

Translated Works

Dispatch from Brazil

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The Frankfurt Book Fair proclaims itself to be the largest book and media fair in the world. In October 2013, while celebrating its 65th anniversary, the fair boasted more than 7,500 exhibitors from over 110 countries, attracting more than a quarter of a million visitors, including an estimated 10,000 journalists. As a major event for the international media industry, it is no small honor that the 2013 fair chose to focus on Brazil in its opening ceremony with keynote presentations by the current president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, Ana Maria Machado, well-known contemporary author Luiz Ruffato, and Brazilian political dignitaries, namely, Brazil's Minister of Culture, Marta Suplicy, and Brazil's Vice-President, Michel Temer.

During the opening ceremony, in a gesture that angered many Brazilian politicians and journalists, Luiz Ruffato presented an unconventional speech, decrying many of Brazil's past and present social problems. The speech irritated Vice-President Temer, who afterwards responded by emphasizing the great positive strides Brazil has recently made in various areas of society. Ruffato's speech subsequently appeared in several Brazilian newspapers, including *Globo* and *Estado de São Paulo*, prompting a series of editorials by public intellectuals about the realities of contemporary Brazil and the construction of Brazil's image both domestically and abroad.

Critics may debate to what extent Ruffato exaggerates or mis-speaks in his depiction of Brazil's social reality, yet his speech sparked a rich debate not only about how Brazil sees itself but what Brazil's future may yet hold.

LUIZ RUFFATO'S SPEECH AT THE 2013 FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR

What does it mean to be a writer in a country located on the periphery of the world, a place where the term savage capitalism definitely is not a metaphor? For me, writing is commitment. I cannot renounce the fact that I live on the threshold of the twenty-first century, that I

write in Portuguese, that I live in a territory called Brazil. One speaks of globalization, but national borders have disappeared only for merchandise and not for the movements of people. To proclaim our singularity is a form of resisting the authoritarian attempt to level our differences.

The greatest challenge humans have faced throughout time has been exactly this: dealing with the self-other dichotomy. Our subjectivity may be confirmed by recognizing the other—it is alterity that grants us the feeling of existence—yet the other is also the one who can annihilate us. And if Humanity builds itself through this pendulum movement between aggregation and dispersion, the history of Brazil has been built almost exclusively through the explicit negation of the other, through violence and indifference.

We were born under the aegis of genocide. Of the four million indigenous peoples who existed in 1500, there remain today around 900,000, many of whom live in miserable conditions in settlements along highways or even in favelas in large cities. Our so-called Brazilian racial democracy is constantly heralded under the sign of national tolerance. It is the myth that there was no decimation but rather an assimilation of the original inhabitants. This euphemism, however, serves only to cover an indisputable fact: if our population is mixed race, this is due to the relationships between European men with indigenous or African women—that is to say that assimilation occurred through the rape of native and black women by white colonizers.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, five million black Africans were imprisoned and forcefully carried to Brazil. When in 1888 slavery was abolished, no efforts were made in the sense of providing decent living conditions for the former slaves. Thus, until today, 125 years later, the great majority of afro-descendants remain confined to the bottom of the social pyramid: they are rarely found among doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, executives, journalists, visual artists, filmmakers, and writers.

Invisible, held down by low salaries and deprived of the basic rights of citizenship: housing, transportation, leisure, education, and healthcare—the majority of Brazilians have always constituted a disposable piece of the machinery driving the economy. 75% of the national wealth lies in the hands of 10% of the white population. A mere 46,000 people own half the land of the entire country.

Historically accustomed to having only duties and never rights, we have succumbed to the strange sensation of non-belonging: in Brazil, what belongs to all belongs to no one.

Living with a terrible sensation of impunity, given that prisons only function for those who have money to pay for good lawyers, intolerance emerges. Abandoned in the bleakness of life on the margins, individuals who are denied the status of being human react to the other who denies them this status. Because we cannot see clearly the other, the other does not see us. And thus our hatreds build—our neighbor becomes the enemy.

The homicide rate in Brazil has reached 20 deaths per 100,000 people, which totals 37,000 homicides per year, a number three times greater than the world average. And those most exposed to the violence are not the rich, who are enclosed behind the high walls of private condominiums, protected by electric fences, private security guards, and electronic surveillance, but the poor confined to favelas and neighborhoods on the periphery, living at the mercy of drug traffickers and corrupt police officers.

Male chauvinists: we occupy the embarrassing seventh place among countries with the highest number of victims of domestic violence, with a total in the past decade of 45,000 murdered women. Cowards: in 2012 we accumulated more than 120,000 accusations of abuse towards children and adolescents. And it is known that regarding both women and children, these numbers are always underestimated.

Hypocrites: cases of intolerance towards sexual orientation reveal, exemplarily, our nature. The location of the most important gay parade in the world, which brings together more than three million participants, the Avenida Paulista in São Paulo, is the same place with the highest number of homophobic attacks in the city.

And here we touch a nerve: it is not a coincidence that the Brazilian prison population, around 550,000 people, is made up primarily by youths aged 18 to 35, poor, black, and with little education.

Over the course of our history, the education system has been one of the most efficient mechanisms in maintaining the abyss between rich and poor. We occupy one of the last positions among rankings that evaluate educational performance worldwide: around 9% of the population remains illiterate and 20% of the population is classified

as functionally illiterate—that is, one in three Brazilian adults do not have the capacity to read and interpret the most simple texts.

The perpetuation of ignorance as a tool for domination, which has been the defining characteristic of an elite that has remained in power until very recently, can be measured. The Brazilian publishing market is currently worth around 2.2 billion dollars, and 35% of this total represents purchases by the federal government on behalf of public libraries and schools. Nevertheless, we continue to read very little, on average less than four books per year, and in the entire country, for every 63,000 people, there is only one bookstore, which are primarily found in large cities.

But we have advanced.

The greatest victory of my generation has been the reestablishment of democracy during the past 28 years—a short period it is true, but this has been the most extensive period of the protection of rights in all of Brazil's history. With political and economic stability, we have continued to garner social victories since the end of the military dictatorship. Without question, the most significant of these accomplishments has been the express reduction of misery: an impressive number of 42 million people have climbed socially during the last decade. Also undeniable is the importance of implementing programs like Bolsa Familia, which provides cash to low-income families, or the establishment of racial quotas for enrollment in public universities.

Unfortunately, however, in spite of these efforts, the weight of our 500-year history of abuses is immense. We continue to be a country where housing, education, healthcare, culture, and leisure are not universal rights but the privileges of a few. Where the ability to come and go, at any time, cannot be freely exercised because of the absence of public security conditions. Where the minimum wage equals 300 dollars a month and exacerbates basic difficulties like the lack of adequate public transportation. Where respect for the environment is nonexistent. Where everyone has become accustomed to circumventing the law of the country.

We are a paradoxical country.

Brazil appears on the one hand as an exotic region, a place of paradisiacal beaches, Edenic forests, carnival, capoeira, and soccer; and on the other hand as a dreadful place of urban violence, child prostitution, disregard for basic human rights, and disdain for nature. Brazil is celebrated as one of the countries best prepared to assume

a leading role on the world stage with ample natural resources, agriculture, cattle production, and diversified industries with enormous potential for production and consumer growth. Yet it also seems destined to an eternal supporting role as a provider of raw materials and products fabricated with cheap manual labor because of incompetence at generating its own wealth.

We now represent the seventh largest economy in the world. And we remain in third place among the highest inequality among all nations.

I return, then, to the initial question: What does it mean to live in this region situated on the periphery of the world, to write in Portuguese for readers who are nearly non-existent, to fight every day in the midst of such adversities, to try and construct a sense of life?

I believe, perhaps naively, in the transforming power of literature. As the son of an illiterate washerwoman and a semi-illiterate popcorn vendor, having worked myself as a popcorn vendor, a store cashier, a sales clerk, a textile factory worker, a metalworker, a manager of a diner—my own destiny was altered through a fortuitous encounter with books. And if reading a book can change the course of a person's life, and given that society is composed of people, then literature can change society. In our day of exacerbated narcissism and the extreme cult of individualism, the person who is strange to us, who should awake in us both fascination and mutual recognition, is now more than ever seen as a threat to us. We have turned our backs on the other—whether immigrant, poor, black, indigenous, female, homosexual—as an attempt to preserve ourselves, forgetting that in doing so we are imploding our own conditions for existence. We have succumbed to solitude, to selfishness, and we have denied ourselves to ourselves. To counteract this, I write: I want to affect the reader, to change the reader, to transform the world. It is a utopic desire, I know, but I nourish myself on utopias. Because I believe that the final destiny of every human being should be only this: to achieve happiness on earth. Here and now.

