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The Tri-Border Area of Parana and COVID-19: A Tale of Two Bridges in the South American Hinterland

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During the COVID-19 lockdown, at night on the stretch of the Parana River that goes from the Ponte Internacional da Amizade (International Friendship Bridge) south to the geographic trifinium, where the river splits and three borders meet, the sound of outboard motors and gunfire has intensified. Seven-and-a-half miles (twelve kilometres) of border space separate Brazil from Paraguay in South America's hinterland. Since 1965, the main transversal gates of a long-shared border of 848 miles (1,364 kilometres) are located on both sides of the Amizade Bridge. In 2020, during the pandemic, work on a second bridge, started the previous year, was intensified. This essay focuses on the study of the border space between both infrastructures: the old and the new.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

— Charles Dickens, 1859



Introduction

The Tri-Border of Parana is a strategic area of about 900 miles squared (2,300 square kilometres) in the heart of South America, where three countries (Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina) and two rivers (the Parana and the Iguassu) meet. Its global reputation is often greater than real knowledge of their complexities. Little is known, in fact, about this border space characterized by many segmentations, mergers and stereotypes that blur its common characteristics and its developments.

This region was, until the COVID-19 pandemic, the second most visited tourist destination in Argentina and Brazil, due largely to the nearby wonder of Iguassu Falls (on the border between both countries). Close to there, one of the fluvial boundaries between Brazil and

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Paraguay houses the Itaipu Dam, second largest in the world. Nearby, Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, is an important commercial node in South America. The whole region is a transnational area little larger than New York City with two national parks and three international airports.

Its geopolitical importance goes beyond its strategic location. From here, for example, the energy needs of Paraguay and the southeast of Brazil are met. It is also where the South Atlantic Ocean connects with South America inland. The Guarani Aquifer, the third largest underground drinking water reserve in the world, flows through its subsoil. Finally, the entire area is surrounded by one of the most productive agribusiness regions of the planet, the so-called “United Republic of Soybeans” (Pengue 2017, 26-27).

It is interesting to consider that, in contrast to the current scenario, when Foz do Iguacu, Brazil, was founded in 1914 its population consisted of some military officers and their families, some loggers and a few producers of yerba mate.¹ Indeed all the area attracted close to a million people in just over a hundred years due to a carefully planned and consistent development strategy (Farias & Zamberlan 2013, 59). Its core was a territorial capitalization strategy inspired by the American New Deal (Sneddon 2015). This strategy enabled the enlargement of the Brazilian intensive agricultural area, the development of a sustainable source of energy, and geopolitical control over the South American heartland (Travassos 1947, 11).

One of the cornerstones of infrastructure was the BR-277 motorway, opened in 1969. This 455-mile (732-kilometre) route, which connects the ocean with the continental midland, was a key to gaining effective entry and control of the whole region. The icing on the project was the Amizade Bridge linking the two banks of the Parana River, and therefore Brazil with Paraguay, a few miles or a handful of kilometres from what, since 1984, has been the Itaipu Dam.



Photo 1. Amizade Bridge from the Brazilian bank of the Parana River in front of ‘Microcentro’ of Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, late July 2020; closed to the transit of people. © the author.

All these interventions changed the borderscape and the evolution of the entire area allowing the construction of the dam, the extension of the motorway to Asunción, Paraguay’s capital city 200 miles or 321 kilometres away, and the founding of Paraguay’s border city Ciudad del Este in 1957 that has always based its dynamism on a tax dumping tolerated by Brazil. These structural transformations, although little studied, could be considered the matrix of modern Brazilian border policy.

Half a century later, when the 2020 pandemic broke out, the practical capacities of the Amizade Bridge were already insufficient but it remains a local symbol. Currently it is 1,811 feet (552 metres) long, 256 feet (78 metres) high and just 44 feet (13 metres) wide: two lanes for vehicles, including trucks, and two others for pedestrians. At each end is a border gate: since the 1990s, thanks to multilateral agreements within the framework of Mercosur (South America’s regional integration organization), formal controls of cross-border movement have been relaxed.

Commercially it is a little different. There is a maximum daily fee for retail transit of goods per person (US\$ 500). For wholesale goods the difference is remarkable: Brazil, for instance, processes them in a ‘Dry Port’ that is about two and a half miles (almost four kilometres) away from the river. Probably this explains why the fluvial border area close to Amizade Bridge has always been prone to smuggling activity. Not coincidentally it is estimated that, in the 11 miles (18 kilometres) between the Itaipu Dam at the north end and the triffinium at the south, there are more or less a hundred clandestine piers, especially active during the night.

COVID-19 Arrives

Our attention, between March and July 2020, focused on the seven-and-a-half mile (twelve kilometre) river stretch that runs from the Amizade Bridge (three-and-a-half miles, five-and-a-half kilometres, south of the Itaipu Dam) to the place where, in 2019, construction began for a second bridge between Brazil and Paraguay. This new site is close to the geographical triffinium where the Parana and Iguazu rivers connect, in a “T” shape. The Parana River strip that goes from this point to the old bridge (Amizade) further north, is one of the Tri-Border Area’s most active and attractive spaces. Observing its development helped to understand what happened and what could happen after COVID-19.

The key events to understand the dynamic predated the arrival of the pandemic. The most important and discreet one was the foundation in late 2019—in the closed outer perimeter of the Itaipu Dam, just five miles (eight kilometres) away from the old bridge—of a *Centro Integrado de Operações de Fronteira* (CIOF

or, in English, Integrated Border Operations Center). It is the first Fusion Center installed in Brazil: through its 70 security cameras and thanks to artificial intelligence, the Brazilian State will have the ability to control, with a panoptic efficiency, all the border transit.

Certain indicators could suggest a political intention that goes beyond the officially argued security reasons for installing digital border control. Products from the Free Zones of Paraguay, for instance, that in previous years freely crossed the Amizade Bridge to Brazil were slowed down in 2020, due to a sudden tariff between 16 and 32 percent. Transborder commercial traffic never stopped during the pandemic. It supposes terrible omens for the *maquila* (local assembly factories) in Paraguay that until now had taken advantage and expanded, not only because of the low cost of labor, but of tax differential between the two neighboring countries.

The function of the new bridge seems, in fact, less designed to complement the needs of the old one, that before the pandemic had an annual transit of 100,000

people and 40,000 vehicles per day. This rather appears about guaranteeing multinational (including Brazilian) companies the best export performance of agricultural goods from South America's Heartland towards the South Atlantic Ocean. This is because the new bridge has been designed, in principle, for the exclusive transit of goods (agricultural and commercial), leaving the old one exclusively for the transit of people. It is also about the possibility of greater control by the Brazilian State over the transborder transit of people and retail goods.

The consequences of this subtle interventionist 'New Normal' that started to be deployed during the pandemic were devastating for an integrated and complementary territory, although politically and administratively 'non-existent', such as Tri-Border Area (De Souza & Gemelli 2011, 13).

In Ciudad del Este, for example, the borderscape changed suddenly: its vital tourist *Microcentro* (commercial area) became a ghost zone for months while the Parana River, in the midst of a severe drought, revealed in May rusty goods in its riverbed, dumped by smugglers over the years. During the lock-down period, the region became almost apocalyptic. In July 2020, some 30,000 jobs were lost or disrupted in the area, many with a direct and tragic link to the border closure: some 8,000 residents in Foz do Iguacu were not able to return to work in Paraguay.

A lot of small companies went bankrupt on both sides; only the largest endured. In addition, some 7,000 people were trapped on the Brazilian side of the border, mainly Argentinian and Paraguayan citizens residing in nearby Brazilian States who lost their jobs and were not allowed to return to their respective countries. Many had to turn to charity and some ended up begging, like most local informal workers who, during the quarantine, were forced to stop their cross-border activities in the Amizade Bridge area.

In this framework, the capacity of local powers to act depended on the attitude of their national governments. Perhaps for this reason the health deployments were scarce and inconsistent. Moreover, paradiplomatic cooperation did not work: the first meeting between the mayors of the twin cities took place on July 27. As a consequence of this and of the combination of a strong local budget deficit and low national interest rates, municipal building licenses shot up prompting a little construction boom in the midst of the pandemic, paradoxically.

But this small boom was not enough to relaunch the economy. In Foz do Iguacu, socio-political pressure led to a premature commercial opening that contributed to the degrading health situation (in July, the number of deaths by COVID-19 was slightly lower than that of the entire Paraguay). Frictions followed after the



Photo 2. New bridge works between Brazilian and Paraguayan banks of the Parana River, seven-and-a-half miles (twelve kilometers) from the Amizade Bridge, May 2020; active lock-down in all the Tri-Border Area. © the author.



Photo 3. A line of trucks with agricultural machinery waiting to cross the Amizade Bridge into Paraguay, mid-May 2020; still open exclusively to the transit of goods. © the author.

Paraguayan border closure and smuggling grew and diversified. Thus, while lobbying for reopening the economy worked in business offices, clandestine piers along the river stretch, especially at night, fought to survive. Smuggling, the eternal last resort to the most vulnerable social sectors grew and diversified (Cardin 2012, 231). The noise of the outboard motors and the rattling of gunshots signified the struggling economy's most dramatic test and epilogue.

Conclusions

The pandemic in the Tri-Border Area of Parana shows that, far from being marked by exceptionalism, such spaces are clear exponents of prevailing ideas in political centers and of the tensions in global economy. The current dynamics on the Brazilian fluvial border with Paraguay are clear: for years there has been a subtle dispute between the Brazilian state and global markets for the control of commercial gains in the area. The implementation of the CIOF and the behavior detected during the quarantines seem to demonstrate that Brasilia was determined, before COVID-19, to redefine any form of pre-existing competitive integration (Becker 1991, 50) with the international value chains.

The 2020 health crisis has slowed down some of the political interventions aimed at promoting a new type of territorialization based on an introduction of technological inputs and on a new governance of state spaces. It seems that, rather than increasing tariff revenues in a period of fiscal deficit, what may have been happening was a conscious attempt to change some of the commercial practices that, historically, have characterized the entire border area.

Effectively, the immediate impact of all that has been both a reduction in the cost of local labor and an exponential increase of crime. This has served to feed back a popular security discourse that supports the rhetoric justifying an administrative 'modernization' of the entire Tri-Border Area which, considering its planning antecedents, could be a precursor of a different border management model. What happened

in this stretch of Parana River during the pandemic could be, indeed, only an indicator of the global orientation of the Brazilian border policy: more filters and more control with an apparently justifiable public health basis.

Note

- 1 Yerba mate is a South American endemic plant. An infusion of its leaves —similar to tea— is widely consumed across the region.

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