

The Circular of Teófilo Otoni: The Luzia Democracy of the Washed Necktie

Christian Edward Cyril Lynch

Christian Edward Cyril Lynch

is a professor at the Institute of Social and Political Studies of the State University of Rio de Janeiro [*Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*].
E-mail: clynch3@hotmail.com

Translation by Frank Hanson

He was born on November 27th, 1807 in the old town of Vila do Príncipe (Princeville), now called Serro, in the State of Minas Gerais. (MG). He was brought up in a family with close ties to politics and at the age of 19 was sent to the Court to do a course at the Marine Academy (currently the Naval College). Once in Rio, he joined the Freemasons and moved towards the liberal opposition. Following a request for the termination of his course at the Academy in Marinhaem in 1830, (as a result of his activities in political opposition), Otoni returned to his home town where he began to publish a newspaper with republican tendencies called *A Sentinela do Serro* [The Sentinel of Serro]. After the abdication of Dom Pedro I, he agreed to reach a compromise with the monarchy provided it became democratic. He ceased to carry out journalistic activities the following year so that he could support the coup d'état through reformist means. Otoni became a provincial deputy in 1835 and was elected as a general deputy three years later. He strenuously opposed the Regression Movement and supported the Additional Act against the conservative reaction. Following the foundation of the Liberal Party, he became a leading supporter of the Majority Coup (1840), in the hope of curbing this movement. Following the return of the Conservatives to power, he took part in the Liberal Revolution of Minas (1842). After being defeated and imprisoned in Santa Luzia, he was freed when an amnesty was granted a year and a half later (1844). He then became a deputy again but left the Chamber when the Conservatives were returned to power. With the capital he had accumulated from his business dealings (he was a textile trader at the Court), he set up the Rio Mucuri Navigation and Trading Company, and founded the town of Philadelphia, now called Teófilo Otoni. He was elected Senator on three occasions although the Emperor always refused to ratify the decision and he became active again in the Chamber of Deputies in 1860. This was when he was able to take advantage of the successive refusals of the Emperor to choose him as Senator by publishing the famous *Circular to the voters of Minas Gerais*. It was the common practice in the 19th Century for candidates as deputies or senators to communicate with their electorate by means of letters in which they explained the reasons for their candidature and outlined their programmes. Following the example of another liberal from Minas Gerais, Bernardo Pereira de Vasconcelos (1827), Otoni made his Circular a strident and disorderly manifesto of a liberal democratic nature, which signalled his return to the Chamber of Deputies as the head of the liberal faction called "traditional". In 1864, he was finally sent up to the Senate by the Emperor; following the rise to power of the Conservatives in 1868, he joined the progressivists in reconstituting the Liberal Party. He died on 17th October, 1869, before reaching the age of 62.

From a formal standpoint, the *Circular* of Otoni represented a historical criticism of Brazilian politics from the time of Independence, and is narrated in the form of a memoir of his career. He sought to provide "an account of my modest life in politics and offer a just criticism of the contemporary facts in which I have been able to take part" (OTONI, 1916, p. 53). It was a narrative that emanated from what the candidate presented to the public as a model of civic virtue. He put himself forward as a modern "son of Plutarch",

who followed the “customs of the ancients” (the Romans) in making a public disclosure of the “acts of his life, however modest they may be”, thus exposing them to “the full glare of public scrutiny” (OTONI, 1916, pp. 57 e 248). He was always distinguished by his commitment to the public sphere together with his doctrinaire consistency and tireless support of freedom. Otoni describes his career as being interwoven with the political trajectory of Brazil itself. “My program lies in the antecedents of my life” (OTONI, 1916, p. 249). He never indulged in flattery or speculated “about politics”; “a disinterested outlook and independence” were always the watchwords of his political career; he was always concerned about “his domestic responsibilities and acting in a human way” (OTONI, 1916, pp. 245 e 248). At a time when so many old “traditional liberals” had died or resigned from their positions – for example, his former mentor the Viscount de Itaboraí, and Bernardo de Vasconcelos himself, Otoni appeared before the electorate with the image of someone who had been “an unswerving adherent of freedom and constitutional government from his earliest years” (OTONI, 1916, p. 57). From a party political standpoint, the old *luzia* Teófilo Otoni sought through the Circular to return to the political scene as the undisputed head of the “genuine” Brazilian liberal tradition: “Freedom is possible; it is easy to set up a free system and it is much more stable than the arbitrary governments of any denomination” (OTONI, 1916, p. 70). The “traditional liberalism” that Otoni was affiliated to, was something that was guided by the Republican federative model of the United States (in line with Jeffersonian principles) and which left its imprint on the first twenty years of autonomous life in Brazil. Apparently it concerned the “exalted” kind of liberalism that was rife at the end of the First Reign and the time of the promulgation of the Additional Act (1834). It was designed by “men with very advanced liberal ideas, who swore by the blood of the Canecas and Ratcliffes”, and who were concerned with “setting up a government of the people for themselves in the strongest sense of the word”. Otoni complained that “the driving-seat of the revolution” which had resulted in the abdication of Dom Pedro I, had been seized by the moderates “who had only joined our appeal for the justice of God at the last minute!” (OTONI, 1916, p.69). For this reason, 7th April 1831 had been for them a *journée de dupes*. [Reference to the French “Day of the Dupes” in November 1630]

However, this identification with “exalted” liberals did not pass without comment and was hedged in with safeguards. The then editor of the *Sentinela do Serro* criticized the conservative excesses of the moderates, “because they perverted the revolution” and with their reservations about democracy, “devoted their energy to stigmatizing the anarchic excesses that were applauded by the democratic publications of the Court” (OTONI, 1916, p. 70). The leader from Minas Gerais put himself forward as “a peaceful democrat”, or rather as being an “exalted” and level-headed person who advocated that “the liberal monarchists exchange their principles and thus be able to merge with all the different shades of the liberal monarchists where all the nuances of the liberal party coalesce” (OTONI, 1916, p. 71). In his view, the kind of democracy that should be pursued was not Jacobin, violent or “exalted” but a “democracy, that was strident and overheated and from the middle class – the *washed necktie democracy* – the democracy that repudiates the despotism of turbans and the tyranny of a single individual with the same degree of loathing” (OTONI, 1916, p. 70). This “middle-class democracy” would be formed by the landowners and urban property owners, wholesalers, financiers and prominent liberal professionals. The civic mobilization of the “lower classes” (the ignorant peasant farmers and poor inhabitants of the towns and cities) would lead to “anarchy and later military despotism which oppresses almost all the so-called Republics of the former

Spanish colonies.” (OTONI, 1916, p. 73). Although his model was that of the United States democracy, it was necessary to take account of the differences between both countries at the time, when thinking about introducing democracy into Brazil where there was a lack of awareness of civic responsibilities. For this reason, “the education that there is here, has not prepared us to be at the same level as the North Americans” And he concluded: “we lack the learning and political morality that distinguish our compatriots” (OTONI, 1916, p. 73). The threat of anarchy that could be triggered by an eventual victory of the “exalted” was represented by Otoni as a sufficient reason to abandon the ideal of installing the republic and espousing the ideal of a *republican monarchy* that was to be attained by means of constitutional reforms which made “broad concessions to the democratic principle” (OTONI, 1916, p.70). Hence although in rhetorical terms, he was affiliated to the “exalted” line of Borges da Fonseca, Otoni’s political plans were closer to those cherished by the left-wing moderates led by Diogo Antônio Feijó: that of the *democratic monarchy*. From an institutional standpoint, the democratization of the monarchy entailed strengthening the Chamber of Deputies and marked the advent of a system of government that was genuinely parliamentary. This could only be carried out through reforms that constrained the “fatal attributes” of the “Moderator Power”; organizing the general councils of the regions into provincial assemblies and curtailing the tenure of the Senate by making it short-lived and an elected body (OTONI, 1916, pp. 235-236).

719

With regard to the Moderator Power, Otoni regarded as unacceptable the conservative constitutional interpretation which had recently been sanctioned by the Marquis of São Vicente in his *Public Law and an Analysis of the Constitution of the Empire*, according to which nobody could be held responsible for acts practised by the Crown in the exercise of its powers. It was the same as recognizing the legality of the vestiges of absolutism in a fully constitutional monarchy. For this reason, he deplored doctrinaire considerations that legitimized the supremacy of the Emperor in the political system: “*Moderator, Perpetual Defendor, key of the political organization*, are long-winded terms, which sometimes have value in the circumstances for which they have been coined but which are empty of meaning on normal occasions” (OTONI, 1916, p. 89). Thus it seemed to be essential for him to abolish the Council of State which had naturally led to the Moderator Power and to hold this new body responsible for its acts together with those of the ministers of State, (as had already occurred with the Executive Power), and in this way ensure the liberal character of the Brazilian monarchy. In abolishing the Council of State and decentralizing the State through the setting up of provincial assemblies, the Additional Act (1834) had been “a memorable victory for a peaceful democracy”; “a pledge of the alliance” of the moderates with “the most forward-looking liberals” (OTONI, 1916, p. 95). In the belief that it was only through these reforms that Brazil could go forward “in security to a state of perfection and happiness and thus rise to the status of the country of Washington, Jefferson and Franklin”, the Additional Act was for Otoni a “symbol of faith” and all his life could be devoted to its seervice (OTONI, 1916, p. 74 e 75). Otoni thus argued in defence of a broad interpretation that the provinces made of the Additional Act and the argument that the legitimacy of monarchical institutions rested solely in their democratic and constitutional origin and owed nothing to the dynasty of the Braganças or the public acclamations of the first Emperor (OTONI, 1916, p. 171). On the basis of the “right to insurrection against tyranny”, Otoni also justified resorting to exceptional measures such as a coup d’état or “revolution”. Although “the school of true liberalism” was “a school of well understood legality and order”, there were circumstances “in which the letter of the law dies and its spirit comes to life”. He went on to explain this more clearly: “In certain

circumstances and on certain occasions, those who execute the laws and Constitution take on the responsibility of not entirely complying with the letter of the law but rather with its spirit, when there are powerful reasons for adopting this procedure". (OTONI, 1916, 121). In other words, revolution was justified in defence of the (liberal) Constitution against its distortion by a literal (conservative) interpretation. This is exactly what took place in 1842: the liberals of Minas Gerais had risen up not against the Constitution but in its defence against the conservative government that had violated it in an attempt to promulgate unconstitutional laws of *Regression* (OTONI, 1916, p. 177).

For this reason, the main adversaries of Otoni in the Circular are the conservatives who had emerged from the split in the moderate Party in 1837. They sought to "annul the Additional Act", in an unconstitutional way, either through a hidden path of judicial interpretation or by restoring the Council of the State by common Law. Under the influence of Justiniano da Rocha, Otoni argued that there were "two principles which are always in conflict in every possible government – the progressive and the conservative principle" (OTONI, 1916, p. 160). The conservatives were thus portrayed as the modern version of the old *coimbrãos* [Portuguese immigrants] or realists of the First Reign – and dubbed the "Portuguese Party" and "Absolutist Party" –, while he portrayed the modern "traditional liberals" as the valiant successors of the liberals of the First Reign, who had brought about independence – the "Patriotic Party" and "the Brazilian Party". For this reason the *saquaremas* [Conservative Party named after the town of Saquarema in Rio de Janeiro State] did not exactly comprise a single party. It included an "absolutist faction", the "oligarchy"; "the ambitious group" which "subjugates ministers, regents, regencies and even his majesty himself" with the aim of overthrowing "the monuments of civilization and progress that the patriots of the First Reign had erected through the legislation of the country" (OTONI, 1916, pp. 96-97); It comprised "a group of men who combined their influence and intelligence to take advantage of the Second Reign. By instilling the monarchy with imaginary fears and dangers, they managed to entrench themselves in permanent lucrative sinecures where they could stir up public demonstrations, financial upheavals and real seditions to their heart's content, and which in their capacity as taskmasters they are called on to restrain." (OTONI, 1916, pp. 154-155). Between 1844 and 1848, he espoused the prevailing ideological *saquarema* cause when his party was nominally in power. This sought to emasculate liberalism but without touching on the question of *Regression*. This is why he retired from politics in 1851 when the liberal leaders proved to be "willing to make more concessions to the personal government than what I had deemed admissible" (OTONI, 1916, p. 225).

Thus in the opinion of Otoni, the *saquaremas* were largely responsible for restoring the constitutional interpretation that granted autonomy to the Moderator Power which, together with the ministers of the State, conferred legitimacy on the *personal government* of the Emperor. This was for him the main problem of Brazilian politics because the "personal government" distorted the representative government by being a synonym of parliamentarianism. "In Brazil, the Emperor chooses the policies that will be given prominence and periodically determines the length of their duration. He also appoints the prime minister who must represent each party, decides what colleagues the prime minister should have and is able to turn down the Ministry's requests for the resignation of trusted staff" (OTONI, 1916, p. 223). However, Otoni did not hold Dom Pedro II responsible for the personal government but the ministers of State, who succumbed to the wishes of the Court and preferred to flatter the monarch by reminding him "that the

role of constitutional monarchs is essentially passive" (OTONI, 1916, pp. 215 e 223). To eradicate the cancer of personal power, it was essential to deprive the government of its ability to influence the elections. Hence it was the "Party of the election campaign" (OTONI, 1916, p. 247), or in other words, the advent of a uninominal majority voting system, which sought to combat electoral fraud and had put the "Nation" (that is the "middle class") in control of Parliament and as a result, of national politics. As well as struggling for reforms which could make viable "the reality of the constitutional system", Otoni also promised to support the end to arbitrary imprisonment; the abolition of compulsory conscription and the effective separation of judicial and police powers, which had become blurred during the period of the conservative "Regression" (OTONI, 1916, p. 249). In the end, it did not seem very difficult to put Brazilian politics in the right direction; it was enough to obtain general support so that any cabinet would ensure "the true and faithful execution of the constitution, freedom and serious management of the elections, as well as integrity in the economy and handling of public finances" (OTONI, 1916, p. 201).

721

Following the historic victory achieved by the liberals in 1860 in the "white handkerchief campaign", the *Circular* immediately became the main ideological benchmark of progressive liberalism in Brazil, until the publication of the Republican Manifesto. However, this did not check the influence of the work. Apart from the uncertain circumstances of the period in which it was written, the *Circular* survived in three respects: first as a model of how a "genuine" liberal candidate should appear, an image that has been repeated in the posterity of several illustrious figures – the most emblematic of whom was Rui Barbosa, in his speech on the presidential platform of 1909 ("My program is reflected in my life"). Secondly, the *Circular* remained as a perfect model of *luzia* historiography or in other words, a critical narrative of the authoritarian transgressions of the Empire and as such, it was appropriated and imitated by other traditional liberals (such as Tito Franco) and later by republicans (such as Saldanha Marinho and Quintino Bocaiúva). Following the fall of the monarchy, the historic interpretation contained in the *Circular* became the main benchmark of the "traditional republicans" and, in view of this, was almost elevated to the plane of the "official" historiography of the period preceding the Brazilian republican campaign (as can be inferred from the narrative sketched by no less a figure than Campos Sales, the true patriarch of the First Republic, in his classic work *From Propaganda to the Presidency*). Finally, the *Circular* survived as a "classic" account of Brazilian liberalism since it was lifted to a plane where it acted as one of the doctrinaire reference-points of the main Brazilian Liberal Party of the 20th Century, the National Democratic Union (UDN) – as well as in the argument underlying the legitimacy of the coup "to save democracy".

In all these cases, the ideal of the "democracy of the washed necktie", remained present although its elitist tendency had already been criticized by the *saquaremas*: "The democracy of the washed necktie" definitely stems from a particular part of the social aristocracy which prevails throughout all the other classes and excludes them from any participation in public affairs. It is not certain if our present system of government is like this, rather than being a monarchy. All the social classes have equal rights and indirectly take part in the government of the country" (apud ARAÚJO, 1999, p. 179). A similar criticism was levelled at the ideas of the self-proclaimed heirs of *luzianismo* – the udenistas [adherents of the National Democratic Union] – and by the lieutenants, the supporters of the New State and the workers affiliated to the policies of Getulio Vargas, several decades later. This is a sign that the ideological debate between the *luzias* and the *saqueramas* has survived well beyond its original time-frame.

To Cite this Article

722

LYNCH, Christian Edward Cyril. The Circular of Teófilo Otoni: the luzia democracy of the washed necktie [A Circular de Teófilo Otoni: a democracia luzia da gravata lavada]. **Revista Estudos Políticos**: online journal published twice a year by the Laboratory for the Hum(e)an Studies (Laboratório de Estudos Hum(e)anos, Fluminense Federal University, Brazil), and the Center for the Study of Political Theory (Núcleo de Estudos em Teoria Política, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). Rio de Janeiro, Vol.5 | N.2, pp. 716 – 722, December 2014. At: <http://revistaestudospoliticos.com/>.

Bibliographical References

ARAÚJO, Valdeir Lopes. “Teófilo Benedito Otoni: visibilidade e esfera pública no Brasil oitocentista” [Teofilo Benedito Otoni: visibility and the public sphere in 19th Century Brazil]. In: Maria Emília Prado (org). *O Estado como Vocação: idéias e práticas políticas no Brasil oitocentista*. [The State as a vocation: political ideas and practices in 19th Century Brazil] Rio de Janeiro, Access, 1999.

CHAGAS, Paulo Pinheiro. *Teófilo Otoni: ministro do povo*. [Teófilo Otoni: Minister of the People] Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia; Brasília: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1978.

MAGALHÃES, Basílio. *A Circular de Teófilo Otoni*. [The Circular of Teófilo Otoni] Separated from Tome LXXVIII, part 2a., of *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*. [Review of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute] Rio de Janeiro, 1916.

MARSON, Izabel Andrade. “O Império da Revolução: matrizes interpretativas dos conflitos na sociedade monárquica” [The Empire of the Revolution: interpretations of the conflicts in the Monarchy]. In: Marcos Cezar de Freitas. (org.). *Historiografia Brasileira em Perspectiva*. [Brazilian Historiography in Perspective] São Paulo, Contexto, 1998.

NABUCO, Joaquim. *Um Estadista do Império*. [A Statesman of the Empire] 5ª. Edição. Rio de Janeiro, Topbooks, 1998 [1897].

OTONI, Teófilo Benedito. *Circular dedicated to the gentlemen who elect the senators in the province of Minas Gerais in the current four-year period and especially aimed at the gentlemen who elect the deputies for the second electoral district of the same province for the next legislature*. Separated from Tome LXXVIII, part 2a., of the *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*. [Review of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute] Rio de Janeiro, 1916.