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"Was Brazilian Industrialisation Fuelled by Wood? Evaluating the Wood Hypothesis, 1900–1960"

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The ecological relationship between cities and resource hinterlands is a major theme in environmental history and historical geography. Most scholars described the twentieth-century industrialisation of São Paulo, Brazil, as reliant on hydroelectricity. Warren Dean's 'wood hypothesis,' published posthumously in 1995, argued that industrialisation relied on wood fuel and charcoal during the first half of the twentieth century. However, Dean's wood hypothesis has not yet been tested or evaluated. Two substantive criticisms are offered here: the wood hypothesis is accurate in general but under-estimated the industrial consumption of fossil fuels, without conclusively rejecting the competing 'hydroelectricity' hypothesis; the method used for estimating potential energy supply from forest area was erroneous. The paper also makes several specific claims that advance the issues raised by the wood hypothesis: evidence of actual industrial demand for fuel, not potential supply, should advance the debate on São Paulo's energy use; wood fuel consumption required labourers, yet work and trade relations are still not well described; and specific moments in São Paulo's energy transition, such as the 1940s, require in-depth analysis. A revised wood hypothesis is that São Paulo's industrialisation depended on the interplay of three energy sources, led by biomass fuels, then fossil fuels and hydroelectricity, each of which was supplied by a distinct energy hinterland.

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