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Workers and Dictators Brazilian Labour History 50 Years after the Military Coup

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Workers and Dictators: Brazilian Labour History 50 Years after the Military Coup

Sean Purdy

Paulo Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*
(Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)

Marcelo Badaró Mattos and Rubén Vega, eds., *Trabalhadores e Ditaduras: Brasil, Espanha e Portugal* (Rio de Janeiro: Consequência, 2014)

IN 2014, BRAZILIANS SOLEMNLY observed the 50th anniversary of the military coup of 1964. The *Comissão Nacional da Verdade* (National Truth Commission, CNV), entrusted by the government to thoroughly analyze and publicize (but not punish) the massive human rights abuses of the military regime, published a 4,300 page final report in December 2014 that detailed the pervasive attacks on civil, legal, and political rights as well as the illegal imprisonment, torture, and forced exile of tens of thousands and the direct political assassinations of 434 left-wing oppositionists.¹ During emotional events throughout the year, family members, friends, and comrades paid homage to the victims and public monuments were dedicated by state officials and social movements in several cities. The extensive media coverage of the events was accompanied by the publication of a plethora of new scholarly books, memoirs, autobiographies, and journalistic investigations as well as the release of documentaries and display of historical exhibitions to coincide with the anniversary.² All these events constituted a profound experience of

1. The full report in Portuguese may be downloaded here: <http://www.cnv.gov.br/index.php/outros-destaques/574-conheca-e-acesse-o-relatorio-final-da-cnv>.

2. For academic monographs, see Marcos Napolitano, *1964: História do Regime Militar Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Contexto, 2014); Daniel Aarão Reis, *Ditadura e Democracia no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2014); Daniel Aarão Reis, Marcelo Ridenti, and Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta, eds., *A Ditadura que Mudou o Brasil: 50 Anos do Golpe de 1964* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2014);

national reckoning with the brutal military dictatorship that lasted for over two decades.

As Antonio Luigi Negro, Larissa Rose Corrêa, and Paulo Fontes remind us, the union movement and workers more generally were the central targets of the 1964 military coup itself and the object of the repressive military regime as well as the active subjects of its overthrow.³ The generals, supported by American imperialism in the context of the Cold War, large national and multinational employers, conservative sections of the middle class, and the corporate media, forcibly deposed President João Goulart in 1964 to prevent the further radicalization of working-class struggles that, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, had increasingly threatened capitalist order. It then governed with an iron fist for more than two decades in the interest of key sectors of multinational and national capital. Repressive legal and police measures against strikes and independent union organization, including the firing, arrest, and sometimes murder of union militants, were central planks of the military regime. Indeed, at least one quarter of the 434 direct political assassinations were of workers active in the labour movement. This proportion would increase significantly if we include “worker-students” – that is, university students who were expelled or abandoned their studies to participate in the labour movement and the struggle against the dictatorship. And the weight of workers among the victims of the regime becomes particularly impressive if we include the more than 1,500 rural workers killed (with condemnations in only eight cases) during the dictatorship by employers’ thugs under the cover of a repressive political environment.⁴ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a protracted economic crisis and a wave of strikes and popular mobilizations sealed the fate of the military dictatorship, forcing the generals to relinquish control in 1985.⁵

Carlos Fico, *O Golpe de 1964: momentos decisivos* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2014); Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta, *As Universidades e o Regime Militar* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2014); James N. Green and Renan Quinalha, eds., *Ditadura e Homossexualidades: Repressão, Resistência e a Busca da Verdade* (São Carlos: EDUFSCAR, 2014); Pedro Henrique Pedreira Campos, *Estranhas Catedrais: As Empreiteiras Brasileiras e a Ditadura Civil-Militar, 1964–1988* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da UFF, 2014).

3. Antonio Luigi Negro, Larissa Rose Corrêa, and Paulo Fontes, “Trabalhadoras e Ditadura,” *Mundos do Trabalho* 6 (Janeiro–Junho 2014): 5–9. This was also the conclusion of the CNV. See Grupo de Trabalho Ditadura e Repressão aos Trabalhadores, às Trabalhadoras e ao Movimento Sindical. *A Luta dos Trabalhadores Por Verdade, Justiça e Reparação* (Brasília: CNV, 2014).

4. Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), *Assassinatos no campo, crime e impunidade: 1964–1986* (São Paulo: Global Editora, 1987). The CNV also found that at least 8,350 indigenous peoples were murdered by agro-business and/or soldiers during the dictatorship.

5. Although limited in theoretical and empirical scope and dated, see the general overview in English by Thomas Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964–1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Recent general textbooks and readers which partially cover the military dictatorship include Boris Fausto and Sergio Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Thomas Skidmore, *Brazil: Five Centuries of*

At first glance, it is thus particularly surprising that the extensive crop of scholarly studies published in 2014 included few specific histories of the role of the working class during the military regime. This reflects in part the newness of Brazilian labour history and the particular institutional and political context in which it emerged. The writing of labour history in Brazil only reemerged in the 1980s after two decades of direct and indirect censorship and fear of persecution during the dictatorship. E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, highly influential in the revolution in labour and social history in Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s, was only published in Portuguese for the first time in 1987.⁶ It thus took some time to intellectually and institutionally consolidate a coherent historiographical field: while there were important labour histories published immediately before and after the end of the dictatorship, it is noteworthy that the Brazilian labour history journal, *Mundos do Trabalho*, only began in 2009.⁷ It was also symptomatic that the first edition of a popular Brazilian historiography textbook, first published in 1997, had surveys on business history and the use of computers in historical inquiry, but failed to include a specific article on labour history.⁸

Moreover, the field emerged exactly at the same time as the cultural turn in historiography and the political downturn of the global workers' movement, both of which tended to influence researchers to downplay the significance of class.⁹ Also important, however, is that the period of the military regime is

Change (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Robert Levine and John Crocitti, eds., *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

6. On the influence of Thompson in Brazil, see Marcelo Badaró Mattos, *E. P. Thompson e a crítica ativa do materialismo histórico* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2012) and Adriano Luiz Duarte and Ricardo Gaspar Müller, eds., *E. P. Thompson: paixão e política* (Chapecó: Editora Argos, 2012).

7. *Mundos do Trabalho* can be accessed at this site: <https://periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/mundosdotrabalho>. For pioneering labour histories in the 1980s and early 1990s, see Sidney Chalhoub, *Trabalho, lar e botequim: o cotidiano dos trabalhadores no Rio de Janeiro na Belle Époque* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986); Francisco Foot Hardman and Vitor Leonardi, *História da Indústria e do Trabalho No Brasil: das Origens Aos Anos Vinte* (São Paulo: Global, 1982); John French, *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Joel Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men: São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil's Industrial Working Class, 1900–1955* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850–1920* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983); Barbara Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920–1964* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

8. Ciro Flamarian Cardoso and Ronaldo Vainfais, eds., *Domínios de História: Ensaios de Teoria e Metodologia* (Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 1997). Even in the updated 2011 edition of this textbook, labour history is only cursorily treated in the chapter on the history of social movements. Hebe Mattos, "História e Movimentos Sociais," in Ciro Flamarian Cardoso and Ronaldo Vainfais, eds., *Novos Domínios de História* (Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier, 2011), 95–111.

9. On the dominance of cultural history in Brazil and the neglect of class and capitalism, see

relatively recent with few accessible sources especially since even democratic governments have refused to force the armed forces to open all the archives on the period. Historians interested in the working class tend to study earlier periods in Brazilian history especially the transition from slavery to full-bodied capitalism in the late 19th century when the working class consolidated itself and launched its first organizations. There has also been significant research conducted on workers, unions, and political parties during the “populist” governments of the 1930s to the 1950s.

The bulk of the scholarly books published in 2014 were general surveys that aimed to understand the overall nature of the 1964 coup, the functioning of the military governments and the uneven and contradictory legacy of the regime in contemporary, democratic Brazil. While most of these studies are generally excellent, thought-provoking and sometimes controversial studies that touch on key aspects of the class experience during the military regime, they do not focus specifically on Brazilian workers and their organizations.

The two books under review were thus chosen to represent scholarly approaches to the specific history of the working class and the military dictatorship. Fontes’ scholarly monograph deals with diverse aspects of labour and working-class history, focusing on the large community of migrant workers from the northeast of Brazil who settled an outlying neighborhood of the city of São Paulo, working largely in the chemical industry. These workers were particularly active in the radicalization of the workers’ movement in the years before the military coup. The second book is an edited collection, including nine articles on Brazil, which broadly explores the social, political, economic, and cultural history of workers before and during the military dictatorship.

The Making of the São Paulo Working Class

PAULO FONTES’ COMMANDING STUDY of migrant workers in the making of the São Paulo working class was first published in Portuguese in 2008 to great acclaim, winning the first Thomas Skidmore Prize for the best book on 20th-century Brazilian history.¹⁰ Fontes cut his teeth on studies of E.P. Thompson while doing graduate work at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) in the 1990s.¹¹ It is no surprise, therefore, that his study of northeastern migrant

Marcelo Badaró Mattos, “As bases teóricas do *revisionismo*: o culturalismo e a historiografia brasileira contemporânea” in Demian Melo, ed., *A Miséria de Historiografia: uma crítica ao revisionismo contemporâneo* (Rio de Janeiro: Consequência, 2014), 67–98.

10. Paulo Fontes, *Um Nordeste em São Paulo: trabalhadores migrantes em São Miguel Paulista (1945–1966)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2008).

11. As a graduate student, Fontes collaborated in the translation into Portuguese of several articles by Thompson and the writing of a lengthy introductory essay on the life and work of the British Marxist historian. See Alexandre Fortes, Antonio Luigi Negro and Paulo Fontes, “Peculiaridades de E.P. Thompson,” in Edward Thompson, *As peculiaridades dos ingleses e outros artigos* (Campinas: Ed. da Unicamp, 2001), 21–57. The Department of History at

workers largely employed at the Nitro Química factory in the São Paulo region of São Miguel Paulista from 1945 to 1966 adopts specifically Thompsonian insights on the role of regional traditions and culture, shifting his emphasis from the factory and union struggles explored in a previous book to “migration, the neighborhood, and social relations” in order to “arrive at a more complex analysis of the lived working-class experience.”¹² True to this perspective, Fontes uses a range of sources “from below” including 42 testimonies from male and female workers, local politicians and unionists, documentary sources from the company, state, police, and political parties as well as representations of the migrant worker in cinema, popular literature, and television. Part of what Felipe Abranches Demier calls the “Unicamp Historiographical Current,”¹³ this book aims to show that culture and traditions were essential elements in working-class formation and political struggles in a populist period traditionally characterized as under the strict control of corporatist labour legislation and charismatic populist politicians.

Particularly important in Fontes’ study is a thorough analysis of how working-class formation was constituted in and through the diverse and complex social networks of the migrant community in the particular space of the working-class region of São Miguel Paulista: “In this conceptualization, space is not only a locus where class formation occurs; it is part of the process.”¹⁴ He thus aims to update the prevalent “community studies” common in labour history in the 1980s and 1990s, integrating space and networks of social relations as constituent factors in class and community formation. He cites Brazilian, Argentinian, American, and British working-class community histories as influences on his decision to explore “connections between migrants and their social networks; connections between workplace and neighborhood; issues of urbanization; the local and national political scene; family and gender relations; the vicissitudes of economic development and the job market; and organizational experiences both formal and informal.”¹⁵

the State University of Campinas included numerous historians influenced by the work of Thompson, including Sidney Chalhoub, Michael Macdonald Hall, Robert Slenes, Silvia Lara and Claudio Batalha.

12. Paulo Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

13. Felipe Abranches Demier, “Populismo e historiografia na atualidade: lutas operárias, cidadania e nostalgia de varguismo,” in Melo, ed., *A miséria da historiografia*, 125–156. For other studies by members of this current, see Antonio Luigi Negro, *Linhas de Montagem: O Industrialismo nacional-desenvolvimentista e a sindicalização dos trabalhadores* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2004); Fernando Teixeira da Silva, *A carga e a culpa. Operários das docas de Santos: direitos e cultura de solidariedade, 1937–1968* (São Paulo: Hucitec/Pref. Municipal de Santos, 1995) and Alexandre Fortes, *Nós do Quarto Distrito: a classe trabalhadora porto-alegrense e a Era Vargas* (Caxias do Sul: Edusc/Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2004).

14. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 8.

15. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 9.

Employing these conceptual lenses, Fontes deconstructs a number of myths in the conventional narrative of the migrant working-class experience in São Paulo whose industrialization relied on masses of workers from rural areas in several northeastern states. Adapting modernization theory for the Brazilian context, many social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the rural origins of the industrial proletariat to explain their supposed apathy and lack of class consciousness. They contrasted “rural backwardness” with “modern urban” social relations in an attempt to explain the allegedly tight adhesion of many industrial workers to populist unions and political projects at the local, state, and national level. Even criticisms of “populism” developed by left-wing sociologists tended to view migrant workers as politically inexperienced and manipulated from above by populist politicians.¹⁶

Reacting to the empirical and conceptual problems of “populism,” other historians developed a paradigm of “labourism” in the 1990s and 2000s, criticizing populism for its imprecision and inclination to see workers simply as objects of manipulation by populist politicians and the state with little construction of reciprocal social relations. Instead, they posited that workers formed part of a labourist project that comprised common identities and a common class consciousness expressed in formal political terms through labourist political parties and politicians. Fontes, however, rejects both populism and labourism as conceptual frameworks to understand working-class formation in São Miguel Paulista.

The traditional populist explanation is simply inaccurate as well as condescending: migrants were not at all helpless victims of the transition from rural to urban industrial settings. In the first three chapters, Fontes explores how migrants built their working-class community through a sophisticated range of survival strategies based on the support of family and friends and the assistance of informal social networks of other migrants from the same community of origin to curtail the risks of the migration process. Lured by stories from family members and friends of relatively well-paid factory work with social rights (labour legislation and social programs) in the exciting big city, northeasterners suffered first from a journey of thousands of kilometres that frequently included long stretches of travel on overcrowded and unhygienic boats, trains, buses and, increasingly, trucks owned by labour recruiters. Indeed, Fontes mines popular cultural sources to highlight the frequently made comparisons of this journey with the slave ships that forcibly brought African slaves to Brazil from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Racism against Blacks and discrimination based on regional origin by employers and state officials were indeed ubiquitous elements of the experience of

16. On these issues, see Ruy Braga, *A Política do Precariado: do populismo à hegemonia lulista* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2012), Chapters 1–3.

newly-arrived migrants, frequently and unjustly scapegoated as responsible for a variety of urban problems.¹⁷

Yet the migrants were neither alone nor inexperienced. Few people came to São Paulo without contacts of friends and family and well-made plans of where to stay temporarily and where to search for work. Usually families as a whole discussed the possibilities of migration, sending young bachelors first; upon successfully finding work, they would invite siblings and other kin and friends to the city. Return rates in the early period were also high, reaching as much as 40 per cent in 1953.¹⁸ In fact, Fontes shows that the supposed instability of northeastern migrants and their inability to adapt actually revealed a rational survival strategy: many migrants maintained a piece of land in their community where they still had family and relatives as “insurance.” The migration process was thus one of “continual, circular displacement between rural and urban areas.”¹⁹

Once arrived in São Paulo, social and familial contacts were key to finding work in a labour market characterized by a strong demand for unskilled workers in construction and industry. Either through labour recruiters or through contacts from family and friends, Fontes shows a typical trajectory was to begin in an unskilled job in construction or services, gaining urban work experience and knowledge of the labour market, and then move on to an industrial job. Living in working-class neighbourhoods with strong social networks of family, friends, and their communities of origin, migrants were frequently hired by companies that employed their relatives or acquaintances from the same regions. This contributed to the consolidation and deepening of existing loyalties.

Perhaps the most innovative practice of migrants was self-construction of their own houses in the urban periphery. Home ownership signified some semblance of economic security in the context of the volatile labour market and economy of the big city and also represented a modest investment. Houses were built gradually with friends and family in a process known as the “mutirão” (mutual effort) on often irregular lots bought on installment. By the 1980s, as many as half the houses in the entire city of São Paulo were built this way.²⁰ Fontes argues that such a strategy actually reflects how the migrant’s rural origin actually benefitted, rather than harmed them, as the

17. Sean Purdy, “Constructing Pariah Spaces in the Americas: Newspaper Representations of Slums, Ghettos and Favelas in the 1960s,” in Karen Dubinsky, Catherine Krull, Susan Lord, Sean Mills, Scott Rutherford, eds., *New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2009), Chapter 21.

18. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 37.

19. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 39.

20. On housing struggles in this period, see the essays in Lucio Kowarick, ed., *Social Struggles and the City: The Case of São Paulo* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994).

populist interpretation stresses, in the transition to urban, industrial life.²¹ Neighbourhood solidarity and community ties were forged through these common experiences rooted in a particular place. Contrary to the “labourist” interpretation that focuses solely on the workplace and formal politics, therefore, Fontes concludes that the construction of urban neighbourhood and regional solidarities were essential experiences that assisted in union and political organization.

What does this have to do with the military coup of 1964 and the dictatorship? Far from docile or puppets of populist politicians, workers in São Miguel were enthusiastic and independent-minded trade unionists and political militants who built significant class-based organizations in the two decades before the coup. A strong Chemical Workers’ Union was established at Nitro Química that organized strikes throughout this period, participating actively in the famous strike waves of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This union, as in many other industrial unions composed of migrant workers in São Paulo, was characterized by a rank and file rebelliousness that frequently pitted strikers against their own union leadership and political parties.²² Residents’ associations founded by workers in the region were also important actors in campaigns for neighbourhood improvement and against cost of living increases.²³

Getúlio Vargas, the ex-dictator and founder of the Brazilian Labour Party (PTB), whose labour legislation in 1943 established labour and union rights for the first time in Brazil, was widely popular at the federal level while the populist mayor of São Paulo, Adhemar de Barros, counted on the support of São Miguel’s workers. The Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) established its largest São Paulo branch (more than 1,000 members) in the neighbourhood in the late 1940s. Communist militants were soon elected to the union leadership and organized numerous neighbourhood rallies, strikes, and political activities in 1945 and 1946 around both workplace- and neighbourhood-related demands such as wage and benefits increases and improvements in urban infrastructure and services. And Fontes emphasizes that in “São Miguel, as in other places, the Communist militants incorporated popular cultural manifestations into political life. Dances, parties, and music were frequent Party events.”²⁴ Indeed, the strong cultural life and ties of neighbourhood solidarity established by the workers was central to the political organization of the region’s workers.

Election campaigns involving the PCB alone or in coalitions with other parties also received strong support from São Miguel’s workers. Numerous communist federal and state deputies as well the governors of the state of São

21. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 69–73.

22. For more on this rebelliousness, see Braga, *Política do Precariado*, Chapters 2 and 3.

23. For similar organizations and mobilizations in other areas of São Paulo, consult Murilo Leal Perreira Neto, *A reinvenção da classe trabalhadora (1953–1964)* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2011).

24. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 177.

Paulo and later mayors of the city, Adhemar de Barros and Jânio Quadros, were elected from the 1940s to the 1960s through the solid support of the new industrial working class in regions like São Miguel. Even after the banning of the PCB in 1947, Communists continued to have a strong clandestine influence in the region. Despite all its dubious twists and turns and electoral alliances with the PTB and the Social Democratic Party, the PCB remained a significant force in the region at the time of the coup.

Fontes underlines that conflict and reciprocity characterized relations between São Miguel's workers and politicians. Cutting against the arguments of both the populist and labourist interpretations of the period, he shows that workers were not a "maneuverable mass" of the populists or of the communists. He highlights "the decisive role of the networks of local contacts that defended and struggled for those leaders on a daily basis and, in electoral periods, mobilized to run the candidates' local campaigns."²⁵ Residents expected politicians to respond to their demands for local urban services while unionized workers pressured their communist leaders to take firm stances in salary and benefits campaigns. Indeed, both the strength of left populist and communist union leaders and politicians was based on their ability to deliver on workers' demands. As Ruy Braga puts it in other words, confirming Fontes' analysis, workers developed a "practical class politics" that "shaped ... the relationship of the rank and file with the unions, helping to reproduce the precarious hegemony of populist regulation."²⁶

It was not surprising, therefore, that workers in São Miguel were actively involved in the increasingly radicalized union and political activities of the early 1960s that provided the backdrop for the military coup of 1964. At the local level, the union dramatically increased its membership, built solid rank-and-file networks of shop stewards, and engaged in militant salary and workplace safety campaigns with broad participation by the majority of workers. Fontes' interviewees and documentary evidence also shows avid support at the federal level for the democratization of the state and the radical economic and social "Base Reforms" of the federal government of João Goulart from 1962 to 1964 that aimed to increase social and economic rights for the rural and urban working class.²⁷

After the military coup, the union and its militants suffered brutal repression, but the solid organization built up over two decades persisted in neighbourhood organization after the factory was closed in 1966. One of the dissident communist workers at the Nitro factory, Virgílio Gomes da Silva, became a leading member of the armed struggle against the dictatorship and commanded the spectacular kidnapping of the US Ambassador in 1969. He was caught soon after and died in custody after extensive torture.

25. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 209.

26. Braga, *Política do Precariado*, 132.

27. Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, 238–239.

What Fontes accomplishes in this excellent book is the resolution of the frequently lamented lack of the social history of politics in working-class historiography. Creatively utilizing a variety of sources, it is a convincing blend of both the social and political history of the working class in São Miguel, emphasizing how neighbourhood cultural and regional solidarities fostered political organization, sustaining a tight-knit working-class community. It contributes greatly to both the tradition of working-class community studies and the political history of the 1964 coup and the two-decade military dictatorship that has shaped Brazilian history in the last 50 years. Historians of the working class in other geographical and cultural contexts would benefit greatly from a reading of Fontes' book.

Nevertheless, while correctly valorizing the community and struggles of São Miguel's workers, Fontes may lose sight of the distinct limits of the working-class political organization under the tutelage of left populists and communists in the period. If workers created spaces for struggle within the corporatist labour relations structure created by Vargas in the 1940s and 1950s and successfully pressured populist politicians to advance their interests, they still operated within an authoritarian union structure closely integrated into the state and within the limited horizons of a nationalist and reformist political project. What did the remarkable rank-and-file militancy signify without the effective advancement of an independent union politics against the rigidity of a corporatist union structure that gave significant power to both employers and the state labour bureaucracy? What did it mean for workers to support labourist and populist politicians, either directly or in fair-weather alliances with the communists, who would end up ardently supporting the military coup in 1964 and the dictatorship? What did it mean for workers to support a PCB that had misplaced faith in a "progressive national bourgeoisie" and failed to prepare for the coup despite glaring signs that it was underway? At the end of the day, what did it mean for workers to abscond from the struggle against the capitalist order in whatever particular form it comprised?²⁸

Repudiating Revisionism

THE TITLE OF THE COLLECTION edited by Marcelo Badaró Mattos and Rubén Vega, *Trabalhadores e Ditaduras: Brasil, Espanha e Portugal* (Workers and Dictatorships: Brazil, Spain and Portugal) is misleading. Nine of the thirteen essays actually deal with Brazil, exploring diverse aspects of the politics and culture of the working-class experience during the military dictatorship. The book is divided into three sections: the first part explores the more general processes of the rise and fall of 20th-century dictatorships, firmly analyzing them through the lenses of capitalism and class. The essays in the following

28. For similar questions directed to this body of historical research, see the critique of Felipe Abranches Demier, "Populismo e historiografia na atualidade," 142.

section study particular actions of the working class during the dictatorship, including struggles by shantytown dwellers in Rio de Janeiro and rural and urban workers. The final section includes three articles on aspects of working-class culture and education during the military regime.

To properly situate the collection, it is important to briefly digress to discuss the fierce debates in the historiography of the Brazilian military regime especially the “revisionist” interpretations which are roundly repudiated in this collection. Classic studies of the coup and ensuing military regime by Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira²⁹ and René Dreifuss³⁰ published in the late 1970s and early 1980s particularly stressed the role of large national and international capital both in the destabilization of the populist and developmentalist Goulart government before the coup and the political economy of the military dictatorship itself. For Moniz Bandeira, the coup was an articulated response to the economic and political crisis of populism, punctuated by the thorough radicalization of workers’ and social movements in the immediate pre-coup period. Dreifuss charted how in the early 1960s two key intellectual and political think tanks funded and organized by both national and international capital formulated a national economic policy centred on the production of durable consumer goods and capital goods with a high aggregate value.³¹ Essential to this process was the subordination of national to foreign capital, increasing the rate of profit through the radical concentration of incomes, the reduction of workers’ rights won during the 1940s and 1950s and the fostering of a middle-class consumer market. For three years, they actively funded opposition parties, mounted a massive propaganda campaign against the Goulart government and even organized massive street demonstrations against the government’s agrarian, social policy and labour reforms. After the coup, the key figures in these think tanks were incorporated into the military regime’s bureaucracy, largely determining, in alliance with the generals, the economic and political policies of the dictatorship until the mid-1970s.

Phyllis Parker’s study of “Operation Brother Sam,” detailing the role of US imperialism in this process, complemented these pioneering studies.³²

29. Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, *O governo João Goulart e as lutas sociais no Brasil, 1961–1964* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1977).

30. René Armand Dreifuss, *1964, A Conquista do Estado: Ação Política, Poder e Golpe de Classe* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1981). This book is largely a translation of Dreifuss’ doctoral thesis. “State, Class and the Organic Elite: The Formation of an Entrepreneurial Order in Brazil,” PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 1980. It can be accessed at <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/4948/>.

31. The two think tanks were the *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômicas e Sociais* and the *Instituto Brasileiro da Ação Democrática*.

32. Phyllis Parker, *Brazil and the Quiet Intervention, 1964* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979). The earliest works in English on the coup were quite limited with no consideration of imperialism and little analysis of the key role of national and international capital. Consult Thomas Skidmore, *Politics in Brazil, 1930–1964: An Experiment in Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) and John Foster Dulles, *Unrest in Brazil: Political-Military*

Materialist and Marxist-influenced historians and social scientists continue to be influenced by these rich empirical and theoretical explorations, focusing on the transformations of Brazilian capitalism in the 1950s, the economic and political crisis of populism, and the emergence of a new “power bloc” that engineered the coup in alliance with the military and proceeded to determine the key economic and political policies of the regime. In short, the focus was on the role of powerful economic groups and classes, economic transformations, and political power. To capture these complex dynamics within political structures and civil society, Dreifuss even used the terms “Civil-Military” coup and dictatorship to describe the military regime while subsequent authors coined the term “Entrepreneurial-Military” regime.³³

Appreciative critics of this focus on economic and political power structures, capitalism and class, convincingly argued that while such analyses captured important economic and political processes they neglected the autonomous role of the military and overlooked resistance to the coup and the subsequent regime.³⁴ Beginning in the 1990s, however, a revisionist historiographical current arose that sought to fundamentally rethink the nature of the post-war populist governments, the causes of the coup, and the nature of the 1964–1985 dictatorship. While such scholars denounced the violent repression and censorship of the military regime, they aimed to shift the focus away from the actions of the dominant classes and the military to the problematic politics and failures of the left, the workers’ and social movements and the Goulart government.

The first salvo in the revisionist attack on Dreifuss was fired by the political scientist, Argelina Figueiredo. She argued forcefully that the radicalism of the workers’ movement and the Goulart government in the pre-coup years was partly responsible for the violent antidemocratic reaction of the military.³⁵ The historian Jorge Ferreira argued similarly that at the beginning of 1964 between “the radicalism of the left and of the right, an ample parcel of the population just silently watched the conflicts.” The ruling class and the military,

Crises, 1955–1964 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970). A more recent study on American intervention is Carlos Fico, *O Grande Irmão: Da Operação Brother Sam aos Anos de Chumbo. O governo dos Estados Unidos e a Ditadura Militar Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008). On opposition to the dictatorship in the United States, see James N. Green, “We Cannot Remain Silent”: *Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States, 1964–85* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

33. See, for example, Campos, *Estranhas Catedrais*.

34. On the autonomy of the generals, see Marcos Napolitano, “O golpe de 1964 e o regime militar brasileiro: Apontamentos para uma revisão historiográfica,” *Historia y problemas del siglo xx* 2 (2011): 209–217.

35. This section relies on the convincing general repudiations of revisionism by Demian Bezerra de Melo, “O golpe de 1964 e meio século de controvérsias: o estado atual da questão,” in Melo, ed., *A Miséria da Historiografia*, 157–188 and Caio Navarro Toledo, “1964: golpismo de democracia. As falácias do revisionismo,” *Crítica Marxista* 19 (2004): 27–48.

he argues, were not just reacting to, but were even “scared” of the radicalism of the period.³⁶ Daniel Aarão Reis has also argued in a series of studies that there was a distinct lack of democracy in the pre-coup left and workers’ movement and a dangerous attachment to the notion of socialist revolution. Most recently, he has employed the term “Civil-Military Dictatorship” much differently than Dreifuss, arguing that a majority of the Brazilian population was partially complicit in the dictatorship through their supposed ample support for the coup and the military regime. Rounding out this current was the well-placed journalist Elio Gaspari, with access to documents by ex-members of the regime unavailable to other researchers, who posited in his four-volume study of the dictatorship, that Goulart and his union backers were supposedly also planning a similarly undemocratic coup to implement their reform package. In sum, the revisionist camp, Marcos Napolitano criticizes, “understands the Jango government as a paradigm of administrative incompetence, irresponsible populism and an ideological imposture of the left as a whole.”³⁷

By the 40th anniversary of the coup, this revisionist current would constitute the dominant interpretation among mainstream Brazilian academics. Such revisionism fit well in the context of the downturn of the left internationally, the widespread rejection of Marxism and materialist analyses, and the growing influence of “culturalist” interpretations. In the Brazilian context, it also combined neatly with the increasing embrace of neoliberalism by the Workers’ Party (PT) governments from 2003 onwards and the emergence of both conservative criticisms of the working-class reformism of the PT and the attraction of some intellectuals to a “Third Way” social democracy represented by the Brazilian Social Democracy Party.³⁸

The essays in *Trabalhadores e Ditaduras* are largely focused on repudiating these revisionist arguments and furthering the research program first launched by Moniz Bandeira, Dreifuss and other left-wing scholars. Gilberto Calil demonstrates that shifts in Brazilian capitalism, the political crisis of populism, and the articulations of employers’ associations, right-wing intellectuals and politicians and conservative think tanks to resolve these problems through an essentially anti-worker program were central elements in the preparation of the coup and the political economy of the military regime.³⁹ Sonia Regina de

36. Melo, “O golpe de 1964 e meio século de controvérsias,” 162.

37. Napolitano, “O golpe de 1964 e o regime militar brasileiro,” 214.

38. On the origins of these developments, see Ronald Chilcote, *Intellectuals and the Search for National Identity in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). On the rise of the right in Brazil, see the essays in Felipe Demier and Rejane Hoeveler, eds., *A Onda Conservadora: Ensaio sobre os Tempos Sombrios no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2016). On the rise and fall of the PT, see Sean Purdy, *Brazil at the Precipice: The Workers’ Party, Crisis and Resistance* (London/New York: Verso, forthcoming).

39. Gilberto Calil, “O sentido histórico do Golpe de 1964 e da ditadura e suas interpretações,” in Marcelo Badaró Mattos and Rubén Veja, eds., *Trabalhadores e Ditaduras: Brasil, Espanha e*

Mendonça charts the actions of the main representatives of agro-business who ardently backed the coup to stop the agrarian reforms proposed by Goulart and repress the militant rural workers' movements.⁴⁰ Based on her previous rigorous empirical studies of Brazilian agricultural capitalism and the articulations of the two main agro-business federations, she refutes the revisionist argument that right-wing forces simply reacted to the radicalization of the left.⁴¹ They were active and long-time participants, in alliance with national and multinational capital and with widespread political representation in municipal, state, and federal legislatures, in proposing a liberal modernization of agricultural production with strict control of rural workers and the maintenance of their centuries-old power and privileges. The agrarian reform proposed by Goulart, backed by the rural workers' movements, threatened this plan. Building on Dreifuss' insights, she nevertheless also pays close attention to the divisions among the agro-businesses and between them and the technocrats in the military government. She thus aptly advances the notion of a "double coup": the powerful agro-business federations actively supported and participated in the military coup in 1964, but then organized to defeat the modernizing agricultural legislation launched by the new military government that aimed to partially redistribute land to small rural proprietors.⁴²

Marco Marques Pestana's article on workers in Rio de Janeiro's ubiquitous *favelas* (shantytowns) successfully brings together urban and labour history.⁴³ He recovers the neglected stories of the *Comitês Populares Democráticos* (Popular Democratic Committees) organized by the PCB from 1945 to 1947 and the *União dos Trabalhadores Favelados* (The Favela Workers' Union) in the 1950s and early 1960s⁴⁴ that actively mobilized for urban infrastructural reforms for low-income residents, mostly Afro-Brazilians, and against the forced removal of irregular housing by state authorities under pressure from real-estate and construction companies. Yet Pestana does not fall into the trap of romanticizing these movements: he deftly shows that they only succeeded

Portugal (Rio de Janeiro: Consequência, 2014), 13–34.

40. Sonia Regina de Mendonça, "O campo 'vai ao golpe,'" in Mattos and Veja, eds., *Trabalhadores e Ditadura*, 35–55.

41. Mendonça, "O campo 'vai ao golpe,'" 36.

42. Mendonça, "O campo 'vai ao golpe,'" 55.

43. Marco Marques Pestana, "Golpe de 1964, ditadura e favelas cariocas: Reflexões sobre as formas da dominação de classes," in Mattos and Veja, eds., *Trabalhadores e Ditadura*, 127–151.

44. For detailed histories of these movements, see Brodwyn Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Brodwyn Fischer, "Democracy, Thuggery and the Grassroots: Antoine Magarinos Torres and the União dos Trabalhadores Favelados in the Age of Carioca Populism," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, Colloques, 10 February 2013. <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/64840>, and Bryan McCann, *Hard Times in the Marvelous City: From Dictatorship to Democracy in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

in constructing a system of *negotiated control* that still left much power to local politicians beholden to urban business interests.⁴⁵ Indeed, even before the military coup, the governor of Guanabara State, that included the city of Rio, Carlos Lacerda, retook the initiative against these urban workers in the early 1960s. He forced through the removal of several favelas to aid urban development companies and negotiated a deal with the United States Agency for International Development for public housing construction, directly defying Goulart's attempt to chart an independent foreign policy.⁴⁶ The military coup resulted in the repression of favela leaders by military forces, the federalization of interventions in the urban landscape and the consolidation and extension of the severe urban spatial segregation that still characterizes Rio de Janeiro. Aiming to understand the role of both urban business and political interests and the federal interventions of the military government, Pestana advances the notion of an Entrepreneurial-Military regime.

Marta Ciocarri's article aims to fill a significant lacuna in the historiography of the dictatorship by focusing on the repression of rural workers.⁴⁷ While Brazil currently has one of the most urbanized populations in the world, the rural population only became a minority in the 1960s.⁴⁸ Indeed, the dominance of export production in the Brazilian economy meant that rural settings were frequent stages for the political and economic interventions of the military government. The public imaginary of resistance to the military regime focuses mostly on the student movement and the armed struggle,⁴⁹ but Ciocarri shows through oral testimonies and extensive documentary evidence that the proliferation of rural workers' unions before the coup and the *Ligas Camponesas* (Peasants' Leagues) organized by the PCB in the 1940s and 1950s were key actors in the politics of the period. Indeed, rural workers' organizations suffered disproportionately from the repression of the military regime although they are frequently left out of the story and the official statistics on deaths, tortures and exiles since much violence was meted out by private agents of the big landowners and agro-businesses. The author also significantly reveals the continuity of the repressive practices against rural unionists who suffered before, during, and after the military dictatorship by rural oligarchies tied to the dominant power structures.

45. Pestana, "Golpe de 1964, ditadura e favelas cariocas," 129–134.

46. Pestana, "Golpe de 1964, ditadura e favelas cariocas," 140.

47. Marta Ciocarri, "Os trabalhadores rurais e o regime militar no Brasil," in Mattos and Veja, eds., *Trabalhadores e Ditadura*, 153–174.

48. Fausto Brito, "O deslocamento da população brasileira para as metrópoles," *Estudos Avançados* 20 (May–August 2006): 221–236.

49. Victoria Langland, *Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the Making and Remembering of 1968 in Military Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Maria Helena Moreira Alves, *State and Opposition in Military Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

By focusing on urban unions, Marcelo Badará Mattos' contribution also deepens our understanding of the continuities of both struggles and repression from the 1950s to the 1980s.⁵⁰ He emphasizes the advances and limits of workers' struggles during the populist period in the context of a union structure institutionally linked tightly to the state. He also clearly outlines that unions were the key targets of the generals, business leaders, and conservative politicians who orchestrated the coup and constructed the military regime. Soon after the coup, there were federal interventions in more than 433 union entities with independent or left-wing leaders arrested and fired and then replaced by business unionists who faithfully did the bidding of the state labour courts and employers.⁵¹ Mattos does not fail to emphasize that despite the brutal repression, there were moments of concentrated struggle such as the 1968 metalworkers' strikes in Osasco and Contagem and during the 1970s the emergence of the *Oposição Sindical Metalúrgico de São Paulo* (The Metalworkers' Union Opposition, OSMSP) that courageously chipped away at the business unionist model imposed by the dictatorship.⁵²

While there were clear ruptures with the rise of the "authentic" unionists led by Luíz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) in the mid-1970s that contributed to the downfall of the dictatorship, Mattos never loses sight of the distinct continuities between the military regime and democratic Brazil. The democratic transition period in the 1980s and 1990s was still dominated by the concentrated power of national and international capital, newly armed with the ideological support of neoliberalism. When Lula assumed the presidency in 2003, he not only neglected the PT's traditional promises of establishing an independent union structure, but actually deepened the vertical structure of corporate unionism as a mechanism of control, bureaucratically integrating the unions into the state. This was accomplished both through cooperative negotiations with the main trade union federations tied to the PT and the incorporation of literally thousands of former unionists into the government as directors of joint government-union pension funds and state companies.⁵³

50. Marcelo Badará Mattos, "Continuidades e rupturas no movimento sindical brasileiro," in Mattos and Veja, eds., *Trabalhadores e Ditadura*, 175–191.

51. Mattos, "Continuidades e rupturas no movimento sindical brasileiro," 180–181.

52. Mattos, "Continuidades e rupturas no movimento sindical brasileiro," 185. On the remarkably courageous strike in Osasco in 1968 which involved an amalgam of workers and socialist militants and students, see Sérgio Luiz Santos de Oliveira, "A Esquerda Radical de Osasco e seu engajamento na guerrilha urbana em São Paulo (1966–1971)," in Jean Rodrigues Sales, ed., *Guerrilha e Revolução. A luta armada contra a ditadura militar no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Lamparina, 2015), 152–172. On OSMSP, see IEP – Oposição Sindical Metalúrgica de São Paulo. (ed.), *Investigação Operária - empresários, militares e pelegos contra os trabalhadores* (São Paulo: NPC, 2014).

53. Mattos, "Continuidades e rupturas no movimento sindical brasileiro," 189–190. For more in English on this issue, see Andréia Galvão, "The Brazilian Labour Movement under PT Governments," *Latin American Perspectives* 41 (2014): 184–199; and Ricardo Antunes

He concludes that historians should never forget the fact that the end of the dictatorship did not mean that workers' struggles were finished. In fact, the current democratic regime continues serving the same dominant class that was largely in charge of the Brazilian state during the military regime.

As in most collections, the contributions are uneven. Two of the three excellent articles in the last section on culture, for example, are not directly connected to the working class.⁵⁴ And the collection suffers from a glaring omission of women workers. In general, the collection succeeds in reasserting the importance of the questions of capitalism, class, and power and makes significant contributions to previously neglected workers such as favela dwellers and rural workers. Yet it also reveals the many gaps in the historiography. In addition to mining new sources and studying previously neglected groups of workers in certain cities or regions, working-class historians of the period could fruitfully integrate new and innovative areas in the general historiography of the dictatorship – historical memory and the particular experiences of Brazilian women, Blacks, and gays,⁵⁵ for example – with a focus on the working class. Thanks to the study by Paulo Fontes and the collection edited by Mattos and Vega, this important task has already begun.

and Marcos Aurélio Santana, "The Dilemmas of the New Unionism in Brazil: Breaks and Continuities," *Latin American Perspectives* 41 (2014): 10–21.

54. Dênis de Moraes, "O grupo Opinião e a resistência cultural à ditadura," 301–318; Romulo Costa Mattos, "O revisionismo histórico no campo dos estudos sobre a música popular brasileira," 319–345; Kênia Miranda, "Da educação popular à luta sindical: a organização dos trabalhadores da educação na ditadura civil-militar brasileira," 347–368 in Mattos and Vega, eds., *Trabalhadores e Ditadura*.

55. James N. Green "Who is the Macho Who Wants to Kill Me?: Male Homosexuality, Revolutionary Masculinity, and the Brazilian Armed Struggle of the 1960s and 70s," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 92 (August 2012): 437–469; Rebecca J. Atencio, *Memory's Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).