

Capistrano de Abreu and J. F. Turner: a national historiography and an environmental history

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses some aspects of the work of Capistrano de Abreu in a comparative perspective with that of F. J. Turner. It highlights the formation of national historiographies on the American continent and their relation with what today we call environmental history. The historiography of the New World has as a characteristic not to approach the history of the young nations of the continent as a mere extension of their metropolises, or of Europe in general but aimed to show the originality and the specificities of the social formation of these american peoples.

Keywords: Capistrano de Abreu, Frederick Jackson Turner, national history, Environmental History.

When a figure is as notorious as Capistrano de Abreu, it is customary to say in Brazil: “he needs no introduction”. Nevertheless, a series of bibliographical remarks tend to appear, sometimes very detailed and oftentimes not really relevant. What made Capistrano de Abreu “Capistrano, the eminent historian” were not his heterodox habits, the fact that he enjoyed reading lying down at a hammock, nor that he used to wear wrinkled clothes, but maybe the fact that he had taken – because of his restlessness and intellectual curiosity – to reading obstinately, to “take a chance and try out his luck” in Rio de Janeiro, spending six hours a day, during his vacations, at the National Library. Maybe, otherwise, what made Capistrano a renowned historian was the fact that, being part of a society deeply marked by the “master-slave bipolarity, he was neither one nor the other”. He came from a landowning family, and probably was the rejection to this paternal world that made him seek refuge amongst books.

In any individual trajectory there are certain data which strategically sustain an intellectual biography, while others are left as simple curiosities, addressed to antiquaries, and dispensable to this presentation. Assuming that Capistrano de Abreu was trained as a historian, I refuse to write an anecdotal account, which he himself would discard¹. He was a man who disliked talking about

¹ Angela de Castro Gomes (1996: 90), after analyzing the supplement “Authors and Books” of the newspaper *A Manhã* paying homage to Capistrano de Abreu, defends that those texts clarify the fact that, with Capistrano, historical knowledge appears in Brazil, and that his personal figure gives shape and concludes the separation between the man of letters and the researcher of historical science.

himself, about what he considered a “life of little interests” (Câmara, 1969: 22). Therefore, this text is not going to focus on the narrative of personal episodes and curiosities.

The relevance of the competitive examination for admission to famed *Colégio Pedro II*, for which Capistrano applied in 1883, lies not in Karl von Koseritz’s famous *a posteriori* commentaries, but that he wrote for this occasion *Descobrimento do Brasil e seu desenvolvimento no século XV* (“Discovery of Brazil and its development during the XV century”). This text stressed the *Sertão*² issue, a theme which pervaded his further work, maturing along its progression. We will not comment how he learned to read in German “just enough to read at the hammock”, neither how these hammocks were brought from his homeland, the Northeastern state of Ceará, all the way down to Rio de Janeiro. What is important here is how his knowledge of German authors, such as Ranke, pushed him to the rigorous and meticulous study of documents.

Centrally important is how his work renewed historiography and how, from a continental perspective, it even anticipated J. F. Turner’s studies, recognized as the founder of American historiography. What would be the nature of this American history indeed?³ Even better, where does the record of birth of an autonomous historiography of the New World lie? This one would have to deny any approach to the history of the continent’s young nations, which considers them simple extensions of their Metropolis, or of Europe, in general. It should be independent and autochthonous, exposing the originality and particularities of American peoples’ social formation.

From this standpoint, Turner would fulfill all these requisites. Few historical interpretations, maybe none, were so successful if compared to Turner’s studies on the US frontier. His theory, focused on the advances of US frontier as the explanatory basis for the particular development in this country, became, still during his lifetime, the orthodox version of national history, repeated and disseminated throughout the schools (Clementi, 1992: 22).

According to Hebe Clementi, Turner’s work is situated within the particular context of late XIX century, when the most important economist of Europe struggled with the issue of land and its value under State-run economies. But the land/frontier theme is revealed in all its importance much earlier. When in 1893, Turner made his speech about the meaning of frontiers in North-American history, Smith, Ricardo and Marx had already highlighted some of the elements which characterized the development of North-American frontier; and Capistrano had already made public his interpretation of the *Sertões*, as well as their formative meaning both to Brazilian people and national history: *Descobrimento do Brasil e seu desenvolvimento no século XVI*, published in 1883; brought up some aspects that would be later widely explored in *Caminhos antigos de povoamento do Brasil* (“Ancient paths to the occupation of Brazil”), of 1899, and *Capítulos de história colonial* (“Chapters of Colonial History”), of 1907. About *Caminhos*, claims José Honório Rodrigues: “this book is, to our historiography, what F. Turner’s *The frontier in American History* has been to the North-Americans (Rodrigues, 1978, 201).

By the end of the XVIII century, at the time when Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, the implications of the availability of abundant and cheap land were already evident in the English colonies. In those places, Smith stated, it was still possible to buy cheap unoccupied land. Therefore, when an artificer acquired some capital beyond what was necessary to provide his neighbors with products, no consideration was given to the possibility of employing this surplus

² In Brazil, *sertão* (Portuguese term for backcountry or backlands) once referred to the totality of the country’s hinterland, going away from the Atlantic coastal regions where the Portuguese first settled in South America. In modern times, the word has acquired a narrower meaning, referring to the semi-arid lands of Northeastern Brazil (Translator’s note).

³ Throughout this article, the term “American” will be used in a continental sense. Sometimes, Turner’s work is qualified through this adjective, in order to stress that, even though it deals directly with the US, it shares common elements with some processes which took part in the totality of the continent.

in order to raise production, but in fact only to buy, improve and cultivate more land (Smith, 1983).

According to Marx, this availability of unoccupied land meant that “(...) each settler was able to convert to private propriety and individual means of production a part of it (...) (Marx, 1986: 650).

In his chapter on the modern theory of colonization, which corresponded to what was happening in the US at that time (amongst other virgin territories colonized by free immigrants)⁴, Marx was interested in analyzing the differences between the two existing forms of property: one based directly on the producer’s labor and the other based on others’ labor. The first form would characterize the kind of property in North-American frontier, where lands were public, abundant and susceptible to be colonized and converted to private property. In Marx’s view, this process discourages the formation of a labor market as in England, since laborers are constantly driven to become independent producers⁵.

By the XIX century, not only the figures mentioned above had realized the peculiarities of North-American frontier; indeed, many other authors and qualified observers of this century had done it. In *The significance of the frontier in American History*, Turner departs from a remark made by the superintendent of the 1890 census:

Until 1880, indeed, the country had colonization’s frontier, but nowadays its non-colonized area is so fragmentally marked by isolated bodies of settlement, which one could hardly argue that it is a border. As a consequence, the debate related to its extension to the West, etc. can no longer take place under the information offered by this census (Turner, 1992).

This quotation is used by Turner aiming to indicate the end of the historical Westward movement. I intend to appropriate it to stress something evident: that the frontier not only was part of the imaginary and was object of political measures steaming from the Union, but also that it was an official analytical category, followed for a long period by the census, which captured its dimension as a historical process.

Turner’s originality resides particularly in his work of systematizing something already accessible in the imaginary – ideas which were part of the quotidian and which had been previously collected by literature – and shaping it into a historical/ideological scope appropriate to a certain historical conjuncture, hence constituting the frontier and the expansion as the destiny of the United States.

Capistrano’s work, on the other hand, condensed and systematized with extraordinary coherence some ideas that had long been part of Brazil’s representations. Marilena Chauí indicates the Jesuit Father Anchieta as the first to raise the fracture between the seacoast, where God’s word had arrived and, hence, the land of goodness, and the wild forests, where the devil was hidden, the land of evil (Chauí, 2000, 66).⁶ Ever since this fracture was announced, it has been updated in

⁴ Virgin lands that in fact were not unpopulated, since they were inhabited by Indians, but which contemporaries refer to as *empty spaces*, assumed as spaces where the logic of land use did not take profit into account.

⁵ About Turner’s acknowledgment of Marx’s work, argues Hebe Clementi (1992: 12): “He did not leave any trace that indicates an awareness of Marx’s doctrine - although, in 1889, *The Capital* was a best-seller in the United States (500,000 copies were sold during this year)”.

⁶ If Pero Vaz de Caminha’s letter to Portuguese King Dom Manuel in 1500 might be considered the first text of Brazilian literature, even better, written on Brazilian territory, also it might be considered the first to establish the divide between the seacoast and the inland *Sertão*. The costal area is where the conquerors arrived, where the Indians danced and displayed themselves, according to Caminha, “more friendly to us

new versions; but compared to all of them, Capistrano's was the most accurate, the one with higher recurrence and explanatory complexity.

Turner's thesis was, in the field of History, a theoretical argumentation which supported a whole order of expansionist political ideas. We should add to this account what one could call the age's mood, the trust in evolutionism and the certainty – which Darwin himself had vouched for – that the history of the United States was an example of natural selection.

The framework of Capistrano's thesis is another. A large part of his work is situated amidst the "disenchantment" which took place between the end of the Empire and the First Republic. Capistrano is not an optimist, given that despite the protagonism conferred to the Brazilian people within the colonial period it does not fulfill its potentialities from the independence onward. Open skepticism is revealed in the following question: "The same doubt strikes me again and again: are Brazilians a people in formation or in dissolution?"

If historical vicissitudes enabled Turner's thesis to become official History, they also exposed it to unintended effects and excessive simplification. But the transcendence of Turner's work did not limit itself to the US. Many historians, sociologists and anthropologists had applied, since then, the concept of a moving frontier to the most diverse realities. It became usual to works enlightened by the universally acknowledged version of the *moving frontier* concept to be endowed with a comparative element, which characterizes American experience, although many times implicitly. According to Otavio Velho, in 1973, when he defended his theses at the University of Manchester, Turner's oeuvre was practically unheard of in Brazil. His work was the first research project that systematically engaged the Turnerian concept of frontier. However, at that time we already had some texts circulating within academics networks which called attention to Turner's works (Velho, 1979). Amongst those, we could underline the short text of historians Yedda Linhares (1959), Nícia Vilella Luz (1963) and José Honório Rodrigues's article (1961), which represents a distinct case, given the series of adaptations he applies to the concept of frontier.

Many of the elements which made Turner the founder of American History were already present in Capistrano's work and the success and universal recognition of the first is ultimately debited to the national historical conjecture in which he formulated his theory. North-American expansionism would still take advantage for a long time of Turner's work, while Brazil's *sertões* would still rest for a long time forgotten or, at least, fragmentarily remembered.

Turner's success in his homeland thus becomes easily explainable if contrasted with the particular situation the United States were going through in his time. The year in which Turner published his essay on the meaning of frontier, 1893, was a year of economic crisis and financial panic, which disturbed the second presidential term of Democrat Grover Cleveland, triggering a whole range of social unbalances. The economic crisis was particularly sharp in the agricultural sectors of the South and West. Under this text's scope, Turner attributed to the frontier a dynamic and democratic role, which had a leveling effect on social tensions. In a certain fashion, that was Turner's explanation to the crisis the US was going through. It was the result, more or less explicit, of the ending of the advancing process of the frontier, as announced by the 1890 census. That special circumstance experienced by the United States converted the North-American historian's hypothesis into intellectual support to the expansionist thesis defended by great financial and political forces in the country.

that we are to them". Inland, on the other hand, appears as an odd place, where one might discover gold, but whose higher richness would be found in the souls to be converted (Caminha, Carta ao rei. In: Aguiar, 2001).

Capistrano also achieved success relatively fast. In 1907, according to José Honório Rodrigues, he was already the most important Brazilian historian; nonetheless his success was limited by some circumstances. In the first place: what was the place occupied by the History of Brazil in the Republic? In 1899, the chair of Chorography and History of Brazil, to which Capistrano had applied in 1883, was eliminated, the subjects of History of Brazil being included within the programs of Universal History. Secondly, what is the place occupied by the *sertões* in the history written during the Republic? Coming from the Northern backlands, nothing was expected in terms of positive contributions, although different was the perspective concerning Southern backlands, whose *bandeiras*⁷ gave place to numerous volumes of the history of Brazilian civilization. The canonized *sertões*'s interpretation would be thus the one by Euclides da Cunha. Thirdly, the very dynamic of Brazilian historiography took newer generations of Historians, moved by an uncontrolled drive for novelty, to feed a distant relation with the "classics". According to Ronaldo Vainfas, Capistrano de Abreu and his *Capítulos de História Colonial* became a monument soon after his death, and that might have generated some negative effects: "the more a monument, the less a document", says he, indicating how the *Capítulos* tended to be less and less read by Brazil's historians at that time (Vainfas, 1999).

Capistrano de Abreu shared a claim with the whole post-Paraguayan war generation: Brazil's history should be interpreted in order to privilege the people and its ethnic constitution at the expenses of the Imperial State, which monopolized history up to that time (Reis, 1999). In Capistrano's work, the concept of culture substitutes race (Rodrigues, 1978). From his perspective, Brazil's history starts within the path which takes us to the backlands. "Going further into Brazil's territory, the colonizer altered himself, assuming a distinctive Brazilian personality" Isolated from the coast, a new man was constituted: the Brazilian. Capistrano's permanent focus was the occupation of territories and its conquest by this newly-born Brazilian people.

Capistrano de Abreu valued indigenous presence, and conceived Brazil as more *mameluco* (hybrid of Portuguese and Indian) than *mulato* (hybrid of Portuguese and African); more *caboclo* than white; more *sertanejo* (inhabitants of the backlands) than coastal. José Carlos Reis states about Varnhagen (in fact referring to the whole XIX century historiography) that he eyed Brazil through Cabral's late XV century sailing ships, conceiving it as an exotic land, inhabited by aliens. To Capistrano, conversely, aliens and exotics were the Europeans and the Africans, and not Brazil and its Indians. This inflection on Brazil's history, which rescued it with its population's identity, is produced especially in *Capítulos de História Colonial*, particularly between chapters eight (*As Guerras Flamengas*) and nine (*O Sertão*). Chapter eight acknowledges that external pressures accomplished a synthesis amongst the different ethnical elements available in Brazil's territory at that time. Chapter nine starts by assuming that the Flemish invasion should be recognized as nothing but a simple episode on the costal occupation: "Capistrano leaves this episode under the shadow of the hinterland occupation, initiated in different ages and steaming from multiple origins until it blends as an inner chain, with more volume and more impacts than the narrow costal line" (Abreu, 1985: 111-113) Therefore, it is the inland occupation which makes Brazil an original work. Turner, on the other hand, would say that the frontier is the fastest and most effective front of Americanization. The virgin land receives the settler, who comes dressed in garments, instruments and modes of thought equally European, taking them out of the train wagon and loading them onto an indigenous canoe, undressing himself and then wearing leather clothes. From this process, emerges a new American product.

7 Bandeiras were exploratory expeditions by trailblazing Bandeirantes, Brazilian colonial scouts. The Bandeirantes expanded Portuguese America from the small limits of the Tordesilhas Line to roughly the same territory as current Brazil. This expansion discovered mineral wealth, which became the basis of colonial exploration during the 17th and 18th centuries (Translator's note).

After Capistrano de Abreu, many Historians came to regard the *Sertões*' occupation as the foundational moment of the nation. Even Gilberto Freyre, famous for disseminating the construction of Casa-Grande (plantation owner's house) as the first moment of nationality,⁸ is obliged to account for the dynamism and originality of these interiorization movements. In *Interpretação do Brasil* (Brazil's Interpretation), he dedicates the chapter "Fronteiras e plantações" ("Frontiers and plantations") to the task of explaining what he defined as two complementary tendencies: the groups which remained at the seacoast and those which migrated towards the interior, enlarging the territory. The coastal group, the one of sugar plantations and farms masters, was the one of Brazil's vertical founders, who laid deep roots on that ground and built solid brick houses, made to endure in time. Conversely, those who when further into the interior were the horizontal founders, migratory and mobile men, trailblazing adventurers, with a strong sense of individual freedom, who could not stand living within the confines of seacoast limits, close to the churches, to public buildings and metropolitan control. Those two groups are presented by Gilberto Freyre as complementary, though opposed by his description and interpretation: coastal line facing and oriented towards Europe, inland oriented towards itself (Freyre, 1947: 91-94). The frontier's men, *Sertão*'s men, were not purely Portuguese, but hybrids of Europeans and Indians.

Brazil' colonization soon ceased to be a strictly European business, becoming a process of self-colonization: a process which would take on, after Independence, a national character (...) This seems right if we contrast this stage of Brazil's colonization with the phenomena described by Turner as the "moving frontier".⁹

But in all fairness to Freyre, it is important to underline that this was not the predominant interpretation in his work; indeed, it was just the opposite. Freyre's Brazil is not *mameluco*; it is *mulato*. In Freyre's synthesis of the three races, the Indian plays nothing but a secondary role. Indians, more specifically female Indians, come to the scene only as a biological means of reproduction to the colonizer, leaving its trace only in the form of material heritage: manioc root and its many-fold culinary uses - *beiju*, *tapioca*, *macapatá*, *paçoca* etc. – besides some other products, recipes and utilities, as the hemlocks, soon evading the stage in order to become a "myth of origin". Freyre's election to the role of interpreter of "national formation" to the detriment of Capistrano is therefore symptomatic of the official denial of Brazil's Indian identity.

In *Caminhos e Fronteiras* ("Paths and Frontiers"), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda situates the overcoming of Serra do Mar¹⁰, achieved during the first ages of colonization, as a singularly unique event. Until then, the conqueror had occupied sites which were nothing but a series of scattered spots throughout the seacoast. This process would be connected to and altered by the sugarcane culture. This former situation was deeply disturbed by the adventurous victory over Serra do Mar: "(...) here there is nothing alike the external cohesion, the apparent equilibrium, although many times fictional, of the Northeastern coastal nucleus..." Clarifying the book's title, the author stresses that by "paths" he intended to grasp the mobility of the initial centuries of Sao Paulo's plateau, in sharp contrast to the seacoast. This same mobility conditioned the implicit status of the frontier's idea.

⁸ If I had to sum up Gilberto Freyre's and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's work, I would say that the first is the historian of the seacoast while the second is the historian of interiorization.

⁹ I should here clarify that *Interpretação do Brasil* aggregates a series of conferences delivered by Gilberto Freyre in the United States, so it is not unlikely that the ideas it expresses might have been influenced by the audience to whom they were addressed.

¹⁰ Serra do Mar is a 1,500 km long system of mountain ranges and foothills in Southeastern Brazil, which runs parallel to the Atlantic Ocean coast (Translator's note).

In the works of both Capistrano and Turner, the coast line is portrayed as oriented towards Europe, as a population and a civilization which turns its back to the backland, projecting itself towards the sea and beyond. Backland (or *Sertões*), on the other hand, gave raise to a strong, independent, stand-alone isolated man, endowed with a new American identity.

According to Capistrano, this new man is the outcome of historical circumstances, and he is not only indebted to his biological miscegenation roots. At a first stage, the three “irreducible races” which constituted the Brazilian people suffered from disaffection amongst and within them: the assimilated black and creoles had a newcomer’s hesitation. The converted Indian, clothed and urbanized, felt himself set apart from the naked Indian, so savage and free. The Portuguese born in Brazilian territory considered themselves inferior to the Metropolitan ones. In sum, Capistrano states: “centrifuge forces dominated the social organism; and only the differences were revealed; there was no conscientious unity”. The unity would come later, during the XVII century, set off by the Flemish presence and the consensus generated around this enemy during combat: “*Reinóis* and *mozambos*, *negros boçais* and *negros ladinos*, *mamelucos*, *caboclos*, *caribocas*, all these multiple denominations, in sum, felt themselves as belonging to each other ... ” (Abreu, 1995: 93).

As José Carlos Reis argues, Capistrano gives origin to a new current in the country’s historical tradition, one which “rediscovers Brazil”, valuing Brazilian nature, the people in its struggles and customs, attributing to this people protagonism, historical agency, capacity to produce its own history” (Reis, 1999: 95).

But Capistrano is not only the people’s Historian – and that would already be a lot – but also the Historian of nature. He was neither a naturalist, nor a natural historian, but a historian of time-space, which situated events in places.

The relatively new environmental history consecrated as its founding fathers Gordon Childe, J. F. Turner and Arnold Toynbe and, in Brazil, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (especially the one of *Monções* and *Caminhos e Fronteiras*); Gilberto Freyre (in *Nordeste*); the geographer Aziz Ab’Saber and essay writers Euclides da Cunha and Oliveira Viana (Drummond, 1991), but this recollection would not be fulfilled without Capistrano de Abreu’s presence.

In a letter written on September 14, 1916, Capistrano states to João Lúcio do Azevedo: “There is no issue as important as overcoming the great bend of the Sao Francisco river (...) The ideal History of Brazil would be one in which the central place today reserved to the Flemish and Spanish wars would be occupied by a different set of achievements. Maybe our grandchildren will be able to see this”. More than thirty years before, he had already expressed the same ideas about the Sao Francisco, a river which he considered to deserve an almost sacred place in Brazil’s history, because it had served as connection between the South and the North; because it was not occupied as a consequence of the mines (as sterile as glittered); because its banks were not stained by the extermination and traffic of Indians. The first cattle raising center was established there, one of the most important formative factors of Brazilian character.¹¹

At a certain period, as a reaction to the dangers of geographic determinism, history ceased to consider environmental variables. It developed as if it were independent from material and, especially, natural conditionings. Worster argues that environmental history rejects the traditional premise which assumes that human experience unfolds itself without natural restrictions, as though the humans were a supernatural species. The main target of environmental history is, still according to Worster, to deepen our understanding of how human beings were, in different periods, affected by the natural milieu and how they affected this environment (1991).

¹¹ March 16, 1883 letter to Dr. Leandro Bezerra, *apud*. José Aurélio Saraiva Câmara. This document is not part of the collection of correspondence organized by José Honório Rodrigues.

Capistrano de Abreu approached space in a similar fashion, which in his work acts as a springboard from which man propels himself. He is not strictly a geographical determinist, since for him the environment does not determine, but only conditions human activities. Space in Capistrano's work is central as something to be transformed by man, who is an active subject, able to create social configurations suitable to each "natural obstacle" he finds, which is permanently transformed into a new resource – not in a reductionist sense.¹² Capistrano shortened the distances between nature and culture, working against the grain of Idealism and Romanticism, intellectual movements that had inserted a gap between nature and culture.

Sílvio Romero has stated that there were two driving engines which had a strong impact on the configuration of a national character: nature and the blending agglomeration of distinct populations. Capistrano replies acknowledging both engines which, despite their impact on the national character, tended to act in response to social structure: "Although, those two motors are not the only ones. If they act upon society, society reacts upon them; social milieu from effect becomes a cause; and suddenly comes to be a component" (Abreu, 1976: 5).

Capistrano's modern history unfolds in time defined as a chronological and spatial variable. "Capistrano interpreted Brazil's social evolution in the XVI century 'situating' events in certain places; everything flowing through a temporal dimension (...) the very idea of space was not 'natural'. Space was not nature's exclusive product, since both of them shared the impact of social formation" (Gomes, 1996: 96). Capistranian *Sertão* challenges man to modify it historically; while Euclidian *Sertão* rests unaffected by the subject.

In reality, he is treading a path three centuries old, the historic trail along which the rude inhabitants of the backlands advance on their excursions into the interior. They did not alter it in the least, and civilization lately has not changed it by laying down alongside the *bandeirante's* trail a modern railway track (Cunha, 1944: 11).

José Augusto Pádua states that there was a solid ecological tradition in Brazil (tradition taken in a double sense), constituted by a series of thinkers between 1789 and 1888. Men concerned with the destruction of environmental resources, such as José Bonifácio, André Rebouças, Joaquim Nabuco, Freire Alemão, Guilherme Capanema etc., the list goes on (Pádua, 2002: 10-23). We could define this tradition as being essentially green. The destruction they address is especially related to the forests, important chapters in Brazil's devastation. There is another *sertanista* tradition, in whose narratives droughts play a central role, a tradition including José de Alencar, José Américo Almeida, Alves de Azevedo, Gustavo Barroso, Adolfo Caminha, Euclides da Cunha, Rodolpho Teóphilo, Graciliano Ramos, Raquel de Queiroz etc., for whom the rainless environment figured as already degraded, extending its destruction to man. But this tradition is not homogenous. For some of them the drought steamed from a social issue; to others, it was a natural phenomenon. According to the second interpretation, conflict unveils easily and paternalist relations are questioned only when nature becomes more scarred than usual, being unable to support everyone. For those who analyze drought as a social problem, it would be understood as a "recurrent struggle between the natural variability of rains and the hydraulic defense of agriculture" (Davis, 2002). Hydraulic defenses, or the capacity of resisting to the consequences of the lack of rain, depend upon social and economic factors: food reserve levels, the possibility of leading cattle to a humid region, money availability, personal networking, etc.

A more or less recent culturalism points out that such a hostile environment should be ignored, that man should be portrayed as independent from it, as almost fluctuating above it. *Sertão* did

¹² Francisco Carlos Teixeira da Silva (1997: 203-216) calls attention to the reductionist and utilitarian perspective on nature that was hegemonic between 1880 e 1910 in Brazil, ultimately anchored on the idea of economic function.

not change into a sea; it became a textual limbo¹³. Such culturalism, remindful of a variety of spiritualism, condemned the *Sertão* to its representations. This position seems to claim that the environment should not be transformed, as almost in a tacit accord, where we do not disturb the *Sertão* as long as it does not disturb us.

If, on the one hand, it becomes urgent to relativize this geographical determinism supposedly fed by Capistrano de Abreu's work, on the other, it is strictly necessary to beware of the conceptual trap inherent to the project of reducing the *Sertão*, as well as material reality in general, to an untouchable folklore, an ultra-particular identity, intangible and picturesque. This process would certainly end in another kind of determinism, a "cultural" one, as stressed by Emília Viotti da Costa (1998). Capistrano's grandchildren began writing another history, as he wished, one where the place of the Flemish and Spanish wars is occupied by different achievements; but still much remains to be done.

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¹³ The author refers here to the famous millenarian account of Antonio Conselheiro, the spiritual and political leader of the Canudos community, which was exterminated by the Republican army in the War of Canudos (1896-1897). Conselheiro had prophesized that "at the end of the world, the land will change into sea, and the sea will change into land" (Translator's note).

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