

# Nelson Werneck Sodré and the history of Brazilian press

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## Abstract

*The History of Brazilian Press*, written by Nelson Werneck Sodré, was first published in 1966, almost 50 years ago. This is an extensive work, which provides detailed and valuable information on the Brazilian press from 1808 until the 1960s. Although other books on the subject have been written before and after, even today the work of Sodré remains a synthesis book used by scholars in the country. The aim of this paper is to think about the history of Communication studies in Brazil, establishing a critical discussion with the work of Werneck Sodré, its meaning and importance, as well as propose the need for further elaboration on the subject.

**Keywords:** History. Press. Media. Theory. Methodology.

**T**he *History of Brazilian Press* (free translation) by Nelson Werneck Sodré was first published in 1966 by *Civilização Brasileira*. Still today, almost 50 years later, it remains the main reference for anyone who studies the history of media in the country—as it should be. The book is awe-inspiring and provides detailed and valuable information of the Brazilian press from 1808 to 1960. The text was certainly not written hastily without little thought, as Nelson Werneck himself was known to say. In fact, the author actually took around 30 years to complete his thorough research and writing.

Since 1966, the book has had four other editions published respectively by *Grall* (1977), *Fontes Martins* (1983), *MauadX* (1999) and *Intercom/EDIUCRS* (2011). The five editions differ little from one another, with the exception of the last two, which include a new ten-page chapter with the author's thoughts on the press and mass media in Brazil in recent years. The 2011 edition also features a preface signed by Olga Sodré, the daughter of the author. It raises questions about her father's work and includes her first-hand accounts of some of the important events discussed in the book.

*The History of Brazilian Press* is an immense record of almost all the newspapers and magazines published in the country during the period. Altogether there are over 1,000 cited newspapers (1,194 to be exact – according to the index of the last edition). The author presents various facts about the publications, their founders and the other professionals who worked on them. Werneck interlaces the information with comments and critical analysis, especially in the last chapter, which deals more with contemporary Journalism, of which he was more directly engaged. As we know, Nelson Werneck never sat on the fence. At times his writing was even militant. This engagement – with the national debate and popular causes – was one of his key traits as a Marxist intellectual.

The book is divided into five parts. In the first, *The Colonial Press* (free translation), he completes a comparative analysis of the development of literary institutions and media culture in the Spanish and Portuguese colonial territories in an attempt to explain why the press only arrived in Brazil in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost 300 years after colonization began. He also analyzes the beginnings of the press – which he refers to as *aulic* – focusing not only on *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro* and *Correio Brasiliense*, but also on other publications such as *A Idade de Ouro do Brasil* and *Variedades e Ensaios Sobre Literatura*, among others.

In the second part – *The Press of the Independence* (free translation) – the author tries to link the evolution of the press with the political conditions that led to Brazil's break from Portugal. He analyzes the stances of several newspapers on the

constitutional disputes, highlighting the postures of notable names such as Joaquim Gonçalves Ledo and Januario Barbosa (the editors of *Revérbero Constitucional Fluminense*), Luis Augusto May (*A Malagueta*), João Soares Lisbon (*Correio do Rio de Janeiro*) and Cipriano Barata (*Sentinelas da Liberdade*). The base theoretic question was trying to explain the colonialism crisis through the contradictions between the ascending bourgeoisie and the declining feudal structures. This point – which involves a debate about the existence of feudalism in Brazil – is perhaps one of the most controversial (as well as one of the most dated) from the works of Nelson Werneck. However, it represents only a secondary discussion in *The History of Brazilian Press*.

The third part of the book, entitled *The Critic* (free translation) is dedicated to the study of the press during Brazil's Regency Period (1831-1840). The author emphasizes the importance of small newspapers in shaping the political and social landscape of the time. Thus, Journalism had very specific features: it was deeply ideological, militant and pamphleteer. The objective was to take a position, with a view of mobilizing readers on different causes. The press was considered a major instrument of the political struggle and even worked as a broader tribune. Journalists were first and foremost publicists, and sometimes even agitators. This is the period in which names like Frei Caneca, Libero Badaró, Borges da Fonseca, Evaristo da Veiga and many others came to the forefront of Brazilian Journalism.

The goal of Nelson Werneck in this part of the book was to shed light on these personalities and the small press vehicles that, according to the author, had been forgotten by traditional historiography due to prejudice and conservatism. Here, Weneck analyzes these small newspapers in great detail—not only their political aspects, but also their technical and editorial features.

In the fourth and fifth parts of the book – entitled *The Press of the Empire* (free translation) and *Big Media* (free translation), respectively – the author analyzes the decline of political Journalism and the rise of mass media. He seeks to link these changes with the transformations in the economic, social and

political life in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the expansion of Brazil's coffee business, the abolition of slavery and the proclamation of the republic. During this period, the small newspapers with simple structures began to be replaced by news organizations with more complex structures that were equipped with sophisticated graphics equipment. New production processes were introduced and printers lost their artisan spirit to gain a foothold in the printing industry.

Journalism began to increasingly adopt foreign standards, making use of literary narratives, cartoons and big illustrations. There was an explosion of illustrated and critical magazines. The press diversified and publications aimed at specific niches, such as women, gained strength. In addition, the daily papers tended to expand their news coverage, discovering new areas beyond politics and economics, such as literature, sports, law enforcement, carnival and other popular events.

Of course Nelson Werneck – the Marxist that he was – always tried to articulate the links of these cultural changes (and in the case of Journalism, specifically the technical and professional aspects) to daily life in Brazilian society. In this case, he associated the changes in the press and the expansion and broadening of economic activity to the emergence of new interests and new social actors. Broadly speaking, it was the rise of the bourgeoisie and capitalist relations in the country as well as everything that was correlated to the historical complexities of Brazilian society. Werneck Sodre emphasized these contradictions of the historical process in his analysis, and, according to him, the development of capitalism in Brazil was a tortuous process without continuity or harmony. The contradictions were quite visible in the power structure needed to accommodate the bourgeoisie (expression for the rise capitalism) and the pre-capitalist latifundia (a remnant of the distant colonial past). With regard to the press, the great contradiction was precisely this: newspapers were a capitalist venture that served a power corresponding to predominantly pre-capitalist relations.

Finally, in the last part – entitled *The Crisis of the Press* (free translation) – Nelson Werneck analyzes the press in the mid-

twentieth century (1950s and 1960s). He says that the shift from artisanal to industrial press – from small to large-scale press – was fully realized in this period. To him, however, it was a time of crisis, as although the traits that characterize a new stage in the development process of the press were obvious, they were not yet fully defined. This was a transition period that took place in the context of the “Brazilian Revolution”. Werneck wrote “Brazil is breaking old structures, old relations of production, and it is suitable, and even acceptable, to talk of a “Brazilian Revolution”. “In the development framework of the Brazilian Revolution, a framework of structural crisis, lies a new stage in the history of the Brazilian press, a stage begun as a crisis” (free translation)”.

This is the lightest chapter in the sense of empirical research and, in turn, includes more commentaries and critical analysis – as it is the chapter most centered on the political disputes in which he was involved. One of the most critical points relates to the increasing interconnection of media companies with the interests of so-called US imperialism, a theme of debate of the leftist agenda at the time of the publishing of the first edition.

In the final chapter – which was only published in the last two editions and written shortly before his death in 1999 – the author seeks to update his analysis, adding comments about the expansion of electronic media starting in the 1970s and the progressive loss of power of the big newspapers. He points to the decreased diversity of the daily papers and the impressive homogeneity of their positions – here, expressing his unconditional support for neoliberalism. To Werneck, the press – more than ever – was attuned with the regime, with the dominant social classes and hegemonic political forces. “When the press, as is the case here and now, modulates a repetitive chorus of praise on neoliberalism, it is clear and evident that it has lost its former ability to reflect reality” (free translation), said Sodre.

However, the historian knew the press could never reflect reality without bending, and throughout his book he strives to show this. For him, the press was an active historical force and one of the main institutions that had shaped the capitalist world. His

statement – in the first sentence of the book’s introduction – is classic: “the history of printing is the history of the development of capitalist society” (free translation).

Nelson Werneck was undoubtedly one of the most important historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The History of Brazilian Press* is just one of his more than 50 published works, among which *The History of Brazilian Literature* (free translation) (published in 1938 when he was only 27 years old), *The Historic Formation of Brazil* (free translation), *The History of Brazilian Bourgeoisie* (free translation) and the *The Military History of Brazil* (free translation) stand out. He also wrote about 3,000 articles published in various newspapers and magazines, such as *Correio Paulistano*, *Cultura Política e O Estado de S. Paulo*. He was also the editor of *Jornal do Commercio*, director of *Revista da Escola Militar* and a contributor to *Folha da Manhã*, *Diário de Notícias* and *Última Hora*.

Nelson Werneck Sodre was not, however, an academic historian. Self-taught, he was not connected to any university or higher education institution. He was from the military left and deeply engaged in the issues of his time, using thought as his main weapon in the struggle. He completed 38 years of active military service up to 1961, then spending another 38 years in the reserves.

Marxism was his main theory of reference. He was influenced mainly by reading authors such as Vladimir Lenin, Georgi Plekhanov, György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, after which he set out to produce an engaged story based on the idea that elements of the past can shed light on contemporary dilemmas. The socialist ideology was always present in his writings, and his reflections were linked to the positions of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and suitable to their guidelines. In the 1960s, the project to build the nation was essential to overcoming imperialism, and his political project was, therefore, the “Brazilian Revolution”.

Despite his unorthodox intellectual path, Nelson Werneck influenced generations with his books and ideas. One of the important institutional references of his school of thought was “The Superior Institute of Brazilian Studies” (ISEB), created

in 1955. ISEB brought together intellectuals from different important fronts, such as Roland Corbusier, Helio Jaguaribe and Cândido Mendes, in addition to Nelson Werneck himself, who also participated in the institute's founding. ISEB promoted courses, lectures and meetings, in addition to launching books and publications, through which it spread the principles of national developmentalism. With some variation, their proposals were based on autonomous industrialization (considered the only way for the country to overcome underdevelopment) supported a political front made up of the national bourgeoisie, the proletariat, intellectuals and technical groups of the administration. The concepts developed by ISEB spread across broad sectors of society – connected to the national development project – and served as a paradigm for understanding the Brazilian reality in the 1950s and 1960s.

The military coup of 1964, however, had harsh consequences for Nelson Werneck Sodre. ISEB was closed and he had his political rights suspended for ten years. He was arrested on May 26, 1964 and was detained for nearly two months. Without the right to teach, he devoted himself exclusively to his research and the writing of his books.

Starting in the 1970s, Werneck's work began to be heavily criticized by professional historians, who accused him of being excessively rigid with some concepts that permeated his work, such as social class, imperialism and democratic revolution, not to mention the controversial debate over feudalism in Brazil, as mentioned earlier. As such, the author's work fell into oblivion within the national historiography for some time, although still continuing as a reference for the study of the history of Communications, especially print.

In the 2000s, however, there was a visible movement to rescue his work. Several academic papers – dissertations and theses – sought to analyze the author and his work. Some examples include the thesis of André Gaio (*A Dependency Theory: History and Revolution in the Work of Nelson Werneck Sodre* (free translation) – PUC-SP, 2000); the dissertation of Delson Ferreira (*Nationalism,*

*Politics and Democracy in the Work of Nelson Werneck Sodre* (free translation) – UFSCar, 2001); the dissertation of Ivan Ducatti (*The Remnants of Feudalism in Brazil as A Political Metaphor: A Rereading of Nelson Werneck Sodre* (free translation) – USP, 2003); the thesis of João Alberto Pinto (*Impasses of the Intelligentsia before The Capitalist Revolution in Brazil (1930-1964): History and Politics in the Works of Gilberto Freyre, Caio Prado Junior and Nelson Werneck Sodre* (free translation) – UFF, 2005).

Several books also deserve attention, such as *Nelson Werneck Sodre: Between the Sword and the Pen* (free translation) compiled by Paulo Cunha and Fatima Cabral, which was released in 2006 by Editora Unesp; and *The Critical Dictionary of Nelson Werneck Sodre* (free translation) compiled by Marcos Silva and published in 2008 by Editora UFRJ. The first book was the result of the Eighth Conference on Social Sciences of UNESP Marília. The event was preceded by another dedicated to discussions on the work of Nelson Werneck Sodre in 2001 at *Centro de Documentação e Memória (Cedem)* of UNESP. Another publication is *Nelson Werneck in Brazilian Historiography* (free translation), a collection organized by Marcos Silva and published by Edusc that brings together texts from different critics of Sodre's work. His Marxism, nationalism and political analysis are some of the topics discussed.

In 2011, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nelson Werneck Sodre's birth, new publications emerged. Noteworthy books include those of José Paulo Netto (*Nelson Werneck Sodre: The General History and Culture*) (free translation) and Lincoln Abreu Penna (*The Republic's Military Manifestos: Nelson Werneck Sodre, A Republican Interpretation*) (free translation). The publication of these works coincided with a series of commemorative events that took place in cultural centers, universities and other academic institutions.

Interestingly, the boom of studies on Nelson Werneck Sodre happened in the field of history and social sciences, and almost nothing was said about his reflections on the press. Only in *The Critical Dictionary of Nelson Werneck Sodre* is there mention of *The History of Brazilian Press*. However, the text only takes up six of the 480 pages of the publication. The parts devoted to his contribution

to the press, as a writer for *Correio Paulistano*, *Cultura Política* and *Estado de S.Paulo*, are limited to reviewing the content of the topics discussed – in general about the Brazilian reality – and do not to comment on the press itself.

In the field of Communication, a thorough discussion and review of Nelson Werneck Sodre's work has not happened in a systematic way. One of the first steps in this direction was the two sessions devoted to the subject that took place at the annual meetings of The Brazilian Society of Interdisciplinary Studies on Communication (Intercom) in 2010 and 2011 at University of Caxias do Sul and Catholic University of Pernambuco, respectively. The events also coincided with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the author's birth.

The fact that Nelson Werneck Sodre is forgotten in debates on Communication is really surprising because, in the specific case of media studies, his work had a founding role. Although other synthesis books on the subject had been written before, the importance of his work as a reference for everything that followed is extraordinary.

However, if on one hand, we are in debt to the pioneering work of the author, on the other hand, we are limited by his approach. It seems that, despite all the advances in research, we have not yet overcome his perspective on the theoretical and methodological themes in a concrete and radical way. It must be said that in some cases the research on the area falls short of the legacy left by the author.

Nelson Werneck Sodre used an extensive and diverse set of reference materials to support his narrative, from literary texts and memoirs to collections of laws, legal processes and correspondence, and of course newspapers, magazines, booklets, pamphlets and parodies. The author's use of these varied sources and his effort for theoretic reflection on them was impressive.

Rescuing the importance of Nelson Werneck Sodre's work, valuing his contributions (both in terms of empirical research and the effort to theorize) should also point to its limits (also of empirical research and theorizing). The critical analysis of his

work did not diminish its importance in shaping the history of the press as a field of study. Moreover, it has an importance that goes beyond press studies itself and expands to the history of media as a whole (because it enables reflections on other forms of media, such as radio and television, for example).

A few years ago, a critical reflection on the production of media history in Brazil developed, particularly on that which stemmed from the field of Communication. Some texts were written and several lectures given on the topic in forums such as “The Brazilian Association of Media History” (Alcar) and “The Brazilian Association of Interdisciplinary Studies of Communication” (Intercom). In 2011, the collection entitled *Communication and History: Theoretical Sharing* (free translation) was published with the goal of only discussing the history of Communication processes. The publication brought together researchers who shared the same theoretical and methodological views.

It is important highlight – as has taken place previously – that the significant and noteworthy increase in the number of works on the history of media history that has occurred in recent years has not corresponded to a maturing of thoughts on the theme. At meetings and congresses, for example, it appears that the theoretical and methodological discussions are still scarce. Discussions are often still limited to the empirical analyzes of the works being presented. And this, from the critical perspective adopted here, is a serious problem. There seems to be a lack of understanding of the theory of history in the study of the press and media history that is practised in Brazil.

There is a great deal of research in various states of the country that try to analyze the intricacies of the historical configuration of the local and regional media. These works have grown considerably in number and mirror the links of the graduate programs in the different states of the country. The problem is that these studies on regional Communications practices – despite the important results they generate – have not been based on research or comparative analyzes. This causes serious distortions that prevent the maturation of reflections on the field. It is as if,

for example, that research on the press in Piauí or Espírito Santo were only of interest to the population and scholars of those states.

Monographic research predominately focuses on very specific themes (a newspaper, for example) or certain periods of time (generally not very extensive). These works are obviously of great importance, as it would not be possible to gain in-depth understanding of certain practices, institutions or situations without them. However, it is also important to create synthesis works that systematize theoretically and didactically the accumulated knowledge of the specific studies that can function as a resource for the development of new investigations.

The classic *The History of Press in Brazil*, by Nelson Werneck Sodre, published almost 50 years ago, is still the main synthesis text used by scholars studying the history of media in country. Besides Juarez Bahia's book published in 1990, it is only recently – on the cusp of the celebrations of two hundred years of media – that the new general publications have come out, such as the books by Richard Romancini and Claudia Lago (2007) and the collection compiled by Ana Luiza Martins and Tania Regina de Luca (2008). Special mention should also go to the books of Marialva Barbosa (2007 and 2010), which were also published in the period. Even as generic synthesis work, they meant a breakthrough in the construction of a theory of the history of the press as well as a research methodology for Communications. The author reminds that history is always a reconstruction the researcher makes based on the remnants of the past that have somehow come to them. It is precisely through the rescue of those memorable traces that Marialva Barbosa's research was completed. The author did some detective work and created a jigsaw puzzle from significant "remnants" present in different reports – in her own news stories, in the memories of media professionals, in romance novels, in the literary chronicles, in popular music, in cinema<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> When this article was already done, *The History of Newspapers in Brazil: from the colonial era to Regency (1500-1840)* (free translation) was published. This is the first volume of a series of three whose author is the journalist Matias Molina. The proposal is that the books tell the history of the press in the country, since its first manifestation until the present moment).

Anyway, it is significant that so few of historical synthesis papers have been written since the work of Nelson Werneck Sodre. This reflects the lack of maturity of research into the history of the press—as well as other media. It is indicative of the absence of a theory and methodology that allows researchers to compare different regions of the country and to discuss more general questions about the historical formation of our society.

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