

The South Way: State and Agrarian Oligarchies through the contemporary spirit of neoliberalism in Brazil

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Introduction

There are so many facets to that which we could call “neoliberal times” in the south countries. Cultural, ideological, economic, or any other names for the configurations we might employ, will always have too large a scope for enterprises that, in most cases, depend nearly exclusively upon individual efforts located within a limited social space and time.

Making satisfactory progress in the unveiling of this object requires a debate with the existing production and the academic consensuses formed on the issue. The hierarchy of such consensuses certainly varies from place to place, especially when south societies are the subject we have in mind. Nonetheless, there appear to be some central issues to the distinct realities in which our countries live and at least one of these issues has been the object of research I have been carrying out in Brazil: the relationship between the State and the agrarian elite.

The present article is an attempt to broaden the discussion on neoliberalism by means of a qualified empirical contribution. In taking the processes that I have been studying and relating them to converging points on the issue, I intend to demonstrate the existing incompatibilities between the way of life of the agrarian elite that still control vast social spaces in Brazil and neoliberalism as an ideological formation. More specifically, I aim to demonstrate the difficulties in implanting a “neoliberal agenda” in countries in which the economic elite directly depends on the state apparatus for maintaining its political power. With the sugarcane plantation zone of the state of Pernambuco as the analytical focus, the text also intends to lay the foundation for a possible comparative interpretation between the Brazilian process and the experiences of other countries in the southern hemisphere, especially in southern Africa.

The role of the State in the neoliberal world

In the Brazilian case, one of the most considerable consensuses (derived from the social experience itself in the last 10 years) on the effects of neoliberalism is the demand for the State displacement of public life regulation function. In referring to the contemporary drama of urban unionism, Cardoso (2003: 25) states:

“The essential point [in neoliberalism] is that [the State] disencumber itself from its place as a center of consolidation and enforcement of general norms of market control (of goods, services, financing, work, etc.), thereby redefining its role in capitalist sociability” (Cardoso, 2003, 25).

Despite its being conceived for a specific context, that of “Brazilian unionism”, this characterization leads us to what I believe to be the central point of the issue, which is what Bourdieu (1996) calls the “abdication of the State”, that is, the removal of government agencies in capitalist societies from certain functions that were attributed to them during the very development of this *mode of production*. To believe that the State has such functions is to think of it as the embodiment of the *collective consciousness*, that is, a social organism, a product of society that by embodying the fragmented individual consciousnesses has the power to organize them in a professedly egalitarian, uniform and supposedly distanced fashion.

The first reservation I have with this definition regards its historical and sociological pertinence to countries in which the State, as a form of embodiment of this collective consciousness, has moved or moves toward a desired consolidation, contrarily to paradigmatic Europe. My second and more specific objection regards the scope of State functions in such non-exemplary societies such as Latin American societies. After all, whenever this “abdication of the State” is announced, the referred objects are regulations of social practices that often involve urban living (fundamentally, industrial work and public services). At no time in the production on the subject do we see, for example, “neoliberalism associated to issues regarding the typical sociability of the agrarian realm (known in sociological common sense terms as the patrimonialist domain).

As it is not of my interest to merely raise rhetorical criticism of the literature on the issue, for through concrete cases I have long since perceived the gaps in the discussion, I will set my efforts in the upcoming pages to presenting the effects that strategies that could be classified as neoliberal had on Brazilian agrarian oligarchies, more specifically, on the landowners in the sugar plantation zone of the state of Pernambuco.

Controversies regarding the notion of State in Brazil

When we speak of the impacts of a doctrine based on that kind of assumption, there is no way, in the Brazilian case, to avoid establishing a dialog with Brazilian social thinking (i. e. the genesis of a national sociology). A large part of this production, located in time between the early 20th century and the mid 1960s, fundamentally characterizes the peculiarities that involve the formation of a society and a modern state as constituted from an eminently agrarian heritage.

The theoretical dilemmas of these classic Brazilian social thinkers faced regarding the possibilities of instating a *competitive social order* in a country with a patrimonialist agrarian elite also helps us consider the impact of that which has been called neoliberalism on the agrarian elites social actions.

From the logic of the *adventurer* (Hollanda, 1995) to the *statesman* who controls the entire administrative apparatus (Faoro, 1991), there were innumerable qualifying terms used to understand the role of the State in this country. At the core of the issue were the (im)possible comparisons with the Weberian model defining the function of the State and its at least conceptual separation from society (Werneck Vianna, 1999). For the broad spectrum of theories on the national formation written at the time, there was no possibility of dissociating the State from the portion of society that supported it (the agrarian aristocracy), for its entire human and physical apparatus had been organized around the patrimonial bases of the landowners. In such a context, the needs of state universality (the bourgeoisie) had absolutely no possibility here simply because there was no bourgeoisie in the classic sense of the word. Our bourgeoisie, responsible for national industrialization, were mostly the sons of slave owners.

Coming back to the central theme of this text, the *problem* was in the alleged lack of conditions for the emergence of a prototypical liberal order, or in the words of Florestan Fernandes, of a *competitive social order*. Distancing himself from Faoro, Hollanda and other authors, Fernandes (1976), who also looked for support in the theories of Marx and Weber, sought to demonstrate that this order, which is seen as a historical requisite for the formation of a modern society and State, could not logically emerge in Brazil as in the paradigmatic cases of France and England, or even their colonies in North America. The principal characteristic of the State here was the extreme dependence on private capital.

However, State reliance regarding landowners was not a one-sided relationship. Over time, with the consolidation of administrative structures, the private exercise of power came to directly depend on government agencies. In the historical balance of power in the early 20th century, the weight of the state apparatus became greater than that of private enterprise. Leal (1997) characterized such a change as the phenomenon of “colonelism” (landowners were and often still are considered “colonels”): a political process dominated by a compromise between the decadent private authority and the strengthened public power.

In the author’s words: “the simple fact of a compromise presumes a certain degree of weakness on both sides, and therefore on the part of the public power as well” (Leal, 1997: 276). The weakness of the public power lies precisely in its electoral realm, for the principal way of herding the rural masses to national elections was, and seems still to be, the alliance of powerful landowners in the countryside, or as they were known in the past, the colonels. Contemporarily, the phenomenon is crystallized with the National Congress of a “ruralist lobby” that is mobilized whenever the interests of the big landowners are threatened by the government.

The State and the sugar plantation zone

The coastal region of the state of Pernambuco has been one of the main mercantile sites since the beginning of colonization. A large part of the sugar that circulated through European cities was produced in this region. As Franco (1983) and Fernandes (1976) suggest, the consolidation of the agrarian economy in these zone of intense mercantile contact was

accompanied hand-in-hand by the formation of the state structure. Looking, for example, over the work of sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1989), we see that until very recently the landowner domain was mixed up with the state domain in the realm of the sugarcane plantations.

In the case of Pernambuco, the centrality of these landowners was such that many of the current cities of the region emerged from villages that formed in the interior of large estates or around sugar mills. According to Franco (1983), we can see how the State was made in these locations as a spin-off of large estates that paid the functionaries and housed the principal services in their facilities. In Franco's work, we see that initially it was private capital that helped consolidate the state apparatus in the rural zones of Brazil. Justice, social assistance and the police force were historically delegated to the only ones that had the economic and cultural conditions to uphold them.

The counterpart of this private construction of the State in rural areas of Pernambuco was the slow, continuous inversion of state resources to the hands of the property-owning families of sugar plantations and mills after the apparatus had been assembled.

One of the principal marks of this direct link between the oligarchies of the region and the State was the creation of the Sugar and Alcohol Institute (IAA) in 1933 to regulate sugarcane production and, consequently, avoid crises in the industry. Among the innumerable attributes that the IAA took on over the years was the formation of regulating stocks (bought at fixed prices by the federal government) to maintain sugarcane production. Such stocks also ensured that producers would receive a constant value from the State for their production, thereby protecting them from typical seasonal variations in international agricultural markets.

Over time and with the advancement of productive technologies, regions that had participated little in sugarcane production, such as the state of Sao Paulo, began to compete with Pernambuco producers. As the region in which sugarcane is cultivated in Pernambuco does not easily lend itself to mechanization, state subsidies were created so that the oligarchies could continue to compete with those from the center of the country (which is a characteristic phenomenon of colonelism).

As I stated earlier, there is no way to separate the economic domain from the political power (the typical analytical model of the neoliberal order). In the perspective that I adopt, such a distinction tends to downplay the complexity involved in the formation and sustaining of a State formed (and it seems to me that it could be in no other way) in the molds of the national society.

The intricate interaction between such domains was not limited to the relationship between the State and the agrarian oligarchies. We must not forget that on the sugarcane plantations of Pernambuco hundreds of thousands of rural laborers lived either within these properties or on their fringes, directly dependent upon the political/economic success of the landowners in maintaining their living conditions. Any setback in this historical relationship had direct consequences on the lives of this population.

While in the cities regulation of laborers' rights and the consequent juridical mediation had been achieved in the 1930s, customary practices continued to regulate work relations in the rural realm until the 1960s. That is, whereas the (typical-ideal) distancing between public and private interests began to consolidate in the urban environment at least as an ideological matrix, private interests impeded direct contact between the population and the State (as an epiphenomenon of modern life) for a long time yet in rural areas. Such contacts only occurred when sectors of the oligarchy began to break from their customary manner of dealing with their workers (Palmeira, 1979).

As the intention of this part of the text is to trace general lines for the understanding of contemporary clashes, I will not go into the important details involved in the intervention process of the Brazilian State in rural work relations. I would merely like to point out that despite introducing new elements, the involvement of the State did not signify a divorce from the traditional forms of work relations. Since the 60's the labour market became a combination of previous patriarchal forms (the language of protection according to Sigaud 1999) and modern state practices, such as social security and the regulation of labor prices.

Neoliberal ideology in Brazil

The action of the State that ensured the reproduction of traditional structures of agrarian domination and simultaneously provided laborers organized into unions with access to social guaranties suffered a great setback at the beginning of the Collor de Mello presidential administration (1990-1992). Considered as a bastion of neoliberal precepts in Brazil, this administration, despite its short duration, was responsible for initiating privatization programs of public entities and opening the national market to imported goods. Condemning the “pachydermic” feature of the state apparatus and the oligarchic structuring mode of the State, the Collor administration extinguished the IAA, putting an end to agency that for more than seventy years had been the practical upholder of the desires of the sugar oligarchies.

In Pernambuco, the main consequence of the extinction of the IAA was the transference of sugar exportation responsibilities from the State to the hands of the producers themselves and the withdrawal of a large part of the subsidies that sustained national and international competitiveness of the local product.

Within the very short span of time between 1989 and 1992, dozens of sugar mills in the region closed down or simply suspended production on diverse properties. In breaking from the structure of credit and subsidies to large-scale plantations, the so-called neoliberal government undermined, whether intentionally or not, the historical support system of the oligarchies and relegated hundreds of thousands of rural laborers to unemployment.

Without the resources that ensured their asymmetric relationship with the working masses, the property owners once again unilaterally broke from not only the provision of their legal obligations such as salaries, but also from other customary obligations such as the maintenance of their residents’ living accommodations (Sigaud, 2000). As they no longer had such privileged access to state means to ensure their power, many of these property owners saw their political power collapse in municipal and state elections during this same period (Garcia Jr., 2001).

The events of the end of the Collor administration therefore conduct sociological analysis to a substantial characterization: the measures taken during this period can easily be associated to descriptions such as the one I presented at the beginning of this text; their immediate result (the laying off of thousands of laborers) is yet another factor that contributes toward confirming their so-called neoliberal handicraft.

If we merely remain attentive to the short term, we would have no doubts about denouncing the disaster. The dismantling of work relations, the severe union crisis and the “abdication of the State” are more-than-convincing symptoms of the neoliberal intention of the measures. However, taking a long-term historical dimension as the point of reference, we realize that the same recipe may at times configure unexpected social situations.

Neoliberalism and old social practices

As we have seen, the privatized state functions in Pernambuco were quite distant from the ideal of social protection; au contraire, they were functions that ultimately contributed to maintaining a lopsided social structure by privileging the large oligarchies with the exclusive access to public resources.

When public resources dwindled, the relationship between laborers and bosses was slowly undermined, as certain procedures of traditional domination (that can be likened to what Leal called *colonelism*) that had been upheld by the possibility of distributing state resources were being put aside.

Among the oligarchies of the region, the main path out of the crisis was worker layoffs, and in most cases without payment of what was legally due. In laying off thousands of laborers, the large property owners also stopped giving the union its obligatory contribution. Without the contribution of the laborers, the representative organizations whose constituents were from the sugar mills that were most affected by the “neoliberal crisis” went without the resources for mobilizing the juridical services that would ensure the payment of legal dues from the bosses.

Amid this process (not as a direct consequence, but as an elective finality) the Landless Rural Workers' Movement – MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) – was formed. In association with the unions, the MST began to claim lands from the property owners that had debts with the laborers. For those that had little contact with the methods of land claiming in Brazil, demanding agrarian reform (or the expropriation of lands) meant calling for direct action in the region from the State (expropriation is a constitutional prerogative of the federal government).

In a previous article (Rosa, 2003), I commented on the positive effects of the disputes between the MST and the rural laborers' unions in the renewal of protest and claim strategies in the region. The core of such strategies seemed overall to be the capacity to insert the demands of the rural population into the new institutional venues that were being created within the Brazilian state organization, such as ministries and secretaries addressing small-scale agricultural producers and land issues. In summary, there was a migration from labor conflicts to contemporary agrarian conflicts through the creation of innumerable relationship channels between the rural population and government agencies. In the last ten years, due to pressure from unions and social movements, dozens of financing programs have been created for small-scale agricultural producers and agrarian reform settlements, as well as education and health care programs in areas previously dominated by the iron fist of the sugar plantation owners.

Once again, an interpretation of a generalizing nature would not hesitate in pointing to the Pernambuco process as a typical case of the so-called “new conflicts” that are said to have emerged in the neoliberal decade. After all, the move from the work universalism to “ruralization” (with the culturalist connotations) is one of the processes that appear to be prototypical of the new order of social protest. However, a more attentive look has led me to understand that streaking through the enchanted “culturalization” of the agrarian disputes were all the elements that made up the previous order: the struggle for salaries, social security and state services, such as health and medical assistance. These elements, however, now appear under the guise of the *struggle for land*.

The point of my argument is that these elements for the “old order” in the period prior to that which has been called the neoliberal decade (Cardoso, 2003) were largely structured in rural areas from an extreme dependence on the agrarian oligarchies. Consider, for example, the case of rural laborers’ unions that depended on the economic success of the landowners in order to maintain their structure and constituent base (despite being a very effective way to combat the abuses of the oligarchy in the region).

In claiming the possession of the fields in which they had worked for a number of generations, diverse groups of rural laborers bit-by-bit created the conditions for constructing a new interlocution with government agencies. By engaging in movements such as the MST or, as occurred in a number of cases, creating their own movements, the residents of the region re-assured access to public assets. Instead of coming from the bosses, however, demands began to emerge from movements whose leaders had also once been laborers. As I have demonstrated (Rosa, 2004), taking part in a movement for land meant the inhabitants of the region had to know the operation codes of the State, its institutional models and, especially, to have the power of controlling access to food hand-outs, educational projects, minimum wages and financing programs for the beneficiaries of agrarian reform projects.

This is, of course, a characterization that does not encompass all the workers of the region, because not all the sugar mills had closed down and a portion of the expropriated lands is still inferior. Nonetheless, these first signs that I gathered during my fieldwork at the beginning of this decade point to these processes as important breaches in a system of domination for which the assets of the State were fundamental pieces.

Meanings of Neoliberalism in the Brazilian rural order

As we have seen, a large part of the intellectual controversy over the formation of the State in Brazil was illuminated from the Weberian point of view (State as an autonomous realm with a legitimate monopoly on violence and taxation). Nonetheless, it is in Weber’s own work (2004) that we find a variant to such teleological dilemma. If, as the classic thinking warns us, capitalism needs a (rationalizing) spirit in order to achieve its totality, I believe that

“neoliberalism”, in the form that academic discourse has adopted, is also achieved only insofar as there are those to carry its spirit through, a spirit, in the cases we have known, that adapted itself with a certain facility in the 1990s to eminently urban social formations. To exemplify, overall, a large part of privatized public services address large cities and their inhabitants.

In the case of the agrarian oligarchies in the sugarcane region of Pernambuco, the monopoly on violence never completely made it to the hands of the State, and taxation was a vehicle for enforcing the power of traditional groups. As such, the rationalizing impulse that impelled the State to privatize the regulation of the regional economy did not rest upon the same pillar as in other places. That is, there was no supposed autonomization of economic interests in detriment to political disputes in the region, or a dismantling of a certain type of state relationship that did not signify its “abdication” from public life.

On the wave of the great directives of international agencies, the Brazilian State, in its traditional formation, tears some (and only some) of the ties that held it morally bound to large landowners. In no longer directly intervening in the economy, it destabilized the political support of the large families and industrial conglomerates that had guided the social life of the sugarcane plantations of Pernambuco. Impeded from dominating the means of social significance, such as state services, landowners no longer had any way to “protect” their subordinates from the chaos of public life and could no longer limit their social space to within the fences of large estates. Free from this ambiguous protection, hundreds of thousands of laborers (about two hundred thousand sugar plantation laborers lost their jobs in the last ten years) went out in search of new jobs and sustenance alternatives for their families.

As we have seen, the vacuum left by these generically classified neoliberal measures was soon filled by a new call to the State on the part of landowners in the form of incentives to tourism, and on the part of laborers in new demands for land, and consequently, a greater presence in areas where it had traditionally only entered through an indirect route (through the “generous” hands of the landowners).

Understanding the process along this path, we have come to the central point of the debate: to what extent has the privatization of certain traditional functions come to mean the

distancing of the State from the organization of public life? Or put better, in what way can the neoliberal precept of social regulation via the market be set up in places where agrarian sociability is dominant? I believe we have to be cautious with the available definitions, for in decreeing the State/public life separation, such definitions no longer perceive the core of the issue, namely, *the change in the forms of State intervention*, changes that bring about the most diverse effects and do not seem to signify its disappearance. One, and only one, such change was the enforcement of the direct power of the State in regions in which its presence was linked to the domains of traditional families to which they identified themselves.

Returning to Max Weber, it is necessary that analyses of the phenomenon extend in the long term from the so-called abdication of the State. For how long? Toward what? In what historical period? Without it, we incur the serious risk of seeing in the short term the bastions of the struggle against the recent forms of capitalist organization become contradicted by the very processes that they denounce today.

Conclusion -

Consequences for a future international dialog

After I had finished the above text, which is specifically restricted to the Brazilian case, a collection entitled “Reclaiming the Land: the resurgence of rural movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America” organized by Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros was published in English. In it, the organizers attempt to trace a kind of state-of-the-art of the struggles for land in the “peripheral” regions of capitalism. Bringing together analyses from diverse authors and contents, we are presented with cases that go from Malawi to the Philippines, passing through Brazil, Zimbabwe and India.

Through distinct paths and with a much broader comparative scope than I have outlined here, “Reclaiming the land” also advances in relating the emergence of new land struggle movements to the effects of neoliberal policies in these countries.

As Moyo and Yeros (2005a) point out, some of the icons of the spreading of the neoliberal ideology in these regions were the so-called “structural adjustment policies”

suggested by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Such policies were at the core of the privatization processes of agricultural exportation in Brazil.

With regard to agrarian issues, experiences financed by the World Bank addressing the so-called agrarian market reform were encountered in nearly all of the countries analyzed. In all situations, such experiences proved unable to incorporate the rural populations studied to the marketplace at the end of the 20th century. The tragic results of international intervention in the rural zones of these regions, added to the resurgence of land struggles, contributed to the authors' conclusion that:

“It is perhaps ironic that rural movements have become the ‘natural’ leaders of progressive change, not by virtue of being exploited by capital, but by being expelled from it” (Moyo and Yeros, 2005a: 55).

As the authors point out, such a conclusion becomes fundamental, since contrary to collaborating with historic teleology from the literature on the peasant farming community, it places rural groups in a concrete situation, in which small-scale agriculture and rural forms of sociability become vehemently denied. As far as we can tell, even the traditional forms of work exploitation on large farms, which are based on patriarchal domination, become impossible in the neoliberal context. In this context of agricultural internationalization and the dilution of relationships between large landowners and the State, even the rural labor unions themselves lose bargaining power.

The analytical and descriptive framework provided in “Reclaiming the Land” further allows us to specifically liken the Brazilian case to two recent processes of outbreak of land struggle movements in southern Africa: a) the formation of the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) in South Africa (Sihlongoyane, 2005); and b) the land occupations supported by the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans’ Association (ZNWLVA) (Moyo and Yeros, 2005b). In both cases, the collective actions through the redistribution of lands ultimately contributed to a reorganization of relations between the State and Civil Society, which prompts us to rethink the meaning of these concepts in countries such as ours. This is something very close to what I affirm to be the main contribution of the MST for the Brazilian case.

Concluding, we get the impression that international research centered on the comparison of relations between the LPM and the state-controlled apparatus of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, between the ZNWLVA and the ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, and between the MST and the most recent administrations in Brazil can significantly alter analytical standards regarding neoliberalism in Latin America and Africa.

Relying on the Brazilian case and on Moyo and Yeros work, I would like to suggest an initial hypothesis regarding this multiple comparison, a hypothesis sustained in the idea that *the resurgence of land struggle movements should be considered as a kind of structural contradiction of neoliberalism in these regions*. In dismantling the traditional mechanisms of the local reproduction of capital specifically centered on the control of the State by the agrarian elite, such a contradiction frees the residents of rural areas (by exclusion, as Moyo and Yeros state) from a complex system of patriarchal domination. Excluded from this market/domination system, the only possible form of social reproduction for a large part of the rural population becomes the politics of the State. As in most of the countries studied, the old structures of the State were undermined by structural adjustment policies. It does not seem to be any accident that the initial steps of movements like the MST, LPM, and ZNWLVA have been taken toward demanding its re-composition and action in rural realms.

Another plausible hypothesis is that these organizations have been converted into a contemporary model of relations between the state bureaucracy and groups that demand its assistance, as I stated for the Brazilian case in Rosa (2005). After all, even though distant from the most modest distributive ideas, it has been by means of temperate state structures created or re-created over the last ten years (financing, technical assistance and social programs) that the rural movements in Brazil, Zimbabwe and perhaps even South Africa have ensured their legitimacy and reproduction as a viable political alternative.

In a incipient manner, the combination of these cases indicates that the expansion of neoliberal precepts to venues that are not completely dominated by international competitive logic, which is typical of metropolises, releases a new type of social energy, a characteristically peasant or rural energy that has slowly but surely been transforming the structures of national States and has converted into one of the principal combatants of this same precept.

Finally, following yet another clue left by “Reclaiming the Land”, we observe that these movements, while contributing to the re-raising of national State structures, have also be able to engender a new international standard of collective action (such as CLOC and ‘Via Campesina’). Such a standard tends to make the limits of neoliberal precepts more visible and also discredits views that treat globalization as a mere dichotomy centered on categories such as “national” and “international”.

Notes

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