

I wrote this article in 2008 for the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, in preparation for the World Social Forum in Belém.

What strikes the attentive visitor to Brazil most is the contrasts that the country displays. From any angle you look at it, this enormous and diverse country, with 8.5 million square kilometers and 180 million inhabitants, reveals brutal paradoxes. It has the 12th largest GDP on the planet and the seventh worst income distribution.

Forty million Brazilians have escaped absolute poverty. Not exactly because they share the results of national production, which is sent abroad in increasing volumes (the export bill has exceeded 120 billion dollars annually).

The inclusion is due more to a bonus from the federal government, the Bolsa Família, which has nothing to do with production, productivity or personal merits (it is a kind of compensation for having children, keeping them in school and being poor, forgotten by the national elite).

This fund, worth 15 billion reais (US\$ 17 billion), is what guaranteed the reelection of President Lula and maintains his popularity, despite the explosions of social tension, mainly in the form of violence and criminality. The former labor leader did not eliminate the contrasts: contrary to the rhetoric, he even deepened them.

But he managed to seize the title of “father of the poor”, an award desired by most politicians, won half a century ago by the greatest of Brazil’s populist leaders, Getúlio Vargas. A depraved version of Robin Hood, charging a service fee to the rich to keep them protected from the poor. Belém do Pará, chosen to host the new version of the World Social Forum in 2009, is also a perfect example of this pattern of contrasts. Visitors will disembark at a new airport, which bears some – albeit vague – similarity to the Barcelona air terminal. But to get to their hotels they will have to cross huge swathes of dirty, precarious, unhealthy and poor areas. These are the “lowlands”, lands located below sea level, constantly subject to flooding

due to the action of rain (which falls almost all year round) and tides (which can vary up to six meters). The marshy and flat site has made drainage the main physical problem and the biggest source of misunderstandings in this city of 1.5 million inhabitants within its metropolitan perimeter. It is the capital of a state that is the size of the troubled Colombia (1.2 million km², or 15% of Brazil's territory) and has 7 million inhabitants. It was the undisputed "metropolis of the Amazon", close to celebrating its 400th anniversary, until it shared the leadership in the last decade with Manaus, today the capital of the western half of the region.

In the 18th century, a foreign technician conceived a plan to adapt the city to this depressed terrain and allow waterways to cross it, like a tropical Venice. But soon the order came from above: it was necessary to fill in as much as possible. Its residents wanted to free themselves from the effects of the insalubrity and the stigma of backwardness associated with the natural landscape, of tropics condemned to underdevelopment.

Since then, landfill has been the bargaining chip in relations between the powerful and their clients. The former promote the replacement of the "lowlands" and the latter return the favor in the form of votes, collected in authentic "corrals", dominated by "electoral workers", a kind of political overseers. But the incorporation of new areas into the urban texture has been at the cost of expelling the old occupants, who have been driven to the outskirts, where they swell like cancerous tissue. Participants at the World Forum will see skyscrapers competing for height and blocking the ocean winds that used to regulate the temperature, blowing over the entire landscape and mitigating the effects of humidity combined with heat.

Dozens of buildings are rising on previously depressed land – physically and socially. Two of these concrete and glass towers have now reached 40 stories, a record in the North and Northeast. Those who can afford one of the most expensive square meters in Brazil, unjustifiably expensive, seem to seek the top to isolate themselves from the surrounding misery below.

Not without reason, Belém boasts the largest horizontal slum in the country, with almost 100,000 inhabitants. The suburbs are formed by lines of passage improperly named streets,

which give access to precarious housing, without basic services, without leisure or work. High levels of alcohol consumption, drugs, idleness and savagery make everyday life bloody, especially on weekends, as evidenced by 12 pages of shameless police coverage in the three daily newspapers, another unwanted record for the city.

Anyone who visits places like Cidade Nova, Benguí or Jaderlândia will be able to associate images with Baghdad or Calcutta, in a state of open or undeclared war. Of every three working-age residents in Belém, only one has a job. The others make their living from occasional services or from the underground economy.

Landing underground can mean that they are street vendors, gently breaking the law to carry out their job, or they are directly involved in crime, even as hired guns in extermination operations that have become routine.

Next to Belém, a city of 80,000 inhabitants, Abaetetuba is considered the Calli of the Amazon, as it is an important reference point on the drug trafficking route, including internationally. Last year, Abaetetuba made headlines around the world: in its public prison, a 15-year-old girl was arrested (for attempted theft) and forced to share a cell with 20 men for a month.

During this time, she was raped and abused several times. No authorities became aware of the fact until it was revealed by ordinary citizens. When the scandal broke, measures were announced, but they are still slow in coming. The victim received financial aid to hide.

The city seems to be going through a generalized state of desensitization. Nothing shocks anymore. Nor is there any hope that the situation can change in substance. Never again has a consistent and bold plan for change been presented, like that of tropical Venice (which Recife, the capital of the Northeast, has incorporated at least partially, with its canals and bridges spread throughout the city).

The occupation of power has been pendular: when one group rises, the other falls. Polarization blocks dialogue and the exchange of ideas: the elites wear themselves out

fighting each other fiercely, while popular participation is merely an instrument for this recomposition of power among the same groups.

The result is a lack of continuity, a waste of resources, and a mismatch between real historical time and the conception of it held by those who really pull the strings of decision-making. Displaced from the third place it occupied in the ranking of Brazilian metropolises at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, with the Amazon rubber crisis (dethroned from its global hegemony by the much cheaper and more abundant Asian product), in the second decade of the last century, Belém tried to find a future in industrialization.

When roads were built to finally integrate the Amazon into Brazil, four decades later, the Belém industrial park went bankrupt: sustained by the physical isolation of the state in relation to the rest of the country, a distance that acted as a veritable customs barrier, local industries were unable to compete with the products that arrived from the south of the country by road. The illusion of an industrial city came to an end. What was an industrial district became a graveyard of industries, which never reborn.

More than two-thirds of the urban economy depends on services and the government. Barcarena, neighboring Abaetetuba, is today the municipality with the highest GDP per capita in the state, much higher than that of the capital. Its industrial district is home to the world's largest alumina factory, two of the largest kaolin plants and the eighth largest aluminum metallurgy plant.

Projects of this size are underway, in a partnership between the former Companhia Vale do Rio Doce (the world's second largest mining company) and foreign groups, all focused on exports. With a rich subsoil, Pará is a mining company on a global scale, mainly of iron, bauxite, alumina and aluminum – and, soon, also of copper and nickel.

It has the fourth largest hydroelectric plant in the world, Tucuruí, which has made it the third largest exporter of gross energy in the country. It is the sixth largest exporter and the third largest in foreign exchange balance. Of every 10 dollars that Brazil receives for its exports, 1

dollar comes from Pará.

Belém collects the crumbs of these riches, the activity that remains for a state that is prevented from charging taxes on companies that export raw materials and basic inputs extracted from its territory. Being the second largest in territory and the ninth largest in population, it is ranked 16th in HDI (Human Development Index) and 23rd in GDP per capita, only ahead of the four poorest northeastern states in Brazil.

This colonial imposition forces the city's most sophisticated elite to hold their noses when large ships arrive at the port, loading thousands of cattle on foot bound for Venezuela and Lebanon. All that remains of this cattle is the scream and the bad smell: the horns and leather, in addition to the meat, will be processed by the buyer.

Belém no longer exercises administrative control of the State. It has lost its mechanisms of action, which encourages separatist movements in the west and south, of municipalities that want to group together to form new states, demanding that the current Pará accommodate 60% of its population in 20% of its area, precisely the one with the least remaining wealth and the most deforestation.

It is not surprising that grandiose quantities coexist with tragic qualities in such a concentrated space. The contrasts are visible to the naked eye and Belém is not unaware of them, but seems to feel powerless to change a destiny that is written in the stars, having only to listen to them, as a great Brazilian poet, who was very fond of quantitative greatness, used to say.

What the still beautiful and characteristic capital of the people of Pará can expect from the thousands of visitors who will be attracted to it next year by the World Social Forum is that they will not be so hasty or superficial in their observations. And that they will be willing to share their knowledge (and their desire to do something) with the city.