

DOWN AND OUT
IN RIO DE JANEIRO:
Urban Poor and Elite Rule in the Old Republic

Todd A. Diacon
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

- POVERTY AND POLITICS: THE URBAN POOR IN BRAZIL, 1870-1920.* By JUNE E. HAHNER. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986. Pp. 415. \$32.50.)
- OS BESTIALIZADOS: O RIO DE JANEIRO E A REPUBLICA QUE NÃO FOI.* By JOSE MURILO DE CARVALHO. (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987. Pp. 196.)
- A TROPICAL BELLE EPOQUE: ELITE CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY RIO DE JANEIRO.* By JEFFREY D. NEEDELL. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Pp. 351. \$42.50.)
- THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE BRAZILIAN STATE, 1889-1930.* By STEVEN TOPIK. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987. Pp. 241. \$25.00.)

The problem with social history, William Taylor noted in 1985, is that its practitioners often fail to explain the lives of women, children, criminals, the urban poor, and others in terms of the larger patterns of socioeconomic change.¹ Specifically, Taylor argued for studies that would analyze “how ordinary people in different places . . . ‘lived the big changes’ of the rise of capitalism and state formation. . . .”² The goal should be to write “whole histories” that bring together the experiences of “the masses” and “the elite” to explain fully why these big changes happened the way they did. It is this dialectic between the poor and the rich, the weak and the powerful, that should concern the next wave of social historians.³

This review essay will critique two new social histories of the Brazilian Old Republic along the lines suggested by Taylor. Two other books that concentrate on the political, economic, and cultural elites of the era will also be reviewed in the context of Taylor’s thoughts on social history. Although the latter task may strike an odd note with readers, it is my belief that Taylor’s argument concerning “whole histories” identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the two additional works as well. If histories of the poor cannot acquire full meaning without reference to economic and political elites, is the reverse not also true?

In *Poverty and Politics: The Urban Poor in Brazil, 1870–1920*, June Hahner seeks to examine “the concrete and complex realities of Brazilian workers’ lives” in light of the larger process of rapid economic change (p. xiii). Hahner seems sympathetic to Taylor’s ideas concerning social history. Indeed, she promises not to write “history ‘with the politics left out’ ” and questions the validity of works that attempt to do so (p. xiii).

While Hahner’s goals are laudable, her execution misses the mark. The problems begin with her geographical focus on Brazil as a whole, with occasional concentration on Rio de Janeiro. Such a broad focus results in the author’s view of the urban poor being blurred by a whirlwind tour of Brazilian cities. Nowhere is this problem more apparent than in her discussion of military recruitment and urban riots in Imperial Brazil.

Hahner mentions examples of such unrest among the urban poor in the provinces of Pernambuco, Bahia, and Minas Gerais (pp. 49–52): “In Ponte Nova, Minas Gerais, . . . over sixty women, ‘armed with clubs, invaded the church’ ” in order to destroy church records that were used for the military recruitment of their men (p. 52). An in-depth examination of this one event (which is ripe with inferences for gender concerns) and the role of the state in the lives of the poor could have fulfilled Hahner’s goal of discussing the complex reality of Brazilian workers’ lives. Yet she spends but a few lines on this and other riots. As a result, the reader experiences less a complex reality than a sense of being in the middle of Varig Airline’s famed three-week tour of Brazil.

By contrast, Hahner’s research succeeds when it focuses on the urban poor in Rio de Janeiro. In Chapter Five, she explores the changing situation of the urban poor during the city’s famed reforms at the turn of the century. Using census data and government *relatórios* creatively, Hahner deftly demonstrates how the much-heralded widening of avenues and paving of streets did the urban poor little good. In actuality, the destruction of slum dwellings (*cortiços*) near the city center displaced the poor and led to overcrowding in other working-class districts.

The congested working-class district of São José suffered the destruction of several tenements to make way for broad avenues. The result of this “reform” was to double the average number in a “household” between 1890 and 1906 (p. 169). Hahner’s comments on the dubious benefits of “modernization” also provide a historical context for similar questions concerning Brazilian development since World War II.⁴ *Poverty and Politics* ends by examining the 1917 strikes that paralyzed São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Hahner again makes extensive use of official reports, but this time her reliance on the official version prevents her from drawing important conclusions about the strikes and the lives of the urban poor. It is interesting that in writing a book about the poor, Hahner prefers to discuss elite actions to the virtual exclusion of the strikes themselves.

Readers discover how Rui Barbosa reacted to these upheavals but find little comment on their composition and the demands of the strikers.

This failure to examine urban unrest in detail limits the usefulness of *Poverty and Politics*. This outcome is unfortunate because a work in progress indicates the importance of the 1917 São Paulo general strike for understanding the lives of the urban poor.⁵ Hahner never mentions the fact that women textile workers began the strike largely to protest changing work conditions, urban reforms (similar to those discussed for Rio de Janeiro), and sexual harassment on the job. Because of her focus on government officials and leading politicians, Hahner fails to note that the general strike forced the São Paulo state labor department and leading Paulista industrialists to adopt a reformist attitude vis-à-vis the workers. Thus although Hahner wished to write “whole history,” her wide geographical focus and overreliance on official records in this book produced neither a detailed examination of the urban poor nor a complex analysis of the dialogue between this group and economic and political elites.

It is precisely this dialogue between the urban poor (*os bestializados*) and urban elites in Rio de Janeiro that shapes Murilo de Carvalho's *Os Bestializados*. Carvalho probes this dialogue via the concept of *cidadania* (citizenship). He asks first, how and why did national political elites limit the dialogue between citizens and government, especially after an initial period of political effervescence and Jacobin mobilization of the poor during the first years of the Republic?

Carvalho argues that given Rio's position as the nation's capital, urban unrest was especially threatening to economic and political elites, who were desperately searching for stability. He posits that most of the urban poor, especially persons of color, had supported the monarchy because of its position on the abolition of slavery. Destruction of urban slums during the first years of the Republic increased their anger. Moreover, demobilization and depoliticization were accomplished by harassing and expelling Jacobin leaders and repressing lower-class street gangs (*capoeiras*). The national government then limited the independence of the Rio municipal council with the result being that “the initial expectation of greater participation, which had been awakened by the Republic, was thus systematically frustrated” (p. 37).

Carvalho aims his discussion of the ramifications of this repression (or narrowing of citizens' rights) at the ills that trouble Brazil today (pp. 37–41). Corruption was born of a system in which Brazilian officials did not have to justify their actions to a free electorate. This exclusion of popular participation from the official governing process led to inclusion of the *povo* in perverse ways, as in the use of thugs by politicians bent on disrupting opposition campaigns. Finally, this demobilization led to state paternalism (*estadania*), that is, to reliance by the powerless many on the favors of the politically powerful few.⁶

Who were these people who were excluded from political and economic power? According to Carvalho, they formed a *lumpenproletariat* that comprised half of Rio's economically active population between 1890 and 1906 (p. 74). They created their own República dos Pobres, an active "republic" in which the poor transformed the elite sport of soccer into a sport for the masses. Later, their dance and music style—the samba—was mimicked by the urban elite. Indeed, Carvalho argues, the poor masses formed a more "Brazilian" culture and society than did Brazilian intellectuals, who were imitating the French Belle Epoque (pp. 39–41).

Carvalho's interest in the lives of the urban poor led him to focus on the largest urban riot of the early Republic, the Revolta Contra Vacina, the anti-vaccination riot of 1904. As the name implies, this riot was sparked by government crusades against yellow fever and smallpox, when officials rummaged through the urban slums and pressured the poor to accept smallpox vaccinations. Carvalho perceives this event as a lens through which to examine the motives of the rioters and the worldview of the urban poor as well.

What he uncovers is a popular uprising of "citizens" provoked by government intrusion into their last bastion of freedom and power—their homes. The rioters, Carvalho argues, barricaded streets to defend their informally defined rights against government encroachment. In other words, the government's intrusive vaccination campaign violated what might be called a "moral politics of the poor," as a corollary of the well-known concept of a "moral economy of the poor."⁷

Carvalho bases his conclusion on the targets of rioter fury: anything or anyone associated with state authority and police power. So great was the moral outrage that the riot soon expanded well beyond its leaders' control. Positivist politicians, trade union leaders, and disgruntled junior military officers imagined a politically inspired chain of events in which urban unrest, combined with a revolt in the barracks, would topple the current administration. These leaders soon found themselves preaching calm unsuccessfully to a mass of urban poor that was challenging the legitimacy of the Republic itself. While the political conspirators envisioned a few limited attacks against public health facilities, the rioters shot policemen, burned police stations, and threatened government offices and officials (pp. 127–33).

Carvalho's concern with the world of the urban poor, combined with his exploration of the dialogue between the poor and elites, makes *Os Bestializados* a "must read" for students of the Old Republic. Yet paradoxically, the book's strength, the focus on the anti-vaccination riot, is also its major weakness. Lack of data on the rioters forced Carvalho to analyze their actions in order to uncover their motives. Because the rioters attacked police stations and other symbols of state authority, the riot represents first and foremost for Carvalho a questioning of the role of the state. But

the rioters also attacked factories and destroyed streetcars, actions that hint at a material dimension as well. Carvalho notes these other attacks but then ignores them in his selective analysis of the episode.

In the same vein, Carvalho's preoccupation with the urban poor in Rio leads him to overemphasize the city's role in defining the history of the Republic. Readers are told that President Manuel Ferraz de Campos Salles bargained with regional oligarchs (*a política dos governadores*) because he needed national unity and support to overcome the threat posed by Rio's restless populace. Carvalho's implication is that the threat to the Republic came from the city, not the countryside (pp. 32–33).

But this revisionist argument ignores the power of the regional oligarchs to impose their will on the weak national government. It also ignores the threat to both national unity and Republican control posed by rural rebellions like the Canudos uprising. Indeed, one could argue that national leaders abandoned any real form of democracy in reacting more to the threat posed by Canudos than to urban unrest.⁸ One might further argue that nervous elites violently repressed the 1904 riot out of fear of an urban Canudos.

Jeffrey Needell focuses on the opposite world of Rio during the early years of the Republic in *A Tropical Belle Époque*. According to his thesis, "elite culture and society served to maintain and promote the interests and vision of the elite, and . . . cultural paradigms of aristocratic European derivation were adapted in the Carioca milieu to those ends" (p. xi). His definition of the elite (found in an appendix rather than the preface) includes those who exercised power derived from political position, wealth, social status, or any combination of these sources. This small group of elites comprised less than 1 percent of Rio's urban population at the beginning of the twentieth century (p. 242).

Needell examines the formal and informal institutions of the Carioca elite, which included the *colégio*, social club, salon, and marriage. In each group, one perceives larger socioeconomic trends mirrored by a changing elite composition, given the exit of Northeastern planters and the entrance of capitalists and urban merchants. Needell argues nevertheless that continuities outweighed changes as members of the old planter families eventually acquired new urban sources of wealth (pp. 108–9).

Given his less than novel thesis that elite culture and society promoted elite interests, Needell's discussion of elite institutions belabors the obvious. The *colégios* served as meeting grounds for elite children and encouraged the formation of future political and economic networks. Social clubs and even the opera provided a place where elites could discuss their affairs informally. Salons, which were hosted by such figures as urban reformer Pereira Passos, also served as informal meeting places for business and political discussions. Marriages between members of

prominent families “served to unite fortune and power and to maintain and increase them” (p. 118).

This thesis requires little space to demonstrate, and Needell therefore fills the remainder of the first half of *A Tropical Belle Epoque* with descriptions reminiscent of the social column in Rio’s *Jornal do Brasil*. For example, at Rio’s Clube dos Diários, “One might glimpse Rui Barbosa. . . . One might meet Henrique Chaves, the noted journalist and editor. . . . And he might be talking to Antônio de Azevedo. . . . And, certainly, one could expect to see Deodato C. Villela dos Santos, one of Rio’s foremost lawyers, a formidable clubman. . . . Perhaps he might be chatting with Harold Hime (son of Elkin Hime, a man big in importing) . . .” (p. 73). Readers are informed that Pereira Passos wore fine European clothing and exhibited gentlemanly reserve but “made no bones about promenading with a French mistress in Rio” (p. 83). We are also told that Passos’s wife was a gifted hostess, that Rui Barbosa possessed an impressive tie collection, and so on.

Needell’s theme in the second half of *A Tropical Belle Epoque*—elite culture in a neocolonial context—is a more analytical and interesting concept. This focus leads to a strong comparative discussion of the rise of consumer fetishism in Europe and Rio de Janeiro (Chapter 5). Needell argues that in England and France, class-based anxieties fueled the bourgeoisie’s inculcation of aristocratic values. In the Rio neocolonial context, the anxieties involved Brazil’s perceived inferiority and led the Carioca elite on a spending spree in search of the “civilized world.” The ensuing cultural fantasy was powerful enough to make men in Rio dress in three-piece wool suits, high-button shoes, and gloves—even during the steamy Carioca summers.

After this promising start, however, Needell draws no further conclusions from the neocolonial context. He argues that the Carioca elite identified with Europe in order to reinforce its own sense of superiority (p. 154). But why did the elite need to reinforce its standing, and why at this particular point in time? Needell cannot answer such questions because he never examines other socioeconomic classes. He does not perceive, as does Carvalho, the threat of a mobilized urban poor that culminated in the 1904 anti-vaccination riot. Nor does Needell consider the possible threat presented by an increasingly powerful São Paulo bourgeoisie.⁹

This ignorance of other classes produces a skewed discussion of the Rio urban reforms. Unlike Hahner and Carvalho, Needell never mentions the working-class dislocations caused by the reforms nor the massive unrest associated with the vaccination campaigns.¹⁰ Instead, he dwells on the obvious influence of the Paris “Great Works” on the vision of Pereira Passos and the influence of the Ecole de Beaux Arts on Carioca architecture of the period. The result is an annoying tendency to credit Passos

with single-handedly paving streets, constructing sidewalks, and building Leme Tunnel, as if no workers were involved in performing these tasks (p. 34).

Given Needell's interest in elite culture in a neocolonial setting, it is unfortunate that he does not fully explore the conflict between Europeanization and a very different Brazilian reality. The conflict is important, because as Thomas Skidmore has shown, it led to the birth of a new literary nationalism out of the ashes of the Belle Epoque.¹¹ Needell explains the popularity of Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* largely in terms of its debt to French writers like Hugo and Zolá (p. 220). Less important in his view was the book's powerful description of a racially mixed Brazilian reality entirely at odds with a "civilized" Belle Epoque worldview.

The point is not that books focusing on elites inherently fail to expand knowledge of the Old Republic. Steven Topik, in his fine revisionist study entitled *The Political Economy of the Brazilian State, 1889–1930*, limits his discussion to the political and economic elites of this period. His thesis asserts that significant state intervention in the economy began long before 1930, the year traditionally considered to be a watershed. Topik argues that the "central government was not simply a puppet" of the southern export oligarchy (p. 17). Instead, "Rio bureaucrats came to recognize and defend national interests, not merely private ones or those of their own home state" (p. 24).

Topik presents a convincing explanation for this intervention by arguing that it represented an unusual means justified by a classic liberal end. The reform of the financial system under Paulista presidents Campos Salles and Rodrigues Alves (who held office from 1898 to 1906) included such liberal goals as a balanced budget, a return to the gold standard, and exchange-rate stability. These classic liberal economic goals would not seem to include nationalization of Brazil's largest bank and subsequent creation of the state-owned Banco do Brasil. Yet this is exactly what happened in 1905.

Under the leadership of Campos Salles, Brazil experienced "a 13 percent drop in paper money, a sixfold increase in trade surplus, and a doubling of the milreis' value" (p. 37). Yet government dealings with Brazil's largest native bank, O Banco da República, were complicated by the bank's large debt to the federal treasury. Even a massive treasury loan to the bank failed to ward off a run on its deposits in 1900. In response to these failures, the Rodrigues Alves administration declared its loan to be one-third of the bank's total share of capital. The government then sold the rest as public shares and thus created the Banco do Brasil (pp. 38–39).

Topik argues that, despite appearances, the bank nationalization was consistent with the goals of economic liberalism. Private investors purchased nearly two-thirds of the bank's shares. But more important, officials nationalized the bank to ensure the success of their liberal-

minded financial reforms. The state invested bank profits to finance the return to convertibility, a classic liberal goal. Thus, as Topik notes, "The state entered the financial market to protect the Treasury's integrity, not to stimulate development" (p. 56).

Topik finds in the history of Brazil's railroads another example of a complex set of events encouraging the federal government to intervene in the workings of the economy. This intervention was instigated by government profit guarantees intended to encourage railroad construction. First granted in the 1850s, these guarantees ranged from 6 to 9 percent. By 1898, however, the federal government had appropriated one-third of its budget to finance this program (p. 95). Faced with increasingly onerous expenditures, the federal government purchased several railroad lines because it could pay less in loan interest than in profit guarantees. This move was not a nationalist effort, however. According to Topik, President Campos Salles "acted simply to alleviate Brazil's financial crisis" (p. 95). Campos Salles maintained his faith in economic liberalism, and Topik cites as proof the fact that the president leased these now public railroads to private (often foreign) companies (p. 96). Only after World War I did economic nationalism prompt further state intervention in the Brazilian railroad sector.

Intervention in defense of economic liberalism is Topik's convincing argument for reexamining the history of state intervention in Brazil. Less convincing is his argument concerning the relationship between state and society during this same period.¹² According to Topik, the reform of the Brazilian financial system challenged coffee planter interests and demonstrated a new degree of state autonomy. The government cut credit to planters to decrease the public debt and lower inflation. A tight money policy promised to increase the value of the *milrei* and thus hurt coffee exports (pp. 35–40). President Campos Salles, himself a Paulista planter, saw his own fazenda being damaged by these government policies (p. 38).

The financial reforms implemented by the Paulista presidents challenged planter interests and demonstrated a new degree of relative state autonomy. Yet Campos Salles was willing to undergo short-term sacrifices as a planter in favor of the perceived long-term benefits of liberal economic reforms. How do scholars know that other Paulista planters were not willing to do the same? If they were willing to sacrifice, did the financial reforms really challenge planter power and interests? *The Political Economy of the Brazilian State* needs an additional chapter detailing the lives of selected planters to provide a sense of their thoughts and ambitions. After all, can readers really judge state threats to this group without such information?

Topik also argues that the history of coffee valorization schemes likewise demonstrates a growing degree of state independence from the

planter oligarchy. Faced with a glut of the market, planters called for a massive loan to purchase excess coffee stocks. The plan was that the São Paulo state government would contract the loan with foreign banks and coffee merchants and would ask the federal government to stabilize the exchange rate. President Rodrigues Alves refused to do the latter, however, because he felt that “the country did not have the financial resources to control world prices” (p. 68). His successor Afonso Pena nevertheless agreed to the plan, and the state of São Paulo, with limited help from the federal government, administered its own valorization scheme from 1906 to 1913.

Topik implies that this initial federal resistance to a plan supported by Paulista planters demonstrates a degree of relative state autonomy previously unrecognized by historians (p. 92). This assertion is problematical, however. It can be granted that Paulista presidents defended classic liberal economic goals in the face of planter demands. Yet such was the power of the planters that they got what they wanted anyway, first from the state of São Paulo and later (after 1914) from a federally funded valorization scheme. Far from demonstrating new levels of relative state autonomy, the history of coffee valorization demonstrates instead the ability of planters to obtain their immediate demands even when opposed by Paulista presidents who were temporarily influenced by national concerns and economic liberalism.

Conclusions

This essay has drawn its inspiration from William Taylor’s desire to see historians write “whole histories.” In this respect, Murilo de Carvalho leads the way in *Os Bestializados* with its engaging analysis of the dialogue between “citizens”—rich and poor, powerful and weak—in the early years of the Old Republic. Although Taylor aimed his advice at social historians, it also applies to other scholars who focus on elites. Viewed in this light, Jeffrey Needell’s exclusive focus on elite culture does not account for non-elite sources of the “tropical Belle Epoque.” That is to say, Needell fails to explain the special appeal of class reinforcement via Europeanization because he ignores the threats to elite rule at the beginning of the Republic.

It is now time for those studying the Old Republic to expand on Taylor’s call to integrate the histories of classes into a complex whole. Historians also need to recognize the importance of a rural-to-urban continuum for the period. This kind of focus on one end of the class spectrum might reveal that peasant rebellions shaped the early years of the Republic as much or more than did urban riots and strikes. Focusing on the other end of the class spectrum would provide more information

about the outlook of Paulista planters that would help in gauging what they considered to be state threats to their power.

Writing such whole history promises to be a difficult, yet rewarding, endeavor. The works reviewed here, when taken as a whole, represent a step in the right direction.

NOTES

1. William B. Taylor, "Between Global Process and Local Knowledge: An Inquiry into Early Latin American Social History, 1500-1900," in *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History*, edited by Oliver Zunz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 115-89.
2. *Ibid.*, 119.
3. *Ibid.*, 120-21.
4. See, for example, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *The Cruel Dilemmas of Development: Twentieth-Century Brazil* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).
5. Information contained in this section was drawn from Joel Wolfe, "The Rise of Brazil's Industrial Working Class: Community, Work, and Politics in São Paulo, 1900-1955," forthcoming Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, especially chaps. 2-4.
6. For an entertaining look at this phenomenon in present-day Brazil, see Roberto da Matta, "The Quest for Citizenship in a Relational Universe," in *State and Society in Brazil*, edited by John D. Wirth and Edson de Oliveira Nunes (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1987), 307-35.
7. The standard starting points for discussing the moral economy are James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); and E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (Feb. 1971):76-136.
8. For a recent work on Canudos, see Robert M. Levine, "'Mud-Hut Jerusalem': Canudos Revisited," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (Aug. 1988):525-72. For thoughts on nation building and the threat of rural rebellion, see Florencia E. Mallon, "Recent Trends in Latin American History: The Nineteenth Century," *Radical History* 39:131-41.
9. On the rise of this Paulista bourgeoisie, see Tércio Saes, *A Formação do Estado Burguês no Brasil, 1888-1891* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1985).
10. Needell's failure to discuss the revolt is especially puzzling given his own work on this topic. See Jeffrey D. Needell, "The Revolta Contra Vacina of 1904," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 67, no. 2 (May 1987):233-69.
11. Thomas E. Skidmore, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), especially chaps. 3, 4, and 5.
12. For a recent review essay on this relationship in Brazil, see Richard Graham, "State and Society in Brazil, 1822-1930," *LARR* 22, no. 3 (1987):223-36.