

The Burning Blaze of Neoliberalism in Brazil

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On Sunday, September 2nd, 2018; thousands of the worlds' invaluable and precious cultural and historical items at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro burnt to ashes due to the budget cuts and the fragile state of neglected building. Unfortunately, this painful news in Brazil was an expected disaster waiting to happen. Signs of deterioration of the 200-year-old building were apparent; ten of the 30 rooms in the museum were closed. The building lacked a proper sprinkler system and was vulnerable to fire. Firefighters found out that both of the fire hydrants closest to the museum were not working after the museum was already in flame. Of course, this was not the first tragedy of the like.

“During the past decade, three museums (including Rio de Janeiro’s National Museum) have been destroyed by fire. Less than three years ago, a similar episode happened in São Paulo’s Portuguese Language Museum. A defective light bulb caused a short-circuit that sparked the fire, which destroyed the museum and the roof of the Luz Station, a historic railway station built in 1901 that housed it, killing one firefighter. Since the fire, on December 21, 2015, the institution has been closed.” (1)

The question is what kind of economic program does not consider a needed budget to protect the nation’s treasure as unique as the National Museum of Brazil? How is it possible that a country as vast as Brazil rich in resources with a population of 200 million cannot afford to allocate \$36 million — the minimum budget needed — to preserve and maintain her significant cultural, historical and educational institution? The answer lies in the decades of implementation of devastating neoliberal economic policies. That is an economic system that strives to privatize all institutions and resources within a country in order to accumulate wealth for the elite and Wall Street, a system that threatens and assaults ALL aspects of the working people lives; a system that through its financial arm, International Monetary Fund (IMF), turns economic prosperity to poverty and sovereignty to subordination in the country after country. Today in 2018, the conditions of the working people in Brazil are as deplorable as the first neoliberal economic experiment which was introduced in Chile after Pinochet’s coup on September 11, 1973. Unemployment, poverty and homelessness are the direct results of the neoliberal policies.

“The name of the game is privatization” says Professor Michel Chossudovsky “and the objective is ultimately to be able to take control over major areas of Brazil’s economic development process through privatization, through the buy-up of Brazilian companies and so on and so forth. We’ve seen this developing in the course, I would say, of the last 20 years, that US dominant financial and economic corporate interests are appropriating large sectors of this wealthy

economy. We're talking about resources, mining, forestry but also industrial development.”(2)

In 2003, he also wrote that,

“We must understand the history of successive financial crises in Brazil. With Wall Street creditors in charge, the levels of external debt have continued to climb. The IMF has ‘come to the rescue’ with new multibillion dollar loans, which are always conditional upon the adoption of sweeping austerity measures and the privatization of State assets. The main difference is that this process is now being undertaken under a president, who claims to be opposed to neoliberalism.”(3)

There are many valuable lessons for working people around the world to learn from the Brazilian neoliberal model. It is important to know how Worker’s Party (PT) of Brazil with its deep roots in the impoverished communities became an instrument in hands of Wall Street and IMF in implementing the neoliberal economic policies in Brazil.

The economic crisis in the 1970s brought an end to the economic policies which were adopted after WWII. By mid 70’s, unemployment and inflation rates reached its peak. The interventionist role of the state involved in the welfare system was exhausted and had to be replaced. For Capitalists the idea of compromising with labor to curtail the potential growth of the mass movements no longer was necessary. To restore the elite power, a new economic policy was needed. Neoliberalism was born out of this situation and meant to increase the inequality. Labor had to be pushed back harshly. Neoliberalism found its functionary characters in Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in 80’s and Bill Clinton in 90’s and so on. The social programs were cut off or reduced to the minimum. Schools, National Parks, Museums and those public institutions that were not suitable or profitable for privatization, became an individual or the community responsibility!



Source: the author

It was the blaze of neoliberalism that burned The National Museum of Brazil. Besides the financial elite are not interested in the culture like public museums that are not lucrative. As we all remember when the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad was gutted out by looters under the nose of American military occupiers in April 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld referring to the “Liberated” Iraqi people casually said:

“... free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes”, “Stuff happens!”

But for people who appreciate art and science, indeed, this was a severe loss. A Brazilian teacher standing at the gates with teary eyes said:

“They’re burning our history, and they’re burning our dreams.”

The Museum collections in part contained a painting by the Brazilian artist Candido Portinari and extensive paleontological, anthropological and biological specimens. It held a skull called Luzia that was among the oldest fossils ever found in the Americas as well as an Egyptian mummy and the largest meteorite ever discovered in Brazil — one of the few objects that officials could confirm had survived. But beside these collections, the building itself had a significant history. This Brazilian National Heritage once was the place that the prescribed declaration of Brazil’s Independence from Portugal in 1822 was signed by the young Prince Pedro who was born in 1800 in the same building — the São Cristóvão palace — his Royal family’s residence. Two decades later, King Don João VI, Prince Pedro’s father in order to save his kingship from the State Council - the Portuguese elite oppose to the monarchy - had to leave the Palace and rush back to Portugal. The King took every dime with him heading back to Lisbon and placed Prince Pedro as Emperor penniless.

“In January 1822, the State Council wanted the Prince to return to Portugal - which he disobeyed. On September 7, orders from Lisbon arrived declaring that Pedro was no longer regent and that all of his decrees were nullified. On that day, the Prince declared Brazil an independent country.” (4)

Also this building before being assigned to the use of the museum in 1892, it hosted the Republican Constituent Assembly from 1889 to 1891 which marked the end of the reign of the Portuguese empire.

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Notes

1. <https://brazilian.report/guide-to-brazil/2017/10/15/brazil-independence-portugal-september-7/>
2. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/neoliberalism-and-the-new-world-order-imf-world-bank-reforms/5572157>
3. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/brazil-neoliberalism-with-a-human-face/374>
4. <https://brazilian.report/guide-to-brazil/2017/10/15/brazil-independence-portugal-september-7/>

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