Brazilian Abundance and U.S. Scarcity: New Directions for Research in the Field of Food History

Frederico de Oliveira Toscano

abstract | This article explores similarities and differences between cultural representations of food abundance and scarcity in Brazil and the United States from the 1930s to the beginning of the 2000s. It traces social developments in both countries, particularly during the Second World War and the ensuing decades. In addition, theories exploring the issue of hunger and access to food in Brazil and the United States, both economically and politically, are discussed. This objective is achieved by reviewing classic U.S. American authors, such as historian David M. Potter, as well as more contemporary scholars who have approached the theme of abundance and scarcity in the U.S. In the context of Brazil, great emphasis is placed on physician and scholar Josué de Castro, one of the most important authors on the subject. The article concludes by proposing new research directions for greater and more in-depth investigations in the field of food studies.

keywords: Brazil, United States, abundance, hunger, history of food

Introduction

The people of the United States (U.S. Americans) have left indelible marks in the imagination of Brazilians, in part, because of cultural exports in the 1930s through cinema, music, and other art forms, or, in part, by their presence in Brazil during WWII. The food habits to which Brazilians were exposed during this period included techniques, preparations, inputs, and production modes that were later adopted, transformed, and even resignified. Some had only a brief life as fads or rituals that disappeared after a few decades or a few years. However, this essay argues that it was not a particular dish or ingredient that remained entrenched in the image that the Brazilians formed of the United States and its people. More than
hotdogs, Coca-Cola bottles, finger food and cocktail culture, what remained was an idea of abundance.

Of quality food and drink, yes, but mostly of plenty in such quantity that the lack of it—and its violent consequences—seemed incongruous with the image of the mighty nation of the North. For Brazilians, hunger was something typical in their own country, a shameful and secluded, though standardized, reality. This manner of thinking was especially true in the deepest corners of the country, such as the backlands of the economically depleted and politically weakened Northeast. There, hunger was as certain and natural as drought, with which it contributed to the misery of people in the countryside. It was also the daily reality of migrants in cities swollen with people. Shacks balanced on stilts overlooking public palaces, while mansions of former sugar mill owners’ families and new skyscrapers sprouted up as if overnight. One insight was clear: hunger was Brazilian, and particularly Northeastern, while abundance was American.

The Good War

The United States felt the effects of economic depression into the early 1940s, when unemployment totaled 15 million and, according to historian Lizzie Collingham, people collapsed from starvation on the streets of cities like Chicago. WWII, however, would eventually bring an economic boom, with national industries absorbing the workforce that, only a few years earlier, had been desperate for employment. Such prosperity would make people in the U.S. refer to the conflict as “The Good War.” While changes in the economy, such as technological advancements and the creation of jobs in industries related to the conflict, meant that food production also exploded, they were mostly directed to military needs. Therefore, civilians in the United States needed to accept rationing and some measure of scarcity, albeit on a much more limited scale than in other
countries.\textsuperscript{2} If, at times, the population had a hard time accessing prime quality beef or items such as coffee, sugar or milk, there were often other foods and drinks at their disposal.\textsuperscript{3}

![Figure 1: A soup kitchen in Chicago, 1931 run by notorious criminal Al Capone, a fact that was probably disregarded by the cold and hungry men in line. Image courtesy of Getty Images, Popperfoto Rolls Press.](image)

Generally, these families were not threatened by the specter of hunger or malnutrition, since one missing food item could usually be replaced by another. At the time, the government-instituted Office of Price Administration (OPA) sought to apply President Roosevelt’s vision of the “Four Freedoms” to everyday life (freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear). Thus, the newly introduced rationing program aimed (and succeeded) at ensuring that food was more equally distributed in American society and not only for those who could pay more.\textsuperscript{4} This produced a relative wartime food abundance in the U.S., which, even with its limitations, was not restricted to domestic civilians alone as the army helped to bring a vision of plenty to the rest of the world. Wherever the U.S. Americans went, they had more food, an
image that other people had built for them and that they had made for themselves. Moreover, in countries that were used as bases, liberated, or defeated by them, abundance of food became symbolic of economic superiority.\(^5\)

The end of the conflict would lead to an economically broken and hungry world, with defeated countries reduced to a state of food misery. In
U.S.-occupied nations, hunger was a daily reality, and its military bases became islands of affluence amid the scarcity. It was around them that German children begged for food, receiving soldiers’ remnants of soup, vegetables, and steaks. Japanese boys and girls quickly learned to approach uniformed Yankees pleading for chocolates, while Europeans asked for Coke, helping the soft drink consolidate globally. U.S. humanitarian aid to Europe and Japan impressed their inhabitants with its abundance, serving as a kind of showcase for the achievements of the country’s economy. In the post-war era, it would not be long before the prevailing logic during the Depression returned: buying was a way to make money circulate, generate wealth, promote industrialization, and keep men in their jobs. It was a common belief in American society that, if people had access to the fruits of economic abundance, political and social equality would follow, causing consumerism to replace the idea of a state of social welfare in the country. The U.S. was growing in the world scene and on its way to becoming an economic superpower, and a predominant part of the image it projected was that of alimentary plenitude.

**Images of Abundance**

In 1942, after the torpedoing of civilian ships by German submarines, Brazil declared war on the Axis powers, with the United States as its main ally. Two years later, the Brazilians would be the only Latin American army to cross the Atlantic to fight in Europe, using U.S. training, equipment, vehicles, and weapons. Although they carried typical provisions from Brazil, the quantity and quality were insufficient, and later shipments were irregular, given the turbulent conditions of the war. Therefore, Brazilian soldiers needed to adapt to the U.S. army’s food regime and its endless provisions of canned and foreign flavors. While they fought on the mountains of Italy, Brazilian soldiers, called “Pracinhas,” received cooking
instructions through courses provided by the Sixth United States Army, to which the Brazilians were attached.⁹

These classes, theoretical and practical, approached food safety and optimal use of the supplied products. Over time, Brazilians would become accustomed to cans, high-calorie chocolates, sweetened beans, and tomato juice, among other foods that were initially strange to them. Despite constant complaints about its taste and style, the Pracinhhas admitted that the food provided by their allies, although not aesthetically appetizing, was nonetheless well-prepared, hygienic, nourishing and, perhaps more importantly, abundant in its availability. As a result, the Brazilians would come to be regarded as generous among the hungry civilian Italian population for lavishly distributing the scatolettas, the food cans to which they had access in great quantity.¹⁰

Not only in war-torn Europe, but also in Brazil, the United States projected an image of economic power through food abundance. Agreements between the Brazilian President, Getúlio Vargas, and the U.S. President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, led to the construction of military bases, primarily in Brazil’s Northeast, located nearest to Africa and therefore the most probable location for an enemy landing.¹¹ There, thousands of U.S. soldiers, along with Brazilian troops, carried out surveillance along the coast, lived with civilians, and participated in the local social life. The headquarters of the Fourth Naval Fleet was settled in Recife, the city with the best infrastructure and the best port of the region, where subsequently the entire command of the South Atlantic was installed.¹²

As capital of the Brazilian state of Pernambuco, Recife would receive large numbers of Americans, mainly aviators and sailors, who frequented local hotels, cafes, clubs, and restaurants. The prodigality with which foreigners spent their valued dollars led to local price inflation and the consolidation of an image of American economic power, which had already been reinforced in the 1930s by Hollywood.¹³ In Northeast Brazil, U.S. military bases developed their own crop and livestock production so that
they did not have to face the food scarcity to which local civilians were subjected during the war. In comparison, daily life for the Brazilians involved long lines at butcher shops and bakeries, where products were sometimes hidden by the owners for personal gain, thus causing artificial scarcity and the raising of prices. While wheat flour, which was primarily imported from the U.S. and Argentina, could be difficult for these Brazilian civilians to find, U.S. soldiers, by contrast, had a steady supply. Beyond Recife, cities such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro were deprived of basic foodstuffs, and the prices of what could be found rose enormously. While even middle-class Brazilians struggled with increasingly empty tables, many Northeastern cities saw the poorest people vying for the food scraps that were rejected and dumped by U.S. bases.

But abundance, or at least an image of it, was not exclusive to the United States. In colonial times (roughly 1530 to 1822), sugarcane, Brazil’s first great export commodity, generated the wealth of cane growers, who were large landowners from the Northeast of the country. It was during that time that Northeastern cuisine *par excellence* was formed, arising from the powerful families who were proud of the abundance at their tables. What made the economic wheels spin, then, was a system of slavery that generated sugar, which was rare and expensive to the rest of the world while being common and abundant in Northeast Brazil. This context created a confectionery culture typical of the region that is still strong today. In the Great Houses of the interior, the *sinhás*, wives of the landowners, commanded the kitchens where hard domestic work was carried out by enslaved Black women. The hospitality of the “great families” in the Northeast was witnessed by a great number of foreign chroniclers, primarily English and French, such as Henry Koster and Louis François de Tollenare, who observed the countless number of meals served and the excellent Portuguese wine poured from apparently endless barrels. In capitals like Salvador, and even more so, Recife, the townhouses of the bourgeoisie that formed during the nineteenth century had kitchens that
were well-stocked. From them came sweets and other foods that were sold throughout the city streets, sometimes under the orders of the *sinhás* and sometimes at the initiative of enslaved Black women who saved to buy their own freedom.\textsuperscript{17}

![Figure 3: The painting is called “A Brazilian Dinner” and it was made in 1827 by French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret, depicting a wealthy merchant’s family in Rio de Janeiro and the disparate abundance in the country. Source: “A Brazilian family in Rio de Janeiro by Jean Baptiste Debret 1839 2” by mr.kloney is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0](image)

The abolition of slavery in 1888 and the end of the monarchy a year later brought many changes to Brazil. Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the abundance of the Northeastern table was no longer concealed within the Great Houses in the countryside or bourgeois townhouses. Abundance was revealed as part of quotidian life in the local newspapers, which publicized the banquets of the political class that sought to legitimize itself in the recent republic of Brazil. These tables were French in their logic and organization, with a hierarchy of dishes and an abundance of champagne, which have been recorded in photos by local magazines such as *Rua Nova* and *A Pilhêria*.\textsuperscript{18}
This abundance was, as before, limited to the elites: economic elites, but often racial, social, sometimes political and intellectual elites as well. The rest of the population was far from participating in that food bonanza, although they were aware of its existence. In turn, the upper classes were aware of the hunger that accompanied poverty in the country, even if they chose to ignore it.

Images of Scarcity

Josué de Castro, a physician, nutritionist, and geographer from Pernambuco, would be one of the first intellectuals to denounce the hunger that devastated Brazil in the 1930s. Although hunger was denied or normalized by most of the Brazilian society at the time, Castro argued that hunger, particularly in the Northeastern region, was not natural or irremediable but produced through centuries of slavery, economic exploitation by the private sector, and the negligence of the state. He wrote about the Recife of his youth, narrating in a fictional way the miserable daily lives of the Silva family, stuck living by the river, feeding from it but also dumping their waste in it and then feeding from it again. He called this the Crab Cycle, at the same time describing the situation of country folk, who migrated to the capitals in search of a better life. There, they were marginalized, stuck in the urban mangroves of the capital, while trying to stretch a living out of the mud of the Capibaribe River. Castro's was one of the first attempts to lift the veil of shame and speak frankly about the hunger that devastated Brazil and especially the Northeast.

"Hunger is not a product of overpopulation: hunger already existed in mass before the phenomenon of the post-war demographic explosion" the doctor insisted in the 1960s. "Only this hunger, which decimated Third World populations, it was concealed, it was muffled, it was hidden. It was not a subject of conversation, because it was considered shameful: hunger was taboo. It is openly spoken about today and the problem has become a major international scandal." If fighting and even acknowledging hunger
was difficult in a democratic Brazil, it got even worse in the following years. During the civil–military dictatorship that took power after the 1964 coup, the socioeconomic gaps widened and the freedom to denounce them was curtailed. Castro was one of many to be considered undesirable by the regime and was exiled overseas for his political views. He would die in 1973 in Paris, still denouncing the problem of Brazilian hunger, but he was never allowed back into his own country while he lived.23

Castro sought to explain how Brazil’s historical inequalities created an environment in which industrialization advanced in the 1930s but was concentrated in the South and Southeast because of government incentives and financial concentration in the private sector. During the same period, agriculture generally suffered from a lack of investment and interest from

Figure 4: Josué de Castro in the beginning of the 1960s, before being exiled by the dictatorship, and being offered some crabs by a poor fisherman, somewhere around Recife. Source: Collection belonging to Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, used with permission.
the state, remaining in a quasi-feudal system into the early 1960s. It was a reality in which large landowners exploited impoverished and usually illiterate field workers while refusing to implement modern methods and techniques. Over time, national metallurgy expanded, automobiles were made, the new federal capital of Brasilia was erected, but the people were still hungry. In the South and Southeast, the most industrialized cities became islands of wealth surrounded by a sea of human misery, and these southern cities became overwhelmed by migrants from the North and the Northeast in search of a better life. These economic and social contrasts of Brazil, which had somewhat diminished in between the end of WWII and the beginning of the 1960s, continued to define the country as one of the largest areas in the universal geography of hunger, in Josué de Castro’s words.24

Hunger in an Abundant U.S.

But hunger was not exclusively Brazilian, African, or Asian. In the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the world community was shocked when the unthinkable surfaced in the news: there was hunger within the United States too. Books such as John Kenneth Galbraith’s The Affluent Society, first published in 1958, and Michael Harrington’s The Other America, released in 1962, presented the reality of the disenfranchised portions of the country, particularly in the Jim Crow South2526. President John F. Kennedy himself had stated, in a famous speech delivered in 1963, that every night more than 10 million Americans went to bed without a meal. The American spectators’ astonishment was shared—at least ostensibly—by local politicians, who only then seemed to realize that there was hunger in their country.27

But hunger had been a harsh reality during the Depression of the 1930s so much so that the government had to intervene. It was in that decade that legislation was passed in order to direct agricultural surplus production to people in need. Because of fraud and distribution problems, the first Food Stamp Program was created in 1939 and hit its peak in 1942,
serving close to four million people. It was discontinued during WWII and its rise in employment. But Congress allowed it to return in 1959 on a two-year trial period. Then, it was officially readopted in 1961, only after Kennedy gave it his support. Eight years later, President Richard Nixon would, too, address Congress, admitting that even though the country produced more food than it could consume, there were people who were not only hungry, but even malnourished. Nixon added that the United States, bountiful as it had been since WWII, still had not conquered this basic human need. That same year, the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health was convened, demanding that the President declare a national hunger crisis and take measures toward solving it. During this period of the 1950s–1960s, part of U.S. society—that is, the many politicians and their primarily white middle-class constituents—had to admit that there was poverty in their land and that it generated underemployment, poor housing conditions, and illiteracy in addition to malnutrition.

Figure 5: Photographer Dan Guvarich snatched a picture of Senator Robert Kennedy, not in some humanitarian mission in Africa or Latin America, but at the Delta of the Mississippi, 1967, seeing the American hunger with his own eyes. Image courtesy of the JFK Library.
Hunger persists today in the United States, and it is the most serious among the so-called developed countries. There is no shortage of theories for its cause: structural racism, immigration, the free market, and a weak workforce with minimal base income, as opposed to a politically strong market. There are many disagreements among these ideas, but one common denominator between them seems to highlight a history of minimal state intervention or an intervention that reinforces market differences. Meanwhile, research has shown that it would be possible to address poverty in the country—if not end it—and reduce it to European levels, provided that the government committed itself to play an active role. State intervention, through income transfer and progressive taxation has been a tried and tested way in other countries to better distribute the abundance generated in the United States. Yet, the history of laissez-faire economics in the U.S. appears to prevent the government from providing solutions to the problem.32

Research in the social sciences has shown that the idea that the U.S. government is not interventionist or that it is constituted of a “weak” state is a myth. Indeed, the United States has a history of strong state interference in some ways, such as through consumer regulation and commodity taxation, with a near absence in others, like social welfare that would redistribute the abundance generated in the country. Consequently, scholars such as sociologist Monica Prasad argue that the United States is not necessarily less interventionist than other nations but that its policies in this regard have been less effective than they should be. According to Prasad, the productive explosion between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries brought with it an economic model different from that which developed in Europe. In addition, the gigantic size of the U.S. market and the strength of its productive capacity eventually led to a general decline in prices throughout the rest of the world. Thus, ironically, the 1929 crash that affected the rest of the planet and from which the United States
emerged with the outbreak of the Second World War was caused not by scarcity, but by an overabundance of resources.33

Works such as Prasad’s demonstrate that questions of abundance in the United States remain relevant even after decades since historian David M. Potter published *People of Plenty* in 1954. Potter’s compilation of lectures sought to analyze the character of U.S. society as well as the ways in which economic affluence had contributed to it. Toward this end, Potter relied, not on the work of other historians, which had hitherto produced little on the subject, but on the contributions of cultural and social anthropologists. In fact, Potter was the first to enumerate the failures of the science of history in defining the complex themes related to American abundance.34 Potter was interested in the behavior of society as a whole, seeking to know how the wealth of the United States had shaped the character of its people.

Potter’s work is still an important reference point for understanding the formation of the U.S. before and after WWII, especially in regard to its food culture. He considered his country a nation that, from the beginning, had vast lands, seemingly inexhaustible resources, and a tradition of technical innovations aimed at increasing productivity. In other words, U.S. Americans seemed to have, at their disposal, the means to grow and expand into a real empire, if not in name, at least in size and wealth. This affluence would, at least partially, help explain the idea of Manifest Destiny formed in the nineteenth century, in which the U.S. was considered a land with so many resources that seemed fated to thrive, expand and become a beacon of civilization.35

In fact, according to Potter, the U.S. sense of abundance was shaped over centuries and helped define the very concept of democracy in the country. Instead of redistributing wealth—expropriating one part of society to benefit another—as was done in Europe, the American system thrived without taking away from others. According to historian Amy Bentley, who has analyzed Potter’s work and its relevance today, “American democracy is based on the assumption that everyone can reap the material benefits of
capitalism through merely making the pie bigger, in part because of the belief in and historical proof of American abundance.” She adds that, in the U.S., “many mistakenly equate democracy with capitalism, largely because of this factor of American abundance.” Therefore, the combination of abundance, destiny, and democracy created a vision that deposited its faith in an economic system capable of continuing to grow indefinitely.

For Potter, U.S. residents in the 1950s hesitated to judge the very rich for their unattainable living standards or to condemn the economic disparity between classes. One of the most persistent myths regarding the formation of the nation is that it would not present social barriers and would not suffer from class differences. This is a story that makes sense only by ignoring the racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination that shook and still shakes the country today. What is left, then, is a democratic ideal that is undermined by economic inequality and histories of discrimination. It is a model that is extremely dependent on a culture of consuming material goods, which cannot easily—if at all—be exported to other countries. The exceptionalism of U.S. abundance, therefore, hinders such a system from being able to flourish in other societies with fewer resources. This exceptionalism was and has been best symbolized by the food of its people.

A History of Brazilian Abundance?

Since Josué de Castro forced the country to acknowledge it in the 1930s, hunger has been an inseparable aspect of Brazil’s culture. While it ceased to be hidden and its causes are no longer inscrutable to the state and society, hunger can still be naturalized and treated as inevitable by society. In the early 2000s, however, some important steps were taken to confront Brazilian hunger through income transfer, instituted by then President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. Programs like “No Hunger” (Fome Zero), among
others, tackled the issue such that the state finally assumed partial responsibility for the food security of its citizens.\textsuperscript{39}

In 2003, “Family Grant” (Bolsa Família) emerged as an income transfer program to fight against poverty/hunger, effectively integrating several social programs into one. Both the No Hunger and Family Grant programs came to be during the re-democratization of the country in the mid-1980s as well as social experiments aimed at protecting the most vulnerable populations of society, still under the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso.\textsuperscript{40} Food scarcity and malnutrition have, therefore, been investigated and to some extent confronted, since the problem came to be more widely recognized after decades of invisibility.

The same cannot be said of its opposite, abundance. For many Brazilians, laymen, or even scholars, the idea of national abundance—

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\caption{From left to right, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva and John Agyekum Kufuor, respectively from Brazil and Ghana, jointly receive the 2011 World Food Prize, for their commitment in creating and implementing government policies to fight hunger in their countries. Photo Credit: Ricardo Stuckert, used with permission.}
\end{figure}
especially regarding food—seems absurd. Brazil lacks a robust historiography focused on studying plenty, especially concerning its food aspect, but this does not mean that the subject is not mentioned, studied, or discussed. And, like the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries more focused on the subject, this Brazilian abundance has its idiosyncrasies and myths. One example is the first document written in and about the land that would one day become Brazil: the famous *Letter of Discovery* (1500), by Pero Vaz de Caminha, which reported what he had seen to King Dom Manuel I.

Caminha, a Portuguese scribe, observed the health of the natives who greeted the newcomers in amazement, later attributing the good shape of those people to their diet. “There is no ox, no cow, no goat, no sheep, no chicken, no other kind of food, which is customary in the lives of men,” the Portuguese nobleman listed in amazement.41 “Nor do they eat but of this yam, in which here is plenty, and of these seeds and fruits, that the earth and the trees cast of themselves. And this way they walk, so fine and so radiant, that we ourselves can’t [do the same], though we eat so much wheat and vegetables.”42 Gold and silver, iron, or other metals were yet to be found, but those people who had encountered the Europeans on the beach for the first time were living witnesses to the generosity of the land.43 Brazil was a place of such good air that it resembled Portugal, and of seemingly endless supply of water, sure to guarantee the abundance of everything that was sown. But the most famous phrases attributed to the document is the mention that “in planting everything grows.”44 However, although it is quoted even today, this phrase does not appear in the actual letter, signifying the expected abundance of that newly discovered land.

Therefore, historicizing Brazil’s food abundance can be a way of looking at some of the country’s social realities of today, many of which were highlighted years ago by Josué de Castro. If the land is so extensive and well stocked with resources, as observed by Caminha, how can Brazilians lack food? Is the hunger felt in the country today the result of historical
injustice and poor income distribution? Is it the consequence of centuries of colonialism, slavery, and uneven industrialization? To see Brazil as a land of abundance is to admit that scarcity is an artificial and unnecessary occurrence. Hunger is a result of an economic system that regards the food of the population, not as a basic human issue, but purely as an opportunity to make profit. In this sense, the failures of capitalist and neoliberal policies applied to the United States may teach valuable lessons to Brazilians. By continuing the social programs created and applied in Brazil, hunger in this country may be able to take another path than the U.S. which sees its economic model depleting itself today and could learn from the Brazilian experiences. In short, the study of Brazilian abundance and U.S. hunger can provide answers to future challenges and inform critical research questions for contemporary historians.

Biography

Frederico Toscano holds a BA in Gastronomy, a masters degree in history, and has finished his Ph.D., also in history, at Universidade de São Paulo. He researched French influences on food habits in Brazil, which he published in 2014 in the book À Francesa: a Belle Époque do Comer e do Beber no Recife. He currently works with American influences in food habits in Brazil. Photography and military history also interest him.

Notes

2 Daniel Smith, Spade is Mightier than the Sword: The Story of World War Two’s Dig for Victory Campaign (London: Aurum, 2011).
3 Lizzie Collingham, The Taste of War.
5 Lizzie Collingham, The Taste of War.
7 Lizzie Collingham, The Taste of War.
Crab Cycle refers to the way the animal fed from the river and dumped its waste there, which in turn would feed the crab again. Castro compared this cycle to how poor people who lived by the rivers lived, often feeding on their own filth.


Translation from the original in Portuguese to English by the author of this paper.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid

Ibid.


Translation from the original in Portuguese to English by the author of this paper.


Ibid.

The Portuguese primarily expected to find precious metals in Brazil. Those would only be found in the 18th century, so not finding them initially was a big disappointment to them.

J. Cortesão, *Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha a El-Rei D. Manuel.*