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Líneas temáticas:

1. Imaginarios de la naturaleza y de los sistemas socioambientales en la historia
2. Tropicalidad, fronteras internas y externas en la historia
3. Ecología política y conflictos socioambientales en perspectiva histórica

Brasília and the Conquest of Nature

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were a series of proposals to transfer the national capital of Brazil from Rio de Janeiro to the interior of the country. While the specifics of the plans varied, they shared a common motive to shift the nation's focus away from the coast and toward its vast inland expanse. Those proposals were part of a larger process of economic development of the interior that took shape in the 1930s during the Vargas era and has continued with relative continuity until the present.

Brasília is located within the Cerrado ecosystem in the Center-West of Brazil, a high plain, tropical savanna biome that occupies much of the central part of the country. Since construction of Brasília began in 1956, the region has seen significant population growth and economic development, most notably in cattle and soybeans. As a result, the Cerrado has experienced significant environmental degradation. While Amazonia lies several hundred kilometers from Brasília, the desire to develop that region was part of the justification to transfer the capital. Proponents of the proposal, in fact, argued that Brasília would be a “trampoline for the conquest of the Amazon”. To that end, concurrent with the construction of Brasília, work began on the first major highway into Amazonia, the Belém-Brasília.

This paper seeks to understand the idea of nature inherent in the project of building an inland capital for Brazil from early proposals in the nineteenth century through the construction of Brasília in the late 1950s. It looks at the proposals, plans, and studies produced by proponents of building a new capital and analyzes newspaper and other media coverage of those proposals and the discussions and debates of proponents and opponents. The paper engages with the relevant secondary literature in Brazilian political, economic, and environmental history.

The definition of an advanced nation was in the eyes of mid-century developmentalists, one that had conquered and disciplined its natural environment. Authors and supporters of the plan to interiorize the national capital tended to emphasize economic development and national integration as its principal rationales. In their justifications, they depicted the nation's interior as an empty space, full of potential but bereft of people. They suggested that the key to national development lay in populating that space and tapping its vast resources. The transfer of the federal government, they argued, would shift policymakers' attention toward the interior and spark the creation of infrastructure that would in turn facilitate human migration and economic activity. Thus the project of Brasília depended on a conception of nature, wherein its value depended on its exploitation and transformation (or perhaps destruction). Nature without human presence was, from this perspective, presented even a danger to national security because unexploited land presented an invitation for other countries to take advantage. Moreover, undeveloped natural environment represented a lack of national development.