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***Nationalism and gender. Comparing images of women in  
Brazilian and Argentine airlines during the golden years.***

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## **1 Introduction**

The 1960s and 1970s were the "golden years" of commercial aviation, an era of jets, mass tourism, and the boom of air travel. Commercial airlines tended to have similar aircrafts and standardized airfares, therefore competition focused on the experiences of the passengers. The service on board, especially offered by female flight attendants, was at the core of these experiences, which included both the promise of sensual pleasures and comfort and an array of symbolic benefits: from the distinction and prestige of glamorous consumption to the patriotic emotion.

In Brazil, Varig - *Viação Aérea Rio Grandense* - was the airline company that best represented the most glamorous moment of commercial aviation. The company was founded in 1927 by Otto Ernet Meyer Labastille. His partners, as well as his ground and flight crews were German, but Varig is considered the first fully Brazilian airline company. Despite being a private airline company, historically, Varig kept close relationship with the Brazilian government from the early 30s, when Meyer gave political support to Getulio Vargas's government, until the beginning of 2000. It always requested and was granted federal subsidies, including concessions to operate international flights, a fact that was triggered by the bankruptcy of *Panair do Brasil* in 1965.

For three decades, at least, Varig was the "Brazilian Flag Carrier", with flights to different national and international destinations, with thousands of travel agents in its sales representatives' teams all over the world, the Varig stores were considered as Brazilian "embassies" abroad (Castellitti, 2019). The high-quality service provided, and its highly qualified personnel were the result of a well-respected pilot training structure and its Flight Attendant School that even trained other companies' flight attendants.

However, according to Ferreira (2017), in its last operation years, Varig was run as a public company "in the worst sense of the word" (Ferreira, 2017:21). Its business position - a private

company carrying the heavy load of public companies, that is, a big and expensive business structure, slow, inelastic to market changes - which led it to collapse in the 1990s, with the deregulation of Brazilian commercial aviation, which started during Collor de Mello's government (1990-1992).

Even with a 49% of the domestic market share, the company suffered two severe blows: the loss of the exclusivity in the operation of international flights and the breaking-up of the cartel Varig-Vasp that controlled the highly profitable route Rio de Janeiro -São Paulo-Rio de Janeiro. The increase in the number of passengers and flights was not enough to prevent the "Brazilian Star" from losing 20% of market share in a decade (1991-2001).

Facing high debt level problems due to bad management and high maintenance cost of a diversified and obsolete fleet, in 2001 Varig was forced to enter in a fare war with low-cost startups like Gol, which heavily affected its already broken fleet. In mid-2006, Varig went out of business, leaving behind debts and creditors - the government, suppliers, and employees, but also, faithful clients who, even today, miss the glamour of the golden years of Brazilian aviation.

Since its creation in 1950, state-owned Aerolíneas Argentinas has been Argentina's flag carrier. By the 1960s it dominated the domestic market, competing with, two private carriers of Argentine capitals (ALA and Austral). Leaving aside some services to neighbor countries, since 1963 Aerolíneas was practically the only Argentine international carrier. Within the context of an expansive phase of Argentina's economy<sup>1</sup>, Aerolíneas fleet was modernized, transporting the double of passengers between 1964 y 1969 and improving its profits. This growth took place against the backdrop of public controversies which seemed to threaten the company's survival: for some, Aerolíneas was a key element in the affirmation of national sovereignty and a fundamental piece of national defense and integration; for others, it was a symbol of corruption and of the State's inefficiency that should be privatized or eliminated.

Aerolíneas and the Brazilian Varig competed for the international air traffic within South America. Both competed as well with several foreign carriers exploiting the routes between South America, Europe and USA. Argentina had a relatively small participation in this traffic, smaller than the one the bilateral agreements signed with Brazil and other countries granted her. In this context, Aerolíneas' advertising strategies aimed at expanding its participation in the international market, particularly the international traffic generated in Argentina.

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<sup>1</sup> After a crisis in 1962 and 1963, Argentine economy entered into an expansive phase between 1964 and 1974. GDP grew at relatively high rates (in average a 5% per year). Consumption expanded notably.

Due to similar international fares (stated by IATA) and equivalent fleets, commercial practices and, among them, advertising strategies and airlines' public images, were significant instruments to attract passengers. Moreover, in the cases of Varig and Aerolineas, which were closely connected with their respective States and presented as national symbols, these images played a crucial role for national identities. Women had a prominent role in airlines advertising in the 1960s and 1970s. Intersecting gender and nationalism we discuss female images in the case of the public imagery of Brazilian and Argentine airlines to explore the peculiarities of Latin American participation in the global aviation market.

## **2- Varig: a representation of a deracialized Brazil abroad**

As it has already been mentioned in the introduction, Varig was established as a regional airline company in 1927. It operated only in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Its development is marked, throughout the 30s, by its close links with the Federal Government and with the local state government of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. The company executives even backed up President Getúlio Vargas, also born in Rio Grande do Sul, when he instituted the Estado Novo dictatorship (1937-1945). This way of doing business, present at the beginning of the company, remained a trait of Varig's administration throughout its 80 years of existence. The company took advantage of government incentives and of the opportunities that they were offered which resulted in the growth of its fleet, as well as the expansion of its air routes and airline network. (Ferreira, 2017).

The Company's first flight was from Porto Alegre to Rio Grande via Pelotas but under the name of another company, Sindicato Condor, in a 9-passenger seaplane. The then-called "The Lagoon Route" was the first Brazilian commercial route and its check-in procedure was The Company's owner himself, Otto Meyer, and Ruben Berta, Varig's first employee and future President led the check-in procedures.

Berta led the company for 25 years (1941-1966). He was responsible for "planting the seed" to what later became the biggest and best airline company in the country, internationally praised for its in-flight service, team service, and aircraft maintenance. Under Berta's leadership, Varig made its first international flight, in 1942, to Montevideo, even before São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, then capital city of the country, became part of its network. The new route to Uruguay's capital city and then to Buenos Aires, inaugurated in-flight service, served by the co-pilot since there was no flight attendants at the time. The first company advertisement released at that time focused on the route expansion "to 20 Brazilian cities and Montevideo" and on the fact that the fleet was being modernized (image 1).



Image 1: print advertising, published in the 1940s  
Source: <https://www.varig-airlines.com/pt/marketing.htm>

It was only in 1955, when the company started flying to the United States – a route so far never operated by a Brazilian airline company – that Varig hired the first group of flight attendants. One of them was Alice E. Klausz, known as the first Brazilian flight attendant. Dona Alice, as she was known, worked at Varig for 35 years and was responsible for the development of the behavior manuals for flight attendants and passenger assistants. The material was used in training courses and, later on, at the Varig Flight Attendant School, “model school in the region, or at least in South America”, which also trained other companies’ flight attendants (Castellitti, 2014).

Despite the novelty of the presence of flight attendants, the ads about the launching of the flight Rio-NY-Rio (images 1 and 2) focused on the pioneer role of Varig both for its new route and for its airline technology, since, at that time, it was the only company that could present a *Super G Constellation* as part of its fleet. Only in one of the advertisements, the presence of the flight attendants is mentioned, among other qualities of the flight, such as, aircrafts with pressured cabins, air-conditioning, lounge with bar service, four restrooms, besides reclining-seats and a Chef on board. This text reinforces Berta’s obsession with the quality of the services provided by the company and the flight experience discovered by the clients, which will be a fundamental element in the positioning of the mark side-by-side with the nationalist imaginary.



Images 1 and 2: printed advertising for magazines and newspapers about the launching of the flight Rio-NY-Rio. Published in 1955.

Source: <https://www.aviacaocomercial.net/propangandavarig.htm>

The relationship between the company and the government has been thoroughly discussed and documented in academic papers and does not fit the scope of this paper. However, it is important to stress that the inaugural route to New York was the beginning of rise of the company to be the leader in the field of commercial aviation in Brazil. The decades between 1950 and 1970, when the government intensified its control over the local air transport industry, represent the moment when Varig decided to build the image of a “company at the service of the country”, establishing close links with the “Brasil Grande” model of development supported by the military governments (Monteiro, 2007).

In this perspective, despite the crisis that hit the sector in the 1960s, this was an important period in Varig’s history. At the end of the 1950s, the company participation share in the market was 23%. However, throughout the decade, Varig became the market leader after buying the competitor Real Aerovias, and being granted, in 1965, by the military government, the concession to operate the European routes of the bankrupted Panair do Brasil. Meanwhile, the South American routes were given to Cruzeiro do Sul airline (Castellini, 2019). It was then that Varig started an advertising campaign to hire more flight attendants for their airline crews with the appealing slogan “to know other people and learn a new lesson every day”. As to the intervention of the Federal Government in the crisis, Bielschowsky and Custódio (2011) state that “the period from 1968 to the beginning of the 1980s was marked by the steady development of companies, stimulated by the increasing demand and protected by a market regulation” designed to guarantee the air companies rentability. The strategy worked for Varig:

in 1969 the company carried 1.34 million passengers and in the next decade this number increased to 6.81 million average passengers in a year.<sup>2</sup>.



Image 4: frame of Varig's commercial in the 1960s.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q36MxkZ2jtM>

Under the leadership of Erik de Carvalho, who took over the head of the company after Ruben Berta's death in 1966, the 1970s are considered Varig's Golden Years. The political context was marked by the "economy miracle" of the military dictatorship and "the Pioneer" as Varig was then known, took upon itself the responsibility of symbolically represent the country abroad and, in Castellitti's words (2019), became the "real Brazilian Embassy outside". As Ferreira (2017) states "Varig stores [abroad] represented the dream of a Brazil that worked out right, which shows the strength of the image of a genuinely Brazilian company"

Varig's nationalist biased branding positioning could be seen not only in its marketing actions – as, for instance, being the official carrier of the Brazilian soccer team, three times champion of the 1970 FIFA World Cup (image 5) – but also, in its branding advertising discourse. In the flight promotion material to destinations like Los Angeles, Chicago, Lisbon, Paris, London, Rome, Beirut, Tokyo, Bangkok, Johannesburg, besides others (images 6, 7, 8, 9, 10), words like "progress" and "development" were frequently used to present the idea that by means of its routes, Varig was opening Brazil and the Brazilians to the opportunities of the "world out there", especially the world of business. That is what happened in the 1968 iconic campaign "The Urashima Taro's Saga" that advertised the route Rio-Tokyo-Rio (image 11).

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<sup>2</sup> Available in: <https://www.varig-airlines.com/pt/70.htm> Accessed on: September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021.



Image 10: print advertising published in the newspaper *A Folha de São Paulo*, June 23, 1970.  
 Source: <https://www.aeroin.net/50-anos-do-tri-o-avião-que-levou-pele-e-a-seleção-brasileira-ao-mexico-em-1970>



Images 6, 7, 8, 9 e 10: print advertising published between the 1960s and 1970s.  
 Source: <https://www.varig-airlines.com./pt/marketing.htm>



Image 11: frames of the campaign “The Urashima Taro Saga”  
 Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLYaPAmMMfM>

Especially after the incorporation of Cruzeiro do Sul Airlines (Images 12 and 13), Varig becomes the leader in the number of passengers transported in international flights with a market-share of 54.21%, ahead of Aerolineas Argentinas (6.69%) and Pan Am (13.55%). If we consider the continents separately, then in South America, from 1972 to 1979, Varig/Cruzeiro held, in average, 62% of the market, as opposed to 20% of Aerolineas Argentinas. In Europe, Varig remained as number one with a market-share of 41%. Air France came in second place with 12%. Only in the United States, the Brazilian company wasn't the number one. Pan Am held the first place with held 46% of the market, as opposed to Varig's 43% and Braniff's 11%. It is important to point out that Varig/Cruzeiro was the only Brazilian airline company that flew to other countries, sharing with other 25 foreign companies the international commercial airline market in Brazil<sup>3</sup>.



Images 12 and 13: print advertising in magazines and newspapers to promote the Varig/Cruzeiro fusion  
Published in 1975.

Source: <https://www.varig-airlines.com/pt/70.htm>

As in the case of the Aerolineas Argentinas mentioned above, the greatest part of Varig advertisement focused on the aircrafts and/or on the promotion of new routes and destinations. During the Golden Age, with international fares determined by IATA and national fares defined by the Brazilian Government, Varig made a difference by positioning itself strategically as the company that would take to the sky luxury and glamour, with an in-flight service considered one of the best in the world (image 14).

However, one of the few moments when the flight attendant stands out in the center of the picture, in the foreground, happens in the advertisement about the fusion with Cruzeiro do Sul (image 13). Usually, the flight attendants would appear in the advertisement as an ornament,

<sup>3</sup> Available in: <https://www.aviacaocomercial.net/pintl.htm> Accessed on: August 28th, 2021.



as a service provider, in the background, giving support to a textual and imagistic discourse that, from an advertising point of view, would focus on the aircraft, dragging behind, the flight experience (images 15, 16, 17 and 18). The way the seats, the food, the drinks, the service, and even the internal decoration were presented in the ads had to convey the company positioning as “the Brazilian dream that came true” as mentioned above (Ferreira, 2017). Then, the flight attendants were just a detail in the pictures. Nevertheless, the way they were presented should reinforce the idea of the courtesy, or the politeness as part of the service.



Image 14: print advertising in newspapers about in-flight service in international flights (1980s).  
Source: <https://gostonasalturas.blogspot.com/2013.11.03 archive htm1>



Image 15, 16, 17 and 18: print advertising in magazines and newspapers, published in the 1970s and 1980s.

Source: <https://www.varig-airlines.com/pt/marketing7080.htm>

Regarding nationalism and gender, it is important to keep in mind that in the perspective of nationalism embedded in Varig’s discourse, the Brazilian woman disguised as a flight attendant was always female and white. From the 1960s television commercial to the last campaigns – or even on the photos at the Varig Museum made public on the site Varig-Airlines<sup>4</sup> – there are no black women or black men or even mixed-raced individuals in the picture. The Facebook profile

<sup>4</sup> Available in: <https://www.varig-airlines.com/pt/60.htm> . Accessed on: September 1st, 2021.

“Varig Experience” was also a source of information (image 19). The profile is used not only to advertise the event, but also to share old company photos from Varig own catalogues, from collectors or from one of its 41.247 followers (accessed on August 2<sup>o</sup> 2021). Of 1,305 photos posted on the profile, there is only one, from October 13, 2017, in which there is a racial diverse flight crew (image 20). The photo was taken circa 1993, so a decade before the introduction of Varig Flight Attendant Susy dolls as part of the celebration of the company’s 75 years. Just like “Barbie”, the doll was white, blond and thin (image 21).



Image 19: Varig Experience’s Facebook front-page  
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/VarigExperience/>



Image 20: Varig Flight crew. Posted on October 13, 2017, on the Varig Experience’s Facebook page.  
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/VarigExperience/photos/1561056923955364v>



Image 21: Flight attendant Susi doll from 2003.  
Source: <https://bonecasusimuseuvirtual.blogspot.com/2019/11/edicoes-boneca-susi-aeromocas.html>

Even though Brazil has a population of 54% black and mixed-raced individuals, throughout our investigation on magazines, TV spots and social media, we could not find one single campaign carried out by Varig with black women or black men. Castellitti (2009:96) even states, “whiteness is thus invariably triggered by its association with class, elegance and excellence (“international standard”), and race is avoided, even though it is imbued in the celebration of the “joy” and “easiness” of the Brazilian “way”. In addition, it is important to remember that the golden decades of commercial aviation in the country coincide, for the most part, with the period of military dictatorship in Brazil. The image spread out by Varig was that of a modern country, successful, technological, but deracialized. An imaginary community (Anderson, 2008), a “magical Kingdom to export” (Castellitti, 2019), probably inherit from its beginning in the southern part of the country, a place with many descendants of German immigrants, as the company founder himself.

## **2- Argentina: between cosmopolitanism and nationalism**

In contrast with the private Varig, Aerolíneas Argentinas was part of a larger nationalist project: its role in commercial aviation was initially devised as a key part of the nation’s air power, hence, of its national defense, and as an instrument for the integration of the territory and for the economic progress. Threatened by those who perceived it as a symbol of Peronism’s corruption and inefficiency, since late 1950s Aerolíneas constructed a public image that appealed to national pride and a sense of belonging.

In 1957 the company launched a very successful advertising campaign, the first one entrusted to an advertising agency. It appealed to national pride and identity: “*Su Compañía*” (Your Company) was the slogan combined with the display of the comfortable travel options that Aerolíneas offered (see images 22 and 23). In this campaign, some pieces portrayed the flight attendants in the foreground, although other representations dominated the picture. In the context of Aerolíneas modernization of its fleet, from the sixties to the early 1980s, images associating the company with the modern aircraft were preponderant. Only in a few advertisements flight attendants appeared, in the foreground and also associated with technological modernity (see images 24 to 27). In these cases, usually the flight attendant was portrayed welcoming or leaning solicitous and maternally over the passengers.



Images 22 and 23: The “Your Company” campaign, 1957.



Image 24: publicity photographs picturing service on Aerolíneas’ new Comet IV. 1958.



Images 25 and 26: Aerolíneas’ ads after the arrival of new B707, circa 1966.



Image 27: 1970, the arrival of the B737.

The flight attendants represented in those images were, in all these cases, white, slim, elegant, middle-class young women. The attitude was warm and demure. Aerolíneas flight attendants were presented as the perfect hostesses. They were look like those girls that the wealthy white passengers used to relate to (see images 24 to 27). This representation was, in those years, relatively congruent with the company's personnel hiring policy because in 1957, Aerolíneas changed the profile of its female workers. Before, flight attendants and receptionists used to be older and with a "maternal" image, then, the company hired girls between 18 and 24 years old, middle class, educated, with knowledge of languages and with a "good appearance" (slender bodies trained in the corporal handling demanded by "class", "elegance" and "good taste"). The girls chosen to be the new face of the company and the images of them, responded, in turn, to the representations that the Argentine urban wealthy and middle classes of the sixties had about themselves: modern, cosmopolitan, with European roots.

Unlike Aerolíneas, Austral and ALA's flight attendants, who were also white and middle-class young women, were at the center of the companies' public image. These companies' strategy was to offer a superior "service" and prestigious and attractive experience. Hence, since the mid-sixties, their public image was built on punctuality, refined food and the seduction of beautiful and a little bold hostess (see images 28 and 29). Other companies that competed with Aerolíneas in the international market, like Braniff (Tiemeyer, 2021) for example, also attracted their potential passengers with sexual innuendo: the possibility of visually enjoying of even flirting with their modern, daring and beautiful flight attendants (see image 30). In contrast, in Aerolíneas both the required (and the trained and demanded) behavior of the flight attendants and their representations, shaped an ideal of elegance and modesty, which matched the conservative sexual morality prevailing in Argentina -despite some modernization that Isabella Cosse (2010) has called a "discreet sexual revolution." The image of the Aerolíneas flight attendant, therefore, was more "familiar" and evoked the calm and warmth of the mother, the perfect hostess or the formal girlfriend, rather than the more vertiginous attractiveness and excitement of the modern, carefree and *avant garde* girl.



Images 28: Austral Campaign “Buena compañía” (“Good Company”), 1965



Image 29: a piece of a series of Austral Advertisements, focusing on flight attendants (*comisarios* are the flight attendants in charge).



Image 30: Braniff new image and the promise of flirtation, late sixties.

Another female figure appeared in Aerolíneas advertisements: the female passenger. Between 1968 and 1973 -the most daring moments of Aerolíneas advertising- this figure tended to be more preponderant than the hostesses in the graphic communication of the company. Although

female passengers had appeared sporadically in the “Your company” campaign (always pictured as upper class elegant young women escorted by men or as a more mature woman with children), most of the advertisements from the early sixties pictured male passengers, formally dressed, enjoying the comfort of the modern aircraft or being cordially welcomed by the air hostesses. In contrast, in 1969, when Aerolíneas extended its US services to Los Angeles, and in 1970 with the new campaign “Sígueme” (Follow me), a good part of the graphic advertising became centered around the figure of the adventurous, young and seductive traveler (see image 31). While Austral or Braniff promised to flirt with flight attendants, Aerolíneas hinted at the possibility of adventure with attractive travel companions.



Image 31: 1970 *Follow Me* campaign.

The images of women who were not Company's personnel were also used in Aerolíneas' advertising abroad: in one piece from early 1970s, the double meaning of the phrase "I am not what you think" is played (see image 32). There, the woman (with European features, young and beautiful, posing sensual and wearing a tight Aerolíneas T-shirt), is at the same time an Argentine girl affirming her morality and the country, inviting the viewer to meet her and exhibiting her achievements (export of wines and meats, natural wonders). This advertisement points to Aerolíneas identification with the nation. The public image of Aerolíneas could not be completely the image of a commercial airline - despite the fact that between 1968 and 1973 the main objective was to turn it into a company with a commercial “spirit” and management- since it needed to represent national identity.



Image 32: 1970 Aerolíneas advertisement for French market, and detail.

These advertisements aimed at foreigners were quite rare. With a very limited budget for advertising abroad and with a relatively reduced transport capacity that limited its share of international services to and from Argentina, most of Aerolíneas publicity was directed at Argentines. On the other hand, in the context of the controversies about Aerolíneas future mentioned above, advertising also sought to achieve legitimacy among public opinion, and therefore to get wider audience than the actual passenger. Advertising was targeted to the people. In this context, Aerolíneas' public image privileged the identification with the nation.

The national representation that Aerolíneas built, which included the representation of the national woman, were images shaped by mass media and expressed the imaginary of upper middle classes. These images represented the national character at the crossroads between an ideal represented many times in the figure of the gaucho (the authentic, the moral, which in some way was opposed to certain perceptions of Western "moral decadence") and the identification with the European (and with certain images of the North Americans), understood as refinement, civilization, cosmopolitanism, modernity: Argentina as a fragment of Europe in America, "aside" from Latin America. Although Aerolíneas appealed occasionally to representations of the telluric (the pilot taming the plane, conquering distances and uniting the national territory), there was a prevalence of representations depicting Aerolíneas "at the height of the [developed] world", providing a service of "international level". Within this context, the images of the women that Aerolíneas chose to present reinforced this cosmopolitan identification with the developed west and erased the "local color", which resided alone (occasionally) in reference to natural beauties.



#### 4 Conclusions

Despite the difference between both Airlines, the public image aimed to attract potential clients (both foreigners and locals) but also it was strongly address towards legitimizing the company in the eyes of the national citizens, showing it as a symbol of nationality, progress and development. Thus, in the case of these Latin American airline companies, this peculiarity was related the close state participation in these airlines, and thus, in the way in which commercial aviation was perceived by the different forms of developmental nationalism that signed Latin American politics during those years. Therefore, if female images were used as an important symbol of the companies in their advertisements, to attract wealthy male passengers, it also helped to create representations of national identity. In the Argentine case, the images of the flight attendant and the female passenger reinforced the self-perception of Argentina's population as European, white, and cosmopolitan; and, in the case of the air hostesses, to evoke the discreet girlfriend or the mother rather than the seductive liberal or modern woman. Otherwise, in Brazil, regarding Varig's case which, although private, served as an informal diplomatic representation of the country outward throughout the "golden years", the flight attendants presented on TV and print advertisements were always deracialized women shown as beautiful and caring, ready to serve the passengers with "gentileza" or cordiality, characteristics that strength an important singularity of the Brazilian (ideal of) nation and culture.

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