

## The Only Thing Like Coca-Cola is Coca-Cola Itself: Agency of matter and food culture in the city of Recife in the 1940s

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When, after a series of attacks on Brazilian ships in the beginning of the 1940s, the then president Getúlio Vargas acquiesced in severing diplomatic ties with Nazi Germany and increasing proximity with the United States. It was agreed that Brazil would be more than a commercial, political and ideological partner. The country would be the only one in South America to organize and send an expeditionary force to the conflict, disembarking in Italy in 1944, one year before the end of the struggle that had started in the European continent, but which had quickly escalated to a world war of never before seen proportions. As part of the bilateral agreements between both nations, Brazil received North-American military bases in several points of its territory, especially along the more strategic portion of its coast, at the time referred to as the Northeastern Protruding (*Saliente Nordestino*), which included cities such as Maceió, Salvador, Rio Grande do Norte and Recife (Toscano 2014).

The latter was the headquarters of all air and naval operations in the South Atlantic, which included not only sea patrols, cargo transportation and refueling of aircrafts and ships, but also the great influx of soldiers and officers from all around the world. Although several Canadians and Australians could be seen on the streets of the capital of Pernambuco and visiting the restaurants and cafes, it was the North-Americans who registered the largest presence in the city, intermingling, up to a certain point, within its society, and in the most diverse levels. Among fights and parties, linguistic misunderstandings and illicit loves, *recifenses* and yanks shared a still provincial city and were unprepared for the changes that surged in at an ever quickening pace. Some of these transformations occurred at the tables of bars and cafeterias, around a bottle of soft drink brought by the American soldiers (Fig. 1), the name of which, though initially strange, began being pronounced with more and more flippancy by the *pernambucanos*: Coca-Cola (Minella 2011).

### Between the glass and the bottleneck

Since 1942, the North-American soldiers could be seen moving around the quaint cobblestoned streets of Recife, wearing the flashy combat uniforms from the army, navy and air force, sometimes heading towards an uncertain fate on the other side of the Atlantic, or making use of their leaves in order to forget, for a few weeks or days, the horrors of the war which still showed no signs of coming to an end. From traditional restaurants, such as *Leite*, to cafes of questionable reputation, the foreigners partook in the food



Fig. 1. Advertisement for Coca-Cola

sociability that the capital of Pernambuco offered them a city still unaccustomed to visitors in such great quantity and with such diverse habits. Of those, one of the most intriguing and showy habits involved the way in which they related with their beloved Coca-Cola, brought in large quantities by the American army. Going without glasses, mugs, cups and the local conventions, the young soldiers used to consume the drink as they did in their country of origin: straight from the bottle, tilting the flask with one of their hands while tossing their heads backwards, ignoring shocked stares from the *recifenses* who still had French manners very much ingrained in them (Paraíso 2003).

It was, after all, a time of social, political and cultural ruptures, including the food-related aspects, changes that often accompanied the very urban developments of the capital of Pernambuco. The idea of modernity chased by the local elites since the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries demanded not only an acceptance for the new and foreign, but also a removal of certain institutions then considered backward, such as the monarchy, the slavery and the interference of the clergy in state affairs. It was, therefore, a time of republican ideas, free labour and scientific thinking, of a modernity which did not always reflect the daily reality of the whole society, but was still craved by its highest classes. These were the ones that propagated an image of progress, often disconnected from the wants and needs of the general population, who were frequently estranged from such developments. Thus, in the name of social advancement and urban hygiene, a veritable siege began on the street food, typically provided by the faddist and black hands of human beings who were enslaved not so many decades before (Costa, 2013). The goal was to 'end the daily footing of the crab vendor, the watermelon merchant and the fisherman showing his *cavala* and the *cioba* basket' (Correia



Fig. 2. Men serve each other tonic water, politely making use of glasses for pouring the liquid, in a Fratelli Vita advertisement from 1941. Source: *Jornal Pequeno*.

2009, p.114). *Cavala* and *Cioba* are two types of fish, very common in the Northeastern coast of Brazil and are still present on the tables of the Brazilians from this region. There was a desire to move away from the typically Afro-descendent cuisine, which was at the time considered to be something dirty, low, and backward and, for the more credulous kind, even diabolical (Bastos et al. 2014). It was, therefore, necessary to obtain and consume foods that were radically different from those still ravenously consumed daily by the mob, if the truth be told, but more and more disowned by the elites.

Coca-Cola seemed to condense, into a small glass bottle, promises of prosperity and freedom, an elixir capable of burying the old and bringing about the new, propagating the American Way of Life wherever it may be. If on one hand, the repercussion and visibility of the drink was an intrinsic part of the plan for (hegemonic) cultural export by the North-American government, on the other, its consumption in locations outside of the United States led to originally unforeseen social changes. Beyond the ingesting of the carbonated syrup – which found strong competition in the varieties of flavours presented by the Fratelli Vita (Fig. 2), a local drinks industry that, for decades, resisted the domination of Coca-Cola – the very gestures of its appreciators in the capital of Pernambuco suffered alterations on account of the flask (Pendergast, 2013). The object seemed, in the Recife of the 1940s, to heed its own designs, exerting a marked influence in the behaviour of the city's youngsters, particularly the boys or young men (Boivin 2010). In a type of apprenticeship, that had much in the way of mimicry through observation,

young men began emulating the foreigners in that which was possible for them; if not in the appearance of the soldiers – many of them tall, fair-haired, blue eyed, with bulked up bodies from the rigorous military training – at least by being savvy and consuming the soft drink in the American fashion, straight from the bottleneck.

An act that, a few years before, would be regarded as being of attested rudeness and an absence of manners, now began to represent an imported and desirable ideal, even if with a touch of rebelliousness, which doubtlessly contributed to its appeal among the youngsters in Recife. The rules of etiquette, so dear to the most well-off segments of the local society – and often copied and distorted by the most humble – would experience a period of familiarisation and relaxation after the first and, mainly, the second great war, leading observers of that time to declare an 'Americanisation' of dress, these becoming more intimate and liberal and more removed from the archaic sentiments of the social hierarchy (Rouvillois 2009). This new familiarity could be perceived in the way by which the glasses were spared unceremoniously, unnecessary intermediaries between the thirst of the trooper and the liquid contained in the flask, which they shed unconcerned. The bottle itself, relatively small and containing around 190 millilitres of soft drink, was certainly well suited to be handled the way the Americans did. In fact, its classical shape, full of curves, created by the designer Earl R. Dean in 1915, had been envisioned to be that original and attractive as to be immediately distinguishable from the competition (Fig. 3). Coca-Cola wished to be instantaneously identified by its consumers, producing a bottle that could be recognized even if fumbled for in the dark, according to its creators ([www.worldofcoca-cola.com](http://www.worldofcoca-cola.com)).

In a curious inversion, the adolescents from Recife, in their turn, wished to be recognized through the bottle, by the way they consumed its contents and by all the signs that



Fig. 3. A Brazilian soldier in the city of Natal, relishes the first bottle of Coca-Cola to officially arrive in the national territory, duly registered by the local press. Source: FGV CPDOC Archive.

were emitted by such action. After all, in the words of the historian Peter Scholliers, 'During and immediately after the war, the soft drink travelled along with the soldiers. In the United States, the drink assumed a patriotic image and, in other places, became a synonym of freedom and heroism' (Scholliers cited in Freedman 2009, p.341). However, it was not only the local young men that felt the power of an object brought from afar affecting their lives and behaviour. Soon, the women would begin to not only experience, but also suffer the consequences of the arrival of the Coca-Cola and its informal military ambassadors in Brazil.

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### The weight of a name

The war itself, along with the horror of bodies mutilated by bullets and lives destroyed by air bombardments, did not set anchor in Recife, although its inhabitants felt its shadow uncomfortably close in their daily lives. Imported goods became rare or prohibitively expensive at the local warehouses and shops. The gasoline that fuelled the growing number of cars was rationed in favour of the war effort and replaced with gasogene (wood gas), thus demanding a costly and somewhat awkward adaptation to the engines of the local vehicles. Blackouts were rehearsed, turning the hot nights of Recife into a sea of darkness where, as attested to by the official propaganda of the time, even the flame of a single candle would be able to draw the attention of a German pilot, thus bringing ruin and death not only to the house that dared challenge the precision of the enemy raid, but also to the whole neighbourhood. As if the shortages and fear weren't enough, the people of Pernambuco were forced to learn how to share their lives with the yanks, whose presence was numerous - and for an undetermined time - made the prices of restaurants and cafes skyrocket. Following the offer of dollars the foreigners generously distributed around, the local businesses adjusted their prices according to the new clientele, in flagrant detriment to the old ones. The soldiers had also come there, after all, in order to remove themselves from the stress of combat, and the American Army spared no cost so that they would feel acclimatised in the best way possible in that strange and provincial city on the South of the Equator (Arraes 2009).

Since 1941, the United Services Organization, commonly referred to as USO, had been providing support to the United States troops stationed beyond the country's domestic borders, in partnership with the Department of Defense (DOD) of the American government. Among the programmed activities were movie exhibitions, radio broadcasts, shows with comedians and cinema stars, feasts, games and, perhaps the most sought after among all of them; balls with orchestras and live music. The USO commonly built clubs so that the military could, as much as possible, feel as if in a sort of home far away from home, providing an enviable infrastructure, often superior to what the cities where the troopers were stationed were

capable of offering. It was in those places that parties occurred, which the local men were strictly forbidden from attending - with rare exceptions -, but where the girls from Recife found the doors always open. Licit and illicit relationships would commence on such occasions, when part of the young women from the capital of Pernambuco managed to, for a few and precious hours, escape the severe vigilance imposed by the local society, learning the steps of the foxtrot in the firm arms of the yank soldiers. The frequency of such dances, as one can imagine, created opportunity for talking, thus setting the foundation for the most diverse rumours, from unfaithful wives to dishonoured daughters, when new lives came to be and so many others were ruined by the gossip of the locals, particularly from the men (Paraíso 1993).

It was they who, after being disregarded in favor of the young foreign combatants, referred to the women who attended the USO, with a mixture of jealousy and spite, as 'used up' girls, an offense which, repeated and multiplied, was capable of destroying even the most solid feminine reputation. However, there was a term that was cause to an even greater uproar and shame for those who were the target of the mockery and the persecution from the local boys, one that was able to compete, almost in even terms, with the word 'prostitute', with all the social stigma such denomination carried and still carries even nowadays: Coca-Cola Girls. The insult hissed on the tongues of the men - and, undoubtedly, on the tongues of many women as well -, implying some sort of equity between woman and product, both existing solely for the entertainment of the yanks and once emptied or 'used up', could be disposed of unceremoniously (Paraíso 2003). Once again, an object brought consequences to part of the population of Recife, a group of women who, by experiencing a greater taste of freedom and surrendering to a fleeting love, attracted the fury and judgement of a narrow-minded and patriarchal society. For them, the arrival of the Coca-Cola meant far more than the mere access to an imported soft drink, especially considering the fact that the product itself was not exactly a novelty in a city that already produced its own carbonated refreshments. Men and women had their lives altered, in part, by the object, the different uses that it was given and/or learned and by the unforeseen agency that it ended up exerting over those it touched.

Such agency passes, necessarily, by the idea that matter is capable of producing its own meanings and that, therefore, the objects, whatever they may be, are not passive. Thus, the capacity of affecting a society and exerting transformations on it ceases to belong exclusively to people, if not eliminating; at least blurring the distinction between nature and agent. Such elements would be, then, part of the same territory, the agency of matter being characterized by the 'interplay between the human and the nonhuman in a field of distributed effectuality' and by the 'inbuilt material-discursive dynamics' (Iovino & Oppermann 2012, p.79). It is not, evidently, about exempting human beings from their

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actions and possible consequences, but recognising the entanglement between people and objects, as well as the ways by which it is capable of altering society. Thus, a bottle of soft drink along its contents took on an active role in the modifications occurring in part of Recife's society in the 1940s and beyond, reframing symbols and being, in their turn, reframed, in an exchange between people and things, all of them actors on a stage devoid of passivity.

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### Final thoughts

The ideal of modernity craved by part of the *recifense* society in the beginning of the 20th century would carry on through the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, anxious for changes, signs of progress and the removal of old values considered outdated at the time. The arrival of the Coca-Cola with the American soldiers would alter consumer and behavioural patterns around a very specific object, a bottle of soft drink. This exerted its own agency over the lives of men and women in the capital of Pernambuco, creating new habits and sociabilities, and causing ruptures and transformations which can still be perceived even today.

Slowly, Coca-Cola would defeat the resistance of part of the locals and the competition of the *Fratelli Vita* factory, in an unfair struggle that would drag on for decades (Arruda 2014). Similarly, the habit of consuming the soft drink – of different brands or even other liquids, from the humble mineral water to beer – from the bottleneck would spread more and more and become naturalised by the men and, later, even the women too. They would, as time passed by, heal hearts wounded by unrequited love and ruined reputations, cherishing close to their chests letters in blurred English writing and children who would never get to know their fathers.

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