

A discussion on the craft of an imagined Brazilian cultural identity with the National Congress

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"Before becoming Brazilian, one must first become aware of the notion of something called Brazil" (Eakin, 2017). What better way to do if not with a new capital in the country's central hinterlands? Inaugurated in 1960, Brasília was built by President Juscelino Kubitschek as a nationalist monument to the grandiose ambitions of a developing nation, connoting a sort of promised land that had been part of the popular imagination for 150 years and promised an extraordinary future (Tauxe, 1996). Brasília can be seen as an attempt to unify a country regionally segregated under a forced civic nationalism disguised as a need to modernize; it is about an artificial (or Kubitschek-made) utopia, not the country's origins or people, as per Kubitschek's speech. "[Brasília] has already been pointed out as a powerful demonstration of our will to progress, as an index of the high degree of our civilization; greater dedication to work to the Motherland(...)" (Nunes Pinto, 2010). Criticism of the microcosm, however, is vast, as many have charged the city as artificial and unrealistic by sacrificing community intimacy in favor of the modernist monumentality present in architect Oscar Niemeyer's buildings, especially in the National Congress (Tauxe, 1996). Brasília and the National Congress are, then, the concrete construction (in a literal sense) of what Anderson (1983) would describe as an imagined community; national identities are assembled through symbols and rituals, and most of its members will never be in direct contact with one another and still feel a sense of, in this case, "Brazilianness".

Thus, this paper has two central claims. Sixty years later, Oscar Niemeyer's National Congress was unsuccessful in creating a monument authentically and identifiably Brazilian to foster national identity because it appeals to non-existing civic citizenship. On the other hand,

cultural nationalism and invented traditions are more successful in nation-building with the semiotics of soccer and Carnaval, even if they exclude subcultures and cultural groups.

The National Congress as a building

As it is possible to see in Figure 1 (see Appendix B), Brasilia is purposely designed as an airplane with a north and south wing (Mogilevich et al., 2014). Lúcio Costa recognized the need for strong national symbols and designed all civic buildings along a monumental axis; he positioned the National Congress at the end of the Ministry Esplanade and in between the Planalto Palace and the Supreme Court Palace, representing, respectively, the legislative, executive, and judiciary triumvirate (Macedo & da Silva, 2010). A simple look at the National Congress and the spectator sees two towers at first glance on top of a horizontal structure with a pair of dome-like cupolas, one facing upwards and the other downwards, giving the impression of being ahead of its time and conceived in the distant future (Hindalkar et al., 2021). Like most in the city, the building is made of mainly concrete and glass, highlighting an imagined future: glass represents clarity, simplicity, and transparency. Reinforced concrete, widely available in the country ("national material"), represents strength, order, and seriousness and required massive manual labor (Douglass-Jaimes, 2015).

As such, it is crucial to highlight the attempt to make use of "Brazilian nationalism," present in Oscar Niemeyer's sentiment of national pride: "I am a Brazilian before I am an architect. I cannot separate the two" (Hindalkar et al., 2021). For Tollerson (n.d.), the conscious decision to use Brazilian professionals (mainly from the Northeast) and materials was the government's effort to make the country a rising industrial power in the eyes of the international community.

An editorial article from 1960 compares Brasilia to other capital cities, such as Washington and Canberra, claiming it takes imagination to locate a new capital in the backcountry, reviving an old tradition(Saturday Evening Post, 1960).

However, juxtaposing the National Congress with other buildings in planned capital cities would be an unfair comparison since countries like Sri Lanka and Australia cannot provide insight into Brazilian-nation building. The following paragraphs explain how other rituals and symbols successfully bring the "Brazilian nation" together. Nevertheless, an understanding of Brazilian nationalism is in order.

Nationalism and cultural citizenship in nation-building

In an analysis of Italian nation-building, Forgacs & Lumley (1996) describe nationalism within four main elements: a narrative that tells the nation's stories and struggles; symbols, either official (i.e., flags) or unofficial (i.e., Pizza); geographical space (i.e., Landscapes); and against things (*We* versus *them*, against a common enemy). Nationalism is the political institution to create a nation (Eakin, 2017).

In "Becoming Brazilians: Race and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Brazil", Eakin (2017) claims that the State's most significant challenge in purposely constructing the Brazilian nation through myths, rituals, and symbols was geographical and technological, as it was impossible to reach different peoples of African, Native American, and European descent in enormous ill-defined political boundaries until the late 20th century. Nation-building in Brazil is fundamental in the quest for state-building. According to Geisler (2005), symbols are essential to creating and maintaining national identity but indispensable in fusing a *nation* to a *state*. However, a glance at Brazilian history is undeniable that for most of its course, Brazilians were excluded

from civic citizenship and full political participation (i.e., the presence of slavery for three centuries, the Declaration of Independence in 1822, and the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889) (Eakin, 2017). This explains why Brasília seems distant from the country's imagery, often associated with pettiness, corruption, and exclusions of politics (Eakin, 2017).

Both Eakin (2017) and Renato Ortiz (1995), the lack of conscious citizenship is due to the Brazilian's inability to create national civic myths encompassing different identities. On the other hand, popular culture offered an "unofficial citizenship" in which people confronted the negatives of politics with the positives of participation in popular culture, particularly with samba, Carnaval, and soccer (Eakin, 2017). As previously mentioned, the mission of nation-building in Brazil was a matter of technology and geography that only took place in the 20th century with the emergence of radio and samba (and even bossa nova) from the 1930s to the 1950s, initiating the first time (the illusion of) a shared national popular culture. Samba, Carnaval, and soccer are closely linked to, if not the personification of, Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) concept of invented traditions with the constant reinforcement of these semiotics by the government and the mass media (think about the stereotypes of Brazil). For this reason, Eakin (2017) argues that in Brazil, the creation of these imagined communities did not occur through print culture in the nineteenth century but through visual and aural cultures. "It is the rise of radio, film, and television that make possible the creation of a "community" of tens of millions of Brazilians and eventually allows them to "imagine" themselves as part of a Brazilian people and a Brazilian nation" (Eakin, 2017).

It is essential to analyze the semiotics of Carnaval and soccer's importance in the deliberate creation of a popular "Brazilian identity".

The "authentic tradition" of Carnaval and soccer

Carnaval and soccer have long been part of the global imagination of a peaceful, festive, and sensualized Brazil (Kath & Knijnik, 2015). Most, however, do not realize that Carnaval (samba) and soccer are, in fact, an invented tradition for their "formalization and ritualization characterized by reference to the past and imposed by repetition" as per Hobsbawm logic (Gerber & Kraut, 2005):

Carnaval

Carnaval was made into a tradition "authentically Brazilian" because the everyday life of the whole country, from schools to government offices, is suspended whether or not one chooses to actively participate in the celebrations, although soccer was invented in the United Kingdom (Kath & Knijnik, 2015). The insertion of this ritual as a tradition dates back to Getúlio Vargas's administration and his Department of Press and Propaganda (D.I.P), as well as the Ministry of Education, actively influencing "cultural values" by sponsoring, for example, the Brazilian theater, and appropriating of subaltern performance genres (i.e.samba) in his populist project of modernity (Putman, 1942; Pravaz, 2008). Carnaval was the perfect tool for nationalistic propaganda because it was present in Colonial Brazil and had the potential to unite an unequal multiethnic country, best described by Loewenstein (1942) as a national event in which "even the poorest save from their pittance in order to celebrate once a year in fitting carnival garb (Neves Silva, 2021). In terms of repetition, it is vital to highlight the consistency with which Carnaval was celebrated over the years, as it was never canceled, only postponed in 1892, 1912, and 2021 (Bittencourt, 2021).

Soccer

During the Vargas administration, soccer was made into a symbol of Brazilian nationalism to reaffirm "Brazilianness" (Prates Silva & Souza de Carvalho, 2016). It has been rumored that Vargas confessed that "the sporting passion has the miraculous power to unite even the far right and the far-left wing in politics" and intended to coordinate and discipline those forces that invigorate the unity of national consciousness" (Kittleson, 2014). Soccer offered Brazil an ideal of modern civilization in Europe, based on the symbolic equality between teams standing vis-à-vis other countries (Kittleson, 2014). Like carnival, soccer became "Brazilian" by being adopted with enormous enthusiasm as in a rhythmic dance similar to Carnaval and allowing miscegenation to impel the national soccer team and the nation itself to glory (Kittleson, 2014). The national soccer team, for example, is famous for its yellow "canary jersey", becoming one of the most famous symbols of the country (Football Museum, n.d.). Brazil has won the most World Cups, five in total, qualifying for every cup (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Conclusion

The popularity of other symbols, as opposed to Niemeyer's National Congress, could be explained by the different mediums and their abilities to induce a feeling of nationalism. The Congress is a building that represents politics and government in a utopian city out of touch with the country's people. Carnaval, soccer, and even colors are more successful as cultural nationalism and can even be considered "bread and circus". Independently on the reasons behind these discrepancies in popularity, it is undeniable that stereotypical Brazil is, perhaps, not untrue but simply incomplete. Limiting Brazil to soccer and samba is to fall into the trap of invented traditions and silence the stories of other lived experiences in the country. When we purposely choose to perpetuate these

stereotypes, we are doing a disservice to diversity and lowering our heads to the government's efforts to homogenize.

It is then possible to hypothesize that this significant shift in the Brazilian industry and cultural scenario with the construction of Brasília could have led to the 1964 coup d'état that installed a military dictatorship, as suggested by Ortiz (1995). Brasília was the metaphorical and literal precursor of Brazil's political, cultural, and economic reconstruction (Ortiz, 1995).

Word count: 1792

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Appendix A — LOs and HCs application

#ah112—communitiestheories — As the main LO for this assignment, this paper includes all aspects we touched on in class, being them imagined communities, invented traditions, authenticity, and even exclusionary communities (personal example). I opted to juxtapose the main artwork — the National Congress — with other nationalistic tools to make the discrepancy between both mediums greater. Due to the word count, I had to remove the section on the national colors. I also discussed how most people are unaware of the true origins of the blue, green, and yellow in the flag.

#ss112—constructivism— Although I did not directly apply this LO in this assignment, studying nationalism and national identity in SS112 motivated me to understand how arts and culture shape a nation. Because nations are imagined, there is room for institutions to deliberately shape them to their wish. In this case, ideas and identities construct a nation.

#context—The application of this HC was broader, as all sections had simple paragraphs contextualizing the main arguments. For this reason, I included an explanation of the difference between cultural and civic nationalism, explaining why cultural citizenship became more prominent in the 20th century. There are also explanations on the National Congress and the 1930s under Vargas.

#sourcequality—This paper contains two primary sources — Kubitscheck's speech and an editorial from 1960—, both primary sources. This was a deliberate choice because it complements my application of #context by adding more nuance to the arguments and showing how people at the time understood the events we now call history.

Appendix B — Images for reference



Figure 1. View of Brasília from above.



Figure 2. Visit to National Congress in Brasilia for the first location-based assignment.