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# Keeping Communism Down on the Farm

## The Brazilian Rural Labor Movement during the Cold War

by  
*Cliff Welch*

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*Drawing on primary and secondary sources, this article discusses the durability of communist ideology in rural Brazil during the second half of the twentieth century. It analyzes the theme in two major periods: the Populist Republic (1945–1964) and the Military Regime (1964–1985). Concluding with a discussion of the first years of the New Republic, it argues that the political mobilization of Brazilian peasants defied the geopolitical logic of the era, which dictated the elimination of communist thought by the conclusion of the cold war.*

**Keywords:** *Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB), labor unions, rural social movements, Brazil, history, post–World War II, Movimento dos Sem-Terra (MST)*

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Whenever they acted openly, the communists of Brazil could almost always count on a stern response from authorities, and in this environment they rose like the phoenix. As in many Latin American countries, they resisted the boot, bounced back, and managed to seize the agenda from time to time. By struggling against cold-war logic, activists from the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist party—PCB) and its offspring opened space for communism and social-justice causes such as improved working conditions and enhanced power for working people and their organizations. Though warned by priests and politicians to fear communists, many workers and peasants sympathized with them because they promised a life better than the one capitalist landlords, merchants, and financiers

Cliff Welch teaches history at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. From 2003 to 2005, he held a CAPES Visiting Professor Fellowship at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo. This article was first presented as a paper at the Twenty-fifth Annual Southwest Labor Studies Conference in 1999. The author is grateful for various comments from conference participants, particularly Dick and Muriel Eldridge, in whose memory he dedicates this article. He also thanks the *LAP* editors for useful criticisms.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 148, Vol. 33 No. 3, May 2006 28-50

DOI: 10.1177/0094582X06287337

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provided: the known world of endless work, valueless money, and profound indignity, a world where subservience alone paved the way to advancement. Communist ideas resonated with rural workers and proved useful at times to the ruling class. Some of these ideas were no more radical than unionization and land possession, but in the Brazilian context, where free workers had replaced enslaved Africans only three generations before the start of the cold war, such ideas had a cutting edge. “Down” (repressed yet resilient) together in defiance of the “free world,” communists and rural workers helped build one of the world’s largest rural labor organizations and most aggressive contemporary peasant movements.

The story of Brazil’s passage through the cold war can be divided into two periods. Many historians call the years from 1945 to 1964 the Populist Republic because electoral democracy was restored after the war and the franchise expanded to such an extent that the political elite had to form platforms with mass appeal in order to get elected. Eventually, these appeals included the extension of labor law to rural workers and land reform. The second period began in 1964, when the ruling class conspired with the military to end the populist era and install authoritarian rule with sharply curtailed civil rights, severely interfering with the rural labor movement. The period of military rule came to a gradual end with the seating of a civilian president and the beginning of the “New Republic” in 1985. Ironically, just as worldwide cold-war tensions were peaking, Brazil’s cold war can be said to have ended with the restoration of the PCB’s legal status. While the party formally changed its name after the collapse of the USSR, abandoning its identification with international communism, in the countryside PCB dissidents as well as other communist parties, communist symbols, and Marxist-Leninist ideology became more of a presence than ever after the military ceded power.<sup>1</sup>

### THE POPULIST REPUBLIC (1945–1964)

The cold war came to Brazil in 1947. In May, soon after the Truman Doctrine was pronounced, President Eurico Gaspar Dutra banned the PCB. From an international perspective, Dutra, a general with close ties to the U.S. military, sought to satisfy the U.S. desire for containing communism, but he also had national concerns. The party’s candidates had done well in the elections of 1945 and 1947, and crucial municipal elections were coming up in November. Campaigning openly after the war, the PCB found support in the countryside as well as the city. Its newspapers trumpeted the cause of *camponeses* and it organized dozens of “peasant leagues,” uniting disgruntled small farmers like João Guerreiro Filho of Dumont, São Paulo, in rural

communities touched by agro-industrial development. While Dutra's clamp-down forced the disbanding of these leagues and drove the party underground, party militants continued to function into the 1960s, with some leaders achieving political influence. Party pressure helped push the government away from ready compliance with U.S. priorities and created space for cross-class alliances (Dulles, 1967: 284–287; Rodrigues, 1986: 409–412; Faleiros, 1989:116; Medeiros, 1995: 76–78; Welch, 1999: 102–107; Silva, 2003).

Following the party's suppression in 1947, communist leaders adopted a revolutionary line that was shaped, as was the anticommunism of Brazilian officials, by cold-war pressures. Embracing the Comintern analysis of colonialism, PCB theorists considered Brazil in a semicolonial relationship with so-called imperialist powers, especially the USSR's archenemy, the United States. This analysis held that the imperialists and their Brazilian collaborators, such as big coffee planters and beef exporters, were interested only in the production of export commodities and strategic resources like oil. In order to protect their interests, they and their collaborators conspired to hold the agricultural sector in a backward state of development bordering on feudalism. To improve the lot of the working classes, Brazil would have to break its ties with the imperialists and restructure agriculture to favor production of foodstuffs for the home market—foodstuffs essential for feeding urban workers engaged in the industrial development of Brazil. Once capitalism had been firmly established, the proletariat would arise in the struggle for socialism. Forced underground by President Dutra, the party chose to fight force with force. “The masses want to struggle,” declared Communist party leader Luis Carlos Prestes in January 1948. “They have already demonstrated,” he continued, “that they simply await direction from the Communists to confront police violence with decisiveness and courage” (Prestes, 1948: 36).

On August 1, 1950, in what became known as the August Manifesto, Prestes called upon party activists to struggle for the violent overthrow of the government and the establishment of a popular revolutionary state. Framed by cold-war concerns, the statement guided party militants into the mid-1950s. Prestes condemned the “servile” Brazilian government for supporting the United States by signing military pacts and providing oil, coffee, and other products to allied troops in the unfolding Korean War. Only by standing with the Soviet Union, he argued, could Brazil restore its tradition of peace, independence, and progress. To reverse the “reactionary fascist advance” of the country, “it was indispensable to liquidate the economic bases of the reaction [by] confiscating the great landholdings (*latifundios*), which should be given freely into the hands of those who work and live on the properties.” Prestes called for peasants and agricultural laborers to rise up and fight for land seizures without compensation to *latifundiários*, the

end of sharecropping arrangements, wage payments in money rather than in kind, and the elimination of all debts. Finally, the manifesto called for the creation of a “popular army of national liberation” to free the nation from the imperialist grip of the United States and its Brazilian collaborators (Prestes, 1982; Loner, 1985: 68–76).

The first test of the party’s commitment to revolutionary struggle and radical agrarian change came in northern Paraná. Contemporary press reports called it the “War of Porecatú,” acknowledging the town of Porecatú as the hub of the conflict. The communist-inspired combatants thought of it as a little Korea (*Coreinha*), making reference to the cold-war clash in Asia. In any event, the conflict of peasants, landlords, and the state attained military proportions, including several pitched battles between soldiers and peasants and at least 14 deaths and 18 casualties, before the fighting ceased on June 21, 1951. Having squeezed the peasants into its theoretical framework, the party did not stand by the popular peasant army when the state police of Paraná and São Paulo amassed to crush the rebellion. Facing defeat, the PCB abandoned the fight and reconsidered its revolutionary line (Welch, 1999: 133–144; Priori, 2000).

A big problem for the party in 1951 was the election of Brazilian Labor party (Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro—PTB) candidate Getúlio Vargas as president. Despite many contradictions, the adept politician successfully presented himself as the workers’ candidate. Though Prestes lambasted Vargas as a “feudal lord,” most voters accepted him as the “father of the poor.” As president and dictator from 1930 to 1945, Vargas used corporatism to balance the boot of order with the sandal of progress through minimum wages and protective social legislation such as legalized unions and social security benefits. The party pushed Vargas to stand up against the “imperialists,” and now and then he did. A case in point was the nationalization of Brazilian oil. The PCB started the campaign in 1951, but Vargas finished it in 1953 by establishing a state oil monopoly (Wirth, 1970: 189–206). On the issue of rural labor, Vargas was articulate but ineffective, and therefore the PCB had more room to maneuver. As part of his economic development program, Vargas exploited coffee export earnings through taxation and the manipulation of foreign exchange rates. While this irritated coffee planters, they were able to protect their profits by reducing their labor costs through increased exploitation and the withdrawal of privileges such as free worker housing. As conditions in the agricultural sector went into decline, PCB militants agitated among rural workers, hoping to build a following for radical change and provoke government action (Welch, 1999: 158–168).

The activities of communist militants soon came to the attention of President Vargas. In September 1952, Vargas’s labor minister, José de Segades

Vianna, reported that spies had secured a secret PCB memorandum on the distribution and discussion of a Prestes communiqué in São Paulo. The document revealed the government's concern that communist rural labor militants had succeeded in meeting with "several hundred peasants" in the interior. Vianna's memo contrasted these rural successes with an anecdote about an industrial city on the outskirts of the capital where communist activists had reportedly failed to unite any workers at all. The minister emphasized the "threat of communist infiltration of the rural masses" and asked the president to instruct PTB leaders to promote worker marches and other popular manifestations to build support for the improvement of agricultural working conditions and living standards (Novaes e Cruz, 1983: 202–205).

Throughout 1952, Vargas spoke about the need to improve the lot of rural workers. In April he addressed the fifth conference of the American member nations of the International Labor Organization in Rio de Janeiro, convened to establish international rural labor law standards and to debate the problem of implementing them; in June he sent a proposal to establish the Rural Social Service agency to Congress. As PCB-directed agitation increased, Vargas replaced Vianna with the more radical João Goulart, who revealed plans to establish a process for legalizing rural labor unions. In January 1954 one of Goulart's subordinates announced that the unionization of rural laborers would begin immediately in São Paulo, "seeking to neutralize communist influence and bring under government control all the farmers' representative organizations." They set a goal of founding 250 rural labor unions in the state, with plans to begin in the areas where communists had been active (Camargo, 1986: 148–151; Welch, 1999: 183–187).

Rural unionization became the focus of intense debate in the aftermath of these announcements. On one side, planters and beef producers associated with the Sociedade Rural Brasileira (Brazilian Rural Society—SRB) called the plan a thinly veiled scheme for the "regimentation of force for the triumph of a future unionist republic or perhaps even a Soviet republic." On the other, PCB bulletins challenged Vargas to put the law into effect. In the end, Vargas appeased the planters by firing Goulart. Frustrated and plagued by scandal, Vargas committed suicide in August 1954. The communists capitalized on his death by cynically assuming the mantle of the "father of the poor," calling on the masses to support them in championing rural labor rights and the rest of Vargas's unfinished agenda. In September they hosted a congress of rural worker and peasant delegates from associations organized by militants around the country. The congress founded the União dos Lavradores e Trabalhadores Agrícolas do Brasil (Farmers' and Agricultural Laborers' Union of Brazil—ULTAB), which became the main tool for advancing the rural labor struggle. The creation of ULTAB demonstrated that the PCB had abandoned the August

Manifesto and adopted an alliance-building, peaceful-transition perspective. This ideological transition came well before the USSR formally advocated similar positions in 1956. It was rewarded with semilegality in 1958 (Welch, 1999: 190–199; Mazzeo, 1999; Gaspari, 2002a: 180; Cunha, 2004).

In the late 1950s a group of peasants and tenant farmers in Pernambuco persuaded the state government to take their side in a dispute with the landlord by expropriating an unproductive sugar mill and its lands. The charismatic lawyer Francisco Julião had organized the rural laborers into a peasant league like those organized by the PCB after the war. The expropriation and clear communist involvement caused the Catholic Church to step up its own version of a cold war with communism. United by anticommunism, Catholics were divided in their hostile attitude toward the leagues and ULTAB and their commitment to unionization. A progressive wing saw unionization as the best way to fight communist appeal while conservatives favored private-sector paternalism—convincing landlords that it was in their best interest to treat workers compassionately. Thereafter, more and more politicians found that rural labor advocacy resonated with their constituents and made the legalization of rural unions and land reform part of their platforms. Since the 1946 constitution advocated unionization and privileged “social utility” over ownership in the determination of landholding rights, all factions could make a legitimate case for semicomunist solutions to rural land and labor problems (Callado, 1980; Bastos, 1984; Azevêdo, 1982; Pereira, 1997; Novaes, 1997).

Indeed, even the international context had changed with the victory of Fidel Castro’s revolutionaries in Cuba at the beginning of 1959. Anxious to forestall more Cuba-like revolutions in the hemisphere, the U.S. government became an advocate of demonstration reform efforts. By the early 1960s the PCB was no longer alone in seeking to welcome rural workers’ participation and resolve their concerns. Under Prestes, the party adhered to the mass-mobilization and popular-front models now supported by the USSR, but, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, reflecting the breakdown in the international communist order that China’s 1949 revolution had begun to express, dissidents appeared to challenge Moscow’s guidance. One of these was Julião, who was befriended by Castro in Havana in the early 1960s and came to reject the popular-front strategy. Another was the Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil—PCdoB), which was formed in 1962 by three former PCB central committee members and looked to China for models to hasten the transition to socialism through insurrection. While these groups concerned the authorities and fed ammunition to right-wing cold warriors, they had little social significance as protagonists of radical change (Camargo, 1986: 144–150; Gaspari, 2002a: 174–182). In the meantime, the PCB line of cooperation with the reformist “national bourgeoisie” became a mainstream movement.

With former labor minister Goulart now serving as president, the debate shifted from whether agrarian reform and rural unionization should exist to who would control the process and the unions once formed. The Catholics got the upper hand when the leader of the Christian Democratic party, André Franco Montoro, became labor minister for a brief period. Montoro put into effect the first federal regulations for the legal formation of rural unions. Even though ULTAB president Lindolfo Silva urged the minister to recognize all “rural unions without discrimination on the basis of ideology, politics, or religion,” Montoro’s ministry recognized 11 rural unions in the state of São Paulo alone, nearly all of them organized by José Rotta, head of the church’s conservative, harmony-oriented wing. So long as Montoro controlled the ministry, church-linked organizations stood the best chance of being recognized by the government (Barros, 1986: 114-116; Welch, 1999: 257–281).

But in July Montoro was out and Goulart confidant João Pinheiro Neto was in. Pinheiro Neto believed the PCB to be an important and useful ally in Goulart’s drive to make structural reforms that would ultimately reduce the mass appeal of revolutionary rhetoric. In November he issued new rural union formation regulations, replacing those of his predecessor with rules that both progressive Catholics and communists found easier to implement. Under these rules more than 100 unions were quickly recognized nationally, with 20 added to the rolls in São Paulo alone. To hasten the pace of what were then called “basic reforms,” Goulart asked Congress to create the Superintendência da Política Agrária (Superintendency of Agrarian Policy—SUPRA). The SRB warned planters that the “most important and dangerous” aspect of SUPRA was its duty to encourage “social equality” by “promoting the just distribution of property, tying its use to the social welfare.” Indeed, Goulart directed SUPRA to encourage the growth of peasant associations and rural labor unions, groups he hoped to use to build support for a broader reform package. Finally, in June 1963 the long-awaited Rural Laborer Statute became law, creating a comprehensive labor code for agriculture. When Goulart appointed Pinheiro Neto head of SUPRA, the agency became responsible for implementing the law (Kornis and Soares, 1984; Medeiros and Araújo, 1984; Barros, 1986: 158–165; Pinheiro Neto, 1993).

The statute called for a national rural labor confederation, something like an AFL-CIO of rural workers, that was to be called the Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores na Agricultura (National Confederation of Laborers in Agriculture—CONTAG). The chance to be associated with a recognized, national, representative rural labor body was of intense interest to all those engaged in rural labor politics and organizing. To form it they needed at least three state federations, and to found these federations they needed at least five recognized unions in each state. Hardball politics generally characterized



disputes between Catholics and communists as they positioned themselves to gain control of CONTAG. Seeing the dispute in cold-war terms, the United States encouraged the rivalry. The worst area for this was in the Northeast, where the popularity and radicalism of Julião's peasant leagues and the exceptional growth of ULTAB-oriented sugar worker unions motivated the United States to establish one of the first Alliance for Progress programs. Under the Alliance umbrella numerous cold-war agencies went to work in the region, including the Central Intelligence Agency, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), and the Food for Peace program. To offset the appeal of the leagues, the United States funneled money to church groups, especially the Serviço de Orientação Rural de Pernambuco (Rural Orientation Service of Pernambuco—SORPE), which was headed by Father Paulo Crespo. In São Paulo, the AIFLD- and CIA-financed Instituto Cultural de Trabalho (Cultural Institute of Labor—ICT) sponsored various projects, including training for Rotta and a Food for Peace project which, according to U.S. documents, "helped the [rural labor] union in its organizing efforts" (Page, 1972: 129–134; Bandeira, 1983: 70; Welch, 1999: 319).

Soon after Pinheiro Neto took control of SUPRA, U.S. Labor Attaché John Fishburn pressured him to favor Catholic over communist unions in the official recognition process. According to Fishburn's report of their meeting, Pinheiro Neto at first told him that SUPRA funds "would be made available to all who request them," that he planned to "recognize all unions organized by the communists or by the church," and that his office could "make no distinctions" between them. But Fishburn made his displeasure with this answer known, and by the end of the meeting Pinheiro Neto had "changed his stand and stated that while he would recognize rural unions by whomever organized, he would withhold funds if it were clear that those requesting them were communists." Nevertheless, Fishburn doubted the sincerity of Pinheiro Neto's anticommunism and did what he could to strengthen the church-oriented movement. It was a frustrating business, though. For the United States, the church's movement was too diffuse and weak to challenge the Red Menace (Welch, 1999: 319–322).

When CONTAG's founding convention finally took place, nearly 30 federations from at least 19 states sent delegates. Although it is unclear how many of these federations belonged to ULTAB, two-thirds of them were later declared "ghost federations" by the military regime that overthrew Goulart. Official records have not yet surfaced, so it is difficult to document these developments. But it is important to note that in São Paulo and other states the PCB had long been active in supporting groups of tenants and sharecroppers who were highly exploited by landlords. In other words, though some federations may have been hastily formed, the PCB-linked workers'

movement had a substantial history in São Paulo and, for that matter, in Paraná, where participants in the Porecatú War had joined with other disgruntled squatters to form another federation. In fact, the labor minister's guidelines for the formation of federations were purposefully made easy in order to "enlarge the composition of CONTAG," the PCB's *Terra Livre* reported. Given the spread and duration of ULTAB's investment in the rural labor movement, it was no surprise that they were able to take advantage of these new rules by quickly founding numerous organizations. Indeed, Fishburn's concerns about the influence of communists proved well-founded, for party members came out on top by the conclusion of the CONTAG conference. The PCB's Lindolpho Silva, for example, became CONTAG's first president (CONTAG, 1993: 10; Coletti, 1998: 65–68; Welch, 1999: 322–328; Silva, 2003; Cunha 2004).

In 1964 the PCB enjoyed increased access to the Goulart administration, feeding the fears of Goulart's anticommunist opponents. In a dramatic March 13 speech, Goulart attacked aspects of the Brazilian constitution, claiming that it legalized an "unjust and inhumane socioeconomic structure" and insisting on its amendment. Standing at his side were the communist rural labor spokesman Lindolpho Silva and Luís Tenório da Lima, a state legislator who headed the food workers' union. For some, their presence added an ominous note to the president's announced intention to fight for the elimination of constitutional language that required the government to pay cash for expropriated land. "The use of land is conditioned by the well-being of society," Goulart announced. "No one has the right to hold land without using it just by virtue of the concept of 'property rights.'" Before a cheering crowd, he reported having just signed the much-anticipated decree ordering SUPRA to confiscate *latifundios* from a 10-kilometer band along transportation right-of-ways for distribution to landless rural laborers. (In his memoirs, Pinheiro Neto revealed that, in a prior meeting with Luis Carlos Prestes to refine this very proposal, the PCB leader had urged a more cautious approach.) Moreover, Goulart promised to send an agrarian reform bill to Congress fundamentally redirecting agricultural production away from export commodities and toward the cultivation of food crops for internal consumption. Finally, he called for the legalization of the Communist party and promised to reform the electoral code by eliminating literacy requirements (Dulles, 1967: 269–272; Bandeira, 1983: 163–165; Moraes, 1989: 264–265; Castello Branco, 1975: 262–266; Pinheiro Neto, 1993: 187–202).

While supporters of radical agrarian reform cheered the president, the March 13 rally and speech offered Goulart's detractors the symbolic and emotional material they needed to launch their attack on the administration. Coffee planters and beef producers organized in the SRB maintained that rural

workers were uneducated, illiterate, and ill-prepared to run their own unions. Rural workers were so indiscriminate in their choice of leaders, they argued, that unions would simply serve the purpose of giving communists an opportunity to generate class struggle, promote “rural anarchy,” and create a state of chaos out of which power could quickly be seized. Since the beginning of his administration, SRB leaders had plotted with other ruling-class institutions and the military to weaken and oust Goulart. The conspirators were frequent callers at the U.S. embassy, where Ambassador Lincoln Gordon had drawn up a “contingency plan” outlining U.S. support for a Brazilian coup d’état as early as December. But Goulart’s speech seems to have tipped the balance in favor of those who urged immediate action, and the coup d’état began on March 31. Fearing a civil war, Goulart and his supporters offered little resistance, and the conspirators took control within 24 hours (Mourão Filho, 1978; Welch, 1995).

Given its radical agenda and close association with the communist-influenced rural labor movement, SUPRA was an early target for attack. Police invaded its offices, interrogated its staff, and confiscated everything. The new regime used the documents taken from SUPRA offices to discredit the agency and the rural labor movement in the press; officials also used them to initiate a criminal indictment against the agency and its staff. All involved were accused of subversion under the national security law, and for eight years the military government hounded them (D’Aguiar, 1976; Mourão Filho, 1978). The regime repudiated SUPRA and then repudiated the system that gave birth to it. Standing against a system that extended back 30 years to the time of Vargas, officials characterized themselves as revolutionaries. Victorious on the field of battle, they seized power determined to establish a system that would protect their property and privileges. A study of rural politics during the populist era shows that the cold war had to do more with control than with ideology, for the conspirators’ first concern was neither capitalism nor democracy but the occupation of state agencies that threatened their interests.

### **UNDER MILITARY RULE (1964–1985)**

Brazilians like to emphasize the nonviolent nature of their political history. From the conquest through independence and abolition to the cold war, there have been no prolonged civil wars in Brazil. The ruling class sometimes takes credit for this by arguing that its sense of grace arises from a European cultural inheritance, but its role has largely been one of maintaining control through discreet acts of violence and a cruel paternalism.

(Its remarkable ability to dominate millions of enslaved Africans for 350 years is one proof, as is the country's persistent contemporary ranking as among the worst in income distribution.) Thus, while the 1964 coup took but a few days and little bloodletting, the campaign to restore the predominance of Brazil's ruling class—a position uncharacteristically weakened in the preceding era—lasted years, cost thousands of lives, and remained incomplete by the time the armed forces relinquished power in 1985.

In the cold-war climate of the 1960s, the United States did not hesitate to recognize Brazil's military rulers. The coup was an early test of the Kennedy-Johnson administration's commitment to democracy, and the administration failed. It covered up its hypocrisy by introducing the Mann Doctrine. Under the doctrine, the United States signaled its willingness to accept the overthrow of democratic constitutional governments that failed to conform to U.S. containment policy (Parker, 1979: 59–61). The Goulart administration had behaved improperly by letting communists dominate CONTAG, expropriating land, and threatening to legalize the PCB. This is not to say that the United States made the coup happen—Brazil's landed, financial, and military rulers drove the overthrow—but the government's frustrations with Goulart and its anticommunist priorities (not to mention direct military and planning support) made it clear that the United States would welcome a coup.

In the aftermath of the coup, the United States denied knowledge of wrongdoing on the part of Brazil's new generals in command. Yet a stream of reports, worsening as hard-line military personnel took the initiative from 1965 on, revealed the regime's systematic and violent persecution of thousands of dissident military officials, communists, progressive Catholics, peasant league activists, rural and urban labor militants, and even moderate and conservative critics of the regime. Claiming that their prisoners held secret information about an international communist conspiracy to take over Brazil, the police subjected hundreds to an array of barbaric tortures: the "telephone" (slapping the ears until the eardrums burst), the "Chinese bath" (nearly drowning the victim in sewage), and the "parrot's perch" (prodding, pounding, and electrocuting a victim hung in a tied knot from a pole), to name but a few examples. The regime found just enough evidence of a plot in the machinations of Cuban and Chinese-linked conspirators to intensify the terror campaign into the 1970s. In the name of freedom, the United States invested millions of dollars in police and counterinsurgency training through the Office of Public Safety, eventually supporting a security privatization process that continues to reinforce the repressive apparatus of both the government and the private sector (Skidmore, 1988: 23–27; Huggins, 1998; Gaspari, 2002a). As elsewhere, the cold war excused terror in Brazil.

Although urban guerrillas such as PCB dissident Carlos Marighella received considerable attention, rural labor activists also suffered dramatically under military rule. A careful study published in 1987 confirmed the murder of 1,149 rural workers between 1964 and 1986, some, such as Nestor Vera, known communist militants and others of unknown ideological or organizational leanings (MST, 1986). Disappearing and killing nonactivists as well as activists functioned to intensify the intimidation. The terrorism persisted in the day-to-day existence of workers through common knowledge of the perpetrator's impunity, for prosecution of the killers was rare and conviction nonexistent. Thus, the shadow of unpunished murder hung over the countryside, a shadow cast over another form of terror: the intimidating hunger, poverty, and chronic illness that plagued an ever-growing number of migrant rural workers. The 1960s and 1970s were bad years for peasants and farm workers.

The first years of the coup left rural workers without institutional support. Many of the unions that SUPRA officials created in the first trimester of 1964 were denied recognition by the military and dismantled. All of CONTAG's officers were judged subversives, and all but 6 of the 29 state federations that had founded the confederation were eventually ruled "phantom" organizations and erased from the labor ministry register. Within a year, the regime shut down 2,381 rural labor unions for the same reason, leaving the country with about 490 functioning unions in August 1965 (Medeiros, 1989: 92–95; Welch, 1999: 343–344; Ricci, 1999: 51–52, 111). The regime imprisoned or forced into hiding or exile the people who had led the now-closed organizations. While Francisco Julião was hunted down, jailed, and exiled, Lindolpho Silva, Nester Vera, and Luíz Tenório de Lima initially escaped capture by going underground. The regime ended the political rights of these men and many more.

In April 1964, João Pinheiro Neto was replaced by Colonel Vital Queirós and eventually arrested as one of 102 "enemies of the state" under the first of what would become a series of five "institutional acts," unappealable executive orders that abrogated the constitution. One of Queirós's first acts was to rescind Goulart's right-of-way expropriation decree of March 13. In November, SUPRA was transformed into two new agencies, the Instituto Nacional de Desenvolvimento Agrário (National Institute of Agrarian Development—INDA) and the Instituto Brasileiro de Reforma Agrária (Brazilian Institute of Agrarian Reform—IBRA), neither of which promoted rural unionization. Under the Land Statute, the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform—INCRA)—which eventually replaced the IBRA and the INDA—encouraged the colonization of lands far in the interior. Here began official support for the migration and settlement that would eventually be blamed for engendering ecological disaster and human tragedy in the Amazon

Basin (Ianni, 1978; Borges, 1984; Kornis and Soares, 1984; Medeiros and Araújo, 1984).

Despite the crackdown on CONTAG and the dismantling of SUPRA, the military regime let stand the much-maligned rural unionization law of 1963. In its view, the rural labor union structure could help achieve greater productivity by containing strikes, channeling complaints through the courts, training workers to operate machinery, and dispensing social services—a policy known as *assistencialismo*—that could ameliorate some of the worst abuses of the transition from an agricultural sector dependent on manual labor to one dependent on machine power (Maybury-Lewis, 1994). This intensification of agricultural productivity was coupled with a process of extending Brazil's agricultural frontiers—into the Amazon region, for example—that together displaced millions of rural workers, smallholders, and squatters, forcing them into an oversaturated urban labor market (Martine, 1987). In February 1965, the labor minister Arnaldo Sussekind, a long-time informant to U.S. labor attachés, reformed the law to eliminate the five categories of rural professional activity that had earlier been established. This forced workers with different problems and perspectives—wage workers and small farmers, for instance—to join together in a single territorially based union, pitting workers with different interests against one another and causing untold internal problems for the labor movement.

The reformed rural labor system needed a reliable leader, and the military found its man in the Catholic layman José Rotta, who continued to receive training and financing from the United States. The regime appointed him to serve as trustee of the leaderless CONTAG. In April 1965 Sussekind allowed Rotta to engineer his transition to elected president of the confederation. Even though only 11 recognized state federations could participate, Rotta ensured the absence of distrusted delegates by waiting to inform them of the meeting until it was too late for them to reach it. Through this intrigue, he excluded delegates from the moderate Catholic federations of Rio Grande do Sul, Minas Gerais, Bahia, and Ceará and bought himself two years as president of CONTAG. Under his rule, the infant rural labor movement barely managed to crawl. Local union leaders became disgusted with the confederation and broke their ties with it until moderates and progressives mounted a campaign to vote Rotta out of office. In the 1967 election, Rotta was defeated by a slate led by the Pernambuco state federation leader, José Francisco da Silva. From then on CONTAG gradually grew in strength, and the union and federation structure became more meaningful to members (Ricci, 1999: 89–106; Welch, 1999: 347–348).

Many were later surprised to learn how Silva worked with communists. This was one of the ways the party stayed in the game. The military regime

that followed the Populist Republic greatly complicated life for the PCB. Many people on the left became frustrated with the party's search for nonviolent means of bringing about change, including the infiltration of organizations such as CONTAG. In the increasingly polarized postcoup era, the activism and influence of dissidents grew as the left fragmented into splinter groups, many dedicated to armed struggle. A notable example is the PCdoB. A band of nearly 70 militants withdrew to the Araguaia River basin to recuperate and train militants as well as build support for an insurrection among peasants. As a strategy for change, the guerrilla base in Araguaia failed miserably—in three operations between 1972 and 1974, the military exterminated the group, murdering all but the few militants who escaped capture (Gaspari, 2002b: 399–464; Portela, 2002). The PCdoB tried to defend and expand its militancy in the region with the August 1973 publication of a “proclamation” on the “liberty and rights of the people.” Generated through discussions with peasants in the region but written largely by São Paulo–based intellectuals, it began by prioritizing land questions and demanding land titles for peasant squatters, prosecution of land-grabbers (*grileiros*), and support such as price controls for small farmers; additional points called for improved rural working conditions and infrastructure improvements, including the construction of schools, clinics, and soccer fields (Portela, 2002: 239–243).

Looking back, it is difficult to imagine how such moderate demands could have been seen as revolutionary. Taken in cold-war context, the brutal assaults of the military in Araguaia—the regime expected “liquidation” of the guerrillas (Gaspari, 2002b: 402–404)—made sense only as a response bent on centralizing control, for INCRA simultaneously pursued similar development policies in other regions (Velho, 1972). Ironically, the government's reaction to the communist action stimulated responses in other sectors that promoted the resilience of communism in the Brazilian countryside.

With the Araguaia guerrillas repressed, a new phase in the history of the two main factions of Brazilian communism began to take shape. As mentioned above, the influence of the PCB filtered down through the organized rural labor movement; in the meantime, the PCdoB's influence reemerged through the work of communism's most traditional adversary, the Roman Catholic Church. While the influences on the church were diverse, a straight line connects the “little Araguaia war” with the formation of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission—CPT), an agency dedicated to helping rural laborers and peasants that the Catholic and Lutheran churches founded in 1975. The Araguaia region represented the cutting edge of a painful development process carved out by the military government, one that inspired the activism not only of the PCdoB guerrillas but also of the Catholic Church. At the same time, the military regime's broad definition of “enemies

of the state” included secular and lay church men and women. As repression of the guerrillas sought first to neutralize their support among peasants through acts of intimidation, priests who had made “an option for the poor” saw themselves and their followers treated as if they were communists. Out of this cauldron came one of the first signs of the church’s future commitment to the rural poor (Indians, peasants, and rural laborers): a 1974 protest letter from the region’s bishop, Pedro Casaldáliga, calling on the church to defend the rural laboring classes. Uniting bishops from the region, the Pastoral Meeting of the Amazon held in Goiânia, Goiás, founded the CPT. In January 2004, the CPT cofounder and coordinator Antônio Canuto told me that “the anticommunism of the military defined us as communists, and we saw our work in that light.” The explicitly class-conscious documents, the Marxist readings distributed to peasants, and the revival of radical agrarian reform in the years that followed point to the perseverance of grassroots communism in the countryside during the military regime (Poletto and Canuto, 2002).

The CPT emerged in the context of broader changes signaling the collapse of Brazil’s cold-war regime. Everywhere the military turned to claim legitimacy as a representation of the popular will, it met with reproof. In the world of soccer, which was explicitly supported by the military as a tranquilizer of the masses, the 1970 World Cup champions placed a sorry fourth in 1974 (Lever, 1983). Later that year, in an overwhelming majority of state legislative elections, the military lost control to the one “opposition” party allowed to exist. Meanwhile, a 35 percent hike in prices consumed the increased earnings a fragment of the working class had gained during the “economic miracle” of the early 1970s and labor unrest began to grow (Gaspari, 2003; Pomar, 2004). A “new unionism” emphasizing grassroots mobilization gradually shattered the labor peace the military had constructed through increased wages, co-optation of union leaders, *assistencialismo*, and outright coercion. In 1979 the new unionists joined with other radical opponents of the regime such as CPT activists to challenge the regime with a new political party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ party—PT). The new unionists challenged union bosses who had collaborated with the regime, and in 1983 enough “new unions” existed to found an extralegal but tolerated national labor body called the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Unified Laborers’ Central—CUT). These new organizations—the CPT, the PT, and the CUT—took the initiative in pushing the transition from military to civilian rule (Keck, 1992; Maria Helena Moreira Alves, interview, Rio de Janeiro, August 27, 2004).

In the agricultural sector, the PCB and PCdoB worked behind the scenes to strengthen CONTAG, enhance the social services of the unions, and eventually organize strikes. The first mass mobilization came in 1979, when 20,000 sugarcane cutters in Pernambuco went on strike. Hundreds of thousands of



sugar workers in the region joined them over the course of the next few years. These strikes as well as elections increasingly won by opposition candidates were carefully orchestrated to adhere to the strict rules established for union activism by the regime so as to avoid a repressive backlash. PCB militants excelled in this realm: through CONTAG and other standing organizations, they worked to win benefits at the outer edges of the system (Siguad, 1980; Coletti, 1998: 161–187).

One big problem with this strategy was that a large portion of the wage-earning rural labor force could not legally be unionized because of its status as seasonal rather than full-time labor. This portion of the labor force grew to become a majority, especially during the harvest season, when tens of thousands of cane cutters descended on Brazil's vast fields of sugarcane ready to work (Siguad, 1979; D'Incao, 1975). Living at times in stalls barely fit for horses, earning wages that hardly lasted the harvest season, and pressured to produce more and more just to stay employed, these workers forced a change in strategy in the early 1980s. In the sugar zones of São Paulo state, the migrant workers found support in the CPT and developed a platform of demands. Strikes of mass proportions exploded in the region on the eve of the 1984 harvest season. Taken by surprise, the labor-union bureaucracy of CONTAG and the state federation at first tried to help authorities contain the workers but soon found a way to ride the wave of popular discontent, helping to shape historic labor agreements that improved conditions for all rural workers and expanded union membership. In these struggles, former communist militants like Irineu Luis de Moraes and "red diaper babies" like union leader Elio Neves, whose father had been a PCB militant, played important roles (Welch, 1999: 349–362; Penteadó, 2000).

Another departure from the norms the military regime envisioned became concrete in 1984 when the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra (Landless Rural Laborers' Movement—MST) was founded. This movement arose first from the demands for land of tens of thousands of former peasants who had lost their farms to dam construction projects, or the expansion of agro-industries, large-scale export farming, and cattle ranching, from the desperate needs of migrant rural workers, many of whom lived most of the year in slums on the margins of cities with no jobs or income, and from the visionary direct-action strategies of CPT activists like Father Arnildo Fritzen and dissident government workers like the economist João Pedro Stédile. As had the PCdoB militants who became part of peasant communities in the Araguaia region in the late 1960s, MST-activists-to-be encouraged the landless to help themselves and promoted an anticapitalist view of communal farming. In 1979 they carried out their first direct action by occupying lands of questionable title in the southern

state of Rio Grande do Sul. The process of occupation, confrontation with authorities, and eventual settlement that began there became the *modus operandi* of MST organizing committees as they spread around the nation, working to help hundreds of thousands of poor people establish themselves in the countryside (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999; Fernandes, 2000; Branford and Rocha, 2002; Wright and Wolford, 2003).

### BRAZIL'S COLD WAR CONCLUDES

Slowly but surely, the cold war ended for Brazilians. Many rural labor militants from the pre-1964 movement resurfaced in the final stages of the military's transitional process of gradual democratization called the "opening" (*abertura*). A general amnesty in 1977 allowed former activists like Lindolpho Silva and Francisco Julião to cautiously reenter political life. For the first time since 1965, voters directly elected state governors in 1982, and a handful of new political parties such as the PT replaced the rigid bipartisan structure imposed by the regime. Mass rallies appealed for direct election of the president, too, but the military resisted this demand and scheduled an indirect election—votes cast by representatives in an electoral college—for January 1985, after which the regime planned to withdraw from power. The college overwhelmingly supported the opposition candidate, bringing Brazil its first civilian president in 21 years. But the winner, former president Goulart's prime minister from 1961, Tancredo Neves, died suddenly before taking office, and the vice-presidential choice, the long-time civilian collaborator of the regime José Sarney, became president. The following year, all restrictions on political organization were lifted, and the PCB and PCdoB came out into the open (Couto, 1999).

Although the country seemed on a "return to the future" path, profound changes had occurred since 1964, and rural workers could have few nostalgic illusions about the New Republic. The military's modernization project affected rural workers and small farmers around the country. Colonization moved peasants from the south to the north; demands for beef, orange juice, and soybeans further concentrated landholding; subsidies for sugarcane-alcohol production turned the central southern region into a gigantic cane field; and subsidies for motorized farm equipment displaced thousands of workers. The bulk of rural labor was now composed of migrant seasonal workers; another group included small farmers. Inadequate financing and market access perturbed the latter category, while forced migration, brutal working conditions, and low wages caused severe problems for the former. The situation created problems that demanded solutions, attracting numerous

organizations, nearly all of them left-of-center, with perspectives at least as radical as those of groups summarily suppressed during most of the cold war.

The theory, practice, and organization traditionally employed by communists gained renewed importance as the New Republic took shape. Analysts agree that communists themselves were important to both the rural labor movement, as represented by the giant, pseudo-governmental CONTAG, and INCRA, the government's lead executive agency for implementing agrarian reform policy. "The conceptions of CONTAG were formulated by aides who were PCB and MR-8 militants who privileged the rural proletariat," one observer concluded (Ricci, 1999: 160). "The majority of the superintendents of INCRA were from the PCdoB and PCB," said Stédile (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 52). Indeed, the rural labor union confederation arose from the PCB-led rural labor movement, and the party's main strategy was to build alliances with whomever or whatever it considered progressive in the established order, even in the context of military rule. Thus, while the discourse of the military regime was fervently anticommunist and the history of repression is well documented, both parties and the militants who pursued a legalistic approach survived. In fact, CONTAG saw its greatest growth during the military regime as president José Francisco da Silva and his staff, many alleged communists, founded 1,206 new unions between 1971 and 1980. A leadership education program accompanied this campaign, and the number of rural workers organized increased by millions, making CONTAG the largest rural labor-union movement in the world (Ricci, 1999: 82–83). Following the restoration of civilian rule, important agrarian reform officials such as Ivan de Otero Ribeiro and Raul Jungmann came out of PCB ranks. Much like the ULTAB-SUPRA project of the precoup period, the CONTAG-INCRA project of the 1980s was to unify the entire rural labor movement under one organizational umbrella (Coletti, 1998: 163–169; Ricci, 1999: 171–205; Santos, 1996: 29–31; Mazzeo, 1999; Branford and Rocha, 2002: 185–194).

While communist influence was concentrated in these official institutions, communist ideology significantly impacted new social movement organizations like the CPT and the MST (Grzybowski, 1990: 35; Porto Gonçalves, 2005: 24). CPT activists participated in CONTAG congresses and infiltrated rural labor unions. They saw the union structure as useful but in need of revitalization. The CPT, like the MST, opposed the centralizing ambitions of CONTAG and INCRA and was determined to remain autonomous and active. The MST invited old PCB militants like Lindolpho Silva to address its congresses. Essential lessons came in the form of things to ignore. Theoretically, the MST made a complete break with communism by rejecting modernist ideas about the extinction of the peasantry. For the MST, the peasant was not

an object but the subject-agent of change whose health and well-being could be the salvation of Brazil. In contradistinction to orthodox Marxist ideology, MST intellectuals argue that history does not determine the transformation of peasants into rural proletarians. To the contrary, MST coordinators and members see themselves as chief agents of the reverse process, turning rural and urban proletarians into peasants. In practical terms, moreover, MST intellectuals concluded that partisanship had compromised the rural labor movements of the past, and it avoided becoming an appendage of any party, even such an initially important ally as the PT. The male dominance of older organizations also seemed problematic to MST activists. Through the experience of occupation, the landless movement had learned to appreciate the fundamental importance of women and children in sustaining the struggle, and the MST opted to incorporate whole families whenever possible. But other communist symbols and ideas inspired imitation. For several years, the MST adopted the precoup motto of the PCB—"Land for those who work it." The MST flag is as crimson as any communist flag. A standard militant's bibliography features Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Ernesto (Che) Guevara. In flags and literature the movement specifically linked itself to historic communists such as Lenin, Gramsci, Prestes, Mao, Castro, and Marighella (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 31–56; Bogo, 1999; Fernandes, 2000).

According to the logic of the cold war, communists and communism were a dying breed by the end of the 1980s and capitalist, neoliberal ideologies were not only ascendant but verging on hegemonic. The history of the Brazilian rural labor movement demonstrates the fallacy of these assumptions. Despite a cold war that included severe repression (coercion) as well as ambitious incorporation schemes (consent), the capitalist ruling class failed to establish hegemony in the Brazilian countryside. When the cold war ended, the symbols and ideas of communism had a renewed vitality, and communist activists, though no longer linked to Moscow, Beijing, or Havana, were more influential than ever in the agrarian sector. This turn of events has many meanings, most of them ironic. The outcome was nothing like that envisioned by communists or anticommunists at the start of the cold war. Despite the appeal of some ideas and individuals, Brazil's communist parties were in disarray as political forces linked to an international movement, but so was the panacea of the liberal market economy offered by anticommunists. Brazil, along with many of the world's nations and people, experienced the cold war in much the way a ping-pong ball experiences novice players. It would have been better not to play. In the Brazilian countryside, hundreds of thousands of people continue to defy the rules of the game as they utilize a hodge-podge of ideas to try to create the utopian future promised by both capitalists and communists throughout the cold war.

## NOTE

1. The 1992 PCB congress voted to dissolve the PCB and reorganize as the Partido Popular Socialista (Popular Socialist party—PPS) (<http://www.pps.com.br>). This alienated some members, who were dismayed by the new party's lack of revolutionary intent, and in 1996 they began a campaign to resurrect the PCB ([http://www.pcb.org.br/historia\\_N.html](http://www.pcb.org.br/historia_N.html)).

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