

Alfredo Bosi. *Brazil and the Dialectic of Colonization*. Translated by Robert Patrick Newcomb. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 392 p.

Alfredo Bosi. *Dialética da Colonização*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992. 404 p.

Some five years after Robert Newcomb's translation of *Brazil and the Dialectic of Colonization* (*Dialética da Colonização*) introduced readers of English to a seminal work of Brazilian literary and cultural criticism, Alfredo Bosi's essays continue to nourish debate about the conceptual and historical bonds that link literature, culture, colonialism, and post-coloniality. Although Newcomb's translation of the opening and longest chapter, "Colony, Cult, and Culture," was published in 2008 by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (edited and with a preface by Pedro Meira Monteiro), this publication of one of the best-known works by one of Brazil's most influential scholars offers cause for celebration as well as an opportunity to reassess the contribution of Bosi's *Dialética* to our understanding of Brazilian cultural history, more than twenty-five years after its original release. The scope of Bosi's critical project is enormous, ranging from the writings of José de Anchieta in the early colonial period to competing definitions of liberalism in the nineteenth century to contradictory invocations of the postmodern in the 1990s. Throughout, Newcomb ably captures the rhythm, tone, and emphasis of Bosi's prose, which can tend to the familiar prolixity of much Luso-Brazilian academic writing, rendering a text that is consistently readable as well as accurate in both substance and style. The volume contains ten essays accompanied by several sections of prefatory and supplemental remarks. Though mostly unified by a passionate concern about the interactions of politics, economics, and artistic creativity, which Pedro Meira Monteiro has termed a dialectic of resistance, the essays vary in their methodology from the literary-

critical to the historical, as Bosi systematically expands his subject matter to take in a broad collection of temporal and structural dimensions of Brazilian culture.

After the author's acknowledgements and a note written to accompany the UMass Dartmouth edition of the first essay, Bosi's study begins in earnest with "Colony, Cult, and Culture." In this chapter, Bosi exploits the shared etymological roots of these terms to develop a powerful analytical triad that informs the succeeding chapters by treating Brazilian history jointly in terms of (a) material relations and sociopolitical power, (b) inherited systems of values and understandings of history, especially within the context of early modern missionary Christianity, and (c) artistic and intellectual efforts to interpret the present and forge a collective project for the future. Although one may easily feel that Bosi overplays the importance of the common etymology that links his key terms, it is evident that this conceptual device allows the critic to illuminate the origins, features and, above all, the specific tensions that define significant texts and debates in Brazilian culture.

Throughout, the author is exercised by the question: to what extent do artistic and intellectual projects resist the colonial imperatives of political domination and economic exploitation (colony) and adapt the potentially inspiring or liberating legacies of tradition and religion (cult), in order to imagine and create a more egalitarian social future (culture)? The utility of Bosi's triad is clearest in the succeeding four chapters on early Brazilian writing, devoted respectively to the works of Anchieta, Gregório de Matos, Antônio Vieira, and André João Antonil (pseudonym of João Antônio Andreoni). In the plays and poetry of Anchieta, Bosi finds that the colonial divisions between the civilized and the barbaric, Christians and heathens, Us and Them, are replicated aesthetically. While the poet's lyric compositions are marked by "symbolism and an effusion of subjectivity," presupposing a reader who is the speaker's social peer, the missionary dramas written for the people display "a rigid, authoritarian, allegoric didacticism" (74). Similarly, though the critic detects in some of Gregório's religious poetry a mystical tendency "toward the dignifying of the individual in and of himself" (96), this attitude conflicts with and ultimately succumbs to the overpowering disdain expressed in the poet's other works. Bosi reads Gregório, the *fidalgo* in decline, as dishing out moral condemnation of those who contest his privileges – notably, the merchant class, Jews, blacks, and *mestiços* – and the rising mercantile system

that permits their social ascent. In Vieira, evidently one of his personal heroes, Bosi exposes the tragic inconsistencies that arise between sermons expressing a universalist theology that treats inequalities of rank and race as sinful inventions of humankind and others that capitulate to the slave economy by defending oppression, bondage, and servitude as a means of attaining salvation. And in Antonil's study of the Brazilian economy at the turn of the eighteenth century, Bosi finds the work of an Anti-Vieira, whose zealous pursuit of objectivity yields the perverse result of turning enslaved human agents into mere objects, while venerating the imagined suffering of sugarcane as though the commodity were a true subject of colonial history.

More varied in their concerns, the next four chapters address the political and aesthetic challenges of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Having moved past the period of the Jesuits and their rival interpreters of colonial Christianity, Bosi discerns a peculiar interpretation of European Romanticism in the myth-building Indianist novels of José de Alencar. For Bosi, in order to accommodate the historical facts of colonial domination of native peoples by Europeans and the Romantic impulse to symbolically exploit Amerindians as noble ancestors of the Brazilian nation, Alencar's fiction relied on a "sacrificial myth," according to which indigenous heroes and other subordinate characters earn their nobility by sacrificing themselves for the benefit of the colonizers. Departing from literary analysis, "Slavery between Two Liberalisms" offers a historical argument for the view that Brazilian liberalism passed through two phases in the nineteenth century. For the first generation of adherents, liberalism mattered chiefly for its application in the defense of property rights, while the succeeding generation would find in liberal thought and language a resource to be employed in defense other values, including individual freedoms, labor rights, and modernization. Bosi argues that this generational conflict, grounded in immediate material concerns, accounts for Brazilian liberals' contradictory attitudes and approaches to the central questions of slavery, the slave trade, and abolition. Having discussed these problematics, Bosi returns in the next chapter to the realm of creative expression to consider "another knot – not that which tied together liberalism and slavery, but rather liberalism and prejudice" (208). In an essay largely devoted to a detailed analysis of Castro Alves "Vozes d'África," Bosi rejects the view that lyrics such as this one

should be read as primarily voicing protest to the contemporary reality of slavery in Brazil. Instead, he develops a meticulous reading of the poem, showing how Castro Alves reached deep into myth, tradition, and religion to portray Africa and its peoples as enduring tragic suffering due to the unknown but unredeemable crimes of forgotten ancestors, wailing cries that do not reach an absent God. Here Newcomb offers us a new translation of “Vozes d’África” that is far superior to the version included in Amy Peterson’s collection of Castro Alves’s *Major Abolitionist Poems*. The chapter closes with remarks on Lima Barreto and Cruz e Sousa, whose brilliant works evince their disaffection with the Brazilian Republic and its neglect of Afro-Brazilians. “Both men extract a rare counterideological lucidity from their condition as poor and marginalized writers” (233), Bosi contends, who criticize abolition and the Republic for allowing “a process that was advancing in two directions. Without: the black man is an outcast from a cosmetically modern and Europeanized Brazil. Within: the same black man is forced into the nether regions of a sordid, brutish, national capitalism” (234). In the ninth chapter, Bosi once more turns from the literary to the historical to study the interventionist legacy of positivism in Brazilian politics, the successor to the conservative and liberal attitudes discussed in earlier chapters. Bosi argues that the success and endurance of this imported philosophy in Brazil’s twentieth century “is proved by its capacity to receive and adapt to itself powerful modern tendencies like leftist social reformism and rightist authoritarianism” (263).

In the final essay and the three concluding sections that follow it, Bosi steps away from close textual analysis and turns to theoretical and methodological reflections. Exposing the division separating the conditions of production and consumption of university and erudite culture from those of popular and commercial culture, Bosi poses the bridging of this distance as one of the central challenges to be addressed by a critically engaged artistic or intellectual community. A lengthy “Postscript” to the last essay, written some ten years after the text it accompanies, wrestles vividly with the notion of postmodernity, its conflicting senses of the ultramodern and the anti-modern, as Bosi decries the “mental and moral dispersion, decomposition, inconsistency, and anomie presently afflicting Brazil” in the 1990s (321). The final two sections recapitulate the major tenets of the volume’s analytical approach, chief among them the claim that “there is no

colonial condition without a weaving together of labors, of cults, of ideologies, and of cultures” (325), and synthesize the results: “The dialectic of colonization described in these pages is less a seesawing between nationalism and cosmopolitanism (which one also observes in European cultures) than it is a struggle between localistic ways of thinking, which reflect calculations made concerning the here-and-now, and projects that imagine the transformation of society using discourses developed elsewhere but supplemented with universal arguments” (329).

If the edition has a flaw, it is that Newcomb’s fine translation is not accompanied by a proper introduction by the author, editor, or translator (the Author’s Note to the North American Edition was written to attend the publication of the first essay only). Though the notes include useful comments by Newcomb among the author’s own observations and references, these concise inclusions provide limited help for readers who would benefit from mention of the debates in which Bosi’s work participates, especially considering that the author does not always address his adversaries directly. For instance, to appreciate Bosi’s recurrent interest in how authors and politicians make use of ‘imported’ ideas to achieve local aims, readers are well served by familiarity with the polemic surrounding Roberto Schwarz’s arguments about what he calls misplaced ideas, which include political liberalism and literary realism in pre-abolition Brazil. In particular, Bosi’s extensive argument for dividing nineteenth-century liberalism into two distinct forms is usefully understood as a rebuttal to Schwarz’s contention that the period’s slave-labor economy dictated that Brazilian liberalism would have to stand for quite illiberal social values. However, without a guide to throw Bosi’s argument into relief, readers may miss part of what makes it interesting. Elsewhere, when Bosi complains that literary studies had suffered decline and increasing irrelevance due to their neglect of the historicity of writing and reading, he again avoids contesting directly other theoretical or critical contributions. Readers must independently evaluate the author’s criticisms of Brazilian literary scholarship, though some might have profited from a recommendation to compare the work of Afrânio Coutinho, for instance, whose promotion of the New Criticism makes him a likely target of Bosi’s attack on “anti-historicist” analysis.

More generally, though, in the absence of a contextualizing presentation, readers may wonder whether the book should be read more productively as contemporary scholarship or as a landmark text whose age nevertheless now shows. While Bosi's discussion of race and racial inequality represents a substantial contribution to the critical reappraisal of the canonical texts he studies, by the standards of our current discourse he may be criticized for treating racism as a subsidiary issue to a more central problem of economic stratification and injustice. And although Bosi shows some interest in gender inequality, contemporary readers may be struck by the almost complete absence of women among the cultural producers to be studied or receive even passing mention in the book. Finally, despite his call for the cultural elite to engage more seriously with the diverse streams of popular culture in Brazil, one may read with some discomfort a condescending or paternalistic note in Bosi's description of the poor, rural, or peripheral agents who maintain and reinvent the forms that constitute the realm of the traditional.

Though the book includes several addenda in which Bosi clarifies his aims and restates a number of his central arguments, his project might have been better served by a comprehensive revision of the original text or by the inclusion of a supplement that would bring it into more direct dialogue with a broader range of scholarship. One might question whether Bosi's central distinction between cult and culture cuts too deeply, given his identification of cult with religion and tradition, while culture is understood as the domain of secular innovation. The diminishing role of the church and the growth of secular culture is of course a significant feature of modernity, but the persistence and evolution of religion in its many forms warn against simply dismissing or minimizing its practice as anachronistic. Perhaps Bosi relies too heavily on a narrow conception of religion in terms of its historical institutions, norms, and social structures, with little regard for the subjectivity of religious experience. Although Bosi thinks that universalist theologies have historically held emancipatory potential, this view stands in tension with his disparagement of religious experience and the poor, uneducated Brazilians who seek it:

The migrant who reaches the city or a foreign land is a mutilated, deprived being. Fabiano, the protagonist of Graciliano Ramos's novel *Vidas Secas* (Barren Lives), is not a mythological figure invented by the author. His conduct will oscillate between the most humiliated subservience and flashes of violence until, one day, his working conditions or the circumstances of his community or family allow for the reconstruction of that web of signs and practices known as "popular culture."

Every instance of relief or improvement will seem to him a product of fortune. And he will still almost always turn to cult, to religious faith of the type now found in the *seitas* (sects) – the collective term for the evangelical (normally Pentecostal and millenarian) churches that have proliferated in Brazil since the 1960s – as the weaver capable of spinning together the strands of his fate. (36-37)

From foundational works like William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* through recent contributions like Gordon Graham's *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion*, modern and contemporary philosophy provide a number of alternative means for thinking about the practical and phenomenological roles of concepts such as faith, worship, and the sacred and their possible application outside the confines of traditional religious organizations. But for Bosi, cult remains predominantly a semiotic system of social control and has little potential as a sphere of active, creative symbolic production for participants in religious practices and communities.

For all the analytical power that Bosi's approach musters, at times his readings might have benefited from theoretical resources that are now quite familiar. For instance, in his discussion of Antonil, Bosi marvels at the long passage that describes the agonies of sugar production – not from the perspective of the brutalized slaves who produced it, but from the point of view of the cane itself. For contemporary readers, it may in fact be difficult to read about the imagined anguish of the sugarcane without displacing the ostensible subject of the scene in favor of the enslaved people we know to have lived it. This might therefore have been an opportune moment to reflect on the Derridean observation that texts seem always to end up meaning something other than their producers intend or, if we incline to reception theory, to consider how much readers' social and material allegiances may influence our affective and cognitive formulation of the text's significance. The case is similar in the brief chapter on Alencar, where Bosi's preoccupation for the author's intentions leads him to find that "Alencar's intuition as a novelist outran his prejudices as an interpreter of our history" (157), instead of allowing that perhaps novels *always* outrun the intuitions, prejudices, convictions, and desires of their producers or that perhaps the attitudes and interests of the reader matter above all in interpretation. Though poststructuralism and reader-response theory were not in wide currency in Brazil when Bosi wrote most of the essays included here, such approaches are now so orthodox as to be noted in their absence and we can only guess what the author might have added to crucial

theoretical debates had he allowed himself to embrace a more dialectical mode of analysis in the more recent sections or in new introductory remarks.

Fortunately, readers seeking orientation can consult Monteiro's excellent preface to the UMass Dartmouth publication of *Colony, Cult, and Culture*, which offers a number of useful insights into the concerns that inform Bosi's dialectic of resistance. Given how rare it is for Brazilian monographs to be published in translation, readers of English are privileged to have access to this important book through Newcomb's superb work. Bosi's essays remain provocative and necessary reading for specialists and students of Brazilian culture.

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