

Contradictions of Modernization in Belém, Metropolis of the Amazon*

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This essay is a montage of photographic images and its comments. The issue of the contradictions of modernization in Belém is presented here through a series of photographs that I took during several trips to Belém in 2007 and 2008, and which I use to explain the geographical and historical context. By doing that, I intend not only to practice a kind of history writing, especially valorized by the great researcher of cities Walter Benjamin, but also to consider the specific conditions of this symposium which brings together researchers from Brazil and Japan. As I don't know the Japanese language, I tried to establish, also with the translator's work, a direct communication with the colleagues from Japan through this international kind of writing which are the images.



Photo 1 Abandoned airplanes at Manaus airport

What are these retired flying devices meditating about? "Why does the modern get old so fast?" This was precisely one of the "seven questions to Walter Benjamin" made at the German-Brazilian Symposium taking place in 1990 at the Goethe Institute in São Paulo¹. Among the answers given by Bernd Witte and Sérgio Paulo Rouanet based on Benjamin texts, I would like to highlight the idea that the modernity – redefined by Baudelaire based on the phenomenon of fashion – always produces for any price the modern, the new, which is replaced by something newer



Photo 2 Belém, seen from an airplane

and then becomes old fashioned and obsolete². Or, in other words, the modernity is a working structure of the economic-cultural system established by the Age of Revolutions (Industrial and Bourgeois), which demands the continuous process of the new getting old³. Based on these previous explanations, I will organize some observations about the relation between the processes of modernization and getting old of a specific city, Belém, the Amazon metropolis.

To begin, the city of Belém will be presented through some panoramic views, as they could be captured by a foreigner just interested in having an overview. Let's start with this air view (photo 2). The city grows looking like "an elbow" (comparison used by the geographer Antonio Rocha Penteado) toward the point where the *Guamá* river (right below, to the south) flows into the *Guajará* bay (right above, to the northeast) which is, with the *Pará* river, the southern part of the Amazon estuary. The most valuable city area, constituted by a concentration of high-rise buildings, is located in the middle of the "elbow", on an elevation that goes from 10 to 12 meters above sea level. Surrounding this area, to the south, north and east, are the growing modest and poor neighborhoods, almost at sea level, which are known in Belém as "baixadas"⁴.

1 See the journal *Revista USP*, n. 15 (September, October, November, 1992), "Dossiê Walter Benjamin", p. 5-124.

2 WITTE, Bernd. In: *op. cit.*, p. 104 (Answer to the question "Why does the modern get old so fast? Modernity by Walter Benjamin", p. 103-110).

3 See Sérgio Paulo Rouanet's answer to the same question, *op. cit.*, p. 110-117, especially p. 116.

4 Lowlands.



Photo 3 Belém's skyline, seen from the river

This view from the water and the islands (still) covered by the (secondary) forest reminds us that the city is in a place far enough from the sea, protected against surprise attacks and favorably next to some natural passages which allow a closer access to the main arm of the Amazon river, without having to face the clash of waters between the mouth of this mighty river and the open sea. At this strategic point in 1616 the city of Belém was founded as a major geopolitical move by which Portugal assured the domain of great part of the Amazon region against its French, English, Dutch and also Spanish rivals.



Photo 4 Panorama I: the place of Belém's foundation

Let's go now into the city to have a first panoramic view. This picture was taken from a window close to the *Ver-o-Peso* market, which is the most famous icon of the city. The *Ver-o-Peso* market is near to the place of Belém's foundation. Directly above we see the *Forte do Castelo*⁵, where the city was founded, and the *Sé Cathedral*, both belonging to the oldest part of Belém: the Old Town, which extends behind. Our observation point is located on the second oldest part: the district of *Campina* or *Comércio*.

5 Old Castle Fort.



Photo 5 Panorama II: Republic Square, from the epoch of rubber (1850-1912)

To get this panoramic view, we left the *Ver-o-Peso* market and walked about one kilometer inside the city. There, in the beginning of the highest part, lies the city's cultural center, whose main icon is the Theatre of Peace, inaugurated in 1878, when Belém, as the world's main export center of rubber, was becoming a rich city. In the four decades between 1870 and 1912, the city intensely lived its first era of modernization, characterized by the accumulation of goods, capital, foundation of commercial companies, by the increase of the population (200,000 inhabitants in 1910) and by a large-scale urban planning – with wide avenues and tree-lined boulevards, the building of mansions and palaces for the rich people, the improvement of the port infrastructure and finally the installation of a modern public transport system: the trams.



Photo 6 *Belle Époque*: outside view of the textiles store "Paris n'Amérique"



Photo 7 *Belle Époque*: stairway of the textiles store "Paris n'América"

The time of the rubber boom (1897-1912) is known as the *Belle Époque*. A typical icon of that period is the department store "Paris n'América". During the *Belle Époque* the planners of the modern Belém dreamed of transforming the city into a "Paris in the tropics", a "Paris in America", as suggested by the name of the department store opened in 1909 in the district of *Comércio*.



Photos 8 and 9 *Conselheiro João Alfredo* Street, in 1900 and in 2008

This street was then the main one of the district of *Comércio*, the economic and social center of town, where the most elegant stores were located and where people of high society strolled. This group of consumers has shifted today to the malls, near to residential areas. The neighborhood of *Comércio* remains busy, but nowadays it is mainly frequented by buyers of modest purchasing power. During weekdays, the streets are full by hundreds of street vendors. Only on Sundays and holidays they are almost empty, and on these days you could get in touch with the past, until 2009, with a ride on the tramways.



Photo 10 The *Comércio* neighborhood

This current view, over much of the district of *Comércio*, between the Sé Cathedral and the Church of *Rosário*, shows the double architectonic feature of this neighborhood. The basic part consists of houses (commercial and residential), built in the first era of modernization, between 1870 and 1910, which since then have not undergone a substantial renovation. A considerable number of these houses gave way to buildings of ten or twelve floors, built mainly in the 1960s when, after half a century of decline, a new period of modernization had begun, but without any urban planning ruled. It is noteworthy that the same signs of deterioration that characterize the townhouses of the decline period following the first stage of modernization can be also observed in most of the newer buildings, which are already half a century old and represent the vestiges of the second phase of modernization.



Photo 11 Panorama III: the current modernization

This third panoramic view was taken again from *Ver-o-Peso* market. Between the phase of modernization that began in the 1960s and the current phase of modernization there has been almost no interruption, just the places and styles of investments have changed. This view shows us the new configuration of the kiosks from the street fair of *Ver-o-Peso* market: the old structures of wood and canvas, often precarious, were replaced by tougher structures of metal and plastic awnings. In the background, we can see some parts of the port, and at the beginning of the pier behind the tress, there is the *Docas*⁶ station, opened in 2000. It is a pleasant meeting place of the middle class, with bars, restaurants and places for cultural events. The wish to “see the river” is a new pattern of behavior of Belém’s middle and upper classes. Only about twenty years ago did they begin to change their old pattern of standing with their “back” to the river (which was regarded as a work area, full of cabins, debris and dirt). A sign of the current desire to live near the river are the recent constructed high-rise buildings, that can be seen in the background and which are located in the neighborhood of *Umarizal*, the most expensive of the city today.

The physiognomy of the new vertical Belém is imposed in such way that it is impossible not to comment on it. Over the last twenty or twenty five years, from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, we can notice an impressive real estate boom. Not



Photo 12 The new vertical Belém (1): the housing boom

that the city itself is generating extraordinary wealth – its investments and GDP are surpassed by those of Manaus –, but large amounts of capital flow to Belém from the whole State of *Pará*, especially from metallurgical enterprises, agribusiness and logging, besides amounts of money from other places and other sources.



Photos 13 and 14 The new vertical Belém (2): “A privileged view” and a building in “naval” style

6 Docks.

With Walter Benjamin, and before him, with Balzac as an exemplary realist writer of the nineteenth century, we have learned how to understand the bourgeois interior as an expression of the mentality of that class. Currently, real estate ads offer a rich material to know the desires, dreams and ideology of the urban middle class. Here is an example of an ad that promises a “privileged view” of the bay for those who are investing in the new “business tower”. Beside it, there is a residential building, already at an advanced stage of construction, whose balconies are designed in a “naval” style – as a reminder of the Portuguese caravels that took possession of this gateway to the Amazon in the times of Grão-Pará⁷.



Within this third view of the new vertical Belém, a building with 40 floors shows off as “the highest twin tower in the Amazon”(photos 15 and 16). In front of this construction site, there is a huge poster that translates the very voice of the housing boom: “22 new constructions in nine years, 12 deliveries in six years and you more relaxed than ever.”

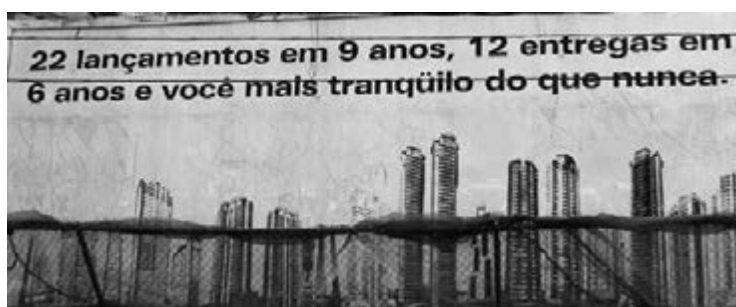


Photo 17 View from the periphery (1)

Does the city of Belém breathe indeed such an atmosphere of tranquility? This is emphatically not the impression we have when we look a bit around it. In this view of the vertical Belém, taken from the periphery of one of the lowlands, near the neighborhood of *Guamá*, a roll of barbed wire over the walls is a clear sign of concern among the inhabitants of being robbed inside their own homes.



Photo 18 View from the periphery (2)



Photos 15 and 16 The new vertical Belém (3): The highest twin tower in the Amazon and “You more relaxed than ever”

This second view of the vertical Belém from the periphery was taken in the neighborhood of *Terra Firme*, which stretches along the creek *Tucunduba*, a tributary of the river *Guamá* and one of the city limits. The huge contrast between the living conditions of the inhabitants of the urbanized area, which appears at the skyline very far away, and the

⁷ The name of the State in colonial times.

inhabitants of this dirt road in the marshland, with its poor constructions made of wood, all among the garbage and pools of standing water, is quite obvious.

We have seen so far some examples of the contradictions caused by the modernization currently underway. What we observe in Belém are structures that are also found in almost all other Brazilian large cities. Through these images, I've been trying to show, as I said initially, the profile of the city as it appears to a visitor from abroad. Given these contrasts, there is a methodological question: How to write the history of modernization in the case of Belém? As a sequence of improvements – the first one around 1900, during the age of rubber, and the second, begun in the 1960s and still going on nowadays – only interrupted between 1912 and late 1950s, by a period of decline and stagnation? Or as a structurally precarious process, even in its “peak”, which produced and is still producing – in addition to “progress” – abandonment, decay and social problems, that instead of being solved become more and more serious?

To answer to this question, “how to write the history of modernization in the case of Belém?”, with better knowledge of the facts, I started studying the work of one of the most significant writers of the region, regarded by some as the greatest novelist of the Amazon: Dalcídio Jurandir (1909-1979). He was born on the island of *Marajó* and spent his adolescence and part of his adult life in Belém. He is the author of a series of ten novels, which he called “*Ciclo do Extremo Norte*” and which portrays the city of Belém, the island of *Marajó*, and *Gurupá*, a town on the lower Amazon. In this large work, I will focus on the novel *Belém do Grão-Pará* (1960), presenting a summary.

By comparing the cover of 1960 with the 2004 one, we notice that the first expresses the vision of a time when *Belém*'s middle and upper classes lived “back to the river” (photos 19). Instead of the water feature, there is a tunnel of mango trees, through which we see some houses, and among them a highlighted one with tiles, typical of the age of rubber. On the cover of the 2nd edition (photos 20), released in the first decade of the 21st century, the vegetable element is missing altogether, instead there is an



Photos 19 and 20 The novel *Belém do Grão-Pará*: covers of the 1st and 2nd edition

overabundance of water. This is a photo showing the dock of *Ver-o-Peso* market, with a piece of pier in the foreground, boats floating in the full river and, in the background, a part of *Ver-o-Peso* fish market. It is a city entirely devoted to the river and to its surrounding waterways.

The theme of the novel, whose action takes place in the early 1920s, is in the words of the narrator “the disaster that happened to the family [*Alcântara*] and to *Pará*” (BGP: 61)⁸, as a result for the abrupt decrease of rubber in 1912. The portrait of Belém that offers Dalcídio Jurandir is therefore focused on the *Alcântara* family: *Virgil*, customs officer; his wife, *Inácia*, who feels sorry for the fall of economic position and social status, and their daughter, *Emília*, a fat and lazy girl, with a high sense of her social status and desperately searching for a husband. To complete this picture of the family, there are also the “*agregados*” of the house: the maid – almost a slave – named *Libânia*, the dressmaker *Isaura*, and the teenager *Alfredo*, an *alter ego* of the novelist, who came, like him, from *Marajó* Island to study in Belém, and who spends his first year at the *Alcântara*'s, thanks to a family deal and to a monthly allowance sent by his mother. The portrait of the city is predominantly topographic, as it shows Belém divided into territories of different social classes from the housing of the characters.

⁸ With the initials BGP from now on we are making reference to Dalcídio Jurandir's novel *Belém do Grão-Pará*, 2nd ed., Belém: EDUFPA; Rio de Janeiro: Casa Rui Barbosa, 2004.



Photo 21 A house between the classes: *Gentil Bittencourt Avenue*

At the peak of the rubber, in the time of intendant *Lemos* (1897-1911), *Virgil Alcântara* occupied an important position: he was the administrator of the Municipal Market. But with the fall of *Lemos*, he lost that position – a loss that compelled the *Alcântara* family to move to a modest house on *Gentil Bittencourt Avenue*, a house of one door and two windows. We can identify in current Belém the block described by the novelist, which is near the corner of *14 de Março Lane*. On the north side, it is occupied by the barracks of the 15th Infantry Battalion of the Army, and on the southern side, by high buildings and some recent old ranch houses. With the changes that have occurred in recent decades, and which have been accelerating in the recent years, it is very difficult to find in this avenue remains of houses from the 1920s. However, in the block indicated in the novel, I could take a photo of this house of just one door and two windows, which conveys the image of a modest residence. From its southern part, it was possible then, to get a view over the lowlands of *Guamá*. Note that *Gentil Bittencourt Avenue* in the 1920s like today offers, as perhaps no other street in Belém, a complete view of the social layers, because it extends from *Batista Campos* neighborhood – the wealthy class' area – until the lowlands and poor neighborhoods of *Canudos* and *Terra Firme*. Therefore, for young Alfredo it was an ideal observatory to learn about the different social territories of the city, and we, as readers, are able to join him in this mapping.



Photos 22 and 23 “Where rich people lived and showed off”: *Nazaré Road and Grand Hotel, in 1900*

Living in the modest house on *Gentil Avenue* leaves *Emília*, the *Alcântara* couple's daughter, deeply dissatisfied. She dreams of living “where rich people live and show off”. An elegant street by excellence is the *Nazaré Road* (now Avenue). It leads to the Republic Square, where are the Theatre of Peace, the Olympia Cinema and the Grand Hotel, all meeting places for the high society.



Photo 24 *Nazaré Avenue in 2008*



Photo 25 Residential townhouse from the rubber epoch



Photo 27 The house of the dressmaker, in a workmen's neighborhood

Suddenly, the discovery of an empty mansion in *Nazaré* Road represents a magical way to *Emília*. She thinks about moving to that place. The impoverished girl “wanted to dress up like a rich girl in the *Nazaré* Road’s three windows” (BGP: 294). The large house is characterized by the narrator since the beginning as “a ruined house”, with an “old and low front”, “ledge” and “three windows, however with no blinds” (BGP: 245). For *Emília*, the home problems are minimized by its excellent location, one block and a half from the Republic Square, close to all the best in the city. She manages to persuade her parents to move there.



Photo 26 A street in a workmen's neighborhood

In contrast to the *Alcântara* family, especially with the idle and presumptuous *Emília*, the narrator draws a portrait of *Isaura*, *Alfredo*’s cousin and *Alcântara*’s “volunteer” dressmaker” (BGP: 182). But she is also ready to fight for her rights. The relationship between *Emília* and *Isaura*, alternating argues and reconciliations, is a class struggle in miniature, although it also shows the dialogue and the interdependence of the classes. The address of the dressmaker is located in *Rui Barbosa* Lane, in the middle of *Reduto*, a workmen’s neighborhood. It is a very simple house, with only one door and one window (see BGP: 183). All *Isaura*’s family members perform manual tasks. Among these characters, the narrator emphasizes *Mãe Ciana*, who is a perfume seller. *Alfredo*, at first sight, gets fascinated with her, because she is a proof that “he came from a family involved in witchcraft, magic, and wonderful herbs” (BGP: 188).

The background of the topographical history narrated in *Belém do Grão-Pará* is situated at the periphery of the three neighborhoods described above (those of the middle-class, the upper class, and the working-class): it is the territory of the excluded ones. These are the lowlands, which suffer with the floods caused by rivers, tide and rains. The inhabited parts of the lowlands were called *Covões*⁹. The population used to live there (and still does) in shacks,

9 Deep hole graves.

at the margins of the economic, political and cultural activities of the city. As the problems of that population increased in the 1920s – especially diseases and hunger – some of these forgotten ones resorted to violence, theft and looting, especially in the lowland of *Guamá*. The problematic situation of those excluded people is a recurring theme in Dalcídio Jurandir's novel. Here are some current photos of the neighborhood of *Guamá*.



Photo 28 *Guamá* (1): Palha Harbor and street fair



Photo 29 *Guamá* (2): Street and dwellings

In addition to market activity – where essential items are sold – we notice, in the background of the picture, the *Guamá* river and, thus, the intense connection between the population of the lowlands with the rivers surrounding Belém. Almost everything that supports the city – from foodstuff to the manpower – comes from the backlands.

The photo 29 shows a pattern of living conditions that is still very common in the periphery of *Belém*: dirt roads in poor condition and poor households, most wooden ones.



Photo 30 *Guamá* (3): Sanitary conditions

Standing water and open sewers on *Bernardo Sayão* Avenue, main connection between downtown and the campus of the Federal University of Pará. These have been the health conditions for the last twenty-five years and nothing has changed.



Photo 31 A frightening neighborhood: *Terra Firme*

Just by the side of *Guamá* and *Cidade Universitária* is located this somewhat dark entry to *Terra Firme* neighborhood. In the conversations I had with *belenenses*¹⁰, this neighborhood was often mentioned when we talked about muggings.

The history of the modernization of our cities would be incomplete if decadence and crime were omitted. These subjects are also parts of the novel *Belém do Grão-Pará*.



Photo 32 A ruined house: “the jungle root going deep into the peeled wall”

The decadence of Belém after the decrease of rubber and its repercussion in the daily life of the Alcântara family found its most concrete marks in the house they rented at Nazaré Road and which is a symbol of their ruin. The decadence is summarized by the expression “the jungle root going deep into the peeled wall” (BGP: 245). Trying to reproduce the novel’s environment, the picture shows the front of a house in the district of Comércio, in present day Belém.



Photo 33 The jungle root going deep into the city

The phenomenon of decadence that *Dalcídio Jurandir* describes in Belém in the 1920s can be seen in a wider scale nowadays too. The picture shows a lane in the district of *Comércio*, a few steps away from the department store “Paris n’ América”. The jungle starts recovering this part of the city.



Photo 34 Material blight downtown

The marks of deterioration in the central district of the city are many. As an example, we have this building of nine or ten floors – dating from the phase of modernization in the 1960s – and, forgotten now, foreshadows a ruin.



Photo 35 Material deterioration (1)

The state of ruin can be noticed, in fact, in this building of fifteen floors, which is shown to the current visitor of the city when he decides to look behind the frontage of a building where is located one of the best known social clubs in the Republic Square.

10 Name given to people living in *Belém*.



Photo 36 Material deterioration (2)

... and moral deterioration. In *Dalcídio Jurandir's* novel, the material deterioration is connected with the moral, as shown in the life story of *Virgílio Alcântara*, the family's head. From exemplary public servant, he turns into a smuggler. And what causes this transformation? Moving to a house that is far beyond his financial possibilities. "How, with that fraction of a salary, could I live on *Nazaré Road*?" "Am I expected to steal?" (BGP: 289, 304). Complementary and ongoing reasons are the complaints and mockery from his wife. She criticizes the successful but dishonest people, but deep down she envies and admires them and despises her husband for not having had the audacity of "taking the risk" to do something big. *Virgílio* eventually lets himself be corrupted, in order "to revenge what was lost" (BGP: 293). When the opportunity of taking part in smuggling business appears, he decides to take the risk. His accomplices, who ask him to "dispatch some papers faster", promise "immunity" to him; and they also say that everything would be covered by the confusion caused by the great upcoming religious festival of the city, the *Círio* (cf. BGP: 243, 269, 404).



Photo 37 Smuggling in the news today (1)



Photo 38 Smuggling in the news today (2)



Photo 39 Smuggling in the news today (3)



Photo 40 Smuggling in the news today (4)

These excerpts of newspaper articles about drug dealing in June 2008 in Belém show that there have been no efficient solutions to control organized crime in the last ninety years. And we could go back to the colonial period to find traces of this very lucrative clandestine economic activity, which is usually not included in the official history textbooks. The excerpts show four details: 1) the headline, “the police turn a blind eye to drug dealing”; 2) a map of Belém with the main points of drug distribution, which stretches like a net over the entire city; 3) an additional map, where you can track down the drugs along the Amazon River from the twin cities *Leticia* (Colombia) and *Tabatinga* (Brazil), going through *Manaus* and *Santarém*, until arriving in *Belém*; 4) hovels along the *Tucunduba* creek in *Terra Firme* neighborhood, where misery and violence provide a favorable environment for drug dealing.

The jungle root going deep into the city – the force of nature invading houses where once people have lived and worked – is also a *memento mori*, which reminds us of the caducity of our modern cities, not less vulnerable to time than many ancient cities that have already succumbed.



Photo 41 Jungle root: a *memento mori*



Photos 42, 43 and 44 *Memento mori*: Morgue – Cemetery – Nossa Senhora das Mercês Church

Under the theme of *memento mori*, I chose three images that remind us of the caducity of the modern metropolis (on this topic, see also, in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the convolute "C", "Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris"). 1) In the activities of *Ver-o-Peso* dock, there is the Morgue, which draws the attention of young Alfredo, when arriving in town. 2) *Santa Isabel* Cemetery reminds us – among the city of the living – the existence of a huge city of the dead. 3) At the Church of *Nossa Senhora das Mercês* we observe already the corrosive action of the jungle that begins taking it over.

Dalcídio Jurandir's vision of History, in his novel – even though knowing that his main concern was to describe the economic, social and moral decadence of the *Alcântara* family – is not, however, essentially discouraging. We must distinguish between the *Alcantara's* historical nihilism, their selfishness and social irresponsibility and, on the other hand, the willingness of young Alfredo to learn – from the territorial organization of the city of Belém – how the whole of society works and which are the possibilities of dialogue between the different classes. As a symbol of that learning process, we show here a picture of *Barão de Rio Branco* School, where Alfredo began his studies in Belém, as well as the writer *Dalcídio Jurandir*.



Photo 45 *Barão de Rio Branco* School

Actually, the learning process, as the writer presents it, extends far beyond the attendance in institutions of formal education, although this is of basic importance. Among the "teachers" of *Alfredo* as well as of Dalcídio Jurandir, there are also several people from the lower classes, as the dressmaker *Isaura*, the perfume seller *Mãe Ciana* and the maid, almost a slave, *Libânia*.

The literary and political project of Dalcídio Jurandir is not focused on the phenomena of decadence, but on the "disaggregation". What does he understand by this word? It occurs for the first time through a comment of *Virgílio*: "Ever since that boy [*Alfredo*] entered the family, the disaggregation seems to have started" (BGP: 322). Yes, that happened because the young protagonist – the writer's *alter ego* – introduces an analytical look into the family. The word appears for the second time in a press announcement: "'the disaggregation of things", said the newspaper against the 1918 strike (BGP: 410). "The term fits me", says *Virgílio*, "disaggregation of things". Not for the strike out there, but by the disunity and dissolution in his own home: he suspects that, in intendant *Lemos'* times, his wife had betrayed him as one of the "*hetaeras* of the situation", and feels guilty for his involvement in the smuggling, as pseudo-solution to his frustrations.

The word "disaggregation" reappears during the *Círio's* lunch in *Alcântara's* home, again through a newspaper quote, this time against the tram driver's strike. The proud militant *Lício* decides to react with a glass of wine in hand: "Yes, I am for the disaggregation of things" (BGP: 501). The dressmaker *Isaura* then remembers of his tinker father, who was a political militant. He was also in favor of the disaggregation of things, like the *Alcântaras*, the wordy *Lício*, the attorney *Porca-Prenha* (*Emília's* fifty-year-old corrupt groom), and the turncoat judge with whom *Inácia* met the other day at the *Olympia Cinema*. *Isaura* concludes with this comment: "What makes people get together: agreement or disagreement, understanding or misunderstanding?" (BGP: 502).

With this question, Dalcídio Jurandir takes up one of the basic topics in the philosophy of language and literature. In fact, as already noted by the romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel, critical literature is

an experiment with the possibility of communication and understanding between people. Dalcídio Jurandir's literary and political project may be related to this tradition. In his novel, he portrays the city of Belém, working on the contradictions between modernity and decadence through a "disaggregation" of the various discourses about it. The reader is encouraged to make a new reading of the various fragments, from the perspective of what Walter Benjamin called "the now of cognoscibility".

One last note about the novel's title. With *Belém do Grão-Pará*, the writer elaborates a superposition of times, by projecting the structures of old colonial times over the decadent modernity of the 1920s, when the action of the novel passes. It is a *long term* time that goes beyond the ages conveyed to represent the periods of "progress" and those of "decadence". In the twentieth century (and still early in our century) structures of the colonial period emerge: traces of a society, whose accumulated wealth came through exploring manpower and nature, considered to be readily available properties. In a conversation between *Alfredo* and *Mãe Ciana*, just a few days before the *Círio*, she reminds him of the long term structures: "Do you think slavery is over? I come from slavery. Me, your grandmother, your mother and also you" (BGP: 327).

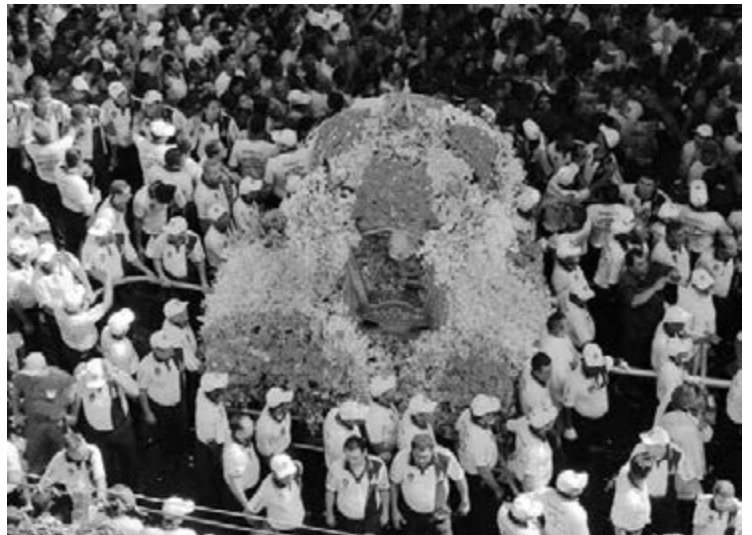


Photo 46 The Sé Cathedral



Photos 47, 48 and 49 The *Círio* Procession and the Nazaré Basilica

During the *Círio* procession – in which on Saturday the statue of the Virgin is transferred to the *Sé* Cathedral, to be retaken on Sunday to the *Nazaré* Basilica –, *Mãe Ciana* remembers, while at the Cathedral, the time of the founding of Belém. Then there is an overlay of several times: the story of the sufferings, from the time of *Grão-Pará* to the present moment, the hope for a time of salvation, and the evocation of a mythical time, in which, according to legend, the city founders had to ask for permission to the *Cobra Grande*, who lived under the *Sé* Cathedral.



Photo 50 Skyline of Belém, with the *Cobra Grande*

We say goodbye to this visit to the city of Belém, with the hope that the society of the free men that existed in the mythic time of *Cobra Grande*, before the arrival of the colonizers, might arise once again in a future truly modern historic time, as a complete achievement of the “disaggregation” desired by Dalcídio Jurandir, in other words: in the form of a society free of “*agregados*”¹¹.

Post-scriptum

The neighborhood of *Terra Firme* was in fact, in 2008, one of the most frightening in Belém. Since then, the situation has improved, due to the installation of a Pacifying Police Unit and the efforts of the state schools in this neighborhood. In January 2009 – during the World Social Forum, which took

place in Belém – I got in contact with a group of teachers and students of a secondary school in *Terra Firme*. We organized together a theater workshop, and, from 2009 to 2014, we elaborated scenic adaptations of all the five novels of Dalcídio Jurandir, whose topographical background is the periphery of Belém. We presented our theatrical productions at the school, at the University of Amazonia (UNAMA), Federal University of Pará (UFPA), Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), and at the Pan-Amazonian Book Fair. These activities are documented in several articles, especially in *Iniciação à periferia de Belém* (BOLLE, 2013), *Cenas de vida numa favela* (BOLLE, 2014), and *Theaterarbeit zwischen Universität und Favela* (BOLLE, 2015).

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¹¹ “Agregado” is the name given to servants working on the properties of rich people. Their pseudo-integration into the family of the masters is masking their dependency and exploration.