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*Culture and Politics: The Relationship between  
the Modernist Intellectuals and the Brazilian State (1920–1950)* \*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to comprehend the existent connections between culture and politics in the development of modern nation-states. My reflection is based on a long-term analysis of the relations between intellectuals and political elites during the period of state building and nation building in Brazil (1822–1970). In this article, I intend to analyze specifically the period from 1920 to 1950, trying to understand the significance of the Brazilian intellectual movement designated as modernism and its influences over the cultural and political scenario. My hypothesis is that the cultural ideals of the modernist intellectuals were directly linked to political issues of state-building. I also examine the case of the Brazilian modernist architecture and its relations with the Brazilian state, uncovering how the artistic utopia of this architecture was part of a political and social agenda.

**KEY WORDS** Brazil; Culture; Politics; Modernist Intellectuals

This paper is based on research that I've been developing as an attempt to comprehend the existent connections between knowledge and power in the development of modern societies. More specifically, I'm trying to understand the relationship between culture and politics during the formation of nation-states. I'm doing this by engaging in a long-term analysis of the homologies that can be found between intellectuals and political elites during the period of state-building and nation-building in Brazil (1822–1970).

In this article, I analyze the period from 1920 to 1950, when the development of Brazil as a modern society became profound, radical, and far-reaching. In this precise

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moment, Brazil started to configure itself as an urban, industrial, and capitalist country as well as a modern, rational, and bureaucratic state.

During the twenties, the aesthetic, cultural, political, and social perspectives of the Brazilian intellectual movement, designated “modernism,” had great influence over the cultural and political scene. This movement contributed to building a new political culture and a new ideology which in turn influenced the process of consolidation and strengthening of the Brazilian state during the thirties and forties. I focus especially on its ideals of modernization and development of Brazil as a modern nation, ideals that somehow matched the perspectives of some political elites.

In a second moment, I examine the case of Brazilian modernist architecture and its relations with those same political elites. The analysis of a series of connections between the modernist architects and important politicians, as well as the connections between their beliefs and ideologies, revealed a historical and cultural arrangement that allowed me to understand how art, culture, and politics got connected during the period of state-building and nation-building in Brazil. I believe that these relations are very interesting to comprehend the symbiosis existent between knowledge and power in modern societies.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: KNOWLEDGE AND POWER**

The sociological issue of this work is about the processes whereby some particular worldviews get connected to specific balances of power, building a sort of “hegemonic social cosmology,” which in its turn naturalizes the balances of power that are in its origin. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues that we’re dealing with processes whereby the symbolic power of a specific group is enshrined as the socially recognized power.

Thereupon, I’m attempting to analyze the connections existing between the institutional arrangements of production and distribution of knowledge and the balances of power, focusing on the modes that knowledge, which is socially built and distributed, incorporates and legitimizes particular beliefs, ideals, interests, and feelings of specific social groups over the beliefs, ideals, interests, and feelings of many others.

In my analysis, I have drawn significant contributions from Michel Foucault (2010), Norbert Elias (1982), and Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Most important about Elias and Bourdieu’s argument is the manner in which they demonstrate the mutual influence between social structures and individual agencies, focusing on the centrality of the modes of knowledge socially available in the processes of structuration of social action and relations.

Insofar as individual psychic structures are constituted by the means of knowledge, which are conditioned by social structure, they are set up as instances of self-regulation that operate informed by social memory and past. Consequently, these psychic structures get a continuity and predictability that goes in the direction of “normal” or “medium” behavior, which in turn, improves the stability and maintenance of social structure.

This whole process is a two-way road in which the construction of personality through social learning sets in motion practices that tend to reaffirm the social structure that is in its principle (Elias, 1982).

The social knowledge is responsible for the standardization of the affections and instincts, building the behavior as habit. The regulation of the passions through the means of knowledge is the condition of the social security and also of the building and consolidation of social formations.

Thus, the social formations are constituted also as systems of physical protection and material reproduction, but, above all, as symbolic totalities grounded on shared stocks of meanings and knowledge inherited by individuals.

This symbolic totality isn't founded by a pure or a priori communion of the spirits, however: The social units are produced through the prevalence of a common view of social world, through specific classificatory schemes that are disseminated, creating the sense and the consensus on the identity and unity of the group. That is, shared knowledge and social consensus are supported by a logical conformism that is socially obtained (imposed from the past and history of social structure) and that is the foundation of the representations and identities that bring social groups to existence (Bourdieu 1984; Foucault 2010).

Historically, in the past four centuries, the national states appeared as the main social units. There was a process of accumulation of all kinds of capital (economic, cultural, political, social, and symbolic) at this same institution, giving it a strong priority on the maintenance of social formations.

In regarding our theoretical framework, it's very important to understand the state as a priority unit not only from the standpoint of the material and physical maintenance (considering its fiscal and administrative capacity, the control over armies, and so on). As Bourdieu (1984) said, the state is not only a technical and administrative apparatus; above all, it's a source that signals and enforces legitimate meanings and values; a discursive and symbolic structure that establishes the patterns of meanings and values and, in so doing, establishes also a normative axis that shifts the probabilities of the social actions and relations in a given and proper course.

About this symbolic aspect of state domination, Elias (1982) puts the importance of nation and nationalism as a set of social beliefs that are linked with feelings of collective belonging, ancestry, obedience, and loyalty that ground and justify the political command and social control by the state.

"Nations" must be understood as narratives, symbolic structures that combine tradition and identity to establish the unity of modern states. The most important thing is to think about the nation and nationalism as a form of social comprehension, which defines the ways of interpretation and communication between individuals who, through those ways, end up being and creating a group; principles of vision and classification that produce concepts, categories, and classes, which, in their turn create and give life to social groups.

The nation declares the state as the main unit of collective belonging and social existence. It translates an ocean of collective identities and self-images related to those populations living in clans, tribes, and villages into a unique identity, the national identity; thus, the nation functions as a symbolic filter.

My hypothesis is that precisely in this process of historical setting of the nation as a filter, the development of an autonomous cultural field got connected with the process of consolidation of the national states. The consolidation of culture as an autonomous and increasingly developed sphere of production of symbolic goods was extremely significant to the processes of linguistic and cultural unification within the national territories (Bauman 1989).

It occurred mostly through the spread of a standardized language during the development of the publishing markets (Anderson 2006) and, especially, through the set of classificatory frames that were disseminated by schools and universities under the direct or indirect rule of the nation-states (Wacquant 2005).

From my point of view, the cultural field contributed in many ways to the integration of heterogeneous elements to the national collectivity, revealing itself as a significant mechanism whereby different populations and ways of life were melded in one unique symbolic totality, the state, although the culture that unifies also divides, because it dissimulates relations of power into relations of meaning and communication, legitimizing a social order that is always marked by an unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources. A series of homologies were therefore established between intellectual and political-economic elites within the historical interdependences that we can call “power fields” (Bourdieu 1990).

### **INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICIANS IN BRAZIL (1920–1945)**

From now on, I'll take into consideration the historical development of the homology relations between political and intellectual elites in Brazil from 1920 until the last years of the forties.

Initially, it's important to say that the beginning of the twentieth century was a significant period of transition in Brazil. Deep transformations that had been happening in a subtle way within all spheres of the society were revealed and then became increasingly powerful, generating a set of large changes in the economy, politics, and culture. The most significant process in this case was the increasing urbanization and industrialization. With the changes that occurred in that period, a symbolic clash gained force: a clash between a rural, traditional, archaic Brazil and a modern, industrial, urban Brazil. Within this clash, a strong feeling of unbelief and opposition towards both the agrarian oligarchy and its republican liberalism could be found in many important sectors of that society.

These opposition tendencies gained a large expression within the cultural and intellectual field, especially within the group known as the modernist movement. Inspired by the European surrealist and futurist avant-garde, these intellectuals believed that the

project of rupture with the dominant aesthetic languages was connected to a project of political and social transformation.

In this period, big changes occurred in the ways of thinking about Brazilian history and society. A new generation of interpreters, who were unsatisfied with the problems of the republic, started to see themselves as the group whose objective was the creation of a necessary theoretical, aesthetic, and cultural grounding for the constitution of Brazil as a modern nation-state.

Because they had the theoretical and aesthetic tools necessary for the revealing of cultural expressions, for the discovering of thoughts and feelings of Brazilian people, the modernist intellectuals believed that they had a national vocation. This generation saw themselves as the group responsible for the discovery and study of the foundations of Brazilian nationality. They were the only group able to apprehend the signals from this asleep nation and thus the only ones able to contribute to the awakening of Brazil as an independent and autonomous nation-state.

There is no doubt that the modernist movement was responsible for the rise of a new kind of national spirit. The modernists sought an original style of artistic expression. They were trying to create some Brazilian artistic styles and cultural themes, a specific and original literature, music, painting, a sort of art deeply national.

These intellectuals put together the elements of popular culture to contribute to the construction of the Brazilian cultural basis. Their task was to gather an ocean of cultural events and expressions around a unique cultural expression and identity: the national one. In this sense, one can say that the modernist generation of the twenties was deeply involved with the mission of revealing the Brazilian nation.

It's really important to take into consideration that the movement of cultural expression had always been linked to a political subject. Its main task was to beat the fragmentary and corrosive aspects of the early republic, contributing to the rise of a Brazilian nation with its own identity and unity. Thus, in the speech and texts of those thinkers, the intellectual mission was directly linked to the need and will for constructing a centralized and strong state—a nation-state that would be able to drive the process of constraint and civilization of the peoples living in the national territory, an institution responsible for the political unification of the society.

By this political and intellectual activism, the modernist group affected the social and political imagery of that period. Mainly, they were very influent in the discussion about the means that were necessary for the formation of Brazil as a politically organized society and, above all, for the formation of Brazil as a modern nation. Their ideas were widely spread through the developing publishing market and some other cultural and artistic organizations and groups.

Progressively, a structural and ideological connection was made between those intellectuals and the political and military elites who were contesting the dominance of the oligarchical government. These political and military elites also defended the idea

that the modernization of the country should be driven through a nationalist project made by a powerful and centralized government.

Years later, during the thirties, these opposite military and political elites gave a coup d'état and took power. It was precisely because of those connections that the modernist formulations and also part of those intellectuals themselves were incorporated to the cultural policy of the new government. This government proposed a much bigger policy of cultural mobilization than a political one and recognized the significance of the intellectuals in the mission on the constitution of the national sense, and also in the configuration of the cultural unity that would legitimize the actions of an increasingly strong state. Great exponents of Brazilian modernism were directly involved with the new government.

From that moment, through the thirties and forties, a strong connection between modernism and Brazilian state took place—a connection based on the nationalizing and modernizing impetus of these groups, groups that started to plan and build a new “national project”—a project that elected modern ideals, scientific discourse, and rational and civilized conduct, allied with the original aspects of Brazilian culture as the major symbolic and normative criteria that shaped an entire cognitive and moral horizon.

This social and historical arrangement constituted the ideas of Brazil, Brazilianness, nation, people, modernity, and progress. These same ideas would fill the social imagination through the years.

I believe that the whole process under study was related to the reconfiguration of what I call “the power space” of Brazil, a power space that was becoming gradually more centered through the historical alliance between culture and politics—power spaces whose cognitive and affective frames were completely marked by the presence of faith in modernization as the goal of History, the fate of all great nations and where Brazil should be, after constituting its political and cultural unity.

### **MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE AND THE BRAZILIAN STATE (1920–1950)**

Holding the historical analysis necessary to understand the relationship between intellectuals and political elites in Brazil during the first half of the twentieth century, I intend to develop some observations about my case study in the next pages: the relationship between modernist architecture and the Brazilian state.

As I said, the analysis of these relations allowed me to acquire a deeper understanding of the processes whereby art, culture, and politics got connected during the formation of the Brazilian nation-state. This case study gave me a lot of elements with which to develop a discussion even more rich and profound about the close relationship between knowledge and power present within the processes of social coordination, elements to build a reflection on the role of culture in the foundation of social hegemony.

Despite the importance of private patronage for the avant-garde architecture during the first two decades of the twentieth century in Brazil, the development of

Brazilian architecture, especially the modernist, was deeply dependent on the protection and funding granted by the state from 1920 to 1980. The Brazilian state was responsible for the major orders and architectural projects throughout the last century. The triumph of the modernist architecture through the first half of the twentieth century depended directly on successful negotiation with the state administration.

The predominance of state patronage reveals the fact that this new architecture somehow matched the needs and interests of the political elites, serving as a symbol of a new order, publicizing their political achievements. Furthermore, this architecture was used as a sort of tool in the building and acclamation of the national culture.

As suggested by Underwood (1994), throughout the twentieth century, a “modern-traditional ritual” was performed in Brazil on some occasions—a modern-traditional ritual of political, cultural, and artistic collaboration in which certain groups tried to change history, to solve the dilemmas of Brazil through the realization of architectural projects.

Throughout the twenties, the pioneers of modernist architecture appeared in Brazil. The first architect to introduce the ideals and forms of European modern architecture in Brazil was Gregori Warchavchik. Warchavchik projected some buildings in Sao Paulo funded by private patronage, developing a typically modern perspective while using the principles of modern industry and criticizing traditional forms.

In 1929, the French architect Le Corbusier visited South America for the first time. The architect and city planner came to Brazil and gave some lectures that had a radical effect on students and architects. During the thirties, through the action of Brazilian architects such as Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, the new functionalist architecture of Le Corbusier became the main reference of the European vanguard in Brazilian architecture.

During the twenties, Lúcio Costa was already recognized as a prominent architect, but the projects and essays of this architect attracted the attention of important politicians precisely when he started to argue about the importance of reinventing Brazilian architecture through the combination of traditional and local elements with modern and international tendencies.

Because of an essay published in a newspaper in 1929, Lúcio Costa sparked the interest of members of the Ministry of Education of the government of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945) some years later. The architect was named to head the National School of Fine Arts. The experience lasted just a few months, but the partnership with the ministry had just begun.

Five years later, Costa was invited to design the new building of the Ministry of Education. The events involving the design and construction of the building were absolutely significant for Costa’s career. Because of these events, he became the most successful member of the Brazilian architectural field. Costa started to play a central role in the architects’ community, in the modernist movement, and in the relationship between architects and the Brazilian government.

One of the most interesting of Costa's moves was the insistent and successful attempt to bring Le Corbusier to collaborate with the project. Costa was able to convince the president (Getulio Vargas) that funding the visit and collaboration of the French architect was a matter of life and death for the project. The visit of Le Corbusier was extremely important, as it consolidated the influence of modernist architecture in the Brazilian cultural field, and it was recognized as a personal achievement, a contribution from Costa to Brazilian architecture.

Another interesting happening that occurred in that moment was the discovery of the brilliant talent of Oscar Niemeyer, probably one of the most famous architects in the twentieth century. Until that moment, Niemeyer had been just a young architect working at Costa's office. From some sketches made by Niemeyer for the new building, Costa saw the incredible potential of the young architect. This time, the contribution from Costa was significant not only to Brazil but also to the world's architecture.

Pereira (1997) argues that throughout the thirties and forties, Lúcio Costa achieved an important position as a political mediator, playing a central role as the arbiter of the Brazilian community of architects.

The success of Brazilian modernist architecture, both within and without the country, led Costa to build an increasingly nationalistic discourse. His discourse proclaimed that the success of "our architecture" was the consequence of the efforts and brilliance of the Brazilian people, the proof that Brazil was a strong, independent, and original nation. This kind of discourse and perspective was the meeting point between the modernist architecture and the political elites—elites who supported and funded this architecture while they were within the state.

Discovered and disclosed by Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer was the greatest Brazilian architect and one of the most famous architects of the twentieth century. During the thirties and forties, the attempt of Oscar Niemeyer to develop an innovative architecture with its own original vocabulary of forms is remarkable. The architect followed the propositions of renovation from Costa in a radical way, trying to combine European principles of rationalism and functionalism with the sensitivity of Brazilian colonial styles into a new architectural proposal.

In 1942, Juscelino Kubitschek, the mayor of one of the most important cities in Brazil (Belo Horizonte), asked Niemeyer to design the project for a new leisure area where he would build a casino, a night club, and a clubhouse. The project developed by Niemeyer had immediate and extensive repercussions. The intensive use of curved lines was recognized as a sign of freedom from the influence of Le Corbusier and the orthogonal architecture of European modernism. Niemeyer admitted in his book, *My Architecture* (2000), that this project (Pampulha's Complex) began to set the vocabulary of his original architecture.

The literature about modern architecture considers Pampulha's Complex a unique mark for Brazilian culture and for international architecture insofar as its original design

reveals a new perspective, a new architectural vocabulary independent of the architecture that had been developed by the European vanguards.

The architect wanted to replace the European functionalist aesthetic (from Gropius to Le Corbusier), which sober and linear tendencies were based on the image of a standardized industrial machine. Niemeyer proclaimed his new aesthetic based on only one rule: "Forms must seek beauty." The new aesthetic should be based on the geography of Brazil, on the beauty of Brazilian women, on the Brazilian curves. The creation of a Brazilian art should begin with the Brazilian habitat (Underwood 1994). For him, the creation of a social architecture (as the Bauhaus) in Brazil would be the abdication from what is most original in Brazilian culture, in Brazilian architecture: the creative force.

The celebration of Niemeyer's "free modernism" within the national and international artistic community yielded a significant amount of symbolic, cultural, and political capital to the architect. In 1956, the same mayor who had asked Niemeyer to project the Pampulha complex was elected president of Brazil and this time asked Niemeyer to project the new capital of Brazil, Brasilia. At this moment, Oscar Niemeyer already had a collection of 38 projects built: residences, hotels, clubs, schools, libraries, theaters, and he had already designed important constructions abroad, such as the Museum of Caracas and the most impressive achievement: the United Nations headquarters in New York.

It's easy to notice that the development of Niemeyer's architecture was totally supported by state patronage. This relationship between architecture and politics was a profound dilemma for Niemeyer, who used to be a left-wing intellectual.

According to Pereira (1997), an intensification of the nationalistic discourse upon Brazilian modernist architecture occurred. The success of the projects of Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer was frequently defended by the intellectual community and especially by politicians through an excessively patriotic discourse.

By the analysis of the architectural modernist movement in Brazil, we noticed that architecture followed the same path of the other arts of the Brazilian modernist movement. These architects and intellectuals named themselves as the representatives of the people and the nation. They performed the task of nation building through their artistic vocation—the vocation that enabled them to reveal the essential elements of tradition and national spirit, defining the unit of the original Brazilian culture.

Somehow, the political and national vocation of these intellectuals was connected to their ambiguous and intense relationship with the state and the political groups that were within the government. Frequently, this relationship culminated in the insertion of part of those intellectuals into government institutions.

Brazilian modernist architecture tried to break the legacy of international domination over the politics and culture of their country. They created new perspectives and contributions that would reveal the brilliance of Brazilian culture and prove that the country was running fast over the paths of progress.

When the Luso-Brazilian overlords of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought in French specialists like Grandjean de Montigny, Alfred Agache, and Le Corbusier to civilize Rio de Janeiro by modernizing its architecture, they were in effect trying to finish an old colonial job with new rhetoric and tools. Brazil became the laboratory for the civilizing ideals of the apostles of progress, and then an experimental field in which to prove that architecture could spawn a modernist utopia all too ill-defined, even to those who envisioned it. Niemeyer, in attempting to define this utopia in more Brazilian and aesthetic terms, has had to come to terms with the positivism, Eurocentric, and imperialist underpinning of modernism and especially with his personal distaste for what he calls “rational architecture”. For him, Brazil’s artistic identity is synonymous with rejecting a European tendency that has nonetheless laid the foundation for his own structural and spatial conquests in reinforced concrete.” (Underwood 1994:19)

During the twentieth century, the political elites used architecture and urbanism as strategic tools to modernize and civilize Brazil. They were searching for an art able to disseminate specific values and ideals, an art able to influence the manners of thinking and acting. The construction of a new image of Brazil, an image of an original nation, was the consolidation of a political and social agenda.

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