

## The Year of Brazil at Chatham University

Convocation Address, September 9, 2008

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### Brazil in the 21st Century: Economic and Cultural Contributions for a Global Society

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about my country to the Chatham community.

Many have said that Brazil is not exotic enough to attract the attention of those expecting large differences from tropical cultures, but not developed enough to be seen as a full-fledged partner in a global society either. We Brazilians confront a similar dilemma regarding our role in the world, which our most important thinkers have examined in depth. Brazil was present at many, if not all, important modern events – the Industrial Revolution, 20th century avant-garde movements, the Second World War – but most of times Brazil was at the margins of these events. My students here at Chatham are learning about a large country, with an impressive regional diversity and an intriguing political history. Coming from São Paulo, a state that attracts people from the many Brazils – from the Amazonian North, from the traditional costal Northeast, from the recently developed West and from the more European South – I am able to tell them about this diversity and reflect upon it and as well.

Brazil has today a strong and growing economy, but Brazilian society still faces many problems that are familiar to less developed countries. This intermediary position can actually be an important asset for the world, if we are able to use it intelligently, fostering dialogue among nations with different values and aims. For us at Chatham, during the year of Brazil, this Brazilian feature can serve as an exciting entrée for the entire community, and especially for students who are for the first time thinking seriously about the world they live in and the cultures they will interact with throughout their lives. Whether you are a forward-looking businesswoman or someone searching for your African heritage; a University professor putting off paperwork or a college student reflecting on your career choice; an Asian immigrant trying to adjust or a third- or fourth-generation American proud of your grandparents' accomplishments, you will find someone just like you in Brazil. If you decide to learn about Brazil during this year, I guarantee that at a certain point you will start wondering who would you be today if your foreparents had taken a different ship.

Brazil is undergoing, as we speak, a revolution. It is a silent revolution, so you might not see it on TV. In 20 years, Brazilian economy grew by 60% in real terms, and today our GDP is US\$ 1.3 trillion. This is 5 times Venezuela's product, but still 10 times smaller than the American economy. When I was growing up, Brazil suffered with the oil shock, but today a much higher demand is met domestically. In the past 20 years, college enrollment tripled in Brazil, and universal secondary education is today an attainable target. I was a tall Brazilian in the 1980's. Today, walking in the streets of São Paulo I realize I am of average height. There are actually 10 times more overweight than underweight Brazilians, which is in part the result of technological advances that dramatically cut food prices.

Our domestic problems absorb us: what to do with traffic in our major cities? How to deal with corruption in all levels of government and society? Are we going to be able to clean up the Tietê and the Pinheiros Rivers, which define the city of São Paulo, much like the Allegheny and the Monongahela Rivers define the city of Pittsburgh? What to do with a prison system that was hijacked by organized crime? How to prevent child obesity? Brazil's problems today are problems of development rather than problems of underdevelopment. Our democracy seems strong. We have had fair presidential elections since 1989, with no constitutional breach, which may well be a Latin American record. Our media is sufficiently diverse to cover political and social events from different and competing points of view. Our leaders seem to prefer to deal with the critics as they are rather than pay the price of another authoritarian cycle. Although we do not have a strong culture of legal protection for free expression, society has been vigilant about recent censorship attempts.

Let me give you a few current examples that show how our intermediary position plays out in the international arena. In 2001, in order to implement a successful health program, the Brazilian government received preferential prices for AIDS-fighting drugs. At the WTO, however, Brazil demanded that Canada stop subsidizing their aircraft industry so that a Brazilian manufacturer could take advantage of free market opportunities. Brazilians might be critical of the effects of globalization in our country, but Brazilian influence is beginning to be questioned as well. In 2006, for example, Bolivia seized the assets of a Brazilian company with substantive investments there. In the cultural real, we might be a bit annoyed by the amount of American songs in our radios and films in our theaters. At the same time, we know that the Portuguese cultural elite is not that happy either with the transformative role that Brazilian soap operas and Brazilian Portuguese have in their cherished language.

Brazilians ask themselves how they can support, as a country and as global citizens, the American intervention in Iraq. Yet as we speak, Brazil's armed forces are in Haiti, as part of a UN peacekeeping mission, one that you might not be surprised to learn has had limited results in bringing security and development to this neighbor of ours. We do have one foot in the global society, the result of decades of strenuous efforts from Brazilian in all segments of society. We still see this global society, however, as an often alien, mysterious entity. We are part of it, and we would like very much to be included in it. Now that is not a terrible contradiction to live in. That is actually a blessing. We have the resources to produce, generation after generation, the best soccer team in the world and – the world roots for the team. Who else is the best anything in the world and still receives unconditional international sympathy?

"She is going on and on about this industrialized country, but when is she gonna start talking about Brazil?", you are all wondering. And you are right, because the distinctive and essential trait of Brazilian culture, a particular sociability, is something that you do have to pay attention to if you decide to go to or to study Brazil, or to interact with Brazilians. As an American once told me – about me and my Latin American friends, I admit – "I enjoy spending time with you, because you just talk, you don't argue, you don't debate issues. One subject leads to another

and this flow of words and laughter is a pleasure.” We enjoy food. We enjoy the company of each other. We enjoy lifelong friendships. We keep our in-laws in the family even after the divorce. We’ll make any sacrifice for a day in a crowded beach. Our cities stop to watch soccer games. We need to laugh and cry every night with the soap opera characters who are like a second family for many of us. We also take special pleasure in complaining about the government and gossiping about the boss, practices that come together maybe with a sense of political alienation and with the weight of economic restraints.

Being able to enjoy the things we have with us, and the people we have around us might be our own very special contribution. Of course every culture has its enjoyments, but we make an art of them. Culture, and music, and sports, and foods, and all sorts of life pleasures have always been powerful glues in diverse societies, Ancient and Modern. The Olympics of Greece, the poetry of medieval Spain and American rock in the 50’s and 60’s meant much more than individual entertainment. They meant that different people could at once reinforce common values and test each other in a friendly manner. The extremely diverse global society we live in today demands places and cultural forms like those, at once rich and welcoming. And Brazil has built entire industries around national cultural forms. Soccer, soap operas, tourism, music, Carnival and other popular festivities are today important sources of income for many Brazilian families. They are still fun, in spite of their commercial aspect, and they are today part of a global culture.

I invite you then to look at Brazil during this year with a double gaze: Look at it as a peaceful partner in a global economy that is trying to deal as creatively as possible with a host of challenges. Open the New York Times and search for Brazil: you will find the country in every section of the paper: medical research, business and the economy, the arts, energy and the environment. But don’t lose sight of the fact that our best contribution to the world is our rich oral culture and our distinctive sociability. Enjoy our food, listen to our music, read our literature and watch our films. Above all, try to meet as many Brazilians as you can. Our richest asset is our own people.