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The Seduction of Brazil: The Americanization of Brazil during World War II

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The Seduction of Brazil recounts efforts by the U.S. government to promote a better image of the United States and to induce Brazilians to accept and even participate in joint policies and actions on the international stage, before and during World War II. To some degree it also measures the success of these efforts and concludes that Brazilians never surrendered their power to filter and choose which influences to accept. Ultimately the book concludes that Brazilians were ready for a degree of Americanization and that they willingly adopted elements not antithetical to their national character, or *Brasiliandade*.

The book's main story concerns Nelson Rockefeller and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), which he set up in 1940, at the invitation of President Franklin Roosevelt. Because of his family's extensive holdings in the hemisphere, Rockefeller knew of anti-American sentiment that grew out of decades of gunboat diplomacy and U.S. imperialism. He, like his friend Harry Hopkins in the Commerce Department, wished to employ modern techniques of public relations and mass communication to improve the image of the United States throughout the region, but especially in Brazil. They never called it propaganda, as did some European governments.

Brazil held special importance for several reasons. It had the longest period of good relations with the United States, the so-called unwritten alliance struck early in the century. It was the most important nation in South America, potentially able to influence neighbor states. It also had natural resources necessary if the United States joined the war. Finally, it had a landmass that jutted into the Atlantic that could provide a land bridge for ferrying aircraft to Africa in case of war.

On the liability side, U.S. agents pointed to the large German and Italian populations in the south that were thought to be susceptible to recruitment by Axis governments. Oddly, little suspicion was cast on Japanese Brazilians despite their numbers and WWII roundups of Japanese immigrants in west coast nations.

The OCIAA approached public relations from many angles. It commissioned movies that portrayed friendly relations among the Americas, made in Hollywood and also abroad. It undertook radio broadcasting, concentrating on news and general interest stories. It sent academics and famous people on good-will tours and also sponsored Latin American celebrities on U.S. tours. It fed news and features into press organizations like Reuters and AP and placed stories in major magazines, especially their Latin American editions. And working closely with State (where Rockefeller supposedly reported) the OCIAA arranged for key diplomatic meetings to sway decision-makers like President Getúlio Vargas.

Three episodes warranted fuller coverage by the author: the extensive travels and appearances by famed singer/actor Carmen Miranda on behalf of the OCIAA, some film projects by Walt Disney, and a sojourn by Orson Welles to shoot a film in Brazil. To some degree these efforts

backfired: Miranda for having sold out to a foreign government, Disney for failing to create an authentic cartoon character to represent Brazil, and Welles over artistic disagreements.

The book stresses that Brazil was experimenting with similar public opinion efforts as OCIAA, though not as sophisticated or well-financed, and saw the possibilities of learning through cooperation. Brazil sent broadcasters to the United States, where they gained valuable experience. Young statisticians, who worked with George Gallup to learn the techniques of opinion polling, later set up the pioneering Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística.

This study also notes that in addition to employing new communications media and techniques, Brazil was expanding its coverage to its vast territory. Aviation helped this process, as did radio telegraphy. This expansion permitted nationwide radio broadcasts as early as 1936, important for government programs and control. (In the 1960s the military government spurred national television hookups for similar purposes.)

Some media did not lend themselves to Americanization. Brazilian music resisted ragtime and boogie-woogie. Some academic writers cautioned against the cultural onslaught.

The author is careful not to accuse the OCIAA of cultural imperialism or even of blatant propaganda. Most campaigns were conducted with the acquiescence and often the participation of Brazilian professionals and agents. The Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda was OCIAA's usual partner. For their part, Brazilians were secure and comfortable enough in their national identity to resist "brain-washing" or other subversive approaches.

The author made full and productive use of the many archival sources in Brazil and the United States, including film and recording libraries. The translator and series editor made sure that the usual critical apparatus was included, even supplying an interpretive prologue to this edition. Students of Brazil, U.S. foreign relations, and communications should all find this an attractive source of information and interpretation during a critical time in the past century.

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