



NEW DIRECTIONS IN BOOK HISTORY

# Stranded Encyclopedias, 1700–2000

Exploring Unfinished, Unpublished,  
Unsuccessful Encyclopedic Projects

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Investigates the obstacles to knowledge dissemination

Contributes to the study of book history, history of encyclopedias, encyclopedism, and lexicography as well as history of knowledge

Considers script, print, and digital cultures

## The Brazilian Encyclopedia: A Stranded Dream

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A strong wave of nationalistic feeling swept across Brazil in the early decades of the twentieth century, at least partially a reflection of the global crisis triggered by the outcomes of World War I, together with a peculiar political and cultural crossroads in the country.

In a curious convergence, in the 1930s, a new authoritarian regime and the literary and artistic vanguard—the Modernist movement—came to see a Brazilian encyclopedia as the emblem of, and a milestone in the development of a new sense of national identity: *brasilidade* (Brazilianness). For this purpose, the government created an ad hoc institution in 1937, the National Institute of the Book. Initially the Institute was attracted toward an erudite project, namely an encyclopedia spontaneously started about 40 years earlier by Alarico Silveira (1875–1943), a member of the Modernist right wing, the so-called *Verde-Amarelos* (green-yellow, after the colors of the Brazilian flag). However, the original plans underwent an abrupt and unexpected twist. It was at this point that one of the most fascinating symbols of the new *Zeitgeist*, the writer—actually, a polymath—Mário de Andrade (1893–1945) claimed for himself the work of compiling an encyclopedia likely to embody the true Brazilian collective identity, and at the same time find a place within universal culture.

Envisaging a theme-based distribution and several levels of complexity intended for different categories of readers, from the working population to learned elites, Andrade insisted that a Brazilian encyclopedia should be written in the language effectively spoken by the people, instead of the erudite Portuguese style imported from Europe. It should also be democratic, flexible, and pluralistic.

Nothing could have been farther from the authoritarian regime's intentions. In consequence, Andrade's project for a Brazilian encyclopedia was never taken forward. As a matter of fact, neither this or any other similar initiative ever succeeded, and to this day all encyclopedias available in Brazil are translations or adaptations of foreign works.<sup>1</sup>

To understand why a Brazilian encyclopedia could not see the light of day in the first half of the twentieth century, we first briefly describe the general historical context that brought together the oddest bedfellows—a totalitarian regime and social and cultural utopians—around the common project of delivering what they saw as the very embodiment of *brasilidade*. Then, we discuss why both parties believed that, of all things possible, an encyclopedia could be a defining national monument, and what each expected the project would achieve. A thorough analysis of Andrade's background and early attempts at organizing knowledge helps explain the origins of his "encyclopedic revolution," which iconoclastic nature, however, brought the seeds of its own dismissal with it. We conclude this chapter with a reflection on the role of encyclopedias as tools to organize the knowledge available in different places and times.