

**“ACONTECIMENTOS DE CRÔNICA URBANA”
ANTÔNIO ALCÂNTARA MACHADO,
FANFULLA AND THE RISE OF AN ITALIAN ETHNICITY IN SÃO PAULO.**

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Abstract

This article examines the development of an Italian-Brazilian identity in the city of São Paulo. Through the distribution of important information, journalism was an important vehicle in describing a new urban reality as well as organising immigrant communities and thus creating a new ethnic conscience. Subsequently we see how Antônio Alcântara Machado, a vanguard writer of the 1920s, uses this urban writing style in his short stories. It is argued that this imitation of popular immigrant speech is not merely an aesthetic decision, but that it indicates a new notion of what it means to be Brazilian.

Keywords: Cultural history of São Paulo; Italian immigrants; *Fanfulla*; Antônio Alcântara Machado

Resumen

En este artículo se estudia el desarrollo de una identidad ítalo-brasileño en São Paulo. El periodismo fue un instrumento fundamental, no sólo en describir una nueva realidad urbana, sino además de instrumento para organizar las comunidades de inmigrantes, difundiendo información y creando así una nueva conciencia étnica. Vemos cómo un escritor vanguardista de la época, Antônio Alcântara Machado, utiliza este estilo de escribir, en su obra literaria. Se afirma que esto no es sólo por motivos estéticos sino que señala una nueva interpretación de lo que significa ser brasileño.

Palabras Clave: historia cultural de São Paulo; inmigrantes italianos; periódico *Farfulla*; Antônio Alcântara Machado

The city of São Paulo, without any strong colonial tradition and growing explosively, was sometimes seen as what Nicolau Sevcenko (37) calls an “inverted Babel”. In this interpretation of the classical myth, the Old World is seen as hopelessly decadent, old, fossilised and oppressed, whereas the New World is mysterious, exciting, dynamic and enchanting – the place where people will all

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come together and a new homogeneous race will be created. For some Brazilian intellectuals this New World was symbolized by the booming city of São Paulo, where people of all races coexisted and interacted. Journalism played a fundamental role in the debates regarding the neighborhood. As Jeffrey Lesser has argued, immigrants themselves were actively participating in the formations of new ethnic identities, and the Italian language newspaper *Fanfulla* was one of the main foreign language newspapers through which newcomers established new communities. I will briefly trace the history of the newspaper and show how it was instrumental in the creation of a new Brazilian/Italian culture, using Brazilian racial politics. These new urban working class Brazilians were subject to many debates. I will subsequently examine some short stories of the upper-class writer Antônio Alcantara Machado, who suggested that that the immigrants' offspring should be seen as a new kind of *Bandeirantes*, bringers of a new culture where people of previously diverse heritages come together.

Inventing a tradition

The desolate character of Brás today stands in stark contrast with its vibrant history in the early twentieth century, when the idea of proletarian urban cultures was new and often terrifying. As an immigrant, working-class neighborhood² Brás was extensively discussed in relation to the modernization of Brazil interpreted as this new, inverted Babel. The neighborhood, where immigrants lived next to the former slaves, was specifically targeted, not merely for its anti-hygenic living conditions, but also to destroy any attempt at labor organizing. Brás thus becomes more than simply a poor area of town and gets transformed into the antithesis of all the bourgeoisie desired the city to be. For instance, the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* published a whole series of articles under the title “Um bairro desprezado,” (An unappreciated neighborhood) illustrated with photographs to accentuate the poverty in the Brás district:

² The spelling of the neighborhood varies. In order to make it clear that it is indeed the same neighborhood that is mentioned by Machado and *Fanfulla*, I have homogenized its use to Brás, the way it is currently spelt in São Paulo.

A poor neighborhood, whose population consists of a majority of simple people who live in modest houses if they do not live in unsanitary tenement buildings ... Brás has always been looked down on. It does not help that the area has hundreds of important commercial businesses and a large amount of factories of different products.... nobody is interested. (SEVCENKO, 1992: 129)³

The newspaper journalist accuses the owners of the factories as well as the municipal officials of completely abandoning and neglecting the neighborhood and its inhabitants. How can São Paulo ever become a truly modern and civilized city when such conditions prevail?

In the early 20th century, as Vinícius Brant clarifies, urbanism began to be used as an instrument that would establish a spatial order in the city in terms of class segregation: on one side the central region, intended for the elite and a place of urban interventions. On the one hand, São Paulo became a wealthy city that tried to emulate Paris, building for instance a copy of the French capital's opera house. Yet the other part of the city, built on flood plains and along railway lines, consisted of quickly expanding neighborhoods where industries were set up and the poor lived. One of the neighborhoods representative of this new proletarian culture was Brás, which until the end of the 19th century had been occupied by craftsmen and small traders.

In the early 1900s Brás began to be transformed into an industrial suburb of São Paulo, inhabited mainly by Italian immigrants. The rapid accumulation of capital allowed São Paulo coffee planters to accommodate to the end of the slave trade by introducing modern technology to increase productivity and by gradually switching slave labor to free immigrant labor. The city of São Paulo was quickly transformed into Brazil's leading commercial and industrial metropolis. More than two million European immigrants entered the whole state, often after receiving a free passage in exchange for work on the coffee plantations, but many also migrated to the city, where they provided cheap labor for the factories. Rather than populating the interior and working on the coffee plantations, as was

³ All transactions in this article are mine except when noted.

originally intended, more and more immigrants stayed in the city of São Paulo instead of going to work on the plantations. Confronted with working days of fourteen to sixteen hours this new proletariat quickly forgot their rural origins and according to Sevckenko (1992: 37-38) the living and working conditions were so brutal that of the more than one million immigrants who came to São Paulo state between 1884 and 1914, almost half left the country looking for a way to improve their lot. Traditionally, the educated and mainly white elites feared violence and danger from blacks and mulattos, whom they portrayed as lazy, undisciplined, sickly, drunk, and in a constant state of vagabondage. To these fears were now added new ones about disorder and violence by foreign-born factory workers, many of whom were expelled from Brazil on charges of being anarchists bent on overthrowing the social order.

Obviously, in reality this “New Babel” imagined by the country’s elites never harmonizing at all, and the vast majority of São Paulo’s population lived in neighborhoods similar to Brás. Immigrants competed with former slaves and the so-called *caipiras*, people of mixed blood coming from the countryside looking to improve their conditions in the city. Some immigrant groups, especially the Italians, did manage to organize, through mutual help organizations, charities and labor unions. An urban blue-collar culture developed, with a strong labor movement inspired by anarchism and fed by Italian, Spanish and Eastern European immigrants. As wealthy *Paulistas* started to realize that the European-born immigrants were often desperately poor and barely literate, living in conditions that were very comparable to those of the former slaves, the more self-assured elites started to doubt the presumed superiority of everything European. The new metropolis, flooded with poor and labor-organizing immigrants, together with modernization and the rise of an increasingly competitive workforce created within the elites a climate of fear about foreignness and materialism, as well as nostalgia for the countryside and the lost values of the pre-immigrant period. European-born immigrants used notions of racial hierarchies originally promoted by Brazil’s elites to defend their presence and claim a superior position vis-à-vis the freed blacks, yet the influx of immigrants in the late nineteenth-century

complicated these ideologies. The governing elites expressed their xenophobia less through racial discrimination – after all, many of the newcomers were “whiter” than the elites themselves - than through the fear of a dissolving nationality, an internal disease that would destroy the city. Former slaves, poor white immigrants - all these new figures-needed to be accounted for in Brazilian social imaginary of that time. The best thing for the immigrants to do, according to the traditional upper-class point of view, was to work hard and maybe their offspring would learn the way of life of the descendants of the *Bandeirantes*, the people who had lived in the area since colonial times.

Negotiating a Brazilian/Italian identity: *Fanfulla*

Immigrants did eventually become “Brazilianised”, although not in such a harmonious and easy way as the myth of the inverted Babel suggests. In the process of acculturation, immigrant groups tend to create a variety of institutions such as mutual aid societies, labor unions, social clubs, schools, churches and newspapers, to help them cope in their new environment. One of the most important of these institutions is the foreign language press. These ethnic newspapers have received limited scholarly attention in the United States; in Latin America, they have been largely ignored. *Fanfulla*, the main newspaper for Italian immigrants in São Paulo, was founded in 1894 by Vitalino Rotellini and became an important vehicle for the distribution of information within the Italian communities of Sao Paulo. According to Joseph Love (1980: 331) São Paulo had the greatest number of periodicals in the nation, and was second only to the federal district in the number of people employed in journalism. In the decade of 1920-1929 alone, over 500 journals and papers were founded. *Fanfulla*, which at one time reached as many as 35,000 readers, began as an eight page morning daily, and by 1913 had expanded to twelve pages and it continued publication daily until 1964 with the exception of five years during World War II. This liberal and anticlerical daily sought to represent the interests of all social strata within the Italian community of São Paulo and Brazil. Newspapers physically deteriorate rapidly and only certain years of *Fanfulla* have survived. During the years 1923-26,

which I was able to consult, much of the newspaper was devoted to news about Italy and the rise of fascism, but attention was given to the living and working conditions of Italians in Brazil, to the labor movement and to the socialists. News from Buenos Aires is also prominent, which reflects considerable impact of the Italian colonies in Argentina, particularly from Buenos Aires, on those of São Paulo. There were also daily columns which focused on local news from different regions of Italy as well as sections of letters and commercial news. The language is a mixture of Portuguese and Italian language and the newspaper seemed to cater to a audience that aspired to become middle class. For instance, there are many advertisements for cheap beauty products as soaps, shampoos, special medicines for people who cannot afford to see a doctor, and Italian steamship companies competing for the lowest fares. However, people also tried to sell luxury items as fine Italian wines, Brazilian products and modern objects such as sewing machines products, and restaurants with both Italian and Brazilian cuisines promoted their cuisines.

Apparently, *Fanfulla* was read aloud in many situations and served as a community bulletin board for Italian organizations (LOVE, 1980: 132). The São Paulo paper consistently favored the participation of immigrants in political life. Although it never explicitly recommended that the immigrants renounce their Italian citizenship, it did urge them to become Brazilian citizens. *Fanfulla* acknowledged the “prejudice against naturalization” among Italians and the “fear of being a traitor to Italianism.” Nevertheless, it vigorously pursued its campaign for naturalization and political participation. In 1922 *Fanfulla* went so far as to declare it was against new immigration from Italy, comparing the treatment of Italian newcomers to that of the black slaves. this remark angered the Brazilian Defense League or *Liga Defensiva Brasileira*, an ultra nationalistic organization that was founded by about two hundred coffee barons, to the extent that they started attacking workers and offices of foreign language newspapers in general and threatening among others..”the Italian newspaper *Fanfulla* ... for their infamous articles against Brazil and the Brazilians” (SEVCENKO, 1992: 139-140).

In this ideology of the urban melting pot seen as an inverted Babel, a mixture of immigrants and elites, the black population is of course the big excluded factor. Immigrants came to São Paulo to replace black slaves and were considered superior by the elites, in spite of being manual laborers, since they were white. Thus, as both Lúcia Lippi and Jeffrey Lesser have shown, by being a menial worker the immigrant neither develops an “ethnic consciousness” as upper-class nor as lower-class. Therefore immigrants discovered they were now something else, “Ethnic”. One has to keep in mind that it was only upon their arrival in Brazil that the Italian immigrants encountered an extremely racialized environment. Brazilian elites, intellectuals and newspapers produced abundant negative stereotypes of the former slaves and of the poor Brazilians in general. It was this disdain for the existing population that had encouraged immigration in the nineteenth century. *Fanfulla* quickly adapts this racialized tone and negative stereotyping, whereas obviously before in Italy color and race had never been an issue. It is striking to see how for instance, in July 1923, *Fanfulla* reports in great detail on a labor strike and notes of each victim whether they are Brazilian, Italian-Brazilian or “Black.” By becoming “White,” Italian immigrants found a way to distinguish themselves from the discriminated position the Afro-Brazilians found themselves in. This implied that with time, the formerly widely diverse Italian immigrant groups developed an “ethnic consciousness” and in this sense, the transformation of strangers to citizens was also a transformation of immigrants “without color” or without a colored identity, into white Brazilians.

Alcântara Machado and his Italian *Bandeirantes*

Antônio Alcântara Machado was an important voice in Brazilian *Modernismo* or avant-garde, a movement that generally is thought to have started with The Week of Modern Art, the first in a series of events in 1922 which were symptomatic of the transformations which Brazilian society was undergoing. This artistic happening can be seen as both precursor and catalyst for the analysis of the state of the nation which took place in the centennial year of Brazilian independence. Dawn Ades sees Brazilian *modernismo* as not only a break with the

past and a celebration of the modern, but also a reassessment of Brazilian traditions and nationalism against internationalism. In line with their search for a mystical “homeland” with one national race, the students of the Faculty of Law together with the anti-immigrant Nationalist League and the elite newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* erected the monument of the nineteenth century poet Olavo Bilac as a symbol of old-school nationalist culture. Furthermore, they erected another statue, called *Bandeirantes*, celebrating the outlaws that lived in the area since colonial times and from which the oldest families claim to have been descendend. This figure of the *Bandeirante* was being constructed as the opposite of the foreign worker; as a pure Brazilian social entity, a conquerer of the interior and founding father of the Brazilian race and land. The immigrants, on the other hand, were supposedly without roots nor cultures, coming from foreign and therefore irrelevant lands (SEVCENKO, 1992: 137).

Antônio Alcântara Machado (1901-1935) came from such a traditional upper-class family. He published *Brás, Bexiga e Barra Funda* in 1927. Machado also worked as a drama critic for the *Jornal do Comércio* and became a passionate promoter of the *Modernismo* movement, collaborating with prominent intellectuals such as Oswald de Andrade and Mário de Andrade, in journals such as the *Revista de Antropofagia*, which he co-founded in 1928. Machado’s work is probably best known for its use of colloquial language, particularly that of Italian immigrants, including Italian phrases, and common interjections through which the author describe the lives of lower middle class Italians in São Paulo. According to Sergio Milliet (1936: 182) Machado saw his endeavor partly as a research project and devoted much time to riding the streetcars of the poorer neighborhoods and frequenting cafés and other business establishments in order to absorb the language of the poor and enabling the upper-class writer to represent this register of speech.

Michael North⁴ has argued that to see linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade simply as instances of modern primitivism, a return to nature or a

⁴ See the preface of *The dialect of modernism*.

recoiling from modernity is to miss a far more intriguing function. The real attraction of the 'other' voice is its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar in language, a language opposed to the standard one. Perhaps this juxtaposition of languages and the communities they signify epitomizes the belief that the division between ethnic identities is primarily linguistic in nature, and can therefore be easily overcome by the second generation, who will mostly have adopted Portuguese as their primary language. Mário Carelli (1985: 192) seems to imply this when he notes that this depiction of Italian immigrants and their speech was not only important for its literary innovation, but also for the role it played in overcoming the xenophobic attitude towards this community previously prevalent in Brazilian fiction. Machado is explicit in his cosmopolitan, anti-xenophobic attitude: in the dedicatory, the "Artigo de fundo" or "Editorial" the narrator directs himself to renowned contemporary Italo-Brazilian people listed on the first page. The short narratives of *Brás, Bexiga e Barra Funda* portray the varying degrees and methods of integration into Paulista society achieved by Italian immigrants and especially the impact on the children in this society in transformation. All of the twelve short stories have as their setting the city of São Paulo. The physical area of the city is constantly brought to mind through references to specific neighborhoods, streets and streetcar lines. As indicated by the work's title, the working class neighborhoods of Brás, Bexiga and Barra Funda are of primary importance in these stories, providing a veritable map of the center of the city and the three neighborhoods of the title. The stories also reflect the occupational diversity of a city with a multifaceted economic base. In the cast of characters we see domestic servants, factory workers, seamstresses, streetcar drivers and municipal employees.

The collection of tales is structured within the narrative framework of a newspaper which chronicles the daily life of the city's Italian population. The author's choice of this medium to celebrate the role of this immigrant community in São Paulo's changing society reflects his awareness of the newspaper's importance in urban cultures, especially in the formation of public opinion. Also, the dynamic milieu which he presents is perfectly complemented by the literary

adaptation of the brevity, speed and economy of journalistic discourse. The narrator, in the persona of ‘a redação’ or “the editor” declares of this work⁵: “It’s a newspaper. That’s all....It does not go deeper. In its pages you will not find one single line of doctrine. Events of urban life. Street episodes. The importance of newspapers is highlighted within the stories by the frequent mention of newspapers, of the *Estado de São Paulo*, an elite newspaper, and of *Fanfulla*. Many of his stories have children as their main character, which enables a light, playful colloquial tone. In the story “Carmela,” the protagonist, a seamstress of Italian origin, meets a boy she likes, mainly because he owns a car: She accepts a ride with this boy, clearly understanding that this outing is merely for fun, and her real boyfriend is for marriage. The sketch is light, brief and funny. Carmela’s desire to improve her social status at least temporarily is treated in Machado’s typical slightly ironic fashion. However, the author never portrays the harsh reality of factory workers or child labor. What could have happened to Carmela had she been raped or had her boyfriend found her out? None of these possibilities are explored or even suggested.

Sometimes Machado’s insistence on linguistic virtuosity above all possible emotions seem rather denigrating as in the following scene in which a little girl has just been killed by an automobile. The mother is naturally extremely upset, but the story focuses on others in the Palestra Itália Salon⁶ who try to imagine how *Fanfulla* will report the news of the girl’s death. They realized it was a wealthy individual who had hit her. They did not even believe that the newspaper would print the story the way it should be, given that the boy was rich, powerful. ... The son of rich people ...can kill without fear. True or not, Mr. Zamponi?” (“Monstro de rodas”)

In this fictional universe social injustice and labor struggles are mentioned in an indirect way and the emphasis is always placed on humorous conversations

⁵ “É um journal. Mais nada. . . . Não aprofunda. . . Em suas colunas não se encontra uma única linha de doutrina. . . . Acontecimentos de crônica urbana. Episódios de rua.”

⁶ “[C]onversam imaginando como o *Fanfulla* daria a notícia da morte da menina. Percebe-se que foi um sujeito rico quem a atropelou. As pessoas não acreditam sequer que o jornal dê a notícia como devesa ser dada, pelo fato do rapaz ser rico, poderoso: “... Filho de rico... [p]ode matar sem medo. É ou não é, seu Zamponi?”

regarding events. This denigrating and patronizing attitude of the writer seemingly contradicts his explicit purpose of celebrating Italian immigrant culture. It is my contention that Machado does not want to celebrate “foreignness” but rather sees the Italian immigrants as a decisive factor in the creation of a new, mixed race. In his “editorial” the author develops his own theory of racial miscegenation, influenced by ideological debates and local politics in his time. After proclaiming his work merely a piece of journalism, the writer immediately mentions the city’s increasingly complex racial make up and comments that⁷ “The ethnic-social aspect of this extremely new gigantic race will tomorrow find its historian. And then it will be analyzed in a book.” Interestingly enough, he calls these new citizens new *mamalucos*, “novos mamalucos,” São Paulo foreigners, “*estrangeiros paulistanizados*.” The first group of *mamalucos*, he writes, were the people born of the Portuguese and the indigenous population, the second those born of the slaves and their masters. The third group of *mamalucos*, according to Machado, are descendents of immigrants with the local, indigenous. These are the “*novos mamalucos*” or new inhabitants of the city of São Paulo, and by extension, of the new, modern Brazil:⁸ “The Brazilianized Italians. Little Gaetano. Carmela. Brazilian and *Paulista*. Even *Bandeirantes*”.

The importance of the Italian immigrants in the formation and direction of contemporary São Paulo is underscored by the author’s comparison of them to the famed *Bandeirantes* of the seventeenth century, adventurers who explored the hinterlands in search of land, riches and indigenous slave labor. The Italo-Brazilians are urban *Bandeirantes*, penetrating and thereby restructuring traditional Paulista society, which is representative of the new frontier of a nation becoming more urban than rural.

Urbanization and mass emigration brought together all sorts of languages, dialects, and idiolects previously separated by space and social difference. A defense of a national language also becomes a way of defending the borders, those

⁷ “O aspecto étnico-social dessa novíssima raça de gigantes encontrará amanhã o seu historiador. E será então analisado e pesado num livro.”

⁸ “Nasceram os italianinhos [sic]. O Gaetaninho. A Carmela. Brasileiros e paulistas. Até bandeirantes.”

outlying borders crossed by foreigners and a growing urban working class. Perhaps Machado's insistence on the mixture of Italian and Portuguese could also indicate a fracturing or radical and terrifying mutation of Portuguese language and society as a whole. This new Italian-Portuguese seems to be everywhere, in the trolleys and in *Fanfulla*. Immigrants do not adapt to a supposed Brazilian national identity; they transform it much as they are transformed by it. And just as industry must progress, the *Modernista* writer had better embrace this new world and popular culture, or else become a fossil of the nineteenth century.

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