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The Price of Success: The Triumph and Limitations of Rural Trade Unions in Pernambuco, Brazil

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Anthony Pereira's *The End of the Peasantry* is a solid contribution to an important and growing body of literature focusing on the Brazilian countryside in the decades following the 1964 military coup. Based upon the close study of rural labor unions in Pernambuco's sugar zone, Pereira's well researched and thoughtfully written monograph explores a number of important questions regarding the changing nature of rural labor unions under the military governments and the continued challenges faced by these organizations as they operate in a recently re-democratized country.

Pereira's point of departure is that the literature on transition politics has concentrated too heavily on shifts in national-level politics. If scholars are to truly understand the changing opportunities faced by social movements, they need to use a historical approach which considers long-term structural changes along with more short-term political constellations at the regional and national levels. By focusing on these long-term institutional and structural changes in a local setting, Pereira hopes scholars will better "understand how the [rural labor] movement was created and sustained, and how its members' and leaders' demands, ideologies, and aspirations were shaped by their interests, environment, and experiences" (p. xviii).

In the case of Pernambuco, the author argues that agricultural modernization and the expansion of the state

into the countryside were the two long-term processes which most affected the rural labor movement. Both forces helped create the conditions under which the rural labor movement developed and thrived after 1964. Yet, at the same time, these structural and institutional changes imposed certain limitations or encouraged practices which had long-term consequences on the unions' ability to adequately represent the interests of Pernambuco's diverse rural population.

The End of the Peasantry divides its analysis into three sections. The first section provides an historical overview of conditions in the sugar zone from the sixteenth century through 1964. Drawing heavily from secondary literature, Pereira argues that society in the sugar zone emerged from a plantation economy in which state power was overshadowed by the power of local oligarchs. Rural laborers, whether slave or free, lacked many basic rights and were largely prevented from creating organizations to advance their interests. These conditions slowly changed in the 1950s as Pernambuco's sugar cane growers, trying to compete with the more efficient Sao Paulo growers, began to cultivate more extensively. As the structure of agricultural production shifted in the Northeast, the number of landless wage-earning cane workers increased as long-standing tenant relations were abandoned to make room for new plantings.

In reaction to this threat, laborers sought support among a diverse group of organizations. Pereira stresses that while the Peasant Leagues have received the most

attention from scholars, the Leagues were just one of several groups competing for the allegiance of rural workers. In fact, the author demonstrates that membership levels in rural labor unions quickly surpassed those of the Peasant Leagues in Pernambuco. Boosted by formal recognition from the federal government and aided by injections of capital through the imposto sindical (mandatory union tax), the state-sanctioned rural labor unions in Pernambuco were given advantages that the Peasant Leagues could not hope to achieve. By 1962, rural unions in Pernambuco formed a statewide federation known as FETAPE. A year later, these same unions were important players in the formation of the nation-wide rural labor confederation, CONTAG. Flexing its muscles in 1963, FETAPE successfully organized a statewide strike which resulted in an eighty percent wage increase for most rural workers in the state.

The 1964 coup and the repression unleashed against the rural labor organizations prevented the consolidation of gains made since the 1950s. Some organizations, such as the Peasant Leagues, ceased to exist, and the rural labor unions affiliated with FETAPE and CONTAG were subjected to intervention and close monitoring. In the second section, Pereira turns his attention to the structural and institutional changes which “quietly and indirectly enhanced the union’s capacity for collective action, ”transforming a rural labor movement largely crippled in the aftermath of the coup into a force capable of sustaining annual strikes and becoming a major force in the push for democracy (p. 39).

The trends of capital-intensive cultivation practices and a greater reliance on wage laborers became more prevalent under the military government’s Proalcool program. Justified by rising oil prices in the wake of the 1973 OPEC agreement and rapidly decreasing international sugar prices, the Proalcool program successfully tied Northeastern sugar producers to the most dynamic region of Brazil’s domestic economy, the center-south. As automobile manufacturers shifted production to cars that utilized alcohol-based fuels, internal demand for sugar production increased substantially. Between 1979 and 1987, cane production destined for alcohol-based fuel grew twenty-five fold (p. 42).

In the largest production units, increased capital investment changed the labor regimes as an increasing number of employees enjoyed year round employment. At the same time, the demand for seasonal labor declined and thousands of tenants were cut loose to allow for more extensive cultivation. Some former tenants were able to

become small producers under the Proalcool program. Most, however, joined the ranks of an increasingly large pool of labor dependent on wages and living in small towns scattered throughout the sugar zone. For Pereira, agricultural modernization led quite literally to an “end of the peasantry,” as tenants and sharecroppers became wage earners and small farmers. As the local class structure became more homogeneous, sugar workers were easier to organize around issues of wages and working conditions than they had been in the 1960s. Moreover, as sugar growers modernized production, labor costs as a proportion of total costs were reduced, making them able to better absorb potential wage increases associated with bargaining with the unions. These were important changes that foreshadowed the re-emergence of the rural labor unions in the late 1970s.

Just as the military’s economic policies changed the labor regime of the sugar zone, social policies initiated during the dictatorship inadvertently gave the unions important resources that strengthened the movement numerically and financially. In the early 1970s, the Fund for the Assistance of the Rural Worker (FUNRURAL) extended health care, dental services, and retirement benefits to the countryside. The FUNRURAL program was administered through the state-recognized rural unions and proved invaluable in attracting new members to the unions. The injection of federal money helped unions to hire lawyers, doctors, and other professional staff. The administration of these welfare programs helped create a cadre of professional union leaders who ran the unions and administered the welfare programs. In turn, argues Pereira, the extension of welfare benefits emboldened union leaders to organize and agitate for other rights, such as the right to assembly and strike. As real wages and working conditions continued to decline throughout the 1970s, the increasing power of the unions and their ability to attract members created the conditions necessary for effective mobilization.

In 1979, within a climate of political liberalization, FETAPE led a hugely successful strike action which won large wage increases and reinstated the principle of collective bargaining ignored since the 1964 coup. The strike marked a turning point in rural labor relations, but I think Pereira is correct not to overstate the extent of the victory. Rural laborers remained far behind their urban counterparts in terms of the rights they enjoyed, and the collective bargaining process secured in the 1979 strike was extremely flawed. Nevertheless, the 1979 strike victory did mark a triumph of sorts for the rural workers.

Drawing heavily on his field research and the interviews he conducted with Pernambuco's union officials, the final section of Pereira's work examines how unions have operated since the resumption of collective bargaining and the return to civilian rule. Each successive chapter focused on a single issue and asks how external and internal factors interacted to inform union behavior. Pereira first turns his attention to the unions themselves, noting how individual local unions were faced with a number of serious impediments which restricted the institution's effectiveness in representing workers. Not surprisingly, Pereira found that size and proximity of the union to the state capital of Recife were strongly correlated to the union's relative strength. Small unions located far from Recife found it hard to attract the attention of local politicians, journalists, or even administrators of FETAPE to lend support to the union's cause.

The uneven relationship between the local unions and the federation was also responsible for the poor performance of local unions. The annual contract negotiations were highly centralized affairs between officials from CONTAG, FETAPE, growers, and the Ministry of Labor. While locally based collective bargaining was not allowed, enforcement of the contract's provisions was left to the local unions. According to Pereira's interviews, fully ninety percent of union leaders claimed that one or more clauses in the contract were not being respected, yet only seven out of fifty union leaders said they spent more than half of their time away from union headquarters trying to get employers to comply (pp. 97-98). If the provisions were to be enforced, local delegados on each plantation were needed. Yet the delegado system broke down because union representatives were threatened with violence or were bought off by bribes.

One of Pereira's most interesting assertions is that union leaders had a bias against working for land distribution. Union officials, even from the smallest unions, were clearly an elite. Removed from the hard labor of the fields, given a salary, an office, and perhaps even a vehicle, union officials realized their privileged position and worked hard to keep their constituents happy to ensure reelection. The tendency for union leaders to favor welfare programs and work-related actions over land issues reflected both the contentiousness of the land question and the belief that higher wages, access to health care, and better working conditions helped more union members than agrarian reform. The issue of land reform provoked violence and promised to benefit too few union members to be an effective issue to mobilize the membership. Pereira concludes that the diminished stature of

land distribution on the unions' agenda was related more to the unions' unwillingness to push this issue forward than a decline in those seeking access to land.

Even with the return to democratic rule, violence actually increased in the countryside and remained a "major impediment to the practical extension of democratic rights formally won by the trade union movement" (p. 114). The author attributes this upsurge in violence to the fears of landowners over the announcement of an ambitious agrarian reform bill by then President Sarney. Structural changes and the modernization of sugar production in the Northeast, however, were other important factors in explaining rural violence for Pereira. The author complicates his earlier portrait of the agricultural modernization process by noting that during the big push for modernization between 1960 and 1985, local growers' associations insisted that small and medium sized growers benefit from the increased demand for sugar production. The result was a greater number of growers who retained a relatively high labor to land expense ratio in the Northeast, as compared to the growing regions in Sao Paulo. In the long run, these growers felt threatened not only by the talk of land reform, but also union activity centered around wages and working conditions. Pereira argues that these structural conditions are a much more convincing argument than some of the culturally based explanations for the high rates of rural violence in the Northeast.

In examining the relationship between union leaders and politicians, Pereira found that many union officials remained skeptical about their ability to deepen democratic reforms in the countryside through electoral coalitions, especially in state- and national-level campaigns. This skepticism was firmly rooted in a political process where political parties were weak and lacked readily identifiable programs. Successful candidates, relying on personal charisma, created short-term coalitions which were designed to ensure electoral success rather than the implementation of a party platform. Under such conditions, union officials were unable to make lasting links with any party, trading their electoral support for a promise of representation of sugar workers. The potential for a beneficial alliance between politicians and union leaders was further diminished by the limited capacity of union leaders to influence the workers in their region. In all growing areas, a considerable number of workers, known as clandestinos, worked outside of the union structure and beyond the influence of union leaders. Even among those workers who claimed union membership, only a small percentage were active members

with regular contact with union leaders. Politicians knew that the ability of union leaders to exert meaningful influence over workers was severely limited, and they acted accordingly.

The uneasy relationship between union officials and politicians shaped the union leaders' view of the democratic process. Based on his extensive interviews with union leaders, Pereira concludes that union officials defined the concept of democracy in broad terms that stressed ideas such as social justice, workers rights, and land reform. Pereira concluded that the "unionists judged the transition to democracy in terms of the outputs and deliberative style of the new government and not just on the basis of changes in the procedures used to establish it" (p. 120). Given this conceptualization, it comes as little surprise that many union officials chose to distance themselves from politicians. Only future studies will be able to determine the long-term consequences of this decision.

In Chapter Eight, the author turns his attention to the issue of land reform and the long-term consequences for the rural union movement of the decisions made in the 1988 Constituent Assembly. The mobilization of rural workers in the late 1970s helped insure that land reform would be at the center of any new civilian government's agenda. The 1985 agrarian reform plan announced by President Sarney was extremely ambitious, promising to distribute land and grant titles to 7.1 million people by the year 2000 (p. 139). Even before the reform movement was given its virtual death blow with the Constituent Assembly's decision to exempt productive land from distribution, resistance from landowners organized into the Democratic Rural Union (UDR) and tensions among pro-reform groups greatly reduced the support for the proposed reforms. By the end of 1988, the reform was considered a failure. Of the intended goals between 1985-1988, only seven percent of the land was expropriated and only 4.7 percent of the families had received land (p. 143).

The 1988 defeat marked a turning point for the rural labor movement and, in Pereira's view, revealed the changed nature of rural labor unions. Despite the rhetorical endorsement of land reform, CONTAG's unions were strongest where agricultural modernization was most complete. If the rural unions were willing to challenge agribusiness on issues of wages and working conditions, CONTAG's retreat in the face of the 1988 defeat showed they were unwilling to challenge the right of agribusiness to exist. As Pereira concludes, "CONTAG was no

longer, as its predecessors in the early 1960s had been, a peasant movement challenging the fundamental basis of capitalist development in agriculture, the distribution of private property rights in land. It was a workers' and farmers' movement, striving to ameliorate the conditions of its members within a system whose basic framework it was no longer able or willing to challenge" (p. 149). In this configuration, Pereira suggests that CONTAG is the institutional embodiment of the "end of the peasantry."

If challenges to this system are to be made, Pereira predicts that they will come from outside the officially recognized rural labor movement. The CONTAG unions, dominated as they are by wage earners and small landowners, are not prepared or even willing to represent the diversity of demands present in the countryside. For groups interested in competing for the right to represent the rural population, the state-sanctioned rural unions hold formidable cards—federal support through union taxes and the administration of important welfare benefits—which make it difficult for competitors to enter the fray. Landlord and police violence are further impediments. Yet, the growing prominence of groups like the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) effectively demonstrates the extent to which CONTAG-affiliated unions are not meeting everyone's needs.

Pereira's study works best in his discussion of the long-term processes of agricultural modernization, creation of a landless, wage-earning labor force, and extension of state power into the countryside. The complex interplay between these processes and the rural trade unions are well done. Likewise, Pereira does an admirable job of illuminating the attitudes of union leaders, and how these attitudes and assumptions impact the unions and their effectiveness in representing the rural workers. I wish, however, that Pereira had gone further in his discussion of the "end of the peasantry." While Pereira uses his interviews with union leaders to great effect, the attitudes and political views of the rural workers were completely absent from the text. Often I was left wondering how workers perceived the actions of local union leaders, the state federation, and the landlords. How well, for example, did the union leaders' attitudes toward land reform reflect the wishes of the membership? Pereira's interviewing techniques, so effectively used with rural labor leaders, could have been employed with workers as well. The inclusion of a worker counterpoint would have greatly enriched Pereira's study.

Physically, *The End of the Peasantry* is a beautiful book. The typeface used for chapter titles mimics the fine

black and white lines of the woodcut prints so typical of Northeastern folk art. Readers less concerned about aesthetics will be happy to know that the publisher actually included both endnotes and a full bibliography, something increasingly rare in an age of rising printing costs. The reprinting of the questionnaire used by Pereira during his field research in 1988, as well as the conclusions drawn from the survey about union leaders in the two appendices, were also helpful in detailing more about methodology. But I found the inclusion of both parenthetical references and footnotes often made for tedious reading. While the publisher may have hoped that the

slim volume would encourage its adoption for the classroom, *The End of the Peasantry* is most appropriate for advanced students and specialists. While the monograph's main focus lies within the realm of Brazilian rural politics and labor, scholars of Latin America who study social movements, transition politics and rural society are all likely to find Pereira's approaches and conclusions valuable.

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