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# Oil in 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazil

## Energy Dependence in the Second World War<sup>1</sup>

### Petróleo no Brasil do século XX

#### Dependência energética na Segunda Guerra Mundial

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**ABSTRACT** In August 1942, Brazil joined the Allied Forces in World War II. Part of the agreement was that the United States would help develop heavy industries in the country, mainly steel and oil. By that time, roughly 90% of Brazil's oil was imported from the US, a fact that had a direct impact on the oil scenario of the country. The war effort meant that fuel was redirected to military use, which generated great restrictions to civilian consumption. In the face of scarcity, thousands of Brazilians wrote the National Petroleum Council to request fuel quotas and traffic licenses. In doing so, they also shared the reasons why they needed gasoline, diesel, kerosene and other oil products. Such letters provide valuable insight into the Brazilian social landscape of the period, how people used different oil products and the meanings of

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1 This text elaborates on Chapter Four of my Master's thesis *Fúria moderna: uma história do petróleo brasileiro através dos arquivos do CNP* (Modern fury: a history of Brazilian oil through the CNP archives) (M.A. thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2016). All the documents cited in this text are part of the recently opened collection of the Brazilian National Petroleum Council, stored in the Brazilian National Archive (Here on CNP/AN).

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progress and modernity they attributed to the access and consumption of such products. It is a moment that marks the deep fossil dependence that underpins this ideal of modernity - connecting, in the same arc, human activity and creativity, the use of machines and fossil fuels, seen as indispensable to bring about the desired progress of a modern nation.

**KEYWORDS** oil history, Brazilian oil, environmental history, Great Acceleration

**RESUMO** Muitos estudiosos consideram o início da Grande Aceleração em meados do século 20 como tendo “iniciado o Antropoceno” (McNeill; Engelke, 2016, p.7). A marca mais visível para tal reivindicação é o uso em larga escala de combustíveis fósseis. Estritamente ligada a isso, é uma ideia da modernidade e de progresso material que moldou o uso e o significado atribuído a essas fontes de energia. Foi nesse contexto mais amplo que, em agosto de 1942, o Brasil se juntou às Forças Aliadas na Segunda Guerra Mundial. Parte do acordo foi que os EUA ajudariam a desenvolver indústrias pesadas no país, principalmente aço e petróleo. Na época, cerca de 90% do petróleo do Brasil era importado dos EUA, fato que teve impacto direto no cenário petrolífero do país. O esforço de guerra significou que o combustível foi redirecionado para o uso militar, o que gerou grandes restrições ao consumo civil. Em face à escassez, milhares de brasileiros escreveram ao Conselho Nacional do Petróleo para solicitar cotas de combustível e licenças de trânsito. Ao fazê-lo, eles também compartilhavam as razões pelas quais precisavam de gasolina, diesel, querosene e outros produtos petrolíferos. Essas cartas fornecem informações valiosas para a superfície social brasileira do período, sobre como as pessoas usavam diferentes produtos petrolíferos e os significados de progresso e modernidade que atribuíram ao acesso e ao consumo de tais produtos. Através de suas palavras, podemos visualizar o país em um momento de transição para a modernidade industrial, deixando para trás a chamada “vocação agrícola”, que foi o principal rótulo do Brasil do século 19 até o início do século XX. Brasileiros, tanto em centros urbanos quanto em locais remotos, não queriam se afastar dos ganhos representados pela velocidade de seus

veículos, os produtos de suas máquinas industriais, o conforto de seus aparelhos. A Grande Aceleração havia chegado e a desaceleração parecia evadir-se da civilização. A modernidade e o progresso são materializados na forma da primeira geladeira para chegar a uma cidade remota, a segunda motocicleta registrada na Amazônia, o caminhão de mudança rapidamente atravessando fronteiras estaduais. Carros, motocicletas, caminhões, máquinas a diesel estavam disponíveis a apenas uma ou duas gerações, mas já eram vistas como essenciais. É um momento que marca a profunda dependência fóssil que sustenta esse ideal de modernidade — conectando, no mesmo arco, atividade e criatividade humana, o uso de máquinas e combustíveis fósseis, vistos como indispensáveis para trazer o progresso desejado a uma nação moderna.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** história ambiental, história do petróleo, Grande Aceleração

## **BRAZIL IN THE GREAT ACCELERATION**

Humans may eat meat, grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables, but we are, as a species, collectively and perpetually energy-hungry. The human adventure on Earth has been a constant search for energy. From the energy provided by the sun, to animal traction, the harnessing of steam, electrification and, more recently, fossil fuels, men and women around the globe have always looked for ways to increase their access to energy. This continuous quest for energy is increasingly fast-paced — so fast that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is being called by many natural and social scientists the Great Acceleration (McNeill; Engelke, 2016).

The term refers to environmental changes brought forth by an unprecedented spike in energy consumption, along with population growth, water use, urbanization and, of course, human-made pollution and climate change. It also marks the onset of the Anthropocene — the geological era being proposed as a successor to the current Holocene. Adopting the term means acknowledging that humans are now collectively the most powerful geological force on a planetary scale, one

that has been rapidly reshaping the face (and the depths) of the Earth.<sup>2</sup> Although there is much debate about when exactly humans started such changes that prompted the Anthropocene, many scholars view the beginning of the Great Acceleration in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as having “jump-started the Anthropocene” (McNeill; Engelke, 2016, p.7). The most visible marker for such a claim is the mass-scale use of fossil fuels. Strictly linked to that is an idea of material progress that shaped the use and the meaning attributed to these energy sources. This text will explore such connections. Through a set of recently released documents, I will discuss the place of oil in everyday life and in the Brazilian social imagination at the start of the Great Acceleration, a place which was becoming more and more important and which could be seen intertwining with notions of progress and modernity.<sup>3</sup>

In August 1942, Brazil joined the Allied Forces in World War II. Part of the agreement was that the US would help develop Brazil's heavy industries, mainly steel and oil. By that time, roughly 90 percent of Brazil's oil was imported from the US. Such dependency meant that the Brazilian national market would suffer with the export cuts required by the US war effort. From the moment the country announced its entry into the conflict, the National Petroleum Council (Conselho Nacional do Petróleo, CNP) “was forced to turn their attention to storage, rationing and distribution, due to the threat of scarcity” (Fausto, 1999, p.372). It was a time of supply crisis: a lack not only of fuel, but of basic consumer

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2 In August, 2016, at the 35<sup>th</sup> International Geological Congress held at Cape Town, South Africa, the international Working Group on the Anthropocene (WGA) put forth their recommendation that the term Anthropocene be officially adopted by the Geosciences community. Acceptance of the Anthropocene has been gaining traction since the term was popularized by chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 and the WGA's endorsement is one more step towards a larger change: officially leaving behind the Holocene and stepping into the Anthropocene.

3 In their *Handbook for (in)experts*, Catalina Arreaza and Arlene Tickner point to some essential features of modernity: anthropocentrism with an emphasis on human rationality, belief in neutrality and objectivity of scientific knowledge, and perhaps more important for this analysis, faith in scientific and industrial progress. These somewhat simplified features do not exhaust the complexity of the historical processes spanning all of the modern era. They are, however, visible in many aspects of the analysis proposed here. Therefore this is the use of the term *modernity* we will adopt for the discussions made in this paper. ARREAZA; TICKNER, 2002.

goods and mainly of imports. The war effort meant that fuel was redirected to military use, which generated great restrictions upon civilian consumption, thus compelling the CNP to establish a broad dialogue with various sectors of Brazilian society.

In the wider national context, the Vargas era was a watershed moment for Brazilian history. Getúlio Vargas remained in power from 1930 to 1945, leading an authoritarian regime that produced Brazil's first organized effort at state-building. Before Vargas, Brazilian politics was decentralized. Brazilian state-level politics was dominated by regional economic elites — in particular those whose wealth stemmed from export-oriented businesses — who supported representatives who protected their interests. This led to the direct dealing of Brazilian states with international commercial partners, linking Brazil's export commodities to world trade without connecting the country internally. States with strong export economies, such as São Paulo and Minas Gerais grew richer and more powerful than states that did not possess export commodities or international commercial ties.<sup>4</sup>

After losing the 1930 presidential election, Vargas came to power in a coup which had substantial popular and military support. From the outset, his government aimed at creating a strong central government. By the end of 1930, Vargas had managed to amass “broader powers than any previous government had ever enjoyed” (Skidmore, 1967, p.33). This new pattern of politics was taken a step further in 1937, with the creation of the *Estado Novo*, the second phase of Vargas' rule, which deepened the authoritarian traits of his regime, thus creating an even stronger central government. The central government marked its presence by establishing a number of federal institutes and councils, such as the Institute of Sugar and Alcohol and the National Petroleum Council. It was the first time in Brazilian history that a federal government had such a pervasive presence in the country's economy.

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4 For historiography on Vargas Era, refer to SKIDMORE, 1967; BAER, 1965 and ABREU, 1997. For historiography on Brazilian industrialization under Vargas, refer to BASTOS; FONSECA, 2011 and SILVEIRA; ABREU; LOSSO, 2010.

As the government agency responsible for overseeing and regulating the oil industry at the time, the National Petroleum Council was characteristic of the growing state capacity under Vargas. The CNP was created by a presidential decree in April 1938. The decree established federal control over the whole supply chain: import, transport, construction of oil pipelines, distribution and trade of oil products. All refining activity was also nationalized: market prices and installation of new refineries were now tied to federal regulation. In addition, the CNP could arbitrate on exploration concessions, national reserves, the functioning of any company established within the supply chain, national supply issues, and changes in petroleum taxes.

The centralization effort of the Vargas period was well under way in 1942 when wartime rationing began. The interactions of the CNP with the broader Brazilian public described in this paper are concrete examples of the high level of centralism achieved by Vargas' regime. The petitions show the considerable success the government had in designing new configurations for centralizing national politics: through this bureaucratic device, Brazilians interacted directly with the central government and state-level communications were mediated by the National Council. State commissions were created to receive requests of fuel quotas, special traffic licenses and other exemptions from rationing. All requests were then forwarded to the Council, which determined quotas and issued licenses, in a clear effort to concentrate decision-making at the federal level.

During the wartime fuel shortage, the CNP enacted several measures to restrict traffic and consumption of oil products. Among these actions was a ban on motorcycle traffic, the establishment of monthly fuel quotas and state-line barriers to reduce highway traffic. To a 21<sup>st</sup>-century readership, these may seem extreme measures, but in the early 1940s in Brazil, both car ownership and interstate highways were quite restricted on a national scale. The vast majority of vehicles was concentrated in southeastern urban centers and interstate travel was limited by the lack of infrastructure.

Despite the limited scale, in the face of scarcity, thousands of Brazilians wrote the state commissions and the National Petroleum Council to request fuel quotas and traffic licenses.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, they also shared the reasons why they needed gasoline, diesel, kerosene and other oil products. Such letters provide valuable insight into the Brazilian social landscape of the period, how people used different oil products and the meanings of progress and modernity they attributed to the access and consumption of such products. In this sense, “automobility” may be “an apt metaphor for modernity, especially in a country as geographically large as Brazil”, as it embodies some key aspects attributed to modernity such as making distances shorter and communication faster. At the same time, it also enhanced the growing connectedness of the country promoted by “a modern state capable of building great road systems and other major public works” (Wolfe, 2010, p.10-11).

Through this documentation we can also perceive, more broadly, a crucial turning point: until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brazil was essentially an agricultural country. In the 1940s however, the country was on the track of industrialization, with growing internal trade and expanding urban centers, which were becoming connected to rural areas through new highways. Nevertheless, all these processes were already completely dependent on the use of fossil fuels — it is precisely this factor that led to the intense correspondence with the National Petroleum Council, in which the passage from an ‘agricultural vocation’ to an age of fossil fuel dependence can be seen.

Thus, this episode of fuel shortage lays bare the intersections between an increased energy demand, characteristic of this time of modernization and building of state capacity, and the meanings attributed to it. As the country extended its industrial base, it had an unquenchable thirst for oil-generated energy and concerns about the availability of

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5 The exact number of petitions sent during the fuel shortage is yet to be established, as the archives holding these documents have not been fully opened. It is safe to say, however, that this number will include at least a few thousand petitioners, including private vehicle owners and businesses around the country.



this energy source indicated a certain perception of the future of the nation, binding the ever-growing energy challenge and the modernity and progress that oil would allow. Here we can see some pillars of the ideological edifice that resulted in the idea — still quite current in Brazil today — that oil equals progress.

## THE WAR EFFORT AND RATIONING OF FUEL

The war effort imposed by Brazilian participation in World War II meant in practice that fuels (gasoline, diesel, fuel oil) and other products (kerosene, lubricants), still mostly imported in that period,<sup>6</sup> were directed to military contingents, leaving to civil society only a small part that had to be distributed to its various sectors. Therefore, the rationing of fuel affected all social strata to some extent.

On the brink of a general shortage in mid-1943, the CNP had to take a number of restrictive measures. It prohibited the traffic of motorcycles without authorization from the agency, it restricted bus lines and road cargo transport to places where there were no railways, and it also restricted interstate travel and private car traffic. Furthermore, it established priorities for the basic sectors (among which were the transportation of food items, cattle, wood and coal). Owners of vehicles driving in urban centers or travelling longer distances had to request permission from the CNP, which assigned monthly quotas of fuel for each case, controlled and distributed by the state commissions.<sup>7</sup>

The amount of letters sent to the CNP was considerable. Although they represented only a small portion of the population, every owner

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6 Candeias, in Bahia, was the first commercially viable well in Brazil to go into production in 1945, but it was not able to meet the demand of the entire country. Oil products were, in their vast majority, imported from the USA.

7 The rationing guidelines were published in all communication vehicles in July 1943 and detailed the determinations of decree n. 42292 of May 1942. There were seven recommendations in total, “for which scrupulous and severe vigilance are required”, which dealt with the issues mentioned, such as the issuance of traffic licenses and quotas of fuel, suppression of traffic in various situations, among others. File n. 1675, CNP / AN.

of a car, motorcycle, truck and any other internal combustion engine machines had to contact the CNP to request licenses, express their fuel needs, request increased quotas, report purchases and sales of vehicles, changes of address or any other action concerning the use of motorized vehicles of all types. These files make up a great social kaleidoscope of the period. From owners of motorcycles in rural areas to industries such as Coca-Cola and Phillip Morris, the press, medical corps and unions, all sorts of correspondents wrote to the Council. Most requests were applications for traffic licenses, but there were also complaints, grievances and protests, revealing a parallel market — both of fuels and of the sale of licenses issued by the agency — in addition to allegations of abuse of power by local authorities and accusations against foreigners, whose disrespect for the rules generated great popular outcry. These letters reveal a society that had, to a large extent, already become used to the comforts of motorized transportation and the convenience of using a growing array of fossil-fueled engines.

## **MOTORCYCLES**

From all over Brazil, motorcycle owners sent the CNP a large number of requests for permission to ride their motorcycles. The explanations varied, but most motorcycle owners claimed that this was the only means of transportation possible — this was because, as the sources suggest, the motorcycle seemed to be the new substitute for the horse, having a strong presence in rural areas.

From the town of Conceição da Feira, in the northeastern state of Bahia, came a request for a traffic license made by Otávio Navarro Britto, who identified himself as a state tax collector, whose “service of collection from taxpayers away from the center of this city” was only possible by motorcycle. The petitioner alleged that, without his motorcycle, commuting “becomes more costly and detrimental to the service” and that if he chooses to use the railroad or animal transport, it would necessarily mean that “two days of work would be lost”. In addition,

Britto argued that “it is not easy to find an animal, even for hire”.<sup>8</sup> Such arguments reveal a change in the relationship with time and work by suggesting that the loss of two days was no longer tolerable. The speed provided by the use of motor vehicles had changed the perception of time and, once having experienced it, modernity (here represented by the motorcycle) seems to be a point of no return. In contrast, the other options appear as costly, detrimental, and difficult — thus delineating an experience of modernity tied to the use of fossil fuel.

It is not known what the first motorcycle registered in the state of Amazonas was, but the one “registered with n. 2 in the Inspectorate of Vehicles of the state” belonged to Amerio Ernesto Pinho, who, in August of 1943, sent the CNP a request to use his motorcycle. One of the reasons stated was the fact that he “resided (...) in a rather difficult place to reach” — the motorcycle would provide “commuting comfort” and represented “insignificant consumption” of fuel. According to Pinho, the restrictions imposed by the “situation created by the war” left him “undermined with an absolute lack of transportation”.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the tax collector’s request, Pinho does not even mention the possibility of using animal transport to reach Cachoeirinha, the suburb of Manaus where he resided. This being only the second motorcycle registered in the state, the question remains of how Amerio’s neighbours commuted to their homes.

From the state of Espírito Santo, several more applications for authorization of motorcycle traffic arrived. Agricultural technician and crop manager Antonio Ferreira Penedo Sobrinho asked “to continue making use of his motorcycle as a means of locomotion” for his work in charge of producing “peanuts and other oil-producing legumes.” His justifications were: the “relatively large tracts” which he had to cover on his own farm. Reinforcing his argument, he made the hopeful claim that

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8 File n. 3458, Box 1265, CNP / AN

9 File n. 3448, Box 1265, CNP / AN

“the activities of the petitioner are not only useful to his employers but also indirectly to the Country”.<sup>10</sup>

Such patriotic appeal is recurrent in these requests and adds yet another element to the social imagination of the period: modernity and progress should serve the nation. This nationalist feeling, characteristic of Brazil under Vargas, permeated many spheres of society — as Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira wrote, “nationalism is essentially the ideology of the formation of the nation-state; it is the ideology that a people, feeling capable of transforming into a nation, uses to be able to endow themselves with a sovereign state” (Bresser, 2011, p.102-103). The people who wrote the CNP also attribute a sense of national identity to their access to the benefits of a fossil-fuelled modernity.

War and nationalism were combined on many occasions: “given the present moment when the Government has the greatest interest in increasing production in the industry” and “also considering that leather and tallow are raw materials of war” are the reasons given by Charqueada Freitas & Co. from the town of Ipameri, in the state of Goiás, who requested a license to ride a motorcycle owned by the company “since this is the only means of locomotion that the company has” for its activities. The small town, according to Freitas, has “only two rental cars and does not have bus service, trucks or any other means of transportation”.<sup>11</sup> Thus Freitas & Co. made their argument: adding the precariousness of transport to the claim of the importance of the leather industry in both the development of the national industry and the war effort.

The requests to the Council were filed in categories, by state, vehicle type, by the social role of petitioners, among others.<sup>12</sup> Each category allows us to glimpse the attitudes of the population on the necessity

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10 File n. 3451. Box 1266, CNP / AN

11 File n. 3447. Box 1266, CNP / AN

12 During the course of the research, such files were found relating to eight Brazilian states: AM, BA, ES, GO, PA, PE, RN, RS. In addition to motorcycles, other categories of filing included private and rental cars, trucks, naval and aviation sectors and licenses to cross state barriers. Other requests were filed in a different way, categorized by activity: press, doctors, cattle ranchers, industry, commerce, etc.

of the use of motorcycles. From Goiás, two requests exemplify these perceptions: a partner in a “greengrocers and local products shop” in Santa Rita do Paranaíba, João Gomes Pereira made a request to use his motorcycle for the “delivery of goods”; while José Marques de Jesus, owner of the Padaria da Família in Goiânia, the state capital, made an identical request to use his tricycle — “which happens to be a motorcycle with three wheels” — in the distribution of his merchandise, “in order for the population of this city not to be so affected by the lack of delivery of bread”.<sup>13</sup> Both requests illustrate changing attitudes regarding the use of motor vehicles: without alleging problems of distance or difficulty of displacement, the simple deprivation of their use is sufficient justification according to the writers. The merchants seemed to no longer conceive their activities without a motorcycle or a motorized tricycle — without them, the population would suffer the consequences, not of a return to a past without motors, but, even worse, of a present without this essential element of modernity.

The prohibition on the traffic of motorcycles without a CNP licence — an initial ban was issued in May 1942 — reverberated throughout the country, as evidenced by the copious correspondence received in subsequent years. Besides the aspects of the social imagination that are captured in the documentation, another factor commands attention: the diversity of the activities described by the petitioners and how the motorcycles lend themselves to so many different purposes. This versatility contributed to the perception that such a vehicle was, to some extent, revolutionary — it went faster, moving along routes that would otherwise be inaccessible. Classifying motorcycles as revolutionary underlines the importance of oil in this context at the same time as it highlights its interweaving with a culture entirely dependent on this specific aspect of the geophysical environment.

The motorcycle was considered so important that, deprived of its use, some petitioners said they feared they would be out of business. This is the claim of Francisco Veloso Pinho, a Spaniard who owned a

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13 File n. 3447, Box 1266, CNP / AN

small cinema in the town of Pinheiro, 40 km from Belém, capital of the state of Pará. Veloso had to travel to the capital “almost daily”, not having “another means of transport faster” than his motorcycle — and here the use of the adjective is revealing — since using another means “would cost a lot.” Forced into such a situation, the petitioner says that he was “looking at the prospect of closing the cinema, the only means of entertainment” for the local population. Essential, versatile, economical: this was how the motorcycle was described by several letter-writers. The Companhia Cinematográfica Paraense — which had among its clients the owner of the cinema of Pinheiro — also used a motorcycle for the distribution of its materials. Such work, the company claims, “can only be completed by motorcycle, a fast and economical transportation that greatly facilitates” the activities of distribution. These stories help reveal an internal economy already heavily dependent on fossil fuels.<sup>14</sup>

In the requests coming from the state of Pará, such adjectives were used in several cases. Luiz Manoel dos Santos, owner of Casa de Riscas, who distributed “tobacco and haberdasher articles” describes his main clients as “grocers and taverns” — establishments often located “away from the tram stops and difficult to access by another type of vehicle”, the only possible means being the motorcycle. Pinkus Wajchman, a German immigrant and tax collector, presents his activity as a “painful life” that “can only be completed by motorcycle, so great are the distances” he usually covers, since he goes from “the commercial district to the urban and suburban areas of Belém” to collect the taxes. Business partners Albertino de Oliveira Bastos and Antero Ferreira da Costa, owners of the Casa Preferida grocery store — located at the fringes of the Bragança Railway, 50 km from Belém — were just starting their commercial activities, with big commitments to fulfil. “If banned from using their respective motorcycles, they claim they would find themselves in a “difficult situation”, that would “cause great damage” to their newly opened business.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> File n. 3442, Box 1270, CNP / AN

<sup>15</sup> File n. 3442, Box 1270, CNP / AN

In general, the petitioners' explanations outlined the versatility and speed of motorcycles — illustrating the aforementioned change in perception of time and of the relation with work, reflecting a social imagination impacted by these aspects of modernity and defining a growing dependence on the use of petroleum in everyday life, in urban as much as rural settings. The motorcycle, in particular, appears as a privileged link, connecting the rural world to urban space more efficiently than any other means of transport. Pack animals, despite being present in cities, belong, in the social imagination, to the countryside; Cars, buses and trams are usually confined to city space — the motorbike, however, connects these two worlds while it is not seen as exclusive to any of them.<sup>16</sup>

The examples above are just a few of the thousands of requests received by the Council as a result of the decree of August 1943 — it was a period of intense production of documents, as is often the case in times of crisis. The rationing of oil products in general, and the prohibition of motorcycles traffic in particular, allow us to envision changing social processes: a society already dependent on oil, modified in its perceptions of time, experiencing in full the modernity of speed provided by the motorization of daily life. Such interweaving increasingly contributed, from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, to the consolidation of the oil and progress dyad across the entire spectrum of Brazilian social imagination.

Considering that the entry of motorcycles into the Brazilian national market — as imported products, since they were not yet manufactured in the country — occurred only after 1912, it is remarkable that, in such short time, the dependence on this transport had grown so much. By 1943, there were only a few thousand motorcycles in the country, from at least six different manufacturers. On average, they used around one or two litres of fuel per kilometre, a proportion which, despite appearing to

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16 Durán y Reyes classify vehicles (cars and motorbikes) as key elements “for social and metropolitan reconfiguration”: “This is the (ephemeral) era of hypermobility, in which daily the distances travelled by a significant part of the world population and, above all, commodities, have been increased by oil” (DÚRAN; REYS, 2014, p.435).

be a great waste by today's standards, was described in several requests as "insignificant" or "economical", consistent with the reality of a time when plenty of cheap fuel was available — that is — until the war effort started demanding its rationing.

## **WOOD AND COAL**

Motorcycle owners were not the only ones affected during the rationing imposed by the war effort. Several industrial and commercial sectors also suffered from rationing and appealed to the Council, thus generating more correspondence — letters from firms, companies and industries were almost always answered by the CNP, which mediated communications between petitioners and other bodies involved in rationing: state commissions, police departments, some sectors of the National Department of Mineral Production (DNPM) and the Economic Mobilization Coordination (CME).

This was the case of the wood and coal industry: the transport of these materials depended not only on the authorization of the CNP but also on the Coal Production Sector of the Economic Mobilization Coordination and the DNPM Development Division. This was because the fuel quotas used to transport firewood and coal were calculated on the basis of the quantity of material to be transported, which could vary monthly. The companies interested therefore sent their monthly production numbers and the routes to be covered in the transport — which were usually only between the mines or forests and the nearest railway or port. This information was often scattered among the responsible bodies, which generated an even greater volume of correspondence as they were sent between the sectors involved.

Producers of coal and charcoal from Paraná, Santa Catarina and São Paulo were among those who sent requests to these government agencies. From Barretos, São Paulo state, came a letter written by Celestino Pereira Soares, whose "legal trade in extraction of firewood, burning and distribution of charcoal" was "now specialized for gasogen" and,



according to Soares, “at the moment, the only one licensed in this field”.<sup>17</sup> Under these conditions, the trader alleged, coal was “a branch of commerce directly linked to National Defence and Brazil’s War Effort”. The businessman wrote the CNP to “expose the distressing situation that” he was going through: his gasoline quota was cut in half, without prior notice from the responsible agency, “leaving his trade in a precarious situation”. To make matters worse, the rainy season was approaching, in which “transporting charcoal from the woods is all but impossible”. Between November and February, Soares says, “the roads become impassable” and he would be sure to lose “approximately 20,000 sacks” of wood. He ends his request by reiterating his initial assertion: charcoal is “a trade that interests Brazil itself and provides for numerous families”.

The Fuel Rationing Commission of the State of São Paulo — which apparently was the same agency Fleury da Rocha mentions — was responsible for answering: the applicant received a “variable quota between 400 and 800 litres of gasoline” until March 1943. According to the document, that month Department VI of the Commission was created to be “in charge of the distribution of liquid fuels for the transportation of solid fuels”. Here it becomes clear how the different energy needs were intertwined and how, in an ever more pressing way, other sources of energy were subordinated to and dependent on oil, without which they would not even reach distribution and consumption points.

This perspective reveals the work and logic of the operation of such a department: by undertaking a review of fuel quotas for this specific purpose, “general rules for the transportation of firewood and coal were established by means of maximum coefficients of gasoline consumption”. According to the commission’s calculations, it would not be feasible to “transport fuelwood over a distance of more than 25 km”. The

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17 File n. 3438, Box 1266, CNP / AN. Gasogen is a machine that turns liquid fuels into gaseous fuels by burning wood or charcoal. During World War II, it was used in a third of the automotive fleet in Brazil, constituting “an example of a successful substitutive energy policy, despite its short duration”. This was due to the various disadvantages presented by this solution: in addition to the weight of the apparatus to be coupled to the cars, the combustion generated low quality gas, which reduced the efficiency of the engines in half (NASCIMENTO, 1987, p.9-26).

route requested by Celestino Soares “varied between 36 and 80 km” and was “considered excessive for the transportation of firewood in gasoline trucks”.

In other words, gasoline rationing outranked in importance the transport of firewood. Linking other energy sources to petroleum further contributed to shaping social perceptions of its centrality. In a clear hierarchy, the Commission considered the rationing of liquid fuels more important than the transport of solid fuels, despite the fact that these could help to supply the growing energy demand. A strategic and emblematic decision: the weight attributed to liquid fuels makes it clear that, in addition to the real dependence of its products, oil already had a prominent place in the social imagination, being seen as more relevant and more essential than any other energy resource at that moment.

#### **REQUESTS TO CROSS STATE LINES AND TRANSPORTATION ACTIVITIES**

The folders labelled “Special Traffic Licenses to Cross State Barriers” contain numerous requests from people and companies who needed to cross state lines with their cars, buses, trucks and tractors. This had been yet another restriction imposed by the CNP during the war: only vehicles with these special licenses could cross state lines. Just as in the case of motorcycles, this documentation allows us to observe the social profile of the country in the period, in which the expansion of industrialization and urbanization were perceptible. Both individuals and companies of all sizes sent requests to the CNP for a myriad of reasons, exposing the centrality and dependence from the onset of liquid fuels in daily life and in the development of the industry and the national trade.

An example of the restriction’s impact on daily life can be seen in the correspondence of Juvenal do Carmo Barbosa Júnior: a resident of Niterói, described as “unable to move around without continuing his massage treatment three times a week, after having undergone 11 surgical procedures”. He therefore requested that the Council “consent to an order for the use” of his car to cross the border into the Federal

District. Attached is a doctor's attestation. The CNP, "considering your state of health, authorizes you to come to Rio de Janeiro and return to Niterói (...) for three months".<sup>18</sup>

No less dramatic is the request of Anibal Winther, surveyor and second lieutenant of the Geographical Service of the Army. He asks to "transfer my furniture and household objects" by truck from Taubaté, a town in the state of São Paulo, to Rio de Janeiro, clarifying that "part of this luggage is a theodolite of the Geographical Service, some chickens and potted plants". The lieutenant explains that "having obtained the license of the municipality of Taubaté, this does not meet the requirements for the aforementioned belongings" to arrive in Rio. It seems that the licenses issued by municipal agencies were invalid at state borders and "the truck (...) is now in serious difficulties and retained in Bananal", a border town between the states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. His appeal was for the Council to assist him "in the face of this unpleasant situation and the imminence of seeing my small furniture, chickens and other objects of domestic use spoil". Winther also claims that he would be running the "serious risk of seeing my meagre prospects shaken as I am poor and transport costs are high". He requested that "the person in charge of the border be authorized to give passage to the truck". In response, a CNP representative writes to the State Governor of São Paulo and the Director of the Traffic Service authorizing "traffic between São Paulo and this Capital".<sup>19</sup> The different spheres of public power did not always work in harmony, but it is clear in this case that the Council exercised authority at the federal level and therefore its decisions overlapped prohibitions or restrictions of other organs.

The transportation and distribution of goods domestically entailed the traffic of trucks, pick-ups (and sometimes tractors) on Brazilian roads. To this end, some categories joined in their requests to cross state lines. This was the case with cattle dealers — it was by showing the strength of their demands as a category that cattle dealers from several

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18 File n. 3560, Box 1268, vol. 3, CNP / AN.

19 File n. 3560, Box 1268, vol. 3, CNP / AN

states got their special permits to cross state barriers. In a communication from the CME Supply Service, dated April 4, 1944, the Council was informed that “in repeated telegrams the frozen and salted meat industry representatives have requested the interference of this Service with the purpose of being granted free traffic (...) for the cars used by their cattle dealers”. The CME further explained that “the current regime, due to the delay it imposes, makes it difficult (...) to supply this capital and the city of São Paulo”. According to this explanation, the letter continues, “we decided to list the names of those dealers (...) confirming the allegations of the interested parties”. The Economic Mobilization Coordination maintained constant contact with the Council, interceding on behalf various stakeholders in obtaining permits and fuel quotas. Thus, on July 14, 1944, the list was sent to President Vargas with fifty-one names of cattle dealers who were authorized to “have free traffic between the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Goiás, Mato Grosso and Rio de Janeiro”. Due to the authorization, the CNP president asks the president himself for “the necessary approval”. The reasons for the exception granted to this category are also explained in the letter: the absence of fresh and salted meat would bring hardship to the population.<sup>20</sup>

Several cases exemplify the needs of different categories of petitioners that travelled on the country's roads: the trade union of Rio de Janeiro retailers, for example, asked the CNP for licenses for ten trucks “which are transporting foodstuffs to local markets”. The Triângulo Mineiro Rural Society, which had “almost six hundred members, almost all farmers or cattle dealers, whose only means of transport is the automobile”, wrote the CNP to protest against “full implementation of the decree” which prohibited free interstate traffic.<sup>21</sup> According to the request, the prohibition would create “a difficult situation for farmers resident [in] the city”, who were unable to reach their rural properties — “the entire Triângulo and the state of Goiás” would be affected by the restriction of road traffic, a fact which qualified as an “immense sacrifice”. The

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<sup>20</sup> File n. 3560, Box 1268, vol. 3, CNP / AN

<sup>21</sup> File n. 2732, Box 1320, CNP / AN

president of the Society, Rodrigues da Cunha, suggested that “police authorities or city halls” could issue licenses to their members. Like several other individual petitions from cattle, agriculture and poultry farmers, the request of the Triângulo Mineiro Rural Society was rejected.

Commercial travellers also requested rationing exceptions. In the words of one of the petitioners, “the nature of our industry cannot dispense with a rapid mode of transport”.<sup>22</sup> They were sellers of paper, fabrics, industrial scales, perfumes, “strings, ropes, shackles, hoses, towels, napkins”, most of whom travelled through various states offering their products. The Association of Commercial Representatives of São Paulo explained that “the commercial traveller uses his car to cross areas deprived of railroad service, located in distant regions”, besides acting as “liaison agent with the great producing centres of the country”. Even so, of the various petitions received by the Council, the few that were answered were rejected. This attitude suggests a classification of activities considered essential — such as the supply of food products — but also gives indications of the influence of certain categories of requests, the most notable being that of farmers and cattle dealers, who obtained exceptions sanctioned by the president of the republic himself.

## INDUSTRIES AND MACHINERY

Transport, fuel, speed, modernity. These are recurrent demands in the petitions. Oil is fuel not only for driving along the expanding road networks, but also for the machines that brought industrialization and feelings of modernity. If gasoline was the main fuel for automobiles, diesel and kerosene were responsible for the working of machines from various industries. In August of 1943, the National Glass Factory sent a petition to obtain these fuels for its machines. Reporting that up to September 1942, “it consumed 220 tons of tar to melt glass and provide work to about 490 workers”,<sup>23</sup> the petitioner lamented the fact that “Cia.

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22 File n. 2731, Box 1320, CNP / AN

23 File n. 3431, Box 1270, CNP / AN

Carris Luz e Força failed to provide this fuel” in October of that same year. It also said that a “commission of workers and industry bosses” had asked the CNP and thus obtained “an average of 120 tons of [diesel] oil”. The problem was that “this amount does not suffice for the whole month”, so they were at that moment “working an average of 18 to 20 days a month”. Having explained their situation, they asked for an increase in the rationed fuel, which the Council granted. The industrialization of the country was a focal point for national development and therefore deserved to have its energy demands met.

In any case, it was not always easy to obtain the necessary permits to increase the output of industrial machines. In October 1943, the Regniér Electric Machines and Electric Batteries Corporation wrote to the Council that, in addition to the production of batteries, it also had “a floor wax factory installed two months ago”.<sup>24</sup> They had tried to “reduce as much as possible the use of gasoline, which is indispensable to our armed forces”, but “despite our efforts to manufacture floor wax without the use of gasoline, they had not had a great result”. Faced with this difficulty, a special process was under development, which would use 50% less, seeking to “consume as little as possible of this valuable fuel”. It requested 1,000 litres of gasoline “which we will use in the manufacture of wax ... a product that will not only be sold to private commerce, but mainly to Public Departments”, since the firm “has been almost exclusively supplying the National Government”. The CNP authorized Atlantic Refining Co. of Brazil to supply 400 litres of pure gasoline per month.

Most petitions referred to monthly quotas of oil products — sometimes, however, the CNP authorized only a single allotment. An example of this situation is Metaloy Ltda, a “Chemical laboratory (...) for the manufacturing of metal alloys and ores, which are vital to the war industry”. It requested “one ton of fuel oil (...) for a combustion furnace experiment”,<sup>25</sup> and once that is approved, “a monthly quota of three

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<sup>24</sup> File n. 3466, Box 1275, CNP / AN

<sup>25</sup> File n. 3424, Box 1270, CNP / AN

tonnes”. For such a request, the CNP communicated directly with the supplier Caloric Co., authorizing “the company to supply (...) one ton of fuel oil once”. There is no indication of the repercussion of the experiment — no new requests of the company have been found.

Brazil’s vast territory meant that remote locations remained off the electric grid until well into the 20th century. In these regions, generators using diesel were essential to power machines and appliances. Therefore, non-industrial consumers of oil products — other than the gasoline used in transport — requested quotas for the use of smaller engines and machines. From the territory of Ponta Porã came two very similar petitions: they required fuel for the operation of refrigerators. Fernando Martinez, “established in Porto Esperança”, presented himself as a “diesel consumer” requesting 500 litres of fuel per month, to be used in the operation of his “refrigerating machine”, which was “the only one existing in Porto Esperança, a location which lacked comforts, with extremely high temperatures”.<sup>26</sup> The ice produced by his machine was used locally and also supplied the “restaurant cars of Noroeste do Brasil Rail on the route from Porto Esperança to Campo Grande and the passenger ship which operates the river cruise line from P. Esperança to Corumbá”. These could be considered sufficient reasons to explain the necessity of the monthly quota, but Martinez complemented his petition with the following argument: “the shutdown of his machine would bring great inconveniences to Porto Esperança, (...), which would be deprived of ice, *a product indispensable to any civilized place*” (emphasis added). The use of these adjectives is symptomatic, revealing the connections between the ‘indispensable’ use of petroleum and the sense of modernity of belonging to a ‘civilized place’ — which would only be possible through the continuity of oil supply.

A similar appeal was made by Bernardes e Cia. Ltda., established as “bar and ice cream shop” in the municipality of Maracajú, also in the territory of Ponta Porã. In writing a petition to the Council requesting a quota of diesel oil, the bar owner “finds it advisable to inform you

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26 File n. 3564, Box 1268, CNP / AN

that his establishment is the only one in this city that has a refrigerator, thanks to which patients deprived of ice have been rescued, most of whom are in serious health conditions”.<sup>27</sup> Porto Esperança and Maracajú were at the beginning of a transition to industrial modernity and in these remote areas of the country, the Great Acceleration took the form of the first refrigerators to arrive in the region.

## COMPLAINTS

The scope of activities of the National Petroleum Council during World War II was not limited to issuing licenses and establishing quotas. The CNP also had to deal with typical problems of times of rationing: black markets and proliferation of accusations of cheating. To that end, the Council was willingly assisted by the population, which wrote with revelations of irregularities in the distribution and use of rationed fuels.

The accusations had two preferred targets: foreigners and officials. The “revolting” fact that “a foreigner in Brazil does not comply with the law when all Brazilians are peacefully and patriotically conforming to the correct measures of our Government” caused a lot of commotion among the population. The general public wrote several accusations that were sometimes anonymous. This was the predominant tone in the revelations made about the activities of people like the “foreigner (Turkish or Armenian) Jorge Jabour”, a “citizen of German nationality”, “a gentleman who calls himself Brazilian, married to a foreign, Hungarian lady” and also “a French lady (...) married to a prominent Portuguese merchant”.<sup>28</sup>

The foreigners were generally accused of driving around in their private cars: the Hungarian-Brazilian couple “apparently bought a new luxury car” which was always waiting for its owners at the door of the building where the whistle-blower lived — the letter is signed simply “Fellow citizen and admirer”. The fact that “these people do not respect

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<sup>27</sup> File n. 3564, Box 1268, CNP / AN

<sup>28</sup> File 2007, Box 1320, vol. 2, CNP / AN



the Government's determination ... has caused me great disgust", wrote the angry citizen. Another complaint, made by "a *carioca*,<sup>29</sup> very Brazilian" as the anonymous letter is signed, stated that "the truck is used for the purchases of the lady (the French woman) and to take her to the farm that she owns, from where it comes loaded with fruits and vegetables for their private use". "The Frenchwoman", continues the accuser, "is disregarding our land and our people all the time" by behaving in such a way. The German national, a "pocketknife factory owner", was accused of being "the owner of two private cars parked in an unknown location" — father and son were accused of driving around improperly in such cars. To verify the information, the CNP could look for the "soldier of the 5th Battalion Police, Euclides Santoro, who is commonly found in the Café Portuense or around Meyer",<sup>30</sup> where the German citizen resided. In addition to undue use, there was the issue of fuel rationing and distribution. "Here, a foreigner, every other day, has gasoline and kerosene; I a Brazilian, only once a month", said the telegram of Daniel Nascimento Montalvão, who also announced: "expect revealing letter".

Both accusations were also made about officials: mayors, police officers, department directors, public agents and tax collectors responsible for the rationed fuel distribution stations were accused of breaking the rules of road travel, distribution and sales. The accusations came from the entire country.<sup>31</sup> In Caxias, a town in the greater Rio de Janeiro area, "a city inspector arbitrarily distributes gasoline", himself owning "worthless trucks and automobiles" that "only exist for the purpose of receiving the quota of gasoline". Another inspector was accused of having "delivered to a single driver" the three barrels "referring to the quota of the month of August". From the center-west state of Goiás, a citizen from Anápolis wrote: "Our city is going through a crisis of gasoline. Not because we do not have the product, but because the competent authorities do not take action against the offenders" when fuel "is sold for a

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29 Person born in Rio de Janeiro.

30 A neighbourhood of Rio.

31 File 2007, Box 1320, vol. 2, CNP / AN

much higher price than the official price”. Meanwhile, in the southern town of Laguna, “it is the mayor who does not observe” the gasoline rationing, “consuming it for his private service and even for the benefit of others, to the detriment of the cause that our Country advocates alongside free peoples”. The mayor of Silvestre Ferraz, in the state of Minas Gerais, was also accused of having retained and hidden three gasoline barrels that were supposed to be distributed to the population. Corrupt officials taking advantage of a moment of crisis seemed to be a common trope in the war rationing.

These sources indicate a large black market in fuel and the efforts of the CNP and some other government sectors to curb such practices. To that end, the accusations that came to the Council were distributed and circulated among the Police General Inspectorate, the Traffic Inspectorate (also connected to the Civil Police Chief), City Halls and State Governments. The traffic authorities either cleared the complaints or levied fines for improper traffic, while police chiefs stepped in in cases of irregularities in the distribution or black market. The authorities generally mentioned the measures taken — the Federal District Police Chief typically informed: “as in similar cases, the perpetrators have been punished (...) continuing to curb abuses, after ascertaining the respective accusations,” “[a] fine has been imposed on the driver of the car (...)” or that “this Office has taken the necessary steps”. At times, however, the answer was different: “This Inspectorate dismissed the accusation”.

Accusations generally focus on the two subjects examined so far; there were, however, some more serious ones that demonstrated the extent of the problem of the country’s supply during the war. In a small card marked with a “classified” stamp, Major Landry Sales wrote to CNP about “an international telephone conversation intercepted by the censors”. The call, which took place in August 1942, was a conversation between Geraldo Gunert, a resident of the federal capital, and Alfredo Capaglia, in Buenos Aires: “We have a lot of oil on board (...). I find it difficult to dispatch the oil (...) because of the control. Better dispatch in Montevideo. I think CNP would not consent to the shipment”. Although the outcome to this story was not found in the volume analyzed,

this small passage reveals the dimensions the black market could take: from the three drums hidden in a small town to a boat with “a lot of oil on board”.<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Like all other cases related to this period of rationing, the extension of the black market and the inflamed attitudes of citizens towards irregularities also seem to point in the same direction: the pervasive nature of the use of fossil fuels in Brazilian society in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The social imagination, impregnated with concepts of modernity, speed and comfort associated with the use of petroleum products, was also saturated with ideas of nationalism and the need for control over misuse and defense of resources by patriotic interests. Several intertwined spheres of daily life were permeated by images of what access to oil represented: the possibility of becoming an industrialized and modern nation. As such, oil in Brazil was inscribed in the ideological framework of industrial modernity. It was researched, explored, consumed and industrialized. At the same time, oil was re-signified, imagined and filled with symbolic capital. These processes transformed oil from a mineral element to the fastest route to *the progress of the Brazilian nation* and the very representation of its *civilization advancement*.<sup>33</sup>

The Great Acceleration is usually understood to have started about 1945. Most of the sources discussed here pre-date this date by two or three years. Still, the issues highlighted in the analysis of these petitions allow us to consider them within the expanding industrial modernity which is at the core of the Great Acceleration. They might be considered an avant-garde development that preceded the full onset of the process, which can be situated in a slightly more elastic chronology of the Great Acceleration. Indeed, in Brazil as in many countries, the exigencies of wartime motivated state actions that prepared the way for the Great

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32 File 2007, Box 1320, vol. 2, CNP / AN.

33 Recurring expressions in the documents analysed during the research.

Acceleration. The federal government's regulation of oil and transport helped to signal their importance as sectors within the national economy. And the deprivations of rationing inspired Brazilian citizens, when peace came, to look forward to a life with fewer constraints on mobility and the use of automobiles, machines and oil.

Brazilians, both in urban centers and remote locations, did not wish to step back from the gains represented by the speed of their vehicles, the products of their industrial machines, the comfort of their appliances. The Great Acceleration was on its way and slowing down seemed like sliding away from civilization. Modernity and progress materialized in the form of the first refrigerators to arrive in an isolated region, the second motorcycle registered in the Amazon, and the moving truck speedily crossing state lines. Cars, motorcycles, trucks, and diesel-fueled machines may have been around for only one or two generations, but were now seen as essential. It is a moment that marks the deep fossil fuel dependence that underpins this ideal of modernity — connecting, in the same arc, human activity and creativity, the use of machines and fossil fuels, seen as indispensable to bring about the desired progress of a modern nation.

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