An introduction to the concept of the “national-popular” through the songs of Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I present the initial results of my doctoral research, the purpose of which is to analyse representations of nationhood as expressed in the songs of two renowned Brazilian composers, Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso. I begin by exploring the concept of the “national-popular” (characterised as a cultural project of the Brazilian left) in Brazilian Popular Music (MPB) in order to understand the different ideological and aesthetic projects of these composers. I take as a working hypothesis the argument that the representation of national projects in their songs – and in the field of MPB more generally – began to decline from the late 1970s, and this decline gained pace in the 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, with the impact of globalisation on Brazilian culture. In this sense, it is possible to argue that by the 1990s the songs of Buarque and Veloso, as representative of the national projects of the left, had entered a crisis.

KEYWORDS: Brazilian popular music; MPB; national-popular; globalisation.

Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso are emblematic figures in the Brazilian music scene. They gained fame during the “Age of Festivals” in the 1960s, which provided the context in which artistic output, although marked by the military dictatorship,
was nevertheless characterised by a great cultural effervescence, in parallel with a process of consolidation in the Brazilian cultural industry. I intend to examine how representations of the nation in these composers’ songs were rearticulated after the establishment of the Institutional Act No. 5, a period distinguished by the harsh restrictions of the military dictatorship. I take as a working hypothesis the thesis that representations of national projects in their songs began to decline from the late 1970s onwards. This decline gained pace in the 1980s, and was especially marked in the 1990s, as Brazilian culture began to feel the impact of globalisation. Thus it could be argued that the songs of these composers, as representative of such national projects, reached a crisis point in the 1990s. However, I recognise that this was indicative of a deeper, more widespread crisis – that of the whole ideological-aesthetic project of MPB. This was in turn linked to the crisis in the cultural project of nationhood – that is, in the national-popular project as formulated by the Brazilian left. I therefore turn to a discussion of the concept of the national-popular in MPB in order to analyse the different ideological, aesthetic projects of Buarque and Veloso.

It is necessary to locate the national-popular within the field of MPB, as this was the central concept underlying the genre. To accomplish this, I have turned to the theory of culture advanced by Raymond Williams (1992). Williams argues that a successful cultural sociology should be linked to a historical sociology, and must not resort to universal explanatory models when analysing the relationship between culture and society. Williams’s theoretical contribution holds validity for this research to the extent that, far from adopting a naive or uncritical view of culture, he understands it as a forum of power, interests and conflicts – or rather, of political struggles. This comprehension of the aesthetic as an area of political struggle is pivotal to my thesis because I consider the various impasses in which MPB became locked to be of a political nature. Analysing the aesthetic work of Buarque and Veloso from Williams’s cultural-materialist perspective – according to which, cultural forms are not independent of their material production – enables an understanding of its political nature. Thus the formulation of my research subject is based on the proposition that Buarque and Veloso, although both concerned with the national question, proposed divergent aesthetic and ideological ways of conceiving Brazil. They were involved in the heated debates of the 1960s around the building of a musical genre that would find acceptance in the mass media while offering aesthetic quality.

When undertaking a literature review on the constitution of the field of Brazilian popular music in the 1960s and its transformation in the following decades, it became apparent that there was a decline in national projects as the field became “institutionalised” (Napolitano 2001). What struck me, however, about the academic writing on the topic was that, although analyses such as Napolitano’s have allowed great advances in thinking about MPB, they do not address the specificity of such national projects. For instance, by taking into account Napolitano’s (ibid.) work, which accurately observes that the national project that permeated MPB was national-popular in nature, I was able to determine that it began to decline in relevance in the songs of Buarque and Veloso; however, his analysis is general and
neither defines the specific nature of the national-popular projects within MPB nor identifies the heterogeneous character of the artists’ individual oeuvres. Therefore, although I have incorporated his analysis as a reference point in my work, I have focused on Buarque and Veloso in order to perceive the differences in the representations of the national project within the contentious field of MPB.

Hence, the need for a historical reconstruction of the concept of the national-popular which, as I noticed in my literature review, lacks a definition in the Brazilian context despite being a widely used concept. During the course of my research, I intend to seek the origin of this general concept in order to render it specific to my analysis of Buarque’s and Veloso’s songs. It will then be possible to understand the specificities of the national projects in the work of both composers, and to verify the degree to which these projects, as represented in their songs, were rearticulated from the late 1970s through to the 1990s, when they appear to have entered a crisis. However, while the academic literature has allowed me to perceive that the aesthetic project that drove MPB was that of the national-popular, I have found some difficulty with its periodization. One of the reasons for this is related to its precise usage, and to the question of when exactly it becomes possible to speak of a political culture shaped by this concept.

These challenges are evident in the fact that research into the subject variously places the birth of a conception of the national-popular in the 1930s, in the 1950s, and in the 1960s. These differences – due perhaps to a lack of precision in the use of the term – reveal how necessary it is, when analysing the national-popular, to discover its specificity to Brazil, and to establish at which point in time we can begin to speak of the concept. It is necessary, however, to first establish certain criteria for working with this concept, beginning with an attempt to seek the particularity of the national-popular in both Buarque and Veloso through empirical research into their songs. Only then will I be able to verify the decline of representations of national projects in their music – if, indeed, there was a decline. Related to this, however, is the danger of trying to classify two composers who are in principle unclassifiable, and whose work is a dialogue with both the tradition of Brazilian popular music and international art music. As the erudition of these composers is obvious, it is not possible to reduce their work to univocal projects. Instead, I will seek to take into account the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in its production, employing both the theoretical support of Williams (1992) and comparative empirical research. In this way, it will be possible to problematise the subject and evaluate the hypotheses developed so far.

It was from this perspective that, at the stage of bibliographical research, I sought clues about the discussion of the nation, nationalism, and especially the concept of the national-popular in Brazil. I was able to determine that this concept is not synonymous with nationalism, populism, or even socialist-realism, even though the boundaries of the national-popular project as proposed here were often blurred in various ways, depending on the agent, institution or cultural event through which it was expressed. I prefer to think of this concept, therefore, as a cultural manifestation.
Once the initial historical research was completed, by focusing on the impact of this cultural manifestation on the songs of Buarque and Veloso, some partial results could be outlined. Their works convey some fundamental insights derived from their experience of exile in the 1960s. As already demonstrated, however, in the late 1960s they expressed different national projects. Silva (2004, p. 10) argues, both “respond differently to the same problems. [...] One could say that they are two visions of Brazil”.

Until the 1970s, Buarque remained partially faithful to the national-popular, although not in the terms expressed by the cultural policy of the *Centros Populares de Cultura* or CPCs (Popular Culture Centres). Amid the tensions that marked MPB, he remained detached from the different musical genres or movements. He neither engaged with leftist political parties nor was he considered a representative of the protest song genre. Although his composition “Pedro Pedreiro” (“Peter Mason”, 1965) could be considered a protest song, instead of singing of the promise of better days to come, he criticises the idea of a redemptive hope in the future. According to Bezerra (2002), this song is representative of the “utopian variant” in the composer’s work, which became more intense from the 1970s. In that context, Buarque – even if grudgingly – “has become a symbol of resistance to dictatorship” (Ridenti 2000, p. 229). His album *Sinal fechado* (“Red light”, 1974) is emblematic of the implications censorship held for his career. Although he did produce critical songs, representative of the national-popular ideology, in the same period he also released lyrical songs such as “Tatuagem” (“Tattoo”), “Olhos nos olhos” (“Eye in the eyes”) and “Fantasia” (“Fantasy”), and his album *Opera do malandro* (1979) expressed in a parodic manner his criticism of the national-popular. Silva (2004, p. 79) argues that this album resumes “the theme of national-popular ideology [...] but in an ironic and parodic key, treating it rather as a problem that was unsolved rather than as a way out that could be seen”.

On the other hand, although Veloso’s output was also a legacy of the national-popular, he explicitly broke with it and expressed instead a “tropicalist” national project, recognising the crisis of national-popular culture and seeking to re-think Brazil through the perspective of an international popular culture. The song “Tropicália” (1968) is illustrative of his national-tropicalist project. Throughout the 1970s, Veloso continued to be the guiding exemplar of the Tropicália movement. One need only recall the experimentalism of his album *Araçá azul* (1972) and the attempted revival of Tropicália with the show Doces Bárbaros (“Sweet barbarians”) in 1976. However, during this period, we can also see a touch of eroticism in some of his songs, as with the album *Bicho* (1977) and songs like “Tigresa”, “O leãozinho” and “Odara”.

I suggest, therefore, that both Buarque and Veloso were guided by the national-popular, understood as the manifestation of a cultural project of the Brazilian left. However, representations of the national-popular in the cultural output of the left were not homogeneous; Buarque and Veloso assimilated the perspective of a turn towards the people, but each in his own way, and both differed from the perspective of the Popular Culture Centres and so-called protest songs. Buarque employed the
samba tradition in his songs, whereas Veloso rescued a tradition regarded by the social memory of the 1960s as “bad taste”. Both based their music on the bossa nova, but Veloso assimilated aspects of bossa nova from João Gilberto, while Buarque was more akin to Tom Jobim. In addition, neither composer was concerned with using their songs to address the general population in a didactic fashion; although interested in the potential of music to bring a new awareness to the people, they did not privilege the content of the song over the form.

REFERENCES


