

An illusory world is not enough: understanding how brazilian territory is constructed

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Maia, João Marcelo Ehlert. *Estado, território e imaginação espacial. O caso da Fundação Brasil Central [The State, territory and spatial imagination. The case of the Central Brazil Foundation.]* Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2012, 222p.

João Marcelo Ehlert Maia is a lecturer in Sociology at the Upper School of Social Sciences at the Center for Research and Documentation of Modern Brazilian History at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (Cpdoc-FGV), Rio de Janeiro. It was within the precincts of this institution that the research was conducted that led to the origins of the book *Estado, território e imaginação espacial [The State, territory and spatial imagination]*. *O caso da Fundação Brasil Central [The case of the Central Brazilian Foundation]* is based on a subject that is kept strictly within the parameters of its inquiries into the relationship between the geographical category "space" and Brazilian social thought. In reality, the outcome is a continuation of the thesis published in 2008 – *A terra como invenção [The land as invention]* – in which there is an analysis of both the concept of space during the First Republic and the importance of this category in the interpretation of the country conducted by important intellectuals like Euclides de Cunha and Vicente Licínio Cardoso.

By referring to the archives of João Alberto Lins de Barros, which were donated to Cpdoc in 1997, in his new book Maia discusses the relationship between the construction of spatial illusion and the practices of the State in its territory, which are crystallized in the projects carried out by the Central Brazil Foundation (FBC).

The study is based on a significant corpus of documents: João Alberto Lins de Barros was the first president of FBC, a body set up in 1943 and linked to the Vargas scheme which sought to integrate the interior of Brazilian territory with national development – known as the "March to the West". The concern of the author was to draw on this fund of research material to determine the way the cultural repertoire (which is responsible for forming the image of Central Brazil) conformed to the State practices administered by this Foundation.

It is a short book written in accessible language and with a structural outline that is made clear by the author at each stage. The first of the five chapters draws attention to the fact that the New State did not usher in state regulation about the territory (the Rondon Commission is an example of the kind of initiative that occurred during the First Republic), but in reality increased the funding and administration for it. This funding was carried out through a set of measures that aimed at colonizing spaces in the interior of the country that were regarded as "empty", in a way that could allow the presence of the State to be consolidated and to foster social development – the March to the West. These initiatives included the Roncador-Xingu Expedition and various other schemes influenced by the Central Brazil Foundation.

After the context has been clarified, the second chapter deals in particular with the setting up of the Foundation and its bureaucratic cadres. Within this framework, Maia concentrates on the networks of friendships and the intellectual environment of the original personnel of the institution.

As a result, there was found to be an affinity with the "lieutenants movement" [*a rebellious political movement of middle and lower ranking officers] and with communism, which was a kind of "common affective and intellectual experience" shared by its first members. This characterized the FCB as having a nationalist ideology which combined a geopolitical way of viewing the territory with a romantic narrative about the State agents and their roles.

The intellectual tools which shaped this mentality derived from what the author calls the "cultural repertoire" of Central Brazil which is the focal point of analysis in the third chapter, the longest in the whole book. The climax of this work is reached when the author attempts to analyse the spatial images within the region. By drawing on works of various kinds – involving journeys, reports, geographical essays and novels –, he finds, on the one hand, that there is a common discourse which highlights the vast expanse, indefiniteness and mystery of the Brazilian Central-West region and on the other, decadence, unhealthiness and poverty. There is also an intrepid romanticism combined with a colonial outlook, both of which are grounded on a pioneering ideology and a liberal perspective that is eager to rationalize the exploration of a space of uncertain dimensions, as a means of consolidating the presence of the State and integrating the country with world capitalism through the actions of the State itself.

The fourth chapter returns to the Foundation again and allows the images that were analyzed in the previous chapter to be appropriated by the bureaucratic language of the institution. The nature of the analysis again relies on reports, projects and internal correspondence, so that it is able to detect exactly the same features that were previously found in the texts from the cultural repertoire which were shaped in the central region of Brazil: a colonial outlook which had a modernizing purpose and the same pioneering ideology, expressed both in internal reports and in the text by the Villas Bôas brothers about the "March to the West".

Up to this point, there has been a consistent analysis of the cultural repertoire which conformed to the spatial image of the Central-West region of Brazil. This is no doubt the cornerstone of the book and the main interest of the author: even though the first two chapters set out to address the context, they also contain elements of an analytical discourse with a view to understanding how these spatial images are formed. This analysis merges with that carried out in the third and fourth chapters which is specifically about this issue.

In the brief fifth chapter, the shortest of all of them, there is a "balance sheet" of the main initiatives undertaken by the FBC, especially with regard to the North Sector projects (since the Foundation also covers the Amazon region) and the Roncador Xingu Expedition. This reveals the financial chaos and administrative disorder of an institution that had only been in existence for four years and was already unable to balance its books within its own administrative organization.

At this point, the author attempts to confront a methodological issue, which is a temporal cut and indeed the chapter itself is called "In search of an end for the FCB". This is because if Maia took the Central Brazil Foundation as his subject, it was not to understand the institution itself, except in so far as the spatial imagination "modelled" State practices.

Thus it did not serve as the final sign of the demise of the FCB in 1967 which led him to offer two brief extracts that represented “two lives” of the institution: the first went back to the beginning of the 1950s when its “ability to create an administrative department” was exhausted and the other which was cultural, lasted well beyond 1967, since, according to the author, the history of this institution is representative of the contemporary dilemmas of the Brazilian State.

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His conclusion is that the story of the FCB is a cultural history involving the formation of the Brazilian State and its languages (p.201). What interests him is the fact that Brazil is a peripheral country in which (like countries of the same nature but unlike the “central” countries) space does not only represent a key feature in the affirmation of the State but, if it assumes full responsibility for the economic and social development of the country, is the State itself. This model of development still remains today and is illustrated by the position that Brazil finds itself in the world economy where the role of rural oligarchies plays a prominent role. Although in the view of João Maia, this leviathan State has several heads, it traverses its own territory as a condition of its own configuration. “This constant accumulation is, indeed, the way the Brazilian State achieves legitimacy and produces social subjects and projects for the nation” (p. 193).

However, it is worth noting that these conclusions are grounded on arguments from intellectual authority rather than historical sources themselves. Thus Maia fails to provide an effective analysis of the projects and practices of the Foundation, apart from his examination of the ideological discourse that was included in its internal documents. Despite this, he provides some fascinating information about the institution throughout the book, especially in Chapter 5 – from the time when it was founded in 1943 and got underway in 1947, till the end of the period of its management by João Alberto Lins de Barros, the Foundation was responsible for building towns and cities, factories, roads, settlement colonies, airfields, railways and commercial warehouses among other schemes. All this was carried out in a territory of undefined contours and with an ambiguous legal status between public bodies and the founding of private rights. There were tax exemptions and unrestricted rights to the use of the land if it was needed for specific purposes, without any obligation to negotiate with the local authorities. Perhaps the most significant extract was at the end of the management of João de Barros when it is discovered that he left a debt of 10 million cruzeiros in his balance-sheet and a legacy of failed projects.

However, the author prefers to concentrate of the first years of the agency, on the basis of a belief that at this time it was possible to understand the full value of this relationship more vividly and dramatically, as well as the effects it has had. At the end of the management of João de Barros, there followed various “attempts to reinvent” the institution but these were not able to revive the periods of daring and adventure which had characterized its first years. This gives the impression that the author is convinced of the validity of the discourse that he himself is analyzing but fails to understand the need for an in-depth assessment of the interests of those in the past whose “daring and sense of adventure” had characterized the first years of the Foundation.

With regard to the question of the indefiniteness of the area covered by FCB, this was denounced by one of its former officials, Carlos Telles, as being a means of allowing appropriations of the land to go ahead without any serious objections. Although they are referred to, these criticisms are a peripheral issue in Maia’s analysis, since he is more

concerned about constructing an illusory world in that space to support his thesis, than considering whether this indefiniteness may have allowed the Foundation “to invent” the region, to the extent that it covered it.

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His point of departure is partly based on this premise: the idea that the spatial illusion *models* state practices. Hence, the case of the “Central Brasil Foundation” is no more than a needless pretext since clearly the pressing concern of the author is not to understand the relationship between a spatial illusion and State practices but specifically to construct a spatial illusion in itself. In carrying this out, his sources go far beyond the personal archives of João de Barros and are based on those of the texts discussed in Chapter Three which the author is effectively committed to analyzing.

If his point of departure is put the other way round – that practices model discourse – then both the analytical and discursive choices, and the results, will certainly be something else. If a serious attempt was made to analyze the institution, it would be necessary to discover what the real interests of its administrative cadres were when they negotiated the million dollar projects which it was responsible for managing. Regardless of the conclusions that can be drawn about what happened, this author should definitely have paid more attention to the relationship between a space of undefined scope, an ambiguous legal status, a debt of 10 million and a number of failed projects. On the other hand, when these events are finally unravelled, they might lead the reader to understand some other equally contemporary aspects of the intervention practices of the State in the economic development of the country.

At the end of the reading, the spatial illusory world of the Central West takes on a clear form and on balance, the book has positive gains, provided that the reader is not concerned with fully understanding the case of the Central Brasil Foundation.

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