

## Makers of my Self

Frederico de Holanda

(address to the audience during the ceremony in which the title of Professor Emeritus was granted to the author)

I was born in Recife on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1944, into a typical middle-class family. My father, Gastão de Holanda, was an employee of Banco do Brasil; my mother, Elsa da Rosa Borges, Federal Inspector of Education. They were part of a circle of (the State of) Pernambuco intellectuals: plastic artists, writers, poets, architects, designers... As a pirate parrot, I, a teenager, witnessed meetings of those irreverent, acidly ironic and humorous thinkers. These acquaintances would deeply mark this future architect. Two of these Pernambucanos ran over the Marvel South, winning important prizes from the II São Paulo Biennial (1953-1954): my father, Gastão, took the novel prize; and João Cabral de Melo Neto, the poetry prize. Besides being a writer, my father was a graphic designer. Thus, as a character in Paul Auster's novels – who receives random blows left, right and centre – and counter-evidence to the fashionable myth of meritocracy, turns of fortune have released me at a high landing. To live up to it was a blessing and a sentence throughout life.

To my genome, internal and inescapable biology, other circumstances are superimposed, layers upon layers that make up my being, which continue to shape it while I live. Over and above the genome my *socionome* is formed, pardon my neologism, constituted by non-biological algorithms forged in me in confrontation with external reality. Initially, in contact with people around me: my parents and their friends, my siblings and their associates, my uncles and cousins, my wife, Rosa, our children Joana and Pedro (both doctors teaching at public universities – Academy takes root), daughter-in-law Mariana, granddaughters Irene and Carolina, my friends, fellow students and later on my colleagues, research partners, my students, my masters - among them the Pernambucano Evaldo Coutinho, a de jure lawyer but a de facto philosopher and aesthete, whose seminal concepts in Architecture (and Cinema, and Philosophy) have mesmerized me since I was an undergraduate student; the Portuguese, Brazilian naturalized architect and pedagogue Delfim Fernandes Amorim, who revolutionized architectural teaching in Recife, and mentor of the movement in our area known as the Recife School, which inspired my project for our Brasilia residence, 37

years after having been his student; the English architect Bill Hillier, my MSc and PhD supervisor, who revealed that the most seemingly banal architectural gesture comes to light inextricably loaded with social content. Then, under the most general circumstances, *à la* Paul Auster, none of my choice: my social class, my hometown, my state, my country, our Latin America, Planet Earth.

This determinism should not be a source of astonishment or moral perplexity. Sam Harris addresses this in his provocative 2012 book, *Free Will* - or rather, its absence. Harris (American neuroscientist), together with Richard Dawkins (British ethologist), Christopher Hitchens (Anglo-American journalist) and Daniel Dennett (American philosopher) form the group gaily called "the four horsemen of the new atheism."

In that book, Harris does not address *rewards* but *penalties*; however, we can relate both to moral responsibility. The focus is not on our sociobiological inevitability but on our relationship with Other. The moral justification for prize or punishment lies in doing good or evil to society. Having had the great misfortune of being born a psychopath does not preclude punishment through confinement; having been fortunate enough to have a sociology that allows the contribution to the good of Other deserves a reward. I gather the award of this title of Professor Emeritus as your generous assessment that I cherish a "Sociobiology of Good"... And I mark another event by chance: the additional honour of receiving the title from the first woman Rector of the University of Brasilia, Prof. Marcia Abrahão Moura. (And by the way, Maria Bernadette Neves Pedrosa [1931-2013], my Philosophy teacher in 1960, during my years at the Pernambuco High-School, a public institution, would become the first woman at the Recife Faculty of Law, in 1965, to receive the title of Professor Emerita, in 2006.)

The genome and sociome combined in our being are our one and only reality, which lasts only as long as our material body exists. Once the machine is extinguished, it is impossible to run the applications it processes and to accomplish the respective results. Among them, history illustrates dazzling deeds, but also limitless cruelties. Think of the hundreds of thousands victims of the Inquisition; the genocide of Native Americans: 20,000,000; the Brazilian Indians: from 10,000,000 in 1500, less than 1,000,000 remain; the victims of Stalinism, 20,000,000; those of Maoism, 40,000,000; the direct and indirect deaths resulting from the slavery of black Africans, 50,000,000; the victims of Nazifascism, 60,000,000, including 6,000,000 Jews. In new facets, genocide continues in Brazil, in the deaths of young, black and poor people on the outskirts of large cities

and at the remotest places in towns or in the countryside. The murder of Marielle Franco epitomizes exclusion *par excellence*: she was young, black, came from the poor periphery and also embodied more stigmatized identities: that of a woman, a leftist and a homosexual. Who killed her? Such references are made because of the frightening upsurge of fundamentalisms violently crushing opposing identities and values.

In the “metaphor of the lamp” in the book *The Place of all Places*, Evaldo Coutinho deals with our real, concrete, material being. While lit, your lamps illuminate my being, but “[I find myself] deceased when someone else passes away, I, myself, gone, with everything else, with the repertoire of those which became extinct.” My genome remains intact (really?), but my socionome fades away with the disappearance of those who were close to me: my parents, friends and colleagues like Brasilmar Nunes, Brianne Bicca, Christina Jucá, Claudia Loureiro, Elício Pontes, Ernesto Walter, Franciza Toledo, Frank Svensson, Jônio Cintra, Marcílio Ferreira, Miguel Pereira, Muhdi Koosah, Nelci Tinem, Nilza Weidle, Paulo Castilho, Paulo Zimbres, Solon Leão, Vicente Barcellos... far too many to name them.

However, the burnt-out lamp erases our physical existence but does not erase representations – for some time, at least. Our species was not made as such by the invention of the tool, extension of our body, as historians, anthropologists, ethologists, social scientists thought, and as Stanley Kubrick submitted in the prologue of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. No: in the words of André Leroi-Gourhand, we did so by the “domestication of time and space – a *human* time and space”. On this planet, at least, there is no other animal species capable of thinking, expressing and representing in concrete signs not only now, but yesterday and tomorrow; not only here, but distant places. 70,000 years ago, we made the cognitive revolution that has distinguished us, as Yuval Harari suggests in *Sapiens*. We live in contact with material things and with the world of imagination.

The genome passes biologically on from parents to children; the socionome, does not. In a book from 2017 – *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* – Daniel Dennett makes an essay on the evolution of minds – and the actions they serve. From Darwinian natural selection to intelligent design, our feats progress along three axes:

(x) bottom-up → top-down: on the one hand, deeds are the outcomes of punctual actions that result, however, in an emergent, successful and unplanned product – like

ants in building the anthill; or bees, the hive; or beavers, the dam; but also the so-called “spontaneous” cities, produced by millions of social subjects; on the other hand, in complex processes of division of labour, a whole is conceived, as in the *Sagrada Família*, whose Gaudi’s sketches guide hundreds of individuals; in Brazil today, the ruling elite, whose managerial caste is literally obscene, rejects a holistic project of nation and its sovereign insertion in the world, and wants to turn the rest into worker ants;

(y) incomprehension → comprehension: on the one hand, the unconscious, irrational, instinctive realization, eventually victorious in the confrontation with social and environmental circumstances; on the other hand, conscious, reflective accomplishments the permanence of which results from its vigor, sometimes reverberating for generations, centuries, millennia; in Brazil today, intelligence must be crushed, Culture and Art abhorred;

(z) trial and error → systematic research: on the one hand, learning by doing erratically, deducing from practical, concrete and complete experience, its failures or successes; on the other hand, to act from observing, ordering, recording, testing, proving, abstracting, generalizing, considering a vast empirical repertoire; in Brazil today, delirious voluntarisms despise the scientific knowledge of the world.

In the fields of Art and Science, holistic thinking, comprehension, and systematic research underlie the most fascinating human achievements: a *prelude* by Bach, Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, Picasso's *Guernica*, Machado de Assis' *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, Oscar Niemeyer's *Palácio do Itamaraty*, the result of which has benefitted from the expertise of Athos Bulcão, Joaquim Cardozo, Milton Ramos, Roberto Burle Marx and the manual workers of the building industry – in my view, the most important architectural accomplishment of all times and places. That simple.

The city is an example of the creative tensions between holistic processes and punctual decisions. Even in the Brasilia's Pilot Plan, thought in detail by Lucio Costa, there emerges specialized streets – “informatics”, “electric appliances”, “pharmacies”, “bridges”, “restaurants”, as well as the absurdly criminalized hostels and other popular services on Av. W-3, along with other uncoordinated actions by countless social subjects, not necessarily predicting the outcome of the whole, but intuiting the success of the venture – and getting it right.

However, I do not mystify the precious lessons I received from anonymous citizens in transforming my projects, contradicting professional knowledge, as in the small town of *Nova Iorque*, in the backlands of the State of Maranhão, my first work as an architect, whose evolution I have been following, dazzled, for fifty years. Nor do I worship the masters, while respecting them and their contribution to my *socionome*. I follow a maxim of the great educator Lauro de Oliveira Lima – education: so badly treated a field today – that recommended: when faced with a work, any work, and I would add, resulting from an individual effort or a collective endeavor – a book, a musical piece, a building, a city – do always ask: "Where this bloke got it wrong?"

I close by referring to two visionary works of art. Ridley Scott's grim movie, *Blade Runner*, my favorite in movie history, which dates to 1982 but takes place in... 2019 – more coincidences – on a devastated, corporate-dominated planet Earth where inhabitants dream of... abandoning it. And in literature, the poem of my countryman João Cabral de Melo Neto, *Fable of an architect*. Luckily for me – chance again – the book in which it was released, *Educação pela pedra*, dates from 1966, the year I graduated. It has followed me ever since: I read the poem as my colleagues' spokesman at the graduation ceremony; I used it as an epigraph to my book on Oscar Niemeyer, *Of Glass and Concrete*; I read it again now. As is proper to Art, the poem is polysemic, but I submit what most strikes me in it: the path from utopia to dystopia, in the direction of which we are speeding up.

### *Fable of an architect*

João Cabral de Melo Neto

Architecture like building doors  
to open; or like framing the open;  
building not to maroon or bind  
nor building secrets to conceal;  
building doors open... onto doors;  
houses naught but doors and roof.  
The architect reveals for man  
(open homes might heal the world)  
doors-through-which, not doors against;

by which to unleash reason, light and air.

2.

Till from fear of the untold free  
he spurned living in the open clear.  
Where spans would open, he walled up  
dark to shut; where glass, concrete sheer;  
till man re-pent: in chapel-womb,  
pampers of the nave, foetus once again.

Once again – and finally – I register my deep gratitude to all of those with whom I have  
been having the privilege of conviviality, present here at this moment or not, living or  
otherwise, but all MAKERS OF MY SELF.

Thank you very much indeed.

Brasilia, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.

(\*) MELO NETO, João Cabral de. *Poesias completas (1940-1965)*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Sabiá, 1968, p. 20-21.

(Translated from the Portuguese by Mark David Ridd.)