THROUGH A NEW LENS

Brazilianists in the twentieth century were concerned with explaining Brazil to foreign audiences; now their research places the country within the context of global issues

Diego Viana | ILLUSTRATIONS **Daniel Almeida**

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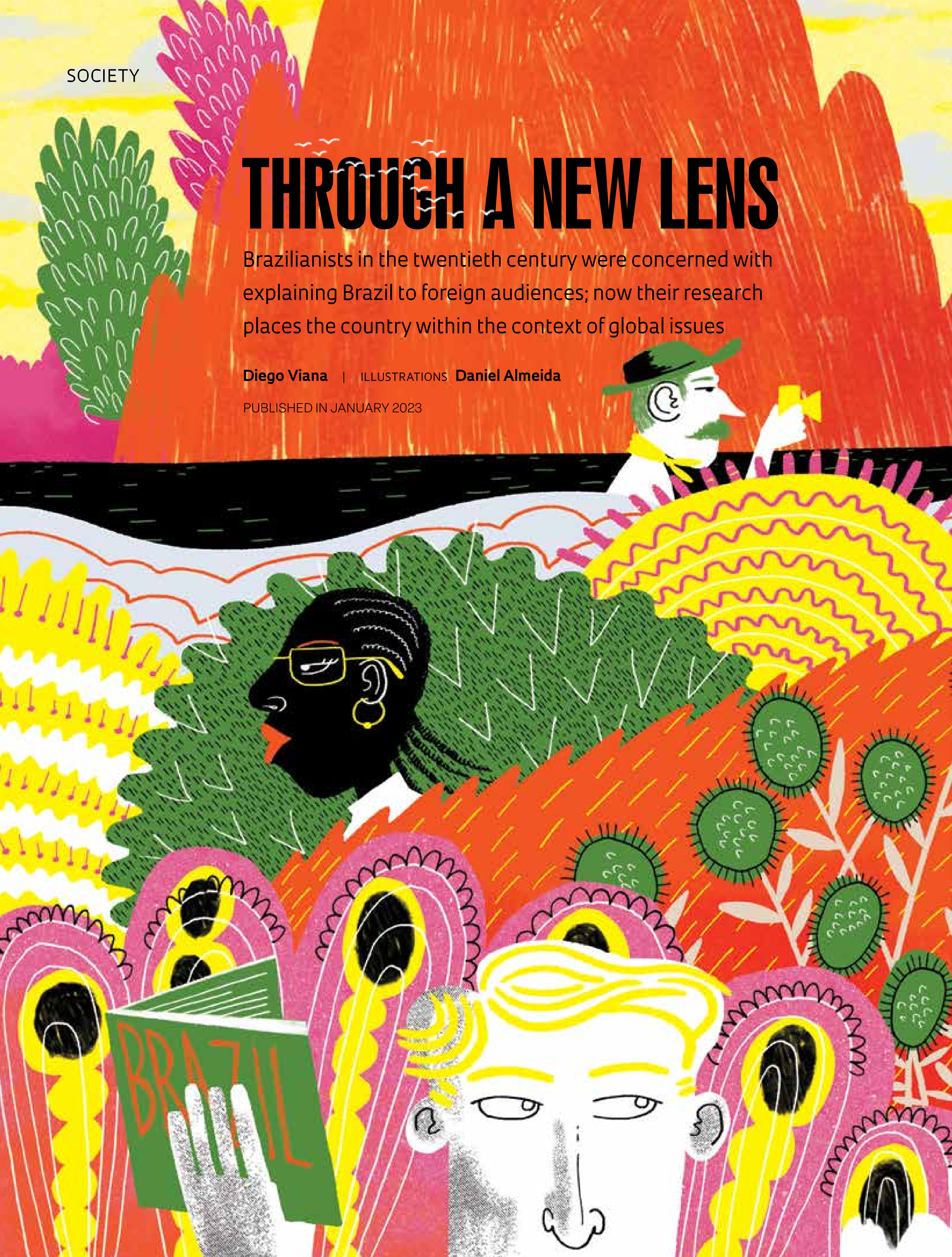


In a 2016 article in *Revista Brasileira de História* (the Brazilian Journal of History), American historian Barbara Weinstein, from New York University (NYU), asks herself: "Am I still a Brazilianist?" In the article, she questions the usefulness of the label "Brazilianist" even though Brazil remains her primary field of research. The term is commonly used to denote a researcher who studies Brazil from outside the country, whether they are foreign or Brazilian by origin. By this definition, the study of Brazil can be considered a branch of the field commonly referred to in the US as "area studies," with Brazilianists sitting alongside other "Latin-Americanists" such as "Mexicanists" and "Cubanists." A Brazilianist is thus a person who conducts research on Brazil with the aim of explaining it to a foreign audience. Brazilian studies, more than other area studies, entail unique aspects that have brought the term "Brazilianist" into more common usage.

"It is still a relevant designation, certainly more so than other Latin American specializations," Weinstein argues. "Although it is very unlikely you can obtain a degree or find a job in the US that is devoted exclusively to the history of Brazil, it makes sense to specialize in the country within the broader framework of Latin American, African diaspora or other studies. It is easy to move between Spanish-speaking countries, for example, but Brazil has a different language, history, and a much vaster scale," she adds.

Weinstein—who has authored books such as *The Amazon rubber boom* (Stanford University Press, 1983); *For social peace in Brazil* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), which deals with social services created by industrialists in São Paulo, and *The color of modernity* (Duke University Press, 2015), on the role of racial ideas in the making of São Paulo's self-image—notes that Brazilian studies has made a departure from the previous century, when Brazilianists were focused on understanding the country as a whole and its own historical process. "The new generation is more concerned with broader themes and no longer focuses solely on the history of a single nation. This is why we may speak in terms of the history of the Atlantic World, of the African diaspora, of indigenous movements, and so on. These are topics that transcend national contexts."

Today, researchers are unlikely to author a paper on "the history of gender relations in Brazil," for instance. "Why would they? What makes

gender relations specific to Brazil?" Instead, we might investigate the "history of women's suffrage in Brazil." "In this case, the focus would be on the way women's voting rights were won and evolved in the country, which cannot be fully understood by looking at Brazil alone and ignoring the international context," says Weinstein. "Themes like this fall both within and outside the boundaries of a given country."

According to Weinstein, the end of the Cold War (1947–1991) led to declining US interest in Latin America and Brazil as the threat of Soviet expansion dissipated. On the other hand, it expanded the range of research interests across transnational themes such as slave trafficking, gender and race relations, and urban development. As a result, while previous generations of scholars were primarily historians—with some political scientists and economists tucked in—today, they also include geographers, anthropologists, and literary critics.

These shifts in perspective raise questions about the continued usefulness of the term "Brazilianist." American geographer Jeff Garmany, from the University of Melbourne in Australia, does not consider himself a Brazilianist despite doing research on urban issues in Brazil and having coauthored the book *Understanding Contemporary Brazil* (Routledge, 2019) with American political scientist Anthony Pereira, director of the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University, in Miami.

"I never refer to myself as a Brazilianist, but others often do. As a geographer, my research interests are mainly in urban and political development, with a particular focus on inequality. My research has always been rooted in Brazil, and my work deals with international debates in political and urban theory within a Brazilian empirical context," he says. "I believe the term Brazilianist is now used more often in reference to others' work than to an actual field of study."

However, the concept remains in current use, including in the Brazilian press, which will often consult foreign specialists on national issues. Behind the usage of the term is a historical process of both rivalry and extensive collaboration. In 1990, historian José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, a retired professor in the Department of History at the School of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Humanities at the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP), published the book *A colônia brasilianista: História oral da vida acadêmica* (The Brazilianist colony: an oral history of academic life; Nova Stella), in which he interviewed foreigners devoted to research on Brazil. In his book, Meihy refers to "anti-Brazilianism" as a "childhood disease of Brazilian historiography" and criticizes the resistance of Brazilian intellectuals to foreigners' research.

ALONGSIDE HISTORIANS, POLITICAL SCIENTISTS, AND ECONOMISTS, TODAY'S BRAZILIANISTS ALSO INCLUDE GEOGRAPHERS, ANTHROPOLOGISTS, AND LITERARY CRITICS

This resistance partly arose after the 1964 coup, when Brazilian scholars became more restricted in their access to public archives than their foreign counterparts. For instance, within just a few years of the coup, American historian Robert M. Levine (1941–2003), at the University of Miami, was given privileged access to documents from the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS), run by dictator Getúlio Vargas (1882–1954) from 1930 to 1945. This created a rift between Levine and his Brazilian colleagues, who complained of special treatment being given to a foreigner. However, the resulting book would nonetheless become one of the most important references for the Vargas period, although it was censored in Brazil until 1980.

On the other hand, foreign scholars, often in collaboration with Brazilian peers, have played an important role not only in exposing the international community to new interpretations of Brazil but also in creating new research programs within the country. One such scholar was American economist Werner Baer (1931–2016) at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. From the 1960s to 1980s, he helped create graduate programs in several Brazilian universities, including USP, the University of Brasília (UnB) and the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), and was also a cofounder of the National Association of Graduate Programs in Economics (ANPEC).

At that time, Brazil did not have an extensive and globally connected university system. Today, collaboration between Brazilian and foreign researchers is both more widespread and more necessary than ever, says Sidney Chalhoub, a Brazilian historian at Harvard University and president of the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA). "No one can be taken seriously as a Brazilianist in the US, writing for US audiences, without drawing on research produced in Brazil and without thoroughly engaging with Brazilian academic literature," says Chalhoub, adding that part of BRASA's mission is to bridge the divide between foreigners and expatriates, on the one hand, and researchers based at Brazilian universities, on the other.

Founded in 1992 as an offshoot from the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), BRASA is the foremost organization devoted to promoting Brazilian studies abroad. "BRASA does justice to the unique position Brazil holds on the continent," says Chalhoub. "Within LASA, Brazil is diluted. In Latin American history programs, Brazil accounts for only 10% or [fewer] of classes, even though it has 40% of the continent's territory and population. BRASA gives the country the prominence it deserves."

American historian Kenneth Serbin, at the University of San Diego, California, who served as president of BRASA from 2006 to 2008 and has also headed the Brazil Section of LASA, says that "an association of Brazilianists serves to beget more Brazilianists," citing American political scientist Timothy Power of Oxford. "This was my mission as president of BRASA. How did I set out to achieve it? By encouraging others to do what I had done in 1986: visit Brazil," says Serbin. "We secured enough funding to establish a Brazil Initiation Scholarship (BIS), which funds two or three people visiting the country each year for field research." BRASA holds biennial congresses and sponsors awards programs, such as the Roberto Reis BRASA Book Award, for books on Brazil.

In 2017, a European counterpart to BRASA—the Association of Brazilianists in Europe (ABRE)—was founded during the first European Congress of Brazilianists in Leiden, Netherlands. The initiative was led by Dutch Marianne Wiesebron, who holds the Chair of Brazilian Studies at Leiden University, and Mônica Raisa Schpun, a Brazilian historian from the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris. "European Brazilianists regularly collaborate with counterparts in Brazil, but often have never met. ABRE aims to change this," says Czech Šárka Grauová, the current president of ABRE and a professor of Portuguese literature at the University of Carolina in Prague. The ABRE currently has 237 researchers from 16 countries in Europe as members. The organization holds biennial congresses and awards an annual prize for the best doctoral thesis.

Grauová believes that the main difference between Brazilianism in Europe and the United States is that, with its diversity of cultures, traditions, and languages, Europe produces a wider range of interpretations of Brazil. "At the 3rd

International ABRE Congress in Prague, we had a panel on the reception of Machado de Assis [1839–1908] in different European countries. We learned a lot, not only about the different traditions but also about the wealth of possible interpretations within different contexts," she says. Grauová notes that the history of European Brazilianism has roots more in language and literature studies than in social sciences, in contrast to the American version.

Meihy's book of interviews classifies Brazilianists into different generations, starting with "The Pioneers," who studied the country for a wide range of reasons, including personal interest. One of the earliest references to a Brazilianist in foreign academic publications is American Samuel Putnam (1892–1950), who translated Euclides da Cunha's (1866–1909) *Os sertões* into English. In 1971, American historian C. Harvey Gardiner (1913–2000) wrote an article highlighting the role Putnam played in spreading interest in Brazil among US scholars. American anthropologist Charles Wagley (1913–1991) and historian Richard Morse (1922–2001) also represent this generation of Brazilianists.

The second wave, dubbed "Children of Castro" by Meihy, saw the term "Brazilianist" become widely used in the Brazilian media. This name stems from the US response to the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and Fidel Castro's (1926–2016) rise to power: to prevent the continued spread of communism in the region, the US State Department began funding research on countries in the region, with a particular focus on Brazil. The Ford and Tinker foundations and the Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) created research grant programs for Latin American studies. Meanwhile, the US Congress passed the National Defense Education Act to fund studies in sensitive areas of the world, including Latin America. In an interview, Brazilian historian José Honório Rodrigues (1913–1987) recalled receiving job offers from American universities, with salaries equivalent to that of a high-ranking general in Brazil.

HISTORIAN MEIHY CLASSIFIES BRAZILIANISTS INTO ONE OF THREE CATEGORIES: THE PIONEERS, CHILDREN OF CASTRO, AND THE SPECIALISTS

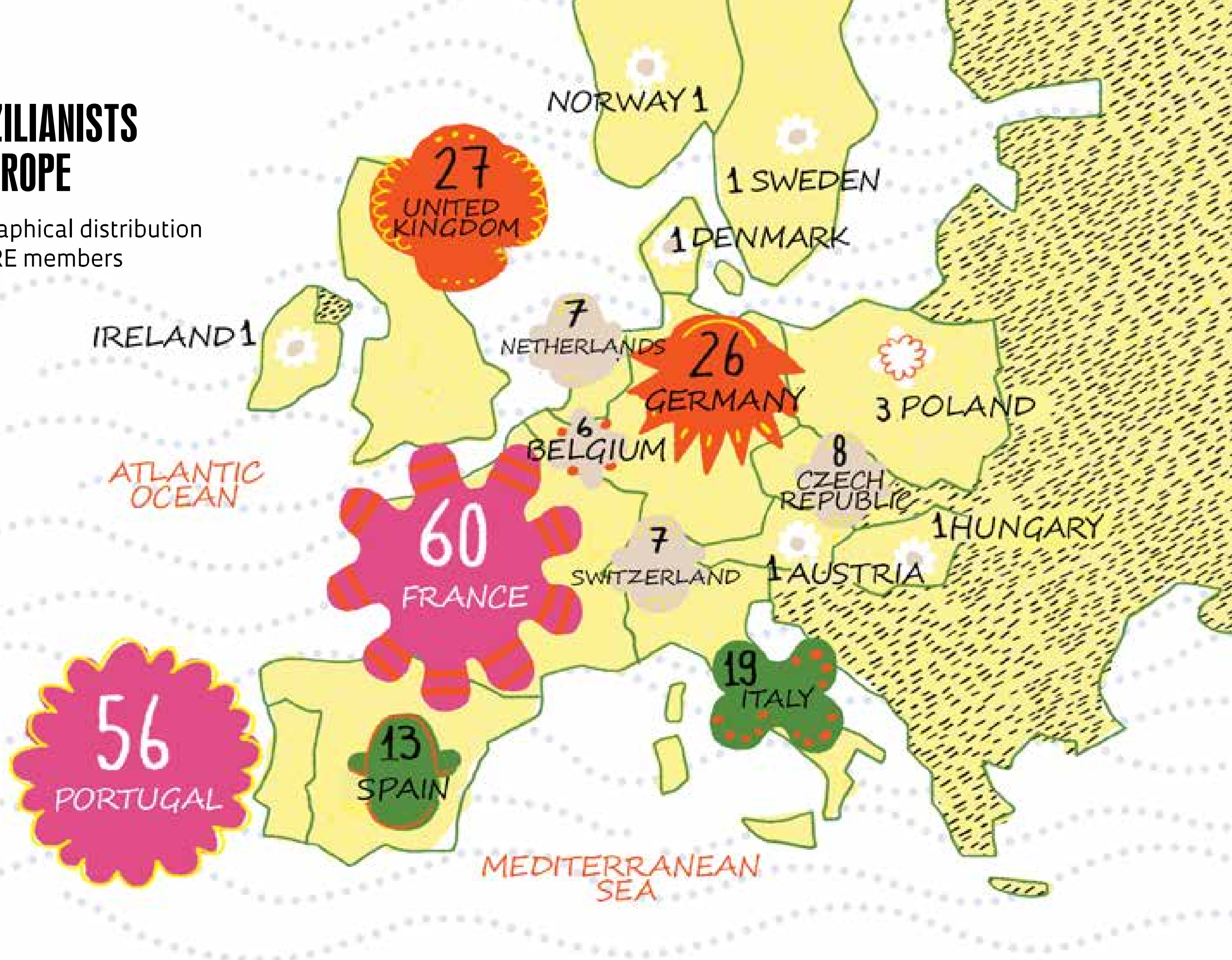
Many of the "Children of Castro" were historians, including British Kenneth Maxwell from Harvard University and Americans Warren Dean (1932–1994) and Stuart Schwartz from Yale University. During this period, the work of American historian and anthropologist Ralph Della Cava, from the Institute of Latin American Studies at Columbia University, was especially noteworthy, including his book *Miracle at Joaseiro*—one of the most important works on parish priest Padre Cícero (1844–1934)—published in 1970. In an interview with Meihy, American Thomas Skidmore (1932–2016) admitted that "the reasons which led [him] to study Brazil depended on the US political context and its reflexes on [the] university system."

Weinstein represents the third generation of Brazilianist scholars, who began publishing around the 1980s and are classified by Meihy as "The Specialists." Brazilianists in this period are less connected to the American context and more interested in studying Brazil itself, deepening their engagement with Brazilian scholars. The book *Beyond Carnival: Male homosexuality in twentieth-century Brazil*, by American historian James Green of Brown University, for example, is considered groundbreaking in its portrayal of homosexual culture in Brazil.

Fellow American historian John French of Duke University recounts how he was about to start his PhD in Mexico in the late 1970s, under the supervision of Brazilian historian Emilia Viotti da Costa (1928–2017) at Yale University, when Costa asked if there was any other topic that might interest him more, especially as it would be a lifetime dedication. "At that time, the ABC Paulista workers' movement was being widely reported in the media during its first strikes in opposition to the military regime (1964–1985)," he recalls. "So I chose to specialize in this topic." His latest book is a biography of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the leader of the strikes, who would later be elected president of the country for three terms.

It was during this period that Serbin first visited Brazil. "The trip was life-changing. I had intended to study Mexico, but instead I fell in love with a Brazilian woman and now consider myself a bicultural person, with Brazil as my second home. Through his friendship with a Luxembourgish novice sent to São Paulo, he was introduced to members of the clergy and went on to author books about the Brazilian Catholic Church.

Among the recurring themes in Brazilian studies is racial relations, including the particularities



and present-day impacts of slavery as practiced in the country. French noted, "It is impossible to study Brazil without dealing with the issue of slavery and the theme of race. Brazil is a country marked by entrenched hierarchies—regional, racial, and gender-based—and this needs to be taken into account." Among the notable contributions in this field are the works of American political scientist Gladys Mitchell-Walthour at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who served as president of BRASA from 2018 to 2020 and is now studying income transfer and affirmative action policies in Brazil, in comparison to similar initiatives in the US.

French also has an ongoing research project on affirmative action in collaboration with legal scholar Silvio Almeida at Mackenzie Presbyterian University. His research is focused on the Brazilian Supreme Federal Court's 2012 decision on the country's affirmative action law. "We examined the participants in the hearings, who were predominantly white but also included members of the Black civil rights movement. We're looking to understand their discourse, strategy, and how they successfully won their case for the affirmative-action quotas," he says.

Other Brazilianists are interested in the works of renowned Brazilian writers and thinkers. Grauová, for instance, has published articles on Lima Barreto (1881–1922), as well as authors such as Machado de Assis, Mário de Andrade (1893–1945), and Chico Buarque de Holanda. In the US, Peggy Sharpe, a literary critic at the University of Florida, devotes her research to Brazilian female writers such as Marina Colasanti, Adalzira Bittencourt (1904–1976), Júlia Lopes de Almeida (1862–1934), and Nísia Floresta (1810–1885). In Germany, literary theorist Berthold Zilly has authored a vast body of research on Euclides da Cunha (1866–1909).

Another field that has attracted a large contingent of scholars is the environment, especially in the context of Amazon occupation. "Graduate and postgraduate students have shown increasing interest in issues surrounding the Amazon," says Serbin. Garmany concurs: "Concerns over deforestation reflect the growing recognition that events in one place have ripple effects across the planet." ■

The research projects and books cited in this article are listed in the online version.