

THE MULTICULTURAL CITY

By José de Souza Martins

José de Souza Martins connects the roots of São Paulo's transitive multiculturalism to the everyday experience of urban life for Paulistanos.

The city of São Paulo and its Metropolitan Region form without a doubt a multicultural whole. The list of cultural diversities that characterises them is extensive and complex, which is not only due to waves of foreign immigration since 1870, but is also a result of the diversity that characterised this immigration.

The most significant of them, the immigration of Italians, was not actually 'Italian' per se. Theirs did not constitute an influx of tens of thousands of immigrants coming from Italy proper. They came from a newly unified Italy, a new state and nation while they originated from many political realities, and hailed from regional cultures that formed the map of Italian diversity, unified by the *Risorgimento*. They arrived here speaking their regional dialects, bringing local customs and traditions with them. In some of São Paulo's neighbourhoods people still speak Portuguese with a Neapolitan, Calabrian, Venetian or Mantovian accent.

They became 'Italians' in Brazil, through their children who possibly went to Italian schools to learn their parent's native language. São Paulo became a city characterised by cultural duplications, where people would speak their mother tongue, whichever it was, at home, and speak Portuguese with a strong foreign accent on the streets. It is no coincidence, then, that the engineer Alexandre Marcondes Machado invented an ironic Italian-Paulistano dialect in his literary work, under the pseudonym Juó Bananere, and that his first book, *La Divina Incrência*, published in 1915 – a parody on Dante's *Divine Comedy* – imagined multiculturalism as confusion instead of an encounter.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Portuguese with a foreign accent mixed with foreign words has been the language of comedy in the work of different authors in São Paulo. This was not meant to be ironic about the immigrants, but to provide an external point of view that could highlight, in a critical way, the municipal and political absurdities of the city, which was being transformed through the influx of money from the coffee export: money that would be multiplied in the financial world, in industry and in trade. Money that also disrupted social relations, especially social differences, took away prejudices and in a short time inverted relations of dominance and power.

In his book, Bananere traces a portrait of intense sounds, of the daily mentality of the population of São Paulo in the 1920s and 1930s, their ways of recognising the city and living the contradictions of life. Immigrants had become Brazilians by the time they had grandchildren, in a process of slow cultural migration to the culture of the society they had adopted, which wasn't a strong culture either, but rather a patchwork of contributions from various sources, among them Italian regional cultures and foreign immigrants in general. The work of an Italian descendant – João Rubinato – illustrates this. He made a move in the opposite direction of Bananere, by adopting a Brazilian pseudonym: Adoniran Barbosa. His musical and popular compositions talk – also ironically – about the life of simple people and are written in a residual Brazilian language, mixed with traces of the Italian accent of the working-class neighbourhoods of São Paulo. Many people believe that this was a made-up language, like in Bananere's book. However, in reality Rubinato spoke exactly like that. When dealing with

matters of daily life in the city, as in ‘Saudosa Maloca’ and ‘Trem das Onze’, he transformed the accent into a disguised ironic language that tells of the small daily dramas of workers and drunks, just like himself.

This diversity had countless other important manifestations that showed a kind of recognition and respect for multiculturalism, which separated the new generations of children from the generation of their parents (which involved just one or two cultures). Such was the case with a successful radio programme in the 1940s, the *Escolinha* of Nhô Totico. Nhô Totico was the nickname of Vital Fernandes da Silva, who was born in the countryside near São Paulo from an Italian mother and a Brazilian father from Bahia. He had a multicultural background as he was born into and educated in a third culture, the *caipira* culture, which was formed by old descendants of Indians and whites. In his radio school, Nhô Totico performed all the voices of its different characters: the Brazilian professor, as well as the Italian, Spanish, Syrians, Portuguese and Japanese students. He transformed the diversity of origins, so characteristic of São Paulo at that time, into a pluralist panel unified by the school and by the Brazilian teacher, turning it into an invitation to overcome cultural differences through education.

Later in the 1950s, the vast and intense stream of immigrants from north-eastern Brazil, expelled by the crisis in sugarcane farming caused by episodes of drought, and attracted by the new industrialisation developed by the car industry, made the culture of São Paulo even more diverse. Not only by the way they spoke, but also because of their kitchen and customs, the *Nordestinos* from North-Eastern Brazil added to the São Paulo culture specific traces of their own. Like there are typically Italian, Spanish, Arab, German, Jewish, Eastern, Russian and Ukrainian neighbourhoods, there are also typically *Nordestino* neighbourhoods in São Paulo. In recent decades Latin American immigration has added new colours to the city, particularly through immigration of Bolivians. The culinary cultures of these various national groups, which can be experienced through the many restaurants that represent them, easily make any tourist and the city’s population recognise it as a multicultural city.

The same can be said regarding its religious diversity, with buildings of worship ranging from synagogues to mosques, from Protestant and Evangelical temples to a great diversity of Catholic churches organised around different devotions which are all expressions of cultural diversity. You can follow a Mass with Gregorian singing in the church of São Bento, or a popular Mass in the shrine of Santo Amaro, an Orthodox Mass in Vila Mariana, a Protestant worship in the city centre, a Muslim celebration on the Avenue of the State, a Jewish worship in one of the several synagogues, a session of the Pentecostal cult in a church in Vila Pompéia or in the *Baixada do Glicério*, a Protestant worship with the sound of *balalaicas* in a church of Russian immigrants in Vila Prudente, or even a Protestant worship in a Korean church from Luz.

However, São Paulo is multicultural not because it was historically open to diversity and tolerance. On the contrary, it carries the weight of two kinds of slavery in its history, together with the restrictions and prohibitions that all forms of slavery eventually resulted in. First, the indigenous slavery, which formally terminated in the early-eighteenth century, and subsequently black slavery, which was abolished in 1888. In a city with few slaves, one would anticipate slavery to end in several ways. However, it happened not as the result of a generous commitment to the idea of freedom and equality, but because slavery was an obstacle for a society hungry for cheap labour, which had already established a regular flow of immigrants and free workers that could fulfil its demands. In economic terms, slavery was a disadvantage.

Influences from those periods of slavery in the language remain in culinary and religious traditions and in other customs. There are even remnants of hybridisations from the time of indigenous slavery. *Saci Pererê* for instance is a mythical being of indigenous origin, which in its African version appears as a black boy with only one leg. As a regular appearance in stories as a naughty character, he still inhabits children’s imagination. His original name, *Saci Pererê*, is indigenous. He became a black character in the eighteenth century, when indigenous slavery was abolished and the flow of black slaves to São Paulo increased, especially to the sugar cane plantations

that flourished within the Capitania, the state of São Paulo.

Studies by Renato da Silva Queiroz show the Saci Pererê was a mythical figure related to limits and boundaries, and therefore he usually appears in fences. In the eighteenth century he had crossed the boundaries and passed on to the side of the new ubordinates, the black slaves, taking on their skin colour and identity while continuing to be an indigenous being in a society with social stratification, with more or less rigid boundaries between races, ethnicities and social groups. This cultural transgression of Saci Pererê was the first highly symbolic demonstration of adaptive multiculturalism in the region of São Paulo.

It is not strange that, at that time, the abbot of São Bento paid a black slave from his Order, a magician, to remove the *banzo* from his slaves. This means that a representative member of an emblematic Catholic order turned to voodism to have his slaves freed from curses and spells. This is a demonstration of diversity and multiculturalism that do not converge, as if society was composed of a structure of specific and distinct cultural layers, each with its own logic, values and reach. Multiculturalism was, and somehow still is, experienced as a way of life in which people move through different cultures daily, depending on the roles they play in a fragmented life of slow and difficult convergences. This is something that persists in practices such as the attendance at shrines of Umbanda, and some people's adhesion to Candomblé and to traditions of African and black religious orientation, while at the same time moving in entirely different cultural and religious circles.

It is in religion and religiosity, indeed, where we find the most relevant signs of original traditions' survival, which is a very typical Paulistano way of continuing to be what one once was, rather than ceasing to be what one is. That is what makes São Paulo peculiar and multicultural. Not because it accepts the cultural diversity of those who arrive in it without conflict, but mainly because it ensures each one of the living experience of diversity is allowed to be what it has always been, and at the same time embracing it as the novelty of the daily coexistence of similarities and innovations.

It is therefore not strange to find a Japanese descendant singing Italian tarantelas in a canteen in Bras, still an Italian neighbourhood, or a black man from Bexiga spilling his sins into a priest's ear in Calabrian during confession. Or to have a Frenchman, such as the sociologist Roger Bastide, who is of Protestant and Calvinist origins, dive into African cultures so deeply that one could say that being black is not based in colour of one's skin but on the structure of how one dreams. These are examples of how São Paulo's multiculturalism is, essentially, an invitation to continue to be what it always was, and to become someone new and different. It is a call for cultural creativity and for a free and constant move between different cultural standards.

In that sense, the multiculturalism of São Paulo and its surroundings can be better understood as a transitive multiculturalism, which makes it very different from other multicultural metropolises that are characterised by the collage of a certain diversity of cultures. In such cases, we are dealing with a multiculturalism of confinement, where diversity is accepted as an aggregation of cultural differences and not as a way of communication and transit between differences. With this, I am not saying that multiculturalism should be faced in terms of rigid forms of organisation of diversity, but as diversity that may be considered from two opposing cultural trends.

The transitive multiculturalism of São Paulo, despite its historical references tending to confinement, ended up being imposed by the complex need for a multicultural transit in a city that was re-created in an urban, architectural sense, and, in terms of its population, at least thrice in modern times: in the 1880s, 1910s and 1960s. These were culturally cataclysmic moments that added new characters to the scene and at the same time, cancelled out old conspiracies.

The rigidity of cultural traditions and customs softened to allow the new and reciprocal adaptation of the former residents and welcome the new residents. However, it would be wrong to say that Paulistanos are unconditionally open to multiculturalism. They are, in relation to aspects of everyday life, in areas where plurality is inevitable, not failing to recognise that this plurality of coexistence is largely responsible for the

breaking down of previous identities and the dilution of possible cultural resistance to change and adaptation. Simultaneously, they are not, when it comes to aspects of their private life, family and community, where they will take care for certain elements not to become mixed up in a pluralistic re-socialisation. As is the case of marriages in some of the cultures that persist in São Paulo, reasonably protected from the outside, especially when they involve rituals between young and old generations, such as Japanese and Korean. It has been typical, however, that the dilution of these obstructions that

happens with the passing of generations, which is what characterises the transitivity to which I refer, exists in a meaningful balance with maintaining the essential elements of the cultures of origin and a complete assimilation of what does not conflict with them or complements them.

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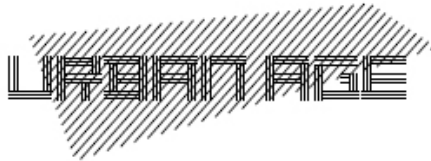
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