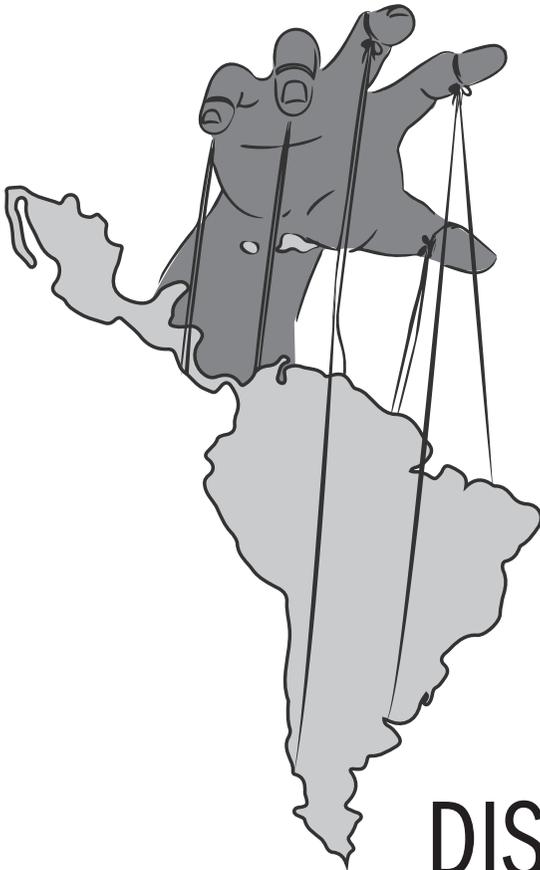


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## DISRUPTIVE FORCES

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# Lessons From the Fire

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Five months after the shameful fire at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, no conclusive investigation has been published. An exhibition early this year marked the rebirth of part of the collection that was saved from ashes.

History teaches us that human wisdom has been developed around fire. Not only does it provide heat, light, and protection, but it also enlightens our imagination. Spend a few minutes in front of a campfire and you will inadvertently begin to reflect on life. For the good, and for the bad. Last year, Brazilians were forced to stare at a painful fire—one that brought, yet again, clarity about our failures in protecting the very same human wisdom.

The fire at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, in September 2018, consumed more than what was visible to the eye. What we saw in flames was already valuable in itself. On fire, the largest Latin American collection of natural history: artifacts of ethnology, archaeology, bioanthropology, paleontology, paleobotany, geology, and zoology were destroyed. In flames, the work of many researchers, burnt fragments of historical documents, books, and theses flying miles away—spreading throughout the city of Rio de Janeiro. Among the intangible losses were several other layers of history: the museum once visited by Marie Curie and Albert Einstein was previously the palace where the Brazilian imperial family lived during the 19th century; before that, it belonged to a slave trader from the colonial period, built on indigenous territory that was native to at least three different tribes.<sup>1</sup>

The real value of the museum deserves much more than the vagueness of the word “inestimable.” But in fact, for many Brazilians, this is the only word that exists. After all, how do you estimate the value of something you ignore? During the fire and in the hours after the tragedy, social networks were infested with comments such as “museums are a waste of public money,” “this is not necessary for the population,” and “I did not even know of the existence of this museum.” Even the current president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, then candidate for the post, when questioned about the incident at the time, responded, “It’s already done, it’s already on fire, what do you want me to do?”<sup>2</sup>

It is true that for other Brazilians, the value of what was lost was perfectly estimable. They are researchers who have seen their work of several decades indefinitely disrupted, natives who have struggled to overcome the firefighters’ blockade in a desperate attempt to salvage sacred artifacts from their ancestors, and unquestionably all those who are stubborn in a Sisyphean effort to preserve our memory. For them, the feeling of humiliation is “inestimable.” For me, witnessing this abject episode in the history of Brazil was particularly painful, for it happened on the eve of me attending Harvard classes, surrounded by similar academic, historical, and cultural wealth which was then vanishing in my country.

Until today it is not known whether it was an arson or not. Police authorities promised the investigation would finish by the end of January 2019.<sup>3</sup> The reasons

for the spread of fire, however, are indisputable: naturally, most of the material of the structure of that old historic building, as well as the collections themselves, are flammable. But other serious factors contributed to this tragedy, as the museum that recently turned 200 years old still awaits the transfer of public funds to invest in the creation of a system to combat fires.<sup>4</sup> At the moment of the fire, there was no water available—as if water would be the best way to protect such delicate artifacts against these threats.<sup>5</sup> Fact: to this day, five months later, people who work on the restoration report that the water supply is still frequently cut off at the museum, compromising their efforts.

In Brazil, the precarious situation of fundamental places for academic research is not uncommon. Just to mention some of the losses of this century, we already saw the Portuguese Language Museum in Sao Paulo burn in flames,<sup>6</sup> and even our only research station in Antarctica is gone.<sup>7</sup> Such precariousness is also not exclusive to Brazil. Developing countries face the dilemma of smaller budgets; therefore, they struggle with the decision of whether to invest their limited financial resources in science and technology, or to areas equally urgent to the public interest: education, health, and security.<sup>8</sup> It is not by chance that many of us, Latin Americans, seek to fulfill our academic goals outside of our countries of origin.

Every year, dozens of Brazilians and hundreds of students from developing countries attend Harvard, expecting to pursue the bright path to leadership positions upon returning home. Throughout this experience, we are constantly exposed to the fact that knowledge, although expensive, has an immeasurable value. We have, therefore, an obligation to use our newly acquired skills to preserve the patrimony of human knowledge and instill a culture of intergenerational legacy, which values the past to frame a better future.

The good news is that the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro is being reborn from ashes. Thanks to the resilience of those who value science, in January, the first exhibition with some of the remaining fossil collection was showcased, naturally in a different venue. This is just a sprout germinating from a burnt ancient tree, but lively enough to give us hope that soon the museum will return, if not to its former glory, then at least to its noble finality.

Let us then contemplate this fire with regret, but as a lesson to be learned in the name of our humanity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jessica Green, “‘It Is a Cultural Tragedy’: Flames Engulf the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro as Dozens of Firefighters Battle to Save Priceless Relics From the 200-Year-Old Building,” *Daily Mail*, 2 September 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6125217/Giant-flames-tear-National-Museum-Rio-Janeiro.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Fernanda Calgaro, “Já está feito, já pegou fogo, quer que faça o quê?”, *diz Bolsonaro sobre incêndio no Museu Nacional*, *GI*, 4 September 2018, <https://gi.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/09/04/ja-esta-feito-ja-pegou-fogo-quer-que-faca-o-que-diz-bolsonaro-sobre-incendio-no-museu-nacional.ghtml>.

<sup>3</sup>Matheus Maciel, “Museu Nacional organiza primeira exposição após incêndio,” *O Globo*, 16 January 2019, <https://extra.globo.com/noticias/rio/museu-nacional-organiza-primeira-exposicao-apos-incendio-23377678.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Dom Phillips, “Brazil Museum Fire: ‘Incalculable’ Loss as 200-Year-Old Rio Institution Guttled,” *The Guardian*, 3 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/03/fire-engulfs-brazil-national-museum-rio>; Alex Horton, “A Lobotomy of the Brazilian Memory: Devastating Fire Destroys Rio’s National Museum,” *The Washington Post*, 3 September 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/09/03/lobotomy-brazilian-memory-devastating-fire-destroys-rios-national-museum/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.d6b63053d9ab](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/09/03/lobotomy-brazilian-memory-devastating-fire-destroys-rios-national-museum/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d6b63053d9ab).

<sup>5</sup>Michael Greshko, “Fire Devastates Brazil’s Oldest Science Museum,” *National Geographic*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2018/09/news-museu-nacional-fire-rio-de-janeiro-natural-history/>.

<sup>6</sup>Vinod Sreeharsha, "Brazil: Fire Destroys São Paulo Museum," *The New York Times*, 21 December 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/22/world/americas/brazil-fire-destroys-sao-paulo-museum.html>.

<sup>7</sup>"Two Die in Fire at Brazil's Antarctic Research Station," *BBC News*, 26 February 2012, [https://www.](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-17168526)

[bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-17168526](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-17168526).

<sup>8</sup>Kelly R. Zamudio et al., "Lack of Science Support Fails Brazil," *Science* 361, no. 6409 (2018): 1322-1323; Barry Ames, "The Politics of Public Spending in Latin America," *American Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (1977): 149-176.