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Diplomacy as an Independent Variable*

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(Ricupero, Rubens. *A Diplomacia na Construção do Brasil: 1750-2016*. Rio de Janeiro: Versal Editores, 2017)

A few years ago, I was commissioned by a Dutch publisher to compose a short biography of Rubens Ricupero for an editorial project on former secretaries-general of international organizations (LOPES, 2015). This offered me the chance to interview this scholarly, polite, and sober character with an impressive career within both domestic and global bureaucracies. It is difficult not to be charmed by his personality. Therefore, like Homer's Ulysses, I confess I had to tie myself to the mast so as not to provide an overly celebratory appraisal of Ricupero's latest work – *A Diplomacia na Construção do Brasil: 1750-2016* (Diplomacy in the Building of Brazil: 1750-2016).

One book is never the same for two different commentators. Indeed, each person has their own reading. For the case in question – an extensive and dense book – there are numerous doubts one might raise and criticisms one could make. My reading is informed by my own concepts, prejudices, and mental dispositions – not to mention the theoretical framework I happen to mobilize. But there certainly are alternative ways of interpreting this piece of work, which amounts to a monumental effort to synthesize 266 years of Brazilian history into no more than 800 pages. Although a career diplomat who is avowedly passionate about Itamaraty (the shorthand for Brazil's Foreign Ministry), Ricupero (2017) does not repeat much of the dominant historical narrative about how Brazilian foreign policy was built. There are myriad passages where one might be surprised by the original stance he takes regarding Brazil's formation through

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diplomacy. Ricupero claims that he wrote 'A Diplomacia na Construção do Brasil' because he never found a book that would commit itself to developing his argument, that is, to think from a long-term perspective about the ways in which diplomatic activity has shaped the Brazilian nation-state.

It is interesting to note that Ricupero (2017) does not portray Brazil as a pacifist nation. The vocation for peace is not quintessential but the fruit of accurate calculation – or perhaps intuition – by the Baron of Rio Branco, widely regarded as the patron of Brazilian diplomacy, after the country had engaged in half a century of war and conflict in the Rio de la Plata Basin. Ricupero (2017) refers to Brazil as a case of 'knowledge-based diplomacy'. Given the lack of military capacity to impose its will by force, Brazil has sought to develop its historical, legal, and cartographic knowledge, in stark contrast to the United States of America – a nation fundamentally devoted to making war and trade. Another interesting passage brings the confession that in the 19th century Brazilians still cultivated a feeling of superiority in relation to their Spanish-speaking neighbors. As widely acknowledged by contemporary sources, some speeches delivered by respectable gentlemen of the Brazilian Empire adopted a majestic accent, while systematically belittling the 'imperfect republics' – simply called 'republiquetas' – of South America.

With regard to the formation of Brazil, Ricupero (2017) sheds light on a series of successful maneuvers, from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, that facilitated the territorial expansion of Brazil to close to its size today. Ricupero dialogues with Junia Furtado's body of work – she who a few years back published the award-winning book 'O Mapa que Inventou o Brasil' (The Map that Invented Brazil), which focuses on the very pivotal role played by the Treaty of Madrid (1750) in Brazilian and South American history (FURTADO, 2013). Ricupero shows, in interesting ways, how the silhouette of Brazil's national territory evolved over time. He posits that diplomats – who were the main negotiators on the Portuguese side – were of utmost importance, with Alexandre de Gusmão depicted as an almost heroic figure.

The dynamics of the early nineteenth century are particularly important in explaining the eventual course of Brazil's external affairs: the ups and downs of the delicate relationship with London, then the Napoleonic wars, which leads to the weakening of Portugal and Spain at a systemic level, and confrontations in the Rio de la Plata Basin at the regional level, let alone chronic domestic instability and crisis.

Ricupero (2017) sails through all of these topics, even attempting to draw connections between them whenever possible. Following his narrative, the elevation of Rio de Janeiro to the position of capital city of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarve, in 1815, had no practical effect whatsoever, as the kingdom continued to be ruled by the Lisbon courts. Independence from Portugal, in 1822, brought a host of challenges for an infant nation at the global periphery. Insertion into international trade networks was not simple. The recognition of Brazilian sovereignty over its own territory took time and resources. Brazilian diplomatic institutions were created at that time, under the auspices of José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva, Brazil's first foreign minister.

Noblemen who seized political posts in the Brazilian Empire are described by Ricupero (2017) in benevolent light. He quotes Oliveira Lima, saying, "it was possible to point out that dignity was a common trait [to all of them]" (RICUPERO, 2017, p. 225). By the time Brazil had become the most powerful nation in South America by the mid 20th century, the idea that Brazil's 19th-century foreign policy was run by visionary and virtuous agents was consolidated. Precisely on this point, though, I missed a discussion of more critical historiographical sources within Ricupero's all-encompassing narrative. Men such as Chancellor Paulino José Soares de Sousa (a.k.a. the Viscount of Uruguay), Honório Hermeto Carneiro Leão, Brazil's representative in the Rio de La Plata Basin (a.k.a. the Marquis of Paraná), and parliamentarian Eusébio de Queirós, were all linked to the interests of big farming (latifúndio) and slavery (NEEDELL, 2006). Although there would seem to be a strong oligarchic component in the history of 19th-century Brazilian foreign policy, lamentably this has never occurred to Rubens Ricupero.

Ricupero is one of the main experts on the Baron of Rio Branco's intellectual legacy. In *A Diplomacia na Construção do Brasil*, he grants the question of Acre a status similar to that of the annexation of Texas in the history of the United States. He praises Rio Branco's diplomatic savviness, in succeeding in completely redesigning Itamaraty in the early twentieth century. However, one of the persistent obstacles to the modernization of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry was the presence of the Viscount of Cabo Frio as secretary of state, serving as a diplomat from the early 1870s until his death in 1907. In a somewhat revealing passage (RICUPERO, 2017, p. 322), Ricupero affirms that Rio Branco had no vocation for politics and therefore would not be involved in 'internal struggles', as it could tarnish his domestic legitimacy. Once again, the

assumption that foreign policy is not exactly – nor should be taken as – a type of public policy is left unexamined.

Amid the political turmoil of the era, Brazil's República Velha (1889 to 1930) gives rise to innovations in foreign policy making: Campos Sales emerges as a pioneer of presidential diplomacy, with successes in both the economic (loan negotiations with the Rothschilds) and political (strengthening ties with Julio Rocca's Argentina) realms. Despite this, Ricupero (2017) treats the years after Rio Branco as an unremarkable and ignominious time, one in which amateurish diplomacy produced unimpressive results. A moment of fascination for foreign policy scholars is the early years of World War II (1939-1942). Dodging the conventional wisdom on Brazil's pendulum diplomacy, and the so-called 'pragmatic equidistance' put forth by Vargas (MOURA, 1980), Ricupero positions the Brazilian state under the umbrella of the United States. On the basis of empirical evidence, he is convinced that there is a degree of exaggeration in the classic narrative according to which Brazil flirted with the promises of Nazism. Vargas' double game was, instead, a diplomatic *trompe-l'oeil*.

In discussing Brazil's 'unrewarded alignment' under president Dutra, Ricupero (2017) proposes that there were good reasons that drove Brazil to bet on a strategic relationship with Washington after World War II. He recalls that Brazil's votes at the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS) tended to merely replicate the official U.S. position. Having joined the Instituto Rio Branco – Brazil's diplomatic academy – in 1958, the author narrates that Brazilian delegates who represented the country in multilateral forums at the time were openly instructed to follow their American counterparts in votes whenever the Brazilian national position was not already known.

In a different vein, Ricupero offers a rich discussion of Brazil's 'Independent Foreign Policy' [Política Externa Independente, which was put into effect from 1961 to 1964]. In one of the book's illuminating moments, he recounts a story in which minister San Tiago Dantas, after elaborating an ingenious plan to autonomously position Brazil at the Punta del Este Summit in 1961, managed to avoid phone calls from Prime Minister Tancredo Neves and President João Goulart. This allowed him to avoid make concessions to the United States, whose interests were being articulated by Lincoln Gordon, then America's ambassador to Brazil. Although barely documented previously, it is a believable account of the incident, which brings to the surface the central argument permeating Ricupero's entire book: that it might be possible, and perhaps

desirable, heuristically, to treat Itamaraty as an independent variable, not as a governmental agency bound to follow the chief of the Executive branch. This is a counterintuitive proposition for any reader aware of the Foreign Ministry's constitutional obligation to obey any presidential command.

Despite its current institutional dysfunction, Brazil has been the largest democracy in Latin America for three decades now, and finely showcases how a foreign ministry can sometimes respond to crises in ways that are hardly compatible with the president's ideology and political will. For that matter, a strong and disciplined bureaucracy can – and sometimes will – shield and preserve a so-called 'tradition' against the vicissitudes of ordinary politics, even if that occurs to the detriment of democratically mandated politicians. In some historical events, Brazil's Itamaraty has resisted presidential rule – as foreign minister Neves da Fontoura did in the early 1950s, when president Vargas attempted to build up Brazil's nuclear capabilities; or when foreign minister Araújo Castro refused to pull Itamaraty into the battlefield in 1963-1964, just before the military carried out a coup d'état. Even in the context of the Brazilian military dictatorship's solid alliance with António Salazar's Portugal, most diplomats objected and refused to advance any colonialist policies against Portuguese-speaking African countries from the 1970s onwards. That is to cite just a few notable examples.

The years under democracy since 1985 – known as Brazil's Nova República [New Republic] – have maintained a peculiar pace. Despite the differences in style and substance between presidents Collor de Mello and Cardoso, both embraced a liberal version of the 'presidential diplomacy' formula, unlike Franco, an introverted nationalist who took over after the 1992 presidential impeachment. Sarney – very much like Rouseff, and her successor Temer – was swallowed up by domestic events and never managed to develop a distinctive foreign policy. Lula da Silva, the most prominent of Brazilian presidential diplomats in the Nova República – a tropical version of France's Charles de Gaulle, according to Rubens Ricupero – left Brazilian diplomacy with an ambivalent legacy: the enhanced prestige and external projection the country achieved during Lula's tenure came at the cost of a degree of de-institutionalization (RICUPERO, 2010). All in all, Ricupero claims that 'Tancredo Neves' consensus' – the 1985 president-elect's expressed belief in Itamaraty's infallible nature – has dissolved, insofar as the

foreign ministry is no longer perceived as the final authority on foreign policy, nor should it claim to be the sole legitimate interpreter of Brazil's national interest.

In any event, the need remains for the South American giant to rise again. And diplomacy, it seems, does have a part to play in that process. Is the Brazilian foreign ministry ready for a new role as a political actor – one that does not necessarily involve the formulation of foreign policy? Is the 'knowledge-based diplomacy' practiced now by Brazilian statesmen in tune with the kind of wisdom that today's brave new world demands? Doesn't Brazil's historical commitment to Western values need to be revisited – and even revised? Is it not high time to integrate social participation to foreign policy decision-making in a more direct and meaningful way? Looking at this landmark in the interpretative historiography of Brazil's foreign policy, I see the work of Rubens Ricupero as paving the way for future reflections. After *A Diplomacia na Construção do Brasil*, discussions in the field of Brazilian diplomatic studies have certainly been renewed, and may never be the same again.

Revised by Matthew Richmond

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