

Telenovelas and representations of national identity in Brazil

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Abstract

The article analyses the representations of national identity in the fictional programming of TV Globo, Brazil's dominant media conglomerate. A textual analysis of telenovelas (soap operas) broadcast in the last four decades of Brazil's political history shows that they build compelling visions of the nation through 'microcosms', the imagined locations in which the stories take place. Based on the concepts of hegemony and mediation, the article identifies a dialectic in which broader processes of political, economic and social change have been reflected in television fiction's localized representations of the nation even as telenovelas shape these same processes and endow them with new meanings. The article then traces the evolution of these complex mediations through four main phases of Brazil's recent political history, highlighting the linkages between television fiction and the dilemmas of the new democracy.

Keywords

hegemony, mediation, national identity, political communication, representation, telenovelas

In the early 1980s, the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–85) was facing one of its most important political crises. Divided by a struggle between 'hard-liners', who wanted to forcibly repress the growing opposition, and those supporting the political opening started by General-President Ernesto Geisel in the mid-1970s, the leaders of the authoritarian regime were discussing the most appropriate strategy for overcoming internal dissent and for consolidating their power. General Golbery do Couto e Silva was one of the most important members of the political establishment and a key strategist of the process of political opening. Nevertheless, because of disagreements with General-President João Batista de Figueiredo (1979–85), Golbery resigned from his position in the presidential

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cabinet in 1981. When journalists inquired about the reasons for his withdrawal from the government, the general responded: 'Don't ask me anything. I have just left Sucupira' (cited by Fadul, 1993: 146).

The general's statement reveals a clear link between television fiction and national identity in Brazil. Sucupira was a fictional northeastern town in *O Bem-Amado* (The Beloved), which TV Globo broadcast as a telenovela in 1973 and as a miniseries between 1980 and 1984.¹ Written by Dias Gomes, the successful telenovela portrayed the traditional political class, which dominates through archaic methods and rhetoric, as embodied by the character Odorico Paraguaçu. The fictional series contrasts the old-fashioned political style of Paraguaçu with the new social processes and forces shaping the country in the 1970s, including urbanization, modernization, the 'new' middle class, and a more assertive press. With his provocative reply to journalists, General Golbery ironically recognized the appropriateness of the parallel between Sucupira and the nation, and between Odorico and the military regime. His comment illustrates how, very early on, telenovelas promoted a specific vision of national identity and how Brazilians often recognized themselves in this representation.

The aim of this article is to present a textual analysis of portrayals of national identity in TV Globo's fictional programming, especially in its prime-time telenovelas. Like other melodramatic genres, telenovelas focus on romantic relationships, tragic suffering and moral conflict. It is therefore important to stress from the outset that telenovela plots usually center on love stories and family life, rather than political conflict and controversial social problems. Nevertheless, as I show below, Brazilian telenovelas have played an active role in the discussion of national politics and current events. Before advancing, however, it is necessary to refine the concept of national identity. This conceptual clarification is important because, as Schlesinger (1987) notes, 'national identity' has become an all-purpose catchword that rarely is presented within a clear and coherent theorization of cultural processes.

Telenovelas, hegemony and representations of national identity

The centrality of television series for the formation of national identities in peripheral societies has been highlighted by several authors (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Estill, 2001; Fadul, 1993; Hamburger, 2005; Lopez, 1995; Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990; Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996; Tufte, 2000). Nevertheless, the dynamic nature of these processes is not always recognized. What happens when media representations of the nation shift, challenging traditional ways of thinking and imagining? How does the broader historical context mediate the symbolic representations of the nation that are built and disseminated by melodramatic series?

Benedict Anderson's (1991) influential study of the origins of nationalism offers an apt point of departure to answer these questions. Anderson defines the 'nation' as a particular type of cultural artifact, an 'imagined political community'. According to the author, 'mass ceremonies' play a significant role in the construction of nationhood. These ceremonies involve consumption of a cultural product by a mass audience in which 'each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he [sic] performs is being replicated

simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion' (Anderson, 1991: 35). Among the cultural products that were central in the creation of this sense of symbolic membership, Anderson focuses on newspaper- and novel-reading as key rituals in the formation of the modern national identities.

This article analyses telenovelas' patterns of symbolic representation and their role in shaping collective identities and sentiments of national identity in contemporary Brazil. Thus the focus is on Anderson's arguments about the linkages between novels' fictional worlds and the construction of sentiments of nationhood. I argue, nevertheless, that we need to overcome some shortcomings of Anderson's analytical framework. For the purposes of this article, I stress two of them. First, Anderson insists upon literacy as the basis for national sentiments, but neglects the role of popular culture and audiovisual media (Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996: 12; Rowe and Schelling, 1991: 24–5; Schlesinger, 1987). As the Latin American context suggests, imagined national communities are shaped not only by novels (Sommer, 1991), but also by technologies such as film (Lopez, 2000; Shaw and Dennison, 2005) and radio (Haussen, 2005; Hayes, 2000). In the specific case of Brazil, television has established mass ceremonies much broader and more significant in scope than the public forums created by print media. Since the late 1960s, television in general, and telenovelas in particular, have provided a common platform that allows citizens from various social backgrounds to engage with a variety of social and political problems. Several studies have shown that Brazilian telenovelas generate a unified national public space that provides diverse audiences with a common experience that cuts across regional, class and other social boundaries (Hamburger, 2005; Kottak, 1990; La Pastina, 1999; Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990; Pait, 2005).

While the telenovelas allow disparate audiences to share a communicative experience and certain patterns of symbolic representation, the notion of a unified public space tends to downplay the contradictory and complex struggles that characterize the formation of collective identities. This aspect points to a second shortcoming of Anderson's framework. Although he recognizes the power struggles and conflicts that shape the formation of sentiments of national identity, the concept of 'imagined political community' implies a relatively homogeneous cultural configuration. In particular, Anderson's approach does not consider 'how a national culture is continuously redeveloped and the contours of national identity chronically redrawn' (Schlesinger, 1987: 250).

In order to understand nationhood as a cultural artifact that is both shared and contested, as well as to investigate how and why it changes across time, I draw on the cultural studies tradition. In particular, I rely on the articulation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony put forward by several authors, including Raymond Williams (1990), Stuart Hall (1996) and Martín-Barbero (1993). These authors help overcome Anderson's tendency to conceive of nationhood as a relatively homogeneous cultural configuration by emphasizing the contradictory and complex nature of collective identities, as well as the role of power relations and social mediation in shaping media representations. For example, Williams (1990) highlights the complexity of any culture and the dynamic nature of the interrelations between its parts by distinguishing between its 'dominant', 'residual' and 'emergent' elements. He also rejects functionalist approaches that define media representations as merely mechanical reflections of society. He proposes to replace the

concept of 'reflection' by the concept of 'mediation', a more active process in which distinctive realms of social life (culture, society, media, etc.) are connected, but not over-determined. Mediation also designates a dynamic relationship that frequently affects the original meanings exchanged in cultural and communication practices.

I apply these conceptual tools to analyse the role of telenovelas in the construction of imagined and compelling sentiments of national identity in Brazil. Based on these assumptions, it is possible to conceive of television as a contested terrain in which struggles over symbolic representation take place. As Michèle and Armand Mattelart (1990: 149) note, we should not consider television as 'an apparatus that manages one-dimensionally the social and ideological reproduction of the existing social order', but rather as 'a contradictory space where meaning is negotiated and cultural hegemony created and re-created in the play of mediations'.

In my analysis of telenovela representations, I focus on how they build compelling visions of the nation through 'microcosms', the imagined locations in which the stories take place. An earlier and insightful essay about Brazilian television suggested that these microcosms include metaphors and analogies that refer to the elements of the general system, allowing telenovelas to focus on contemporary changes and conflicts in social relations (Carvalho et al., 1980: 56). Several later studies confirmed that viewers often make strong parallels between telenovela representations and the political and social realities of the nation.²

These theoretical perspectives permit the analysis of a dialectic in which broader processes of political, economic and social change have been reflected in television fiction's localized representations of the nation, even as telenovelas shape these same processes and endow them with new meanings. Subsequent sections trace the evolution of these complex mediations through four main phases of Brazil's recent political history.

Telenovelas and modernization in the authoritarian state (1964–73)

In this section, I analyse telenovela representations of nationhood during the first decade of daily television melodramas in Brazil.³ Telenovelas of this phase were constrained by the military dictatorship's repression of political criticism and its efforts to create or reinforce a Brazilian identity conducive to capitalist development (Straubhaar, 1988). In this initial period, government censorship and a close alliance of interests between media owners and the military contributed to shape telenovela representations. The authoritarian regime's project of 'national integration' is one of the most important points of convergence between the policies of General-President Emilio Garrastazu Médici (1969–74) and the expansion and unification of TV Globo's programming (Carvalho et al., 1980: 24). The 'integration' of the nation demanded the standardization of aspirations and preferences, and the creation of a specific consumer culture that could support the unequal model of development known as the 'Brazilian Miracle' (1968–73), a period in which the country experienced record economic growth and a simultaneous concentration of wealth in the hands of the upper classes. Thus, the national identity formed in the period was linked to the integration of the country through the market (Ortiz, 1989: 165).

During the initial period of the military dictatorship in Brazil, the main problematic of telenovela plots was the conflict between the 'old' and the 'new', between rural traditions and the modern processes of industrialization and urbanization (Carvalho et al., 1980; Kehl, 1986). This is a common aspect of the construction of the idea of nation in marginal societies. As several authors demonstrate, the desire to achieve modernity has defined the construction of national identity in Latin America (Garcia Canclini, 1995; Ortiz, 1989; Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996; Rowe and Schelling, 1991).

The authoritarian regime's optimistic and nationalistic discourse ('This is a country moving ahead' and 'Brazil: love it or leave it' were some of the official slogans of the period) was also a reaction to the national identity being shaped by progressive and radical movements in the period preceding the 1964 coup. Thus, the national identity established by the military between 1964 and 1973 can be seen as a form of 'official nationalism' (Anderson, 1991), a conscious, self-protective policy based on a fear of political mobilization by the popular classes. Politically conservative and with an emphasis on economic modernization, this national identity was fundamentally marked by the repression of popular movements and all alternative ideas of the 'nation'. Not surprisingly, there was a tendency to ignore trade unions and other forms of collective mobilization in telenovelas of this initial period.

No other social group better expressed such aspirations of consumerism and modernization than the 'new' middle class born out of the economic expansion that took place during the 'Brazilian Miracle'. Since this early period, the social perspective of this middle class has dominated telenovela plots. In the representation of the nation based on the views of urban middle-income sectors, the reality of the lower classes usually appears as a caricature. In TV Globo's telenovelas, the working class settings are never really poor, since they always exhibit a certain comfort and a lot of furniture. Author Manoel Carlos once complained that, in spite of his instructions about portraying the homes of working-class characters, producers often embellished them (Vink, 1988: 177).

Two telenovelas aired by TV Tupi represent key moments of this initial period: *O Direito de Nascer* (The Right to be Born, 1964/5) and *Beto Rockfeller* (1968–9). The first was an adaptation of Cuban writer Félix Caignet's well-known melodrama, which had already been successful in radio. The telenovela was the first daily television melodrama to galvanize Brazil, becoming a huge success in terms of popularity and audience ratings. According to press accounts of the time, even religious ceremonies and sessions of the Senate changed their schedule so as not to coincide with the telenovela (Ortiz et al., 1991: 62). The Cuban melodrama's popularity pushed TV Globo and other television stations to increase the airtime devoted to telenovelas, leading to the genre's dominance of prime-time scheduling, which continues to this day.

The telenovela *Beto Rockfeller*, on the other hand, inaugurated a faster narrative rhythm and the use of colloquial language, with characters that became closely associated with the national ethos (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990: 15). Beto, the protagonist of the telenovela, was a charming, cunning and deceptive middle-class man who entered the world of the upper classes by faking his identity as a wealthy member of the elite. The adventures of this anti-hero illustrate some of the main themes of the period, including urbanization and the rise of the middle class to positions of affluence. *Beto Rockfeller* also marks a transition from more traditional melodramatic texts to a focus on realistic depictions of national themes.

Telenovelas and political opening: reconstructing the imagined nation (1973–85)

The previous section has shown that telenovela representations were initially constrained by censorship and by the regime's official nationalism. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that the image of the country constructed by telenovelas during the military dictatorship was fixed and free of contradictions. In this section, I examine the ways in which telenovelas contributed to a hegemonic view of the nation during a period of deep economic and political changes by incorporating emergent demands from civil society.

The official nationalism of the authoritarian regime started to face severe legitimacy problems after 1973. The end of the economic expansion and the international oil crisis helped erode the 'Brazilian Miracle' and threaten the new middle class. Political opposition grew and in 1974 the only opposition party permitted by the military achieved its first major electoral victory by gaining a majority of seats in the Senate. In response to this shifting political scenario, General-President Ernesto Geisel (1974–80) established the project of *abertura*, a process of political opening that was supposed to be 'slow, gradual and safe'. During this period, TV Globo contributed to establishing a new social consensus that incorporated emerging popular demands and issues, while maintaining the hegemony of the same 'historical bloc' or class alliance of which the network was part (Carvalho et al., 1980: 17; Kehl, 1986: 259).

The idea of the 'nation' built by the authoritarian regime faced a crisis after 1973, not only because of economic difficulties but also because of the growth and consolidation of civil society in the late 1970s. This period witnessed a remarkable expansion of collective movements and the rise of new social and political actors. Society was now more organized and politically active and telenovelas had to deal with its new demands.

The liberalization promoted by the military in the final stages of the dictatorship affected the representation of the nation constructed by television fiction. Joseph Straubhaar (1988) argues that telenovelas reflected the process of political opening, but were seldom among the leading actors in the promotion of political liberalization. Due to official and internal censorship, pressures from advertisers, corporate interests, as well as to collusion between media owners and the government, Straubhaar argues that TV Globo's telenovelas delayed support for the process of political opening. Although Straubhaar is right in pointing to key factors that constrained television fiction in the period, I argue that some telenovelas helped to weaken the regime's legitimacy by giving visibility to emergent meanings and new representative claims, creating more favorable conditions for the mobilization of new collective forms of political and social organization.

The telenovela *O Bem-Amado* (The Beloved), first aired by TV Globo in 1973, and thus before the beginning of General-President Geisel's political opening, illustrates this active role of television melodramas. As explained in the introduction, the main character of this telenovela, Odorico Paraguaçu, personifies a traditional political boss who stands in sharp contrast to the modern processes and groups that were shaping the country in the early 1970s. In the telenovela, Odorico decides to run for mayor of Sucupira on a single-issue platform: the construction of the city's first cemetery. Odorico is elected,

builds the cemetery, but soon runs into problems when he cannot inaugurate it because nobody dies in Sucupira. The mayor then orchestrates several attempts to cause the death of one of the city dwellers. He even invites an exiled bandit, Zeca Diabo, to return to the town, in the hope that he will kill someone.

O Bem-Amado offered audiences a subtle critique of the military dictatorship, despite the limits imposed by government censorship. The result was a clear vision of Sucupira as a microcosm of the nation, as well as an association between Odorico and the military, which contributed to weaken the regime's legitimacy. In the telenovela's final episode, Odorico himself is the corpse who inaugurates the cemetery, slain by the bandit that he had lured back to the city.

O Bem-Amado constituted an audacious experiment on the part of TV Globo, but the incorporation of emergent and critical representations by telenovelas remained limited during the 1970s and early 1980s for several reasons. First, government censorship frequently prevented authors from incorporating political and social commentary. Second, even when governmental control was loosened during the period of political opening (1974–85), TV Globo established self-censorship mechanisms which eventually blocked issues deemed controversial (Carvalho et al., 1980: 60–3; Kehl, 1986: 271–4; Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990: 46–7; Porto, 2003: 38–9; Vink, 1988: 139). Finally, the more challenging and oppositional representations of Brazil's process of modernization were often restricted to late-night melodramas, such as *O Bem-Amado*, which was broadcast in the now extinct 10:00pm time slot.⁴

Despite the constraints imposed by government and internal censorship, critical views about the development model adopted by the military started to emerge in TV Globo's telenovelas during the process of political opening. The previous emphasis on national integration through the market and consumerism was not abandoned, but a more critical and pessimistic view of the process of modernization emerged. The telenovelas *O Espigão* (The Skyscraper, 1974) and *O Grito* (The Scream, 1975–6), for example, discussed the negative consequences of Brazil's fast and chaotic process of urbanization, portraying big cities as a world in which isolated and alienated individuals are oppressed by powerful forces, including real estate companies. But as often happened during the period of the military dictatorship, critical representations were more common in late-night television. Both *O Espigão* and *O Grito* were broadcast in the 10:00pm slot, which reached a smaller and more affluent audience when compared to prime-time telenovelas.

Telenovelas and the initial period of democratization (1985–93)

The inauguration of the first civilian president in 1985 after two decades of military rule opened a new phase in the role of telenovelas. The end of censorship and the rise of a democratic political context allowed telenovela writers to comment more freely on contemporary political and social problems. As a result, TV Globo's prime-time melodramas have played a significant role in shaping nationhood in the period following the return of democracy.

Brazil's transition to democracy was a slow and difficult process. The new democracy was inaugurated in 1985 when dissidents of the regime joined the main oppositional party to form the 'Democratic Alliance'. The Congress members and representatives of state assemblies composing the Electoral College elected Tancredo Neves (a moderate member of the opposition) and José Sarney (a dissident from the regime's official party) as president and vice-president, respectively. The nation was caught by surprise when Neves fell ill the night before he was supposed to take office. In a dramatic turn of events, José Sarney, the former president of the official party of the military dictatorship, was sworn in as the president. After weeks of agony and several operations, Tancredo died, unexpectedly transforming Sarney into the leader of the new democracy.

During all these traumatic events, television fiction played an active role in helping Brazilians make sense of rapid processes of political change. The telenovela *Roque Santeiro* (Roque, the Saint Maker, 1985–6) presented an allegory of Brazil's new democratic government and criticized in subtle ways the type of political transition that was unfolding in the country. The fictional city of Asa Branca became another microcosm of the nation, allowing viewers to build compelling associations between telenovela representations and contemporary political events (Fernandes, 1997: 130; Johnson, 1988; Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990: 91; Pait, 2005; Vink, 1988: 179).

Roque Santeiro had been completely censored by the military dictatorship in 1975, after TV Globo had already taped more than 30 episodes. The return of democracy ten years later allowed the network finally to produce and air Dias Gomes' text. The telenovela told the story of the popular myth surrounding the figure of Luís Roque Duarte, or simply Roque, an artisan who was known for his sculptures of Catholic saints (thus the designation of 'saint maker'). According to the myth, Roque died just after marrying the unknown shop attendant Porcina while defending the city from the gang led by a thug called Navalhada. The hero then became a saint in the eyes of the local population and several miracles were attributed to him. The prosperity of the city and its elite, including the widow Porcina and local political boss 'sinhozinho Malta', was based on the commercial exploitation of the myth. Problems emerged when Roque, who had in fact not died, returned to the city 17 years later, thus threatening the existence of the entire social order of Asa Branca. Nevertheless, nothing changed, since the truth about Roque remained hidden. Due to the suspense built around Porcina's final choice of partner, the last episodes of *Roque Santeiro* were seen by almost 100 percent of the households with television sets (Vink, 1988: 179).

Roque Santeiro reflected and gave new meanings to a scenario of disillusionment with the country's transition to democracy, reinforcing cynicism and a negative representation of the nation. While Malta was clearly associated to the military dictatorship, Porcina and the entire social system of Asa Branca were implicitly linked to the troubled democracy that was established during José Sarney's presidency (Johnson, 1988).

In the first years of the new democracy, telenovela representations of the nation became more complex and diversified. One of the most fundamental aspects of this change was the introduction of discussions about social problems that had been absent from television, including corruption and social inequality. The shortcomings of the process of modernization became so serious in the 1980s that telenovelas began developing a general attitude of cynicism and pessimism about the country. Besides *Roque Santeiro*,

another example of this trend was *Vale Tudo* (Anything Goes), which was aired between 1988 and 1989 (Lima, 1993; Rubim, 1989; Weber, 1990). *Vale Tudo* recounted the story of Maria de Fátima, a young woman who sought social ascension and enrichment by all possible means, in a clear contrast to her honest and kind mother. The telenovela also featured unscrupulous corporate executives, such as villains Odete Roithman and Marco Aurélio. The question ‘Who killed Odete Roithman?’ galvanized the country, building the suspense that further boosted the telenovela’s ratings. In the end, businessman Marco Aurélio, who was involved in the assassination of Roithman, fled the country with millions of stolen dollars, highlighting the general impunity for those involved in corruption as well as the sense of powerlessness felt by ordinary Brazilians.

A public opinion survey conducted in 1988 in São Paulo, Brazil’s biggest urban and industrial center, provides evidence of the important political impact of the telenovela *Vale Tudo*. The series enjoyed impressive audience ratings and was very well evaluated by the population. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of those interviewed said they were following *Vale Tudo*, 36 percent said that they were following it once in a while, and less than 1 percent said they were not following the telenovela.⁵ According to the same survey, 31 percent evaluated the telenovela as excellent, 45 percent as good, 18 percent as fair and only 3 percent considered it bad or terrible.

Some authors provided significant evidence that the telenovelas *Vale Tudo*, *Que Rei Sou Eu?* (What King Am I?) and *O Salvador da Pátria* (The Savior of the Country) played a key role in building a specific political context for the first presidential election of the new democracy in 1989 (Lima, 1993; Rubim, 1989; Weber, 1990). According to these studies, by emphasizing the corruption and the inefficiency of both the state and the political establishment, television fiction helped build the conditions for the rise and triumph of outsider candidate Fernando Collor de Mello. Some authors reject this interpretation, arguing that telenovelas just reflected popular feelings, instead of shaping them (Lins da Silva, 1993; Marques de Melo, 1992). Nevertheless, such interpretations of telenovelas as ‘mirrors’ of reality tend to neglect their active role in the mediation of historical change and in the construction of hegemonic cultural values. Although the complex historical process of Collor’s rise to the presidency in 1989 cannot be explained in terms of telenovelas, they did play an active role in representing political conflict, social problems and current events during the electoral period. In the process, telenovelas not only reflected, but also gave new meanings to the changes unfolding in the country.

President Collor de Mello ran into trouble in May 1992 when his brother gave an interview exposing a corrupt network in the federal government led by the president’s former campaign treasurer, Paulo Cesar Farias. Soon after, Congress established a parliamentary investigative committee, or CPI, to investigate the charges. Opposition parties and civil society groups then launched a massive campaign in support of the investigations by the CPI and demanded Collor’s impeachment. After months of dramatic exposés and street demonstrations, Congress concluded that the president was directly involved in the corruption and opened a process of impeachment, forcing Collor out of the presidency in August and voting for his impeachment in December.

In this turbulent period, television fiction played a significant political role. On 14 July 1992, TV Globo launched *Anos Rebeldes* (Rebellious Years), a miniseries set in the late

1960s, during the darkest period of the military dictatorship. The miniseries portrayed with some sympathy the life and dilemmas of young Brazilians who had chosen to join urban guerrilla movements in order to fight the authoritarian regime, causing the Ministry of the Armed Forces to protest at the way the past was being 're-written' (Conti, 1999: 627). Some authors have argued that by focusing on the famous demonstrations of the 1960s *Anos Rebeldes* legitimated the street rally as a form of political expression for young people, who started to appropriate the music, the language and symbols of the miniseries in their pro-impeachment demonstrations (Rubim, 1999: 51–6). Despite some limitations in the miniseries' portrayal of Brazil's authoritarian past (see Xavier, 2004), *Anos Rebeldes* challenged significant aspects of authoritarianism and legitimated forms of political protest that were later incorporated and transformed by the students' pro-impeachment movement.

Telenovelas and democratization since 1993

After Collor's downfall in 1992, Vice-President Itamar Franco became the new head of government and formed a new cabinet based on a broad political coalition. In a context of continuing economic instability and high rates of inflation, Itamar invited Fernando Henrique Cardoso to become his finance minister in 1993. Cardoso then designed a new economic plan, the *Plano Real*, which succeeded in controlling inflation and in bringing the long-desired economic stability. Based on the success of the plan, Itamar launched Cardoso as the official candidate in the 1994 presidential election.

Telenovelas helped establish a specific context for the second presidential election of the democratic period in 1994 (see Porto, 1998). The telenovela *Pátria Minha* (My Homeland, 1994–5), in particular, presented a renewed sense of national identity that went beyond the traditional tendency to represent the nation in cynical and negative ways. A key feature of the telenovela was the cultivation of a spirit of optimism and confidence in the country's future. This representation was mainly developed through the story of an immigrant couple, Pedro and Ester. Residing in the United States, they faced a dilemma: Pedro wanted to go back to Brazil, believing that the prospects in the country were good, while Ester opposed the idea, arguing that the country was in chaos and that the living conditions were poor. After the couple returned to Brazil, Ester gradually overcame her pessimism and finally joined in with the atmosphere of patriotism created by the story. This new patriotic representation of the nation, in turn, played an important role in the 1994 presidential election, since it resonated with the *Plano Real* and other policies associated with incumbent candidate Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Porto, 1998).

One of the most important changes in telenovela images of the nation in this last phase was the rise of new modes of representation of subordinate groups. The focus on the world of the middle class continues to this day and the representation of the working class remains a caricature. Nevertheless, the notion of the 'Brazilian people' has become more complex and diversified. Even though subordinate groups are not framed in terms of class discourses, telenovela representations have become more complex by presenting a new emphasis on Brazil's unequal social and economic structure. In the telenovela *Renascer* (Revival, 1993), for instance, the only dream of poor peasant Tião Galinha is

to own a piece of land, but he fails and, in desperation, kills himself in one of the most dramatic moments of Brazilian television fiction.

If the tendency in previous years was to eliminate civil society from the screen, during the 1990s non-governmental organizations started gaining more space in telenovelas. For example, the telenovelas *Renascença* and *Pátria Minha* highlighted the national campaign against hunger developed by a network of civic organizations led by sociologist Betinho. In a newspaper interview, Betinho praised *Renascença*'s character Tião Galinha for putting social problems on the national agenda, in particular the fight against poverty and hunger (Porto, 1998: 445).

The telenovela *O Rei do Gado* (The Cattle King, 1996–7) represents a striking example of the inclusion of social movements and subaltern groups in television fiction. This telenovela was one of the first to discuss the need for agrarian reform and focused on one of the most important social movements in Brazil, the Landless Movement or MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra*). The basic strategy of the movement has been to move a cluster of families onto government-owned or unproductive private land and stay there until they are granted its title. *O Rei do Gado* told the story of two families of Italian immigrants who came to Brazil in the 1940s, the Berdinazzis and the Mezengas. Because of disputes over land, the families developed a strong rivalry and became enemies. After an accident, one of the Berdinazzi, the beautiful Luana, lost her memory and became a manual laborer in sugar cane plantations. She then joined the landless movement led by Regino, who decided to invade one of the farms of the powerful Bruno Mezenga, the 'Cattle King'. Not knowing that they belonged to opposing families, Luana and Bruno fell in love.

O Rei do Gado put forward a new image of the MST, especially since news coverage of the movement has been traditionally critical or even hostile (Aldé and Lattman-Weltman, 2000; Hammond, 2004). In contrast, the telenovela represented MST members not as violent or dangerous, but rather as ordinary citizens who simply want to own a piece of land to grow their crops. Despite the fact that the leaders of MST criticized some aspects of the telenovela, they praised it as a positive contribution to the struggle for agrarian reform in Brazil (Hamburger, 2000; La Pastina, 2004).

O Rei do Gado also played an active role in discussing Brazilian politics. One of its main characters was Senator Caxias, an honest politician who devoted his life to the struggle for agrarian reform. After 'real' Senator Darcy Ribeiro praised the fictional character in the press, an intense blurring of fiction and reality took place, with the fictional senator responding to the compliments of Ribeiro in the telenovela. In the climax of this fusion of media representations and national identity, two senators of the Workers Party (PT), Benedita da Silva and Eduardo Suplicy, appeared in the telenovela episode portraying Senator Caxias' funeral, which was taped in the building of Congress in the national capital (Hamburger, 2000, 2005; Hammond, 2004; La Pastina, 1999, 2004). These remarkable episodes are examples of another key feature of the representations of Brazilian telenovelas: the intense blurring of the borders between fiction and reality. Telenovela plots frequently represent recent events, while television news often reports on developments in the fictional worlds of telenovelas.

A final characteristic of representations of politics and politicians distinguishes telenovelas written in this period. One of the most consistent findings of studies about the

symbolic world that is constructed by Brazilian telenovelas is the dissemination of a negative and delegitimizing image of representative government and institutions, including politicians and political parties (Guazina, 1997; La Pastina, 2004; Lima, 1993; Porto, 1998, 2005; Rubim, 1989; Weber, 1990). In Brazilian telenovelas, all politicians are either corrupt or use politics for their own benefit. As a result, they tend to reinforce a traditional aspect of the country's political culture: a deep-seated mistrust of politics and politicians (see Porto, 2005). By portraying the main actors and institutions of representative government in this way, telenovelas may have contributed to delegitimizing political participation and to limiting some forms of collective action.

Conclusion

The analysis of telenovelas broadcast in the last four decades of Brazil's political history suggests that they have become a significant public space in which compelling images of the nation are negotiated. Television fiction should therefore be viewed not only as a form of entertainment but also as an important source of symbolic representations of national identity. This is even more evident in societies like Brazil, where television melodramas have been characterized by a realistic mode of representation and by an active role in the discussion of political and social problems. Public opinion data suggests that Brazilians recognize and support this political role of prime-time melodramas. In a survey conducted in 1988 in the city of São Paulo, the country's largest urban and industrial center, people were asked about what the role of miniseries and telenovelas should be. The great majority of respondents (58 percent) chose 'To show reality', 26 percent chose 'To entertain and distract', while 10 percent said that television fiction should perform both functions.⁶ When asked in the same survey if topics related to Brazilian politics should appear in telenovelas and miniseries, 60 percent answered yes and only 36 percent answered no. This data suggests that Brazilians recognize the important political function of television fiction and that its role in the discussion of national realities enjoys high levels of social legitimacy.

The examination of telenovela representations presented in this article offers significant contributions to debates about the role of mass communication and fictional genres in shaping sentiments of nationhood. By applying the concept of hegemony as articulated in the cultural studies tradition, this analysis helps overcome some limitations of research on media and national identity, especially the line of inquiry that draws on Anderson's seminal work. More specifically, the article emphasizes how broader processes of economic, social and political change mediate the 'imagined political communities' that are built and disseminated by television melodramas. It therefore highlights the fact that this sense of symbolic membership is dynamic, being continuously redrawn by the power relations and social forces that characterize specific historical contexts.

The article accomplishes such 'historicized' interpretation of media representations by identifying four main phases in the history of Brazilian telenovelas. As we have seen, the initial period of the military dictatorship (1964–73) was constrained not only by government censorship but also by the authoritarian regime's official nationalism and its

policy of national integration through the market. The rapid processes of industrialization and urbanization that characterized this historical moment were connected to telenovela representations through the predominance of a middle-class perspective, which continues to this day, albeit in more complex forms. During the period of political opening (1974–85), television dramas responded to the economic crisis, the growth of the opposition and the rise of a more organized and active civil society by incorporating more ‘bottom-up’, emerging cultural meanings, although they continued to reinforce a social consensus that sustained ‘top-down’ visions of national identity. It is also important to stress that, in the last period of the military dictatorship, critical representations of the nation were often restricted to late-night melodramas, which were more experimental, but had smaller audiences.

In the initial period of democratization (1985–93), telenovela writers enjoyed greater freedom to comment on contemporary social and political problems, enhancing the linkages between television fiction and the construction of national identity. Telenovela representations of this period expressed and articulated sentiments of disillusionment with a democratic transition that was characterized by substantial levels of continuity in relation to the authoritarian past. Television fiction also became more complex and diversified. For example, it incorporated new themes, including corruption and social inequality, and provided social forces, like the pro-impeachment student movement, with alternative ways of imagining and expressing political reality. When Brazil’s process of democratization entered a more mature phase (after 1993), telenovelas promoted new modes of representation of subordinate groups, increasing the presence of ‘bottom-up’ meanings that emerged from civil society organizations and social movements, such as the MST.

When telenovelas represented national identity in more plural ways, by incorporating emerging perspectives and cultural meanings, they often assisted in holding power holders accountable. This type of impact of television fiction became clear in my personal interview with former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who governed Brazil between 1995 and 2002. When asked about the role of telenovelas, Cardoso suggested that they function as a ‘chronicle of customs’, raising new topics in the public agenda and establishing new behavioral models. When asked about the role of the telenovela *O Rei do Gado* in the discussion of agrarian reform during his first term in the presidency, Cardoso argued that the telenovela reinforced the notion, predominant at the time (1996–7), that there was an urgent need for an agrarian reform in Brazil. As a result, people tended to overlook his achievements in this area, including a significant growth in productivity and a record number of families that received titles to land. According to Cardoso, *O Rei do Gado* did not cause this attitude, but the telenovela did ‘precipitate’ it, reinforcing the idea that there was a tragedy unfolding in rural Brazil and strengthening the Landless Movement (MST). Although the former president stated that there is nothing inherently wrong with this function of the telenovela, he also maintained that there were some important ‘exaggerations’ in the period.

Whatever judgment one makes of the outcome of Cardoso’s agrarian policies, the president’s interview identifies important connections between symbolic and political representation. He stresses the fact that telenovelas reinforce or ‘precipitate’ certain public attitudes and emergent meanings that play a central role in the process by which

presidents are held accountable. As Cardoso admits, the representations of *O Rei do Gado* favored the views and perspectives promoted by an important social movement, the MST, while at the same time downplaying what he saw as major achievements of his administration. Such linkage between television fiction and processes of political accountability is another indication that the microcosms of telenovela plots often build compelling representations of the nation that reflect – but also give new meanings to – the dilemmas of Brazilian democracy.

Notes

1. Telenovelas are melodramatic series that dominate the prime-time schedules of TV Globo, Brazil's dominant network. TV Globo was launched in 1965 by press baron Roberto Marinho (1904–2003), who established close political relations first with the military dictatorship (1964–85) and later with the democratic governments that followed it (Fox, 1997; Lima, 1988; Sinclair, 1999). Although this article focuses heavily on telenovelas, it also considers another genre of television fiction: the miniseries. While telenovelas last approximately six to eight months, frequently including more than 180 episodes, broadcast daily, miniseries are much shorter. *O Bem-Amado* was an exception to these general rules. The success of the telenovela aired in 1973 was so significant that TV Globo later transformed it into a miniseries, with weekly episodes that were broadcast between 1980 and 1984.
2. For example, in her ethnography with viewers of the telenovela *Que Rei Sou Eu?* (What King Am I?, 1989) in a small northeastern town, Sluyter-Beltrão (1992) argued that they interpreted the melodrama in different ways, frequently resisting its messages. Nevertheless, the author also found a general consensus among viewers that Avilan, the fictional kingdom of *Que Rei Sou Eu?*, was a representation of Brazil, allowing them, for example, to identify clear parallels between the political establishment of the kingdom and that of the nation. A more recent study about the telenovela *Terra Nostra* (1999–2000), based on focus groups, found that the fictional worlds of television melodramas play an important 'orientation' role for audiences, allowing them to make sense of contemporary political realities (Porto, 2005). One study based on focused interviews with viewers of the telenovela *Explode Coração* (Exploding Heart, 1995–6) arrived at similar conclusions (Guazina, 1997).
3. The first telenovela broadcast on a daily basis was *2-5499 Ocupado* (2-5499 Engaged), aired by TV Excelsior in 1963. For analytical purposes, I do not consider daily telenovelas broadcast before the military coup (between June 1963 and March 1964). My analysis also focuses primarily on the telenovelas produced by TV Globo, the dominant player in Brazil's communication system.
4. TV Globo broadcasts telenovelas in three main time slots: 6:00pm, 7:00pm and 8:00pm (the latter starts in fact around 9:00pm). Each time slot attracts specific audiences and has specific features. The six o'clock dramas generally target younger audiences, housewives and maids. They are considered 'lighter' in content and frequently include literary adaptations. The seven o'clock dramas occupy a transitional zone, when professionals with higher levels of education and income are arriving home for dinner. The time slot has become known for the sub-genre of comic telenovelas. Finally, the eight o'clock telenovelas (known in Brazil as '*novelas das oito*') not only attract larger and more mature audiences, they also tend to include more realistic representations and controversial themes (Kottak, 1990: 40; Tufte, 2000: 104–5; Vink, 1988: 46). Besides these three main time slots, TV Globo aired telenovelas in the ten o'clock slot between the late 1960s and the late 1970s (only one telenovela was broadcast at 10:00pm

after 1979: Jane Clair's *Eu Prometo*, which came out in 1983). The ten o'clock dramas had a smaller and more affluent audience. They were also more experimental and included more emergent and critical representations.

5. The survey included 1050 respondents and took place on 25 November 1988 (Vale Tudo I – DATAFOLHA/SP88.NOV-00119; Banco de Dados do Centro de Estudos de Opinião Pública – CESOP-UNICAMP; URL [consulted July 2008]: <http://www.cesop.unicamp.br/site/html/busca/php>).
6. The survey included 1050 respondents and took place on 22 November 1988 (Censura na TV/ Erundina – DATAFOLHA/SP88.NOV-00119; Banco de Dados do Centro de Estudos de Opinião Pública – CESOP-UNICAMP; URL [consulted July 2008]: <http://www.cesop.unicamp.br/site/html/busca/php>).

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