





The valley and the river: historical-geographical sketch of the lower São Francisco, by Francisco Henrique Moreno Brandão (1905)

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“The São Francisco, like an oasis in the desert, through the arid hinterlands from Bahia to Ceará, from Pernambuco to Piauí, is, in fact, the Promised Land” (Sampaio, Teodoro, 2002, p. 65-66).

With the aim of analyzing the essay by Francisco Henrique Moreno Brandão (1875-1938) on the history and geography of the Lower São Francisco, this article seeks to situate it within the historiographical and geographical perspective of the early decades of the 20th century, guided by the primacy of the “geographical nature conditioning historical processes” (Lima, 1999, p. 59) in the intellectual culture of that time.

As Dirceu Lindoso (2005, p. 36) wrote, at the end of the first half of the 19th century, the representation of the province of Alagoas began to be written with a conscious preparation of pamphlets and sketches in the construction of a homogeneous and configured image of the physical space, the people, production, and administrative organization.

The advent of the first historical and geographical studies on the Province of Alagoas and the founding of the Historical and Geographical Institute of Alagoas (1869), with notable works by Antonio Joaquim Moura (1778-1857), José Alexandrino Dias de Moura and Thomaz do Bomfim Espíndola (1832-1889), represented the contribution of the Generation of 1860 “to the implementation of the idea of progress in the culture of Alagoas” (Lindoso, 2005, p. 43).

However, in the early years of the Republic, backwardness was still the norm in Alagoas, even in more economically advanced sectors such as sugar mills, as recorded in a questionnaire from the Inquiry Commission on the sugar industry in 1907 stating that “sugarcane cultivation in Alagoas was done with hoes, as very few farmers have plows and modern planting tools”. Therefore, the first sugar mills did not have a major impact on the productive structure of the state, with “the same rural organization as before, the same type of property, the same form of production, and the family as the central point of reference for social organization” (Verçosa, 2015, p. 105-106 and 100).

The educational misery in Alagoas was also recorded by the Director of Public Instruction in his 1905 report when he stated that the teaching profession was “confusing itself with ordinary means of livelihood, a simple livelihood for a few mediocrities”. This

was despite the existence of higher education courses in Philosophy and Theology at the Seminary of Maceió starting in 1902 (Verçosa, 2015, p. 108) and the expansion of printing presses in the capital and major cities in the interior, such as Viçosa (Barros, 2017, p. 32), where more than two dozen newspapers were published throughout the state, including *A Tribuna*, *Gutemberg*, *Jornal de Debates*, *O Evolucionista*, *Revista do Instituto Arqueológico*, *Viçosence*, *O Libertador*, among others (Tenório, 2018, p. 34).

According to Luitgarde Barros (2017, p. 36), the generations born in the last decades of the 19th century in Alagoas “found opportunities for intellectual life with the possibility to perform roles that did not require higher education in public service, allowing them to live as dignified self-taught scholars”.

Born in Pão de Açúcar, Alagoas, in 1875, Moreno Brandão was “a member of an important family of farmers, doctors, sugar cane plantation owners, and intellectuals” (Barros, 2017, p. 33) and was associated with the main cultural institutions in Alagoas, such as the Historical and Geographical Institute and the Alagoas Academy of Letters. Included in the group of “systematizing historians”, alongside Melo Moraes, Dias Cabral, Jayme de Altavila, and Félix Lima Jr (Maciel, 2015, p. 22-23), his proposal to frame the past of Alagoas was aimed at freeing it from the “heavy burden of the past” (Maciel, 2015, p. 36).

It is possible to associate the work *O Baixo São Francisco: O Rio e o Vale*, dated 1905, with pioneering studies in the field of Human Geography in Brazil, similar to the works of João Capistrano de Abreu, Euclides da Cunha, and Bernardino José de Souza. The historian from Alagoas poetically appropriated the concept of landscape to describe the Lower São Francisco, as seen in the passage in which he states that the “landscape that can be glimpsed, either in the overflowing estuary or in the valley it encircles, is varied, unexpected, and opulent” (Brandão, 2005, p. 205).

Despite being based on the definition of landscape as a “visual pattern resulting from the concrete geographical characteristics that occur in a region – or in a specific extension of physical space” (Barros, 2017, p. 53), his approach aligns with the consortium between science and art advocated at the time by, among others, Euclides da Cunha, in his classic book *Os Sertões* (1902). Even though there is no mention of this writer in the analyzed work, we perceive a certain affinity in the description of the landscape of the *sertão* of the Lower São Francisco when he suggested, “the view delights and entertains itself with dazzling singular aspects and oddities that enchant the spirit” (Brandão, 2005, p. 205). However, the notion of a ‘natural region’ emerged as

fundamental, as it was based “frankly on the role played by certain physical elements in the organization of space” (Barros, 2010, p. 72).

In a way, the writing of the Alagoas author approaches the Humboldtian views that nature and art merge in the description of the landscape, as can be seen in the following excerpt describing Ilha São Pedro, in the municipality of Porto da Folha:

[...] the sky in the afternoon is a kaleidoscope, and like it, it never reproduces what it once let you see. Little by little, the clouds disintegrate; the portions of the ever-shifting panorama come apart. The imaginative artist who composed it uses his palette of rare hues to form another magnificent and dazzling scene. At once, the colors have changed; the blue fades, soon becoming violet, and the red concentrates at the apex of a cloud (Brandão, 2005, p. 209).

Although Osvaldo Maciel (2015, p. 28) emphasizes the defense of the “ethics of impartiality”, advocated at the time by João Ribeiro on the part of Moreno Brandão, it is plausible to add that the influence of the historian from Sergipe also manifested itself in the interaction between science and art in the narrative about the Lower São Francisco, with the use of metaphors and metonymies to describe the natural and cultural landscape. For the Sergipe historian, historical writing should bring the enchantment of style and form without sacrificing erudition, as shown in the works of Jules Michelet (Ribeiro, 1961, p. 23). In fact, this French historian, under the influence of Alexander von Humboldt, wrote, “books dedicated to the enthusiastic praise of natural elements”, but he also claimed, in the *History of France*, “the organic integration of man and nature” (Souza, 2009, p. 43).

In the early decades of the 20th century, the category of landscape “emerged from the interaction between space and materiality (whether natural materiality or man-made materiality)”. Its importance was such that it became a defining force for the science of geography itself, in terms of “describing landscapes” (Barros, 2017, p. 25). In fact, some geographers even went so far as to claim that geography is “the science of landscapes” (Melo, 2001, p. 29).

At that moment, the notion of landscape was built based on the separation between society and nature, aiming at “an instrumental rationality that would give science more analytical power”.

However, as Maria Tereza D. P. Luchari (2001, p. 12) pointed out:

paradoxically, by separating itself from nature, modern society invented and valued the notion of landscape. Its aesthetic meaning, riddled with subjectivity, transformed the landscape into an antidote for humanity, which had desacralized nature and broken up with animism.

The morphological approach to the landscape at this historical moment also privileged the material aspects of culture, problematizing the classical dichotomy between ‘natural landscape’ and ‘cultural landscape’. “Landscapes are, first and foremost, processes that interweave mutability and permanence in a single fabric” (Barros, 2017, p. 55).

In Moreno Brandão’s synthesis, the photographic proposal of the Lower São Francisco region was carried out in the pursuit of a faithful description of its landscapes, following the model that Albrecht Wilhelm Sellin (1841-1933) presented in his book, *Geografia Geral do Brasil* (General Geography of Brazil), dated 1889 and translated by João Capistrano de Abreu. Published in 1885, in the ‘Wissen der Gegenwart’, a publication in which specialists from Austria and Germany collaborated, this book created a geographical description of nature and history, and spiritual and material cultures, based on thesis and reports, in addition to the author’s 12-year experience living in Brazil, when he directed a colony in the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Abreu, 1889).

Quoting Albrecht Wilhelm Sellin (1899, p. 30), the author characterized the São Francisco River as “the largest river that flows into the eastern coast of Brazil” (Brandão, 2015, p. 201), describing notable and less important tributaries that, during their annual floods, inundated its banks, fertilizing them with silt.

His concern throughout the book was to provide a description of the natural landscape, focusing on the lagoons, territories subject to intense disputes due to the quality of the land, but mainly on the waterfall-laden region of the valley, especially Paulo Afonso. In his symbolic representation of chaos, where the “water, crazy, rushes in whirlpools, trying to channel itself through the bed, in a great astonishing and volcanic noise” (Brandão, 2005, p. 203), the geographer compares it with to Niagara Falls, claiming that it is more remarkable in some aspects, quoting Albrecht Wilhelm Sellin (1899, p. 32).

The focus on the description of the waterfalls in the São Francisco Valley was shared by other authors of the time as they represented, in addition to obstacles to the various river paths, hope for the mitigation of the inhospitable climate of the sertões (Brasil, 1999, p. 30).

The development of natural sciences in Brazil, especially geology, would mark the geographical narrative in the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries, as there was a considerable number of works by authors ranging from naturalists to geologists and engineers. One of the main proponents of this science was Charles Frederic Hartt (1840-1878), who first visited the country in 1865, “accompanying Louis Agassiz as a member of the Thayer Expedition, returning four more times until 1875 when he organized the Geological Commission of the Empire, which operated until 1877”. His most well-known book was *Geology and Physical Geography of Brazil* (1870), which represented “a kind of compilation of what had been published until 1870 on geology and physical geography in Brazil” (Santana, 2001, p. 134).

From him, the professor of geography from Alagoas incorporated into the narrative his geological description of the stretch from Propriá to Piranhas, identifying that the rocks in most of the first city to Pão de Açúcar were composed of “schistose gneiss, passing to mica schist” and from this latter city upwards “the rocks are more massive, consisting of slightly schistose gneiss, granite and syenite” (Brandão, 2015, p. 226).

Another researcher in the field of geology mentioned by Brandão was Orville A. Derby (1851-1915), with his proposal to divide the São Francisco Valley into two parts:

a system of waterfalls (among which Paulo Afonso is the most notable), starting with Itaparica, just below Jatobá, and extending to the port of Piranhas, or rather, to the city of Pão de Açúcar. In the upper part, which covers almost the entire valley, it has a height of 300 meters or more above sea level and belongs to the vast and elevated Brazilian Plateau (Brandão, 2015, p. 223).

Author of 173 works on geology, paleontology, archaeology, physical geography, cartography, and other subjects, Derby exerted great influence on geologists and geographers at the turn of the 20th century, contributing decisively to the studies of the Brazilian hinterlands (Santana, 2001, p. 137). His mentions of the stretch of the river above Pão de Açúcar resonated in the writings of Theodoro Sampaio, a companion in the expedition of the Scientific Commission for the São Francisco River, led by William Milnor Roberts (1879-1880), whose description appeared as “a narrow canyon of steep and rocky banks, where gneiss and mica schist predominate and give the landscape that rough and blackish tone of barren and almost vegetation-free regions” (Sampaio, 2002, p. 71-72).

In the same tone, Brandão (2015, p. 226) wrote about this stretch of the river as follows:

With the difference in the character of the rocks, the valley also changes in character, becoming very narrow and limited on each side by almost sheer high walls, thus increasingly taking on the form of a canyon as it rises to the port of Piranhas. At the same time, rocky islands and rock banks begin to appear in the middle of the river.

These considerations help define the origin of the great canyon, which extends from Paulo Afonso to near Pão de Açúcar, asserting “it seems more reasonable to assume that the canyon was carved by the river” (Brandão, 2015, p. 227). Regarding the São Francisco Canyon, Bernardino José de Souza, in *Por Mares e Terras: Leituras Geográficas* (By Sea and Land: Geographical Readings), brought up the discussion about adopting this notion in the nomenclature of physical geography as “a narrow and tight valley carved by the waters through the rocks, through which the river flows” (1913, p. 25), since, in Brazil, it was also known as Talhado, Brechão or Garganta (Carved, Rift, or Gorge).

According to this scholar, the “majestic gorge that crosses the São Francisco River” extends from the Paulo Afonso waterfall to the Alagoas city of Piranhas, or even to the city of Pão de Açúcar, preserving “the aspect of an enormous trench with steep edges, at spaces bristling with bare pinnacles and barren hills that contrast with the grayish colors of neighboring wild lands, with barren caatingas stripped of foliage under the sun of the extended summer” (Souza, 1913, p. 26 and 29).

Thus, the region from Piranhas to Pão de Açúcar was also seen by the Alagoas writer as a desolate landscape due to its ‘rough, wild’ nature, featuring rocky terrain, steep hills without vegetation, and scorching heat in the summer. With the exception of Penedo, the settlements are markedly small and of little economic relevance, with artisanal fishing. According to him, this activity could be better exploited “if it weren’t for the traditional inertia of Brazilians and the lack of incentives” (Brandão, 2015, p. 249).

For Brandão, the entire Lower São Francisco was seen through the idea that the hand of man “erected nothing sublime, monumental, grand”, always playing a secondary role to the work of nature. Following the determinism of climate and race, the author reiterated the “indolent nature of the Brazilian, the timid and insecure manifestations of the intellectual elite, the heated lyricism of the poets of the land, the nervousness, and the

unrestrained sexuality of the mulatto” (Ortiz, 1985, p. 16).

The inertia towards productive work was, according to the writer, linked to the way of life of the caboclo (an individual of mixed Indigenous and European descent), whose main professions were being a cowboy or a canoeist. With regard to the former, despite portraying them as “taciturn heroes with admirable deeds”, he did not fail to criticize them for the “barbaric persecution of stray cattle”. As for the latter, he claimed they were “always talkative and nostalgic singers of ‘modinhas’” (Brandão, 2015, p. 235 and 274).

Regarding the criticism of the ‘ruins’ of human action, the historian took the case of Ilha São Pedro, which was once a center of catechesis, consisting of a college and a convent. For him, Indigenous people were “incapable of emerging from the savagery in which they were, even when attempts were made to gather them together to provide some enlightenment” (Brandão, 2015, p. 271). This view was shared by Burton during his visit to Ilha Assunção on the São Francisco River in 1868 (Burton, 1977, p. 315).

We can draw a parallel to Euclidean interpretation of the sertão as a “realm of the anachronistic”, where customs refer back to past or even barbaric societies (Alves, 1997). In this perspective, the settlements on both sides of the river were seen as retrograde, immersed in “profound stagnation”. Tradition prevailed over evolution, with a pastoral industry that had “an appearance of overwhelming decadence”. According to Brandão, “the Lower São Francisco has no noteworthy facts. It is a land that lives as if segregated from the great movement of contemporary life, in the perpetual melancholy of the ‘taperas’ (ramshackle huts)” (Brandão, 2015, p. 270-271).

This was due to the fact that the population of the region had been marked by the presence of Indigenous tribes in the marginal areas of the São Francisco River, whose descendants still remained, “crossbred with Black people and Portuguese who came in small numbers to the sparsely populated margins of the São Francisco River” (Brandão, 2005, p. 273). According to him, the periodicity of droughts would mark the entire 19th century, causing much damage and reaching maximum intensity in years like 1824-1825, 1835-1837, 1844-1845, 1877-1879, 1889-1890, 1989-1899, with hideous and Dantesque effects on social life. Brandão would also document diseases such as malaria and cholera, with an epidemic that “decimated the riverside population in 1855 and 1862-1863” (Brandão, 2015, p. 217).

In this part of the narrative, the sertão emerge through images drawn from Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* as a way of exposing the contradictions and mysteries of the

hinterlands. Moving away from the image of the sertão as paradise or purgatory, Brandão presents the image of the sertão as hell, marked by the “unrestrained nature scorched by a fiery sun and the flames of fire, by the punishment of droughts and its animals dying in flight and degrading themselves in acts of anthropophagy to survive or postpone death”. It is hell because of the despair of those condemned by the inhospitable land (Cristóvão, 1993-1994, p. 43 and 49).

Due to the climatic and unhealthy environmental conditions, “the population tends to be reduced by constant emigration to Mato Grosso, Amazonas, and other parts of the country, especially during the droughts, (...) thanks to the habitual carelessness that has been passed down as a disastrous legacy from their ancestors, the Indigenous people of the country” (Brandão, 2005, p. 273).

According to the scholar, “slavery was never a preponderant element in Lower São Francisco, and, due to the absence of large farms and sugar cane plantations, it became deeply integrated with families. It was not uncommon to find former enslaved men consorted with the daughters of the households they served, and vice versa, which shows a complete absence of prejudice, except for one or two exceptions” (Brandão, 2005, p. 273-274).

Although he characterizes the predominant type of inhabitant in the region as ‘caboclo’, the author states that “it is not uncommon to find entire families with all the characteristics of the purest white race, which seems to be a survival from the Dutch rule in Brazil” (Brandão, 2005, p. 274).

These statements regarding the making of the population served to emphasize the economic, social, and cultural backwardness of the region, as manifested, according to Albrecht Wilhelm Sellin, by the “barbaric methods” of agriculture in the region. Thus, despite the valley being suitable for all types of crops, “only gross ignorance and a proven inability for work, which is so peculiar to the Brazilian people, make the progress of agriculture in the aforementioned area nothing more than a utopia” (Brandão, 2015, p. 257).

Animal husbandry faced the same problem, as “cattle breeders, always ignorant and careless, do not even know the basics of zootechnical science”. As a solution, Brandão advocated that the government should implement vocational schools, “where the new generation can acquire the indispensable knowledge to for various industries” (Brandão, 2015, p. 263).

Following Orville Derby’s description of the topography, mineral wealth, climate,

vegetation, and agricultural capacity, the author understood the need to “make efforts to improve the people morally and intellectually, which would undoubtedly be more beneficial than investing only in large public works” (Brasil, 1999, p. 164). Therefore, he stated, “there is truly no agriculture in the São Francisco Valley” and that to reach the “zenith of progress”, it was necessary to “duplicate the efforts that ensure victory in the industrial competitions” (Brandão, 2015, p. 259). This denunciation stemmed from the ‘complete nullity’ of spiritual culture, as primary education schools were marked by the precariousness of their operation, which discouraged families from sending their children to school. He also noted that secondary education was limited to a high school in Penedo, Alagoas, which functioned as a teacher-training school.

In his words, “Not even a scientific or literary institution thrives in the area we are describing” (Brandão, 2015, p. 253). Despite this, there is the ‘plague of cheap poets’, and the press is reduced to the four newspapers in Penedo. For the writer, the press played a role of “retrogradation due to the false notions it provides, feeding, instead of eradicating, prejudices which threaten to be perpetuated” (Brandão, 2015, p. 254).

Nicolau Sevcenko helps us unravel the complex web of relations between the cultural elites and the illiterate masses in the transition into the 20th century, with the objective of redeeming the popular classes from their condition of social destitution. This ‘cultural missionary work’ was based on the heroic and solitary endeavor to eradicate illiteracy and lead Brazil toward ‘progress and civilization’. The various intellectual strands of the Brazilian *Belle Époque* assumed the missionary task of witnessing their country, propagating their social ideals, and extensively disseminating their projects for modernizing Brazil. Here we see an intellectual class forged in a paternalistic yearning, of an authoritarian nature, with a desire to exercise tutelage (Sevcenko, 1982). The idea of the sertão as a place incompatible with progress, marked by “(...) a reversal of values, barbarian and incult” (Ventura, 1998, p. 135), was present in his analysis of the religiosity of the Lower São Francisco hinterlands, characterized as ‘ingrained’, ‘instinctive’, ‘fanatical’, linking it to the “collective delirium of Pedra Bonita, the pilgrimages of Juazeiro do Ceará, and the bloody episode of Canudos” (Brandão, 2015, p. 232).

These religious events stirred the imaginations of the residents of the Lower São Francisco, unlike national historical events that had little impact on them. According to the author, “superstitions thrive in the uneducated, mostly illiterate classes” (Brandão, 2015, p. 274). There is a clear association between superstitious practices and the type of inhabitant of the area, predominantly the caboclo. For him, the foreigners who arrived

here were “bearers (...) of the notions of a superior civilization”, as they had found “the savage given over to the bestiality of his instincts, unable of escaping the savagery in which he found himself” (Brandão, 2015, p. 271).

Moreno Brandão, by using the concept of ‘race’ to characterize the population of the Lower São Francisco region, brought into his writing issues related to immigration policies and racial whitening. The Europeanizing ideal of the immigration program, through the incorporation of ‘superior ethnicities’, was found in the section ‘Problems to Solve’, when the historian proposed that, to achieve progress, “foreign colonization [is] the best guarantee of a solid future for the region bathed by the Opará”, as the “aptitudes of the European settler” would serve “as an incentive to the apathetic Brazilian proletariat” (Brandão, 2015, p. 277).

These parameters were the basis for his analyses of popular festivities and amusements, such as the ‘despallhadas de arroz’ (rice harvest celebration), the ‘batalhão’ (battalion), the ‘transportation of images’ of saints, pilgrimages, Christmas celebrations, cavallhadas (horseback games) and vaquejadas (cattle herding contests). His interpretation, typical for the time, characterized the psychological state of hinterlands dwellers as a “painful melancholy”, present in the hymns of processions and pilgrimages. The celebrations of the community such as the rice harvest celebration and the battalion were marked by samba, which, according to him, was very ‘vulgar’. The mix between the sacred and the profane was also observed in both pilgrimages and Christmas celebrations (Brandão, 2015, p. 229-232).

When speaking about folklore and religiosity, Moreno Brandão partially diverged from Sellin's model, as he did not restrict himself to describing the territory, but also focused on the ‘cultural landscape’. In fact, João Capistrano de Abreu criticized Sellin's book for the absence of a chapter on anthropogeography (Abreu, 1889). In this sense, it can be argued that Brandão was out of synch with the ongoing debate on the ideas of F. Ratzel, which circulated at the time, including the publicization of Ratzel's ideas in the press by the historian from Ceará in the early 20th century. Even though he advanced beyond Sellin, he was not up to date with “modern scientific geography” (Machado, 2000, p. 20).

On the other hand, unlike folklorists of the time such as Sílvio Romero and João Ribeiro, among others, who resisted the industrial present with the illusion of “preserving the veracity of a threatened culture” (Ortiz, n.d., p. 6), Brandão did not express concern about the disappearance of habits, beliefs, and customs due to the advance of modernity

in Brazil, which should be overcome by progress. As Jacques Le Goff (1984, p. 363) pointed out, the driving force of the ideology of progress was economic progress.

Like other contemporary authors, the focus of his suggestions for the region's progress centered on developing actions related to trade, overcoming obstacles to river navigation, and mitigating the impact of droughts via the establishment of meteorological stations, the implementation of irrigation systems and the construction of railways, and the harnessing of the "indomitable power of the Paulo Afonso Falls" (Brandão, 2015, p. 280).

Only in this way "this great river artery will flow at the feet of a flourishing and prosperous region, instead of alongside gloomy, lifeless villages trapped in eternal and shameful torpor" (Brandão, 2015, p. 277). This statement leads us to link him to a set of narratives that described the potential of the São Francisco River during the second half of the 19th century. These narratives include accounts from the expeditions of Henrique Guilherme Halfeld (1852-1858), Emmanuel Liais (1864), Richard F. Burton (1867), and William Milnor Roberts (1879-1880), in which participated the geologist Orville Derby and the geographer and historian Teodoro Sampaio. Similar ideas were echoed in the early decades of the 20th century by the likes of Vicente Licínio Cardoso, Souza Bandeira, among others.

As Laurent Vidal (2013) states, these narratives describe a fragmented and diverse geography, but these authors consistently mention the great potential of the navigable part of the São Francisco River (that is, beginning from Pirapora), especially after completion of the works that channeled the river's waters to circumvent the Paulo Afonso Falls, allowing the boats to reach the sea.

The historical-geographical outline analyzed here constitutes relevant empirical material for understanding the impulse to 'domesticate' the sertão as part of a broader project of modernizing the national state. In this context, the river was portrayed as a source of life radiating into the interior of the country, bringing benefits to all of Brazil. It was common to compare it to the Mississippi River in the United States (Vidal, 2013). The United States of America served as a model for Brazil because they were seen as having made good use of the "extraordinary advantages for their material progress, which would naturally lead to moral progress". This was especially evident in areas such as meteorology, agronomy, and irrigation. According to the author under analysis, the proposed improvements "will come sooner or later, when education becomes a reality" (Brandão, 2015, p. 279 and 280).

Bernardino José de Souza described the São Francisco River as a “superb and sought after routes for indomitable adventurers of beneficial entries”, which “plays a multifaceted role as a penetration route, climate moderator, refuge for a region wider than Germany, the core of a vast riverine communication network” (Souza, 1913, p. 33).

Moreno Brandão challenged the “drowsy eyes of its quiet villages and towns in the hinterlands” of Alagoas with proposals filled with hope in defense of education, progress, and science. The contrast between these ideas and the reality of the hinterlands was inevitable, reflecting the “conflict between the old agrarian-commercial civilization of the 19th century and the new urban-industrial civilization”. Perhaps the exception was Penedo, which had a “prosperous commercial and industrial park” in the Lower São Francisco (Tenório, 2018, p. 21, 23 and 31), and the steamboats that rolled from Penedo to Piranhas were seen as vehicles of civilization and opulence.

However, as the reality of the province remained grounded “in sugar agro-industry and latifúndia, complemented by the landowners of the sertão and, for some time, cotton planters and the incipient class of industrialists” (Tenório, 2018, p. 111), his modernizing ideas did not bear fruit satisfactorily. This was due to the continued control of the oligarchy over the immense illiterate population. Therefore, a significant part of the society of Alagoas remained on the margins of “progressive achievements”, living “a life of simple vegetative functions”, contrary to the proposals of the enlightened historian-geographer (Brandão, 2015, p. 281).

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