

# Agriculture and Technical Cooperation: Nelson Rockefeller and the Work of AIA in Brazil (1946-1961)\*

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It aims to analyze the work of American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA), a philanthropic agency founded by Nelson Rockefeller, between 1946 and 1961 in Brazil. Aiming to promote better standards of living to the Latin American rural population, AIA is merged in a historical context of increasing US economic and politic influence over Latin America and Brazil, diffusing and adapting US technical assistance programs to local contexts. However, this research developed the idea of an intense process of political negotiation, including resistance from Brazilian political staff. Also, there were many difficulties in adapting these programs to the local context, leading to constant reorganization of the AIA's work in Brazil.

*Key words:* Brazil, Extension Service, rural development, technical assistance, rural people

## Introduction

American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) was a philanthropic association founded by Nelson Rockefeller in 1946 in New York and extinguished in 1968. This article intends to analyze the work of AIA in Brazilian agricultural development, discussing how the political negotiations between Rockefeller's AIA and Brazilian institutions were and how AIA's programs were practiced between 1946 and 1961<sup>1</sup>. It argues Brazilians and Latin Americans had an important role to reshape some aspects or even programs of "international" policies towards technical cooperation in agriculture under Cold War.

AIA aimed, according its own institutional discourse, to promote self-development and better standards of living to Latin American small farmers as follows:

Based upon a faith in the inherent dignity and worth of the individual and in the capacity and desire for self-improvement of human beings of whatever nationality, race, creed or color, and upon a conviction that the welfare of each nation and person in the modern world is closely related to the welfare and opportunities for advancement of all the people of the world, this Association is organized for the purpose of promoting self-development and better standards of living, together with understanding and cooperation, among peoples throughout the world<sup>2</sup>.

Agriculture was the best way to promote better standards of living, according AIA members. So, AIA's

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<sup>1</sup> When AIA left its major programs in Brazil. The author has been developing agricultural studies since 2000, when the author researched about an agricultural program whose intention was to teach the rural youth to deal with the "modern" technologies in the agriculture in the 1970's. This program, called "Clubs 4-S" (4-S Clubs), was inspired in a similar North-American model—the 4-H Clubs, whose meaning is Head, Heart, Hands and Health—and becomes a very common model in some Brazilian states after World War II. These programs were introduced for the first time in Brazil by Nelson Rockefeller's AIA.

<sup>2</sup> The AIA's objectives were mentioned by Dalrymple (1968, p. 10). The most important review about AIA history in Venezuela is RIVAS, Darlene (Rivas, 2002). The author is focusing in this article the Brazilian experience of AIA.

tools to achieve these goals were programs of Supervised Credit and Agricultural Extension Service in Brazil and Venezuela after the Second World War. According to many scholars (Fitzgerald, 1994; Fonseca, 1985; Brunner & Yang, 1949), Agricultural Extension Service was organized in United States based on experiences from late 19th century, when farmer's associations and its relationship with experimental stations and Land Grant Colleges led them to the application of scientific knowledge in order to increase agricultural production. These successful experiences, like Seaman A. Knapp's demonstration work, were absorbed by the United States Government in 1914 (Smith-Lever Act). In Latin America, following the North-American experience of Extension Services, AIA's agreement with Latin American governments developed projects intending to promote agricultural science in relation with health and social change, a way to become an "archaic" agriculture in a "modern" agriculture.

AIA's first projects started to be developed in Venezuela and Brazilian State of São Paulo between 1946 and 1948. An Agricultural Credit Agency (CBR) was created in agreement with Venezuela's federal government. In São Paulo, AIA developed projects of hybrid corn, trench silos and promoted the organization of rural youth clubs and health programs in two rural areas, *Santa Rita do Passa Quatro* and *São José do Rio Pardo*. But AIA's importance was consolidated by its accomplishments in another Brazilian state, Minas Gerais, in an agreement with conservative governor Milton Campos which originated the first important institution influenced by AIA's projects in Brazil: ACAR (*Associação de Crédito e Assistência Rural/Association of Credit and Rural Assistance*), founded in 1948.

According to journalist and AIA consultant Martha Dalrymple, it was:

An agreement, under which a program was to be carried out for three years, with AIA contributing \$75,000 each year and the state contributing in the first year R\$25,000, in the second R\$75,000 and in the third R\$125,000, was sealed. (Dalrymple, 1968, p. 41)

The original agreement between AIA and Minas Gerais started with a three years' experience. In case of success, this agreement could be renewed. So, from 1948 to 1961, Milton Campos' followers (including Juscelino Kubitschek) signed in order to renew an "improved" contract, where the amounts of money spent with farmers through ACAR were increasing. At that time, it was not AIA intention to work in Brazil for a long time, but support technically Brazilian agents to improve Brazilian agriculture.

ACAR's original objectives were to promote the "increasing of crop and livestock production and the improvement of economic and social conditions of rural life". So, according to the agreements terms:

This objective will be accomplished through the application of a dual assistance, technical as well as financial. This dual assistance will facilitate the adoption of an adequate credit system for small crop and livestock producers and a plan of supervision that guarantees the efficient use of credit<sup>3</sup>.

This idea was similar to the New Deal's Farm Security Administration (FSA), which employed some AIA members between the late 1930's and early 1940's (Dalrymple, 1968, p. 41; Ribeiro & Machado, 1960, pp. 11-48). However, this original idea did not find more than a few Brazilian "Okies" in the first year and just some farmers got loans. Even changing some rules and increasing loans in 1950 and 1951, ACAR's evaluation led the institution to adopt US Agricultural Extension Service as the main model to achieve its goals (Silva, 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> ACAR's Agreement as mentioned by Dalrymple (1968, p. 41).

In other words, not only Supervised Credit or Technical Assistance but programs of Domestic Economy and Rural Youth were necessary to include farmers in a system, according to USDA Agricultural Extension Service way. So, the development of agricultural projects in the early 1950's and the election of Milton Campos' follower, Juscelino Kubitschek as President of Brazilian Republic (1956-1961) influenced in creation of ACAR's follower, ABCAR (*Associação Brasileira de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural/Brazilian Association of Credit and Rural Assistance*). This new agency resulted from an agreement between Brazilian Government and US Agency of International Development (USAID), which provided the expansion of Agricultural Extension Service to whole Brazilian territory not as a philanthropic agency, but as a governmental issue. Decades later, Brazil established the world's second largest Agricultural Extension Service program.

### **AIA and ACAR Historiography**

Most of historiography about Brazilian Extension Service interpreted AIA and ACAR according to Nelson Rockefeller's AIA point of view. In other words, AIA original goals led researchers to find their answers. If philanthropy, Cold War or Imperialism was the best concept to interpret the origins of AIA, so ACAR and other agencies were supported only by these ideals. In this sense, the debate about AIA was strongly influenced, on the one hand, by the idea of a philanthropic agency working to improve the agricultural and life conditions in Latin America. The Brazilian Agricultural Credit and Extension Service's traditional historiography, which includes Martha Dalrymple's book, economists and agricultural engineers, was interested in analyzing whether AIA's goal was reached or not (Mosher, 1957). In other words, it was an institutional history. On the other hand, a critique historiography grew up in the 1980's under a historical context of crisis in Brazilian Agricultural Extension Service program. Educators, agricultural engineers, and historians of international relationship interpreted AIA not only as a missionary project but as an arm of American Imperial Capitalism under the Cold War context to avoid revolutionary peasants' movements in Brazil<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, Extension Service was an "educative" project leading farmers to join with capitalism system and AIA was represented like an "educative" program trying to disseminate capitalism ideas in Brazilian agriculture led by international capitalism and headed by Nelson Rockefeller<sup>5</sup>.

However, if Dalrymple explored the philanthropic theme, in these Brazilian historical researches "philanthropy" is not explored enough. Actually, a traditional idea of "philanthropy" and "Empire", as fixed categories does not help to understand a complex web of relations and the "simultaneously sites of multivocality; of negotiation, borrowing, and exchange; and of red employment and reversal" (Joseph & Salvatore, 1998, p. 5), which AIA's work was part in Brazil.

### **Another Interpretation to AIA**

However, the current historical researches about Latin America are interested in studies about processes of *negotiation* between Imperial United States and Latin America as quoted by Fernando Coronil's idea of "encounter", which means "a complex interaction among unequal social actors, illuminating in new ways their modes of cooperation, subjection, and resistance under changing historical conditions" (Coronil, 1998, p. 9). In this sense, a strong interpretation about AIA's work suggests a research about the historic transformations, not only its origins. Also Nelson Rockefeller was not the only character in these history and these agencies were carrying on some ideals shared not only by American politicians.

<sup>4</sup> The best examples are Colby and Dennett (Colby & Dennett, 1998; Fonseca, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> In 1947, Rockefeller founded another agency, a profitable International Basic Economy Co. (IBEC).

Nelson Rockefeller enlightenment discourse to improve Latin American farmer's life, for example, found a reverberation in Brazil. According to Rockefeller's words:

Tomorrow's world, bright with promise of better living needs new highways for the march of science and technology over the obstacles of language, race and customs. AIA is one way of bridging these gaps between people so that the benefits of science and the new technology can spread more widely over the earth. (Dalrymple, 1968, p. 15)

In this sense, there was a similar project between American and Brazilian politicians, businessmen, and intellectuals, trying to eliminate the same obstacles as quoted by Rockefeller. It could not be exactly the same project, but according to the anthropologist Arturo Escobar, after 1945, "development" was a key word to Latin America and other "undeveloped" parts of globe (Escobar, 1995) (Princeton studies in culture/power/history)<sup>6</sup>. In Brazilian case, according to many politicians and intellectuals, even before World War II and with different meanings, modernization and development were key words included in different political projects to Brazil (the right and left wings).

After 1945, Brazilian agriculture was not the best example to the nation. The Western Backlands, a kind of wilderness where people were fighting against the inhospitable environment and cultivating a subsistence plantation with "archaic" tools was not a real "modern" example. The Portuguese heritage, best demonstrated in the system of monoculture—sugar cane in the first centuries and plantations of coffee since the 19th century—and the Brazilian *latifúndios* (big plantation farms) were only part of the agricultural problems. The indigenous and African heritages, on the other hand, were interpreted as complementary elements of backwardness, only helping to increase the erosion of the deforestation.

Liberals, Conservatives or even Communists, politicians and intellectuals used to agree that Brazilian agriculture was "archaic" or "backward". In other words, the left and right wings had different projects and different ways to achieve their goals in the 20th century, but both sides were interested in projects of rural development, here including modernization of agriculture, in order to support Brazilian process of industrialization (Martins, 1989)<sup>7</sup>. Modernization ideals were growing before World War II as a conservative project of industrialization. One of the most important states during the gold mines exploration times, in the Colonial Era, Minas Gerais was trying to recover its economic importance in the 20th century. And development here was meaning industrialization at that moment to Minas' elites, where agriculture had an important role to provide the achievement of its goals. In this sense, the AIA's interpretations can demonstrate that "modernization" and "development" were not only part of American projects.

In other words, it was not only the old idea of an imperial imposition, but a long process of negotiation between these agencies and Minas' government and later, between USA and Brazilian governments, where power had not only one owner. Of course, power was not equally shared by US governmental or private agencies and Brazilian government, but Brazilians influenced—or invented—a new way to deal with Extension Service. Brazilian agricultural engineer Glauco Olinger, for example, wrote critically decades later that Extension Service in Brazil was "something" different from Extension Service original ideals (Olinger, 1996).

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<sup>6</sup> Michael E. Lathan, a North-American historian, argued that "many modernization theorists" of the post-World War II, aimed "to find ways to rejuvenate and project abroad America's liberal social values, capitalistic economic organizations, and democratic political structures. Victory, they claimed, would depend on defeating the forces of monolithic communism by accelerating the natural process through which 'traditional' societies would move toward the enlightened 'modernity' most clearly represented by America itself" (Lathan, 2000, p. 6).

<sup>7</sup> Brazilian Political Scientist Otávio Dulci has been demonstrating a similar process in Minas Gerais state, where AIA first implemented its programs (Dulci, 1999).

This “something” different could be interpreted, in other point of view, as local influence dealing and modifying the original project. In this sense, the author considers that AIA’s work in Brazil must be interpreted as relational with Brazilian social groups and institutions, in a long process of political negotiation which also provided the adoption of some Brazilian cultural patterns in a constant process of negotiation with original goals of AIA. These first idea—which discusses the AIA’s work not only as a capitalist imposition or a missionary ideal, but as a process of negotiation—is complemented with a second one.

AIA’s work in Brazil, here including ACAR and accomplishments, shaped small farmers’ behavior towards a “scientific” agriculture, in order to provide a new way to—as they used to say—improve farms and farmers’ family. This influence can not be denied. However, lots of examples in primary sources could bring us to a different point of view about this process, demonstrating that Brazilian farmers and Brazilian Extension Service agents “improved”, influenced, or changed the AIA’s programs. How was this cultural encounter and what changes it brought to both?

Some examples to support this idea: Firstly, an elementary information: ACAR’s Board of Directors was composed in its first days by both Americans and Brazilians and the first two directors were born in United States—Arkansas’ Walter L. Crawford and New Mexico’s Santiago Apodaca. But, according to AIA’s discourse, Americans would leave these Brazilian agricultural institutions in “Brazilian hands” to manage it (or “get out” from Brazil as people used to say). In 1956, however, ABCAR was created and some original ACAR members migrated to the national agency. The original idea of “training and leaving” had some difficulties to be achieved: in the late 1950’s Brazilians agents were feeling “ready” to manage ACAR, or in others words, they were “ready” to increase their power into the institution. Santiago Apodaca found himself in trouble when Brazilian agents like Geraldo Machado and others questioned Americans why they did not leave it to Brazilian, under tension arguments (Silva, 2009). This short example leads us to ask how “friendly” these agreements were and how some social groups, nationally identified (subalterns?) developed some strategies to increase their political power. But it does not mean “reshape”. Not yet.

Example of political rearrangements could be found, for example, when the head of Minas Gerais’ program of modernization, Américo Gianetti, was opposed to the negotiation between Nelson Rockefeller and Milton Campos. As a steel businessman, Gianetti decreased his profits because, according to his interpretations, “the Americans” got a big part in this business. It was necessary for the interference of some politicians to sustain the agreement like Minas’ Secretary of Finances José de Magalhães Pinto. Even in agreement with most of “Imperial eyes” statements, historian Elisabeth Cobbs has also been demonstrating how Rockefeller needed to deal with different Brazilians politic leaders from different traditions like presidents Eurico Gaspar Dutra, Getúlio Vargas and Juscelino Kubitschek (Cobbs, 1988).

Extension agents while in field work found themselves trying to deal with political, religious, or farmers’ resistance. Minas Gerais was ruled in the 1950’s—and not only in the 1950’s—by a strong relationship between State and Catholicism in rural areas<sup>8</sup>. In January 1954, Pedro Strabelli, a Catholic Priest of *Machado*

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<sup>8</sup> According to North-American anthropologist Charles Wagley, the Brazilian Eastern Highlands “are also characterized by a large number of small towns with less than 5,000 people. In 1950, Minas Gerais had two cities with over 50,000 inhabitants out of a total of 1,095 urban centers. Many of these small towns and villages owe their origin to grants or *patrimonios* made by landowners to the Church with the express purpose of creating a town devoted to a particular saint. As Preston James points out: “While there is a certain religious prestige to be gained by such a grant, it is obvious that economic profit will also accrue, if only because of the supply of workers gathered together in the neighborhood”. In this sense, “Yet the people of the Eastern Highlands, and especially of the core state of Minas Gerais, are noted as the most conservative in Brazil. Several Brazilian writers speak of their conservative spirit and traditionalism” (Wagley, 1965).

district was informed that a Presbyterian woman, Zélia Rodrigues, was working as ACAR's supervisor and visiting that community. Demonstrating his power over "his" community, this Catholic Priest denounced her to ACAR and asked them to fire her because she was not in agreement with religious concerns. Whether fired or not by ACAR, she had no more religious "allowance" to work in that community since then and Ms. Rodrigues was transferred to another ACAR's office. In other words, this example could demonstrate how local impositions—aka local power—promoted changes in ACAR's way of dealing with rural communities.

### Conclusions

A clear example which shows how ACAR policies could be reshaped can be discussed when an extension agent, Ms. Rodrigues colleague's Aldo Borges was running for local politics (*vereador* in Portuguese, similar to city counselor). In a local political context dominated by *Coronês*, the traditional politician leaders, this agent promoted "social convulsion", involving ACAR with politics<sup>9</sup>. This episode "introduced" ACAR to a fight between two powerful families of that municipal district which used to divide the small town, and military police was called to avoid more problems. ACAR's director, Walter Crawford was called to interfere in the process, firing the agent and closing the local ACAR's office—It also brought problems to Minas Gerais' governor, Juscelino Kubitschek in his agreement with AIA (which was not so "happy" about it). To summarize it, the Machados' office reopened with new extension agents which spent months trying to recover ACAR's purposes towards technical assistance in agriculture and "political questions" were prohibited into ACAR's discourse (actually, as strategy ACAR was always close to politicians but not linked to an specific party). In other words, the author has been trying to introduce in this debate not only a "nationalistic" point of view about AIA or Extension Service in Brazil, but how Brazilians and Latin Americans had an important role to reshape some aspects or even programs of "international" policies towards technical cooperation in agriculture.

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<sup>9</sup> According to Charles Wagley, "The Eastern Highlands, then, is the region par excellence in which to seek the traditional ideal patterns of Brazilian national culture. It retains the religious brotherhoods or *irmandades*. There is a middle class, even in the small cities, which persists in old patterns of behavior such as the *compadresco* system. Manuel Diegues Junior describes the importance of kinship—the *parentelas* or extensive kinship webs that still dominate local politics. Some thirty extensive kinship groups control politics in the area and extend into the federal arena with considerable force. This is both one of the most vigorous and one of the most conservative regions in all of Brazil" (Wagley, 1965).

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