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978-0-521-10231-5 - *Coronelismo: The Municipality and Representative Government in Brazil*

Victor Nunes Leal

Excerpt

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I. Notes on the structure and functioning of coronelismo

I. Introductory remarks

Anyone who wishes to understand the nature of political life in rural Brazil must, first of all, take into account the notorious phenomenon of *coronelismo*. It is not a simple phenomenon, involving, as it does, a number of complicated factors relating to politics at the local government level. It will be the object of this work to examine these characteristics. Given the regional peculiarities of *coronelismo* and its variations over periods of time, the present study could only have been totally satisfactory if it had been based on detailed regional analyses of a kind which we were unable to undertake. Nevertheless, the most accessible documentation, and that relating to different regions, revealed such similarities in essential aspects, that we can undertake an over-all examination with the available material.

As a preliminary observation, we must stress that we conceive of *coronelismo* as the result of the superimposition of structural forms, evolved through the representative process, on an inadequate social and economic structure. It is not, therefore, a mere survival of private power whose hypertrophy constituted the typical phenomenon of our colonial history. It is, rather, a specific manifestation of private power or, to put it another way, an adaptation whereby the residual elements of a previously extravagant private power have been able to coexist with a political regime which accepts the principle of broadly based representative government.

Because of this, *coronelismo* is above all a compromise, a trading of interests between the public authority, itself continually being strengthened, and the declining social influence of the local bosses — notably the big land-owners. It is therefore not possible to understand this phenomenon without reference to our agrarian structure, the basis on which are maintained those manifestations of private power still so much in evidence in rural Brazil.

Yet, paradoxically, these remnants of private power are sustained by the public authority. This can be explained precisely in terms of a representative regime based on a wide franchise: the government cannot proscribe the rural electorate, which nevertheless still exists in a situation of absolute dependence.

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From this fundamental compromise spring the secondary characteristics of the system of *coronelismo*, for example, authoritarianism, nepotism, rigging of ballots, the disorganisation of local public services.

With these preliminary explanations, we now go on to examine the principal features of political life in our rural municipalities.

II. Land ownership as a factor in local political leadership

The most striking aspect is that of leadership with the figure of the *coronel* occupying the most prominent position. The political bosses of our municipalities are not always real *coronéis*. The wider diffusion of higher education in Brazil created everywhere a class of doctors and lawyers whose relative distinction, combined with qualities of leadership and dedication, accustomed them to taking political charge.¹ But these same 'doctors' are either relations or kinsmen² or political allies of the *coronéis*.³

In other cases, the leader of the municipality, once he has built up, inherited or consolidated his position, becomes an absentee. He only returns to his political fief periodically, on holiday, to visit members of his family, or, more usually, for party-political reasons. Political fortune will already have raised him to the rank of state or federal deputy, to a portfolio in a ministry, a high administrative post, or even a lucrative position in the state or federal capital. Success in business or his profession can also be a reason for his absence from the municipality while retaining the political leadership of it. The lieutenants who remain on the spot themselves become the real local bosses, dependants of the higher chief who is an absentee. Absenteeism is a situation which is full of risks: when the absent boss falls out with the government, defections among his subordinates are by no means rare. At other times, it is he himself who advises this course of action when he wants to beat a tactical retreat.

Whatever or whoever this municipal leader may be, the typical example of him is the *coronel* who arbitrarily commands a considerable number of 'block votes'. [The Brazilian term is stronger and more pejorative than the English 'block votes': *votos de cabresto*, *cabresto* meaning a 'halter' – *Translator*.] Electoral strength lends him political prestige, the natural culmination of his social and economic position as a landowner. Within his own sphere of influence, the *coronel* himself unites important social institutions without replacing them. For example, he exercises considerable juridical power over his dependants, settling quarrels and disagreements, and sometimes handing down actual judgements which are respected by the interested parties. He also accumulates, officially or unofficially, numerous police functions which he often discharges simply by force of

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his social ascendancy, but which he can, ultimately, render more effective with the help of employees, household servants or hired assassins.⁴

This ascendancy results quite naturally from his position as a rural property-owner. The masses who eke out an existence on his land live in the most appalling state of poverty, ignorance and neglect.⁵ Compared with them, the *coronel* is rich. There are, certainly, many solid and prosperous landowners, but the general rule today is the landowner who is simply 'well-off', a man who has property and businesses but who does not possess ready cash; whose livestock may be in pawn and his land mortgaged; who haggles over rates and taxes, pleading for fiscal consideration; who courts the banks and other creditors in order to be able to pursue remunerative activities. Anyone who has travelled in rural areas will have observed the lack of comfort in which most of our landowners live. They tend to eat well, or at least abundantly – drinking milk and eating eggs, chicken, pork and desserts – and their houses do offer a minimum of comfort of the sort unavailable to the agricultural worker – sometimes running water, modern bathrooms, and even electric light and radios. The worker, therefore, always sees the landowner as a rich man even when he is not rich in absolute terms but only in comparison to the worker's own unmitigated poverty.⁶ Furthermore, in rural society, it is the owner of land or of livestock who has the means to secure financial backing. From this arises most of his political prestige, through 'understandings' with the banks. It is therefore to the *coronel* himself that the worker appeals in times of hardship, buying on credit in his shop in the hope of paying with the harvest, or asking for cash loans on the same terms for other necessities.

If the middle class is small in the towns of the interior, the numbers are even more restricted in the countryside where the owners of smallholdings, tenant-farmers or sharecroppers and even independent small farmers are very little above the wage-earner since many of them often work under a wage system as well. There the two terms are still generally represented by the big landowner and his dependants.⁷ Completely illiterate, or almost so, without medical help, without newspapers or magazines in which he could do no more than look at the pictures, the rural worker, except in isolated cases, sees his employer in the guise of benefactor. And it is, in fact, from his employer that the worker receives the only favours which his dreary existence knows.⁸ In such a situation it would be illusory to pretend that this new pariah has any awareness of his right to a better life or struggles for this right with the independence of a citizen. The logic of the situation is what we observe: on the political level he fights with the *coronel* and for the *coronel*. Hence the 'block' votes which, for the most part, are the result of the form of economic organisation which exists in the countryside.⁹

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For a better understanding of the political influence of the big landowners, such an important factor in the mechanism of local leadership, we must examine some aspects of the distribution of property and the composition of classes in Brazilian rural society. The census of 1940, the partial analyses of its results, elaborated by a competent system of subdivision, and the interpretations by other scholars using criteria not necessarily based on the census, provide very instructive data.

When the problem is considered in broad terms, it emerges that the concentration of property is still, at the present time, the dominant fact of rural life. The higher incidence of small and middle-sized properties in some places can be explained by several factors. In the case of São Paulo, Caio Prado Júnior set out to enumerate them in a study published more than ten years ago. The factors which he indicated (in the sequence adopted by him and which is not in order of importance) were the following: (1) Official settlement, the main purpose of which, according to a number of authoritative declarations, was to form a reserve of manpower for the landowners. (2) Private settlement, less significant than the first, but both seeking to create conditions capable of attracting immigrant groups. (3) Proximity of the large estates on whose outskirts the smaller property developed as a sort of storehouse of labour for the larger venture. (4) Disintegration of the large estate by the impoverishment of the soil, by erosion, by misfortune, by economic crisis, etc. (5) Influence of the large urban centres whose needs demand the production of types of food-crops incompatible with large-scale agriculture. In dealing with the decline of the large estates the author further noted, a little out of place perhaps, the presence of the small property in areas in which 'the management of the estate, when it came across land of inferior quality, simply bypassed it, leaving room for the establishment of small properties'.¹⁰

This work, as has been stated, refers especially to São Paulo. In a more recent work, dealing with the whole country, the same writer gives primary importance to immigration in the creation of the small estate, a fact which is borne out chiefly in the extreme South: Rio Grande, Santa Catarina and Paraná. In São Paulo, this factor played a far less important role because of competition from the large coffee plantations which absorbed most of the immigrant labour. The production of vegetables, fruit, poultry and eggs, flowers etc., to supply the larger urban and industrial centres was of great importance for the development of the smallholding not only in São Paulo but also, in a general way, although with variations, in other states. The decline of the large estates, chiefly because of economic crises and the

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predatory type of agriculture which we practise, is also a factor which is not limited to São Paulo but is generalised at least throughout the whole of the coffee-growing region: 'In its constant moving from one place to another, coffee-growing leaves behind impoverished land rendered unsuitable for large-scale cultivation; this devalued land was often taken up by the less wealthy sections of the rural population, which set themselves up as small landowners.'¹¹ This fact can be easily observed in Espírito Santo, the states of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, and especially in the Valley of Paraíba. In other regions other causes, the particular physical characteristics of the area, have also played a part.

Yet, in spite of the increase in the number of small estates in Brazil, the percentage of concentration of rural property has not fallen. This has already been observed by Professor Jorge Kingston in his analysis of the agricultural and zootechnical census of the state of São Paulo in 1934, where, 'rather than a more rational distribution of land holdings . . . a worsening of agrarian concentration' could be observed.¹² The reasons for this contradiction must lie in the greater fragmentation of middle-sized properties;¹³ in the re-establishment of large estates¹⁴ compensating for those which are broken up; or again, in the survival of large estates, even in conditions of decline, by the substitution of cattle-rearing,¹⁵ for example, for cultivation. The easy accessibility of fertile, virgin lands, especially in the case of coffee, was the basic reason for the formation of large estates which could show a high level of productivity albeit under a system of extensive and predatory exploitation. This process, however, is approaching its final stages, at least in São Paulo, where the phenomenon assumed enormous proportions. The cultivation of coffee, starting in the river basin, has now spread across and despoiled a large part of the states of Rio and Minas Gerais. New factors may emerge favourable to the re-establishment of large estates (as happened in the case of cotton) or which prevent existing latifundia from disintegrating (as possibly the development of cattle-rearing, or the introduction of some large-scale operation of a typically capitalist type, using advanced technology). But, in the absence of these new factors, conditions are becoming more and more unfavourable to the survival of latifundia, as is evidenced by the present precarious state of the major agricultural industries of the country: sugarcane, coffee and cotton.¹⁶

In spite of these perspectives, the dominance of the large estate is still obvious at the present time, as was proved by the agricultural census of 1940, whose data were interpreted by Professor Costa Pinto in a recent work.¹⁷ Classifying rural properties by area, he obtained results which we have summarised as follows:¹⁸

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Table 1

Area	% of the total number	% of the total area
Super estates and latifundia (1000 hectares and more)	1.46	48.31
Large estates (200–1000 hectares, exclusive)	6.34	24.79
Middle-sized estates (50–200 hectares, exclusive)	17.21	15.90
Small estates (5–50 hectares, exclusive)	53.07	10.45
Micro-properties (less than 5 hectares)	21.76	0.55

Not every rural landowner has a single property only, but even if we ignore this for the moment, it is evident that the small landowners (up to 50 hectares), who represent about three-quarters of all landowners (74.83%), possess only 11% of the total area of agricultural establishments in the country. Of the remaining area (89%), only a small part (15.90%) belongs to owners in the middle category, leaving not less than 73.10% of the total area to the big landowners (200 hectares and more), who represent only 7.80% of the total number of owners. Together the big and middle-sized properties belong to just over a quarter of the landowning population, but this property covers almost nine-tenths of the total area of agricultural establishments.¹⁹

The situation of the small landowner is characteristically a difficult one in our country, especially when in contact with a large and expanding property. This precariousness is aggravated by the low productivity of the soil in those cases where the division of the land was caused by the decline of a large estate. There are also difficulties of running costs. All these problems weigh much more heavily on the very small holdings – those of less than 5 hectares – which in 1940 constituted 21.76% of the total number of agricultural establishments. The prosperous smallholding is an exception, save in those regions in which it is not subject to competition from the large estate and where it does not owe its very existence to the ruin of the latter.

This is the picture presented by the sector of rural landowners, a derisive minority of the population. It is a picture which reflects the immense poverty of the people who live in rural society, given that the number of those owners possessing more than 200 hectares was, according to the 1940

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census, no more than 148,622, this figure being based on the assumption of one owner to each property. As owners in the middle category – following the same criterion – totalled 327,713, we have the situation where, out of a rural population of 28,353,866,²⁰ only 476,335 are owners of agricultural establishments capable of remunerative production. It will be clear that such figures do not represent the exact state of our agrarian economy, since there are also prosperous smallholdings and ruinous latifundia; they are, however, sufficiently indicative to give us a very clear idea of the mean existence which is the lot of millions of people who live in Brazil's rural areas.²¹

IV. Some aspects of class composition in rural society

The situation we have just described becomes clearer when we look at the principal aspects of class composition in rural society. Here again, we shall follow Professor Costa Pinto's elaboration set out in the work referred to above, although this entails modifying his results and sometimes doubling his figures.

The agricultural census of 1940 provided him with the following breakdown of the active population, grouped according to the position occupied by the various categories whose members work chiefly in cultivation, cattle-rearing and forestry:²²

Table 2

Categories	Number (men and women)	%
Employers	252,047	2.67
Employees	3,164,203	33.47
Self-employed	3,309,701	35.01
Members of family	2,665,509	28.19
Position unknown	62,052	0.66
Total	9,453,512	100.00

Calling table 2 a 'census pyramid' of rural society, the author attempted to regroup the data following criteria that would make for a better understanding of the class position of the various groups in order to set up what he called a 'social pyramid' of Brazilian rural society. Two of the groups indicated above, 'employers' and 'employees', are self-explanatory, and the fifth – 'position unknown' – can be ignored because it comprises only 0.66% of the total number. The difficulty lies therefore in the interpret-

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ation of the two categories which the census labelled 'self-employed' and 'members of family'. The definitions adopted by the census administrators themselves provide valid interpretations.

The category of self-employed, represented by 'those who work for themselves either alone or with the help, not directly paid for, of members of their own family', includes, apart from the owners of small tracts of land, those 'tenants' or 'leaseholders' who work on a sharecropping basis. Everything leads us to believe that the sub-category of sharecroppers is much larger than that of smallholders and Costa Pinto sought to demonstrate this numerically. Admitting, as a rule, that the smallholder has only one property and considering that for 3,309,701 'self-employed' there were only, in 1940, 1,425,291 properties of less than 50 hectares, he concluded that there were 1,425,291 'self-employed'/owners, as against 1,884,410 'self-employed'/non-owners; or 43.07% for the first and 56.93% for the second.²³

As for the other category not easily interpreted – 'members of family' – the census defines them as follows: those 'who work for the benefit of another without receiving a fixed wage, or by the job', and it goes on to explain that the 'great majority' are members of the families and helpers of the 'self-employed'.²⁴

If we take all the members of this category as being associated with the group of 'self-employed'²⁵ we can divide it, too, in roughly the same proportions, into the two sub-categories of 'self-employed'/owners and 'self-employed'/non-owners. Thus the 2,665,509 labelled 'members of family' will add 1,517,474 of their number to the sub-category, 'self-employed'/non-owners (which then rises to a total of 3,401,884), and 1,148,035 to the 'self-employed'/owners (which then rises to a total of 2,573,326).

If, however, we do not take the 'members of family' as being exclusively tied to the category of 'self-employed',²⁶ this calculation becomes more faulty, but in either case it is still very significant because the greater margin of error is unfavourable to the conclusions which we must draw. We might adopt the following criteria:

In the first place, let us admit that the 'members of family' of the group 'position unknown' and of the group 'employers' collaborate with them, in agricultural activities, in the same proportion as the 'members of family' of the 'self-employed'. There we have the first margin of error, unfavourable to our conclusions, because it is clear that in the class of the 'employers' the number of members of the family who work with them is proportionately smaller.

In the second place, one observes a perceptible difference between the

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number of 'employers' (252,047) and the number of large and middle-sized estates (476,335). This can be explained, quite naturally, by the existence of middle-sized owners who do not employ salaried workers, or by the existence of large landowners who own more than one property, or, as is probably the case, by both reasons at the same time. Nevertheless, we shall take this difference (224,288) as representing only the middle-sized landowner who does not employ paid labour and, for this reason, should be included in the category of the 'self-employed'. Here we have a second margin of error unfavourable to our conclusions, because we are not taking into account those cases in which more than one large property belongs to a single person. And everything indicates that such cases are more numerous than those of middle-sized owners who do not use 'employees'.

When the calculations are based on the premise we have described, the category 'members of family' has a pattern of distribution as follows: for the 'employers', 185,519; for the 'self-employed'/middle-sized owners, 164,995; for the 'self-employed'/small landowners, 1,048,345; for 'self-employed'/non-owners, 1,221,070; for those of 'unknown position', 45,580. The category of 'employees' is excluded from this distribution, since they, by definition, are counted *per caput*.

Putting together the data obtained and basing our calculations on two different premises, we arrive at the results shown in Schemes 'A' and 'B'.

The two schemes represent a doubling of the figures given by Professor Costa Pinto and based on the official census. We have subdivided the census categories of 'self-employed' and 'members of family' according to the criteria already described, and have arrived, in the hypothetical situation most unfavourable to our conclusions, at the following result: at the time of the census, 63.95% of the working population employed in agriculture, cattle-rearing and forestry, belonged to the categories of employees and sharecroppers (non-owners); if we add to these the smallholders (up to 50 hectares) whose position in many places is most precarious, the proportion rises to 90.12%.

In spite of the obvious deficiencies of the approximate criteria which we have adopted, it will not be difficult in the face of such significant data, which moreover refer to the working population only, to appreciate the dependent status of the people who work in the countryside, especially as there is so little difference between the misery of the rural wage-earner and that of the sharecropper or smallholder. There is, consequently, no obvious way of alienating the 'block' votes.

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Division of the 'members of family' only among the 'self-employed', taking as belonging to this category small landowners (up to 50 hectares) and non-owners (shareholders):

Category	No.	Members of family	%	Total	%
I Employers	252,047	—	—	252,047	2.67
II Self-employed					
a) Smallholders	1,425,291	1,148,035	43.07	2,573,326	27.22
b) Non-owners	1,884,410	1,517,474	56.93	3,401,884	35.98
III Employees	3,164,203	—	—	3,164,203	33.47
IV Of unknown position	62,052	—	—	62,052	0.66
TOTAL	6,788,003	2,665,509	100.00	9,453,512	100.00