**Peter Drucker Challenge**

# The “Gambiarra” Principle

*Improvisation, Tradition, and the Conditions That Make Innovation Possible*

A storm was gathering. I was very young, and I was at my grandparents' apartment — a place with a chronic plumbing problem that no one had ever managed to fix: whenever it rained hard, the sewage would back up through the kitchen sink. That night, it was only a matter of time before chaos arrived. With the light, almost comedic air of a man who had seen this film before, my grandfather rose from his chair and said: *"I'll sort this out the gambiarra way."* He grabbed a tape measure, gauged the distance from the cabinet to the drain, cut a broomstick to the right length, wrapped a cloth around one end, and wedged the whole thing at an angle that kept the drain sealed. That night, the kitchen stayed dry.

*Gambiarra* has no precise equivalent in any other language — which already says a great deal. It is a Brazilian colloquial term describing creative, improbable solutions born of necessity. But that definition is far too small for what it truly represents, because *gambiarra* is not merely a solution: it is a *posture.* Whoever practices it does not ask "do I have the right resources?" — they ask "what do I *have* here, right now?"

This posture has given rise to real inventions. The electric shower, ubiquitous in Brazil, is perhaps the most audacious example: who else in the world would devise a solution to cold baths that combines electricity with running water? Only someone who desperately needed a hot shower and had no alternative. The opening sequence of *City of God* — one of the most recognized shots in world cinema — was filmed with a camera lashed to a broomstick, chasing a chicken. When Fernando Meirelles met Steven Spielberg years later, the American was dumbfounded: that single shot would have cost him a million and a half dollars. For the Brazilian crew, it cost creativity and a broomstick. The same broomstick as my grandfather's, in a sense.

Yet not every environment shaped by necessity generates innovation. Despite its often painful origins in adverse economic conditions, innovation can still emerge through a sense of social cooperation, an absence of judgment, and a willingness to try new ideas. Whether in a company or a society, fertile ground is required for ideas to arise and be seized. I will return to this point. What is striking is how such innovations have become tradition in Brazilian culture — and how, culturally, tradition and innovation so frequently travel together. This leads me to the central question of this essay — not "what is innovation?" but "where does it come from, and what kills it?"

## THE DONKEY AND THE CAMEL: WHEN TRADITION BECOMES AN ANCHOR — AND WHEN IT BECOMES BALLAST

In 1859, Emperor Dom Pedro II organized a scientific expedition to Brazil's northeastern interior. One of the ideas tested was the importation of camels from Algeria for use as pack animals in the state of Ceará — a region he imagined might hold the promise of an Eldorado.[1] After all, the camel

[1] Further information in: Lorelai Kury, ed., *Comissão Científica de Exploração: canções tupi, fósseis e borboletas* (Rio de Janeiro: Andrea Jakobsson Estúdio, 2001).

is *traditionally* known for enduring extreme heat. Why rely on a donkey — an animal regarded as "inferior"?

It was a disaster. The camels could not adapt to the sandy, rocky terrain of the *caatinga*. They became useless. Meanwhile, the donkey — born on that very soil, accustomed to those stones, native to that logic — proved infinitely more efficient. The episode inspired a famous Carnival samba-enredo at Rio's Sapucaí: *"Better a donkey that carries me than a camel that throws me off... up there in Ceará."*[2]

The irony is structural. The camel was imported as innovation — the "modern" animal for arid climates — but in practice it was a solution stripped of context. The donkey was dismissed as backwardness, yet it was the most advanced technology available for that specific terrain.

This is the error that repeats itself: when we do not know our own tradition, we become vulnerable to two symmetrical traps — mistaking what is genuinely ours for backwardness, and mistaking what comes from outside for progress. The historian Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Invention of Tradition*, argues that many practices we consider ancient were in fact recently constructed by elites to forge a convenient sense of identity. In other words, not every tradition is legitimate — some are fabricated. But the conclusion to be drawn from this is not to abandon tradition. It is to know it deeply enough to distinguish what is root from what is mere decoration.

Tradition functions like ballast on a ship. In navigation, ballast is the weight held low in the hull to provide stability. It does not propel the vessel. **It does not dictate the destination.** But without it, the ship may capsize. Culture operates in precisely the same way: it is not the engine of innovation, but it is what prevents the shipwreck. **When tradition becomes an anchor — when it holds the ship in place rather than steadying it — the result is stagnation. When it disappears entirely, the result is chaos.**

The very same Ceará expedition that failed with the camels also produced genuine advances: it was the first major Brazilian scientific expedition composed exclusively of national researchers (rather than Europeans); the painter Reis Carvalho[3] produced watercolors that broke new ground in the visual documentation of Brazilian science; and the expedition organized the first exhibition of Ceará's products at the Imperial Court, serving as a model for the National Industry Exhibition of 1861. The ballast of Brazil's scientific tradition was already there. What was missing was recognition of our own beloved donkey.

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[2] Samba-enredo is a specialized sub-genre of samba created to narrate a school's theme during the Carnival parade. In this 2023 parade by Paraíso do Tuiuti, the lyrics celebrate the "brazilianness" of the donkey (jegue) over the exoticism of the camel. The verses "Simplicity is worth more / than seeking a thousand novelties / and creating complications" serve as a critique of cultural subservience, suggesting that neglecting local wisdom in favor of foreign imports leads only to failure.

[3] Lorena Féres da Silva Telles, *Reis Carvalho: um olhar sobre o Brasil do século XIX*.

**THE BOOING THAT PRECEDES RECOGNITION**

It was 1968, at the International Song Festival held at TUCA, in São Paulo. Caetano Veloso[4] stepped onto the stage with the band Os Mutantes and launched into *É Proibido Proibir* — electric guitars blazing, avant-garde noise filling the hall. The audience booed. Part of the crowd, self-appointed guardians of what they considered "authentic" MPB, saw in the performance an act of betrayal. Sonic imperialism. Surrender to the enemy.

Caetano did not switch off the guitar.

I grew up studying classical piano, and I learned early on that much of the repertoire conservatories treat today with near-religious reverence was, when it first appeared, received with hostility. Tchaikovsky is the case that has never left me. The most influential music critic in nineteenth-century Russia, Nikolai Rubinstein, heard the *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor* for the first time in 1875 and declared it unplayable, trivial, vulgar — and that it would never be performed by any competent pianist. Today, that same concerto is among the most performed in the world, studied as an epitome of the classical tradition. Yesterday's innovator became today's classic.

The irony is not incidental. It is structural. And what Tchaikovsky reveals is the human cost of this logic: when a culture cannot distinguish between what must be preserved and what must be questioned, it does not merely reject the new — it damages those who bring it.

The pattern is universal: in 1913, the premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* provoked one of the most notorious brawls ever recorded inside a Parisian theater. In the 1950s and 60s, American executives ridiculed the first proposals for compact cars — until the Japanese brought them to market and transformed the industry forever.

But what Tropicalism reveals is that creating the future does not mean erasing the past. Caetano knew *baião, frevo, candomblé,* and cordel literature with depth.[5] The electric guitar replaced none of that — it entered into dialogue with it. And from that dialogue emerged something that had not existed before: a language simultaneously local and universal, ancient and contemporary. This is *gambiarra* on a cultural scale. It is not improvisation — it is innovation with ballast.

I once participated in a theater piece about the Brazilian dictatorship. I was at the piano. The play called for *Roda Vida*, by Chico Buarque — composed in 1967, veiled enough to slip past the censors, charged enough for those who knew how to listen. We chose not to perform it as everyone

[4] Caetano Veloso (born 1942) is one of the most influential singer-songwriters in Latin American history. In the late 1960s, he co-founded Tropicália, a revolutionary cultural movement that fused traditional Brazilian rhythms with psychedelic rock and avant-garde poetry. Because his art challenged the status quo, he was imprisoned and eventually exiled by the military dictatorship in 1969. Often compared to Bob Dylan or David Bowie for his constant reinvention, Veloso remains a central figure in Brazilian intellectual life, symbolizing the tension between local roots and global modernity.

[5] Major cultural styles rooted in Brazilian tradition.

knew it. I played slowly, like a music box forgotten in a sealed room. Almost unrecognizable in form, but entirely faithful in content. People wept. Not because I had betrayed Chico Buarque — but because the alteration revealed something the original version, vigorous and combative, sometimes conceals: the sorrow beneath the resistance. The innovation did not supplant the tradition. It deepened it. In the Latin sense of *educere*: it drew outward what was already within.

When an organization imports methodologies without understanding its own culture; when it discards the tacit knowledge of its most experienced people in the name of the agility of the youngest; when it mistakes rupture for progress — it is not practicing Tropicalism. It is ordering camels for the *caatinga.*

## THE SHIP WITHOUT A KEEL: HOW THE ABSENCE OF CULTURE TURNS PRESSURE INTO CHAOS

There is a kind of workplace that does not appear in management textbooks. Not because it is rare — but because it is difficult to name without sounding dramatic. I worked inside one.

The firm was internationally renowned, the sort of place whose name on a résumé functions as a credential in itself. I arrived with the feeling of someone newly admitted to an elite conservatory — that mixture of pride and intimidation that makes you want to prove you deserve to be there. The stated values were clear: excellence, cooperation, delivery. In practice, it was something else entirely.

One lawyer — I will call her Helena — was brilliant, the kind of brilliant that intimidates before she even speaks. She was the one who assigned us the task: analyze, organize, and edit more than 3,600 documents for an important case. Deadline: twenty-four hours. Tight, exhausting, but feasible — provided we worked together, as the firm's values promised. We did. Six continuous, concentrated hours, without pause. Then Helena revised the recommendations. Six hours of work, discarded. The following day, the same. By the third day, it was clear Helena was not following what we were doing — it was like someone advising a kitchen team to bake a cake without leavening, with the authority of someone who had never baked a cake in their life.

The consequences cascaded. People began delegating tasks to artificial intelligence without verifying the results — not out of laziness, but out of desperation. Resentment grew silently, the kind that only surfaces when someone finally hands in their notice. And that is what happened: an intern left, disorganization spread, other lawyers replicated Helena's behavior — not by choice, but for lack of time to do otherwise. After a while, I resigned too. To this day, I receive messages from colleagues still there. The situation has worsened.

For Drucker, management is grounded in values and in the human condition, not merely in techniques of command. What that firm had in excess was technique — deadlines, targets, pressure. What it lacked was the art of cultivating a culture. Without that soil, any pressure becomes chaos. This is what I call the *Culture of Chaos*: not the absence of rules, but the presence

of rules without meaning; of hierarchy without cooperation; of demand without trust. It is the environment in which *gambiarra* — that creative intelligence born of the freedom to try — becomes impossible. Because in *gambiarra*, there is no authority standing at the door assessing whether the result will do before you have even finished. There is space. There is time. There is the dignity of completing what one has begun.

Tropicalism required space to exist. Tchaikovsky required time to be recognized. And the Wright Brothers required something subtler still: they required permission to ask the wrong question.

Samuel Langley was the favorite in the race for the first powered flight. He had United States government funding, a team of celebrated engineers, and state-of-the-art equipment. His approach was impeccable within the established logic of engineering at the time — which is precisely why it failed. Langley proceeded from the assumption that the problem was to build a machine powerful enough to sustain weight in the air. It was the right question. It was also the incomplete question.

Orville and Wilbur Wright ran a bicycle shop in Dayton, Ohio. They had no engineers, no sponsorship, no laboratory. They had an obsession: observing how birds adjust their wings during flight. This detail — the dynamic control of surfaces in motion — was ignored by conventional aeronautical engineering, which conceived of flight as a problem of lift, not of balance. The Wrights perceived that sustaining weight in the air was only half the challenge. The other half was *controlling* that weight while it moved. That question was in no manual. They brought it from outside — from watching birds, from practical experience with bicycles, from the willingness to build and dismantle their own prototypes in the field before theorizing in a laboratory.

Langley built an expensive, sophisticated aerodrome. It plunged into the Potomac River twice, before the press. The Wrights flew at Kitty Hawk in December 1903 — with no official photographer, no celebration, in forty-three-kilometer-per-hour winds and with a borrowed camera. But they flew.[6]

The difference was not one of resources. It was one of method — and of culture. Langley operated within a structure where established logic dictated which questions were permissible. The Wrights operated in a bicycle shop where no one had yet defined which question was impossible. There was no Helena to revise the recommendations. There was only the field, the wind, and the time to try again.

> *"The unexpected success is almost totally neglected; worse, managements tend actively to reject it."* — Peter Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship.*

Langley did not lose to the Wrights because he had less talent. He lost because he had more certainty. And excess certainty is the first symptom of a tradition that has stopped learning.

[6]Further information in: Tom D. Crouch, "The Feud Between the Wright Brothers and the Smithsonian," *American Heritage of Invention & Technology*, Spring 1987.

The Culture of Chaos is the inverse — not excess certainty, but excess pressure without direction. In both cases, what is lost is the same: the space for someone to rise, pick up the broomstick, and solve.

## THE SOIL THAT MAKES THE SEED GERMINATE

My grandfather had no manual. No consultancy, no certified framework, no two-day design thinking workshop. He had a broomstick, a cloth, and — this is what matters — an environment in which no one would judge him for the wrong angle or discard the result before seeing whether it worked. He had, at home, what entire organizations fail to build: culture.

Innovation is not the opposite of tradition. It is born *within* it — or it is not born at all. Ballast is not conservatism; it is the memory that distinguishes the donkey from the camel, that tells the navigator where the bottom lies without needing to capsize the ship to find out.

What suffocates innovation is rarely a lack of talent. It is the Culture of Chaos — that state in which pressure exists but trust does not; in which hierarchy speaks louder than process; in which human exhaustion accumulates silently until the most capable people simply leave. Not dramatically. With a polite message and a relief that is hard to conceal. The Wrights flew because no one in the bicycle shop had the authority to declare that birds were an invalid engineering method. Caetano did not switch off the guitar because there was, on that stage, something stronger than the booing — the conviction that the question was worth asking.

Every organization faces the storm. The question is not whether one has the right resources — it is whether there is sufficient culture for someone to rise, take what is at hand, and solve. Not through heroism, not through exceptional talent, but because the environment made it possible. Because there is space. Because there is time. Because there is the dignity of completing what one has begun.

That stormy night, the kitchen stayed dry. Not because my grandfather was a genius — but because no one was standing at the door evaluating the angle of the broomstick.

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