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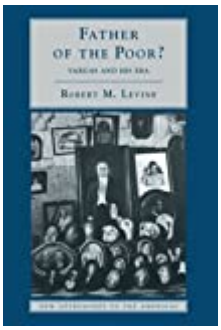

Robert M. Levine. *Father of the Poor?: Vargas and his Era.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. x + 193 pp. $23.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-58528-6; $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-58515-6.

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In 1964 Robert M. Levine traveled to Brazil to conduct research for a Princeton University doctoral dissertation in history and a monograph that appeared in 1970 under the title *The Vargas Regime: the Critical Years, 1934-1938*. That book, an assiduously researched political and ideological history, was published sixteen years after the suicide of Get?lio Vargas and during a period of trenchant military rule in Brazil that would last until 1985. Still, the memory and legacy of Vargas were sensitive issues in the early 1970s and military censors, in fact, twice seized the contracted translation of *The Vargas Regime* when Brazilian publishers tried to publish a Portuguese language edition. Levine's most recent book, *Father of the Poor?: Vargas and His Era* builds on his previous work while addressing the fundamental question of what has and has not changed in Brazil since Vargas. Levine, in updating, revising and re-casting his 1970 book provides a lesson in historical methodology by showing that fresh, nuanced interpretations are critical to advancing scholarship. Those interpretations develop out of new research together with the questions and doubts that accumulate during, in the author's case, more than 34 years of focused scholarship. *Father of the Poor?* is a compelling portrait of contemporary Brazil drawn from Brazilian archives, Vargas's personal diary and suicide note, oral history testimony and photography, as well as recent Brazilian and non-Brazilian social history, anthropological, and sociological scholarship.

Father of the Poor? is organized in six chapters. The first chapter briefly identifies the enigma of Vargas by placing him and his program in the context of the 1930s– a time of explosive change and political polarization in Europe, the United States and Latin America. Levine refers to Vargas's early days in office as a kind of "corporate populism" where the state chose not to intervene massively in the economy or society as it did in Mexico or the U.S. during the same period. Still, the Brazilian state sought strict control over politics and the media and many citizens responded positively to Vargas because (his) "initiatives...promised them better working conditions, job security, and opportunities for subsidized housing" (p. 10). Vargas understood the importance of reaching out to the millions of Brazilians who had been shunned by parasitic politics and hierarchical history – including women and urban workers – and he endeared himself to the popular classes. Levine stresses the efficacy of the leader's "political skills" (based on informality and a genuine anti-elitism) while presenting Vargas's political nature as conditioned, to some degree, by European corporatism. The author carefully and continuously juxtaposes a seemingly benevolent Vargas who is at ease with the povo against a manipulative, politically calculating power-broker. This organizational framework is ex-

tremely effective and helps the reader reach a more profound understanding of the complexity, contradictions and "enigma" of Vargas and his era.

The regime gradually moved to the right and fought against those who openly criticized the expanded, centralized government: the critics were accused of being "communists." Vargas staged an auto-coup in 1937 and "masterfully orchestrated the events through which the Estado Novo was imposed" (p. 51). External events, though, would influence the trajectory of the Estado Novo as much as internal change. Levine shows how Vargas's sending 25,000 troops to Europe to fight against fascism ultimately undermined his own authoritarian governmental structure. A similar "pattern" of events emerged in the US where African American soldiers from the segregated south considered the contradiction of their fighting in Europe against the racist and murderous Nazis. They returned to US to set in motion the events that would culminate in the struggle for Civil Rights during the 1950s and 1960s. Levine's presentation of Vargas and Brazil within the context of global events is a refreshing and sophisticated approach, and, by providing this wider context to Brazilian history, the author ensures that this book will appeal to a diverse audience.

As Vargas sought a more open and representative political system after the war he struggled with the Brazilian military and they forced him out of office in 1945. He would return to office in 1950 through popular elections as the candidate of the Labor Party (PTB), but a democratically elected Vargas grew impatient with the inability to rule by decree: the military, backed by the elite, were ready to remove him from office (again) in August, 1954. To forestall their plans, the president chose to commit suicide on August 24, 1954, an act which "silenced Vargas's critics and solidified permanently his image as protector of the poor, fighting to the end" (p. 89). Levine, of course, does not uncritically accept this prosaic picture of Vargas, and in the final two chapters of the book, he addresses the legacy of Vargas, arguing that "striking parallels" existed between the political repression of the 1930s and 1940s and the repression of the military dictatorship that lasted from 1964-1985. Vargas's policies created favorable conditions for industrial growth yet "the unmistakable division separating the social classes remained essentially untouched by government reforms" (p. 100). Vargas's reforms never reached the poorest of the poor and Levine shows how most rural Brazilians were poor during the Vargas era and remain so today. Chapter six, then, evaluates the legacy of Vargas as "incomplete revolution" where "new rules were grafted onto traditional political practices" (p. 112). But the complexity of Vargas's revolution and the difficulty of dismissing him as simply another politician are reinforced through the oral history testimonies that are brilliantly woven into the text, especially in chapter five. The testimonials are straight-forward and moving; they provide the reader with an additional and too-often ignored layer of understanding of Vargas and his legacy.

Father of the Poor? is clearly written and designed to generate debate, scholarship, and discussion on a complex personality and period in contemporary Brazilian history. This book is, thankfully, jargon free and the presentation is clear, inclusive and essentially democratic. The nearly fifty pages of appendix and bibliography demonstrate the author's commitment to advancing scholarship and interest in modern Brazilian history. Appendix B compiles documents, many of which have been translated by the author, including the text of Vargas's suicide letter. A wide selection of letters from common Brazilian citizens is included in this appendix, as well as oral history testimonies and lyrics from popular music of the period. Appendix C compiles nineteen stunning black and white photographs from the era, including the work of Genevieve Naylor, which provide additional countour to this richly documented text. The English-language bibliographic essay at the conclusion of the book is clear, logically organized and will help students and scholars alike. This book, undoubtedly, will become the definitive study on the Vargas era; advanced undergraduate students will want to read Levine's work in Latin American and Brazilian history classes, and the book will be read by graduate students and scholars looking for a clearly analyzed, thoroughly researched work on the controversial leader and era that have contributed so much to the forging of today's Brazil.

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