

1-1-2000

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Cliff Welch

Grand Valley State University

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Recommended Citation

Welch, Cliff (2000) "Giving Voice to Brazil's Rural Labor Movement," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 8.

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

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Giving Voice to Brazil's Rural Labor Movement

Cliff Welch is associate professor of History and Coordinator of Latin American Studies.

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I met Jofre Correa Netto and Irineu Luís 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.¹ 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 than 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



life story in nearly every chapter (Welch, 1999). Because of our work, Irineu enjoyed a bit of fame in the last years of his life: reporters interviewed him and Brazil's Tonight Show carried him to São Paulo for a nationally broadcast interview. This attention mattered to him not only due to the recognition 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).² By 1995, he could see that the attention he received from the public at large and the me-

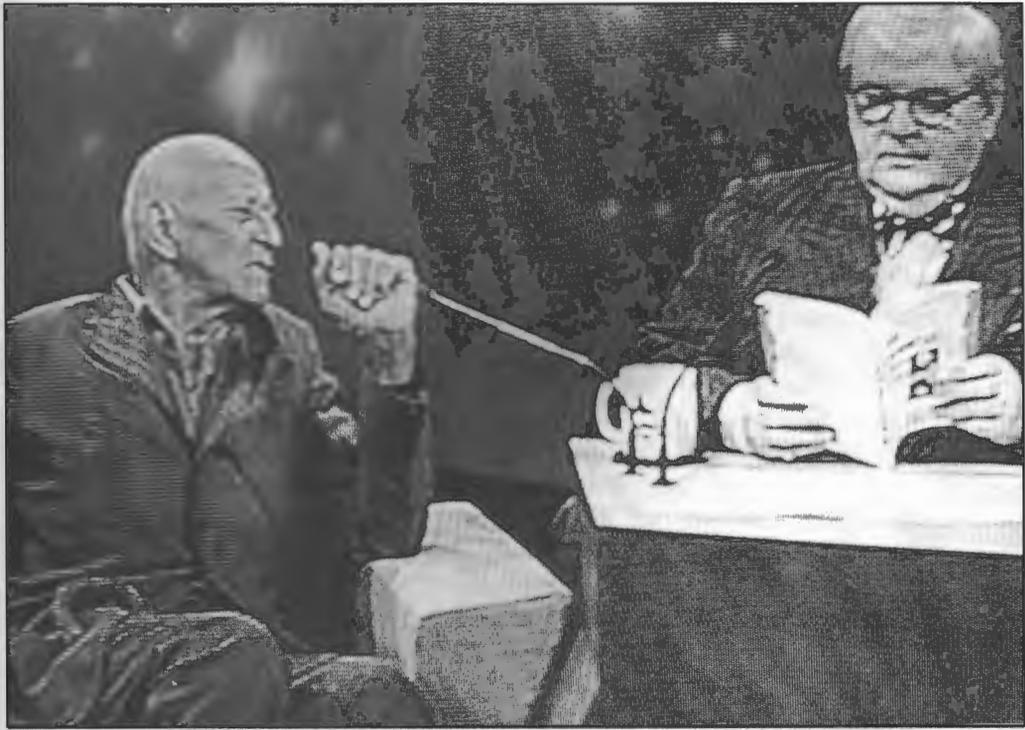
Brazil's "Backlands Fidel Castro" Jofre Correa Netto behind bars in 1960. Using the National Security Law, the Brazilian government kept Jofre jailed for more than two years in the early 1960s.

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



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 silently 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. Before 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 reasons, I came to distrust and perhaps even resent

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

prisoners died in custody and the consensus was that Jofre had, too. I built up a file of clips and documents and wrote a successful grant proposal. Titled "Jofre and the Brazilian Revolution," the proposal argued that Jofre could be used to represent the peculiarities of peasant struggle in Brazil. The proposal characterized Jofre as a hero, someone who had overcome enormous odds to become an authentic, militant rural leader. My file of evidence and my desire to tell such a story combined to make this a sound thesis.

Then I met Jofre and he shattered my narrative about him. Jofre failed to fit my image of a Brazilian Fidel. Indeed, he failed to fit the image of anything I had read about him. We scholars 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 Luís 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, "Communist Party of Brazil, Headquarters Number 1"—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 with a small dirt yard and no sign of his political affiliation. Like the house, Irineu was spare and devoid of flashy luxuries like the golden jewelry Jofre wore. A big man, he shared his large achievements with me reluctantly as if he did not want to call attention to himself. He spoke carefully and clearly—neither chaotically nor floridly like Jofre—a great aid to me, still in my first year of developing Portuguese fluency. He also told stories in near linear fashion. They had a beginning, middle, and end. Although he got distracted occasionally, he indulged few digressions. For a man in his seventies, he offered remarkably concrete and vividly detailed anecdotes from the 1920s to the present.

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 clarifying interviews, recommending corroborating sources, and demanding few changes in the final manuscript, which was published in 1992 with his full approval (Welch and Geraldo, 1992).³ Only recently did I learn that he had turned away Brazilian researchers—at least Luíz 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 "achronic 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



Jofre Correa Netto stands in front of one of his safe houses in the Ipiranga neighborhood of Ribeirao 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 MacDonal'd'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.

48 **G**iving 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 relentlessly pro-Communist stance was some kind of performance, acted out to test or shock me, because a year later he consented to an interview by a Brazilian sociologist Vera Chaia and made almost no mention of his Communist sympathies (J. C. Netto, personal communication, 1989).

While I question my motives for responding more positively to Irineu than Jofre, it is also

worthwhile to consider how society might have responded to each of them. The 1988 and 1989 years brought momentous changes with the collapse of Communism in Europe. I was both reading about and thinking about these events and they informed my perspective of Brazilian Communists. The times demanded explanations for the failure of Communism; Jofre refused to submit to this question while Irineu spoke to it directly. 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?

Deeper, less visible issues also led me to give voice to Irineu rather than Jofre. Irineu'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. As a dedicated Communist militant, Irineu 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 unscathed 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

insubordination. 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 hide-away 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 a 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.

2. Other published secondary sources mentioning Jofre are: José de Souza Martins, *Os camponesas e a política no Brasil* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1981); Clodomir Santos de Moraes, "Peasant Leagues of Brazil," in *Agrarian Problems and Peasant Movements in Latin America*, edited by Rodolfo Stavenhagen (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 453-501; Vera Chaia, "Santa Fé do Sul: A luta dos arrendatários," *Cadernos AEL* 7 (1997), 11-49; Nazareth dos Reis, "Tensões sociais no campo: Rubinéia e Santa Clara D'Oeste (1950/1960)," *Projeto Memória do Jornal de Jales*; Welch, *Seed*, p. 322; and Cliff Welch, "The Shooting of Jofre Correa Netto: Writing the Individual Back Into Historical Memory," *Radical History Review* 74 (Fall 1999), 1-X. Three significant master's theses have examined Jofre and the rural labor movement he became famous for in Santa Fé do Sul. These are: Vera Lucia M. Chaia, "Os conflitos de arrendatarios em Santa Fé do Sul, São Paulo, 1959-1969" (Unpub. Master's Thesis, Universidade de São Paulo, 1980); Luiz Noburu Muramatsu "Revoltas do capim: movimentos sociais agrários do oeste paulista, 1959-1970" (Unpub., Master's thesis, Universidade de

São Paulo, 1984); and Nazareth dos Reis, “*Tensões sociais no campo: Rubineia e Santa Clara D’Oeste*,” 2 vols (Unpub. Master’s Thesis, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 1990).

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.

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