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Vargas and the reorganization of rural life in Brazil (1930-1945)

Vargas e a reorganização da vida rural no Brasil (1930-1945)

Clifford Andrew Welch*

RESUMO

Ainda é comum a crença de que a classe dominante rural negociou com o regime Vargas um pacto de exclusão. Tal acordo teria excluído das reformas corporativistas do período o mundo rural. Todavia, pesquisa nos discursos, leis e organizações patronais da época mostra haver nessas análises certo exagero na apreciação, uma vez que o regime empregou grande esforço para transformar as relações sociais no campo. O fato é que muitas iniciativas não foram bem-sucedidas no período, mas todas estimularam mudanças significativas nos anos subsequentes. De fato, até 1945, o regime Vargas gerou uma série de estudos, leis e instituições para reajustar a vida rural, um conjunto de intervenções que criou um legado importante e duradouro. O artigo utiliza pesquisa documental, diários, história oral e a revisão da literatura para apoiar seus argumentos.

Palavras-chave: Estado Novo; Sociedade Rural Brasileira (SRB); relações sociais no campo; políticas públicas.

ABSTRACT

It remains common to argue that Brazil's longest serving 20th century leader, Getúlio Vargas, accepted the continuity of landlord power in the countryside by negotiating a "hands off" pact regarding government interference in rural social and labor relations. But research in speeches, legislation and organizational activity during the 1930 to 1945 period of his reign demonstrates the efforts of his regime to dramatically change traditional relationships. Many initiatives failed, but they all stimulated change. Thus, by 1945, Vargas regime had generated a series of studies, laws and institutions for the reorganization of rural life that proved an enduring part of his legacy. The article uses research in documents, oral histories and the literature to support its arguments.

Keywords: New State (Estado Novo); Brazilian Rural Society (SRB); farm labor relations; public policy.

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It has become common to deny the state value. The right-wing promotes a discourse that denies the state's importance by emphasizing its negative role in controlling the "invisible hand of the Market," even while they use the government to concentrate their wealth and power. On the left, the Leninist project to takeover the state and acquire its power to emancipate humankind from the stranglehold of the capitalists is seen, more and more, with skepticism, something more dangerous than promising. Those who take power are soon corrupted, and any benefit in terms of social policies soon despoiled in plunder. Narratives of frustrated experiences, historical and current, leave those who dream a better world is possible, sink into disheartened despair.

Brazil's only revolution-like experience, in which state power was taken in the name of dramatic change, is the 1930 movement led by Getúlio Vargas. Social revolution it was not, but certainly there are those who credit it with provoking changes beneficial for nation building. "The figure of Getúlio Vargas is," according to economist Eli Diniz (1999, p. 21), "one of the most controversial of Republican Brazil's history." One controversy relates to the Vargas regime's contribution to changing power relations in the countryside. Land use is a cornerstone for any nation, and it has long been said that the 1930 Revolution hardly helped resolve the agrarian question. The narrative of the futility of taking power was thus fed.

My research on this question began in the United States in the 1980s. In the library of Duke University I found the complete collection of Vargas's speeches (1938-1947) as well as the proceedings of the First Brazilian Social Law Congress (IDS, 1943-1945), held in 1941 under the auspices of the Social Rights Institute (IDS), a think tank of influential Catholic theologians, lawyers, teachers and bureaucrats. What drew attention to the two sources were frequent comments about the "man of the countryside" and the need to improve the living conditions of "peasants" and "rural workers," to increase the sector's productivity, halt the "rural exodus" and strengthen the interior as a consumer of products made in the new urban industries. Could all these discourses have been "just for show"?

After two years of research in Brazil, the resulting doctoral thesis (Welch, 1990) showed how the rural political movements of the 1950s and 1960s appropriated the speeches of Vargas and the regime's agrarian policies, stimulating both anticipated and unexpected changes in the countryside and policy in subsequent years. The findings served historians Maria Yedda Linhares and Francisco Carlos Teixeira da Silva (1999) when they wrote that "the current basic thesis that Vargas intervened in the urban world of work and remained

silent in regards to rural workers ... should be revised in light of specific research focussed exactly on the role of agriculture and the countryside in the general politics of the Vargas regime” (pp. 103-104).

The sociologist Fernando Antonio Azevedo authored one of the first academic works to coin the “current basic thesis” condemning Vargas for trampling on the social rights of peasants. In a book based on his dissertation, Azevedo defended the thesis of the existence of an “agrarian peace” between the state and “large landowners,” which “was based on the *political and social exclusion* of peasants and rural workers” (Azevedo, 1982, p. 37, emphasis in the original). The evidence Azevedo used to support his thesis was essentially theoretical. The same lack of evidence undermines the work of the most prolific propagandist of the “basic thesis,” the renowned sociologist José de Souza Martins. In *O poder do atraso*, Martins wrote: “Vargas established with the ‘colonels’ ... a kind of tacit political pact ... The government would not interfere directly or decisively in rural labor relations. It did not regulate them, indifferent to their historical backwardness...” (Martins, 1994, p. 32).

Among empirical researchers the trend has been to ignore the issue. In 2003, the political scientist Maria Celina D’Araujo, announced early in her chapter dedicated to Vargas’s social policies that “they were destined to regulate only the interests urban labor” (D’Araujo, 2003, p. 217). A year later, the historian Boris Fausto wrote that Vargas “almost ignored” rural workers due to “a set of factors, among which we highlight the desire to maintain good relations with big landowners and the fact that significant rural mobilizations were inexistent during the period” (Fausto, 2004, p. 14).

Since then, many of the flaws of the basic thesis have been documented, especially through the contributions of historian Marcus Dezemone. In several recent articles, Dezemone has described the living legacy of Vargas among peasants. He has done so by exploring three bodies of evidence: 1) the first Vargas government’s “legislative production for the rural world” (Dezemone, 2007, p. 178); 2) the “mass dispersion of a discourse” valorizing all workers, rural and urban, especially via radio (Dezemone, 2008, p. 226) and 3) peasant oral histories and correspondence that express their reception of the Vargas discourse and reveal actions taken by rural workers in response to the regime’s initiatives (Dezemone, 2014).

In fact, there is enough evidence to show how the Vargas regime sought to “organize rural life” from the first months of his provisional government in the 1930s, until his last days in office, in 1945. In the 1970s and 1980s, the resurgent peasant movement had already drawn the attention of social

scientists in Brazil. Studies of peasants from that period showed how they remembered “the time of Getúlio” as a “a prosperous time.” In the 1970s, Dona Maria – an itinerate sugarcane cutter – told the anthropologist Verena Stolcke (1986, p. 308, 327), “He left those laws that the poor aren’t dogs, that you couldn’t fire someone without paying damages.”

This article offers evidence to complement other new research, seeking to join forces to once and for all end the “basic thesis” of the “indifference” of Vargas to the “historical backwardness” of peasants. By analyzing the production of social legislation in the larger context of the Vargas regime, it also speaks to the importance of skilful statesmanship for generating change. It shows how the regime persisted in challenging and manipulating large landowners to initiate not only symbolically, but materially, a reorganization of social relations in the countryside, issuing favorable decrees and establishing institutions that stimulated progress toward parity in social rights between rural and urban areas.

PEASANTS AND THE 1930 REVOLUTION

In January 1930, Vargas (1938, p. 28) issued the platform of his party, the Liberal Alliance (AL), including a section on “social issues” that recalled some of the proposals presented by the Worker and Peasant Bloc (BOC), the Brazilian Communist Party’s (PCB) political front. The platform insisted that an AL government would develop a labor code to serve all workers and assured that the AL would offer rural workers better educational, residential, nutritional and health services. Vargas and his advisors shrewdly made use of finely tuned rhetoric to incorporate BOC’s concerns, dilute the influence of opponents and attract popular support to his candidacy for president.

When the AL challenged election results and occupied the presidential palace by force, Vargas (1938, p. 29) advocated “the need for social and economic organization, the collaboration of social classes in a modern government and ... a controlled economy, free of conflict and competition.” To rescue São Paulo coffee planters from the repercussions of the Great Depression, the provisional government emphasized the need to control coffee production costs as well as its commercialization. Famously, the new government sought to raise the value of coffee by buying and burning stockpiles of beans. Less known are the proposals for intervention in the labor market, with the intention of improving labor relations to ensure efficient and reliable manpower to “rationalize” production.

Coffee planters complained constantly about labor shortages, a lack of “hands.” For planters, an intervention to recover the flow of workers available in the market would solve one of the coffee economy’s biggest obstacles. But the historical context of Europe during the period saw the arrival of fewer and fewer immigrants and nationalism made the issue increasingly problematic in Brazil. Vargas emphasized the need to rely on Brazilian workers and expressed his desire to abide by International Labour Organization (ILO) standards. To achieve these goals, labor markets and relations needed to be “rationalized” and interventionist state regulation was widely viewed as the way to do it (Vargas, 1938, pp. 50-52).

For the hundreds of thousands of Brazilians living in the countryside, far away from these policy disputes, the new social legislation would be the instrument that could motivate them to increase productivity. Already in 1930, this possibility inspired Vargas to anticipate the enactment of a labor code for all workers. “Both the urban and rural proletariat need tutelary devices, applicable to both, subject to their respective peculiarities” (Vargas, 1938, p. 28). According to Vargas (1938, p. 28), “hundreds of thousands of Brazilians [were] living in the backlands, uneducated, unhygienic, poorly fed and poorly clothed, having contact with government agents only through the extortionate taxes they pay.” What appeared to be new in Vargas, however, was an emphasis on igniting the internal motivation of peasants, responsible, according to his view, for production shortfalls in agriculture. Vargas (1938, p. 29) proposed measures to “awaken in them the desire to work, instilling habits of hard work and efficiency,” through interventions sponsored by the state.

Early in 1931 the new labor minister, Lindolfo Collor, articulated the provisional government’s philosophy toward labor – corporatist syndicalism – when he expressed the regime’s plans for the social organization of the countryside. “Since agricultural workers’ syndicates practically do not exist, it will be essential to promote the formation of some of them in various states,” said Collor (1931). In a meeting with planters, Collor explained that corporatist syndicalism would be the means through which the two classes (plantation employers and employees) would help shape Brazil’s farm policy. In March, four months after the revolution, Vargas issued Decree 19,770 that explained how Collor’s Ministry of Labor, Industry and Commerce would assume responsibility for regulating working conditions in the agricultural, commercial and industrial sectors, registering associations of employers and employees at local, state and national levels as official advisory agencies. The decree also limited the participation of foreign workers in the labor market, established

controls on the ideological and organizational liberties of syndicate members, and dedicated ministry support for the syndicates to provide “urban and rural workers” with protection, training and social welfare assistance, safe and healthy workplaces, and the ability to improve wages and equalize pay and conditions for workers of both sexes (Brazil, 1931).

By the end of 1931 the labor ministry had recognized 251 syndicates, only six of them for agricultural workers. By 1935, in the state of São Paulo alone, the ministry had registered 12 rural employers’ unions, while recognizing only two unions of employees, both representing farm managers (Brusantin, 2003, p. 40). Only one more would be added by 1941, demonstrating both the resilience of the rural oligarchy and the success of the political police in repressing the initiatives of peasants in the state. Indeed, five of the 33 strikes repressed by the São Paulo State Police Department of Political and Social Order (DEOPS) between 1931 and 1945 involved workers in the agricultural sector (Araújo, 1981, p. 151).

Government attention to rural workers was partly motivated by the concerns and perspectives of the *tenentes* (lieutenants and other younger military officers, thinkers and bureaucrats who supported Vargas). In February 1932, the group *Clube 3 de Outubro* released their “revolutionary program” for restructuring Brazilian society. Leading the agrarian question in Brazil, the *tenente* program required that the “workers of the countryside” (Club October 3, 1932, p. 220) be granted the same rights and benefits as urban workers. The program emphasized the “social function of property” (p. 211) and proposed diverse land policies for rural workers. They called for profit-sharing between land owners and peasants and worker control of labor processes. The program expressed a version of the old communist slogan, “land to the tiller,” saying that “he who works the land is worthy to benefit from its proceeds” (p. 211). However, Vargas’s tolerance for the alleged excesses of the *tenentes* caused some allies of the reform cause, such as Lindolfo Collor himself, to turn against the provisional government later that year.

In view of the consolidating trends of these more radical proposals of the 1930 rebellion, the feuding factions of São Paulo’s ruling class began to reunite around a common desire rid the country of Vargas. In July 1932, they unleashed a war against his regime. The federal government’s inevitable victory over the *paulistas* and the prominent role of *tenentes* in defending Vargas might have resulted in a dramatic implementation of the “revolutionary program.” Instead, “the military success represented in the short and medium terms, an inevitable and thunderous political defeat” for the *tenentes* that would “strengthen the most conservative tendencies of the military hierarchy” and drive Vargas “closer

to dissident regional powers” that required the restoration of constitutional government (Camargo, 1986, p. 136). In other words, more radical projects, such as intervening in rural labor relations, were hampered by the Constitutionalist Revolt of 1932. It taught Vargas to prioritize stability in order to protect the longevity of his government and the chance to promote change gradually.

According to Angela de Castro Gomes (2010), the 1934 Constitution should not be considered as resulting from the 1930 Revolution, but from the 1932 counterrevolution. In fact, the detailed diary Vargas kept during his years in government shows how the provisional government got to work on drafting a constitution in the context of the conflict. Once a constituent assembly took over the process in 1934, Vargas and his ministers generated several laws to forestall the ways they feared promulgation of a new constitution would restrict their power. One of these was Decree 24,694 of July 12, 1934, entitled “Dispositions regarding professional syndicates” (Brazil, 1934). The decree did not revoke Law 19,770, but through its article 40, guided previously recognized syndicates to “adapt their statutes to the provisions” of the new decree.

In addition to regulating the formation of local syndicates among those “employed in agriculture and animal husbandry,” Article 26 of Decree 24,694 legislated the formation of regional, state and national level organizations. Signaling the concrete creation of the National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG) in 1963, the 1934 decree named the new top level institution as the National Confederation of Agricultural and Livestock Workers. While Vargas reluctantly approved the new Constitution, promulgated just four days after he decreed Law 24,694, the new charter did not ignore the question of rural labor syndicalization. Their right to organize was recognized in section 4 of the constitution’s article 121, which explained that “agricultural labor will be the object of special regulation” that “will serve as much as possible” to guarantee social and economic rights to “rural employees.”

The social scientist Aspasia Camargo (1986, pp. 126-127) argues that such contradictions enabled the oligarchy to control processes that “slowly undermined planter hegemony.” The oligarchy was well aware that their dependency on “land monopoly and control of elections” could not last. Many members of the class invested in urban commerce and industrialization. They anticipated the inevitable transformation of the urban-rural relationship and thus the need to create other means to prolong their dominant position.

With reconstitucionalization, argues Camargo, the struggle over land moved from the political realm to the social, from the state to civil society. This interpretation is problematic, however, as no evidence supports that Vargas

gave up his attempts to proceed with the organization of rural life. On the contrary, his new labor minister, Joaquim Pedro Salgado Filho, prepared Decree 24,694 on the eve of the constitution's promulgation. For days 14 to 16 July, Vargas wrote in his diary, "From the ministries, gushed almost daily dozens of decrees to sign before the Constituent concludes its work ... It seems to me that [the Constitution] will be more hindrance than formula for action" (Vargas, 1995, v. 1, pp. 306-307).

Perhaps in the case of land policies, Camargo's assertion makes sense. But the question of rural social rights did not pass from state hands to street protest marches. It did not appear in the demands of the National Liberation Alliance (ANL), that started pressuring Vargas from the left in 1935. In a five-point agenda for change, the PCB militant Gregorio Bezerra (2011, p. 230) especially remembers the ANL plan "to confiscate large unproductive estates [*latifúndio*], nationalize and distribute them free of charge to all the peasants, either landless or with little land, and to all those who wanted to farm." In citing the agenda, Camargo (1986, p. 139) notes the justification expressed, by describing these workers as "the ones who have made the land valuable with their work and therefore are its sole and rightful owners".

In the countryside, PCB militants preached a platform that linked "land and freedom," in hopes of building support for a revolution against the regime. In São Paulo, as shown in numerous DEOPS files, as well as in the papers of Vargas's presidential secretary, the regime's promises caused excitement among peasants, small farmers and farm workers alike. The self-identified "agricultural worker" João Francisco Thomaz wrote to Vargas in June 1934, asking the government to produce a statute to help peasants understand "our rights, our duties, [and] act in accordance with the opinion of V. Sa" (Thomas, 1934). It is clear from various sources, including Vargas's diary, that communist agitation was a major concern. With decrees such as Law 24,694, the regime tried to decrease the ability of opposition groups to build a following among peasants. In fact, very few peasants participated in the PCB/ANL uprising of November 1935.

THE NEW STATE AND RURAL SOCIAL RIGHTS

Some say that mobilization of both left and right-wing groups (the latter represented by the Brazilian Integralist Action, which defended the primacy of private property) were what led Vargas in 1937 to protect his power and the regime's program by abrogating presidential elections and establishing the

New State dictatorship. Vargas himself explained his action by claiming conditions “offered no alternative but to install a strong regime of peace, justice and work to readjust the body politic to the economic needs of the country and guarantee the indicated measures” (Vargas apud D’Araujo, 2011, p. 364).

The “indicated measures” included the formation of rural syndicates, an objective identified in the corporatist Charter of 1937. The Charter persisted in bringing together under the law agricultural workers and all other workers. Its chapter on the national economy (Art. 57-63), required investigating agricultural working conditions to “rationalize the organization and administration” of the sector. When a new syndicalization law (Decree 1402) was enacted in July 1939, it determined in Article 25, section 4, that “upper-level syndical associations in agriculture and animal husbandry will be organized in accordance with laws designed to regulate the syndicalization of these professions.” Article 58 was more specific in excluding rural workers from decree 1402. Existing syndicates, recognized under the procedures established by Law 24,694, were ordered to adapt to the new rules within a period of 6 months.

Obviously, there was a significant change in the government’s stance on the issue of labor relations in the countryside. For the first time the exception of rural workers became transparent, and the question remained on the table. It was assumed that a law already existed to “regulate the unionisation of these professions.” In fact, decree 24,694 continued to apply to the sector, not having been revoked by law 1402. Still, the organization of rural labor syndicates did not advance. In the meantime, the social legislation congressional committee commissioned a detailed study of the conditions and nationality of rural workers. Published in 1937 by the labor ministry, the report contained statistics compiled on prices and wages, and recommendations for changes (Leitão; Cavina; Palmeira, 1937).

In fact, the Vargas government highlighted the social rights of peasants before 1942, the year Gomes (2010) indicates as marking the beginning of when the New State “centered [its discourse and policies] on the affirmation of citizenship expressed as social rights” (p. 65). In a number of setting, the regime pressured landlords and planters to collaborate in the development of laws to establish social rights for peasants and rural employees. The negotiations allowed Vargas to stimulate competition for governmental recognition between two powerful elite groups, the National Agricultural Society (SNA), headquartered in Rio de Janeiro and the Brazilian Rural Society (SRB), with its headquarters in São Paulo. The SRB represented coffee planters and cattle ranchers interested in exporting their product and fiercely supportive of São

Paulo's hegemonic aspirations. In contrast, the older SNA was established in 1897 and represented growers and processors of sugarcane, especially from Brazil's northeastern states and other regions in decline. The record of rural labor negotiations leaves little doubt that the SNA sought a path to regain influence. Their representatives supported the idea of legalizing rural syndicates and assisted in the process. In fact, in 1941, SNA representatives presented Vargas with a new rural syndicalization draft law. SRB representatives also participated, but struggled to undermine the realization of Vargas's objectives. Deprived of their own organized "society," especially after Vargas repressed the ANL and PCB in 1935, peasants did not participate directly in any of the negotiations.

Diniz (1999) argues that Vargas sought to strengthen "the power of the state in the face of the regional oligarchies" (p. 25). His administration worked to "dismantle the mechanisms of influence of traditional elites" and to implement "a national project over the rivalry between elites" (Diniz, 1999, p. 26). Vargas's persistent "readjustment" campaign for "rural life" through the recognition of rural workers' social rights illustrates this process. As Diniz indicates, however, the attempt to build an autonomous administration did not mean that Vargas produced a "neutral state, impartial, equidistant from conflict and committed to the public interest" (p. 28). In the case of rural labor, Vargas insisted on syndicalization as a means to contain the influence of the powerful *paulistas* while increasing the power of the federal government, not that of peasants. In creating "trading arenas" between the SRB and the SNA, arbitrated by government ministers, Vargas also "consolidated the asymmetry between employers and workers with regard to access to central decision-making nuclei" (Diniz, 1999, p. 28).

On May 1, 1941, speaking largely to an audience of urban workers at the Vasco da Gama football stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Vargas directed his attention once again toward the "rural workers" and "peasants" (Vargas, 1945, v. 8, p. 261). The president spoke to awaken the sense of justice and equality of his listeners, as well as their fears. His speech warned that if the standard of living in the countryside were not equal to that in the city, urban commercial, industrial and service workers could expect to see their working conditions worsened by competition resulting from the in-migration of rural workers. A rural exodus, said Vargas, threatened the government's objective of strengthening the working class both economically and physically. For the landless, he promised support for the creation of new colonies. For listeners, however, the

message of Vargas promised parity to make countrylife more desirable, equivalent to that of the city (Vargas, 1945, v. 8, p. 261).

Two weeks after the speech, a high-level meeting was held in São Paulo to discuss social legislation. In it, representatives of the labor ministry, lawyers and planters discussed the extension of urban social rights to rural workers. Represented as the First Brazilian Social Rights Congress, the event was organized by the newly formed IDS, and enjoyed the full backing of the New State. Among prominent participants were SRB spokesmen João Carlos Fairbanks and Francisco Malta Cardoso, both lawyers and coffee planters from western São Paulo – and SNA spokesmen, Arthur Torres Filho, the society's vice-president, and Pericles Madureira de Pinho, a young sugarcane grower from Bahia, who had recently written a book (1939) on rural syndicalization.

Although all of these gentlemen argued against employing urban labor laws in the countryside, they all supported the concept of incorporating rural society in the corporatist structure of the New State. Agreeing that the “rational” organization of the sector was fundamental to Brazil's economic progress, they made their contributions in a cooperative, non-confrontational way. In fact, the planter spokesmen took advantage of ambiguities in Vargas's demands to appropriate the organization of rural life initiative to emphasize *their* desires for state intervention in relieving impediments to production and to negate their responsibility for any deprivation suffered by workers.

Justifying the regime's agrarian policy proposals, Vargas had said: “The public welfare requires increasing the prosperity of the rural population to absorb growing industrial production; it is essential to raise the purchasing power of all Brazilians – which can only be done by increasing the income of agricultural labor” (Vargas, 1945, v. 8, pp. 261-262). The planter spokesmen expanded the concept of “agricultural labor” to apply to the productivity of the agricultural sector. By defining “the income of agricultural labor” as the profitability of plantations rather than rural worker wages, the planters transformed Vargas's populist discourse into traditional capitalist jargon. Farms needed to be more profitable.

Since no peasant representative were on hand to challenge the spokesmen, the reinterpretation of Vargas's words enabled planters to divert attention from rural society's internal problems to those of the outside world. They maintained that the conflict between capital and labor could be blamed for the slow progress of industrial activity, but that no such tension undermined agriculture. According to Fairbanks, only one social right's issue affected the countryside: the unjust exploitation of the sector by industrial capitalists, traders

and other profiteers. As for any gap or inequality between planter and worker within the rural society, its existence was denied. Plantations “were formed on the basis of the great solidarity of economic interests and intimate contact between ‘boss’ and ‘worker’” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 4, p. 194).

For Cardoso, coffee workers were not mere employees but the planters’ “fellow workers” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 3, p. 214). Fairbanks argued that rural labor was only a temporary stage toward land acquisition. “Brazil’s ‘rural working class’,” said Fairbanks, “is to be understood as a temporary situation, a preparatory state toward the possibility of becoming a property owner” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 3, p. 195). Given this scenario, labor laws seemed inappropriate: useful legislation would facilitate the ability of small producers to purchase old coffee lands, thereby enhancing the availability of workers near the plantations. Another useful policy would be to help planters buy land on the frontier where they could hire “the tireless ‘baiano’,” encouraging northeasterners to take part in the “grand spectacle” of establishing new plantations (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 3, p. 196).

Planters at the meeting denied the role of market forces in the relationship between landowners and rural workers, emphasizing instead each category’s “CONVERGENT and COMPLEMENTARY interests” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 3, p. 193; emphasis in the original). The spokesman essentially argued that Brazilian agriculture was a hybrid capitalism. According to Cardoso, “The whole issue resides in the possibility of economic exploitation, ensuring the boss or employer reasonable profits, capable of allowing in turn, an equal distribution of well-being and social security to workers or agricultural employees” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 3, p. 218). However, the conviction of having built such a moral economy did not lead them to argue the exclusion of rural workers from the corporatist system. On the contrary, the deep cohesion of rural society was the basis of the argument for the inclusion of agriculture in the corporatist system of representative syndicates established by the New State.

What worried Sao Paulo planters was their perceived lack of influence over the central government. They did not want to see Vargas’s ideas for organizing rural life implemented without being heard. Better yet, if new laws were to be released, they wanted to be the ones to write them. Fairbanks protested the exclusion of representatives of the São Paulo coffee planters in the rural syndicalization outline composed by Northeast farmers linked to the SNA. “There is only one solution,” Fairbanks defended in Congress, “mandatory syndicalization” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 3, p. 202). According to Article 140 of the 1937 Charter, all sectors of the economy should be organized in product-specific syndicates. In the agricultural sector there were to be separate syndicates

for coffee, sugarcane, beef, and so on. “The syndicates will need active lawyers,” explained Fairbanks, “all the more active and energetic given the fact that the judges and courts ... are the ones that pose the greatest resistance to recognizing syndicates as agencies of the state” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 3, p. 202).

By advocating the cause of agricultural syndicalization, Fairbanks did not express reservations about the possibility of forming rural workers’ unions. Pinho revealed that the SNA proposal for a rural syndicalization law recommended the creation of “mixed syndicates.” A mixed syndicate was one that had employers and employees as members. To ensure balanced participation, the proposed legislation required that five members of each category of “employers, employees and self-employed workers” meet together in order for the syndicate to be recognized by the government. “It’s that there’s no class division in rural activities,” said Pinho (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 4, p. 77), coining the term “planter clan,” uncritically characterizing the patriarchal nature of labor relations on plantations. Employers and landlords would lead the clan’s syndicate, excluding the participation of illiterates, naturalized Brazilians and foreigners. “All of these circumstances should be studied in considering a law that will bring together in association, syndicate and later in corporatist entity, the economically weak employer and the employee in nearly squalid living conditions” (IDS, 1943-1945, v. 4, p. 79).

It was precisely this kind of combination – workers together with a revitalized rural oligarchy – that Vargas wanted to avoid. Part of the justification for the 1937 coup was the perceived need to distance rural workers from the manipulative hands of the rural political bosses (*coronéis*) and draw them closer to the state. According to Ben-Hur Raposo, director of the Rural Economy Service (SER), the Ministry of Agriculture department charged with drafting a rural syndicalization law, “the false representation of the great rural mass was one of the factors that led to the advent of the New State” (SNA, 1943, p. 39). In the context of the 1941 social rights congress, Raposo defended state intervention in rural social relations and the organization and protection of rural workers. “Given a lack of means to live, few possibilities for education, most lead almost primitive lives, without the necessary understanding of what is their right” (SNA, 1943, p. 39). This situation, added Raposo, “has led the democratic system in Brazil to a precarious situation,” making it “impossible” to ensure “through the vote of the masses in the interior” the representation of peasant interests (SNA, 1943, p. 39).

The social rights congress did not witness the resolution of these issues. Vargas’s fight to circumvent the resistance of São Paulo, coordinated by the

SRB, continued in two more government commissions. Francisco Malta Cardoso served planters on both: one that produced a broad “rural code,” and another, a rural syndicalization law. In August, Cardoso joined the Special Rural Syndicalization Study Commission, headed by Arthur Torres Filho, venerable leader of the SNA.

The committee met weekly from August 21 to September 25, 1941. It began its deliberations discussing a draft law already prepared by the SNA and SER. They debated, identifying points of convergence, and voting on contentious issues. Although consensus was the rule, committee members did not avoid controversy. In order to continue their work, they agreed to disagree on some issues, allowing the majority to settle disputes. One of the first disagreements concerned a proposal to invite a rural worker representative to join the commission. The pros and cons were discussed, with Cardoso consistently opposing the idea, certain of his capacity to speak for the interests of all rural classes. As the proposal was supported by the representatives of the labor ministry, chairman Torres concluded the discussion by noting that Vargas himself had appointed the committee as an intragovernmental body, with the inclusion of private sector representatives from three significant regions and products: Rio Grande do Sul beef, São Paulo coffee and Pernambuco sugarcane. “The commission was not [given] the character of a labor meeting,” said Torres (SNA, 1943, p. 35). If Vargas had wanted the participation of a rural worker, he would have appointed one.

Another area of disagreement, already debated in public, concerned the nature of the syndicates: they could be parallel or mixed unions. While the apparent “cultural deficiency” of peasants, as well as other arguments, had been used as justification for denying workers the right to organize independently, most commissioners favored separate unions for each class. The case of parallel unions was first advocated by the only representative of the labor ministry on the panel, Rego Monteiro. A system of syndicates with mixed members, he said, was inconsistent with the “corporate spirit of the Constitution, which, in several articles, recommends equal representation of employees and employers” (SNA, 1943, p. 35).

In a surprising twist, Cardoso supported the ministry’s position. “We know that the corporatist parliament cannot exist on the basis of mixed syndicates, as it would be nothing more than a larger mixed syndicate” (SNA, 1943, p. 37). He advocated for a system in which employees and employers had separate unions at the municipal level, and together they could solve their problems in federations organized in each state. Advocating for separate syndicates,

argued the Ministry of Agriculture representative, amounted to ensuring inequality between workers and employers. He explained that since each syndicate was responsible for its own administration and finances, employee syndicates would always be weaker than their counterparts. Meanwhile, the representative of Rio Grande do Sul cattlemen, Sílvio da Cunha Echenique, supported the opinion of Cardoso. But the justice ministry representative supported Monteiro's interpretation of the law. At the end of the day, the committee voted by 5 to 3 in favor of separate unions for workers and bosses.

Numerous additional issues divided the members of the committee. While Monteiro sought to expand the role of the labor ministry in agriculture, most of the other members resisted his amendments to the draft bill. Monteiro tried to gain support to place the unions under the umbrella of his ministry, but the commission soundly rejected the idea, preferring the supervision of the agriculture ministry. After a month of work, Vargas had in hand a blueprint to organize the agricultural sector that called for establishing a structure of parallel syndicates, recognized by the Ministry of Agriculture. All workers in the sector, including field and industrial transformation workers, were to be grouped into employee syndicates.

We still lack sufficient information to understand exactly why nearly three years passed before the rural syndicalization project reappeared. Part of an explanation may be in the initiative taken to group together and perfect all social rights in a Consolidated Labor Code (CLT). Early in 1943, the struggle over rural worker social rights ignited again when a government commission released the first draft of the CLT, which integrated rural and urban workers as beneficiaries of various provisions. Since agricultural leaders had not been invited to participate in this project, they reacted against the proposal. The SRB interpreted the proposal as an "invasion of rural activities in the countryside" (Cardoso, 1943, p. 14) and argued that the law should not apply to rural labor. This was an argument the *paulistas* would not win.

In February 1943, Cardoso protested against the CLT proposal in another forum sponsored by the IDS. He argued that agricultural production differed fundamentally from commercial and industrial activities, since it relies much more on the rhythms of nature than the hours of a clock. According to Cardoso, agricultural production's dependency on nature, made it difficult to control the duration of a rural work day, regulate safety standards and establish regular days of rest and vacation times. He pleaded for patience in preparing a specific "rural code" (SRB, 1943, p. 7). He asked the regime to postpone plans to extend the social rights of urban workers to their rural counterparts.

To the chagrin of planters, the final version of the CLT offered similar basic rights to both rural and urban workers. These included: minimum wages (Articles 76-128), vacations (Articles 129-131), employment contracts (Articles 442-467), prior warning for dismissal (articles 487-491) and limitations on payments in kind instead of specie (Article 506). These measures gave the resident farm and ranch workers a base for defining their citizenship and a starting point from which to challenge for the fulfillment and expansion of their rights in the coming years. Vargas planned for this struggle to occur in a special judicial system for mediating disputes between rural and urban employers and employees. The system was regulated in the CLT (Articles 650 to 653) and Vargas established that year four regional labor tribunals and eight local courts. The non-exclusion of rural workers from these CLT provisions is living proof of the absence of a peace pact between Vargas and planters.

Ranchers and planters organized in São Paulo continued their campaign to completely exclude rural workers from the CLT, focusing their efforts on formulating a “rural code,” which they intended as a replacement for the labor code in agriculture. As soon as the draft CLT appeared in January 1943, Cardoso began work on the rural code. On May 4, three days after Vargas announced the CLT during May Day celebrations, Cardoso presented the SRB’s official replacement proposal.

The SRB document was didactic, polemical and not a little pompous; a comprehensive proposal, it was subdivided into three “books,” 10 “titles” and 49 “chapters.” The largest book was called, “On Rural Work,” which was broken down into 18 chapters. A systematic attack of 24 points on the interference of the regime, the labor ministry and the application of “urban labor laws” in the countryside preceded the proposed code (Cardoso, 1943, pp. 12-41).

At an April 1944 SRB meeting, Cardoso read a letter from Luciano Pereira da Silva, presiding officer of a new commission established to consider new laws for organizing rural society, much as the SRB’s rural code sought to do. According Cardoso’s reading of Silva’s letter, the commission had included many of the society’s ideas in a new proposal. “We have reviewed and taken into account many of the suggestions submitted, approving many of the provisions presented in Brazilian Rural Society’s substitute proposal,” wrote Silva (SRB, 1944b, p. 4). The final version arrived on Vargas’s desk in July, where it seems to have died, at least until 1951, when an observer claimed that Cardoso’s chapters on rural work had been incorporated in a new rural labor proposal, also doomed to fail. Vargas’s rejection of the SRB code deepens the evidence that no pact existed between landlords and bureaucrats.

Instead, Vargas resumed the campaign to support peasants in the heart of *paulista* resistance. In 1944, Vargas made his first May Day speech outside of Rio de Janeiro, speaking to a largely working class crowd at Pacaembu Stadium in Sao Paulo. He congratulated organized workers and promised, once again, “enactment of a law defining the rural workers’ rights and duties.” He declared that “a fifth of our total population works and lives from agriculture” and commented that “it was no longer possible for workers and employers to continue in their current precarious situation” (Vargas, 1944, p. 482). On November 10, the date chosen to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the New State, Vargas signed a new law, Decree 7038, built on the results of the work of the special rural syndicalization commission of 1941.

Ironically, the SRB was enthusiastic about the new law. In its November editorial, entitled “About Rural Syndicalization,” the SRB editorial board reiterated “the importance of representation in rural syndicates” and emphasized the influence of Cardoso and other planters in the law’s construction (SRB, 1944a, p. 12). Cardoso worked to convince the SRB that “organization is an imperative of all aspects of modern social life. Thus, attending to the demand of the federal government and organizing rural syndicates, national agriculture will show its perfect consciousness of its class interests and its great love for Brazilian soil” (Cardoso, 1944, p. 19).

The support of the SRB was strictly self-interested. Rural workers who were able to organize unions had before them a thankless task, because members had to finance the budget of syndicates and maintain insurance to protect members injured in accidents. Cardoso had lobbied to ensure rural workers were specifically excluded from the union tax system used to finance urban unions. By insisting that rural workers pay for their own accident insurance, law 7038 actually took a step backward, as Decree-law 24,637 of 1934 had established a fund financed by the state and by employers to cover expenses and disabled workers, both urban and rural.

Finally, Decree-law 7038 included a clause reserving a special place for organizations such as the SRB in the body politic of the New State. Article 20, which had not appeared in any of the previous versions of the law specified that the president reserved the right to license some civil associations with some of the same rights as the syndicates. The article meant organizations like the SRB could collaborate “with the state, as technical and advisory bodies in the study and solution of problems” (Brazil, 1944) that affected agriculture, without being liable for any other duty required by law. The Ministry of

Agriculture, mentioned only in this article, had the power to nominate organizations for this role.

In the end, the law of rural syndicalization did not immediately threaten coffee planters: worker syndicates would be impoverished, their main source of labor – *colono* settlers – would remain in a nebulous position, and the SRB would continue its powerful lobby. The final result depended on the Vargas regime. “We are waiting to see how the law will be regulated,” explained the SRB in its August editorial, “to see what agriculture’s representative entity [the SRB] will do” (SRB, 1944c, p. 135).

Four months later, in March 1945, the labor ministry issued the necessary instructions to the official recognition and the administrative organization of syndicates. Although law 7038, like much social legislation, had little initial force, the fact that it was regulated and had not been revoked, made it an important tool for organizing peasant militancy in the 1950s. Yet, in 1955 only five rural syndicates in the whole country had been recognized by the labor ministry, and by 1962, just one more had been legalized, despite the fact that 29 official requests had been registered, seven from the state of São Paulo. In fact, no rural employer syndicates had been created (Azevedo, 1982; Silva, 1962).

Observers of the time blamed the ineffectiveness of the law on its failure to fit rural socioeconomic realities. “Of all the obstacles,” the worst were “the near impossibility of defining professional activities and the broad dispersion of the agricultural class throughout the country,” said an SNA editorial (SNA, 1954, p. 2). The law was not enforced, according to José de Segadas Vianna (1965, pp. 45-46) “for maladjustment with its times.” Even before being enacted, Antonio Ferreira Cesarino Jr., founder of IDS, predicted that the unionization of rural work would be virtually impossible due to the nomadism, illiteracy and relative isolation of rural workers. These disadvantages were amplified by the lack of suitable means of communication, the same scholar maintained. Still, was it not the idea of rural syndicalization to gather all the “men of the countryside” to work together to resolve just such problems?

These obstacles were real, but they did not cause the Vargas regime to abandon state intervention as part of the solution. The implementation of decree 7038 depended in reality on the initiative of employers. Section 3 of its first article established a trigger that relied upon employer initiative: “once employers differentiate their activities to establish corresponding professional organizations, employees may congregate in specific parallel professional entities for each category” (Brazil, 1944). Among employers, until 1945, there was no agreement and hence no action on the issue. Under increasing pressure to

democratize Brazil on the eve of the collapse of fascism and the end of hostilities in Europe, Vargas took the initiative once again.

In April 1945, Vargas signed a new decree to regulate rural society geographically and not according to productive activity, as had been foreseen in the rural syndicalization decree. The historian Flavio Heinz saw the new law as a repudiation of law 7038. "Rural workers were excluded from the syndical representation system," wrote Heinz (2001, p. 94), "resulting in the establishment of a 'rural exception' within the syndicalization apparatus of the country."

But the SRB saw this new law as an attack on *its* prerogatives, considering decree 7038 more rational and preferable. In the calculations of the SRB, the 1944 syndicalization law gave a substantial advantage to planters, as the SRB was by far the wealthiest and most dynamic of agrarian interest groups in the nation. In contrast, the new decree mandated the reorganization of farmers according to geographical subunits, giving preference to municipalities. Cardoso observed that it threatened to considerably dilute the power and influence of SRB planters and ranchers. While acknowledging the existence of state-wide rural civic associations, like the SRB, they would only be recognized by the government if no competing federation of rural associations was formed. Thus, there was really no future for the SRB in the new system. Turning a blind eye to the scathing criticism of the society, Vargas had the law revised and reissued as Decree-law 8127, regulating its implementation only five days before being deposed in October 1945.

For São Paulo, the new "organization of rural life" law (Brazil, 1945) was much worse than the law of rural syndicalization. Cardoso deplored the decree as "totalitarian" because it virtually ignored the legitimacy of the SRB, disallowing procedures for the recognition of organizations not formed and registered in accordance with the law. This contrasted significantly with Law 7038, through which the SRB expected to maintain its status and gain official recognition. "Adding fuel to the fire," commented Cardoso, law 8127 favored the SNA, based in the capital, with two seats for their representatives on the board of the Brazilian Rural Confederation (CRB), the new governing body of the regional associations of rural landlord associations. In articles and more articles, Cardoso and other SRB planters demanded "pure revocation, simple and immediate of Decree-law no. 8127, which offended the democratic principles of Brazilian legislation" (SRB, 1947, p. 2).

Despite the protests of the SRB, however, the number of rural associations registered under the Decree-law 8127 grew. Early in 1946, the government recognized a São Paulo federation of these entities, the São Paulo State

Federation of Rural Associations (FARESP). Shortly after, FARESP established a monthly newsletter to promote the organization of more associations and give voice to the community of São Paulo farmers who were more and more diversified in their activities. (Technically, *colonos* and farm owners of all sizes and categories were eligible to join these associations.) Initially, these associations were an unacceptable challenge to the authority of SRB. “The Brazilian Rural Society,” commented one prominent member, “has indisputable authority to represent planters, and defend their rights and interests before the governments of the Republic” (Gomes, 1946, p. 18). But the Vargas regime had contested the position of the SRB. Its incapacity to accompany the implementation of the syndicalization law and oppose the rural association decree illustrate the internal struggle of the rural oligarchy provoked by Vargas.

Vargas was determined to gradually reduce the power of the planters and cattle barons who presided over the SRB. His regime excluded them from the “organization of rural life” decree and created with the rural syndicalization law institutional mechanisms for peasants to organize and strive to counterbalance their influence. In the 1950s, the peasants responded by using the labor courts and forming civic associations, waiting for guidelines to turn these into syndicates, measures that came in the process of legislating the Rural Worker Statute (ETR) of 1963. The fact that so few rural worker syndicates formed until then demonstrates the force of resistance of the rural oligarchy and the ambivalence of the political class to advance the incorporation of rural workers.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Vargas era debate over the organization of rural life highlighted the willingness of Brazil to “rationalize” or “modernize” all sectors of its economy. To mirror modern industrial society, agricultural society had to be organized. Vargas institutionalized processes of change, and no one after him could deny the consequences. The economic activities of the countryside developed in every way with the formation of 8000 rural workers’ unions, the growth of agribusiness and the appearance of a multitude of organizations among both peasants and landlords. The steps he took helped extend the social rights benefits of urban society to rural society.

Syndicates for rural workers and employers, registered by the labor ministry, became part of Brazil’s political and administrative landscape. Although the reality of this objective remained unmet in 1945, by initiating the process,

Vargas left a dramatic challenge for the nation to fulfill. When his regime collapsed and new political parties sought power, the candidates went in search of support among peasants as never before. The promise of citizenship through rural social rights suggested that the votes of rural workers would eventually count more than the loyalty of planters, ranchers and rural political bosses (*coronéis*). For the militants of the PCB, decrees 7038 and 8127 helped to legitimize, if not legalize, in the eyes of peasants and rural employees, the value of mobilization and organization. Moreover, the labor courts established by Vargas became a means for rural workers and their new political actors to demand the rights granted them in the CLT.

In seeking to organize “rural life,” the Vargas regime did not seek to make a revolution to emancipate peasants from a feudal world, but to adjust the political economy of agriculture and thus strengthen agrarian capitalism. The global economic crisis of the 1930s, an incipient movement of rural workers, the formation of an agro-industrial bourgeoisie, the Second World War, and the corporatist state built by Vargas were factors that helped to launch the “readjustment” of social relations in the countryside until 1945. Thus, Vargas neither excluded nor ignored rural society, but used his control of the state to generate a series of studies, ideas, laws and institutions for the organization of rural life that proved to be a permanent part of his regime’s legacy. Right or wrong, for many peasants, “Getúlio was good for the poor” (Stolcke, 1986, p. 327).

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