

John Dos Passos on the Brazilian Migration: Analyzing *Brazil on the Move**

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Abstract

This article aims at analyzing in what manner John Dos Passos portrayed migration in *Brazil on the Move*. Our text starts by showing the writer's interest in Brazil's development ever since the Portuguese settled the country. We then look closer at how Dos Passos reported on internal migrations that were being stimulated to settle Brazil's interior during the late nineteen forties. The article also analyzes how the construction of Brasília is interrelated to the migration problem. Furthermore, Dos Passos wrote on the *favelas* (slums), suggesting that people had to move out of the big cities and get themselves some virgin land to work on. He believed that agriculture could free the Brazilian people from poverty.

Keywords

John Dos Passos, Migration, Juscelino Kubitschek, Oscar Niemeyer, Slums

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar de que forma John Dos Passos retratou a migração em *Brazil on the Move*. Começamos por descrever o interesse que o escritor teve pelo desenvolvimento do Brasil desde a sua colonização pelos portugueses. Em seguida, evidenciamos como Dos Passos relatou as migrações internas que estavam sendo estimuladas para povoar o interior do Brasil durante o final dos anos quarenta. O artigo também analisa como a construção de Brasília esteve inter-relacionada com o problema da migração. Além do mais Dos Passos escreveu sobre as favelas, sugerindo que as pessoas tinham que sair das grandes cidades para encontrarem trabalho no campo. Ele acreditava que a agricultura poderia libertar o povo brasileiro da pobreza.

Palavras-chave

John Dos Passos, Migração, Juscelino Kubitschek, Oscar Niemeyer, Favelas

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John Dos Passos's many travels took him to Brazil. His two trips in the late nineteen fifties and early nineteen sixties were rich in subjects which went into the writing of *Brazil on the Move* a collection of material that starts with a look into the Portuguese settlement of the country in its colonial days.

Whereas Dos Passos had felt negatively about the Portuguese during his early years, he now (in the late 1950s) started to reflect on them appraisingly. In *Brazil on the Move*, he asked how it was possible that

a handful of settlers from tiny Portugal, a country which during the great period of Portuguese colonization numbered at most a couple of million souls, [managed] to occupy and assimilate one half of the South American continent. (1991, p. 2)

He further questioned how it befell “that the Brazilians, of all the South American peoples, [seemed] furthest on the way towards producing a civilization of their own” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 2). With the last question, Dos Passos seemed to imply that the Portuguese had sown a seed more successful than had the Spaniards in their American colonies. For Dos Passos the explanation for “the success of the Portuguese as colonizers” lay in the fact that they were

made up of more various cultural strains than the other colonizing nations of Europe. The northern Portuguese had a lot of Celt in them. Many of the landowning families were the offspring of blueeyed Visigoths. There was a strong infusion of Burgundian French during the period of the establishment of the monarchy. In the south there was Arab and Berber blood (Dos Passos, 1992, p. 2).

In stating this, Dos Passos inferred the Portuguese had been a thriving people, because they had amalgamated with other peoples ever since Portugal's early history, interpreting this racial mixture as beneficial. Naturally, amalgamation also occurred in the colonization of Brazil. But for Dos Passos, in the colonization process, the use of force and the subjugation of the natives were as important as the mixing with the original inhabitants. Rather deferentially, he stated that the “Portuguese patriarch dominating the Indians by sexual prowess, by strength of character, by the possession of firearms and the knowledge of how to make gunpowder, became a prime factor in the colonizing of Brazil” (Dos Passos, 1969, pp. 362-3). To colonize Brazil in an orderly way, the country had been organized in captaincies. The Portuguese settlers “suffered various fortunes. At Ilhéus a colony was set up without difficulty by treaty with the local Indians” (Dos Passos, 1969, pp. 362-3). As put by Dos Passos, the settlements were successful in the end, even if some backlashes also occurred as when, for instance, “colonists who tried to plant a town near the mouth of the Northern Paraíba River were driven off.” To undercut these Indian rebellions, the Portuguese governors had “encouraged the colonists to marry into the native population,” as they had done before, in their possessions in “India and the Orient” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 374), recognizing that “racial [admixture]” was the best way “to conquer the tropics” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 44). Hence, in Brazil too, “intermarriage became [...] a fact of nature” (Dos Passos, 1969, pp. 374-5). Even in rural agricultural practices, Dos Passos discerns the presence of cultural intermingling. Although the “Portuguese strain was dominant,” “stock raising and agriculture, [...] was carried on by the old Indian system of burning off the forest [...], planting a crop or two of maize or manioc and, as the soil became exhausted, moving to another virgin tract” (Dos Passos, 1969, pp. 374-5). This was the case, because “chemical fertilizers” were “unobtainable and even if they could be” arranged the “rainfall would wash [them] away with the first tropical downpour” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 121).

Looking back at colonial history, Dos Passos addresses the issue of the urgent need of labor hands. Even though the Portuguese colonists were mixing with the natives, more settlers were needed to help to work on the “*fazendas*” (plantations) “of enormous extent” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 375), where “enough sugar” was produced “to yield an income to the royal exchequer in Lisbon” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 364). “Negro slaves” were imported, and these “were considered part of the family” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 9), too. “The master’s mulatto children,” Dos Passos thought, “enjoyed a certain status. Halfbreeds, whether of Indian or Negro blood, tended to be drawn into the dominant culture, instead of being discarded into an outcast class as they were in English-speaking America” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 9). Dos Passos seems to have been proud that the Portuguese had recognized their “part Indian or part Negro” “half-breeds” as belonging “to the family group.” Approvingly he wrote:

The patriarch recognized his bastards. No obstacles were placed in the way of their rising to any situation they were capable of. The slaves were at the bottom of the heap but their lot was often alleviated by the fact that they too were thought of as relations. (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 375)

To be sure, even though Dos Passos seemed to subscribe to a somewhat benign view of the slavery system in Brazil, he was not oblivious to the fact that there were striking differences and a stratified social order. Slaves occupied the lowest rung in society, whereas “the mixed breeds [...] cared for the stock, furnished the skilled and semi-skilled labor and the overseers and the minor officials” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 375).

Brazil was rich, not only in exported raw materials (such as gold and silver), but in farmland as well. Rapidly, the name of the colony came to be connoted with “affluence.” As a result, “[i]mmigration from Portugal increased. By eighteen hundred the population of Brazil counting Negroes, Indians and whites and mixed breeds was reckoned at three million. This was considerable more than the population of the mother country” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 376). Before long the Portuguese monarch determined “under royal charter” that immigration was to be “controlled,” to impede Portugal’s depopulation (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 376). Ironically, the king himself soon had to leave for Brazil. When Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Europe, and was already subjugating Spain, John VI, fled for Rio de Janeiro: “John and his whole court embarked on a fleet, sometimes described as consisting of a thousand ships, for Brazil. [...] Rio de Janeiro suddenly found itself the capital of the Portuguese world” (Dos Passos, 1969, pp. 378-9). King John’s emigration was to last from 1808 to 1821. Only then did John VI return to Lisbon “to try to restore the family fortunes in the home country. [...] John left his son Pedro I as prince-regent in Rio” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 379). Pedro had no intention of accepting that Brazil, a territory that largely outsized Portugal, would continue under the latter’s dominion. In “1822 young Pedro was proclaimed constitutional emperor of an independent Brazil” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 379).

When John Dos Passos visited the country in 1948, the building of the infrastructure to the hinterland was in a developing phase. In Dos Passos’s opinion, Brazil’s progress had “been held back by its inconvenient geography” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 1). It was difficult to build roads; since “distances were immense,” and “transportation hazardous” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 376), and “half the land area of South America” was still “empty” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 68). The government understood that only “[r]oads meant settlers” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 80). Money was spent on the construction of highways, long “before housing” was erected for colonists in Brazil’s interior (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 80). In an interview, a Brazilian tried to explain to Dos Passos, why it took so much longer in Brazil to settle its backlands than it had taken in North America.

“During your pioneer days,” he said, “you North Americans always had the Pacific Ocean for a goal to lure you on across the mountains. That’s why you populated your part of the continent so quickly. Our way west has been barred by impenetrable forests.” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 69)

Although slowly, Dos Passos concluded, they now “were peopling Brazil” (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 381). The new infrastructures to the hinterlands were attracting people, willing to move further into the country, hoping to find themselves a farm.

Wherever a new road opens in Brazil a band of settlement spreads out along it. Here settlers are encouraged to build themselves houses and to clear small farms on six and a half acre tracts [...]. If the planting meets the requirements the settlers are supposed to get title to the land with the lapse of a year. [...] [Nevertheless, clearing] a small patch is long and tedious, [...] in most cases, a man has only his own two arms and an axe and machete, about the best he can do is burn the underbush and let the big trees lie where they fall. (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 121)

Commonly, those who were willing to engage in an internal migration were people from “the droughtstricken regions of eastern Brazil and from Bahia and from the baked out of towns in the backlands of Minas.” Some of them “seemed to have brought a little money with them, enough to buy some building materials.” Meanwhile, before the houses were finished, the “settlers lived in shelters of palmettoleaf thatch” (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 90-1).

Dos Passos noted that internal migrants also came from São Paulo, and the federal states Paraná and Pernambuco to the “western river valleys of Goiás” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 89). Whereas

[p]ublic officials travelled by air [...] the working farmer sort of people travelled by truck, jolting over endless miles of wilderness trails. These were the trucks called *pau d’arara*: parrot perches, because to keep from being jolted out you had to hold on to poles slung overhead. People who could not raise the truck fare had to walk. [...] In all they must have walked a thousand miles with their poor possessions on their heads, through tropical rain and scorching sun. (Dos Passos, 1969, p. 380)

For John Dos Passos these people “were true pioneers”; they “came buoyed up by the certainty that nothing they found in the new settlements could be worse than the poverty they had left behind.” Progressively, villages and cities were developing. Some recently founded cities, as Dos Passos reported, had already “eight thousand inhabitants, with an estimated fifteen thousand in the environs, schools, a newspaper, a hospital, and twentytwo banks” (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 89-99).

During the first visit Dos Passos paid to Brazil, he interviewed Bernardo Sayão, a Brazilian politician (vice-governor of Goiás), commissioned by the government to build the roads to the interior and support logistically the settlements (*colônias*) alongside the constructed roads. In *Brazil on the Move* Dos Passos explained how the settlements functioned:

“The first year is hard,” [Sayão] explains. The newly arrived often camp out under a tree. Next they’ll put up a bamboo shelter thatched with palm. In the Brazilian backcountry there’s a mutual aid system [...]. By the end of a year you are beginning to get enough food out of the crops of beans and rice and manioc you planted. Maybe you have something left over to sell, enough to buy shoes with. A couple of more years, if it’s a hardworking family

with plenty of children to help, you'll clear a little more land and sell the timber. [...] "When they get a little cash they'll buy bricks and build themselves a better house [...]. Then they'll clear more land and sell the timber to the sawmill and buy cattle... Coffee does magnificently here. We are planting Colombian type coffee for the American market. I want my settlers to plant coffee to tie them to the soil. A coffee plantation is a longterm investment... Brazilians are nomadic. They drift all over the continent. They'll clear a piece of land and plant a couple of crops on it and move on. I want my people to stay." (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 54-5)

Dos Passos, as well as Sayão, were well aware that Brazil, like the United States, needed immigrants for its development. It was necessary to entice them and to make them settle down. To attract colonists and end their nomadic life, hospitals and schools also had to be constructed near the settlements. Although one road already existed, Sayão believed additional roads had to be built to better interconnect the settlements, for instance, to "the city of Belém" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 56). Sayão argued that no agricultural settlement "would do [...] good without roads to bring" the peasant's "products to market" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 58). In the *colônia*, Dos Passos noticed that not only other Brazilians (internal migrants) were settling down, but also foreigners who had immigrated to Brazil. Russians, (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 46) Austrians, Hungarians, (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 49) Germans, (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 108, 133)—some of them speaking still their mother tongue, (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 95)—Greeks, Spaniards, Portuguese (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 99), Hollanders, (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 73), Lithuanians,—who were successfully producing paper (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 95)—and Japanese had joined the settlements in the country's hinterland. Among the latter group, were people growing pepper, (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 123), whereas others worked as gardeners (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 99). Dos Passos also found people of Polish (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 95) and of Scottish ancestry in Brazil (see Dos Passos, 1991, p. 138).

Some of these immigrants were "engineers and technicians" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 96) and must be approached as brain gain, such as "[y]oung Germans from Siemens," who "were putting through the last tests on [...] two freshly installed generators" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 134). Yet, as Dos Passos was told, the majority of these engineers "would rather work in the cosmopolitan regions of Rio and São Paulo" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 120) than in the country's backlands. Among these immigrants as well were learned agronomists from Switzerland, contacted by the "Brazilian Government" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 49).

Dos Passos proudly recalled having interviewed two Brazilians of great importance, whose ancestry was distinctly foreign: Juscelino Kubitschek, "one of the leading politicians," and Oscar Niemeyer, "their best-known architect" (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 9-10), who had all "sorts of European strains" that "[made] up his family tree" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 82). Their prominence led, Dos Passos to conclude that it was possible for any descendant of an immigrant to become a leading public figure in Brazil. Kubitschek had even succeeded in becoming President of the country. He "was the son of a middle-European immigrant and a Brazilian mother" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 64). Although he "had no money behind him," he achieved success because he was a "hardworking eager young man," and "managed to get himself into the medical school in Belo Horizonte" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 64). Later, Kubitschek studied in Paris and became upon his return one of Brazil's "leading urologists" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 65). In no time, "he was appointed mayor by Cetúlio Vargas"; and from "mayor of the state capital it was an easy way to governor of the state" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 65). It was Kubitschek who "promoted" Niemeyer. He had a "novel style" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 66), which did not always earn acclaim (see 1991, p. 81). "Kubitschek stood by his architect." Not even "the fact that Niemeyer [called] himself a Communist while Kubitschek [...] defended] private enterprise did [...] interfere with their collaboration" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 66).

Even though Dos Passos admired Niemeyer on the one hand, he criticized his communist attitude on the other. Dos Passos wrote:

About politics he is disconcertingly naïve. Though he claims to be a Communist and contributes to the Party war chest he designs churches and yachtclubs and gambling casinos with as much enthusiasm as he does worker's apartments. (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 82)

John Dos Passos admiringly remarked that in Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais, “shone the angular construction of glass and concrete designed by Niemeyer” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 42). Dos Passos considered these some of “Niemeyer's most original and imaginative works” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 42). Yet, upon observing one of Niemeyer's houses of worship, Dos Passos could not suppress his judgment, finding it “odd that a professing Communist should have designed such a pretty church” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 42). In the late nineteen fifties, President Kubitschek “offered Niemeyer the post of Supervisor of Construction of Brasília at a salary which amounted to only a few hundred dollars a month,” while Lúcio Costa, (Niemeyer's teacher) became responsible for the working out of a city plan (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 66). To construct Brasília, Niemeyer had to move from Rio to the region, where the future Brazilian capital was to be located. The problem was that Niemeyer had a “dread of travel” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 83). Dos Passos had interviewed him shortly before he moved:

During his last days in Rio he seemed to be thinking more about how much he hated to leave his family and the pleasant dwelling he designed for himself, [...] than about the glorious opportunities the Brasília project offered him as an architect. He cried out how hard it would be not to see his grandchild every day. He has a horror of airplanes. The six hundred and fifty miles between Rio and Brasília will be a tough trek by car until the new road is finished. Once he tears himself away from Rio and settles in Brasília he seems to expect to stay there for the full two years (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 83).

Not only the architect had to move. The future city needed workers in order to be constructed.

Fortyfive hundred people were unloaded from trucks almost overnight into the wilderness. They had heard about the new capital. They believed in Brasília. They wanted to settle there [...]. The authorities of Novacap¹ had plans drawn up to build what they called “satellite cities” to accommodate the populations they knew would be attracted to the scene and to keep their capital city from becoming a rural slum before it was ever completed. (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 89-90)

Many workers were settled just around the future town, and a “bus service was set up to take them back and forth.” People from all over the country moved to the satellite cities. There, “[w]ages were better than they were accustomed to” elsewhere in Brazil (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 91). Amongst others, Niemeyer was to design the congress building in Brasília, which Dos Passos considered “a conspicuous failure” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 130), “inconvenient to operate” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 163). “The interior,” John Dos Passos wrote, “is cramped and illplanned for its purpose. There is a frivolous ugliness about the exterior hard to explain in a designer with such great talent for sculptural effects” (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 130). Furthermore, Dos Passos criticized Niemeyer's Palace

¹ NOVACAP was the governmental company responsible for the construction of the new capital of Brazil.

Hotel, and the presidential palace in Brasília, when he and other journalists were being guided through the town still under construction.

Niemeyer's strange mania for underground entrances has saddled the hotel with an unnecessarily inconvenient lobby. It surprised us to find in a pupil of Le Corbusier's functionalism so little regard for the necessary functions of a building. In case of fire, [...] how would we ever get out? The presidential palace we found to be a singularly beautiful building of glass and white concrete [...] The inner partitions were glass too. We did ask each other where amid, all those glass walls, the poor President could find a spot to change his trousers or a private nook to write a letter (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 77).

Overall, Dos Passos thought the country was improving in economic terms (as he expressed through the title he had chosen for his book). However, he did not overlook Brazil's poverty, and also wrote about the *favelas*, which "in Brazilian Portuguese means slum" (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 30). There he stated:

People are poor all right. [...] In North Carolina the solution was textile mills. Here it might be small industry. It might be resettlement on virgin lands to the west. Cutting the throats of the landlords isn't going to help. It's so much easier to appeal to envy, hatred and malice than to work out rational solutions: therein lies the success of the Communist play for power. (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 188).

Dos Passos uses the comparison with a poor region of the U.S. to once more take the opportunity to criticize the communists, whose approach, in his view, was bringing no real improvement to the country. John Dos Passos sees the communists as hate promoters. The communists accused the great landholders of possessing all the good land, leaving the poor with no other choice but to work for the property owners, almost as slaves. In contrast, Dos Passos trusted capitalism, i.e. "small industry," or internal migration, suggesting that people could move westwards to virgin tracts. Concerning the *favelas* themselves, Dos Passos considered they were the outcome "of the population explosion which [had] resulted from the success [...] of public health measures" (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 30-1) introduced in Brazil. He argued "the growth of industry" (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 30-1) was another reason for people to crowd "out of the back country into cities and towns" (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 30-1), finding there that they still had to draw on ways they were familiar with in the rural areas they had left:

In the back country, they had lived a barefoot life as ungarnished in every aspect as the little huts with dirt floors they were born in and dwelt in and died in, but at least they had space about them and air to breathe. Except in very bad droughts the rural economy had furnished sufficient food. [...] In the cities the immigrants find no housing ready for them, so they picked themselves out a back lot and put themselves up a shack out of whatever materials are cheapest and handiest just the way they would back up in the hills. [...] They cook on charcoal. They can't read and write so they don't need much artificial light. The women and children fetch water in gasoline tins from the nearest pump that may be a mile away, just as they would have gone down to the river back home, and they deposit their excrement behind the fence and throw their garbage out on the path just as they always did. The shacks agglomerate into rattletrap settlements [...]. In Rio—this was in 1948—there were said to be three hundred thousand people living in favelas. Today there are nearer a million. [...] The

main trouble is lack of water and light. There is no garbage disposal, no sewerage. (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 30-1)

These were the conditions in Brazilian slums, where the police did not even “dare penetrate” (Dos Passos, 1991, pp. 30-1). Crime rates and drug abuse were always said to be high among the dwellers of the slums. But according to Dos Passos, the authorities tried to help these poor people, as the writer observed at Guanabara. There the government was trying to furnish these *favela* people with building materials.

The governor furnishes cement, lumber, and technical help for these projects, but the heavy work is done by the faveladwellers themselves [...through] *mutirão*, mutual help. Since most of the squatters are recent immigrants² from the backland they are used to the old peasant system. If a man is building a house the neighbors pitch in to help. They work the same way in the favelas. The governor’s plan is to give the squatters title to the little plots they have already built their houses on, and gradually to draw them into the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship. (Dos Passos, 1991, p. 171)

Although occasionally critical, we may conclude that on the whole Dos Passos was approaching Brazil full of hope, and believed it could soon become a prosperous nation of international influence. The title *Brazil on the Move* expresses that and the many migrations that took place to settle and construct in the country.

² We consider that these people are not immigrants but rather internal migrants.

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