1-1-2000

Giving Voice to Brazil's Rural Labor Movement

Cliff Welch

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol21/iss1/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
Giving Voice to Brazil's Rural Labor Movement

I met Jofre Correa Netto and Irineu Luis de Moraes on the same day, one after the other, but I spent the next eleven years giving voice to Irineu’s story, not Jofre’s. Both men were members of the Brazilian Communist Party, which had been particularly active in the rural labor movement that burst forth throughout the country in the early 1960s, only to be suppressed in 1964 by a military overthrow of civilian rule. In 1986, finding next to nothing written about the rural labor movement, I decided to make this my dissertation research theme back in 1986. Little by little I learned Portuguese and gained the confidence of academics linked to the Communist party. By 1988, they trusted me enough to open the door to a clandestine network of militants. On the eve of the Cold War’s demise, I was given a key to the Communist movement of Brazil. After reading dozens of articles and documents about Jofre in archives and old newspapers, I found myself suddenly looking into his bright eyes. No sooner had I met him then my guide, anxious to introduce me to other old militants, whisked me away to Irineu’s house. I had never heard of Irineu, but something about him—a quiet strength? or the very fact that his clandestine work had remained clandestine?—attracted my attention and I felt compelled to include him in my study, too. That very day, both men agreed to let me interview them, to let me capture their memories and carry them away in a few plastic cases of magnetic tape.

Eventually, my Brazilian friend and colleague Sebastião Geraldo and I turned several interview sessions with Irineu into a memoir that was published by a Brazilian trade press (Welch and Geraldo, 1992). Just last year, I published a monograph on the rural labor movement that used his story in nearly every chapter. During the last years of our work, Irineu enjoyed a kind of recognition he received from the public a few years after we published his memoir. He showed up at my hotel, cried, and generally expressed some anger about not being included in the research. He was a kind man, a true friend. Even though he never wanted to write about his life, he gave me the opportunity to do so. It was a great honor to be trusted by these men to capture their stories. I hope their legacy will continue to inspire others to speak out against injustice and fight for freedom.
Giving Voice to Brazil’s Rural Labor Movement

Brazil’s “Backlands Fidel Castro” Jofre Correa Netto behind bars in 1960. Using the National Security Law, the Brazilian government kept Jofre jailed for more than two years in the early 1960s.

Both Jofre and Irineu Luís de Azevedo, one after the other, gave voice to Brazil’s rural labor movement, one after the other, over seven years giving voice to Brazil’s rural labor movement. Both men were members of the Communist Party, deeply active in the rural movement that took root throughout the 1980s. By 1986, the party had been suppressed and only to be suppressed when Brazil was ruled by civilian rule.

Both men trusted me enough to bring them to the Communist network of clandestine network of archives and old men. I had met Jofre and Irineu’s house. I did nothing with Jofre’s story. Although I had abandoned Jofre, Jofre had not abandoned me. He showed up at my hotel, called me in the U.S. from Brazil, and generally subverted my efforts to let his story go. Even though several scholars took an interest in his history, he wanted me to write about him, too. A book published in Brazil in 1989 included three pages on his militancy and several photos but he used this, like other things written on him, as leverage with me (Medeiros, 1989). By 1995, he could see that the attention he received for a life of struggle but for the opportunity it provided him to preach the need for radical social change.

During the time I worked on Irineu’s story, I did nothing with Jofre’s story. Although I had abandoned Jofre, Jofre had not abandoned me. He showed up at my hotel, called me in the U.S. from Brazil, and generally subverted my efforts to let his story go. Even though several scholars took an interest in his history, he wanted me to write about him, too. A book published in Brazil in 1989 included three pages on his militancy and several photos but he used this, like other things written on him, as leverage with me (Medeiros, 1989). By 1995, he could see that the attention he received for a life of struggle but for the opportunity it provided him to preach the need for radical social change.

During the time I worked on Irineu’s story, I did nothing with Jofre’s story. Although I had abandoned Jofre, Jofre had not abandoned me. He showed up at my hotel, called me in the U.S. from Brazil, and generally subverted my efforts to let his story go. Even though several scholars took an interest in his history, he wanted me to write about him, too. A book published in Brazil in 1989 included three pages on his militancy and several photos but he used this, like other things written on him, as leverage with me (Medeiros, 1989). By 1995, he could see that the attention he received for a life of struggle but for the opportunity it provided him to preach the need for radical social change.
dia was not nearly so great as that Irineu enjoyed after our memoir was published. The fact that a researcher from the United States had taken an interest in Irineu’s life seemed to validate it more than Jofre’s.

It is an ironic twist of cultural imperialism that the things core countries want to consume from peripheral countries make them suddenly more precious and good. Somehow, Brazilian coffee and oranges exported to the U.S. are tastier than those left behind for domestic consumption. I eventually awakened to the power of a foreign researcher’s choices and realized that they were often perceived as public acts that might well influence lives in the present and future. In this context, research topics or subjects had to be selected as consciously as possible. Knowing this now, it is useful to look back and ask why I decided to “do” Irineu and not Jofre?

At the time, I gave myself one intellectual reason for favoring Irineu over Jofre. My contact with Irineu led me to concentrate on the struggle of rural laborers for legal protections and bargaining rights. I reasoned that Jofre had fought for land rights more than labor rights, so I told myself that his story was less relevant to my ultimate goal. And yet, the movements for land and labor rights were so well integrated by the Communist party that my reasoning was not sound. The newspapers demonstrated beyond a doubt that Jofre had been an influential public figure in the struggle to build Brazil’s rural labor movement. Moreover, the struggle that made him famous is best classified as a labor rights campaign rather than a land struggle.

In 1959, a few months after the Cuban Revolution, Jofre became a national media figure, described by two major newspapers (Última Hora and O Estado de São Paulo) as the “Fidel Castro of the Backlands,” during a struggle of tenant farmers to prolong their tenancy on land in a frontier region of São Paulo named for the nearby town of Santa Fé do Sul. To most people Jofre was Captain Jofre, an honorary title recognizing both charisma and his tour of Brazil’s World War II contingent. Discourse in Santa Fé helped squelch a tenant-squatter dispute that would otherwise have been squashed by the landlord. Jofre’s attention-getting ability became evident when one of these gunmen was shot and miraculously survived the caliber blasts. From then on, his public appearances attracted attention, and the military golpe of 1964 twice ordered him jailed as a security risk. His imprisonment left no doubt that Jofre had been right. The leadership of Brazil’s rural labor movement had been wrong of me to claim I now realize that at some reasons were chief among the sons, I came to distrust and p...
Giving Voice to Brazil’s Rural Labor Movement

that Irineu enjoyed
ted. The fact that a
ticates had taken an
validate it more

al imperialism that
ron from them suddenly more
Brazilian coffee
U.S. are tastier than
ic consumption. I
power of a foreign
ized that they were
might well in­
and future. In this
jects had to be se­
able. Knowing this
and ask why I de­
jofre?

one intellectual re­
tover jofre. My con­
concentrate on the
legal protections
ized that jofre had
than labor rights, so
was less relevant to
the movements for
well integrated by
reasoning was not
stated beyond a
influential public
Brazil’s rural labor
struggle that made
a labor rights cam­

for the Cuban Revo­
ional media figure,
peers (Última Hora
Castro of
guage of tenant farm­

for the nearby town
people jofre was
recognizing both

his charisma and his tour of duty as a soldier in
Brazil’s World War II contingent. His dynamic
presence in Santa Fé helped gain state mediation
of a dispute that would otherwise have been si­
ently squashed by the landlord’s gunmen. Jofre’s
attention-getting ability became even more clear
when one of these gunmen tried to kill him and
he miraculously survived two point-blank .38
caliber blasts. From then on, nearly everyone of
his public appearances attracted the media. Be­
fore the military golpe of 1964, the government
thrice ordered
him
jailed as a threat to national
security. His imprisonment provided the party
opportunities to challenge the state’s policies with
national “Free Jofre” campaigns. The paper trail
left no doubt that Jofre had been a significant
part of Brazil’s rural labor movement, so it had
been wrong of me to claim I could ignore him.

I now realize that at some base level personal
reasons were chief among the various factors that
led me away from Jofre initially. For various rea­

Irineu Luis de Moraes (left) interviewed on
national television by Jo Soares, Brazil’s
“Tonight Show” host in 1993. Soares is
reading from our memoir of Irineu’s life.
“Lutas camponesas no interior paulista.”
him. These responses formed during a week in August 1988 when I visited with Jofre nearly everyday. We ate together, walked around town, drove to São Paulo, met with his former Communist party superiors, and talked a great deal. When we had sized each other up by the end of the week, he had become much smaller in my estimation than the media had represented him. I found him to be opportunistic, irrational, boastful, antisocial, and ignoble. He lived in squalor, fathered children willy nilly, conned people out of their money, ranted and raved about U.S. imperialism and wore a Palestinian liberation headpiece to underscore the point, flaunted his Communist affiliation without evidence of action, incongruously displayed Brazilian army badges, and bragged about his status as Captain Jofre, the Fidel of the Sertão. He offered to host a barbeque for me and asked for a ride to the butcher shop where he ordered about five kilos of meat and then waited for me to pay for it. In the Communist party offices of his former superiors, he grew quiet and reserved and seemed disoriented. I asked him about this later and he explained that he had been a "shock trooper" for the party rather than a leader; the organizational aspects of the party, its discipline, and codes of conduct discomfited him. Increasingly, I felt misled and resentful for having my expectations shattered. How could this man have been compared to Fidel Castro? It was not his fault that the press had built him up so much, but I blamed him for wanting me to acknowledge him still as the media's Captain Jofre (Welch, Field Notes: Jofre, 1988).

Before being delivered into Jofre's arms I had thought him dead. For eight months I researched his story in newspaper archives and interviewed scholars who had written a little about him already. None of them had interviewed Jofre—all assumed him dead, for the last public record of his whereabouts had come in a 1973 newspaper article reporting his arrest as a terrorist by the military regime. Many political
I recently did learn Carvalho Costa—thus Irineu’s stories typically centered on his experiences and what experiences they were! He told of his radicalization in confrontations near his hometown, his secretive induction into the party, his work as a union leader, his negotiations with planters and politicians, his work organizing a statewide energy workers strike, his militancy among coffee and sugar workers, his fights with party bureaucrats and Catholic priests, and his contributions to planting the seeds of Brazil’s phenomenal rural labor movement. After a year of contacts and two lengthy taped interview sessions, Geraldo and I approached him about turning his interview transcripts into a publishable memoir. He accepted the idea enthusiastically and cooperated fully, sitting for mending corroborating sources, clarifying interviews, and demanding few changes in approval (Welch and Geraldo, 1992).3

Irineu welcomed me with reserve and simple courtesies. He lived with his wife of nearly 60 years in a rough, three room, cinder block house that had been poised to try to turn Jofre into an international figure on a par with Mexico’s famed peasant leader Emiliano Zapata! I shuddered at the thought and turned my attention to Irineu Luis de Moraes.

Some of Irineu’s appeal for me had to do with Jofre’s lack of appeal. While Jofre made a spectacle of himself—across the front of his house he had painted in large, dripping red letters, “Comunisto” (Welch, Field Notes: 1). For eight months I raved about a Palestinian liberation leader; the organizational discipline, and codes of honor about him. Increasingly, I felt misled about having my expectations up so much, but I blamed this man have been corrupted? It was not his fault that he had been fooled, I thought; and, grant in hand, I had been poised to try to turn Jofre into an international figure on a par with Mexico’s famed peasant leader Emiliano Zapata! I shuddered at the thought and turned my attention to Irineu Luis de Moraes.

Irineu’s stories typically centered on his experiences and what experiences they were! He told of his radicalization in confrontations near his hometown, his secretive induction into the party, his work as a union leader, his negotiations with planters and politicians, his work organizing a statewide energy workers strike, his militancy among coffee and sugar workers, his fights with party bureaucrats and Catholic priests, and his contributions to planting the seeds of Brazil’s phenomenal rural labor movement. After a year of contacts and two lengthy taped interview sessions, Geraldo and I approached him about turning his interview transcripts into a publishable memoir. He accepted the idea enthusiastically and cooperated fully, sitting for mending corroborating sources, clarifying interviews, and demanding few changes in approval (Welch and Geraldo, 1992).3 Only recently did I learn that he had turned away Brazilian researchers—at least Luiz Flávio Carvalho Costa—thus holding to an unspoken exclusive contract with us. After years of working together, tears well in my eyes now to think of it all—the privilege of “giving voice” to this great figure and his suppressed story, the pleasure and intensity of working with him, the joy of seeing his satisfaction
with the recognition he received, and the pain his 1996 death caused me.

Seven years after Irineu’s memoir came out, I published a monograph on the origins of Brazil’s rural labor movement that used Irineu’s life in nearly every chapter to make concrete the seamless web of subaltern history, to show how individuals can carry the history of struggle from one generation to another. It argues that even though a voice might not be integrated into official history, strong voices exist in memory and influence the turn of events. Unlike the memoir, the monograph contrasted Irineu’s memory with other records and attempted to establish the meaning of the many disconnects between what he recalled and what other sources revealed about given events. The Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli helped a lot with his ideas of “uchronic dreams” and Communist myth-making (Samuel and Thompson, 1990). Irineu’s inaccuracies could be seen as both a normal part of time’s distortion of memory and the continuation of class struggle through historical reconstruction. I learned a lot from this to value the gray areas of memory as something of substance and importance, not dismissible inaccuracies.

This process also opened my eyes to the ways my attitude toward Jofre may have blinded me to the value of his story. The substance of Irineu’s life story made it compelling and yet, my attraction to him also had to do with my response to his manner and values. His soft spoken approach was more acceptable to my Episcopalian upbringing than Jofre’s brashness. Irineu’s humility had reassured my perception of his noble intentions while Jofre’s flamboyant character had repelled me. I had to admit that I had given voice to Irineu partly because he fit my image of what a Brazilian rural labor militant should be better than Jofre. Moreover, I liked Irineu from the start and I did not like Jofre at first; one man made me feel comfortable, the other uncomfortable. Ironically, I had
ceded to a strange place familiar. It was the intellectual at a MacDonald’s in Pennsylvania slowly dawned on me that Brazil’s peculiar historical past’s world (J. C. Flora, 1997). This came about the aging of my parents forced me to make more demands on my relationship...
Giving Voice to Brazil’s Rural Labor Movement

Jofre Correa Netto stands in front of one of his safe houses in the Ipiranga neighborhood of Ribeirão Preto, Brazil, in 1997. The sign reads, “Number 1 Base, Brazilian Communist Party.”

traveled to a strange place only to settle on the familiar. It was the intellectual equivalent of dining at a MacDonald’s in Paris.

It slowly dawned on me that Jofre, in being so exotic, might in fact have a lot to say about Brazil’s peculiar historical process. In 1997, I decided to confront my fears and misgivings and enter Jofre’s world (J. C. Netto, personal communication, 1997). This came at a time in my life when the aging of my parents, especially my father, forced me to make much the same decision regarding my relationship with them. I say this not to make a spectacle out of myself but to point out that maturity and life stages influence the way we scholars deal with the evidence. In my case, the uncanny parallels between my father and Jofre simultaneously frightened and seduced me. Both were womanizers, absentee fathers, WWII veterans, and loners. Deciding to finally give voice to Jofre was like stepping

...
out from behind the apparent safety of Dad’s easy chair to watch a scary movie. My heart leapt as I went from eight to forty in the few steps it took to let down some of my defenses.

Giving voice is a tricky business, made all the more difficult where cultural and language barriers must be crossed. Ideologically, I am drawn by political sympathy and common experience to leftist militants, but even here borders had to be crossed. When first I met Jofre, the Soviet Union was relaxing ideologically, which seemed healthy to me, yet Jofre opposed the process. He constantly confronted me about U.S. imperialism yet proved unwilling to consider the question of self-determination. He seemed to abdicate Brazilian responsibility by blaming the U.S. for all the problems in his society, a self-defeating position, I argued. The interviewer and informant do not need to have the same point of view but in my youth I had a more difficult time being tolerant of Jofre’s position. Possibly, Jofre’s manner was more academic and rational than Jofre’s—the one told a straight story, the other did not. It scared me to bridge this chasm. At first, I easily grew frustrated, even irritated with Jofre and expressed my aggravation like a teenage son. But upon return to his story, I just let him talk and forced myself to look for the logic of his apparent digressions, to journey with him rather than remain an observer. I began to see him as even more of a subversive than Irineu.

Deeper, less visible issues also led me to give voice to Irineu rather than Jofre. Irineu’s behavior offered clues to the logic of his apparent digressions, to journey with him rather than remain an observer. I began to see him as even more of a subversive than Jofre. As a dedicated Communist militant, Jofre had read the standard Marxist texts and he had adopted some standard narratives about class struggle, history, religion, progress, and the like. Jofre emerged from a much shorter period of militancy almost untouched by Communist ideology. While advocating class struggle, he held to a personal code of conduct that brooked little interference or external control. He thought and acted as an individual, not a class. He grew up never knowing his father and estranged from everyone in his family but his mother. In the 1940s, he had been dishonorably discharged from the army for misconduct. In the 1950s, he was convicted of raping a woman. In the 1960s, he was shot, some say by police, and sent to a mental hospital. Irineu had no difficulty, any way but Jofre looked dandified and dandified to his contact, “Captain—!” (J. A. Portella, personal communication, 1989).

Was it courage, bravery, or a fear of punishment that motivated Jofre’s evident reluctance of his militancy like the world, he was in a reflective mood about the Cold War. Given this context, it is worth wondering if an unreconstructed Communist like Jofre (as he presented himself, anyway) would have attracted the trade press editor and Tonight Show producers as Irineu had attracted them. Although I had thought I was doing radical history, I can see now how well Irineu’s memoir fit the dominant ideas of the time. Is it indeed impossible to escape our context, to be truly subversive?

The trick is how to give voice to Irineu rather than Jofre. As a Brazilian researcher, I found that I had been trained to isolate some of the unexpected, the irritating, the criminal behavior of Jofre’s stories. I still fit him. This challenge has pushed me to understand his code of conduct, that brooked little interference or external control. He thought and acted as an individual, not a class. He grew up never knowing his father and estranged from everyone in his family but his mother. In the 1940s, he had been dishonorably discharged from the army for misconduct. In the 1950s, he was convicted of raping a woman. In the 1960s, he was shot, some say by police, and sent to a mental hospital. Irineu had no difficulty, any way but Jofre looked dandified and dandified to his contact, “Captain—!” (J. A. Portella, personal communication, 1989).

Was it courage, bravery, or a fear of punishment that motivated Jofre’s evident reluctance of his militancy like the world, he was in a reflective mood about the Cold War. Given this context, it is worth wondering if an unreconstructed Communist like Jofre (as he presented himself, anyway) would have attracted the trade press editor and Tonight Show producers as Irineu had attracted them. Although I had thought I was doing radical history, I can see now how well Irineu’s memoir fit the dominant ideas of the time. Is it indeed impossible to escape our context, to be truly subversive?
how society might have seemed. The 1988 and 1989 changes with the collapse of communism in Europe. I was both reflecting about these events from the perspective of Brazilian sociology, demanding explanations of the changes; Jofre refused to talk while Irineu spoke to it. When he was in a reflective mood, he was in a reflective mood. Given this context, it seems that an unreconstructed Communist as Jofre presented himself, attracted the trade press producers as Irineu had thought I was. I can see now how well I understood the dominant ideas of the time. To escape our context, to

issues also led me to give voice to Brazil’s Rural Labor Movement. In the 1950s, authorities repeatedly jailed him for antisocial behavior, including striking a woman. In the 1960s, he rejected and accepted party discipline on his own terms. The day he was shot, some say, he was warned of the danger and told to lie low but he ignored the warnings. Sought by police on another occasion, he arrived at the São Paulo bus station where a comrade was to greet him and take him to a hideaway but Jofre looked danger in the eye, calling aloud to his contact, “Captain Jofre, at your service!” (J. A. Portella, personal communication, 1988). Was it courage, bravado or innocence that motivated his evident recklessness?

Jofre had no difficulty reconciling what he knew of communist ideology with Brazilian popular culture for he seamlessly called up Afro-Brazilian proverbs to explain reality; characterized the gypsies he lived among as revolutionaries; and borrowed widely from a multiplicity of alien and national traditions. This had all been Greek to me, a U.S.-born and -based researcher, when I first met him. Years later, his behavior offered clues to the relative stability of Brazilian history, the surprising ability of the ruling class to retain power and inability of the working class to take power. The digressions of his speech now seemed like samba, the inconsistencies of his militancy like carnival, turning the world upside down in a festive yet ineffective way.

The trick is how to give voice to the circular, the unexpected, the irritating, and the outlandish, even criminal behavior of a man whose media fable ill fit him. This challenge now engages me as Dr. Toni Perrine and I set about making a documentary video on Captain Jofre, the Fidel of the Backlands. My purpose here has simply been to compare my encounters with Jofre and Irineu in order to isolate some of the factors that complicate the process of giving voice across cultures. Among these, I have described ideological, personal, and psychological factors. As a U.S. researcher, I found that I had an inordinate amount of power to influence people’s lives and the shape
of history. Irineu was suddenly important partly because someone from the United States thought so. Now that I am following Jofre’s life, his stock has also gone up—soon after we interviewed one professor about Jofre, for example, he set up a week-long seminar on him at his university. Because of this influence, it becomes all the more important to understand how our values, resentments, and fears shape our selections. Some reasons may be unknowable, but I have tried to be honest here in examining the way a host of factors influenced my choices, for these choices, in turn, influence the historical record, the consequences of which should not be underestimated.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper in October 1999 at the Oral History Association meeting in Anchorage, Alaska. “Giving Voice” was the conference theme.


References


suddenly important partly because the United States thought so. During Jofre's life, his stock in the United States thought so. After we interviewed one example, he set up a university. Becomes all the more how our values, resentments, shape our selections. Some are unalterable, but I have tried to remaining the way a host of choices, for these choices, historical record, the con- should not be

References


3. The original tapes and transcripts of these interviews, conducted 23 August 1988, 20 February 1989, and 27 May 1989, can be found in the Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth, Universidade Estadual de São Paulo, Campinas.