

editorial  
editorial

entrevista  
interview

artigos submetidos  
submitted papers

tapete  
carpet

artigo nomads  
nomads paper

projeto  
project

expediente  
credits

próxima v!rus  
next v!rus

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**Marcelo Tramontano: The city of Asuncion has a unique historical importance for the entire South American continent. How is that memory of the "Mother of Cities" constructed?**

**Jorge Rubiani:** Asuncion is a very peculiar city. It was founded in 1537, right after Buenos Aires, in 1536, which was abandoned four years later. The entire Spanish population that had come on the Pedro de Mendoza's expedition arrives at the Río de la Plata, in the most prominent expedition of the Spanish crown after Columbus voyages. Some historians speak of 1,800 men, some others, of 2,000. Some ones mention 15 vessels, some others, 18 vessels, but it clearly sought to reach Peru by the way of the River Plate, which had already been explored a few years earlier by other conquerors. The Río de La Plata, or the river of Silver, takes its name for the reason I just pointed out earlier: it led to the Peruvian hill of Silver, within the Andean foothills. In some maps, it also appears as the river of Paraguay, because at that time Paraguay was an extensive territory. This is the only pre-Hispanic name given to a South American country, since all others' names were borrowed names, or alluded to birds, caciques, or lords. But Paraguay is the only pre-Hispanic name already seen on maps long before the consolidation of South American republics. So that ambitious expedition of Pedro de Mendoza dissolves in the failure by a series of contingencies, but mainly by the fact that Pizarro had already arrived at Peru, by way of the Pacific Ocean. Asuncion is therefore completely forgotten from 1547 on, as some expeditionaries finally arrive at Andean foothills and realize that other Spanish conquerors were already there, coming from the other side.

From that moment, the city develops what some historians call "the long Asuncion colonial siesta." That is, a period when no one else came to Paraguay, no one else came from Spain to the River Plate, except for some absolutely accidental contingency. Not even the conquistadors [Translator's note: *adelantados*, in Spanish] - which happened to Pedro de Mendoza - came to form an action line aiming to consolidate the colony. Five consecutive conquistadors faced many drawbacks, and altogether exercised less than five years in government. The disinterest in the territory, since it was much easier to reach Peru from the North, by the Pacific Ocean, led to a great poverty in Asuncion, which was forgotten for a long time. In 1580, Juan de Garay refounded Buenos Aires with Torres de Vera y Aragón, one of the last conquistadors. At that time, Asuncion inhabitants had decided that, before conquering a territory, they had to populate it. Therefore, several expeditions departed from the city, where an important cattle herd had been consolidated since 1556, to found other cities.

But stronger than the cattle herd, Asuncion faced major social problems. The last contingent left in the La Plata estuary came in 1541, as a result of the depopulation of Buenos Aires. At that time, in Asuncion - where there were almost no women - lived already about two thousand mestizos, who were the children of the ferocious miscegenation mentioned by the Paraguayan historian Manuel Domínguez. All the expeditions that left Buenos Aires were formed of single men, soldiers who came without women, and who quickly took women, many women for each single Spaniard, given the "cultural weaknesses" of the native society. From this fact, already in 1541, a large number of mestizos lived in the city, running around the village's narrow corridors. When girls of these groups reached the age of 14, or had their first menstruation, easily they found marriageable men between the Spanish contingent. Many families were therefore formed by mestizo girls and Spanish men.

But what happened to men? What happened to those guys who grew up and did not have women to share their lives with? So the Asuncian expansion also aimed to make use of that unemployed male contingent, surly and very hostile that, in a way,

created problems for the rest of the population. This group of people is used to nourish foundations abroad. By this group, Buenos Aires was re-founded in 1580, which, given its privileged location, recovered coastal activity, very important at that time. But between 1580 and 1617, when the partition of the province occurs, Asuncion had been "the original and secular population of the entire Río de la Plata", in the words of the Argentinian historian Ramón José Cárcano.

Buenos Aires acquires relevance from the province split in two parts, in 1617. This division condemns Paraguay to become the only Spanish province overseas without sea coasts, due to a mere mistake and the constant ignorance of the Spanish monarchies on the overseas territories of the River Plate. Hernando Arias de Saavedra, then Governor, had dated in Buenos Aires his request for the province split, in 1602. Indeed, he was accidentally in Buenos Aires, but the Spanish King believed the letter had been sent from the capital of the province, and decides the division of Paraguay. He thus created the province of Río de la Plata, whose capital was Buenos Aires, and the province of Guairá, whose capital was Asuncion.

**MT How did the city of Asuncion developed after the province split?**

**JR** Asuncion remains absolutely neglected. In such a way that, until the 19th century - i.e., more than 250 years later -, its urban center does not expand far beyond its original limits. This means what we call today the city's Historical Center: from the Uruguayan square to the Colón avenue, which leads to the port. Six blocks between the riverbanks - because there was still no bay, only an arm of the Paraguay River that was silting and later became a bay - up to six blocks to the North. That constituted what Captain Aguirre called "the huge amphitheater of the city towards the river." That was Asuncion.

In 1869, the allied armies of Brazil and Argentina arrived in the city and surveyed the reforms that had taken place in 1821, during Dr. Francia dictatorship, when the city lost its natural, initial order, to the dictator-imposed geometric order. Such planning attitude was very common at that time, in which beauty or order was referred to a disposition attached to geometry, with a certain regularity, proportion, a conformation, let's say, measurable. I believe Francia's reform has been one of the most serious inconveniences for Asuncion's urban personality. It was, by all accounts, an arbitrariness from which we could never recover. Because many people in Asuncion still think that, when paving a street, everything that is below it disappears. And so we have paved streams, we covered ravines, we have ignored the signs of the landscape for the benefit of a regularity that ordered geometrically the city, but that deprived it of its natural essence. Asuncion was then the only city whose design was not covered by Sevilla rules.

**MT The Triple Alliance War, or the Guazú War, known in Brazil as the Paraguay War, represents an unfortunate turning point in the history of Paraguay. Has it led to profound changes in the design of the city?**

**JR** On this subject, much reflection has to be done. Usually, when people talk about the Triple Alliance War they get, to a large extent, to justify what has been done. And to justify what has been done, they feel the need to speak ill of the enemy. But things are not so simple. Let's start from the fact that, from a war, we are all losers. Someone said that truth is the first casualty of any war. Much was lied on the Triple Alliance War, and this amount of lie made that, when trying to get to the heart of the matter, one finds many interferences and many wrong versions. On the other hand, history must make use of absence of emotion, as much as possible. And unfortunately those who wrote about the war generally were its protagonists, and had to be loyal to their bosses, flags, and monarchs, and so one moves away from the truth. This is a serious impediment to getting to the heart of the matter. Nevertheless, the Brazilian military occupation sought to consolidate the winner dominance, as Ramón J. Cárcano says, this Argentinian Alliance' supporter.

In 1869, an Austro-Hungarian cartographer arrived in Asuncion with the allied troops, and plotted all the urban enclaves the Alliance army was conquering. He made a map of the city according to Dr. Francia reforms, and all subsequent city expansions followed that matrix. That is, they extended the streets of Francia eastward and southward, thus forming an urban expansion subjected to the regularity imposed by him, geometric and arbitrarily. I consider this phenomenon absolutely pernicious for the future development of the city. Because of shortcomings of both national and local governments, the city could not equip the streets, due to the fact that, when crossing hills and promontories, no pavement could resist torrents and rapids that immediately carried everything that was put on. Therefore, Asuncion had no choice but to develop eastward towards its flat streets and forget higher sites. These were, however, environmental and scenically the most beautiful parts of the city, which separate the northern and southern slopes. That neighborhood could have been, let's say, a salvation for Asuncion, for placing the historical center at the expansion center, both Eastward and Southward. Due to these promontories, it was not possible to expand southward. So the city expansion made it grow disproportionately to the East, setting up a very inconvenient distance to its center.

**MT Why inconvenient?**

**JR** There is a saying that cities begin to be inefficient whenever their geometric center moves far from their vital center. Asuncion's vital center remained clinging to the outskirts of the port, to the neighborhoods of the axis harbor-rail station, the most important local circulation axis, from 1861 on. Not only passengers, but all the interior of the country that could access the railroad reached the port by rail, enabling the transfer of goods for export and import. The city development was based on that axis. When Asuncion expands, it does so in that direction. That made it even harder to urban location within those enclaves that, again, are the best of Asuncion in environmental and landscape matters. This phenomenon is completed with another very characteristic phenomenon of Paraguay villages, but especially of Asuncion: the problem of the river.

Some people say, in a very simplistic way, or simplifying the phenomenon, that Asuncion turns its back to the river. Asuncion does not turn its back to the river. The problem is that, since its foundation, population enclaves that settled in the city had by the river natives very hostile to catechization or to being integrated within the city. They were the Indians from the Chaco, from the coast, Guaicurus, Pajaguás, Mbayás. These Indians have always been very hostile to being integrated into the Spanish community, and were also hostile to the Guaranies, who did ally with Spaniards at some time. Then the river was a place of care. Later, with the consolidation of national states, the river becomes a permanent source of hostility between states and a common access mechanism for warships, invasions, revolutions, as they used it as a core translation element.

The authorities' reaction to these raids was walling off the river with barracks. For example, from colony times, there existed a towing service. To tow a ship meant that, when in the middle of the stream, the canopies could not outbrave the river current due to a lack of wind, some sailors were lowered to the coast with a rope and dragged the ship. That was the tow, and for that reason it was necessary to leave some space of the coast free of buildings or interferences. Such servitude is valid until today. Although sails no longer exist, everyone does what he wants on the coast. Further figures leave the use of the coast to the domain of the Military and National Navies. Some councilors of Santa Catarina told me that this figure is valid in Brazil, especially in Santa Catarina, as local governments can not use the beach freely if there is no agreement with the Navy. Even if they had made use of the franchises urban heritage offered them, people would not approach the coast, except in very specific places, because it was occupied by barracks. We have a long list of such coastal enclaves, from the National Penitentiary in Tacumbú to almost the center of the city. Then Asuncion did not turn its back to the river: the river was inaccessible to citizens, in a functional way.

#### **MT What happened to the expansion to the East?**

**JR** This topic is connected to the above. People say that Asuncion has six hundred thousand inhabitants, but about two million come every day, and residents protest: "We are providing services to those who come to use the city." It is not so simple. These people were previously expelled from Asuncion, and must return to the capital every day because here are their workplaces, fun, relaxation, soccer fields, whatever. These people were expelled in the most arbitrary way possible. They were taken out of their natural, original environment. Because especially under the Stroessner dictatorship, the government paved streets with a hideous cobblestone. Inhabitants had to pay peremptorily the pavement cost, and if they did not, they were taken from their homes. Those people went slowly to the margins of the city, constituting a huge population with no services, access, public transportation, health coverage, education, and so on. A marginal population of enormous volume, which has to come and leave the city permanently. This is an example of how things, apparently without consequences, do have consequences over time, in an anti-economic and antisocial way of great importance.

#### **MT Returning to the war, what impact had Brazilian occupation in the city's physical space?**

**JR** There is a very characteristic fact that may seem an accidental matter: all the Brazilian chiefs used the houses of the Lopez family to settle in Asuncion. The Brazilian hospital was installed in the house of one of Lopez's brothers, the Argentine barracks were in the Lopez's sister house, Marshal Caxias settled in Lopez's father house, General Osorio settled in a house that had belonged to Lopez, and the Rio Grande cavalry was installed in the palace that used to be Francisco Lopez's private home. Those were the largest houses in Asuncion, it's true. But, in such decision, there was also a will to formalize the domain by occupying the vanquished's house. Of course this can be understood from the point of view of marketing today, but probably there has been some similar interest.

Fundamentally, the isolation of Asuncion, an isolation of centuries, produced a great curiosity to know what Asuncion was, what Paraguay was. Thus, along with the occupation army many merchants, adventurous people came. The truth is that Paraguay was devastated, and the first profession that emerges strongly after the war is that of the scribes. Because anyone who occupied an empty house, simply published an edict in the newspapers that said "whoever claims to be the owner of the house on La Igualdad street, must go to the clerk to formalize such property, because after fifteen days it will become the house of John Doe." Obviously real owners were not there, and in fifteen days that house happened to belong to a new owner. That ignorance about Asuncion produced many fantastic speculations, on the fact that, having no banks here - remember that people left peremptorily and quickly the city on February 21, 1868 -, where had they left their belongings? Where were their possessions? Where were the sterling pounds, gold objects, mangers, gold saints, filigreed rings, their silverware? Where? There was great speculation about where those treasures were buried, and a devastation of the city begins looking for those burials.

The city was then completely destroyed. The houses had thick adobe walls to support the structure, and inside those adobe walls people used to make like niches for a small altar to keep a saint, to keep the bread, whatever. When invaders saw that there were things in those cavities, they presumed that in the rest of the walls there could be hidden things as well. Then they began to destroy the houses, and at night they burned the wood and straw roofs to lighting up the place, to keep working on the destruction. That probably resulted in the loss of a heritage. But from a physical standpoint though, it was not a considerable patrimony because there were no palaces, no sculptures, no bas-reliefs or over-reliefs here. There was not here the most pretentious architecture that had already been developed in cities like Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, perhaps Montevideo. Architecture was still modest in Asuncion. So, if we talk about destruction of heritage, we are talking about houses whose relevance laid only on their meaning, not not on their material value. But that was a devastation indeed. It was somewhat alleviated with the subsequent Italian immigration, which brought great builders who restocked the built patrimony with a much higher level of solvency, in formal and material terms.

Asuncion still has many houses from that time, with a diverse architecture that tried to collect cultural ferments which flourished in Europe then. Some contradictions could be dimensioned as well. Some architects came to make art deco architecture, but employed materials much more rustic than the granite or marble characteristic of that style. Many of them used a plaster called "faux stone", because there were no stones to use in construction works. Paraguay had not developed technology in the use of stone because, except in some quarries of Jesuit missions, there were no stones here. Brazilian military occupation lasts for six years, and the city remains, let's say, damaged.

But more than destroying the material environment, those who settled down also incorporated a cultural sediment to the local society. Brazilians settled in Asuncion, married daughters of local families, and changed the existing social matrix. The same goes for the indigenous matrix. It was changing with the integration with a not too large migration, which is, however, much more evident and strengthened after the Triple Alliance War, because the whole country was completely depopulated, and not only Asuncion. This also produces changes simultaneously to the slow incorporation of industrial manufacturing services and products. When that mixed social group began to consolidate, resulting from a large migratory component, the Chaco War

broke out, between 1932 and 1935, and consumed, in three years, a Paraguayan youth of thirty-six thousand men. Not to mention the consequences that every war always leave. These are the fundamental basis of Paraguay and Asuncion society. But the Chaco War also produces a phenomenon - which, if studied outside this context, can not be well understood -, that is, the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner.

**MT Would Stroessner be a consequence of the Chaco War?**

**JR** When Stroessner made his coup d'etat, in 1954, in my house, the house of a communist worker, as was my father, and of a peasant mother, they got very happy and said "Finally, we are going to have a strong man that will end with anarchy!". Yes, Paraguay was then an anarchy. My father went to work on any given day and did not return home, because a revolt or a coup d'état broke out. Almost every day we had a similar thing. So everyone said "finally, we have a strong man who will solve the problem of instability". It happened that Paraguay was militarily triumphant of the Chaco War. The military enlistment becomes then a great prestige. The military dominates the picture, much like its domination today, in democracy, through its former supporters, by defection of democrats themselves. To this day, we have a huge number of survivors of the dictatorship both victims but also victimizers boasting of Democrats, because the Democrats were not brave enough to face them. In the same way, at that time, the military - covered with great prestige - begin to dominate the scene, and politicians will knock on barracks doors for the military to solve their adventures of power.

In the midst of this situation, in 1947, an appalling civil war ensued, between governing Colorados and their Liberal, Febrerist and Communist opponents. That civil war, just like all civil wars, does not stifle tempers. In 1954, while the Government was struggling in absolute inoperativeness, Stroessner took Power. That is, Stroessner and the Chaco War are consequences of unresolved problems of the Triple Alliance War, when Argentines put into the final treaty that Argentina owned the Chaco region, from the Bermejo River to Bahia Negra. When the treaty is disclosed, in 1866, Bolivians say: "But, how can Argentines say that the Chaco is Argentinian? Chaco is Bolivian!". So the discussion was not between Paraguay and the other countries. It was between Bolivia and Argentina, and Brazil supported Bolivia. Then Paraguay slowly collects titles, puts them on the table and recovers the Chaco region until the war breaks out. That is to say, the Chaco War is a consequence of the Triple Alliance War; the Triple Alliance War is a consequence of the bad resolutions of Independence, and the emergence of the dictatorship is a consequence of the military prestige that results from the Chaco War. That is the situation.

From there, Stroessner's long term takes place, whose sequels have not been fully measured. I mean, people can not pretend that, because the dictator was gone, the dictatorship was also gone. People can not be so stupidly innocent, if we call innocent to what is really a lack of shame. People must know that a dictatorship generates a social state with many distortions, and that the time demanded thereafter to restructure things and society is perhaps much longer than the time the dictatorship took to exercise such distortion. Many people believed American friends when they told us: "Okay, we no longer support Stroessner, now we will make you democrats. Choose what democracy you want. This one? Well, come that democracy for the Paraguayans! There is democracy, enjoy it." Things are not so simple. It is clear that if, on the one hand, Americans had much to do with supporting Stroessner, on the other hand they were also a decisive factor in his dismissal. Because once General Rodríguez was accused of being a drug trafficker, he was used as the only possible link to get Stroessner out. So Americans told him: "We forgive you, you will stop being a drug dealer for us, but you must expel your father-in-law". That is how Stroessner left. This democracy is almost like a creature born with congenital defects, which can only be solved with many surgeries and long medical treatment. That democracy was born that way, and again, under military leadership.

**MT Stroessner's dictatorship is largely contemporary of Brazilian military dictatorship, which signed with Paraguay the treaty for the construction of the binational Itaipu power plant. Even today, Itaipu has great weight in the Paraguayan economy. What is its influence on the recent history of Asuncion?**

**JR** What does Itaipu produce immediately? It produces a flood of dollars that created the breed we call the Barons of Itaipu. They begin to make investments of great value, with large buildings, and then indeed the urban image of Asuncion is deformed. The city of colonial courtyards disappears, in connection to other measures implemented by very little informed people - to call them that way, generously - or people who only saw their own profit under the guise of modernity. That is the course for the Asuncion we have today.

At the time I gave classes at the university, I used to say that it would not be fifteen years before Asuncion had at least two or three bridges crossing the city. As the city remained attached to its vital center, and all expansion occurs eastward, there is therefore a dense, complicated traffic, which also draws its causes from the lack of urban planning. While Asuncion had neighborhoods relatively close to the microcenter, intercommunication with them was easy. But when its population is expelled out of the city, much more efficient transport is required, not collective but massive transfer.

That precisely coincides with the disappearance of some means of transport useful in the past, as the train or tram. They were lost simply for lack of maintenance, or the rulers' poor vision. So, as time goes by, people seek to procure their own vehicles to move. This produces a huge traffic congestion, also caused by a complicated urban arrangement, permanently interfered, in which car's supremacy over the pedestrian or other means of circulation is observed. Under such scheme, Asuncion keeps generating a huge traffic. But why is the Historic Center still the city living space? Because all the country's public offices are housed on those six by thirteen blocks, which were already the city's historic center founded by Martínez de Irala in 1537. There are more than fifty public offices, with more than 300,000 officials that crowd the city accesses every day because almost everyone lives outside the city, and almost one million users have to come downtown through those same roads.

**MT In the last twenty years, many plans were made to requalify the Historical Center of Asuncion. None of them was fully implemented, nor considered in the development of subsequent plans. How do you see this process?**

**JR** What happens is that no plan will work if it is conceived in isolation from the rest of the city's problems. Today, the Ministry of Public Works has rudely intervened in strictly municipal attributions to make a viaduct, or to make a coastal road, without any study of their functional implications with the scheme of the whole city. Yes, it makes me a faster section, a stretch of three kilometers where I can drive at 120 kilometers per hour, but thereafter I go back into the scheme of closures, cuts and advances, driving at 10 kilometers per month!, more or less. This is exactly opposite to the reasoning that was developed in Germany, when they built their first pedestrian cities. As they began to realize that a bicycle went faster than a car, or a pedestrian could compete with a car in some sections, they said "no, this is not working". The city is a whole and several things must be studied together. If one thing should be done before others, let's see priorities, benefits, and costs. Let's see if there is a reasonable cost/benefit relationship so that a work must be addressed before another one.

But I must not do it just because I need to achieve it before the end of my term, and then I want to inaugurate a public facility so that it brings me some prestige. That is another problem we have. We are entering the agenda of politicians and working according to that agenda. And we forget many other aspects. Asuncion's environmental problem, for example, is a serious one. Its scale is still small but it is quite serious, as we have covered streams in the city. We had fifty-four streams throughout the city, but today we do not have a single one,. The water is down there and emerges when it rains. This was the case of Atlanta, in the United States, when they looked for reasons why the city was flooded under every heavy rain. They realized it was simply because the entire floor had been covered, stripping it of its absorption capacity. Today we have built so many pavements, parking lots, buildings, and the water, where is it going to? Such questions are elementary. Today politicians say "I paved 800 blocks like no one else has never done in Asuncion!". So what?! Eight hundred blocks that are not cleaned, 800 blocks not signalized, 800 blocks that have multiplied the number of traffic accidents, and so on.

It is said that he has power who exercises his will. But the Power organized for people's benefit is the Government. And that Power, organized for people's benefit, forgets, however, the people itself. Today's leaders - of any political sign - want power only for a matter of vanity. They want to exercise power for power itself and its advantages. This way we are not going anywhere. That is, we are going to collapse. And the collapse, we already knew it.