The Powerful in the Outback of the Brazilian Northeast

by
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A large landowner, feared and respected for his achievements and wealth, a rural political boss and head of a large extended family who shares his authority with no one, an example of the complete overlapping of public and private interests, a model of traditional domination, a symbol of paternalism in a backward society, a deliverer of votes and other political services to the bourgeoisie, a mediator between state and society—all these are customary descriptions of the rural *coronel*, regarded as the key personality in Brazilian politics under the Old Republic. Opinion nowadays concedes that *coronelismo* is disappearing as the state is consolidated, the economy is modernized, and new elites are formed. In this article I shall argue that coronelismo was not a system of historically determined political dominance and that landownership was not its foundation. My field of study is the semiarid interior (*sertão*) of the Brazilian Northeast, a vast expanse given over to the large-scale raising of beef cattle ever since colonial times.

COLONELS AND CORONELISMO

The title of "colonel" has been widely used by Brazilians to address and describe important people. This practice did not originate, as is frequently alleged, with the establishment in 1831 of the National Guard but may be traced back well before this to the situation when Brazil was still a colony and members of the gentry sought military commissions in recognition of the service they would render in time of war. Acquiring these commissions required them to exhibit personal power and considerable wealth. Granted the honor

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of what was regarded at the time as a quite high rank, they received no salary, did not have to undergo any training, and were not subject to the hierarchy of a modern military organization but enjoyed a certain legal right to command, along with other privileges. At the end of the colonial period, everyone who held a commission in the militia regiments of the Recôncavo region of Bahia was the owner of a sugar plantation (Schwartz, 1988: 233). The introduction of the National Guard only served to prolong the use of the title "colonel" to describe someone powerful. Under the Republic the term has remained a prestigious title, bestowed informally.

Coronelismo is a term established in the jargon of reform in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1930. The thesis of the jurist Victor Nunes Leal in his *Coronelismo, enxada e voto*, published in 1949, bestowed on it the meaning of a definite political phenomenon: "The feature immediately observed by anyone seeking to understand the political life of the Brazilian outback is that of its wretched '*coronelismo*' " (1976: 19). Besides its geographical location in the outback, the phenomenon involves such unwholesome practices as despotism, nepotism, electoral fraud, and neglect of local public services (20). Since Leal's use of it, the term has become established in political debate and in the literature. Researchers used to take care to enclose it in quotation marks, but these have now been abandoned, as if it had come to designate something definite and precise.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, "colonel" itself became pejorative, implying an unyielding and outdated despotism. The comedian Chico Anísio has turned the colonel into a pitiful caricature: in retirement, wearing pajamas and a pair of broken glasses, sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of a modest house, listlessly scratching his foot and telling tall stories. His authority is now exercised only over his wife, forced to vouch for the truth of whatever he says.

The literature has attributed serious responsibilities to the colonels. They are supposed to have preserved a monopoly of landownership and hindered the transition to a modern society, encouraging personal dependency and making it difficult for their farm laborers to develop into responsible citizens. They are considered to have been obstacles to the establishment of a centralized democratic state in that, favoring their clients, they were unconcerned with the public interest and kept alive the eternal dispute over the respective powers of the county, the state, and the federal union. (The problem of distinguishing public administration from the exercise of political power causes the different administrative levels to be treated, usually, as instances of power—local, regional, or national.)

The term *coronelismo* has been employed indiscriminately to designate forms of power involving administrative competencies, geo-economic space,

and a variety of social relationships. In southern Brazil the preferred term is the Spanish-derived *caudilhismo*. The word "colonel" (derived from Roman military tradition and meaning the commander of a column) designates, in the modern Western world, a military rank. In the Spanish-speaking Americas, the caudillo has been seen as someone with emotional power over ordinary people, an ascendancy based more on personal qualities than on wealth.

Under the Republic coronelismo was widespread. The Bahian physician Floro Bartolomeu, who as a federal congressman from Ceará led armed bands to overthrow that state's governor, was a "colonel," as were the educated modernizing industrialist Delmiro Couveia, who became a martyr of the resistance to the invasion of foreign capital, and Horácio de Matos, the guerrilla leader in the Diamantina highlands who showed more competence in fighting the Prestes Column[1] than did the generals of the Brazilian army and treated the state governor of Bahia as his equal. The naturalized Lebanese Zacharias Nicolau, who made his fortune trading coffee in upstate São Paulo, was yet another, along with Misael da Silva Tavares, who started as a mule teamster in Sergipe and moved to Ilheus, where he became the biggest grower of cacao in the country, the professor Antônio Gomes de Arruda Barreto, a sensitive intellectual who gained power through dedication to his prestigious Colégio Sete de Setembro, and Pedro de Almeida Freitas, the unlettered trader from Piauí who for over half a century lorded it over judges, congressmen, tax inspectors, and schoolteachers and made and unmade governors, senators, and members of Congress. Janotti (1987: 73) has included the name of a holy man in the role, Father Cícero of Juazeiro,[2] one of the most phenomenal examples of charismatic influence in the history of Brazil. The fact is that men who were called "colonels" could have very different social origins, economic interests, amounts of property, educational background, ways of operating, and leadership qualities.

There were colonels who were landowners, large or small, and others who were modern businessmen, merchants, or bankers. They could be quite unlettered or known for their education or intellect. Some belonged to great families with roots going way back, and some were parvenus. Some derived their status from the number of armed retainers they had at their bidding, some from their moral authority, and some from the way they could make themselves useful, whether through their economic resources or from their position in government, and anyone might combine all these qualities or possess some of them in varying proportions. A colonel might control part of a county (*município*) or all of it or several neighboring counties or even an entire state. He might dominate his fellow colonels, form alliances with them, obey them, or act as their spiritual leader. When up against it, he might call on the state to intervene, and equally, insofar as it was possible or

convenient, he might completely ignore orders from those above him. In the words of Machiavelli, he might impose his will by his *virtù* (strength of personality) and his own resources or by his *virtù* and the weapons of others. A "colonel," in sum, was anyone regarded, for a variety of reasons, as worthy of respect.

Leal (1976: 19–20) recognized how many varieties of colonels there were but judged the main consideration to be what they had in common. His concept of coronelismo remains widely accepted. He attributed it to the superimposition of the developed forms of representative democracy upon a social and economic structure unsuited to it. The type of coronelismo seen as characterizing the First Republic (1889–1930) made it central to a network of compromises among the holders of power, a mutual recognition of interests between the local power (the county administration), represented by the colonel (the local big landowner), and the state government. The chief role of the colonel in this view was that of ensuring voter turnout to legitimize the state governor.

This dualist approach reflects badly on the rule of law in Brazil. Features of liberal democracy and in particular the electoral system are regarded, a priori, as characteristics of the developed world inconsistent with the social and economic structure of Brazil's rural hinterland. This dualism seeks to separate the archaic from the modern, ignoring how the two parts of Brazil are connected across geographical diversity and in the division of labor, as if one existed without the other (Oliveira, 1997). Leal saw a population bereft of any political influence, with conflict and negotiation occurring only among the powerful themselves or between them and the public authorities. Conflicts, alliances, and compromises are the elements of politics at any time or place. What was so evil about the compromises inherent in coronelismo was the way in which the general population accepted the situation because of the poverty and ignorance that resulted from their lack of education. Whenever ordinary people showed their dissatisfaction they were regarded as outlaws incapable of rational behavior. The variety and ingenuity of the ways in which ordinary people resisted the powers-that-be were stigmatized by Leal just as they were by Euclides da Cunha (1989).

Leal's legalistic approach is apparent in his exaggeration of the effects on society of institutional change; because the Republic had changed the rules of political representation, it had, in his view, actually created the phenomenon of coronelismo. Underlying this approach was his regret that the law had been unable to improve society. The way the colonels behaved had thwarted the lofty aims of the law. The provision for popular representation would have been adequate for a developed society, but it was incompatible with the *backwardness* of the Brazilian countryside.

LAND AND POWER

The link between landownership and the exercise of power originated in antiquity, continued during the rise of the bourgeoisie, and persisted as the explanation of the political process in modern Brazil. There is a close connection between owning land (or the right to cultivate it) and the possession of power. John Locke maintained that the first bestowed a right to the second. According to classical liberal theory, the state, creator of society, should be immune in its workings to the pressures and counterpressures of individual interests. Being the sum of all individual wills, the state should be averse to arbitrary power based on the happenstance of the moment and impartial in determining and applying the law. This attitude is what, strictly speaking, underlies judicial bias and economicist interpretations establishing simplistic associations between the ownership of wealth and the exercise of power.

The Marxist Caio Prado Júnior (1985: 23), referring to colonial Brazil, declared: "The land is given over to large-scale exploitation; the rural landlord has a monopoly of wealth and its natural attributes: prestige and power." The result of this monopoly is that the authorities at the county level represented the power of the local landowners. Limits to the supremacy of the power of the county and to local autonomy persisted throughout the eighteenth century, but as an independent Brazil came into existence the great landowners acquired a dominance that no one could challenge (1985: 29). Alberto P. Guimarães, along with many others, came to the conclusion that "monopoly of landownership in the precapitalist conditions of our agriculture ensures that the great landowners have a power greater than the merely economic, a type of power that often exceeds and survives it—extraeconomic power" (1997: 35).

A mechanical connection between wealth and power was stressed by Faoro (1979). Given that the Portuguese political system, of which Brazil inherited the essentials, was characterized by a concentration of all rights to land in the hands of the crown, the resulting "patrimonialist" state was necessarily bureaucratic and authoritarian. This made it an obstacle to economic modernization and the emergence of a civil society. The country's development was determined by the dictates of a bureaucratic machine that foresaw everything and controlled and shaped it in a routine that was predictable, tiresome, and exasperating (164–165):

> The state was imposed upon society, as something alien, distant, and foreign, always ready to cut off any member that resisted its dominion. There was no contact, no life-giving wave flowing between government and its people. Order meant passive obedience or silence. It is therefore no surprise that, two

> centuries later, such liberties as are granted to the people exist only to amuse the educated, the expression of dreams that have come across the seas from other worlds.

Under the "politics of the governors"[3] instituted during the presidency of Campos Sales (1898–1902), the state governors controlled Congress and the judiciary and held the president hostage, making public authority the supreme guardian of society, which was henceforth organized into principalities and dukedoms (the states) very much in the old colonial mold (631). Coronelismo was a new phenomenon only in its outward appearance: it was simply power at the local level, which the 1891 Constitution, by strengthening states' rights, had now freed from the shackles of the central authority of the empire and from any economic dependency on it. As did Leal, Faoro attributed the power of the colonel to his ability to get out the vote in favor of the holders of power, among whom the state governors were now preeminent. More than just a mediator between state and society, the colonel was often the representative of the all-powerful establishment. His economic position allowed him to dominate a dispossessed, inert, atomized society that had no way to express itself politically (620–625). Schwartzman (1988: 14) accepted Faoro's position but made it more flexible, proposing the term "neo-patrimonialism" (a Weberian invention) for a form of political domination created in the process of transition toward a modern society burdened with a heavy administrative bureaucracy and a weak "civil society" divided by social class, religion, ethnicity, language, rank, etc., into almost wholly disconnected groupings.

The literature on coronelismo, although voluminous, lacks empirical elements, comparative exercises, or the support of rational theory. The phenomenon has not been conceived in such a way as to satisfy the rich variety of models of dominion in rural Brazil, its changes over time, or its position in the configuration of the state.

I am unaware of any typological study of the Brazilian "colonel." Cid Teixeira undertook a brief essay in this direction (1988), but he limited his field of observation to Bahia. Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz (1975) put forward some stimulating ideas on what she considered to be the structure of coronelismo—how those in power were able to exercise it—but her ideas of the variety of ways the colonels behaved are taken from elsewhere, essentially from Jean Blondel's research on political life in Paraíba.[4] One significant contribution to the debate is that of Ibaré Dantas (1987), who showed the need for a periodization of the phenomenon and considered the importance of the colonel's electoral function to vary over time and from place to place. Emphasizing the history of Sergipe and the results of studies of upcountry

violence such as those by Amaury de Souza (1973) and Eul-Soo Pang (1979), Ibaré stressed the coercive power of the colonels over society.

Décio Saes (1994: 87), drawing his inspiration from Poulantzas,[5] has suggested a reinterpretation of coronelismo defining it narrowly as a set of political and electoral practices that makes a particular contribution to the dual function of the bourgeois state: preventing the working class from organizing while unifying the dominant class under the hegemonic leadership of one of its factions. Saes explains that his concern is not primarily a particular, national form of coronelismo but the manifestation of the phenomenon in the rural areas of present-day bourgeois states such as France, Germany, and Italy (88–89). However, his work concentrates on the electoral influence of the great landowners in Brazil, where a precapitalist situation has allowed them to perpetuate relationships of domination and personal dependence.

THE LAW AMONG PEOPLE PERPETUALLY AT WAR

If the colonel is defined as a large landowner, then we should at least expect the concept of coronelismo to be based on the relationship between landed property and the exercise of power in the rural scene. Agricultural societies develop a sociopolitical order closely tied to access to the use of land. In Europe, when landownership was turned into capital as private property, an immense army of the dispossessed was set free, fostering primitive accumulation and the emergence of the world of trade. Landownership, the object of bloody conflicts and hard-fought political disputes, became fully adjusted to capitalist development and the construction of the bourgeois state. Without law and the instruments to apply it, land could not have become something to be bought and sold. There could have been no full ownership of it, only possession, occupation, feudal fiefdom, dominion, overlordship, fee tail, or tenancy at will.

Applying the experiences of Europe during the Middle Ages or in the transition to capitalism to the Brazilian outback is problematic. The fixed idea that the law defines and upholds large-scale property in land fails to take into account the background to such legislation, its applicability, and the dynamic of the chronic state of warfare characterizing the society of cattle raisers who occupied the sertão. The notion of property in land was alien to the Portuguese law on unoccupied land, which allowed the wilderness to be occupied but conceded no right of purchase or sale. Anyone who failed to cultivate such a land grant or handed it over to a third party or parties was to have his right of occupation and cultivation suspended, but this law was totally ignored. Sobrinho, a pioneer in the study of the history of land in the

Northeast, believed that the landholdings illegally occupied by the powerful were far more extensive than what they had been legally granted and that the proportion of such virgin land transferred to its actual cultivators was insignificant. The state gave occupancy rights to people who had no intention of cultivating the land but simply wanted the income from renting it out. The law made no provision for payment of rent, but rent was in fact exacted by the great landowners' armed retainers. In the outback of the Northeast during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when free-range cattle rearing was experiencing expansion and dominance, the idea of landownership was inapplicable.

Driving the frontier of settlement deeper into the outback was originally in the interest of the sugar industry, which needed Indian slaves, protection against the wild Indians, live oxen (for traction), and cheap beef and leather. The growth of cattle ranching on the open range was linear and rapid, and this required that the Indian tribes be exterminated. Fencing off the range was seen as an act of war—the usual reaction in societies of herders, who are always involved in fighting for space for their herds. The literature has idealized the capacity of the state in its old Portuguese homeland to impose its will. It certainly could not do this or limit conflict in the vast, remote, and largely unknown world of the ranchers, plagued with bloody struggles among the aboriginal Indians, the actual occupiers of the land, and those to whom the *sesmarias*[6] had been granted.

This state of chronic warfare was perpetuated even after the fenced-off areas had become ranches and the cattle barons had turned themselves, with or without the blessing of the law, into ranch owners. Dependent on natural pasture and suffering from the rapid deterioration of the soil, cattle raising increased linearly, leading to the rapid occupation of an immense territory. In the first decades of the eighteenth century the territory between the southern borders of the Diamantina highlands and the valley of the Parnaiba River was parceled out into ranches, regardless of the law. To expand the territory given over to cattle raising it was essential to make each holding viable, and the ranchers were continually engaged in bloody fights to extend and secure their domains. In such a situation, talking of landownership is a legal anachronism: the land naturally belonged to anyone who showed talent in commanding armed force.

Under the empire, the repressive arm of the state made itself apparent in the outback, particularly through the Land Law of 1850, which created full property rights in land, making the old open-range ranching no longer viable. Given worn-out soil, reduced grazing areas, and declining productivity, the needs of a growing population encouraged the introduction of farming and vegetable growing. Division of property at death among the heirs, as foreseen

by the new land law, was one more complicating factor in the inheritance of units of production. The ranch owners got rid of their slaves, diversified their activities, adopted a variety of ways to get rent from their lands, and went into internal trade. The number of tenants, sharecroppers, smallholders, tradesmen, and laborers increased under a great variety of contracts. Society, ever more dependent on agricultural crops, began to run the risk of disasters such as the great drought of 1877–1879. Serious fighting was no longer merely a matter of wars between ranchers but involved more and more people of various conditions as the population grew. Nor were they any longer moved exclusively by questions of bravery, loyalty, or honor, exacerbated by continual conflict: rather, they were increasingly affected by motives and ways of thought that educated townsfolk found difficult to understand. This was the era of the bandits Antônio Silvino and Lampião and charismatic religious leaders such as the Conselheiro[7] and Father Cícero.

Cattle ranching was now entering its republican phase of slow but irreversible disintegration. The strength of the powerful in the hinterland continued to be linked with the exercise of private violence, but now it had to take into consideration more complex social demands. The state, under the domination of the exporters of agricultural products, no longer concerned itself with the problems of the outback but began imposing on it laws and proceedings (taxes, civil registration of births, deaths, and marriages, church disestablishment, the metric system, compulsory vaccination) for which there was no evident need. The family or group of powerful rural leaders had to perform a multiplicity of functions, public and individual. To exercise power, owning a business and being connected with government was becoming more important than owning land. The rancher with no head for business was facing ruin.

What is normally thought of as *bestowing favors* is looked upon in the outback, by both the powerful and those they control, as the *fulfillment of obligations*. Social dominion and leadership have come to require new qualities and new knowledge, charisma, and a firm moral ascendancy over a variety of contingencies. These things must be taken into consideration if we are to understand how some colonels (but not others) managed to retain their power, dominating wide areas and influencing whole communities. The power of a so-called colonel to determine elections derived, above all, from his success in earning respect as a bold, assertive character, imposing his will, by force if need be, and never hesitating, when necessary and possible, to confront the state, an entity whose status was even less well-defined than his own.

The literature—even those contributions to it that attach importance to displays of imagination, symbols, speeches, and the perception of being different—ensures that coronelismo will continue to be understood in terms of

law and economics, with large-scale landownership still seen as the basis of the dominant position of the colonels and with the working population treated as excluded from the political process (Barreira, 1992). Terms become fashionable in the social sciences without their meanings' ever being clearly defined. It is difficult to find an intellectual, a politician, a priest, or an artist who fails nowadays to use the terms "exclusion" and "excluded." One has to ask, "Excluded from what?" From the rights promised them by the law? From the chance to demonstrate and to have political representation? From the attentions of power? From the category of clients? From the world of labor and of the market? The term "excluded" lacks precision and is used nowadays to designate those who used to be called, according to one's taste, "poor," "exploited," "impoverished," "pauperized," "oppressed," "subjected," "dominated," "marginalized," or "outsiders." This imprecision is not lessened when the term is used to suggest the occurrence of a new phenomenon, as is the case with Jaguaribe (1986), whose work is responsible for its widespread use in Brazil. Jaguaribe is referring to the enlargement of the contingent of poor people without further consideration of the ethnic, social, cultural, economic, political, and religious differences objectively associated with poverty. In the same way, Oliveira's (1997: 49) reflections on exclusion depend on an idealization of the bourgeois state, which is assumed to be capable of including all of society within its vast and chimerical list of rights. The intensive use of the term dates from the time when the word "citizenship"—a word that has an equal variety of meanings—became popular. The "rights of citizenship" denote a list of wishes and demands that never stops growing. Citizenship, that is, political inclusion, is no longer limited to the protection of the law, equal treatment, physical integrity, and free expression of opinion. It has come to include the right to decent living conditions, respect for the individual, a healthy environment, and so on—all rights open to subjective interpretation.

It serves little purpose to use "exclusion" to cover just about everyone discriminated against by the status quo. In academic analyses, it may be helpful to point out in a vague way that some people are only limited participants in stable democracies. However, its employment in the study of power relationships in the Brazilian outback in any of their historical contexts confuses more than it clarifies. It would imply the summary denial of the existence of radicalized conflicts. Fighting men with weapons in their hands are naturally classified as political opponents. Those in power normally look upon them as outlaws even while they are making a claim for their own legitimacy. But armed struggle, by its very nature, repudiates the idea of authority. Rivals preparing for war and, above all, actually involved in it suspend, reinterpret, or ignore any legal decisions, traditions, or moral principles that are not

conducive to winning the war. Faced with killing or being killed, they form their own ideas of crime and law to suit their own interests, heedless of norms set up by other people (Domingos, 1997). Djacir Menezes (1970), in his study of the inhabitants of the outback, concluded that a man who had neither land nor slaves nor hired killers nor fortune nor prestige considered himself practically outside the law. He was not thinking of the bloody conflicts in the outback as breaches of the routine of a harmonious society but deprecating the way in which clients in the outback would be protected by men who could bend state authority to their will.

Despite the wish to rewrite old interpretations, it is not hard to understand how the label of "politically excluded" has been given to the working class in the Northeast as a new guise for old prejudices about the wars in the outback. Euclides da Cunha stigmatized the courageous fighters of Canudos as incapable of becoming civilized: they might be brave, even heroic, as fighting men, but they were not rational creatures. A century later, Hobsbawm classified the conflicts between the bandits of the Northeast, people of a cattle-ranching world in advanced decay, as "pre-political." His formulation was repudiated for reducing the notions of civilization and politics and idealizing the values that the bourgeois state sought to sanctify, but the use of the expression "the politically excluded" shows just how much life still remains in it.

In their political relationships, people show conflicting interests. These change over time, are given new labels, and are stimulated by different interpretations, feelings, and impulses. And if this is where the whole complex process of gaining and retaining power has its roots, then in order to understand how politics operate in a precapitalist world we have to go beyond a simple consideration of wealth derived from the ownership of land.

THE COLONELS AND THE MODERN WORLD

Those who believe that power in the outback is based on large-scale landownership that perpetuates archaic labor relationships invariably conclude that the resultant political situation will disappear with the modernization of the economy and the assertion of state power. In this sense, José de Sousa Martins (1994: 13) puts forward ideas that both the liberal Faoro and the Marxist Celso Prado could have agreed with:

> Ownership of land is the historic center of a long-enduring political system. In association with modern capital it has given renewed strength to this political system that has been an obstacle both to the constitution of a truly civil society and to the exercise of citizenship by the people who live under it. Civil society

> has only a tenuous existence because it is, in so many ways, dominated by the state and made into an instrument of that state: a state, moreover, based on extremely primitive political relationships, such as those of patrons and clients and the traditional control of everything by the oligarchy. In Brazil, society's backwardness serves as a source of power.

For Martins, modernization has worked to strengthen this backwardness. What these interpretations have in common is that they reduce the responsibility of the dominant political sectors for the condition of the poverty-stricken parts of Brazil. Large-scale cattle raising is incompatible with a respect for the law, access to land by ordinary people, or the development of farming. Could a country controlled by export-oriented agribusiness be expected to encourage economic alternatives to the world of the cattle farmers?

Obviously, the rural oligarchy of the Northeast would not favor the reduction of its own capacity to act as arbiter, but this is not enough to make it hostile to the dominance of those sectors that are regarded as the modernizers of the state. As Schwartzman (1988: 38) has observed, a political system that has long regarded itself as *traditional* is, in the context of Brazil, not rural but urban and "modern" and practiced by an elite with sufficient refinement and capability to control a complex state apparatus. The makeup of any centrally directed state depends on an intimate relationship between the central authority and power at the local level. Indeed, such centralization derives from the hegemony of interests that originally secured their power in geographically limited areas.

The colonel Pedro Freitas, whose control of Piauí lasted longer than the power of any other local oligarch of the twentieth century, was a decisive supporter of modernization because it was in his interest, and this was one of the reasons he retained his power for so long. His family was prominent in both domestic and foreign trade and was at the forefront of modernizing initiatives. There was nothing contrary to his interests in the growth of the regional consumer market that resulted from a diversification of production. Several decades of institutional changes did little or nothing to reduce his power and influence, not even during the military dictatorship of 1964–1985. Pedro Freitas was not a colonel just because of his landholdings, his tenants, or the tenants of his fellow landowning friends; his influence came from his ability to form alliances with the rich and powerful, to develop a vast network of interests that government action would affect, and to approach an electorate whose composition had permanently changed in a new way. His influence cannot be simplistically attributed to his power as a great landowner. Case studies show that traditional domination in the Northeast was exercised by modern entrepreneurs (Chilcote, 1990; Lemenhe, 1995).

The freedom with which the term coronelismo is used also applies to terms such as "clientelism" and "clientele." The Latin word *cliens* in Roman law denotes someone protected, looked after, by a social superior, the *patronus*. In ancient Rome the client owned no land. He belonged to his tribe (*gens*) as a family servant, not through any ties of blood but because he obeyed the head of the household (*pater*). The clientele was the group of clients dependent on the same patrician. Among the Gauls and the Germans the meaning was broadened to include vassals, allies, and worshippers of the same god. In English, "client" is employed even today to mean a customer, dependent, or constituent. Juridical practice, that worthy preserver of bygone attitudes, has retained part of the word's original meaning: it is customary for the defendant's lawyer to be referred to as the "patron" and the accused, whether rich or poor, powerful or humble, as his "client." The term is also widely used to mean users of services they pay for such as those of physicians, barbers, or business people. In France *clientèle* is even used to denote the admirers of an artist or the followers of a political leader, without any implication of subservience.

Here in Brazil the literature employs the term to indicate the group of poor and protected people who establish a relationship of subordination with the rich, powerful, and influential—a relationship that involves the manipulation of government employment and government decisions to benefit individuals. Those receiving such benefits reciprocate in the way they vote. Clientelism is a form of corruption that turns "universal" access to public goods (which should in principle be available to everyone) into something restricted to the favored few. This sort of clientelism is, however, narrowly defined: it does not include reciprocal favoritism among the rich and powerful themselves.

Martins (1994: 29) seeks to change this definition. He would prefer to use it for any exchange of political favors for economic benefits, regardless of scale; he would include relationships between the wealthy and the powerful and not mainly those between the rich and the poor. He persists, however, in restricting the concept to the trading of economic benefits for political favors. It would be more appropriate to define "clientelism" as a relationship covering the exchange of favors, regardless of their nature or scale, whenever power exercised in the name of the public is diverted in any way toward the interest of an individual. The patron-client relationship would then cover any type of situation in which the public interest was overruled by private concerns to the benefit of those holding power or claiming it, with repercussions on actions by the state. Such a broadened definition might well upset academe, but it could be quite fruitful in studying elections. In the spectacular success of the young physician José da Rocha Furtado in his race for the governorship of Piauí, in which he defeated the powerful family of the colonel

Pedro Freitas after the fall of Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship in 1945, those on the losing side were condemned as "clientelists." But, among the grouping of forces ranged in support of Rocha Furtado, the preponderant elements were those whose way of controlling the vote was no different from that of the Freitas people.

A recent case in which an electorate in the Brazilian Northeast was galvanized to oppose coronelismo was that of the political group that won in Ceará in 1986. Proclaiming themselves the paladins of modernity, this group characterized the other side as "backwoods colonels." Part of the left adopted a similar line, with its strong appeal for the electorate. The intelligentsia, considering clientelism a negative survival of traditional habits, saw the diatribes against the colonels and certain administrative initiatives as evidence or signs of a break with the old order of things. Celeste Cordeiro and Irlys Barreira (1992–1993: 22) speak of a "New Order": "Fortaleza in 1985 has opened up the electoral process again. A bastion of the old politics of the colonels was being challenged by the arrival of new personalities, topics, and utopian movements and projects unconnected with the old order." Linda Gondim (1998: 70) concludes that "the management model being introduced by Tasso Jereissati and Ciro Gomes has constituted in fact an irreversible step in overcoming patrimonialist clientelism and therefore in creating the necessary conditions for the citizen to be able to exercise his rights." Actually, the defeated party in Ceará had, while it was in office, begun planning public policies that embraced the modernizing recipe: improving the infrastructure, diversifying economic activities, improving productivity, training the workforce, attracting new enterprises. The colonels Virgílio Távora, Adauto Bezerra, and César Cals acted in fact like army officers undertaking the conversion of Brazil into a great power—which was one reason the army seized power in 1964. As for the new administration, it does not seem that it had rejected arrangements with those who have been known in the past as the masters of bringing in the vote. In the Legislative Assembly, the supporters of the colonels allied themselves with the modernizers. The journalist Fábio Campos observed how well the newcomers to power got along with the old-style politicians. In contrast to the situation in the past, the local Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Brazilian Social Democracy party—PSDB) members became friendly with, not to say quite close to, those of the old regime. Ceará's PSDB mayors, with an occasional and honorable exception, were now all "good old boys" of the traditional type (*O Povo*, August 26, 1977).

Although these new groupings have shown no desire to confront established interests, this does not exclude the possibility of their taking on new concerns or adopting new ways of proceeding. Innovation has become necessary not just because of the changes that took place during the military regime

and the subsequent return to democracy but because of new arrivals on the political scene some of whom secured their positions during the dominance of the colonels: large-scale property speculators, foreign investors, people from modern service corporations, those involved in agribusinesses, producers of cultural goods, communication professionals, academics, and technically specialized civil servants. These new politicians were fighting for votes in a society that was now more urbanized, educated, and complex. Clientelism would now have to include new interests and new strategies. No longer limited to the traditional protection of fugitives from the law, gifts of coffins or wheelchairs, and patronage of civil service jobs, it was being extended to include inside information about public works projects, the expansion or reduction of public services, tax concessions, and privatization—in sum, the sorts of undertakings that interest modern businessmen everywhere.

The nature of the patron-client relationship survives changes in the way it operates and its direction but continues to feed on the always nebulous distinction between public and private interests—something that is not peculiar to the Northeast or to particular periods of history. The chance of influencing government is what makes business people finance election campaigns the world over. In the case of Ceará, the persistence of traditional practices is simply more visible when they occur upstate, as Regianne Rolim shows (1997).

Barbosa Lima Sobrinho, in his preface to Leal's work, asks, "What does it matter that the colonel is now a university graduate? Or that his plantation is now an industrial plant? Or that his henchmen are now advisers or technicians?" Having been a governor of Pernambuco in the days of the legendary colonels, Sobrinho had learned what politics was like in the back country. In speaking of colonels' having become "doctors,"[8] he was well aware that, regardless of how they were addressed, those in command were behaving in the same old way. The case of "Dr." Rocha Furtado is a good cautionary example: not having adopted the traditional practices or acquired the wish or the capacity to act according to the Piauí pattern, his period in command was ill suited to its time and place and could not last. Economic development, the complexity of social relations, the dominant position of the urban electorate, the greater importance of the state, and the increase in the number of educated people and people with academic titles affected the way power was acquired but not its fundamental nature.

To consider landownership as the foundation of power in the outback is to deny the complexity of the social dynamic and reduce history to the assertion of the prince's will. Agrarian legislation, administrative organization, the tax system, the choice of political representation, and the distribution of political office and military commissions have now become extremely significant

factors. Whenever the peasants resorted to violence to demonstrate their anger at the actions of the powerful, the classic explanation was always that the law had been badly drawn up, that it had been based on foreign models ill suited to Brazil, or that the population was just not civilized enough to understand and accept its intent. If the focus of my window of observation, the cattle-ranching region of the Northeast, is too narrow to permit final conclusions about a phenomenon that was never purely regional, it does justify the suggestion that we should avoid using the term "coronelismo" to describe a precise form of political domination. At worst the word is loaded. A reflection of something more than the idealization of the bourgeois state and the scorn of the urban as opposed to the rural, it has been associated with constructions related to regionalism. In their current sense, colonels and clients are a peculiar feature of the largest and oldest dwelling place of the country's excluded, the outback of the Northeast.

NOTES

1. The surviving remnant of the 1924 revolt of the São Paulo garrison, named for its Communist second-in-command, Luis Carlos Prestes, whose flight took it on a "long march" terrorizing the backlands of Brazil until it finally took refuge in Bolivia in 1927. —Translator's note.

2. Cícero Romão (1944–1934), a defrocked priest whose reputation as a miracle worker gave him a massive following among the poor of the outback that he was able to transform into the basis of extensive economic and political power. —Translator's note.

3. A political bargain giving autonomy to state governors in return for their support of the party in office at federal level. —Translator's note.

4. A Ph.D. thesis published in translation as *Condições de vida política no estado da Paraíba* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1957). —Translator's note.

5. Nicos Poulantzas. Presumably his *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales de l'état capitaliste* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1968). —Translator's note.

6. Royal grants of unoccupied crown land. —Translator's note.

7. Antônio Conselheiro, founder of the millenarian community of Canudos, described in Euclides da Cunha's *Rebellion in the Backlands* and Vargas Llosa's *War at the End of the World*. —Translator's note.

8. The traditional Brazilian form of address to any university graduate. —Translator's note.

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