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## Walking on Sand

Politics, Coexistence and Land Conflict in Salvador  
(Bahia, Brazil, 1945–1949)

### ABSTRACT

In 1949, the occupation of land in Caminho da Areia, an industrial suburb of the capital of Bahia, illustrated the politics of coexistence, through which the common Bahian people were able to express their choices and attitudes. In becoming squatters, workers publicly emerged from their anonymous and everyday lives. They were instantly perceived as a relevant social group with the ability for collective action by the Communists, who sought to assist them, and also by the Bahian Governor, Otávio Mangabeira, who promised his palace would always be open for pleas from the poor. While the Governor failed to welcome the squatters' representatives, he managed to reinstate his paternalistic authority by granting the occupied land to the squatters and using his friends from the press to mediate the deal. The Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), however, which had backed the protests from the beginning, received a “pair of handcuffs” instead of a “pair of wedding rings” from the newly established Brazilian democracy, as Hélio da Costa so aptly described the situation.

Keywords: *squatters, communism, paternalism, Otávio Mangabeira, Brazil, Bahia*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Brazilian state of Bahia has been portrayed as an idealised land of happiness. It has been celebrated as a unique place, imagined as peaceful, colourful, vibrant, romantic and idyllic, like Walt Disney depicted it in his animated musical film *The three caballeros* (released in 1944). Prior to the Second World War, according to Omar Thomaz, Brazil had been generally considered a distinct place “of interethnic relations”, and particularly in Bahia, the “relationship between different ethnic and racial groups tended to produce culturally and racially mixed societies that initially contained antagonistic centres”. In

1 I would like to acknowledge Christian Wicke for his comments, corrections and criticisms, as well as the peer reviewers, who assisted me in reviewing the entire text.

the context of a planet fractured by inequalities, imperialism, genocide and segregation, Thomaz wrote, “the mere idea of overcoming conflicts [and differences] through relationships, and even through racial mixture, was like a breath of fresh air.”<sup>2</sup> Also the French photographer Pierre Verger, who had been used to always remain “a white among blacks” during his travels, regularly asserted that his “love of Bahia” was based on its exceptional “racial understanding”. In Bahia, Verger wrote, “one is never sure where black ends and white begins”.<sup>3</sup>

In 1949, the occupation of land in Caminho da Areia, an industrial suburb of the capital of Bahia, illustrated the politics of coexistence, through which the common Bahian people were able to express their choices and attitudes. The squatters then publicly emerged from their anonymous, invisible and everyday lives. They were instantly perceived as a significant social group with the ability for collective action by the Communists, who sought to assist them, and also by the Bahian Governor, Otávio Mangabeira, who promised his palace would always be open for pleas from the poor. While the Governor failed to welcome the squatters’ representatives, he managed to reinstate his paternalistic authority by granting the land to the squatters and using his friends from the press to mediate the deal. The Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), however, which had backed the protests from the beginning, received a “pair of handcuffs” instead of a “pair of wedding rings” from the newly established Brazilian democracy, as Hélio da Costa so aptly described the situation.<sup>4</sup>

Born in 1886 in the Bahian capital Salvador, Otávio Mangabeira made his name and Bahia known beyond his homeland. Mangabeira developed close ties with foreign countries during his term as foreign minister under President Washington Luís (1926–30) and also during two periods of political exile (1930–34; 1938–45), which were forced upon him for his opposition to authoritarian President Getúlio Vargas. Mangabeira’s career in the Brazilian legislature included two terms as federal congressman (1912–1926 and 1955–1959) and another one as member of the Senate (1959–1960). After the Second World War, Mangabeira was president of the National Democratic Union (*União Democrática Nacional* – udn), a liberal political party that stood in opposition to Vargas. From 1947, he governed as the first democratically elected governor of Bahia. During this term (1947–1951), the labour movement was increasingly repressed by the administration of

2 Omar Thomaz: Introduction, in: Gilberto Freyre: *Interpretação do Brasil*, São Paulo 2001, p. 9. Sources translated by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

3 Pierre Verger: Pierre Verger, in: Amanda Hopkinson: *Hidden View. Images of Bahia*, London, 1994, p. 93.

4 Hélio da Costa: *Em Busca da Memória: Organização no Local de Trabalho, Partido e Sindicato em São Paulo*, São Paulo 1995, p. 40.

President Dutra (1946–1951). In the meantime, Mangabeira developed a close affiliation with the poor and working classes.<sup>5</sup>

Mangabeira left his mark on the public memory in Bahia, where he has been characterised as a sensitive, progressive, democratic and reconciliatory man. He has been portrayed not only as “elegant, polite, with aristocratic manners” but also as “the most democratic of democrats”, and as a bright, sensible and liberal man who had welcomed the common people of Bahia at the governor’s *alcazar* (palace).<sup>6</sup> Despite the luxurious surroundings and the refined manners of their host, this was a “general public hearing”, where men and women,

[...] young and old, the ragged and barefoot filled the grand meeting room, turning it into the wailing yard. It was a wonder to see how he treated everyone with equal patience, tolerance and affection (over 400 people in a single afternoon!), giving each not only a word of encouragement and consolation but also taking steps to reduce their suffering, mitigate their hunger or restore their health.

In addition to these meetings with the poor,

[...] Mangabeira himself would visit the hospitals. He wanted a first-hand impression of the suffering of others, the poverty and pain that are always the close companions of the dispossessed. The institutions he most assiduously investigated were those for the tubercular and the mentally ill. At one of them he was moved by the suffering and malnutrition he saw; at another one, he was indignant about the pitiful state in which the mentally insane were found, and angrily observed: ‘there the patients do not die of insanity, they die of filth, mistreatment and hunger’.<sup>7</sup>

However, the focus of this article is not to praise the memory of an illustrious Bahian, a wise white man (despite the fact he was not that white). Based on the records of meetings between Mangabeira and the Bahians he received at Rio Branco Palace, this article will firstly analyse the public audiences that were arranged to manage citizens’ requests and solve their problems. The sources from the Otávio Mangabeira Archive and the political police files have shed light on the workers’ experience in the context of post-war politics in Brazil. Its title was drawn from the records of the land occupation on the outskirts of the city of Salvador, in Caminho da Areia, which translates as “Path of Sand” (it was later renamed Vila Rui Barbosa). This expression, “Path of Sand”, alludes to the homeless

5 Diário Carioca, 26 November 1948, Centro de Memória da Bahia (CMB), Arquivo Otávio Mangabeira (OM) 5987, Notas políticas, CMB, OM5702.

6 Jayme de Sá Menezes: *Vultos que Ficaram: Os Irmãos Mangabeira*, Salvador 2001, p. 208.

7 Ibid.

Bahians' struggle to get support from their governor and be able to maintain their space to live in the city.

## The Communist Party in Bahia

Under Vargas's *Estado Novo* (1937–1945), an authoritarian regime, the Bahian section of the PCB diverged from the Brazilian left for one simple reason: it was a rare example of a local branch of the party that had – with some success – gone underground to escape persistent repression.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, after the end of war and deposition of Vargas in October 1945, Brazil experienced a wave of political democratisation and the communists' platform of national union, counting on their Bahian party leaders, enjoyed social popularity. Their party line, following the principle of “national unity”, resolutely sought represent a broad political mass, defend society against rightist forces, protect law and public order, and support the democratic institutions (a universal suffrage elected a new parliament, being the Communists the fourth delegation, and promulgated a new constitution in 1946). Not by chance, the *Tribuna Popular*, a newspaper published in Rio de Janeiro, interviewed the Bahian communist Giocondo Dias, who said his comrades were “one of the factors that ensured order and peace in our state, which will be very important for ensuring the same atmosphere in the rest of Brazil.” Dias moreover stated he hoped that also political leaders like Mangabeira would reflect this atmosphere of trust in the “peaceful process of democratisation”.<sup>9</sup> The communists would hold the party line till they were outlawed by the same people, who they had guaranteed not to threaten with a revolution. To them democracy was the better environment to organise workers.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, Vargas's former governor Juracy Magalhães, who had turned against his previous political chief in 1937, returned to Bahia's political scene after the war. Next to the Bahian PCB, the Bahian section of the UDN, including both Mangabeira's and Magalhães's wings, thus gained considerable political weight. Mangabeira (UDN), Magalhães (UDN) and Carlos Marighella (PCB) – all three from Bahia – were elected to Brazil's Constituent Assembly in 1946.

On 17 January 1947, the PCB concluded the election campaign with a public rally, where its leader Marighella gave a speech. According to him, the party's support for Mangabeira was the result of a “public commitment”. Although Mangabeira could be seen as an “old” politician, Marighella argued, he was “progressing” and seemed “not

8 João Falcão: *O Partido Comunista que Eu Conheci: 20 Anos de Clandestinidade*, Salvador 2000, p. 121, 170.

9 *Tribuna Popular*, 8 June 1945, Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Aperj), DPS, D 885, p. 315.

10 See John French: *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo*. Chapel Hill 1992, chapters 4, 5.

afraid to appear alongside the communists.”<sup>11</sup> But the agreement reached between the communists and the pro-Mangabeira wing of the UDN did not settle the growing hostility from President Dutra (Social Democratic Party, PSD), who embraced anti-communism and rejected social struggles, including workers’ strikes. The communists were also increasingly frustrated by the marginalisation imposed on them and felt that their possibilities within the democratic system were exhausted, despite their repeated defence of peace and order.

On 7 January 1948, after their party had been banned by the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE), the communists were defeated in the House of Representatives: 169 congressmen (to 74) voted in favour of the termination of the mandates of city councilmen, congressmen and Senator Luís Carlos Prestes, who had then been the leading communist in Brazil. It was a significant day in the history of Brazil’s democracy and Congress. The seats of the deposed communists (in the Senate, Federal and State Congresses, as well as City Councils) provided fresh opportunities for several other politicians: once the Communist Party had been defenestrated (even though it had the fourth-largest representation in the 1946 Constituent Assembly), there was a voluminous political market niche to be filled.<sup>12</sup>

The following appeals across the country to the Brazilian authorities to lift the ban of the Communist Party were unsuccessful. On 25 August 1947, the director of the National Security Department of the Ministry of Justice wrote to the Political and Social Police Division in regard to the piles of “petitions, letters, telegrams and bulletins” that had been forwarded to him since the banning of the PCB. Due to their contents and origins, he found they would be of interest to the police, for the purpose of registering and identifying their authors. One petition, for example, reads as follows: “the men and women of Salvador, Bahia, in using their constitutional right, are protesting against the act of brutality perpetrated by police on the night of 22 August, while we were commemorating Brazil’s entry into the war.”<sup>13</sup>

The PCB’s attempts to organise meetings failed regularly because of the strict surveillance by the police. Their frustration was growing, also due to the defamation by the press, which accused them of planning the disturbance of public order. The *Diário de Notícias* wrote that “the Bahian reds [were] slyly organising a demonstration against hunger” for 25 August 1947, which was also the *Dia do Soldado* (Soldier’s Day). Any communist meeting should be repressed as Mangabeira’s police had discovered “terror-

11 Tribuna, 10 January 1947, 18 January 1947, Aperj, fundo DPS, D 885, p. 299, 300.

12 Adriano Duarte/Paulo Fontes: O Populismo Visto da Periferia: Adhemarismo e Janismo nos Bairros da Mooca e São Miguel Paulista, 1947–1953, in: Cadernos AEL 11:20/21 (2004), pp. 87–122.

13 Ofício, 25 August 1947. Memorial, 25 August 1947, Aperj, PPRJ, Geral, 26 K, p. 2282, 2315.

ist plans' [...] directed against the Armed Forces on Soldier's Day."<sup>14</sup> According to the newspaper, a group of communist provocateurs were intending to take over a central square and gather in front of Mangabeira's palace. "By using all possible means", the paper assured that the police would not allow the agitators to disturb the peaceful life of the Bahian people. It stated, moreover, that the PCB's fundamental problem was the public perception of Mangabeira: the Bahians had realised that the only government that "took real interest in the problems of poverty and paid great attention to the poor, helping those most in need for official aid, that government was Mr. [Mangabeira's]." The *Diário* referred to numerous government measures that he had been taken for that reason, including the "donation land to the squatters" (in an area known as Corta-Braço), although they had supposedly been "duped" by the communists. All initiatives had been decisively "in favour of the poor". Furthermore, the paper reassured that Mangabeira had provided solutions to anyone who came with petitions to the "highly popular public meetings".<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the communists and the *Associação Geral dos Trabalhadores* (General Workers' Association – AGT) did not give up their plan to assemble a crowd and enter the palace in order to deliver a petition to the governor. The newspaper *A Cidade* then reminded its readers of Mangabeira's declaration that he would keep "the doors of the palace open to the people and listen to their complaints." *A Cidade* argued that the entrance of the palace had instead turned into a "doorstep of disappointment" and was "only open to those who were deluded by UDN demagoguery." The paper complained that for conscientious, enlightened and diligent workers, these doors had been always closed and were "strictly guarded by the Bahian *Gestapo*".<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, on 26 August 1949, the state police force was in control of the city, under the command of the Public Order State Secretary, seeking to combat leftist agitation. The Military Police Cavalry and the political police stood guard at the cathedral. Jeeps carried Special Police "goon squads", and the patrols kept a sharp eye on the comings and goings of passersby.<sup>17</sup> In the early morning, the president of the AGT, Elson de Araújo, was arrested at a bakery. The AGT delegation, which subsequently managed to enter Rio Branco Palace, was not able to meet Mangabeira, as they were told that the

14 *Diário de Notícias*, 25 August 1949, *Aperj*, Fundo DPS, D 885, p. 178.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *A Cidade*, 10/9/49. *Aperj*, DPS, D 885, fls. 143.

17 "Needing clear police unity," Robert Rose wrote, "Getúlio ordered João Alberto to organise a new and frankly vigorous group solely for that purpose." That was the cue for the creation of the brutal Special Police, a division of the Civil Police. Known as "tomato-heads"; they were based at their fearsome headquarters in Rio, on Santo Antônio Hill. See: Robert Rose: *Uma das Coisas Esquecidas*, São Paulo 2001, p. 46.

governor had left the house.<sup>18</sup> In the afternoon, PCB Councilman Florisvaldo Viana escaped from the hands of the police, receiving popular support for his flight.

## Hailed by Spin Doctors

“This will be an open-door government,” Otávio Mangabeira announced before taking over the governor’s seat. After dealing with government business in the mornings, he promised the afternoons would be free for conversations on “[...] political matters and meetings with anyone who wants to speak with the governor about any subject.”<sup>19</sup> Unlike Vargas’s former appointees, who were seen as authoritarian usurpers incapable of ending Bahia’s problems,<sup>20</sup> Mangabeira was portrayed by the press as a truthful and productive leader, a man capable of tactful conciliation. Through him, it was believed, Bahia would recover its central role in Brazilian society.

Once in office, Mangabeira made an effort to establish closer ties between his party, the UDN, and President Dutra’s PSD. According to the *Time* magazine, Mangabeira was the most important politician in the country by the time he landed in Rio to see President Dutra in November 1947. After several meetings with military chiefs, party leaders and government ministers in the backrooms of the Central Hotel, the factious quarrels in Congress were played down to launch a concerted policy to cure Brazil’s economic woes.<sup>21</sup> Part of the deal was that Bahia would receive a significant influx of money from the Federal Treasure. After returning from closed-door meetings in Rio to his mansion in Salvador, the *Diário* applauded and continued to praise his public audience as:

[...] a brilliant example of democracy [...] where Mr. Otávio Mangabeira, putting into practice the ideas and principles he has always upheld and proclaimed, established the closest possible connection between the people and the government, thereby eliminating the intermediaries between the government and the people.<sup>22</sup>

18 A Cidade, 10 September 1949, Aperj, Fundo DPS, D 885, p. 143.

19 Diretrizes, 31 March 1947, CMB, OM5880.

20 Juracy Magalhães (1931–1937), Antônio Fernandes Dantas (1937–1938) and Landulfo Alves (1938–1942) were appointed governors (*interventores*) imposed to Bahia. Whether due to the censure of the locals or the fact that Bahia housed enduring groups of Vargas’s political enemies, Otávio Mangabeira supposedly embodied native authenticity, liberalism and the promise of prosperity.

21 *Time*, 24 November 1947, CMB, OM5918.

22 *Diário de Notícias*, 8 November 1948, CMB, OM5949.

While the liberals rejected his political style as populist, because the absence of representatives between the people and the government implied to them the political parties' and institutions' abdication from power, the the *Diário* hailed Mangabeira as a hero:

[...] there is no one in Bahia, not even a beggar, who cannot talk to the current governor in person if he wishes to do so. There is no fair proposal or just claim or deferred right in the administrative sphere of the state or counties that cannot be brought to the knowledge of Bahia's first magistrate [...]. This is the closest and soundest possible form of contact in Brazil between the governed and [the governing].<sup>23</sup>

Mangabeira was presented as an effective leader in creating social peace. Under his government, "party struggles" would not trespass "the borders of Bahian territory", Congressman Nelson Carneiro guaranteed during Salvador's 400th anniversary celebrations. The governor would welcome "everyone, rich and poor, day and night."<sup>24</sup> Unlike his opponent, Vargas, who is still said to be the Machiavellian master of the zigzag between demagogic populism for the poor and paternal indulgence of the rich, Mangabeira has been described as someone with no intention of manipulating the needy but as genuinely protective. His achievements in the field of public health and assistance for the poor were frequently reported in the press, which presented him as the "President of the Institute of the Deprived" who, in contrast to Vargas, had ensured that labour and social security laws were enforced.

It seems that Mangabeira restored social policy and reaffirmed liberal ideas in creating a personal atmosphere between different parties, but little is actually known about the history of the common people who came to the public meetings at Rio Branco Palace to see their governor. The *Folha Carioca* reported that he met with approximately 300 people during each session. Irrespective of this great number of visitors, the newspaper repeated that it would have been no problem for anyone to have a brief conversation with Mangabeira "in a cordial atmosphere that is never disturbed."<sup>25</sup>

Once in October 1948, however, there was one person in the long line who stood out: *A Tarde*, according to which there were still "some disbelievers, informed by their experiences during the previous regimes", reported:

[It was 4 p. m.] when suddenly a black woman of medium height appeared, wearing blue, with a rose in her blouse. She went up to the governor and introduced herself: 'I am Queen Maria de Orleans e Bragança. I want to live in Brazil and I have come to occupy the Palace. I will be sending over my furniture at any moment.' Mr. Otávio

23 *Diário de Notícias*, 8 November 1948, CMB, OM5949.

24 *Jornal do Brasil*, 16 September 1948, CMB, OM5967.

25 *Folha Carioca*, 2 July 1949, CMB, OM6008.



Mangabeira understood what was going on and smiled pleasantly. Knowing that he shouldn't argue with the poor woman, who was obviously unhinged, he replied: 'You're most welcome.' The 'noble lady' then asked: 'Haven't you received a message from my minister? How careless!' And the governor replied: 'As you know, these things take time to arrive.'<sup>26</sup>

## Sand and Swamp on the Path of Post-War Bahia

In Bahia, Governor Mangabeira was not alone in practicing the political art of conciliation. It was no easy task to find a balanced solution for difficult living conditions caused by low wages and a housing deficit in Salvador. *The People of Bahia Can't Find Housing* was the headline of an investigative report published in Bahia's communist newspaper *O Momento*, according to which the general situation was desperate and overcrowded buildings were crumbling, despite the high rents.<sup>27</sup>

In 1947, when President Dutra paid Bahia an official visit, PCB activists criticised a number of other problems caused by poverty. "Your Excellency can be sure that, for many of us, miserable poverty, hunger, disease and lack of housing are part of our daily life", stated a circulating petition.<sup>28</sup> The petition referred to statistics showing that every five hours someone in Bahia died of tuberculosis. By comparing the workers' average daily wages to the cost of living, including food staples, like meat, milk and bread, the document concluded that the Bahian people lacked the basic necessities, particularly appropriate housing. Its signatories moreover complained about public services: "the dreadful transport, light and telephone services are a torment for us." They also mentioned the common fear of the "spectre of unemployment" and the growing beggary, especially around the textile mills and tanneries that had been crushed by the credit restrictions of the federal economic policy. Furthermore, the petition appealed to the president to respect the constitution, which had been "violated" by repressing labour unions and the PCB as well as by the despotic behaviour of the police and attacks on the freedom of the press, including the "assault" on *O Momento*.

In contrast to the PCB's "peace and order" principle after 1945, which was effectively abandoned in 1947 with the proscription of the PCB, the communists were prepared to move away from their peaceful disposition towards the liberal forces, when the police was informed in 1949 that a terrain in Caminho da Areia had been "occupied by workers".<sup>29</sup> It must also be stressed that the new residents – the squatters – would have preferred to resist their eviction, instead of being homeless. However, any leftist contestation of

26 A Tarde, 8 October 1948.

27 O Momento, 7 May 1945.

28 Petition, 10 June 1947. Aperj, PPRJ, Geral, 26 K, p. 2320, 2321.

29 Report, 21 October 1949, Aperj, DPS, D 885, p. 94.

authority at that time, would not be an easy endeavour, since democracy and anti-communism were often believed to be “the same difference”. Even though the state government was concerned with keeping its promises of aiding the poor, it was reluctant to trespass the “sacred” line of private property rights.<sup>30</sup>

The public settlement policies for Alagados (Swamps), located at Salvador’s Itapagipe Peninsula, date back to 1943, when the Department of Urban Planning categorised it as an industrial suburb. For the people who had already found shelter there, despite its distance to the inner city and the extremely precarious infrastructure, it was not entirely disadvantageous to live there: not only did the local factories offer employment, but also the nearby districts of Plataforma (a hub for textile industry since the late nineteenth century) and Lobato (where the first Brazilian petroleum was extracted in 1939) attracted workers from Alagados and other areas.

Alagados was not just a centre of territorial dispute; it was the political battleground for the worker and union leader João dos Passos. In 1919, his father brought him from Ilha de Maré (an island in Todos os Santos Bay) to Salvador in order to take an apprenticeship as a blacksmith at the shipyards of the Companhia de Navegação Baiana’s in Itapagipe. By the 1940s, Passos had become one of the top communist leaders in the Bahian labour movement and a leading activist in the Union of Tramways, Telephone, Power and Light Professionals (and later also of the Metalworkers’ Union). Furthermore, Itapagipe was the territory of Sister Dulce, a Catholic nun, who was often called the “Angel of Alagados”. Since 1935, she had been a staunch defender and helper of the afflicted and workers. In 1936, she founded the São Francisco Workers’ Union, which was reorganised as the Bahia Workers’ Circle in the following year.<sup>31</sup>

Police investigator “JBA-19” – a secret code that concealed his real name – reported on 21 October 1949 that the land occupied by the new residents of Caminho da Areia belonged to a private bank and some private individuals and that “the owners” had unsuccessfully “struggled to evict” the squatters, who the Communists had tried to assist in “avoiding the inevitable”.<sup>32</sup> Less than three weeks later, it was reported that the usual enemies – the communists – “did not let up for a single day.” Honoured by assurances and visits from revolutionaries and journalists, the squatters were “encouraged to resist the government and the police.” Their struggle represented not only a local problem, they were told, but one of the whole Brazilian society. In fact, at that time PCB members

30 For an interesting parallel see: Brodwyn Fischer: *The red menace reconsidered: a forgotten History of Communist mobilization in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, 1945–1964*, in: *Hispanic American Historical Review* 94:1 (2014), pp. 1–33.

31 “O Anjo Bom do Brasil”, republished by Obras Sociais Irmã Dulce, at: <http://www.irma-dulce.org.br/anjobom/vida.php> (accessed on 24 April 2008).

32 Report, 21 October 1949. Aperj, DPS, D 885, p. 94.

from several Brazilian states did visit Caminho da Areia, which was therefore renamed Vila Rui Barbosa.<sup>33</sup>

The political police informant, JBA-19, supposed that, since approximately 100 shacks had been built in the shantytown, the communists were expecting that the dweller's perseverance would ultimately demoralise the police. According to the agent, the communists, "almost certain that the government would capitulate", were also planning to provoke police violence in order to convince Mangabeira that he should expropriate the land. The investigator warned of the growing rebellious energy the Vila Rui Barbosa was generating to defeat its "real owners". If these "communist workers" were "victorious in their direct action against the government, they would continue occupying other people's property" and invite "representatives of all Brazilian states to come and see in person how communist methods can be successfully applied."<sup>34</sup>

In the meantime the settlement was growing. The impoverished but hardworking residents, were quick and creative in recycling materials to solve their housing problems: even in the marshlands of the area, they managed to erect houses on stilts. It was obvious that the squatters were primarily occupied with the organisation of the bare necessities of life, and had little time to organise politically. In 1997, then in her eighties, Diva Machado remembered how she built her first *palafitte* on the marshes: "I took the roof over in a canoe. At first, I remember lining the floor with newspaper to make a bed, and I also used it as a sheet."<sup>35</sup>

The police informant, however, failed to distinguish between squatters and PCB activists, and called for repressive state intervention. JBA-19 reported that the PCB was planning a campaign for Christmas bonuses and the AGT about to carry it out; that PCB and AGT had criticised Dutra and Mangabeira for their alliance between the state and federal governments; the communists in Salvador were organising rallies to protest against the repressive laws of the national security doctrine; and that the AGT was encouraging workers to demand further benefits and the rise of inflation. JBA-19 saw in Vila Rui Barbosa the centre of "red agitation" and recommended that "its operations should be suspended."<sup>36</sup>

On a Thursday, the day when Mangabeira held his public meetings, the residents of Vila came to the city centre to see Simões Filho, the owner of the local newspaper *A Tarde*. Although Filho was hosting friends and colleagues in his private office, he welcomed them and listened to their request.<sup>37</sup> On behalf of the crowd of squatters, who were gathering at the entrance of the newspaper's headquarters, one of them explained

33 Reports, 10 November 1949, Aperj, fundo DPS, D 885, pp. 38–39, 83–84.

34 Report, 16 November 1949. Aperj, fundo DPS, D 885, pp. 10–11, 86–87.

35 Correio da Bahia, 11 February 1997.

36 Report, 23 November 1949, Aperj, DPS, D 885, p. 89.

37 *A Tarde*, 2 December 1949. Aperj, DPS, D 885, p. 132.

that the shacks were built on land, which had been “ceded to the Navy” on the “edge of the swamp”. If these houses were torn down, nearly 6,000 people would have nowhere to go. This is why they were looking for an “an advocate for their cause”. Filho responded that he had already been assessing that problem and guaranteed “that Governor Mangabeira would never consent to acts of violence, particularly against the poor”.

The decision to send another delegation to the city centre, this time to Rio Branco Palace, was taken the day after the journal *Momento* spread the word about a sinister plan: a judge had been entrusted by a fellow magistrate with the task of notifying the Chief of Police on the day when the eviction notice would be executed, “for which the Public Force should be placed at his disposal.” Claiming to have reprinted the judge’s order word for word, and downplaying a conciliatory announcement Mangabeira had issued in the meantime, the newspaper accused the courts and police of jointly preparing a violent onslaught. *Momento* moreover reported that another delegation had come from the suburb to meet with Mangabeira. A small committee from Vila Rui Barbosa subsequently managed to meet with Mangabeira, who promised that the expropriation would finally be carried out. At the same time, a rally was held at Vila. Celebrating the news, *Momento* reporter Dermeval Araújo wrote “when the people trust in their own strength, organise and fight firmly, no one can defeat them.” The *Momento* article rejoiced at the “incredible enthusiasm” of the people whose shacks had been “reclaimed from the swamp”.<sup>38</sup>

However, living on recovered land from the swamp depended not only on the art of dealing with the tides and filling the muddy ground under the stilt houses. Marshals and police officers still came out to execute the eviction order as requested by the bank, which sought to keep its formal property. According to the communist newspaper *Imprensa Popular*, the township had grown immensely: “seven thousand squatters raised 1,500 houses with tiled roofs, with well arranged streets and boulevards.” According to the newspaper report, a delegation had asked Mangabeira for a “favourable solution”.<sup>39</sup>

The informant, JBA-19, contradicted the communists’ criticism of police aggression and denied their “false” claims to the land. He angrily reported about the lawsuit on 12 December 1949: while communist “agitation” persisted, the marshals and Military Police only participated “to give the impression that the government had authorised the execution of the warrant”, while the residents remained “immovable”. As a consequence, he warned, “more shacks are currently built”. He thus corroborated the growing numbers the communists had reported for entirely different purposes.<sup>40</sup> In an impassioned speech before the City Council, Councilman Almir Matos subsequently repudiated Mangabeira

38 O *Momento*, n. d. Aperj, Fundo DPS, D 885, pp. 125–127.

39 *Imprensa Popular*, 8 December 1949, Aperj, Fundo DPS, D 885, p. 218.

40 Setor trabalhista, 12 December 1949, Aperj, Fundo DPS, D 885, p. 22.

by stating that the governor was playing a double game in promising solutions while ordering aggressive police action.

Mangabeira subsequently visited the settlement, accompanied by the Chief of Police. All they found were “poor people” – only “several hundred” – and no hotbed of Bolshevik rebels, as JBA-19 had suggested. The Governor then ordered a halt to the demolitions that were carried out with the help of the police. Irrespective of the judicial orders, Mangabeira guaranteed that no person would be evicted after having inspected the buildings and seeing that it was not a large number of shacks. He then ordered an investigation of those who were supposedly exploiting the situation and building houses to rent. He also commanded an inquest into the court’s authorisation of the bank to demolish the shacks, as dozens had already been torn down. If speculators were involved, there were also political agitators, the governor argued. The Chief of Police, who had seen the situation in person, ordered his forces to withdraw and stop the demolitions.<sup>41</sup> *O Globo* commented that Mangabeira was able to solve the problem effectively and peacefully, whereas the communist actions were spurious and illegal.<sup>42</sup>

In early 1950, a reporter from *A Tarde* came for an investigation into “trespassing on land”, a problem which he believed “demanded a definitive solution”. His article described how poor people had managed to erect shacks and huts in the still of the night, which had first occurred in the Liberdade district of Corta-Braço. After his inauguration, Mangabeira had expropriated the land and immediately responded to the needs and aspirations of its residents. However, the Governor had soon observed that there were also unscrupulous individuals, who exploited the situation by encouraging construction and speculating in rental properties. The journalist wrote that since late August 1949, the largest and attention-grabbing squatter settlement had been established in Caminho da Areia. By the time the owners were “opening their eyes”, countless homes “had already been built and inhabited, while others were being erected at a feverish pace.”<sup>43</sup>

The residents, who had managed to keep the tiles on their roofs after the November and December evictions, were still apprehensive. They were afraid the police would return and the demolitions resume. The greatest source of anxiety was the fact that they had nowhere else to go:

[...] many of these homes are nothing more than four wood beams planted in the mud, with tiled or tin roofs, and no walls or anything else. Others used mud and spread it on woven vine, building wattle-and-daub walls [...]. All told, there are over

41 *Diário da Noite*, 14 December 1949, Aperj, Fundo DPS, D 885, p. 176. After these incidents, the police documents are silent on the subject. However, there is no mention of it at all in Mangabeira’s personal archives.

42 *O Globo*, 14 December 1949, Aperj, fundo DPS, D 885, p. 202.

43 *A Tarde*, 3 January 1950.

100 families living here without comfort [...]. Here, too, speculators are discovered. They have some money and are quietly building their homes, so they can rent them out later. But most of the 'squatters' are poor people who don't earn enough to pay rent. Here, too, there are soldiers: police and naval sergeants, particularly marines. Not all of them, however, are residents of this city. Many have come from elsewhere.<sup>44</sup>

The reporter quoted the residents, who were telling their personal stories. They surrounded him, and while they had recognised that they were in the wrong,

[...] they said [...] they only did that because they thought the land didn't belong to anyone, and also because they had nowhere to live. Now, when they had spent all their savings and gone into debt to build their little houses, it would be impossible, barbaric, to drive them out of there, because they had nowhere else to go.<sup>45</sup>

This was their "harsh reality", according to *A Tarde*. While police patrols prevented the settlement from growing, the residents continued "their efforts to improve and fill in the holes in their houses, using their lunch breaks and working in the evenings, at night, and the early mornings." Influenced by the PCB press, *A Tarde* estimated that there were no more than 100 homes, which meant the newspaper entirely rejected the figure of 1,500 houses as previously reported by *Imprensa Popular*, and claimed that there were no speculators at all.<sup>46</sup> In fact, *A Tarde* was anxious to find a way to stop the squatters and protect the right to property, which had been "the basis of our economic structure" and should be relieved of the constant threat from poverty. In order to modernise, authorities should also end their paternalism and yielding to pressure from below.<sup>47</sup>

This urge for liberation from above, however, was confronted with the public responses to the existential demands and touching stories of the poor. By recognising they were in the wrong for trespassing private property, and expressing their vows of humility, feelings of harassment as well as anxiety about the future, the squatters were able to win over sections of the population and authorities. Lacking any other option, they told *A Tarde* they had sought shelter in Vila Rui Barbosa. They admitted to have listened to the wrong people, the communists, which they deeply regretted. The reporter concluded that evicting them and making them homeless would be "barbaric". The *A Tarde* reporter functioned as a diplomat, and his article represented a settlement, which opened the opportunity to make peace and sign an informal armistice. The appeal to show mercy to the poor was affirmed with a condescending and condolatory gesture to prevent barbarism: the

44 *A Tarde*, 3 January 1950.

45 *A Tarde*, 3 January 1950.

46 *A Tarde*, 3 January 1950.

47 *A Tarde*, 3 January 1950.

paternalistic attitude of the ruling classes in Bahia could ultimately not resist the workers' clemency appeal.

Would such a heartless and barbaric attitude really be unbearable to the Bahian (or Brazilian) elites? Of course not. Nevertheless, their paternalism forced them into the traditional role of the gentleman, who had agreed to provide help for the needy. "The theater of the great depended not upon constant, day-by-day attention to responsibilities but upon occasional dramatic interventions", as E. P. Thompson argued.<sup>48</sup> "Such gestures", Thompson wrote, "were calculated to receive a return in deference quite disproportionate". Thus, one should not expect any great "sense of public, or even corporate, responsibility". In fact, instead of "public buildings", the (in this case English) gentry would build "private mansions", for which they would be remembered in History. However, they would also be "noted for the misappropriation of the charities of previous centuries as for the founding of new ones".<sup>49</sup>

Whilst taking into account that the poor, the Communist Party and ex-President Vargas remained a risk to Mangabeira's government, the paternalism in Bahia had to be kept within politically defined boundaries, since the social pressures for preserving property rights could ultimately not cope with the general condescendence towards the occupation of Vila Rui Barbosa. In other words, this is why the spectacle at the open-doors palace could not turn into a scene of squatters and communists shoulder to shoulder. It cannot be interpreted in the propogandised way as a deep sense of public responsibility. With a scenario set to be a private mansion it was a misappropriation of the charities of previous centuries. Surely, new forms of responsibilities to the working class were the labourite politics of Vargas, the Communist Party and the workers themselves.<sup>50</sup>

48 E. P. Thompson: *Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture*, in: *Journal of Social History* 7:4 (1974), p. 390.

49 *Ibid.*

50 For an overall perspective on Brazilian politics in war and post-war period, see: Alexandre Fortes: *Os impactos da Segunda Guerra Mundial e a regulação das relações de trabalho no Brasil*, in: *Nuevo Mundo-Mundos Nuevos*, 1 (2014), p. 66177.



## Conclusion: Inventing Citizenship

As E. P. Thompson wrote, the European labour movements in the first half of the 20th century raised hopes that were subsequently not fulfilled.<sup>51</sup> Also in Bahia, like in other Brazilian states, the labour movement was not able to attain the same popularity as former President Getúlio Vargas.<sup>52</sup> The years from 1945 to 1947 were highly polarised between the communists on one side and liberals and rightists on the other. Nonetheless, instead of settling their dispute, which would have attracted local followers by the thousands, both sides fought a fierce political battle.

The poor neighbourhood of Vila Rui Barbosa suffered from police violence, evictions and demolitions. The squatters in the township appealed to the press and the authorities, who allowed them to present complaints and demands. The people of Vila demonstrated great abilities to act collectively, to settle on the marshlands and to peacefully defend themselves in the public. The workers claimed their place in the new Brazilian system of post-war mass politics, yet open conflict was not the only solution of their agency problem.

The PCB was a decisive actor in Brazilian politics. Having abandoned the national union party line in 1948, it followed the philosophy that no political transformation could be expected from anyone except from the workers alone. Instead of allying with other social and political forces, the PCB members decided to trust only those who were the closest to them: the communists themselves. In the wake of Vargas' political retreat, the PCB and UDN were fighting over the electorate left behind by the former president. As a result, the potential for a CP with a popular, democratic and electorally viable support was undermined not only by President Dutra on the national level but also by the ambitions of the Bahian UDN.

In view of what the communists have gained from their alliances with Vargas and Mangabeira, but also of what they have lost through broken alliances, the Bahian communists were able to establish a prominent place for themselves within Brazil's CP and Brazilian politics in general. The Bahian communists also played an important role in mobilising wide sections of society, like the rural and urban workers, women, liberal professionals, and students, among others.

While the PCB was banned from the democratic system, Mangabeira managed to form a national alliance with President Dutra. Although Mangabeira demanded that Dutra should show respect for the constitution – which Dutra's banning of the CP had

51 Edward Palmer Thompson: *As Peculiaridades dos Ingleses*, in: E. P. Thompson/Antonio Luigi Negro/Sergio Silva (eds.): *As Peculiaridades dos Ingleses e Outros Artigos*, Campinas 2001, pp. 77–179, especially p. 135.

52 Antonio Luigi Negro: *He did not work because he did not want to: a textile strike in the Labor Court (Bahia, 1948)*, in: *Revista Brasileira de História* 32:64 (2012), pp. 87–114.



violated – the law was instrumentalised against “outlawed subversives”, who were hindered in their actions, because they were supposedly against the law. That was another kind of national unity: involving anti-communists, Roman Catholics, business leaders, military officials, the police, the PSD and the UDN (who were partners in a coalition).

This alliance was forged before the presidential election of 1950, when Mangabeira was supposed to compete for the office. However, the PCB was just a pawn in the political power play. And so were the workers, when viewed from the perspective of the UDN. “[The] nervous young women from government offices; down-at-heel young men; the sweaty and thirsty claque”, were not an irrelevant electorate, as *A Tarde* described it.<sup>53</sup> Mangabeira eventually realised the importance of mass politics in the post-war period and dedicated himself to the deprived ones. Whether as a star of the centre-right or as presidential candidate, the governor needed Bahia to be at peace. Although the communists de facto intended to unmask what they believed to be a farce, they mobilised social groups for real issues. Nevertheless, they claimed that anyone attached to Mangabeira had been deluded.

What was at stake was something which the Bahian workers have traditionally been practicing: the politics of coexistence. Without forming permanent and confronting monolithic blocs, they were able to find arrangements of stable asymmetry and communication. By calculating the possibilities and risks of expressing their differences in public disputes, this multifaceted social group was able to maintain their right to the city, which included the right of being visible and having shelter, without being evicted. If their ancestors had managed to affirm freedom in slavery, they emerged as the creative inventors of citizenship in a free market order.

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53 *A Tarde*, 14 January 1947, CMB, OM5825.

