

Black Tropicalist in Power

From the Margins of Counterculture to the Stage of Change

The legacy of Tropicália or Tropicalismo¹ is a widely discussed topic. The subject of this study², however, is to examine Ministro da Cultura Gilberto Gil's rocking career, not as a guitar man but as a key political figure in Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government, a man with the power to request and distribute funds for the development of the arts and culture. The focus will be on the relationship between Gil's nine-month performance as the glowing bureaucrat of Lula's government and the underpinning concepts of the movement launched in 1967 by Caetano Veloso, Tom Zé, Gal Costa, Gil himself, and others. The central query is the extent to which Gil's positions, proposals, and actions in office suggest the persistence of tropicalist art concepts and political views. Academic literature, newspaper reports, and television news programs constitute the principal source of information for the analysis of the Minister's exploits (which will be featured in chronological order).

In reality, Gilberto Gil's counterculture activities in the second half of the 1960s were not at all marginal. He already was a famous pop singer by 1968 and had directed two weekly television shows before the end of that year. A couple of decades later, his art had even become "canonical", to use a term of Liv Sovik's to describe today's status of tropicalist art (113-114). The term seems quite apt. This is so despite the fact that Gil was a radically innovator musician formerly jeered and physically hurt by conservative nationalists. Considered a politically subversive artist, he was jailed and sent into a two-and-a-half-year exile because of his debunking of bourgeois values and religious symbols and his protest against a reigning draconian federal

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1. The semantic difference between these two terms most often used interchangeably is actually spelled out by a prolific scholar in the field of Brazilian popular music, Charles Perrone: the former being the daring art produced on «the heroic phase», between 1967 and 1969; and the latter, its aftermath and lingering influences in Brazil and the rest of the world (see *Topos* 3-5). Major studies on Tropicalist art are found in Calado (1997), Dunn (2001), Favaretto (1996), Fonseca (1993), Johnson (2000), Perrone & Dunn (2001), and Veloso (2002) (see bibliography).
 2. Special thanks to philosopher and friend Richard Hogan, for his time to discuss and suggest changes to this manuscript.

government. But since January 2, 2003, this former renegade has been Brazil's full-time Minister of Culture.

One can infer that for Lula's administration, Brazil in the early 21st century is very different from what it was in the 1960s, when it needed to borrow ideas to push for drastic changes. Gil and Lula share a considerable amount of utopian ideals and actually envision a role of leadership in the world for Brazil as Brazilian art, cultural industry, and other economic activities acquire further prominence in today's globalized world. Approximately six months after Lula's inauguration, Kenneth Maxwell (*The New York Review*, 3 July 2003: 29) articulated a convincing argument on Lula's self-attributed role of leadership among developing nations «as a Latin American leader who is playing by the rules of the game»

However, Lula's greatest challenges are clearly not on the international front, but at home, where his approval rates started to drop to disturbing levels in late 2003. Now with eighteen months of experience (nearly one third of his four-year term) behind his back, Lula has vented his own frustration at his compatriots' impatience. A few weeks after an embarrassing and scandalous incident that took place in May 2004, which involved Lula and the *New York Times* correspondent in Brazil, Larry Rohter³, the president declared to another reporter from that same newspaper, Barry Bearak (*The New York Times Magazine* 27 June 2004: 34): «When the conservative right governed the nation for 10, 15, 20 or 30 years, no one demanded results. But when it's us who have won, people want us to do in one year what they haven't done in 50».

Bearak's assessment of Lula's government is a mixed chant of accomplishments and disappointments, faith and hardship. In one of his best metaphors the reporter implies that Lula, a very poor child of 50 years ago, «ended up in the midst of democracy's great folk dance and somehow emerged as a vessel for the hopes of the country» (59). Singer and songwriter Gilberto Gil's actions in the federal government have helped Lula carry that same flag of hope. As far as his first nine months in power are concerned, Gil's contribution has been inspiring, but not devoid of controversy and uproar. It shares Lula's utopian goals of national and international harmony and social betterment without shying away from the inevitable hurdles and pragmatic ways to reinvent and fix society through art and culture.

A Bustling Start

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3. In «Brazilian Leader's Tippling Becomes National Concern» Rohter suggested that Brazilians at large feared that the president's drinking habit played a role in his inability to do what they expected him to do in office. The reporter clearly ended up writing such a poor news story that it would not allow him to pass a Journalism 101 class. The author not only gave too much credit to Lula's political enemies but also refrained from including other views on the issue (which would certainly prove that his suggestion was far from the truth). Unfortunately Lula called the world's attention to that article (and to his own insecurity) by revoking the journalist's work visa. About a week later the president reversed the ban on Rohter after receiving an apologetic letter from the editors of *The New York Times* (even though such editors publicly refused to regard that letter as an apology). At any rate, the damage had already been done to Lula's image by both Rohter's incompetence and Lula's unpredictable burst of authoritarianism. See Rohter's ill-fated report from May 9, 2004 at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/09/international/americas/09lula.html>>.
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Before finishing his third month in office, Ministro Gilberto Gil had already had to face a number of polemical attacks and widespread animosity. For example, his presence at Carnaval festivities in three cities of the country immediately involved him in controversy. Despite the fact that he was entitled to a four-day holiday, like the majority of other Brazilians, he elected to follow an official but also highly entertaining itinerary – one night in Rio, one in Recife, and another two in Salvador – thanks to the use of a small jet-plane, paid for by the federal government. Some commentators, for example Gilberto Dimenstein, of the reputable newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, claimed he should have been forced to pay for such an extravaganza⁴.

During the inauguration of new executive directors for Brasília's Fundação Cultural Palmares, which is dedicated to black Brazilian culture, Gil voiced the view that the role of the institution was not to serve as a watchdog guarding against social and economic inequalities, but rather to foster general education and growth of Afro-Brazilian arts and culture. Journalists and academics, including Carlos Henrique Siqueira, from Universidade de Brasília, denounced the Minister's position as an attempt to transform Palmares into an *órgão ornamental* (a graceful but useless institution) and to kill all politically driven aspirations of the Palmares members⁵.

Between April and May, Gilberto Gil's goals were far-reaching. He traveled to Chile and Peru to propose cultural projects linking Mercosul and other neighboring nations. While performing in Brasília for the first time since becoming Minister of Culture, Gil presented a repertoire of reggae that honored the legacy of Bob Marley, especially his protest songs of freedom and diaspora. His open-air concert lasted until six in the morning, in spite of the fact the minister was scheduled to fly to Angola approximately one hour after the gig⁶. In Africa Gil signed several agreements with the governments of Angola (where large-scale reconstruction is due after many years of civil war) and Ghana (whose capital city has no more than one movie house). Brazil has pledged to provide aid to both countries and many others in Africa, where its music and other cultural products have had an enormous impact.

Before crossing the Atlantic, Gil acted as if his own ministerial office were not scarcely three miles from the stage where he danced and sang to more than 15,000 fans. Quite curiously, he behaved as if he had nothing to do with the federal government in Brasília. As he had done throughout his 2002 tour of *Kaya N'Gan Daya*, the baiano musician made provocative

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4. Dimenstein, who writes a weekly column for *Folha Online*, is a member of *Folha de São Paulo*'s Editorial Board. For his remarks on Gil's Carnaval trips, see <www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/pensata/ult508u105.shtml>. Reports with a much more favorable account of Gil's Carnaval mission are found at <www.carnaval.terra.com.br/interna/0,6750,0I91138EI1158,00.html>, <www.vermelho.org.br/diario/2003/0303/0303_gil_olinda.asp>, and <www.samba-choro.com.br/s-c/tribuna/samba-choro.0303/0003.html>.
 5. See Gil's speech posted on MinC's official site, <www.cultura.gov.br>. Starting on Feb 13, several of Siqueira's commentaries were sent to a group discussion, <cultbrasperspectivas@yahoogrupos.com.br>.
 6. Gil's official web site (<www.gilbertogil.com.br>) displays all lyrics of his songs, including the titles from his latest work. One report on the event is available at <www.estadao.com.br/divirtase/noticias/2003/mai/25/79.htm>.
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grimace toward imaginary bureaucrats and CEOs while repeating «gente estúpida» [stupid people], the refrain of his own song, «Barracos». In private boxes, members of congress listened to his music. One of them was Aloizio Mercadante, the Workers' Party leader of that house. Days before, Gil and Marcadante had exchanged opposing views about the budget for the Ministry of Culture (an office often called just MinC). A revealing aspect of this discussion was that Gil made a point by alluding to the verses of one of his songs, «Super-homem». In response, Marcadante applied a metaphor from another song by the baiano, «Drão»⁷. Gil then proposed that 1% of the 2004 budget be allotted to the Ministry of Culture, since culturally generated revenues were responsible for 1% of Brazil's GNP. The plan finally approved, however, reserved 0.4% of the GNP for Culture – not exactly what Gil had asked for, but an increase of 70% over the 2003's budget established by Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration.

In May, the new minister was embroiled in the most intense polemics in cultural politics since the onset of Lula's term. With the intent of correcting a major problem in the Weffort Law (which had been responsible not only for the sound return of cinematographic production in Brazil, but also for a deplorable abuse of public money), the Ministry of Culture and the Secretariat for Communications issued a plan that caused an immediate uproar. Filmmakers, championed by Carlos Diegues, wrote a grievance manifesto⁸ that strongly criticized the new guidelines that regulated the offering by state-owned companies of partial sponsorship of cinema and other art productions. It was clear that the new guidelines exerted extensive control over the content and ideology of all new projects.

Consequently, a new pejorative nametag circulated in the press: Diegues and company accused Lula's government of «dirigismo cultural», a kind of cultural politics similar to that which had destroyed cinema in the Soviet Union in the name of the proletariat. Lula's administration realized its mistake in time. Before being subject to further criticism, MinC invited an array of artists for a dialogue, and the implementation of the new law was immediately suspended. Everyone was soon to know that Gil had nothing to do with the polemical aspects of the new guidelines. Apparently it originated from the ideas shared by a hard-core faction of the PT. Many of these so-called PT Shiites – or *xiitas do PT*, the pejorative tag employed by more conservative parties and less radical PT members – have felt alienated by Lula's administration and have sought a chance to prevail in cultural politics through the role of the secretary of Communications, Luiz Gushiken.

Multiple Tasks Both at Home and Abroad

June 2003 was perhaps the busiest month in Gil's recent years. He attended various cultural events, such as the Parintins Popular Art Festival, in Amazonas, and the Gramado Film Festival, in Rio Grande do Sul. He

7. A short report on the incident is available at <www.estadao.com.br/divirtase/noticias/2003/mai/21/66.htm>.

8. Fernando Meirelles, director of *City of God*, Laís Bodanzky, of *Bicho de Sete Cabeças*, and Nelson Pereira dos Santos, of *Vidas Secas*, also signed the manifesto, available at <www.estadao.com.br/divirtase/noticias/2003/mai/08/229.htm>.

organized a series of events that gathered more than 5,000 people in 15 large cities of all regions of Brazil. With more than 150 hours of discussions and artistic performances, the *Seminário Cultura para Todos* was Gil's response to the crisis involving the guidelines for private and state sponsorship of cultural projects. On such wave of *seminários* there was a Pernambucan maracatu performance in Londrina; chorinho in Florianópolis; capoeira in Porto Alegre; a Mato Grosso guitar ensemble in Rio; Yorubá chants in Salvador; and Amazonian Pajé dance in São Paulo. For the first time in history the Ministry of Culture heard first-hand about doubts, ideas, and aspirations from the cultural communities of Brazil themselves.

In that busy month of June MinC announced an incipient project for an international television channel that would focus on the federal government's goals and achievements. The Ministry went far beyond panels of discussions and artistic shows, though. It donated R\$ 2,5 million to Museu Nacional de Belas Artes in Rio, which had fallen into a lamentable state of dilapidation and neglect. Brazilian museums in general are in very bad shape. But now MinC has embraced the cause and will allot considerable funds for the newly created Sistema Nacional de Museus. The restoration of historic landmarks is on the agenda as well. After MinC's collaborative work with the state and city administrations, The Estação da Luz in São Paulo, for example, has become Estação Luz da Língua, and will host literacy and cultural workshops and events. In the heart of Rocinha, considered the largest *favela* in Latin America, MinC constructed and inaugurated, in 45 days, the first Casa de Cultura. The Ministry, in partnership with the city and state of Rio, had gathered donations (mostly obtained by Gil's wife, Flora, from Petrobrás, Embratel, and Unesco) that would guarantee the opening of such units at another 19 *favelas* in the country. Casa de Cultura da Rocinha, after its debut on the 16th of June, is employing 40 people and offering arts and sports – from ballet to percussion classes, computer literacy to graffiti art – to 400 people.

Out of the country on an unpaid leave of absence in July, Gil the part-time musician toured Europe without putting aside the ambitions of his full-time job, even if it may seem odd to the most conservative eye. He had undoubtedly become an international icon. While Latin Grammy advertised that he was the recipient of The Celebrity of Year Award⁹, Gil joined Rome mayor, Walter Veltroni, and two former ministers of culture (Jack Lang, from France, and Manuel Carrilho, from Portugal) in their effort to foster culture as a tool against social exclusion. They created the World Forum on Culture, which will take place every three years. However, Gil's double duty did not amuse journalists from a Swiss newspaper, *Le Matin*, which reports somewhat sarcastically on the Brazilian artist's participation in Montreaux as «a minister having fun»¹⁰.

One of the Minister of Culture's most inspirational moments since January, 2003 occurred after he accepted Secretary-General Kofi Annan's invitation to play at the United Nations Assembly Hall on September 19,

9. On the Sept 3 ceremony in Miami, Gil received the Grammy Award from legendary actor and singer Harry Belafonte, who, on the occasion, praised the Brazilian musician for being one of the world's greatest contributors to the development and dissemination of African cultural heritage. See report at <www.ofuxico.uol.com.br/noticias.php?id=102177>.

10. See report at <www.estadao.com.br/divirtase/noticias/2003/jul/11/33.htm>.

2003. Honoring the life of many UN staff members killed in Iraq one month before the event (among them was Brazilian seasoned diplomat Sérgio Vieira de Mello), Gil claimed for world peace in a speech delivered in English, French, and Portuguese. He also interpreted various songs in those languages and in Spanish. His remarkable presentation ended with an anthological moment of international cooperation and harmony through music and dance. Gil surprisingly summoned Annan to the makeshift stage, where the Secretary-General played an *atabaque* and sang with Gil (on the guitar) the song *Toda menina baiana*. The entire audience, approximately 9,000 people from 189 different countries, stood up and danced to the musical grace of Bahian samba-beat¹¹.

Replays and Misunderstandings of Tropicália

A medley of innovation, controversy, and infatuation never seems to come to a halt in Gil's career. Between August and September MinC established a national competition among playwrights with a cash reward of 160,000 reais. On a two-hour interview to journalists of the *Estado de São Paulo*, Gil argued that «erotic comedies are also worthy. They are also movies. They also provide jobs»¹². A few days prior to the interview, he now added, he «had to say a heresy: bad music is also culture». Various artists did not share his evaluation and criticized the Minister's pronouncements on commercial aesthetics. Singer Laura Finnochiato, for example, contends that when «Gil and Caetano [Veloso] support axé music, or pagode, or commercial funk, it's the end of the world»¹³. She adds that both musicians' talents have always been references of musical excellence, but «they should be more coherent with their own art».

The canonization of Tropicalismo did not, as Sovik suggests, necessarily arise in or from understanding it. Mercadante's use of metaphors found in Gil's songs does imply a degree of canonization; Finnochiato's observations, in turn, give away her limited grasp of the tropicalists' ideas. According to its dadaistic concepts, Tropicália came alive as an iconoclast, rebellious, and anti-establishment movement against all prejudices. It was likewise against all movements, including itself, because its message was by nature non-dogmatic. Tropicália was not rhetorical. It usually revealed a multiplicity of views and attitudes (no matter how contradictorily) toward the same social and cultural phenomena, such as modernization, consumer society, and mass communications. Gil's irreverent stage performance in Brasília, hours before flying to Angola, corroborated that same multiplicity of roles and perspectives.

Tropicalist humorous tone, ludicrous allegories, and satirical experimentation target the political narrow-mindedness of the leftist intelligentsia and the appetite for the sublime of show business and art critics. These individuals are responsible for what Veloso would later define as Brazil's «social and cultural apartheid». Regarding himself as more of a tropicalist in

11. See reports on the event at <www.visaonews.com/v/MUNDO/2003/09/WORLD022.aspx> and <www.nordesteweb.com/not07_0903/ne_not_20030920a.htm>.

12. Gil's interview with *Estado de São Paulo* was first published on 13 Sept 2003. It can be found at <www.estado.estadao.com.br/editorias/2003/09/13/cad034.html>.

13. A report that includes Finnochiato's remarks and other various reactions to Gil's interview is available at <www.estado.estadao.com.br/editorias/2003/09/17/cad031.html>.

the late 1990s than in 1967, he explained that this apartheid was caused by the tendency among well-educated Brazilians not only toward separating good and bad taste and pure and trite art in absolute terms, but also toward despising and abhorring any identification with allegedly vulgar and inferior cultural goods, such as highly commercialized music and cinema (Gonçalves & Silva 1999: 7). Gil's polemical opinion on «bad music» reinforced such aesthetic views, and his disagreement with the initial guidelines proposed by Lula's administration testified to those views as well.

Tropicália started out exactly by recognizing the value of cultural goods set on the margins and shadows of that cultural apartheid, said Veloso (*Ibid.*). It retrieved old Brazilian pop music – for example, that of overtly sentimental Vicente Celestino or of sell-out Carmen Miranda – which had been despised as romantic trash in one way or another. Tropicalist themes would take shape in such a fragmented and gaudy way – an approach that came to be known as carnivalization – that always shocked. Eccentric and funny, the new Brazilian music of the late 1960s had employed contrasting images of a nation faced with the dilemmas of modernization against the backdrop of world capitalism. Irreverence and mockery mixed with intentional bad taste and apparent absurdity became the common features of the tropicalists' clothing and stage behavior. During one of Gil and Veloso's perplexing television program series (*Divino, maravilhoso*, in 1968), Veloso did a headstand (a *bananeira*) with his bottom directed toward the audience, while Gil played his old fashion squeeze-box following the chords of «2001, a Hillbilly Odyssey», a tune associated with the ultra modern electric guitar of Serginho, of Os Mutantes.

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Gil has been transformed from being an actor-musician with an old accordion (his first instrument) into a clever and dedicated bureaucrat whose pen is capable of signing laws, allocating money, and disseminating power. Television, cinema, theater, capoeira dance, and other forms of popular culture were once as important to the tropicalists as the musical excellence to which they themselves aspired. Two and a half decades later, the Ministry of Culture's endeavors to provide opportunities for the growth of these forms of art display a similar attitude.

One difference, though, is the new addition. Rather than the Bahian songwriter's sardonic satire over the traditional and the pompous (like Gil's personification of the *negromestiço* Machado de Assis on the cover of his 1968 solo album), one sees the Minister's deep concern with museums and the restoration of historic materials and sites. The second difference comes from Gil's attitude toward negritude and *mestiçagem*. In the 1960s and 1970s Gil's use of traditional West-African tunics and Black Power hair-style seemed to suggest that one of his chief ambitions was to make Brazilians realize that black was beautiful. It was a political initiative that echoed the analogous aesthetic component of the civil rights movements taking place in the United States. Christopher Dunn contends that Gil and Veloso invested their considerable symbolic power of influence into new Afro-Brazilian cultural

movements, such as Black Rio and Movimento Negro Único, which were obviously inspired by African-American identity politics. Unlike other artists, the tropicalists were not afraid that such movements were perceived as radical or decisive (or something not authentically Brazilian). They championed such movements, instead, «as an expression of Afro-diasporic modernity and a vital component of the general critique of authoritarianism in Brazil» (Dunn 2001: 180).

A quarter of a century later, Gil's address to the Palmares Foundation in Brasília does not support racial thoughts of aggression and isolation of Black Brazil – thoughts that should now be seen a mistaken tactic and an avoidable waste of energy and talent. As Minister, Gil rejects extremist racial models and theories from abroad and urges Brazilians to promote negritude as it fits and manifests itself within the profoundly syncretic racial make-up of Brazilian society.

To seize and excel in the role of artistic, political, and economic leadership in a globalized world Gil's endeavors reflect the notion that all segments of Brazilian society itself must participate in Brazil's wave of change. The Casa de Cultura Project in 20 *favelas* is an opportunity for many lives to join in the process. Bringing multiple artistic and cultural communities closer to the Ministry of Culture through Cultura para Todos seminars is another avenue of change. By proposing consortiums and alliances with artists and policy-makers from other South American countries, MinC seeks the same progress.

Tropicalist art concepts and political views have largely withstood Gil's passage through youth and middle age. Perhaps this sexagenarian's admirable level of energy and enthusiasm invite us all to rethink the porous age borders of youth. But in his heart and mind, the joy, humor, and iconoclasm of yesteryear have made room for balance, diplomacy, caution and – why not – a healthy dose of contagious utopianism. If it all depended on Gilberto Gil's charisma and talents, wisdom and conscientiousness, Brazilian culture and world culture would be now entering an enlightened era. It would be a time in which cultural projects would adamantly and objectively fight economic inequality and contribute to tolerance and understanding of human difference. The historical event at the UN Assembly Hall, in which Gil's music translated an ode to peace and world integration through art, ought to be taken as a hint of his endeavor to foster greater empathy and understanding of all peoples toward each other, but most urgently, toward Africans and their descendents worldwide, most of whom bear today the heaviest burden of humanity's uneven and abhorring processes of industrialization and wealth distribution.

While in the old days of counterculture and protest the tropicalists urged the rest of Brazil to discern the real Brazil, as it was, with its beauties and contradictions (at the same time diverse and perverse, pathetic and sublime), now one of the those daring artists has at hand some of the tools to make that nation and the rest of the world a little less bitter, prejudiced, and unjust. Perhaps the lesson is, while there is hope, and Gil has a chest full of it, there is a stage for change.

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