

SECTION III. RESEARCH PROJECTS AND DISSERTATIONS – WORK IN PROGRESS

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Fordlândia: The Needle in the Haysack of the Comintern's Struggles in Brazil over the Black Question. Research Project

The racial question within the International Communist movement is one of the rising topics in Latin America and the United States in the past decade. Brazilian communists have a long history of denial of the racial issue as a major component of Brazil's history of inequalities and as a probable revolutionary trigger. During the Comintern period, it can be very fairly argued that Moscow drew pressure over the Communist Party of Brazil to dismantle this regional cadre resistance to adopt race as driving force to revolution. In 2015 I finished my Ph. D. thesis on the matter. Besides all, I have come to realize that this is a very long and – possibly – a never-ending story yet to be properly understood by Brazilian left history specialists.

This current project has a very precise objective. It can be unfolded in two ways: empirical and methodological. If my assumptions are right, then I may be able to argue that Brazilian historians must move out from a certain chauvinist and exceptionalist approach towards the history of the Communist Party. Moreover, it is not only fashionable to reach out to new empirical evidence; it is mandatory. As a consequence, an analysis of Fordlândia may also prove that as far as empirical paths lead to a transnational plot, analytical methods should also convey such broad traces.

It all started with an aggressive entrepreneurial action taken by Henry Ford which led to promote an unimaginable scenario: in the middle of the Amazon basin, workers from local areas as well as from a relatively broad array of origins came to share the same workplace, contracted by one of the largest companies of the world. Periphery suddenly could become the world center of the rubber industry.

Amidst an intense redefinition over the rubber market during the 1920s and after a large myriad of governmental concessions, Henry Ford decided to endeavor to create a new factory town such as Detroit, except without unionist “contamination”, in his words. The location of this enterprise was chosen accordingly to its suitability to the rubber culture. On the left bank of the Tapajós River (a tributary of the Amazon River), about 1200 km far from Belém (state capital of Pará) and over 300 km down the river from Santarém, the most important city of the region, Aveiro City hosted Henry Ford's project. It was a challenge from scratch. Most of all, the civilizational task self-given by the moralist and reactionary Henry

Ford was unbearable to Brazilian amazon culture and, not less important, to working-class culture.

After 1927, Ford's rubber crop in the Amazon basin was operational. The timing coincides with a hot topic within the International Communist movement in Brazil, which was "the black question". Since 1924 there has been major disagreements between the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and the Comintern over the racial issue. "Fordland" was a symbol of this misencounter.

One of the main triggers for the disagreement among PCB leaders and Comintern cadres concerning the black question was a forever obscure event: an alleged conflict between Brazilian and Jamaican workers in 'Fordland'. During the discussion of the Brazilian question in Moscow in late 1929, Brazilian communists argued that this was not a matter of race between blacks and whites, but a misunderstanding caused by the different nationalities. However, the Comintern cadres, in spite of not allowing themselves a thorough evaluation of the matter, supported that there must have been some racial component overlooked by the PCB, as in relation to all the remainder of the country. Through the Comintern's lenses, the PCB had neglected work among Brazilian blacks as for the party's Central Committee there was no "black question" in Brazil.

As far as Fordland is concerned, Jules Humbert-Droz blamed the lack of information Comintern had about the subject. He reported that the statement 'We have been told by telegram that the whites were on strike against the blacks' was their only source of information. He agreed with other Comintern comrades that, once there had been a clash between blacks and whites or even between blacks and blacks, the racial question was a fact. According to him, the same had taken place in Cuba and in the Antilles when the indigenous people had been dislocated from their working positions to be replaced by black workers. The Swiss communist had painted a scenario in which the racial question was uncovered 'under a new shape, connected to the policies of great yankee companies in order to divide the proletariat'. He added 'this doesn't mean that workers make up a distinct race, it means that the imperialists – foremen – employ workers of a certain race in order to cause another one to be out of work or to have their pay decreased.' He finished by suggesting ways through which Brazilian communists could tackle the question.

Lastly, another Comintern responsible, Samuel Guralsky, restated how the PCB's omission in relation to the Fordland question had triggered even more distrust among the different race groups in the proletariat. Going deeper, he supported that, with such omission, the PCB missed an opportunity to show black workers their white companions fight for black causes.

Our empirical bottom line is the Fordlândia's papers in The Henry Ford Foundation as well as the State Archives of Pará. There is evidence of the United Kingdom's Foreign Office that there was surveillance of the labor force migration from Central America to the Amazon basin. The monitoring of the Panamá Channel already was a constant by intelligence organizations. Therefore, I intend to cross all sort of sources and build this story from the bottom up. By the end should be clarified the existence of international bonds between workers of Fordlândia as well as what, indeed, the Comintern and the PCB knew of the "Aveiro" struggles and, most of all, how they handle it until it was abandoned in the mid 1940s.

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