

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering Ruth Cardoso

by Teresa Caldeira



Photo by Getúlio Gurgel / Arquivo Pr. FH Cardoso

Ruth Cardoso.

in academia and in her roles as public intellectual, feminist and politician were far ahead of her time. As a result, she faced quite a bit of opposition, which she took calmly but also forcibly. When she died unexpectedly on June 24th of this year, everyone agreed that she had created her own space and left a strong mark on all of the many spheres in which she had crafted her life: anthropology and the university, her family and friends, the field of nonprofit organizations and social policy and the institution of the “first lady of Brazil.”

Ruth, as she liked to be called by colleagues and students, was born in Araraquara in the interior of the state of São Paulo in 1930. She went to the capital to study and earned a B.A. in Social Sciences at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP) in 1952. During her college years, she was part of a group of intellectuals who would become extremely influential in Brazilian academic and political life and with some of whom she developed a lifetime of collaborative work. It was called “The Capital Group” after the title of Marx’s book, which they discussed in weekly meetings. Among the members of this group was Fernando Henrique Cardoso, whom she married in 1953. She went on to earn an M.A. in Anthropology at USP in 1959.

After the military coup of 1964, the Cardosos and their three children went into exile in Chile. Ruth taught anthropology at several universities in Santiago between 1965 and 1967. After a period in France,

Ruth Cardoso always had a new project. There was always something new that she wanted to understand and, frequently, something she would like to change. She had an incredible sensibility to detect emerging social practices, a sensibility anchored

in ethnographic research and observations about the everyday. When she embarked on any of her projects, one thing was certain: she was not going to take a conventional approach. She always looked for alternative perspectives, and many of her initiatives both

they returned to Brazil in 1968. Ruth earned a Ph.D. in anthropology in 1972 at USP with the work *Familiar Structure and Social Mobility – A Study of the Japanese in the State of São Paulo*. She taught at USP until 1991 and was a visiting professor at universities in the U.S. and Europe, including UC Berkeley and Columbia. (Her last period as a visiting professor at UC Berkeley was in 2000, during Cardoso's presidency. She deeply appreciated the opportunity to return to the classroom and library and to spend time without security personnel, just enjoying the pleasures of being with her friends and taking care of her everyday grocery shopping and cooking).

Ruth was an intellectual always in search of new theoretical paradigms to understand the emerging social processes that she had a special talent for detecting in her ethnographic research projects. Lacking support for her research in the Department of Anthropology at USP, she joined the Department of Political Science in the early 1970s. It was there and at Cebrap, the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning, that she developed her most important research projects. In these multidisciplinary contexts, she investigated *favelas*, criticized the theory of marginality, theorized about the role of urban social movements, studied the transformations of youth, investigated the new role of NGOs and developed an important critique of ethnographic methodology summarized in her edited volume *A Aventura Antropológica* (1986). In these environments she and Eunice Durham formed at least two generations of urban anthropologists who now occupy prominent positions in the field. They were trained in weekly extracurricular seminars that addressed international debates and pushed the frontiers of the discipline to foster an understanding of contemporary transformations (for example, in the 1970s and '80s, they discussed Althusser and Gramsci, the work of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Foucault, Lacan, Castells and Touraine).

One of the most important research projects that Ruth developed at Cebrap in the early 1980s investigated the formation of new types of political action. Brazil was democratizing, social movements were emerging daily in the urban peripheries, and Ruth was convinced that the available theoretical frameworks and information did not allow for the understanding of what interested her the most: the novelty of the political action articulated in the peripheries. It was a moment of perplexity for the left, which had failed to detect the potential of the social movements, most of which had been organized by institutions such as the Catholic Church. The research was designed as a two-year-long ethnographic project

in several neighborhoods in the peripheries. Ruth met weekly with the seven members of the research team (of which I was part), visited neighborhoods with them, listened to countless hours of interviews and, at the end, organized an unusual debate at Cebrap in which all the researchers sat in the audience to listen to a discussion among five neighborhood leaders. This has always been her way of working: getting totally involved, taking nothing for granted, relying on countless observations and details and looking for new ways of framing questions and interpretations. As a result, she published important articles analyzing the role of social movements in Brazilian democratization and the type of relationship that they had established with the state. This research also unfolded in several other projects in the peripheries done either by her or by her students. These studies became important references for her conceptualization of public policies after she moved to Brasília.

Ruth was always a public intellectual. She had a special role in Brazil's feminist movement and democratization, helping to bring the interests of women to the forefront of public policy. However, she reluctantly approached the role of first lady when Fernando Henrique became president in 1995. Nevertheless, she transformed this role by downplaying its ceremonial aspect, insisting on separating her private and public lives and maintaining her independent opinions and professional activities. Most importantly, she had a decisive role in the creation of innovative public policies to combat poverty that fostered citizens' autonomy by encouraging them to claim their own rights. Under the label of "solidarity community," she created a series of social programs that focused on literacy, education, re-qualification of the labor force and the generation of income that have become models for social programs well beyond Brazil. The Brazilian media consider her to have been the most influential first lady in modern Brazilian history.

I met Ruth in 1976 when I was an undergraduate student at USP and soon became her advisee and later her research assistant and colleague at Cebrap. I learned with her the craft of anthropology, and it is still her voice that I hear when I teach my students about fieldwork or when I play with ideas for a new project. She was my close and dear friend. It will take me time to believe that her phone is silent and that she will not reply to the emails I keep thinking of sending her.

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