Battles, But Were They Really Wars?

This is a good book about an interesting but neglected topic: the cultural history of Brazil as seen through events of this fifteen year period of Getulio Vargas’s rule in Brazil. There are, of course, numerous studies of the era and of Vargas. But none of them, to my knowledge, provide us with exactly this view of the man and his era. Indeed, it is a real strength of the book that one finishes it with a new and different understanding of a topic most of us probably think we understand quite well.

Two main themes dominate the study. The first is the construction and expansion of central state power via the practice of what one might call "cultural politics." Specifically, the book examines the material construction and expansion of state power by looking at the creation of new state bureaucracies and institutions devoted to cultural production and memory. It also examines the ideological content of this construction by focusing on the disputes between traditionalists and modernists, as both fought for the primacy of their vision for Brazil (hence the term "culture wars"). The account of this struggle over "Brazilianess" (or what Williams calls "brasilidade") leads Williams to his second point: that the process was one of exclusion, as the model for Brazilianess largely ignored indigenous and African contributions to the culture and history of the country.

The material expansion of state power via cultural politics, Williams notes, revolved around Vargas’s creation of bureaucracies such as the National Historical and Artistic Patrimony Service (the SPHAN, created in 1937). Via this agency the federal government solidified its right to condemn private properties in the name of guarding historical memory. The Vargas administration greatly expanded the National Historical Museum, and created the Imperial Museum in Petropolis, and the Monument to the Inconfidencia Mineira, among others. The emphasis on technical expertise, and on the professionalization of museum curators and workers, accompanied and reinforced the bureaucratic centralization of Brazil under Vargas, so that "it is clear that the Vargas era, and most especially the Estado Novo,
stood for a time and place in which the federal government established itself as a center of cultural authority” (p. 259).

The most interesting sections of *Culture Wars* examine the ideological content of this state-sponsored cultural production. Inside the museums and state agencies supporters and critics fought for the primacy of their visions of Brazil. On the one hand traditionalists sought to build buildings, restore buildings, and display works of art that harkened back to Brazil's colonial past and its Luso-Catholic and European heritage. On the other hand emerging young professionals such as Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, and the powerful head of the Education and Health Ministry, Gustavo Capanema, sought to attach brasilidade to modernism, science, and technology. As a result the Vargas government created the Ouro Preto historical district to preserve the remnants of a prosperous colonial past, but included in the middle of that district a new hotel of a decidedly modernist design by Niemeyer, and the modernist Inconfidência monument designed by Costa. In 1937 the Brazilian government proudly exhibited its modernist credentials by building a stunning pavilion designed by Costa and Niemeyer for the New York World's Fair. And yet, in 1940 the government’s contributions to Portugal’s Exposicaco do Mundo Portugues were a pavilion and exhibits of a more conservative nature.

William’s study soars when he examines a key component of the traditionalist-modernist split: the place and role of whites, elites, non-whites and the poor in the developing official history, memory, and culture of Brazil. In a groundbreaking section he reviews a largely forgotten 1940 exhibit of Jean-Batiste Debret's watercolors of Brazil, which were painted between 1816 and 1836. Few people attended the 1940 show, Williams asserts, because everyday scenes of the cruel treatment of slaves “were simply too raw in an era in which the state was promoting strong, confident, and unified visions of Brazil’s past, present, and future” (p. 175). Exhibits at the National History Museum presented a past that “was wealthier, nobler, whiter and more stable than the citizens of Brazil could actually remember” (p. 136). The museum’s emphasis on durable objects, Williams continues, meant that slaves and the poor were ignored, so that the “saudades invoked by the MHN were, at their core, longings for a seigniorial, aristocratic, and bellicose society that lived in the light of God and glory” (p. 146). In contrast, official cultural presentations such as the New York World's Fair pavilion and other exhibits included works by artists such as Candido Portinari, whose murals and paintings focused on, and celebrated, the poor, the nonwhite, the downtrodden and forgotten, and in so doing generated opposition from traditionalists at home who resented such an ignoble representation of their nation abroad.

This very strength of the book, however, points out the one real flaw in the study, which is the author's failure to capture the emotions, energy, heat, and drama of these cultural battles. For a book with the phrase “culture wars” in its title, there is precious little in the way of the charged encounters one would expect in a war. Indeed, the actual language of these disputes, oddly enough, is usually absent. And, when we do hear from participants it is usually from the official side, accompanied by generalizations such as "modernists argued " or "conservatives asserted." An exception is the author’s study of the controversy surrounding Portinari’s work in New York City. But here he focuses far more on what U.S. critics had to say than on what Brazilians thought.

This impressively researched study is filled with important and learned observations about an era when the “national and cultural canon and the institutions that managed it continued to blur the line between cultural and political power” (p. 260). It is a model for how to organize a complex argument clearly and effectively. Chapter introductions are helpful, clearly written statements of
contents and assertions. For a book with such a dramatic title and illustrations, however, this is not an especially exciting study, and the wars certainly seem more like skirmishes. Nevertheless, Daryle Williams has succeeded in writing a book that any of us would have been proud to write, and it will become mandatory reading for future generations of Brazilianists.

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