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Ten Years of Teaching U.S. History at unicamp, Brazil: A Memoir

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I remember well the feeling I had on the first day teaching U.S. history at State University of Campinas (unicamp), Brazil, in August 1993. I faced a challenge as big as the one I had undergone when, as a graduate student at Columbia University, I transferred to the American history program. Back in 1989 I had been the only student from Latin America among my American colleagues and a couple of Europeans. I had had to prove to the professors who accepted me at Columbia, the sponsors of the Fulbright-Laspau program (a faculty development program involving U.S., Latin American, and Caribbean universities), as well as myself, that I could quickly overcome my ignorance in that field.

Now in 1993 I had to prove to Brazilian undergraduate students enrolled in a one-term (four hours per week for four months) required course that it was worthwhile to study the history of that big world power called the United States of America from the beginning and from inside. As I explained on the first day of class, they should open their minds to the full range of U.S. history and leave aside the more common approaches of diplomatic relations and comparative history, usually centered on “race relations” between the United States and Brazil, which they might have already experienced in other courses. (In Brazil, college education is organized according to fields of knowledge from the beginning. Thus, a high school student has already chosen a profession to pursue before applying for college. Students taking the history route go through history classes from their first year to their fourth. Graduation in history combined with a number of courses taken in unicamp’s School of Education allows one to teach high school.)

As I suspected, I faced two problems from the start. First, I had to deal with students’ varying expectations. For some, the United States was the land of affluence, movie stars, amazing inventions, and endless prosperity for its people. For others, it was the major global symbol of contemporary imperialism, racism, and the oppression of Third World countries. Most students harbored a mixture of those expectations: a complex intermingling of fascination and horror. In introducing my syllabus I reminded them that many years before the United States rose to be a great power, it was like many other countries in the world vis-à-vis other big powers of the day. To those inclined to the left, I suggested that Third World countries could never fight imperialism if their people, especially their enlightened youth, did not know the history of the dominant powers.

Second, I had to convince them that U.S. history was not the “bore” they knew from their high school studies. Anyone who had gone through the harsh written history exams, among those in many other disciplines, which have been generally required for entering public universities in Brazil—the so-called Vestibular—knew well what I meant. Basically, the Brazilian high school syllabus in U.S. history covers eight topics: the arrival of the English “pilgrims” in America and the founding of the thirteen colonies; the Declaration of Independence and the “War of Independence”; the Monroe doctrine, westward expansion, and the beginnings of American imperialism; the “secession war” and Abraham Lincoln’s abolition of slavery; the 1929 crash and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal; World War II and the Marshall Plan; the Truman doctrine and the Cold War; and the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. against racial segregation. I remembered well those required topics, except the last one, from many years ago when I first applied for college, as well as the endless hours of memorizing cold facts without really understanding them to solve multiple-choice questions in a couple of hours.

The peregrinos (pilgrims) or pioneiros (pioneers), that is to say the Puritans, was one topic that especially persisted in my memories, probably because it dwells on an old, widespread existential question in the Brazilian imagination: what went wrong in Brazilian history in comparison to the successful American history? Brazilian textbooks commonly represent Puritans as the personification of dynamism, forbearance, and progress, characteristics attributed by these texts to the history of the United States even from colonial times. Due to their labor orientation, morals, and religious creeds—in a word, their culture—Puritans supposedly cultivated the seeds of a homogeneous and united people, that is, the Americans. Even when historical comparisons are not explicit, the Puritans’ tale implies a reverse narrative of inferior Portuguese colonials forging a foundation of apathy, misery, and corruption in Brazilian lands from their very first

“feudal” steps there. Why study history, then, if common sense tells us that people’s paths and destinies are already determined from the start?

That was precisely my purpose when I invited my students to study the history of the United States from the beginnings and from inside: to deconstruct the “common sense” narrative of the history of the United States, one shared by Brazilians of diverse social backgrounds and incessantly nurtured by old American movies, tv shows, cartoons, Disney media, and, of course, U.S. propaganda. In Brazil, the novelist Vianna Moog’s *Bandeirantes e Pioneiros: Paralelo entre duas culturas* (Bandeirantes and Pioneers: A parallel between two cultures)—still a very popular book on comparative history first published in 1954 and with almost twenty editions by 1993, when I began to teach U.S. history—had especially popularized the imagined role of the Puritans in the future progress of the United States.^[1] Black American leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X had long been well known by students and the media in general, but this fact had not fractured the commonly shared tale of a thriving European stock of Puritans forging the future American nation. Black slaves were always presented as a minority of outsiders whose main role as victims did not fit well in the golden tale of the origins of a superior white people forging the American dream.

But following a historical narrative from colonial times to the present should not necessarily mean reducing history to a monolithic tale of progress, told from above by an omniscient narrator of facts whose only visible actors are the rulers. Approaching traditional history critically was certainly not new to students enrolled in unicamp’s sophisticated history program. International authors as distinct in their views as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Michel Foucault, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Jacques Le Goff and other *Annales* scholars, Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, and François Furet had already caught the students’ attention. Students appreciated the diversity in these scholars’ work: ideas and actions from below clashing with those from above; a myriad of disciplinary powers other than the state molding the daily lives of subaltern peoples; popular cultures and their anonymous characters seen from a microhistorical perspective; and the possibility of multiple historiographical interpretations of any single major event.

There was, indeed, a chasm between the history taught in high school and what undergraduate students began to learn at unicamp. Therefore, my task on the first day of class was considerably eased: the minds of my thirty second-year students had already been opened to new versions of history. Many of them were nevertheless surprised to find that U.S. history scholarship had recently followed a path of critique, revision, and new interpretations, much like the one Brazilian historiography had been undergoing over the previous two decades. As I told them, the old idea of American exceptionalism had been under fire from the moment that social historians began pointing to the diversity of the American people and their cultures. Some authors even added an s to the word people to denote peoples of many cultures and distinct geographical origins, and many historians also emphasized internal social divisions along lines of gender, class, and racialized identity. At first glance, my syllabus, which centers on a narrative from the colonial beginnings to the present, could be mistaken for the old one learned back in high school. But, as I explained, I did not think that one should just throw away the baby with the bathwater. I always had in mind the appalling case of a student who had recently taken a course on the many interpretations of the French Revolution but who could not situate the Jacobins in their time and context. “Who came first, Napoleon or Robespierre?” she asked at the height of her confusion. So I determined to follow a narrative, keeping in mind that events may be told from the distinct perspectives of subjects who play different roles in society and that some people’s versions go unheard until a historian approaches the past with different expectations and new questions. At the same time, since it would be impossible to teach all history, I emphasized specific themes in each historical period, ranging from the coexistence of labor regimes in colonial times (European servants, Indian servants, African slaves, free workers) to the conjoined twentieth-century struggles for civil rights in the South and against informal racism in the North.

My syllabus changed over the years, thanks to new readings and the students’ new expectations. For example, in my last two courses at unicamp in 2001 and 2003, I introduced the debate over affirmative action policies in the United States once this issue had become a major topic of political discussions in the Brazilian media and among black militants, university students, and scholars. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq, the issue of American imperialism attracted renewed attention from students seeking to understand how a nation so proud of its democracy could bomb whole cities and towns overseas. Indeed, Brazilian tv viewers were daily presented with terrible images of mutilated children, elders, and civilians dying in hospitals after being caught by American bombs. Therefore, I included a section on imperialism in my syllabus, trying to analyze the issue more consistently from its first steps in the north-hemisphere-continental West, at a time when it did not yet belong to Americans, through the war against Spain and the occupation of the Philippines, and through a number of invasions by the American military throughout

the twentieth century. We particularly explored the rise of Pan-Americanism, “dollar diplomacy,” and the “good neighbor” policy, the developments with which Brazilians are more acquainted.

Since my methodology centered on critical narrative, I sought to maintain a balance between chronology (factual coverage) and close reading of texts. At the beginning of every course, I asked students to form groups of four or five, each of which would lead one seminar during the semester, generally after three weeks of lecture classes. The syllabus included a reading list for each seminar: primary documents, memoirs, and secondary sources. The primary sources ranged from the Declaration of Independence and Constitution to texts by Thomas Paine, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Jack London, James Baldwin, and Cornel West; as for secondary sources, students did close readings of works by Gary Nash, Herbert Aptheker, Bernard Bailyn, John Hope Franklin, Eugene Genovese, Eric Foner, Peter L. Eisenberg, Barton J. Bernstein, and Lars Schoultz.

The lack of translations of outstanding American historians’ books and memoirs into Portuguese posed a major problem. Students had to read Frederick Douglass’s narrative in Spanish and French. They had to read Bailyn, Nash, and Bernstein in Spanish (a Portuguese translation of Bailyn appeared only in 2003). Requiring readings in Spanish was always a challenge, since this generation—born in a democracy—had never read the forbidden (Spanish-language) leftist books brought from abroad during Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985). I reminded students that in my youth those who wanted to survive intellectually had no other option but to begin patiently to read Spanish, which is quite similar to Portuguese but full of traps for beginners. One could also read leftist books in French, but not without a formal course in the language. Of course, my personal story offered no relief for those who faced the harsh task of reading in a foreign language for the first time.

Along with the lack of translations, I had to face gaps in important periods and subjects in U.S. history, worst of all the Civil War and Reconstruction. Fortunately, the late Brazilianist historian Peter L. Eisenberg, my master’s thesis sponsor at unicamp, wrote a precious small book on those topics with many important insights on capitalism, political parties, and class struggle.[\[2\]](#)

Although many students had learned some English in high school, most of them had no habit of reading in this language. Once, a seminar on the civil rights movement was saved by a student so enchanted by Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech that he translated it into Portuguese and distributed it to his colleagues. A colleague of mine generously allowed me to make copies of a David Montgomery text, which he had translated for a publisher but which unfortunately never came out for lack of “market interest.” But authors as outstanding and as dear to me as Barbara J. Fields (my former Ph.D. advisor), Elizabeth Blackmar, Edmund S. Morgan, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Richard L. Bushman, Herbert G. Gutman, David Brion Davis, C. Vann Woodward, among many others could be quoted only in my lectures. Luckily, I found a good selection of translated primary sources in Harold C. Syrett and Richard B. Morris; as for factual coverage, students could rely on a translated textbook by Charles Sellers and other authors. This situation has improved recently with the expansion of the Internet. But one still needs to be extremely careful with the translations circulating in this new virtual world. Further, the easy and not-always-reliable information offered by numerous sites may present a new source of problems for U.S. history courses.

As for the reception of the course by students, I can recall one revealing anecdote. After a lecture on the Industrial Workers of the World, union strikes, and socialist turmoil in various parts of the country, a student came to my desk with a straightforward question: “do you really mean that there are leftists in the United States?” As he explained, he had always thought the right was all that could be possibly found in that history. Now he was learning that that country could also have very interesting people.

Unfortunately, all my work throughout the years to persuade some students that they should leave aside their antipathies toward U.S. history seemed dismissed once American troops began their massacres in Iraq. But, fortunately, Michael Moore’s movies and his quickly translated books began to help those who, like me, think that the people of any country (like the Germans during the Nazi regime, for example) should not be held totally responsible for their government’s crimes.

In looking back at my experience teaching American history as well as other undergraduate and graduate courses at unicamp in which I presented topics related to the United States, such as racism, antiracism, and multiculturalism in a comparative perspective, I believe that no other historical field faces so intensely the threat of presentism interfering in its narrative. The histories of imperial countries of the past such as Great Britain and France do not seem to raise as many questions associated with their old colonial power in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world. One can peacefully study these histories in the medieval and modern age without constantly confronting discussions of the evils they are doing now around the world and questions regarding the extent to which those evils were inherent to those countries from the beginning.

One may certainly conclude, as many critics of U.S. imperialism have done, that each American bomb dropped on other countries carries the ever-growing seeds of anti-Americanism throughout the world.

[1] Vianna Moog, *Bandeirantes e Pioneiros: Paralelo entre duas culturas* (Bandeirantes and Pioneers: A parallel between two cultures) (Rio de Janeiro, 1954).

[2] Peter Louis Eisenberg, *Guerra Civil Americana* (American Civil War) (São Paulo, 1982).

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