

# H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 300

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**James P. Woodard.** *Brazil's Revolution in Commerce: Creating Consumer Capitalism in the American Century.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-4696-5636-6 (hardcover, \$95.00); 978-1-4696-5643-4 (paperback, \$37.50).

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The study of the history of consumption and commercialization has expanded for the last two decades. In 2004, Frank Trentmann published an article that became a watershed in the way historians deal with consumption. In his analysis, he emphasized how during the previous twenty years theoretical debates had prevailed against more empirical research on the dynamics of consumption. In particular, two concepts, “consumerism” and “modern consumer society,” pervaded academic discussions. While both proved to be useful to reflect on the transition from modernity to post-modernity, they seemed to fail when it came to understanding consumption from a historical point of view.<sup>1</sup> Only one year after Trentmann’s article, Victoria de Grazia published *Irresistible Empire*. She emphasized the influence of U.S. consumer society in Europe during the postwar era. Retailers, advertisers, and private business reshaped everyday life in the old continent imposing a new cultural hegemony – a process of Americanization.<sup>2</sup> However, the field remains particularly underdeveloped in Latin America.<sup>3</sup>

James Woodard’s new book builds on this recent expansion of the history of consumption to understand how Brazil experienced a process of Americanization throughout the twentieth century. For Woodard, the patterns, institutions, and ideas representative of the “consumer society” in the United States became hegemonic in Brazil between the 1910s and the 1970s. This was part of a larger expansion of U.S. business in Latin America but had a particular strength in Brazil. However, Woodard nuances the meaning of this process—rather than a straightforward imposition, it implied the translation and adaptation of U.S. consumer values into a different setting. Although private companies and diplomatic institutions performed a key role, U.S.-style consumerism would never have been implanted without the active participation of Brazilian professionals. Moreover, consumer capitalism had a homogenizing effect in a country traversed by social and regional inequalities. While the former were partially redefined by new marketing techniques, the latter were employed by the advertising industry to increase sales. In the process, consumer capitalism contributed to define ‘Brazil’ as a cultural entity.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Trentmann, “Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39:3 (2004): 373–401.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough summary of the field see Fernando Rocchi, “Consumption in Latin America,” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935369.013.14>.

One of the strengths of Woodard's work is his archival research. From this point on, it will be really hard to write a book about twentieth-century Brazilian economic or social history without consulting *Brazil's Revolution in Commerce*. Woodard has read and analyzed an outstanding number and variety of primary sources from Brazil and the United States – private company records, Brazilian and U.S. official documentation, newspapers, trade magazines, and edited books by diverse Brazilian intellectuals and public figures. For anyone interested in conducting research on the history of capitalism in Brazil, this book should be one of the starting points.

The way Woodard makes these different sources interact is another strength of the book. His narrative provides a dense net where durable consumption goods (cars, radios, televisions), advertising agencies, credit institutions, government offices, and retailers are connected to provide a hybrid narrative. Thus, the commercial revolution that took place in Brazil should be understood as the entangled changes affecting advertising, marketing, retail, public policy, commercialization, and consumer credit.

Nevertheless, some aspects of the book deserve further attention. The first issue has to do with the concept of Americanization itself. As stated above, studies on Americanization have a long tradition, especially in the United States. However, the concept has been questioned by recent literature. Stefan Schwarzkopf argues that American commercial culture was in fact strongly influenced by European innovations of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Frank Trentmann shows that the expansion of U.S. consumer culture around the world differed in its extent and depth.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, we know that the idea of a consumer culture in the United States changed throughout the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Thus, one may ask about the benefits of such an approach. Yes, Brazil experienced the effects of an expansion of U.S. consumer culture, but how that interacted with the other multiple factors that explain the evolution of Brazilian capitalism during the twentieth century is not fully addressed.

This leads to a second issue – Woodard's historiographic intervention. He presented the book in a quite peculiar way: the endnotes are mostly used to reference primary sources, but at the end of the book the reader will find a bibliographical essay. At the beginning of that essay, Woodard states that “the running commentary on other historians' work featured in most monographs these days ... has been omitted on the assumption that readers will not have picked up this book to discover my thoughts on the historiography of Brazilian identity, inter-American relations, or the sixties, much less what I make of this or that social-scientific method, theoretical approach, or critical technique” (479). He further mentions that “the scaffolding and soldering of this book have been hidden away” (479). But this presents two problems. On one hand, any academic reader would like to know how Woodard thinks about his own intervention in the existing historiography. An academic reader needs to know why this book adds a different interpretation to the many ones already out there about Brazilian and Latin American twentieth-century economic and social history. On the other hand, if the ideal readers are not academics, then the way in which Woodard presents the information is also problematic. The book is replete with direct quotations from primary sources. Although this resource nourishes the analysis, it complicates the reading. More narrative, instead of a proliferation of quotes, would have had more sense vis-à-vis the bibliographical essay statement mentioned above.

*Brazil's Revolution in Commerce* is exciting news for those working on the history of consumption in Latin America, but also for those interested in the history of modern capitalism in the region. It provides an amazing account of the information

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<sup>4</sup> Stefan Schwarzkopf, “The Subsiding Sizzle of Advertising History: Methodological and Theoretical Challenges in the Post Advertising Age,” *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 3:4 (2011): 528–548.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

available for those who study Brazil's twentieth-century history, and a solid narrative of the cumulative process that led to the expansion of U.S. cultural influence in Brazil.

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