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*Scattering Seeds and Laying Bricks in a Lettered Land: Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Angel Rama and the Latin American City*

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### Introduction

Images emanating from 21<sup>st</sup> century Latin American metropolises seem all too similar and familiar. The media reports of escalating violence between drug lords and police, residents held hostage, and innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire. Politicians and intellectuals decry the situation and call for alternative solutions. We could be talking about the police occupation of *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, the crimes of Mexican *narcotraficantes*, or conflicts between the FARC and the state in Colombia. In this collective imaginary, violence has become synonymous with many Latin American cities. These conflicts become aestheticized in artistic representations like the 2002 blockbuster film *Cidade de Deus*. Seductive narratives, glossy publicity, and up-tempo

soundtrack pull us further into this other world without pushing us to critically reflect on our consumption of this misery. We become the voyeurs of these urban realities, shocked by what we see, yet not quite able to pull ourselves away. The plight of these Latin American cities becomes reduced to a problem of drugs, gangs, and violence. However, closer consideration of these urban realms and their histories reveals a more complex situation.

Returning to earlier representations and theoretical approaches to the city allows for a better understanding of the contemporary urban problematic. Since the colonial period, the city has developed in Latin America as a place of inhabitation and lived experience, as well as a space of the imagination and the intellect. In order to unpack experiences of urban violence, socio-spatial segregation and their aesthetic representations in cities as diverse as Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City, the city must be situated not only as an aesthetic question, but also as a social and historic problem grounded in a specific terrain. This paper analyzes prior scholarship on the Latin American city to better understand the urban question. Among this earlier work, contributions of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Angel Rama are particularly noteworthy. Both Buarque and Rama compare the cities of Latin America to European and North American urban models. Whereas Rama proposes a generalized notion of the “lettered” Latin American city in *La ciudad letrada*, Buarque differentiates between colonial cities built in the Americas by Portuguese *semeadores* and Spanish *ladrihadores* in *Raízes do Brasil*.

Since their colonial foundation and consolidation as “lettered” bureaucratic

centers, Latin American cities have transformed radically. Given the growth, modernization and development of urban centers over the past century, can the theoretical concepts elaborated by Buarque and Rama apply to contemporary Latin American cities? Do the cities founded by Portuguese seed-throwers and Spanish bricklayers develop into the lettered cities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or does Rama's concept of the lettered city more aptly apply to the Spanish American context? If, as I would like to suggest, Latin American metropolises no longer function as lettered cities organized by their colonial blueprints, how can we understand these urban spaces? Rather than propose a new theoretical approach to the Latin American city, this paper will analyze the works of Buarque and Rama as texts critical to understanding these cities. Through a comparative analysis of these works and their Weberian model, I will argue that their insights held true for the colonial and early republican periods, yet become less relevant as urbanization, industrialization and modernization increased over the past century. Latin American cities have become more similar in recent years, as evidenced in statistics and aesthetic manifestations. While Manichean divides between cities built by *semeadores* and *ladrihadores* no longer apply to Latin American metropolises, an awareness of their unique historical processes helps to illuminate our understanding of contemporary urban spaces.

### **Spreading Seeds, Laying Bricks: A Search for Roots in the America's**

*Raízes do Brasil* marks a shift away from Buarque's earlier endeavors as a literary critic affiliated with Modernism. Although a Modernist interest in the distinctiveness of

Brazil informs Buarque's work, this classic text represents his first work as a historian (Morse 52). Returning to the colonial experience, Buarque differentiates between the practices of Spanish and Portuguese in the Americas. His analysis of the colonial process lays the groundwork for understanding the modern Brazilian nation. Buarque was not alone in his interest in discovering the distinctive roots of Brazil. Whereas Modernists reflected upon Brazilian national identity through artistic experimentation, Buarque and other essayists of the 1930s approached this question from the social sciences. Antônio Candido situates *Raízes do Brasil* within this context, identifying it as a key work along with Gilberto Freyre's 1933 *Casa-grande e senzala* and Caio Prado Júnior's 1942 *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo*. Candido explains that, "São estes os livros que podemos considerar chaves, os que parecem exprimir a mentalidade ligada ao sopro de radicalismo intelectual e análise social que eclodiu depois da Revolução de 1930 e não foi, apesar de tudo, abafado pelo Estado Novo" (Candido 9). Published six years after the Revolution of 1930 and a year before the installation of Vargas' Estado Novo, *Raízes do Brasil* is a product of this very particular moment.<sup>1</sup> Social and political events of these years caused Buarque and his colleagues to reflect upon the roots of Brazilian social reality.

In Buarque's case, the title of his essay, *Raízes do Brasil*, reveals this interest in roots (*raízes*) on a telluric level, as well as a social and cultural plane. This search for *raízes* attempts to construct a Latin American identity, yet its approach remains

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<sup>1</sup> See Skidmore for additional information on the social and political context of the Revolution of 1930 and the rise of the Estado Novo.

indebted to European traditions, particularly the work of Max Weber. Buarque's quest for a Brazilian identity develops as a series of contrasts, employing a dialectic methodology informed by Weber's typologies. Pairs of opposites – work and adventure, method and capriciousness, rural and urban, bureaucracy and patronage, impersonal norms and affective impulses of cordiality – structure the essay as Buarque identifies the traits that distinguish Brazil from both Europe and other Latin American nations. Rather than emphasize the intrinsic opposites, Buarque focuses on the interactions between these concepts as historical processes (Candido 12-13). His experiences in Europe, which ended up orienting his life work, enable him to explore such tensions. According to historian Richard M. Morse, Buarque “uses his European training to explore the tension between inherited patriarchalism and the encroachment of Western liberalism... [He] followed a classical or linear search for tectonic strength” (Morse 52). During his European travels in 1928, Buarque studied history and sociology with Meiecke, Kantorowicz, and Sombart, but was particularly influenced by the recently departed Weber. This impact of Weberian social thought becomes particularly evident when we consider Buarque's reflections on work ethic, capitalism, and bureaucracy in the Americas.

These themes are perhaps most evident in the sections where Buarque addresses the rural colonial legacy and the rise of the city. Buarque's reflections reveal the influence of Weber's classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* and his later essay *The City*. Stylistically, this first piece is a highly suggestive essay written by a sociologist of religion. Weber makes observations about the work ethic of Calvinism in

England, Holland and other Northern European countries and of Puritanism in North American, claiming that this work ethic is essential to the “spirit” of capitalism. While many historians have dismissed the essay as lacking historical substance, Buarque embraced its method, terminology, and style as a young historian. Highlighting this Weberian influence in Buarque’s essay, Pedro Meira Monteiro explains that, “To understand *Raízes do Brasil* fully, or at least to understand its portrayal of Portugal, we must remember that Max Weber’s images provided a backdrop for the young Sérgio Buarque de Holanda... In sum, the reference here is the work ethic within the capitalist world” (Meira Monteiro 75). These Weberian concepts emerge as key terms in Buarque’s imaginary as he distinguishes between the ethic of work and of adventure, between the rural and the urban, and between Portuguese *semeadores* and Spanish *ladrihadores*. Reframing Buarque’s essay in terms of this Weberian perspective, Silviano Santiago states that, “O principal argumento de Sérgio Buarque deriva de distinção importante entre o funcionário público burocrata e o funcionário público patrimonial feita a partir da leitura de Max Weber” (Santiago 188). While the specificities of Buarque’s argument emerge from his observations and experiences in Brazil and the Americas, he derives the broader structure of his work from Weber’s claims about state bureaucracy and urban development.

This influence becomes particularly evident when Buarque articulates the differences between Spanish and Portuguese American cities. Yet prior to this analysis, he emphasizes the division between Europe and the Americas. In the opening lines of the essay, he observes that, “A tentativa de implantação da cultura européia em extenso

território, dotado de condições naturais, se não adversas, largamente estranhas à sua tradição milenar, é, nas origens da sociedade brasileira, o fato dominante e mais rico em conseqüências” (Buarque 31). Brazil and the America are clearly not Europe, but that does not prevent European nations from attempting to implement their institutions and cultural practices. Buarque continues by conceiving of Spain and Portugal as distinct from Europe north of the Pyrenees. Viewed as a bridging territory between Europe and the rest of the world, Spain and Portugal “constituem uma zona fronteira, de transição, menos carregado em alguns casos desse europeísmo que, não obstante, mantêm como um patrimônio necessário” (Buarque 31). With the era of colonization, Spain and Portugal extend their territory beyond Europe, which in turn helps to resituate the peninsula closer to the center of European geopolitical power. These colonial projects have lasting consequences in everything from the way of life to the construction of urban space throughout the Americas.

As he continues to analyze the colonial experience, Buarque’s vision becomes more attuned to the subtleties between Spain, Portugal, and their presence in the Americas. He still compares the Iberian nations to their North American and European counterparts when discussing the rural inheritance and the ethic of work and adventure. However, when considering the city, he reveals distinctions between Spain and Portugal. Drawing on Weber’s work, Buarque notes that the city functions primarily as an instrument of domination for conquering nations:

Max Weber mostra admiravelmente como a fundação de cidades representou, para o Oriente Próximo e particularmente para o mundo helenístico e para a

Roma imperial, o meio específico de criação de órgãos locais de poder, acrescentando que o mesmo fenômeno se encontra na China, onde, ainda durante o século passado, a subjugação das tribos miaotse pôde ser identificada à urbanização de suas terras. (Buarque 95)

With praise for Weber, Buarque highlights the role of the city in consolidating and administering political and economic power throughout a national or imperial territory. Weber focuses on the nature of the city primarily within Europe as he traces its development of the Greek polis to the autocephalous medieval city. His analysis emphasizes the legal and administrative role of the city. Although Weber does not directly address colonization, his observations about the city's political and economic importance could be extended to the emerging cities of the Americas.

Buarque's recognition of the city as an instrument of domination brings to mind not only Weber's study of cities, but also Angel Rama's subsequent formulation of *la ciudad letrada*. Cities throughout Latin America have often functioned as socio-political and economic centers controlling a vast territory. However, these cities cannot be viewed as identical since they emerged as products of distinct colonial processes and mentalities. Similar to Weber's differentiation between Northern and Southern European cities, Buarque distinguishes between the colonial cities in the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Their unique development originates in Iberian colonial practices. Portugal sought to expand their commercial interests through a colonialism based on maritime exploration.

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<sup>2</sup> Weber notes that southern European cities of Italy and France are closer to the ancient Greek polis than those of north Europe, such as north France, Germany, and England (95).



The colony is “simples lugar de passagem” (Buarque 90). In contrast, Spanish colonialism was motivated by a desire to consolidate power throughout the colonial territories via military force. The Spaniards “querem fazer do país ocupado um prolongamento orgânico do seu” (Buarque 98). Cities as legal and administrative centers proved essential for implementing this colonial imaginary.

As evidenced in Mexico City, Lima and Buenos Aires, Spanish colonization resulted in the construction of rectilinear cities organized around a main plaza. It is this planned geometry of the Spanish American city that Buarque contrasts with the cities scattered along the coast by Portuguese explorers. The Spanish American cities follow a bricklayers’ logic and abide by the rationality of the militaristic Spanish colonial enterprise. While these cities are often situated in the climatically favorable interior highlands, the Portuguese colonial cities develop in coastal lowlands at the whim of the seed-throwing explorers. Buarque further explains that:

Os grandes centros de povoação que edificaram os espanhóis no Novo Mundo estão situados precisamente nesses lugares onde a altitude permite aos europeus, mesmo na zona tórrida, desfrutar um clima semelhante ao que lhes é habitual em seu país. Ao contrário da colonização portuguesa, que foi antes de tudo litorânea e tropical, a castelhana parece fugir deliberadamente da marinha, preferindo as terras do interior e os planaltos. (Buarque 99)

Buarque tends to generalize about climate, location, and preferred environment. The Americas do not boast a uniform geography or climate, but are rather dynamic lands with diverse weather patterns and heterogeneous populations. While Buarque’s

description of Spanish and Portuguese cities holds mostly true for the initial period of colonial development, a questioning of his generalizations allows for a more nuanced understanding of the Latin American cities.

Rather than ground his work in such a critical approach, Buarque opts to paint a suggestive comparative portrait of Latin American cities in a style reminiscent of Weber. The Spanish and Portuguese tile and plant the cities of the New World, yet similarities between these colonizers may actually provide the basis for these comparisons. In an insightful summary of Buarque's project, Silviano Santiago suggests that, "Ao querer rastrear desde o primeiro capítulo do livro a estratégia de diferenciá-los pelo modo diverso como, respectivamente, *plantam e azulejam* as cidades no Novo Mundo, percebe-se que a *distinção* entre os dois personagens latino-americanos veio sendo montada, não pelos traços que respectivamente os individualizam, mas pelos traços de *semelhança* que guardam" (Santiago 69). The distinctions between these Latin American types characterized as the *semeador* and the *ladrilhador* are built upon their similarities. Santiago's observation helps bring us back to the broader picture of a shared colonial experience. While Buarque highlights the differences between Spanish and Portuguese colonial cities, his discussion is situated within a broader analysis that recognizes the Americas as non-European.

### **Imagining the Creations of Seed-throwers and Bricklayers**

The distinctions Buarque makes with respect to the colonial period hold true to at least a certain extent through the early republican period. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century,

however, Spanish American and Brazilian cities have undergone processes of industrialization, expansion and modernization. A strict division between creations of *semeadores* and *ladrilhadores* no longer resonates with the spatial development and organization of these metropolitan regions. When we envision the Latin American city today, the central main plaza surrounded by government buildings, cultural institutions, and commercial districts figures prominently in our imaginations. Urban peripheries extend concentrically outwards from this historic downtown to emerge as a metropolitan conglomeration with multiple city centers and many plazas. Nonetheless, the central plaza, such as the Zócalo in Mexico City, the Praça da Sé in São Paulo, or the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, continues to predominate the visual imaginary of the Latin American city.<sup>3</sup> Such parallels between contemporary Latin American metropolises cannot be traced to the colonial experience. Instead, these similarities have developed over the last century and a half as Latin American transformed from a region of rural countries to one of modern, industrial nations. With this shift, cities experienced massive waves of migration, implemented Haussmanian reforms, and became the home to the majority of the population. These former Spanish and Portuguese colonial settlements developed into global cities virtually undistinguishable in our contemporary imaginations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Sá for an overview of these parallels between São Paulo and Mexico City. She notes similarities in their rhythm, enormity and urban challenges, but also observes the distinctions in their (so-called) historic centers.

<sup>4</sup> This brief outline of Latin American's urban history by no means presents a complete narrative. See Morse's "Cities as People" for an overview of Latin American urban development, Gorelik for more information on Buenos Aires, and Morse for a closer look at São Paulo.

Modern development often appears as a palimpsest over colonial bones of the city. The colonial experience may be a distant history, yet it informs the architectural structures, urban planning, and personal relations shaping modern Latin American cities and society. Buarque's essay rightfully suggests that returning to the colonial period provides the possibility for discovering the "roots" of Brazil. His comparative analysis of the colonial period situates Brazilian and Spanish American cities within their differentiated historical contexts, which allows us to better understand the contemporary metropolis. While a more nuanced knowledge of these cities would require an in-depth historiography, I am not proposing such a historical approach. Instead, I would like to embark on something more suggestive in the style of Weber or Buarque whereby images allow us to trace a historical trajectory. By placing Buarque's analysis in dialogue with maps and images, we arrive at a better understanding of this urban history. Returning to maps from the colonial period, Buarque's claims about the geometric development of Spanish American cities appear quite accurate. For instance, a 1628 map of Mexico City reveals an ordered city developing along a grid system around a central square. The city's rectilinear plan emerged as not only an invention of the colony, but also as a continuation of the pre-colonial organization of Tenochtitlan.<sup>5</sup> Building upon the ruins of the Aztec city, the Spanish colonizers established a layered Mexico City that would carry forward these physical traces of the past. Like Mexico City, Buenos Aires follows a grid pattern that radiates out from the central plaza. The

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<sup>5</sup> Observations by Sá in "Approaching the Monster" contribute to these descriptions of Mexico City. For additional images of Latin American cities and perspectives on their historical development, consult the beautiful collection edited Lejeune.

evenly spaced roads follow straight lines and intersect at right angles, revealing the workmanship of a *ladrihador*.

In contrast to these ordered city plans, a 1791 map of Rio de Janeiro suggests the vision of a seed thrower. Development runs parallel to the coast as city streets follow the contours of geography. Based on this cartographic image, the city seems to lack the more regimented structured nature characteristic of Spanish American colonial cities. The map corroborates Buarque's suggestion that, "A cidade que os portugueses construíram na América não é produto mental, não chega a contradizer o quadro da natureza, e sua silhueta se enlaça na linha da paisagem" (Buarque 110). While the city predominantly follows the lines of landscape, this preference towards the natural does not exclude the suggestion of a grid pattern within the city. In fact, straight lines and geometric angles emerge as the organizing principle of the central district. Buarque notes that, "É verdade que o esquema retangular não deixava de manifestar-se - no próprio Rio de Janeiro já surge em esboço - quando encontrava pouco empecilhos naturais" (Buarque 109). Topography generally prevented the systematic implementation of a grid system. Instead, the Portuguese adapted their urban development to geographic constraints. When topographical challenges did not present themselves, suggestions of grid patterns might emerge. However, the grid held little weight when building these colonial cities. Buarque emphasizes that, "Seja como for, o traçado geométrico jamais pôde alcançar, entre nós, a importância que veio a ter em terras da Coroa de Castela" (Buarque 109). As a result, the cities scattered by the Portuguese in the Americas never achieved the same degree of rigidity and

organization of those constructed by the bricklaying Spanish.

Buarque's division between *semeadores* and *ladrilhadores* refers not only to the layout of the built environment, but also to the geographic position of the city. Spaniards situated their cities in the less tropical zones of the interior *altiplano*. This location proved more comfortable for their European blood and also served a strategic function by facilitating the administration of power within a given colonial territory. Cities like Mexico City, Bogotá, Santiago de Chile, La Paz, and Quito fit the geographic description outlined by Buarque, yet other Spanish American colonial cities do not coincide with his schema. Even though Buarque suggests that waterways were not critical in determining the location of Spanish American colonial cities, important regional centers like Lima and Buenos Aires developed along the coast. Although situated in the lowlands, these cities nonetheless served as critical political and socioeconomic centers for the Spanish crown. Most colonial cities established by the Portuguese sprouted up along the coast. Summarizing Buarque's differentiation between Spanish and Portuguese colonial cartography, Silviano Santiago explains that, "Às avessas do ladrilhador hispano-americano, o semeador brasileiro vai plantando anarquicamente os povoados no território selvagem. É um transeunte" (Santiago 82). The Portuguese colonist scatters human seeds along the coast. These population groups develop into the Brazilian colonial cities of Salvador, Recife, and Rio de Janeiro.

From the colonial period until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political and socioeconomic power remained concentrated in these coastal cities. Now, however, both the national capital of Brasília and the business and population center of São Paulo

are located in interior highlands. Their geographies have more in common with the locations favored by Spanish colonialists according to Buarque's description. This shift of power away from the coast reveals the limits of understanding contemporary Brazil through Buarque's schema. His dialectical reading of Spanish and Portuguese American cities proves less accurate when approaching modern Latin American cities. The construction of Brasília in the country's high central plains in the 1950s, for instance, followed logic similar to that of Spanish colonialists. Repositioning the national capital to the interior would facilitate the administration of governmental power throughout the nation. With its modernist design and totalizing planning, Brasília can be conceived of as an ordered and lettered city reminiscent of the tradition of Spanish American colonial cities.<sup>6</sup> This inauguration of Brasília in 1960 shifted the political center of the country from coastal Rio de Janeiro to the interior. Buarque's vision of the Portuguese scattering their urban seeds along the coast is no longer relevant. Instead, Brazilians emerge as the ultimate bricklayers - envisioning, planning and constructing a new capital in the span of a few years.

The rise of São Paulo, however, is a shift that Buarque at least partially envisioned. Returning to the colonial foundation of the city, he notices a streak of independence and self-reliance often characteristic of interior regions. He observes that:

No planalto de Piratininga nasce em verdade um momento novo de nossa história nacional. Ali, pela primeira vez, a inércia difusa da população colonial

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<sup>6</sup> See Holston's *The Modernist City...* for an excellent overview of the city's history, planning, and development.

adquire forma própria e encontra voz articulada. A expansão dos *pioneers* paulistas não tinha suas raízes do outro lado do oceano, podia dispensar o estímulo da metrópole e fazia-se freqüentemente contra a vontade e contra os interesses imediatos desta. (Buarque 102)

The adventurous spirit of the pioneers led them to explore beyond the coast, motivated not by the orders of the colonial power but rather by their own interests. For Buarque, these founders of São Paulo discovered their own voices as they explored new territories and began to establish roots. They broke with the Portuguese tendency to scatter the urban seeds and passively let them grow into cities. This active approach to colonization would become more common with the extraction of minerals in Minas Gerais during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As Buarque suggests, the discovery of São Paulo marks a new historical moment. Challenging the dichotomies outlined by Buarque, these *paulistas* lay the groundwork for an urban revolution.

Since these distinct colonial beginnings, Latin American cities have transformed into metropolises with notably similarities. Over the past century, these cities experienced a desire for modernization, an infusion of industrial capital, and a dramatic increase in the urban population. These factors resulted in two parallel and apparently contradictory forms of urban construction: state-funded modernizing projects concentrated in the city center and residential auto-construction throughout the periphery.<sup>7</sup> One makes the city more formal, ordered, and regulated, while the other

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<sup>7</sup> In *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*, Holston outlines this history of São Paulo with an emphasis on the rise of auto-construction.



disrupts this order with its visual disarray, its precariousness, and its illegality. Often, modernizing the center causes displacement, which results in an expansion of the periphery. Examples of these modernizing reforms include the creation of the Viaduto do Chá and accompanying parks in downtown São Paulo and the expansion of the Avenida 9 de Julio in Buenos Aires. Photographs and other images of these cities from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveal the similarities between these modernizing metropolises. The street life, architectural details, and emerging signs of industry and technology captured in Horacio Coppola's Buenos Aires album could as easily be found in the scenes of *São Paulo, Uma sinfonia da metrópole*. They do not highlight the specificity of place, but rather focus on the emerging modernity. In recent years, aesthetic representations of Latin American cities have stressed their immensity, diversity, and inequality by contrasting the growth of urban peripheries with the construction of new office buildings and chic shopping centers. As with earlier photographs, these images are often interchangeable. Differences become minimal as these metropolises develop into global cities far removed from the Portuguese seeds and the Spanish bricks that gave root to them.

### **Beyond Rama's Lettered City**

As the division outlined by Buarque becomes less useful for understanding Latin American cities, it is helpful to place his vision in dialogue with the work of Angel Rama. Whereas Buarque focuses on the differences between Spanish and Portuguese

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colonial cities, Rama approaches the Latin American city as a unified entity from a diachronic perspective. His slim volume begins with a description of organic, baroque cities before elaborating his concept of lettered cities and, finally, concluding with some thoughts on the modernized city. Cities emerge as a tool and a product of capitalist expansion according to Rama, which echoes Weber's thoughts on the city. Rama creates a typology somewhat analogous to the one developed by Weber in *The City*, employing the adjectives *ordenada*, *letrada*, *escrituaria*, *modernizada* and *revolucionada* to characterize cities from the colony to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Weber focuses on antiquity and the Middle Ages in his typology, which uses terms such as occidental, patrician, and plebian to describe the city. When theorizing the Latin American city, Rama draws not so much on the specificities of Weber's work, but rather on its style and its conception of themes like bureaucracy. In particular, Weber's notion of the "patrimonial bureaucratic state" emerges as critical for both Buarque and Rama. In a passing reference, Rama mentions the "conocidos análisis de Max Weber sobre la burocracia" (Rama 37). He cites Weber's work in order to situate his own considerations of bureaucracy when developing his key notion of the lettered city.

Generally, Rama conceives of the Latin American city as a product of the intellectual class dating back to the colonial period. It implied both a physical and a semiotic order. He emphasizes "el triunfo de las ciudades sobre un inmenso y desconocido territorio" in the Americas, which recalls Weber's vision of the city as imperial force and also Buarque's idea of the Spanish colonial cities as the product of *ladrihadores* (Rama 25). The city exercised power over the territory as its administrative,

legislative, educational, spiritual, and intellectual center. In the lettered professions within the metropolis, Rama identifies a city within a city, which he terms “la *ciudad letrada*, porque su acción se cumplió en el prioritario orden de los signos” (Rama 32). Even though no physical walls separated these lettered elite, they were relatively isolated given that “sus miembros conformaron un grupo restricta y drásticamente urbano. Sólo es posible dentro de una estructura ciudadana” (Rama 37). As “los dueños de la escritura en una sociedad analfabeta,” these educated men of letters controlled the legal documents, administered colonial rules, brokered political relationships, and guided spiritual practices (Rama 37). Through words, they controlled the city and, by extension, the colonial or national territory.

These men of letters served as administrators of colonial power, especially in the case of the Spanish colonies where the crown desired to exercise control over the entire territory. The role of lettered elite in territorial domination was less evident in the case of the Portuguese colonialists. Rather than forcefully implement the dictates of church and state, the Portuguese men of letters preferred to scatter their beliefs and knowledge. Buarque emphasizes the contrast between this *semeador* and the Spanish *ladrihador*, a distinction absent from Rama’s work. In fact, Rama only occasionally differentiates between the experiences of Spanish America and Brazil. For the most part, his analysis tends to conflate Spanish American with Latin America. He supposedly presents an analysis of Latin American lettered cities, yet the majority of examples are drawn from Spanish America. At times, it seems as though he developed a theory of the Spanish American lettered man, added a few representative cases from Brazil, and reframed it

as a Latin American theory. In particular, his observations about the role of the university and the importance of print press prove less than compelling arguments when considered in the Brazilian context.

According to Rama, the university emerges as an institution intended to prepare future members of the *ciudad letrada*. The first university in the Americas was founded in Santo Domingo in 1538. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico, Lima, Bogotá, Quito and Cuzco all had universities. This creation of higher education, but not of primary schools, guaranteed that reading and writing would remain a privilege of a select few. The intellectual elites would continue to dominate over the rest of society (Rama 43). Whereas the universities in Spanish America churned out new generations of elite citizens, Brazil lacked institutions of higher education. The colony remained tied to the metropolis as Brazilians had to attend university in Portugal or elsewhere in Europe. Receiving a college degree in Brazil only became possible in 1827 with the founding of law schools in São Paulo and Olinda (Buarque 144). These schools only granted law degrees. As lawyers, however, they were prepared for what Rama describes as a “*tarea primordial de la ciudad letrada: la redacción de códigos y de leyes*” (Rama 67). Universities offering a full cadre of degrees would only emerge in Brazil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the colonial and early republican period, Brazil was not a lettered society to the same extent as Spanish America. For instance, in between 1775 and 1821, the University of Mexico granted 7850 bachelor’s degrees and 473 doctorates and other professional degrees, while the University of Coimbra granted 720 degrees to Brazilian nationals (Buarque 119). The intellectual experience of the university was firmly

entrenched in Spanish America, yet virtually absent from Brazil. Rama fails to make this distinction, which raises the question of the applicability of his framework to Brazilian cities. Are they perhaps only partially lettered cities?

A look at the printing press and print culture further suggests this differentiation between Brazil and Spanish America. Whereas Mexico and Peru had publishing traditions dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the printing press effectively came to Brazil with the arrival of the Portuguese court. In contrast, the Mexico City press published 11,652 works between 1535 and 1821, while the Lima workshops produced 3,948 titles between 1584 and 1824 (Buarque 120). Publishing in colonial Brazil was relatively anemic in comparison to its Spanish American neighbors. Yet, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, print culture in Brazil was much more robust. Brazil developed into a modern, industrial nation with a young, but rich, literary canon and a vibrant scene of newspapers and chronicles. The emergence of figures like Rui Barbosa – men of letters in the multiple senses implied by Rama – suggest that the lettered nature of Brazilian cities became stronger after independence. Brazil has developed a strong tradition of reading, writing, and critical thought over the past century and a half. Rama's notion of the lettered city as a controlling colonial force does not seem as relevant in the Brazilian case. Instead, the importance of the lettered city develops as a politicized and revolutionary city during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Final Considerations

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the question of the city is more pressing than ever.

Nearly 80% of Brazil’s population lives in urban areas, with nearly 20 million concentrated in the São Paulo metropolitan region. Another 20 million people reside in the greater area of Mexico City. Images emanating from these cities are often quite similar and at times disturbing. Violence and suffering on one hand, wealth and excess on the other hand. We want to understand the city and appreciate the lived experiences of its residents, while not reducing its complexity to a series of easily consumable images. How can we value the city without aestheticizing it? How can we think the city, especially when our old models of interpretation no longer seem to serve us? Earlier intellectuals, like Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Angel Rama, provide examples of how we can imagine and theorize the city. We must problematize simple dichotomies, yet not fall into the trap of making sweeping generalizations. We must ponder relationships between people, space, time, and institutions, which form the essence of urban life. To approach an urban theory for the present, we must think beyond divisions between *semeadores* and *ladrilhadores*, beyond the lettered city. As Silvia Spitta suggests:

Pensar el espacio latinoamericano es pensarlo desde más allá de las fronteras establecidas por las disciplinas y lo que es más es pensarlo mucho más allá de la limitada noción de espacio que ha manejado el Occidente hasta hace poco... Si nuestras ciudades son tan abigarradas, nuestros modelos de pensarlas no pueden ser menos complejos ni menos nómadas. (Spitta 21)

That is our challenge and our task. It is not an easy one, but it is a crucial one.

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