



# Introduction: The Great Agro-Acceleration in the making

## **Transnational and global histories of agricultural modernization in Brazil (since 1940)**

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With the emergence of the notion of the Anthropocene in the 2000s and its appropriation and consolidation in a multidisciplinary academic agenda in the following decade, part of the community of historians may reconsider concepts and approaches that seemed consolidated in the post epistemological crisis context (Munslow, 2009). Among the challenges and opportunities presented by the Anthropocene to the academic tradition of history, new questions have begun to be asked about the idea of scale, of agency, of archives, in tandem with contributions such as the decolonial, the ethical-political, the post-humanist, and the geological (Rangel, 2019; Hamilton/Bonneuil, 2015). The commutation of concepts, protocols, and approaches involving these different notions little explored before, materialized in the modification of analysis programs, retro-fueled by the technological acceleration provided by the online diffusion of these new forms of historiographical debates and new narratives.

As an example, South Asian postcolonial or Latin American decolonial writing, even with a certain approval from institutions and intellectual groups in the Global North, were perceived by the 'global community of historians' as ways to approach new themes, sources, and narratives in the already consolidated traditions of social or cultural history. Beyond the critique of colonialism incorporated into historiography from the studies of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, or in the reflections of Walter Dignolo and Maria Lugones (Bhambra, 2014), other fields have gained momentum with the advent of the Anthropocene, promoting new readings in environmental history, history of science, and to a lesser extent, history of agriculture. Although the history of science already has a tradition of almost a century, the part of it focused on the analysis of the (dis)encounters between science and technology with the natural world began to produce an excellent interlocution with the consolidation of environmental history – which in turn seems to obliterate the previously prominent history of agriculture. As historian Veronika Settele (2021: 527) reminds us, with the decline of the economic importance of agriculture in industrialized countries, the history of agriculture has been losing territory in historiography<sup>1</sup>, although it should gain more space in the Global South. Such historiographically observable shifts exemplify that during this era in which we have anthropocentrically named the human experience on the planet, many fields of

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<sup>1</sup> A look at H-net (<[https://www.h-net.org/jobs/job\\_browse.php](https://www.h-net.org/jobs/job_browse.php)>), a web portal for academic jobs and fellowships, confirms Settele's argument: between May and December 2021, H-net registered 12 openings in Science Studies, twelve in Environmental Studies and only one in Agrarian Studies.



knowledge have been accepting the challenge to think phenomena and even interpretative fields from the agenda of the Anthropocene. And in a critical manner, or rather, intellectuals from diverse fields of knowledge have been constructing (g)locally pertinent perceptions of issues previously belonging to Western European or North American academic circles. A significant number of historians have understood the opportunity for dialogue, and since then, they have been creating new dissonances in the score of the global concert.

The release of the book *The Great Acceleration* by John McNeill and Peter Engelke (2016) marked an important turning point in the perception of the task of historians facing the Anthropocene – a concept marked by global interdependence and that, for this very reason, can pose analytical problems. Perhaps we have not yet understood how the concreteness of agendas such as the Anthropocene or the Great Acceleration imposed on the historiographical work, not only in conceptual terms or in terms of scales, but also in terms of the use of sources and the theory of historical knowledge itself. If in more or less a century and a half our field of historical studies has already questioned the narrative of the great heroes and the predominance of official documents in the elaboration of our texts; if we have already questioned whether history is necessarily a lesson – *magistra vitae* – and if we have already incorporated voices of the excluded as historiographical practice, among so many other innovations, the Anthropocene and Great Acceleration remind us that this is still a time to continue reflecting on our craft and especially on the frontiers of history writing. Cautions critically presented by authors such as Kate Soper regarding the exaggerations of the linguistic turn serve as a reminder that the hole in the ozone layer is not just a representation, a perception or a discourse: “It is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier” (Soper, 1995: 151). Thus, to think history anthropocentrically implies contemplating new materialities that need to be taken as a source of analysis or, as McNeill and Engelke (2016) intend, to analyze the great acceleration of biogeochemical cycles and their impacts on the planet, on humans and non-humans.

With some of these questions in mind, we propose this dossier for *Diálogos Latinoamericanos*, entitled ‘The making of the Great Agro-Acceleration: transnational cooperation and agricultural modernization programs’, highlighting the role of transnational technical cooperation in the transformation of traditional agriculture into industrial agriculture.

Recently, the publication *Feeding the world: Brazil's transformation into a modern agricultural economy* by Herbert Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna (2019) synthesized how Brazil in particular, but also Latin America, have been dealing with a colonial past in search of ideals of modernity – and from agriculture are perceived in the global economic food chain as key players, even if subordinated. This obliterated image of the ‘big farm’ as provider of food for the world, on the other hand, also reflects the environmental crises caused in part by increased deforestation or water crises - among many other possible examples. Perhaps the new environmental crises of recent years will help urbanized historians reinterpret Latin America not exactly as a desirably urbanized area, because if we think from the Anthropocene and the Great Acceleration, CO2 emissions from agriculture and cattle ranching represent 73 % of the total emitted in Brazil from 2020 (and had already reached 83 % in 2005, or 2.2 billion tons) (Canal Agro, 2021).

Therefore if it is from the rural areas that industrialization took place, and it is from the rural areas that Latin America integrates into the complex acceleration of



biogeochemical cycles, good or bad, we need to critically analyze the gears of this sparse and complicated system.

In this dossier, we demonstrate how transnational technical cooperation has operated in a complex way in the construction of possible modernities for Latin America. If much of the territory was represented as backward until the end of World War II (1939-1945), the same cannot be said of today, where state-of-the-art machinery and inputs operate simultaneously with labor practices from colonial times. Therefore, our goal here was first of all to map and discuss the impact of the various agricultural development programs in Latin America that have been carried out through transnational cooperation. In general, many of these programs are not known or evaluated by Latin American agrarian, agricultural, rural, or environmental historiography, as well as their impacts on agrarian structure, institutionalization of projects, landscape change, and land uses. Therefore, the need for a broad dialogue between the history of the sciences and the environment with the history of agriculture – a history of the Great Agro-Acceleration – makes us resume the almost forgotten but important project of the history of agriculture from new perspectives.

In addition, fundamental in this regard is the influence of the United States in these cooperative efforts, especially during and after World War II. For the text ‘Transforming Brazilian agriculture: the experience of the Brazilian-American Commission for the Production of Foodstuffs, 1942-1945’, the U.S. historian Earl Richard Downes used a vast literature and primary sources little known by Brazilian historians to approach the Brazilian-American Commission for the Production of Foodstuffs, between the years 1942 and 1945. His narrative guides us through how both the Brazilian and American governments responded to the pressures of World War II and fundamentally altered the course of Brazil’s agricultural development. Because of fears of a European war in the late 1930s, the Brazilian political leadership became convinced that collaboration with the United States would be essential to boost the production of Brazilian agricultural and extractive products. In his text, Downes demonstrates that the mutual search for ways to increase agricultural and extractive production created an important incentive for wartime cooperation. As a result, importing technical expertise and equipment from the United States became the primary option for Brazilian economic planners, while securing Brazil’s support emerged as a political priority for the Roosevelt administration. While the joint food production commission was conceived as an instrument to assist rubber production in the Amazon, the Getúlio Vargas government transformed it into an important binational subsidy for the Brazilian Northeast. Also, the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture and the commission to introduce even rudimentary agricultural inputs accelerated technological substitution and marked the beginning of support for more capital-intensive cultivation. Finally, the author argues about the Brazilian government’s intentions in creating and maintaining links between domestic agriculture and the United States as Brazilians realized the potential benefits to the country from the agricultural revolution underway in North America.

The article “‘Awakening the sleeping beauty’: Brazil’s vision of a modern agriculture and the role of the Office of Inter-American Affairs under Nelson Rockefeller”, by historian Ursula Prutsch, addresses a theme well known in Brazilian international relations studies, but from a different perspective: the role of the U.S. war institution Office of Inter-American Affairs (1940-45) in Brazil’s modernization policies during the first government of Getúlio Vargas. With a strong dialogue with other texts of the same dossier, Prutsch analyzes in the first part of her article the utopias of modernization of Brazil since the end of the nineteenth century – the



concept of nation-building with its ‘Marcha para o Oeste’ (March to the West), the integration of the *sertão* wilderness into the nation. Later, the author describes the structure and strategies of the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) and its goals of mobilizing as many natural resources as possible for the war effort. The provision of food for the Allied Forces and American troops in Brazil, and for miners and rubber gatherers, comprised the most eminent tasks of the OIAA, whose agricultural policies in Brazil are the topics of the third section, while the last section highlights that American policies of agricultural modernization in Brazil went well beyond World War II.

In the article entitled ‘Cooperativa técnica Brasil-Estados Unidos e a extensão rural: a criação das bases do Sistema ABCAR (1953-1958)’, researchers Felipe Loureiro and Lucas Guardiano discuss a fundamental theme for the Great Brazilian Agro-Acceleration: the introduction of a rural extension service at a national level through the ABCAR System, the Brazilian Association of Credit and Rural Assistance, observing the role of American diplomacy in this process. Loureiro and Guardiano demonstrate how key players in this process have been obliterated – or have not had the discussion they deserve – by part of agrarian historiography, international relations, or agricultural history. Examples of this are programs such as Point Four – Harry Truman’s geopolitical diplomacy – and the Technical Bureau of Agriculture (TBA), which had a decisive influence on the consolidation of ABCAR. As the authors demonstrate, ‘ABCAR would represent the consolidation, at the national level, of the extensionist project initiated by Rockefeller in Minas in the late 1940s’ through the American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA), that gave origin, in the 1960s and 1970s, in several agricultural research and extension institutions in Brazil. The text makes fundamental progress in the debate on the consolidation of an American paradigm – known in Brazil, but from a history without subjects – which makes Loureiro and Guardiano’s text a must-read for studies on ABCAR, TBA, and the role of North Americans in Brazil.

In his article A TVA to the Amazon Forest? The training of development experts, researcher Rômulo de Paula Andrade discusses the courses of the Superintendência de Valorização Econômica da Amazônia (SPVEA), a government agency responsible for the development projects directed at the Brazilian Amazon. In the 1950s, SPVEA held courses for the technical specialists who would work on development plans for the region. In the midst of several intervention projects in the Amazon, the teaching of modern planning techniques was intended to confer technical status to the actions undertaken, to remove the so-called political influence from the plans. Amidst the proclaimed success of the Tennessee Valley Authority during the first decades of the New Deal, its model of control over the natural world – flood control, fertilizer generation, as well as the idealization of regional planning and economic development policies – would be exported within the diplomatic context of Point Four. Although it is an influential theme in regional development policies in Brazil and Latin America, TVA remains a topic little explored by Brazilian researchers and Brazilianists. And precisely because of this, Andrade’s text provides a pertinent discussion by making use of primary sources such as the syllabus of courses held at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) in the 1950s for the then future SPVEA workers; also, the author makes use of reports, books, and publicity materials published by the agency itself. Through these historical sources, it is possible to perceive the reception and adaptation of the ideas of planning and development that circulated in Brazil during the Cold War.

The article ‘Fruit frontiers: research on feijoa cultivation in Brazil and Colombia’, by Samira Peruchi Moretto, Eunice Sueli Nodari, and Rubens Onofre Nodari, takes



an interdisciplinary perspective to discuss how Latin American countries cooperated with the United States on projects that aimed to increase the production of basic commodities to supply the international market. As a result, the space for rural peasant agricultural practices and food cultivation outside the logic of productivism diminished considerably over time. These alternative practices have been maintained peripherally, including the production of native fruits, including feijoa (*Acca sellowiana*). In this article, the authors discuss how advances in scientific research and smallholder production, rather than public policy, favored feijoa cultivation in Brazil and Colombia. Scientists supported increased production and productivity of a fruit species that remained on the margins of industrial, science-based agriculture. These countries were under strong international influence to adopt plans to modernize their agricultural sector. Despite being on the margins of these development plans and receiving few direct financial subsidies, research on feijoa has continued over time. Finally, the article demonstrates that while Colombia produces monocultures of feijoa for export, cultivation in Brazil remains incipient and limited to small farms.

Bringing a contribution between East and West, the article ‘A Great Agro-Acceleration by proxy: the Japan International Cooperation Agency in South America’, by historian Jó Klanovicz, discusses the role of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in the construction of a great Japanese agro-acceleration in South America, established from the second half of the twentieth century. This agency established cooperation by investing financial and technical resources and encouraging the migration of Japanese settlers in areas considered little explored by the Brazilian government. The author uses primary and secondary sources linked to the agency, weaving an analysis of documents in order to describe two cooperation processes woven by JICA in South America, with emphasis on Brazil: the development of soybean cultivation in the Cerrado, and temperate climate fruit farming in the Atlantic Forest. In his argument, the author realizes that large-scale projects related to agriculture in countries like Brazil reinforce the role of JICA in the great acceleration of resource use and food production, making up a global history of circulation of experts, money and agricultural varieties in the second half of the twentieth century.

In a very original way, this dossier presents themes, sources, and analyses that are extremely pertinent for the public to get to know the workings of the Great Agro-Acceleration – once celebrated and now considered quite controversial. The articles presented here are in dialogue with each other and demonstrate how Brazil – but also Colombia and other South American countries – established intense debates about the future of agriculture and its own natural resources in the establishment of modernity projects.

Alongside some of the classics originally written in English about agricultural modernization and natural resource extraction in Brazil and South America - such as *With broadax and firebrand* by Warren Dean (1995) and *In search of the Amazon* by Seth Garfield (2013) – we consider this dossier a must-read for understanding the human and non-human actors in the process of consolidation of industrial agriculture – and all its problems – in this region of the planet.

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