

João Goulart: from oblivion to making history

João Goulart: do limbo à escrita da história

João Goulart: del olvido a las páginas de la Historia

João Goulart: de l'oubli à écriture de l'histoire

Lucilia de Almeida Neves Delgado[1]

FERREIRA, Jorge. *João Goulart: uma biografia*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2011. 714 p.

History and memory, although different in the way they register and manifest, are fertile interlocutors. As mentioned by Jacques Le Goff, both have expressive powers, among which are, for instance, those related to constructing forgetfulness, disqualification and interdiction of registers. On the other hand, memory and history also gain powerful meaning by constructing positive and flattering versions of events and people. When it happens, these characteristics often contribute to lay the foundation for dynamics of mythification of people and social processes. Both disqualification and mythification distort reality. It is up to the well established historical and analytical knowledge to interrupt the chain built by these strategies in relation to what has been lived and what actually took place.

The book *João Goulart: uma biografia*, by the historian Jorge Ferreira, beautifully reaches the objective to build solid historical knowledge, since it is interpretative and well based. The text includes countless contributions for a better understanding of the Brazilian history post-1945. The book has the special merit of breaking with conjectures and clichés which isolated the former president João Goulart in the scope of memory and oblivion, of disqualification and interdiction, and brought him to the field of History and knowledge.

Ever since the general presidents took power in 1964, the memory of president João Goulart has been present in the ethereal and mythical zone of oblivion. For many years, forgetfulness has been covering his path, which unlike what is consolidated in common sense, and despite the crises, was rich and marked by expressive and special participation in public positions.

Such strategy to build this oblivion memory concerning the former president was consolidated thanks to the effort of political opponents who deposed him. This strategy had two goals: to justify the coup d'état itself and to build a possible legitimacy for the authoritarian regime. However, other factors also integrate the kaleidoscope that explains it and also reproduces

Review received on October 05, 2012 and approved for publication on December 22, 2012.

[1] Historian; Professor at the Postgraduate History course at Universidade de Brasília (UnB); Researcher from the Program of Oral History at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG); author, among others, of the book: *PTB: do Getulismo ao Reformismo (1945-1964)*. 2 ed, São Paulo, LTr, 2011. E-mail: lucilianeves@terra.com.br

it. Among these factors, the interpretative construction produced especially in the 1970s and 1980s by famous intellectuals, such as Florestan Fernandes, stood out by identifying in Jango strong political fragility and slippery ambiguity as to his left ideology. Also, the recurring silence of newspapers and magazines of broad circulation empowered the subject of disqualification and forgetfulness when it comes to Goulart.

Jango's biography, written by Jorge Ferreira, is based on solid documental and bibliographic research. The information was taken from books, chronicles, official documents, articles from newspapers and magazines, manifests, speeches, pictures, memoirs, and articulated in a text which has the merit of being dense, but fluent. The author also made interviews of great contribution which gave a touch of emotion to his writing. Because of these qualities, the book, written clearly and with aesthetic care, effectively assists the deconstruction of injustice concerning the events that led to the disqualification of president Jango as a public man. Such disqualification was carefully and strategically created, thus not sparing the frequent use of negative adjectives to identify the former president, among which were expressions like demagogue, incompetent, irresponsible, bohemian and populist.

*Ten years were dedicated to the research and
writing of a long and pleasant biography [...] an
impressive outcome by combining
biographic registers and History*

The combination of strategies for the construction and reproduction of forgetfulness and the diffusion of generalized criticism about João Goulart evolved to the great silence concerning his political life. Such fact becomes more evident when the number of books and articles published about the leader is compared with the profusion of publications about Getúlio Vargas and Juscelino Kubitschek, who worked during the same historical phase in which Jango reached national fame. It is worth mentioning that Goulart was the minister of Labor during Vargas' term (period when he became nationally known), federal deputy by the state of Rio Grande do Sul, vice-president for Juscelino Kubitschek and Jânio Quadros, and, finally, president.

Even though Jorge Ferreira is aware of the ambiguities that marked the path of Jango, he goes in the opposite direction in comparison to the solid negative image built around the former president. Without being tempted to present himself as a redeemer of the memory of the president deposed in 1964, the author wrote a balanced, serious text, known for its qualities, which are inherent to the construction of historical knowledge: research, register of facts and interpretation of the process. Ten years were dedicated to the research and writing of a long and pleasant biography. Ten years of persistence

and meticulous dedication to an objective that had an impressive outcome by combining biographic registers and History.

The book goes through the life of João Goulart, from his childhood to his death, which occurred during the exile, in 1976. Inside the state of Rio Grande do Sul and based on his family characteristics, the book searches for elements that formed the personality of a politician who, in spite of having inherited solid fortune and multiplied it with effective competence, always had an elective affinity with the poorer segments of the Brazilian population. This preference of the former president — urban and rural workers — was never understood or accepted by the most conservative sectors of the Brazilian society, which were articulated in the social-political alliance and acted in order to overthrow the former president. This alliance was formed by the following characters: expressive segments of the armed forces, parties such as *União Democrática Nacional*, major land proprietors — who saw him as a traitor —, members of the conservative catholic church, State governors — such as Minas Gerais, Guanabara and São Paulo —, the foreign capital companies which invested in Brazil and international organizations that became the guardians of the capitalist system in times of Cold War.

Ferreira has shown that from a young age, Jango, as he was known in São Borja, where he was born, had some qualities that deserved to be cared for and elaborated in his life as a public man. He was patient and an excellent negotiator, as shown during his vice-presidency term at the time Kubitschek was the president. Above all, he had a talent for the art of politics, especially the formation of consensus. To these virtues, however, were added some flaws, such as looking for the construction of conciliation with adversaries and fragile supporters. The latter did not hesitate to attack him with what is currently called “friendly fire”. The orientation of the president to search for conciliation even when the signals pointed to its impracticability could have been a style and a strategy, but it ended up being identified as hesitation, incapacity to make decisions and populist demagogy.

The author also brings up the correct and well based argument that, different from what is publicized, it is not possible to define Jango as a populist without merits or historic tradition. On the contrary, the author identifies him as the main heir of Vargas — although they were different — and one of the greatest leaders not of populism, but of Brazilian laborism. For him, the main political choice of Goulart was laborism, transformed into nationalism, structuralism, social distribution and state interventionism. Jango was certainly in touch with expressive politicians and intellectuals in his day, who considered that the adoption and administration of public, social and economic policies were a responsibility of the State.

Goulart’s biography brings the innovative historic contribution by Ferreira concerning the period between 1945 and 1964. His main investment in relation to politics in these years was in the effort to deconstruct the theory of populism. He disagrees with the concept, which identifies populism as manipulation and demagogy. Therefore, he completely diverges from the use of this concept to explain that period, since he understands that laborism and national development are more consistent ideas, which can better explain a political option, hegemonic at the time and guided by a national project characterized by precise

definitions and established goals. Among the main objectives were the valorization of work, social distribution, state planning, the value of national investors, a solid social security policy and social reformism, with emphasis on land reform. Without neglecting the private aspects of the former president's history, since he enjoyed the pleasures of a bohemian life and the daily life of the rural area, Jorge Ferreira also registered the life of a leader during exile in three long chapters. It has been years of bitterness and solitude. In this final phase of his life, Goulart only had the pleasure to care for his cattle farming, which was mostly located in Argentina and Uruguai, instead of Brazil.

Jango went into exile with the idea that it would not last long ever since the military took power in 1964. He went with his wife, Maria Tereza, and his kids, João Vicente and Denize. He chose not to resist to the coup d'état that deposed him. For many of his allies, his mistake was exactly that: not having reacted to the coup d'état. However, Ferreira argues that the president chose the way of exile, with all of his unpredictability, over resistance, which would most likely have led Brazil into civil war. This same guidance led him to agree, even if displeased, with the adoption of parliamentarism, in 1961, when president Jânio Quadros resigned.

The decision to not resist the coup d'état was opposed to different tenden-

*Anxious to get to power, left parties never
forgave João Goulart's choice [...] They forgot
that Jango was never a man of conflict*

cies of the Brazilian left, which began to gain shape in the pre-1964. Anxious to get to power, left parties never forgave João Goulart's choice when the military got to *Palácio do Planalto* and the American marines were watching the Brazilian coast. That is when the National Congress, despite the protests of some deputies, declared the position of president of the republic as vacant, even when Goulart was in national territory. They forgot that Jango was never a man of conflict. On the contrary, he always chose conciliation and negotiation, understood by him as features inherent to democracy.

Also, João, who was always a conciliator and a laborist, strongly embraced the reformist radicalism at the end of 1963 and the beginning of 1964. After countless and failed attempts to negotiate with the most conservative sectors of the Brazilian society, he went for the support of the left to stay in power. Such strategy guided the regulation of the law that controlled profit remittance by foreign capital companies installed in Brazil, and the adoption of measures such as the land reform, announced in the rally of March 13, 1964.

For Ferreira, the conservative conspiracy that deposed Goulart gained shape in this context. Therefore, it is believed that, at this point, the author exaggerated a bit, because in 1954, when the political crisis led Getúlio Vargas to suicide, the happenings of 1964 had already been announced. The adverse circumstances of Jango's term and the movement of the chess pieces in the story only defined the exact timing of this outcome.

Finally, it is worth to mention that in this bold biography Ferreira clarified his understanding about the role of the diverging political forces that acted in those years in the context of immediate pre-coup d'état of 1964. He considered the scenario was marked by marches and counter-marches and by strong radicalism to the left and to the right. This radical system made a precise evaluation difficult as to the possible outcomes resulting from this extreme polarization. In this picture of increasing intransigence, also encouraged by the Cold War, Goulart's negotiation calling did not echo nor had persuasive strength. To a certain point, defined as the year of 1963, it was no longer possible to contain the advances of the opposition or to neutralize the strength of the left political radicalism which was moving under the influence of Brizola. However, even by reaffirming the thesis of growing radicalism, it was registered that the opponents of laborism, nationalism and reformism were the main actors of the coup d'état of 1964. In other words, those responsible for the coup d'état were from the right.

The high-quality biography written by the historian Jorge Ferreira is indispensable for those who want to know more about the polemic and agitated times of the pre-1954 and its terrible outcomes, once the book is extended to the death of Goulart, in 1976, when the president was still in exile. Among the author's merits, which are many, it is possible to emphasize the boldness to go against the hegemonic history and the construction of collective forgetfulness about he who was a suppressed protagonist, instead of a winner. More than that, the historian demonstrated that Jango was a great public man who deserved to move, once and for all, from oblivion to making history.

