

Entrevista

Joel Wolf*

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Tendo em vista que você já lançou dois livros que tratam da história do Brasil, o primeiro deles - *Working women, working class - São Paulo and rise of Brazil's industrial working class, 1900-1955* - lançado em 1993 e o mais recente - *Autos em Progress: the Brazilian Search for Modernity* em 2010 - Gostaria de iniciar nossa entrevista, perguntando como surgiu o interesse em estudar o Brasil?

I became interested in Latin America in college during the late 1970s and 80s. I lived in Mexico as a student, but Brazil interested me more because of its transition out of dictatorship. I was particularly interested in the role of the New Social Movements in that process, especially working people.

Nos dias de hoje, não concebemos mais a vida comum sem a presença do carro. Todavia, no início do século passado, esse era um produto novo e absolutamente desconhecido para todos. Como você mesmo apontou, os carros eram, não raro, vistos como produto "exótico". Nesse sentido, gostaríamos que você discorresse sobre o impacto inicial que a chegada do automóvel causou tanto na população em geral quanto nas cidades, que não estavam preparadas para receber carros em suas ruas.

* Joel Wolf, brasilianista, é docente da University of Massachusetts. Recentemente, lançou o livro *Autos and Progress: The Brazilian Search for Modernity* (2010), texto que aborda o processo de modernização brasileira através de um produto de consumo, o carro. O autor, na contramão de outros pesquisadores que estudaram a modernização, por exemplo, através da economia cafeeira, concentra sua análise sobre os carros, tomando-os como elemento propulsor da modernização no país. Nessa entrevista, Wolfe explica porque escolheu como objetivo de estudo e apresenta mais detalhes sobre sua recente publicação. [Nota do entrevistador.](#)

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There were three immediate ways the arrival of cars affected people in the cities. First of all, they were loud, bizarre looking machines that fascinating and frightened people. Second, they forced cities to assert more control over the streets and what went on in them. This involved everything from the establishment of speed limits to the eventual installation of traffic lights. And, third, it created completely new businesses, what economists call forward and backward linkages. Gas stations, garages, etc. opened to service these new machines. There were also interesting consequences in a place like Belo Horizonte. The new Mineiro capital was seen as very modern, but its brand new streets had been designed for slow, horse traffic and so Belo became one of the worst Brazilian cities for driving cars.

Quais as razões que levaram o governo brasileiro, no começo do século passado, abandonar a expansão da malha ferroviária e apostar num sistema rodoviário de transportes para fazer essa conexão entre as mais diversas regiões do Brasil?

This is a great question that gets to one of the book's main findings. Brazil, as a colony and a nation, made only a few attempts to tie itself together geographically. The União e Indústria road from Petrópolis into Minas Gerais is one of the very few examples of road building. That compares very unfavorably with the rest of the hemisphere. The U.S. and Canada were obsessed with national integration through canals, roads, and railroads. Mexico, with its largest city and capital in the geographical center and with major ports on both coasts and the U.S. market to the north built roads and railroads. Argentina had extensive roads and rails bringing goods from the interior to Buenos Aires. But, Brazilians continued to “hug the coast like crabs” throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The internal rail development focused on moving agricultural goods from the interior to various ports, with no thought given to connecting internal areas to each other. And, given the prevalence of foreign capital in the railroads, that made sense.

The car offered a much cheaper and more flexible way to tie the nation together. You can see that most clearly in JK's plans. Brasília was not only built to move the population into the interior, it was connected to most of the country by highways, not railroads.

Na sua interpretação, quais os sentidos (significados) que a opção pelo sistema de transportes e comunicação, baseado no uso dos automóveis, atribuíram ao esforço de modernização realizado pela sociedade brasileira ao longo do século XX?

They were connected. Automobility was the easiest and most obvious solution and it was resonated with the modernist world view and the desire of many Brazilian industrialists to have a vital auto parts sector in the economy. Also, autos were one of the most prestigious manufactured goods. They were made in the U.S., Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. Joining the groups conferred a great deal of prestige on a nation.

Qual a relação entre carros, modernização e cidadania no Brasil, especialmente no final do século passado?

My answer is by nature, speculative. My sense is that cars were part of a growing sense of citizenship through consumerism. JK focused on transforming the majority of the population through his programa de metas and consumerism and new living patterns, in Brasília at least, were a big part of that. Consumers are more a part of society. They literally “buy in” to the project of the state. The car was the ultimate consumer product in that sense.

But, the legacy of Fordism, with its focus on working-class consumerism, made its way into policy as well. It did so through the private sector through multinational corporations such as Kaiser, Ford, GM, and Volkswagen. Auto workers became the first large group of factory workers to have the potential to become middle class. Their experiences in the 1950s until 1964 very much shaped opposition politics during the dictatorship. So, during the Abertura, narratives of democracy included discourses of democracy that included calls for participation through consumerism. I think you can see that really clearly in the fact that the PT in power has focused on raising living standards for so many in Brazil.

Como você poderia definir o papel que os carros exerceram no imaginário brasileiro ao longo do século XX?

My short answer is that people should read the book because that’s what it’s about. My more detailed answer is that I think that Brazilians have a very healthy view of

themselves. They generally love Brazilian culture, but they're open to new and foreign ideas. This is the essence of the Modernists' "cultural cannibalism." Automobility allowed Brazilians to be both "developed" in the American and European sense and to be Brazilian. The cars were made in Brazil, driven by Brazilians, and driven in Brazil. It's a Brazilian experience of something that is heavily identified with the richer countries of the North. So, automobility allowed Brazilians to see themselves as consumers in a better way, especially after so many years of being the world's largest slave holding society. And, the presence of well trained, hard working, and extremely competent autoworkers was another example of Brazil's success as a nation.

Look at how Brazil began the 20th century: a fragile Republic of largely unconnected states only a short time removed from slavery that still relied on agricultural exports for its economy. It began the 21st century much more unified, with a powerful and functioning democracy, a diversified economy with great industry, and a president who had been a factory worker and union leader. The car was at the center of many of those changes.

Para encerrar, apenas como um exercício de reflexão, como podemos pensar a relação entre carros e modernidade no século XXI?

Thomas Skidmore, my graduate advisor, jokes that historians are "prophets of the past." In other words, don't ask us to talk about the future.

The one guess I'll venture is that as Brazil becomes more like the U.S., Japan, and Europe, it will have to address the problems of automobility. The issue of urban traffic has long been with Brazil, but it will also have to think beyond the car and when thinking about the car, beyond the internal combustion engine. Brazilians are comfortable with change and with public-private partnerships, so there will probably be some very interesting solutions to these issues. I'll be fascinated to see how Brazil continues to move forward.

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