

State Capitalism under Neoliberalism: The Case of Agriculture and Food in Brazil

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State Capitalism under Neoliberalism: The Case of Agriculture and Food in Brazil edited by **Alessandro Bonanno** and **Josefa Salete Barbosa Cavalcanti** Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019. 184 pp. \$? Cloth. ISBN 9781498589895

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This collection of papers, edited by two renowned rural sociologists Alessandro Bonanno and Josefa S.B. Cavalcanti, arises from a seminar entitled “The Emancipatory Role of State Capitalism in Brazil” held in Recife, Brazil in November 2017. Nearly all the contributors are Brazilian academics based in Brazil, very well placed, therefore, to comment authoritatively on the recent experience of “state capitalism” in their country. Given the general ebbing of the “pink tide” of “state capitalism” in Latin America, this volume is a timely and topical assessment of “post-neoliberalism” in that region’s largest, most populous country. Specifically, this book provides a welcome analysis of the enhanced intervention by the Brazilian state (“state capitalism”) under the Lula and Dilma governments (2003-2016), actions intended both to stimulate capital accumulation, and to mitigate poverty through greater social security provision and (limited) land redistribution. These left-leaning regimes of the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) confronted what appears to be the perennial conundrum for Latin American states: how to alleviate neoliberalism’s negative impacts on working-class incomes, welfare provision, and family farming, whilst simultaneously remaining committed to key tenets of that doctrine through support for export-oriented growth based, centrally, on large-scale agribusiness (on which state revenues largely depend). This sets the context for the book’s key question: whether the type of state capitalism implemented in Brazil between 2003 and 2016 represented an emancipatory alternative to neoliberal globalization.

In answering this question, the contributors’ conclusions comprise a pretty consistent, although qualified, “no” (it is interesting to note, however, that the editors and contributors never really specify what they mean by “emancipatory”). The negative conclusion is qualified

because, while the authors see the continued dependence on agri-food exports and political concessions to the agrarian oligarchy as deeply compromising of “emancipatory” policies, they nonetheless acknowledge the real efforts and selective (albeit limited) successes of the PT regimes in alleviating poverty, improving the fortunes of the family farm sector, enhancing women’s rights, and undertaking redistributive land reform. The (necessarily?) deeply compromised character of PT policies, seeking revenue growth through agro-export capitalism whilst mitigating its negative impacts through welfarism and selective support for the small farm sector, is thus, rightly, an insistent theme throughout the book.

In this way, the opening chapter by Bonanno explores how support from the state under PT administrations fomented a globally competitive and successful TNC (JBS) while concluding that such success has done little to improve the lot of “the poor and the working and middle classes” and has failed to “promote economic development relevant to the majority of the national population” (p. 38). In a similar vein, chapter 2 by Paulo Niederle and Catia Grisa describes the relationship between PT policies and the preceding neoliberalism of the Cardoso regime as a “transition” rather than a rupture, with the neo-developmental paradigm adopted by the former bearing greater resemblance to the latter than to early “developmental approach” deployed by the Brazilian state between the 1940s and 1970s. The authors thus emphasize the contradictory nature of PT policies, simultaneously supporting family farming through socially-oriented and redistributive measures, whilst introducing macro-structural policies to benefit the agro-exporting oligarchy. The success of the the latter, however, has been achieved only by jeopardizing the well-being of the former.

In chapter 3, Andrea Butto analyzes the “March of the Daisies” (*Marcha das Margaritas*), the largest social movement of rural women in Brazil and its struggle for the redistribution of land and the adoption of agroecology. She stresses, perhaps more than any of the other contributors, the *positive* role that PT administrations have played, in this instance for the democratization of labour relations in agriculture and the conditions of rural women. Whilst recognizing that this positive (legitimation) role should be balanced against the adverse impacts of the PT’s accumulation imperative, the author underscores the former’s achievements by stark comparison with the elimination or attenuation of pro-democratization policies since undertaken by the incumbent neo-conservative regime. The

next chapter, by Cinthia R.N. Reis and Stephane G.E. Gueneau, reverts to the qualified “no” in response to the “emancipatory question”. Using the example of state support for agro-export in the São Francisco Valley, and deploying (implicitly) a class interest analysis (more enlightening in fact than the authors’ avowed Foucauldian approach), the authors point correctly to the dual and contradictory nature of state intervention. This arises from the *structural limits of state actions that attempt simultaneously to satisfy classes with incompatible interests*. Thus, the PT’s attempts to improve conditions of the classes of labour (legitimacy role) ran up against its efforts to enhance the competitiveness of agri-business capital (accumulation role). The authors capture the essence of the PT dilemma: “while it is arguable that the ultimate objectives of the state under neo-developmentalism were emancipatory..., the idea that the Brazilian state could simultaneously support labour and management emerges as seriously flawed” (p. 89). The chapter (6) by Guilherme J.M. Silva reaches an identical conclusion, indicating the irreconcilable contradiction in PT policy between the neo-developmental aim of wealth redistribution and social justice, on the one hand, and the neoliberal requirement of generating high rates of profit, on the other.

Beatriz M. de Melo in the next chapter reprises the same theme, stressing the contradictory nature of PT policy in attempting to improve the conditions for small, family agriculture whilst simultaneously promoting export agri-business in the hope of gaining from global market competition. Interestingly, however, she seems to suggest that ultimately it was the strength of “global trends” which were the undoing of the PT, “a reminder of the difficulties that nation-states encounter in their dealings with global economic forces” (p.145). While the strength of transnational capital (and the imperial states that lie behind it) should not, of course, be underestimated, this conclusion nonetheless seems to let the PT “off the hook” somewhat. The PT deliberately chose the line of “least resistance”, appeasing the agri-food oligarchy in the vain hope that export-led growth could resolve the structural problems of precarity, landlessness, and land-poverty when, in reality, it was, and remains, the cause of them. Understanding this structural contradiction leads to the conclusion that the PT project, as *dual policy*, was doomed from the outset.

The most penetrating theoretical analysis comes in the editors' Conclusion. In general, this chapter is absolutely "spot on", and the editors' final and decisive conclusion, that pro-capitalist forces limited the ability of the PT regimes to implement a truly emancipatory agenda, such that their contradictory actions "were the result of specific forms of class contestation that defined capitalist social relations in Brazil" (p. 176), seems entirely apposite. While rightly placing "class struggle" as the ultimate arbiter of politico-economic dynamics, this conclusion again reprises the qualified "no" in response to the "emancipatory question" and, thereby, perhaps underestimates the degree to which the PT compromised its own fortunes by nailing its colours firmly to the mast of agro-export productivism. Other minor quibbles in what is otherwise a fine volume are: first, that there is no explicit mention of imperialism and of the fundamental, continuing, division of the world capitalist system into imperium, sub-imperium, and periphery, a frame that might have lent better contextualization to the discussion of class contestation; second, the discussion of the "failed resolution of the agrarian question", while very welcome, suggests a "populist" definition of small/family/peasant farming, failing to differentiate class fractions within this sector. Such conflation tends to generate a "progressive", petty capitalist, rather than "radical", anti-capitalist, class positionality (Tilzey 2018), and perhaps explains the editors' advocacy of social democracy, rather than socialism, as the foundation of emancipatory politics. This also throws light on the editors' qualified, rather than unqualified, "no" in response to the "emancipatory question".

Tilzey, M. 2018. *Political Ecology, Food Regimes, and Food Sovereignty: Crisis, Resistance, Resilience*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
