



# The art of power

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Italian map of colonial Brazil from 1556, drawn by Giacomo Gastaldi and Giovanni Battista Ramusio

**I**n the last two or three decades, one of the most striking trends in academic work coming out of the history department at the School of Philosophy, Literature, and Human Sciences (FFLCH) at the University of São Paulo (USP) has been the blending of perspectives taken from culture and the arts with Brazil's political trajectory. Studies that highlight the role of the media, music, film, theater and other means of artistic expression during the military dictatorship (1964-1985) were taking shape in an area of study that, like FFLCH, took its first steps at USP under the strong influence of French academicians who arrived very early in the university's history.

"Until the 1960s, economic history had a huge influence on the department. Next, social perspectives on history predominated, serving as a big umbrella for various topics and methodologies. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, a

## Approaches that meld culture and politics are characteristic of the Department today



The play *Roda viva*: historical studies about art during the dictatorship

decisive shift occurred, and history was viewed through a cultural and political lens,” says Maria Helena Capelato, a professor in the department who specializes in research on the impact of the media in Brazil and Latin America during the last wave of authoritarian governments in the Americas.

One of this latest trend’s most important contributors is Marcos Napolitano, also a professor in the history department, whose research has focused on trends in Brazilian popular music and, to a lesser extent, on audiovisual work, during the military regime. According to Napolitano, “this cultural approach gained ground after the end of the dictatorship.” FFLCH lost one of the exponents of approaching history through a cultural lens with the death of historian Nicolau Sevcenko, who died in August 2014. Sevcenko’s work was distinguished by his use of literature as a source of historical research.

Another direction the department is taking in its research is to study the history of colonial Brazil, its relationship with Portugal as the metropole and the transatlantic issue. Historian Laura de Mello e Souza, who recently retired from USP and now teaches at the Sorbonne in Paris, coordinated FAPESP’s thematic

### Colonial Brazil and its relations with the metropole also inspires important research

project entitled “*Dimensões do Império Português*” [Dimensions of the Portuguese Empire] from 2005 to 2010. One of the project’s findings was that the Portuguese colonial administration could not be reduced simply to a gigantic, rigid and inefficient bureaucratic machine run by an authoritarian centralized government overseeing its submissive colonies. In

fact, Lisbon, which led the most enduring modern European empire, adroitly used its power, “overcoming the limits imposed by the oceanic separation between the metropole and its colonies,” she related to *Pesquisa FAPESP* in a report published in November 2012. On the topic of the colonial system, the work of Fernando Novais, today a professor emeritus at USP and professor at the Colleges of Campinas (Facamp), is also required reading.

Although certain fields of research have historically been dominant at USP, the history department today is producing research on a variety of topics and time periods. Studies are being conducted on ancient history, the medieval period, the modern age, and contemporary themes. “History’s focus today is finely differentiated and multifaceted,” says Napolitano. The focus of one department project is a good example of the current openness to

the most varied subjects: under the coordination of Professor Gildo Magalhães dos Santos Filho, researchers are studying the implementation of an electric power system in the state of São Paulo between 1890 and 1960, which will also generate a database accessible by the public.

From the very beginning, USP has been a pioneer in the topics and approaches it introduced to historical research. Fernand Braudel, a professor at USP from 1935 to 1937 and one of the exponents of the so-called second generation of the *École des Annales* [Annales School], disseminated the notion of “*longue durée*” – that is, historical time that passes more slowly than circumstantial events – and that of a history of human mindsets and ideas. His influence reigned for decades at FFLCH. Subsequently, other heavyweights played an important role in shaping subsequent generations of historians trained by the department. Having written *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo – Colônia* [The Colonial Background of Modern Brazil] in 1942, the pivotal work of his intellectual output, Caio Prado Jr. promoted historiography from a Marxist perspective. Author of the classic book *Raízes do Brasil* [Roots of Brazil], published in 1936, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda became a professor of the history of Brazilian civilization at USP in 1958 with his thesis *Visão do paraíso – Os motivos edênicos no descobrimento e na colonização do Brasil* [A Vision of Paradise: The Search for Eden in the Discovery and Colonization of Brazil]. “His work still garners high levels of respect today,” says Capelato. ■