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Joel Outtes of Oriel College, University of Oxford has written a pathbreaking study on the origins of modern urban planning for the city of Recife in Brazil, capital of Pernambuco state and unofficial capital of the Northeast region of that country, from the waning days of the Old Republic (1889-1930) until the apogee of Getulio Vargas’s populist dictatorship (1930-1945). Exhaustively researched, utilizing private papers, newspaper files, and interviews this book deserves to join the ranks of a growing body of literature on the politics of citizenship and the housing question in Brazil; most of which, however, predictably concentrates on Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and links urban history to greater trends such as the modernization of the Brazilian economy.[1] Outtes eschews metanarratives of this sort and modestly asserts that his only aim is to “rescue the proposals for physical-spatial organization of the city.”[2] In truth, his study does much more than this; it casts new light on the modernist movement dominant in Brazilian arts and letters during this period by focusing on architecture—a topic usually ignored by cultural historians. The book also provides the first-ever examination of the historical formation of Brazilian urbanism; the creation of university courses, survey teams, and publicity apparati that solidified a heretofore eclectic band of architects and engineers into a professional elite. But this volume in is some ways surprisingly traditional; a history written from the top-down that makes only passing references to race and gender in the creation of urban space and the efforts of the poor and working classes to resist elite schemes of urban reform. As such, it runs directly counter to the prevailing trend in Latin American urban studies, which records how the subaltern utilized popular notions of social class, ethnic, and gender solidarity to leave their own imprint on the development of modern cities.[3]

The first chapter, "City and Health: The Metaphor of the Body and Recife" draws inspiration from Michel Foucault in tracing the evolution of a “hygienist discourse” in Recife, which branded the working-class quarters as sick, dirty and dangerous, from the Seventeenth century, when the Northeast was the fulcrum of Portuguese power in Brazil and surveys of urban problems were entrusted to physicians, until the 1920s when full-scale plans for urban reform drafted by architects and engineers were proposed to the city council. As a port city, sometimes referred to as the "Venice of Brazil" because of its many bridges and canals, Recife was particularly susceptible to cholera, tuberculosis and Yellow Fever. Whence did such terrifying diseases originate? The colonial authorities hired medical experts to inspect the city to buttress their claim that particular locations—cemeteries, stockyards, factories—posed a natural and social threat to public safety and thus had to be regulated by ordinance. City fa-
thers exploited the legitimacy conferred upon the medical establishment by popular tradition and the power of the Portuguese state to expand the means of vigilance over the majority of the population which was labeled “unfortunate” i.e., not rich, white, and European. But although Outtes bravely utilizes the new cultural history to illuminate this period, he doesn’t delve far enough into the complexities of manufacturing a hegemonic discourse in a multi-racial patriarchal society. Slave owners are mentioned in passing but never the slaves themselves. What was the racial composition of Recife during the colonial period and the Brazilian empire (1822-1889) and how did this fact enter into the plans for cleaning up the city? As the author himself notes urbanization became part of the national campaign for eugenics in late Nineteenth-century Brazil; for those who wielded power the city constituted a "sick organism" and the sanitarista, whom the author defines as a public figure somewhere between the physician and the engineer, was entrusted to identify and then demolish unsanitary constructions, like a surgeon ordered to severe malignant portions of the body. In the case of Recife this injunction was aimed at the mocambos, shantytowns mostly occupied by the Afro-Brazilian poor. Yet the book gives no clear idea of the ways race was configured by the white elites at this time, and how this led them to select certain parts of Recife for destruction. Women are hardly mentioned in the text, which is perplexing. If the city was imagined as a "body", then why not elaborate on the Brazilian understanding of gender? Was Recife thought to be maternal or paternal? The reader is advised to consult Nancy Stepan’s "The Hour Of Eugenics”: Race, Gender and Nation in Latin America for a fuller treatment that complements Outtes’s cursory explanation.[4]

In the remaining four chapters Outtes abandons the discussion of "imagined spaces" and "body politics" in favor of a straightforward account of the emergence of the Recife urbanista, or professional urban planner. Plans for urban reform after 1927 focused on the proletarian neighborhood of Santo Antônio, where slums were to be razed and avenues and other arteries paved over to end traffic congestion problems and make possible the full transition from bonde (streetcar) to automobile transportation. Once the job was finished, construction companies would begin building new port, railroad, educational, and cultural facilities in the same area. This was not done out of concern with public comfort but rather resulted from the decline and fall of the Old Republic dominated by agro-export oligarchs and the concurrent rise of an industrial bourgeoisie in Recife allied to the new Vargas regime after 1930. Removing the geographical obstacles to capital accumulation became the watchword in urban planning. City commissioners entered into “sweetheart” arrangements with private companies by doling out concessions for building projects in return for payoffs. But these plans failed to pass muster with the city council, in part because of savage denunciation in the press but also because politics in Recife became embroiled with the much larger schemes of Vargas to restructure federal government finances in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Once the central government refused to bail out the city, which had lost considerable sums of money in trying to eradicate Santo Antônio, urban planning in Recife collapsed into competing fiefdoms of engineers and architects all vying for the approval of the city fathers. Out of this warfare, Outtes suggests, was born the ethos of modern Brazilian urbanism: an omniscient view of the city where all aspects of urban living, from sanitation to aesthetics, are fit for regulation; an abstract vision of the role of the urban planner—he works within paradigms, not from a detailed survey of actual conditions; the city is perceived as a "factory" rather than a body—it has distinct zones that must either be preserved, renovated, or destroyed; and speed is the essential quality that distinguishes urban areas from suburbs and the rural periphery-everything in the urban landscape must move fast or assist in the
process. Outtes notes perceptively but with sadness that this is an inherently anti-democratic approach to designing city life; since the working classes are deemed obstacles to urban reform their fate must be left in the hands of "experts" who need not consult the intended victims. In this regard, a useful comparison for American urban historians to Outtes's study is Robert Caro's masterly biography of Robert Moses; that titan too idolized the motor vehicle and believed that urbanization should promote greater spatial segregation so that rich and poor, black and white, came together as infrequently as possible in the public arena.[5]

Vargas's coup d'état of 1937, when he proclaimed the authoritarian Estado Novo (New State) modeled on Mussolini's Italy and Salazar's Portugal proved to be the turning point in the urban reform of Recife. The dictator commanded city officials to accelerate demolition in Santo Antônio so as to make way for office buildings to house an expanded government bureaucracy and construct monuments to the Getulista regime. Interestingly, Outtes notes that in calling for the physical removal of the last remaining tenements from the neighborhood municipal authorities resorted to an anti-capitalist harangue that blasted the owners as "capitalists", "usurers", and "enemies of the people."[6] I should have liked Outtes to give a fuller account of the politics of urban poverty, slum clearance and the explosion of squatter settlements during the Vargas years, because evidence from elsewhere in Brazil suggests that demolition was not the only option pursued by the dictatorship in dealing with this problem. In Rio de Janeiro mayor Pedro Ernesto (1931-1936) persuaded the president to cancel the urban plan (Plano Agache) that called for the destruction of the slums that housed thousands of poor people, arguing that this would only create more favelas (shantytowns). Likewise he urged Vargas to treat the favelados (squatters) as outcasts who should be reintegrated with the city through education, health programs and social assistance in return for granting their political loyalty to Getúlio.[7]

What does "success" mean when it comes to designing urban space? Outtes calls on planners to act less like aesthetes and more like historians and sociologists. Knowing the economic and social heritage of the city is de rigueur, otherwise the inhabitants will be treated as expendable. Taking into consideration the economic and social consequences of demolition and relocation is more important than relying faithfully on a paradigm of urbanism that has little to do with local reality. A humanitarian urban policy requires that housing, and not the beautification of the city (and the glorification of the elites) gets top priority. His views coincide neatly with urbanologists from the Third World who challenge the condescending belief that only professionals are capable of dealing with the problems of the uneducated and underprivileged.[8]

Students of Getulista Brazil will want this book, especially those who wish to further their understanding of urban history beyond Rio and São Paulo. The detailed maps and nostalgic photographs of the vanished neighborhood of Santo Antônio, painstakingly recovered by the author, are especially admirable.

Notes


[6]. Outtes, 192.


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