

Brazil's Revolution in Commerce: Creating Consumer Capitalism in the American Century. *By James P. Woodard.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. xvi + 524 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. Paperback, \$37.50. ISBN: 978-1-4696-5643-4.

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In *Brazil's Revolution in Commerce*, James Woodard analyzes the people, institutions, and technologies behind the growing culture of consumerism in twentieth-century Brazil. It is hard to find a more apt topic for a history of modern Brazil; Brazilians are famous consumers. In the 1980s, when measures to protect domestic industry combined with rampant inflation and a devastating debt crisis to disrupt an almost pathological drive to own the latest gadgets, affluent Brazilians flew to Miami to buy the goods that eluded their grasp at home. A young graduate student (me) was flabbergasted by what Brazilians carried onto the flights home (microwave ovens!) and by the volume of luggage and boxes awaiting them in customs upon arrival. A fine study of consumerism in 1980s São Paulo by Maureen O'Dougherty, *Consumption Intensified: The Politics of Middle-Class Daily Life in Brazil* (2002), explored this phenomenon, which compelled upwardly striving middle-class Brazilians to make the journey to Florida on a type of grand tour that included a de rigueur stop at Disneyworld. Woodard's new book explores and explains how this spectacle came to be. Through a mostly chronological examination of the influence of print, radio, film, and television images and advertising, and of the men behind the campaigns and the institutions they formed to become "prosperity professionals," Woodard argues that the apparently American nature of this process was actually Brazilian. Advertising agencies and cultural products arrived from the United States, but the agencies and supporting institutions, such as market research firms and government programs, made this uniquely Brazilian. Normally such a story tells us about resiliency, creativity, and agency in the Global South. In this case, however, Brazilian authenticity and ingenuity served—perhaps unwittingly but most definitely—to mask the vast and growing inequality of Brazilian socio-economic development in the twentieth century.

This is a compelling story of advertising, market research, innovation, and expansion of consumer society that will interest business historians of the United States and Latin America. Throughout the book is the strong theme of bringing American "know-how" to Brazil and making it Brazil's own. Part business history, part economic and business diplomacy, this book is about the ultimate drive in consumer capitalism: to create demand where none existed and sell, sell, sell. To create

aspirations for upward mobility from below and then offer something not quite “it” but close enough to satisfy the want.

The chapters take us from the 1920s, when silent films first played on the Brazilian screen, through the 1930s arrival of U.S. products and ad men and the growing sophistication of market research and advertising in the 1940s and 1950s, to provide context for the increasingly complex ways Brazilians were sold products and services. Some of these products were tangible, like radios, automobiles and refrigerators, but others were experiential, like department stores and the shopping malls that housed them. Layer upon layer of consumerism thickened across the decades to the point that Brazilians were jostling in the airplane aisle to shove a clearly-too-large box into an overhead compartment.

Given the setting in a developing nation that was only somewhat capable of meeting very basic needs, the process is depressing: Create new wants and transform them into heightened needs, and then sell things to satisfy the new needs that heretofore did not exist. Create mechanisms to identify and target subsectors of the consuming population to manufacture new needs, market those needs to said subsectors, and sell to satisfy them. Wash, rinse, repeat until consumer culture is spread and generalized, offering the lower classes a diluted version of what the “Classe A” elites had, while reaching into the backlands to spread this consumerism to every corner of the country. This iterative process was at work in Brazil, bolstered by the introduction of financing mechanisms to place the desire to consume within reach. In the Brazilian context, this process became indistinguishable with modernity, and therefore consumerism embodied the very value of Brazilian society and culture. At the same time, the process created the fallacious notion that Rio de Janeiro culture was Brazilian culture (a fallacy that wormed its way into historiography that treats the history of the capital city as a stand-in for Brazilian history). When the 1970s oil embargo created inflationary pressures and ballooning debt, cutting off the drug of consumption, the bubble-like nature of Brazilian consumerism was revealed. Brazilians engaged in panic buying to hedge against rampant inflation, indulged in exuberant consumption during windows of improved conditions, and experienced despair at the loss when those windows closed. Changes in the exchange rate and the value of currency had immediate and profound effects on personal economy and everyday well-being. The country was in fact *not* modern, nor even comfortable. Consumer fever had masked growing inequality.

An important critique of modern Brazilian and Latin American economic development is that growth and modernization were pursued without taking the time or care to invest in the very consumers on which that development relied to sustain its momentum. How to

establish a foundation for a consumption-driven economy without actual consumers? This book explains this tension—Brazilians did create a bona fide consumer class through advertising, market research, promotional calendars, the invention of needs—and so is very strong at explaining the demand side of the equation. It deals less with the supply side—the many flaws, mistakes, and callous disregard for income distribution to grow a middle class—that was its undoing. It presumes a fair amount of familiarity with Brazilian history, in order for readers like me to place the rise of consumer capitalism in larger contexts of developmentalism and state-owned enterprise, protectionism, the failure to develop a middle class, and other prominent features of Brazil's economic development. For someone unfamiliar with the history, these connections might not be apparent, but the history of advertising, marketing, and the rise and spread of consumer culture will be a valuable comparative case to their own interests.

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