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rbh@edu.usp.br

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Dezemone, Marcus

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The Agrarian question, the Goulart administration, and the 1964 coup half a century later¹

A questão agrária, o governo Goulart e o golpe de 1964 meio século depois

Marcus Dezemone*

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é discutir o papel da questão agrária na crise política que conduziu à derrubada do governo Goulart (1961-1964). Trata-se de identificar o tratamento conferido pela produção historiográfica à questão agrária nos 50 anos do golpe, relacionando-a às fontes exploradas e às pesquisas desenvolvidas no âmbito da História Rural. Com isso, busca-se investigar três aspectos fundamentais que estão indissociados: o debate sobre a reforma agrária, o papel e a atuação das Ligas Camponesas e o processo de sindicalização rural de iniciativa do governo. Defende-se que a reabilitação da questão agrária ajuda a melhor entender temas importantes sobre a crise de 1964, como a concorrência e competição política no período, a tese da radicalização das esquerdas e os efeitos esperados e não previstos das políticas trabalhistas.

Palavras-chave: Questão Agrária; governo Goulart; golpe de 1964.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to discuss the role of the agrarian question in the political crisis that led to the overthrow of the Goulart administration (1961-1964). Initially, the treatment of the agrarian question by the historiographical production during the 50th anniversary of the *coup d'état* is identified, which is related to the sources explored and research carried out under the auspices of Rural History. It is sought to investigate three key aspects that cannot be separated: the debate on land reform, the role and the activities of the Peasant Leagues, and the rural trade unionization process, a governmental initiative. It is argued that the rehabilitation of the agrarian question helps to better understand important issues of the 1964 crisis, such as political competition in the period, the thesis of the radicalization of the left, and the expected and unforeseen effects of labor policies.

Keywords: Agrarian Question; João Goulart's government; 1964 coup.

* Mestrado Profissional em Ensino de História (Prof História), Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ); Programa de Pós-Graduação em História Social (PPGH), Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Niterói, RJ, Brasil. dezemone@gmail.com ²

In 2014, various academic events were held in Brazil commemorating the 50th anniversary of the overthrow of President João Goulart. Many publications were launched during the year, with the question receiving special attention from the media. Numerous approaches and perspectives were presented, revising consecrated authors and sources, while part of the reflection produced in recent years by post-graduate programs all over the country was disseminated.

Comparing the academic events and the publications of the 50th anniversary of the coup with those of the 40th, 30th, or 20th anniversaries of 1964, one thing is easy to perceive: the decline in works concerned with the agrarian question – understood as the set of problems related to the countryside, to the debate about agrarian reform, to social mobilization, and to rural trade unionization – in its relations with the political crisis and the overthrow of Goulart.³ More than this: in the actual explanations for the coup, the place of the agrarian question was noticeably reduced.

For example, this can be seen in some of the books published in 2014, such as the overview written by one of the most important Brazilian specialists in the study of the Dictatorship, Carlos Fico. In this work, agrarian reform is presented on the eve of the coup as a measure receiving “support superior to 70% in some capitals” (Fico, 2014, p. 9), according to opinion polls carried out by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública* (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion – Ibope), but only released in the 1990s by the sociologist Antonio Lavareda (1991, p. 157). Was there therefore consensus about the subject and not intense dispute? Unfortunately, this theme is not developed. Afterwards some references are made to projects underway in the National Congress and the Basic Reforms (*reformas de base*). The expression ‘Peasant Leagues’ only appears once throughout the work and then in an extract of a speech by Brizola, which cites it amongst other organizations, such as the National Union of Students (*União Nacional dos Estudantes* – UNE), the General Command of Workers (*Comando Geral dos Trabalhadores* – CGT), the Brazilian Labor Party (*Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro* – PTB), the Nationalist Parliamentary Front (*Frente Parlamentar Nacionalista*) and the Popular Mobilization Front (*Frente de Mobilização Popular*) (Fico, 2014, p. 43). In the rest of the book which is over one hundred pages long, there is no emphasis given to rural trade unionization which in 1963 alone involved 475 rural worker unions and 29 federations recognized, or in the process of being recognized, by the state. To gain an idea of the notion of the intensity of this process, until 1960 there only existed five rural worker unions and no federations (Barbosa, 2007, p. 192).

Another book launched in 2014 by the specialist Daniel Aarão Reis did not differ much from the work of Fico in relation to the agrarian question and the themes of agrarian reform and rural unionization. It is unnecessary to spell out the contribution of both authors to the advance in the understanding of the coup and the dictatorship in Brazil. They are recognized and consecrated historians, references for many researchers. For this reason, they appeared in various events which discussed the coup in 2014. It should be emphasized that at no moment in the two books was the importance of the agrarian question denied or refuted: it was not just problematized and related to the other richly covered processes.

It was given greater emphasis by Jorge Ferreira and Angela de Castro Gomes, for whom “agrarian reform is a central theme for understanding the Goulart administration and the coup” (2014, p. 94). Also sharing this perspective is Marcos Napolitano (2014), although the coup occupies a lesser place in his book, since he prioritizes the study of the Dictatorship. However, the former two historians, implicitly alluding to the same Ibope opinion polls, understand that “agrarian reform was not a taboo topic” and “that it could be negotiated” (Ferreira; Gomes, 2014, p. 94). A very distinct perspective was adopted in the collections which were important in the academic environment in the previous 25th, 30th, and 40th anniversaries of the coup (Moraes, 1989; Toledo, 1997; Aarão Reis et al., 2004). Caio Navarro de Toledo is adamant in his argument first raised in 1982, reinforced in 1994, and reaffirmed in 2004: the coup was against the basic reforms (*reformas de base*), principally the agrarian ones, and against democracy (Toledo, 2004, p. 67). In summary, the agrarian question appears to have been more relevant for the analysts in the past (and as will be seen, for the contemporaries of the coup) than for the greater part of researchers half a century later.

The aim of this work is to discuss the role of the agrarian question in the political crisis and in the overthrow of the Goulart administration (1961-1964). It involves linking these themes to the advances of historiography, the new sources explored, and the most recent research carried out under the auspices of Rural History. With this, it is sought to investigate three fundamental aspects which cannot be separated: the debate about agrarian reform, the role and the actions of the Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Camponesas*) and the process of rural trade unionization at the government’s initiative. It is not intended to overvalue any of these aspects as preponderant motivations for the coup, but to identify how the rehabilitation of the agrarian question helps to better

understand the 1964 crisis, a subject which not only attracts social and academic interest, but is the subject of heated political disputes.

‘PROBLEM NUMBER 1’: PREVENT ‘CUBANIZATION’

Many advances have been made in recent decades in understanding the coup. The useful analytical distinction proposed by Carlos Fico (2008; 2014) about the destabilization campaign against the government, which should not be confused with the conspiracy which overthrew it, is one of these examples.⁴

The opening of US archives, making available to the public documents classified as ‘confidential’ or ‘secret,’ whose access was previously not permitted, has allowed the revisiting of facts that were already known, but described from another point of view, as well as the clarification of obscure elements about which there were considerable doubts. The publication in 2008 of Carlos Fico’s book, *O Grande irmão: da operação Brother Sam aos anos de chumbo* (Big Brother: from Operation Brother Sam to the ‘leaden years,’ shed some light on subject which had always been very discussed, but which until then needed greater investment and an empirical foundation: the role of the United States of America in the political crisis which culminated in the 1964 coup. There are many merits of the work, which unveiled the connections between foreign and national interests strengthening a certain positive judgment of the absence of a reaction commanded by Goulart in order to avoid the ‘shedding of blood,’ an expression which was used by the president, according to Leonel Brizola, in reference to a possible civil war potentialized by US intervention. For the objectives outlined here, however, it is fundamental to understand the reasons for the positioning of the United States, directly linked to its national security.

The initial exaltation of the movement led by Fidel Castro gave way to a new posture towards the Cuban Revolution, both in Brazil and in the United States. The days when Fidel was feted in New York in 1959 were rapidly left behind.⁵ The words of the then candidate for the presidency, Jânio Quadros, were also forgotten. When he visited the island in March 1960, Jânio stated: “There is a revolution in Cuba and all revolutions are the source of examples and lessons.” In his committee were Francisco Julião, state deputy for Pernambuco for the Brazilian Socialist party (*Partido Socialista Brasileiro* – PSB), leader of the Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Camponesas*).⁶ A little more than a year after this visit, the socialist nature of the Revolution was declared. The

following week the Bay of Pigs invasion occurred, the landing of Cuban exiles on the Caribbean island, funded and trained in Miami by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The failure of this, added to the inability of US diplomacy, pushed Cuba in the direction of the Soviet Union, contributing, at the insistence of Fidel himself, to the communist superpower accepting to install its missiles with nuclear warheads in the Caribbean. The strategic advantage was impressive: its unprecedented range allowed the capital Washington and the large metropolises on the densely populated East coast to be hit. There is a great historiographic consensus about the seriousness of this crisis, which according to Hobsbawm (1995, p. 227) “left the world on the brink of an unnecessary war” in 1962.

What the analysis of the documentation used by Fico in 2008 and the other evidence reveals is the concern with what can be called the ‘Cubanization’ of South America, especially its largest country. Avoiding it was a strategic element of US policy for the hemisphere and it appears to have found strong support among Brazilian conservatives. It was not by chance that the propaganda film produced by the Institute of Research and Social Studies (*Instituto de Pesquisa e Estudos Sociais* – IPÊS), commanded by General Golbery do Couto e Silva, had the title “The Northeast: problem no. 1” (Dreifuss, 1987, p. 250). Misery, backwardness, and poverty – in summary, underdevelopment – could fertilize the soil in Brazil in which there would flourish another communist revolution in the Americas.

The theme of Cubanization was recurrent in the Brazilian press between 1962 and 1964.⁷ In common was the association between it and ‘problem number 1,’ the Northeast. In this way, the contention of ‘Cubanization’ was related in a direct form to the mobilization of the Peasant Leagues in that region. Furthermore, it was also related to the representations produced by this mobilization and the agrarian question by the multiple actors involved, from the left to the right.

ACCELERATED URBANIZATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION: THE ‘INVASION’ OF CITIES BY THE PEASANTS

It is evident that the rise of the Peasant Leagues in themselves do not explain the relevance of the agrarian question in that scenario. It should be remembered – and some of the recent analyses have sought to minimize this aspect a little – that the industrialization and urbanization processes occurred

in Brazil at an accelerated rate, with few comparable precedents in world history. During the Juscelino Kubitschek administration (1956-1961), according to IBGE data, the participation of industry surpassed that of agriculture in the composition of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the first time in Brazilian history. It was also at the end of this period that a majority of the Brazilian population became urban, based on the criteria then use. In a few decades there was a significant demographic alteration: in 1940, around 31% of the Brazilian population lived in cities against 69% in rural areas. In 1980, these numbers were inverted.⁸

To have an idea of the velocity of these changes, England, the first country to go through an industrialization process, with profound social consequences, took almost a century for industry to surpass agriculture in the composition of its wealth and to become predominantly urban. China only reached this point in 2011, even with three decades of double digit annual economic growth, and also in the middle of the adoption of serious restrictive policies on internal migrations as a form of containing the rural exodus and its social and economic impacts (Miller, 2012). When the Brazilian population is compared with the global one, the intensity of the process can be clearly seen: less than half of the global population live in agglomerations considered to be urban, which puts Brazil in a small group of less than thirty countries with very high percentages of urbanization.⁹

In a historical period that is relatively short when compared to that of other countries, Brazil became a predominantly urban society. The consequences of the intensity of this process can still be perceived in the large cities, especially state capitals: urban overexpansion, peripheralization, and the growth of *favelas*. These are marks visible at the beginning of the twenty-first century which appeared in the news reports in the 1960s, as they were already underway.

All these transformations involved a dramatic aspect: the large cities, such as state capitals, and not just those of the Southeast, were roughly speaking 'invaded' by rural populations in various manners, with distinct meanings and developments. The first, by those who sought insertion in the urban environment with the migrations relates to the rural exodus: the migrant who abandoned the countryside in search of employment. This phenomenon was perceived in the large cities with a negative dimension, and associated with *favelization*.¹⁰ The second, those who, although they came to live in peripheries, continued to work for the large properties which they had left, but on a new basis. In the 1970s this group came to be known as the *boia-fria* (roughly

speaking seasonal laborers). The last, which also became the most frequent, were those who reacted against these processes, who sought to remain on the land, resisting evictions and the will of the landholders, those who came to cities to pressurize authorities and to look for support from urban elements, holding protests, and demanding what they considered just (Grynszpan; Dezemone, 2007).

Demands of the peasant movements received greater publicity and visibility if expressed in the urban space, understood, following Max Weber (1967), as a *locus* of power and the base of the institutions with intervention capacity, such as newspapers, trade unions, political parties and dioceses, and the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial powers. Amongst various actions in the 1960s were the occupations of land in the countryside and of public buildings in cities, such as in the state of Rio de Janeiro, under the leadership of José Pureza.

With the more intense arrival of rural populations in the cities, seeking work, settling there, or protesting, a large contingent was created over which the traditional control of large landholders no longer held force. The reasons for the erosion of this traditional authority are varied and have been explored on other occasions, even being related to the unforeseen effects on the process of the production and divulgation of the labor legislation put together in the Vargas Era (Dezemone, 2008). What matters for the aims of this paper is the fact that the organization and representation of this large contingent came to be an object of dispute among agents who intended to present themselves and be recognized as ‘spokespersons,’ in the terms of Luc Boltanski (1982). Various agents competed, with different political inclinations, such as parties, activists, clergy, lawyers, journalists, and politicians. One of the forms through which this dispute occurred was the creation of organizations which congregated and intended to lead the peasants in their struggles and demands. The Peasant Leagues were one of these organizations, but not the only one.

THE PROJECTION OF THE LEAGUES IN THE POLITICAL STRUGGLES AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Overwhelmingly, the Peasant Leagues are considered by the historiography as the principal organization which acted in the rural Brazilian world before the 1964 coup.¹¹ According to Leonilde Medeiros (1995), the Leagues came to figure in the ‘sociological imagination’ as a real mark of rupture,

through it was possible to proceed to the distinction between ‘revolutionary’ and ‘reformist’ movements. The first ‘League’ emerged in 1955 in Engenho Galileia, in Vitória de Santo Antão, in the Zona da Mata of Pernambuco. Rapidly the model of organization as a civil association, without the official recognition of the state, expanded, reaching other states. Its most intense activities were in the Northeast, above all in other states of Pernambuco and Paraíba.

Two aspects were fundamental in the genesis and growth of the Leagues. The first was the struggle against the *cambão* – unpaid work in sugar mills –, emphasized recurrently by Francisco Julião (1962; 1977). Researchers who have studied rural workers have identified the role played by the *cambão* in the mobilizations (Dabat, 2003). A common practice for many years, the *cambão* came to be seen as a problem when the landholders began to demand more days, intensifying the exploitation of workers, while evictions from the mills became generalized.

Preventing evictions was a fundamental target of the Leagues. An important strategy was resorting to the judiciary, when lawyers sought to legally extend permanence on properties or face the payment of compensation. In the words of Julião (1977): “The landholder exhausted the means of coercion, of violence, and began to lead the peasant to where I wanted. The great revolution I was doing was nothing other than transferring the peasant from the door of the police chief to the door of the judge. This step for peasants was a real revolution.” And he continued stating that “the peasant is very legalistic. He is always concerned with finding and checking if it is according to the law.” Julião recognized that the law played a limiting factor on the authority of the large landholders, crucial for mobilizations. What he did not recognize was that this peasant legalism was not innate. It was constructed in association with the concepts of rights going back to the Vargas Era (Dezemone, 2008, pp. 233-235).

The second aspect was the rise of political groups who disputed the new contingents from the country who reached the cities and who achieved a greater influence and presence of the left in Pernambuco between 1955 and 1964. The election of Pelópidas Silveira, from the PSB, the same party as Julião, as Mayor of Recife, in 1955, pushed aside the power of the groups who had traditionally controlled local politics, identified with the Social Democratic Party (*Partido Social Democrático* – PSD). Following this, in 1958 Cid Sampaio became state governor, supported by a broad alliance which ranged from the National Democratic Union (*União Democrática Nacional* – UDN) to the clandestine Brazilian Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Brasileiro* – PCB).

This contributed to the election of Miguel Arraes as governor in 1962. In his campaign, Arraes sought the support of rural workers, opening space for trade unionists in government (Pereira, 2008, pp. 262-263).

The production of the perception of the weight and the greater relevance of the Leagues at the front of the struggles during that period was not circumscribed to the short temporality of the existence of those entities, from 1955–1964. An initial reason for understanding this perception of hegemony was the renewed intellectual interest in 1960s rural mobilizations when, at the beginning of the 1980s, there occurred the “slow, gradual, and secure opening” of the authoritarian regime, in the middle of a new context of mobilizations in cities and in the countryside (Grynszpan; Dezemone, 2007). Representing and at the same time part of these movements were publications such as those of Fernando Azevedo (1982) and Elide Rugai Bastos (1984). Separated by two years both books had the same title: *As Ligas Camponesas*. Also in 1984 the film *Cabra marcado para morrer* was launched, which gave new visibility to the story of the Protestant pastor João Pedro Teixeira, murdered in 1962, the leader of the largest Peasant League, that of Sapé, in Paraíba.

The film, directed by Eduardo Coutinho, established a bridge between the rural mobilizations at the beginning of the 1960s and the struggles at the beginning of the 1980s. Involved with the CPC, *Centro Popular de Cultura* (Popular Cultural Center) run by the National Union of Students at the beginning of the 1960s, the then young filmmaker participated in an itinerant project, UNE-Volante, whose objective was to document and to publicize popular culture in Brazil. Passing through Sapé, Paraíba, where a protest against the murder of João Pedro Teixeira was being held, he met the latter’s widow Elizabete Teixeira. Coutinho decided to start the film covering the trajectory of the murdered leader, the struggle against the *latifúndio*, and the urgency of agrarian reform. Interrupted because of the coup, the filming was only returned to in the 1980s, with part of the previous material being restored and used, it also dealt with the trajectory of the widow and the separation of the family, confronting the two scenarios: that of the hopes for re-democratization in the 1980s, with that of the struggles in the 1960, attributing great emphasis to the Peasant Leagues (Grynszpan; Dezemone, 2007).

Neither the books nor the film gave much or any attention to other organizations such as the Communist Leagues in the 1940s, closed down after the PCB was made illegal in 1947, considered ‘incipient,’ ‘fragile,’ ‘appendices of the centralized structure,’ as revealed by the critic Leonardo Santos (2005), scholar of those organizational actions. The image of the reduced importance

of the Communist Leagues increased and emphasized the role and the novelty of the 'Julião's Leagues.' The actual term 'League' was adopted by the conservative press in Pernambuco to link the 1950s movement to the Communist Leagues of the 1940s. The name of the organization created in Engenho Galileia in 1955 was the "Agricultural and Livestock Society of Planters of Pernambuco" (*Sociedade Agrícola e Pecuária dos Plantadores de Pernambuco* – SAPPP). Despite the initially pejorative content attributed, the term League ended up incorporated and was diffused by the movement.

There is also a second reason for in the genesis of the idea of the hegemony of the Leagues: the combined process, in which at the same time that its action was naturalized, constructed a certain idea of the 'Northeast' in substitution of the 'North' – the denomination of the region since colonial and monarchical times. The Northeast was increasingly represented as a symbol of backwardness and as the problematic region of Brazil. From the core of the colonial economy, the region consecrated itself during the Republic as an area which demanded resources and public investments. One of the greatest expressions of this process was the creation of the Superintendency of the Development of the Northeast (*Superintendência de Desenvolvimento do Nordeste* – Sudene) in 1959, during the JK administration, responding to the commotion caused when Antonio Callado published a series of reports about the 'industry of drought.' It was in this manner that the Northeast became, from the perspective of IPÊS, 'the no. 1 problem.'

The perception of the preponderance and the power of the Leagues was not exclusively produced *a posteriori* or only because of the action of other actors. It resulted from the diffusion and the use of an extract from a speech by Francisco Julião – "agrarian reform by law or by force, with flowers or with blood," given at the I National Congress of Agricultural and Rural Workers, better known as the Peasant Congress of Belo Horizonte, in 1961. It was the Leagues which sent the tone of the Congress, despite its delegates being in a minority. The Federal government funded the event, while the Union of Agricultural Laborers and Workers of Brazil (*União dos Lavradores e Trabalhadores Agrícolas do Brasil* – Ultab) was responsible for organizing the event, with a more effective national presence, to which were linked the majority of the 1400 delegates from 20 states, as against 245 from the Leagues (Pereira, 2008, p. 252; Costa, 2010).

Ultab was created in 1954, under the influence of the PCB, with one of its principal leaders being Lyndolpho Silva. His trajectory was similar to that of other activists who, working together with the urban working class, began to

move to the countryside. When still legal in 1946 the PCB emphasized the importance of this to organize the peasants (Santos, 2005).

The Belo Horizonte Congress was the stage of intense disputes between the Leagues and Ultab, political forces which sought to consolidate and affirm their representativeness. Appearing in the Final Declaration was the:

unshakeable decision to fight for radical agrarian reform. This reform has nothing to do with the palliative measures proposed by the retrograde forces of the Nation, whose objective is to postpone for some time the liquidation of *latifundiária* property. The banner of radical agrarian reform is the only banner capable of uniting and organizing the national forces which desire the welfare and the felicity of the masses of rural workers and the progress of Brazil.

For this, the first measure needed to be the:

Immediate modification by the National Congress of article 141, paragraph 16, of the Federal Constitution, which stipulated the requirement for the ‘prior, just, and in money’ compensation for the cases of the expropriation of land in the social interest. This mechanism needs to be eliminated and reformulated, determining that the compensations for the social interest be done in public bonds, redeemable in the long term and with low interest rates.¹²

The Peasant Congress is still little studied in the historiography which not rarely gets confused when studying it. Daniel Aarão Reis wrote than “in the Congress that founded the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers/Contag (*Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores da Agricultura/Contag*), there appeared and received an ovation a slogan which synthesized diagnostics and prognostics: agrarian reform by law or by force.” Following this he stated in a note that “the slogan was widely agitated in the founding congress of ... Contag and spread by the entire leftwing press, even by more moderate leftwing parties, such as the PCB” (Aarão Reis et al., 2004, p. 36 and note 10). It is important to stress that the ‘slogan’ appeared in a speech by Julião and not in the Final Declaration of the Congress convoked by Ultab. Moreover, Contag was only created in December 1963, and was formally recognized by the state in January 1964. It was counterpoised to the Leagues which, due to their format in civil associations, were considered by the Christian Democrat Franco Montoro, Minister of Labor in 1962, as an “almost clandestine” organization (Pereira, 2008, p. 251).

However, the most important aspect is not the small factual confusion, but the great historiographic controversy which resulted from the generalization of the 'slogan' 'by law or by force' among the left as a whole. Certain critics stated that this perspective helps to make the left responsible for the overthrow of Goulart, supporting arguments in favor of the coup. It was spread around the 40th anniversary of the coup, through events and publications (Mattos, 2008, pp. 254-255). It is symptomatic that the advance in this interpretative approach in the 2000s coincides with the reduction of interest in and research which considered the contribution of the agrarian question to the 1964 crisis. In a survey carried out in the newspaper *Novos Rumos*, linked to the PCB, whenever the expression 'by law or by force' appeared, it was exclusively associated with agrarian reform.¹³ The motto does not appear to have been expanded to other reformist proposals. Moreover, when Contag was mentioned in *Novos Rumos*, agrarian reform was associated with proposals for constitutional reforms which had to be approved by the National Congress. Here there is an interesting indication of the need for more research to understand the effective scope of the motto 'by law or by force' and its use by the left.

The visibility obtained from this slogan coincided with the mass movement of *Nordestinos* (Northeasterners) from a rural origin to the cities in the Southeast, which made the problems of the countryside more perceptible and close. In this way, the idea became strengthened that the *latifúndio* was at the foundation of the rural exodus. Peasant mobilization and the action of the Leagues were therefore seen, at that time, as natural occurrences, the inevitable and legitimate consequences of the situation existing in the Brazilian countryside, created by the *latifúndio*. These mobilizations consecrated the idea that agrarian reform was not only the principal demand of this group, but that it was necessary for the progress of the nation as a whole, by considering *latifúndio* to an obstacle to Brazilian development (Grynszpan; Dezemone, 2007).

This understanding, far from constructing a consensus around a distributional proposal for land, began to give rise to hotly contested disputes. It was not only the left who defended 'agrarian reform.' Analyzing publications such as *A Lavoura*, a magazine linked to the large rural landholders of São Paulo, ongoing research has revealed that, after initially being opposed to agrarian reform, an 'agrarian revision' came to be defended in some articles, with the expression afterwards being accepted. However, this occurred without a discussion of the alteration of the concentrated landholding regime, prioritizing

the introduction of new techniques, public health conditions, and an increase in productivity (Garrido, 2014).

This reveals the construction of an association of the concept of ‘agrarian reform’ with economic development, but not necessarily the distribution of landholdings. It would be interesting for more research to be undertaken in relation to these disputes due to the significance of the idea of agrarian reform in the years prior to the coup. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the percentages of support for agrarian reform in the large cities indicated by the public opinion research carried out by Ibope at the beginning of the 1960s – much cited on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the coup – could be understood from another perspective. The figures in this research are related more to the containing of the rural exodus, the urban problems resulting from it, and to economic development than to a consensus about the reduction of the concentration of landholding. In summary: containing the rural exodus and economic development were notions shared by the left and even by sectors of the right, while the distribution of landholdings was defended by sectors that were self-denominated as ‘radicals,’ against the ‘palliative measures proposed by the retrograde forces of the Nation’ in accordance with the Final Declaration of the Peasant Congress, defender of the reforms implemented by the National Congress, in other words, the ‘law.’

After the coup, during the Castelo Branco administration (1964-1967), repression led to the cassations of mandates and arrests, resulting in the demobilization of the countryside, the closing of the Leagues, and interventions in rural trade unions. In this scenario, the National Congress approved two measures which also celebrated their 50th anniversary in 2014, despite passing almost unperceived: Constitutional Reform no. 10 and the Land Statute, both from November 1964. In the reform, the expropriation of unproductive land was to be done by payment with public bonds, without the need for vast sums disbursed in cash, as had been defended in the ‘radical’ proposal from the Final Declaration of the 1964 Peasant Congress. In the text of the Land Statute, the understanding that prevailed was that the concentration of land in themselves was not the problem to be combatted, since these lands could be considered productive. However, the criteria waited for years until they were regulated and implemented (see Borges, 2002).

COMPETITION FOR THE REPRESENTATION OF WORKERS AND 'RURAL' *TRABALHISMO*

The Goulart administration was not a passive spectator of the mobilizations in the countryside. Attentive to the political opportunities being opened, the government sought to become closer to the peasant movements. As well as federal funding, President Goulart (PTB), Tancredo Neves (PSD), then prime minister, and the governor of Minas Gerais, Magalhães Pinto (UDN), amongst other politicians were present at the Peasant Congress in Belo Horizonte.

Based on this meeting, there was an intense legislative effort which was translated into measures which recognized and stimulated rural unions, which were rapidly proliferating. Of special importance in this process, was João Pinheiro Neto. He occupied various positions such as Minister of Labor from September to December 1962, during the period of parliamentarianism. In July 1963, under presidentialism, Pinheiro Neto was nominated president of the Superintendency of Agrarian Policy (*Superintendência de Política Agrária – Supra*). His administration of the agency was marked by an aggressive policy of encouraging agrarian reform and rural trade unionization, evidenced by the creation of the National Commission of Rural Trade Unionization (*Comissão Nacional de Sindicalização Rural – Consir*), presided by Sergio Veloso, in a partnership with the Ministry of Labor and Supra (Kornis, 2002).

The legislative production and the efforts to stimulate the creation of trade unions in the countryside revealed an intervention strategy with clear objectives in the presidentialist phase. The enactment of the Rural Worker Statute (ETR), on 2 March 1963, was greeted at the time by Caio Prado Jr. as a “real complementation of the law which abolished slavery in 1888” (apud Santos, 2005). Rather than just extending social rights to the countryside, the ETR also contemplated the creation of higher level union bodies, in other words, state federations and a national confederation.

Restored in the ETR were the vertical union structure, official trade unions, the monopoly of representation, and single trade union, characteristics of the rural trade unionization decree of the *Estado Novo*, dated 10 November 1944 (Dezemone, 2008, p. 224). Of these, the one which had the greatest difficulty in being regulated until the ETR was the single trade union, due to the plurality of labor relations in the countryside – *meeiros, colonos, foreiros*, residents, *posseiros, arrendatários*, and others. The solution came from the category ‘rural worker,’ flexible and wide-ranging, defined by the rendering of services in exchange for a wage or *in natura* product, which contemplated the

multiplicity of arrangements of the rural world. Stated in article 2 of the ETR was that “Rural workers for due effects are all individuals who provide services to rural employers, on a rural property or rustic building, through a wage paid in money or *in natura*, or part *in natura* and part in money.”¹⁴

The significance of the reproduction of the principles of 1944 in 1963 is that the government imposed the official recognition, following the example of what the 1939 Unionization Law did for urban workers. It defined what would be the principal space of competition among the forces in the countryside, establishing the terms according to which the organization of these workers would occur, delimiting their choices, impelling them to interlocution.

A type of ‘peasant hunting season’ was opened: Catholics and communists strongly engaged in a dispute for the creation of new trade union organizations, by transforming civil entities into unions, for example. The action of communists was related to a wider perspective of rural mobilization in the struggles for national decolonization in Africa and Asia, as well as the influence of Maoism and *Castrismo-Guevarismo*. Some saw a ‘potential revolutionary’ in the countryside which could be explored, whilst others were concerned with the extension of social rights to the rural world. The presence of Catholics intensified in the 1950s, as a form of staunching the loss both of influence, due to the growing presence of communists, and believers, due to the advance of Protestantism (De Kadt, 1970). João Pedro Teixeira, whose murder inspired *Cabra marcado para morrer*, brought together the two fears: leader of the Sapé League and Protestant pastor.

Contag emerged out of an intense race for the creation of unions and federations in the molds of the ETR, in a competition between the leaders of Ultab, with a strong communist presence, and the trade unions of the ‘priest,’ with ‘Catholics’ and ‘radical Catholics’ (De Kadt, 1970, pp. 144-145). In this way, it can be understood how from only five rural trade unions officially recognized by the beginning of the 1960s, more than four hundred were constituted in 1963 alone. In January 1964, Contag was officially recognized after a conference held in December which counted with the presence of Pinheiro Neto, from Supra. Lyndolpho Silva, a communist and from Ultab, was chosen as its first president. In the pages of *Novos Rumos*, the creation of the Confederation was exalted, without any association being made with the motto ‘agrarian reform by law or by force.’ To the contrary, the Final Declaration of the Peasant Congress was supported, the text in which there appeared the reference to a ‘radical agrarian reform,’ involving reform of the Constitution.

Furthermore, the periodical insisted on concentrating efforts on “the preparation of an Agrarian Reform bill to be presented to the National Congress.”¹⁵

The Peasant Leagues opted, in the name of the maintenance of autonomy, not to follow the path of official trade unionization, which resulted in the loss of space to their communist and Catholic competitors. The understanding of leaders such as Julião was that rural unions were inappropriate entities for the peasant struggle. For this reason, he undermined the union model in benefit of civic associations such as the Leagues, without either the recognition or the guardianship of the state. Moreover, after the Peasant Congress some of the members of the Leagues such as Clodomir Moraes adopted another path: they become involved in the resort to arms, such as the Tiradentes Revolutionary Movement (*Movimento Revolucionário Tiradentes* – MRT), in 1962. Its connections with the Cuban regime are well known and are as proven as Goulart and his ministers’ concerns about the Leagues (Pereira, 2008, p. 253): after an air accident in Peru in 1962, official Cuban postal documents revealed support for training for guerrillas linked to the Leagues and to MRT (Moraes, 1989, p. 84). They had thus moved away from the peasant legalism which Julião had stressed (1977).

Communists and Catholics knew how to take advantage of the consequences of these options and the government’s incentives to expand their support bases: the majority of the rural trade unions which emerged during Goulart’s presidency were linked to PCB activists and sectors of the Catholic church. In Pernambuco, for example, cradle of the Leagues, Catholic unions had 200,000 members while the Peasant Leagues had 40,000 in 1964. This data was collected by the US researcher Mary Elizebeth Wilkie, who was in Brazil in the 1960s and did extensive field research in Pernambuco for her master’s in sociology (Wilkie, 1968, p. 39). It is evident that this does not mean that number of members automatically resulted in greater or lesser mobilization, but rather that the majority of rural workers moved away from the Leagues’ proposals and concepts. The same perception is reinforced by Anthony Pereira, whose article has the suggestive title “O declínio das Ligas Camponesas e a ascensão dos sindicatos” (2008 – The decline of the Peasant Leagues and the rise of trade union). He demonstrates that in Pernambuco “state protection and sponsorship were key factors in permitting the unions to surpass the Peasant Leagues as organizations with preeminence to represent rural workers in the Zona da Mata of Pernambuco. While the 1964 coup brought a definitive end to the Leagues, their decline had begun earlier” (Pereira, 2008, p. 264).

In addition to the intensive actions of the government, the Leagues suffered a campaign in the large newspapers, as recorded in popular culture, ‘funded by the right,’ as revealed in pamphlets from *cordel* literature: “Now the Peasant Leagues / Seizing properties / Tearing up deeds / Humiliating the authorities / Practicing injustices / Crimes and barbarities” and also “Here comes the band from hell / Someone called Chico Julião / It looks like he was expelled / from the school of the thief / Today he walks through the square / Attracting the attention of the people ” (Curran, 2001, pp. 167-168).

From December 1963 onwards, shortly after the foundation of Contag, an important parliamentary impasse emerged about the agrarian question. Pinheiro Neto adopted a position in defense of an amendment of the 1946 Constitution, replacing the text which allowed for the payment of indemnification to the owners of expropriated land in cash with payment in public bonds, which would accelerate expropriations. For this reason, the alteration of the constitutional text was strongly opposed by the most conservative sectors. Both under parliamentarianism and presidentialism, the Goulart administration lacked the majority necessary in the National Congress to reform the Constitution. What was needed was the creation of the political conditions to get them passed.

In her 1997 doctoral dissertation, Leila Stein argued, based on legislative production related to the countryside from the 1950s and 1960s, that João Goulart’s *trabalhismo* (literally *laborism*) sought to stimulate popular mobilization as a form of expanding his support base. In a pioneering manner, she even talked about “rural *trabalhismo*” (Stein, 2008).

It is defended in her work that, under presidentialism, the extension of social legislation to the countryside and principally trade union organization in the Varas framework, sought to expand political support in order to pressurize the National Congress. This strategy sought to move the peasants away from the radicalization of the Leagues, as they were considered by Catholics, communists, and the government. Far from being a ‘revisionist’ interpretation, she found support in various involved parties who were contemporary to the process – Montoro, Goulart, Pinheiro Neto, Julião, and workers; in the quantification of the decline of the Leagues; and in the more recent historiography.

The government’s intention was to hold a series of large rallies, but only the first was held on 13 March 1964, in Central do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro. The Rally was full of symbolic elements, such as the fact that Goulart gave his speech on the same wooden plank used by the “immortal and great patriot Getúlio Vargas,” invoked three times in his speech. Various popular leaders

spoke on top of this old plank, such as Miguel Arraes and Leonel Brizola, associated with a distributive agrarian reform.¹⁶

Agrarian reform was stressed. Posters were seen with the slogan 'agrarian reform by law or by force,' although it does not appear that any of the speakers said this. Goulart considered it "the complement of the abolition of captivity for dozens of millions of Brazilians, who stagnated in the interior, in revolting conditions of misery." All the time Goulart emphasized that "agrarian reform is indispensable not only to increase the level of the man in the countryside, but also to give more labor for industries and better pay to the urban worker." Like Vargas in his rallies, Goulart announced measures such as the decree for the expropriation of land alongside federal highways, drafted by Pinheiro Neto. According to Goulart, "the first step: a door opens to the definitive solution of the Brazilian agrarian problem." After this a promise was made to send the decree in a presidential message which would be submitted to Congress in 48 hours.¹⁷ In the message which was more than 300 pages long, in the field "factors which limit public action" there appeared "the absence of an agrarian structure which contributes to the establishment of man in the countryside, reducing the exodus of the population to urban centers which, unprepared in their totality to support the continual demographic growth, suffer serious disturbances in their structures."¹⁸

A little more than 15 days later, Goulart would be overthrown.

Using politically the rhetoric of *part* of the left, conservative sectors instrumentalized it in the parcel of the arguments for the overthrow of Goulart, imposing the representation that a coup from the left was on the way which justified the 'timely intervention' in defense of 'legality.' The Constitution was torn up and disrespected under the argument of protecting them. To reach their objectives, they intentionally confused one of the parts with the totality of their opponents.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reduction of the emphasis attributed to the agrarian question at the time of the 50th anniversary of the coup can be considered in part as a vestige of the vision of the countryside and the rural as lesser objects by part of the historiography, when compared to the mobilizations of urban workers and the expectations for social transformation deposited on them.

Furthermore, the influences of Cultural History and the New Political History from the 1990s onwards on the Brazilian historiography of the coup

contributed to a decline of a social and economic focus, principally a Marxist one, which had characterized the approaches to the rural sphere until the beginning of that decade. However, it is not intended to state that this influence was necessarily and exclusively noxious: it also helped a lot of research projects to think about the rural and the agrarian question in the context of the 1960s.

Another aspect, which should not be confused with the above, is that the posture that occasionally affects some Brazilian historians and ends up considering an entire reflective effort as outdated, and that only the new, recent work, serves to promote the understanding of historical processes. This posture guards a relationship with the constitution of the scientific field, with the dispute and the competition for the legitimate discourse, which does not differentiate it from the other social fields, as identified by Pierre Bourdieu (1976).

At the same time, the reduction of interest in the agrarian question was also related to the predominantly urban condition of the country. The speed and the intensity of urbanization makes it seem nowadays that the role attributed to the social relations and practices existing in the countryside and the rural world in the construction of the modern, urban, and industrial world was a lesser one. In the present, therefore, the dimension of the old rural features would become ever more vague memories.

The rural exodus has stayed in the past and is currently not a significant problem faced by Brazil, to the contrary of other countries considered as emergent, such as China and India (Miller, 2012). It thereby stopped being an urgent question, one recognized as such, as it was in the 1960s, becoming instead the distant cause of the problems experienced by large cities. The solutions for these problems no longer involved the stopping of the migratory flows from the countryside, but public policies related to themes such as transport, mobility, *favelization*, the housing deficit, and infrastructure. A symbol of this was the creation of the Ministry of Cities in 2003, with a budget which was frequently among the ten highest of the federal government, always higher than Defense, Agrarian Development, and Agriculture.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the recognition of the importance of the agrarian question in the 1960s which appeared in various works without being accompanied by a more profound and consistent development does not benefit the debate. The opportunity has been wasted to think of how the questions raised allow light be shed on various points discussed in more recent academic squabbles, such as the civil support for the coup, the destabilization campaign and the conspiracy, and the thesis of the radicalization of the left.

Part of the motto of the Leagues – ‘by law or by force,’ but without the ‘agrarian reform’ – has been generalized to the left as a whole, although there are few consistent empirical indications that this perspective was extended to other reforms. The Leagues sought to reinforce their image of hegemony to the peasants through the radicalization of their discourse. Despite the proven Cuban support for armed groups, an effective military capacity of the Leagues was a great bluff. At the same time, the right sought to inflate this threat in the name of the contention of a possible ‘Cubanization’ through the Northeast. In this way, the image constructed about the Leagues counted on actors from both poles in the political spectrum, indisputably with distinct interests, but which converged onto representations and image that are still powerful today, and which have various uses.

The absence of a more significant reaction to the coup by the Leagues – ‘the army of Julian’ – was partly due to the efficient strategy of rural unionization adopted by the government which reduced its ‘legalist’ foundation and isolated the movement. These strategies were not new, but went back to what could be thought of as a ‘rural *trabalhismo*,’ whose first actions were adopted under the *Estado Novo*. References were used which had great meaning for the countryside population, mistakenly treated by the majority of the historiography as separated by an unsurpassable abyss from the material and symbolic benefits obtained by urban workers (Dezemone, 2008).

Much more for analytical gains than for political orientation or nostalgia, the agrarian question deserves to be better considered to the understanding of the crisis of the Goulart administration and the coup which overthrew him.

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NOTES

¹ This article presents the results of research divulged in the Thematic Symposium “Rural History in Brazil: research, teaching, and the office of the historian,” coordinated by Marina Machado (UERJ) and myself at the XVI Regional Meeting of ANPUH-RJ in July 2014. I would like to thank my colleagues from the regional sections of ANPUH Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Pará who invited me to roundtables, talks, and conferences in the second semester of 2014 and stimulated the submission of this text to RBH. Moreover, I would like to thank CNPq which funded the scientific initiation grant of Luciene Garrido (UFF) and Capes, for supporting the research of Pedro Balthazar (UFF), whose completed and underway orientations have reinforced the understandings sustained here.

² Doctorate in Social History, from the Post-Graduate Program in History, Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF).

³ The publications of the events from previous decades (TOLEDO, 1997; AARÃO REIS FILHO, 2004) can be compared with the 2014 programs, such as in USP, São Paulo (Available at: <http://fflch.usp.br/sites/fflch.usp.br/files/50anosdh.jpg>; Accessed on: 15 May 2015) and Unicamp (Available at: <http://www.unicamp.br/unicamp/noticias/2014/02/17/evento-debater-os-50-anos-do-golpe-de-64>; Accessed on: 15 May 2015); in Rio de Janeiro, the joint program brought together CPDOC/FGV, Uerj, UFF, UFRJ, UFRRJ, UniRio, and PUC-Rio (Available at: <http://cpdoc.fgv.br/50-anos-do-golpe-de-1964/programacao>; Accessed on: 15 May 2015). Events in other universities in different Brazilian regions were analyzed. In some the presence of the agrarian question was not lower only because of the improvised exhibition of the film *Cabra marcado para morrer*, due to the tragic death in February 2014 of the director Eduardo Coutinho.

⁴ Understood by the destabilization campaign is the effort to weaken the Goulart administration, hindering the chances of electoral victory of the president in a possible candidacy in 1965 or of him becoming the decisive actor in the succession process. Understood by conspiracy is the campaign to breach with legality which culminated in the overthrow of the president. Obviously both are linked, but at the same time they cannot be confused.

⁵ See, amongst other, *New York Daily News* whose access is free. Available at: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/fidel-castro-new-york-gallery-1.48730>; Accessed on: 19 May 2015.

⁶ *Jornal do Brasil*, 29 mar. 1960, p. 4.

⁷ In Rio de Janeiro, Cubanization was looked at by the following periodicals: *Jornal do Brasil*, *Correio da Manhã*, *Diários de Notícias*, *Diário Carioca*, *Diário da Noite*, *Última Hora*, *O Fluminense*, *O Semanário*, and even *Novos Rumos*, linked to the PCB. Available at: <http://bndigital.bn.br/hemeroteca-digital/>; Accessed on: 15 May 2015. Although the *O Globo* collection is not open to the public, subscribers can consult copies. Available at: <http://acervo.oglobo.globo.com/>; Accessed on: 15 May 2015. Pedro Balthazar’s Master’s Thesis in Social History, still in preparation in PPGH-UFF, uses this documentation.

⁸ Available at: www.ibge.com.br; Accessed on: 15 May 2015.

⁹ There is a debate about the classification criteria for urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, when compared to the world in general, the Brazilian percentage remains significant. The data about global urbanization are from the United Nation Population Fund. Available at: <http://www.unfpa.org/urbanization>; Accessed on: 15 June 2015.

¹⁰ Built into the logic of northeastern migratory flows, the principal one between 1940 and 1980, was the desire to return to the countryside after the accumulation of resources in the city, in other words, to return in better conditions and an improved social position to the peasant way of life after 'spending time' in the city. Although often this did not happen, this return was a decisive element for the option to move (GARCIA, 1990).

¹¹ See: JULIÃO, 1962; AZEVEDO, 1982; BASTOS, 1984; MEDEIROS, 1995, amongst others. When not indicated, from here onwards, the information about the Leagues is taken from: CAMARGO, 2002, pp. 3122-3124.

¹² *Estudos Sociais*. Rio de Janeiro, v.III, n.12, pp. 433-437, abr. 1962.

¹³ The first time the expression appeared in *Novos Rumos* was in the 24–30 Nov. 1961, issue pp. 1-3, in a report by the journalist Rui Facó about the Peasant Congress in Belo Horizonte.

¹⁴ *Diário Oficial da União*, retificação, 22 mar. 1963, p. 3033, col. 1.

¹⁵ "CONTAG: Sindicalização e reforma agrária", *Novos Rumos*, n.259, 7 a 13 fev. 1964, p. 6.

¹⁶ Temporary measures for the implementation of a distributional agrarian reform had been occurring in various Brazilian states, such as Rio Grande do Sul under Brizola (1958-1962), and in Pernambuco, under Miguel Arraes (1962-1964). In other states, ongoing research has found similar indications, as in Rio de Janeiro and Pará, according to Prof. Edilza Fontes (UFPA).

¹⁷ Speech of João Goulart at the public rally in Central do Brasil, 13 Mar. 1964. Available at: <http://www.institutojoaogoulart.org.br/conteudo.php?id=31>; Accessed on 15 June 2015.

¹⁸ Message of President João Goulart to the National Congress, 1964, p. 198. Available at: <http://www.biblioteca.presidencia.gov.br/ex-presidentes/joao-goulart/mensagens-presidenciais/mensagem-ao-congresso-nacional-na-abertura-na-sessao-legislativa-de-1964/view>; Accessed on: 15 Jun. 2015.

¹⁹ Survey of public administration sites for ongoing research. Available at: <http://www.portaldatransparencia.gov.br/graficos/>; Accessed on: 19 June 2015.