CLASS POLITICS AND CLASS IDENTITY IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRAZIL

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FATHER OF THE POOR? VARGAS AND HIS ERA. By Robert M. Levine. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. 193. $54.95 cloth, $15.95 paper.)

INTIMATE IRONIES: MODERNITY AND THE MAKING OF MIDDLE-CLASS LIVES IN BRAZIL. By Brian P. Owensby. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998. Pp. 332. $45.00 cloth.)

FOR SOCIAL PEACE IN BRAZIL: INDUSTRIALISTS AND THE REMAKING OF THE WORKING CLASS IN SÃO PAULO, 1920–1964. By Barbara Weinstein. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996. Pp. 435. $59.95 cloth, $24.95 paper.)

THE SEED WAS PLANTED: THE SÃO PAULO ROOTS OF BRAZIL'S RURAL LABOR MOVEMENT, 1924–1964. By Cliff Welch. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. Pp. 412. $65.00 cloth, $25.00 paper.)

With two of four titles alluding to E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, it should come as no surprise that the studies under review here reexamine "class" as a category of analysis in the history of the mid-1900s from a variety of perspectives. The authors all analyze how issues of race, gender, nationality, experience, and sexuality shaped class struggle, cooperation, and identity formation. Rather than insisting on fixed taxonomies of class, these authors rightly see it as a contested set of identities that develops over time. In examining the contributions made by each author, this brief review will compare aspects of their approach to class analysis and identity. Along the way, it will venture some possible future avenues for research and synthesis in the history of the mid-1900s suggested by a combined reading of these works.

Robert Levine's *Father of the Poor? Vargas and His Era* builds on the author's years of research on Getúlio Vargas and the era of his political ascendance. This work of synthesis draws together insights from recent scholarship, observations from the former president's recently published personal diaries, and new oral histories of common Brazilians. The result is a concise yet lively overview of the legacy of Vargas's government and the significance

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of his social policies. Levine's analysis moves adroitly between the voices of workers and their views of events and the musings of Brazil's most influential political, economic, and cultural leaders in the 1900s. The book is part of a series targeted for adoption in undergraduate seminars and surveys of Brazilian and Latin American history. Readers seeking a more critical assessment of recent scholarship or indications of promising areas and documentation for future research will need to look elsewhere.

Levine's overarching argument in *Father of the Poor?* is that Vargas "fundamentally left unaltered much of the fabric of Brazilian life" (p. 112). Levine later rephrases this assessment by noting that whether one looks at Vargas's social legislation as a glass half-full or half-empty depends on what one is looking for (p. 133). The Vargas enigma and Brazil ultimately defy easy characterization. Still, by asking and addressing probing questions, Levine shows that despite the recent spate of research on the period, many important questions surrounding Vargas and the power of the Brazilian state remain poorly illuminated.

For example, Levine ponders why the urban and rural poor generally recalled Vargas favorably. Levine surmises that the reason was that Vargas reached out to these politically untouchable classes in ways that no previous politicians had. While this statement is broadly true, one wonders if so many uneducated and undereducated Brazilians were so easily hoodwinked—and if so, how thoroughly? Do scholars tend to overestimate the expectations that Brazilian rural and urban workers had for state relief as "a class"? Were the poor victims of "false consciousness" because they seem to hold views contrary to their material interests?[1] To answer these questions, scholars must also ponder the nature of memory and how subsequent experiences shape recollections of the past.

Levine's argument about popular perceptions implies that image was more important than legislative accomplishments or specific institutional actions in determining popular perceptions of Vargas's legacy. Did Brazilian industrialization and agricultural progress (however unequally shared) convince many workers to look beyond their own wages and benefits to take pride in their role in national advancement? Or did new propaganda strategies and mass-media systems (little used by even the Brazilian commercial sector until the 1920s) convince many Brazilians that Vargas had improved the working poor's wages and conditions, even though the changes affected only a modest few? How did Vargas's policies directly and indirectly feed the nationalist sense of a more egalitarian and homogenized imagined community in Brazil? Levine's synthesis draws thoughtful readers' attention to these issues, and his interrogation of the evidence suggests that more re-

1. For a recent critique of the use of the concept of "false consciousness," see James Scott, *Dominance and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

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search needs to be done to access public attitudes. Levine's use of new oral histories of everyday Brazilians in *Father of the Poor?* points to an important methodological pathway that future researchers interested in these issues will have to develop in a more comprehensive fashion.[2]

Levine's broad-stroke portrait of Vargas as a mostly neglectful "father of the poor" more interested in his affairs of state than in the people's welfare differs from the other studies under review. It is not that Owensby, Weinstein, and Welch portray Vargas in a kinder light. Rather, they examine issues of class, identity, experience, and state formation in more discrete regional contexts, whereas Levine looks at class on a grand national scale and largely in terms of class support of or opposition to Vargas's agenda. Levine's cogent synthesis of current scholarship contributes a needed up-to-date overview of current understandings of the Vargas era. The significance of the new case studies by Welch, Weinstein, and Owensby is revealed in part by how they challenge or modify some of the current interpretations of the Vargas era and the years preceding the 1964 military coup.

In *The Seed Was Planted: The São Paulo Roots of Brazil's Rural Labor Movement, 1924–1964*, Cliff Welch traces the rural workers' movement from the tense labor negotiations in the final decades of slavery to more contemporary mobilizations. His research illuminates the understudied deep roots of rural labor organization in the Brazilian countryside. Rural labor enters most historical narratives only in the early 1960s, during João Goulart's troubled presidency. As Levine observes of the Vargas period, "since there was rarely any industrialization [in rural areas], there were no labor unions," while employers in urban areas often ignored labor legislation (pp. 121, 124). Welch succeeds in modifying this characterization of the Vargas period. He shows that even though Vargas gave mostly lip service to rural labor organization, rustic labor leaders fought stiff opposition to take advantage of the meager protections afforded by the Estado Novo's labor legislation. Welch demonstrates that the rural labor movements of the early 1960s were "the first fruits" of organizers who had struggled since the 1920s. Granted, the number of unions and their members were relatively few, but Welch's *The Seed Was Planted* reveals that rural labor was not as inert as often depicted in the 1930s and 1940s. Radical labor leaders competed actively with more conservative labor organizers in the São Paulo hinterland. Regardless of their ideological bent, these organizations focused early on the development of labor leaders. Many of the leaders groomed in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s emerged in the early 1960s to head a more vigorous Brazilian rural labor movement.

2. See for example Alice Beatriz da Silva Gordo Lang, "Getúlio Vargas: Marcas de memórias nas mulheres paulistas," *História Oral* 1, no. 1 (June 1998):145–67; also Levine and John Crocitti's inclusion of oral history in "Ordinary People: Five Lives Affected by Vargas-Era Reforms," in *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Levine and Crocitti (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 206–21.

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Welch's analytical narrative focuses on union organization in part because sparse sources make exploring the everyday lives, beliefs, and attitudes of rank-and-file rural workers difficult. This focus makes it difficult for Welch to analyze concepts like class identity and the identification of common workers with the goals and ideas of their leaders, as he admits. Perhaps the work of research groups like the Núcleo de História Oral, headed by José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy of the Universidade de São Paulo, will provide researchers in the future with more source material for exploring the lives of rural workers outside the union halls. Oral history could be combined with harder-to-work sources like criminal trial records and less traditional sources of popular memory such as cordel literature to explore the lives, attitudes, and identities of Brazilian rural laborers.

Despite these limitations in sources, Welch shows that rural sharecroppers and salaried workers had different needs that complicated common action and identification among them. Brazil's rural working class in the 1920s and 1930s also included small farmers who owned their property, not just rural wage workers and sharecroppers. Only later would the labor movement of *boias frias* (rural wage laborers) predominate in the rural labor movement. This change in the labor market ultimately stimulated the formation of rural labor unions to improve wages and conditions in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Even though the military government "cut back hard" on the rural labor movement after 1964, Welch and many elderly rural labor leaders perceive the roots of contemporary movements like the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (the movement of the landless rural workers) in the struggles that stretched back to the 1920s. *The Seed Was Planted* is a thoroughly researched and original contribution to Brazilian history. When combined with Verena Stolke's work, Welch's study provides an analytical and historical scaffolding that future researchers can build on to explore the lives of common rural workers in the southeast in the 1900s.[3] Welch's book also adds to a small but growing body of work in twentieth-century rural Brazilian labor history of the 1900s, one still too heavily weighted toward the urban industrial working class. It is to be hoped that Welch's work will inspire more research on Brazil's understudied twentieth-century countryside.[4]

3. Verena Stolke, *Coffee Planters, Workers, and Wives* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988).

4. Here I echo a plea made earlier by Todd Diacon in "Down and Out in Rio de Janeiro: Urban Poor and Elite Rule in the Old Republic," *LARR* 25, no. 1 (1990):243–52. Bert Barickman's recent work on the rural history of the Recôncavo in the 1800s points to numerous questions in rural labor that can only be resolved through further work on the subject in the 1900s. For instance, Barickman found that land suitable for subsistence agriculture was plentiful in the 1800s. He has suggested that lack of access to land for small producers can be more fully understood only through investigations of agricultural production and rural labor in the 1900s. See Barickman, *A Bahian Counterpart: Sugar, Tobacco, Cassava, and Slavery in the Recôncavo, 1780–1860* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 190.

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Rural workers in the 1900s have been almost as neglected by scholars as the middle class. Brian Owensby shows how analysts lost interest in the middle class in the 1960s and 1970s as dependency and modernization theorists came to dominate theoretical debates on the roles of class and the state. Few scholars since John Johnson attempted a non-Marxist analysis of class in *Political Change in Latin America* (1958) have investigated the Brazilian middle class. By applying new theory and methodology developed since the 1960s, Owensby produces an important reconsideration of the role and the identity of the Brazilian middle class. There is no dearth of sources on this topic. In his research for *Intimate Ironies: Modernity and the Making of Middle-Class Lives in Brazil,* Owensby creatively scrutinized novels, opinion and consumer surveys, census material, publications of white-collar unions, advertisements, memoirs, political tracts, letters, and periodicals. He moves well beyond a simple analysis of wages to define middle-class status. Owensby found that many Brazilians refused to work at higher-paying manual-labor jobs in order to maintain occupations more consistent with middle-class status. His analysis considers the behaviors and cultural practices that shaped conceptions of what was appropriate middle-class behavior.

One question that Owensby examines in *Intimate Ironies* is why Vargas did not enjoy a stronger base of political support among the middle class by the 1950s. To foreground the issue, Owensby analyzes the political movements on the Right and the Left during the 1930s that he characterizes as largely middle-class in orientation: Integralismo and the Aliança Libertador Nacional. After this flurry of political experimentation and conflict with the fascist Right and the socialist Left in the 1930s, Owensby argues, most members of the middle class felt politically orphaned by the mainstream political parties focusing on either populist strategies or the interests of powerful entrepreneurs. Only maverick candidates like Adhemar de Barros and Jânio Quadros enjoyed broad support from the urban middle class.

Owensby lays a good deal of the blame for the middle class's "apolitical attitudes" at its members' own feet. They retreated from formal politics, preferring the pleasures of domesticity over the corruption and conflict of the public sphere. In Owensby's view, these reactions to political, ideological, and economic circumstances immobilized most members of the middle classes during the populist years of the Estado Novo and the so-called Democratic Experiment (1945–1964). Feeling left out of the debate over capitalism versus socialism, members of the middle class identified with candidates who advocated fighting corruption and increasing the efficiency of government. This retreat contrasts starkly with other extreme examples of middle-class identity in the 1900s. In the United States, most citizens came to declare "a middle-class identity," and leaders of both mainstream political parties spoke freely in its name. Conversely, most collar-and-tie workers in the Soviet Union rhetorically adopted a proletarian posture to better con-

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form to the Soviet ideal of a model citizen: the industrial worker.[5] Some broader international comparisons might have helped situate the Brazilian case in a Latin American setting and might have thrown into relief the national mythmaking so integral to the elaboration of class identity in the 1900s.

Owensby outlines in *Intimate Ironies* a useful list of attributes that most members of the middle class came to consider touchstones of class identity: education, consumption patterns, dress, occupation, hygiene, race, taste, and manners. Many Brazilians studied these attributes avidly in magazines, novels, and newspapers. Owensby might have enhanced his analysis of Brazilian middle-class identity by exploring the types of public duties and services that they retreated from outside the political party system. For example, vulnerability to military conscription came to mark a line of social status that separated the middle class from the working class. While officers numbered among the ranks of the middle-class, conscripts were identified with humble social origins and a humiliating servility unbecoming to the sons of tie-and-collar aspirations. The families of middle-class youths used legal and extralegal means to secure exemption from the draft for their sons. Similarly, middle-class families distinguished themselves from working-class families by not putting their children to work to increase family income. Most sons of working-class families were expected out of necessity to contribute to family income, and this need pressured them to curtail education in favor of work (Weinstein, p. 223). A cult of adolescent leisure and education helped middle-class families mark the social distance between themselves and the industrial proletarians.

Owensby's analysis in *Intimate Ironies* lumps together the experiences and mythologies of Paulistano and Carioca middle-class identity without discussing how these two major urban centers differed in their involvement in politics or their regionally inflected conceptions of class identity. Paulistanos certainly perceived the middle-class of Rio as depending less on "know-how" than on "know-who" for their success. In this sense, Paulistanos built their regional sense of middle-class superiority on a belief that in São Paulo, merit more than connections determined the heights to which someone with talent might ascend (p. 67). An interesting future study might contrast the self-perceptions of the Paulistano middle class, composed largely of private-sector employees and small-business owners, to Rio's larger proportion of public-sector middle-class employees.

Despite these quibbles, Owensby's *Intimate Ironies* provides a compelling history of the formation of Brazilian middle-class identity around a complex cluster of behaviors, dress, consumption patterns, attitudes, educational aspirations, and ideologies from 1920 to 1950. Along the way, he

5. For example, see Daniel Orlovsky, "The Hidden Class: White-Collar Workers in the Soviet 1920s," in *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity*, edited by Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Suny, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 220–52.

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criticizes views predominating among academicians before 1964 that the middle class in underdeveloped countries would be the harbinger of modernization, meritocracy, democracy, and class harmony. To avoid the dangers of class warfare, members of the Brazilian middle class retreated to their redoubt of tranquil respectability: the family home. Now it is easier to understand why the March for the Family that preceded the 1964 coup was composed principally of middle-class women banging kitchen pots together to protest their deteriorating economic conditions. Alienated from party politics, most members of the Brazilian middle class came to place more faith in the nationalist, anti-communist, anti-corruption, and anti-political rhetoric espoused by most Brazilian military officers.[6]

Barbara Weinstein's *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo* brings together themes that connect urban working-class and middle-class reform movements. She examines how mostly middle-class social workers, bureaucrats, and teachers attempted to reform the industrial working class. Weinstein brings a new approach to labor unionism by looking at the negotiations among the representatives of the state, industrialists, and labor through two unique Brazilian institutions: SESI (Serviço Social da Indústria) and SENAI (Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial). Created by industrialists to improve worker productivity and diffuse class conflict, SESI and SENAI were sanctioned and supported by the state but continued to be directed by "a vanguard" of industrialists concerned with scientific management (studying the philosophy and methods of Taylorism, Fordism, and applied psychology). Once again, Vargas's state corporativism was not as state-dominated as sometimes described. Here Vargas ceded control to private industrialists—no wonder the enforcement of labor laws was lax. Labor had little voice in the direction or ideological content of these programs nominally intended to benefit their ranks, industry, and society as a whole. Both programs sought to improve the training, health, and discipline of workers.

Weinstein challenges labor histories that have generally portrayed SESI and SENAI as blunt tools of capitalist oppression. For instance, several scholars have suggested that the application of scientific management was resisted by skilled workers (following patterns that E. P. Thompson described in early industrial Britain). Weinstein finds that these hypotheses of labor struggle and organization overlook the fact that only a small minority of São Paulo's industrialists actually applied modern technology and Taylorist methods in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus scientific management affected few skilled workers in the area. She also notes that while some unions (such as

6. On the politics of anti-politics among Latin American military officers, see Brian Loveman, *For La Patria: Politics and the Armed Forces in Latin America* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1999). On the hypocrisy of the military's rhetoric on corruption, see Shawn C. Smallman, "Shady Business: Corruption and the Brazilian Army before 1954," *LARR* 32, no. 3 (1987):39–62.

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typesetters) resisted modernization and criticized the rationalization of production techniques, many workers in other sectors supported these measures in the belief that modernization would improve the working conditions and prosperity of workers. Many workers cheered, participated, and took pride in Brazil's industrial modernization. This stance indicates why many came to identify with Vargas's vision of Brazil as a great economic and political power in the making, even though workers were not getting their fair share of the pie.

As Weinstein observes at the outset of *For Social Peace in Brazil*, "the narrow conception of rationalization as a thin disguise for intensified domination yields meager results for the historian's labors" (p. 2). She explores instead how the industrialist vanguard's rhetoric of rational organization and scientific management was a means of claiming the expertise to implement appropriate policies to improve production while ensuring social peace. Vargas's administrative push for industrial modernization placed reform in the hands of organizations headed by industrialists and run by mostly middle-class teachers, doctors, lawyers, and bureaucrats. In short, through SESI and SENAI, industrialists hoped to "remake" not only Brazilian workers but also their "backward" fellow employers whose "misguided avarice" threatened social peace. Both labor leaders and industrialists sought to proclaim themselves champions of modernization, public welfare, and national progress. At the same time, Weinstein shows that even though these institutions were intended to pacify industrial laborers and steer them away from Communist affiliations, the results of these efforts were ambiguous at best. On the one hand, some of the most important leaders of Brazil's truly independent new labor unions in the late 1970s were products of SENAI schools. On the other, the work of some middle-class reformers in SESI and SENAI to improve workers' homelives, education, leisure, and workplaces radicalized them (as happened with Brazil's famous educational theorist Paulo Freire). Here one can glimpse a parallel between the efforts of the Catholic Church to involve their clergy in lives of poor Brazilians and their communities, which led to the radicalization of some priests and the emergence of liberation theology. Some moderate reformers unmasked "the intransigence of industrialists" in living up to the rhetoric of "social peace." For example, industrialists resisted the efforts of mostly middle-class SESI employees to unionize themselves (pp. 216–17). Workers meanwhile appropriated and reinterpreted the rhetoric and legislation of "social peace" set forth by industrialists. Weinstein argues convincingly that "an organization and a discourse developed to advance industrialists' hegemony were serving to erode the political and ideological position of the industrial bourgeoisie" by the early 1960s (p. 218).

The strength and originality of *For Social Peace in Brazil* lies in Weinstein's ability to illuminate the interactions among different classes (indus-

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trialists, the middle class, and workers) while narrating the development of institutions intended to implement specific policies based on the ideologies of welfare capitalism and the promotion of social peace among classes. Throughout the book, she reminds readers of the contradictions within each class: between the industrialist vanguard and more traditional colleagues; between conservative and more idealistic middle-class reformers; between labor leaders and rank-and-file workers; and among workers in different sectors of industrial production. In so doing, Weinstein depicts more clearly the rise and fall of populist democracy and the rhetoric of social peace that sought to diffuse an intensifying sense of class antagonism.

Conclusion: Vargas's Legacy Reconsidered

Perhaps one way to think of Vargas's legacy is to examine how he established law and precedent for including new groups as participants in and beneficiaries of state institutions. As Levine argues, those who actually enjoyed the benefits promised by Vargas's social legislation in his lifetime were relatively few. Maybe his legislative and institutional legacy is better compared with the most progressive provisions of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. In both countries, many laws remained unenforced. In most cases, as the works reviewed here show, when the laws were acted upon, the state and industrialists sought to distance decision-making power from labor and make only enough concessions to prop up a façade of class harmony. The processes in Mexico may have been different, but the results were in many ways similar. At least Vargas's social legislation and the Mexican Constitution of 1917 provided a means by which labor and its allies could attempt to force the state to live up to its rhetoric and law, as Welch and Weinstein show. It is to be hoped nonetheless that the strategies of corporativist and state-sanctioned institutions intended to organize labor to control it are one of the bequests of Vargas that President Fernando Henrique Cardoso had in mind when he spoke of undoing Getúlio's legacy (Levine, p. 12).

The books reviewed here will enliven debates on class, which as a category of analysis is currently overshadowed by research agendas stressing issues of race and gender. The interlocking and mutually constitutive nature of these categories demands more synthetic theorization and investigations that bring these categories of analysis together. In this respect, Weinstein's *For Social Peace in Brazil* goes the farthest in achieving such a synthesis. Fortunately, research has moved well beyond the bland and mostly sterile debates that attempted to assert the primacy of one of these categories over the other. The four studies reviewed here demonstrate the utility of class analysis—especially when enlivened by new methods and theory developed to analyze race and gender—for crafting new brushes that will reshape the broad and fine strokes of historically significant periods like the Vargas era.

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