

# ‘Awakening the sleeping beauty’

## Brazil’s vision of a modern agriculture and the Role of the Office of Inter-American Affairs under Nelson Rockefeller

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**Abstract:** *This article discusses the role of the U.S. war institution Office of Inter-American Affairs (1940-45) in the modernization policies of Brazil during the first government of Getúlio Vargas. The first section analyses - based on Brazil’s modernization utopias since the late 19th century - the concept of nation-building with its “March to the West”, the integration of the hinterland into the nation. The second section describes the structure and strategies of the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OLAA) and its goals to mobilize as many natural resources for the war effort as possible. Providing food supply for Allied Forces and US troops in Brazil, and for miners and rubber collectors comprised the most eminent tasks of the OLAA, whose agricultural policies in Brazil are the topics of the third section, while the last section highlights that the US policies of agricultural modernization in Brazil went far beyond World War II.*

**Keywords:** agriculture, Amazon, Brazil, United States, Rockefeller, OIAA, frontier

### Introduction: Brazil awakens

In 1944, Walt Disney’s documentary *The Amazon awakens* was released in U.S. and Brazilian cinemas. In bright colors, unusually splendid for the time, the master of animated film drew a future vision for the vast Amazon basin, for the abundant world of *El Dorado*, with its rivers, forests and raw materials of all kinds. The Amazon offered seemingly endless possibilities for arable land, rubber reservoirs, cities, dams, airstrips and roads, and was ready to welcome *bandeirantes e pioneiros* as agents for a future modernity. Brazil could not achieve this transformation on its own. In order to kiss the ‘sleeping beauty’ of the Amazon to awake, it needed Prince Charming United States. Forty minutes of impressive images show the inhabitants, the plant and animal worlds, as well as an idealistic picture of Henry Ford’s capitalist rubber utopia Fordlândia. The task now was to boost rubber production for the war effort after the Asian plantations had fallen into the hands of the Japanese. In the context of the war effort, the *seringueiros*, the rubber tappers, were the soldiers on the ‘rubber front’ that had to be won (Weinstein, 2019).

But in the United States, politicians and entrepreneurs thought beyond the war. In the last few minutes of *The Amazon awakens*, Disney reverted to his famous art of animation: the real footage changes to a painted green landscape through which the rivers run like pulsating arteries. Ultra-modern buildings and gigantic dam power plants, transformers and runways are erected at lightning speed, bulldozers push back the green carpet of forest in favor of farmland. The voice of the speaker becomes euphoric: ‘The jungle rolls back and runways take its place [...] The river awakens, eager, ready for the touch of men with visions, the men who would accept the exiting challenge to pioneer, to work, and a will. This land is El Dorado, a true



and lasting El Dorado'.<sup>1</sup> The voice of the speaker ends, as does the film with Disney's symbol of a medieval castle that glooms in bright color (Prutsch, 2008).

These scenes are the starting point for the present article on Brazil's agrarian modernization during the first reign of Getúlio Dornelles Vargas (1930-1945), which made use of U.S. wartime needs for its own civilizing mission. The northern neighbor should help to provide capital and technology to 'conquer' part of the remaining natural resources and transform frontier lands into 'civilized' areas (Cytrynowicz, 2000; Garfield, 2013; Lochery, 2014; McCann, 2018; Sá/Sá/Silva, 2020).

The formative institution for this unequal partnership, directed between the Brazilian president-dictator Getúlio Vargas and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) under Nelson Rockefeller. Founded in August 1940, it was an experimental laboratory for modernization policies in Latin America. Distant from the bloody theaters of war, but geopolitically and economically involved in the war, Latin America served the U.S. as fertile reservoir on different levels. The goals of the policy makers in Washington were first to replace Great Britain as a major investor in Latin America, second to push Axis companies and capital out of the subcontinent, and third to implement U.S. businesses in this artificially created vacuum that remained entrenched in Latin America beyond the war (Cramer and Prutsch 2006).

The inter-American war alliance, fostered by the OIAA, was greatest between Brazil and the United States. The OIAA was an remarkably multi-layered organization that linked art, culture, science, technology transfer, resource policy, infrastructure, and health policies alike. Historian Hubert Herring remarked in 1941 when reviewing the flurry of activities his fellow citizens were prepared to engage in both in the U.S. and in Latin America:

*Club-woman read papers on the Humboldt Current, dress up as Aymará, listen to guitarists strum tunes reputed to come from the Amazon. College presidents substitute courses on the Incas for those on the age of Pericles. Chambers of Commerce give dinners to visiting Argentine bankers, and keep up a set of twenty-one American flags among their props. Schoolgirls cut paper dolls which represent the dwellers by Atitlán. (Herring, 1941: 327)*

Already by August 1940, under the umbrella of the OIAA, there existed a host of governmental and non-governmental initiatives theoretically devoted to keeping the Americas one big family, as the *Time* wrote enthusiastically on June 9, 1941. But after a series of errors, cultural misunderstandings based on the lack of Spanish and Portuguese language skills by the OIAA agents, and obvious US paternalism towards the Latin American partners, President Franklin D. Roosevelt subordinated the new emergency agency to the Department of State against its strenuous resistance. Nevertheless the Office of Inter-American Affairs continued to mobilize the nation for the sake of hemisphere defense, and consequently was dismantled in April 1946 after working less than six years (Prutsch and Cramer, 2012: 16).

When the OIAA also ceased to exist shortly after the end of World War II, it had helped to pave the way for US American companies to sell their products to Latin America afterwards or even establish branches in several countries. Nelson Rockefeller himself profited from the Inter-American business relations, fostered by the OIAA, by founding the American International Association for Economic Development (AIA) and the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC). Martha Dalrymple, a former consultant to the Office of Inter-American Affairs,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Amazon Awakens*. 1944. Directed by Walt Disney. Produced by Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). Tarrytown: New York.



wrote openly in her book about the AIA, how helpful it had been for the team of Nelson Rockefeller, after having been ‘freed’ from the control by the State Department and released from the logics of Good Neighbor Policy, to use the established networks in order to focus on profits in the fields of mining and agriculture (Dalrymple, 1968; Campos, 1997; Silva, 2013; Garfield, 2013; Nehring, 2016).

The research on the interlacing between economic and geopolitics as well as cultural diplomacy, that made the OIAA so special, creative and flexible, but made it also an agent to ‘sell’ the American Way of Life, is constantly growing (Sadlier, 2012; Tota, 2014; Franz, 2016). But in this article the focus will be limited to the modernization projects in the agricultural sector, based on Brazilian as well as US-American concepts of frontier and the mission of modernization. The fact that this policy was legitimized and propagandistically disseminated by means of popular culture will be shown on the basis of Walt Disney’s documentaries.

In the first section of my text, I will analyze – based on Brazil’s modernization utopias since the late 19th century and Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis – the Vargas regime’s concept of nation-building with its ‘March to the West’ and the integration of the hinterland into the nation. The second chapter introduces the United States as a crucial agent of development and modernization in Brazil. This chapter offers an overview over the structure of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, its intentions, goals and visions, and analyzes why the Vargas government tolerated the multiple economic and geo-strategic measures of the OIAA, although it sought to realize a politics of nation-building and national sovereignty, that should reduce foreign dependence. The third chapter goes much more into detail and focusses on the agricultural policy of the OIAA and adjacent organizations in Brazil, that was strongly connected to the food supply for U.S. soldiers on air bases, rubber collectors, miners and other workers on the Brazilian war front. The concluding chapter highlights the advantages and side-effects of this war partnership, outlines the legacy of the OIAA in Brazil, and again underlines the importance of the war years for the United States. It is during the war and not afterwards, when the United States developed and tested its strategies of economic development, that would contribute to the development of the ‘Great Acceleration’ (Silva, C., 2018: 410; McNeill/Engelke, 2014).

### ***A marcha para o oeste – The March to the West***

In 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau had determined that the United States was settled from east to west. By this it meant that the *frontier*, the intersection between so-called civilization and the wilderness, had been successfully and steadily pushed westward until it reached the Pacific Ocean. Three years later, historian Frederick Jackson Turner, himself raised not far from the *frontier* in Wisconsin, gave a landmark lecture in Chicago just as the World Fair was being held there and indigenous peoples from the Americas were on ‘display’. In talk, that was later quite rightly criticized, he explained:

*In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness; [,,] The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. (Turner, 1893)*



Even before Frederick Jackson Turner, the historian Capistrano de Abreu brought the country's backlands, the *sertão*, which encompasses by far the largest part of Brazil, into the thinking of the Brazilian elite in his books. The *sertão* has a connotation similar to 'wilderness' (Abreu, 1997). For centuries it was imagined by Brazilians of the east coast regions as a remote and unsettled land with an almost 'empty' and hostile environment, sparsely populated by 'wild savages', that were sometimes considered brave, but certainly not compatible with progress. The Portuguese word for *frontier* (*fronteira*) was sporadically used in Brazil. It means borders or barriers between established countries (Silva, S., 2018: 61; Moraes, 1991).

One historian who reflected on the *sertão* ten years before Turner's Frontier thesis, in 1883, was Capistrano de Abreu. In his work *O descobrimento do Brasil* (1883) and later in *Capítulos de história colonial* (1907) he tried to capture the *sertão* and its settlers as the new Brazilians, different from the European-oriented ones on the coastal regions. He considered the inhabitants of the backland the true Brazilians, who, left to his own devices, had to prove themselves. Where in Turner's United States racial segregation was enshrined in law, Capistrano de Abreu emphasized (without, admittedly, calling it that) that interethnic relations constituted *brazilianness*. However, as a child of his time, he was influenced by evolutionist theories, believing that through these interethnic ties, indigenous people would also be 'civilized' and no longer in a state of nakedness (Secreto, 2007: 2).

In his work *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the backlands)*, 1902, Euclides da Cunha elevated the people of the backland to the status of national heroes, that were completely alien to the coastal elites (Cunha, 2013). Euclides da Cunha had witnessed and reported on a civil war provoked in 1896 and 1897 by federal troops against Canudos, a poor sectarian community in the Bahian backland. Its dwellers followed a local messianic preacher who, as it was interpreted in Rio de Janeiro, was a monarchist and opponent of the newly formed laic Republic with its mechanisms of taxation, order and progress. In this unequal war of 'modernity' versus 'backwardness', most of the dwellers were killed. But the manner with which they bravely resisted the muzzle flashes of so-called modernity, so impressed Euclides da Cunha that he jettisoned his evolutionism. His book became a key text for understanding Brazil as a nation.

In the 1920s, the writer Cassiano Ricardo borrowed myth and reality of the *sertão*, but turned it into the 'West'. Ricardo was a representative of Brazilian modernism, but its authoritarian direction, which would result in fascism later. In 1940, he published the book *Marcha para oeste* (Ricardo, 1940). In a more social Darwinist way than Euclides da Cunha, Ricardo imagined an ideal, but hierarchically structured society, in which the white race would have to develop a spirit of adventure in order to prove itself. Like Turner, he invoked the (São Paulo) *bandeirantes* as the agents of progress. He meant the surveyors, the pioneer farmers, the merchants. With the concept of *bandeirantes*, he reached back to the beginnings of the colonial era (Campos, 2005/6: 140f.).

Brazil's Portuguese conquerors had initially concentrated on the coastal regions. But by the sixteenth century, slave-hunting private militias (*bandeirantes*) had penetrated further into the *sertão* in search of indigenous slave labor for the plantations. They carried a flag (*bandeira*) as a sign of triumph for having 'discovered' a new territory. Like the squatters ('pioneers') in the United States, *bandeirantes* were followed by peasant settlers from Europe, who in the course of the nineteenth century also pursued genocidal policies by carrying out real headhunts on Xokleng, Kaingang and other indigenous groups in southern Brazil (Santos, 1973). In political symbolism and cultural memory, *pioneiros* and *bandeirantes* are still uncritically



elevated as heroes of the frontier, of the March to the West (Da Silva/De Majo, 2020: 4; Moog, 1978).

At the end of 1930, the politician Getúlio Vargas came to power through a so-called 'revolution from above'. As an 'outsider' from Rio Grande do Sul in a political system with, most of the time, alternating presidents from São Paulo and Minas Gerais, he took advantage of the profound crisis that followed the stock market crash of 1929. Vargas came from a wealthy cattle ranching family in São Borja, a former Jesuit missionary land on the border with Paraguay and Argentina. He had studied at the Military Academy in Porto Alegre, where he had been influenced by the guiding philosophy of the Brazilian military, the positivism of Auguste Comte. With the slogans 'order and progress', positivism sought to find technocratic solutions to the complex problems of the Brazilian economy and society with the help of sociology. Vargas ruled Brazil democratically until 1937, then staged a coup to remain in power as dictator of the *Estado Novo* (New State) until October 1945, governing with decrees rather than parties (Pandolfi, 1999; Hentschke, 2006).

Vargas based his power on large landowners and conservative elites, the Catholic Church, the military, but also the industrial workforce, whose acclamation he bought through modern social legislation copied from the *carta del lavoro* in fascist Italy. The Vargas government saw its mission in transforming the heterogeneous, federal agrarian state into a modern nation with a centralized government that would drastically reduce its dependence from Europe. In view of the world economic crisis and dramatically falling coffee prices, Vargas knew that the reliance on a few cash crops would not provide a stable basis for a strong nation. First, however, cash crops and commodities provided the necessary income for what should later become industrialized modernity.

One glaring contrast, which the Vargas government sought to overcome, was the gap between urbanized coasts and the hinterland. Vargas' concept of *marcha para o oeste* also meant westernization, i.e. modernization (Lenharo, 1986; Maia 2019). A theoretical basis for reducing the gap, and one that was heavily debated in the government, was provided by the works of the Romanian Mihail Manoilescu and his books *Théorie du protectionnisme et de l'échange international* (1929) and *Le siècle du corporatisme* (1934) (Prutsch, 2018: 317). In his publications, Manoilescu spoke of unequal exchange, referring to bilateral relations between economically stronger and weaker states, but also between town and countryside, between agricultural producing and exporting structures and urban industrialization. Therefore, Manoilescu encouraged the transportation of agricultural surpluses to domestic cities in order to raise wages in the countryside. His theory fit with the Vargas regime's vision of urban and rural modernization and their interdependence.

Based on Euclides da Cunha and Capistrano de Abreu, but drawing on the young sociologist Gilberto Freyre, the Vargas regime created the euphemistic myth of Brazil as a 'racial democracy', a cultural peaceful *mélange* of its ethnic groups in order to camouflage structural racism and leave social Darwinism behind. But in its nationalist policies and discourses, however, it invoked Cassiano Ricardo's book, who also played on racial mixture in the *bandeirantes* (indigenous and white). The powerful Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda (DIP), that directly depended on the presidency, disseminated the progress credo through a variety of channels. A radio broadcast of the regime was called *A marcha para o oeste*, and a carnival song of the time had the same title (Garfield, 2001). The spirit of the *pioneiros* and *bandeirantes*, filled the need for self-affirmation and rebirth in the years after the stock market crash. In the context of the Vargas regime, Cassiano Ricardo's *bandeirante* was the conqueror, technocrat and pioneer farmer. Other expressions circulated as well, such as *desbravadores* (conquerors), *fazendeiros da vanguarda* (vanguard farmers),



*soldados sem farda* (soldiers without uniform) und *heróis do sertão* (heroes of the wilderness) (Silva, S., 2018: 67).

These discourses accompanied a new settlement policy of the *colônias agrícolas nacionais* (CAN) in the state of Goiás, with new towns, roads, farms for subsistence agriculture, and thousands of settlers. They were intended to help relieve social tensions and land shortages in already more densely populated regions. At the same time, the dominantly agrarian colonization was to be controlled from above, be efficient, and provide food for the rapidly growing cities. A new capital, Goiânia, was founded in 1933. This program of linking urban and rural modernity was in keeping with the new social order of the *Estado Novo*, although the regime's social and labor policies favored industrial workers. One of the new municipalities that was established as part of the Agricultural Colonies of Goiás (CANG) was called Ceres, after the Roman goddess of fertility, in 1941 (Silva, 2017).

The Roncador-Xingu expedition, undertaken between 1939 and 1941, was part of the *marcha para o oeste*. Getúlio Vargas sought to open up western and central Brazil logistically for the planned economic exploitation of the vast territory in search of minerals and fertile land. A network of new roads was to crisscross Mato Grosso and Goiás as far as Minas Gerais, making it accessible to potential settlers (Menezes, 1999).

### **The United States, the 'development agent'**

By mid-1940, Nazi Germany had occupied vast areas of continental Europe and seemed poised to crush the last remnants of Allied resistance. Though the future course of the war was impossible to foresee, U.S. policy makers feared that Nazi Germany's vastly enhanced power would have profound repercussions well beyond the confines of the Old Continent and not least in Latin America. Few observers trusted in the steadfastness of Latin American governments when it came to resisting the lures of fascist policies.<sup>2</sup>

Brazil, the home of millions of inhabitants of German, Japanese and Italian descent, having maintained solid economic bonds with Germany, and ruled by dictator Vargas, was considered such an unsecure territory. Apart from domestic dangers, U.S. military strategists feared that the German Luftwaffe would probably reach Northeastern Brazil from Dakar in West Africa, as the distance was only 2.700 km long (Lübken, 2004). But the war, the British blockade and German submarine attacks had begun to interrupt transatlantic flows of cash crops and finished goods. Latin America's vulnerable economies appeared to be on the brink of a severe downturn by the war, which offered new economic opportunities for the United States (Seitenfus, 2000; McCann, 1973).

After entering the war theater in December 1941, the United States needed Latin American support for their war effort: in raw material and foodstuff and even cheap workforce in armament industries (McCann, 2018; Cytrynowicz, 2000). In this geopolitical situation, the Office of Inter-American Affairs was established to devise and coordinate policies that would diminish the influence of Nazi Germany and its allies in Latin America, deepen inter-American cooperation, and secure Latin America's allegiance and assistance in the war effort and beyond (Cramer/Prutsch, 2006).

The OIAA was established to operate primarily as a coordination agency that would avoid bureaucratic buildup by relying on the expertise and resources of other

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<sup>2</sup> The background information about the OIAA is taken from Cramer/Prutsch (2021) and Prutsch (2008).



players in the field, both public and private. It was to mobilize vast sectors of the U.S. business community and civil society at large for the sake of hemisphere defense and it was intended to promote private U.S. industries in Latin America. In the first year of its existence, the agency received a budget of 3,5 million dollars directly from the President's Emergency Fund. In the following years it depended on the generosity of Congress, which provided the organization with 140 million dollars (Rowland, 1947: 8). Most of the money was spent with projects in the broad field of 'economic development'.

Under the auspices of its Department of Economic Development the United States purchased goods from Latin America in the amount of 434,5 million dollars only in the first five months of 1941. This huge sum included bonds, price and export priorities, advertising and negotiation of low tariffs, so that the flow of goods from the south to the north of the Rio Grande would run smoothly and quickly substitute the interrupted transatlantic flows of European products.<sup>3</sup>

The OIAA's Department of Transportation coordinated and co-financed the construction and extension of transport routes such as the Pan American Highway in order to find alternatives to the dangerous coastal transport routes. Likewise important was the Department of Basic Economy that was responsible for health and sanitation projects and food supply (Campos, 1997). Its functions overlapped practically with those of the Institute of Inter-American Affairs, a sub-organization of the OIAA, that created sanitary posts, built water supply and irrigation structures, engaged trained personnel to fight tuberculosis, syphilis, typhus and malaria as well as to introduce new plants and fertilizers. Regions crucial for the war effort were the mining area in the Brazilian Doce valley, the port area of Chimbote in Peru, the Pacific coast lines of Central America and the state of Pará, Brazil. More than half of the OIAA's budget flowed into basic economic programs of 16 Latin American countries and employed 15-16.000 workers.<sup>4</sup>

All these projects could only be sustainable with the substantial help of local experts. As the OIAA had a hard time to respect and trust domestic skilled laborers and field experts and had a self-declared civilizing and economic mission to fulfill, it founded the Inter-American Educational Foundation (IAEF). The new organization, together with the already established Rockefeller Foundation and other well-endowed philanthropic organizations, considerably expanded scholarship programs in order to send young Latin Americans north. But by far not all the money for economic development came from U.S. institutions. Most of the projects in health and agriculture were co-financed by Latin American partners through bilateral contracts.<sup>5</sup>

As the relations between the north and the south of the Rio Grande had been shaped for decades by US paternalism and 'Bick Stick Policy', the OIAA also developed a broad range of strategies in the Field of Public Diplomacy, in order to win 'the hearts and minds' of their southern neighbors. The historically loaded hegemonic relationship should be transformed into a mutual friendship, a 'true' Good Neighbor Policy. Thus, the OIAA ordered educational and feature films by Disney and other agencies. Radio programs, journals, pamphlets and posters were produced, promotion trips for scientists and artists to the U.S. were paid, although

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<sup>3</sup> RAC, NAR pers. III 4 0, OIAA, Box 1, Folder 1940, Plan Presented to Secretary Harry Hopkins by Nelson A. Rockefeller at a Meeting with him and Mr. Ruml on June 14, 1940.

<sup>4</sup> RAC, NAR pers. 4 L, Box 239, Folder Whitney, John Hay, 1942-1946, Nelson A. Rockefeller and John Hay Whitney, 27.7.1943.

<sup>5</sup> Due to its many competences in different fields the OIAA was considered a competitor by other wartime agencies such as the Office of War Information (OWI), and the Board of Economic Warfare (BEW). See Rowland (1947), 207.



it was extremely expensive and complicated in war times. The OIAA became one of most active information (means propaganda) agencies in the hemisphere. But its culture and media products were also used to promote U.S. products such as wheat and soybeans in Latin America (Leonard, 2000; Prutsch, 2008; Tota, 2014; Keller, 2019).

Such media products were produced by Disney. The OIAA engaged the Disney Company to advertise monocultures in educational films such as *The grain that built a hemisphere* (1943). It is a story of corn, its importance for the ancient cultures and its global circulation. Part of the short film is the propaganda of new production technologies. As the OIAA made statistics about the number of moviegoers, they counted that *The grain that built the hemisphere* was seen by 4,2 million spectators. Another documentary Disney made for the OIAA, is *The soy bean*. It should propagate the cash crop south of the Rio Grande, as the United States marketed it as the new and preferable form of nourishment for Latin America's lower classes. But the employees of the OIAA Agricultural Division had to intervene and provide the Disney Company with new material, as Disney did not respect the Latin American setting and promoted a kind of U.S. Midwest instead (Keller 2019: 73, 95). Such differences of opinion happened regularly between Disney and staff members of the OIAA, as also occurred between the headquarter of the OIAA in Washington and local staff in Latin America. But Disney's products openly aimed at profit and went over well-argued objections by anthropologists and other experts, when their remarks risked to destroy the fun factor or over-simplified messages, Disney preferred to gain vast audiences.

As Disney's educational films illustrate, food supply, produced by 'vanguard farmers', by the 'soldiers without uniform', by the Amazon 'rubber soldiers' for the joint war effort, was extremely important. At the same time, Latin America was considered a laboratory for modern agriculture, with model farms and hybrid seeds. Mexico produced wheat and corn for the United States and its railroad workers, Panama and Costa Rica planted bananas and other foodstuff for the U.S. army in the Canal zone. In Costa Rica the OIAA built an institute for tropical agriculture in Turrialba (Rowland, 1947: 97; Leonard, 2000: 101). In Paraguay it fostered the construction of a refrigeration plant and silos for wheat. U.S. Vice President Henry A. Wallace was one of the most ardent advocates of the cultivation of hybrid varieties in Latin America as well. The first U.S. company to specialize in the production and sale of biotechnologically modified seeds was founded by him (Wallace, 1943). The fact that fertilizers and pesticides polluted the environments and harmed people was not taken into consideration by the advocates of rapid modernization.

The professional background of several of its local managers shows that agriculture played an important role within the OIAA. Bradley Frank, the general manager of the American Coffee Corporation was member of the OIAA in Colombia; Charles Lyon Chandler was the head of the OIAA's Rubber Development Corporation. William Clayton served as Director of the Division of Commodities and Natural Resources. James Gentry, a manager of the British-American Tobacco Company, formed part of the OIAA Coordination Committee in Guatemala and Berent Friele, the ex-president of the American Coffee Corporation, served as the head of the OIAA's Brazilian Division.

### **Agricultural projects of the OIAA in Brazil**

Brazil stood out in its significance for the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) above all other Latin American nations: it was a geopolitical springboard to North





Africa and Europe, a seemingly inexhaustible source of raw materials and foodstuffs, an important experimental field for healthcare and technology, as well as a huge potential market for (mass) consumption. On March 14, 1942 Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles and the Brazilian Secretary of Finance, Arthur de Souza Costa, signed a bilateral agreement. Part of the agreement were generous U.S. loans of 100 million dollars for military armaments and the construction of a steel-mill in return for Brazilian raw material such as mica, iron, raw diamonds, tungsten, tropical woods, rubber, nuts, cocoa and carnauba wax. As the Vargas government estimated that 2,5 million inhabitants lived along the waterways of northern and northeastern Brazil, only half a million were part of the potential workforce.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the OIAA should produce propaganda material and motivate future workers to settle in the 'New West'. In July 1942, Brazil and the United States jointly founded the Serviço Especial de Saúde Pública (SESP) that existed until 1991. The SESP was established as an autonomous institution for the states of Pará and Amazonas. Branches were also established in the mining area of the Doce valley, where the world's largest deposits of mica are found, along with iron ore. In these regions, crucial for the war effort, the workforce had to be healthy and productive (Campos, 1997).

In August 1942, after a series of German submarine attacks on Brazilian commercial vessels and hundreds of victims, Brazil declared war on Germany and Italy. In the context of the hasty wartime production, the Amazon region and the coastal areas of the Brazilian east became the focus of joint interests. Brazil did not only allow the U.S. government to build air bases for its troops on their way to Europe, but also to map the Amazon region, and to explore the possibility of water transportation routes on the Orinoco, Casiquiare and Rio Negro (Kraus, 1986). The production of food supply, cash crops and other strategic products were a crucial goal for both war partners. Unlike in Asia, rubber trees did not grow in plantations. But it was the task of the OIAA to organize the recruitment of new *seringueiros* from northeastern Brazil and safeguarding their food supply. The military bases in coastal cities needed food as well. Whereas agricultural products had been transported by sea from southern Brazil in earlier decades, the war industry and enemy submarines off Brazil's coast restricted transport capacity. This was to the advantage of the U.S. food industry, which not only noted a drastic shortage of food in the affected areas of northeastern Brazil, where small farmers were engaged in subsistence farming, but also found the quality of locally produced food to be inadequate.

Therefore, in September 1942, the U.S. and Brazilian foreign and agricultural ministers signed a bilateral agreement for a joint commission on food production, the Comissão Brasileiro-Americana de Produção de Gêneros Alimentícios (CBA). The agreement existed until June 1945, and the CBA established model farms and training centers for breeding higher-yielding crops through hybrid seeds. One such farm, acquired near the Natal military base in Rio Grande do Norte, bore the name of Nelson Rockefeller. The Guaiuba model farm in Ceará, for example, experimented with peanuts, soybeans and sweet corn. An agricultural school was attached to it. At the Fazenda Cruzeiro do Sul in Pernambuco, green fodder and castor beans were cultivated in particular.<sup>7</sup>

The CBA operated not only in northern and northeastern Brazil, but also along the coast down to Espírito Santo and west to Minas Gerais. It distributed tools and

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<sup>6</sup> National Archives Records Administration (NARA), RG 229, General Records, Central Files, Group 3, Information, Science and Education, Race, Box 410, Folder US-Section of Inter-American Institute, TR 47, Report by Ernest Maes.

<sup>7</sup> NARA, RG 229, Coordination Committee for Brazil, Box 1336.



seeds to local farmers, provided technical assistance, and granted loans for the acquisition of new agricultural technologies. The CBA built rice mills and warehouses, opened institutes of proper nutrition with attached restaurants in Ceará and Paraíba. The CBA explored the need for exporting rice, beans, peanut oil, powdered milk, and flowers from Brazil to the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the urgent need for food for soldiers and rubber collectors, according to the logic of American industry, long-term sales interests of hybrid seeds and artificial fertilizers played a significant role, supported by the argument of modernization aid. CBA farms now produced a plethora of different food products, from poultry and eggs to fruits and vegetables. Tomatoes led the range of products. Grown from hybrid seeds, the fruits with resonant names like New Stone and Marglobe were to replace the smaller Brazilian tomatoes.<sup>9</sup>

Efficiency was not only visible in mass production and suitability for U.S. needs. The most beautiful allotments were also promoted as individual examples of wartime success. The OIAA announced its own competition project, the so called Victory Garden Program. A panel of judges selected the most beautiful home and school gardens. Educational films captured the results on celluloid and commercialized the gardeners' dedication to wartime success.

What quantities of food were produced, cannot be determined because of the disparate material. One statistic, for example, indicated that the U.S. military stationed at Fortaleza purchased 6,200 pounds of meat and nearly 26,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables from surrounding CBA farms in the month of July 1944.<sup>10</sup> Around 200,000 Brazilians were involved in CBA production nationwide. Frank McCann estimates that over 100,000 hand tools, thousands of tons of seed, hundreds of tons of artificial fertilizer and insecticides were distributed to farmers and potential cash crop growers (McCann, 1973: 400). Other wartime organizations such as the Office of Economic Warfare, the Commodity Credit Corporation, and the British Ministry of Food also purchased Brazilian 'surplus' rice production beginning in late 1943.

A key figure in the logistics was John Griffing, a former Protestant missionary to China who specialized in agribusiness. As a university teacher in Viçosa, Minas Gerais, he trained young Brazilians who would find their first jobs in OIAA programs (Griffing, 1940: 13). Another model school existed in Piracicaba in São Paulo, where some students received scholarships in the United States, while U.S. specialists in crop, livestock, and vegetable oil went to the south to spread their philosophy of modern agriculture.<sup>11</sup>

Already in 1942, many Brazilians had felt uncomfortable about the wartime alliance with the United States. In a conversation with the painter George Biddle in late 1942, journalist Samuel Wainer ventured that most Brazilians believed that their country was being transformed into an American colony.<sup>12</sup> Two years later, and alluding to the massive physical and cultural presence of the Americans, Maurício de Medeiros deplored the *cocacolonization* of Brazil in an article for the *Diário*

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<sup>8</sup> Arquivo Itamarati, Rio de Janeiro, Consulado em Los Angeles, 48/5/4, 17.8.1942.

<sup>9</sup> NARA, RG 229, Coordination Committee for Brazil, Box 1336, Folder Health and Sanitation Newsletters, 1943.

<sup>10</sup> NARA, RG 229, Coordination Committee for Brazil, Box 1336, Folder Food Supply Division, Brazil, Monthly Report, July 16 to August 15, 1944.

<sup>11</sup> RAC, NAR pers. comm. III 4 0, Box 4, Brazil 1942-1946, Trade and Finance Division.

<sup>12</sup> George Biddle, Diary, Dec. 1941-Dec. 1942, October 31, 1942 and November 1, 1942 (Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Manuscript Division, Papers of George Biddle, 0457 H, Box 28, Folder 2).



*Carioca*.<sup>13</sup> Not only the presence of thousands of soldiers and airport construction workers stationed in northeastern Brazil were often irritating, but also the rationing of some products such as fuel, sugar, milk and wheat as well as rising prices (Cytrynowicz, 2000). They were the result of increasing exports to meet U.S. needs. The OIAA's propaganda contents therefore turned to the tirelessly repeated theme of sacrifice for the war effort. But in some areas of Brazil, the OIAA's programs to boost the production of meat and vegetables to supply military bases came in for harsh criticism. Since the surplus products were sold on local markets, they actually decreased the prices local farmers were receiving for their produce.<sup>14</sup>

The Rockefeller Foundation, the Institute of Inter-American Affairs and other organizations operating in the Amazon region and other areas of Brazil applied herbicides without hesitation. Research by Brazilian institutions about the fragility of the Amazon soil went unnoticed, as the modernist Brazilian political and economic elite profited from wartime fraternity. The belief in the blessing of the new agricultural techniques for modernization and progress was both the motor and justification for the economic and political interests of both states.

### **The legacy of the wartime brotherhood – a conclusion**

There is no definitive answer whether the cooperation with the United States strengthened the *Estado Novo* or, to put it differently, whether it helped the regime to survive, as it did, until October 1945. Yet, the economic relations between the United States and Brazil served to undermine the regime's legitimacy. The mutual propaganda strategies stressed the topic of two democracies fighting against totalitarian powers. For those segments of Brazilian society increasingly dissatisfied with the dictatorial regime, such a discourse may well have served to strengthen the resolve to bring about a change of regime. Although the wartime alliance had brought tangible benefits, many critics accused the Vargas administration of not investing the profits in social and educational programs. Instead, they charged, the government had fallen into corruption and contributed to scarcity and inflationary pressures, while building casinos and showering its clientele with privileges.<sup>15</sup> In the face of rising opposition, the regime started to crumble. In October of the same year, Getúlio Vargas was forced to resign after a military coup d'état.

While facing growing protest over the years, the OIAA nevertheless aimed at defending the goals of economic cooperation beyond wartime emergency. Even though Latin America realized 50 per cent of its foreign trade with the United States during the war years (Nieß, 1984: 209), the OIAA was abolished in 1946. U.S. funds for non-military assistance were also directed to other geographic regions when the Cold War began. Between 1945 and 1955, three percent of the budget for non-military U.S. aid went to Latin America, 65 percent to Western Europe, and 20 percent to the Asia-Pacific region. (Berger, 1995: 67). Brazil, like other Latin American countries felt exploited, and those who doubted the sustainability of an honest Good Neighbor Policy, would soon be proven right.

Hence, the networks and contacts built up by the OIAA and the Institute of Inter-American Affairs were continued and intensified after the war. Brazil was the

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<sup>13</sup> Maurício de Medeiros, "Ghettos para negros", *Diario Carioca*, May 9, 1944.

<sup>14</sup> NARA, RG 229, Coordination Committee for Brazil, Box 1336, Folder: Health and Sanitation Newsletters 1943, Folder Food Supply Division, Brazil. See also RAC, RFA, RG 4, NAR Papers, OIAA, Box 4, Folder: Brazil 1942-1946, Commercial and financial section.

<sup>15</sup> Fundação Getúlio Vargas, CPDOC, Agencias Militares do EUA, AMA 41.08.06. See also NARA, RG 226, Office of Strategic Services, Box 980, No 84283, Military Intelligence, Division, Report Horace Peterson, July 11, 1944.



only country in Latin America the Inter-American Educational Foundation had signed a contract with to train engineers for the agricultural industry. To finance the planned projects from 1947 to 1952, the United States was to contribute two million dollars, while the Brazilians were to contribute almost nine million. Although the developmental argument remained the same, the images of the enemy changed significantly after 1945. The Institute of Inter-American Affairs (IIAA) and the Health and Sanitation Division of the OIAA, which continued in part until 1948 and was taken over by the Inter-American Educational Foundation, now pressed for continued funding of education in the agricultural sector arguing that the fight against communism had been successful, because such schools reached broad sectors of society: 'They reach down to the masses of people, assisting developing a healthy, democratic and productive citizenry, and require only a small expenditure of U.S. funds in relation to the benefits which they afford to the U.S. and to Brazil.'<sup>16</sup>

Soon after the end of the war, Nelson Rockefeller founded the two interrelated organizations, the American International Association for Economic Development (AIA) and the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC).<sup>17</sup> They carried forward globally the techniques and networks tested by the OIAA and its sub-organizations. Launched in 1946, the nonprofit AIA billed itself as an altruistic supranational development aid organization dedicated to fighting disease, poverty, and illiteracy in those states that were 'underdeveloped' by Harry Truman's definition. The idea for the AIA, which was originally to be named the Bolívar Foundation, came from Kenneth J. Kadow, a former staff member of the Institute of Inter-American Affairs.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the AIA was set up for research purposes, with John Griffing hired as a consultant, the IBEC worked as a global profit organization.

In the early 1950s, specialists of the IRI Research Institute arrived in Brazil. This institute was part of a project, also conceived by Nelson Rockefeller, to recover the soil of degraded coffee plantations with the help of machinery, fertilizers and hybrid corn seeds. It cooperated with agronomic institutes in the State of São Paulo (Silva, C., 2018: 419f.).

The profit organization IBEC, founded in 1947, could now plan over longer periods than a fiscal year, as had been customary for the OIAA. Economic aid in the post-war years was justified by politicians as Rockefeller in terms of the need for accompanying support for Latin American states before they could be released into independence. 'Helping them to help themselves' was also a motto of the AIA. Both organizations, the AIA and the IBEC, worked well together. The AIA promoted the use of hybrid seeds, new cash crops such as sweet and popcorn corn, and modern storage, the commercial production of which was run by the for-profit IBEC. It, too, opened an agricultural research institute in which Nelson Rockefeller's brother David was involved,<sup>19</sup> the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. By 1971, IBEC had established over 200 different enterprises not only in Brazil, but in 32 other countries, including Iraq and Iran, ranging from dairies and low-cost houses to chicken farms and supermarkets, the first of which opened in Venezuela's capital, Caracas.

The OIAA is a missing link between U.S. initiatives before World War II, that were organized along private economic lines, and the post-1945 period. The variety of programs implemented and experienced especially in the agricultural sector, were

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<sup>16</sup> NARA, RG 229, Department of Information, Education Division, Box 1208, Pawley and den Secretary of State, 25.6.1947].

<sup>17</sup> RAC, RFA, RG 4, NAR Papers, AIA-IBEC.

<sup>18</sup> RAC, NAR pers. comm. III 4 B, AIA-IBEC, Box 1, Folder 2.

<sup>19</sup> RAC, NAR pers. III, 4 E, OIAA, Box 3, Folder 50.

the expression of both an experimental field of modernization and a source of profit. The character and the significance of the OIAA makes clear that U.S. modernization projects did not start only after World War II, but several years before, in a geopolitically highly charged environment, that was not directly involved in World War battles.

The OIAA considered itself and was in effect a development agent for the Vargas government. It helped to push the national dream forward, the advance the *frontier*, the march towards the west, like in the Cerrado. In 1978, the Brazilian writer Vianna Moog, who had been a recipient of an OIAA scholarship to the U.S., published a book titled *Bandeirantes e pioneiros*. In his book he drew stereotypical parallels between both countries. When the book was published, Brazil was ruled by military dictators. One of their goals was to realize as much of the long-time national vision of colonizing the remaining frontiers as possible. Currently, the government of Jair Bolsonaro, strongly supported by communities like Novo Progresso, and by other nuclei of the last ‘frontiers’ in Matto Grosso and Pará, uses all means of destructional force in order to push back the remaining Amazon forest, and to transform the last natural reservoirs of the Cerrado into seas of soy plants. The Bolsonaro government embodies the mission of hybris that Walt Disney had named *The Amazon awakens* almost eighty years ago.

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