
THE SECOND REASON RELATES TO THE PEClARITIES OF THE WAY IN WHICH THE IDEA OF “POPULAR MUSIC” IS THOUGHT OF AND LIVED IN BRAZIL. AT FIRST GLANCE, THIS ATTITUDE IS NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE ADOPTED IN THE UNITED STATES. IN BOTH CASES, “POPULAR MUSIC” IS SIITUATED IN A TRIPARTITE DIVISION IN WHICH IT IS DISTINGUISHED, ON THE ONE HAND, FROM “FOLK MUSIC,” AND ON THE OTHER, FROM “ERUDITE” OR “ART MUSIC.” BUT BEHIND THIS APPARENT SIMILARITY IS HIDDEN A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE IN CONCEPTUALIZATION. ALLOW ME TO DISCUSS THESE DIFFERENCES BY MEANS OF A FEW EXAMPLES.

CHORO IS A TYPE OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC THAT CAME INTO EXISTENCE IN RIO DE JANEIRO IN APPROXIMATELY 1870. ACCORDING TO ITS SCHOLARS, CHORO AROSE FROM SOME OF THE LOOSER PERFORMANCES OF MUSICAL SCORES, FULL OF LOCAL SWING, BY BRAZILIAN MUSICIANS WHO PLAYED POLKAS, WALTZES, MAZURKAS, AND OTHER EUROPEAN DANCE GENRES. GRADUALLY, CHORO BECAME DISASSOCIATED FROM DANCE AND BECAME A MUSIC OF VIRTUOSOS, INSTRUMENTALISTS, AND COMPOSERS, ALL HIGHLY SOPHISTICATED AND, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, ELITE. NOT BY CHANCE, MANY PEOPLE COMPARED IT TO JAZZ. BUT CHORO IS CONSIDERED BY THE MAJORITY OF CRITICS (WHETHER ACADEMICS OR JOURNALISTS) TO BE PART OF BRAZILIAN POPULAR MUSIC. THUS, I WAS MORE THAN SURPRISED TO DISCOVER THAT JAZZ, WITH WHICH CHORO SHARES SO MUCH IN COMMON, IS NOT GENERALLY CONSIDERED TO BE “POPULAR MUSIC” IN THE UNITED STATES. DESPITE THIS, I DIDN’T FIND IT DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND THE POINT: NEITHER JAZZ NOR CHORO IS POPULAR IN THE SENSE THAT MADONNA OR THE BRAZILIAN ROMANTIC SINGER ROBERTO CARLOS IS. THE TWO GENRES—AND IN THIS BRAZILIANS AND AMERICANS CERTAINLY AGREE—ARE NOT PART OF “POP MUSIC.” BUT IN BRAZIL, “POP” IS NOT JUST AN ABBREVIATION FOR “POPULAR”; TO THE CONTRARY, THE TWO DESIGNATIONS ARE SEEN BY MANY TO BE OPPOSITES TO A CERTAIN EXTENT. IN THE UNITED STATES, THE EXPRESSION “POPULAR MUSIC”—OR “POP MUSIC,” FOR THE SAKE OF ABBREVIATION—SEEMS ALWAYS TO REFER TO MUSIC THAT SELLS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF RECORDINGS, PLAYS TO HUGE AUDIENCES ON THE RADIO, AND IS ASSOCIATED IN SOME WAY WITH WHAT THE PHILOSOPHER THEODOR ADORNO CALLED “CULTURAL INDUSTRY.” (BOTH JAZZ AND CHORO ARE, TO BE SURE, SOMEHOW ALSO RELATED TO THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY, BUT THAT RELATIONSHIP CANNOT BE SAID TO BEST CHARACTERIZE THEM.) IN BRAZIL, “POPULAR MUSIC” IS ALSO, IN PART, DEFINED BY THESE SAME FEATURES, BUT NOT BY THEM ALONE, AND CERTAINLY NOT IN THE SAME MANNER AS THEY DEFINE IT IN THE UNITED STATES.

CHORO, LIKE JAZZ, EXISTS TO A LARGE EXTENT IN A CULTURAL SPHERE INDEPENDENT OF LARGE RECORD COMPANIES AND THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY. ITS INCLUSION IN OUR IDEA OF “BRAZILIAN POPULAR MUSIC” IS TIED TO THE FACT THAT THIS CATEGORY IS SEEN NOT ONLY, AND PERHAPS NOT EVEN PRINCIPALLY, AS SHOW BUSINESS OR ENTERTAINMENT, BUT ALSO AS A MAJOR EXPRESSION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY. IN THE UNITED STATES, TO THE CONTRARY, IT SEEMS THAT THE CONCEPT OF “POPULAR MUSIC” IS NOT ESPECIALLY TIED EITHER TO THE IDEA OF ARTISTIC ELEVATION OR TO NATIONAL IDENTITY. THEREIN LIES THE DIFFICULTY IN TRANSLATING ONE IDEA TO THE OTHER.

ANOTHER WORRISOME ASPECT OF THE SUBJECT RELATES TO A PHRASE THAT IS NOT JUST MUSICAL. THE TERM CULTURA POPULAR IN BRAZIL IS USED TO MEAN ALMOST...
IN THE UNITED STATES . . . THE CONCEPT OF “POPULAR MUSIC” IS NOT ESPECIALLY TIED EITHER TO THE IDEA OF ARTISTIC ELEVATION OR TO NATIONAL IDENTITY. THEREIN LIES THE DIFFICULTY IN TRANSLATING ONE IDEA TO THE OTHER.

the opposite of “popular culture” in the United States. Studies of media idols, radio and television programs, comic books, or advertising are more recent and fewer in number in my country than studies of folklore. Perhaps for this reason, academics and Brazilian cultural institutions tend to use the expression cultura popular as a synonym for folklore.

“But how can that be?!” asked my UT student, bewildered when I spoke of these things. In Brazil, “popular music” is the opposite of “folk music,” but “popular culture” is synonymous with “folklore.” The paradox can perhaps be explained in part by looking at the way in which the cultural influences of France and North America combined in Brazil. The connotations associated with the word povo are different in the two languages. In France, le peuple always has a political connotation, which cannot be said for the English the people, or people. The French equivalent of “people” would be les gens. In Brazilian Portuguese, the French le peuple is translated as povo, and the English “people,” like the French les gens, is translated as pessoas (persons). The former is politically charged; the latter is merely descriptive. In the land of Rousseau, the word is always used along with the definite article (le peuple), as if to accentuate their indivisibility. Of course in English, “the people” can also carry a political meaning, but the term is commonly used, without the article, to designate any more or less heterogeneous group of persons.

In Brazil, the word povo tends to be used more in the French sense. But the corresponding adjective, popular, is ambiguous, appearing with two different meanings. There is a “quantitative popular,” that which refers to the number of people reached, or records sold: this is the “statistical popular,” so to speak, or even the “popular by induction.” And there is a popular that refers to the povo as political entity: the “qualitative popular,” or even “popular by deduction.”

In Brazil, when we speak of “popular music,” these different conceptions of popular are in play. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the period of slavery’s abolition (1888), and the proclamation of the Republic (1889), until the beginning of the twenty-first century, when a former labor leader, representative of a Workers’ Party, takes office as president of the Republic, definitions of the “Brazilian people” (povo brasileiro) have been in debate. Intellectuals like Silvio Romero, Márcio de Andrade, Gilberto Freyre, Florestan Fernandes, Roberto Da Matta, and many others helped to make these definitions explicit. And, as Bryan McCann points out in his book Hello, Hello Brazil, even Brazilian musicians and lyricists have made their songs a laboratory of ideas about the povo and Brazilianness.

Thus, books as diverse as Cantos populares do Brasil (Silvio Romero, 1883), Máscara popular brasileira (Oneyda Alvarenga, 1946), Pequena história da música popular (José Ramos Tinhorão, 1974), and songs as diverse as “História do Brasil” (Lamartine Babo, 1931), “Aquarela do Brasil” (Ary Barroso, 1939), and “Que país é este?” (Renato Russo, 1987), give testimony to the conceptual changes regarding the Brazilian povo and its musical expressions.

Through this process, the most expressive musical personalities—like Noel Rosa in the 1930s and João Gilberto in the 1960s—and proponents of the most dramatic artistic trends—like the tropicalist explosion of the 1960s—always associated the national-popular vein with the cosmopolitanism and consumerist orientation of the masses, typical of modern popular music, whose paradigm is, without doubt, North American. Add to this the fact that Brazilian folk music is not revivalist and not even very rural; its performers maintain in many cases a dynamic aesthetic dialogue with the recording industry. The result is that opposition between the ideas of “popular” and “folk” is, in my country, much smoother than it seems to be in other countries, including perhaps the United States. In Brazil, at least according to musicians, if “popular” is different from “folk” it is far from being its “opposite”; and they would conceive of “popular music” as different, to at least the same extent, from “pop music,” the latter perceived as having the least critical relationship with the market and cosmopolitanism.

This difficult mediation between quantitative notions of popular, politicized notions of popular, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism contributes a great deal to the contradictions and paradoxes, but also to the richness and the fecundity, of Brazilian popular music. My semester at UT was enormously helpful to my thinking on these contradictions and this richness from a comparative perspective. And despite—or perhaps, because of—the difficulties in translation, of both language and culture, I hope to have helped my students understand and appreciate Brazilian popular music more fully.

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