

§I The Marvelous City and the New Navy

With its granite mountains rising from the sea, its seemingly endless beaches, and its new landscaping, Rio de Janeiro had no rival in tropical splendor during the Belle Époque. Following the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the replacement of the increasingly inert imperial regime by a federal republic in 1889, Brazil's leaders sought to catch up with Argentina, even surpass it, as a candidate member of the comity of "civilized" nations. Around 1890, Rio had lost its position as the largest city in South America to Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital, and many Cariocas (inhabitants of Rio) admired the metropolis of the Rio de la Plata. General Emídio Dantas Barreto, who plays a role in the narrative below, wrote of the Argentine metropolis in 1906, "Its avenues of luxurious palaces and its monuments, gracefully conceived in every detail, spoke to us of the wealth, taste, and culture of this hardworking and daring people who realized the ideal of progress and civilization in Spanish America."¹

Other Cariocas imagined their city to be in fierce competition with Buenos Aires: the protagonist of a 1909 novel by Afonso Henriques Lima Barreto, the celebrated bohemian writer and social critic, summed up Cariocas' envy of the great city on the Rio de la Plata:

We were weary of our mediocrity, our lassitude. The vision of a clean, attractive, and elegant Buenos Aires provoked us and filled us with a mad desire to equal it. In this [emotion] there was a looming matter of national amour-propre and a dimwitted yearning not to allow foreigners, on returning [to their countries] to pour forth criticisms of our city and our civilization. We envied Buenos Aires moronically. [The argument ran:] "Argentina shouldn't outshine us; Rio de Janeiro couldn't remain just a coaling station, while Buenos Aires

was a genuine European capital: Why didn't *we* have broad avenues, carriage drives, formal-dress hotels, and gambling casinos?"²

Yet in many ways the Cariocas' aspirations were already being met through advances in sanitation, public works, architecture, and the stylish display of wealth. By 1910, Brazil's capital had become the "Marvelous City" celebrated in the Carnival march of that name.³ Dr. Oswaldo Cruz, a pioneer of preventive medicine for the tropics, had attacked bubonic plague in the city in the late 1890s, vastly reducing the number of cases by 1908, and eliminating the disease altogether in the following decade.⁴ More spectacularly, Cruz had virtually freed Rio from yellow fever during the mosquito eradication campaign of 1907. In 1909 he declared Rio to be free of that illness.

The more salubrious city would attract new inhabitants, and by 1910 it would have 870,000 residents,⁵ though Rio still trailed Buenos Aires. Although it might be said that the beautification of Brazil's capital dated from 1808, when the exiled Portuguese regent (the future João VI) commissioned the neoclassical Botanical Gardens, the city planners of the new Republic remade the face of the city. During the first years of the new century, Prefect Francisco Pereira Passos and his chief engineer Paulo de Frontin had overseen the redesign of the Brazilian metropolis, including the creation of its sinuous and sensuous Avenida Beira Mar (Seashore Drive). This thoroughfare connected the fashionable districts of Glória, Catete, Flamengo, and Botafogo to the commercial center of the capital, and the New Tunnel linked Copacabana to the established residential areas in 1906. Four years later, 615 licensed automobiles were cruising the city.

In the beachfront districts of Glória, Flamengo, and Botafogo, and soon in Copacabana too, *palacetes*, palatial multistory homes, were erected on the Beira-Mar in a style that might be called tropical gingerbread. They featured fanciful towers, arcades, and balconies fronting Guanabara Bay. The writer Lima Barreto even refers to a "Botafogo style" of *palacetes*, surrounded by iron fencing and featuring ornate plaster work and a veranda on the side.⁶ Art Nouveau motifs were frequent.

Official Rio was also showing a new face. When it opened its doors in 1909 Brazil's premier theater, the Teatro Municipal, inspired by the Paris Opera, offered an adaptation of nineteenth-century French eclecticism coupled with modern ventilation.⁷ The building displayed "a profusion of marble, velvet and gilding."⁸ It was Brazil's answer to the great opera

house of Buenos Aires, the Teatro Colón, which had opened a year earlier. The Teatro Municipal was situated on the Avenida Central, a motorway cutting a north-south line through the heart of downtown and stretching from today's Praça (square) de Mauá to the Praia (beach) de Santa Luzia, thus linking two distant points on the bay. City planner Frontin had purposely designed the Avenida Central to be thirty-three meters wide, so that its width would exceed that of the famed Avenida de Mayo in Buenos Aires by three meters.⁹

But the Teatro Municipal was hardly the only memorable state building erected on the Avenida Central in early years of the new century. Other notable institutions were the National Library, the National School of Fine Arts, and the Naval Club, inaugurated in May 1910 in the presence of President Nilo Peçanha. Designed by the Italian architect Tomasso Bezzi, the Club was richly appointed with marble columns and parquet floors. An official pamphlet describes it as constructed "in an eclectic style with elements of the Italian Renaissance," having "marine motifs" both inside and out.¹⁰ In the Green Salon one can still see a painting of Brazil's first great battleships, the *Minas Gerais* and *São Paulo*, moving at full steam.

Among the stately new commercial buildings erected, slate-covered turrets and bell-shaped domes, topped with spires, abounded, though "most of the Avenida's construction involved a Beaux-Arts façade grafted on to a plain, functional building . . . a Brazilian body with a French mask."¹¹ By 1909, the city also had ten movie theaters, all concentrated on and near the Avenida Central. Meanwhile, the construction of the cable car to the top of Sugarloaf Mountain, the most famous of the Rio's granite *morros*, had been initiated in 1908 and would be completed in 1912. Rio's new port—financed, like so many public works—by foreign loans, opened the city to expanded trade and travel in 1910. At that time, it was the fifteenth most important port in the world in terms of freight handled.¹²

Traversing the Avenida Central was the cultural heart of the capital city, the Rua do Ouvidor, built in the mid-eighteenth century, but recently spruced up by the new premises of the traditional Garnier and Lammert book stores. On the Ouvidor, the city's most fashionable street, men could be seen in top hats at midday, while upper-class women more sensibly carried parasols. Most of the leading newspaper offices were located on the Ouvidor or the Avenida Central—among them *Jornal de Comércio* (the most respected daily), *O País* (the unofficial mouthpiece of the government), *Correio da Manhã* (the leading opposition paper), *Jornal do Brasil*,

Diário do Rio de Janeiro, and *Diário de Notícias*. Ouvidor was also the most stylish street for Carnival activities. The modern Carnival had arisen in the early years of the new century, as the samba replaced the *entrudo* as the leading street dance of Carnival on the Ouvidor and elsewhere in the years around 1910.¹³ On an adjoining street, parallel to the Avenida Central, stood the city's best restaurant and tearoom, the Confeitaria Colombo, which survives to the present day. Laid out in Art Nouveau style, the Colombo had four floors appointed with countertops of Italian marble, eight three-by-six-meter mirrors set in jacarandá frames, and crystal chandeliers. An oval window of tiffany glass provided additional overhead light.

No one was more concerned with Rio de Janeiro's new glamour than the Brazilian foreign minister, the baron of Rio Branco, who was eager to display the city to the world. Rio Branco had hosted the third Pan-American Conference there in 1906,¹⁴ making Rio de Janeiro the first city in South America to sponsor the event, ahead of Buenos Aires. The Monroe Palace,¹⁵ a French eclectic extravaganza erected in 1904 to display Brazil's opulence and grandeur at the St. Louis World's Fair (Louisiana Purchase Exposition), was dismantled and reconstructed in Rio for the Pan-American Conference.¹⁶ It was placed at the south end of the Avenida Central, where an obelisk was also raised to commemorate the whole complex of new buildings and landscapes associated with the creation of the *avenida*. In 1908 the Brazilian government put Rio on view again at Brazil's first National Exposition, commemorating the centenary of the arrival of the Portuguese royal court from Europe, a twelve-year exile that, in effect, had initiated Brazilian independence. (That the Exposition of 1908 would upstage Argentina's centennial celebration by two years could not have escaped Rio Branco.) An array of gleaming-white palaces, whimsically eclectic in design, was erected by Brazil's major states for the occasion.¹⁷ Elsewhere, a pile similar to the Monroe Palace—also with imposing columns and slate dome—was raised for the Brussels World's Fair in 1910. The Argentinians meanwhile hosted their own international exposition in conjunction with their country's centenary of independence.

The *Povo*

Rio's new face could not mask an inconvenient reality: given that some very large share of the population of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil as a whole was nonwhite—perhaps half, though nobody knew for sure—and given

that many, perhaps most, politically aware Brazilians tended to believe nonwhite populations were innately incapable of achieving the same level of development as white ones, how could Brazil succeed against Argentina or any other country perceived as white? The most widely accepted “solution” was that Brazil should adopt European ideas about lifestyles and attract European settlers on a massive scale, as Argentina had, and that continued race mixture and displacement over time would result in a benign whitening effect. In the meantime, in Rio poor people could be pushed into the background in the newly Europeanized capital. The same pushing would occur in other cities as well.

To an anonymous British observer of the era, Brazil was a country of “illiterates and *doutores*” (doctors, that is, university graduates).¹⁸ In fact, in 1910 about three-quarters of the national population could not read. And though the rate of illiteracy was lower in the cities, behind the glittering new facade of Rio de Janeiro lay the city of the *povo* (the populace, lower classes), considerably more African in appearance, on the average, than the upper classes. As James Scott has noted about Brasília, officially inaugurated as Brazil’s capital in 1960, the planned city and the unplanned slums it spawned were symbiotic;¹⁹ such was the case of Rio before it. And the Marvelous City was not created without social cost. The urban planners of the early twentieth century wanted foreign visitors to see a predominantly Europeanized and prosperous Rio de Janeiro, an objective achieved by leveling tenements and slums near the center of the city, which such visitors were most likely to see. Just to build the Avenida Central and remodel the areas alongside it, 640 buildings, many of them tenement houses, were razed, and their lower-class inhabitants were forced to seek shelter elsewhere.²⁰

The Republican regime also introduced new measures of social control. A long-term process that began in 1889 and was virtually completed twenty years later was the suppression of *capoeira* (hooligan) gangs.²¹ The first chief of police under the republic, João Baptista Sampaio Ferraz, made this task a priority since former slaves, some of whom had only been freed in 1888, were drifting into the capital city in large numbers. By 1910, the problem of gangs was largely limited to roving street urchins.²² Furthermore, in Pereira Passos’ new urban order, beggars, vagrants, and prostitutes were to be kept out of public spaces.²³

The *povo* had rioted against compulsory smallpox vaccination in 1904, and in response, Justice Minister J. J. Seabra had ordered a broad sweep of the capital city.²⁴ “Jacobin” followers of Marshal Floriano Peixoto, led by a

former military officer and former governor of Pará, Lauro Sodré, tried to use the crowd to topple the government of President Rodrigues Alves and found support among cadets at the Military School at Praia Vermelha.²⁵ Almost a thousand people were arrested, half of whom were soon released. The rest were removed from Rio. Foreigners, labor activists, and people among the poorest sectors of the population were first detained at the Ilha das Cobras (Snake Island), under the jurisdiction of the navy. From there, Brazilian nationals were sent to the farthest reaches of the newly acquired Amazonian Territory of Acre, and noncitizens were deported.²⁶ The latter element, which constituted about 25 percent of the city's population, was considered to be a special problem, despite the fact that the largest group among them was the Portuguese, who were most easily assimilated.²⁷ Among the non-Brazilians were prostitutes of all classes, pimps, and labor agitators, especially anarchists, but socialists and communists as well.²⁸ In 1907 the Adolfo Gordo Law granted the state broader powers to rid itself of criminal and politically radical foreigners. In addition, roundups across the city to remove domestic and foreign undesirables were facilitated by repeated proclamations of a state of siege in 1904–5, and every year from 1909 through 1918, excepting only 1915–16.²⁹

Nor did the populace of the capital city have effective political rights. Only literate males age twenty-one and older could vote, and political enforcers linked to the government under the president's appointed prefect kept the turnout low. In the early years of the republic, as in the late empire, the police used their own *capoeiras* to break up the meetings of the opposition candidates and to intimidate their followers at the polls, a process simplified by the fact that votes were cast by open ballot.³⁰ Despite the much higher literacy rate in Rio than in the country as a whole, only 2.8 percent of the total population in the capital city was registered to vote in 1910. In the presidential election that year, less than 0.5 percent of the city's population actually cast valid ballots. Yet in the country as a whole, 2.7 percent cast such ballots—seven times as many as in Rio. Of the total number of registered voters, those who cast certified votes numbered only a little more than half the national average, raising the suspicion of massive fraud.³¹ “It can be said that the republic almost literally eliminated . . . the right of political participation through the vote” in the capital city, in the view of the historian Murilo de Carvalho.³² A contemporary witness, the French ambassador stated that four-fifths the voting stations in Rio were closed down by the police during the presidential elections of 1910.³³

An observer who frequently crossed the line between the elite and the *povo* was the journalist Paulo Barreto, better known by his pen name, João do Rio. The city's best-known *cronista* (chronicler of daily events and gossip columnist), João do Rio was also the city's leading *flâneur*. His *Enchanting Soul of the Streets*, published in 1908, brought together the writer's observations on the bizarre and remarkable inhabitants of the city.³⁴ They included professional prayer-chanters and mourners, street artists, *cordões* (predecessors of modern samba schools), street balladeers, whose moralistic tales in verse resembled those of today's *literatura do cordel*, occupants of flophouses, beggars learning their profession, prisoners, and tattoo artists. According to João do Rio, the majority of lower-class Cariocas were tattooed. The *cronista* mentions an astute sailor named Joaquim, who had a crucifix tattooed on his back to lessen the possibility that he would be whipped by his superiors.³⁵

The Political Elite

Upper-class Cariocas were not especially proud of the lower orders that João do Rio described, and they probably considered the people he wrote about weird and dangerous. The political elite, like the broader social elite from which it was derived, tended to be Caucasian in appearance, though the standards for "whiteness" were more relaxed as one moved along the coast north of the Federal District, containing the city of Rio de Janeiro. To be sure, it was not the case that persons with African forbears were excluded from middle and upper strata of Carioca society, so long as they spoke and wrote Portuguese correctly and had the appropriate manners and values. In the absence of a "white" reality, which Brazilians assumed Argentina enjoyed, Brazilian society was inclusionary of non-whites who accepted European (and especially French) values and symbols of civilization.

Despite their doubts about the extent to which their nation could claim European descent, middle- and upper-stratum Brazilians were eager to stake out a place for their country on the international scene. Although the political elite and the broader social elite felt sure of their right to rule those beneath them, they were less certain about the degree to which their nation cut a figure on the world stage. They were proud of the inventor Alberto Santos Dumont, who was arguably the first man to fly an airplane, based on his experiments in Paris in 1906. Brazilians were also proud of the

role that Senator Rui Barbosa, the country's leading legal mind, had played at the Second Hague Peace Conference in 1907. Though less well known, the fact that Brazil had won a gold medal at the International Hygiene Congress, also in 1907, reflected the impressive achievements in public health of Oswaldo Cruz. His research laboratory for tropical medicine at Manguinhos, a Rio suburb, would identify new diseases in the future.³⁶

Brazilians were also proud of their foreign policy achievements, especially under Foreign Minister José Maria da Silva Paranhos Jr., better known by his imperial title, the baron of Rio Branco. The scion of the viscount of Rio Branco, the prime minister who had begun the emancipation of slaves in 1871, the baron grew up in the most intimate circles of power-wielders in imperial Brazil. Born in Rio in 1845 but with roots in Bahia, he attended the empire's most prestigious secondary school, the Colégio Pedro II, named for Brazil's second emperor. The youth subsequently entered the law school at São Paulo, but graduated from Brazil's other college of law at Recife. Studying at both academies was a means of insuring that he would make the acquaintance of the majority of the political actors of his generation. After a short stint as a member of the Chamber of Deputies and still in his twenties, Rio Branco assisted his father in drawing up the peace treaty with Paraguay, which Brazil, together with Argentina and Uruguay, had defeated in South America's bloodiest nineteenth-century war, from 1864 to 1870. (Brazil had been the leading combatant among the three allies and occupied the conquered country.) The future baron became a full-time diplomat in 1876, taking a consular post in Liverpool. He distinguished himself in several European posts and was ennobled by the emperor in the dying days of the old regime. Despite his monarchist convictions, Rio Branco continued his diplomatic career during the republic, and served as ambassador to Berlin in 1900. President Rodrigues Alves appointed him minister of foreign relations in 1902.

On his way to the top post in the Foreign Ministry, Rio Branco had won important territorial awards from France in a region bordering French Guiana, and from Argentina in the Missões [Misiones] District, in negotiations arbitrated by then US president Grover Cleveland. Backed by Brazil's superior naval power, Rio Branco as foreign minister won the territory of Acre from landlocked Bolivia in 2003, following a revolt in the disputed territory by the Brazilian filibuster Plácido de Castro. It was Rio Branco who announced the enormously expensive naval rearmament program in 1904.³⁷