

The Northwestern Railway of Brazil as a prelude to the anthropocene: A critical look at a photographic exhibition in Santarém, Portugal

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Between January and February in 2025, the Casa Pedro Álvares Cabral/Casa do Brasil in Santarém, Portugal, hosted the exhibition *The Northwest Railway of Brazil (NOB) in the Interior of São Paulo in the Prelude of the Anthropocene*. Curated by Fábio Paride Pallotta and Hugo Silveira Pereira from the Faculty of Science and Technology at NOVA Lisboa University, the exhibition presented a collection of photographs and historical documents detailing the construction of this railway. Built in the early twentieth century, the railway connected the state of São Paulo to Mato Grosso, radically transforming the territory and its ecosystem.

The exhibition is not limited to a technical look at the railway but seeks to place the NOB within the broader context of the Anthropocene, the so-called *Age of Man*, a period characterised by irreversible human impact on nature. The aim of the exhibition was to highlight the environmental, health and human costs of railway expansion, a development that, although it boosted Brazil's economy and territorial integration, brought irreparable consequences.

The railway and its impacts: A history of progress and tragedy

The Northwestern Railway of Brazil, whose construction began in 1906, was designed as a strategy to integrate the state of Mato Grosso with the rest of the country. However, the exhibition shows that this integration came at a significant environmental and social cost. According to the data presented in the exhibition, on the São Paulo section of the railroad alone, 13,410 km² of forest were cleared between 1906 and 1910, mainly impacting the Atlantic Forest.

The impacts were not only environmental: the suppression of native vegetation paved the way for diseases such as malaria, yellow fever and leprosy, which affected railway workers and the population of Bauru, the city in São Paulo where the project began, on a large scale. In addition, the Kaingang indigenous people were direct victims of the railroad expansion. Many were murdered by *bugreiros*, hunters hired by the railway company, which resulted in the near extinction of this people in the area.

A key contribution of the exhibition is its effort to recover this often-forgotten history, shedding light on the burdens of modernisation on vulnerable groups and the environment. At a time when global discussions on sustainability and the environmental impact of infrastructure projects are gaining prominence (or are they losing ground with the new United States presidential administration taking office in 2025?), revisiting the history of the NOB provides critical reflections on the contemporary challenges facing Brazil. Even today, agricultural expansion, illegal mining, and the construction of new railways continue to reproduce the same destructive patterns of the past.

Narrative strengths of the exhibition

The exhibition stands out for its multidisciplinary approach, weaving together history, geography, ecology, and public health to construct a comprehensive narrative of the railway's impacts. The use of historical photographs, technical records, and archival accounts enables a rich visual and documentary immersion into the early twentieth century, facilitating a deeper understanding of the challenges faced at the time and their lingering consequences today.

Another significant strength is the critical curatorial perspective, which moves beyond a celebratory account of railway engineering to critically examine its broader implications. The visitors are not merely spectators of a technical achievement but are instead encouraged to reflect on the social and environmental consequences of this so-called *progress*.

The choice of Casa do Brasil, in Santarém, as the exhibition venue is also a success. The space is dedicated to spreading Brazilian culture in Portugal and provides an ideal context for the discussion, as well as increasing the visibility of the exhibition with the European public.

Limitations and opportunities for expansion

Despite its comprehensive approach, the exhibition could have delved deeper into indigenous perspectives on the railway's impact. While it highlights the suffering of the Kaingang people, there is a lack of contemporary indigenous voices, testimonies, or records, which could have enriched the narrative and strengthened the exhibition's documentary value.

Another point that could be improved is the connection with the present. Although the curator draws parallels between historical deforestation and current environmental devastation, there is a lack of detailed information about contemporary infrastructure projects that reproduce the same mistakes of the past.

Conclusion

The exhibition *The Northwest Railway of Brazil (NOB) in the Interior of São Paulo in the Prelude of the Anthropocene* successfully rescues an overlooked chapter of Brazilian history. Its greatest strength lies in deconstructing the traditional narrative of railway progress by exposing the human and environmental costs of this expansion.

Although it could be improved in some respects, such as the inclusion of indigenous voices and greater interactivity, the exhibition makes a valuable contribution to the history of transportation and to reflection on the impact of major infrastructures on society and nature.

By revisiting the past, the exhibition alerts us to the challenges of the present, reminding us that the Anthropocene, far from being a distant phenomenon, continues to be written every day in landscapes transformed by human hands.


Author's note

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