

Ribeirão Preto, "Petit Paris": Dreams and Dramas of a City of São Paulo during the Heyday of the Coffee Culture (1880-1929)¹

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to address the urban trajectory of Ribeirão Preto at the height of the coffee culture by the State of São Paulo during the First Republic (1890-1930). In this period, the local elite wanted to build a series of changes in the city's urban landscape, what some visitors called at the time "Petit Paris". We also discuss the reinvention of urbanized areas and the new directions printed by the workers and popular classes of Ribeirão Preto, showing how his criticism of public authorities revealed the contradictions of the urban modernization process. This is a topic of great relevance to the study of urban history in Brazil, as part of the history of a city in the interior of Brazil with the aim of showing different readings of urban modernization processes.

Introduction - City, culture and the study of 'the', 'in' and 'beyond' local

The history of many cities located in the interior of Brazil is still little known to the academic public, national and international scientific community and even the readers of its country. Statements like these can cause scandal or surprise. Which is ironic, if we think that Brazil is currently a predominantly urban country. However, we know that this reality, although uneven and discontinuous, appears to be gradually changing. It is the case of the history of many cities located in the state of São Paulo (Doin et. al., 2007). Its urban history already has a significant number of scholarly works, published books and thematic groups.

It is the specific case of Ribeirão Preto (Paziani, 2004; Mello, 2009/2011). The city is known for several years as the "Brazilian California" and more recently as the "Capital of the Brazilian Agribusiness", because of the franc agricultural, industrial and urban development, which made it a land of opportunity and led it to the status of "regional capital" of the state of São Paulo.

For over two decades, the Brazilian historiography centered on the cities theme has prepared a series of important studies about the different experiences of modernity and urbanization in capital and port cities in the Second Empire (1822-1889) and the First Republic (1889-1930) (Needell, 1993; Sevchenko, 1995; Salgueiro, 1995; Lanna, 1996; Chalhoub, 1996; Pesavento, 1999).

If we are aware that the narrative of "big cities" contributed to the theoretical and methodological redefinition of the urban theme, the purpose here is to speak of "other" history writings: the story of the small urbs in the state of São Paulo which, through the coffee economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, became not only centers of agricultural production, but also a territory in which a number of cities and urban experiences emerged (Doin, 2001).

It is almost undeniable that city, culture and history can be considered inseparable sisters. A place, quintessentially, for demonstration of public life, political participation, the meeting of sacred and profane, of sociability and solitude, seduction and fear, the city is inextricably linked to the different representations and experiences of men in history - an object of study that gained more space from the relations with modernity (Raminelli, 1997, p. 185; Berman, 1997; Lepetit, 2004).

Based, for a long time, on concepts that sometimes favored linear narratives of strictly political context, sometimes the socio-economic analysis of the Marxist perspective, sometimes even quantitative approaches

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- research on urban history reserved itself to see the city only from a materiality point of view (Pesavento, 2007, pp.12-13). It was from the 1980s and 1990s, that city and urban acquired new strength due to the strong influence of "cultural history" - which culminated with the appearance of the "city's cultural history" (Pesavento, 1995, pp. 279-290) - a branch of historical knowledge which examines representations and social practices shared and experienced by individuals, classes and/or groups in a given urban space. (Pesavento, 2003, p. 78; Lepetit, 2004, pp. 238-240)

This phenomenon seems to translate the need of intellectuals to reflect on the complexity of human relationships and, empirically, in a methodological concept that, from "the" place, reorients the relationship between 'knowing' and 'doing' produced and/or lived "in" the place (Geertz, 1989), as well as, the presence in this place of historical contexts located "beyond" the place (Biersack, 1995, pp. 111-112; Santos, 2002).

In this regard, studies of cities located within the State of São Paulo, as the case of Ribeirão Preto, not only allow opening prospects for reconstruction methods, objects and themes, but also enable a differentiated and detailed reading of aspects considered "global". Even distant in time and space in relation to the historical experiences of modernity in European and Brazilian metropolises, the ideas, values and urban modernization projects are able to be rediscovered in specific contexts and places, as said by Sandra Pesavento (1999, p. 22):

If the discourses and images constructed on the urban are a social index and an object of the collective imagination, they are also able to migrate in time and space. In this context, it is possible that in different times and places, identical or similar solutions are adopted, but the explanation of an outright imitation, result of a naive cosmopolitanism, should be discarded. The fact that it is possible to establish a link between practices and representations of the urban between different eras and places, show us that similar or even identical problems were placed in these different times and spaces. Thus, it is possible that the images and urban discourses can, not only, be read and understood, but also, be matrices of social practices in different contexts from those that gave rise to them. Establishing this level of reflection is not to deny the specificity of each context. Likewise, when they migrate in time and space, the images and discourses about the city can be increasingly endowed with new meanings for each situation and diverse social compositions [...]

It is from these theoretical and methodological perspectives, which, in this article, we will discuss Ribeirão Preto's trend of modernization during the heyday of the coffee economy in the city and how it allowed the city to experience its own "Belle Époque".

Ribeirão Preto to the world: the power of the coffee culture

In January 1911, another number of "*Brazil Magazine: revista periódica e ilustrada d'arte e actualidades*" (*Brazil Magazine: periodic and illustrated art magazine and updates*) was published in Rio de Janeiro, then, the federal capital. It was a biannual magazine of French origin, with offices in Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro.

Like many illustrated magazines of its time, "Brazil Magazine" published texts and images that sought to value the state of 'progress' and 'civilization' of the country in those Republican days: economy, society, arts, personalities, significant events, all that was related to the climate (euphoric still) experienced by our elites, eager to put Brazil in the march of modernity.

With national and international circulation, the magazine had as a writer and editor in chief in Brazil Mr. Martinho Carlos de Arruda Botelho (1867-1916), son of the famous "Conde do Pinhal", Colonel Antônio Carlos de Arruda Botelho (1827-1901), one of the most fortunate coffee farmers in the interior of São Paulo. Considered one of the biggest promoters of the Brazilian "Belle Époque" - since the purpose of the magazine was the "Publication of the Brazilian advertising abroad" - Martinho announced on the 57th edition, an amazing cover story titled "Ribeirão Preto, Le Pays du Café".

It was a special issue dedicated to the city of Ribeirão Preto. And for good reason. At the turn of the twentieth century, Ribeirão Preto appeared as the largest national center for coffee production. Statistical data reinforced the prominent position occupied by Ribeirão Preto: between 1904 and 1905, of the 265 agricultural establishments in the municipality, 254 owned coffee plantations. Also, according to the production and coffee trade census published in 1925, its rich region (even in a period of crisis) had more than 36 million coffee trees planted. (Marcondes, 2002)

Some of the most prominent men of the State were also large planters and political leaders in the region: its main representatives were Colonel Joaquim da Cunha Diniz Junqueira (1861-1932), a powerful local leader and distinguished member of the Republican Party of São Paulo, and Colonel Francisco Schmidt (1850?-1924), a German immigrant who became the largest coffee producer in the world, thanks to the 293,596 acres of its eighty farms scattered through the interior, which produced more than one million kilos of coffee! So much so that in the pages of "*Almanach Illustrado de Ribeirão Preto*" (*Ribeirão Preto Illustrated Almanac*), published in 1913, Schmidt was called 'Coffee King'...

Well, if the municipality had become, during the First Republic, a hegemonic center of agricultural production and exportation - being considered by the magazine "The Country of Coffee" - what was the role played by the city? Martinho Carlos, in a passage of the magazine, made the following comment: "... *Ribeirão Preto is a major urban center, benefited by all comfortable material life, and all the pleasures of modern civilization*". What does this mean?

The "Belle Époque" on inland lands: Ribeirão Preto, "Petit Paris"...

Because of the coffee saga, the small and inhospitable village, set in the times of the Empire (1871), would be 'shaken' by the winds of urban transformations. With the implantation of the railway in 1883, the Mogiana Railway, people from various places landed in this region: Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and in particular, immigrants from European origin (especially the Italians) that, far from living exclusively on farms, helped form a diverse and urban society.

The municipality, which appeared in the 1872 census with almost 6,000 inhabitants, thirty years later would see that number rise to about 60,000, with more than a third of the residents living in the urban area. Concurrent to the movement of people, a small whirl of modern newness - announced by locomotives - arrived in these parts as small companies, banks, utility companies, newspapers and magazines, commerce, leisure, etc. This whirl led to the emergence of representations and cultural practices associated with modern life.

One of the most revealing, and what would increase the fame of the city, was the French influence. It seemed so natural to identify the strength and progress of Ribeirão Preto to the French capital - the "City of Light" - that the city became known as 'Petit Paris': "*Ribeirão Preto, the magical city, the west pearl of São Paulo, the Petit Paris, as it was called by the Mogiana Zone travelers*" - wrote a priest (not identified) to the newspaper "Daily Morning" in 1909, during a visit to the city.

The central area - formed by the streets Duque de Caxias, General Osório, Barão do Amazonas and Álvares Cabral - occupied the main commercial activities that existed in Ribeirão Preto in that "beautiful time" - warehouses, stores, tailor's workshops, restaurants, bars. In almost all of them, there were references to France (or rather, Paris) for the express purpose of making publicity of their properties to an incipient consumer society.

It is what you could read in the "*Almanach Illustrado de Ribeirão Preto*": "Au Bon Marche" ("*News of Paris! Silk rayée, crepe of Chine et manteaux*"), "House Petit Marche", "Au Bon Gout", "Notre Dame de Paris" (where "*daily, the honorable families go on, in the pilgrimage, to acquire all that is more 'chic'*"), "Au Louvre", "Au du Sport São Paulo", "Au Bonheur du Dames", "Confectionery Smart", "Tailoring Paris" - coexisting with retailers who carried the surnames of Italian families, such as "Home Brancato", "Pharmacy Pelosi", "Beschizza's House", "House Bertani"...

On the threshold of the twentieth century, the coffee oligarchy itself, which also held the main positions in the municipal government (the case of Francisco Schmidt), was concerned with the positive images of the city, through the urbanization of the central area - such as water networks (1898) and sewerage (1900), electric lighting (1899) - and, in particular, investments in public works that would project the city to the status of a Paris in miniature.

One example of this change was the construction of the 'Carlos Gomes' Theatre, a project financed, for the most part, by Colonel Schmidt (who was also a member of the Town Hall). Designed by the technical office of

Ramos de Azevedo, headquartered in São Paulo, this theater – the second largest at the time, behind the Amazonas Theater (1896) – opened in 1897 and welcomed the Lyrical Company 'De Mattia', which staged the piece "O Guarani", by Carlos Gomes.

The rental of the building would be in the hands of François Cassoulet (1864-1917), a French immigrant who would become a big entertainment entrepreneur. The presence of Cassoulet was constant in newspapers like this: *"The Company Cassoulet, will perform in the following Sunday on the Carlos Gomes Theater a great popular show with its excellent cosmopolitan troupe..."*. (Newspaper "The City", 1908; Cione, 1993)

Besides the theater, the coffee culture strength would allow the emergence of other modern elements, which, adapted to local life, would appreciably change habits and help creating the image of Ribeirão Preto as a city dedicated to leisure and entertainment. The breweries of 'Antarctica' and 'Paulista', the 'Recreational Society', the 'Rotisserie and Risorant Sportsman', the Eldorado 'Casino' and the cine-theaters, cases of 'Politeama', 'Bijou', 'Paris-Theatre' and of 'Carlos Gomes' himself, translated some of the elite dreams of living in a 'little Paris' in an interior land.

In 1912, an article published in the newspaper "Diário da Manhã" – signed, probably, by a former resident of Ribeirão Preto – seemed to give a tone of realism to those dreams of "Belle Époque" in the interior of São Paulo, with a goal to make the reader believe in the relentless modernization of places, habits and behaviors:

Twenty years ago, Ribeirão Preto was a little bigger than a village, with potholed streets, lighted by kerosene, dirty and ugly houses ... Everything is changed now, and who returns to Ribeirão Preto, having known it in those good old days, naturally note with astonishment the extraordinary change. It is now a modern city with sidewalks, afforestation, lighted by electricity, water and sewerage services, and all the comforts [...] that comes across a truly modern and advanced city. ("Diário da Manhã" Newspaper, 1912)

Thus, the "age of certainties" (advocated by the European bourgeoisies) that, in the late nineteenth to the twentieth century, made emerge in the elite located in Brazilian cities some of the "indubitable" modern beliefs in progress and civilization, seemed to have gotten, in the midst of coffee expansion and the whistles of locomotives, to the small town of Ribeirão Preto, a provincial village of São Paulo that had turned into the epicenter of coffee production in the state and in an internationally known city.

However, the "age of certainties" turned out to be opposed by these same forces of modernization. In the urban daily life, a multitude of scenes considered "unpleasant" would shake the signs of the desired order, promoting, in turn, the emergence of signs of disorder: it was the specific case of crisis in infrastructure and urban services (water, lighting, sewage) in the city.

In our opinion, these signs may also be seen as signs that reveal looks and urban experiences in a specific locality (Perinelli Neto & Paziani, 2012). All of them are traces of an ambiguous (and tense) relationship between order and disorder inherent in the city - signals present in the discourses and practices of the elite, as in the participation of workers and popular classes.

Then the dream turned into the drama: contradictions of modernization in Ribeirão Preto

If Ribeirão Preto earned a reputation of 'Little Paris', to the delight and satisfaction of the local elite, no less real was the presence of the most confusing and cruel situations that were rapidly gaining the public and urban scene.

That is what we discuss, for example, in an article entitled *"Other readings of the city: urban experiences of the population of Ribeirão Preto during the First Republic"*⁴. In this paper, we analyze the reinvention of urban spaces and the printing of new meanings employed by the population of Ribeirão Preto during the First Republic, showing the contradictions and ambiguities of modernization in Ribeirão Preto during the peak of the coffee economy.

Daily, and with more insistence, the pages of the two major newspapers in Ribeirão Preto – "Diário da Manhã"

⁴ Article published in the journal "Tempo" – journal of the Graduate Program in History, Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), Rio de Janeiro, in 2005.

(Daily Morning) (founded in 1898) and "A Cidade" (The City) (founded in 1905) – and the minutes of the City Council meetings published news that turned, in the eyes of the elite, into the unwanted faces of urban transformations: we specifically speak here of the problems of urban infrastructure and services in the first decades of the twentieth century.

During the process of modernization in Ribeirão Preto, public services and improvements reported were restricted to the central area of the city – at least until 1905, when the municipality was victimized by epidemics of yellow fever and smallpox. However, even aware of the need to meet the social demands and expand the improvements to outlying neighborhoods and areas, the authorities usually acted in accordance with the rules of power to which they were inserted.

"Almost"... Even excluded from active participation in the (unrepresentative) republican political system (Carvalho, 1987, p. 86), most of the inhabitants of the city of Ribeirão Preto were fighting social indifference and urban crises through requests and/or criticism of the City Hall. One of the most common issues in the city concerned the deficiency or absence of a regular system of public distribution of water and sewage networks in various parts of the urban area:

A representation of many residents of the neighborhood "Barracão" asking for the City Council to send their professional personnel to examine the site of the termination point of the sewage system, since the population which is being attacked by a fever of bad character, is convinced that it is caused by the disposal of sewerage. (Minute of City Council, 1902)

The so-called "complaints of the people" (Silva, 1988) were characterized by claims, complaints and requests addressed to the government. The complainants originated especially from the lower classes, the case of urban workers, since they were at actions marked by violence or indifference of the public authorities. Nevertheless, the plaintiffs did not seem to demonstrate passivity in the face of the authorities.

Among the many and following criticism, complaints and pressures to the municipal authority on the problems of (access to) infrastructure and urban services, it is worth mentioning one that occurred in 1914, in the same neighborhood mentioned above. A text, sent by residents of the neighborhood to the newspaper "Daily Morning", made explicit the inconsistencies of precarious or poorly rendered services to the population living in remote districts of the central area:

[...] Sirs. Drs. Editors of 'Diário da Manhã'. We would be very grateful if this worthy sheet called the enlightened attention of the distinguished mayor to the danger that is running through great part of the prosperous and futuroso⁵ neighborhood "Barracão", as already nicknamed 'dam death', which is a long and deep ditch full of stagnant, muddy and putrid water that extends along the old mill in the Company of Light... This dam, which emanates a terrible smell, has already reaped some precious lives of poor workers and led others to malaria, with its black court, in great part of Barracão [...] Only seeing it, Mr. editors, is a horror! Urge that the worthy city hall with general applause takes care of embellishing the city, adorning it with sumptuous gardens, protecting the bourgeoisie from fires, also taking care of the fate of suburban poor, protecting them against epidemics and inevitable death. The Mr. Dr. Mayor is an outstanding physician and a man of generous heart, if you take the trouble to go to the old mill, we are certain, you will be horrified and will send incontinent to sanitize that unhappy corner of the city. (Newspaper "Daily Morning", 1914)

Let us examine the claim above. It is a collective representation forwarded to the editors of the newspaper. The plaintiffs resided in a neighborhood occupied mostly by workers – therefore, located in unconsecrated areas and often forgotten by the municipal authorities. The explicit claim showed an unpleasant and uncomfortable scenario experienced daily by residents of the neighborhood, "a long and deep ditch full of stagnant, muddy and putrid water"; also called "dam death".

The authors referred to the place where it stood the old supplier of electricity – which worked there, possibly until 1912⁶ – a private company called "Empresa de Força e Luz de Ribeirão Preto" chaired by Flavio Uchôa

⁵ The word "futuroso" have a meaning of "place for future".

⁶ When the direction of the "Empresa Força e Luz de Ribeirão Preto", was created in 1909, sold most of its shares and was expropriated by the state government under the name "Companhia Paulista de Força e Luz".

and that had among its shareholders Sylvio Alvares Penteado, Martinho and Caio da Silva Prado, Joaquim Junqueira and others - all of them members of São Paulo coffee elite.

The dramatic narrative faces a tragedy: we are told that "dam" took "some precious lives" qualified by the authors as "poor workers" – reinforcing the social status of those who lived there. Indeed, during the 1910s, it grew the number of complaints sent to the City Council related to crises of infrastructure and urban services. One of the main complaints concerned the problem of regular water supply: crisis that reached the newspapers of the time for being called "Question of the Waters". (Paziani, 2004, pp. 211-231).

Claims such as those cited above allow us to see these residents as actors in a given story – in this case, "anonymous" who lived in a society headed by colonels and his men. But not all of them were "anonymous". The presence of the names of people among the subscribers could be an indication of a desire to single out the role of certain social actors (Ginzburg, 1989: 175) – especially being a woman – in a society marked by strongly patriarchal and conservative values (Mello, 2009): "Representation signed by Maria José da Costa and other inhabitants of this city complaining about the lack of water for more than 30 days despite being punctually paying their taxes" (Minutes of the Council City of Ribeirão Preto, 1906).

Thus, the acts of composing documents and driving to the office of a newspaper (or Town Hall) revealed what Michel de Certeau called "tactical". For Certeau (1998), "Tactical" can be defined as a set of actions and practices without a definite place, the result of "occasions", the "gaps" and "opportune moments" left by the system and utilized by the subjects, especially for the most disadvantaged ones, to nourish themselves with cunning and intelligence to achieve their goals. In this sense, we can say that the residents of poor neighborhoods and workers used tactics for the extension and the proper functioning of an urban public service.

We know little about the specific answers provided by the municipal government – more concerned in feeding the myth of "Little Paris".

However, the inhabitants, particularly those in remote areas of the historic center - in neighborhoods like 'Barracão', 'Vila Tibério', 'Vila República', 'Bairro do Retiro' - insisted to remember and display in their claims a different image of the city that the elite dreamed of. Complaints and claims showed a painful scenario for the local elite: that the wishes of "modernizing" the city at any cost would have a price - the dismantling of the myth within their own "womb". And worst: enlisting the active participation of workers and popular classes.

Conclusion

Between the 1890s and 1920s, the city of Ribeirão Preto experienced a series of urban transformations through the introduction of some "wonders" of modernity, such as electricity, automobiles, buildings, phones, pavements, palaces, theaters, casinos and cinematographers.

The dreaming of progress and civilization in the interior of São Paulo almost simultaneously to the grief and uncertainty experienced by the urban modernization process. The dream of the local coffee elite: transforming Ribeirão Preto in "Petit Paris". But also, dreams of the lower classes: located in the neighborhoods and suburban areas, these residents claimed the right to urban goods (water, electricity, sewerage, paved streets).

However, the 1920s was marked by a historical context of economic and financial crises in Brazil and throughout the capitalist world - with the 'crash' of the New York Stock Exchange in 1929 and the 'Revolution' led by Getúlio Vargas in 1930 - which overthrew the foundations that supported the privileges of farmers in São Paulo.

At the end of this decade, the "Belle Époque" of Ribeirão Preto would dictate their latest rules, expressed henceforth by the ideals of another elite, identified by the global hegemony of the United States. The texts and images conveyed by Martin Botelho on the number 57 of the "Brazil Magazine" would lose their meanings: Ribeirão Preto, would gradually cease to be "Le pays du Café" and "Petit Paris"...

More: the construction of the "Quarteirão Paulista" (1926-1930) – architectural ensemble formed by 'Teatro Pedro II', 'Hotel Central' (later 'Palace Hotel') and 'Edifício Meira Junior' – represent the urban culture of an "other" time, not identified anymore with the coffee culture and its 'Frenchification', but with the presence of

American pragmatic values.

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