hand, Getúlio spoke with a soft, squeaky voice that would have suited a professor better than a strongman. The historian Thomas Skidmore has described him as "about as uncharismatic a dictator the world is likely to see," and in a traditional sense, this was true. But Getúlio was enormously appealing in his own way. He dressed splendidly, always in a blazer and a hat, even in the tropical heat. People saw him as very kind and very competent, the sort of sober father figure they wanted running a tumultuous country.

Behind the benevolent public façade, however, resided a much darker, more anxious man. Since so many members of my family worked in his government, our dinner table buzzed with talk of

Getúlio's hidden fears and eccentricities. Those who knew him best said Getúlio became surprisingly reserved when the spotlight dimmed, mistrusting even his closest circle of advisers. He seemed lonely, perhaps even depressed. He was a gaúcho, from a family of ranchers, and this made him somewhat of an outsider in Rio's high society, which never really accepted him. Given the circumstances, one could forgive Getúlio for seeing conspiracies around every corner; his diary was a veritable laundry list of supposed military putsches seeking to oust him from power. Many of them were imagined, but many others were true.

To fight off the plotters, Getúlio also often relied on naked nationalism. As a small child, I remember attending a giant parade to support the government. It was called "Patriotism Day." My entire school was there in a plaza in Rio, and we sang songs about the greatness of Brazil. Flags hung from the buildings. Getúlio and his top aides stood on a giant stage and waved as the children paraded below. He employed similar tactics with other sections of society; once a year on Labor Day, thousands of factory workers would gather in a soccer stadium to hear Getúlio give a speech.

This was part of a greater change—the twentieth century saw massive growth in Brazil's economy. Between 1900 and 1982, only Japan's economy grew at a faster pace than Brazil's. The fallout from the Depression waned rather quickly, and workers streamed into the cities to fill new jobs. Their children would become part of an expanding middle class and began to hunger for a political voice to accompany their newfound wealth. Industry expanded at a torrid pace once the Depression ended, and factory output more than doubled during the 1930s. Getúlio realized that, by co-opting the new urban working classes, he could gain a powerful, up-and-coming ally and stoke the engine of economic growth.

Although Getúlio may not have always governed in their best interest, he was at least smart enough to acknowledge the workers' presence—and that was largely enough. For the first time in Brazil, a labor

ministry was created. State policy was guided by a new form of social organization, called "corporatism," that sought to facilitate the adoption of modern-day capitalism while avoiding both a completely laissez-faire approach and total state direction. Syndicates were established to represent certain economic sectors for both workers and business, and it was the government's role to negotiate disputes between competing syndicates. Put a different way, the state was expected to solve all economic problems—a legacy that would be no small headache for future leaders down the road.

Ultimately, the comparisons to Mussolini and Hitler were inaccurate. Certainly, Getúlio was an autocrat, and his government was capable of deploying an intolerable degree of torture, imprisonment, and censorship to stifle its opponents. He closed Congress in 1937, and he spoke gleefully of the "decadence of liberal and individualistic democracy." But to put Getúlio in the same league as the material authors of World War II would be disingenuous. Even though the military was his power base, specifically the tenentes during the early years, Vargas himself was not a military man. He cultivated close political ties with the Catholic Church and discouraged political parties of any kind. He was, to almost an extreme degree, the emerging face of Brazilian compromise. He was a master in the calculus of building and maintaining power.

Ironically, Getúlio's sympathies for the Allied cause in World War II led to his downfall. When the war broke out, it was at first not at all clear which side Brazil would support. My father initially supported the Axis powers because of his deep distrust of Great Britain, which he saw as an imperialist power. However, he and the rest of the military elite eventually came around, owing in part to a skilled U.S. lobbying effort for Brazil to join the war. Washington dispatched a group of Portuguese-American military officers to Rio to cultivate the military and cultural elite. I remember these officers coming to our house on several occasions to have dinner with my father. These efforts—along with the promise of generous U.S. financing to help Brazil create a steel industry—eventually won Getúlio over. Brazil committed 25,000 troops to

the Allied effort, sending the only Latin American army that fired a gun. By the time the war ended, 500 Brazilians had died fighting for the liberation of Italy.

For me, the war was a vivid reality, not at all distant from our shores. In 1942, German submarines sunk numerous Brazilian ships just off our coast, killing hundreds of people. I was just eleven years old, but my father allowed me to accompany him late at night to the docks in Rio, when Brazilian ships sailed under the cover of darkness. I stayed up late at night listening to the radio and tracking the movements of the Allied and Axis armies on a large map in my parents' bedroom, using buttons to pinpoint troop locations. I am at a loss to explain why, but I also distinctly remember clambering about on a playground while wearing a gas mask. Members of my family wore pins that said "Royal Air Force" or "I gave to the Allied cause." Innumerable donation drives and military parades united Brazil in a way that nothing else really had before.

For a while, at least. When Brazil's troops came home from Europe after the war was won, they took a good long look at Brazil—and at Getúlio—and realized that it was time for change. After years of spilling blood in the name of democracy, and confronting the Holocaust and the other horrors that Europe's fascists had wrought, these officers believed the dictator at home also had to go. The middle class concurred. In October 1945, just a few months after the war in Europe ended, the Brazilian military, with no sense of irony or inappropriateness, staged a coup—a coup in the name of democracy. Getúlio was informed that, unless he resigned immediately, the army would surround his palace and cut off power, water, and all other supplies.

This time, with the deck stacked against him, Getúlio opted to leave the presidency just like his predecessors had: without much of a fight. He muttered vaguely of a global conspiracy to depose him, but in the end he went quietly. "I was the victim of agents of international finance who intended to keep our country simply as an exporting colony for raw materials and a purchaser of industrial goods," he declared.

The military handed over the presidency to the head of the Supreme

Court, who organized elections that would be relatively fair and open, inaugurating universal suffrage in Brazil for the first time. Meanwhile, Getúlio was spared exile and retired to his ranch in Rio Grande do Sul, where he immediately started laying the groundwork for another act that would become quite familiar in Brazilian politics: the comeback.

Shortly before the war ended, my father was transferred from Rio to São Paulo, which the British travel writer Peter Fleming visited during the same era. "The air is brisk," Fleming wrote. "The streets clang; electric signs challenge the stars with hyperbole. . . . As you watch the straw hats bustling in and out of Woolworth's you feel—with satisfaction or regret, according to your nature—that here is the South America that matters, the South America of the future."

A travel guide from Great Britain from the same era was no less enthusiastic. "São Paulo bears the impress of energy. . . . The City indeed represents that solid core of well-based economy, industry, agriculture, export and import which lies behind the façade of romance which is usually associated in the visitor's mind with Brazil."

Well, maybe. But to me, having grown up among the finer trappings of Rio, São Paulo was a frightful shock. I had never seen unpaved roads before; in our new neighborhood, all the roads were made of dirt, and cows still walked through the streets. In just three decades, São Paulo would become the largest city in South America, but at the time I felt as if we had moved to Siberia. I hung on somewhat pitifully to the traditions of Rio, continuing, for example, to wear the same white-and-black shoes to school that Rio kids wore. I despaired when my prized footwear became ever filthier from those awful muddy streets. My schoolmates insisted on calling me *carioca,* the term for someone from Rio. I spent several sleepless nights plotting a daring escape by night from my family's home so I could somehow rejoin my good friends on Copacabana Beach.

Thankfully, as on so many other occasions in my life, I made friends and adapted quickly. In fact, I would spend most of the rest of my life in São Paulo, and I have always felt more *paulista* than *carioca.* I eventually shunned my Rio shoes and adopted the formal coat, vest, and tie of São Paulo, then perplexed my parents by insisting on wearing the ensemble to the beach on visits to Rio. The truth is that I was an oddball in São Paulo, and I was an oddball in Rio; it didn't really matter where we lived. Luckily, I had friends and family that were willing to tolerate and even encourage my eccentricities.

I rapidly discovered the pros of living in a bona-fide boomtown—circuses and movies, museums and book clubs. Most schools were divided by gender in those days, but my friends and I nevertheless acquired girlfriends at a very young age—aided by the fact that my parents' house was strategically located around the corner from a girls' school. My friends came over and we would spy on the girls for hours on end. Swing dancing came into style, and we struggled to master it. Some had more success than others; I was a less than brilliant dancer. But at least I tried. It was, overall, a quite idyllic upbringing, a solid, happy foundation for the rest of my life.

In one of the military parades during the war, I was allowed to climb into one of the tanks that rumbled down the boulevards in Rio. Influenced by the drama of war and the example of my father, I decided that I wanted to be either a general or a cardinal.* For the only period in my life, I became intensely religious. My sister remembers walking by my bedroom door at night and listening as I kneeled on the floor and fervently prayed for God to save my family of heathen nonbelievers.

As an adolescent, I began to enjoy participating in everything. I had a broad range of friends—not all of whom liked each other. This was probably why I began to develop skills as a diplomat. Years later, Celio Benevides de Carvalho, a close childhood friend of mine, describing me for an interviewer, said:

*Rather than just a "soldier or a priest." I suppose I have always had an appreciation for hierarchy.

> He wasn't someone who was necessarily *always* leading the group. He wasn't the leader, but more the man of consensus, who made alliances. He went and talked to everybody. His leadership was of a different nature. It was he who coordinated, who articulated. He already manifested a pronounced taste for politics that was unmistakable. He also punctuated everything he said or did with a good dose of humor, which was sometimes ironic or malicious. He knew how to find the funny side of things, and his ironic observations always ended up tearing down his worst adversaries.*

I think that description makes me sound a bit too much like a fourteen-year-old Machiavelli. I say that with the benefit of hindsight, because I never aspired to be "political" as a child, but the description is nevertheless essentially accurate. The truth is that our pursuits were usually quite trivial, or at least typically adolescent. We organized an art appreciation group, a reading group, and even took a shot at starting a literary magazine. All of us were desperate to be writers, and we penned poetry. We took ourselves extremely seriously. Some of the poems I wrote have, regrettably, survived for posterity and surfaced in biographies of me, including this one:

Ai, os agudos acordes do violino
Soando nos meus ouvidos,
E eu que perdi o ritmo da vida
Na luta com os demonios
Criança sem vida
Amiga perdida.

Alas, the violin's acute harmonies
Echoing in my ears
And I who lost life's rhythm

*Quoted in Brigitte Hersant Leoni, *Fernando Henrique Cardoso: O Brasil do Possível* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Fronteira S/A, 1997).

In the struggle with the demons
Lifeless child
Lost friend.

The world is probably a better place since I stopped writing poetry. That piece appeared in the first edition of a magazine called *Revista de Novíssimos.* Three of the young writers for the magazine would later go on to become accomplished poets, but apparently the contributions of the less gifted among us deprived them of earlier fame. *Novíssimos* never managed to publish a second edition.

Our youthful enthusiasm, if nothing else, reflected the excitement of living at the time of São Paulo's burgeoning growth. We lived in an area, Perdizes, that was on the outskirts of the city when we arrived but is considered part of downtown today. With such rapid change, it became a city of apparently limitless potential, quickly transforming itself into one of South America's main centers of thought. People were practically elbowing each other out of the way to get noticed. Aspiring thinkers all knew each other and crossed paths constantly at bookstores, teahouses, and cocktail parties. São Paulo also enjoyed an economic boom, as the war in Europe fed the need for factories in Brazil to meet demand at home and abroad. Following the coup of 1945, liberal democracy took hold in Brazil for the first time, empowering more people than ever before. Ultimately, all these factors made São Paulo a turbulent microcosm of the class conflicts and ideological debates rocking Brazil, and the world, at the time.

The man who replaced Getúlio was Eurico Gaspar Dutra, who had been an aide-de-camp to my grandfather and a close friend of my father's as well. In the mornings during the 1930s, Dutra had often stopped by our house, and he and my father walked to work together at the war ministry. Dutra offered the country a totally different political program in theory—which turned out, typically, to be all too familiar in practice. It was, in that strange Brazilian way, fitting that the man who led Brazil through its first steps of democracy was a general

who, at the beginning of World War II, was so retrograde that he had opposed aligning Brazil with the Allies against Nazi Germany. When he came to office, he quickly outlawed the Brazilian Communist Party. He supported the United States in the opening salvos of the Cold War, and he exchanged official visits with President Harry Truman, asking him for U.S. economic aid.

How to understand all of this when you're just a teenager? Inspiration struck me in an odd place: by the swimming pool. On a vacation in the mountain resort of Lindóia with my friends, I struck up a conversation with an elderly gentleman who was reading books that interested me. He turned out to be a distinguished professor of literature named Fidelino de Figueiredo, a Portuguese exile. Poetry was a shared interest of ours, although, as previously illustrated, my talent in that field probably did not impress him. After a brief chat, he suggested that I apply to the brand new College of Philosophy, Sciences, and Letters at the University of São Paulo (USP).

I already knew I would attend USP, but I had not defined my field of study. My father had never imposed a military career on me, and I was more interested in the world of words and ideas. Law seemed like an appropriate choice, or at least a popular one—fully a quarter of Brazilian university students in those years became lawyers, reflective of the enduring bureaucratic legacy from the imperial era. But, in one of those tiny random acts that changes the course of one's life, I failed the Latin portion of the entrance exam for law school.

So off I went to the philosophy school, as Figueiredo had suggested. Once there, I instantly gravitated toward sociology. If the field was not quite as respected in Brazil as law and medicine were back then, it at least was not as dull or dogmatic as it might seem now. In the 1950s, sociology was a fresh, exciting field of study. It taught us how to understand society in order to change it. Sociology incorporated a bit of politics, economics, culture, and social life, and it offered the opportunity to study the present just as much as the past. We were taught, in a very scientific manner, to analyze hard data and apply what we found to a

dynamic and shifting world. All of us who entered the school were motivated by a desire to change Brazil. Most of us were from the ideological left, perhaps more interested in being socialists than sociologists. But the rigor of the school would soon discipline us. The sociology department at USP created a remarkable generation of young thinkers who would become some of Brazil's most prominent leaders.

Eager to show that we were neutral, objective scientists, we wore white lab coats around campus, as if we were medical doctors. The field of study was rigorous and comprehensive—my first paper was on a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Parmenides.* The prosperity of São Paulo had allowed the department to import several fine French professors, and many classes were taught in French. Meanwhile, the intellectual life outside class was also stimulating. We had imposed on ourselves a rigorous set of rules that theoretically forbade us from participating in daily life with the "subjects" of our studies; sociologists were supposed to operate in a world apart, dedicated to science. Of course, this was impossible in practice, and I might add that these rules fell apart entirely in the 1960s, when students and professors alike were drawn to the glamour of street demonstrations or to the guerrilla movements themselves.

I soon decided that I wanted to be a professor. I was sure that I wanted to spend my life researching, writing, and trying to understand the world—and teaching was the best avenue available for doing that. I was also good at it, despite my bad grade on that first paper. When I was twenty-one, still an undergraduate, I was asked to teach a course in European economic history. That was the first paycheck I ever earned. I received my degree in 1952 and was hired as a teaching assistant in the sociology department the following year. My lectures generally were well-attended, my first books were judged important, and I climbed in the leadership structure of USP.

In some countries, academics are perceived as people who have

*I got the Brazilian equivalent of a D, not exactly an auspicious start. I also had a rather difficult time with economics, ironic given my later career path.

failed in life, unable or unwilling to participate in the real world. But in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, this could not have been further from the truth. The intellectual elite was unbelievably small—there were only about 100,000 university students in a country of 65 million people. So men and women with degrees were accorded almost reverential importance. Top academics had an influential role in government and business. Universities were seen as the perfect place to educate oneself in preparation for a full, active life. It was like being in training; we just didn't know for what exactly. After twenty years, a professor could go on to become a senator or a business executive. As a young professor, I had no intention of entering politics; I was happy to teach and to learn. But I always felt that I was preparing myself for *something.*

In the meantime, we sociologists felt as if we were investigating an exciting mystery. Studying sociology required us to try to explain the larger forces driving everyday events in our society. In Brazil, this meant looking into a whirlwind—everyday events for us would have been national traumas in some other countries! Why was Brazil in such turmoil? What were the structural reasons for poverty? What was it that drove people from the countryside into the cities? What were their stories? These were the questions that motivated our research.

From the very beginning, I honed in on one topic that seemed to lie at the heart of it all: race.

Back in the 1950s, race was something no one talked about in Brazil. The subject was completely taboo. When someone did bring it up, it was only to parrot the socially acceptable, official line: that Brazil had a "racial democracy." For decades, official Brazil—the government, the media, and most literature and music—had promoted a popular image of our country as the world's leading model of harmony between the races. Nowhere else, the official line went, had blacks and whites blended their cultures and their families into such a peaceful melting pot. Nowhere else was slavery more benign over the centuries. Nowhere else had there been such an absence of discrimination, or such an abundance of opportunity for people of African descent.

There was *some* truth to these ideas. For example, race relations in Brazil were always less confrontational than those in the United States. Blacks and whites could live together, and interracial violence was rare. There were no laws sanctioning institutional racism along the lines of the "separate but equal" statutes in the United States. The blending of the races was widely accepted, which had the corollary effect of making it difficult to create and enforce legislation on the matter. Put another way, there was no way to define who was black and who was white; almost everyone in Brazil has some African and indigenous blood. Occasionally in Brazil, a dark baby is born to fair-skinned parents, and no one really bats an eye, just because a few generations back, who knows what happened?

And yet, in general terms, to be black was to be poor in Brazil. This could be summed up in one word: *favela.* The favela was really much more than a shantytown or a very poor neighborhood—back then, it was a cluster of homes that didn't have basic sanitary services, didn't have a police presence, and didn't even appear on maps. In the Brazilian public imagination, it was a place that *didn't technically exist,* populated by people whose role in society could, unfortunately, be compared to untouchables. Favelas started to proliferate in earnest following World War II, most famously on the green hills overlooking Rio where I had run and played as a child.

Anyone who entered a favela or any poor urban neighborhood in Brazil in the 1950s could plainly see that most of its inhabitants were black. However, there were no official government statistics on the matter because the subject was so taboo. So we sociologists decided to go study the situation ourselves. We felt that, if we could understand the dynamics of race, we could gain unique and unparalleled insight into the forces that were transforming Brazil.

The leaders of the study were Roger Bastide, a French professor, and Florestan Fernandes, the son of humble Portuguese immigrants. Florestan would be the greatest influence on my development as an intellectual. Following research done under their guidance in São Paulo, a

group of us, all assistant professors, started our own surveys in the southern states of Brazil: Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul. Over the course of five years, from 1954 through 1958, we asked several questions in these areas over and over again, trying to get to the bottom of the mystery.

They were simple questions: Are there many blacks here? How do you get along with the whites? Do your children play with friends from other races? Do your children attend school? Are you discriminated against in your job? All of our queries sought to decipher how blacks and whites interacted in Brazil.

We must have been quite a bizarre sight. We were young, relatively wealthy white men, wearing white lab coats and carrying clipboards, entering some of the most dire neighborhoods in Brazil, mazes of houses made of wood, tin, and cardboard. We sometimes had to wade through ditches or trudge through seas of mud, since the blacks were always clustered in the worst part of the favela, often pressed up against the banks of a river. We sometimes had difficulties communicating—Bastide, for example, when researching in São Paulo's slums, spoke with a thick French accent that was rendered even more incomprehensible by his ever-present cigar—but people were exceedingly patient with us.

Despite our odd appearance, and the intrusive nature of our questions, the people we encountered were simply wonderful. Nowadays, it can be very difficult to enter a favela because of the violence, but back then people were softer, less angry. Everywhere we went, people answered our questions with enthusiasm and honesty. They were docile, articulate, and direct.

Slowly, surely, a portrait of the region emerged. The racial patchwork in Brazil's south was far more complicated and fascinating than anything we had expected. We discovered that there was a black petit bourgeoisie—largely made up of people whose grandparents had been free blacks. The members of these families had worked for generations in manufacturing, often at the dried meat factories in southern cities.

They attended black social clubs. I went to one of these club gatherings when I was invited there by a friend. It was held at a place in Porto Alegre called "Floresta Aurora."

The name of the club was in itself odd—*floresta* means jungle, and *aurora* means dawn. I discovered the significance of the name only later, while doing research in the city of Pelotas, when I came across old copies of a nineteenth-century newspaper by the same name that had been written by and for freed slaves. There was another club called "Marcílio Dias" that was named after a mulatto marine hero during the Paraguayan War. Both names spoke to a vibrant and distinct black Brazilian culture that was, to a large extent, kept underground in those days. I realized that this was yet another hidden aspect of the myth of "racial democracy"—in a society of supposed equals, a separate black culture was in itself controversial.

Meanwhile, the mere need for black social clubs reflected the discrimination that existed in day-to-day life. They were among only a few places where blacks with a certain degree of education and culture could establish a social network. Understandably, those who went to these events often felt frustrated by their limitations. I will always remember a gorgeous young mulatta woman, a high-school teacher whom I met at Floresta Aurora. She pointed at the crowd of young black men on the dance floor. "You know, I will end up marrying one of these," she told me with a look of disgust on her face. "And they are far less educated than I am."

In one favela after another, we saw the structural causes of Brazil's poverty. Slavery had left an unquestionable legacy of violence and inequality. This was the basis for a presentation I gave at a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference in Rio. The conference was held at Itamaraty Palace, the former presidential residence my father had grown up in as the son of a presidential adviser. UNESCO had partially funded our efforts. When I was finished, the leader of the seminar, a respected elderly Brazilian lawyer, approached me.

He was furious. "I was ready to throw you out of the room," he seethed.

"Why?"

"Because you didn't have the right to speak the way you did in the presence of foreigners. You said we have racial discrimination, and there is none. We are a racial democracy."

I was astonished. "I would love nothing more than to live in a racial democracy," I replied. "But my data show just the opposite. What would you have me do? Not tell the truth?"

He said nothing and walked away. The honest answer, of course, would have been a resounding "yes." The persistence of the myth depended on it.

Understanding race, and thereby the history of slavery, completely transformed the way I looked at Brazil.

The problems were nothing new; in many ways, nothing in Brazil had changed in the previous four centuries. By the mid-1950s, half of Brazil's 61 million people still suffered from chronic malnutrition. Half were barefoot, and more than half were illiterate. Only one out of three children went to school; one out of six made it to high school. One out of three Brazilians hosted intestinal hookworms. In some remote areas, every other baby died before turning one year old. The average life span was 46 years, versus 69.4 in the United States. All of this misery was as old as Brazil itself.

So what was the big change, then? In a word: urbanization. As the poor masses fled rural discrimination and moved to the city, a process that began in earnest after World War II, Brazilian politics would be turned upside down. This is what the changes in the twentieth century were all about. These new city dwellers would justifiably demand health care, education, jobs, and a political voice. The percentage of the population living in cities would skyrocket to 41 percent in 1955, 62

percent in 1975, and 79 percent in 1995. These newly enfranchised Brazilians would multiply in number as well. In the course of those same years, the total national population would grow from 59 million in 1955 to 107 million, then 172 million.

The bubble was bursting.

During those years, the country came face to face with what it had always been. The poor saw the rich, and the rich saw the poor. Brazil would never be the same.

Still, most of the Brazilian elite remained completely in the dark about the reality in the country. The old guard would try to govern the country the same way they had before, and then fail miserably. No one discovered this quite as completely as Getúlio Vargas, who staged a doomed return to the presidency in 1951.

Getúlio was vaguely aware of the rapid social changes, but not quite sure how to harness them, and his second coming was more precarious than his first. His labor minister, a young fellow gaúcho named João Goulart, terrified the business elite. Goulart recommended a 100 percent increase in the minimum wage, which had not been raised for several years. The uproar from the conservatives was so loud that Goulart was forced to resign—but Vargas announced that the wage increase would be implemented anyway. Some employers then refused to honor the decree, leading to a wave of strikes across the country. With labor unrest growing, whispers that Getúlio had become a Communist grew louder and louder.

Then onto our national stage strode Brazil's answer to Joe McCarthy. A city councilman in Rio and the owner of an influential newspaper, Carlos Lacerda would play a major role in the downfall of three Brazilian presidents, including Getúlio. Though he had been a Communist during the 1930s, Lacerda turned on his roots with a vehemence that suggested no small amount of self-loathing. His newspaper focused almost exclusively on attacking communism and populism of all forms, using every means possible to defame Getúlio and his ministers. He became the best-known voice of the opposition,

openly calling for the military to overthrow the president and "save Brazil."

Getúlio was desperate to silence his new foe, but he had no idea how to go about it. In his first, more authoritarian term, censorship would have been the likely recourse, but the new spirit of democracy made that impossible. Getúlio tried to fight back at first by building up his alliances in the media, engaging in a competition with Lacerda that resembled an epic arms race—but this was a race for newspapers instead of nukes. Brazil became more polarized. In the end, Lacerda's guns proved bigger and louder. His *Tribuna da Imprensa* newspaper published lurid accounts of corruption. Getúlio was shaken by the revelation that a journalist friend of his, Samuel Wainer, had gotten sweetheart loans from the Bank of Brazil. The president later lamented: "I feel like I am standing in a sea of mud."

The palace was in constant turmoil. Getúlio became withdrawn and more depressed. One of his most faithful followers, Gregório Fortunato, the president's black bodyguard and chauffeur, decided to help out his beloved boss—by contacting a professional gunman and telling him to eliminate Lacerda.

Early on August 5, 1954, as Lacerda pulled into his apartment on Copacabana Beach, his car was showered with bullets. Somehow, Lacerda suffered only minor wounds in the foot. But a heinous sin had been committed anyway: Rubens Vaz, an air force major riding in the car with him, was killed while trying to escape. The armed forces were livid, along with the rest of Brazil. Lacerda resumed his attacks, now even more virulent, from his hospital bed. Although it could not be proven that Getúlio had personally sanctioned the hit, the die had been cast. Twenty-seven army generals signed a manifesto demanding the president's resignation. Vargas holed up in the presidential palace, silent.

On the morning of August 24, with a coup imminent, Getúlio sat down to write a letter. "I have fought against the looting of Brazil," he wrote. "I fought against the looting of the people. I have fought bare-

breasted. The hatred, infamy and calumny did not beat down my spirit. I gave you my life. Now I offer you my death. Nothing remains. Serenely I take the first step on the road to eternity and I leave life to enter history." He then withdrew quietly to his bedroom, closed the door, and shot himself through the heart.

For eighteen months after Getulio's suicide, the country suffered a period of uncertain transition as various politicians and military figures wrestled for power. A democratic successor to Getulio was finally assured by the intervention of the minister of war, Marshal Henrique Teixeira Lott, who guaranteed the army's support for Juscelino Kubitschek. Kubitschek's name alone was an indication of a Brazil that was changing fast: he was the offspring of Czechs who were part of relatively recent immigration from Europe, the first president whose origin was not Portuguese. Others would follow in the future. Juscelino helped promote change at an even faster pace during his term, which lasted from 1956 to 1961.

JK, as he was known, left a legacy of respect for democracy and tolerance that was hardly matched by any other president. Two small military upheavals tried to oust him. He not only dismantled these coup attempts, but granted amnesty to his enemies. Faced with harsh opposition throughout his tenure in office, he managed both to formulate and implement—a novelty in Brazil—a very ambitious plan that laid the pillars for the industrialization and basic infrastructure of the country, all that in partnership with foreign investment. He was also the visionary who built Brasília, the new capital, in the geographical center of the country.

Yet, and possibly on account of the enormous tranquility he ensured for the country, that was the period in which I was possibly most distant from politics. I remember visiting Congress only twice during all those years. My children were very young. When I was not with them and Ruth, I was either traveling extensively into Southern Brazil to undertake my field research or organizing the Marx seminar sessions. The Left did not regard JK favorably, given his efforts to strengthen a free

market economy with participation of foreign capital. Nor was he much admired by the academy that viewed with suspicion his flamboyant democratic attitude, which usually led him to reconcile conflicting forces. My father was a federal deputy at that time, a member of the coalition of parties that supported the government.

In any event, JK's administration was a landmark in Brazil, a good time for Brazilians. He is still considered one of the top three presidents Brazil has ever had. No one could imagine then the disaster in the making, in the person of his successor Jânio Quadros.