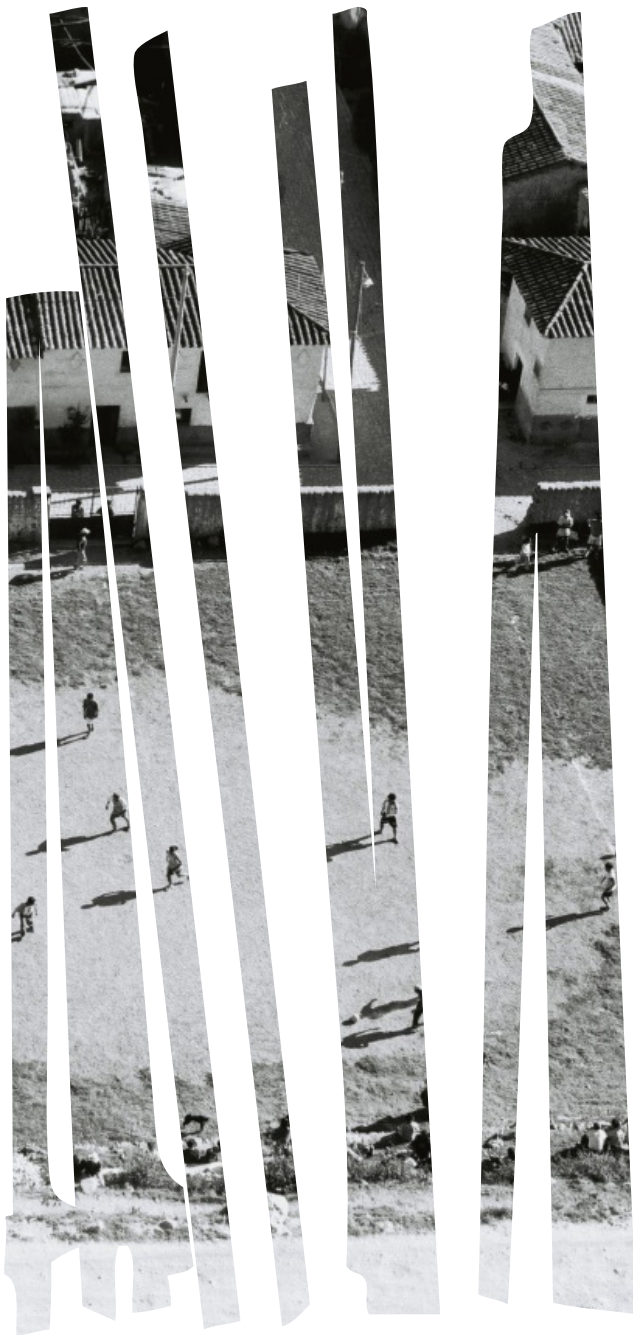


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**Agrarian Colonization and
the Problem of Conviviality-Inequality in
Twentieth-Century Latin America**

Georg Fischer



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Agrarian Colonization and the Problem of Conviviality-Inequality in Twentieth-Century Latin America

Georg Fischer

Abstract

This paper examines agrarian colonization as a distinctive state development policy in twentieth-century Latin America. After discussing its intellectual roots in the nineteenth century, the study explores post-World War II agrarian colonization policies in Bolivia, Colombia, and Brazil. Proposing conviviality-inequality as an analytical lens, the paper contends that the concept of colonization, rooted in European colonialism, evolved with Latin Americans aligning it with national policy goals after 1930, particularly after World War II. Finally, the paper suggests that adopting a conviviality-inequality perspective enables us to challenge linear narratives and to explore the complex interplay between politics, nature, and society in the history of agrarian colonization. Although agrarian colonization aligns with the emergence of the Plantationocene, local specificity reveals diverse convivialities embedded in conflicting rural futures envisioned by different stakeholders.

Keywords: agrarian colonization | Latin America | rural development

About the author

Georg Fischer (Mecila Senior Fellow, 2021) holds a PhD in history from Freie Universität Berlin and an MA in history from Essex University. He works as an associate professor for Brazilian Studies at the Department for Global Studies at Aarhus University. He is broadly interested in nature-society relations, science and knowledge, and North-South inequalities. His ongoing research focuses on state-led agricultural colonization in Cold War Latin America as the materialization of contested visions of rurality. Having previously worked on the history of knowledge about Brazil's mineral resources, he maintains a strong interest in material history (*Stoffgeschichte*), natural collections, infrastructures and supply chains. He is further interested in frames of global justice and emerging transnational memory practices in the context of climate change. His recent publications include "Showcasing a High-Modernist Landscape: Spatial Imaginaries and Rural Development in Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1970s" (*Comparativ*, 2022); "Agrarian Colonization and Indigenous 'Integration': The Cotoca Project in Eastern Bolivia, 1955-62" (in: Heinrich Hartmann and Julia Tischler (eds.), *Planting Seeds of Knowledge: Agriculture and Education in Rural Societies in the Twentieth Century*, Berghahn, 2023).

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1. Introduction

Agrarian colonization in modern Latin America changed social structures, demographic distributions as well as the meanings and material composition of vast ecosystems. It bolstered the emergence of late twentieth-century farming systems that relied on the implements, practices and bodies of knowledge of the “Green Revolution”: the mechanization and scientificization of agricultural production; the prominent agency of rural cooperatives; public credit and other state incentives; the growth of transnational corporations supplying agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides. It led to the production of “second natures” through soil improvement, deforestation, introduction of new plants and crop varieties as well as infrastructure development. The agrarian colonization of vast areas was embedded in existing social structures and triggered new social dynamics such as internal and international migratory flows. Agricultural colonies often served as sites of social experimentation and engineering and engendered new forms of agrarian citizenship and economic integration as well as exclusion and inequality.

In the course of the twentieth century, the term “agrarian colonization” was used to describe a variety of processes of settlement and cultivation in areas which policymakers and techno-scientific experts considered to be lacking integration with the national economy. Authors referred to such areas using a broad range of terms, including “frontier”, “pioneer fringe”, “pioneer belt”, “*frente pioneira*”, “marginal lands”, “*zonas colonizables*”. There were also many varieties of projects and processes which were termed “colonization”:¹ “spontaneous” colonization denoted uncontrolled migratory flows of smallholder peasants or squatters who often moved into new areas following (or anticipating) the expansion of the transport infrastructure. “Semi-directed” colonization schemes often involved settlers coming from the same regions of origin and who received some form of “agronomic and educational assistance, including housing, land clearance, water supply and schools, as well as food and tools” (Eastwood and Pollard 1985: 67). “Directed” colonization went yet a step further in that all phases of the establishment of an agricultural settlement – from the recruitment of colonists to the marketing of crops – were organized or closely assisted by state agencies and technical experts. My discussion is centred on semi-directed and directed colonization schemes, as these allow for close examination of official discourses, expert communities and transnational circulation of ideas, all stored in the archives of states, non-government organizations or international organizations. Yet although there are historical studies of individual colonies (e.g., Dutra e Silva 2017) and groups of colonists or specific regions (e.g., Nobbs-Thiessen 2020), there are no studies of twentieth-century agrarian

¹ This classification is largely based on Eastwood and Pollard (1985) who evaluate colonization experiences in the Bolivian lowlands, but similar categorizations can be found in studies of other countries.

colonization as a “category of development knowledge” (Sackley 2011: 482) and specific kind of state intervention that mobilized settlers, transnational experts and participants in international scholarly debates alike. This working paper assembles elements of this history and suggests a periodization according to which the middle of the twentieth century marks an inflection point.

In this working paper, I proceed in four steps: I first trace some of the main intellectual roots of agrarian colonization since the nineteenth century. After discussing some general features and key actors of agrarian colonization in post-World War II Latin America, I delve into three local cases from Bolivia, Colombia, and Brazil to highlight the variations and local adaptations of agrarian colonization policies. In the concluding section, I present some hypotheses to introduce an analytical angle of conviviality-inequality to the history of agrarian colonization. Here I propose a broad notion of “conviviality” covering both the interactions between human communities affected, in one way or the other, by agrarian colonization as well as those between colonists and non-human environments. My discussion explores whether the convivialities engendered by modern agrarian colonization share characteristics with the socio-natures invoked by the literature on the “Plantationocene”.

An article-length treatment of a subject as multifaceted and large in scope as agrarian colonization in modern Latin America necessarily has to be selective and can only provide some building blocks for more systematic and comparative histories. Nevertheless, the methodological choice of combining intellectual histories, even if painted with broad brushstrokes, with an analysis of concrete rural development interventions gives us some good indications for crucial inflection points within the larger history of agrarian colonization as a specific category of development knowledge and practice built into nation building processes in post-Independence Latin America. I argue that the concept of colonization used to describe settlement policies in Latin America (and elsewhere) has significant roots in European colonialism, manifesting in both its outward-facing, imperial form and its inward-facing form of domestic colonialism. Intellectually, emerging from the universe of colonial thinking during the period of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century colonial globality, it was deeply entwined with notions of race, whiteness, and “improvement”. From about 1930 onwards, but especially following World War II, Latin Americans gradually appropriated the concept and aligned it with more specific national policy goals – even though these were often reactions to global events and processes. This integration occurred in response to societal issues and political pressure. The international context, shaped by the Cold War, global food security concerns, and population growth, created challenges and opportunities for financial support and knowledge transfer, as rural inequalities and the need to increase food production were perceived by actors both from the Global North and the Global

South as legitimate and globally significant political projects. Consequently, as I show in my case studies, the concept of agrarian colonization was continually applied to and further elaborated in new contexts, including “Indigenous integration”, rural pacification, land distribution, and the introduction of new technologies and agrarian capitalism. As a result, new constellations of human and more-than-human conviviality-inequality emerged in colonization zones. The map of twentieth-century state-led agrarian colonization in Latin America includes monoculture croplands from which smallholders have been largely removed as well as diverse, mosaic-like multispecies landscapes and the ruins of ghost towns.

2. What Was Agrarian Colonization?

“Colonization” was a standard term in the political discourse of young Latin American states since the nineteenth century. In Brazil, reports issued by provincial presidents routinely included sections on the progress and impediments of “colonization”, the Mexican government established a Secretaría de Fomento, Colonización, Industria y Comercio [Secretariat of Development, Colonization, Industry, and Commerce] in 1853, and intellectuals all across the sub-continent produced lengthy treatises on the need for, obstacles to, and political measures to foster “colonization” (Rosales 1853; Souza 1875; Herrero y Espinosa 1882; Gouchón 1889). Semantically, the terms “colonization” and “immigration” were closely connected and were sometimes used interchangeably. These overlapping meanings indicate that the overarching goal of colonization as a state project in the Latin American context was the population of a territory often framed as “empty” and, consequently, the expansion of territorial control by weak nation-states. Elites regarded attracting immigrants, preferably white Europeans, as a highly desirable objective in order to expand agricultural production or to phase out coercive labour regimes which, like slavery, were increasingly falling out of favour. Indeed, Latin American nation-building had “xenophilic” characteristics (Goebel 2016: 9) – not least due to Latin American elites’ close alignment with European ideas about race and civilization. This understanding of “colonization” as the bio-political underpinning to nation-building, resembled a meaning of “internal colonization” found, for example, in the border regions of East Prussia or in what many historians call Russia’s “self-colonization” (Etkind 2015).

Given these intellectual inclinations, it is not surprising that European colonial studies – the study of processes and policies driving European overseas expansion, white settlement and colonizer-colonized relationships – left a strong intellectual imprint on Latin American elites’ writings on “colonization”. One example is French economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, whose prize-winning *De la colonisation chez les peuples modernes* (1882) figures as a key reference in studies on colonization in Argentina, Uruguay

and Brazil (Souza 1875; Herrero y Espinosa 1882; Gouchón 1889). Next to his strong emphasis on the demographics of colonial expansion and his preference for agrarian settler colonies over plantation or trade colonies, Leroy-Beaulieu's exclamation that "[c]olonization is [a people's] power of reproduction, its expansion and multiplication across spaces; it is the submission of the universe, or a vast part of it, to its language, customs, ideas, and laws" and his assertion that "[a] people that colonizes is a people laying the foundations of its greatness in the future and its future supremacy" (Leroy-Beaulieu 1882: 641–642, author's translation) clearly resonated with post-independence nation-building projects across Latin America, connecting colonization policies across the continent with discourses on Europe's civilizing mission and white supremacy characteristic of nineteenth-century "colonial globality" (Conrad 2006).

However, "colonization" in nineteenth-century Latin America was also concerned with non-foreign-born populations, and politicians and interpreters of Latin American societies frequently raised the question how states could mobilize a native workforce which they largely perceived as idle, unproductive or isolated in remote corners of the national territory. This concern found its expression in vagrancy laws, missionary centres run by secular directors intended to instil a productivist work ethic in Indigenous populations, prison colonies, model farms, and the like. Such initiatives resembled Global North discourses and practices around what political philosopher Barbara Arneil has termed "domestic colonization" (Arneil 2017). Whereas common definitions describe "colonization" as the process of establishing colonial rule, i.e., foreign domination over territories and peoples by geographically distant metropolises, Arneil has demonstrated that such an understanding overlooks the ideologies and practices of "domestic colonization" that manifested themselves in societies undergoing imperial expansion. Such practices included establishing agricultural colonies for marginalized populations like the "idle poor" or progressive-utopian colonies for former slaves and their descendants. Arneil identifies three fundamental principles of domestic colonialism in nineteenth-century Europe and North America: segregation aiming at separating colonized people from urban surroundings; agrarian labour aiming at increased production and therapeutical redemption of outcasts; and improvement, which could also take the shape of self-improvement, as a moral principle opposing the idea of punishment (Arneil 2017: 5). As transnational and global history approaches to colonialism have shown, domestic colonial practices were inextricably entangled with the emergence of labour regimes and forms of state control in formal, overseas colonial contexts. Yet, in the Latin American context, the principle of segregation may only be applicable in specific cases such as prison colonies and Indigenous missions, whereas in general strategies of aggressively "uplifting" marginalized population groups consisted precisely in drawing them closer to or interspersing them with immigrant

colonies – a policy goal which sometimes clashed with segregationist preferences of immigrant communities (Schulze 2014).

In the first half of the twentieth century, new trends in colonization studies emerged. Although formal colonial empires ceased to be the main empirical subject of this body of scholarship, now mainly produced by geographers, racial and Eurocentric undertones persisted. A new version of frontier studies elaborated at U.S. universities gained particular influence over this international scholarship. This field's guiding interest was to identify those geographical zones that were still available for human settlement and to understand the structural factors which would allow for their development. Isaiah Bowman (1878-1950), president of the American Geographical Association from 1915 to 1935 and thereafter professor at Johns Hopkins University, and his work on the world's "pioneer fringes" became a central international reference in this literature. Bowman took up and internationalized the intellectual tradition of historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), who had affirmed in an influential essay from 1893 that the westward expansion of white settlement in the United States had been concluded and that the frontier had been "closed" (Turner 1921). This led him to ask how the end of the age of pioneering would impact American culture and democracy.

Bowman set out to translate these questions to what he considered a fundamentally different twentieth-century context. He also disagreed with some of Turner's conclusions, arguing that the idea of the "closing frontier" ignored the persistent pioneering character of many regions within the U.S. To the contrary, the "pioneering belt", a zone whose economic and cultural integration with the economic centres was still ambiguous, was noticeably alive. The massive problems farmers of the Great Plains experienced during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s showed how poorly they had adapted to the natural environments in which they had settled (Bowman 1971 [1931]; Worster 1979; Cronon 1992). However, instead of just producing new interpretations of the U.S. frontier, Bowman aimed at studying pioneer fringes on a global scale. By means of comparison, he sought to elaborate general principles and to establish a "science of settlement" (Vance 1933). Bowman considered such applied geographical knowledge to be an indispensable tool for state agencies, since, in contrast to nineteenth-century pioneers, twentieth-century colonists demanded robust infrastructure, health care, credit and insurance against harm, all of which meant that public administrations bore much greater responsibility than in the past to assist settlers.

Bowman identified the most important pioneer belts in the transition zones between natural barriers like the Sahara desert or the Amazon rainforest and the established demographic and industrial centres. Large parts of the South American interior met his criteria, especially the grassland and savanna biomes of Brazil, Bolivia, and Colombia. To be sure, Bowman's idea of "pioneering" clearly had racial connotations.

Essentially, he was interested in potential areas of settlement for white, European-descended people. Although he avoided determinisms such as theories of biological adaptability and degeneration, he assumed that tropical forest zones could only be colonized by Asians, whereas Europeans would have a cultural preference for more open landscapes and temperate climates (Bowman 1971 [1931]: 51–52). Likewise, he ascribed to European-descended farmers a natural inclination to adopt advanced technology in their quest to subdue nature: “To ask the Chinese to machine their land is like asking American farmers to discard the disk harrow for the hoe” (Bowman 1971 [1931]: 38).

European and U.S. geographers disseminated such applied, normative approaches to the study of human settlement in Latin America through a range of focused studies. One particularly prominent figure in this regard was German geographer Leo Waibel (1888-1951). Waibel worked as a consultant to the Brazilian Conselho Nacional de Geografia [National Geography Council] between 1946-50, just after spending six years in exile in the U.S., during which he participated in the classified “M Project” launched by president F.D. Roosevelt and led by Bowman with the aim to identify possible target regions for a large-scale post-war refugee resettlement campaign (Bell 2016; Smith 2004; Kohlhepp 2013). In Brazil, his work centred on elaborating measures to populate the vast interior, on examining potential locations for the new capital Brasília, and on formulating policies to foster European agrarian colonization (Pfeifer 1955).

Waibel’s work offers good examples for the shifting frames of the “science of settlement” between the 1910s and the 1950s. For instance, Waibel’s interest in the divergent prospects of forest and grassland colonization (“Wald- und Kampkolonisation”) stemmed from his academic socialization in the context of German colonialism in Africa (Gräbel 2015) – an aspect that seems to have been largely ignored by the existing scholarship on his influence on Brazilian geography. The spatiality of open-range grasslands had a special appeal to colonialist mind-sets. As a participant of a scientific expedition to the colony of Kamerun, Waibel examined possibilities of opening up the eastern and northern savannas for colonization by white settlers (Waibel 1914a, 1914b). In search for anthropogeographic analogies, he referred to the Brazilian State of São Paulo. In his view, the historical trajectory of that region showed how European-descended settlers were able to overcome the obstacle posed by a hilly rainforest and to found an agrarian civilization teeming with creative energy in an ecological setting reminiscent of the interior of the Germany’s African colony. In the early twentieth century, Waibel argued, São Paulo represented Brazil’s “spiritual core”: “This, of course, is primarily due to the large white population, but the latter, in turn, is geographically determined by the healthy climate, the nature of the grasslands and the fertile soil” (Waibel 1914b: 284).

In Brazil, he maintained his interest in European settlement by studying the past and present of diverse immigrant colonies in the southern part of the country. The contrast between colonization projects in forest, grassland and transition zones continued to figure prominently in Waibel's work, as can be seen in his *Die europäische Kolonisation Südbrasilien*, a main result of his research in Brazil published posthumously in 1955 (Waibel 1955). The colony of Carambeí, where Dutch immigrants produced dairy products and grew rice, corn, and potatoes since 1930, caught his attention, since it was located in the Campos Gerais, a high plateau in the state of Paraná, which for a long time had been considered a sterile open landscape dominated by grasses and scrubs similar to the Campos Cerrados further north (Waibel 1955: 127–129). Waibel saw in the colony's experience the confirmation of two hypotheses that were central to his work on Brazil: firstly, it corroborated his critique of the widespread habit of separating livestock farming and land cultivation, which he considered a major factor for the rapid exhaustion of forest soils in the European colonies of southern Brazil (Waibel 1955: 131–133; Relly 2020: 9). Second, it supported his optimistic view regarding agrarian colonization in the savanna-like environments of the Brazilian interior.

However, Waibel now increasingly saw his studies of different European colonization experiences as important groundwork to support ongoing national colonization campaigns in the context of the “March to the West” (Marcha para o Oeste) initiated by president Getúlio Vargas in the late 1930s and aimed at fostering agrarian colonization and infrastructure development in the vast Centre-West region. The March to the West was well in line with Waibel's conviction of the colonizability of the Campos Cerrados and he denounced the mistaken assumption of Brazilians that these zones were unsuitable for crop cultivation. Waibel outlined the kind of farming that could turn the Campos Cerrados into agricultural lands and a target area of future colonization schemes, namely mechanization, crop rotation, permanent cultivation, fire prevention, deep ploughing, liming, and fertilizer use (Waibel 1948: 550–552). Yet, he remained sceptical regarding the role of poor Brazilian peasants in this process, fearing they would reproduce long-standing ills of Brazilian agriculture, namely slash and burn cultivation, and land rotation (Waibel 1947: 25). Waibel based his concerns on observations made during a visit to the Colonia Agrícola Nacional de Goiás (Agricultural Colony of Goiás, CANG) in the forest region named Mato Grosso de Goiás north of Anápolis (Dutra e Silva 2017).

3. Varieties of Agrarian Colonization in Post-World War II Latin America

Seen from a wider angle, however, initiatives like the CANG – started in 1941 – arguably mark a watershed in the history of agrarian colonization in Latin America.

Latin American governments by now had appropriated and re-elaborated agrarian colonization as a distinct category of development knowledge and state practice, though always in reaction to global events and processes as well as in conversation with transnational knowledge flows. To be sure, especially in the late 1940s and 1950s, international migratory flows remained important, as Latin American governments tried to channel migrants from war-torn Europe and East Asia to their colonization zones or, as in the case of 1950s Bolivia, granted experienced Mennonite farmers privileges to settle in the country's eastern lowlands. Still, on a larger scale, agrarian colonization gradually transformed from a measure associated with "uplift" through the introduction of foreigners and the opening up of new frontiers into a flexible, adaptable policy package intended to foster national integration by targeting specific domestic groups following a range of varying policy goals. Among these goals, land reform, demographic redistribution and food production figured prominently. Land reform initiatives aimed at rectifying historical inequities and fostering social justice. Land tenure became a crucial issue in the context of the global Cold War, as experts from different ideological camps identified unequal land distribution as a key factor driving rural unrest. Agrarian colonization came to be seen as a "conservative" version of land reform, as it promised to broaden access to land without structural redistribution. Demographics were another major concern, and both planners and politicians saw in agrarian colonization a possible "population valve" capable of reducing regional demographic imbalances and alleviating the pressure on cities in the context of a growing "rural exodus". Urban and overall population growth led to increasing anxieties over countries' food supplies and lack of self-sufficiency. At the same time, scientists developed new technological packages for increased yields that seemed adaptable to multiple ecologies. Over time, institutional and financial arrangements were established which enabled policymakers to roll out Green Revolution-style rural orders across vast landscapes, often through state-led agrarian colonization. To show the diversity in Latin American appropriations of agrarian colonization, this section discusses three local cases from Bolivia, Colombia, and Brazil.

Projects of agrarian colonization in post-World War II Latin America engaged diverse stakeholders: national governments and their specialized agencies – including development authorities such as the Corporación Boliviana de Fomento (Bolivian Development Corporation) or the various national land reform agencies such as INCRA (Brazil), INCORA (Colombia), CORA (Chile), IERAC (Ecuador) – driven by agendas of economic development, land distribution, and territorial expansion, served as primary architects and implementers of colonization projects. Private entrepreneurs, motivated by opportunities for land acquisition and economic profit, often took the lead or partnered with authorities, invested capital and provided expertise to facilitate settlements and initiate production. Grassroot initiatives, emerging from local communities, political

movements, rural cooperatives or unions seeking new prospects or addressing land distribution concerns, also became driving forces influencing political decisions. Often the success or failures of colonization schemes depended on the relationships between state authorities and such civil society actors. Simultaneously, international organizations and transnational experts, influenced by global policy trends and development ideologies, participated in these projects, providing financial support, technical expertise, and agricultural knowledge. When examining the actors involved in colonization policies, it is crucial to adopt a nuanced perspective that assumes neither strict top-down or bottom-up dynamics but rather acknowledges a diverse array of relationships of cooperation and co-optation. The interactions among these stakeholders highlight the complex nature of agrarian colonization in Latin America, where local, national, and international interests converged and sometimes clashed.

On a transnational level, knowledge flows and centres emerged where expertise in colonization took shape in distinctive ways. Many of these arenas were associated with pan-American institutions or U.S. collaboration under the Alliance for Progress. The examples of the Instituto Interamericano de Ciencias Agrícolas (Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences) in Turrialba, Costa Rica (IICA, established in 1948), and the Centro Interamericano de Reforma Agraria (Inter-American Centre for Agrarian Reform) in Bogotá, Colombia (CIRA, founded in 1964), illustrate such trends in hemispheric cooperation, which, in turn, were shaped by Cold War politics and the perceived need to offer non-revolutionary answers to the increasing demand for more equitable land distribution (Puente 2020). While U.S. research centres like the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison were crucial reference points, it is essential to emphasize that significant and lasting networks of Latin American rural development experts emerged from IICA and CIRA.² Latin American agronomists or social workers were also part of the expert pool from which international organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) drew when engaging in agrarian colonization projects – although we lack studies on the patterns of expert recruitment within these organizations. In addition to trans-Latin American knowledge flows and expert networks, scholarship and alumni networks of private foundations such as the Rockefeller or Ford Foundations were equally vital for the training of rural development experts. Furthermore, there were arenas where practical experiences in rural development projects could be gained or served as models for training content, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (Andrade 2022). Its integrated development approach, with a focus on energy and transportation infrastructure, was a significant

² I owe my insights into the significance of these transnational knowledge hubs to the intensive exchange with Carolina Hormaza, from whom I have learned a great deal about transnational knowledge production related to agrarian colonization.

source of inspiration for geographically focused development authorities throughout Latin America.

3.1 Agrarian Colonization and Indigenous Integration (Bolivia)

If up until around 1950, the idea of agrarian colonization had been entwined with a colonial globality in which white farmers figured as the only possible “shapers” of frontier environments, by then it became increasingly enmeshed with discourses and practices of modernization and development that diversified the spectrum of actors. In Latin America in particular, social scientists and policymakers increasingly discussed agrarian colonization as a problem within the complex of land reform. At the same time, hitherto marginal biomes such as savannas, dry forests, or the Amazon rainforest experienced a re-interpretation and became spaces of latent modernity that were no longer marked by sterility, isolation and hardship but imbued with futurity and opportunity. Rising concerns about uncontrolled, regionally uneven demographic growth put these peripheries into the limelight and called for bold state action.

A case in point is the Bolivian land reform initiated by the Víctor Paz Estenssoro government in 1953.³ Whereas in the highlands the reform intended to end the *hacienda* system and to replace it with a class of smallholder peasants organized in rural unions, in the lowlands its most expressive consequence was agrarian colonization. Especially in the department of Santa Cruz, agricultural colonies founded by European, Okinawan or Mennonite immigrants, the Bolivian army, state agencies, or international organizations mushroomed (Nobbs-Thiessen 2020). Ecologically, the Oriente is composed of very different biomes including rainforest, dry forest and patches of savanna. Large parts of the department of Santa Cruz can be classified as a transitional zone between the Dry Chaco to the south and the Amazon basin to the north. Multiple expert reports that formed the basis of the colonization efforts of the 1950s, presented the region invariably as “underused” and “undeveloped” and framed it as an outlet for the demographic pressures in the highland (Heath et al. 1969). Furthermore, developing the region promised a solution to food shortages and chronic trade imbalances.

The early 1950s marked a decisive confluence of national and international concerns in the Andean region, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Andean Indian Programme (AIP) involving various UN organizations and national government agencies (Maurel 2011; Rens 1961). While the Paz Estenssoro government focused on creating a “modern” Indigenous peasantry, international organizations such as the International Labour Organization paid increasing attention to Indigenous issues,

3 The following section is based on Fischer 2023.

prompting a UN mission in 1952 that proposed a technical assistance program for Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, emphasizing the concept of socio-economic “integration”. This concept was later enshrined in the ILO Convention 107 of 1957 and reflected the ILO’s broader modernization agenda. The AIP included an experiment in Indigenous agrarian colonization involving the resettlement of highland Indigenous people to the lowlands. Supported by various UN organizations, the Cotoca colony became a critical experiment to assess the adaptation of Indigenous people to lowland conditions, which was seen as a critical precondition for addressing the country’s uneven population distribution and socio-economic disparities.

The majority of colonists in Cotoca hailed from Calcha in the Department of Potosí. The social workers responsible for the recruitment of colonists chose this *cantón* because of the high number of male *calcheños* who regularly travelled to the Bolivian valleys or the Argentine sugar plantations to work as seasonal labourers. The men’s experience in lowland agricultural labour as well as the women’s experience in managing the community’s affairs during their husbands’ periods of absence convinced the experts that the *calcheños* might become successful settlers in the Oriente. The colonists received individual plots of land and became members of a cooperative with land which the colonists cultivated collectively under the guidance of an FAO expert. Development workers undertook efforts to instil the values of rural cooperativism in the colonists, a strategy which ILO officials considered to be in line with Indigenous notions of community as epitomized by the Andean *ayllu*. As I have argued elsewhere (Fischer 2023), such adaptations of European and North American concepts and forms of organization – as well as the integration of Andean techniques at the expense of motorized agriculture – represent a “low-modernist” approach to rural development, taking into account local knowledge and practices while steering them in directions compatible with modernization-inspired transformation.

As the Cotoca experiment was implemented, the technical staff reflected critically on its impacts. For instance, the project’s Haitian-born social worker discussed the negative impacts of the development intervention on women, who were stripped of important roles in community life. Later evaluations of the Cotoca colony emphasized high desertion rates and a lack of stable community life. A 1973 study revealed that only 80 out of 320 families remained (Stearman 1973: 286). Observers argued that the experts sent by UN organizations and the Corporación Boliviana de Fomento (Bolivian Development Corporation) had provided overly generous assistance to settlers and failed to give incentives for self-improvement and entrepreneurship, but that the project had proven the highlanders’ adaptability to the new climate, soil, diet, and to a labour regime dictated by the cooperative, market-oriented agricultural production (Monheim 1965: 51–64). Therefore, Cotoca did serve as an important reference point

for subsequent Indigenous colonization in the lowlands. In the 1960s, regions near Santa Cruz attracted increasing numbers of highlanders and foreigners alike. In this sense, the Cotoca colony marked an important step towards merging the ideals of Indigenous integration with practices of agrarian colonization and rural development.

3.2 Agrarian Colonization and Pacification (Colombia)

Another example of how Latin American governments imbued “colonization” with new and localized meanings is the attempt of the Colombian state to deescalate rural violence and to promote rural development by resettling internal refugees from conflict zones in the mountains to the Eastern lowlands (Torres 2019: 136). Such policies gained prominence after 1958, when liberals and conservatives agreed on a political pact (the “National Front”) led by newly elected president Alberto Lleras Camargo in order to put an end to hostilities between liberal and conservative guerrilla groups. While this power-sharing arrangement led to the demobilization of these armed groups, the structural factors underlying the bloody conflict, which had been going on in different phases since the murder of charismatic liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948, persisted. The conflict known as “La Violencia” (The Violence) had uprooted scores of rural dwellers who had become internal refugees in search of land and protection.

Regardless of different interpretations among the political actors comprising the National Front, in 1958 a Special Commission for Rehabilitation was instituted with the aim to assist families who had lost their livelihoods during the conflict and, in this way, reduce the likelihood of future violence (Sánchez Gómez 1988). For this purpose, the government entrusted the public rural development bank Caja Agraria (Agricultural Bank) with the task of building social and transport infrastructure, including schools, health posts, roads, and bridges, competencies that were transferred to the Caja from the Instituto de Colonización y Inmigración (Colonization and Immigration Institute). In the first phase, the Caja’s objective was to settle 1,300 families in six colonization zones in the Eastern lowlands, three along the Ariari river and three along the Caquetá river (Brücher 1977: 15). The Rehabilitation Program’s *comisariato* built warehouses in the colonial hamlets on the Ariari, where colonists and local peasants could purchase agricultural inputs and sell their harvests at stable prices (Torres 2019: 139). As Carolina Hormaza has shown based on a report prepared by the Colombian government for a technical meeting organized by the FAO in Montevideo in 1959, the Ministry of Agriculture had ambitious plans for the colonization zones including community development programs, support for rural cooperatives, training of rural teachers, and the establishment of a broad range of other community services (Hormaza 2016: 66–72).

The colonization scheme on the Ariari river was fraught with difficulties and has been assessed by some observers as an outright failure. It certainly faced complex social realities on the ground: by no means a *tabula rasa*, the colonization zone along the Ariari had already previously been the destination of uncontrolled migration flows. Consequently, the political fault lines of Colombia's large-scale conflict were already pervasive in the region, with clear dividing lines between conservative and liberal zones of settlement as well as more remote communist self-defence enclaves (Torres 2019). As anywhere else, agrarian colonization projects in Colombia cannot be disentangled from their broader political context. Geographer Wolfgang Brücher studied several colonization projects conceived in the context of the rehabilitation program and dismissed them as a "propaganda coup [...] aimed at distracting from demands for land reform" (Brücher 1977: 15). Similarly, historian Sven Schuster has argued that the commissions instituted by the National Front along with their humanitarian and pacifying measures intended to legitimize the power-sharing agreement and to distract from the elites' historical responsibility for La Violencia (Schuster 2009: 21). More locally focused analyses found that planned colonization fostered, and ultimately could not compete with, spontaneous colonization, which thwarted the ideals of ordered parcellation and the provision of quality infrastructure (Eidt 1967: 41). After the negative experience from this first phase of directed colonization and the insolvency of Caja Agraria due to low repayment rates on loans to settlers, the government decided to shift its focus to supporting spontaneous settlers from then on (Brücher 1977: 15–16; Schuurman 1980: 47). In retrospect, the agrarian colonization projects in the Oriente are usually regarded as the origin of Colombia's coca frontier and as a cradle of armed groups which became protagonists in later iterations of the country's spiral of rural violence (Torres 2019; Jaramillo et al. 1986).

As a result, when the government enacted a land reform law in 1961 in the spirit of the Charter of Punta del Este and the Alliance for Progress, directed colonization had largely fallen out of grace. In contrast, the titling of land occupied by spontaneous colonists in frontier areas was at the centre of INCORA's activities. Critics such as rural economist Ernest Feder denounced that in the first three years of the agrarian reform INCORA had given titles to "10,000 occupant settlers in the far-away public domain [...] to land already occupied by them" (Feder 1965a: 654) instead of actively pursuing redistribution, raising the question whether colonization could actually ever be considered a viable method of land reform, unless it was accompanied by massive investments in infrastructure, housing, and technical training (Feder 1965b).

However, there were also voices who took issue with previous colonization efforts from a different vantage point and attacked the idea that public support should focus on the rural poor at all. To be sure, economic advisor Lauchlin Currie, who argued against

any public support of rural smallholders – including poor colonists – and for investing resources on cities and industries while leaving the development of the countryside to the enterprise of large capitalist farmers, may have been at the extreme end of the spectrum of opinions (Currie 1966). In a similar vein, in his assessment of the failure of directed colonization on the Ariari, US geographer Robert C. Eidt criticized the public support given to poor, landless people who often lacked relevant farming experience and argued that governments should instead privilege highly qualified settlers: either “foreign settlers” or “highly prepared Colombian pioneers” (Eidt 1967: 40). This view was well in line with a version of directed agrarian colonization rolled out in the 1970s by Brazil’s military regime to which I shall turn next.

3.3 Agrarian Colonization and the Origins of Agrobusiness (Brazil)

The Brazilian military dictatorship which came to power in 1964 intensified existing policies of agrarian colonization and steered them into new directions, even though the objectives at large resembled those which had informed rural development policies since 1930. Colonization was intended to strengthen the state’s control over less populated areas to guarantee territorial integrity and to stimulate growth in economic backwater regions. Remote frontier areas such as the Amazon basin were to serve as a population valve and relieve pressure in urban areas. Colonization served (with notable exceptions) the existing national rural population rather than new immigrants. More than previous governments, and perhaps ironically, the military dictatorship adopted a discourse that stressed, and laws that facilitated, land reform highlighting landowners’ societal obligation to produce on their landholdings while threatening idle latifundia with expropriation. However, in practice such measures were rarely taken, and the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute of Colonization and Land Reform, INCRA), founded in 1970, mostly focused on settling landless rural dwellers along roads projected to open up forest frontiers (Medeiros 2018). Next to frontier development carried out by smallholder settlers, the regime heavily promoted initiatives to roll out Green Revolution-style, capital-intensive agriculture geared to realizing higher yields in areas which were regarded as lacking in agricultural productivity (Nehring 2022). This included large parts of the central-western Cerrado biome, which – contrary to previous assessments – scientists had identified as apt for mechanized agriculture after the application of lime and fertilizers (Silva 2018). Such policies also included elements of agrarian colonization as planners intended to resettle experienced farmers in possession of machinery and financial resources into regions characterized by extensive, low-productivity cattle ranching carried out by tenant farmers on land owned by absentee latifundistas.

An example of this type of land reform privileging relatively well-off farmers is the Programa de Assentamento Dirigido do Alto Paranaíba (Directed Settlement Program of Alto Paranaíba, PADAP) which started in 1973 in western Minas Gerais.⁴ The PADAP was implemented by the federal Ministry of Agriculture in coordination with a state development bank, a rural extension agency, the state colonization institute and, crucially, a rural cooperative from São Paulo, the Cooperativa Agrícola de Cotia (Cotia Agricultural Cooperative, CAC). The CAC selected one hundred settlers from its ranks, mostly young *nissei* and *sansei* (second- and third-generation descendants of Japanese immigrants) from Paraná and São Paulo, where available land was becoming scarce. Each colonist received between 250 and 500 hectares of arable land and was obligated to strictly follow the instructions and advice of the cooperative and technical advisers. Local landowners with holdings of up to 100 hectares, termed *remanescentes* (remnants), had to submit production plans elaborated together with rural extension workers or become members of the CAC to avoid expropriation.

The PADAP turned out to be the first of a series of rural development interventions involving internal resettlements of farmers considered capable of carrying out a capitalist, technology-driven modernization agenda in landscapes framed as degraded wastelands. The most prominent follow-up project which promised to scale up the experiences from the PADAP pilot region was the Programa de Cooperação Nipo-Brasileiro para o Desenvolvimento Agrícola dos Cerrados (Japan-Brazil Cooperation Program for Agricultural Development of the Cerrado, PRODECER) a Japanese-Brazilian cooperation project initiated in 1979 backed by major public and private corporations of both countries which invested in the Companhia de Promoção Agrícola (Agricultural Promotion Company, CAMPO), the program's coordinating agency (Santos 2016). Narratives of the PADAP experience recognize the Alto Paranaíba as the starting point for the large-scale transformation towards an industrial agricultural model, which extends beyond Brazil to influence global rural development practices. For instance, Japanese-Brazilian development plans for rural Mozambique in the 2010s drew on Brazil's agricultural experiences from the 1970s – as did their critics (Oliveira 2016; Shankland and Gonçalves 2016). Positive renderings present key figures such as the military regime's minister of agriculture, Alysso Paulinelli, as heroes of rural development for providing solutions to global food challenges (Hosono, Hongo and Rocha 2016), whereas critical perspectives critique the "Brazilian model" of rural modernization for issues such as property concentration, exploitation of nature and labour as well as the loss of economic autonomy due to the focus on cash crop production for international markets (San Martin 1985).

4 For a more detailed discussion of the PADAP, see Fischer 2022 and Ribeiro 1986.

These three examples show how agrarian colonization as a distinct state-led development intervention came to serve more delimited objectives attuned to political and socio-economic circumstances than its nineteenth-century predecessor, which aimed vaguely at economic growth and social uplift often framed in racial terms. As diverse as the objectives were the outcomes: whereas Bolivia's Cotoca colony failed to permanently settle a substantial number of highlanders, it convinced planners of the feasibility – in principle – of Indigenous colonization. Colombia's attempt to pacify rural areas ultimately resulted in spontaneous and precarious frontier settlement distant from the state and public infrastructures. Brazil's experiment in *cerrado* agriculture established an institutional framework capable of upscaling a model that on a local level had triggered significant social and land-use change. What ties these examples together is their ambition to engender new rural orders and ways of co-habitation, but also that each of them resulted in new categories of inclusion and exclusion. In the following section I outline some initial ideas on how to combine my survey of the intellectual and political histories of agrarian colonization with a perspective on conviviality-inequality.

4. Conviviality-Inequality and Agrarian Colonization

As recent discussions have underscored, the concept of “living together” goes beyond just human interactions and extends to a broader understanding that encompasses coexistence between humans and non-humans (Stefan 2022; Manzi 2020). In this way, “conviviality” adds rich and innovative analytical perspectives to the history of agrarian colonization, precisely because these development interventions represented a complex combination of politics of nature and society. Thinking with the idea of more-than-human convivialities challenges narratives of a process that arguably resulted in less diverse landscapes and severed nature-society entanglements. Conviviality forces us to rethink large-scale socio-ecological transformation in a way that transcends declensionist narratives, renderings of past human-nature interactions that solely highlight distancing, separation and destruction, which many authors rightly criticize for reproducing outmoded nature/society dichotomies (Duarte 2004; Gallini 2020; Carey 2009). In the original understanding proposed by (Illich 1973), the concept describes resources to re-establish bonds between individuals as well as between individuals and non-human environments in explicit opposition to industrial-capitalist modernity. This notion is compatible with the reconceptualization of more-than-human entanglements which has informed the dialogue between environmental history and the environmental humanities at large (O’Gorman and Gaynor 2020). Such methodological innovations have resulted in new histories of human-nature interdependence in Latin America beyond destruction (Carvalho Cabral 2021). To be sure, an outright rejection

of declensionist narratives would severely distort our still incipient understanding of the global socio-ecological transformation that took place in the modern era. Yet, if we apply conviviality as a flexible lens to identify and rescue past forms of co-living, co-inhabiting, and co-constituting that were overwritten, hidden or newly created by modernist scripts of unlimited expansion of production and anthropization, we may be able to defamiliarize both the narratives of boundless destruction and of infinite progress.

Scholars in the environmental humanities attribute global environmental crises such as climate change specifically to human-nature relationships that stem from an ontological separation between the social and the natural. The view of nature as something external to human existence forms the basis of the objectification of nature and its indistinct use as a “resource”, an analysis which has branched out into different conceptual approaches and periodizations united in their critique of the homogenizing connotations of the Anthropocene concept (Swanson 2016). In research on food systems and agriculture the severance of human/more-than-human entanglements is referred to as the Plantationocene. The Plantationocene is characterized by the widespread establishment of large-scale monoculture plantations with a profound impact on societies, economies, ecologies and knowledge systems, or more specifically, in Donna Haraway’s words, “the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor” (Haraway 2015: 162). The modern plantation serves here as an archetypical space of severed human/more-than-human conviviality.

Arguably, twentieth-century agrarian colonization by and large fits within a Plantationocene narrative as it gave rise to rural development interventions designed to severely alter or unmake existing nature-society entanglements. This involved making landscapes legible through mapping, inventory and categorization. As James Scott has argued, legibility and simplification of landscapes has since early modern times been at the core of nation-building and modernization processes (Scott 1998). For example, complex savanna ecologies described by scientists such as Eugen Warming or Felix Rawitscher gave way to “modern” *cerrado* studies, which opened the path for Green Revolution-inspired colonization designs (Silva 2018). The anthropogenic origin of the landscape, i.e. the impact of Indigenous fire practices and extensive livestock economies on the shape and composition of soils and vegetation, informed a discourse that construed the Cerrado as a damaged landscape in need of (human-induced) recovery (Fischer 2022). In the Bolivian case, both revolutionary-nationalist groups and international developmental organizations framed the Oriente as largely “empty” (Heath et al. 1969; Stearman 1973) and thereby simplified the territorial and

ecological presence of *camba campesinos* or *chiquitano* Indians and ignored the biological diversity of the region. Without romanticizing nature-society relationships in frontier areas, it is fair to state that the new discursive frames veiled existing forms of conviviality.

In general, agrarian colonization thus implied the remaking of nature-society entanglements. In some cases, it shifted the meanings and material composition of vast ecosystems and led to the production of non-convivial second natures through deforestation, soil “improvement”, introduction of new crops and infrastructure development. Starting in the mid-1950s, soil scientists and agronomists became increasingly convinced of the “correctability” of *cerrado* soils and the agrarian “vocation” of the region (Silva 2019). Since acidic *cerrado* soils could be turned into fertile land through liming, a vast mineral-agrarian complex emerged, connecting limestone quarries across the Bambuí series of Minas Gerais or the new Brazilian production sites of European and North American chemical industries with the expanding plantations in the Cerrado. In the Bolivian Oriente, some of the most biodiverse dry forests gave way to cattle ranches or soy, maize and sorghum plantations.

However, reducing the impact of agrarian colonization on more-than-human convivialities to a story of high-modernist unmaking and remaking of socio-natures according to the simplifying designs of the plantation would be overly simplistic. Since agrarian colonization in twentieth-century Latin America is not a story of linear progress and top-down rule of experts, the ecologies it kept creating over time were far more diverse and often diverged significantly from their original layout. An example of this is how mules and horses were brought to the model colony of Cotoca to replace tractors, as the *calcheño* colonists were accustomed to working with them. In addition, UN experts had chosen such a barren land for the colony that the soil was urgently in need of the organic fertilizer provided by the animals (Fischer 2023). Hence, to cite Wendy Wolford’s thoughtful qualification of the Plantationocene, “[p]lantation boundaries were and are porous” (Wolford 2021: 1630). Furthermore, the kinds of plantation landscapes that grew out of state-led colonization schemes often differ from the plantation types prevalent in regions that are thoroughly integrated with the global neoliberal food system – namely the soyified landscape. The Alto Paranaíba, although held to be cradle of *cerrado* agriculture now dominated by soy, today produces vast amounts of vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, and beetroot for domestic markets. The widespread coca plantations in the former colonization zone in the Colombian Oriente highlight how colonists, in face of state abandonment, resorted to yet another kind of plantation economy – also with significant ecological consequences (Dávalos 2019).

Uses of nature were also important for the social configurations of conviviality-inequality which agrarian colonization engendered. Implementing colonization policies meant

mobilizing people and communities with distinct environmental practices. Indeed, in the process of agrarian colonization, the ways that settled and migrating people treated the land and its resources became an important marker of difference that legitimized the privileging of certain groups over others. Governments made more or less conscious selections based on who they saw as desired (or available) bearers of envisioned modernities and rural futures. For instance, the PADAP changed the parameters of agrarian citizenship in the Cerrado as traditional tenant farmers (*meeiros*) in the Alto Paranaíba were forced to accept advice and technical training to adapt their farming techniques to the new production regime. As colonization policies combined analyses of social phenomena with interpretations of and designs for natural landscapes, they were embedded in prevalent ways of naturalizing the social, suggesting that certain populations were inherently suited to particular environments, while others were not.⁵ This means that the imagined geographies that underlay the plans of governments and international organizations associated groups of people with specific landscapes or “colonizable zones”. This is particularly evident in the Bolivian case: international experts perceived the resettling of Indigenous people from the highlands to the lowlands as a challenge to overcome deeply ingrained connections with landscapes and invested in social programs and research to accompany this transition. In the eyes of European and American experts, Indigenous lowland settlers chewing coca leaves, associated with Andean culture, epitomized the persistence of “backwardness”. However, the generally positive appraisals of Indigenous colonization in the lowlands might be interpreted as an indicator that in the second half of the twentieth century such naturalizations gradually lost ground. Another example of this might be the state-supported settlement of European-descended farmers from southern Brazilian in the Amazon, a migration flow which observers from the generation of Waibel and Bowman might have considered highly unlikely.

5. Conclusion: The Futures of Agrarian Colonization

The cases of agrarian colonization policies presented here engendered highly diverse social outcomes, so aspiring to write a general history of sociabilities of agrarian colonization in Latin America would be overly ambitious. On an anecdotal basis, we can establish that such a history would include moments of unequal integration – for instance, when colonists managed to form a local elite while being widely accepted by the local population as leading a modernization project which benefited the region as a whole (as is the case in the PADAP; see Haro Matas 2019) – as well as moments of local political conflict and further estrangement between colonists and state agencies,

⁵ This argument of the naturalization of the social is inspired by Orlove (1993) and Lima (1999).

as the case of the Colombian Ariari shows. Given this diversity, which reflects the constellations of conviviality-inequality in frontier contexts and of state-society relations in twentieth-century Latin America, it seems more promising to treat agrarian colonization as a phenomenon which allows us to investigate the convivialities implied in rural futures encapsulated in colonization schemes. What ideals of rural life and co-living did different stakeholders – policymakers, national and transnational experts, union and cooperative leaders, colonists, local populations – project onto agrarian colonization as a specific, transformative development practice? From this angle, we can discern common motives such as a belief in a special potential of modern agriculture to form modern rural citizens and in supervised colonies as engineered spaces capable of “radiating” out and inducing large-scale societal transformation.

Such prefigurations of rural convivialities were, of course, context-specific and linked up with specific political-ideological traditions, such as Andean indigenism in its specific contours of the 1952 Bolivian revolution or the combination of extraordinary state capacity and the politics of conservative modernization during Brazil’s dictatorial regime. Upon close inspection, however, common lines of conflict around rural futures emerge: for example, whether agrarian colonies should be organized following cooperative or collective models or rather aim at creating a class of individual peasant smallholders were hotly debated issues among international experts and national policymakers. In Bolivia, Latin American development experts warned their European and North American peers that the allocation of individual property would lead to the formation of an impoverished peasantry. In the case of Brazil, the government’s choice to favour large landholdings and mechanization as well as to invite corporate capital to colonize the interior became a cause of disagreement around which an emerging rural movement demanding true land reform, civil rights, and a limitation of the influence of transnational corporations in rural affairs could mobilize. These projections and their political effects provide valuable insights into the broader implications of agrarian colonization projects. As these initiatives were widely regarded as real-life laboratories for social engineering and landscape transformation, they became arenas where the diverging rural futures championed by political elites, transnational experts, and peasants crystallized. Through these projects, local experiences became intertwined with global issues and projections such as population growth, rural exodus, food production, and ideological conflict. It is within these global frameworks that the rural futures of agrarian colonization, each with its own unique context, unfolded.

6. Bibliography

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Contact

Coordination Office
Maria Sybilla Merian Centre
Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America

Rua Morgado de Mateus, 615
São Paulo – SP
CEP 04015-051
Brazil

mecila@cebrap.org.br

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