

The Wall Came Down! Hope Returned!

Estevão C. de Rezende Martins

In 1989 Brazil was still undergoing a stage of account settling with its immediate past, of reestablishment of democratic practices. In fact, the military regime had imposed stringent authoritarian rules between 1964 and 1985. March 1985 witnessed the beginnings of a transition to democracy that would last until October 1988, when the new Federal Constitution, currently in force, was promulgated.

Many were the traumas that had to be overcome in the country. Twenty years of restrictions and of impositions, serious problems in the economy, runaway inflation (an average of 330% a year during the 1980 decade), painful memories of political persecutions and of armed conflicts, the need for reconstituting the bases of a political leeway, steep domestic and foreign indebtedness (on the order of 35% of the GDP in 1989).

In January 1989, another economic recovery plan – known as the *Plano Verão* – had been adopted by the government, amidst a myriad of negative numbers in the economy, in another effort to restrain inflation – but in vain.

Apprehension permeated Brazil's political restructuring, given that in 1989, after a 29-year political abstinence, society would elect the President of the Republic by direct vote. Public awareness was to a greater extent dominated by the theme of the unrelenting economic crisis and by the elections, than by the developments of the recent constitution or by the international context. Among these, there was the imperative of drafting or redrafting the constitutions of the country's states pursuant to the Federal one.

Politicians, academics, journalists, commentators and entrepreneurs had their attention steadfastly fixed on this domestic agenda. A political *première* was taking place in São Paulo: for the first time the Brazilian megalopolis begins to be run, on January 1st, by a mayoress elected by the PT (Workers' Party). Additionally,

another major city (Porto Alegre, capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul) also comes under the rule of the PT.

Thus, the Brazilian domestic scenario provides an intense and intensive program of interests and attentions. On the other hand, the international scene, as perceived by the country's public view, seems to be congealed within the traditional seesaw of the Cold War. George Bush Senior became President of the United States and pointed towards continuity of Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" policy. For a long time already, the South Atlantic wherein Brazil is situated exhibits a mostly favorable attitude with regard to the American protective shield, albeit some localized criticism. At the same time, one eagerly expects the Russian-American disarmament talks to advance beyond the merely rhetorical plan.

A number of signs that the international scenario was changing were little or poorly perceived: the fall of Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay, the leave-taking of the communists from the Hungarian government, the return of Solidadanorsc to political the scene in Poland, the soviet defeat in Afghanistan, the first direct election to the European Parliament, the street demonstrations in Eastern Germany.

In the sphere of political events, the prospect – of relatively little impact – of celebrating the centennial of the Republic on November 15th was overshadowed by the electoral campaign for the Presidency. The bicentennial of the French Revolution seemed to have mobilized public awareness to a greater extent, due to its symbolic importance and the strong international festivity-programming that France organized around it.

Press, radio and TV news gave priority to the coverage of the presidential election, given its unprecedented nature to the majority of Brazilians. The campaign also electrified public opinion, given that in its first round it comprised all the leading political figures of the time. In the run-off, it pitted a center-right candidate of the political, economic and cultural elite with a liberal and aggressive discourse against a left-wing candidate of labor lineage with a tolerably revolutionary-socialistic tainted discourse – to a certain extent already outmoded by global events at that stage.

Upon the disclosure of international news on the unexpected developments in Berlin, a part of the public opinion began to interest itself with regard to the new situation. Not many political leaders, but opinion-forming academics and journalists. The

tendency was towards the perception of a no-return trend, towards the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* started to become a part of the vocabulary of political commentators to define the renaissance of hope for getting out of deadlocks.

Without leaving domestic politics unheeded, these elucidated groups gradually began to pay more attention to what was taking place in the “democratic republics”, albeit without quite grasping its meaning. Indistinctly, one had a “*wind of change*” foreboding, of an epoch-making transformation, whose perception hovered imprecisely in the air with an undefined expectation, amorphous hope and a latent anxiety.

As of the recent repression of the demonstrators at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing on June 4th, the impression that the rigidity of the communist regimes had remained unaltered and that the absurdity of the situation would continue to persist permeated minds once more. The ‘reformer’ image of Deng Xiao Ping became irreparably dented. Considerations with regard to the domestic power confrontation within China, as a possible explanation factor of the harsh decisions taken by Beijing, appeared very superficially and sporadically within the scope of comments by pundits.

In May, the celebration of West Germany’s 40th anniversary had left an aftertaste of fraternal joy due to the friendship that had sprung up between Brazil and the revived German society. The recollections of the triumphal path of democracy in German redemption and of the social and economic effects of the social market economy were the object of unanimous applause. The successful partnerships between the Federal Republic of Germany and Brazil already as of the 1950 years were remembered and duly appreciated. On the other hand, the jubilee of Eastern Germany in September due to its formalism and ostentation, brought back to the minds of many, the coldness of ideological war, the political standstill, the monotony future expectations and the risk of confrontations. Nothing seemed more unshakeable than the ‘war of positions’.

On the eve of the first round of the Brazilian presidential elections of 1989 a sudden outburst of surprise and joy encompasses reality: the wall had come down! During outright ‘prime time’ of the television newscast, due to the difference in time zones, one watches a multitude of Berliner’s crossing over to the western side of the city.

A sensation of apprehension that this will not last and that repression shall reproduce something akin to what had taken place in Beijing still permeates the air for a couple of hours. When one ascertains that no intervention takes place, that one does not run the risk of a turnaround, commentaries explode: freedom won, democracy may be late but prevails, reconstruction is possible, a new world may be our tomorrow.

The parallelism with the wave of redemocratization that Brazil was undergoing is immediate. The circumstances of the political events experienced in Berlin and in Brazil become the issue for immediate discussion. In August 1961, twelve days subsequent to the construction of the Berlin wall, when the world was still aggrieved from the shock caused, Brazil undergoes a political trauma of great consequence. On August 25th, President Jânio Quadros, the last to be elected by direct popular vote prior to 1989, resigns from office plunging the country into a maelstrom of confusions, conflicts and both political and ideological confrontations. A physical wall does not materialize, but the political process unleashed at this moment inexorably leads to the symbolic walls that install themselves in April 1964, and which only begin to come down in 1985. The two last stages for the removal of the 'authoritarian debris' in Brazilian life were the 1987-88 National Constitution Convention and the presidential elections of 1989.

In 1989, Berlin, Germany and the world as well, ridded themselves of a greater trauma that has its beginning in 1961, albeit inserted within a perverse logic of confrontation, in practice since 1945. In the swell of commentaries and of attempts to understand what was taking place, some took advantage of the opportunity to recall a famous passage of a speech by Konrad Adenauer, federal Chancellor from 1949 to 1963, while still President of the Parliamentary Council at the beginning of the German recovery on promulgating the Basic Law of 1949: "*this is the happiest day for the Germans since 1933*". November 9th 1989 was, possibly, the second happiest day for Germany during the 20th century. The third might well have been October 3rd 1990, when Germans separated by the line of shame of the intra-German frontier could, at last, reunite.

During November and December of 1989, the most disseminated popular feeling within the Brazilian environment is one of solidarity and euphoria, "*we are all Berliners!*" – drawn

from the exclamation of President Kennedy, in 1961: “*Ich bin ein Berliner!*” – A kind of shout of emancipation at last achieved! Public and individual contentment is generalized. The political and economic world enthusiastically hails the collapse of one of the most painful stigmas in contemporary history.

The theoretical hope of four decades suddenly gives way to concrete hope, to a real possibility: Germany may come together to reinvent itself.

Brazil, its government and its society, sincerely and spontaneously vented their joy with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The impression one gets is that the cure of this politically and physically rankling sore on German, European and International territory came late, even if within a manner unexpected by both politicians and analysts. What a wonderful surprise for the Christmas that was drawing near! To this joy one must couple another one: the unprecedented mobilization in the Brazilian presidential election. Albeit in a different manner, the country was witnessing the downfall of social and political walls that had sprung up between Brazilians since 1964. It was lucky coincidence that such obstacles had given way to political common sense, social practice of democracy and the collective construction of well-being.

The sequence of events as of November 9th was accompanied with great interest. The path towards German reunification was seen as the real one for global reunification as well. And for Europe, whose redefinition was (and is) relevant both domestically and internationally. Brazil became quickly aware of this trump card and embraced the German cause with enthusiasm. However, only slowly did it become conscious that the task before the Germans was gigantic and costly - both socially and financially. Nonetheless, the Brazilian attitude remained optimistic and confident: if the Germans managed to overcome so many hurdles since 1945, they are confidently going to overcome new ones.

Thus, 1990 began under the sign of renewed hopes. From exacting hardships one extracts salutary teachings. By and large, public opinion lauded the victory of tolerance, of negotiations, of patience, of perseverance and of trust. One may assert that, since then, this apprenticeship proved to be beneficial for both Brazil and Germany.

Estevao Rezende Martins is Professor in the department of history at the University of Brasilia, Brazil