

Frontier and Western History in Central Brazil

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Book Review:

Sandro Dutra e Silva. *No Oeste, a terra e o céu: a expansão da fronteira agrícola no Brasil Central* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2017)

The westward course of empire has long been celebrated in North American myth and history². Often the distinction between myth making and history writing, however, has been ignored. Myth tells stories laden with emotion and patriotic fervor. History in contrast tries to separate fact from fiction, to advance rational theories, and to test hypotheses. Such frontier historians as Frederick Jackson Turner³ (in the United States) and Donald Creighton⁴ (in Canada) now and then blurred that distinction and sometimes wrote to celebrate the march of civilization across the New World, bringing enlightenment and progress to the wilderness. They

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² Worster, Donald. *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (Nova York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/Londres: Harvard University Press, 2009)

³ Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894)

⁴ Creighton, Donald Grant. *The Empire of the St. Lawrence: A Study in Commerce and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002)

went beyond the facts in their praise of economic development, often ignoring the social and ecological destruction that westward expansion brought.

Now in this important book Sandro Dutra e Silva examines a newer frontier than North America's: the frontier of Central Brazil, which became a site of western imperialism in the 1930s and after. Before that time, he writes, ninety percent of Brazil's population lived along a narrow coastal zone fronting the Atlantic Ocean. Then a flood of hunger and possessiveness among a hybridized European and African population poured into the interior, destroying ecosystems and native tribes, replacing them with cities, roads, and fields of modernity. But early or late, the process of frontier expansion in both North and South America followed similar patterns and left similar legacies of conquest. And we can be sure that, in Brazil as in the United States, myth and history got confused in the march to the west, forcing historians to take a more critical approach.

Interior Brazil may seem like a long way from global centers of power and influence, but like Montana and California, Alberta and British Columbia, this hinterland became an assault on ancient harmonies of people and nature. Above all, the ideology of progress, which so powerfully animates modern capitalism, industrialization, politics, and culture, wrenched hitherto remote places into the future. The idea of progress suggests a movement toward a higher state or condition. Progress was an ideal measured in material terms – the production of food, the building of homes, the mining of ores, the accumulation of money generated from the earth—but it also became a moral imperative. In this way, the *Mato Grosso de Goiás* can make a powerful claim to be a spearhead of modern civilization and a quintessential testing ground for the dream of progress.

Does that region still seem to be on the front edge progress today? Is the March to the West still promoted by government and society, driving the nation to exploit its resources and rise higher among the nations of the world? Or has progress begun to lose its glamour in Brazil as elsewhere?

Today in the United States and Canada, and perhaps also in Brazil and other parts of the Americas, the word “frontier” seems to have lost much of the appeal it once had. These days the frontier suggests images of human suffering, environmental destruction, and even apocalypse. In a postmodern world, the “frontier” has come to be associated with war, violence, exploitation, and degradation. This seems to be the message of the 1979 film “Bye Bye Brazil,” directed by Carlos Diegues, a tragic-comic fiction of Brazil’s march westward. In the film the *Caravana Rolidei*, featuring a tawdry troop of showmen, try to bring the glitter of progress and civilization to the hinterlands, but everywhere that troop goes, disaster follows. Their show is finished, bankrupt, and fraudulent.

Perhaps we have reached the end of the myth of the frontier, but powerful forces continue trying to transform the New World into something called civilization. But how long can the march westward continue after it has lost its supporting mythology? This is a question that Brazil, like the rest of the hemisphere, may be asking. There is no unspoiled hinterland any more. But to reexamine the Brazilian frontier of many decades ago is to ask ourselves what were we doing then and why we were doing it. What was rational and was irrational about the frontier? What is left of progress and what has crumbled with time?

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