

COFFEE PLANTERS, POLITICS,
AND DEVELOPMENT IN BRAZIL:
A Comment on Mauricio Font's Analysis

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"If monoculture is an evil, this was not so with coffee. Coffee was autarkic; it demanded for its cultivation the simultaneous production of the most varied crops, even cattle raising. These were subsidiary crops, no doubt, but their total production was voluminous. It was cheap production, because it was an accessory that offered the people abundant and healthy food." Thus asserted Joaquim Sampaio Vidal, a federal deputy for the Partido Democrático of São Paulo and president of the Sociedade Rural Brasileira in 1940.¹

In a recent article in this journal, Dr. Mauricio Font challenged earlier accounts of the economic and political cohesion and hegemony of São Paulo coffee producers in the 1920s. He has detected instead growing factionalism within the export-sector elite as well as diversification of the structure of coffee production, which he interpreted as revealing significant weaknesses in the coffee plantation system. According to Font, one result of this alleged weakness of the *fazenda* system was the emergence of an "alternative agrarian economy" of immigrant smallholders who competed with the "traditional planters" for market shares, thereby undermining their political and economic power. This characterization of São Paulo agricultural and political development in the 1920s addresses a number of controversial issues on which I would like to comment.

Font's article forms part of the old debate over the economic and political logic of productive relations prevailing on São Paulo coffee plantations at the time, namely, the unique *colonato* system as the predominant form of labor power appropriation, and the class identity of large coffee planters. His article addresses the polemic surrounding the opportunities for accumulation and social mobility allowed by this form of labor exploitation for the mass of immigrant families who worked on plantations. It also raises the important question of possible linkages and tensions existing between the export-sector elite and emergent industrialists as the Brazilian economy became more diversified.

The article is roughly divided into two sections. In the first part, Font elaborates on the transformation of a sector of the immigrant *colonos* into smallholders whose interests differed from those of large coffee planters. Thereafter he analyzes factionalism among the elites as manifested in producer organizations and political alignments in national and state politics in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Font's views place him among the optimists in the debate over the opportunities for social mobility that the coffee plantation system offered to colonos.² In this respect, he seconds the arguments of some large coffee planters in defense of subsidized mass immigration. For example, Antônio Prado, a prominent São Paulo planter, banker, and exporter, argued that subsidized immigration was preferable to settling immigrants on the land because it offered them the opportunity to become acclimatized and accumulate the means to buy land of their own.³

In his article, Font attributes the ability of immigrant colonos to become smallholders to the earnings they could obtain from surpluses they produced on the food plots assigned for self-provisioning. It is true that immigrant families frequently changed plantations in search of more favorable contractual conditions that would grant them better self-provisioning rights (contracts were annual). But as I have shown elsewhere,⁴ this practice was not a sign of labor scarcity. It was due instead to the nature of coffee expansion, which after a few decades occasioned significant differences in the self-provisioning possibilities of coffee zones, decadent and new ones. In principle, food-planting rights were granted in proportion to the number of coffee trees tended by a colono family in order to prevent labor power from being diverted to food crops beyond that needed for subsistence. In the new zones, however, immigrants could intercrop among young trees on fertile soil whereas on mature plantations they cultivated separate plots on marginal land that required more time and produced lower yields. In addition, the extent of self-provisioning depended on coffee prices, with planters offering better terms at times of low prices but reducing them when prices rose and paying higher task wages for coffee cultivation instead. As Font has indicated, colonos indeed sold food surpluses in the market. The amount sold, however, is extremely difficult to estimate. Marketing opportunities depended on such factors as the proximity of towns, which developed slowly in the frontier region, and the planters' not monopolizing these surpluses themselves. Therefore, if it was ever possible, it is more likely that colonos would have accumulated savings at times of high task wages when coffee prices were good and would have used these funds later to move off the plantations when a price slump set in. This pattern seems to have been less the case in the early part of the century than in the late 1920s, when wages were unusually high. Thus the planters' provision of a food plot did not

signify a weakness in the coffee plantation system that implied a permanent loss of labor power. Contrary to what Font affirms,⁵ the *colonato* actually persisted into the 1960s—well beyond the end of subsidized immigration in 1927—not only because self-provisioning reduced the cost of reproduction of labor and generated a labor rent but also because the symbiosis between coffee and food crops gave coffee growers considerable flexibility in responding to oscillations in coffee prices without seriously jeopardizing the labor supply. During overproduction crises, coffee planters were able to reduce monetary wages compensating their work force with better self-provisioning rights, which were curtailed once prices improved. This practice was a major reason why coffee growing was a profitable venture even during price slumps, as was demonstrated by continued planting of new trees even under adverse market conditions. Moreover, nowhere did crops go unharvested, nor were coffee trees uprooted on a significant scale until the late 1930s, when the European market closed due to the outbreak of World War II.⁶

Font adduces some official figures to demonstrate the magnitude of what is probably mostly second-generation immigrant landownership and coffee production by smallholders in the early 1930s.⁷ These figures, however, do not allow one to distinguish the period before the depression from the period afterward. Font also offers partial figures on plantation size by number of coffee trees for 1927 but not on the participation of immigrant owners. Mircea Buesco, by contrast, provides a rather different picture. According to this author's interpretation, land distribution in coffee production was very unequal, and the amount of coffee produced by smallholders in 1927 was not significant enough to have constituted a serious challenge to control of the coffee market by the alliance of large planters and coffee traders.

Buesco provides the following figures for 1927: 18.4 percent of São Paulo coffee trees were grown on the 73.7 percent of all coffee farms having less than twenty thousand trees; 33.4 percent were grown on the 20.2 percent of farms having twenty thousand to one hundred thousand trees; and the remaining 48.2 percent of the trees were cultivated on the 6.1 percent of the estates with more than one hundred thousand trees. No figures are provided on the proportion of immigrants among small coffee growers, however.⁸ Thus until more complete quantitative evidence is available, Font's thesis about the emergence of an "alternative agrarian economy" that undermined the power of large planters must remain open to dispute. This point holds despite the arguments of scholars like Sérgio Milliet, a staunch enemy of the coffee *latifundia*. He celebrated the democratizing effect of the 1920 depression, but it was limited at best.⁹

This conclusion does not imply, however, that the São Paulo economy did not become more diversified during the period. By the

1910s, food was being grown throughout the state by the colonos and by an emerging sector of autonomous food producers of hitherto unknown origin who were operating completely outside the coffee economy. At the same time, the industrial sector was also developing.¹⁰ It was among the social agents of industrial capital accumulation that immigrant importers predominated, although merchants operating in the internal market and coffee planters (especially those in São Paulo) also played a significant role.¹¹ Nevertheless, if the sustained high level of coffee production after the 1929 depression and again in the 1950s is any indication of the fortunes and political power of the coffee growers and exporters, then they showed notable resilience in a setting where profitable alternatives existed in both agriculture and industry. Moreover, coffee planters continued to wield considerable influence over the government until the 1964 military coup, as indicated by the repeated moratoria on debts and price support policies in the 1930s and their later success in resisting the transfer of earnings to industry through “exchange confiscation” in the 1950s.

While it is true that the Brazilian government progressively formulated a more systematic coffee policy and that relationships among producers, exporters, and the state were not always harmonious, the coffee sector generally succeeded in defending its interests and having its demands attended. Even Font’s persuasive demonstration that the Partido Democrático of São Paulo represented “big coffee” interests may be interpreted in this sense. Coffee growers thus owed their resilience in times of crisis to the efficiency of the colonato system in protecting them from the full effects of price slumps and also to coffee’s preponderant role as Brazil’s main exchange earner until the 1960s, an indispensable prerequisite for import-substitution industrialization.

I am not suggesting, however, that the coffee bourgeoisie constituted a cohesive elite. Font has made an important contribution in disentangling the political tensions and alignments among the São Paulo elite and their forms of organization. For example, the irritation of commerce and industry in the 1930s about the debt moratoria granted to coffee growers is one indication of divisions among these sectors. But more research is still needed on the nature and degree of investment of coffee wealth in industry.

I will focus here, however, only on the cleavages and associational structure of the coffee sector, which deserve additional comment. As Joseph Love has shown, all associations involving the coffee sector (which sprang up until the 1930s) were led by powerful planters responding to a particular economic conjuncture that demanded concerted action. Politically relevant differences among their associates are not immediately apparent, however. Sometimes different organizations were led by the same men. The Sociedade Nacional de Agricultura,

founded in Rio in 1897, was followed in 1902 by the Sociedade Paulista de Agricultura, which was established by coffee producers and brokers to deal with the crisis and the flow of immigrants. The Sociedade Rural Brasileira was founded in 1919 by coffee planters, exporters, and representatives of foreign meatpacking houses during the crisis in international trade produced by World War I. Finally, the Liga Agrícola Brasileira established in 1921 organized opposition against the export levy on coffee imposed by the government.¹²

State intervention in the coffee market increased in response to successive overproduction crises that were threatening the country's main source of foreign exchange (coffee accounted for about 70 percent of foreign exchange in the 1920s). But as state intervention grew, the coffee sector reacted by creating interest organizations of its own that sometimes appealed to the government for support and at other times denounced what the sector viewed as excessive encroachments. Alignments and cleavages among coffee growers and exporters should be viewed primarily as the combined result of potentially conflicting interests among planters (due to relative advantages created by regional differences in age of trees and soil fertility between coffee zones) and export interests as well as the diverse effects of government coffee policies on different sectors, rather than as resulting from the growth of a smallholding system in coffee, as Font argues.¹³ Thus the tax introduced in 1902 on all new trees planted for the next five years (renewed thereafter for five years more), which virtually prohibited further planting, was badly received by planters who were opening up new plantations on the frontier. For example, Antônio Prado, one of the most prominent "traditional" planters, expressed the feelings of many more powerful fellow planters in describing the prohibition as "anti-economic" and "anti-liberal." In a similar liberal vein, he later opposed coffee valorization. But I would not interpret such opposition as reflecting fear of greater surpluses and more competition, as does Font.¹⁴ As the owner of a business empire that embraced all spheres of coffee from planting to trading and export, Prado perceived the reduction of coffee trading to support prices as a threat to his interests as a merchant and exporter.¹⁵ Yet planters who lacked the means to move to the frontier and those in the older coffee regions welcomed this prohibition because they feared the competition from new high-yielding plantations. As one advocate argued,

Limitation of new plantings would not occasion the abandonment of old groves. If the measure were general, no one would have new groves to awaken the greed of the colono; the colono would no longer be attracted and would have no interest in changing his employer. If new plantings were limited, the

introduction of new immigrants would have the advantage of reducing wages more and more through the competition that would then arise among them. Without this limitation, introducing new immigrants will only help increase the number of new plantations and augment the affliction of the afflicted.¹⁶

It should be noted in passing that the issue was neither an absolute shortage of labor nor fear that colonos might establish themselves on their own but fear that coffee growers might be incapable of imposing the wage cuts they sought when coffee prices fell.¹⁷

Only rarely did planters combine coffee growing and trading. Exporters' interests could, in effect, also clash with those of growers. While growers might welcome storing or burning coffee to protect prices (as occurred in the 1930s) as long as the costs of storing coffee were borne by the government, exporters were inherently economic liberals who opposed any measure that might interfere with or diminish trading. It remains to be investigated to what extent these differing interests found expression in the coffee sector's diverse associational structure beyond the separate organization of merchants in the Associação Comercial de Santos and the Associação Comercial de São Paulo.

In sum, although the Brazilian economy became progressively more diversified and coffee policymaking was increasingly centralized, large coffee planters and exporters retained considerable political power, which they used to their advantage effectively until the 1960s, not least because of coffee's central role in national economic development. This interpretation, however, does not endorse what Font calls the "ultraholistic" functionalist thesis. I am proposing instead that competition and contradictions were not generated by an emerging "alternative economy" but inhered in the coffee production system itself, just as they inhere in capitalism per se, governed as it is by the market principle. The repeated overproduction crises and subsequent price slumps resulted from coffee growers' competition among themselves. Labor problems like the great instability of colono families and recurrent strikes by colonos grew out of contradictions in prevailing relations of production whose cost flexibility benefited planters but also created a rural labor force prone to take collective action against them.

NOTES

1. As quoted in the *Revista da Sociedade Rural Brasileira*, Sept. 1940, p. 13.
2. The main contenders in this controversy fall into two camps. On the side of the skeptics regarding colono opportunities for accumulation are Warren Dean, *Rio Claro: A Brazilian Plantation System, 1820–1920* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976); Michael M. Hall, "The Origins of Mass Immigration in Brazil, 1871–1914," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1969; and José de Souza Martins, *O Cativo da Terra* (São Paulo: Livraria Editora Ciências Humanas, 1979). The optimists are Thomas H. Holloway, *Immigrants on the Land: Coffee and Society in São Paulo* (Chapel

- Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mauricio Font, "Planters and the State: The Pursuit of Hegemony in São Paulo, Brazil, 1889–1930," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1983; and Thomas W. Merrick and Douglas H. Graham, *Population and Economic Development in Brazil, 1800 to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), who offer the most optimistic interpretation of all.
3. Letter by Antônio Prado published in the *Correio Paulistano*, 20 Aug. 1889, quoted by Brasília Sallum, Jr., *Capitalismo e Cafeicultura: Oeste Paulista, 1888–1930* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1982), 108.
 4. See Verena Stolcke, *Coffee Planters, Workers, and Wives: Class Conflict and Gender Relations on São Paulo Plantations, 1850–1980* (Oxford: Macmillan and St. Antony's College, 1988), especially chap. 2.
 5. See Font, "Coffee Planters, Politics, and Development in Brazil," *LARR* 22, no. 3 (1987):73.
 6. For further details on the cost flexibility of the colonato and colono opportunities of social mobility, see Stolcke, *Coffee Planters, Workers, and Wives*.
 7. Font, "Coffee Planters, Politics, and Development," 73.
 8. Mircea Buesco, *Evolução Econômica do Brasil*, 2nd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: APEC, 1974), 126.
 9. Sérgio Milliet, *Roteiro do Café e Outros Ensaios* (São Paulo: Coleção Departamento de Cultura, 1939).
 10. Angela A. Kageyama, "Crise e estrutura agrária na agricultura paulista na década de 30," master's thesis, Escola Superior de Agricultura "Luiz de Queiroz," Universidad de São Paulo, 1979; and Wilson Suzigan, *Indústria Brasileira: Origem e Desenvolvimento* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986).
 11. Suzigan, *Indústria Brasileira*, 350.
 12. Joseph L. Love, *São Paulo in the Brazilian Federation, 1889–1937* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1980).
 13. Font, "Coffee Planters, Politics, and Development," 80.
 14. *Ibid.*, 81.
 15. Affonso de E. Taunay, *Pequena História do Café no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Departamento Nacional do Café, 1945), 297.
 16. Francisco Ferreira Ramos, *O Café: Contribuição para o Estudo da Crise* (São Paulo: n.p., 1902).
 17. For a more detailed discussion of the question of labor supply, see Stolcke, *Coffee Planters, Workers, and Wives*, especially chap. 2.