

From Neo-Scholasticism to New Criticism: The Brazilian Catholic Intelligentsia

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During the 1930's, a conservative intelligentsia based on Neo-Thomism was established in Brazil, with similarities and differences in relation to the philosophy of French authors such as Jacques Maritain, Georges Bernanos and Daniel Rops (Cf. COMPAGNON, 2003). However, during World War II, resembling the path of jurists and avant-garde artists¹, many artists and intellectuals who were based in

¹ About the exile of French intellectuals, see: JACKSON, Julian. *France: the dark years* (1940-1944). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Paris came to the American continent in exile. This article investigates some of the inter-Atlantic relationships of a spiritualistic intelligentsia in the interwar period, as well as the first years after the armistice, based on two Brazilian literary critics: Alceu Amoroso Lima, leader of the lay catholics and one of most prominent literary critics of that time, and Afrânio Coutinho, another renowned academic in literature, much known for the diffusion of the American New Criticism in Brazil. What kind of relationship was established prior to and after these events?

Although the exile of artists and intellectuals to the new world is widely acknowledged, Brazil is not always taken in consideration in this matter. Apart from some anthropologists, such as Lévy-Strauss, and some Italian jurists, little is known about other networks of exiled artists that came to South America because of Catholicism. Based on research of cultural catholic reviews, as well as other types of publication and even letters, it is possible to say that even if there were mutual mentions of European and Brazilian intellectuals before the war, only after that period there is knowledge of a true dialogue, in which interlocutors were really opened to change their ideas, conciliate catholicity with the American way of living and embrace concrete problems of the time in a more tolerant way.

Renouveau Catholique in Brazil

In the interwar period, the *renouveau catholique*, a new wave of catholic thought widespread by lay catholics committed to christianize political institutions since the nineteenth century, became a motif for the grouping of many intellectuals and artists around the world in the 1920's and 30's. These ideals, according to Villaça (2006), were diffused especially by those who felt uncomfortable adhering to leading ideologies, such as positivism, liberalism, communism or fascism. All those ideologies were considered too materialist for them, as they preferred to dedicate themselves to a more spiritualistic direction. This catholic intelligentsia was strongly influenced by direct guidelines from Rome, among them the Encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, issued by the Pope Leo XIII in 1879, which determined a renewal of Thomism, and mainly the Encyclical *Pax Christi in regno Christi*, by the Pope Pius XI in 1922, which encouraged the formation of a militant intellectual

elite in every country in order to renew the influence of Rome in politics, morals and art. While French and Belgian intellectuals were the diffusers of these ideals, Brazil was one of the first countries to accomplish much of this agenda. In 1921, the conservative and militant intellectual Jackson de Figueiredo established in Rio de Janeiro the review “*A Ordem*,” a mensal periodical that had the premise, in its own words, to “recatolicizar o Brasil” (AZZI, 2006). A year later, to fulfill the determinations from Rome, Figueiredo also founded the “Centro Dom Vital,” a cultural society formed by lay catholics, such as doctors, politicians, teachers and so on, which shared the same conservative momentum, with an esteem for Joseph De Maistre and Juan Donoso Cortés, as well as a common interest in the spiritualistic philosophy of Pascal, Henri Bergson and Raymundo Farias Brito, among many others. Figueiredo died in 1928 and his recently converted friend Alceu Amoroso Lima took over directing the “Dom Vital Center” and its review “*A Ordem*” with the intention of creating a more cultural, less political review. Over the following years, the group promoted leading philosophical debates, especially around Neo-Thomism, personalism and metaphysics, besides having published renowned and new poets, like Jorge de Lima, Murilo Mendes or Vinícius de Moraes.

Amoroso Lima was also a model philosopher and literary critic to young intellectuals, such as Sylvio Elia, Alberto Guerreiro Ramos and Euryalo Cannabrava. One of these young intellectuals was Afrânio Coutinho, who abandoned his medical studies to dedicate himself to literature, which proved not to be a vain decision, since he came to exercise great influence in all academic studies of literature over the twentieth century. His first article in “*A Ordem*” was published in 1936, although it was written a year earlier. Coutinho (1936b, p. 36-51), then 25 year old reader of Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, brought to discussion the problem of Neo-Thomism and Neo-Scholasticism in literary studies. That same year, Jacques Maritain landed in the city of Salvador in Bahia, where he first met Afrânio Coutinho, before continuing his trip to Rio and Buenos Aires. A year later, he published a lecture on the book “*Rimbaud, le drame spiritual*,” written by another French author, Daniel Rops², who was strongly committed to Catholicism, as he used to publish in catholic reviews such as “*La Vie*

² However, by 1935 Coutinho had already published his book “*Daniel Rops e a ânsia do sentido novo da existência*.”

Intellectuelle” and “Sept.” The main theme of Coutinho’s article was the divine wrath, in which he stated a theorization of radical alterity in poetry from the work of Rops, stating, “literature is a magical medium of the unspeakable. The writer is a medium, in other words, the almost unconscious expression of an ‘other’ that speaks by his mouth (Rops)” (COUTINHO, 1936a, p. 40).³

It is quite interesting to know that the future diffuser of the close reading in Brazil was once interested in a spiritualistic understanding of writing. Although enthusiasm was not an unusual problem for literary criticism, which was part of the main argument of Plato’s *Ion*, for example, there always remained a theme related to an exteriority (a sort of magnetism) that affects the writing. This metaphysical reasoning was the basis of Coutinho’s early work. By his citations of Maritain and Rops in his publications after 1935, it is possible to conclude that Coutinho was in some way informed and involved in what was happening within the French avant-garde Catholicism and, by then, had even some personal contact with Jacques Maritain in his short trip to Salvador.

Meanwhile, Maritain was arriving in Rio de Janeiro a few days later. He was received by Alceu Amoroso Lima, who by then was one of the most prominent personalities in Brazil’s cultural agenda and an undisputed leader in catholic intelligentsia (See COMPAGNON, 2003). The main idea widespread by Alceu was the rediscovery of a moral hierarchy, that is to say, the abstraction of the material reality in order to select an objective teleology, in some part very close to Thomism. But his public activity was far from contemplative. He intended to assemble a cultural elite to bring order, principles and discipline to institutions and to ordinary people, protecting them from communism and secularization, which in part was the logical continuation of Jackson’s conservative ideas. In that sense, there should have been political essays in favor of the diffusion of the ideas, poems for an approximation to the faith and literary criticism for the moralization of the arts. In short, actions were always aimed for a conclusion, they were always a medium for an objective finality. So the political

³ “Assim, a litteratura é um meio magico de apreensão do inefavel. O escriptor é medium, é, por assim dizer, a expressão quase inconsciente de um outro que falla por sua boca (Rops).”

activity should also have been indirect. Even after Jackson's death, Amoroso Lima kept the legacy of his friend. In 1932, he co-founded the Catholic Electoral League (LEC), which wasn't a party, but rather an activity to guide people to act and vote in the most appropriate way. This worked very well for them, since the Constitution of 1932 partly reconnected State and Church and, in 1935, he became director of the Brazilian Catholic Action. Curiously, this initiative took place in France. The LEC experience was unprecedented in the world and came to be discussed in "*La Vie Intellectuelle*," the mainly catholic cultural French review to which Maritain contributed, in January of 1934, in an article by Jean Duriau:

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Mais nous souhaitons vivement que l'action de la ligue catholique soit des plus efficaces. L'expérience serait intéressante à étudier et à imiter après avoir subi la contagion pernicieuse du Nord du continent américain, l'Europe aurait alors avantage à chercher des modèles au-dessous de l'Équateur et à se remettre résolument à l'ouvrage en vue d'un établissement des valeurs. (30 novembre 1933)". (DURIAU, 1934, p. 51)

Although there were several contacts among Brazilian and French intellectuals regarding Neo-Thomist doctrine or catholic militancy, there is no indication that they became dialogues. Maritain's presence in Brazil did not guarantee an immediate spread of his liberal ideas. On the contrary, even though he was respected for his views on Thomism, he was not really known for his new positions in the 1930's. When Maritain came to Rio de Janeiro in 1936, his most impactful book, "*Integral Humanism*," was still being published. While his first studies were more directed towards Thomism in a strictly theoretical vision, his new book brought new ideas of democracy and the acceptance of some principles of communism, as well as the condemnation of autocracy, which in part were grounds to a critique of dictatorships such as the nationalists in Spain or the rise of Hitler and Mussolini.

Maritain did not stay for long. He continued the trip to Buenos Aires, where he found a larger opposition among conservative catholics than in his Brazilian experience. Thus, while Maritain spoke in the "*Cursos de Cultura Católica*," a great part of the lay intellectuals and the Argentine church itself condemned his ideas as heretical, especially because he did not see in the nationalist Spain a crusade of faith as

it was asserted by the Monsignor Gustavo Franceschi, director of the “*Criterio*” review, the equivalent publication of “*A Ordem*” in Argentina. With this polarity of conservative and humanist catholics, Maritain found better reception with intellectuals of liberal direction of the “*Sur*” group, especially with Eduardo Mallea and Victoria Ocampo. They also refused to see virtue in the reactionary war in Spain, as it is possible to read in their review in August of 1937, when the violence in the country was condemned: “We are interested in political affairs only when they are linked with the spiritual. We raise our voice when Christian principles, the very foundations of spirit, show themselves menaced by a certain politics” (POSICIÓN de *Sur*, 1937, p. 7).⁴

The intellectual shifts during wartime

In the upcoming years, war will be a changing point to the polarization of catholic intellectuals in both sides of the Atlantic and, as their contacts were usually followed mainly by tension rather than compliance, it is not possible to say that Argentinian or Brazilian intellectuals simply adhered to French *renouveau catholique* or Neo-Scholasticism. During wartime, the American continent became home for intellectuals such Maritain, who lived in New York, and Georges, who lived in Brazil, both very active in defense of the French liberation from the Axis. During exile, the dialog among French and Brazilian, Argentinian or even North-American intellectuals became much more lasting and effective. Brazil received, besides Bernanos, authors like Gabriel Mistral, Otto Maria Carpeaux and Stefan Zweig, all of them linked with the catholic intelligentsia, some by location, like Zweig, or by some common interests, like Gabriela Mistral and especially Bernanos. But their relationship was far from being stable, as the letters from Bernanos to Alceu written in 1938 suggest. They were published only ten years later in the review *Esprit*, directed by Emanuel Mounier, in which the French writer criticizes the blind view of the members of the “*Ação Católica*” in Brazil before the canonical hierarchy and the refusal to deal with immediate problems, arguing that “you all betray an idea inspired in the Holy Spirit, some by malice, some by laziness...

⁴ Posición de *Sur*. *Sur*. Buenos Aires, n° 35, p. 7, ago. 1937. Original: “nos interesa la cosa política sino cuando está vinculada con lo spiritual. Cuando los principios cristianos, los fundamentos mismos del espíritu aparecen amenazados por una política, entonces levantamos nuestra voz.”

You will all pay dearly for this treason against the Holy Spirit” (BERNANOS, 1950, p. 191).⁵ This shows Bernanos’ spontaneous faith in contrast with the serenity and sometimes conformism of Alceu, who, at the time, was opposing the totalitarian regimes with a mild attitude. However, this tumultuous friendship would also be a sort of awakening so that both could review their political and moral ideas.

During World War II, indeed, the intellectuals’ movements were not made in a single direction because there were also exchanges happening within the American continent. An example of this is Afrânio Coutinho’s stay in New York from 1942 to 1947, when he accepted the job of secretary for the Brazilian edition of *Selections of Reader’s Digest*, which would soon become the most read review in Brazil. This is a turning point if we compare his new occupation with some of his previous writing, in which American thoughts and education were viewed with inquietude.⁶ The translation was made by another famous intellectual, Octávio Mangabeira, who at the time was living in exile in New York for his contributions to the fascists in Brazilian *Integralismo*. The Brazilian version of the review did not show many modifications. The only change from the American version was, at first sight, some puzzles with phrases like “improve your vocabulary” and a collage of quotes from national authors, such as Machado de Assis, Mario de Andrade and Érico Veríssimo, forming a jester in a page called “Picturesque and Poetic Phrases.” Latin America in general was portrayed by images of animals or landscapes in the cover, curiously always through pictures, not written content, albeit in a certain picturesque and poetic way. Apart from directing the review of the American Way of Life, Afrânio Coutinho took some courses at Columbia University with very interesting personalities, such as Maritain, who was exiled in the United States at the time and with whom he became close.⁷

Coutinho also took courses with other famous personalities, such as Roman Jakobson and René Wellek, whose ideas proved to be

5 Original: “vous trahissez, les uns par malice, les autres par lâcheté, une idée visiblement inspiré par l’Esprit Saint, que vous paierez tous très cher cette trahison vers l’Esprit Saint.”

6 One example of these texts can be seen in COUTINHO, Afrânio. *Vocação da America: Ocidente e Continente. A Ordem*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 20, n. 9, p. 352-360, set. 1938.

7 Those memories were related in the book: *Jacques Maritain*. Afrânio Coutinho (org.). Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 1945.

very important to his future, in which he adhered to many postulates of the American New Criticism, as well as Russian formalism. Not long after his return to Brazil, Coutinho started a newspaper column called “*Correntes Cruzadas*” in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* from Rio de Janeiro, which lasted from 1950 to 1961. It was an attempt to oppose to subjective and superfluous criticism, or what he called an impressionist critique, since friends and enemies were publishing short judgmental notes that he felt should be replaced with more serious content. Coutinho started a campaign for more scientific analyses, making use for literary studies in universities and, most of all, seeing to it that new critique began with a return to the text in its individuality and not a mere historical and moral illustration, nor a sociological discussion. It was time to separate the real literary criticism as a study with its own methodology, from the journalistic review, where the immediate impressions of reader was the main goal and even served as illustration of some theses for any human sciences, except for literature itself (COUTINHO, 1975).

But how is it possible that Afrânio Coutinho, one of the major supporters of the Neo-Thomist way of thought with his essays and translations of Daniel Rops and Jacques Maritain in the 1930’s, whose main goal was to establish the concept of universality for reading texts, could, in just a few of years abroad, return with an opposite theory that intended to focus on its individuality? One possible answer to that question is that Neo-Thomism and New Criticism are not really opposites, but different sides of the ancient problem that surrounds the universal and the individual. In Neo-Thomism, this is seen more clearly, but even for New Criticism it is not hidden. On the contrary, it is very explicit. Maybe the first argument that opens the widely known “Theory of Literature” of Wellek and Warren is based on the proposal to rediscover the importance of individuality in the work of art. He states:

Why do we study Shakespeare? It is clear we are not primarily interested in what he has in common with all men, for we could then as well study any other man, nor are we interested in what he has in common with all English men, all men of Renaissance, all Elizabethan dramatists, because in that case we might just as well study Dekker or Heywood. We want rather to discover what is peculiarly Shakespeare’s, what makes Shakespeare Shakespeare;

and this is obviously a problem of individuation and value. Even in studying a period or movement or one specified national literature, the literacy student will be interested in it as an individuality with characteristic features and qualities which set in off from other similar groupings. (WARREN; WELLEK, 1973, p. 19)

In the same study, it worth remembering that Wellek rejects the Neo-Thomist literary thought because of its excessive abstractions and absolutist way of thinking texts in its universality. To sum up, both Neo-Scholastic and New Criticism share the same distinction between universality and individuality and neither of them really reject the other premise. In the end, the difference lies in the predominance of the individual over the universal for New Criticism and the prevalence of the universal for Neo-Scholasticism.

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Incidentally, Alceu Amoroso Lima did not travel to the United States in the 1940's and never made the discussion of individuality explicit in his writings about literature. He was, however, somewhat famous abroad. By the end of the war, he had already been published in reviews related to lay catholics such as "*Cristerio*" in Argentina and "*La Vie Intellectuelle*" in France and had formed a network of correspondents worldwide. Nevertheless, after the death of his closest friends from within the clergy, like Dom Sebastião Leme or the priest Leonel Franca, he lost support for his projects in Brazil and did not keep up the same pace of the 1930's during the 40's. In 1949, Alceu traveled in a pilgrimage through Europe and, in January of 1951, he lastly accepted to travel to the United States in order to take, from 1951 to 1953, the post of Director of the Cultural Department of the Pan-American Union, organ of the Organization of American States (OAS). As he was arriving, he began to think about individuality. His first impressions were the fact that the Americans lacked a thought in an afterlife and that they were wardens of a legacy, so their imperative of life had to be personal triumph. He stated:

Life is a victory to conquer, not a heritage to enjoy, they seem to keep saying. And, because of that, they have developed an extraordinary energy and toughness. Americans are definitely capable of great deeds... No other people in the world knew how to develop a welfare philosophy that is more dangerous or more complete.

The pioneer spirit remains mainly intact. (LIMA, 1995)⁸

Some time later, his texts became ever more affirmative and critical of the American political situation, where he argued against Republicans and later lamented the election of Eisenhower. After his return, his previous pace was somehow back, but he did not dedicate himself to programmatic writing anymore. His main commitment as a literary critic is subtler, with publications with less political appeal such as his “*Introdução à literatura brasileira.*” Still, his political books like “The American Reality,” in which he points out much of his criticism regarding American politics and way of life while he lived there, or “*Revolução Reação ou Reforma*” (1964), a book that rejected any form of authoritarianism, published in the same year of the military coup d’état in Brazil, an act for which he became known as an important voice in the country’s leftist political front. At any rate, these kinds of reactions would sound somehow very unlikely in the 1930’s, primarily because he had always been very diplomatic and careful with his words, despite being very present in public debates. He even wrote the program for the Christian Democratic Party in Brazil in 1945 without applying for it. In the 1950’s, however, he seemed to be more assertive, not only because of a democratic change in his political thought or a form of moralization, but mainly because he started to see his own activities as an act itself. That applies to texts, which by now were their own finality, and not media for separable consequences, revealing a sort of pragmatism after his return from the United States in the 1950’s. In his book “*Problemas de Estética,*” published in 1960, Alceu demonstrates recognizing the objectivity of the work of art with its own rules besides man and nature:

Art is the domain increasingly expanding of freedom, from architecture to poetry. Besides, along with the different species of art, the arts of creation, verbal or plastic, are the own expression of undefined human possibilities, for which man, exercising his freedom, crates a new world in the image and likeness of his inventive power that begins, by the way, to have a

8 Original: “A vida é uma vitória a conquistar e não uma herança a desfrutar, parecem estar sempre dizendo. E para isso desenvolvem uma energia e uma tenacidade realmente extraordinárias. Os americanos são realmente capazes de grandes feitos... Nenhum povo no mundo soube desenvolver, como esse, uma filosofia do bem-estar mais completa e mais perigosa [...] O espírito ‘pioneer’ continua mais ou menos intacto.”

life of its own and objective, side by side with natural and human forms. Art is, then, the own domain of freedom ruled itself by the objective requirements of the developing masterpiece, or by the expansion of the subject, in music and poetry". (LIMA, 1960, p. 31)

More than words

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Among the catholic network of intellectuals and artists established during World War II, the two examples of Brazilian intellectuals, Afrânio Coutinho and Alceu Amoroso Lima, can demonstrate, by unusual means, how the literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth century went from being teleological and moralistic to a much more logical and free way of reading. During the 1930's, the United States were seen with exaggerated precaution and its ideals were considered the personification of individualism, which was censured in the name of personalism or Neo-Thomism, both metaphysical conceptions. The overture to the United States and its academic ideas by Brazilian lay catholic intelligentsia was not just a political position based on the contemporary war campaign. It was a symptom of a completely new way of seeing culture, in which intellectuals from different countries co-existed and new dialogues emerged, so much that that many of their conceptions would be changed forever. Amoroso Lima's ideals would be, after the interwar period and his stay in America during the 1950's, a turning point for a more comprehensive experience of the world and an overture to strive for pragmatic solutions to concrete political problems instead of searching for timeless answers for everything. Much of this new Alceu was expressed during the dictatorship, where the once catholic leader became a scathing critic of the military regime (See MENDES, 1996).

The real contact of Jacques Maritain and Afranio Coutinho in the United States was also an important changing point. More than a simple defense of American values partly explained by his activities in the *Selections of Reader's Digest*, his stay among catholics and New Critics had a profound impact on his life and career. His literary criticism begin to consider the text in its concreteness, v. g., it's own individuality. Indeed, this discussion has much of a scholastic character, but it surpasses the mere speculation as this shift for the individual brought a new way of reading and even of thought. Nevertheless, this



new approach has also strengthened an autonomist view of literature. Autonomy should not be interpreted as synonym for national, but as a new approach of literary criticism based on the text.

It is possible to conclude that these war and post-war years have produced a rich and complex network of intellectuals across many continents, which makes it possible to imagine a sort of affiliation of the intellectuals from the American continent with the ones in Europe. Thus, these relationships have not yet been fully investigated and, for that, there is still much work to be done, especially when they are understood as a great network and not only dialectics of mentors and disciples. Even if Brazilians, Argentineans and French had shared the same postulates, especially taking Maritain in great account for his pure metaphysics, the political actions taken by the church in Brazil, such as the electoral league, was a model for France's catholic intelligentsia and even Argentina's. However, it is impossible not to discern the radical change that the cultural interchanges by European and American intellectuals has provoked when the exiled and the hosts necessarily needed to establish more horizontal dialogues, new ways of dealing with practical problems, as well as a propensity to change themselves: like Amoroso Lima and Coutinho did.



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