

Rethinking Amerindian Spaces in Brazilian History

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This special issue on Amerindian spaces is the result of a workshop held at the University of St. Andrews, UK, in June 2015. We asked participants to examine key concepts related to spatial history, such as borderlands, frontiers, and territories, by looking at them through alliances and rebellions involving Amerindians and the colonial and independent states in Latin America.¹ Our aim was to gain a continental understanding of Indian political geography that went beyond European territorial divisions. This purpose continues into the present issue with its focus on the internal and international frontiers of Brazil and how they relate to spaces of indigenous collective action. The articles here reexamine areas that have been considered peripheral in Brazilian historiography, placing the emphasis on indigenous history and society. These spaces proved surprisingly impervious to the imposition of external authority, but each space has its own history that cannot be solely defined by the internal and external frontiers of Brazilian colonial and national expansion. Equally, these indigenous spaces influenced policy and practice, as governments sought to exert control over native labor and advance land settlement for colonists. Our choice for a spatial perspective forces an examination of a regionally connected system of social groups and the environments in which people lived, and which they sought to protect and defend. As a result, we go beyond place, territory, and frontier as concepts and use the term *space* to invoke a direct and holistic relationship with the larger spheres in which people move and act.

This volume is part of a general spatial turn in Latin American history and anthropology that has opened up a field of new questions about indigenous people, their presence in different spaces, territorial configurations, and indigenous influence on the

borderlands of the nation-state (for the evolution of the field in North America, see Hämäläinen and Truett 2011). These studies have revealed that Indians actively shaped and challenged colonial and state frontiers, and through their actions, they also defined the limits of European imperialism and the nation-state (Radding 2005, Barr 2011, Readman, Radding and Bryant 2014). For Brazil, Vieira, Amoroso and Viegas (2015) use “territorialities” to refer to the spaces in which indigenous people convert outside pressures into culturally meaningful values and practices, allowing the conduct of independent Amerindian affairs. Within what are normally portrayed as colonial villages, Celestino de Almeida (2014) has shown that the missions in Rio de Janeiro were neither Portuguese nor Brazilian spaces in any simple sense. There was a constant shifting of power relations back and forth between different authorities and followers, preventing the consolidation of any one position. Similarly, in the Brazilian Amazon, Roller (2014) demonstrates how Indians combined the formation of strong, enduring kin-based communities in the supposed colonial sphere with the pursuit of opportunities that took them far away, such as visiting distant family groups and harvesting products in the backlands. These new readings move beyond a dualistic understanding of the way indigenous people responded to colonial incursions by either fleeing to a safe place in the forest or allowing their assimilation. Revisiting the concept of the frontier, Langfur (2014a) argues that the process by which Brazil was internally colonized—how different kinds of spaces became incorporated into national territory—is a critical ongoing question requiring attention.²

The size of Brazilian territory means that there were expanses where, from the time of their arrival, Europeans had a minimal presence. The Portuguese used the term *sertão* to refer to inland areas, in contrast to the Atlantic coast. The *sertão* was often seen as peripheral to the colonial world, and, as such, it provides a fertile concept to explore native Brazil. Russell-Wood writes, ‘When the word *sertão* appeared on colonial maps, it was invariably

accompanied by an ethnographic qualifier, such as '*sertão dos tapuias*' (Russell-Wood 2002: 123). The space was acknowledged to be inhabited by diverse peoples, but, at the same time, its limits were rarely well defined, indicating a shifting perception of, and shifting relations with, Indians and where the colonial frontier may have lain. That enigmatic character is implied in an eighteenth-century dictionary definition of the *sertão* as the "interior" and "heart" (Silva 1789: 396). Here, the *sertão* can be seen as inside the colonial body: on the one hand, the powerhouse of the colonial enterprise from where the Portuguese extracted Amerindian labor and products and, on the other hand, the Indian heartlands that the Portuguese sought to conquer and occupy. The articles here build on these foundations and address the problem of naming these spaces and how to characterize them.

From an Amerindian point of view, however, these movements and exchanges drew them into contact with new actors. As Amerindians contended with these pressures, their own relations were affected as they competed for control of trading and access to European goods. According to Ferguson and Whitehead, these sorts of spaces came to have an indirect relation to the state and were composed of multiple societies with evolving power dynamics (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992: 3). Our objective is to understand how each of these spaces in Brazil came to have its independence but not one that was necessarily opposed to the state. In many cases the indigenous people moved from defiance to negotiation and compliance and back again depending on how they perceived their position. For these reasons, we advocate a long-term spatial perspective to show evolving relations and movements as integrated into a web of regional societies and cultural meanings. These spaces were constituted by indigenous interests and materially and culturally affected by the colonial presence. Equally, the varied people who lived in and defended these spaces shaped the policies and practices of governments and directed commercial networks. The evidence here challenges the assumption that indigenous peoples were pushed into isolated zones from which they might

have sought contact. Fausto and Heckenberger (2007: 16–17) also criticize this idea from the perspective of contemporary situations of indigenous people. Yet their position is to view European intervention as marked by discontinuity and fragmentation: “Colonialism promoted insularity by causing demographic and social disruption of native networks” (2007: 17). The articles in this special issue—through their attentive analysis of archival and ethnographic sources—suggest that there was more interethnic and social organizational continuity than has been appreciated. Certainly, the reconfiguration of ties did not automatically lead to inward-looking social forms.

Hal Langfur’s article highlights the influences of indigenous people on the state in his examination of the eastern *sertão* of Minas Gerais. One of two royal policies for the newly arrived Portuguese monarchy in 1808 was to wage a just war on the Botocudo Indians (who were in fact made up of various ethnicities) to clear them from the lands. This war would allow colonists to settle there. As part of the effort, stories of Indian cannibalism circulated to justify the war. Langfur argues that the reality was more complex than either the Crown wanted it to be or the contemporary scholar might realize. For a start, there were provincial colonial agents on the ground who proposed peaceful alliances to pacify the Indians with interethnic exchanges. The indigenous people themselves were also differentiated: some wanted greater contact and to settle in villages, and others rejected engagement. Overall, the Indians of the eastern *sertão* enacted their own peace-making strategies and successfully defended their area from state territorial consolidation. As a result, the newly independent nation pursued milder policies toward the space, and frontier advancement was slowed down.

One legacy of these interactions with the state is that indigenous people today identify as both Brazilian citizens and natives at the same time (Devine Guzman 2013), but being Indian and Brazilian is highly conflicting (Ramos 1998). For instance, contemporary indigenous people have a different relationship to their lands than other citizens: Indians have

collective rights to their territories because the state does not allow them full citizenship, unlike other Latin American countries (Ramos 2003). Despite the size of Amerindian areas in Brazil, in the 2010 census, only 0.4 percent of the Brazilian population classified themselves as *indígenas*, one of the lowest percentages in the Americas. This percentage includes urban, rural, and indigenous territories. However, the number has increased over the last decades, a consequence of the new processes of ethnic reaffirmation (IBGE 2012: 4–5, 8). The areas where the majority of indigenous people are concentrated—northern, northeastern, and center-west—coincide with the geographical focus of four of the five articles included in this issue. This does not mean that indigenous groups have remained immobile and unchanged since the early modern period, but it does indicate the locations where a higher proportion of the population self-identify as indigenous now.

Although we do not trace the histories of specific territories, we do analyze the spatial strategies relevant to understanding the background to the contemporary Carib peoples of the Trombetas region, the Tupi of the Tapajós and Madeira Rivers, the Kadiwéu of the Paraguay River, the Xavante (Krenak) of Minas Gerais, the Palikur of Amapá, and the Kali’na of French Guiana. At the end of the nineteenth century, interested parties thought many of these indigenous people were dying out and as a result sought to document the final chapter of native worlds (Stocking 1992: 178). As Heather Roller shows in her article, the Kadiwéu were not becoming extinct—that was a misreading of their spatial strategies. In their selective appropriation of outsider artifacts and habits, the Kadiwéu were continuing well-established practices of accommodating and resisting nonindigenous elements. What looked like simple acculturation was in fact reinforcing native traditions. In one telling example, when a leader visited a Portuguese fort, he demanded to sit with the captain at his table; he also insisted that an accompanying but inferior group of Indians eat outside on their own. Here colonial hierarchies were used to express indigenous ones. Only with such a shift in perspective can

we also appreciate the ethnic revival and growing numbers of people who are demarcating their own lands as indigenous spaces in Brazil (Viegas 2007 and French 2009 in the northeast, Bolaños 2010 in the north of Brazil).

The reconnection to indigenous identities indicates the need for a long-time framework when examining spatial strategies. People draw on a range of actions that resurface from time to time to defend their independent spaces. Examples include seeking better allies, changing names (the Kadiwéu were once the Guaikurú), moving away from conflict, killing leaders or missionaries who followers disagreed with, and burning the villages of an unpopular leader. As such, this special issue points toward a deeper understanding of Brazil that cuts across space and time and integrates the different historical societies. To this end, Pablo Ibáñez-Bonillo revisits reports of the deaths of two Jesuits at the hand of Indians in the 1640s, one on the island of Marajó at the mouth of the Amazon and the other on the Itapecuru River in Maranhão. Underlying these tragic events were indigenous histories of trade and war that come from a pre-European past. Rather than situating the deaths in frontier violence of the time, Ibáñez-Bonillo shows the need to investigate a deeper set of relations that spread along the northeastern Atlantic coast. His critical reading of the colonial narratives used to justify frontier violence allows him to re-center the frontier by revealing the interconnection of natives and Europeans before the colonial agents established total control.

One of the biggest challenges here is to understand how political leadership and organization, ceremonial exchanges, trading routes and products, and ethnic belonging and frontiers are expressed in spatial history. This effort requires a combined anthropological and historical approach, such as found in Carneiro da Cunha (1992), Fausto and Heckenberger (2007), and Perrone-Moisés and Sztutman (2010). Early Brazilian historiography often assumed that indigenous people took flight following experiences with the expanding frontier

consisting of cattle ranchers, farmers, miners, and traders, not to mention the violent shorter-term incursions of soldiers and slavers (e.g., Capistrano de Abreu 1997). Once on the move, native people found isolated areas in the middle of the forest, in marshes, or at the head of tributaries where they did not feel threatened: these have been considered refuge zones, or Amerindian spaces. Commonly, these spaces were considered by Europeans to have few riches or to be difficult to access. While the state took little interest in these spaces and did not know about the geographic spread of regional societies, individual colonial agents had alliances with indigenous leaders, in some cases including kinship relations that strengthened the bridges between the colonial and Amerindian worlds. These spaces drew interest from the mid- to late nineteenth century as rubber extraction and agriculture grew and border disputes were settled by diplomatic efforts.

Our contention is that this historical characterization of the refuge zone flattens out myriad indigenous experiences and makes the state and nonindigenous actors appear as though they acted uniformly across Brazil. In this view, indigenous people are homogeneous, and little consideration of the roles of indigenous leadership, political organization, or networks is made. These were not “societies from scratch,” as maroon communities that coexisted in these spaces were (Price 1996). Nor could they be defined as a “shatter zone,” a place of safety where people dodge being governed, as James Scott conceptualized Zomia in Southeast Asia (2009: 8). We show that, in their actions, Amerindians defended their spaces but had different strategies for doing so depending on the relations that linked them to other groups or the state. This was a demonstration of the desire for territorial autonomy and the control of interactions with outsiders, though not necessarily in a manner that threatened the integrity of the state. In this sense, Silvia Espelt-Bombin challenges the definition of the current Brazilian state of Amapá and eastern French Guiana as an Amerindian refuge zone due to its frontier status between the Portuguese and French colonies in the early modern

period. Reconstructing indigenous networks made up of trade, rituals, war, alliances, and ethnogenesis processes, Espelt-Bombin uncovers a longer history of indigenous connections and migrations along the coastal areas between spanning from Belém and the Amazon delta to the Maroni River. This Amerindian space was not limited by European settlements or missions; rather, the indigenous networks gradually incorporated Amerindians living in Portuguese and French missions, blurring the limits of European territorial control and questioning the conceptualization of this space as a 'refuge zone'. It was the Amerindians who lived in and interacted within this space that managed to maintain its autonomy, setting the limits to European expansion in northern South America.

Understanding Amerindian historical movements requires an awareness of the important role of the environment. Brazil encompasses highlands and lowlands, rural and urban areas, and it is home to the biggest river basin in the world. Indigenous societies live in and across multiple environments, which in turn have shaped their alliances and wars. Knowledge of labyrinthine networks of waterways helped Amerindians protect themselves, but colonial routes also followed Amerindian ones, connecting regions across watersheds and mountain ranges. For instance, a riverine route connected São Paulo and southeast Brazil with Belém from early colonial times (Monteiro 1994), and Amerindian routes connecting the Atlantic and the Amazon via the Orinoco, Negro, Branco, and Essequibo Rivers were used by the Dutch and their allies in their enslaving expeditions (Dreyfus 1992). On the other hand, rapids, waterfalls and rock formations along rivers seem to have acted as meeting points and markers of ethnic borders (Radding 2005). Along the waterways, a novel way of life developed as the congregation of shared interests strengthened (Buarque de Holanda 1994 [1956]). The *bandeirantes* who traveled the rivers from São Paulo to find Indian slaves were aided by friendly Indian navigators and paddlers. This aquatic space gave rise to its own social forms and rhythms, neither white nor Indian but a space in between.³ In the Amazon,

the northern *bandeirantes*, transfrontiersmen, created posts along remote rivers and formed family links to indigenous peoples, using their labor and knowledge for the extraction of products (Sweet 1974, Sommer 2014). These individuals actively traveled along these spaces, more than slavers or missionaries did, and they adapted and fitted into Amerindian life through kinship and ritual life in particular.

The pathways that connected the *sertão* with the colonial core were frequently along rivers and streams and across lakes rather than over land. Yet the *sertão* was not a dead end, for it led to other centers, colonial and Amerindian. What role did rivers play in the formation of Amerindian spaces? Mark Harris examines how regional river systems shaped political divisions in the Lower Amazon. For example, at the mouth of each tributary to the Tapajós River, a settlement marked a new field of people within. Between neighboring groups there was periodic fighting, followed by alliances of marriage and exchange. Rivers joined and separated indigenous affiliations. This dual role is nicely brought out in the work of Thomas Oles on walls (2015). He argues that walls not only divide but also constitute relations: people and their differences meet at walls.⁴ Rivers served as pathways connecting each end of the spectrum, along which were placed towns, missions, villages, encampments, trading posts, and backlands. Individuals and groups had to stop off on these trails to get from one end to the other, making each place a service point in the wider chain.

The fact that indigenous people increasingly demand the right to create and live in collective spaces and to be full citizens at the same time makes our historical approach to Amerindian space and indigenous strategies timely. This territorial endurance and temporal resilience requires special attention. The authors here all point to a view of native histories that is contingent on contestation and the variability of spatial patterns and processes. Thus, Brazil is, in part, constituted by these conflicting and divergent historical processes. In this

way and in all that follows, we are mindful of Frank Salomon's call to integrate the otherness of Amerindian history and Amerindian agency in the making of modern states (1999: 51).

This challenge is met by focusing on three forms of spatial strategies that have been hinted at up to this point: (1) spatial practice itself: the everyday making of political geography through exchange, war, movement, and marriage; (2) the making of defiant spaces and the practices of territorialization, configuring and making political spaces and regional alliances and enemies; (3) the practices of imagining spaces in terms of both barbarity (cannibal societies) and riches (e.g., El Dorado), and their historiographical characterization (frontiers, empty spaces, refuge zones). These common themes force a revision of the core-periphery matrix and elaborate indigenous spaces as complex regions of entangled ethnic relations that were themselves centers of native interaction and in many cases have endured into the contemporary period.

Each article elaborates all three elements of the argument, showing that the presence of Amerindian spaces is a reminder of the impossibility of internal colonization and fixing international borders. Starting with the historical and anthropological characterization of these spaces allows scholars to overcome the limitations of the historical record and historiography itself. These constraints concern the difficulties in the identification of individual groups, as people move in and out of certain spaces, change names and adapt their social and political organization to influences from neighboring Indians and incoming colonial actors. By focusing on these streams of cultural change and historical events, we seek to shift attention to the spaces of diverse interacting societies on a regional scale.

Notes

¹ The editors would like to thank all the original participants of the workshop for their contributions: Cynthia Radding, Matthew Restall, and Sabine Hyland as well as the authors in this edition. We are grateful to the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust (RPG-2012-

699 and SG132847 2014-2015) for funding, and to the Centre for Amerindian, Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of St. Andrews for hosting the event.

² See Bastos and Brito (2018), which appeared just before this issue went to press.

³ The rivers enabled colonial control, but they also shaped cultural and material life in a manner that privileged those with regional knowledge and skills. This is especially clear in the Amazon, where, as David Davidson has shown, the rivers facilitated Portuguese conquest because they came to establish a networked presence in the form of trading posts in very remote areas (Davidson 1970).

⁴ This double role is similarly discussed in Readman, Radding, and Bryant (2014).

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