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Review Article

Power: How Brazil Works

Archibald O. Haller

Michael L. Conniff and Frank D. McCann, Eds. *Modern Brazil: Elites and Masses in Historical Perspective*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. \$33.95, xxiv + 305 pp. inc. index and glossary.

This edited volume was a pleasure to read. It's not easy for foreigners, even those who are trained social scientists, to get their minds around Brazilian society. As a matter of fact, Brazilians themselves are often poorly informed about regions outside their own home territory. The writers of this book know Brazil, and they understand how it works. Brazil is a society openly run an elite stratum. So to understand the stratum is to understand a great deal about Brazil. The writers do a good job explaining this stratum and its alter ego, the stratum of the masses.

The specialist in societal stratification who understands Brazil is bemused by political researchers who impose European and North American definitions of the term "elite" on Brazil, a sin these authors manage to avoid. In rich democracies it may make some sense to restrict the definition to office holders in government, unions and big business. In Brazil, this doesn't ring true. The question is how Brazilian national and major regional economic and political decisions are made and who makes them. Prestigious politicians, whether in office or not, are involved in the decision-making process—unless they are exiled or otherwise muzzled. Certain bishops count, whether proscribed or not. Some big business leaders often count, rich farm owners often count too. So do some of the generals and few professors of prestigious universities. Then there are "in-elites" and "out-elites." In-elites are active decision-makers who belong to cliques or families who have members who hold powerful government positions and who themselves are known to support the actions of those in power. Out-elites are those who belong to politically influential groups which are out of power, at least for the present, or are known to support influential groups that are out of power. Even though "out," their opinions count. Union officials, so important in the developed democracies, may be elites when unions are allowed to strike and their members can vote in major elections. They are *not* elites when union activity is proscribed. To be an elite in Brazil one must exert, through the exercise of power greater than that accessible to ordinary voters, an identifiable influence on the economic or political decision-making process. Many elites do this without holding any key office at all, and many key office holders, whom the naive might think of as elites, are in fact stooges for real elites who may or may not hold high office. And many business leaders, big farmers, generals, etc., are not elites.

In terms of power, Brazil is a truly and openly an unequal society. The top families and cliques might as well be considered as an elite stratum. Though most members of the stratum may never become elites, practically all the elites emerge from it. Who is

and who is not an elite in Brazil is a tricky question. The writers of this book understand this, and it makes their task difficult.

Since power is the name of the game, one might think that modern measures of societal stratification might be brought to bear to identify Brazil's elites. But no. True, classical stratification theorists (e.g., Weber, Marx, Sorokin, and Lenski) have insisted that power and wealth are the main dimensions of stratification, though American empiricists favor occupational status and education. But we cannot measure power differentials with the kinds of sample survey data that would be needed to identify elites. We do pretty well with income, occupational status and educational attainment—but not power.

Still, in Brazil, income, occupational status and education are highly correlated. And we know that all elites (in and out) and their fellows of the elite stratum are high in at least one of these three dimensions and often all of them—except for times when unions are “in,” in which case a union official of modest income, occupational status and education might slip into an elite position.

For those who do not know Brazil as well as the authors of this book do, the shapes of the distributions of income, occupational status and education may provide an idea of why it makes sense to focus on elites and masses. These distributions show great concentrations of people at the bottom of each such variable, with long distances (in money, occupational status scores or years of education) between these low-level concentrations and the few who are on top. I would guess that not more than one-tenth of one percent of the adult population are elites, and that practically all of them are drawn from an elite stratum that consists of no more than two to three percent of the adult population and who are members of this stratum because of their high levels of wealth, income, education, occupational and/or familial status. Two facts need to be added. First, the status of one's parents exerts a sizable influence on one's own education, occupational status and income, so elite stratum recruitment is largely heredity. Second, there exists over all Brazil a concept of the *família tradicional* (traditional family). These are high status extended families whose social identity persists over the generations. Members of *famílias tradicionais* are automatically members of the elite stratum.

The authors of these chapters understand very well that Brazil is run by the people from the elite stratum, like the aristocrats or gentry of other times and places. They understand, too, there is not much mobility into that stratum. They know that under the affable and apparently egalitarian relations among Brazilians lies the well-recognized distinction between those of the elite stratum and the masses—the *povo*.

This is an edited volume, with 12 chapters, an introduction and an epilogue. The Introduction, by McCann and Conniff, provides a notion of the history of the concepts of elites and masses, especially as applied to Latin America. Then it goes on to specify the referents of the terms within Brazil. Their instincts are right: what they call the “middle class” looks to me like the elite stratum from which the elites emerge. They know too that there are in-elites and out-elites. Surprisingly, they suppose that the masses constitute sixty or seventy percent of the Brazilian population, figures which are surely too low, unless they consider people of lower white collar and skilled blue collar levels as middle. But they are right when they point out that the masses are poor, have low occupational status levels and low levels of education. And as they imply, the educational system tends to serve as a device for transmitting status across the generations.

Part I concerns political elites. The first chapter, by Joseph L. Love and Bert J. Barickman, is on regional elites. Some Brazilian states—São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio

de Janeiro, Pernambuco, and Rio Grande do Sul—are powerful entities. Love and Barickman focus on elites in São Paulo, Minas and Pernambuco, collating data from several studies which identified elites and assessed some of their characteristics. These elites were apparently all politicians and they are from 1889 to 1937. Their origins, education and occupations are discussed, along with conditions of their degree of “success” as politicians.

In the next essay, Conniff writes on the national elites. He, too, uses quantitative data—taken from a biographical “dictionary” of 1980-1983. Like other such lists, as a source of precise information, it must be taken with a grain of salt. But it is useful as a way of getting a feel for some of the Brazilian political elites—about as good as *Who's Who in America* would be for the United States. Of course, there is no way of knowing what degrees and types of bias enter this sort of sampling from universes (elites or the elite stratum) whose parameters are unknown. He provides evidence on the origins and careers of leading politicians as these change over time. He also describes the changing system by which political and other elites have been recruited into their positions of influence. A lot is made of informal networks, Anthony Leeds's “*panelinhas*”—life-long cliques whose members support each other. This is well worth mentioning. But it should not be thought that, say, the United States is very different: those who think societies with “universalistic” criteria are not “particularistic” are wrong, as both countries illustrate. Particularism works very well indeed within universalistic recruitment criteria. The chapter ends with a nice review of more recent political history.

The two last-mentioned chapters attempt to show what the elites and the elite stratum are like and how they have changed. I like them. Yet they overestimate the place of office-holding politicians to the neglect of other influentials who are not so much in the public eye. Wealthy families, “*empresários*” (roughly, financiers), certain economists and others with highly specialized training exert enormous influence on the destiny of the nation. Surprisingly, too, little is said about the role of the “technocrat” during the time of military control. Soldiers set and enforced the ground rules. But the technocrats—highly trained economists, scientists, engineers, and lawyers—used their differing sets of expertise to make the system work. Were not both the generals and the technocrats political elites?

The Military is the title of McCann's chapter. It provides an excellent description of the social organization of the army, together with characteristics of various levels of soldiers, recruitment structures, training, and social origins. The chapter also includes a thoughtful overview of the role of the military in the governance of the nation. Yet in this connection, very little is said about the years of the military's avowedly authoritarian rule.

The next section concentrates on economic elites. It consists of two chapters, one by Steven Topik on the Old Republic, the other by Eli Diniz on the Post-1930 Industrial Elites. Topik holds that economic elites have had a powerful though subtle and usually indirect influence on political decision making. He reviews the origins of their agencies of influence in the early part of the century.

Diniz reviews the rise of industrialists from about the Revolution of 1930 up to and through the Military Period and beyond. She seems to concentrate on the private sector, which may make the coverage lop-sided. In recent years, half or more of the economy has been in state-owned industries, including for example, Petrobras (oil) and Cia. do Vale do Rio Doce (mining), two of the world's largest companies, and many others. The Banco do Brasil has had a privileged place in Brazil. How are its top managers and

those of Petrobras and CVRD recruited? What sorts of influence have they exerted on government? Perhaps the heavy role of the state on industry has something to do with the authoritarian slant of the private industrial community.

Part II is on the Masses. It begins with Eul-Soo Pang's essay on agrarian change in the Northeast. For the most part this interesting essay is a review of "social banditry" à la Hobsbawm and others. For those who are already familiar with such episodes as those of Lampião and his bandit army, with Antonio Conselheiro's community and the attacks upon it by the army, and with Padre Cicero's charismatic community, this may be a useful interpretation. But the chapter neglects more than it covers. Nothing is said about the *Ligas Camponesas*, the powerful peasant movement of the early 1960s, or the forces that gave rise to it. Nothing is said about the half-hearted, abortive moves of the post-1964 governments to consider land redistribution or about the reactions to them. Someone ought to point out that the nation has priorities for its agricultural policies and that these hit the populous (45 million) and poor Northeast especially hard because its people and economy are more rural than those of the rest of the nation. So far as I know, these priorities were never articulated publicly. I think they are: 1. to earn hard currency so as to finance the development of the rest of the economy; 2. to feed the working class population of the cities, thus maintaining social tranquility and keeping the industrial system going; 3. to colonize the frontiers, so as to protect the borders and to open new resources; and last of all 4. to feed the rural population. Lastly, nothing is said about the rise of large scale farming (which is both capital- and labor-intensive) and its consequences for the rural masses.

I like Thomas Holloway's quick review of the early settlement of the four southern states and of the colonization efforts—German and Italians—in Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. His review of these patterns and the labor policies of São Paulo's coffee producers is most enlightening. Still, I wish he had made more of a point about the flow of descendants of the Italians, Germans, Japanese, and yes, even American immigrants into today's Paulista elite structure.

Each taken in itself, the two chapters by Pang and Holloway are useful. But by their omissions they illustrate the main problem of the book. Its coverage of the masses is its weakest general point. Within this, its coverage of the rural masses is weakest of all. Readers need to know that only a generation ago Brazil was a rural society, with two-thirds of its people living on farms. This has switched. Today, two-thirds are urban. Regarding the rural masses, it would have been most helpful to have provided data on the educational, occupational, income and nutritional levels of the population, startlingly low everywhere, but especially so in the Northeast. Readers also need to know about the variety and characteristics of Brazil's farming systems—the nation's inefficient, labor-intensive plantations, its productive new capital-intensive plantations, its rich operations in São Paulo, its cacao farms in Bahia, its immense operations in the west, etc. And above all, they need to know how people live in these varying circumstances.

The urban working class has come to have great importance in Brazil. Along with the immense rural-urban shift, there was a substantial increase in urban-based manufacturing. Today, Brazil exports cars, airplanes, military equipment, oil refineries, etc. Its manufacturing system has grown rapidly. Most of this activity is centered around São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, and a few other cities. Michael M. Hall and Marco Aurelio Garcia review the rise of movements of the working class which provides the manufacturing labor force. They provide useful information

on the main trade union organizations today, what they want and how they tie to the party system and to government.

Race and *Povo* is the title of the chapter by Sam Adams. This is a topic that will become increasingly important in Brazil as blacks become better organized and more conscious of their socioeconomic position. Also, it is blacks who are the authorities in the Afro-Brazilian religious movements. With theologies, epistemologies and values which are inconsistent with those of the elite stratum, it looks as though some day their vast numbers of adherents may run into ideational conflicts with those elite stratum. Adams writes from analyses of selected factories, unions, the navy, etc. He discusses black-white differences in jobs, nutrition, education, housing, mortality, etc. both in the past and in the present, and includes a section on crime, police surveillance, arbitrary actions of the police, etc. The whole is a litany of discrimination and suffering among the urban poor in general and among blacks and mulattos in particular.

Part IV concerns linkages between the two strata. Robert M. Levine's chapter is entitled "Elite Perceptions of the *Povo*." The poor are seen as threatening, as embarrassing, and as "childlike and docile." What seems to impress him most in the elites' combination of disdain, fear and romanticizing of the *povo* is that the latter constitute a vexing problem for the elite stratum. The *povo* constitutes the vast majority. Elites believe them to be poorly educated, undernourished, and politically untrustworthy. Clearly, Levine thinks the elites would like the problem to go away but since they do not want to help remove it, they avoid serious consideration of the condition of the masses.

I would go further. The elites know they have a near monopoly on wealth, income, prestige, power, and education. They didn't ask for it; the monopoly was there before they were born, and most were born into it. But their own positions are not secure. Brazil's lurches from crisis to crisis leave them too concerned about themselves to devote much time to solving the problems of the *povo*. Besides, the poor provide advantages to the elites: housemaids, cheap factory labor, cheap farm workers, etc. And, deep down, many are convinced that the *povo* are miserable because they lack the ability to be anything else. Finally, those of the elite stratum are pretty well off themselves. They are like the well-to-do in North America and Europe. But they are so few and the *povo* are so many. So the problem of the *povo* remains.

Joseph Dean Straubhaar writes on mass communication and the elites. Radio, newspapers and magazines have long been important to Brazilians, print media especially so among the elites. Today, television is accessible, Straubhaar writes, to at least two-thirds of the population. Indeed, he says that T.V. Globo is the fourth largest commercial television network in the world. He concentrates mostly on television and radio. In a review of the literature on the class influences in television, he holds that sponsors' needs yield presentations that do not contradict the advertising message and that the programs promote political conformity to the existing social order. Also, the military uses television to promote national identity. Besides notes on the social consequences of television, he presents an interesting review of the history of radio, noting that class-specific audiences are characteristic. His panoramic view of television's history is equally informative.

I wish he had mentioned the international projection of Brazilian television, which seems to be substantial. For example, though he discusses the *novelas*, the evening serials, a word might have been said about how compelling they are, not only to Brazilians, but also to their audiences abroad. For another point, a few years ago mass communi-

cation researchers were obtaining hard data on the structure and beliefs of media audiences in all of Latin America. It is a pity that so little such data are gathered today. This would remove the guesswork from the analysis of stratum-specific media fare and its consequences.

The last essay in part IV deals with religion. It was written by Fred Gillette Sturm. Such a kaleidoscope! Two catholicisms—popular and Jesuit; church of the rich, church of the poor; messianic movements; Umbanda, Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian movements; various and growing Protestant groups; Spiritualism. Spiritualism is a religion of elites and Pentecostalism of the masses, but Catholicism, Umbanda, even most of Protestantism tend to be active over the whole status range. Sturm's chapter makes it clear that we need direct empirical research on the belief systems of the different religious movements. Today's Brazil is a montage of beliefs which are often antithetical to each other. As communication among groups increases, these differences will surely become more obvious. They may well lead to new conflictive divisions with the society. What will happen when they collide? Will they merge? Will their adherents fight each other? Or what?

The book ends with an Epilogue, which reviews recent historical development—the demise of the military government, the writing of a new constitution, the recent debt crisis. These were actions mostly of the elites. But among the masses, a few black politicians began to emerge, and the rural poor became more proletarianized. Women's movements have come into being, reacting against violence and against the subservient position of women—though the elite-mass gulf among them continues to be great.

All in all, this is a good book. It is at its best when reviewing the history of the intellectual life of elites and in its realistic "feel" for the elites and masses of Brazil. It would have been even better if for the modern period it had used the quantitative sociological data that are available, and if it had looked more seriously at the integrative and disintegrative forces in Brazil. But the authors are not wholly to blame for this. Complex societies may be understood only through the research of many people. Serious analysis of Brazilian society has not received much encouragement. And, though the government collects dependable data on aspects of Brazilian society, those for which good data exist are few and there are too few trained social scientists to exploit the data that are available.

Books Reviewed

Severino João Albuquerque, *VIOLENT ACTS: A Study of Contemporary Latin American Theatre*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991, 297 pp.

Prof. Albuquerque's book is a valuable addition to the scholarship on Latin American theatre. Combining rigorous and tightly focused analysis with a panoramic scope, *VIOLENT ACTS* serves the needs of both specialists and general audiences. In its sweep across the American continents, the work considers a hundred plays, written in Spanish and Portuguese, by forty playwrights, over a span of three decades (1960s, 1970s, and 1980s).

Although the book focuses on one theme, violence, it is by no means reductionist. On the contrary, violence is a frame through which Albuquerque manages to portray a great diversity of drama and multiplicity of theatrical modes and techniques. While the author commands a wide array of theoretical perspectives—semiotic, psychological, historical, ideological—he never submerges his subject matter in theory, but uses the latter to illuminate the former.

The book begins with an introduction that provides fundamental definitions of violence with a particular emphasis on its socio-political applications to Latin America. The author goes on to provide an overview of the ways in which *engagé* theatre has confronted the region's problems, with specific references to important figures and groups (e.g., Colombia's Enrique Buenaventura and Brazil's Teatro de Arena). He discusses violence against plays critical of repressive governments: censorship, banning of performances, and the arrest, torture, and exile of playwrights. There is an examination of the theatrical languages that have shaped recent Latin American theatre, among them the Brechtian model, the Theatre of the Absurd, and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The introduction ends with a theoretical discussion of the relationships between dramatic text and theatrical performance and finally with perspectives on the ways violence is depicted in theatre.

Chapter one features a wide-ranging view of the nature and forms of verbal violence. Using a linguistic model as his starting point, Prof. Albuquerque provides a useful typology of violent language (e.g., abusive, violative, torturative). Here the author provides numerous examples from works by several playwrights: Jorge Andrade, Plínio Marcos, Mario Benedetti, Jorge Díaz, to mention a few. Chapter one also considers verbal violence conveyed by the side text (stage directions).

Chapter two considers nonverbal violence, and by doing so *VIOLENT ACTS* transcends most scholarship on Latin American theatre, which usually ignores or gives cursory treatment to performance-related issues. This chapter takes into account the ways violence is expressed by the myriad elements constituting stagecraft, including block-