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# Brazil's 35 years-old quasi-stagnation: facts and theory

Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira

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# Brazil's 35 years-old quasi-stagnation: facts and theory

Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira

Written to the book edited by Matías Vernengo and Esteban Perez, *Why Latin American Nations Fail: Development Strategies in the 21st Century*, to be published by University of California Press. July 2015 version.

**Summary:** Brazil is growing around 1% per capita a year from 1981; this means for a country that is supposed to catch up, quasi-stagnation. Four historical new facts explain why growth was so low after the Real Plan: the reduction of public savings, and three facts that reduce private investments: the end of the unlimited supply of labor, a very high interest rate, and the 1990 dismantling of the mechanism that neutralized the Dutch disease, which represented a major competitive disadvantage for the manufacturing industry. New-developmental theory offers an explanation and two solutions for the problem, but does not underestimate the political economy problems involved.

**Key words:** quasi-stagnation, investment, interest rate, exchange rate, Dutch disease

**JEL Classification:** E6, O5

In my 2007 book *Macroeconomics of Stagnation* I asserted that the Brazilian economy had been quasi-stagnant since 1981 – due, first, to the major foreign debt crisis and high inflation, and second, from the early 1990s on, to a macroeconomic trap of high interest rates and a currency overvalued over the long term, which discouraged investment and hampered economic growth.<sup>1</sup> However, when the book was published it seemed to make no sense, in light of the satisfactory growth rates between 2006 and 2010, which were driven by the large increase in the prices of exported commodities (the “China effect”). At that moment we were being told by distinguished Brazilian foreign economists, whether liberal or developmental, and by representatives of the national and international financial system that Brazil had “resumed growth”, and that it was one of the BRICs destined for grandeur. In reality the country was benefiting only from a boom in commodities, as was soon be confirmed by the low growth rates between 2011 and 2014 and the predicted negative rate (-1.5%) for 2015. In fact, the Brazilian economy has been quasi-stagnant since 1981. The average rate of per capita GDP growth between 1981 and 2014 was 0.94% per annum; if

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Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira is emeritus professor at Getúlio Vargas Foundation, bresserpereira@gmail.com www.bresserpereira.org.br. I thanks Nelson Marconi for his comments.

we exclude an exceptionally negative period (the 1980s, when the country stagnated due to a major financial crisis) and also the commodity boom (2006–10), the rate has been even lower: 0.78% per annum.

What is the reason for these low growth rates, which for a developing country represent quasi-stagnation? How can an economy that between 1931 and 1980 grew at a per capita rate of 4.0% per year have grown so slowly since 1981? The reason for stagnation in the 1980s is well known: it was the foreign debt crisis, which resulted from the misguided policy of growth with foreign savings adopted by the Geisel government (1974–79) and from the high and inertial inflation this crisis unleashed.<sup>2</sup> But after the 1994 Real Plan controlled inflation, why did the Brazilian economy continue to grow so slowly? Why did the investment and savings rate continue to be so low? To answer these questions we need *historical new facts* that are significant. Four simple and decisive new facts meet these conditions: (a) the fall of public savings with the debt crisis, (b) the exhaustion of an unlimited supply of labor due to a fall in fertility rates, (c) the 1990 trade liberalization that dismantled the mechanism that neutralized the Dutch disease, and (d) the extremely high rates of interest since the Real Plan. These four historical facts reduced both public and private investment and pushed the Brazilian economy into long-term quasi-stagnation.

There is today certain uneasiness among Brazil's economic and political elites, who are beginning to realize that they have failed. I've always been optimist, but today I have no great hopes for the Brazilian economy. What I see are low growth rates, very far from assuring the catching up; a state that does not have an investment capability; an exchange rate that is appreciating over the long term and depreciating only in financial crises; and the basic interest rate as well as the banks' spreads remaining at very high levels. Why are the elites unable to solve these problems? Why don't they frame a development project, which should start by overcoming the macroeconomic trap of high interest rates and an overvalued currency? Essentially for two fundamental reasons: because the elites, along with the people, have lost the *idea of nation* – which makes them accept uncritically the recommendations and pressures emanating from the rich countries – and because the society as a whole is dominated by a high preference for *immediate consumption*. More specifically, I see politicians, businessmen, economists and economic journalists, whether liberal or developmental, whether left or right, refusing to lower the basic interest rate “because it is required to control inflation”, and refusing to depreciate the exchange rate because this will cause, in the short term, a temporary reduction in revenues and an increase in inflation. Besides, they have proved unable to increase the state's investment capacity – whether because those on the right see public savings and investments as unnecessary, if not dangerous, or because those on both the left and the right prefer to increase social expenditures that produce electoral dividends.

My pessimism regarding the Brazilian economy springs from three disappointments. The first disappointment was with the first government after the 1985 transition to democracy. The collapse of the Cruzado Plan in 1987 was an economic and political disaster of great magnitude, which demonstrated that the opposition that fought the military regime lacked a project to promote

growth and development. Instead, we had vulgar Keynesianism, characterized by fiscal and exchange rate populism, which ignored the fiscal crisis of the state. The second disappointment was with the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration (1995–2002). After the Brady Plan (1990) resolved the financial crisis of the 1980s, and the Real Plan (1994) controlled high inflation brilliantly, we Brazilians expected that the economy would start to grow fast; but, instead, what we saw was government economists subscribing to the liberal orthodoxy that prescribed absurdly high basic interest rates, an expansive fiscal policy and a highly overvalued exchange rate. The outcome of this exchange rate and fiscal populism was a major financial crisis at the turn of 1999, while growth rates were mediocre.<sup>3</sup>

The third disappointment was with the government of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), a social-democratic and developmental political party that has been in office since January 2003. By rejecting neoliberal policymaking it created an opportunity for economic development, but this didn't materialize. The PT government defined itself as "social developmental"; it was relatively successful with its social commitment, but not with its developmental ambition. It failed to lead the country into resumed growth, and was unable to form a developmental class coalition associating the industrial bourgeoisie with workers and the public bureaucracy. Its great merit was to secure social inclusion, which occurred due to the substantial increase in the minimum wage and the expansion of cash transfers to the poor, allowing a significant portion of the population access to mass consumption. But the long-term overvaluation of the exchange rate was not resolved; on the contrary, it was aggravated. The Lula administration inherited a highly depreciated exchange rate from the previous government (which was a blessing), but let it appreciate hugely during its eight years in office. In today's prices (June 2015), from 31 December 2002 to 31 December 2010 the exchange rate appreciated from R\$ 6.50 per dollar (a rate that expressed the financial crisis of the time) to R\$ 2.00 per dollar! In consequence, manufacturing industry stopped exporting. In Lula's administration there were five years of satisfactory growth driven by the rise in the price of commodity exports (a typical commodity boom), which, combined with much-needed distribution policies, expanded the domestic market. This involved a trade-off for manufacturing industry: it lost foreign markets due to the appreciation of the real, but gained a stronger domestic market. This was hailed as an achievement by the developmental defenders of the wage-led strategy. But this kind of strategy only works when the country is closed to imports; it is in an import-substitution case. Since the Brazilian economy is an open economy, supposed to be competitively integrated in global markets, the trade-off had a brief history. Soon importers of manufactured goods got themselves organized (which takes on average three years), and imported goods flooded the domestic market; as a result the Brazilian manufacturing industry lost the domestic market, which accelerated the deindustrialization process.

When Dilma Rousseff assumed the presidency in January 2013, with the exchange rate at R\$ 2.00 per dollar (in June 2015 prices), she faced an impossible task. Given that the industrial or competitive exchange rate should, at that time, have been around R\$ 3.00 per dollar,<sup>4</sup> the real needed to depreciate in real terms

by 50%! Rousseff had no power to bring that about. She was able to achieve only a 20% depreciation in the first two years of her administration, while the Central Bank lowered the interest rate substantially. But manufacturing business enterprises didn't start investing because, given the foreign competition and the overvalued national currency, their expected rate of profit remained very low, if not negative. The low rates of growth surprised the government, and the president made a decision of last resort that amounted to a major mistake: she adopted a costly industrial policy involving a substantial reduction of specific taxes for specific industries.<sup>5</sup> Again, industrial business enterprises didn't resume investing, because an industrial policy is no substitute for a competitive exchange rate and a reasonable interest rate. The country remained caged in the high interest-overvalued currency trap; manufacturing business enterprises continued without net (of interest) expected profits. Besides, the governing party became involved in a major corruption scandal – the Mensalão. Thus, the industrial entrepreneurs, who since 2003 had been called on by Lula and Dilma to form a developmental class coalition with the workers, gave up and opened the way for the liberal hegemony of the rentier capitalists, including the traditional middle class and financiers who manage the rentiers' wealth.

Despite the opposition of the economic elites, Dilma Rousseff was reelected at the end of 2014 with the support of the poor and of the Northeast. However, when she took office in January 2015, the economy was entering a recession, while inflation had risen to 8% a year, the primary surplus had deteriorated from 2% of GDP positive in 2013 to 0.6% negative in 2014, and the current account deficit reached 4.6% of GDP.<sup>6</sup> The recession was triggered by the low investment rate and the precipitate fall in the international prices of the two major commodity exports (soybeans and iron ore). Besides, a second and major scandal, now involving Petrobras, broke at the end of 2014. In consequence, on assuming office for the second time, in January 2015, President Dilma faced an acute economic and political crisis – a generalized loss of confidence – which was immediately aggravated because she decided to change drastically the existing macroeconomic policy and to engage in a major fiscal adjustment while the economy faced recession.

#### **Four new facts**

Let me now set aside the short-term adjustment problem faced by the Brazilian economy in the first semester of 2015, and discuss long-term questions. What are the new historical facts that keep the Brazilian economy growing so poorly – that is, quasi-stagnant? Why do financial advisors, whose forecasts are consolidated in the Focus Report of Central Bank, expect GDP growth up to 2018 to achieve a maximum of 2% per year? Of the four explanations that are most often proposed – insufficient household savings, a low level of basic education, lack of strong institutions, and lack of investment in infrastructure – only the last is useful. These problems are of long standing; they are always being confronted and never satisfactorily resolved, but they haven't prevented the country from growing strongly in the past. To explain the quasi-stagnation, I propose four new historical facts: (a) the reduction of public savings and, therefore, the fall in the state's capacity to invest in infrastructure since 1980; (b) the end of the

unlimited supply of labor; (c) a large competitive disadvantage that Brazilian business enterprises have faced since the trade opening in 1990 that involved the dismantling of the mechanism that neutralized the Dutch disease; and (d) a very high (though decreasing) interest rate level since the Real Plan. These four facts caused the fall in both public and private investment, and explain the fall in the historical per capita growth rate to a quarter of the rate before 1980.

**Table 1: Public savings and total investment  
(Average of the decades since the 1970s, as % of GDP)**

	<b>Public savings</b>	<b>Investment</b>
1970s	3.9	21.4
1980s	-1.5	22.1
1990s	-0.8	18.2
2000s	-2.8	17.1

As shown in Table 1, public savings reached high levels in the 1970s (an average of 3.9% of GDP), but plummeted in the 1980s and has remained negative since then; in the 2000s they were negative by 2.8% of GDP. The origin of this fall in public savings lies in two misguided policies pursued by the Geisel government in the second half of the 1970s: the use of the prices of the state-owned enterprises to control inflation, and the decision to grow with current account deficits which would be financed by “foreign savings”. As for the first, the profits of the state-owned enterprises were used from the start of the military regime in 1964 to finance government investment in infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> Using their prices to control inflation was a serious mistake, similar to the use of the exchange rate as an anchor to control inflation. This decision reduced the profits of the state-owned enterprises, and public savings fell. Second, the first OPEC oil shock in 1973 led all rich countries into recession. On assuming office in the following year, President Geisel declared that Brazil would nevertheless continue to grow in accordance with his Second National Development Plan. How? By using foreign savings, becoming indebted in foreign currency. A self-defeating policy. With the second oil shock, in 1979, the United States dramatically raised interest rates, and the countries indebted in foreign currency, including Brazil, broke up. The state was constrained to bail out business enterprises that were highly indebted in foreign currency, which represented a second blow to the fiscal health of the country, besides the loss of revenues derived from the state-owned enterprises. As a consequence of these two mistakes, public savings turned negative and the state’s capacity to invest declined. From this moment on, the country faced serious difficulties in financing the required infrastructure projects.

Public savings recovered somewhat in the 1990s, but in the 2000s they deteriorated further, for several reasons: first, the Brazilian government, captive to neoliberal thinking in the 1990s, privatized monopolistic state-owned enterprises, whose profits financed investment; second, since the 1985

transition to democracy governments had given priority to social spending to the detriment of investment in infrastructure; and third, the engineering capacity that a developmental state must have to develop infrastructure projects was seriously damaged by the many years of low public investment. Considering the high economic inequality, I understand the priority that was given to the social state over the developmental state, but this policy change went too far. The tax burden increased from 22% of GDP in 1985 to 36% in 2014, but, of this 14 percentage-point increase in the tax burden, around 11 percentage points were applied in the social area: education, health care, social security, social assistance, and culture, and the rest, to finance the high interest rates that the Treasury pays to rentiers. Social spending is a fair and highly efficient way of increasing indirect wages. In fact, this increase in social spending was a result of a momentous political agreement – the 1977 Democratic Popular Pact – that besides calling for democracy was committed to reducing social inequality. The fact, however, is that public investment lost the priority that it had had in the 1970s, and this is one reason for the subsequently lower investment and growth rates.

The second new fact that had a negative impact on investment and growth was demographic: it was the exhaustion of the “unlimited supply of labor” that exists in developing countries. According to the classical model of Arthur Lewis (1954), it depressed wages but kept them sufficiently high to allow for the transfer of labor from agriculture to the manufacturing sector, which could pay low wages, while the productivity of the country increased. As the business enterprises that benefited from low wages applied the resulting profits to investment and technical progress, economic growth was accelerated. This simple model explains some of the industrialization in developing countries, including Brazil. But fertility rates fell strongly in Brazil after the 1980s, resulting in a strong decrease in the labor supply in the 2000s (when the country reached the “Lewis’ point”). This was the main cause of the sharp rise in formal employment that began at that moment, and is one of the reasons why wages began to increase faster than productivity in several industries.

The third new fact that explains Brazil’s long-term quasi-stagnation is the increase in real interest rates, which were very low if not negative in the 1970s, but became extremely high from the Real Plan on. It is true that the level of interest rates has been falling throughout the period since 1994, but it is still very high. In June 2015, when this paper was written, it was 6% a year in real terms. What is the explanation for this? “Because high interest rates are required to control inflation”, is the usual response. Indeed, when inflation is rising, an increase in the interest rate is the first thing that should be done. But monetary policy does not need to go up and down around a 5% real rate of interest, as it does today; it may very well be practiced having as mid point a 1-2% real rate of interest. The high rates of interest in Brazil reflect the political power of rentier capitalists and financiers, who have a *seigniorage* of around 5-6% over GDP. Since the collapse of the Plano Cruzado (1987), rentier capitalists and financiers have become very powerful in Brazil and their influence only increases in so far as great numbers of industrialists sell their business enterprises to multinationals and become rentiers. When, in 2011, the Central Bank



substantially lowered the basic interest rate, President Dilma Rousseff gained the support of manufacturing industry. But the political power of industrialists has long been waning in Brazil, due not only to the process of deindustrialization but also to the process of denationalization: since the 1990s the number of manufacturing business enterprises sold to multinationals has only increased.

The fourth new historical fact explaining Brazil's quasi-stagnation is the *dismantling* of the mechanism that neutralizes the Dutch disease. This occurred in 1990, within the framework of the trade liberalization then realized. This was a major mistake. In the 1990s Brazil no longer had a "infant manufacturing industry", and should have opened its economy and become more competitive; but it quite rightly could not ignore the Dutch disease – a competitive disadvantage for the non-commodity tradable goods sector – which is the major cause of the long-term overvaluation of the real. The mechanism that neutralized the Dutch disease was built *into* Brazil's foreign trade system. In 1990, when the Brazil's average import tariff was reduced from 45% to 12% of GDP and the subsidy to the exports of manufactured goods, also 45% of GDP, was eliminated, the government was not only opening the economy; it was also dismantling the mechanism that neutralized the Dutch disease, without knowing what it was doing; it was creating a major competitive disadvantage for Brazilian manufacturing firms. For sixty years after the 1930s, the developmental economists who managed economic policy neutralized instinctively or intuitively a Dutch disease whose concept they didn't dominate; multiple exchange rate regimes, or high import tariffs combined or not with export subsidies to manufacturing goods did this job; in one stroke, this neutralization, wrongly understood as protectionism, was discarded, giving rise to a major competitive disadvantage to the Brazilian firms.

The Dutch disease can be defined as a permanent appreciation of the exchange rate and, therefore, as a competitive disadvantage caused by the export of commodities using abundant and cheap natural resources; these commodities can be exported profitably at an exchange rate that is significantly more appreciated than the rate necessary to render competitive both existing and potential producers of tradable goods and services that use world state-of-the-art technology. The commodities that generate the Dutch disease set the "current equilibrium" – the value of foreign currency that guarantees the intertemporal equilibrium of the current account – while the value required to render the other competent tradable business enterprises competitive is the "industrial equilibrium". The greater the difference between these two equilibriums, the more severe will the Dutch disease be. In oil-exporting countries like Venezuela or Saudi Arabia, where the cost of production is very low, the disease is very serious, while in countries like Brazil or Argentina the disease is moderate but enough to cause de-industrialization and – more than that – to *prevent* the vast majority of potential industrial projects in Brazil from being realized.

Under the developmental macroeconomics that I have been elaborating during the past 14 years within the framework of New Developmentalism, a tax on exports of these commodities is the only way to neutralize the disease. As this tax increases the cost of production, exporters require a more depreciated exchange rate, and since it is the supply curve (of the commodities, not of

manufactured goods) that determines the exchange rate, the curve will shift to the left as the cost plus reasonable profit fall, and the exchange rate duly depreciates. If the tax is equal to the severity of the disease, the current equilibrium will become equal to the industrial equilibrium, and the neutralization is complete. In consequence, all tradable industries that are technically competitive (not only commodities benefiting from Ricardian rents) will be economically competitive.

The takeoff of industrialization in Brazil in the 1930s benefited from the depreciation of the national currency caused by the Great Depression and the long-term fall in coffee prices. From the early 1950s, the Dutch disease was neutralized by a disguised tax on commodity exports, mainly coffee at that time.<sup>8</sup> Originally, this export tax was embedded in multiple exchange rate regimes, involving a more appreciated rate for exporters of commodities. What I call the “Delfim Netto model” is the mechanism that, from 1967 to 1990, neutralized the Dutch disease. It was embodied in the aforementioned Brazilian foreign trade system of high import tariffs and substantial subsidies to exports of manufactured goods. The coffee exporters knew that this was a disguised export tax and called it “exchange confiscation”, although, eventually, they paid nothing because they recovered their tax payments through the depreciation of the currency. It was a big tax, amounting to 31% of commodity prices – more than is required today to neutralize the Dutch disease. With this mechanism the competent manufacturing business enterprises that Brazil was building became competitive, and exports of manufactured goods soared: they accounted for 6% of total exports in 1965 and for 62% in 1991. Today they represent only 36% of Brazilian exports.

## **The theory**

The last two new historical facts that explain the low investment and growth rates in Brazil since the early 1990s (the high level of interest rates and the non-neutralization of the Dutch disease) may be more clearly understood in light of the developmental macroeconomics that a group of economists have been developing since 2003 within the framework of New Developmentalism. In this paper I use the concepts of this developmental macroeconomics, which is focused on the exchange rate and the current account instead of on the interest rate and the budget deficit.

In short, according to this view, economic development depends on investment, which depends on the expected profit rate and the interest rate; and the expected profit rate, in turn, depends on the exchange rate. The theoretical novelty here is the exchange rate; it is not considered in either Keynesian or neoclassical macroeconomics, because both assume that it is volatile but floats around the equilibrium exchange rate. New Developmentalism drops this assumption and claims that in developing countries the exchange rate tends to be overvalued in the long term in so far as it exhibits the tendency to cyclical and chronic overvaluation. Thus, when business enterprises evaluate their investment opportunities, they take into consideration the ongoing exchange

rate, which most of the time is overvalued, and conclude that the investment will not be competitive even if they utilize, or plan to utilize, the best technology available in the world.

The competitiveness of a country depends on the evolution of this equilibrium exchange rate, which, for its part, depends on the comparative index of unit labor costs, that is, the wage rate over the productivity of the country compared with the unit labor cost of a basket of countries. When this index rises, the equilibrium exchange rate goes up and the national currency depreciates so that its business enterprises may remain competitive; when it falls, the exchange rate appreciates with no harm to local business enterprises. Whenever the exchange rate does comply with this expected market behavior, we need not worry about the exchange rate; what we have to worry about is the loss of competitiveness of the country as a whole. This is not true when the exchange rate remains overvalued in the long term. In this case, investment will stop, and the economy will immediately face deindustrialization and low rates of growth if not stagnation. There are four causes for that, one structural cause – a non-neutralized Dutch disease – and three habitual policy causes: the policy of growth with current account deficits or “foreign savings”, the use of an exchange rate as an anchor to control inflation, and the central bank conducting its monetary policy around a high level of interest rate. While the Dutch disease pulls the market exchange rate to the current equilibrium, these other three policies widely used in developing countries, except those East Asian countries that count with competent developmental states, explain the current account deficits. These policies, together with expansive and irresponsible fiscal policies, besides causing low investment and growth rates, lead the country into increasing indebtedness in foreign currency and into recurrent balance of payment crises.

The policy of growth with current account deficits (“foreign savings”) to be financed by foreign loans or the investment of multinational companies automatically appreciates the exchange rate. Since there is a direct relationship between current account deficits and the exchange rate – the higher the current account deficit, the more appreciated is the exchange rate, and vice versa – this policy appreciates the exchange rate, discourages domestic investment, and involves a high rate of substitution of foreign for domestic savings: foreign investment does not add to, but rather replaces domestic investment – except when the country is growing very fast and there is already a very high expected rate of profit. As for the exchange rate anchor policy, it means maintaining a relatively fixed exchange rate while inflation continues to occur, which causes inflation to fall. This is a perverse way of fighting the symptomatic evil that inflation is, since it does so at the price of distorting the most strategic price that exists in a national economy, namely the exchange rate. And as for the high level of the interest rate, it makes sense only to the rentiers and financiers usually associated with foreign interests.

Large fiscal deficits are an expression of fiscal populism and vulgar Keynesianism, not of liberal orthodoxy; instead, large current account deficits associated with a long-term appreciation of the exchange rate are a manifestation of exchange-rate populism, whether developmental or orthodox.<sup>9</sup> These two forms of economic populism have always been present in Brazil since

the transition to democracy. Exchange-rate populism was present in the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration; it was even more intense in the Lula administration; and it recurred in the last two years of the Dilma administration. Fiscal populism was absent from 1999 to 2013, but returned in 2014.

Today (July 2015), in June 2015 prices, the industrial or competitive exchange rate is around R\$ 3.65 per dollar, the current equilibrium is around R\$ 3.20 per dollar, and the exchange-rate market price is also around R\$ 3.20 per dollar.<sup>10</sup> The equality between the current and the industrial equilibrium means that today the Dutch disease is zeroed, because the current equilibrium increased in the preceding years due to the fall in the prices of the commodities; when their prices fall the exporters require a more depreciated currency to export. As to the R\$ 0.45 difference between the exchange-rate market price and the industrial equilibrium, this appreciation is consequence of the *net effect* of three habitual policies that appreciate the exchange rate of developing countries, particularly the strong increase of the interest rate by the Central Bank that attracts capitals *minus* the facts that recently contributed to its depreciation: (a) the relative loss of confidence of foreign creditors, (b) the consequent reduction of the capital inflows, and (c) the decision by the Central Bank to buy back part of the reserves that it sold (actually, swaps) from August 2013 to avoid the depreciation of the real and the resulting inflation before the elections.

## **Solutions**

My experience and my research with Nelson Marconi suggest that the average severity of the Dutch disease in Brazil is around 15–20%, ranging from 8% to 25% as the international price of the country's commodity exports varies. When the price rises, the current equilibrium goes down and the Dutch disease worsens; the reverse happens when commodity prices fall, as they did in the last quarter of 2014. This competitive disadvantage is more than enough to render most competent industrial business enterprises in Brazil unable to export. The solution to the problem – the correct way of neutralizing the Dutch disease – is, as I have already said, to levy on the commodity exports that generate the disease a tax equal to the severity of the disease at each moment, ranging between 8% and 25% according to the variation of the international price of the commodities. This would increase the cost of production of the commodities so that a more depreciated exchange rate is necessary, equal to the one required by the production of the other tradable goods and services. Regarding the domestic market, the competitive disadvantage is smaller because we must discount the existing import tariff.

The long-term overvaluation of the exchange rate is more than enough to explain the loss of competitiveness of the Brazilian industry and de-industrialization in motion – the de-industrialization that we see in the fall of the share of manufacturing industry in employment, in GDP, and in total exports, and its increasing trade deficit. De-industrialization was not greater because the “Brazilian automotive regime” that was initiated in 1995 imposed an import tariff on the auto industry of about 35%. Thus, in relation to this industry, which is key to the Brazilian economy, the government fully neutralized the Dutch

disease, but only in relation to the domestic market; the competitive disadvantage remained in the case of exports. The rationale for the adoption of the program was the importance of planning the production chain, but its good results actually reflected the fact that tariffs are a form of exchange rate, and its increase led to the neutralization of the Dutch disease in relation to imports.

### **A second-best policy**

To counteract the tendency to cyclical and chronic overvaluation of the exchange rate and to make the exchange rate competitive, the government must neutralize the Dutch disease and radically reject the three habitual and populist policies. What, then, to do about inflation? If inflation does not have an important inertial component, the solution is to reduce demand.

It is politically very difficult to neutralize the Dutch disease, not only because powerful agribusiness resist an export tax but also because it involves a temporary and modest, but unpopular, fall in all real revenues and a temporary increase in inflation – something that Brazilians are not ready to accept. In the event that this export tax is adopted, it is necessary to ensure a minimum real exchange rate for exporters because there is the risk of a repeat of what happened in Argentina from 2007 on. In the 2001 financial crisis a tax (*retención*) was imposed on commodity exports, which neutralized the Dutch disease and for six years allowed the economy to grow at a very high rate. However, in 2007, given the rise of inflation, the government decided to adopt the exchange-rate anchor policy to control inflation. In consequence, despite the tax, the exchange rate has appreciated, industry has lost competitiveness, and the growth rate has fallen, at the same time as the country has failed to earn a current account surplus. This shows that it is useless to neutralize the Dutch disease with an export tax and then adopt policies that appreciate the national currency.

Everything indicates that an export tax to neutralize the Dutch disease will not soon be adopted in Brazil, (a) because both domestic and foreign economists have not so far understood what the Dutch disease really is and how it should be neutralized; here we see a repetition of what happened in the 1980s, when only eight Brazilian economists understood the theory of inertial inflation; (b) because nobody is ready to reject the three habitual and ultimately populist policies that further appreciate the exchange rate; (c) because no one wants to incur the temporary and once-and-for-all costs of a devaluation; and finally (d) because, as a result of all this, there is no political power to achieve a competitive exchange rate and the consequent small current account surplus.

Thus, I offer here a second-best alternative. It proceeds from a well-known fact: the exchange rate and import tariffs are substitutes. The proposal is, in light of that fact, to establish an import tariff consisting of two parts: an “exchange-rate tariff” intended to neutralize the Dutch disease, and an “escalation tariff” to account for the universally adopted policy of establishing higher rates for goods with higher value added per capita. The exchange-rate tariff will be a single tariff for all goods and services, and will vary from 15% to 25%; the escalation tariff, in

its turn, will be specific to each type of good or service imported, varying according to the technological complexity of the good or service from 0% to 10%. The maximum tariff will be Brazil's consolidated tariff at the WTO. The exchange-rate tariff will not be protectionist; it will only make the competitive conditions of the national and the other countries' business enterprises equal; the escalation tariff has a protective element, which is limited to 10%, something perfectly acceptable internationally. Rebates will be assured for re-exporters of imported goods.

It is an inferior solution to the export tax, because it neutralizes the Dutch disease only on the domestic side; exporting companies continue to face a competitive disadvantage. But it is a politically easier solution. And as Brazil has a relatively large domestic market, it saves Brazilian manufacturing industry from the threat of extinction. It didn't die only because in a key sector – the automotive industry – the Dutch disease was neutralized on the domestic side through the Automotive Agreement 1995, which involves for this industry a 35% import tariff. This proposal is simple and feasible, and it does not conflict with WTO rules; we just have to negotiate with our Mercosul partners.

Note that the devaluation required to bring the exchange rate down to where it floats around the industrial equilibrium should be a once-and-for-all policy. Thereafter, the government should guarantee that the exchange rate remains competitive by having a clear exchange-rate target. Exchange-rate policy should not be the responsibility of the Central Bank, which faces a conflict of interests in so far as its mission is to control inflation. A high-level exchange-rate committee similar to the one that takes care of the interest rate should frame it: the COPOM. I know that an exchange-rate policy is a heterodox thing, and that other countries would immediately say that Brazil was indulging in a “beggar thy neighbor” practice; but provided that the logic of the policy is transparent – that it avoids the competitive disadvantage that results from a non-neutralized Dutch disease and from the three habitual policies – this criticism is null and void.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have used the ideas of the new developmentalism and developmental macroeconomics models to explain the quasi-stagnation of the Brazilian economy. In short, after the mechanism that neutralized the Dutch disease was dismantled with the 1990 trade opening, the exchange rate appreciated chronically by about 13–25%, except in the cyclical moments of financial crisis when it sharply depreciated. In addition to this structural cause, I identified three habitual (and equivocated) policy causes: growth with current account deficits (“foreign savings”) policy, an exchange rate anchor policy to control inflation, and a high level of the interest rate both to attract capital and to control inflation. The non-neutralization of the Dutch disease and the three habitual policies have reduced the productivity and the competitiveness of Brazil's manufacturing industry in monetary terms and also in technological terms, because the lack of investment hinders the modernization of machines and equipment. Second, the interest-rate level has remained very high since the Real Plan. Third, from the late 1970s public savings became negative, which

substantially decreased the investment capacity of the Brazilian state and so rendered the infrastructure obsolete. Finally, in the 2000s the country reached the “Lewis point” in so far as the unlimited supply of labor ended.

Of these four policies, the first two, which raise interest rates and result in a currency that is overvalued over the long term, are the most important causes of Brazil’s low investment and growth rates. They represent a serious problem, but neither the liberals nor the developmental economists have conducted a serious debate about this macroeconomic trap. The political economy causes for this are as clear as burdensome. The necessary exchange rate devaluation displeases both groups. The new models of developmental macroeconomics remain generally unknown. Therefore, instead of discussing how to carry out devaluation, what the economic and political obstacles to doing so are and how to overcome them, they immediately argue that devaluation is either unnecessary, or unfeasible, or both. Independently of whether they are developmental or liberal, they reject the required initial and once-and-for-all devaluation because, so they claim, in the short term it would reduce wages (which it would) and would increase inequality (which it would not, because it would reduce not only wages but all kinds of income). Indeed, the attempt to reduce the extreme inequality in Brazil through the exchange rate makes no sense. The correct way to reduce it is through progressive taxation, a minimum-income policy, low interest rates and an expanded social state. Progressive taxation explains, for example, why Sweden has a much more civilized distribution of income than the United States. The Gini index pre-taxation is almost equal in the two countries, but post-taxation it is very different. While taxation is progressive in Sweden, it is not in the United States.

Liberal economists also reject devaluation, both because it temporarily increases inflation and reduces the real interest rate – which is unacceptable to the rentier capitalists – and because it would create difficulties for companies indebted in dollars and therefore for the creditor banks. Like the developmental economists of the left, right-wing liberals display a holy horror of currency devaluation – which, to the left, implies inaction, and, to the right, implies fiscal austerity, which will achieve an “internal devaluation” as unemployment grows and wages fall while the incomes of rentiers will remain untouched. In so far as they focus only on the difficulties associated with the proposed policy, they have abdicated responsibility for defending the temporary reduction of incomes and the temporary increase in inflation which a devaluation involves. As a result of the economic elites’ *active omission*, society is uninformed about the real causes of the stagnation of the Brazilian economy since the early 1990s. Government is paralyzed, no matter which political party holds office. Economists, businessmen and politicians fail to understand, and seem uninterested in understanding, the fundamental role of the exchange rate in the growth process and in catching up.

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<sup>1</sup> *Macroeconomia da Estagnação [Macroeconomics of Stagnation]* was the name of the 2007 edition; in English it was published two years later with the title, *Developing Brazil - Overcoming the Failure of the Washington Consensus*.

<sup>2</sup> The often-heard alternative explanation – that the exhaustion of the import substitution model explains the stagnation – is just ideological. This model has been exhausted since the early 1960s. It is true that import tariffs remained high after the model was abandoned, but the fundamental point is that, in 1967, Brazil began a highly successful period of growth led by the export of manufactured goods, on which I offer some numbers below.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the Real Plan was successful because it was the outcome of a heterodox economic theory (the theory of inertial inflation) developed by Brazilian economists.

<sup>4</sup> In January 2011 prices, the exchange rate was R\$ 1.65 per dollar and the industrial equilibrium – the exchange rate that makes non-commodity goods and services competitive – was around R\$ 3.00 per dollar.

<sup>5</sup> Previously she had already failed to undertake a fiscal adjustment when, in the second semester of 2011, the Central Bank firmly lowered the interest rate.

<sup>6</sup> The explanation for the rise in inflation is given in the previous note. A substantial reduction in the interest rate must be accompanied by a fiscal adjustment.



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<sup>7</sup> In 1964 the liberal and highly competent Planning Minister, Roberto Campos, nationalized the foreign companies to incorporate them in two major state-owned enterprises, Telebras and Eletrobras, and, immediately increased their prices to the consumers – a policy that allowed the two companies to self-finance their much needed investments.

<sup>8</sup> Coffee planters called this disguised tax, “confisco cambial”.

<sup>9</sup> Liberal orthodoxy is closely associated to exchange-rate populism in developing countries in so far that their economists see positively current account deficits, which, in most cases, finance consumption.

<sup>10</sup> As I said previously, in June 2015 prices, the industrial equilibrium in January 2011 was R\$ 3.50 per dollar. The industrial equilibrium increased from January 2011 to July 2014 to R\$ 3,65 because the unit labor cost in Brazil increased faster than the wages and the productivity of labor in its competitors. I arrived at these figures based on the calculation of the industrial equilibrium made by Marconi and myself at the Center of New Developmentalism of the São Paulo School of Economics of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, and also on the studies by Marconi (2012), Nassif, Feijó and Araújo (2013) and Oreiro, Basílio and Souza (2014).