

Book Review

**Ruy Braga (2012) *A política do precariado: do populismo à hegemonia lulista*. Brazil: Boitempo.
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Review by Gianpaolo Baiocchi, New York University, New York

Ruy Braga's *A política do precariado: do populismo à hegemonia lulista* – Politics of the Precariat: From Populism to Lula's Hegemony – is a synthesis of the author's recent works, including a number of shorter essays published since 2008 in a monthly column, which engages in a debate that has been carried out with some vigour in Brazil in recent years – about the class nature of *Lulismo*. The book, a winner of the prestigious Jabuti prize of 2013, advances that discussion significantly while proposing a new framework for the study of class relations in Brazil and making a broader argument for a critical public labour sociology. It is a novel, powerful and timely intervention that has already received acclaim in Brazil but certainly deserves a readership abroad.

The central analytic of the book, as the title suggests, is its reading of the politics of the *precariado*, the recent neologism for the precarious proletariat, the “worst paid and most exploited fraction of the urban proletariat and the rural working class” (p. 12).¹ The concept of the precariat owes its origins to European sociology (particularly Robert Castel in France, but also Guy Standing in the United Kingdom), but Braga returns to Marx's description of “relative superpopulation” to develop a much more analytically precise concept: these are workers who are part of a population that is floating (they enter and leave employment quickly), latent (a young population waiting for opportunity), and impoverished. For Braga, this definition excludes both the lumpenproletariat as well as professional workers. It is not Braga's intention to debate some of this international literature, but he does draw important distinctions from other Brazilian authors, especially noting that this differs from Singer's “subproletariat” and Souza's “*batalhadores*” (strugglers).

Central to Braga's overall argument is that Brazilian class relations cannot be understood without returning this class fraction to the centre of the story. It is neither an exception nor a simple surplus, but a fundamental fact of class relations in peripheral capitalism. To demonstrate this, he traces its history (through re-readings of Brazilian classics) through the last five decades. And as Braga argues, as he approaches the present, this class fraction is not a simple passive recipient of *Lulismo*'s gifts, but rather an important part of a hegemonic project that now supplants an earlier, populist moment.

The first part of the book is an interesting intellectual history that reconstructs the role of the precariat in the Brazilian literature on class formation and class analysis in the 1960s and 1970s through the artifice of the “ethnographic revisit”. Early scholarship, as described in Chapter 1,

¹ Citations that appear in this manner refer to pages in the book being reviewed.

mostly centres on the (Centro de Sociologia Industrial e do Trabalho (CESTIT, Centre for Industrial and Labor Sociology) and the work of such scholars as Leôncio Rodrigues, and saw the precariat through the lens of underdevelopment. It mostly argued that the backwardness of the working class as a whole, and of the precariat itself, often its unnamed and most backward element, kept it as a passive block. Braga contests this by using the scholarship itself.

Chapter 2 focuses on the development of the class analytic framework in the late 1970s (now focusing on the likes of Chico de Oliveira and Francisco Weffort), which took place against the backdrop of new labour mobilisation at the time. This new scholarship tended to see the working class as more of an agent, for example recasting populism in Brazil as a response to labour militancy rather than as a project from above, but by and large these scholars still neglected the precariat. Again, re-reading the literature, Braga redefines Brazilian populism along the way:

Instead of passive behavior liable to political manipulation, populist hegemony was characterized by a state of permanent disquiet among workers, especially among their most precarious fraction, which was expressed by repeated misunderstandings (*desencontros*) between the activism of the base and the moderation of union leadership (p. 66)

The second half of the book is fascinating and likely to be of most interest to non-Brazilian readers. They are two ethnographic reconstructions, one about strikes at the birth of the new unionism in Brazil, and one about a contemporary call centre in São Paulo. The historical chapter reconstructs the relationship between union bureaucracy, the experience of the precariat and the new unionism. Going back to the strikes in the early 1980s and the formation of a political tendency within the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, Workers' Party) around Lula, Braga identifies the beginnings of a new practice. It is there that the Lulista hegemony begins, around the absorption of the most notable activists into the union structure combined with small material concessions for workers. The call centre chapter rests on Braga's own work, and there he finds not passivity but ample evidence for the possibility of collective consciousness sufficient to "guarantee some steps towards self-organizing".

Finally, then, the book comes around to its conclusion on Lulismo. It combines the passive consent of the masses, seduced by redistributive policies and modest wage gains arising from economic growth with the active consent of union leadership – lured in turn "by their position in the state apparatus, and the countless material benefits conferred by control of pension funds" (p. 181).

This is a short book that does a lot. It has been rightly recognised as a very important contribution, and I will refrain from detailing the multiple reasons why, but I agree with the assessment that this book opens the way for a renewed practice of labour sociology in Brazil and merits readership abroad. Its methodological innovation of the appropriation of Burawoy's revisit is alone worth reading. And just as the book does a lot, it also rests on a broad set of influences: it draws from class-analytic critical sociology, a hybrid Marxism that is equal parts Trotsky, Gramsci and elements of Burawoy's public sociology. The book's theoretical infrastructure reflects this eclecticism without letting go of analytical rigour.

That said, it is worth raising three interrelated issues that the book suggests for further debate and discussion. Some readers will notice a gap in the book between the description of the emergence of Lulismo in the early 1980s and the experience of workers in call centres in the 2010s. The book

describes the trends in the years in between, but has little to say about the political changes in the Workers' Party itself during this time or of the changes in the country's politics. By the time Lula arrived in Brasilia in 2003 the Worker's Party had had experiences in government at all levels – some successful, some not – and had accumulated two decades of parliamentary experience as well. Labour unions transformed during this time, becoming ever closer to the party while becoming increasingly bureaucratized, while social movements achieved some gains and contested very many issues across the political landscape. But in the 1980s and 1990s movements across the spectrum came to see themselves represented by a political party that managed, over time, to craft a way of governing that seemed to reflect very many different agendas. It is difficult to imagine the hegemony of Lulismo without the very many activists who came to populate the ministries, to propose national conferences on so many different themes, and so on. Civil society, in the minds of many observers, has been the terrain of the making of both contestation and consent. This kind of Gramscian observation is indeed very compatible with Braga's argument about the active consent of union leaders, but is not developed in the book.

The book also gives a strong impression that Lulismo's hegemony is a *fait accompli*. By reading its archaeology back into São Bernardo in 1983, it is difficult to see much room for contestation, contradiction, or even much of any paths-not-taken with Lulismo. Certainly one sees here traces of a debate with others in Brazil, notably André Singer, but it might be interesting to develop this line of discussion more explicitly.

A third, related, issue has to do with the lives and worlds of the precariat *outside* of work. Since this is a population that floats in and out of positions and has ambitions for another life for itself, one has to imagine that identities and subjectivities and their political refraction must reflect this. There is fascinating work in Brazilian anthropology today on new urban populations – from new religious identities, to new cultural expressions, to novel ethnic identifications. Some of these populations are no doubt part of the precariat, and it is tempting to read the ontological disquiet of the precariat, which Braga so eloquently describes at work, into new recent forms of urban cultural expression like Bailes Funk. Is it important?

I raise these three issues – civil society, historical contingencies, and the world beyond the workplace – as a way to continue the discussion that the book itself suggests. The book is an admirable example of a new kind of scholarship, which among other things, invites not only readership but dialogue. I hope it achieves the international public it deserves.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gianpaolo Baiocchi is based at the Gallatin School of Individualized Studies and Sociology at New York University. [Email: gb97@nyu.edu]