

## **Territory and Progress: Manifesting Regional Consciousness in Southern Brazil**

On May 23, 2017, the small southern Brazilian city of Farroupilha found itself implicated in an online controversy of national proportions. Footage from a web broadcast of a Farroupilha city council meeting had begun making the rounds overnight, circulating a short declaration from city councilwoman Eleonora Broilo about Brazilians from the Northeast Region: “I think people from the Northeast do know how to get together to steal... They might not even know how to even speak correctly, but they certainly know how to steal just fine” [1]. Over the next week, Broilo—who, like Brazil’s current president Michel Temer, is affiliated with the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB)—explained that her attack was aimed at politicians from the Worker’s Party (PT) and not at Brazilians from the northeast, but this did little to stop the immense social media backlash that understood her criticisms as “hateful” and “prejudiced” speech.

The widely publicized clip of the councilwoman’s political attack, as well as the online response to it, will not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the place of the culturally rich Brazilian Northeast in the national political imaginary. Hounded since the mid-twentieth century by regular droughts, low literacy rates, and extreme wealth inequality, the Northeast Region has long been the target of class- and race-marked denigration by conservative, center-right and far-right commentators based in the South and Southeast, Brazil’s more economically prosperous regions. However, even though many anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists have emphasized, historicized and defended Northeastern identity in comparable moments of similar political violence, few of these thinkers have paid the same attention to the cultural climates in which these attacks originate.

I traveled to Brazil in May of 2017, two weeks prior to the controversy stirred up by Councilwoman Broilo, precisely in an attempt to center this southern regionalism and to bring it under close scrutiny by seeing it in action in Porto Alegre, the capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Although my research focused originally on how this powerful sense of regional identity was verbalized among artisans and their customers, my preliminary research determined that the sense of tradition that defines the identity of the South also had a deep history that persists in some of Porto Alegre’s most iconic spaces. This history is one in which immigration policy linked up with dynamic ideas about ethnicity to produce a sense of group belonging in the Brazilian South that is profoundly connected to land, to notions of self-disciplined hard work, and of cultural advancement. To be southern, the narrative goes, is to hold up a certain kind of banner in the name of civilization.

### **Colonizing the South: Peoples and Precedents**

The confluence of land, labor and progress began with the initial colonization of Brazil’s southernmost lands in the early nineteenth century, when the nascent Empire of Brazil became interested in populating and “taming” its southernmost lands by encouraging immigration and settlement by European immigrants.

At the start of the nineteenth century a portion of the Brazilian Empire’s southernmost provincial holdings had recently been taken from the Spanish by the former Portuguese crown. But by the 1820s, aside from a few missions and coastal trade outposts, the lush lands that would become the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul had seen little permanent settlement by the newcomers up the coast. Starting in 1824, the Empire of Brazil set up an immigration system that was designed to occupy this territory with skilled agricultural and trade workers. Highly favored were those coming from morally upstanding and “civilized” ethnic backgrounds, and therefore German and Italian immigrants were given priority. Anthropologist Giralda Seyferth (2013) notes that, interestingly, the language used by the laws of the time do not use terms such as “immigrant,” but instead use the word “settler” (*colono*) specifically to refer to the Empire’s intention of bringing these lands into civilization [2]. Immigration-enforced

colonization, then, was one of the first moments when land was tied to an idea of progress mediated by the labor of the civilized. To be a desirable presence on the land in this situation meant being equipped with the work ethic required to tame wilderness.

The opening up of Imperial Brazil to German immigrants coincided with the rise of Romanticism in Germany. Major debates about the relationship between society and the state after the French Revolution led famous German poets and thinkers such as Herder, Schlegel and Fichte to formulate a specific idea of the *Volk*, the ethnic group: a culturally and linguistically unified people sharing a common origin and spirit. The Romantic understanding of culture emphasized the body, the emotional and the reflexive as opposed to the cold, abstract reason of prevalent theories of civil society like the social contract [3]. Ideas about belonging to a national, ethnic or cultural community could now be explored not just through elite political philosophy but also through everyday aesthetic practices in the arts such as poetry and folklore. We find resonances of this, for example, in the diaries and publications of many early German immigrants in Santa Catarina who first began exploring their liminal German settler identity through journals and literary creations in the language and style of their homeland. These writings show that German settlers fulfilled the civilizational mission of the Brazilian government and yet unconsciously defied the government's wish for these new immigrants to assimilate socially [4]. Immigration for these colonizers was an economic gesture, but not a cultural one—even in this new land, they still saw themselves as ambivalently German.

Starting in the 1850s, right as massive waves of European immigrants began settling in Brazil's southern provinces, the Romantic idea of group identity such as the *Volk* collided with the emergent discoveries of eugenics and racial pseudoscience at the time. New ideas about ethnicity infused the embodied Romantic idea of emotional social belonging with a crude biological idea of racial evolution [5]. In a foreign land where European homesteads shared their territory with few indigenous or Afro-descendant communities, to be white became also a marker of progress and of the particular relationship to the land codified by Brazilian immigration law. This is significant because after World War I, colonization of the land was continued by the descendants of the early European immigrants (since most Europeans who migrated to Brazil in the early twentieth century began settling increasingly in São Paulo), and even then, the Brazilian government's legal vocabulary emphasizing "settlement" and not "immigration" in the rural South persisted into the 1990s.

### **Materializing Tradition in Porto Alegre**

In short, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, what had before been European social aspects of the *economic* practices of colonization became also *ethnic* practices of regional identity. Importantly, these practices linked ethnicity to modernity by means of racialized ideas about what land and labor were. Such connections paved the way for the development of a regional culture proper in the 1940s and in the 1950s: the *gaúcho*, the masculine, Euro-descended, *mate*-drinking pampas cowboy who has become a ubiquitous symbol of the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

Ruben Oliven (2000) reminds us that the Gaúcho Traditionalist Movement that created this very identity of the white cowboy was not a product of the rural masses. Instead, it was the result of the efforts of public intellectuals from the urban middle and upper classes, whose nostalgia for rural life benefited from the increasingly ethnic connotations of southern tradition and quickly spread throughout the Brazilian south [6]. Yet despite the recent and artificial origins of the *gaúcho* as a symbol of southern identity, it is everywhere in Rio Grande do Sul, and even in a highly urban context like that of Porto Alegre. We can spot the *gaúcho* in the city's statues and monuments, in its murals, and even in the regional literature popularized in Brazil by writers like Érico Veríssimo. This special South American cowboy embodies all of the originary myths about the South, including the work ethic and sublime cultural unity of early European immigrants.

Over the past thirty and forty years, as the city of Porto Alegre has undergone massive population growth and has become increasingly racially heterogeneous, the quasi-Romantic expression of regional identity in the gaúcho capital has become less obvious, but not any less loaded with this history. Public spaces and public art objects have become some of the most important and most powerful media for the expression of gaúcho regionalist sentiment.

Take, for instance, the Public Market of Porto Alegre. The two-story neoclassical building occupies an entire city block at the heart of downtown Porto Alegre, directly across the street from City Hall. Nowadays nestled amidst bus terminals and high-rise buildings, it has always functioned as a major hub of leisurely consumption even since Porto Alegre's establishment as a small Portuguese coastal outpost. From 1820 to 1850, major debates about giving the market a formal structure and a more permanent design took place in city government. These debates determined which kind of merchant was suited to occupy a place in the market: the ranchers and investors who were seen as more hardworking and more committed to the city's economic growth. In 1886, new architects were hired to assist in Porto Alegre's entrance into modernity by designing a permanent structure for the Market, including an economically efficient interior. Individualized retail spaces were installed inside the building and all of those who could not afford to pay for a space, such as fruit vendors and other informal sellers without any startup capital, were deemed officially undesirable. Archival records show that at the end of the nineteenth century clashes between law enforcement and street sellers deemed undesirable were common sights in front of the Public Market.

Curiously, both then and now the Public Market has been portrayed in the popular media as a democratic and accessible place for consumption, even as it becomes an inaccessible workspace for those in the lower classes. Just as back in the 1880s it was made exclusive by design, over the past twenty years entire sections of the marketplace have been sold to corporations such as Coca-Cola, which have expelled informal vendors such as artisans from areas where they traditionally were permitted to sell.

The artisans who today sell their goods in the Public Market occupy an even more contradictory position: through the redesign and privatization of the Market's structure, they have lost opportunities to work as well as much of their clientele. They now are relegated to a small corner on the first floor of the Market, crowded and poorly trafficked. They suffer the consequences of that long tradition that values space and labor according to ideas of civilizational, racialized progress and modernity. Yet at the same time, they make a living by creating objects that honor that recent gaúcho tradition, which is supposed to be the most pure and distilled expression of regional pride. Every week, dozens of tourists stop by these artisans' tables to purchase keychains and fridge magnets in the shape of cowboy boots or *mate* gourds so as to be able to have a souvenir from their time in Porto Alegre. In other words, the artisans manufacture local culture while at the same time being excluded from it by the very historical dynamics that birthed it. This paradox of regional identity demonstrates that gaúcho regionalism is alive and well in southern Brazil, but perhaps not in the obvious visual-iconic ways of years past.

The Romantic model of a culturally united peoples has curiously fused with the economic imperatives of those progress-oriented projects unfolding in the South. An economic ethic has now become a territorialized, ethnic one. Returning to Councilwoman Eleonora Broilo's attack against politicians from the Northeast, it is clear that the opposite of the hardworking and morally upstanding citizen is the one who steals and cannot even "speak correctly." As we move forward in thinking about and analyzing Brazil's current political upheaval and economic crisis, we might do well to pay closer attention to moments such as these, in which distinctions between a "them" and an "us" are deployed and taken for granted as present givens. If we remember that the distinction is a product of history, we might perhaps be able to see how this history persists in the present, hidden insidiously in the subtleties of the everyday.

## References

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