

Márcio de Oliveira, *Brasilia entre le mythe et la nation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 228 p.

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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Márcio de Oliveira, *Brasília entre le mythe et la nation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 228 p.

In “Brasília between the myth and the nation” Márcio de Oliveira provides an important contribution to the literature on the history of the city of Brasília. Oliveira manages to offer an impressive account of the process through which the idea of a new capital city became the promise of a united nation. This is an important book for scholars interested in processes of nation building in Brazil, as well as for researchers concerned with the political struggles behind the conception and construction of Brasília.



Persons interested in the book should look at its title to understand its focus. Oliveira is particularly interested in framing the construction of Brasília in a mythic narrative according to which the nation was unfinished and the construction of a new capital along the country's isolated highlands would complete it. For Oliveira, it was the government of Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira (1956–1961) that spread and gave meaning to this myth, calling for the occupation and development of the whole country. Oliveira claims that by doing so the government promised a different future and was able to shed some positive light on the usually pessimistic image that people had about their country back then. But the discourse of incompleteness of the nation was not new in Brazilian history; neither was the idea of transferring the capital. Oliveira argues that the government astutely took advantage of all these disjointed discourses of the past and presented them as a coherent narrative. Within this narrative Brasília was a historical aspiration, and the president was in charge of “putting an end to the long journey of the conquest of the nation” (p. 50).

Oliveira divides his arguments into four chapters. The first chapter of the book provides a brief biography of Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira (also called by his initials, JK) and presents the political context of his presidency. Born into a middle class family in Diamantina, Minas Gerais, JK was trained as a medical doctor. Oliveira suggests that his marriage to Sarah Gomes de Lemos, daughter of a former parliamentary member, catalysed his entry into the world of electoral politics. JK held public office on two earlier occasions. He was appointed mayor of Belo Horizonte – where he first collaborated with architect Oscar Niemeyer – and was elected governor of Minas Gerais. Once elected president he launched the “*Plan de metas*,”

comprising 31 goals covering such issues as energy, transport, and base industries. According to JK's testimony, the Brasília idea, which became goal number thirty-one, occurred to him when a “man of the people” asked if, once elected president, he would respect the transfer of the capital stipulated in the 1946 Constitution (p. 46).

But why was the transfer of the Brazilian capital a constitutional mandate? Oliveira goes on to provide that history in chapter two. The desire to transfer the capital to populate the hinterland can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Oliveira presents the history of these projects and ideas through official and alternative sources. From the first initiative, presented in the context of a political separatist revolt in 1789, to the constitutional mandates of 1891 and 1946, and through the dream of Italian priest Giovanni Bosco – who never knew Brasília but supposedly dreamed about it – Oliveira tracks down every reference to a new capital. The compilation of all these initiatives reveals a significant amount of meticulous archival work.

This second chapter is by far the most interesting and pertinent to the arguments that Oliveira is ultimately making. The author explores the way in which JK selectively articulated the ideas that had defended the transfer of the capital to the mythical desire of nation building. The ideas were gathered and disseminated in official publications, such as the Brasília Collection, and in numerous presidential speeches. Even if disjointed and unconnected, all the initiatives were presented as a coherent and chronologic corpus of *ideas mundacistas*. JK made every effort to link them to the construction of the city, inaugurating the “Don Bosco” chapel before the city was even completed, emphasizing that Brasília was the “culmination of a process nearly as old as the country” (p. 64).

In the final two chapters of the book, Oliveira argues that the building of the nation was a conscious priority during the design and construction of the new capital. Brasília is “a myth made out of concrete” (p. 125) and both architectural designs and daily construction activities embodied the quest for a new Brazilian nation. In chapter three the author analyses how the discourses of architects Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer became well integrated into the discourse of the construction of the nation. Structures such as the Square of Three Powers and the Congressional Palace were intended to inaugurate a new democratic, free and participatory society.

The final chapter presents an assessment of how Brasília was actually built year after year. Oliveira draws on official construction reports and reflects on the metaphorical quality of concrete, the quintessential modern material, easy to manufacture, transport, and shape. Oliveira concludes the book by focusing

on the perspective of those who actually built the new capital. He maintains that despite poor working conditions and exclusion from the city itself – their homes were located in satellite towns – construction workers expressed “the mythical desire to build the nation” (p. 124).

This is perhaps the least convincing part of the book. Oliveira argues that construction workers felt that by building the city they were contributing to the founding of the Brazilian nation, as did the president and chief architects. However, he does not provide enough evidence to support this claim. While Oliveira interviewed engineers and other early settlers of Brasilia, his argument about construction workers is based exclusively on two secondary sources: a master’s dissertation written by Gustavo Ribeiro in 1980 and the book *Brasilian Builders* written by Nair Souza in 1983. He does not explain why he did not interview construction workers or what kind of challenges drove him to use secondary sources instead. Besides, although he relies heavily on those two secondary sources, he does not provide any information about them or about the context in which the construction workers’ testimonies were gathered: who exactly was interviewed? When? Where? By whom?

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Timothy W. Cobban, *Cities of Oil: Municipalities and Petroleum Manufacturing in Southern Ontario, 1860–1960*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. 172. Maps.

Cities of Oil is a complement to the historical literature that examines the early Canadian petroleum and manufacturing industry, building on the works of those historians who have studied the economic and political development of the industry. Cobban documents the development of the industry in southwestern Ontario from its initial clustering in London East in the 1850s to the successive relocations to Petrolia and Sarnia. He draws on contemporary theories of *industrial clustering* to explain the importance of local economies to industrial growth. Cobban explores the role of municipalities in the location and development of the petroleum industry in each community drawing on the previous research by Gilbert Stelter, Robert Lewis and others who argue that “municipalities contributed to industrialization process in central Canada, particularly in its early stages” (10).

The Canadian oil industry had its birth in the early 1850s with Charles Tripp’s early exploration of the “gum beds” in Lambton County. The small urban areas of Canada West were a logical

choice for refineries, and London East emerged as a refining centre in the 1860s. Cobban suggests that the growth of petroleum manufacturing here was not stimulated by any direct municipal action, but rather by the presence of a municipal boundary, which prevented the city from imposing regulations on the industry. This resulted in “industrial suburbanization” whereby land-use policies and zoning laws were used to restrict the location of oil refineries to the outskirts of the city.

The refining industry shifted from London East to Petrolia following the opening of the town’s second railway in 1878. The Sarnia, Chatham & Erie Railway posed direct competition to the monopoly over freight rates previously enjoyed by the Great Western Railway. Cobban suggests that of the three municipalities, local government actions positively influenced the industry in the case of Petrolia. Direct municipal action in the form of a railway allowed the monopoly over the industry’s transportation to be overcome, leading to the concentration of petroleum manufacturing there in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

When the Standard Oil Company acquired the assets of Imperial Oil in July 1898, company offices were transferred to Sarnia, and Sarnia emerged as the centre of petroleum manufacturing in Canada. Ontario’s system of municipal aid grew out of state involvement in railway promotion, but by 1922 the reforms of the Mowat government had reduced the scale of direct municipal investment in industry. By the 1930s, after two decades of growth, petroleum manufacturing in Sarnia had slipped into a state of relative decline. Wartime rubber shortages resulted in the construction of a synthetic rubber plant in Sarnia, Polymer, a crown corporation. Although the demands on local infrastructure were considerable, Polymer was essentially a federal government operation. Cobban suggests that the story of the making of Canada’s Chemical Valley in Sarnia after the war was mostly a federal one as well.

While Cobban sets out to explain the influence of municipal government on the location and development of the petroleum industry in southwestern Ontario, he concludes that it was in the protective trade policies of the federal government where most of the investment in the petroleum industry occurred. In this regard, Cobban suggests, the petroleum industry fits the scholarly narrative about the rise of modern industrial capitalism and the decline of the relevance of municipal corporations. He is careful to point out, however, that municipalities played a role at a critical juncture, accommodating the need for land, tax concessions, and implementing land-use policies.

Cobban uses a rich variety of primary sources to build his argument including the business papers and government documents from the three levels of government. A wide array of business papers ranging from the Great Western Railway, to the diaries of J.H. Fairbank of Petrolia, and Polymer Corporation add depth to the study.

Cities of Oil is a short book, only 121 pages plus notes and bibliography, but it is rich in its explanation of the intersection of government intervention at all three levels in the development

