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Review of "The American 'Amigo' Nelson Rockefeller and Brazil" by Antonio Pedro Tota

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Book Review of *The American “Amigo” Nelson Rockefeller and Brazil* by Antonio Pedro Tota

- . Translated by Lorena B. Ellis and Roberto Ellis
- . Foreword by Edward Tassinari
- . Underline Publishing, 2021, Pp.325. \$25.00.

Book Review by Lorena Balensifer Ellis

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Antonio Pedro Tota, the author of [The American “Amigo” Nelson Rockefeller and Brazil](#), teaches history of the United States and contemporary history for International Relations courses at PUC (Pontifícia Universitária Católica, São Paulo). Tota is also the author of many Brazilian history books used in secondary schools throughout Brazil. This book, *The American “Amigo” Rockefeller and Brazil* (Underline Publishing), as well as his previous one, [The Seduction of Brazil: The Americanization of Brazil During World War II](#) (University of Texas Press), are his only works translated into English; they elaborate U.S.-Brazil Relations during and after WWII and can be regarded as chronologically sequential, especially when it comes to more than two decades of Nelson Rockefeller’s activities in Brazil, from roughly 1941 to 1967. When the University of Texas Press published *The Seduction of Brazil* it summarized the works as:

A fascinating study of how the Roosevelt administration used mass media, including films by such luminaries as John Ford, Walt Disney, and Orson Wells, to promote the American way of life to Brazilians and how Brazilians actively interpreted, negotiated, and reconfigured this effort at cultural seduction.

Both books are the result of extensive research conducted by Tota – as a FAPESP and FULBRIGHT Award recipient, in Brazil and in the U.S., where Tota was a visiting Scholar at Columbia University in 1989-90; a visiting Scholar at the Catholic University of America in DC in 1992; a visiting Professor at Pace University in NY in 1996; and a Fellow at the Rockefeller Archives Center in 2004.

[The American “Amigo” Nelson Rockefeller and Brazil](#) is the English translation of [O Amigo Americano: Nelson Rockefeller e o Brasil](#), a chronological follow-up to his previous book [The Seduction of Brazil: The Americanization of Brazil During World War II](#), which covers roughly the period prior to the beginning of World War II to the end of the War. With the cultural exchange between the US and Brazil including stars such as Carmen Miranda and the recruitment of American celebrities such as John Ford, Walt Disney, and Orson Welles, an ideological “bombardment” was launched via radio, cinema and magazine, showcasing a modern and attractive way of life. This book was previously published in Brazil as [O imperialismo sedutor: Americanização do Brasil na época da Segunda Guerra](#) (Companhia das Letras). The other important aspect of this “seduction” was securing an alliance with Brazil during World War II; geographically, the country offered a strategic location to defeat the German Nazi troops from the south, i.e. in the north of Africa. In 1940 President Roosevelt appointed Nelson Rockefeller as chair of the U.S. Office of Inter-American Affairs, which assured that the Vargas administration would keep Brazil under the U.S. American influence. In a book review published in [The American Historical Review](#), Volume 116, Issue 2, April 2011, [Michael L. Conniff](#), states: “Ultimately, the author concludes that Brazilians were receptive to a degree of Americanization and that they willingly adopted elements not antithetical to their national character.”

Rockefeller made important connections during the 1940-1945 period, and – according to Edward Tassinari, who summarized and wrote a brief analysis of the book in the [foreword of The American “Amigo”](#) – Tota presented

[...] a tale of two powerful, charismatic, persuasive heads of state, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Getúlio Vargas, and how their relationship enhanced their agendas during the evolution of Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy and throughout World War II.

However, according to the synopsis of Underline Publishing, beyond the cultural exchange promoted by Nelson Rockefeller from 1941 to 1945, the U.S. government organ, the Office of Inter-American Affairs,

“strove to distance the Vargas Administration from Nazism and Fascism and to guarantee that Brazil would remain under the aegis of the U.S. American influence.” Yet when President Roosevelt died in 1945, World War II ended with a defeated Germany divided into four sectors; the new U.S. administration no longer required Brazil as an ally in actions related to international conflicts. Consequently, Nelson Rockefeller’s services in Brazil were no longer crucial for President Truman. Therefore, Rockefeller’s approach was redirected after WWII to his larger endeavor: to combat the expansion of communism. To accomplish that, he focused on combating social inequality and urban development in São Paulo, e.g. through the creation of museums, alongside more profit generating interests such as rubber cultivation and the importation and implementation of modern agricultural and industrial practices from the United States.

Then comes Act II of Nelson Rockefeller’s activities in Brazil; they comprise the subject of *The American “Amigo.”* After 1945 he was no longer a U.S. government representative, but a private citizen with “missionary capitalist” intentions, as phrased by Darlene Rivas, in [Missionary Capitalist, Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela](#). Through both his public and private efforts, he stimulated Brazilian economic, political, and social change, always utilizing connections with influential individuals, idealism, love of art, and humanitarian concern toward many ends, especially preventing any Brazilian pursuits of Communism. Over the seven chapters and epilogue, in which Tota presents Nelson Rockefeller’s activities in Brazil after 1945 and until roughly 1967, the veracity of his interest in Brazil and renowned charm remain somewhat of an open question.

Preface: The American Amigo

Two spies from Nazi Germany are arrested in New York City; in their possession a letter involving the daughter-in-law of Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas, then the most important ally of the United States in Latin America during World War II. Thanks to the discreet intervention of Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, the diplomatic imbroglio was resolved. For this and various other reasons detailed in this book, Nelson was considered an American friend to Brazil.

Chapter 1. The Making of a Rockefeller

The first chapter details a brief history of the Rockefeller family, famous for monopolizing the oil industry in the U.S., and mentions the presence of Standard Oil in Brazil. It also describes the birth, childhood, and youth of Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller in further detail, emphasizing his religious education and overall liberal tendency. From an early age Nelson demonstrated strong leadership over his siblings. After getting married, and during the Great Depression, Nelson assisted his father, John D. Rockefeller Jr., with the enormous Rockefeller Center project in the heart of Manhattan. With the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the *New Deal* was inaugurated with the intention of ameliorating the poverty wrought by the crisis. The text demonstrates how Nelson Rockefeller sympathized with the Democratic president’s reform policies. Chapter one’s sub-chapter titles: Wealth and Oil; Society against Standard Oil; Rockefeller, Esso, Brazil and Philanthropy; Ludlow’ Massacre and the Struggle to Rebuild the Name’s Image; Nelson Rockefeller’s Birth, Childhood and Youth; Education and Marriage of the Chosen; Rockefeller Center and the Entrepreneur; Drawn in by Politics: Rockefeller and the New Deal.

Chapter 2. The Discovery of Brazil

The second chapter deals with Nelson’s first (private) trip to Brazil in 1937, noting how he seemed more interested in the country’s agricultural potential than in the possibility of oil exploitation. The text also explains how the Vargas government’s nationalist policy supported research that would transform Brazil into an independent and modern nation. This drew the attention of Nelson and his group of advisors, who began to formulate projects considered “less imperialist” for Latin America. The advent of WW II heralded the spread of Nazism and Fascism in Europe, and cast an ominous shadow over the rest of the West and the World. FDR and his government’s policy makers knew that the U.S. needed Latin America’s help to face the German threat. Due to its natural wealth and its strategic location for defending the South Atlantic, Brazil held a prominent position. Nelson’s trip to Brazil and Latin America at large was like a political crash course for his team in better understanding the cultures and situations of the neighbors south of the Rio Grande. After Germany occupied France, Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller was invited to work in the Roosevelt government to encourage Latin American support of the United States should war reach the Americas. Chapter two’s subtitles are: Preparing an adventure; Crossing the Equator towards Brazil; A Secret Journey; Was the Oil Ours or Theirs? The Brazil that Nelson saw; The Significance of the Trip; How Nelson Ended Up Working with Roosevelt.

Chapter 3. The Rediscovery of Brazil

The third chapter explains how Nelson ran the Office of Inter-American Affairs. For Nelson, this agency was a powerful tool to help the southern neighbors overcome their relative economic and social backwardness. But Roosevelt's man in Brazil also had the purpose of showing that the American way of life could be a model for Brazil and other countries on the southern continent. The chapter summarizes how the cultural relationship played an important role in the rapprochement between the U.S. and Brazil, as well as how, as undersecretary for Latin America, Nelson rose to the most important position within the Department of State after the conclusion of WW II. When Nelson left his position in the government he did not forget his connection with Brazil. Chapter three's sub-chapter titles: Roosevelt's Man in Brazil; The American Way of Life as a Model for Brazilians; Within the Office; Rubber, a Delicate Issue; Culture as a Weapon; The End of the War: Nelson as Under Secretary of State for Latin America; International Intrigue; A Semi Sentimental Balance of Relations between Brazil and the United States.

Chapter 4. Sowing Well-being, Part One

The fourth chapter reveals how Nelson A. Rockefeller remained concerned about the situation in Brazil even after his time in the government; the country needed to modernize to face the new situation of the post-war world. To this end he created two institutions: the American International Association (AIA) and the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC), both of which aimed at accelerating the financial development of Brazil. According to him, the modernization of agriculture was a key factor for the nation's renovation. He hoped that Brazil would replicate the expansion of U.S. agriculture, which had been achieved with small and medium-sized properties. Aside from the agricultural aspect, he also felt that the mega city of São Paulo needed to modernize and eliminate infrastructural bottlenecks, which had been hindering free and easy movement of goods. Chapter four's sub-chapter titles: Next Target, Brazil; Considering a Solution for Brazil; The American International Association (AIA) and International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC); The Paths Towards Brazil's salvation; Clarifying the Proposal; Next Stop, São Paulo; Developments and Dreams of a Temperate Climate in the Tropics; The Way of Modernization: Reinventing the City of São Paulo.

Chapter 5. Sowing Well-being, Part II: Anticommunism and Business

The fifth chapter elaborates Nelson's goal of using all means possible to prevent Brazil from opting for socialist or communist political solutions. On his fourth trip to Brazil, he collaborated with several Brazilian entrepreneurs to modernize the corn crop and created an association to help small farmers in the south of the state of Minas Gerais employ techniques similar to those in practice in the United States. This chapter also tells of Nelson's growing interest in his native country's own domestic politics, leading up to his election as Governor of New York. Chapter 5's sub-chapter titles: Means of Communication and Anti-Communism; The Fourth Time in Brazil: Corn Crop in Redemption; The "United States" of Minas Gerais; The Technique and the Improvements in Agriculture; Coat Tails and Top Hats at Vargas' Inauguration: Protocols and Businesses; Nelson and Vargas's Brazil; From Government Employee to Governor of New York: Politics as Profession.

Chapter 6. Letters to the American "Amigo"

The sixth chapter displays how well known and popular Nelson Rockefeller was in postwar Brazil. Nelson's correspondence was analyzed over several years: letters asking for help with business and in politics, for financial support, etc. Most of the letters were from simple people, but some were also from powerful businessmen and influential politicians. The title of the book comes from this exchange of letters. Chapter 6's sub-chapter titles: Letters and Celebrity Cult; Business, Politics and Friendship between Partners; Culture, Favors and Friendships; Charity, Aid, Military and Refusals; A Picturesque Version of Modernity: Anti-Communism and Requested Favors; Nelson's Life Projects: From Hero to Anti-hero; On Lamentations, Art, and Politics.

Chapter 7. Art and Culture: Recipes for the Brazilian Elite

This chapter shows how Nelson encouraged the Brazilian elite to overcome provincialism through the fine arts. He was aware of the connection between art and ideology and so helped found important art museums in São Paulo (MASP) and in Rio de Janeiro (MAM). Chapter 7's sub-chapter titles: Art and Ideology; American Endorsement of the Rio de Janeiro Museum of Modern Art; A Biennial or How São Paulo Stole the Title of Center of Modern Art from Rio.

Epilogue: Mission Accomplished?

The epilogue takes stock of Nelson's performance in the Brazilian economy during the 1940s and 50s. The author mainly seeks to show how Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller became more conservative with old age. When he last visited Brazil in 1969 as President Nixon's representative, he was comparatively cold and conservative.

The summary above reflects the extent to which Nelson Rockefeller was able to build a network of connections with important people in the Brazilian government, members of the media, the arts, and industry leaders, mainly in the agricultural sector.

The *American "Amigo"* is an important perspective and source of information for a U.S. American audience or other English-speaking readers interested in Brazil and its relation with the U.S. during WWII and beyond, covering important happenings in the mid-twentieth century for almost three decades. Tota's many visits to the U.S. as guest lecturer in various universities and as a recipient of FABESP and FULBRIGHT scholarships are reflected in the extensive bibliography visible in the many footnotes, showing the quantity of sources consulted to write *The American "Amigo"*. Even though the English version does not include the many historical images, nor the vast bibliography, nor the name index of the original text in Portuguese, these elements were mentioned in the footnotes and in detailed explanations throughout the text.

Compared with today's political climate, the attitude of the Republican Nelson Rockefeller, who worked extremely well with the Democratic President Roosevelt, shows a very different attitude of relations between members of opposite political parties in the U.S.. As Ed Tassinari states in the Foreword, Nelson Rockefeller's affection for Brazil and extensive contributions are

[...] a vestige of a simpler era where American foreign policy objectives were more readily understood and directly linked to hemispheric decision-making. Within this context, Rockefeller remains, for some, an enigma, a staunch cold warrior but an advocate of peaceable persuasion rather than clandestine penetration or brute force.

Tota's work in *The Seduction of Brazil* as well as in *The American "Amigo"* show an angle of Nelson Rockefeller as a "missionary capitalist" and a "cold warrior" rare in today's world, wherein authoritarian politicians and autocratic despots seem to be on the rise, and democracy lays severely threatened in too many nations around the world. The translation of *O Amigo Americano* to *The American "Amigo"* was undertaken by a Brazilian native speaker and a native speaker of English who tried to remain loyal to the author's original style as well as the content of the text in Portuguese. As the translators wrote in the beginning of the book: "The themes discussed in *The American "Amigo"* are tender; the occurrences and conflicts of the 20th century sowed the seeds of a landscape that would blossom devastatingly decades after the fact. Now coming up on the first quarter of the 21st century, it could be helpful to take a look at the difficulties woven into the past to better understand our knotted present." In sum, *The American "Amigo"* is a great source for students of U.S. relations with Latin America, especially Brazil, during and after World War II.

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If you are interested in more details about the creation and the translation of *The American "Amigo"*, feel free to see a [discussion in Portuguese among the author, Tota, the publisher, Nereide Santa Rosa, and the translators, Roberto Luis Ellis and Lorena B. Ellis.](#)

If the above link does not open, try the next:

[Conversas sobre o livro *The American "Amigo"* - Nelson Rockefeller and Brazil - de Antonio Pedro Tota](#)

Lorena Balensifer Ellis

October 18, 2022

TRANSLATORS

Roberto L. Ellis is a student of Language, Philosophy, and Art, currently enrolled in a Master's Program at the Philosophisches Institut at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. His Degrees include an M.A. in German Studies from the Middlebury Language Schools, and a B.A. in Sociology/Anthropology from Middlebury College. He has edited texts in de- & post-colonial as well as transnational studies, and directed and produced a documentary-essay, which brought together Heideggerian thought concerning technology with the history of the Rhine river through industrialization to speak to problems still plaguing the world today; it entitled *Flow & Rive*. He is the translator of the book *The American "Amigo" Rockefeller and Brazil* by Antonio Pedro Tota.

Lorena B. Ellis, Professor of German and Latin American Cultures for 25 years at Queensborough Community College and CUNY School of Professional Studies. Her degrees include a BA (from USP, U. São Paulo); an MA (German, from NYU); an MA (Spanish/Portuguese, from NYU); PhD (German, from NYU). Her area of specialization is Brechtian and missionary theater in Brazil, and Latin American Cultures. She has presented papers at regional, national, and international conferences on various topics related to German language/literature and Latin American Cultures. She has published articles in refereed journals and a book: *Brecht's Reception in Brazil*, by Peter Lang; she translated two books by Antonio Pedro Tota: 1) *The Seduction of Brazil* (Imperialismo Sedutor), Texas UP; 2) *The American "Amigo"* (O Amigo Americano), Underline Publishing. Among her academic and professional honors are: "QCC Excellence in Scholarship"; the "DUDEN Award" from Bibliographisches Institut & F.A. Brockhaus AG/AATG Metro New York Chapter; "Certificate of Merit Award" for outstanding achievement in furthering the teaching of German in schools of the United States from AATG/Goethe Institut.

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