

“Brazilian Workers!:" The commemorations of the First of May during Vargas' *Estado Novo*¹

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RESUMO

O presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar as celebrações do Primeiro de Maio ao longo do Estado Novo varguista. Pretende-se identificar mudanças e permanências em seus rituais comemorativos, bem como as estratégias de preparação, apresentação e legitimação de suas comemorações por parte do governo. Palavras-chave: Primeiro de Maio; Estado Novo; relações de poder.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze the celebrations of the First of May during Vargas' *Estado Novo*. It is intended to identify changes and permanencies in its commemorative rituals, as well as the strategies used by the government for the preparation, presentation and legitimation of these commemorations. Keywords: First of May; *Estado Novo*; Relations of Power.

The aim of this article is to analyze the First of May celebrations between 1938 and 1945. It is intended to focus on the meanings attributed to the date, as well as the changes and permanencies in these commemorations. The guiding hypothesis of the discussion is that these celebrations were progressively appropriated, becoming very important moments in the pedagogical and legitimating efforts made by the *Estado Novo*. However, even if its meaning and commemorative forms underwent a profound reconfiguration, privileging the aesthetic, the propaganda and diffusion of its ideas, some of the traits of the previous rituals were maintained albeit with new meanings, allowing its recognition and identification by the workers who appeared at the festivities.

To develop the proposed analysis, the text is divided into four topics, taking into account the characteristics of the commemorations and the context in which they were realized. Initially I briefly list the May Day celebrations during the First Republic and in the initial years of the Vargas government, emphasizing their principal ritualistic characteristics and the disputes over their 'paternity' and meaning. In the second topic I deal with the 1938 and 1939

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commemorations, years in which the government became more interested in the organization and the normatization of the commemoration, progressively appropriating them from that date onwards.

In the third topic I look at 1940 to 1942, a period in which the celebration came to be organized jointly by the Ministry of Labor, Industry and Commerce, (*Ministério do Trabalho, Indústria e Comércio* – MTIC) and by the Department of Press and Propaganda (*Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda* – DIP), and the commemorations were transferred to the Stadium of the Vasco da Gama club, *São Januário*. It was a golden moment in the ‘cult of personality’ of Getúlio Vargas, as well as of the normatization and state investment in the festivities.

Finally, I look at 1943-1945, when the commemorations were marked by tensions and impasses characteristic of the dying gasps of the *Estado Novo*. A moment when the voices of the oppositions began to be heard and the Second World War was drawing to an end.

For this investigation, information was used from three newspapers with widespread circulation: *Jornal do Brasil* from Rio de Janeiro, *Correio do Povo* from Porto Alegre, and, especially for 1944, *Folha da Manhã* from São Paulo. I sought to observe in these sources forms of diffusion, agendas, strategies to attract the public, and the possible repercussions of the date in regions that were far from the national political center. The messages from both the ministers of labor and the president, given in speeches made during the festivities, were also analyzed, as well as impressions of the commemorations registered by the British consul, present at the 1944 commemoration.

THE FIRST OF MAY: A DISPUTED DATE

Throughout republican history in Brazil the commemorations of the First of May have undergone transformations, being marked by disputes over their meaning and the form of their celebration. In short, we can say that in an initial phase, located between the final decade of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, following the example of the social democratic international,² the demonstrations blended a festive and protest nature, presenting the day as the great holiday of universal confraternization, created on 14 July 1889, when the centenary of the fall of the Bastille was celebrated. In Brazil the first commemorations of the date, held in Rio de Janeiro from 1891 onwards at the initiative of socialist activists, maintained this posture and not rarely also became patriotic acts in support of the young republic.³

This formula was followed, with local variations, in the principal cities in the country where processions of workers, meeting soon after dawn in the central squares, marched through the streets with fireworks, observing an order that in general intermixed commissions of the festivities, musical bands, young women wearing clothes that symbolized worker aspirations – especially liberty, social justice and the reduction of work hours – and groups carrying banners and standards representing the nation and the various organizations present, as well as the workers who, wearing their Sunday clothes, appeared accompanied by their families. During the commemorations working class leaders made speeches and not uncommonly young ladies recited poems exalting workers.⁴

In the initial decades of the twentieth century, with the growth of the anarchist influence of the national worker movement, May Day came to be presented both as a day of a general revolutionary strike and a day of mourning to remember not only the execution of Engels, Spies, Fischer, Parsons and Lingg in 1887 in Chicago, but of all who had perished in defense of the cause of the working class.

Socialist and republican festivities then began to coexist alongside anarchist meetings. Long explanations were published in newspapers of working class entities highlighting the importance and meaning of May Day, according to the ideological posture of the editor group, reinforced by illustrations and allegories alluding to the theme. Occasionally the controversies left the pages of the newspapers as physical confrontation broke out on city streets.

From the 1920s onwards the demonstrations organized by communist leaders came to express both the necessity to show the cohesion and political strength of the working class, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Brazil (*Partido Comunista do Brasil* – PCB), and the possibility of amplifying alliances with leaderships of other groups, so the day became a privileged moment for demonstrating the scope of the ‘broad front’ policy.

In addition to the disputes among themselves, working class leaders also needed to compete with the government, the employers and with the Catholic Church about the definition of the date – as the ‘Day of Labor’ or the day of the worker; as a holiday or a day of strike. This tendency was accentuated when in 1924 the Artur Bernardes government decreed its transformation into a national holiday, making it the ‘Day of Labor,’ alleging that in recent times the First of May had become the exaltation of “orderly and useful labor.”⁵

In relation to the beginning of the 1930s, from a reading of the sources

there does not appear to have been any great official concern with the May Day commemorations. One of the sole concerns of the new government was to keep it among the few holidays preserved from those commemorated during the First Republic.⁶

Very probably the effects of the economic crisis and the overwhelming need for the re-accommodation of national political life occupied a space of greater preeminence in governmental demands, while it can also be supposed that the conflicts between MTIC and worker organizations which were still autonomous were very intense, preventing the effective appropriation of celebrations by the government.

With the exception of 1930, in which the delayed and tense counting of the votes of the presidential election held on 1 March lasted until 22 May, leading to the prohibition by the police in the Federal Capital of all public demonstrations, including those of May Day, until 1935 the commemorations appear to have followed a consecrated formula: gatherings of worker associations, meeting in the central squares, parades through city streets, dances, open air masses, festivities in teaching establishments and, especially in 1933, meetings in the offices of ephemeral worker parties who were running for places in the constituent assembly, as well as at the head office of *Ação Integralista Brasileira* (AIB – Brazilian Integralist Action), which also began to commemorate the date.⁷

Despite the approval in April 1935 of the National Security Law, the commemorations of First of May of that year do not appear to have suffered any great changes. The same could not be said in 1936, when *Jornal do Brasil* stated in a discrete note that “The Day of Labor in this capital, as in the rest of the country, will not have the same shine and enthusiasm as in previous years, nonetheless, various unions and other bodies will hold fraternal manifestations.”⁸ However, it was not reported what these manifestations were, nor if they included any participation by authorities, a situation that reflected the repressive action on the part of the government after the November uprisings of the previous year.

In 1937 the same newspaper published a special pullout in ‘honor of the day of labor,’ in which highlighted in the center of the page was an allegoric image of a proud woman, representing the Republic, sheltering a young worker. The text emphasized the differences between the Brazilian working class and those of other countries, and argued that in Brazil, thanks to the Catholic spirit and the proper action of the press, which warned society “about the dangers of communism,” peace and concord had returned to the national

routine. However, there were no mentions of solemnities or commemorations related to the date.⁹

The decreeing of the State of War in March 1936, allowed intervention in and the closing of various trade unions, as well as the imprisonment of their leaders, though the process of the ‘pacification’ of civil society, after various years of tensions, strikes and armed movements, could not only be based on actions of force. A powerful resource for the expansion and amplification of the legitimacy of the government was the establishment of a civic calendar, whose festivities were inaugurated during the 1936 Patria Week.

Among these festivities was the *Day of Youth* or *Parade of Youth* and the *Hour of Independence*. In the former students paraded in gymnastics uniforms and in the latter a gigantic choir sang, under the regency of Heitor Villa-Lobos, patriotic anthems and nationalist songs. These ceremonies, initially held in the open space, were also transferred to the Vasco da Gama Stadium. According to Maurício Parada, “controlling the crowd was the principal concern and in function of this, technology was consolidated to deal with the large urban masses, which before the large civic gatherings had been restricted to police action.”¹⁰

In relation to the concerns of this article, the holding of these festivities is of interest for two reasons: the first is that they allow the observation of the creation of a scenic space in which the public power, through the growing appropriation of civic manifestations, controlled and disciplined popular participation, at the same time that it emitted its pedagogical and legitimating discourse. The second reason is related to the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus, even including increased budgetary expenditure of the bodies involved and the establishment of know-how for holding the ceremonies. Therefore, the organization of the commemorations of the First of May in the *Estado Novo* were part of a broader normatized planning of national civic festivities.

FIRST OF MAY IN THE NATIONAL CIVIC CALENDAR

Although not held as a ‘state monopoly,’ the celebrations of First of May in 1938 in the Federal capital occurred under ‘supervised liberty,’ because by order of the police headquarters no public demonstration or occupation could be held on the streets of the city, under any pretext. Unions and other groups whose functioning was assured by law held ‘civic session,’ followed by dances and other festivities.

The novelty arose out of the fact that the government had approved the opportunity to sign two decrees, the first regulating the formation of 22 commissions – representing each state, the Federal District and the territory of Acre –, which would advise on the creation of a minimum wage to be implemented in the future, and the second on the waiving of taxes for the acquisition and construction of houses for workers.¹¹ It can thus be noted that this May Day, the first of the *Estado Novo*, received special attention in its preparation and publicizing, marking the government's new relationship with the date. According to Angela de Castro Gomes, the day became part of the 'festive time' created by the regime.¹²

Despite the limited size of the ceremony, which did not come close to rivaling the great solemnities of the 1936 and 1937 Patria Weeks, some care appears to have been taken with the commemoration held in Guanabara Palace. In the coverage of the *Correio do Povo* newspaper, it appears that Vargas met with ministers, civil and military authorities and representative of worker unions and employer federations.

The emphasis of the presidential speech, making the day a mixture of a rendering of accounts and propaganda for his government, was the desire that commemoration would not be "limited to words, but to be translated into facts and acts that could constitute imperishable landmarks in the progress and evolution of social laws in Brazil," adding that "Labor is the greatest fact in the elevation of human dignity! No one can live without work; and the worker cannot live earning just enough to not starve! Justly paid labor raises it in social dignity."

Statements that the act of working was a source of dignity and that the worker deserved social justice had appeared in the discourses of the authorities since the initial moments of national republican life. The novelty in Vargas' discourse was that this was postulated as state policy.

Nevertheless, going beyond the defense of dignifying workers, the presidential speech highlighted other urgent necessities: the diversification of production and the formation of an internal market of consumers. He went on to state that it is "it must be noted in a country like ours where in some cases there is an excess of production, that once the worker is better paid, he can increase his standard of living, increase consumption, acquire more products and, thus, improve the conditions of the internal market."¹³

These excerpts allow us glimpse the new meanings attributed to the First of May. During the following years the government would use the date as a

privileged moment to direct workers, employers and society, seeking to highlight social and economic directions to be followed.

According to the newspaper *Correio do Povo*, in other capitals the First of May was marked by solemnities, presentations by musical bands, parades with the presence of *interventors* and military authorities and outdoor masses that attracted large numbers of people. In a note in *Jornal do Brasil*, the *interventor* of Rio Grande do Sul, Cordeiro de Farias, received authorization from the federal government to transport workers from the interior of the state to Porto Alegre, the capital, in order to participate in the First of May festivities. It can be deduced that the *interventores* in other states were authorized to take similar measures.¹⁴

In 1939 the preparations and publicizing of the May Day commemorations were increased significantly. The celebrations in the Federal District occurred in the Esplanade of Castelo, a place in itself of much significance, since it was where the old Morro do Castelo had been and where the occupation of the city had begun. In the 1930s various ministerial buildings were built, including the recently inaugurated Palace of Labor, Industry and Commerce.

A few days previously the press began to report the preparations of the “great proletarian parade in honor of President Vargas” and to report the instructions for “its greater brilliance.” Based on these guidelines, the form of presentation and the intended meaning for the commemoration can be noted. Each union called on its members to appear at Praça Paris at 2 pm, while from there they would head organized to the parade which began at 3.

The parade in front of the Palace of Labor was opened by the executive commission of the Confederation of Trade Unions who carried the National Flag; shortly afterwards the standards of the federations appeared, flanked by the respective executive commissions, showing the transformation of the date into a privileged moment of the cult of the nation, deleting any allusion to its internationalist character.

Following this the trade unions marched with their respective standards, carried by members, formed in columns of eight, singing the National Anthem. According to the press coverage, each union designated a commission of ten to exercise the control over their members, with the commission being responsible for members’ presence and discipline.

The Minister of Labor was responsible for the necessary agreements with employer organizations, as well as with the City Government and the Federal District police, so that the parade, which was intended to be gigantic, could be undertaken with any mishaps. In addition, Valdemar Falcão – who was in

charge of MTIC from November 1937 to July 1941 – was responsible for summoning workers over the radio.

However, the control and collaboration aimed at by the government were not absolute. Among the instructions given to the workers was this text:

We would like to take this opportunity to warn the enemies of the regime, hidden in anonymity that the proletariat, unified around the *Estado Novo* and its great leader Getúlio Vargas, will not allow the intromission of foreign elements in the different classes and principally that of old extremists who, sabotaging the news of the great parade of the First of May, still intend to criticize the decisions of trade union assemblies.

It can be inferred that the trade union opposition still found some breaches to demonstrate against the regime. This was not the only problem faced by MTIC, as it was also necessary to depend on the good will of employers. With this aim, the minister appealed “to commercial and industrial establishments, houses of various publications, to close their doors between 12 and 5 of this day, so that their employees could participate in the imposing civic demonstration.”¹⁵ It can be noted that the holiday, created in 1924 and confirmed in 1930, was still not respected by the majority of employers, obliging the government to negotiate so that the festivity could be attended by the largest number of workers possible.

Announced on the radios and in the newspapers was the signing of two new decrees: “the first creating the Labor Court and the second popular cafeterias for workers and vocational schools for workers’ children,” through which the government proved its power to convoke. The version published by *Correio do Povo* emphasized the grandiosity of the commemoration:

much before the time marked for the beginning of the parade there was already stretched out in front of the Ministry a crowd calculated at 100,000 people. The parade began at the time set. When they passed the balcony the representatives of the union carrying the standards greeted the president of the Republic with applause and cheered the *Estado Novo*. The artists’ union gave the president an arrangement of flowers.

Once again the question of greatest interest for this analysis is not the signing of the decrees, as their implementation would take a long time, and the labor court was only actually created in May 1941, when its establishment was announced a second time. What is of interest here is the increase in the size

and the undeniable transformation of the commemoration into a mass event. Even if the figure of 100,000 participants was an exaggeration, the date served as a moment of demonstration of strength, both for adversaries and recalcitrant allies, as well as undergoing a profound resignification, being presented as the honoring of Vargas by workers.

Vargas speech emphasized the comparison between the conquests achieved by the “victorious movement of 1930” and the “abandonment of the worker during the Old Republic.” This idea can be observed in an exemplary form in the final part of his speech:

Workers: as you can see in this regime you participate directly in the organizing activities of the state, in flagrant contrast with the situation before 1930, when your interests and complaints were not even heard and died smothered in the narrow enclosures of police stations. Now you have in the greatest and most beautiful public building in the country your own house and into this you can come without embarrassment.

In addition, according to the *Correio do Povo* coverage it can be noted that in the regions most removed from the center of the country the commemorations also underwent a significant increase in size. In Porto Alegre, for example, the newspaper reported the participation of worker entities in a great procession through the streets of the city, carrying slogans such as “the worker is the engine of progress” and “rise up workers, all the machinery in the world is not worth a single worker.” In this procession there also “figured two floats with the portrait of Sr. Getúlio Vargas, surrounded by flowers. Each of them had words of thanks for his Excellency for the interest taken in favor of the working classes.”¹⁶

In this example there can be seen the confirmation of the importance of the worker for the construction of the national state, an idea dear to workers’ leaders and stressed by the regime, combined with an incipient cult of the personality of Vargas. In the following years this posture was expanded and normalized by the participation of DIP in the organization of the festivities.¹⁷ As part of this new order, the festivities in the Federal capital were transferred to the Vasco da Gama stadium, then the largest sporting arena in the city. The festivities were held in *São Januário* from 1940 to 1942 and again in 1945.

THE FIRST OF MAY AS A ‘SPECTACLE OF POWER’¹⁸

The 1940 commemorations were organized by the National Department of Labor (DNT), a MTIC body, in collaboration with DIP. According to the information published in the press, a “great gathering of workers in the field of Vasco da Gama” was set for 3 pm, while buses and special trams left from various parts of the city, transporting for free workers and their families.

In the press coverage a concern with the distribution of workers in the stadium space can be observed, as it was stated that the union standards were unfurled in the terraces, around which the workers of each body gathered. In relation to this measure, it can be supposed that, as in the previous year, the unions had commissions of discipline and control and in addition that a competition may have been created among the organizations, since based on the number of workers involved it was possible to note the interest of the category and the organizational power of each union directorate.

In the extensive agenda, in which the participation of radio and theater artists was of special importance, there were presentations of the National Anthem, speeches from the authorities and the awarding of certificates of merit to employers who adhered to the norms and provided cafeterias for their employees. Among the most famous names were Itália Fausta, one of the most important artists in Brazilian theater at that moment, and Carlos Galhardo, one of the principal singers of the radio era, interpreting *Canção do trabalhador*, specially composed by Ari Kerner for the date, with a message, as can be seen in this extract, exalting the act of working and the loyalty of workers to the grandeur for the country:

*We are the voice of progress
And the hope of Brazil.
Our arms of steel
Give it grandeur and strength.
Whether on the fertile soil,
In the sky or at sea.
We are always present,
With the altar being the patria.*¹⁹

In *Jornal do Brasil*'s coverage it appears that various cinemas in the capital “desiring to associate themselves with the commemorations of the Day of Work, held between 10 and 12 in the morning film sessions for workers’

children,” while the sessions of 8pm and 10pm were also dedicated to “monumental spectacles for the national proletariat.”

It can be argued that these attractions signified, on the one hand, the growing investment of the government in names that could bring large crowds to the stadium and, on the other, that this could have been the counterpart of the ‘workers’ of radio, cinema and theater, who benefited during the *Estado Novo* from governmental decrees and regulations, such as, by way of example, the Getúlio Vargas Law, which regulated copyright payments (Capelato, 2006, p.130). Nor can it be ignored that a presentation for such a large public, at a moment when a large part of the cultural life of the country was under the control of the government, could signify an important stimulus for an artist’s career.

Artistic attractions apart, the intended culmination of the event was Vargas’ speech, which that year finally announced the creation of the national minimum wage. In his speech, the question was mentioned as follows:

We seek through this measure to assure workers payments capable of providing them with what is indispensable for their own sustenance and that of their families. The establishment of a minimum living standard for the great majority of the population, which over time will increase the indices of health and productivity, will help the resolution of important problems that have delayed the onward march of our progress.

The message also contained a response to the employers who had criticized state regulation of wages in 1939. He stated that what was being sought was “the increase of the standard of living which would equally raise the acquisitive capacity of populations and expand... industries, agriculture and commerce, which would see general consumption and the volume of production grow.”²⁰

In 1941 the final celebration of May Day was held with Valdemar Falcão in command of MTIC. It was presented as a “worker-sporting gathering and a great tribute to President Vargas,” during which the Labor Court would be created.

On the morning of that day, as his first official engagement Vargas went to Praça Onze de Junho, where the building of a monument ‘by the proletarian element’ in tribute to the government was going to start. There he was greeted by union representatives, and afterwards there was a presentation of orphonic singing.

It is interesting to note that Praça Onze – the traditional meeting point of

sambistas and samba schools in the city and one of the most important locations for May Day celebrations during the First Republic – disappeared a few months after this ceremony, giving way to the construction of Avenida Presidente Vargas.

In the afternoon, the festivities were coordinated by DNT, part of MTIC, and for the first time the press published extensive regulations about how the representatives should act and behave, including the detailed orientation of the stadium gates to be used for each group. In addition to the artistic presentations, the national anthem and Vargas' speech, other highlights of the agenda included two football matches, one between professional players, representing the north and south zones of the city, and another between workers from different trades.

The parade of delegations of 'worker athletes' from various trades was well covered in the press. According to *Jornal do Brasil* the exhibition would permit a "new vision of the physical and educational conditions of our workers"; in it participated youths from the Army School of Physical Education, delegations of soldiers and sailors, accompanied by the band of the Naval Marines. Another important innovation was the presentation of a squadron from the recently created Brazilian Air Force (*Força Aérea Brasileira* – FAB), which flew over the stadium at 3 pm, performing an exhibition of aerial maneuvers.

Much has already been said about the relationship between the physical attitude of workers and the militarization of the world of work, reflected in the expression 'soldiers of production,' used in the texts of the ideologues of the *Estado Novo* and some of Vargas' speeches. The question was discussed, for example, in the middle of the 1980s, by Alcir Lenharo, for whom these occurrence was neither episodic nor accidental, since "care with the militarization of the body that workers constituted the axis of the concerns of those who desired the corporization of the social order."²¹

However, it should be noted that in relation to the First of May festivities, the aesthetic and the military exaltation that were present in the 1941 and, even more strongly, 1942 celebrations, disappeared shortly afterwards, which allows us to presume that this project despite being much trumpeted in the theoretical texts, did not achieve much practical success, and was abandoned after the entrance of Brazil into the Second World War.

The contribution of DIP to the increased festivities in 1941 was the transmission, for the first time in a national radio network, of the speeches of Vargas and Valdemar Falcão, retransmitted in shortwave outside of Brazil.

After this the solemnities of the Patria Week also came to rely on this ‘technical prodigy’ during the *Estado Novo*.

That year there was a great concern with the control of movement outside the stadium, with the gathering of delegations in adjacent streets, athletes’ clothes and the ‘economy of gestures’ during the parade and especially during the greeting of Vargas. Thus, the participants were informed beforehand of how they should proceed:

The formation of each delegation with the National Flag in front shall be columns of six; when the first white flag is reached, after the whistle from the leader, the President of the Republic shall be greeted as follows: the National Flag shall be unfurled and that of the delegation furled and kept like this until the second white flag; the members of the delegations shall execute ‘eyes right.’

As Bronislaw Baczko stated, “the function of the symbol is not only to institute distinctions, but also to introduce values and to model individual and collective conduct.”²² In this case the widespread use of the National Flag, both on the First of May and in other festivities in the civic calendar, exalted the intended national unity, reinforced by the prohibition of the use of state symbols, as well as all those associated with ‘exotic ideologies,’ combated by the regime and by the non-existence of institutional channels of collective participation.

In relation to Vargas’ speech, what should be noted is the usual rendering of accounts and the reaffirmed coherence between his arrival in power in 1930 and the achievements of that year, seeing to demonstrate that the creation of the labor court would be the crowning moment of a broader project that began with the ‘Revolution.’ An example of this is the part in which he stated that “since the distant day of the creation of your Ministry we have without ceasing sought to protect the Brazilian workers, guaranteeing them rights and stipulating duties.” In declaring the Labor Court created, he defined it as a “mission... to defend against all dangers our model social and labor legislation, improving it with coherent jurisprudence and with the rectitude and firmness of judgments.”²³

As well as the regular program – football, artistic presentations, the acclamation of the flag and Vargas – the 1942 May Day celebrations had two novelties: first, the presence of Alexandre Marcondes Filho, coming from the Administrative Department of São Paulo State (Daesp), as the Minister of

Labor, a function he held from 1941 until the deposition of Vargas in October 1945. Second, the presentation of the event as a ‘civil and military rally.’

The press reported that the following presentations occurred from 2 pm onwards in the Vasco da Gama Stadium: “defense exercises by the anti-aircraft artillery and the fire brigade, demonstrations of efficiency of the mechanized forces of the army, FAB squadrons and a parade of militarized workers.”

It should be noted that although the declaration of war only occurred in August, at the end of January the Brazilian government, in compliance with the decisions of the Second Consultation Meeting of Foreign Ministers of American Republics broke off diplomatic relations with the Axis countries. As a result the commemoration of the First of May in 1942 occurred under the impact of Brazilian participation in the global conflict and the obvious attempt at political capitalization of this participation.

It was sought to reinforce discipline, order and respect for hierarchy as values of the ‘patria at war.’ This posture was reflected in a concern with the occupation of space within the stadium. Before reaching the location, participants were informed that “the terraces of the stadium were reserved for the people; the stands for the unions; the podiums for the *tiros de guerra*, i.e., the militarized workers; and the special podiums for the members of Vasco and the high civilian and military authorities.”

Under the coordination of DIP the speeches of Marcondes Filho and Vargas were once again to be transmitted on a national network. However, the greatest novelty was related to the overcoming of technical problems that probably had occurred in previous years. The news was presented as follows: “the radio division of DIP was charged with the electro-acoustic service in the Vasco da Gama field, carrying out once again the most complete and perfect amplification service,” so that there could be heard “perfectly clearly and with great sharpness the words of President Getúlio Vargas.”

What could not be predicted was that Vargas, as the result of a car accident, would miss the ceremony and the only voice that would be heard was that of Marcondes Filho, who read the discourse of the head of government. Beforehand, he made his greeting, speaking “in the name of the workers” to Vargas, in a version in which the First of May was presented as a day to celebrate “social legislation granted by the clairvoyance of a political genius.”

Vargas’ speech, reflecting the international situation, centered on the need to increase production: “our task, in the fields, in manufacturing, in the mines and shipyards is to fill the blanks of importation and to manufacture in exportable quantities what was previously only enough for internal

consumption.” At the end he reinforced the nationalist appeal: “We are all soldiers and our duty is to face the seriousness of the present time so that we will deserve that the future generations remember us with pride because we worked with lots of faith, without doubting the immortal destiny of the Brazilian Patria.”²⁴

The 1942 festivities represented the pinnacle of normatization and state investment in the May Day celebrations and marked, at the same time, the beginning of the loss of control of public demonstrations by governmental bodies. Examples of this are the gatherings of people around Guanabara Palace in solidarity with Vargas while he convalesced and in June the holding of a march/parade by the National Union of Students (*União Nacional dos Estudantes* – UNE) in favor of the entrance of Brazil into the war.

THE FIRST OF MAY AND THE END OF THE *ESTADO NOVO*

Another indication of the ongoing changes was the return in 1943 of the May Day celebrations to Castelo Esplanade, where the festivities were presented as a ‘civic and labor movement’ and various unions invited their members to meet at “1 pm in Largo da Carioca in order to pledge our full support to the serene attitude of President Getúlio Vargas in defense of our integrity and our beloved Brazil.”

Even with the holiday falling on a Saturday the problem of workers being excused from their jobs was repeated, Marcondes Filho had to negotiate with employers so that establishments would close at midday, thereby permitting greater adhesion to the celebrations.

According to the description published in *Jornal do Brasil*, during the festivities a large Brazilian flag covered part of the façade of the Ministry of Labor and five hundred young girls in white uniforms formed a guard of honor for the building, each carrying a Brazilian flag, an option that seemed to mix both the nationalist emphasis of the celebration and its peaceful and orderly nature, represented by the idealization of the feminine presence in the celebrations.

On the avenue in front were the workers from the Volta Redonda steel plant who carried the following slogan: “Volta Redonda the greatest achievement of Brazil: Getúlio Vargas its idealizer and builder.”

Once again there was a parade of unions and associations, as well as artistic presentations, followed by a greeting of Vargas, read by Marcondes Filho. According to the minister the commemorations had returned to the

Castelo Esplanade because it was in that place where in 1929 the then presidential candidate Getúlio Vargas ‘gave his word’ about labor guarantees. In this version a cycle of achievements was being completed with the establishment of the Consolidated Labor Laws which represented the return to the “sacred soil in which promised are kept.”

It can also be argued that the holding of a more ‘civic’ and less ‘military’ ceremony marked a strategy of marking distance from the Nazi-Fascist aesthetic and relations with the Axis countries. This idea was reinforced in a passage in Vargas’ speech when he stated that “Within ten days it will be the fifth anniversary of the first attempt in Brazil, according to Nazi methods and inspiration, to subvert order... The Integralist conspiracy failed, but only today is it possible to image the sad condition we would be reduced to if it had been successful.”

Vargas thus offered the episode of the defeat of the attempted coup, the so-called *movimento golpista*, which occurred on 11 May 1938 and was known as the Integralist *Putch*, as an example of the Brazilian struggle against Nazism, without obviously mentioning the previous collaboration between *Ação Integralista Brasileira* (AIB) and his government.

However, the emphasis in his speech was the need for unions to enlist members. The target was to “make the number of unionized workers rise until every worker is covered”; declaring that “we are at war. This means we are engaged in a decisive struggle for the destinies of the Patria. Whoever is not with us is against us. I know I can count on the working men,”²⁵ allowing a glimpse of the deepening tensions and dissensions that would prevent his remaining in power.

In 1944 Vargas participated in the May Day celebrations in São Paulo. There were no official festivities in Rio de Janeiro that year. In the capital of the country there was only the “installation of loudspeakers in various parts of the city to retransmit the labor festival from Pacaembu” and “film sessions especially dedicated to proletarians.”²⁶

In Vargas’ speech his participation in the São Paulo festivities was justified by the “need to answer the appeal of almost one million workers in the city” and by the recognition of the “exemplary conduct” of local workers, who “neither went on strike, nor caused any perturbations or disagreements,” since they understood that “with the same integrity of spirit used in carrying out daily tasks, the serious circumstances we were going through.”

According to the *Folha da Manhã* newspaper, “After leaving Congonhas airport a enormous crowd thronged the public streets in order to greet the

president who was loudly acclaimed.”²⁷ According to the same source, the agenda included a game of football between teams of workers from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro; a parade of union delegations from the interior of the state with their standards and slogans hailing Vargas; a presentation from the Municipal Theater Symphonic Orchestra and a presentation of classic ballet, in a version in which ‘the popular and the erudite’ met contributing to the ‘grandeur of the event.’

At 4pm upon the arrival of Vargas the national anthem was sung and simultaneously doves were released and the supporters of São Paulo Football Club paid a tribute formed an image of Christ within a large V on the terraces and the slogan: “the Brazilian soul together with the heart of the Expeditionary Soldier;” after which the *interventor* Fernando Costa greeted Vargas and Marcondes Filho spoke in the name of the workers.

The press coverage does not allow us glimpse the occurrence of any embarrassing situations. In the official version the ceremony occurred in perfect order and was received with great popular enthusiasm. However, the British consul, Robert T. Smallbones,²⁸ present on the podium of honor, offers in a report sent to the government a very different vision of the fact. He began his report talking about his expectation that in his speech Vargas “would make an important political statement, a harbinger of radical changes in the regime.”

However, this did not occur, frustrating the expectations of the diplomat, who went on to report the ‘artifices’ used by the authorities to attract workers to the event. Among these was the free supply of food and transport and the promise that nothing would be discounted from their wages. Even still the response had been insufficient, causing the authorities to hold the already mentioned game of football immediately after the speeches.

This part of the report does not contain any novelties, it only presents in a critical tone what appeared in the Brazilian press as the ‘grandiose agenda’ of the event, pointing to the reoccurrence of strategies long used in holding commemorations.

What is unprecedented is found in another part of the document, where the consul explains that after finishing his speech Vargas had consulted the police in charge and decided to make his usual lap of the field, hailing those present. However, even with all the strategies used to attract public, there were large empty spaces and as a result moments when the applause was not heard, hindering the task of the DIP radio-transmission team, who had to condition the speed of the automobile, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, depending on the quantity of applause received.

Furthermore, in order not to leave any doubts, he added that the real applause only occurred after the president had left and football match began, finalizing his report with the impression that if they had not been bribed or coerced, the workers would not have taken a single step to hear speeches about the benefits given or promised by the regime.

In addition to the deception with the lack of democratic commitment on the part of the troublesome ally, his report states some reasons which can explain the holding of the festivities in São Paulo. The principal one was the search for a greater approximation between MTIC and the worker associations in the most industrialized state in the country at a moment in which the government was expanding, without many effective results, its unionization policy, and the return of ideological disputes within union organizations was being evidenced. This was reflected in the part of his speech where Vargas directed his reiterated appeal for the officially recognized unions “to really represent a number of members which was the total expression of each activity.”

However, the part of the presidential speech which disappointed the British representative and which according to him caused no enthusiasm among those present was this: “liberty, in the strict sense of political franchises is not enough to resolve the complex social question. Without economic independence it is almost always converted into licentiousness and derision towards the people, since the right to vote does not kill hunger, nor does the right to associate educate children.”²⁹

It would be necessary to wait until the following year to hear from Vargas the expected announcement of the re-democratization of the country.

The final May Day celebration of the *Estado Novo* was held once again in the Vasco da Gama stadium using with the ‘civic-artistic-sporting’ formula. On the agenda were parades of union delegations, scouts, military bands, bands from factories, gymnastics presentations, orphonic singing and the novelty of this year: the presence of the National Service for Industry (*Serviço Nacional da Indústria* – Senai) which, having been created by a presidential decree in January 1942, appeared with a delegation of one thousand students. This presentation was greeted by the press as a demonstration of the victorious partnership of the state with employers.

What most calls attention is the fact that at that moment the newspaper reports were already talking about the electoral process and providing information about two intended candidates who had begun their campaigns,

reflecting the ever more open critiques of the opposition towards the regime that was fading.

Since it could not be otherwise, Vargas’ speech sought to respond to these criticisms, preparing, as was usual, a positive balance of his actions in the social area in comparison to what existed during the First Republic and seeking to demonstrate the control exercised by his government of the direction of the re-democratization process in the country. The announcement of the measures expected by the British counsel was then realized: “I have done my part in the great task of mobilizing, for the common aggrandizement, the creative forces of nationality. Having finalized the political recomposition and having readjustment the ranks of government, I shall return to being a simple citizen, I shall retire to private life.” However, despite the intended governmental control, the speech made it seem that ever more bitter conflicts were being fought:

Professional demagogy and the factious agitation of those who miss power have not managed to impress public opinion which is not fooled by the processes of sensational journalism... the statement of the ballot boxes will liquidate these remnants with a retarded mentality and provincial partisanship, who appear to have slept in 1930 and woken in 1945.

Vargas finalized his speech with the promise that “any attempt to disturb order will be severely reprimanded... I will hold the elections and hand over power to whoever is legitimately elected by the people.” As is known, the development of the political process would contradict him a few months later.³⁰

I will return, by way of conclusion, to some propositions previously sketched out. The first is that the First of May celebrations, as all other important dates, were progressively appropriated, contributing significantly to the pedagogical and legitimization efforts made by the regime. The meanings attributed to and the forms of presentation of the date were modified according to the different conjunctures of the period.

The celebrations served to indicate social and economic directions, demonstrate strength, spread propaganda about the intended coherence of the ‘governmental project’ and progressively worship the figure of Vargas. The gatherings, depending on the context, were presented as a ‘civic labor movement,’ a ‘civic and military rally,’ and as a ‘civic-artistic-sporting’ act. Although varying in emphasis, they shared the combination of popular diversions with civic-nationalist and government exaltation, as well as the

permanent search for normatization and the control of the presence and the participation of the public, whose role was destined to be that of spectator.

However, although the rituals underwent a profound reconfiguration, they kept some previous traits, such as: gatherings in public squares, the holding of worker parades, even when combined with other groups and in an allegoric manner; the presence of association standards, now subordinated to the Brazilian flag, and the female element, symbolizing national aspirations. This combination of elements, supported by a wide propaganda network, helps explain the presence of workers in the celebrations.

NOTES

¹ The discussion was developed as part of the research project “Images and messages of the First of May: disputes and transformations in the representations of the date during the Brazilian republican period,” carried out with CNPq funding.

² In relation to the international rituals, see: DOMMANGET, M. *Historia Del Primero de Mayo*. Barcelona: Laia, 1976; SÉGUY, G. *1er Mai – Les 100 printemps*. Paris: Messidor; Éd. Sociales, 1989; PERROT, M. *Os excluídos da história: operários, mulheres e prisioneiros*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1992. p.127-164.

³ In relation to the first commemorations, published in the working class press, see: PETERSEN, S. R. F. *Origens do Primeiro de Maio no Brasil*. Porto Alegre: Ed. UFRGS; MEC, 1981.

⁴ For examples of this, see: for Rio de Janeiro: ARÊAS, L. *As comemorações do Primeiro de Maio no Rio de Janeiro (1890-1930)*. *História Social*, Campinas (SP): IFCH/Unicamp, n.4/5, 1997/1998; for Porto Alegre: BILHÃO, I. *Identidade e trabalho: uma história do operariado porto-alegrense (1898-1920)*. Londrina: Eduel, 2008. p.204-238.

⁵ BERNARDES, Artur da Silva. Mensagem ao Congresso Nacional, segunda sessão da décima segunda legislatura. Rio de Janeiro, 1925, p.30. Available at: brazil.crl.edu/bsd/bsd/u1317/000003.html.

⁶ The provisional government reduced the number of national holidays from twelve to six. The First of May remained as the day “consecrated for the universal confraternization of the working classes,” a designation received in 1924. See: CINTRA, F. A. *Os feriados da República*. Rio de Janeiro, 1934. p.10.

⁷ Examples of ceremonies published in *Jornal do Brasil*, 30 abr. 1933, p.6.

⁸ *Jornal do Brasil*, 1º maio 1936, p.7.

⁹ *Jornal do Brasil*, 1º maio 1937, p.6 and 11.

¹⁰ PARADA, M. *Educando corpos e criando a nação: cerimônias cívicas e práticas disciplinares no Estado Novo*. Doctoral Dissertation (Doctorate in History História) –

PPG-História, UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro, 2003. p.25. Published as: _____. *Educando Corpos e criando a nação*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. PUC; Apicuri, 2009.

¹¹ *Correio do Povo*, 1º maio 1938, p.1 and *Jornal do Brasil*, 1º maio 1938, p.7.

¹² GOMES, A. C. A invenção do trabalhismo. 2.ed. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1994. p.200.

¹³ *Correio do Povo*, Porto Alegre, 3 maio 1938, p.1.

¹⁴ Respectively *Correio do Povo*, 3 maio 1938, p.1 and *Jornal do Brasil*, 30 abr. 1938, p.7.

¹⁵ In relation to the preparation of the 1939 festivities, see: *Jornal do Brasil*, 30 abr. 1939, p.7.

¹⁶ Analysis made based on the coverage of the newspaper *Correio do Povo*, 2 maio 1939, p.1, 2 and 32.

¹⁷ In relation to the actions of DIP, see: PAULO, H. O DIP e a Juventude: ideologia e propaganda estatal (1939-1945). *Revista Brasileira de História*, São Paulo, v.7, n.14, p.99-113, mar.-ago. 1987.

¹⁸ Expression used by CAPELATO, M. H. O Estado Novo: o que trouxe de novo? In: FERREIRA, J.; DELGADO, L. (Org.). *O Brasil republicano 2: o tempo do nacional-estatismo*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2006. p.111.

¹⁹ GOMES, F. O trabalho na música popular brasileira. Available at: www.brasileirinho.mus.br/artigos/trabalhombp.html.

²⁰ For Vargas' speech and the other information referring to 1940, see: *Jornal do Brasil*, 1º maio 1940, p.6.

²¹ LENHARO, A. *Sacralização da política*. São Paulo: Papyrus, 1986. p.83.

²² BACZKO, B. *Los imaginarios sociales: memorias y esperanzas colectivas*. Buenos Aires: Nueva Vision, 1991. p.29.

²³ For Vargas' speech and other information about 1941, see: *Jornal do Brasil*, 3 maio 1941, p.5 and 10. In relation to the relationship of workers with the labor court and labor legislation, see, amongst other references: PAOLI, M. C. Os direitos do trabalho e sua justiça: em busca de referências democráticas. *Revista da USP*, São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, n.21, p.105-115, mar.-maio, 1994; e FRENCH, J. *Afogados em leis: a CLT e a cultura política dos trabalhadores brasileiros*. São Paulo: Ed. Perseu Abramo, 2002.

²⁴ For Vargas' speech and information related to 1942, see: *Jornal do Brasil*, 3 maio 1942, p.6.

²⁵ For Vargas' speech and information related to 1943, see: *Jornal do Brasil*, 30 abr. 1943, p.5 e 9 e 2 maio 1943, p.6.

²⁶ *Jornal do Brasil*, 30 abr. 1944, p.7.

²⁷ *Folha da Manhã*, 3 maio 1944, p.7.

²⁸ The Report is in the National Archives, London. (Political Situation in Brazil, Close until

1972). Document: AS2734/95/6, From Mr. Broadmead – Rio de Janeiro, 11th May, 1944. I would like to thank Samuel Souza for access to his transcription.

²⁹ *Folha da Manhã*, 3 maio 1944, p.7.

³⁰ For Vargas' speech and information related to 1945, see: *Jornal do Brasil*, 1º maio 1945, p.5 and 6.