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Imagining the Land of the Future: New Histories of Brazilian Modernity



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Reviewed Work(s)

Autos and Progress: The Brazilian Search for Modernity. By Joel Wolfe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Pp. 228. Hardback,

\$99.00. Paperback, \$21.95.

Brazil's Steel City: Developmentalism, Strategic Power, and Industrial Relations in Volta Redonda, 1941-1964. By Oliver J. Dinius (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Pp. 352. Cloth, \$65.00. E-book, \$65.00.

Hotel Trópico: Brazil and the Challenge of African Decolonization, 1950-1980. By Jerry Dávila (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Pp. 328. Cloth, \$84.95. Paperback, \$23.95.

The twenty-first century has so far been one of Brazilian ascendance, at least according to the international media.^[1] The 2002 presidential election of the former metalworker Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva sparked a new global interest in Brazilian politics. As most of the world has reeled from economic recession since 2008, Brazil has not only survived the crisis, but thrived. The coming decade will be particularly eventful for Brazil. The country's first woman president, Dilma Rousseff, elected in late 2010, will supervise preparations for the World Cup in 2014 and for the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. In the eyes of the world, Brazil's prestige has never been higher.^[2] Though the adoration of Brazil by international journalists began suddenly, Brazil's bid for international eminence was long in the making. Three new books on the history of Brazilian modernization reveal how twentieth-century Brazilians have envisioned their country as a potential world power.

In *Autos and Progress: The Brazilian Search for Modernity*, Joel Wolfe interprets twentieth-century Brazilian history through a trajectory of "automobility," from the first car imported to Brazil through the development of the domestic Brazilian auto industry. In the history of cars, trucks, and buses, he identifies many of the same themes that drive the contemporary historiography of modern Brazil: efforts for geographical unity, social unity, and economic power. Automobility, as an idea and aspiration, belied the belief that, despite the environmental challenges of Brazil's geography, technology could ease racial and class tensions by increasing the nation's standard of living (4). Automobiles were a "symbol of hope" for what Brazilians aspired to be (12).

Since the earliest days of Portuguese colonialism, Brazil has been a regionally fragmented country. Colonial settlements were almost

exclusively coastal, with São Paulo and the gold-mining region of Minas Gerais as notable exceptions. The populous Northeast and Southeast were for centuries largely isolated from each other due to unfavorable oceanic currents and colonial pressures for external trade. Mountain ranges cut through the population centers of the Southeast, the arid *sertão* made overland journeys perilous in the Northeast, and the massive Amazon rainforest remains an almost impenetrable barrier to travel in the North and West.[3] This geographic fragmentation had created a divided population that threatened the national government's internal sovereignty. Rebellions by secessionist millenarian groups in the 1890s and 1910s intensified the government's urgency to unify the disparate territories of Brazil (6). In 1926, President Washington Luíz declared, "to govern is to make roads" (34). According to Wolfe, elites viewed roadbuilding not only as a strategy for making physical connections between regions, but of creating sociocultural connections as well: "Roads would allow [rural] people to participate not only in the broader markets for goods but also in the life of the nation. Contact with urban Brazil and with capitalism would civilize the backwoods Brazilians" (51).[4]

Wolfe argues that part of the allure of automobiles was their potential for rearranging social life. The owner of the first car in South America was the pioneering Brazilian aviator Alberto Santos Dumont, as cars were little more than status symbols for elites in the first decades of automobility (13, 15). With this cachet of luxury, marketers in the 1920s and 30s were able to cast inexpensive U.S. American cars as essential aspects of modern living (9). This new pattern of modern consumerism portrayed women as active participants in public life. Advertisers targeted women by extolling the freedom of life with a car, a stark contrast to the nineteenth-century norm of the secluded "angel of the home" (73).

As the Brazilian domestic auto industry developed in the mid-century, owning a car became a link between citizenship and consumerism. According to Wolfe, "The opening of automobile factories in Brazil held out the promise of the creation of a disciplined, nonradical working class that mirrored what Brazilians perceived to be the experiences of autoworkers in the United States" (10). Though Brazilians looked to the United States as inspiration for industrialization, Wolfe emphasizes that

they were not looking to mimic the United States. Development in Brazil was meant take the best parts of American industry and make them Brazilian (61). Ideologies that linked production with consumption were particularly influential. Fordism represented an exchange of good wages and labor conditions for productivity and labor control, meshing easily with Brazilian Catholic social doctrines that emphasized improving quality of life for the poor while maintaining traditional power relations. Sloanism, named for General Motors president Alfred Sloane, stressed the style of consumer goods over their function and associated different tiers of products with different stages of life.^[5] Modernizing reformers hoped that mass consumption and industrialization would mutually reinforce each other, creating perpetual economic growth, while canceling out the politically disruptive power of poverty (11).

Technologies like automobiles “became a measure of Brazil’s ‘civilization’” (11). They offered a view of Brazilian development departing from the export-based plantation agriculture that had long dominated the national economy (33). The first great experiment in American-inspired – and, in this case, American-led – economic innovation was Ford Motor Company’s creation of Fordlândia, a rationalized Amazonian rubber plantation more important for the inspiration it provided Brazilians than for any great economic success. Great swathes of the jungle were cut down and replaced with neatly lined rubber trees. A company town, modeled on U.S. suburban architecture, provided shopping, education, religious services, and extracurricular activities for workers and their families. Though the project would ultimately fail, Wolfe argues that it “fired the imaginations of Brazilians over the possibilities of using modern technologies to create out of the forest a productive, developed region with a well-educated and democratic workforce that would actively and positively participate in Brazilian society” (84). Furthermore, Fordlândia inspired not just because it brought modernity to the jungle, but also because it used the jungle – once seen as a barrier to progress – to bring modernity to Brazil (83-88).

A second great experiment in innovative development, also inspired and initially financed by the United States, was the Volta Redonda steel mill, the subject of Oliver J. Dinius’s *Brazil’s Steel City: Developmentalism, Strategic Power, and Industrial Relations in Volta Redonda, 1941-1964*. This labor history approaches the creation and early years of Brazil’s first

– and, for decades, only – steel mill, contrasting the expectations that surrounded the project with the empirical realities that sustained it. In contemplating the apparent lack of worker militancy at Volta Redonda, Dinius first explores the impact of industrial and labor ideologies on the plant's workers. He then focuses on the *strategic* power of metalworkers, examining how they viewed their own enormous impact on the national economy.

In the 1940s and 50s, the most powerful economic doctrine in Brazil was *desenvolvimentismo*, or developmentalism. Maintaining that economic growth would diminish class conflict, developmentalism urged government-led development in order to raise the standard of living of all Brazilians (6). Developmentalism required and (mostly) had the support of the state, industrialists, and workers, in a hopeful truce first cobbled together during the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945).

[6] In *Autos and Progress*, Joel Wolfe describes Vargas's dictatorship, often called fascist or populist, as driven by no ideology so much as a quest for modernity (92). Vargas's 1941 founding of the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN, the National Steel Company) concurs with the Volta Redonda mill. Dinius explains that Vargas desired a real, total industrial revolution for Brazil and viewed national steel as the necessary precursor (14-15). During construction, Vargas's government celebrated the mill as nationally transformative, and with its completion, extolled the foundation of a new age and a "new Brazil," emancipated from "tropical languor" (39, 68). Their optimism apparently was not squashed by the fact that about 66 percent of the Brazilian working population still worked in agriculture (23). Nor were they dissuaded by the reality, confirmed by Wolfe, that Brazil still was marked by regional divisions and economic disparities. Dinius affirms that although the mill fueled an economic boom reaching its pinnacle with the "Brazilian Miracle" of the 1970s, the areas that experienced the greatest growth were those that already had experienced significant development before the establishment of Volta Redonda (16).[7]

Closely linked to the developmentalist consensus was the concept of *trabalhismo* (roughly equivalent to laborism), a social welfare regime aimed at workers. *Trabalhismo* enabled developmentalism by linking together workers, industrialists, and the state. Industrialists guaranteed workers good wages and benefits in exchange for labor control and

acquiescence to corporate hierarchies. The state compelled each party to keep its side of the bargain, by force if necessary. But the state never intended force to be necessary. Dinius describes *trabalhismo* as a hegemonic, not despotic, labor regime (3-4). Developmentalism proposed state-led new industry, and *trabalhismo* advanced a state-led 'new man' who would be guided by the mantra "Laboro, ergo sum" (94). Like Fordlândia, Volta Redonda became a factory town that united all aspects of life under the eyes of the company. Workers and their families, though socially segmented by class in company housing, comprised the "steel family." Wives were offered classes in consumer education, nutrition, and child-rearing, while their husbands were named "soldiers of progress" (87-89). Dinius finds that the government accorded tremendous respect to employees at Volta Redonda for producing the steel that fueled national development. While their work conditions were not always ideal, this respect earned them concessions and benefits that labor militancy did not, including wages many times larger than most of them had previously earned as agricultural laborers (49).[8]

Regardless of industry, in mid twentieth-century Brazil, labor relations were rooted in developmentalism and *trabalhismo*, but not all workers received the same concessions as steelworkers. Dinius attributes their special position vis-à-vis the state and their employers to their unique standing within the national economy of Brazil. Steel was the foundational product of the modernizing Brazilian economy. Construction, shipbuilding, auto manufacturing and numerous other industries that grew rapidly in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s depended upon steel from Volta Redonda. Even a short strike at Volta Redonda would have had damaging repercussions throughout the entire national economy (189-193). Challenging the now-traditional labor history theme of "the exploitative wage relationship" and the resistance and integration model,[9] Dinius argues that "workers in highly strategic industries or in strategic positions in any industry had the power to stand up to management; they were not condemned to be victims of capitalist exploitation" (10-11). The "strategic position" of CSN workers garnered them special privileges but also put them in a privileged place to affect relations between the state and workers more generally.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking new book on modernity in Brazil is Jerry Dávila's *Hotel Trópico: Brazil and the Challenge of African Decolonization, 1950-1980*. At its core, Dávila's account is a history of how Brazilians viewed the future of their place in the world, told through the diplomatic wrangling of Brazil, Portugal, and West African countries. Brazil's aspirations to be a world power depended on the long-embattled notions of racial democracy and Lusotropicalism but were impeded by the legacies of colonialism and slavery.

Dávila portrays Brazil in the second half of the twentieth century as emboldened by the successes of mid-century developmentalism and a long-held belief in Brazilian exceptionalism that rested on the country's geographic and environmental assets. Combined with a resentment about their country's subservient relationship with the United States, Brazilians began to imagine themselves as a future world power. The Brazilian diplomatic corps successfully framed the decolonization of Africa as the moment for Brazil to make its ascent. In 1975 foreign minister Azeredo da Silveira explained, "if Latin America is the essential environment of our foreign policy, Africa is the screen upon which we project it, demonstrating the shape that our foreign relations will assume in the future. (...) We are not planning a foreign policy for the 1970s, we are planning for the year 2000" (4-5). In the early 1960s, the nonaligned "Independent Foreign Policy" of President Jânio Quadros defined Brazil as the leader of the developing world, not a follower of the decadent United States (34). For Quadros, "Brasília was the center of a world that Brazil was trying to make" (225). As the military dictatorships of the late 1960s and the 1970s promoted the "Brazilian Miracle," Africa became a market for Brazil's economic aspirations. Brazilian "tropical technology" (e.g., Brazilian-made cars and supposedly sturdy heat- and moisture-resistant appliances) was marketed to oil-rich Nigeria. Though African consumers were often unimpressed with Brazilian goods, they were more than happy to join the empire of Brazilian soccer (156, 223-239).

The notion of racial democracy formed the ideological rationale for Brazil's ambitions in Africa. The distinctly nationalist myth of racial democracy was a "positive response" to Jim Crow and European colonialism, holding that in Brazil racial difference did not create racial hatred, or even racial tension, owing to the high degree of racial mixture in the Brazilian population (4). As such, racial democracy promoted

Brazil's case for being a leader of the third world, especially in the newly independent African nations that the Brazilian foreign service portrayed as "future Brazils" (2). The Brazilian belief in racial democracy obscured the very real prejudices and structural disadvantages against Afro-Brazilians in the twentieth century. The diplomatic corps that sought to create linkages between Brazil and newly independent African countries was overwhelmingly white (2). However, racial democracy proposed that the racial and ethnic diversity of Brazil was collectively shared and that such identities were interchangeable (65-66). As a result, white diplomats were confident in their own blackness and in their ability to relate to African leaders. The first black ambassador to Africa was accused by Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah of having been appointed because of "reverse racism," and African leaders were largely skeptical of Brazil's supposed racial democracy (43). In turn, Brazilians confident in the inclusive nationalism of racial democracy were mostly unconvinced by the pan-African anticolonialism of *négritude*, as the Afro-Brazilian diplomat Raymundo Souza Dantas explained, "I am not a Brazilian black. I am a black Brazilian" (131). Though racial democracy was Brazil's justification for assuming a major role in African affairs, its contradictions often damaged efforts to form meaningful political and economic connections.

Racial democracy was closely associated with "lusotropicalism," a theory of history proposed by the noted Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. Freyre proposed that the Portuguese had created a particularly benign, and even beneficial, form of colonialism that was based on racial mixture and an innate love for dark-skinned people. He believed that this "lusotropicalism" gave birth to Brazil's racial democracy and had even done the same in Portugal's African colonies, thereby ignoring the grossly abusive political and economic inequalities that prevailed throughout Portuguese Africa in the twentieth century (2, 17). Portuguese colonial officials eagerly latched on to Freyre and his theory, seeing lusotropicalism as a modern, anti-racist justification for continued Portuguese colonialism in Africa. The idea was also espoused by Portuguese-Brazilians who wielded significant power in Brazilian politics and supported the status quo for Portuguese relations with Africa and Brazil (13-15). Lusotropicalism, combined with lobbying by the Portuguese government and Luso-Brazilians, created a strange neutrality in Brazil's foreign policy towards Angola and Mozambique despite its

eager support for independent former British and French colonies. Furthermore, lusotropicalism inspired the misguided belief among some Brazilian diplomats that Brazil and Portuguese Africa shared similar colonial histories. That is, they envisioned Africa as they romantically envisioned colonial Brazil with little knowledge of Africa in the modern age (5, 13). By the late 1950s, much of the Brazilian population had grown weary of tolerating Portugal's colonialism, racism, and dictatorship. In order to become the world power that they dreamed of being, the "country of the future" had to confront the "empire of the past" (10, 30). For the government, in the end, it was not ideological incompatibilities, but economic pressures that compelled Brazil to cut ties with Portuguese colonialism, as Brazil's dependence on foreign oil made Angola a more attractive ally than the mother country (168).

Wolfe, Dinius, and Dávila provide novel views on some of the most important themes in the literature on modern Brazil, including social peace, developmentalism, and racial democracy. They contribute to an emerging view of modernity in Brazil, which rejects the once-dominant argument that Brazilian modernity was imperfectly imitative of the United States and Europe.^[10] Brazil is no less "modern" today for not following the same economic and political trajectory as the so-called West. For these authors, Brazilian modernity progressed along a different path. Dávila's mid-century Brazil did not seek to become a white colonial power, but a mixed-raced leader of the developing world. The workers that Dinius describes did not need labor militancy to improve their lot in life; rather they took advantage of the government's concern for social peace.^[11] Wolfe postulates that Eurocentric modernity is often thought of as a railroad, a straight and narrow path with a fixed endpoint. But the car, with its nearly infinite endpoints and routes, may be a more accurate description, especially in Brazil (10).

In exploring how Brazilians in the twentieth century envisioned themselves and struggled to build their ideal future, these books also present new perspectives in understanding how Brazil became the country it is today. Wolfe identifies efforts to create a cohesive, unified nation out of disparate regions, while Dinius describes how Brazil created the technical capabilities to promote national growth. In Dávila's work, we see Brazilians in the second half of the twentieth century addressing what to do with the modern economy they had created and

how to translate it into international success, using diplomatic linkages to further strengthen it.

Though next year Brazil will celebrate its 190th anniversary of independence, Dávila shows how – in the twentieth century – the legacies of Brazil’s colonial relationship with Portugal impeded forming new relationships with Africa. Today, the colonial patterns of concentrated settlement along the coast described by Wolfe survive in the substantial economic disparity between wealthy coastal cities and the impoverished interior. For a hundred years the internal migration caused by this inequality has exacerbated political and cultural tensions between regions. With even more salience, the legacy of slavery haunts Brazil’s “racial democracy.” Although economic-based affirmative action has made headway in changing the face of the Brazilian educated elite, recent debates over race-based affirmative action show that a plurality of Brazilians considers these efforts as insufficient.^[12] While providing an understanding for the triumphs of the Brazilian people in the twenty-first century, these new histories also highlight the challenges that threaten to undermine the future that Brazilians have worked so long to create.

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[1] Kelley Lee and Eduardo J. Gomez, “Brazil’s Ascendance: The soft power role of global health diplomacy,” *European Business Review* 23:1 (2011): 61-64.

[2] Hugh O’Shaughnessy, “The rise and rise of Brazil: Faster, stronger, higher,” *The Independent*, Sept. 27, 2009.

[3] Discussed extensively in Celso Furtado, *Formação Económica do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundo de Cultura, 1959).

[4] Another fascinating account of the cultural implications of roadbuilding is Todd Diacon’s *Stringing Together a Nation: Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon and the Construction of a Modern Brazil, 1906-1930* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[5] See Chapter 3.

[6] To understand how such a broad consensus on developmentalism could be reached, see Barbara Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Re-Making of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920-1964* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[7] See also Dinius's conclusion.

[8] See also Chapter 3.

[9] See Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[10] For an earlier discussion of this dispute see Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (New York: Verso, 1992).

[11] See Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 1995 [1936]) for an early analysis of sociability as the dominant cultural trait of Brazil.

[12] Amy Erica Smith, "Affirmative Action in Brazil," *Americas Quarterly* (Web Exclusive), Oct. 25, 2010, <http://www.americasquarterly.org/node/1939> (accessed Feb. 17, 2011).

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