

Regina Horta Duarte\*

## ☞ Nature and Historiography in Brazil, 1937-1945

**Abstract:** Three seminal Brazilian authors published some of their most important works in the period in which Brazil lived under the authoritarian regime of the *Estado Novo* (1937-45): Gilberto Freyre published *Northeast*, Caio Prado Júnior published *The Colonial Background of Modern Brazil*, and Sérgio B. de Holanda published *River Expeditions*. Besides the proximity in time of their publication, they have another characteristic in common: all of them broadly analyze the relations between man and the environment. In contrast to the majority of people of their time, they extended their understanding beyond the grandiose speeches in which territorial grandeur and abundance of wealth became the founding element of a nationalist spirit. The occupation of territory was studied as historical, social, economic, and cultural action. Their works suggest proposals for the transformation of Brazilian society, with the making of a path to modernity different from the Iberian heritage as well as the idealized patterns in Vargas's dictatorship.

### 1. Introduction

Gilberto Freyre, Caio Prado Júnior and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, seminal authors for the construction of Brazilian history, published some of their most important works between 1937 and 1945, the period in which Brazilian society lived under the authoritarian regime of the *Estado Novo*, embodied in the figure of president Getúlio Vargas: *Nordeste* (*Northeast*) by Freyre, *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo* (*The Colonial Background of Modern Brazil*), by Prado and *Monções* (*River Expeditions*), by Holanda. Besides the proximity in time of their publication, they have another characteristic in common: all of them broadly analyze the relations between man and the environment.

In order to understand the dialogue established by these authors with their contemporaries, it is necessary to consider the history of Brazilian society during those years when the nature of national territory was a theme constantly appearing in the writings of intellectuals, novelists, scientists, members of various associations and governmental authorities. In contrast to the majority of people of their time, Freyre, Prado and Holanda extended their understanding beyond the grandiose speeches in which territorial grandeur and abundance of wealth became the founding element of a nationalist spirit

---

\* Regina Horta Duarte is Associate Professor of Brazilian History at The Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. She published *A Imagem Rebelde* (1991), *Noites Circense* (1995) and *O circo em cartaz* (2001). She is currently studying Brazilian scientific institutions in the 1930s. E-mail: regina\_horta@hotmail.com.

filled with pride, in a constant, empty praise of nature in Brazil (Lippi 2000: 10-14; Chauí 2000: 31-55). The occupation of territory was studied as historical, social, economic, and cultural action, in which men depend on the environment, and it, in turn, is transformed by them. From this perspective, their works suggest proposals for the transformation of Brazilian society, with the making of a path to modernity different from that which had been anticipated by the idealized patterns in Vargas's dictatorship, which was in operation at that time.

The originality displayed by the works cited above in the treatment of the nature theme makes their rereading today particularly intriguing. Since the 1990s, the relation between society and the environment has emerged as an important theme in the writings of some Brazilian scholars. In 1991, a major academic journal dedicated a special issue to the theme. Works on the Atlantic Forest, as well as on some of its specific areas, were translated and/or published. Some authors dwelt on the history of reflections on nature in Brazil. Others analyzed the representations of the tropics in travelers' accounts (Dean 1996; Heynemann 1995; Drummond 1997; Pádua, 1987; Sússekind 1990; Lisboa, 1998). Although they were aware of the pioneering aspect of their approaches, several of these works demonstrate the possibility of a surprising rereading of some classic works of our historiography, in the present context of environmental concerns.

However, to avoid possible anachronism, it is essential to distinguish the social position occupied by current historiography sensitive to the environmental perspective from that in which these works were published (Certeau 1982: 66). We live in a moment when Brazil has a democratic government, despite the profound social exclusion which remains. Since the 1980s, environmental movements have questioned our developmental past, in which economic growth took place at any price. The Constitution of 1988 has an entire chapter dedicated to the environmental theme, which stemmed from the activities of congressmen connected to environmental social movements. Added to this is the international context in which a growing questioning of globalization has arisen, including its environmental consequences, in which the city of Porto Alegre, in Rio Grande do Sul, played an emblematic role by hosting the World Social Forum (Zhourri 1992: 65-102; Viola 1988: 134-160; Drummond 1998: 127-149).

Scrutinizing the specific significance of the quoted works, at the historical moment of their publication, becomes the first step for a current reading of their work to enable us to understand the history of Brazilian society's relationship with nature and, consequently, the creation of new environmental practices in our own time. Therefore, before focusing on each of them in turn, it is first necessary to present the debate about nature in Brazil that existed during the years Freyre, Prado and Holanda's works were written and published.

## **2. Nation, nature and territory in the 1930s and 1940s in Brazil**

The emphasis on the natural environment is one of the most striking points in the texts that described, discussed or analyzed Brazil since its discovery. A land of abundance and fertility, an earthly paradise filled with riches and possessing exuberant beauty, the nature of the territory justified the people "boasting of their country", as an intellectual declared at the beginning of the twentieth century (Celso 1997). Such praise would

not cease to exist in all its strength in the 1930s and 1940s. And yet, certain changes were evidence of the development of new attitudes in relation to the environment. In the first place, some criticism of the former vision arose. The idea of inexhaustible nature, wasted by the lack of a worthy people, was qualified as liberal and decadent. Predominant political practices in the authoritarian period of the *Estado Novo* emphasized the need to forge a Nation, occupying the territory through the action of Brazilian man, bringing back the figure of the pioneering explorer, calling for a “march westward”. In this way, nature, nation, people and territory were joined (Gomes 1982: 115-117).

Secondly, nature would appear countless times as an object to be not only known and conquered but also preserved. Some sectors of society built specific discourses and practices in relation to the theme. Scientific institutions, like the *National Museum*, the *Paraense Emilio Goeldi Museum*, the *Paulista Museum* and the *Butantã Institute*, exerted themselves to inaugurate a tradition in the areas of botany and zoology relating to Brazil, developing conservationist positions of its ecosystems (Urban 1998: 79-103). The botanist from the *National Museum*, Alberto Sampaio, who supported the creation of a Forest Service and the surveillance of private forests, created the *Society of Friends of Trees*. In 1934, this institution organized the “First Brazilian Conference on Nature Protection”, sponsored by the then Provisory Government leader, Getúlio Vargas, with the participation of members from many societies, such as the *Oswaldo Cruz Institute*, the *Brazilian Association of Education*, the *Brazilian League of Hygiene*, the *Brazilian Pharmacists’ Association*, the *Club of Friends of Nature*, the *Geographical Society of Rio de Janeiro*, the *Society of Alberto Torres’s Friends*, among others. The existence of so many institutions interested in the debate about nature preservation shows the importance associated with the theme in the most intellectual circles.

Such interest in the nature theme also manifested itself in the editorial movement from those years, which brought to the awareness of the Portuguese-speaking audience a significant list of translations of a number of travelers’ accounts, a great number of them having been initiated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such works acquired great acceptance among intellectuals. This was somewhat due to the ease of access to a series of books which were up to then rare and difficult to find. Mainly, however, it was due to the intensity of the debates on Nation, people, territory and the importance of recognizing these issues during those years. The educator Fernando Azevedo organized, from 1931 on, the *Coleção Brasileira*, whose main objective was “to reveal Brazil to Brazilian people”, making it “more and more familiar to make it more and more loved”. His method was the systematic publishing of studies about Brazil, in the fields of geography, biology, demography, ethnology, politics, economy, military issues and biographies of national figures. Besides works from traveling naturalists, present in Brazil in the nineteenth century, the *Coleção* started to publish works by Brazilian scientists devoted to the study of Brazilian flora and fauna, as well as geological, cartographic and geographic studies. Once again, the consistent presence of the nature theme and its preservation can be seen here in the intellectual circles of the time (Azevedo: 1941: 1-2; Pontes 1989: 359-409; Almeida 2001).

Despite the heterogeneity of perceptions about the natural environment existing in society of the time, the State solidified environmental preservation practices – certainly timid, but historically unusual – in Brazil. In 1934, the Forest Code started to establish rules for the protection and felling of forests. For the first time, fauna and the danger of the extinction of species were mentioned in Brazilian legislation. A short time later, the

Constitution of 1937 included nature in the list of items to be protected and specially cared for by the Nation, states and cities. Attacks against “landscapes or places particularly endowed by nature” were compared to the ones committed against national heritage.

During these years the first three national parks were created: *Itatiaia* (1937), *Serra dos Órgãos* and *Iguaçu* (1939). The first two locations favored extremely overused regions in the State of Rio de Janeiro, where the federal government’s headquarters were located. The logic for their creation did not involve, therefore, the necessity to preserve remote and still well-preserved areas. It met the demand for recreation by the urban populations concentrated in the southeast region of Brazil, also taking into account easy access for scientists from institutions in Rio de Janeiro, such as the *National Museum* and the *Botanical Garden* (Drummond 1997:148-149). Governmental action to establish the parks was based on the idea of natural and geographical heritage. The representation of the natural environment was united with nationalism and the lack of distinction between territory, people and government proposed by the *Estado Novo* discourse, which presented itself simultaneously as the builder of nationality and its guardian. As I see it, the predominant motive for the creation of these parks was the State’s pedagogic intention with regard to the masses – not in the current sense of promoting an environmental education – but of trying to awaken in the visitors the feeling of love and belonging to the Nation and respect for the State. At the same time as designing the concept of a national character, in a totality of coherent and closed lines, there emerged the notion of a geographic historical patrimony as the symbol of national power, in a melting of State and Nation, transcendent entity and guardian of public symbols (Chauí 2000: 14).

We can evaluate these years, therefore, as a period in which discussion about nature took place at various institutions, involving people with differing positions, such as governmental authorities, publishers, scientists, and various people connected to conservationist organizations. There is, therefore, a network of practices and discourses around nature that constitutes a new way of looking at it. Brazilian society argued about the urgency of occupying its territory as well as finding solutions for the gap which existed between an urbanized coast and an enigmatic interior. It experienced the debate on the making of a modern nation and the possible ways to achieve it. In those years, the heterogeneity of the various visions of building a new Brazil faded in the face of Vargas’s authoritarian regime, which defined certain standards of modernity and a model of Nation, between 1937 and 1945 (Lippi 2000: 10-11; Lima 1998: 35-53; Souza 1997: 17-33).

It is at the crossroads of these practices that Gilberto Freyre, Caio Prado Júnior, and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda wrote the works to be analyzed here, from which I shall emphasize the discussion on the environment. I do not wish to return to them as the origin of our current environmental historiography or as a precocious revelation of an environmental consciousness. They are works that, by interpreting Brazilian society and positioning themselves before its problems, proposed new attitudes to the men of their time, including the attitude of looking at the natural environment as something to be included in the historical investigation of Brazilian culture and society.

### 3. Nature and society: three authors, three views

In the preface to the first edition of *Nordeste – Northeast* (1937), the sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) defines his work as an impressionist, ecological essay of

that region, the first center of Brazilian civilization. He offers an analysis of the influence of sugar cane on the life of the people and the land. After spending a long time in Franciscan contact with the landscape, nature, and its typical inhabitants, as well as carrying out research in archives, with new and old books of history, the author defines an ecological criterion for his study. This intention is displayed in the interrelations of physical, cultural, natural, and historical factors, in an approach defined as one of “social ecology in the broadest sense” (Freyre 1989: 25).

In this active and involving research, the author questioned the landscape. He wanted to know from it much more than what objectivity could provide in physical and geographical data. He considered himself influenced by the North-American geographer Carl Sauer, in that a significant part of his sensing was beyond scientific systematization. His interpretation needed to consider much more than natural knowledge, allowing himself to be penetrated by art, philosophy and poetry. Thence came the impressionism that would lead him to speak of rivers, soil composition, animals and vegetables from the perspective of human and cultural values.

Freyre seems concerned with the fact that many men who lived in the Northeast region of Brazil did not know – or did not care to know – the names of the various beings that surrounded them. They did not know the names of the trees or the herbs, nor even the wild animals. In fact, all of them were beings to be avoided and exterminated: the jungle should be axed and reduced to ashes, opening space for the sugar cane plantations; the *bichos do mato* (jungle beasts) should be kept at a distance as they were the enemies of sugar cane, cattle, horses and most importantly, men. In this “state of war between man and jungle”, nature’s proximity was feared. They built houses whose perimeters were totally barren, except for a small cultivated garden, an orange grove or some banana trees. However, at dusk, the windows were closed for fear of animals, humidity and miasmas brought by the wind.

This was a strange ontology that, symbolically, extinguished the beings by not naming them, by forgetting the words that meant them. Animals and trees disappeared initially from the vocabulary of the region’s settlers to, later on, succumb themselves to destruction by fire, as well as by the progress of the sugar cane, the oxen, the horses and the goats. It was a kind of inverted exorcism, in which the non-invocation dissolved these undesirable beings into non-beings. The jungle’s space configured itself as emptiness, a “no-place”, until the sugar cane plantation granted it ontological status.

In his journey, Freyre set out to hear the names from the mouths of those who still knew how to say them, repeating them to his reader as if this enumeration could acquire a demiurgic character, establishing and making them come back to life and to memory, enabling them to be seen. After all, in *Nordeste*, the author affirms his intention to “simply see”. In order to see, however, it is necessary to remove all these beings from the indistinction produced by the shadow; to distinguish, name and bring to light a multitude of trees, animals and people obscured by the progress of a homogeneous civilization and destroyer of cultural nuances.

Among the people, the thick and oily *massapé* – damp, fertile soil covered with humus –, the rivers, the animals and plants, Freyre sketches a constant cultural relationship, in an ecology and geography where the human condition consists of the conspiracy of space and the social environment, as he had learned from the French historian Fernand Braudel. Man and nature do not appear as beings distinct from which a relationship is studied, but as

beings who constitute themselves in and by the relationship among themselves and as beings who cannot exist outside of such a relationship. Man is also nature; nature, which is also always culture, since it is the landscape seen by the human eye. And here we can reread Freyre through a perspective in which “there is no reflection on nature which does not depend on a cultural arbitrariness, and there is no integration with the environment that does not go through a specific form of social organization” (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 23). The debate is based on the refusal to reduce human and cultural problems to facts of physics and natural history.

Beginning from these assumptions, Freyre studied the land, the water, the forest, and the surprisingly fertile soil, *massapé*, of the Brazilian Northeast. He describes how the *massapé* opened up possibilities for the first settlers. He observes the various relations between man and water throughout time. If in the early period of occupation, the houses were built facing the rivers – where people washed dishes, took baths, rode in boats and canoes – they later turned their backs on them, “scorning them” (Freyre 1989: 64). He establishes, with some distress, how a perverse process of modernization transformed the old mills into large sugar refineries, making the rivers a veritable sewer where the stinking waste products were disposed of.

The “single-crop drama” had stripped nature of its essential variety, creating unbalance, hunger, drought, and revolution. The forest was deflowered by burning, swallowed by the ovens of the mills, cut down to build ships and convent doors in Portugal, treated with disrespect and exchanged for a mode of standardized urban tree-planting in the Benjamin fig and the Australian eucalyptus, which grew so fast that they sucked the water out of the swamps and decreased the water in the soil, probably altering the climate. Transplanted horses, oxen, goats and chickens substituted the entire diversity of the native fauna. In place of the Northeast of the *massapé*, generous rivers, and thick forests, a single-crop Northeast, described by Freyre as desert-like, took over, with dirty rivers and earth hardened by direct sunlight.

At the same time that he demonstrates the impoverishment of the environment, Freyre describes the process of the region’s cultural homogenization, based on European models.<sup>1</sup> He regrets the loss of the diversity of traditions that was once present in colonial society, which, despite the evils of patriarchy, included Iberian, Arab, Asian, African, and indigenous elements without an imposed synthesis that would dissolve the differences. This is the picture drawn by the author, these are the criticisms made against his time. Nevertheless, amidst this desolation, he sketches two other possibilities for the history of the Brazilian Northeast.

The first appears in the practices of some of the first Portuguese settlers, who, according to Freyre, sought to prevent the absurd clearing of forests and destruction of animal species. Second, the culture of the blacks would suggest another historical counter-example of the destructive logic of sugar-cane, through the practices of multi-crop

<sup>1</sup> Talking about the typical capitalist relations of the sugar refineries, Freyre has shown a standardization process which “intended to minutely regulate clothing, furniture and food, and also disseminate it in the squares, avenues, Swiss gardens and linear eucalyptus rows, decorating the city, transforming it into a true piece of rhetoric able to express the most rigorous European tradition” (Araújo 1994: 163). For an analysis of Freyre’s cultural perspective, see also pages 97 to 105.

cultivation set up in the *quilombos* (communities founded by escaped slaves) and the wise use of natural resources, such as the straw huts, a truly ecological form of housing.<sup>2</sup>

Defining the 1930s as a “time without lyricism”, Freyre recovered the fissures and paradoxes of the single-crop colonial culture, emphasizing its creative ability. Alternating positive evaluation and rigorous criticism, he foresaw the potentiality of another Nation, different from both the single-crop culture of the mills and from the falsely modernizing power of the great refineries. He sketched a project for an “alternative modernity”, in which the ecological diversity of the Northeast region would coexist with a Brazilian culture marked by plurality (Araújo 1994: 19-24, 57, 176, 199).

Five years later, at the height of the dictatorship of the *Estado Novo*, the Marxist historian Caio Prado Júnior published *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo* (*The Colonial Background of Modern Brazil*), one of the great seminal classics in Brazilian historiography for several generations. This author, by noting the permanence of the colonial world in the Brazil of his own time, underlines the need to study “the past that made us”. His analysis of colonial society emphasizes the predominance of the single-crop logic, in which the action of the Portuguese metropolis took on the aspect of a commercial enterprise, with the sole objective of exploiting the natural resources of a virgin territory to the advantage of the European economy. This exploitation took place through the continuous draining of the available natural resources. Once it was ruined, a place was simply abandoned to the advantage of other enterprises, other lands, and new perspectives, leaving behind “only remains, rags of a small parcel of humanity in decomposition” (Prado Júnior 1981: 9, 28).

Caio Prado was a scholar fond of travels. As a pupil of the geographer Pierre Deffontaines in the 1930s at the University of São Paulo, he went out on excursions with the professor on Sundays, to learn “to classify strata, observe the quality of soils, get to know the vegetal layering and, above all, understand the relationship between the physical environment and human work” (Cândido 1989: 24; Santos 1989; Ab’Saber 1989; Reis 1999: 173-201; Iglesias 2000: 200-206). His taste for geography and his astute observation of landscapes are characteristic elements of Prado’s analyses of the relationships between the environment and the men who left Portugal to come to Brazil. According to the author, the Portuguese settlers encountered savage and untraversed tropics in which hostile nature humiliated man. Motivated by the notion of immediate and easy exploration, they did not prepare nor articulate any rational defense strategy

---

<sup>2</sup> “In the case of Duarte Coelho and his settlers, the alliance between man and sugar cane was what could be called a marriage of love; and not simply one of interest. [...] While struggling against the native Indians and the animals forming the greatest obstacles to the progress of the sugar cane plantation, the mills, the manor house, the chapel; he also combated, among his own people, the simple adventurers who intended to make a fortune by cutting the trees down and killing the animals to sell their fur. His voice was the first great Portuguese voice that spoke in America and maybe in the tropics, in favor of the jungle and the tree. He did not want the jungle to be rashly and brutally devastated. If it were up to him, the sugar cane plantation would have been achieved with the minimum destruction of the native resources” (Freyre 1989: 119). In relation to the Negroes, Freyre says that if the Portuguese won the tropical forest by destroying it, the Negroes who lived there, fugitives from slavery who adapted themselves to it, conquering it “with an astonishing capacity of adaptation to the environment and a control of the region’s vegetal and animal life” (Freyre 1989: 80-82).

towards this world sewn with uncountable and unpredictable obstacles. They responded to these in the most immediate form, simply by destroying everything that deterred the accomplishment of their objectives in the short term. However, the diversity of the natural conditions – the combination of climate, jungle and the tropical fauna – was also the major attraction factor, as it would be exactly that which provided different types of cultivation and extraction of riches coveted in cold Europe.

Upon narrating the territory settlement, Prado Júnior points out how the coast formation related to the settlement dispersion. The excessive regularity of the littoral coast – with no inlets that could shelter ships – as well as the frequency of mangrove swamps or the great sandy deposits, which obstructed the entrance to the interior, led to the concentration of settlement in the few favorable areas, such as Pernambuco, the fertile Bahia Basin and Rio de Janeiro. On the rest of the long Brazilian coast, only a few scarce and insignificant life forms “more or less vegetative and with no horizons, of almost null economic and demographic expression”, linked to the peculiar conditions of the coastline were established. These were small nucleuses, turned exclusively to the sea, isolated by the lack of overland roads. Prado observes how the immediate and accommodative nature of Portuguese colonization prevented men from working to supply what nature had denied them: where there were no favorable geographical conditions, nothing was done. In a mediocre form of societal organization, man in colonial Brazil did not go beyond nature’s limits, remaining submissive to them.

Together with the population’s advancement, the trail of fires was drawn, a brutal preparation for plantation. The destruction of jungles would also be caused by wood extraction for the Royal Navy yards. Added to that was the indiscriminate and uncontrolled use of firewood, as in the case of the mill ovens being fed with “noble” hardwood. Solutions to the demand for energy favored, therefore, the use of natural resources slow to be replaced, combined with the total waste of easier and much more rational options, such as sugar cane husks which, as our author observes, were always stupidly burned up by the sugar mills’ owners.

A fatal separation between agriculture and cattle-raising, due to the one-crop system, prevented the utilization of manure as natural fertilizer. In the case of cattle-raising, the author observes the same submission of man to his natural conditions. In the Northeast backlands, some aspects were extremely favorable to cattle-raising, such as the abundance of brine spring, the facility with which salt could be transported through the São Francisco river and the *caatinga* – scrub-brush – vegetation that, being, thin and flat, saved the tree-felling. Due to these favorable conditions, nomadic and extensive cattle-raising appeared, marked by owners’ absenteeism and by the complete lack of distinction between pastures and the original vegetation. The animals were raised loosely, with such a lack of organization that they turned wild. Contact with the cowboys was often so sporadic that the animals ended up losing their domesticity. A second region was the south of the country, which had wonderful natural conditions: uniform topography, balanced vegetation, clear water. However, the cattle-raising done there was not careful at all: the men from colonial society were appeased, trusting much more in nature than in their own efforts. Finally, Prado describes the south of the state of Minas Gerais, with large rivers, fertile lands and dense jungles. The soil was extremely favorable for the growth of high quality grass. The forest supplied much wood for the fences, within which the cattle were kept domesticated and received their salt. Despite the common picture of



destruction of the natural contour and the strong presence of slave work, this region profited from some promising economic aspects, such as the development of a dairy industry and a trading network, as well as a flow of agricultural products.

The North was the only region saved from irrational conquest. With its semi-aquatic jungles and land where the irregular fluvial regime nullified any human effort, it imposed an unlimited struggle on those who wanted to visit or settle themselves in it. All of these aspects derailed the settlers' greed, causing the region's isolation. In this way, Prado insists, once again, in one of the book's central hypotheses, that Portuguese colonization in Brazil acted within the narrow limitations of the impositions of a rather adverse and, often, whimsical tropical nature. Adapted and resigned to these obstacles, such a society submitted itself to geographic determinations, in a one-way movement in which the environment dominated human action. Only that which demanded minimal effort was accomplished. The single active attitude plotted out in this colonial logic was pure and simple devastation. In regard to this tradition, this colonial legacy, Prado considers that a rupture with this mode of relating with nature was only possible with radical change of forms of social organization in Brazil. In his understanding, there was no way to partially break with these traditions, since the way man relates with nature was fused with the way men relate to each other.

In spite of the desolate picture presented, the author identifies a historical transformation in progress since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which a contemporary Brazil overcame a Colonial Brazil. The case of the southern region of the State of Minas Gerais, with its intensive cattle-raising, its major agricultural and economic diversification, as mentioned earlier, appears as one of the examples of such a tendency. A new historical phase for the formation of a truly national economy with the settlement of the territory and the organization of social life was being laid out. However, there were obstacles to the solidification of a modern nation: free labor had not yet been organized around the entire country, and production was still directed toward foreign markets, as the domestic market had not been satisfactorily established. Such factors caused the maintenance of a colonial past and of the subordination of the Brazilian economy to other foreign economies. Due to these issues, the evolution of Brazilian society was prolonged indefinitely by progress and regress. The study of history emerges as a "precious and irreplaceable" key to the understanding "of the constituent elements of our nationality". Only in this way would it be possible, Prado affirms, to consolidate the transforming elements and complete the foundation of nationality (Prado Júnior 1981: 9-11).

In a frank discourse with the Brazil of his time, Prado discusses, through the analysis of colonial Brazilian society, the theme of modernity. As a tenacious opponent of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, he reflects upon an alternative to modernity full of other meanings for Brazilian society, in which there would be a different relationship with the environment. The themes of nature, nation and modernity are blended in his argument. Besides actively breaking with the colonial past, a modern Brazilian society should face up to the challenge of tropical nature not through its devastation<sup>3</sup>, but through rational

---

<sup>3</sup> For Caio Prado's view of tropical nature as an obstacle to be overcome, see Wegner (2000: 174-176). Caio Prado's argument also approaches the analyses made by modern Environmental History authors, such as Warren Dean, for whom the large region of the Atlantic Forest was completely hostile to human

and constructive human action which would lead the Brazilian people to face and overcome the geographic factors up to then determinant of their settlement, trade and economy.

*Monções*, published in 1945 by the historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, is an analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup> century expeditions towards the west of the country, from São Paulo to Cuiabá, in fluvial routes that extended from the Tietê river beyond the Paraná river, up to the end of the Guaporé river, on the current border of Brazil with Bolivia. The author constructs an original interpretation on that theme, much explored by his contemporaries through romanticized and heroic images of these pioneers. After his stay in the United States, where he was exposed to writings about the conquest of the American west, he became influenced by the thinking of Frederick Jackson Turner and his theses about the relations between territorial conquest and the formation of a democratic society (Wegner 2000: 94-115). According to Holanda, conquest of the frontier – the source of equality of opportunity and encouragement of the enterprising spirit – played a transforming role in colonial society.

On venturing into the interior of Brazil, these bold settlers encountered the contingencies of the environment. To reach their goals, they had to leave behind the greater part of Iberian customs, accepting and assimilating ways of survival and native wisdom. By adopting crude habits, they molded themselves to the environmental asperity, abandoning the custom of wearing shoes, for instance, and learning to count on their own strength in ways that were true tests of survival. Such pioneers needed to be astute to face the hostile environment, their own exhaustion, wild nature and tropical diseases. They learned which food was edible, the medical herbs that could be applied for maladies suffered during their sojourns, the best way to walk and the proper position for the feet when walking. They sharpened their topographic sense, becoming alert to the possible forms of guidance in the middle of a jungle where the density of vegetation often confused the traveler. From initial obstacles to their progress, the rivers were adopted as irreplaceable means of penetrating the jungle, in trips soothed by the availability of food and water.

Portuguese knowledge of navigation on the high seas proved itself useless for rivers that formed waterfalls through the forests. The conquistadors used canoes like those made by the natives, carved out tree trunks. To make them, they made use of the material abundantly available in the forests, such as the perobas and the acacias. Throughout the eighteenth century, the constant cutting for lumber and use of land-clearing by fire – for the plantation of subsistence farming such as corn, beans, pumpkin, banana, manioc and some sugar cane for rum – led to a lack of trees large enough for this purpose, leading men to go forth “through the inlets of the river, confining themselves in the jungles for months”, in the search for adequate trunks (Holanda 2000: 33-34, 49).

The long trips in small canoes, the constant sight of bordering jungles intercepting the horizon, the night and dawn fog, the abundance of scale and leather fish, the

---

life, or even Alfred Crosby, who discusses how the European conquest in temperate regions had results very different than those of the tropical regions' conquest, as in the case of hot and humid America. According to Crosby, “these were regions easy to reach, hard to grasp”. See respectively Dean (1996: 28-30); Crosby (2000: 123-132).

abundance of animals to hunt in rivers of opulent fluvial fauna, the bats and mosquitoes, and finally, the novel experience of men who encountered an environment simultaneously hostile and abundant played “a disciplinary and somehow shock-absorbing role on the traditionally adventurous spirit of those men”. In other words, the misfortunes that fell upon them had “a selective function, because as the impatient ones were eliminated, the aggressive energy the expansion movement required was strengthened in the others” (Holanda 2000: 56, 72).

After the initial shock of the inefficiency of the Iberian tradition in that environment and the integral adoption of native wisdom, those men started to adapt their new knowledge to the legacy of Portuguese civilization. This, however, did not mean a simple recapture and reaffirmation of the Iberian tradition, but the creation of new habits and new forms of social living.

At the same time that the men changed from the peculiarities of the environment they faced, the landscape also changed from the systematic and progressive destruction of trees that were true forest giants. In a few decades, the land was depleted and the jungle around the rivers had lost its density. Far from a vision of the natives as a people in total harmony with nature, Holanda points out the destructive aspects of some of their practices, such as the use of land-clearing by fire, taken to the extreme of its destructive potential by the magnitude of the pioneers’ advance.<sup>4</sup> Added to that is the arrival of other invaders, such as pigs, hens, an uncontrollable number of rats that destroyed all the food, and cats that, consequently, became extremely valuable.

Writing a few years after the dictator Getúlio Vargas had called the country to a “march towards the west”, the author outlines a movement of conquest in the colonial past, whose realism does not prevent the emergence of optimism. At a time of fierce debate about the possibilities of Brazil entering modernity, the history of the rich experience of the expeditions went in a new and peculiar direction, in which there were positive and negative lessons to be learnt. Among the negative aspects, there was the destructive and careless relationship with nature, a distinctive trace of the Iberian colonization practices that were perpetuated throughout time and of some native practices that, taken to the extreme, also proved themselves disastrous, such as burning as a form of preparing the soil for planting. In *Visões do Paraíso (Visions of Paradise)*, a 1954 book, the author differentiated the North-American pioneers’ attitude – whose actions aimed at transforming the territory – from the Portuguese colonization, which only aimed at taking advantage of the natural riches. This attitude of “harvest without planting” caused uncontrollable devastation in a succession of *Eldorados* – mines, sugar, tobacco, coffee –, that is in a “procession of miracles” which extended throughout the colonial period, and which was not interrupted by Independence, nor in the Republic (Holanda 1994: 334).

On the other hand, the capacity manifested by the settlers from the country’s interior opened up a series of possibilities for historic transformation. They had taken innovative initiatives. Portuguese society historically favored the occupation of basically only the coastline of its entire territory, which many times led the Portuguese to be compared to

---

<sup>4</sup> Holanda (2000: 33); Dias (1985: 28). For this “ecological absolutism” and its ethnocentric and romantic presuppositions, very common today, see Drummond (1997: 31-49).

crabs who limited themselves to scratching along the beaches. Always directed to the other side of the ocean, they founded in the colony a society which was also coastal. The conquest undertaken towards the west opened up the possibility of a society capable of constructing its own dynamics, in which it was possible to overcome the aristocratic Iberian tradition through the expansion of democracy and of modernization in Brazil.

Considering America “rather a form of society than a geographic area”, Holanda described the conquest of the west as a historical experience, much more than a mere territorial occupation. In order to overcome bad weather on their journey, the travelers had to learn a lot, in onward marches that were “slow and guided by continual experience”. The history of the river expeditions was also that of a decisive cultural transformation, since they formed values and customs, such as creativity, ability to adapt, persistence and, above all, a rational adjustment to the world, which man needed to learn to measure and calculate, distancing himself from thoughtless attitudes regarding the mere exploitation of what nature offers. Many times the Portuguese considered Brazil a paradise, which did not mean that they showed a greater concern for nature. Holanda, by demonstrating the change of values in the men who penetrated the jungle on the rivers and by identifying in them the cultural bases for the formation of a modern nation, also gambled on the possibility of the adoption of a new attitude in regard to the environment. In that, his prediction, calculation of and discipline in handling the goods necessary for life would lead to the end of the hedonism of merely enjoying a nature always complimented for its endless generosity, but which men’s actions insisted on destroying and wasting. Certainly, by betting, with optimism, on the existence of historical elements that would bring the possibility of a unique way of modernizing to Brazil, Holanda foresaw the formation of a relationship with the environment that was guided by the rational and cautious use of natural wealth.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The works analyzed here give an account of the rivers, jungles, animals, biological diversity and imbalance resulting from their destruction. To argue for the necessity of new trends for Brazil, Gilberto Freyre, Caio Prado and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda related the indiscriminate and unsustainable devastation with a model of society to be abandoned in the construction of a modern Brazil. Freyre defended the value placed on cultural multiplicity and ecological diversity, which existed in the colonial world as the basis for the construction of the future. Prado criticized the colonial past and the foreign logic that had guided the fate of Brazil for so many centuries and were still present during his time. Holanda discussed the possibility of transforming the Iberian tradition with the experience lived on the frontier and founding a society with new values and customs. Despite the particulars of each analysis, all of them incorporate the consideration of environmental variables as part of social conditions. They all strongly compare society, culture and nature, reflecting on how men’s relationships with nature are inseparable from the ones they have with themselves. They have also reflected on how the dialogue with nature has combined with men’s perceptions, values, laws and customs. They propose the construction of new values. This is what makes these works interesting to us today. After all, they broach another tradition of Brazilian intellectual thought on nature,

far from the boasting descriptions. As they were written at a different time and in discourse with a Brazil from other decades, they enabled the reconsideration of issues that had been obscured by the post-war obsession with developmentalism, when industrialization was achieved at any cost, worsening the reality of destruction in Brazil. At this turn of the millenium, a time in which the discussion of sustainability has become essential for decision-making about the future of mankind, the criticism made by these authors of the centuries of careless exploitation of Brazil's environment, as well as the clarity of the analyses showing the necessity of historical changes in order to implement new attitudes in regard to the environment, are of current interest and immensely intriguing.

## Bibliography

- Ab'Saber, Azib Nacib (1989): "Tempos e espaços na mira de um historiador" in: D'Incao, Maria Ângela (ed.): *História e Ideal – ensaios sobre Caio Prado Jr.* São Paulo: Brasiliense, pp. 407-418.
- Almeida, Maria Rita de (2001): *A proposta de formação do leitor da Biblioteca Pedagógica Brasileira.* São Paulo: USP.
- Araújo, Ricardo Benzaquem (1994): *Guerra e Paz – Casa Grande e Senzala e a obra de Gilberto Freyre nos anos 30.* Rio de Janeiro: Editora 34.
- Azevedo, Fernando (1941): *Catálogo Comemorativo, Quinta Série da Biblioteca Pedagógica, sob direção de Fernando de Azevedo.* São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional.
- Cândido, Antônio (1989): "A força do concreto" in: D'Incao, Maria Ângela (ed.): *História e Ideal – ensaios sobre Caio Prado Jr.* São Paulo: Brasiliense, pp. 23-26.
- Celso, Afonso (1997): *Porque me ufano do meu país.* Rio de Janeiro: Expressão e Cultura.
- Certeau, Michel de (1982): *A escrita da história.* Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária.
- Chauí, Marilena (2000): *Brasil, mito fundador e sociedade autoritária.* São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo.
- Crosby, Alfred W. (2000): *Imperialismo ecológico: a expansão biológica da Europa, 900-1900.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Dean, Warren (1996): *A ferro e fogo – a história e a devastação da Mata Atlântica Brasileira.* São Paulo: Cia das Letras.
- Dias, Maria Odila Leite (1985): "Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, historiador" in: Holanda, Sérgio Buarque de: *História.* São Paulo: Ática, pp. 7-64.
- Drummond, José Augusto (1997): *Devastação e preservação ambiental no Rio de Janeiro.* Rio de Janeiro: EDUFF.
- (1998): "A legislação ambiental brasileira de 1934 a 1988" in: *Ambiente e Sociedade*, II, 3-4, pp. 127-149.
- Freyre, Gilberto (1989): *Nordeste.* 6 ed. Rio de Janeiro: Record.
- Gomes, Ângela Maria de Castro (1982): *Estado Novo, ideologia e poder.* Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores.
- Heynemann, Cláudia (1995): *Floresta da tijuca - natureza e civilização.* Rio de Janeiro: Secretaria Municipal de Cultura, Divisão de Editoração.
- Holanda, Sérgio Buarque de (1994): *Visão do Paraíso: os motivos edênicos no descobrimento e colonização do Brasil.* 6 ed. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- (2000): *Monções.* 3. ed. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- Iglesias, Francisco (2000): *Historiadores do Brasil.* Belo Horizonte/Rio de Janeiro: Ed. UFMF/Nova Fronteira.

- Lima, Nísia Trindade (1998): *Um sertão chamado Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Revan.
- Lippi, Lúcia (2000): *Americanos – representações da identidade nacional no Brasil e nos EUA*. Belo Horizonte: Ed. UFMG.
- Lisboa, Karen (1998): *A Nova Atlântida de Spix e Martius – natureza e civilização na Viagem pelo Brasil*. São Paulo: HUCITEC.
- Pádua, José Augusto (1987): “Natureza e Projeto Nacional: as origens da ecologia política no Brasil” in: Pádua, José Augusto (ed.): *Ecologia e Política no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Espaço e Tempo, pp. 11-59.
- Pontes, Heloísa (1989): “Retratos do Brasil: editores, editoras e ‘Coleções Brasileira’ nas décadas de 30, 40 e 50” in: Miceli, Sérgio (org.): *História das Ciências Sociais no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Vértice/Ed. Revista dos Tribunais, pp. 359-409.
- Prado Júnior, Caio (1981): *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo*. 17 ed. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- Reis, José Carlos (1999): *As identidades do Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas.
- Santos, Milton (1989) “Renovando o pensamento geográfico” in: D’Incao, Maria Ângela (ed.): *História e Ideal - ensaios sobre Caio Prado Jr*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, pp. 419-433.
- Souza, Candice Vidal e (1997): *A pátria geográfica – sertão e litoral no pensamento social brasileiro*. Goiânia: Editora da UFG.
- Süssekind, Flora (1990): *O Brasil não é longe daqui – o narrador, a viagem*. São Paulo: Cia das Letras.
- Toledo, Maria Rita de Almeida (2001): *A proposta de formação do leitor da Biblioteca Pedagógica Brasileira*. São Paulo: USP.
- Urban, Teresa (1998): *Saudade do Matão – relembrando a história da conservação da natureza no Brasil*. Curitiba: Editora da UFPR/Fundação O Boticário de Proteção à Natureza/Fundação MacArthur.
- Viola, Eduardo (1988): “O ambientalismo multisetorial no Brasil para além da Rio 92” in: Viola, Eduardo et al: *Meio ambiente, desenvolvimento e cidadania – desafios para as Ciências Sociais*. 2 ed. São Paulo: Cortez/Florianópolis: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, pp 134-160.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (1992): “Prefácio” in: Arnt, Ricardo Azambuja/Schwartzman, Stephan: *Um artifício orgânico – transição na Amazônia e ambientalismo*. São Paulo: Rocco, pp. 13-23.
- Wegner, Robert (2000): *A conquista do Oeste: a fronteira na obra de Sérgio Buarque de Holanda*. Belo Horizonte: Ed. da UFMG.
- Zhuri, Andréa L.M (1992): “A maturação do verde na construção do inteiro ambiente, ambiente e sociedade – possibilidades e perspectivas de pesquisas” in: *Textos NEPAM/Série Divulgação Acadêmica/ UNICAMP*, 2, pp. 65-102.