

Paulista Exceptionalism and the Struggle for Confederacy

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Currently home to 11% of Brazil's GDP and roughly 10% of its population, São Paulo has long prided itself on its economic output, regional influence, and multicultural attitude. Paulistas (as residents of the Brazilian state are called) have often self-identified as inherently different than the rest of the country given their demographic clout and diversity, and it has resulted in a sort of "Paulista Exceptionalism" that permeates their political and societal ideals, particularly in the early 20th century. Exceptionalism, as it is commonly used in political discourse, refers to a belief that, "a nation, region, or political system is exceptional and does not conform to the norm."¹ In this case, it refers to a permeating belief in São Paulo culture that they're stronger, wealthier, more productive, and more important than the rest of the Brazilian states. A closer examination of the Federation-Confederation debate will illustrate how this attitude manifested itself in Paulista intellectual life.

After a failed constitutionalist revolt in 1932, Paulistas again found themselves struggling to differentiate themselves from the rest of the country. The 1932 revolt was an attempt to rein in what they saw as an overreaching federal government; their failure to do so was a direct hit on the exceptionalist lenses with which they viewed themselves. Turning away from armed revolt and taking advantage of provisional President Getúlio Vargas's promise to call a new constitutional convention in 1934, Paulistas mobilized themselves once more, this time to argue for the possibility of reorganizing Brazil as a confederacy. In an attempt to salvage some vestige of autonomy for the state of São Paulo, Paulista intellectuals lobbied through newspapers and periodicals to sway popular opinion enough for the confederate system to be created in the 1933 constitutional convention.

Strong regional identities like those found in São Paulo dominated the political elite in the early 20th century, inhibiting the country from progressing more uniformly due to competing regional interests. Burdened by the landed, oligarchical interests of the *café com leite* government, Brazil's economy and national infrastructure were falling behind on the world stage. The "Old Republic", as it came to be known, was defined by government patronage to the coffee and milk industries of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. This patronage fed into politics as well, and the government of the First Republic (roughly from 1889–1930) was dominated by Presidents from either São Paulo (*café*) or Minas Gerais (*leite*). It was so pervasive that nine of Brazil's twelve presidents during this time were taken from these two states, further perpetuating this cycle of nepotism and favoritism. This elite-centric government, while favorable for the country's wealthy landowners, further disenfranchised the lower rungs of Brazilian society and more especially the rising working class.

As popular unrest against the government was growing and regional interests were again taking precedence over political expediency, the once sturdy alliance between the Paulistas and the *Mineiros* (those from Minas Gerais) began to

¹ "exceptionalism." Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/exceptionalism> (accessed: March 28, 2017).

fall apart. After the New York Stock Exchange crashed in 1929, coffee production and exportation to the world market diminished greatly, putting strain on an already fragile regime. The nomination of paulista Júlio Prestes in 1929 effectively broke the *café com leite* alliance as the Mineiros (who disagreed with Prestes's proposed policy initiatives) decided to back Getúlio Vargas, a civilian leader from the state of Rio Grande do Sul running on an opposition ticket. As a result, the fractured political relationship between Brazil's two largest states broke down completely.² Vargas, ever politically astute, took advantage of the broken political climate and organized the civil unrest into a movement that became known as the "1930 Revolution" (a misnomer since it was much more a coup than a revolution). Marching into Rio de Janeiro with the support of the army, Vargas secured his power as the provisional president, much to the chagrin of São Paulo.³

In many respects, Vargas's revolution was a coalition of the disenfranchised elements of the old *café com leite* regime: political liberals and the rising working class. They rallied around a few common values, including a friendly outlook towards industrialization, the involvement of new sectors of Brazilian society in political life, and new social liberties and an increase of workers rights.⁴ To the many Brazilians that fit into these disenfranchised categories, Vargas was a veritable savior — one who could bring a new era of social justice to a population that had been stomped on by wealthy elites. These elements of society rallied around Vargas's provisional government and were a key pillar of his support during his entire administration.

Despite a high population of working-class Brazilians and potential political liberals, São Paulo was experiencing difficulty adjusting to the new power dynamic. To the proud Paulistas, Vargas was a foreigner — an outsider imposing his will on Brazil's most productive state. For his part, Vargas was aware that the heavier hand of federal government had the potential to further antagonize São Paulo and stoke the flames of their regionalism. Historian Thomas Skidmore notes, "The state and city of São Paulo had such a superiority complex toward the rest of Brazil that a movement in opposition to the federal government could gain many supporters who failed to agree on any principles except their passionate identification as Paulistas."⁵ As the early 1930s wore on, this regionalist zeal was further exacerbated by Vargas's reluctance to hold elections and relinquish his power as provisional president. Vargas's reticent posture eventually helped turn Paulista antagonism from fiery rhetoric to armed revolt.

The culmination of São Paulo's dissatisfaction later became known as the "Constitutionalist Revolution." Unhappy with their loss of political power after the collapse of the *café com leite* government and hoping to curtail Vargas's chokehold on national politics, Paulistas instigated the revolt, which quickly escalated into a full scale civil war. Military units stationed in São Paulo, numbering between 40,000 and 50,000, took up arms against Vargas's provisional government. São Paulo's factories were converted into munitions manufacturers, and the middle class rallied around the cause by donating money and mobilizing soldiers to fight 20 relatively indifferent to the cause.⁶ While the movement found great support within São Paulo itself, it failed to spark widespread rebellions in other parts of the country. Before the breakout of the revolt, the states of Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul were expected to join in the fight against Vargas.

2 Thomas Skidmore. *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change*, Oxford University Press, New York: NY, 1999, 106.

3 Michael Reid. *Brazil: The Troubled Rise of a Global Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2014, 78.

4 Lilia M. Schwarcz and Heloisa M. Starling. *Brasil: Uma Biografia*. São Paulo, SP: Companhia das Letras, 2015, 354.

5 Thomas Skidmore, *Politics in Brazil: 1930–1964: An Experiment in Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford U.P, 1969, 17.

6 Skidmore, *Politics*, 17.

Unfortunately for the constitutionalists, the support never fully materialized. Specifically, São Paulo's eagerness to get the "revolution" moving caused them to act before the other states had properly organized, and their movements were quickly stifled by pro-Vargas elements (mostly in the form of politicians from Vargas's own party) in their respective state governments.⁷ After nearly three months of intense warfare and the death of at least 600 Paulistas, São Paulo finally conceded defeat. Though the revolution was unsuccessful in its liberalizing vision, its violence prompted Vargas to extend an olive branch to the constitutionalists by committing to uphold his earlier promise of a constitutional convention and elections.⁸ As a means of pacifying political radicals in the region and ensuring support for his regime, Vargas also directed the Bank of Brazil to take over Paulista war bonds that were floated to finance the war effort.⁹ The Vargas regime had a two-pronged goal by assuming São Paulo's debt: to improve Paulista perception of the regime by an extension of goodwill and to consolidate the regime's power over the country's most productive state. By assuming São Paulo's debt, Vargas was signaling that the federal government was the true sovereign and that São Paulo was unable to survive on its own terms. In short, it was a display of federal power meant to curtail Paulista feelings of independence.

Despite the best efforts of the Vargas regime to rein in São Paulo's autarchic nature, the announcement of the new constitutional convention renewed Paulista ideas of exceptionalism and autonomy. Paulista intellectuals and philosophers turned to newspapers and periodicals in order to influence public opinion in favor of (and in some cases, against) the possibility of a confederate system, the implementation of which would provide São Paulo with a greater degree of independence. With their demographic enormity, São Paulo hoped that their delegates would be able to persuade the convention to call for a confederate system, guaranteeing São Paulo's exceptionalist ideal for itself and taking a swipe at the Vargas administration, which they saw as increasingly authoritarian.

With Brazil's largest metropolitan population within their reach, the clamoring voices of both prominent intellectuals and anonymous editorialists filled the pages of São Paulo newspapers. These voices were always aware of the disparity between São Paulo and the rest of Brazil, the source of "Paulista Exceptionalism." In one editorial, author Azevedo Amaral says, "O Sul trabalha, produz, enriquece, e atinge rapidamente um plano geral da civilização superior. O Norte permanece estacionário, com uma economia atrasado [sic] e em muitos casos rudimentar, é pobre . . . o progresso do Norte depende literalmente na prosperidade do Sul."¹⁰ As his article illustrates, the economic disparity between the largely rural, poor North and the more industrialized South-Southeast certainly was not lost on Paulistas in the 1930s. Contextually, it is important to note that São Paulo and the industrialized South saw themselves as the embodiment of Brazilian progress, while other regions (like the North-Northeast) were specifically excluded from this group. It was the South-Southeast alone that could act as the economic savior for Brazil; their industrial output and power in the world economy was the only way that Brazil, as a whole, could prosper. The North-Northeast (with a reputation for being poverty-stricken, illiterate, and unindustrialized) would naturally be excluded from the group capable of Brazil's "order and progress." The educated, industrialized, and wealthy South-Southeast was, in the eyes of the Paulistas, the only region with the strength to carry Brazil into future prosperity.

7 Skidmore, *Politics*, 18.

8 Reid, 78.

9 Skidmore, *Politics*, 19.

10 Azevedo Amaral, "Problema da unidade," *Diário de São Paulo* (São Paulo, SP), 1/11/1932, PP-01-10, Acervo Política Paulista, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, Universidade de São Paulo.

Not all intellectuals felt that socio-economic arguments alone could persuade the wider populace; other more creative writers turned to poetry in order to express their opinions. Martins Fontes, a paulista poet, penned a patriotic anthem to São Paulo called “Todas cantam sua terra”:

Paulista eu sou, há quatrocentos anos,
Immortal, indomável, infinta
Dos mortos de que venho resuscita
A alma dos Bandeirantes sobrehumanos . . .

Por ella sonha num perpetuo enlevo
E incapaz de servile-a quanto devo,
Quero ao menos amal-a quanto posso.¹¹

Fontes makes sure to emphasize his Paulista heritage, using the mythologized *bandeirantes* as an analogy for what he sees as the independent São Paulo spirit. His patriotism lies with his state and with his people, not with a more abstract national entity. These types of regionalist attitudes were increasingly common in São Paulo during this period in history.

While many prominent Paulista intellectuals voiced their opinions singularly, societies and advocacy groups also formed to disseminate persuasive prose in order to sway public opinion. One such organization called themselves the *Liga Confederacionista* (Confederation League). This Paulista “think tank” published a manifesto wherein they outlined their justification for a confederate system, though their vision of São Paulo as unique permeates the text. According to the Liga Confederacionista, “o melhor sistema de governo para o Brasil deve ser baseado no regime confederacionista, em que haja igual potência política de todos os Estados, sem, porém, haver diminuição dos mais ricos e adiantados.”¹² This caveat at the end of phrase is key to understanding the confederates’ attitudes. The Liga Confederacionista clearly understood São Paulo’s economic and demographic dominance, and they apparently see a federal system as burdensome to its potential. In the eyes of the Liga, São Paulo would be carrying the “dead weight” of the other Brazilian states. In addition, the Liga Confederacionista saw federalism as historically violent and unstable, saying that it is:

Responsável por tantas e sangrentas lutas políticas. E não é patriótico, depois de todos estes movimentos armados — índices de incalculáveis prejuízos morais e materiais — que se penserestabelecer as mesmas normas do governo, para cairmos nos mesmos erros, nas mesmas desilusões, e nas mesmas lutas. Quem deseja sinceramente um futuro de paz, de ordem e progresso para o Brasil não pode encomendar uma segunda edição da velha Carta Constitucional, ainda que melhora de num ou noutro ponto.¹³

11 José Martins Fontes, “Todas Cantam sua Terra . . .,” *Folha da Noite* (São Paulo, SP), 6/10/1933, PP-01-72, Acervo Política Paulista, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, Universidade de São Paulo.

12 “Liga Confederacionista”, PP-01-24, Acervo Política Paulista, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, Universidade de São Paulo.

13 Ibid.

To the *Confederacionistas*, federalism is more than a burdensome system of government for São Paulo — it is a historically demonstrable cycle of violence and meaningless reform that has inhibited Brazil’s ability to truly progress. By this time, Brazil was on its 2nd constitution, growing out of the constitutional monarchy of the Constitution of 1824 and embracing a nascent federal republic with the Constitution of 1891. The Liga has taken quite a bit of historical license in their interpretation of Brazilian history. Specifically, neither of these constitutions were preempted by especially bloody or violent conflicts (though occasional revolts were not unheard of), and the first republic was declared in a largely bloodless military coup. In the eyes of the confederacionistas, confederacy would alleviate the pressure on a historically weak federal government by decentralizing government and granting more autonomy to the states.

A final and interesting case study involves a back and forth discussion between two Paulista intellectuals, one who stood strongly for and another who stood against the confederate system. Their dialogue provides a valuable insight into other prominent attitudes in São Paulo during 1933, a tenuous time between the violent uprising in 1932 and the new constitution in 1934. Dr. Mario Pinto Serva (against confederation) and Dr. Agenor Machado (in favor of confederation) wrote a small series of articles and responses that illustrate how these two sides frame their respective debates and what arguments they employed.

In his opening article, Serva concedes that São Paulo’s rise to economic and cultural dominance was in large part dependent on its autonomy under the earlier constitution. “A própria autonomia,” Serva writes, “tal e qual como se acha definida na Constituição de 1891, satisfaz integralmente todos os aspirações do estado de São Paulo, conforme se constata pelo simples estudo de todo o nosso progresso e desenvolvimento nos 40 anos de República.”¹⁴ However, Serva also recognizes that a confederate system would effectively create twenty-one independent sovereign states, a potentially disorientating and confusing system. “Com a confederação cada uma ficava no caso soberana e só pactuaria com os outros vinte que bem entendesse. Quer isto dizer que o Brasil ficava transformado num sacco [sic] de gatos.”¹⁵ To Serva, this trade-off simply isn’t worth it. He sees Brazilian national unity as an absolute necessity, and not worth the potential “freedom” that may come from a confederate system. In other words, an economically and politically unified Brazil is the best way to assure future prosperity and progress.

As a direct response to this article, Dr. Agenor Machado submitted his own editorial to the same newspaper. As a member of the newly founded Liga Confederacionista, Machado took issue with Serva's characterization of a confederacy as a disorganized or unmanageable conglomerate of states. “O ilustrado publicista, por uma inadvertência pouco comum à sua arguta perspicácia, tomou o termo como um synonymo [sic] de uma sociedade de Nações, coisa que ninguém pensou ou falou.”¹⁶ This argument over definitions demonstrates that even amongst the intellectual elite there was no clear idea of what exactly “confederation” meant, or how that system of government would be applied in Brazil. This dichotomy also shows an interesting reaction to the failed constitutionalist revolt a year earlier; whereas some saw the failed revolt as evidence that centralized government was an inevitable conclusion, others saw it as proof that São Paulo had what it took to govern and manage themselves.

14 Mário Pinto Serva, “Confederação ou Federação?” *Folha da Noite*, (São Paulo, SP), 4/1/1933, PP-01-25, Acervo Política Paulista, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, Universidade de São Paulo.

15 Serva, “Confederação ou Federação?”, PP-01-25, Acervo Política Paulista, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, Universidade de São Paulo.

16 Agenor Machado, “Confederação ou Federação?,” *Folha da Noite*, (São Paulo, SP) 4/3/1933, PP-01-26, Acervo Política Paulista, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros, Universidade de São Paulo.

In a more impassioned part of the article, Dr. Machado uses historical evidence to make his case that federalism is inept and incapable of properly serving the needs of the diverse Brazilian states:

Vamos admitir, de barato, que a constituição de 1891 garanta a autonomia de São Paulo, o que não é verdade, como todo mundo sabe. Mas garantiu ela a de Pernambuco, quando foi invadido pelas tropas de General Dantas Barreto? Garantiu ela a da Bahia, quando a sua capital foi bombardeada? . . . de que valeu a Constituição quando o sr. Assis Brasil . . . executou uma guerra civil? . . . De que nos vale, pois, um tão famoso papel, se nós não compreendemos e nem temos a capacidade e a hombridade de cumprir dignamente seus conceitos? Onde está, agora, a fantasia?¹⁷

Dr. Machado uses a classical argument for decentralization here: the idea that each region implicitly understands its own needs and which solutions would best meet those needs. In this case, when conflict was at the doorstep of Pernambuco or Bahia, the state itself should have been able to assess and deal with the problem instead of waiting for a response from the federal government. Machado also takes advantage of these historical accounts to attack the constitution's institutional weakness. In his eyes, the Constitution is hardly followed and respected by the Brazilian government — why, then, should there be any problem with dispensing it and creating a new form of government? As Machado puts it when referring to revolution, “where is the fantasy”?

Despite the best efforts of the Confederacionistas, the 1934 Constitutional Convention convened and produced a constitution based purely around the ideals of federalism. Title 1 Article 1 states, “A Nação brasileira, constituída pela união perpétua e indissolúvel dos Estados, do Distrito Federal e dos Territórios em Estados Unidos do Brasil, mantém como forma de Governo, sob o regime representativo, a República federativa proclamada em 15 de novembro de 1889.”¹⁸

While the Paulistas and Confederacionistas did not get their way in the form of a confederate system in Brazil, their influence did extend to several other provisions that appeared to give more individual rights to Brazilians. The constitution specified that , “Não haverá privilégios, nem distinções, por motivo de nascimento, sexo, raça, profissões próprias ou dos pais, classe social, riqueza, crenças religiosas ou idéias políticas,” the first time such rights had been expressly given to Brazilians.¹⁹ The Constitution also outlined work-ers rights, such as the limit of an 8-hour workday and maternity leave rights.²⁰ While the Confederacionistas did not achieve their overall goal of autonomy for São Paulo, their persistent clamor for decentralization did result in more express rights given to Brazilians as a whole.

These victories were short lived, however. With his term as president coming to an end under the terms of the 1934 constitution, Getulio Vargas formulated a plan in order to retain his power. Under the pretense of the Plano Cohen, a supposed communist takeover of the federal government, Vargas initiated a self-coup and consolidated all executive power with himself. In reality, the Plano Cohen was a creation from within the Vargas government itself in order to maintain the status quo and solidify Vargas's role as a despot in Brazil. This new regime was called the Estado Novo, a dictatorship centered around the charismatic figure of Vargas. On the day of the self-coup, “the government issued a decree cancelling the election due in 1938, at which Vargas couldn't be a candidate, setting aside the 1934 constitution and proclaiming in its

17 Ibid.

18 “Brazilian Constitution of 1934.” Georgetown University, 2016. <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Brazil/bra-zil34.html>.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

place an unashamedly authoritarian [state.]”²¹ Whatever progress the Paulistas had hoped for relating to autonomy was summarily erased with the creation of the Estado Novo.

Though he was an authoritarian in every sense of the word, Vargas styled himself a “paternal protector” by perpetuating an image of compassion for the fragile Brazilian state after his takeover. In his 1938 New Year’s Address, given only two months after he took power, he said, “I judge myself obligated to transmit to the people my word of faith, so much more opportune and necessary if we consider the responsibilities arising out of the recently instituted regime, in which patriotism is measured by sacrifice and the rights of individuals have to be subordinate to the obligations to the nation.”²² Under the Estado Novo (which took many of its governing cues from European fascist regimes), nationalism and patriotism were lauded as celestial values, with any dissent against the government seen as traitorous. Vargas’s regime would come to be characterized by rapid centralized industrialization, the creation of extensive federal bureaucracy, and a populist ideology centered on the working class — ideals that Paulistas, in many ways, sought to avoid through the creation of the confederate system. The rise of Vargas destroyed any remaining hope that São Paulo would be able to operate or govern itself again as a quasi-independent state.

Clearly, the 1930s was a turbulent decade for Paulistas. The collapse of a government that had favored them, paired with the militaristic rise of an outsider who did everything in his power to curtail their influence, demoralized the confederate cause. For a time in the early 1930s, however, São Paulo was ready and willing to fight for their exceptionalist ideas, as their armed revolt and subsequent confederate campaign so clearly demonstrate. São Paulo continues to advertise its uniqueness among the Brazilian states, and has retrenched itself as the undisputed cultural and economic hub of the country. It could be said then that “Paulista Exceptionalism” never truly died — neither economic depression nor the dictatorial Vargas could kill it completely. In many ways it continues to exist today as São Paulo continues to spearhead Brazil’s journey into the future. Major international banks and corporations are almost always headquartered in São Paulo. It remains Brazil’s largest economic bloc and is still often referred to as the “heart” of Brazil. It has even retained some of its independent streak, functioning as a hotbed of opposition against the current ruling coalition. With its roots in elite power politics and with a country resting on its productivity in the future, São Paulo will continue to act as Brazil’s most essential and exceptional population.

21 Reid, 83.

22 *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Edited by Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti, Duke UP, Durham, 1999, 186.

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