Michael Oakeshott in Brazil: Building a Legacy

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THE BRAZILIAN LANDSCAPE AND THE RECEPTION OF MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

Political philosophy in Brazil has long enjoyed a serious and sophisticated tradition. Over the decades, Brazilian scholars have engaged deeply with the broad currents of Western thought, producing rigorous studies on classical authors, the historical evolution of political institutions, and the distinct dilemmas of our own national development. Yet, despite this intellectual vitality, the work of Michael Oakeshott remained neglected for far too long. The reasons for this omission are varied, reflecting the dominance of specific ideological and theoretical currents within Brazilian universities. The consequence, however, was plain: one of the twentieth century's most original political minds was largely absent from our academic curricula and public debates.

This state of affairs began to change steadily over the past decade, driven in large part by the gradual arrival of Oakeshott's writings in Portuguese. For years, the only translation available in Brazil was his historiographical collection *Sobre a História* (*On History*), published in 2003. A decade later, in 2014, a collection entitled *Conservadorismo* brought together three selected essays from his best-known work, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Some time later, in 2018, the translation of *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* was published, an essential work that offered the public a necessary framework for understanding the historical tensions between interventionist and skeptical styles of governance. With these publications, commentators and intellectuals began to cite Oakeshott with greater frequency in public debate, though still somewhat occasionally, drawing on his concepts to try to understand some of the impasses of the national political moment.

At the academic level, an institutional turning point occurred in 2018 with the founding of the Laboratory of Politics, Behavior, and Media (Labô), created by FUNDASP, the governing foundation of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP). Labô was conceived to produce rigorous academic scholarship that engages directly with society, reaching beyond university walls. Within this framework, we established the Political Philosophy Research Group with the explicit purpose of researching the Anglo-Saxon political philosophy tradition, paying particular attention to its skeptical foundations, its appreciation for tradition, and its defense of pluralism.

From 2020 onward, the Research Group focused its attention systematically on Oakeshott's work, organizing seminars, debates, and conferences, including an address by Professor Timothy Fuller, one of the world's foremost authorities on the philosopher and editor of several of his foundational collections. To consolidate this initiative and facilitate access to the author, for researchers as well as the general reading public, we created the Michael Oakeshott Room (*Sala Michael Oakeshott*), a digital platform integrated into the Labô portal that gathers comprehensive bibliographical surveys, essays by Brazilian and international specialists, and the work of our own group members.

Our research trajectory followed a coherent path. We began with a close examination of the essays in *Rationalism in Politics* and Other essays, proceeding to the collections edited by Timothy Fuller, such as *The Voice of Liberal Learning* and *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, alongside *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, and culminating in a study of his mature systematic work, *On Human Conduct*. A core pillar of the group has always been the commitment to publish essays, studies, and translations on our portal, which culminated in December 2024 with the launch of the inaugural issue of the *Laboratory of Essays Review (Revista Laboratório de Ensaios)*, an open access online publication dedicated exclusively to Michael Oakeshott.

The maturation of these research efforts unfolded into books characterized by collective scholarly production. In 2025, we published *A Filosofia Política de Michael Oakeshott* (*The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*), bringing together contributions from Brazilian scholars as well as Portuguese scholars from the Institute for Political Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal, establishing an enriching dialogue between Brazil and Portugal on the English philosopher. In the same period, it published *Michael Oakeshott no Oceano Ilimitado da Política* (*Michael Oakeshott on the Boundless Ocean of Politics*), featuring contributions from several present and former researchers from the Group as well as university professors across the country. In 2026, the volume *Conversação: ensaios de Michael Oakeshott* (*Conversation: Michael Oakeshott´s Essays*) was published, bringing for the first time into Portuguese three essential articles by the author addressing conversation, a fundamental aspect of Oakeshott's mature thought. In its most recent stage, the Research Group has placed Oakeshott in critical dialogue with other major twentieth-century thinkers, such as Leo Strauss and Thomas Sowell, analyzing convergences and divergences among these thinkers regarding the foundations of political philosophical thought. This sustained work is already bearing clear fruit, inspiring master's dissertations and doctoral theses, and embedding Oakeshott clearly within Brazilian academic life.

TWO FUNDAMENTAL PILLARS FOR THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

Studying Oakeshott's vast body of work from a Brazilian perspective reveals that its value lies not only in the academic interest of his formulations, but in the singular capacity of his ideas to respond to concrete problems within our civic life. Among the many possible contributions, we consider two aspects absolutely fundamental for the national debate.

The first is his reflection on liberal learning and culture understood as a wide-ranging conversation composed of many voices. In a country marked by severe polarization and utilitarian immediacy, rediscovering the meaning of formative education is an urgent task. The second aspect is his principled defense of the limits of politics and his critique of the contemporary illusion that all dimensions of human existence must be subordinated to the struggle for power. Below, we examine each of these two points a bit more closely and consider their relevance for our time.

THE PLURALITY OF VOICES AND EDUCATION AS CONVERSATION

Our contemporary social life is marked by an enormous difficulty in dealing with differing worldviews and their forms of expression. In present-day Brazil, the digital environment and the interference of social media algorithms have exacerbated this condition, feeding opinion bubbles, tribalism, and mutual intolerance. Faced with this situation, we must ask how to confront this problem in a deep and lasting manner. Although there are no simple solutions, any consistent response necessarily involves conscious action in the field of education.

In a seminal 1975 essay entitled "A Place of Learning," Oakeshott develops his vision of learning, both within the university and in civic life itself. For him, learning is precisely what makes us human. The philosopher argues that our life in society is constituted by multiple cultural expressions accumulated by

humanity over centuries. He calls these expressions languages, each possessing its own voice. Thus we find the natural sciences, history, poetic and artistic imagination, practical daily life, and philosophy itself.

For Oakeshott, liberal education is the formal process through which the individual is initiated into this intellectual, moral, emotional, and imaginative heritage of civilization. It is called liberal precisely because it liberates the student from the urgencies of the present moment, from purely utilitarian pressures, and from the immediate necessity of satisfying contingent desires. From this perspective, culture is not a chaotic heap of opinions, but a harmonious variety of distinct languages of understanding, which represent the most mature expressions we have of human self-understanding.

Culture can therefore be conceived as a meeting of voices that unite in the only authentic and free way possible: in a conversation. Oakeshott describes conversation as an endless, unrehearsed intellectual adventure during which we gain access to different ways of looking at reality. In this conversation, the absence of a definitive conclusion or a single answer is not a weakness, but the very testament to the richness and diversity of human life.

Liberal education consists of educating the imagination and teaching the art of this conversation, enabling the individual to recognize each voice in its own dignity, without allowing any one of them to dominate or silence the others. It is through this learning that we develop the moral and intellectual habits required to live in society. The capacity to enter this conversation and respect the plurality of voices is the most powerful resource we have to overcome the authoritarianism and polarization that divide us today. This is, in the most authentic sense of the term, a true education for diversity.

THE LIMITS OF POLITICS AND THE FREEDOM OF CIVIL SOCIETY

While in the sphere of education Oakeshott's thought teaches us to value plurality, in the political realm it offers an indispensable warning: politics requires clear limits so as not to suffocate the other spheres of human life. The idea that "everything is political" has become a widespread dogma in our day, but we must ask whether this belief has been useful to society. Oakeshott firmly argued that it has not. In his essay "The Claims of Politics," he defended the view that political activity, to fulfill its role virtuously, must have a limited scope; otherwise, it risks compromising fundamental liberties.

Oakeshott was a skeptical thinker and rejected the easy solutions of what he called Rationalism. He saw rationalism as a mental habit that attempts to frame the complexity of human life into simplified theoretical schemes, treating society as a mechanism to be repaired by abstract projects of social engineering. This way of thinking fuels the so-called politics of faith, which turns government into an instrument designed to impose mandatory collective goals and ready-made visions of social perfection. Against this posture, Oakeshott set the politics of skepticism, which views the governing function with prudence and modesty, aimed at preserving peace and respecting the choices of each citizen.

This reflection achieves definitive clarity in the distinction the philosopher establishes between two models of human association: *universitas* and *societas*. An *universitas* is an enterprise association, in which people are brought together around a common collective purpose, and individuals end up being viewed merely as instruments for achieving that predetermined goal. In its most extreme expressions, this model opens the way for the cancellation and nullification of anyone who does not align with the common purpose imposed by central authority.

Conversely, *societas*, or civil association, is the model Oakeshott defended as the safeguard of freedom in the modern world. Within it, individuals are not compelled to pursue the same life objective. They live together peacefully under a body of general and impersonal laws that function as rules of conduct, allowing each individual to pursue their own purposes and vocations. The laws of a civil association are non-instrumental: they do not dictate what each person must do or produce, but merely establish the just conditions for all to act without frustrating one another.

In this context, government has a limited and sober role. Governing is not leading a crusade toward an obligatory destination, but providing a stable framework of rules so that manners of conduct are less prone

to result in destructive collisions. The government must act as an umpire that maintains order and resolves friction, respecting the multiplicity of individual purposes.

Furthermore, the idea that "everything is political" fails grievously by ignoring the richness of human experience. Civilization flourishes only when we recognize that art, friendship, spiritual seeking, family life, and disinterested reflection possess intrinsic value and require no ideological justification to exist. As Oakeshott pointed out in "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," the attempt to politicize all areas of life is a true corruption of consciousness, destroying the autonomy of non-political activities. Rejecting the maxim that everything is political does not mean devaluing politics, but affirming our capacity for self-determination and preserving the spaces where life can be lived in its full and diverse expression.

It is striking to observe how Oakeshott's reflection anticipates with precision the phenomenon of the culture wars that dominate public debate today. We live in an environment in which ideological dispute has overflowed the institutional boundaries of politics and begun to colonize virtually every dimension of social existence. Personal relationships, moral values cultivated in daily life, religious beliefs and practices, artistic production, and even the intimacy of family life are under constant pressure to take sides and fit into the camps of a polarized struggle. When everything becomes a trench, mutual trust unravels, and common life loses its spontaneous warmth and delicacy.

Faced with this stifling environment, Oakeshott's thought offers far more than a refined diagnosis: it provides intellectual instruments essential for understanding what is being threatened and for constructing a balanced response. The concept of conversation restores our capacity to listen and live with different voices without attempting to silence them, while the idea of *societas* reminds us that a free society does not demand uniformity of purpose, but only respect for shared rules of civil coexistence. Together, these two concepts form a solid and serene foundation for any action aimed at defusing the dramatic polarization of our time, protecting society from its own fragmentation and preserving the spaces of liberty where real life takes place.

CONCLUSION: A HORIZON FOR THE BRAZILIAN DEBATE

The trajectory of research and dissemination developed by the Political Philosophy Research Group at Labô is not a purely academic exercise detached from our reality; it represents a living contribution to the renewal of ideas in Brazil. Over recent years, the work of producing and translating articles, editing books, organizing conferences, and training new researchers has allowed such sophisticated thought to take firm root within our intellectual and university environment.

This institutional construction takes on its full meaning when articulated with the two major themes we have examined. The defense of liberal education as an open conversation of many voices and the insistence on the necessity of limiting political power offer mature and balanced responses to the impasses of contemporary Brazil. At a moment marked by discursive extremism and the constant temptation to place society under guardianship, Michael Oakeshott emerges as a steady reference. He reminds us that true civility consists not in imposing absolute certainties, but in protecting individual liberties, preserving spaces of coexistence, and keeping alive that generous, unarmored conversation that defines the very best of human experience.

In his own words,

> *"In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no 'truth' to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another (...); they may differ without disagreeing."* [1]

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NOTES

1 Oakeshott, Michael. *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*. In: Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays. Liberty Fund, 1991, p. 489