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# Guest Editor's Introduction: Getúlio Vargas and His Enduring Legacy for Brazil

Joel Wolfe

Forty years ago, on 25 August 1954, Brazilians woke to learn that Getúlio Vargas had killed himself the night before in his bedroom in the Catete Palace. In a rambling suicide note that Vargas left to be read on the radio that morning, Brazil's most important twentieth-century political leader attempted to craft his own place in history.<sup>1</sup> Popular reaction, however, was muted. There were no great rallies or protests to mark the death of the man who had—in the span of twenty-four years from 1930 to 1954—run Brazil as revolutionary leader, interim president, quasi-fascist dictator, and finally elected populist president.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the 1955 election of Juscelino Kubitschek seemed to usher in a totally new, “modern” era for Brazil.<sup>3</sup>

Recent events have begun to shift focus back on the Vargas years. As Brazil made the slow transition out of military dictatorship into a system of open and competitive elections, Brazilians began to re-examine the various Vargas administrations. Tancredo Neves, for example, spoke at length about his role in the second Vargas government (1951–1954) to give himself added credibility as he moved toward becoming Brazil's first civilian president in more than two decades.<sup>4</sup> Vargas's life and death took on an even deeper meaning for many Brazilians during the disastrous presidency of Fernando Collor de Mello. As an increasing number of people called for Collor to resign in the face of mounting corruption charges, a group of actors gave nightly performances on the grounds of the Catete Palace in Rio of a play depicting Vargas's last day in office. The play ends with the audience in Vargas's bedroom during the suicide scene. That this play was so popular—running for months after having been planned to run for only a week—no doubt reflected people's hopes that Collor would leave office one way or another.<sup>5</sup>

The essays collected here represent the latest scholarly attempts to come to grips with the Vargas years and their legacy for Brazil. Indeed, in different ways and with different focuses, these essays reveal that Vargas's years in office were pivotal for Brazil. The Vargas era (ca. 1930–1954) was a period of fundamental changes in the government, populace, and society overall. Jeff Lesser's article explores the ways in which debates over immigration were shaped by and then shaped a variety of views of national identity. Through a careful reading of a wide range of primary sources, Lesser shows how these debates over identity affected state policy making. This article makes an important contribution to our understanding of twentieth-century Brazilian history, for it shows the complexity of racial and ethnic identities beyond the broad categories white, black, and mulatto.

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Most of the scholarly works on the Vargas years—including several essays in this collection—have been researched in the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação (CPDOC) located in the Fundação Getúlio Vargas in Rio. The collections of personal and official papers, oral histories, and other documents make CPDOC one of Latin America's finest archives for the study of the twentieth century. Daryle Williams provides a close and fascinating reading of Vargas's explicit attempts to craft a new historical identity for Brazilians as part of his overall program to unify and modernize Brazil. Williams' careful analysis of Vargas's quite conscious policies provides an important new perspective on this period in history and how Vargas shaped the ways we understand the connections between nineteenth and twentieth-century Brazil. It also serves as a valuable cautionary tale for historians conducting research in the Vargas papers and other collections held in museums and libraries funded and reformed by the Vargas administrations.

My article, "The Faustian Bargain Not Made," likewise, traces government policies to find the impact of the Vargas years on a broad spectrum of the population, in this case the industrial working class. The article debunks the common view of the Vargas years as a period of state manipulation of workers. It details the fact that Vargas's labor ministry was chronically under funded and so only operated in the national capital, Rio de Janeiro, during this period. Accordingly, I argue the Brazil's workers could not have entered into a Faustian bargain with Getúlio Vargas, for the president was unable to grant them benefits through the weak and ineffective labor bureaucracy.

Angela de Castro Gomes, in "Trabalhismo e Democracia: o PTB sem Vargas," details the ways in which Vargas left his mark on the political structure. Her close analysis of Vargas's labor party in the years after his death reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of the populist political structure. Gomes demonstrates how the party operated—especially in Rio—and how it often failed to garner the wide-spread popular support its leaders sought. "Trabalhismo e Democracia" provides an excellent example of the ways in which Vargas's programs often had unintended results, for the PTB never evolved into the sort of popular institution its founders had envisioned; it began as a personal vehicle for Vargas and ended as one for João Goulart.

The Vargas legacy is not confined to politics. The 1930–1954 period witnessed a variety of forms of significant literary production. Randal Johnson's "The Dynamics of the Brazilian Literary Field" closely analyses the shift in focus among writers from the 1920s modernist generation to a new set of literary traditions in the 1930s and 1940s. Johnson does a wonderful job of detailing the connections between the shifting political world of this era and intellectual expression. This period is a particularly important one, for the country's intellectuals developed new relationships with the state, and the state was increasingly interested in their output. In the final analysis, Johnson's article shows us how this literature not only reflects the politics of the Vargas years, but also what its production tells us about the relationship between intellectuals and the state.

Two review essays by Mary Lou Daniel and Dain Borges provide a different focus on literary and intellectual output during the Vargas years. Daniel analyzes two proletarian novels from the 1930s. Borges looks at recent scholarship about a variety of writers whose major works were published during these years in order to analyze the sort of national debates about Brazil that Vargas's policies fostered. All the works collected here address the Vargas years and how they continue to influence Brazilian society forty years after his suicide. These essays by no means deal with every aspect of the

Vargas years, but they are examples of the latest scholarship on a fundamental period in Brazilian history.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The complete text of Vargas's suicide note can be found in John W. F. Dulles, *Vargas of Brazil: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 334–335.

<sup>2</sup>Before running for president in 1930, Vargas had been governor of Rio Grande do Sul. After his ouster in 1945, he was elected senator from Rio Grande do Sul in the same year, but actively campaigned throughout Brazil for the 1950 presidential election.

<sup>3</sup>The single best analysis of politics in the 1950s is still Thomas Skidmore's *Politics in Brazil: An Experiment in Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). On the Kubitschek years, see pp. 163–86. See also Maria Victória de Mesquita Benevides, *O Governo Kubitschek: Desenvolvimento Econômico e Estabilidade Política* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1976).

<sup>4</sup>See Valentina da Rocha Lima and Plínio de Abreu Ramos, *Tancredo Fala de Getúlio* (São Paulo: L & PM, 1986). Neves died before assuming office.

<sup>5</sup>For a report on the ties between the play and Collor's problems see *The New York Times*, 1 December 1991.