REVIEW ESSAYS

FRONTIER THEORY AS AN EXPLANATORY TOOL FOR BRAZILIAN HISTORY

A Viable Construct?

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The Forbidden Lands: Colonial Identity, Frontier Violence, and the Persistence of Brazil's Eastern Indians, 1750–1830. By Hal Langfur. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006. Pp. 432. $65.00 cloth.
Frontier Goiás, 1822–1889. By David McCreery. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006. Pp. 312. $55.00 cloth.
Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500–1600. By Alida C. Metcalf. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. Pp. 391. $55.00 cloth, $22.95 paper.

When Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the meeting of the American Historical Association in 1893, he probably had no conception of the enduring impact that it would have on future research not only in the United States, but also throughout the world. Enthusiastically embraced by scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, it was, in the latter half, vehemently criticized, redefined, modified, reviled, or totally rejected as an explanatory tool by revisionists. Nevertheless, despite these many objections, the notion that frontiers play a discernable role in historical development continues to inspire young scholars to produce valuable studies that enhance our understanding of nation-state formation. Such is the case with the

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three books under review. All three works use some aspect of frontier theory to interpret data collected from a variety of archival sources, and all three provide fresh interpretations of colonial or nineteenth-century Brazil.

Until the last two decades, most Brazilian (as well as other Latin-American) historians rejected Turner's thesis of a moving frontier, preferring instead the European definition of the frontier as a "border between two nations." For these scholars, the closest Brazilian equivalent to Turner's concept was the *sertão*, which they characterized as an "untamed, uncivilized interior" and as a "sinister, arid, inaccessible and backward" place (Langfur, 290–292). For the few disciples who tried to apply Turner's approach, the pattern they saw in Brazil was not a movement of civilization steadily advancing from east to west, but the development of "hollow frontiers," where a group of entrepreneurs pushed into virgin land, only to sell out and move on once they had exhausted the area, leaving it as empty space to be occupied by other immigrants twenty years later.[1] Reflecting Turner's view, this interpretation has a tendency to focus on the movement of Europeans westward from the Atlantic coast and to negate indigenous history as well as the participation of African slaves and hardscrabble settlers.

In his well-written survey, *Frontier Goiás, 1822–1889*, David McCreery rejects the "hollow frontier" concept as an accurate description of the nineteenth-century development of Goiás, a province physically in the center of Brazil but, due to poverty and poor communications, effectively on the far edge of the empire. Employing the word sertão as the Brazilian equivalent of Turner's notion of a frontier, McCreery points out that a gold boom in the 1730s attracted the first rush of individuals into the region, but the collapse of mining after just thirty years brought an equally speedy withdrawal. In the decades that followed, some isolated towns remained, as did a few settlers who devoted themselves to subsistence agriculture or ranching. As a result, by the late nineteenth century, Goiás was already an "old," urban-based frontier, in contrast to the rapid opening and closing of the North-American far west.

Drawing information from previously untapped Brazilian archives, newspapers, journals, and secondary sources, McCreery recounts the history of Goiás in a straightforward manner, with chapters covering state structure, state power, industry, commerce and communications, agriculture and food supply, stock raising, land, and work. He concludes that, over the space of sixty-seven years, the province changed while remaining a frontier. Attempts to mobilize Native Americans for wage labor failed due to their declining numbers and their little inclination to toil for money.

1. Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 98.

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Divisions between urban elites and rural residents continued, with the former seeking to imitate the "more civilized" customs of the developed parts of the empire, in an attempt to overcome the sense of contempt with which people of the coast regarded the inhabitants of the sertão. By the end of the century, Goiás was more rural than it had been at its beginning, with the northern section facing increasing Native American attacks and fading settlements. McCreery concludes that "there was little to integrate Goiás' hamlets, farms, fazendas and mining camps among themselves. Each constructed its own frontier . . . each frontier was unique" (209).

In Turnerian language, the characteristics of Goiás appear to meet the criteria of a classic "hollow frontier," but McCreery argues that the province may more accurately be defined as "the periphery of the periphery," a term borrowed from 1970s dependency theorists (16). Although industrial capitalism cut a path squarely through Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, it struck Goiás but a glancing blow. The province suffered from primitive communications because it was poor, and the imperial regime in Rio de Janeiro had no reason or resources to invest to improve them. Further, since Goiás presented "congeries of frontiers," which surrounded and separated each settlement, the sertão did not lie beyond some distant line, but rather encircled each village, *fazenda*, and farm, reminding the Luso-Brazilian settlers and their African and Creole slaves of their uncomfortable and precarious situation (17).

In short, McCreery suggests that Goiás does not easily fit the standard frontier patterns based on cattle or missions. Its nineteenth-century history does not show either a moving line of settlement or the characteristics of a "hollow frontier." Moreover, McCreery concludes that it was an "unsuccessful" frontier since it failed to close and did not provide security: "rather and until almost the end of the century, the opposing forces of intruders and indigenes remained locked in a bloody balance of weakness" (22).

In *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500–1600,* Alida C. Metcalf offers a novel look at Brazil's colonial foundations by applying a variation of frontier theory. Conceiving this early period as the interaction of two very different worlds, the Native American and the European, she focuses on the "middle ground" between the two "frontiers" by emphasizing how go-betweens played a central role in the colony's historical development. Building on a theory developed by Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), Metcalf explains that there were three major types of go-betweens that facilitated contact between the two worlds. First, there were physical/biological go-betweens who created material links as carriers of plants, animals, and disease, and as bearers of mixed-race children. Second, there were transactional go-betweens or translators, cultural brokers and negotiators who facilitated social interaction between worlds. Finally,

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there were representational go-betweens who wrote, drew maps, and represented the "other" culture through texts, words, or images (9–12).

Metcalf rightly points out that, until now, the history of sixteenth-century Portuguese colonization of Brazil has been poorly understood, for it has been related in bits and pieces that leave many questions unanswered. By incorporating new data collected in Lisbon, Bahia, Rome, and the Vatican archives, she provides a coherent narrative that goes far toward filling in these obvious lacunae. Metcalf begins her book by explaining the concept of go-betweens and arguing that in the encounters of the sixteenth century, hundreds of various types of go-betweens were present. The seven chapters ("Encounter," "Possession," "Conversion," "Biology," "Slavery," "Resistance," and "Power") that follow trace major aspects of colonial development, stressing the roles of go-betweens and showing how these intermediaries shaped the "birth and evolution of the relationship between Portugal and Brazil." Metcalf concludes that the Portuguese were able to establish their authority by the end of the century "by ensuring that the majority of go-betweens arbitrated for the Portuguese side, but the world that was created was a mixture of native and Portuguese thanks to the go-betweens" (13).

Not the least of Metcalf's achievements is her chapter on the reaction of the Native Americans to the arrival of the Portuguese. Traditional histories have maintained that "disease, death, and slavery seemed to seal the fate of the native peoples . . . [and] it has been all too easy to characterize this process as the inexorable march forward of Europeans and the rapid retreat of Indians" (196). Metcalf, however, shows that native resistance to colonialism took at least two forms. In the first half of the sixteenth century, native incursions against European settlements were frequently devastating, but, as the decades passed, Native Americans were less able to vanquish their foes. More successful were Native American shamans and wandering prophets, described by the Portuguese as *santidades* (saintly or holy persons), who represented the Jesuits and the entire colonial enterprise as evil (213). Their influence inspired captured natives to rebel against the Europeans, to flee from plantations where they had been enslaved, and to reject Christianity.

In these standoffs, go-betweens, especially *mamelucos* (people of mixed European and Native American race), played an essential role "because of their fluidity, bicultural ambiguity, and facility with language," negotiating first between warring parties and later between santidades and the Portuguese colony (234). Metcalf concludes that by the end of the sixteenth century, of all the various go-betweens, it was the mamelucos who won the sertão for the Portuguese: "Their complex personalities and cunning strategies created modes of domination that would persist long after they themselves had been forgotten" (274).

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Alistair Hennessey once remarked that, without specific definition, the term "frontier" became so elastic that its use suggested that almost everything in Latin-American history "was being subsumed under a capacious umbrella."[2] Despite her rather precise definition of go-betweens, the same objection might be applied to Metcalf's application of this concept, for she includes not just mamelucos, but diseases, plants, translators, cultural brokers, travelers, and even historians, to mention only a few. Nevertheless, the go-between is an innovative and helpful tool for analyzing cultural interaction within and between frontier zones. Moreover, Metcalf's broadly conceived narrative elucidates so many aspects of the sixteenth century that scholars and students alike will surely find it the most satisfying account to date of the early history of Brazil as a European colony.

In *The Forbidden Lands: Colonial Identity, Frontier Violence, and the Persistence of Brazil's Eastern Indians, 1750–1830,* Hal Langfur is also concerned with frontier zones of contact, conflict, and interaction, and in recovering the history of natives, mamelucos, and African slaves. Rather than providing an overview of all of sixteenth-century Brazil, however, he has chosen to focus on the eighteenth century and a specific region, Minas Gerais, a geographic frontier that in colonial times expanded eastward from the mountainous interior. This pattern, as Langfur points out, defies traditional Turnerian theory because it was not a "hollow frontier" and did not represent "the leading edge of European expansion from the Atlantic coast." The frontier analyzed in this book bordered Brazil's great gold and diamond fields, and stood between its two principal urban areas, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador da Bahia. In Langfur's view, Minas Gerais was a frontier "remote to settled society but central to indigenous peoples (up to now totally ignored by Brazilian historians), where such consolidation was not yet assured, and where the outcome of multiethnic cultural encounters remained in doubt" (5).

The book is the result of monumental research based on material drawn from more than eighteen archives located in Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, Lisbon, and the United States. The dense narrative is divided into two parts. The first, "Colonization," looks at the development of Minas Gerais from the point of view of the Portuguese crown and settlers. It also includes a chapter about the impoverished free individuals who went to the frontier. The early success of the mining boom masked the tenuous state of many of these would-be pioneers, regarded as "useless people" and "vagabonds" by government officials. Resisting the repressive tactics of the state, these settlers were the forerunners of a regional economic shift from mining to agriculture. Once Native American attacks declined, other settlers with sizeable slaveholdings established themselves in

2. Hennessy, 3.

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outlying lands. Bolstered by state authorities, these wealthier individuals worked to force transient subsistence farmers to become compliant workers and to attach them to the land as dependents. Runaway slaves coming to the region suffered a similar fate. If they could not join remote maroon settlements, they soon became targets of whites seeking to return them to their former slavery. Langfur argues that "the very fact that this was a slave-owning society proved decisive to the course of frontier settlement" (13).

Part two, "Confrontation," seeks to see the settlement of Minas Gerais from the point of view of the Indians. After identifying the various native groups, Langfur describes the "dozens of military and paramilitary expeditions" launched between the 1750s and 1808 to neutralize the resistance of these groups east of the mining district (14). Following the arrival of the royal court in Rio de Janeiro, Prince Regent João declared open war on the natives, officially sanctioning their slaughter and enslavement. Relying on previously neglected archival materials, Langfur demonstrates that, despite aggression against them, indigenous groups found ways to maintain peaceful relations with the settlers and, when accommodation failed, to resist invasion of their domains. In this way, he refutes the common belief that violent indigenous resistance was ineffectual by the late colonial period. Moreover, Langfur asserts that the pervasive violence in the eastern forests was evidence "not of the cessation of cultural exchange but . . . a primary mode of interethnic commerce." Settlers, soldiers, and Native Americans appropriated rules and techniques of barbarous conduct from one another, and from the terror that resulted there emerged "an essential language of contact and communication" (15). In other words, official policy evolved as a result of the contact and clash of cultures on the frontier, rather than the other way around.

Langfur ends his narration of the history of Minas Gerais with an analysis of the war launched against the natives in 1808 and its immediate aftermath, emphasizing the "sustained ability of the Indians to force settlers to retreat from previously unincorporated lands" (16). The inability to subdue the Native Americans forced crown officials to transform what they described as a defensive war into an openly offensive posture. The policy of military invasion remained in place until 1831, even though its failings quickly became apparent. Langfur argues that violence was central to the development of the Minas Gerais frontier and that it continued for a much longer period than previously believed.

In his conclusion, Langfur tackles frontier interpretations of the United States and Latin America head-on. This final chapter is a masterful survey of flawed applications of frontier theories a la Turner to Latin America, and of newer revisionist views of the various ways that the frontier developed throughout the Western Hemisphere. Langfur rightly identifies the most prominent problem that revisionists currently confront: how does

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one determine the closing of a frontier? As a partial answer, he suggests that one must understand the social and cultural formation of the frontier as a precursor to its incorporation, and that this can only be done by recovering the history of the Native Americans and other marginalized persons who lived in the so-called wilderness. Although he argues that the expansion into the eastern forests of Minas Gerais between 1750 and 1830 formed part of the most important frontier movement in late colonial Brazil, Langfur nevertheless maintains that

> the inequitable process of territorial consolidation did little to foster the emergence of a transcendent, unifying notion of the frontier in which civilization could be construed as having overcome savagery. Brazil's most durable myths of national identity—and the historical narrative deployed in their service—therefore have to be sought somewhere else. (299)

The continuing efforts of scholars to dismiss Turner's frontier thesis bring to my mind the segment of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" in Walt Disney's classic movie *Fantasia* in which Mickey Mouse desperately tries to demolish the sorcerer's broom he brought to life, but only succeeds in dividing it into more and more brooms. Notwithstanding the fact that Turner's original formulation of the role of the frontier is unsustainable today, his thesis continues to prompt investigations that produce new interpretations on the old theme. Of the three books profiled here, Langfur has made the most concerted effort to demonstrate the flaws of Turner's ideas, yet not the least of the many strengths of his study is a sophisticated understanding of frontier dynamics that reveals the nuances of development in eighteenth-century Minas Gerais. While Langfur may reasonably conclude that a "transcendent, unifying notion of frontier" cannot continue as one of "Brazil's most durable myths of national identity" (299), he, like McCreery and Metcalf, offers variations on the frontier theme that suggest exciting avenues for future investigations that will undoubtedly enhance our understanding of Brazil's and Latin America's past.

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