

BRASILIA, FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

The transfer of the capital to a new site on Brazil's central plateau had a particular significance in the eyes of those who conceived the idea. Its primary aim was to create a nucleus from which to promote the development of the vast and almost deserted interior regions, abandoning Rio de Janeiro which was, for various reasons, no longer judged capable of fulfilling its role as the seat of national political life. As the Brasilia project was realized, thanks to the inspiration of President Kubitschek, it was hoped that it would contribute to the solution of urgent problems stemming from the country's development. Its basic function was to stimulate this development, no longer seen only as the development of the coastal regions but also of the interior, the *sertão*, that is the "great desert" of the Goiás, the Mato-Grosso and of Amazonia.

Fifteen years have passed, and a considerable number of political events have taken place on the sidelines of the project. It is therefore interesting, and undoubtedly opportune, to examine the outcome today. How has Brasilia lived up to its founders' ideals? What have been the consequences of the transfer for the country's political evolution, and subsequently, to what extent has the enterprise truly helped to direct official attention towards the *sertão*, unknown and uninhabited, at the same time moderating the obsessive attention that Rio has always paid to foreign

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examples and of which it was always the principal channel of diffusion. Has what Brazilians call *interiorization* really been effective anthropo-geographically and psychologically? These are the questions that we shall try to answer in the course of this brief study.

We must first of all recall that the idea of leaving Rio de Janeiro and building a capital city in the interior was an old national dream of symbolic significance. It dates from the period of national independence (1822). We realize today that myths, symbols and magic formulae play a considerable role in the history of man. The collective spirit is nourished upon such phenomena of the unconscious that can often activate much deeper responses than any objective event.

We can thus conceive Brazil's history in the form of a dialectic between three myths that as parameters seem to direct its historic evolution and expand into the geo-political area, molding the Brazilian national character.

First was the myth of the Tropical Paradise. After Columbus, the colonists who disembarked on the snow-white beaches, bordered by elegant palm trees, with their wild green waves and azure sky, were seduced by the incomparable beauty of still undespoiled nature. In this aphrodisiacal atmosphere they marvelled at the Indians' nudity that deceived them with an illusory image of the noble savage; friendly, innocent and pure. The Renaissance imagination led them to search deliberately for a paradise on earth, a "new world," that the Iberian navigators were discovering for Europe. Via Montaigne, and then Rousseau, the myth took possession of the Romantic movement, but in Brazil itself it served as a backdrop for a patriarchal society, built upon African slavery and the monoculture of sugar.

Nevertheless, when the Portuguese coloniser decided to leave the coasts to penetrate into the interior, he suddenly realized, to his cruel surprise, that the Indians were not virtuous innocents, but bloodthirsty cannibals whose resistance increased as he advanced further into their hunting grounds. Nature did not welcome them with open arms, but rather unleashed upon them—as in a Bosch painting—fevers, insects, poisonous snakes, high mountains, rivers as wide as the sea, deluvial rains and the impenetrable virgin forest; all the snares of the tropics. Claude Lévi-Strauss considered the Mato-Grosso the most hostile natural

environment Man had ever encountered. The antithesis of the Eden-like vision was thus the phantom of the Green Hell. The social effects of these Unhappy Tropics can be reduced to a single word: underdevelopment. The attitude towards this natural environment on the part of the disciples of scientific and literary positivism in the Nineteenth Century and the first half of the Twentieth Century is totally negative: the tropics are hostile to the white race, they are inhabited by "colored men" who are ignorant, lazy, obscene and uncivilizable. In Brazilian literature this European opinion took the form of an expression of pessimism and destructive cynicism regarding the future and the country's cultural possibilities.

Then a third myth took shape, surpassing the others in a creative synthesis: Eldorado. This is what is referred to in historical terms as the epic of the Bandeirantes. During the Seventeenth Century a prestigious captain would hoist his banner (*bandeira*) and on his orders a few hundred, or often a few thousand, people of all classes, colors and kinds started off for the unknown, in search of Indian slaves, gold and precious stones. "They could be called a race of giants," remarked Saint-Hilaire. It was undoubtedly the most dynamic phenomenon of Brazil's history. It is noteworthy that the enterprise was of a collective nature, practically feudal, while the American "rushes" of the Nineteenth Century were purely individual affairs. Starting off from São Paulo, the Bandeirantes almost reached the Andes, and more than doubled the extent of the territory, finally to discover gold and diamonds in Boiás and in the region of the "general mines" (Minas Gerais). Then the movement suddenly came to a halt. For two hundred years the vast *sertão* was abandoned, except for several waves of pioneers, such as those cultivating rubber in Amazonia and coffee in S. Paulo, who followed one another in a series of new influxes.

The Bandeirante spirit is still alive. It is the nomadic instinct, the desire to set off, to explore, to settle down and leave again and again, of those who search for

 this daughter of chance,
 from kingdom to kingdom,
 faithful courtiers
 of a fleeting phantom.

With Brasilia the epic comes to an end. The typically Brazilian concept of development (called *desenvolvimentismo*), that is high-speed industrialisation, is nothing but a modern form of the old conquering instinct.

Accordingly, President Kubitschek was the last of the Bandeirantes, with all their faults and all their virtues. His administration (1956-61) marks the beginning of the country's great economic growth, that, interrupted by inflation and political agitation during 1961-64, was accelerated from 1967-68 onwards, in the course of what is called the Brazilian Revolution.

The construction of Brasilia is thus a milestone, a decisive turning-point in the country's history. It symbolizes the will to overcome the shameful conditions of under-development—backwardness, ignorance, poverty, disease and injustice bequeathed by centuries of colonization. Despite the ambiguity of the political events that followed the transfer of the capital, Brasilia represents in spatial terms the return to the *sertão* which is in keeping with the purest Bandeira tradition; such that with the passage of time, it reflects the essentially "futurist" nature of the leap forward.

Fifteen years suffice to judge the effects of the transfer on the course of Brazilian political life. Thus, the crisis of the years 1961-64 is revealed in a virtually complete withdrawal from Brasilia. President Quadros detested the city in which he was obliged to live. During this period the new capital was most threatened. Nevertheless, the transfer was irreversible, and all the efforts of the Opposition, whose power had grown under the Kubitschek administration, was not enough to bring about a retreat. Quadros isolated himself in his palace, became bogged down in debts and stagnation; he lost all contact with the masses, so fatal for a demagogue. His attempt at a dictatorial coup d'état, in August 1961, came to nothing, and he resigned the Presidency.

The days that followed were dramatic. For the first time the Rio garrison (the First Army) did not have the final say in a constitutional crisis. Vice-President Goulart's accession to power was guaranteed by the forces stationed at Rio Grande do Sul. The economic and political debacle of the Left government followed its course, however, parallel to the almost complete abandonment of the capital on the part of the President of the Republic who, in the depths of despair, vainly endeavoured to

rally Rio's sailors and stevedores to his side.

Again, following the coup d'état of March 31, 1964, the Rio garrison was the last to acknowledge the revolution: in effect, the fate of the nation was no longer decided in Rio, Brazil had become too large and complex. In a country of continental dimensions social and political forces act autonomously, according to their regional distribution and conflicting interests: the nerve endings meet in Brasilia. No one particular element determines the result any longer, neither the plantation owners, the S. Paulo industrialists, the Rio bureaucrats, intellectuals, journalists nor the army. The will of the entire nation, as the sum of all these interests, is expressed and agreed upon in Brasilia.

Rio is, in fact, instinctively attracted to all that is foreign, but in a particular way: towards that which is gay, exuberant, extrovert, the springs of art and entertainment. We see this somewhat artificial aspect of the old capital's character—that had nourished an immense, indolent bureaucracy, living in search of the comforts and illusions of an imported culture—as the *negative* reason for the transfer project.

Rio has neither the physical nor moral climate suitable for the seat of an efficient government that must assume the austere task of dealing with the gigantic problems of development. Inasmuch as it is the supreme expression of the vision of a Tropical Paradise mentioned earlier, Rio has become a kind of Cythera, surrounded by all the seductions of its luxurious atmosphere. By the sea, at Copacabana or Ipanema, thousands of beautiful brunettes, in their mini-bikinis—so pleasing to the eye—create a radiant image of a modern tourist version of the *dolce vita*. These beaches offer relief from the stifling summer heat that engulfs the commercial centre. Work is characterised by the frustrations of the inevitable conflict between the allure of the beach and the contradictory demands of modern economic activity.

Previous governments therefore tried to create a metropolis as wonderful and comfortable as possible: in the interest of the *cariocas* bureaucrats, but not necessarily in that of the other Brazilians. Federal authorities became subject to the pressures of local public opinion, and were often inclined to deal with purely municipal business, as, for example, when the Minister of Justice, who was in charge of the Fire Department, was called upon to intervene in the case of a fire at a fashionable night

club. Obviously, the delightful atmosphere of Saint Tropez or Miami is not exactly what is called for to test the efficiency of a leader.

One of the two reasons behind the creation of Brasilia was the physical removal from this seductive environment for another, wilder, one, where attention would be forcibly directed towards the underdeveloped interior. Those who complain of deathly boredom in Brasilia confirm, in doing so, the reason for the transfer. Since there are no amusements in Brasilia, one works: this is the intention of the project!

Nevertheless, Rio has not lost its importance since the departure of the federal government: it has simply freed itself. Today the State of Rio de Janeiro, which includes the city and the ancient province of the same name, is the third unit of the Federation in terms of population, and second in economic power (with 17% of the Gross National Product). The problem of reconciling work with pleasure has now become the concern of the *cariocas*; in any case, they are pastmasters of this admirable art—something which is to their credit in our harsh age which exposes the human limitations of industrial civilisation.

The other fundamental idea behind Brasilia—that of creating an artificial instrument by which the State could divert westwards the internal flow of migrants to the south, in search of work and better living conditions—was severely tested. In this case no final judgement can be given. It is clearly too early to determine from the censuses of 1960 and 1970 whether there has been any considerable demographic movement to counter-balance the wave of workers pouring into S. Paulo and the other prosperous states of the southern coastal region. Nevertheless, in less than 20 years, the population of the Federal District grew from 0 to 800,000. 300,000 people live in the “pilot plan,” in other words: in the city itself and its immediate residential suburbs. The remainder are divided among the series of “satellite cities” created to absorb the overflow of all types of professionals and workers who, in their thousands, emigrate there every year. The capital’s cultural influence, educational and medical resources extend not only north of Minas Gerais and south of Goriás, but within a radius of 2,000 kilometers, all the way to Amazonia.

Even during the epoch of President Kubitschek the concept

of Brasilia as a "roadway capital" took shape with the construction of the road to Belem, at the mouth of the Amazon. In the course of the last few years this concept expanded through the policies of President Médici who aimed at opening up for civilized occupation the largest demographic wilderness in the world, the planet's last "human frontier." A road network several thousand kilometers long, conceived of as a weapon to conquer the territory, will soon be completed. It will be possible to travel by car, on a paved road, from Brasilia to Caracas, via Manaus—equal to the distance from Madrid to Moscow.

I would now, however, like to draw the reader's attention to another aspect of the concept behind Brasilia.

What is already called the "Brazilian miracle" cannot be understood solely in terms of a capitalist boom. Despite the undeniable importance of private initiative in the country's economy, particularly with regard to the development of industry in S. Paulo and of agriculture, another factor should be revealed which, in our opinion, also plays a considerable role. This factor is the Plan. The Brazilians apparently wish to profit from the best of two possible worlds, such that almost all Brazil's economic infrastructure is in the hands of the state which possesses extraordinarily powerful means of directing its growth. In this sense it is more socialist than any other Western country.

The Brazilian regime can be defined as a civil and military technocracy. The technocrats are fanatical advocates of the Plan on the basis of the twin considerations of Security and Development, (*Segurança e Desenvolvimento*), the official motto of the Senior Military Academy. The secret of the regime's success lies in its stability, guaranteed by the armed forces, that gives national and foreign investors the necessary confidence to carry out long-term undertakings and allows the technicians to execute projects in a program transcending the immediate requirements of transitory administrations.

It was Brasilia that consecrated the philosophy of the Plan. To date, its first application has been the Pilot Plan of the new capital, as elaborated by the architect Lucio Costa, who won the competition of 1956. Thus neither economists, with their model of the Soviet-type five-year plans, nor the military, with their strategic major-state plans, but architects and urban planners were the first to conceive this method and formulate it in a collective

project. Descartes was of the opinion that buildings for which only one architect was responsible were generally more elegant and comfortable than those which several architects had tried to improve. For this reason the construction of Brasilia was put in the hands of one sole dictator of genius, Oscar Niemeyer. This rigidity was one of the conditions for unity of project and execution.

The above is what I feel represents not only the original character of the Brazilian "model" of development, but also the particular physiognomy assumed by this people's psychological transformation, (what Jung would call the *Wandlung* of its collective spirit). There is no doubt that it is remarkable for such a fundamentally emotional and intuitive people, with an overflowing sense of imagination but lacking methodical habits, all "sense of geometry" or organizational talent, a people without foresight always having recourse to improvisation and their skillful resources, knowing nothing of teamwork—suddenly to set itself to the task of planning its future in a rational and pragmatic way.

Brasilia represents a Cartesian revolution, the new Age of Reason. It is all the more curious in that we are in an age that indulges in an exaltation of the irrational. It is not groundless to consider Descartes as both the great master of the Age of Reason and the founder of modern urban planning. It was Descartes who transformed the architectural ideas of the Renaissance and the Baroque into firm principles of thought. "Considering each of their buildings by itself," he says, referring to the cities of antiquity, "one can find equally and more artistic work in other cities; nevertheless, when we observe their arrangement, here a large one and there a small one, and how the streets are curved and assymetrical, we might say that it was more the work of chance than the will of reasoning men that arranged them in such a way." *The will of reasoning men*—this is the postulate of a modern urban plan! This is also the principle behind the transfer project and the construction of Brasilia. It is, above all, the course of action inspiring the technocracy in the application of their project for headlong development.

The merit of Brasilia, as well as of the economic "miracle," is that of having been planned and constructed on the basis of *labor planning*—a result of even more exceptional value inasmuch as Brazil had hitherto no urban tradition. Neither does it yet

exist. The growth of those cities founded according to a plan, such as Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais (1897), or Goiânia, capital of Goiás (1934), was left to chance. These cities are in the process of becoming monsters. Furthermore, S. Paulo, with its eight or nine million inhabitants, will soon be one of the largest (and most anarchical) cities in the world. Probably the aspect of Brazilian collective life for which their genius (or vice...) for improvisation is most notorious, is the thoughtless way in which they allowed their great cities to mushroom.

In spite of the faults for which it may be reproached, Brasília nevertheless represents a kind of statement, a declaration of principles, a symbol. Its origin marks an historic moment, characterised by its accent upon the rational and the pragmatic, to the extent that it is the joint work of the military, the economists, administrators, businessmen and engineers. After the experience of Brasília it can be seen that the Brazilian élite is obliged to consult a preliminary work-study team before undertaking any important project, dispensing with the hazards of partisan politics. It seems that now they will have to read the "Discourse on Method" to discipline their thoughts and steer towards clear and precise ends. It must be observed, however, since this is the first time that a national talent for rational work has manifested itself, that the enthusiasm of the neophytes has not been without its faults, its excesses and unfortunate lapses.

Three kinds of error were committed in the case of Brasília. The first derives from non-execution of the program: in other words, the betrayal of Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan. We can take, for example, the unanticipated growth of certain commercial areas (along the Avenue W-3), and the delay in planting trees in the residential areas. The city clearly has its own dynamics that cannot be precisely planned for in the immediate future. Lucio Costa could not have anticipated the enormous expansion of the automobile industry. It seems unforgivable, however, that until now no measures whatsoever have been taken to provide the capital with a satisfactory system of rapid, surface, public transportation. We can scarcely agree that in a poor and inexperienced country the entire middle-class should be obliged to acquire Volkswagens. The pedestrian is forgotten, harassed, run over and killed. Along the fifteen kilometers of the city's residential axis cars travel at top speed, as if in a race, resulting

in one of the world's highest accident-rates.

The second type of error stems from the over-consideration of purely aesthetic aspects, to the detriment of practical ones. The dogmatism of the new architectural aesthetic explains the mania for constructing all the buildings, whether apartments or offices, in the shape of glass rectangles. The Bauhaus precepts undoubtedly have a *raison d'être* in a temperate climate, but is it really reasonable in a hot country to construct these enormous hothouses, these suffocating ovens, simply because it goes according to the canons of Le Corbusier or Gropius?

The third group of failures results from an abuse of the geometric spirit. It is the sin of fanaticism. Brasilia is accused of being cold, monotonous and depressing. Certainly, every recently built new city lacks soul. Can it be otherwise? Only the patina of time can soften contours and kindle warmth in an urban atmosphere. Undoubtedly, Brasilia does not have a very sociable nature, which can be explained by the desire deliberately to mix social classes and to avoid the scandalous juxtaposition of luxury and poverty. Brasilia has even been accused of being "totalitarian," a kind of Alphaville, an Orwellian 1984. This may be true...but in the sense of the Marxist-Leninism of some of its apostles. Another expression of fanaticism can be seen in the type of indications (or lack of them) used for addresses. No neighbourhoods have names, but, rather, cabalistic numbers. An example might be: *SQS 315 - H - 412*. This indicates that one lives in unit (super-quadra) No 315, in the south wing. The 300 series is on the west side, between avenues W - 2 and W - 3. One counts from 1 to 16, from the centre of the city: therefore number 315 is the next to last SQ on the south-western side. The letter H indicates the block or building (there are generally about 10 per Super-quadra); however, it is not always easy to locate each building in the neighbourhood. The last number indicates apartment 12 on the fourth floor. It is a rational system—but also Kafkaesque. The positions are not always logical, and unfortunately one cannot learn them all by heart. After three years I still get lost, even though I do not have a bad memory or sense of direction. Signposts and indications are needed, but they often simply do not exist. It is a labyrinth lacking Ariadne's thread...

Yet it would be unjust to deny that the idea of the Plan in

Brasilia has certain pedagogic virtues. It accustoms one to thinking; it demands operational technique, executed with perseverance and continuity, without interruption or confusion. Since we are dealing with an intuitive people, who tend to rely upon chance to solve their problems, on a system of muddling through, (since as Clemenceau, the great psychologist, observed, the Brazilian is too intensely Latin to resist the temptation to precipitate events), a method depending on clarity and precision is even more helpful to him, compensating for his defects in reasoning. From this, let me repeat, stems Brasilia's pedagogic importance, whose faults of detail cannot compromise the whole.

In conclusion, new capital cities are always designed on a manifest, concrete basis, of a geo-political nature; they also have a hidden, secret and symbolic significance. Now, as old Heraclitus once said: the occult link is stronger than the apparent one.

The desire to escape the influence of the priests of Amon in Thebes lead the Pharaoh Akhenaton to build his new capital on the site of Teel El-Amarna. The requirements of imperial security, reinforced by Christianity, persuaded Constantine to leave Rome for Byzantium. But Constantinople and the Horizon of Aton have religious and historic implications that transcend immediate political calculations.

Charles the Fifth took up residence in Madrid for reasons of health; his son, however, starting from this bastion dominating the peninsula, intended to consolidate the centralist policies of Castille. At Versailles, Louis XIV breaks away from a Paris that he detests; he then subjects the aristocracy to his royal absolutism. This rupture, however, paves the way for the fall of the Bastille. By founding St Petersburg, Czar Peter The Great decides to "open a window on Europe." But was he aware of the disastrous consequences his action would have, since the creation of an enormous Western cultural facade led, after an interval of 200 years, to the Russian Revolution and the return to Moscow?

The desire to find a compromise between the slave masters of the South and the Yankee businessmen of the North led some farsighted senators to agree on Washington as the site for the federal capital of the United States. But they could not have dreamed that their geographic choice would assure, some 60 years later, the triumph of the Union over the secessionist Southern

states. Canberra is also a happy compromise between the rivalry of Sydney and Melbourne. Ottawa, also, between francophone Quebec and anglophone Ontario.

As the seventh city built on the same site, New Delhi stood for the accomplishment of the grand imperial aims of the British. Hardly was it finished when its time was up. By becoming the capital of independent India, however, it ensures the transmission of the Imperial idea and of the efficiency of the English civil service.

Important strategic considerations led Ataturk to withdraw his headquarters to Ankara in the war against Greece. He then took up residence there since he wished to break away from the finished Ottoman past symbolized by Istanbul. He also wanted to reconstruct modern Turkey at the very source of her strength, on the Anatolian Plateau.

In the case of Brasilia, the movement is in an opposite direction to that of Peter the Great. It has more in common with Mustapha Kémal's aims: the idea being to abandon the window on the cosmopolitan coastal regions and turn towards the heart of the country.

This, then, is Brasilia's role: tropical man must filter, analyse, select, discriminate carefully, in order to avoid upsetting the fragile balance of biological coexistence in this over-heated environment. To avoid floods, epidemics and erosion, which can destroy everything in a moment, he has to isolate himself, protect himself, discard what is surplus. He must find a way of preventing the environment, super-charged with vital energy, from overwhelming and suffocating him. One might even go so far as to say that he must turn in on himself, become *interiorized*. This is the theoretical justification for Brasilia, according to the Brazilian essayist Miran Latif ("L'Homme et les Tropiques"). On the Central Plateau, in the isolation, tranquillity and silence of the new capital, protected by large glass windows, man will be able to contemplate the whole from a more congenial standpoint, in the best environmental conditions for its central planning. This is the necessary horizon, where one can remove oneself and observe the different "Brazils" (Jacques Lambert), integrating them into a single perspective, and welcoming what he can use from the United States and Europe in the form of ideas and techniques, discarding, shelving, what cannot be of immediate use. Its Cartesian capital

opens a new chapter in Brazil's history, that of its economic take-off. In any case, is it not shaped like an airplane, and does it not depend upon aviation for its contact with the outside world? It is the product of the intuition of the country's needs and of its future greatness—the symbol of the Pilot Plan is therefore a bird.

For the first time, Western man faces the virgin forest with a chance of success, and settles comfortably in its center. Brasilia in fact represents the first example of the establishment, right in the middle of the Tropics, of a multi-racial, industrial society, with a Western and Latin culture.

“The capital of hope,” as Malraux named it—*civitas ubi silva fuit*—from this central strategic point the development plan spreads across the country, and its whole energy is concentrated on the great task of building there a new power and a new civilization.