The full flower of democracy came late to Brazil, nearly five centuries after Europeans first arrived, but finally, little more than a decade ago, it did come—and so far, it has survived. But its roots are shallow, and daunting social problems persist in the world’s fifth largest and (with 150 million people) fifth most populous country. Sixteen scholars, writing in Daedalus (Spring 2000), assess Brazil’s condition and prospects.

Fernando Collor de Mello was elected president in the 1989 elections that marked Brazil’s becoming a full-fledged democracy. The traumatic but successful 1992 impeachment of Collor on corruption charges, and his removal from office, can be read as a sign of the democracy’s strength, rather than its weakness, notes Leslie Bethell, director of the Centre for Brazilian Studies at the University of Oxford. Current President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who won a second term in 1998, is “a distinguished sociologist . . . and a politician with impeccable democratic credentials and advanced social democratic ideas.”

But Brazilians consistently hold political leaders in extremely low esteem, Bethell and historian José Murilo de Carvalho, of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, separately observe. In a 1998 poll, 94 percent said they did not trust politicians, overwhelmingly regarding them as dishonest. President Cardoso fared a bit better: Only 69 percent distrusted him. Eighty-five percent looked upon Brazil’s political parties with suspicion. Those parties are numerous—30 or so, cur-
rently—ideologically incoherent, and highly undisciplined, Bethell points out. Nearly a third of the deputies elected in 1994 switched parties during the Congress of 1995–98, some of them more than once.

It is not surprising that, even though voting is technically mandatory, large numbers of Brazilians—38.4 million in 1998—either fail to vote or cast blank (branco) or spoiled (nulo) ballots.

“The people do not trust their leaders and institutions but do little to make the former more responsible to public needs and to change the latter, taking destiny in their own hands,” writes Murilo. “All the energy and immense creativity of which they are capable is directed toward the private domain, be it to enjoy life or simply to survive.” In a 1995 survey, some 60 percent of Brazilians expressed great pride in their country, but the leading source of that pride was not national institutions (mentioned by only 10 percent), but nature (mentioned by 25 percent)—Brazil’s pleasant climate, big forests and rivers, beautiful beaches, fertile land, and abundant resources. Brazilians—who overwhelmingly see themselves “as more cheerful, more hospitable, more loving, and more religious than other people”—imagine their country, Murilo says, as a natural paradise open to all, “a gift to be enjoyed, not a goal to be achieved.”

Brazil has “remarkably few of the regional, national, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions, tensions, and conflicts that pose a threat to [many other] democracies,” Bethell observes. But Brazil also may be the “world champion in social inequality. Can democracy be healthy, can it properly function, can it even survive in the long run, when, as in Brazil, [at least] a third of the population . . . live in conditions of extreme poverty, ignorance, and ill health and are treated at best as second-class citizens?”

Brazil’s turn to democracy, writes political scientist Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, of the University of São Paulo, has been accompanied by “[an] increase in violent criminality and the spread of gangs, Mafiosi, and other criminal organizations.” The homicide rate of about 25 per 100,000 people in 1996 was nearly twice the rate in 1980—and three times the U.S. rate in 1996. Among South American nations, Brazil, with 40,470 homicides in 1997, now ranks second only to Colombia.

Many North American academics and philanthropic organizations believe that racial bias is at the root of many of Brazil’s woes. They say that statistics on infant mortality, life expectancy, education, income, and criminal justice show that nonwhite Brazilians fare worse than whites (who make up about half the population, according to official statistics). American-style affirmative action is the solution they favor. But racial lines are more indistinct than in the United States, notes Peter Fry,
Resistance to American-led globalization is, well, global, but the French, as usual, are a special case. Theirs is the only 21st-century nation, besides the United States, with universalist pretensions. Naturally, then, they feel especially aggrieved by the sight of the Golden Arches and the invasive presence of the Big Mac.

“[France’s] political and cultural identity combines all the elements threatened by globalization,” explains Meunier, a visiting fellow at Princeton University’s Center of International Studies. Those elements include “a universalist culture, a language with international aspirations, a ‘superior’ cuisine, a sensitive view of national sovereignty, a strong, centralized state, a need for a world role, a sense of duty toward the poorer nations, and a deeply rooted anti-Americanism.”

The French have worried about the invasion of American movies, music, and TV programs for years. More recently, Meunier says, their fears have grown to encompass “trade in general.” The World Trade Organization (WTO) “has been por-