

# BRAZIL, THE COLLAPSED EDEN: NATURAL DISASTERS IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL

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## Introduction

The discovery of the Brazilic lands by the Portuguese in 1500 was the crowning of the quest for the Edenic land, representation of the long-awaited earthly paradise. Driven by the economic bias, whetted by the desire for natural wealth, the European expansionist epic was no doubt driven by the Edenic myth. The search for lands and wealth is evident in Caminha's letter, who was overwhelmed by nature and abundance of the New World lands.

This discourse echoed through time, gaining historical dimensions, despite the present evidences showing the opposite. The 2007 EM-DAT survey compiled 150 records of natural disasters in Brazil, from 1900 to 2006 (Marcelino, 2007).

Floods, windstorms, tornadoes, hail, landsliding and even earthquakes have been constantly reported in the Brazilian news. According to the National Institute of Spatial Research (*Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais* – INPE), 84% of the total occurrences have been computed from the 1970's, showing a considerable raise in the number of disasters in the last decades, with 8183 casualties and losses of approximately 10 billion dollars.

It seems, however, that the Edenic myth has anesthetized our perception to a point that we are convicted that the Brazilian lands, besides “*bonita por natureza*” (beautiful by nature), are “*abençoadas por Deus*” (blessed by God). The generalizing effects of this Edenic scenario mark a very particular way of understanding environmental issues in Brazil. This discourse establishes effects of truth, norms and regulating principles, even with the evidence of exposing the Brazilian population to natural impacts caused by climatic changes, according to the 2013 edition of the World Risk Report, published in

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To accept that Brazil is prone to natural risks means that the first step to provide solutions for the challenges triggered by natural disasters has been taken. Nevertheless, it necessarily implies not only the abandonment of the Edenic myth that lives in Brazilians' imagery, but also facing the difficult reality that even Eden is susceptible to natural disasters.

## Brazil, the foundation myth

Finding a new land, besides signifying the expansion of European kingdoms' wealth, also represented the dissemination of the Evangels proposed by the Church, shaken by the increasing Protestant wave. In addition, Europe had faced a generalized crisis since before the 16th century. These facts were strong provisions for the imagination, as depicted in the following text:

*A miséria e a fome criaram um meio propício para a busca de um paraíso terrestre; um paraíso de delícias (Gên. 2,8-14), em que a abundância de recursos vegetais, animais e minerais permitiu uma vida tranquila, sugerida pelo próprio texto bíblico (Gên. 2,7-17). Imagens de um jardim do Éden, idealizado pelo homem, povoam o imaginário europeu que concebe este espaço dentro de uma geografia visionária, que em termos físicos é uma síntese da literatura clássica e das narrativas bíblicas (...). Uma natureza abundante, repleta de árvores frutíferas, rios, fontes e lagos com água límpida, paisagens verdejantes entoadas pelos cantos dos pássaros eram o quadro edênico a ser conquistado (Assunção, 2001:35).*

*Poverty and hunger have created a favorable medium for the quest for an earthly paradise; a paradise of delights (Gen. 2, 8-14), in which the abundance of plant, animal and mineral resources made a quiet life possible, as suggested by the biblical text itself (Gen. 2, 7-17). Images of a Garden of Eden, idealized by man, populate the European imagery, conceiving this space within a visionary geography. In physical terms, it is a synthesis of classical literature and biblical narratives (...). An abundant nature, full of fruit trees, rivers, fountains and lakes with clear water, and green landscapes with singing birds were the Edenic scenery to be conquered (Assunção, 2001:35).*

The quest for wealth that guided the 16<sup>th</sup> century navigators and the vision of a paradise, elements for the adventure overseas, were immersed in a discourse that, according to Roland Barthes, can be called mythic dimension. According to Barthes, a myth is

born from historical contingencies and intentionally imposes itself on a reality as building space, modified by means of representations (Barthes, 1985).

Granted by the (re)discovery of the New World, the Iberians confirmed the premonitions of the paradisiacal and seducing lands pre-announced in the Scriptures. The representation of an Edenic paradise was transplanted to America's lands. From a mere metaphorical suggestion, the myth gained strength and the belief became a fixed idea.

The bewilderment caused by the impact of the vision narrated in Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter associated myth with reality. This association ended up giving support to creative imagery. The nature of the place that met the eyes on the first impact gave support to imagination, obsessed with the idealization of the land. This mentality, historically populated by mythical narratives of an earthly paradise, ended up making sense. The European realized that his mental matrix made him see.

With the arrival of the first Jesuits, also in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the perspective concerning the stunning, pure, untouched and beautiful nature of the tropical paradise, so idealized by the Ignatians, sedimented in the European mentality. Assuming that Europe was a "Lost Continent", contaminated by "infidelity", and aiming at the maintenance of its universalizing evangelizing character, the Roman Church embraced the expansionist projects of the European powers. Thus, the New World is an open field for this process, being the primary task of the Society of Jesus, religious order founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1538, the Christianization of natives and colonizers, which was secured by the Portuguese Crown by the institution of "catechism" (Neves, 2007:127).

The priests of the Society of Jesus, concerned about the evangelization of the natives, wrote countless letters to their European superiors and brothers, telling in detail their mishaps with the Christianization of the indigenous people living in the forests, and the everyday life in the Colony. Not rarely did they demonstrate admiration and respect in face of a wild and untamed nature.

It is well known and relatively famous José de Anchieta's letter addressed to Priest Diego Laynes of Rome. Anchieta wrote in São Vicente, in May 1560, seventeen long pages, describing animals, forests, climate and the whole nature of "terras dos Brasis". In many passages, Anchieta admires the Brazilian fauna diversity:

*No interior das terras acham-se cobras de extraordinário tamanho, a que os Índios chamam sucurijuba, que vivem quase sempre nos rios, onde elas apanham para comer os animais terrestres que com frequência os atravessam a nado, mas as vezes saem a terra e os atacam nas veredas por onde costumam passar dum lado para o outro. Não é fácil crer na grossura do seu corpo. Engolem um veado inteiro e ainda maiores animais. Coisa comprovada por todos. E alguns irmãos nossos o viram com espanto; e um deles, vendo uma cobra a nadar, julgou que fosse o mastro de um navio (Leite, 1954: apêndice VI: VI).*

*In the interior, snakes of extraordinary length are found, which the natives call sucurijuba. These snakes usually live in rivers, where they capture the terrestrial animals that frequently cross the them swimming. Sometimes*

*the snakes go to the land and attack these animals in the paths where they usually pass from one side to another. It difficult to believe in the size of their body. They swallow an entire deer and even larger animals. Fact attested by all. Moreover, some of our brothers saw it with astonishment; and one of them, watching a snake swimming, thought it was a mast of a ship (Leite, 1954: appendix VI: VI).*

In another passage of the same letter and after writing in detail about the caprices of winds and rain, the candor of parrots, birds and butterflies, or spending some time describing magnificent fierce jaguars, Anchieta surrenders to the divine wonders of a land touched by the Lord's hands:

*Até nas pedras há com que se admirar e, portanto exaltar a onipotência de Deus Nosso Senhor, sobretudo uma, útil para afiar espadas; mas tem de maravilhoso que se presta a ser tratada como couro maleável, e, qualquer parte que dela se toque, move-se como encaixe, de maneira que não parece uma pedra só, mas muitas, pegadas entre si por diversas juntas (Leite, 1954: apêndice VI: XVI).*

*There is always something to admire, even the rocks, and therefore exult Our Lord's omnipotence. A special one is useful to sharpen spades; but it is marvelous that it can be treated as soft leather and any part of it that is touched fits into the other, so that it does not seem to be a single stone but many linked to one another by several joints (Leite, 1954: appendix VI: XVI).*

In another segment of the letter, the Jesuit highlights the wonders of the forest, of the trees, in other words, the environment. Trees, roots and fruit, according to him, had ample healing properties, showing how much he learned with the natives and the constantly tried to approach the gregarious and generous nature:

*Das árvores, parece digna de menção (embora haja outras que destilam líquidos semelhantes à resina, úteis para remédios), uma que dá um suco suavíssimo, que querem seja bálsamo. Escorre a princípio como óleo por orifícios abertos pelo caruncho ou também por incisuras feitas por facas e machados, e depois coalha e parece tomar a forma de bálsamo. Exala cheiro não demasiado, mas suavíssimo, e é muitíssimo próprio para curar feridas, de maneira que em pouco tempo nem sinal fica da cicatriz (Leite, 1954: apêndice VI: XV).*

*Among the trees, it seems worth mentioning (although there are others that distill liquids similar to resin, useful for remedies) one that yields a very soft juice, that is supposed to be balm. Firstly, it flows as oil through holes opened by woodworms or also by incisions made by knives and axes, and then it coagulates and seems to take the shape of a balm. It exudes a very sweet smell, and is perfectly used to cure wounds, so that in a short time no signs of scars remain (Leite, 1954: appendix VI: XV).*

In his report, Anchieta emphasizes the goodness of the climate, the softness of the seasons, the abundance of rain and the mildness of the winter. However, his discourse also reveals fear and respect for a primitive and wild nature, capable of triggering tortuous storms in distinct and unusual moments:

*Não há muitos dias, estando em Piratininga, depois do por do sol, de repente começou a turvar-se o ar, a enevoar-se o céu, a amiudarem-se os trovões e os relâmpagos; o vento sul envolveu a terra até chegar ao nordeste, donde quase sempre costuma vir a tempestade, ganhou tal violência que parecia o Senhor ameaçar com a destruição. Abalou casas, arrebatou telhados, derrubou matos, arrancou pelas raízes grandíssimas árvores, partiu ao meio ou destroçou outras, de maneira que nos matos se taparam os caminhos, sem ficar nenhum (Leite, 1954: apêndice VI: II).*

*Not long ago, being in Piratininga, after the sunset, the air suddenly started to darken, the sky to fog, thunder and lightning to accumulate; the south wind enveloped the land reaching the northeast, from which the storm usually comes; it gained such violence that it resembles God menacing with destruction. It shook houses, snatched roofs, destroyed the forest, ripped out giant trees by the roots, broke in two or shattered others, so that the tracks were closed in the woods, remaining none (Leite, 1954: appendix VI: II).*

It is important to emphasize how much fear and wonder Jesuits and settlers experienced in relation to the inhospitable tropical nature, or of the “*terras dos Brasis*”, as Brazil was called at the time. Religious people and travelers, each in his own way, tried to decipher the unknowns of a unique world, Edenic principle that, both in Portuguese America and Spanish America, was able to translate the expectations of these “foreigners”.

Each European kingdom, in its own way, imprinted its mark in the New World. Organized, planned and structurally conceived cities marked the detailed and careful zeal of the Spanish colonization in America (Holanda, 1969:62). Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, in *Raízes do Brasil* (Roots of Brazil), reveals how much the Spanish conquerors cared for, when founding cities in America:

*Na procura do lugar que se fosse povoar cumpria, antes de tudo, verificar com cuidado as regiões mais saudáveis, pela abundância de homens velhos e moços, de boa compleição, disposição e cor, e sem enfermidades; de animais sãos e de competente tamanho, frutos e mantimentos sadios; onde não houvesse coisas peçonhentas e nocivas; de boa e feliz constelação; o céu claro e benigno, o ar puro e suave. Se fosse na marinha, era preciso ter em consideração o abrigo, a profundidade, e a capacidade de defesa do porto e, quando possível, que o mar não batesse da parte do sul ou do poente. Para as povoações de terra dentro, não se escolhessem lugares demasiado altos, expostos aos ventos e de acesso difícil; nem muito baixos, que costumam ser enfermícios, mas sim os que se achassem a altura mediana, descobertos*

para os ventos de norte e sul. Se houvesse serras, que fosse pela banda do levante e poente. Caso recaísse a escolha sobre localidade à beira de um rio, ficasse ela de modo que, ao sair o sol, desse primeiro na povoação e só depois nas águas (Holanda, 1969:63).

*When looking for the place to settle down, it was necessary to carefully check beforehand the most healthy regions by the abundance of old and young men of good complexion, disposition and color, devoid of illnesses; of healthy animals of appropriate size, fresh fruit and nourishment; where there was no poisonous or harmful things; of a good and happy constellation; clear and benign skies, pure and soft air.*

*Should it be the littoral, it was necessary to consider the shelter, the depth, and the capacity of defense of the port, and, when possible, the sea should not strike from the south or west. For the interior populations, places that were too high, exposed to winds, or of difficult access should not be chosen; not very low, because they are usually unsafe, but in median heights, open to north and south winds. Should there be hills, they should lie east and west. If the choice was a place at the margins of a river, it should lie in such a way that when the sun rises, it would shine on the settlement first and on the waters afterwards (Holanda, 1969:63).*

On the other hand, the natives' nudity and innocence gave the Portuguese the right to make ownership concrete. Based on the Christian faith, the Portuguese settled down armed with prerogatives, essential base for the exploration of the Eden. The delirium of the first moments determined the exploration culture, overshadowing the owners' wisdom and the conscience in dealing with the land. Optimistic, the Portuguese follow their way of producing, sure of the endless immensity of the lands and in the continuity of their fertility. Hampered by a reality, our agriculture-exporting economy followed its course permeated by crises, revealing the seeds of its decadence (Stein, 1990:253).

The researchers, trying to understand this phenomenon, attributed the coffee crisis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the old deforesting practices, together with the periodical invasions of ants, locusts and other pests to coffee plantations. Based on these factors, we can add to the list of reasons that led to the coffee collapse the scarcity of slave workforce and its following valorization, as well as the coffee price fluctuations in the international market and the producers' indebtedness.

It was primarily the depletion of the productive lands and the "cultivation methods employed that progressively undermined the material and environmental support of this production" (Petruccelli, 1994:23).

However, the farmers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, overshadowed by the force of the Edenic myth, "blamed the (production) decline on the amount of interest on agricultural loans or lack of machinery for the treatment of coffee beans" (idem). Certainly, these were determinant factors. However, the stunned producers could not see that the most categorical of the motives was in the way the environment was being destructed (*op. cit.*).

The unaltered methods of manual cultivation were applied using the trial-and-error method. Successive times they tried and failed, notably because the form of exploration and

occupation of the land was grounded in empiricism. The agricultural methods used in Brazil were based on local habits. The most experienced advised: “if the ankle and half of the calf sink in the humus under the tree, the soil is good” (Stein, 1990:58). In turn, the less worried warned: “I have done these things this way, let the next generation do as it pleases” (Stein, 1990:256). This mentality, together with the property, was transferred to the new generations.

The imperial palms, symbol of opulence, obscured the clarity of management. The baroness of Paty sarcastically observed in 1862 that the son’s ideas were still the father’s, who was persuaded by the grandfather (*apud* Stein, 1990:78). Lucidly the baroness observed in her inventory of 1868: “we can still see establishments, raised more than 60 years ago, guided by the same methods that leave production in the hands of nature and of the slow action of time” (Stein, 1990:78). It is interesting to note that this perception revealed that few were the actions taken to adequate the forms of production to a new mercantile status of the lands. Since the Law of 1850, the lands have officially become part of the mercantile circuit, with the establishment of the properties’ frontiers.

However, despite the valorization of the lands and the delimitation of the geographic frontiers, there were no changes in the conception of how the land should be explored. The arrangement of coffee plants in vertical columns was still a practice. The disaster caused by a torrential rainfall in 1878 revealed to an observer that: “Every time it rains (...), an avalanche reaches the base of each row of coffee plants, powered by the mounds of grass left by the slaves between the rows. Fancy what it would be like if the hill is steep and high and the soil sandy” (Stein, 1990:259).

It is not necessary to fancy. We could see with our own eyes, enchanted by the New Year’s celebration of 2009, “the revolt of nature”. Santa Catarina ended 2008 in wreckage. The alarming data revealed that since September 2008 to the beginning of 2009, 135 casualties occurred in that State due to the storm. More than 97% of the deaths were consequence of burials, affecting one third of the territory and more than two million people (34% of the total population). Considering the magnitude of the 2008/2009 disaster (Fig. 1), the civil defense concluded that this was the worst disaster in the Santa Catarina history ([senado.leg.br/comissões CMMC/AP/AP20090814\\_Def\\_Civil\\_SC](http://senado.leg.br/comissões/CMMC/AP/AP20090814_Def_Civil_SC)). In Minas Gerais, the damage in the same year, although less intense, was also preoccupying, with 25 casualties.

The CREA Report (2011/09) published data on the tragedy occurred in the *Região Serrana* (hilly region of Rio de Janeiro) in January 2011, were more than 900 people died and thousands became homeless. In December 2013, Nova Iguaçu in *Baixada Fluminense* (Rio de Janeiro lowlands) was one of the municipalities most affected by the storm. Around 70% of the occurrences were caused by landsliding, according to the civil defense (O *Fluminense*, Dec. 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

We could include more examples from other areas. Who could fancy the *Nordeste*, northeastern arid region of Brazil, covered by water? On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011, a strong rainfall led to the flooding of the Granjeiro River in Crato, Cariri of Ceará. “The *sertão* (outback) will turn into sea”, a prophecy turned into song, became reality. It reminds us of *Súplica cearense (Pleading For Ceará, 1964)*, considered the Northeast anthem, immortalized by Luiz Gonzaga. In the song, the exaggeration of the wish or the strength of faith overlaps other conditions linked to the empirical man/nature relationship.

Figure 1: Landsliding and burial in Blumenau, 2009.



Blumenau

Source: [http://www.senado.leg.br/comissoes/CMMC/AP/AP20090814\\_Def\\_Civil\\_SC](http://www.senado.leg.br/comissoes/CMMC/AP/AP20090814_Def_Civil_SC)

### *Súplica cearense*

Luiz Gonzaga

*Oh! Deus, perdoe este pobre coitado  
Que de joelhos rezou um bocado  
Pedindo pra chuva cair sem parar  
Oh! Deus, será que o senhor se zangou  
E só por isso o sol se arretirou  
Fazendo cair toda chuva que há*

*Senhor, eu pedi para o sol se esconder um tiquinho  
Pedir pra chover, mas chover de mansinho  
Pra ver se nascia uma planta no chão*

*Meu Deus, se eu não rezei direito o Senhor me perdoe,  
Eu acho que a culpa foi  
Desse pobre que nem sabe fazer oração*

*Meu Deus, perdoe eu encher os meus olhos de água  
E ter-lhe pedido cheinho de mágoa  
Pro sol inclemente se arretirar*

*Desculpe eu pedir a toda hora pra chegar o inverno  
Desculpe eu pedir para acabar com o inferno  
Que sempre queimou o meu Ceará*



### Pleading For Ceará

Luiz Gonzaga, translated to English by Fagner

*Oh God, pardon this poor man that I am  
That so much prayed on his knees  
Begging for the rain to come, without stopping  
Oh God, is it just that you are angry on me  
And that's why the sun went away  
Causing all the rain that exists to fall down*

*Lord, I just asked you to hide the sun for a little  
I asked for rain, but a quiet rain  
Just to see at least some plant on the soil grow*

*Oh my God, if I didn't pray right, Lord, pardon me  
I think that the blame is on  
This wretch I am, that poorly knows to pray*

*My God, pardon me for showing you my eyes flooded in tears  
For asking you, with my heart full of regret  
To the severe sun draw away*

*Pardon me for asking you to the winter come  
Pardon me for asking you to end the hell  
Which ravaged as always my Ceará*

[LYRICS TRANSLATE. Disponível em: <<http://lyricstranslate.com/en/suplica-cearence-pleading-ceara.html#ixzz3Fy40UBdv/>>. Acesso em: 17 dec. 2014.]

Brazil, turned into myth, revealed its other side, contradicting Rocha Pitta, considered the first historian of Brazil. Convinced of the country's natural potentialities, he declared in 1930:

*em nenhuma outra região se mostra o céu mais sereno, nem madrugada mais bela a aurora; o sol em nenhum outro hemisfério tem raios tão dourados, nem os reflexos noturnos tão brilhantes; as estrelas são mais benignas e se mostram sempre alegres (...) as águas são mais puras; é enfim o Brasil Terreal Paradise descoberto, onde tem nascimento e curso os maiores rios; domina salutar o clima; influem benignos astros e respiram auras suavíssimas, que o fazem fértil e povoado de inumeráveis habitantes (Chauí, 2004:6).*

*in no other region the sky is more serene, nor does the early morning dawn more beautifully; the sun in no other hemisphere has such golden rays,*

*nor are the nocturnal reflections so bright; the stars are more benign and are always happy (...) the waters are purer; it is Brazil Earthly Paradise discovered, where the longest rivers are born and flow; the climate dominates healthfully; the stars influence benignly and breathe their very smooth auras, which make it fertile and populated by uncountable inhabitants (Chauí, 2004:6).*

The positive representation of the Brazilian landscapes, flaunted through the four corners, has had great effect. Back in 1995 a survey revealed the representation of the homogeneity of the discourse. Sixty percent of the Brazilians interviewed were proud of the country. Among the motives of pride, nature was the leader (Cf. Chauí, 2004:6). The statistics simply demonstrated that, however reframed, the founding myth is present in the imagery of the Brazilians. The majority of the answers favoring “nature” coincided with the characteristics of the Edenic tradition. Some examples were clear, when mentioning the marvelous land, the sky, the pure air, the beauty of the beaches, the forests, Amazonia, the fertility of the soil, the blessed country, the size, the natural richness, the climate, the lack of earthquakes and hurricanes. This paradisiacal vision, remembers Carvalho, was also stigmatized by the playwright Nelson Rodrigues, when he stated that: “Ah, Brazil is not a country, not a nation, not a people, but a landscape” (Carvalho, 2007).

Despite the long distance from the original myth, Brazil continues to be conceived as “a gift of God and nature” (Chauí, 2004:8). The motto of the blessed land, in broad military dictatorship, gained strength with the musical group *Os Incríveis* (The Incredible). Represented by Dom and Ravel, the hit intoned: “*O Céu do meu Brasil tem mais estrelas, O sol do meu país, mais esplendor; A mão de Deus abençoou; Em terras brasileiras vou plantar amor*” [The Sky of my Brazil has more stars, The Sun of my country, more splendor; God’s hand blessed it; In Brazilian lands I will plant love]. The founding imagery continued to support our way to deal with our natural potentialities. However, the belief that “*em se plantando tudo dá*” [when planting, everything grows], despite common sense, was not a consensus in the country. Graciliano Ramos, for example, dismayed in his childhood memories, tells us about the results of a sad secular routine:

*Mergulhei numa comprida manhã de inverno. O açude apoiado, a roça verde, amarela e vermelha, os caminhos estreitos mudados em riachos, ficaram-me na alma. Depois veio a seca. Árvores pelaram-se, bichos morreram, o sol cresceu, bebeu as águas, e ventos mornos espalharam na terra queimada uma poeira cinzenta. Olhando-me por dentro, percebo com desgosto a segunda paisagem. Devastação, calcinação. Nesta via lenta sinto-me coagido entre duas situações contraditórias – uma longa noite, um dia imenso e enervante, favorável à modorra (apud Neves, 2006:16).*

*I dived into a long winter morning. The swelling dam, the green, yellow and red plantation, the narrow paths, turned into streams, remained in my soul. Soon, after this, drought arrived.*

*Trees went bare, animals died, the sun grew strong and drank the water, and warm winds spread a grey dust throughout the land. Looking into my feelings, I realize how I dislike the second scene. Havoc. Searing heat. In this slow motion life, I feel compelled between two contradictory situations – a long night; a huge and irksome day, good for dozing off.*  
 [Translated by Maria de Lourdes Pereira in: *Cadernos de Literatura em Tradução* 4, p. 51-64].

Unfortunately, the voices of those who warned about the one-way road faded away in face of the secular form of exploitation of the lands. What remained was the conviction that we had in our hands the blessing of the foundation. How can one understand the maintenance of this idea? How can one understand the positive representation of our image in face of so many contrary evidences in our contemporaneity? How can one understand the destruction of São Luiz do Paraitinga and Angra dos Reis, affected by the strong rainfall during the celebration of 2010 New Year's Eve? And the burial of the cities of the *Region Serrana* of Rio de Janeiro during the 2010/2011 summer? What could be happening in the “*país tropical abençoado por Deus e lindo por natureza*” [tropical country blessed by God and beautiful by nature]? The diluvium that affects the country every December indelibly marks the breakup of the harmony and the return to Chaos.

Would Brazil, the blessed land, be renegaded by the gods? What may have happened to the good omens? Certainly we watch in daze the “rebellion of nature”. The Brazilic lands, Eden described in prose and verse, have collapsed in contemporary times, leaving everyone aghast.

### Eden or purgatory?

What happened in the last years has shown us a harsh reality that was unthinkable, even remotely, to the first inhabitants of Brazil, nor to the settlers' minds.

In fact, the global environmental changes that materialized in the form of local impacts caused by extreme climatic events, as the ones observed every summer in all Brazilian territory – floods and landsliding in the Southeast and Northeast or draught in the North and South – are something that has not belonged to the Brazilian imagery, despite such occurrences were not exactly novelty.

Several researchers of different areas have systematically warned to the fact that the global environmental changes would be especially impacting on economic and political sectors, as well as on human health (Hogan; Tolmasquim, 2001; Giddens, 2008). However, the public perception of these impacts has been little considered in the academic literature, and also the analysis of the conceptual and cultural constructions associated with the “right” granted to humans to dominate the other species and the planet as a whole.

The specialized academic production has also revealed that, to make the scenario even more complicated, the impacts of the global environmental changes are not evenly distributed, with some areas being more intensely impacted

and affected than others. Among the areas that are prone to be impacted, the coastal regions are the most sensitive and vulnerable (Confalonieri, 2005; Hogan; Tolmasquim, 2001).

More specifically, the Brazilian coastal regions have been calling attention because of their history – since the Colonial Period, with the acceleration and intensification of processes in more recent periods – of intense and profound environmental and consequently social and cultural changes, which result from alterations in the cover and use of the soil, of the new spatial configurations – with a significant predominance of the disperse urbanization pattern – and the intensive use of natural resources – in special fossil fuels as petroleum and natural gas (Barbosa et al., 2009; 2010; Ferreira et al., 2011; Hogan et al., 2008; Freire de Mello; Hogan, 2007; Freire de Mello, 2008; Freire de Mello, 2010). In turn, the Portuguese way of space occupation followed natural instincts. No rules, no order, very sloppily and no method, taking the lands away from the natives. Importing unefficient methods from the European matrix, the Portuguese “feitorizavam mais que colonizavam” [rather than colonizing, they managed] (Holanda, 1969):

*A rotina e não a razão abstrata foi o princípio que norteou os portugueses, nesta com em tantas outras expressões de sua atividade colonizadora. Preferiam agir por experiências sucessivas, nem sempre coordenadas umas às outras, a traçar de antemão um plano para segui-lo até o fim (...). Nenhum rigor, nenhum método, nenhuma previdência, sempre esse significativo abandono que exprime a palavra “desleixo” (Idem, p.76).*

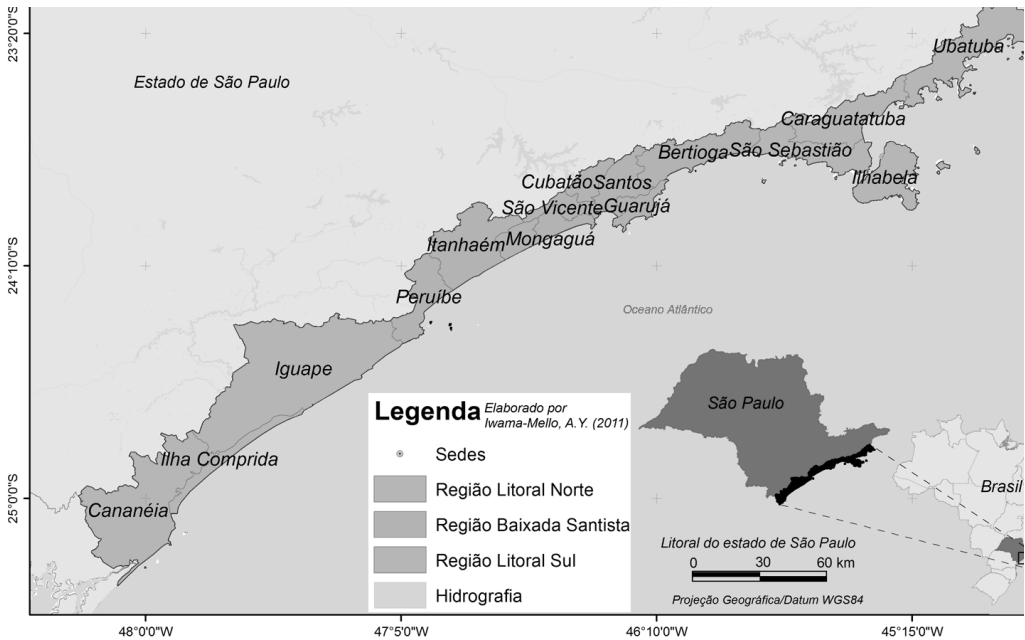
*The routine rather than the abstract reason was the principle that directed the Portuguese, in this and in many other expressions of their colonizing activity. They preferred to act by successive experiences, not always coordinated with each other, than draw a plan beforehand to be followed to the end (...). No rigor, no method, no security, always this significant abandonment that the word “sloppiness” expresses (Idem, p.76).*

If we analyze the specific case of the Northern Littoral of São Paulo State – region that encompasses the municipalities of Caraguatatuba, Ilhabela, São Sebastião and Ubatuba, and is famous for its very beautiful coastal landscapes and for being one of the main touristic poles of the State and Brazil – studies show that the floating population present in the four municipalities during summer and school vacations easily exceeds a million people – we will see that the vision of an “Earthly Paradise” inherited from our ancestors still continues strongly impregnated in people’s minds. Out of the four municipalities, Caraguatatuba presents marking characteristics that make our analysis even more interesting under the perspective now proposed.

The Northern Littoral of São Paulo State (Fig. 2) belongs to the geological and topographic structure of *Serra do Mar* (Cruz, 1974), including the coastal zone and associated slopes, where a mosaic of ecosystems known as *Floresta Atlântica*

or *Mata Atlântica* (Atlantic Forest) predominate. It was one of the largest tropical forest areas of the Americas, occupying approximately 1.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of the Brazilian territory and including a large part of the Brazilian littoral (Ribeiro et al., 2009).

**Figure 2: São Paulo coast and subdivision: Southern Coast, *Baixada Santista* and Northern Coast.**



Source: IWAMA-MELLO (2011).

Thanks to its privileged geographic position, the region was one of the first to be occupied in the Colonial Period and, since the beginning of the colonization, its history and economy intermingled with the domination and intensive exploitation of the Atlantic Forest. In a territory originally occupied by biome, ca. 70% of the Brazilian population today lives there, which corresponds to ca. 80% of the *Produto Interno Bruto* – PIB (Gross Domestic Product – GDP = total value of the industrial production and services of a country) of Brazil (Seixas et al., 2011).

The population of the Northern Littoral of São Paulo State is 281,778 inhabitants (IBGE, 2011), distributed in the four municipalities – Caraguatatuba, Ilhabela, São Sebastião and Ubatuba, which sum a total area of 1,947.70 km<sup>2</sup>. The original vegetation persists in 84% of the area of Ilhabela, São Sebastião and Ubatuba (SOS *Mata Atlântica*; INPE, 2009), whereas in Caraguatatuba, with the largest population, this percentage falls to 74%.

The Northern Littoral has its historical occupation and its economic development strongly linked to the Paraíba do Sul River Valley, region that, despite its strategic spatial localization – between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the two major Brazilian metropolises – was characterized, especially during the first half of the 20th century, by significant isolation and economic stagnation (Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010a; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010b; Silva et al., 2010).

The process of occupation and settlement started in the Colonial Period, when, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, São Paulo explorers began to move towards Minas Gerais, with the objective of capturing natives and explore gold deposits. At this moment, the Paraíba do Sul River Valley was made corridor to regions localized more in the interior, making the entry of colonizers and the occupation of the territory easier. Along the following centuries, the region has kept the character of passageway of people and products between the interior and the coast (Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010a; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010b; Silva et al., 2010).

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the coffee culture expanded throughout the region, starting around 1760, from the crops localized in the Paraíba Valley in Rio de Janeiro. In the following decades, coffee became the main Brazilian export item and the region lived a period of significant dynamism and growth, both in population and economy, financed by the great profits generated by the agricultural production, reaching its peak during the Second Brazilian Empire, promoting the beginning of industrialization in that region (Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010a; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010b; Silva et al., 2010).

In the 1970's, the consolidation of the spatial parting of the industrial activities of São Paulo State, which were previously concentrated in São Paulo's Metropolitan Region, took place. This process followed the parting of the agricultural production from São Paulo, starting in the 1940's and reaching its peak at the end of the 1950's (Martine and Campolina, 1992: 125 *apud* Freire de Mello, 2012).

As Martine and Campolina affirmed, the parting of the industrial activity, contrarily to what was usually thought, was planned and implemented:

*refletindo a lógica e o interesse das firmas do estado, de vez que foi induzido, em grande parte pelas necessidades de expansão das empresas paulistas sobre uma parcela crescente do espaço nacional. [...] O lançamento do novo pacote de projetos industriais – a partir do final da década de 60, à medida que as plantas existentes alcançavam suas escalas técnicas ou atingiam plena capacidade – também favoreceu o deslocamento espacial (Martine and Campolina, 1992: 127 *apud* Freire de Mello, 2012).*

*reflecting the logic and interest of the statal companies, once it was induced in great part by the need of expansion of São Paulo companies on an increasing fraction of the national space. [...] The launching of a new package of industrial projects – from the end of the 60's, as the existing plants reached their technical scales or full capacity – also favored mobility (Martine and Campolina, 1992: 127 *apud* Freire de Mello, 2012).*

Contemporaneously and as consequence of development policies adopted by the last Federal Government administrations, the economy of the Paraíba Valley in São Paulo state entered a new phase of dynamism and growing, specially as a function of the implementation of the activities related to the extraction and exploitation of natural gas reserves of the Mexilhão field and petroleum of the *Pré-Sal* platform and the expansion of the São Sebastião Port (Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010a; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010b; Freire de Mello, 2012).

This new and dynamic phase, besides significantly incorporating and increasing the economic and political importance of the Northern Littoral municipalities, has also contributed in a very important way for the establishment of a new vector of attraction of economic activities, localized in the Northern Littoral-Campinas axis and along the Dom Pedro I (SP-65) and Tamoios (SP-99) highways, which starts to compete with the Dutra Highway axis (Breunig and Freire de Mello, 2010; Castro, Freire de Mello and Reis, 2010; Freire de Mello, 2012; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010a; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010b).

The new development axis is accompanied by a series of projects of high economic, social, environmental and political impact, besides contributing very significantly to the increase of anthropic pressure on the environment, as a function of the urban occupation expansion on areas of strong socio-environmental vulnerability located in its surroundings, both in the interior and littoral (Alves et al., 2010; Breunig and Freire de Mello, 2010; Castro, Freire de Mello and Reis, 2010; D'Antona, Alves and Mello, 2010; Iwama-Mello, Tomás and D'Antona, 2011; Freire de Mello et al., 2010; Freire de Mello, 2012; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010a; Moreira Neto and Freire de Mello, 2010b; Seixas et al., 2010).

More than that, the new development axis represented by the Dom Pedro I and Tamoios highways allows that several social actors expand their participations, expanding their influence and intensity of their impacts on the socio-economic and political reality of the Caraguatatuba region. Maybe one of the best examples of these participations is the creation process that started some years ago and reached its peak on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2012, which was called Paraíba Valley and Northern Littoral Metropolitan Region and followed the approval of the Complementary State Law 1166 by the Governor of São Paulo State.

Among these actors, it is worth mentioning the role played by the real estate industry in transforming the space and, consequently, in the generation and intensification of socio-environmental impacts.

In turn, the occupation of the Northern Littoral had already started in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in a process of indigenous resistance known as the Tamoios Confederation (1554-1567), which gathered the native chiefs of the Northern Littoral of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro against the European invader (Marcílio, 2006, p.47). The official peace agreement, the first of Brazil, known as the Iperoig Peace Treatise, was signed on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1563. The indigenous leaders agreed with the settlement of Portuguese people by means of sesmarias (land concession). The occupation of this region was "typical of a colonizer who had no money to buy slaves, build mills or participate in the com-

mercial economy: in other words, of the colonizer who was limited to a subsistence economy” (Costa, 1984, p. 144).

The discovery of gold in Minas Gerais gave a certain motivation to the region, which started the production of sugar cane and commodities to supply mining areas. The Ubatuba port was used in transportation. In 1789, the governor the captaincy of São Paulo determined that each and every export could only be carried out by the Santos Port, which led to the decadence of the Northern Littoral. This crisis was solved only after 1808, with the arrival of the Royal Family and the opening of the ports. However, the successive economic crises in Brazil – in part resultant from the coffee crisis – lead to a grave economic marasmus in that region.

With the construction of the Tamoios Highway (SP-099) in the 1950's, thus connecting the São Paulo State coastal region with the interior, the municipalities started experimenting a new phase of dynamism and development, as they became very popular touristic poles, especially for the São Paulo middle class.

The population growth observed along the following decades was significantly propelled by the real estate industry and by the predatory and disordered touristic activity, which caused striking environmental changes that generated great socio-environmental impact in the region.

Today, a new economic development phase is installed, mainly related to the exploitation of petroleum and natural gas reserves known as *Pré-Sal*, which can significantly increase the risk of accidents and floods, because of an expressive change in the present scenario, with the increasing population, vehicles and load transportation. At the same time, the precariousness of the health service net, including the hospital emergency services, is observed. It is not prepared to assist the demand resulting from the urban expansion that is already in course (Hogan et al, 2008).

The municipality of Caraguatatuba, localized 186 km far from the capital of São Paulo State, has 29 km of coast, formed by 17 beaches. It is very popular for leisure and touristic activities, and is maybe the most impacted of the municipalities of the region, due to the contemporary development phase related to the exploitation of *Pré-Sal* reserves. The demographic density is 183.52 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, but a significant increase is expected because of the new economic activities (Hogan et al, 2008; Barbosa, 2007; Renk, 2010; Freire de Mello, 2012).

To highlight the vulnerability of the region, it is worth mentioning that in March, 1967, an important climatic event known as “The Catastrophe” occurred as consequence of a sequence of landslides in *Serra do Mar*, triggered by a positive rainfall anomaly, causing, according to the records of the time, the death of 436 people, besides severe damage to the local infrastructure and economy. Thirty-three percent of the population of Caraguatatuba became homeless due to landsliding. In the *Parque Estadual da Serra do Mar*, countless collapses occurred, causing a mud blanket that in only ten minutes covered the entire city (Cruz, 1974; Castro et al., 2012).



## Final considerations

Some years until now, Brazilians have constantly watched a series of natural disasters, which are cataclysms usually associated with intense rainfall. It has triggered landsliding, burial of people and properties, as well as the destruction of infrastructure and interruption of economic activities.

It can be said that the endangered regions have a particular and very characteristic natural dynamics that composes a scenario of high environmental vulnerability and exposes the population to a complex list of socio-environmental risks, which are bound to worsen. The area of the *Parque Estadual da Serra do Mar*, for example, has concentrated a series of investments in infrastructure related to petroleum and natural gas exploitation of the *Pré-Sal* layer, such as the Petrobras Mexilhão Project and urban infrastructure as the *Anel Viário Caraguatatuba-São Sebastião* (Caraguatatuba-São Sebastião ring road), the *Aterro Sanitário Regional* (Regional Landfill) and the *Centro de Detenção Provisória* (Provisional Detection Center), all located in the limits of the Caraguatatuba and São Sebastião municipalities (Hogan et al., 2008; Renk, 2010; Seixas; Renk, 2010).

All the forms in which the media and the Brazilian society itself have been understanding and representing the *Pré-Sal* remind the old Edenic myth materialized in Brazilian lands, which has accompanied the history of the country since its beginning. However, reality has revealed itself much harder than that fantasized in the past and inserted in the national culture. The myth of the Edenic nature, flora, fauna, rivers and forests gave way to frustrations of our dreams, destroyed by the colonizers' predatory activities, helped by Brazilians themselves.

We imagine that a review and a systematic and arising dismantling of the myth can help the Brazilian society to overcome this psychological and cultural obstacle that blurs its perception and consequently its relationship with the environment. A new logic oriented and better tuned with the contemporary reality takes into account all the issues related to the socio-environmental vulnerabilities the population and institutions are submitted to, mainly as consequence of the intense and significant global environmental changes. It is with this process that this study intends to contribute.

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# BRAZIL, THE COLLAPSED EDEN: NATURAL DISASTERS IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to contribute to the academic discussion related with the role that myths about the New World played – and also play – into the historic building of the contemporary relationship between environment and society. The main idea is based on historical texts that point out that the relation between man and nature was always mediated by the first's attitude, culturally and socially constructed. Thus, men found on cultural and religious myths all the needed justifications to allow them to dominate and to explore/exploit the natural resources, given that the physical world was created by God and only exists to sustain human societies.

Such argumentation can nowadays be found, even in others forms, inside the contemporary development speech, especially when it's made by corporations that explore/exploit directly the natural resources as, for instance, oil, coal and natural gas companies. The study area is the Metropolitan Region of Paraíba do Sul River's Valley and North Seaside of São Paulo State, Brazil.

**Keywords:** environment; global environmental change; society; myth; risk

**Resumo:** O presente artigo discute a permanência de antigos mitos edênicos na sociedade brasileira bem como a relação destes, com o ambiente, a sociedade e as explicações utilizadas para diferentes desastres naturais ocorridos no início do século XXI, em território brasileiro. A perspectiva se justifica a partir das relações que se estabelecem entre homem e natureza, relações mediadas pela postura do primeiro, construída cultural e socialmente. O artigo propõe a entender, também, a origem histórica e cultural do mito do Éden – paraíso terrestre – e como este foi projetado pelos portugueses no momento da conquista do Novo Mundo. Esta perspectiva nos permite uma melhor compreensão da atual relação homem/natureza na sociedade brasileira, configurada, agora, por processos contemporâneos de mudança ambiental global e, pelos novos riscos e vulnerabilidades, deles decorrentes tendo como área de estudo a Região Metropolitana do Vale do Paraíba e Litoral Norte Paulista.

**Palavras-chave:** ambiente; mudança ambiental global; sociedade; mito; risco.

**Resumen:** Este artículo discute la permanencia de antiguos mitos edénicos, en la sociedad brasileña y su relación con el ambiente, la sociedad y las explicaciones utilizadas para los diferentes desastres naturales ocurridos en inicio de este siglo, en territorio brasileño. La visión se justifica a partir de las relaciones establecidas entre hombre y naturaleza, mediadas por el primero y construidas social y culturalmente. El artículo también se propone a entender el origen histórico y cultural del mito del Edén – paraíso terrestre – y la forma como fue proyectado por los portugueses en el momento de la conquista del Nuevo Mundo. Esta perspectiva nos permite un mejor entendimiento de la relación actual hombre/naturaleza en la sociedad brasileña, ahora, configurada por procesos contemporáneos de mudanza ambiental global y por los nuevos riesgos y vulnerabilidades, de ellos decurrentes. El área de estudio es la Región Metropolitana del Valle del Río Paraíba del Sur y Litoral Norte del Estado de São Paulo, Brasil.

**Palabra clave:** Medio ambiente; cambio ambiental global; sociedad; mito; riesgo.

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