

“A Brazilian monarchy in the twenty-first century:
anachronism and alleviation”

By Jules Arts

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Professor: Dr Paul Scheffer

Student ANR: 336856

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Introduction

In June 2016 a Monarchical Encounter was held in Rio de Janeiro, attended by approximately 120 people carrying flags of the Empire of Brazil, a state which ceased to exist in 1889 (Kiernan, 2016). Kiernan (2016) writes that the supporters of reinstating constitutional monarchy in Brazil gathered for the twenty-sixth time to express their belief that the country would increase its political stability with a nonpartisan monarch as a symbol of national unity with a prime minister and parliament being responsible for the everyday political affairs. Their organisation, Pró Monarquia, is not exactly archaic. It has a Facebook page, hosted by a 21 year old, showcasing support from young people. As anecdotal as monarchist activity may be, it is still an interesting view to consider.

In this paper I endeavour to answer the question whether the restoration of monarchy in Brazil would actually be beneficial to the country, politically and in a broader perspective. The essay is structured as follows: after an overview of the historical context on which it is based, the current political outline is reflected upon. Possible alternatives will be discussed followed by a look at the everyday practical situation. The subsequent chapters assess the effects of an actual reinstatement of monarchy, from a national as well as an international perspective. These chapters include a comparison with Spain as an indicator of the effects of monarchical restoration.

Chapter 1: The historical context

§1.1: The colonial era

The Portuguese navigator Pedro Álvares Cabral is regarded as the discoverer of Brazil, first setting foot on what would become its soil in 1500, claiming the territory for the Crown of Portugal. This discovery laid the foundation for what would become the most important Portuguese colony. During the early seventeenth century the sugar plantations flourished. This was followed by the fortuitous discovery of large reserves of gold, exceeding the amount assembled by Spain from its colonies in the preceding two centuries (Bayer, 2006). It is typical, to say the least, that all this immense wealth was mostly sent to the small and economically backward nation of Portugal, instead of being redistributed for the benefit of the colony itself (Bethell, 1985).

Bethell (1984) denotes 1750 to 1808 as the late colonial period prior to the commencing of the independence process. This period was characterised by the development of new export industries such as coffee and cacao, the restriction of religious influences (exemplified with the expulsion of the Jesuits) and the first separatist movements, partly inspired by the events of the French Revolution. Even though these movements were effectively repressed, the desire for a change in status had taken root. The invasion of Portugal by Napoleon's forces and the subsequent fled of the Portuguese royal court to Rio de Janeiro in 1807-08 set into motion a chain of events that would eventually lead to independence. It must be mentioned however, that there was never any truly widespread popular desire for it, as a sense of one Brazilian national identity remained absent. The transition accordingly had a large degree of continuity in the political, economic and social spheres, including maintaining the institution of slavery (Bethell, 1985).

§1.2: The imperial era

Brazilian independence cannot be discussed without the mentioning of "fico" or "I am staying". It was with this single word declaration that prince Pedro, son and heir of Portuguese king João VI, refused to return to his homeland in 1822 (Rohter, 2012). Rohter (2012) further writes that the newly crowned first Brazilian emperor wanted to be progressive. Ironically his liberal constitution created a parliament dominated by slaveholders. Eventually, in 1831, he abdicated in favour of his young son, who ascended as Pedro II.

Pedro II proved to be a progressive and enlightened monarch as well, overseeing fifty years of expansion and modernisation, partly due to his support of technological innovation. The government invested in (rail)roads, banks and insurance companies increased in presence and the industry of São Paulo developed rapidly (Bayer, 2006). The improvement in technology was also responsible for enriching the coffee planters, now able to increase their production (Rohter, 2012). Coffee was by far the most important export product by the

middle of the nineteenth century while the significance of sugar, tobacco and cacao plantations decreased at a fast pace (Bayer, 2006).

According to Rohter (2012) the slave problem continued to rear its head and in 1850 Brazil was forced to participate in the outlawing of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Over the following decades the abolitionist movement increased its influence. Bayer (2006) writes that these developments culminated on 13 May 1888 when crown princess Isabel, under pressure from liberal elites and international fashion, declared the abolishment of slavery. This heavily increased the imperial family's popularity with the general populace but greatly diminished it with the conservative plantation owners who felt betrayed and uncompensated. The emperor was also far from beloved by the catholic clergy due to his suspected ties to Freemasonry. The end of the empire was sealed with the military coup d'état by young republican officers of 15 November 1889. The emperor went into exile to Europe and a Brazilian republic had come into existence.

§1.3: The republican era

The period from 1889 to 1930 is known as the First Republic, mainly characterised by economic progress on the one hand and lack of political change on the other. The democratic system was flawed. The economic progress is illustrated in the fact that there was a 160 percent increase in population between 1890 and 1930. The economic boom fell apart with the crisis of the 1930s and the resulting fall of the coffee industry. President Vargas, aided by the military, rose as a dictatorial president. Despite his active social policies, his rule was also full of corruption and intimidation. His presidency ended abruptly with his suicide in 1954 (Rohter, 2012).

Afterwards came president Kubitscheks promise of "fifty years in five", forced economic progress at the expense of the national budget. In 1964 a military dictatorship was established, a combination of political terror and more economic growth. This growth was halted by the oil crisis of the 1970s, eventually leading to a democratisation process starting in the early 1980s. The constitution of 1988 was revolutionary in the way it codifies all basic rights and limits presidential authority (Bayer, 2006). The constitution also called for a plebiscite (Temporary Constitutional Provisions Act, art. 2) to be held on 21 April 1993 (Constitutional Amendment No. 2, 1992) on the form and system of government (monarchy or republic and presidential or parliamentary). The result of this plebiscite was an overwhelming victory for the presidential republic with 87 to 13 percent in favour of the republic and 69 to 31 percent in favour of the presidential system. The system survived in spite of, or possibly thanks to, the removal of president Collor the previous year (Butler & Ranney, 1994). The presidency of president Cardoso further opened the Brazilian market but did little for the poorest parts of the population. President Lula da Silva's biggest challenge was not the social problem but rather the ever rampant corruption (Bayer, 2006). His successor, president Rousseff, was removed from office in 2016, again in a context of corruption (BBC, 2016).

Chapter 2: The current situation

§2.1: The presidential system and its effects

According to Hague & Harrop (2013) the Brazilian president forms coalitions in an informal and pragmatic way, blurring the separation between the executive and the legislative. Nevertheless, they mention as a strength of the presidential system how the president provides a natural symbol of national unity, offering a familiar face for domestic as well as international audiences. If the word president were replaced by sovereign the argument would make more sense. Although it is true that the electoral victory requires broad support across the country as Hague & Harrop (2013) write, this still creates a far from natural symbol of unity. After all, the campaigning in an election is in its essence a popularity contest promoting a certain political orientation, whereas a monarch possesses a non-political ancestral connection to the country and its people. Also it would appear a sovereign provides a more familiar face, certainly to international audiences, during a reign of decades rather than during a presidency of a few years. One only needs to look at Queen Elizabeth II for an international reputation of stability and continuity after more than sixty years on the throne (Foss, 2012).

Presidential democracies are at a higher risk of falling apart and becoming dictatorships than parliamentary democracies are (Hague & Harrop, 2013). Brazilian history confirms the establishment of dictatorships as a very real possibility. In the end though, the way the president of Brazil is expected to combine his positions of head of government, characterised by much political manoeuvring, while also serving as a nation-uniting head of state presents difficulties as far as the representativeness of the executive is concerned. Alternatives, fundamentally restructuring the Brazilian form of state, must therefore be discussed.

§2.2: Alternative systems and their implications

When referring to the restoration of the monarchy, constitutional and not absolute monarchy is meant. As such, a dictatorial monarch with absolute (or even arbitrary) control is out of the question. A constitutional monarchy is taken to mean a head of state with limited to no political power, being held in check by a democratically legitimised government.

Of course, a monarchy could never function within a presidential system. Should constitutional monarchy be implemented, the parliamentary system would have to be as well. An important concept in this regard is the distinction between two aspects of parliamentary systems: the dignified and the efficient. In this system the positions of head of state and head of government are separated: the head of state the ceremonial and dignified, the head of government the efficient (Hague & Harrop, 2013). This raises the question why the step of monarchical government would have to be taken. After all, a republic with a parliamentary system also possesses the separation. Germany, for example, has a

ceremonial president as head of state and a chancellor to rule the country. What the republican parliamentary system lacks however is the political neutrality needed to represent the people as a whole. A president in a parliamentary system, as neutral as he is required to be in theory, is still (informally) aligned with a certain political movement. And as irrational as crowns and carriages may be, they do possess the symbolism needed to actually be dignified. Nevertheless, an elected symbolic president is still just that, elected. He possesses a democratic legitimacy that a monarch never could, who bases his position solely on right of birth (Harris, 2005).

§2.3: Monarchism and republicanism in practice

The plebiscite, described in §1.3, shows that desire for a return of the monarchy was very small and it thus legitimised the republican form of government. If this was so in the early 1990s, it is unlikely that another referendum in the late 2010s would have a different result. The term “saudade”, referring to the affection for tradition and mysticism and the reminiscent nature of many Brazilians (Bayer, 2006), would suggest nostalgia for monarchy but most Brazilians aren’t even aware the pretenders to the throne are in existence (Kiernan, 2016). Adding difficulty to that, due to dynastic disputes, there are currently multiple pretenders (The Economist, 2008). In addition, according to Kiernan (2016), to have an enormously (racially) diverse country such as Brazil ruled over by the strongly Catholic European-descended Braganças is contradictory at least. With that said however, the monarchist minority is becoming more vocal with each passing year, provoking sentiment for the apparent good old days of the empire, in particular the reign of the beloved emperor Pedro II, even though that sentiment may be built on false assumptions (Kiernan, 2016). In any case, it is doubtful whether modern day Brazilians would view a restoration as a continuation of a more legitimate regime rather than as the revival of a forgotten and irrelevant relic of the distant past.

Chapter 3: Rise or decline of a monarchic Brazil

§3.1: Restoration effects on Brazilian politics

Hypothesising a constitutional monarchy would actually be restored in Brazil, it is interesting to speculate what effects it would have on the political happenings of the country. Hague & Harrop (2013) state that although monarchs usually stay uninvolved with politics, they can be of importance to national stability. Pillalamari (2014) confirms this stabilising effect by denoting how monarchies encourage slow and incremental change as opposed to extreme regime changes, citing the evasion of the Arab Spring by Arab monarchies as an example. Generally speaking, as described in §2.1, parliamentary systems are less prone to turning into dictatorships compared to presidential systems such as the one in use in Brazil. Although the presence of a monarch, if even symbolically, at the top of the political pyramid might prevent this, he could of course also be used easily as a puppet of a dictatorial prime minister, therewith even providing a degree of legitimacy to said dictatorship.

It is notable how the presence of monarchies seems to curtail the presence of corruption. According to Bird (2015) seven out of the top ten of least corrupt states are monarchies. Social trust and cohesion are higher in them, correlating with less corruption. Brazilian politics, plagued by corruption for years on end, could only benefit from this obviously. Having said that, the direct causality between having a monarchy and having social trust and cohesion can be called into doubt. Nevertheless, Bird (2015) acknowledges that even if constitutional monarchies do not cause democratic practices, they do showcase a political culture that is characterised by compromise, self-limitation and moderate adjustments.

Another interesting point to consider is whether the presence of a monarchy could have a positive effect on the sense of unity between the federal government on the one hand and the regional governments on the other. This will be elaborated upon in §3.3 by providing a comparison with the Spanish situation.

§3.2: Restoration effects on Brazilian society

Guibernau (1996) writes that monarchies by divine right were useful for evoking emotional attachment from the people. The post-revolutionary creation of the nation-state refocused that attachment to abstract symbols and rituals. What Guibernau fails to mention however, is why these two couldn't be combined. A constitutional monarchy appears the perfect framework for national symbolism, personified through the monarch, providing a non-abstract focus for the people's attachment. Practically speaking of course, the reestablishment of the monarchy probably wouldn't change anything fundamentally about the Brazilian economy or culture, although Bird (2015) writes that "in a country with weak executive constraints, going from a non-hereditary leader to an hereditary leader, increases the annual average economic growth of the country by 1.03 percentage points per year", which does appear quite substantial. Given the inherent weakness of the Brazilian presidents

position, as denoted in §2.1, this is a promising prospect. A monarchy could also provide a benefit in securing trade deals during state visits. This will be discussed in chapter 4. To the numerous poor people of the “favelas”, it is all unlikely to matter much, if at all. It certainly wouldn’t (directly) improve their financial situation.

Culturally, as mentioned in §2.3, the placement of a conservative Catholic monarch of European ancestry on the throne may have a divisive, rather than a uniting, effect on the very diverse society that is Brazil. Beneath the surface it remains quite racist in everyday affairs (Bayer, 2006) and the establishment of a “white” monarchy may strengthen these attitudes and therefore the emotional attachment mentioned above may only come from the European-descended parts of the population. A factor to consider in this matter is the personal attitude of the prospective monarch as far as racism is concerned. If the sovereign, if even in his actions and not in his words, were to (strongly) address and condemn the racist culture he may very well play a uniting role and compensate the “white monarchy effect”. Nevertheless, the implementation of a monarchy would imply the degradation of “free” citizens to “unfree” subjects, which carries a denigrating tone regardless of the absence of practical meaning and doesn’t seem helpful in uniting the nation (Harris, 2005).

§3.3: Internal comparison with Spain

A country which has, rather uniquely, relatively recently restored its monarchy is Spain, which occurred in 1975, after the death of general Franco (Hague & Harrop, 2013). With the new constitution of 1978 the legitimacy of the monarchy was affirmed as being derived from the historical Crown and not from the personal wish of Franco (Section 57, art. 1). To compare the Spanish situation to the Brazilian one requires certain precautions to be taken into account. The Spanish monarchy was restored after a period of military dictatorship, a concept not foreign to Brazil, but the Spanish Crown was abolished in 1931 (Harris, 2005) and restored 44 years later, short enough for plenty of people to be alive who had lived under the old monarchy, therewith providing a sense of continuity. With the Brazilian empire having been disestablished for almost 130 years, there is no continuity to speak of. The language is a further obvious cultural difference but both countries do share a broad Latin culture which enables a broad comparison in how the monarchical restoration has affected Spain and how it could thus affect Brazil.

Hague & Harrop (2013) cite king Juan Carlos of Spain steering his country to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s as an example of providing national stability. The king, earning the nickname “el piloto del cambio” or “the pilot of change” in the process, reportedly preferred exile to the absence of democracy. Although the degree of causality between the restoration and the listed improvement can be called into doubt, the question should be asked whether that matters. If the very idea of causality exists among the people, isn’t that all that’s needed for the monarchy to matter? Then again, despite all its problems, Brazil is a functioning democracy whereas Spain transferred from a dictatorship to a democracy, under the symbolic guidance of the king, and a restoration would therefore lack a similar effect in Brazil.

The restoration of monarchy in Spain hasn't had much effect on bringing the different regions closer together, let alone truly create a singular Spanish nationality. Rather, regional divergences remain a central political problem and Catalonia in particular seeks more and more autonomy in addition to recognition as a distinct nationality (Hague & Harrop, 2013). Fausto (1999) speaks of the provincialism of Brazil's politicians yet there is something to be said for the focus of duty that a monarch provides. Through their impartiality monarchs accommodate civil servants with a sense of final loyalty beyond the regions (Harris, 2005). After all, although the Brazilian states obviously have notable differences between them, such nationalistic distinctions as are present in Spain remain absent in Brazil (Bayer, 2006).

Chapter 4: A monarchic Brazil in an international perspective

§4.1: International political effects

Bershidsky (2015) takes a rather far-fetched stance in stating his desire for constitutional monarchs to be more politically active, citing the British queen speaking out against Brexit as an example (failing to establish why she is apparently anti-Brexit). This is in line with Pillalamari's (2014) argument that monarchs, due to their exalted nature, are capable of making last-resort decisions, despite the obvious lack of political power of constitutional monarchs to do so. Overall though, something can be said for the general diplomatic strength that monarchs possess. The political impartiality and symbolic ceremony that the Brazilian monarch would possess could indeed prove useful in international relations, having not a single political goal at heart but rather the Brazilian well-being in general. The pomp and splendour of monarchical state visits continues to be a powerful diplomatic weapon to world leaders, with the British invitation to American president Trump as a very recent example (although given the amount of protest against the invitation it is debatable whether the political importance outweighs the societal lack of support for it) (Asthana & Mason, 2017). Recreating a monarchy in Brazil will certainly give it priority with autocratic rulers, sensitive to royal titles as they are (Ansink, 2013). A visit from the Emperor of Brazil is likely to impress more than a visit by a "mere" president.

§4.2: International societal effects

The pageantry of state visits as organised by monarchies and of monarchies in general serves an economic purpose in addition to a political one. Ansink (2013) states that, despite the impact of such state visits being hard to quantify, they do provide a benefit in generating trust with companies investing in the country in question. In a 2007 study economist van Dalen found that the presence of a monarchy "accounts for 0.8 to 1.0 percentage points of additional economic growth". According to van Dalen royalty provide a sense of efficiency and social capital through the trust they generate (Ansink, 2013). As Bershidsky (2015) puts it: monarchs are "slightly stuffy yet right-minded role models". Interestingly, polls held in Australia and Germany show monarchism is highest with the age group 18-24, showing the legitimacy monarchs bring to a country speaks to younger generations as well. Of course, royalty have developed into something of a celebrity culture, which may also help to explain this notable result (Bershidsky, 2015). Regardless, it is promising that were a Brazilian monarchy restored, it would appeal to the younger generations as much, if not more, than it would to the older generations.

§4.3: International comparison with Spain

The controversies that have entangled the Spanish royal family in recent years, from accusations of tax fraud to infidelity don't exactly inspire confidence. Yet, the succession of king Felipe VI and the popularity of him and his wife do show the institution as a whole can outlive an individual controversial monarch (Roberts, 2015). Nevertheless, such controversies are bound to have a negative impact on a number of the benefits listed in the previous paragraphs. Of course, it will greatly depend on the Brazilian monarch in question whether controversies will arise. If they do however, they are bound to have a greater impact than had it concerned a president given the important symbolic and impartial function of the monarch. Add to that the celebrity culture that will inevitably encircle the monarchy, in addition to its permanent character, and the negative image will only be enlarged. An abdication, such as the one that occurred in Spain in 2014, is a method to preserve the monarchy as a whole, which can still inflict damage to its (international) reputation and might require years of mending by a "better" king, a situation currently affecting Spain (Roberts, 2015).

Conclusion

A monarchy can function as a natural symbol of national unity, stability and continuity through its dignified representativeness. It creates a transparent political culture with lower corruption levels and generates economic growth through its diplomatic impact. A monarchy nevertheless lacks democratic legitimacy and especially public support in Brazil's case, regardless of the appeal to younger generations. It is questionable how well a monarchy would represent all Brazilians with its non-egalitarian nature although this may counterintuitively raise it to a role model status, as long as it avoids too much controversy. In conclusion, despite its anachronistic characteristics, a monarchy could certainly be the alleviation Brazil needs.

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