

# Classic Works of Brazil's New Rural History: Feudalism and the Latifundio in the Interpretations of the Left (1940/1964)<sup>❦</sup>

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Artículo recibido: 6 de noviembre de 2012

Aprobado: 18 de abril de 2013

Modificado: 6 de mayo de 2013

DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.7440/histcrit51.2013.06](https://doi.org/10.7440/histcrit51.2013.06)

❦ This article is one of the results of research developed on rural history and historiography in Brazil. The research on which this article is based has benefitted from the Cientista do Nosso Estado, program with the support of FAPERJ and CNPQ.

### **Los clásicos en la historia rural en Brasil: el feudalismo y el latifundio en las interpretaciones de la izquierda (1940/1964)**

#### **Resumen:**

En este artículo se examinan las obras de dos destacados autores brasileños, que se consideraron como los principales exponentes de la presencia del sistema feudal en el campo brasileño durante la primera mitad del siglo xx. Con base en el análisis de los escritos de Nelson Werneck Sodré y Alberto Passos Guimarães, el objetivo de este trabajo es identificar los principales argumentos de estos autores en su relación con el contexto histórico en el que fueron producidas sus obras. Lo que permitiera discutir los aspectos desarrollados sobre el campesino y las élites terratenientes, algunas de sus diferencias, sus vínculos con la sociedad contemporánea, y las lecturas del pasado que legitimaron o parecían legitimar la producción de sus escritos históricos.

**Palabras clave:** *Brasil, 1940-1964, historiografía, clase campesina, estructura agraria, reforma de la tierra.*

### **Classic Works of Brazil's New Rural History: Feudalism and the Latifundio in the Interpretations of the Left (1940/1964)**

#### **Abstract:**

This article examines the works of two prominent Brazilian writers considered to be the leading exponents of the presence of a feudal system in rural Brazil during the first half of the 20th century. Based on an analysis of the writings of Nelson Werneck Sodré and Alberto Passos Guimarães, the objective of this work is to identify Sodré and Guimarães main arguments with relation to the historical context in which their works were produced, based on an analysis of their writings. This leads to a discussion around the topics explored by these authors regarding the farmer and the landholding elites, the differences between them, their links to contemporary society, and the readings of the past that legitimated or seemed to legitimate the production of their historic writings.

**Keywords:** *Brazil, 1940-1964, historiography, peasants, agrarian structure, land reform.*

### **Os clássicos na história rural no Brasil: o feudalismo e o latifúndio nas interpretações da esquerda (1940/1964)**

#### **Resumo:**

Neste artigo, examinam-se as obras de dois destacados autores brasileiros que se consideraram como os principais expoentes da presença do sistema feudal no campo brasileiro durante a primeira metade do século xx. Com base na análise dos textos de Nelson Werneck Sodré e Alberto Passos Guimarães, o objetivo deste trabalho é identificar os principais argumentos desses autores em sua relação com o contexto histórico no qual foram produzidas suas obras. Isso permite discutir os aspectos desenvolvidos sobre o camponês e as elites latifundiárias, algumas de suas diferenças, seus vínculos com a sociedade contemporânea e as leituras do passado que legitimaram ou pareciam legitimar a produção de seus textos históricos.

**Palavras-chave:** *Brasil, 1940-1964, historiografia, classe camponesa, estrutura agrária, reforma da terra.*

# Classic Works of Brazil's New Rural History: Feudalism and the Latifundio in the Interpretations of the Left (1940/1964)

## Introduction

This text re-examines the main works of two Brazilian authors who are considered to be the principal exponents in the interpretation of the existence of traces of feudalism in the Brazilian countryside during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on the analysis of the books written by Nelson Werneck Sodré and Alberto Passos Guimarães, the aim of this work is to identify the authors' main arguments in their relation to the historic context in which they wrote.

In our opinion, these books were not merely theoretical works that supported the argument of a retrograde Brazil; it would also be simplistic to state that these texts were simply out of place, having been written during a time in which Brazilian industrialization and its participation in the international market were already very obvious. An understanding of the background of these authors and their main arguments helps us reflect on their reading of a feudal Brazil, which consolidated the notion of backwardness and of a country without a peasantry. Through an analysis of the books by the aforementioned authors, it is possible to discuss the problems arising from importing their theoretical framework, the rationale behind their main arguments, and the people with whom they dialogued. It also allows us to analyze their arguments about peasants and latifundio owners, the differences between them and their links with their contemporary society, as well as the readings of the past which supported or seemed to support the writing of both these historic books.

Moving away from the traditional interpretation of this "feudal current," I discuss the different perspectives on Brazil's rural past within this current in order to re-emphasize the striking originality of Alberto Passos Guimarães' arguments. In other words, the rejection of his interpretation regarding the existence of traces of feudalism in Brazil also dismissed his arguments about the strength and the struggles of the peasantry. Far from being an obstacle to the expansion of capitalism, the large estates were inserted into this very same economic system using the hypothetical gain of the country's dependency.

## 1. Colonial Expansion, the Latifundio and Feudalism in Brazil: Sodr e's Interpretation

Born into a military family in Rio de Janeiro in 1911, Marxist intellectual Nelson Werneck Sodr e wrote dozens of books and is acknowledged by many to have been an exemplary human being, a democrat, and a combative essayist.<sup>1</sup> For others, Sodr e was also an example of the so-called military left in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> Identified in the historiography as the champion of the idea that Brazil retained traces of feudalism rooted in its colonial past, his work is “emblematic of a time and of a political position.”<sup>3</sup> He was an avid reader with a deep knowledge of Brazilian literature and history. Over time he came to be considered an example of a misled intellectual. The author of the most important work that explored the notion of a feudal Brazil, he was forgotten for decades, only to be rediscovered in the past few years through numerous publications about his life and work. His books invite us to think about the relationship between political theory and practice, between history and engagement.<sup>4</sup>

Some authors have suggested that Werneck Sodr e's use of the mode of production concept to interpret the history of Brazil neither oversimplified the past nor denied the specificity of the country's colonial character. In fact, much of his work is based on close readings of non-Marxist authors with whom he dialogues to try to find an explanation for the backwardness of Brazil. Werneck Sodr e was also multi-faceted. The magnitude of his work, which also includes studies on literature and the history of the press, cannot be compressed into a single monolithic vision of his intellectual trajectory. But if the respect shown towards Sodr e's work is a *sine qua non* for re-thinking his place in Brazilian historiography, the aim of this article is to focus on what is probably his most important book: *Forma o Hist rica do Brasil*.<sup>5</sup> This book, written between 1956 and 1961, grew out of discussions held at the *Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros* (Brazilian Institute of Higher Studies) or ISEB.

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1 See statements about the author in: F tima Cabral and Paulo Cunha, orgs., *Nelson Werneck Sodr e entre o sabre e a pena* (S o Paulo: UNESP, 2006).

2 Paulo Ribeiro Cunha, “Nelson Werneck Sodr e, os militares e a quest o democr tica: algumas quest es e uma problem tica”, in *Nelson Werneck Sodr e*, 85-102.

3 Jorge Luis da Silva Grespan, “Nelson Werneck Sodr e, intelectual engajado”, in *Nacionalismo e Reformismo Radical*, org. Jorge Ferreira and Daniel Aar o Reis (Rio de Janeiro: Civiliza o Brasileira, 2007), 197.

4 Amongst the works exclusively dedicated to analyses about the author, see: Marcos Silva, org., *Nelson Werneck Sodr e na historiografia brasileira* (S o Paulo: EDUSC/FAPESP, 2001), and F tima Cabral and Paulo Cunha, orgs., *Nelson Werneck Sodr e*.

5 Actually, the book *Forma o Hist rica do Brasil* is a rewriting of his former work, *A Forma o da Sociedade Brasileira*, from 1944: Jorge Luis da Silva Grespan, “Nelson Werneck Sodr e, intelectual”, 203.

The ISEB, founded on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1955, sought to lay the foundation for a new Brazilian way of thinking. The goal was to promote an ideology through which the nation could become aware of its own development. While the institute provided advice in the formulation of the economic policy behind Juscelino Kubitscheck's 'Plano de Metas,'<sup>6</sup> it was also a vibrant intellectual center —publishing books, hosting debates and offering courses for various social groups— including employees, entrepreneurs, union workers and members of congress, etc. According to Toledo, the “ISEB was also the cultural institution that best symbolized or realized the notion (and the practice) of the engagement of intellectuals in the political and social life of the country.”<sup>7</sup>

As a co-participant in that project, Sodré also shared the belief that the structural foundation of Brazil's underdevelopment was characterized by a decadent and retrograde ideology. As the product of colonialism, the nation suffered from ongoing underdevelopment, which did not differ qualitatively from the situation prior to the country's independence. Brazil's workforce was thus subject to a double alienation: “1) due to the fact that the phenomenon of alienation is typical of capitalism; 2) because it lives in a backward country, which is dependent on other nations and exploited internationally.”<sup>8</sup> However, contrary to his peers, Sodré preferred to use the concept of transplantation when referring to the persistence of the country's cultural backwardness and the retrograde role of the elite.

However, it is important to understand the differences in Sodré's thinking within the ISEB. First, according to Toledo, there was an apparent lack of mutual recognition: Sodré's colleagues at the ISEB seldom quoted him, nor did he cite any of them.<sup>9</sup> Influenced by Marxism, he understood ideology to be a form of false consciousness and domination that rested on the alienation of individuals. For this reason, he held that the rural poor could not have an autonomous destiny since they were alienated by capitalism. Sodré thus had trouble relating philosophically to the perspectives of his ISEB colleagues who “endeavor[ed] to construct *in-advance* an ideology,” which they understood in an apparently neutral sense connected to the idea of a transformation and dear to the Enlightenment.

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6 I follow closely the work of Caio Toledo, *ISEB: Fábrica de Ideologia* (São Paulo, Ática, 1982). Juscelino Kubitscheck was the president of Brazil from 1956 to 1961. His economic policy, known as the *Plano de Metas* (Plan of Goals), aimed to diversify the Brazilian economy by promoting foreign investment.

7 Caio Toledo, “50 anos de Fundação do ISEB”, *Espaço Acadêmico* 50 (2005): s/p., accessed August 11, 2010, <<http://www.espacoacademico.com.br/050/50ctoledo.htm>>.

8 Caio Toledo, *ISEB: Fábrica*, 73.

9 To reach this conclusion I analysed all the notes present in the book *Formação Histórica do Brasil*, which, as is known, was written during the period in which Sodré actively participated in the discussions at the ISEB.

Sodré —like his ISEB colleagues— also defended a national project to overcome backwardness. This underscores his belief that nationalism, not ideology, offered a solution to the country's problems.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the apparent contradiction between the notion of ideology as alienation and the belief in a nationalistic project was due to the fact that Sodré was also a career general and a participant in the project to transform and renew Brazilian society that the army supported.<sup>11</sup> In *Formação Histórica do Brasil*, Sodré tried to identify the elements that would explain the country's underdevelopment but, contrary to his ISEB colleagues, he did so by incorporating the Stalinist view of historical evolution.

At first glance, and despite his stage-by-stage view of history, Sodré shows himself to be familiar with the discussions about European feudalism, such as the work of the then famous historian Henri Pirenne, as well as texts that explored the specificity of the Portuguese variant. He disagreed with the controversial notion, sustained earlier by the historian Herculano and supported at that time by Sérgio Bagú e Azevedo Amaral, that feudalism had not developed in Portugal. Unsurprisingly, his views on the subject were inspired by Marx, but he also relies on the German geographer, Leo Waibel.

For Sodré, Brazil's formation rested on two contradictions: internally, the opposition between masters and slaves; and externally, the relationship between the metropolis and the colony. The dialectical articulation between these two contradictions shaped Brazil and explained the maintenance of its backward, feudalistic type of relations. His understanding of Portuguese colonization comes mainly from the works of Sérgio Bagú, Celso Furtado, Roberto Simonsen and Caio Prado, Junior.

It is not surprising that Sodré relied on the arguments of Sergio Bagú, who is considered to be one of Latin America's foremost Marxist thinkers and a pioneer of what would later be known as the dependency theory. Because Bagú analyzed the subordinate relationship between the colonial economy and the international capitalist system, his books had a crucial impact on the development of the social sciences in Latin America. Celso Furtado, who sought to historicize CEPAL's economic theories, "showing how the relationship was established between colonies and the metropolis, developed and under-developed countries, and center and periphery," also had an important influence on Sodré's studies.<sup>12</sup>

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10 Caio Toledo, *ISEB: Fábrica*, 103.

11 Edmundo Campos Coelho, *Em busca da identidade. O exército e a política na sociedade brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Forense, 1976).

12 Bernardo Ricupero, "Celso Furtado e o pensamento social brasileiro", *ArtNet. Gramsci e o Brasil*, <<http://www.artnet.com.br/gramsci/arquiv260.htm>>.

Despite the influence of such authors, Sodré defended the idea of feudalism in Brazil, an idea that was explicitly rejected by Celso Furtado, for example, who argues that Brazil was subject to the slave mode of production during the colonial period.<sup>13</sup> For Sodré, from the very beginnings of colonization, there had been a “a perfect articulation between the Portuguese Crown, the dominant class of the feudal lords from the metropolis and the *senhores de engenho* (sugar mill owners), the dominant class in the slave-labor colony.”<sup>14</sup> In that tripartite division, the structure of the sugar-producing colony rested on the initial lack of value of the land, on the regime’s commercial monopoly, and on the colonial situation. The expansion of livestock, which occupied new lands in the interior, stimulated exchange between the economies of the pastoral and the mining areas. According to Sodré, the *Sertão* was thus like a “reinforcement and complement to the agricultural and mining areas, and an escape valve for the agricultural area that had already been appropriated.”<sup>15</sup>

But if the *Sertão* was the place where a *campesinato* (peasantry) might have developed, free from the domination of large landowners, it actually became the site where

the absence of government, [and] the morose rhythm in which things took place there, led to the configuration of a peculiar scenario in which [...] land disputes were solved through violence, family issues led to long-lasting feuds, and [the development of] endemic banditry tinged, in some cases, with fanaticism.<sup>16</sup>

Feudalism in the *Sertão*, therefore, developed alongside the rise of slavery elsewhere. In other regions, the decline of gold production created conditions that made it possible to begin to overcome the colonial situation. The progressive loosening of ties that took place between the dominant classes of the colony and metropolis were encouraged by the expansion of capitalism in England and the end of the commercial monopoly. But even if it was possible to overcome the backwardness that delayed the circulation of goods, conditions were not yet ripe to put an end to slave labor, which still represented one of the “fundamental pieces of the Brazilian production structure.”<sup>17</sup>

However, by not changing the form of land appropriation, the decline of slave production and the abolition of slavery at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have widened feudal

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13 In spite of quoting Caio Prado at many points, he prefers to argue that the aforementioned author was not concerned about characterizing the regime, but defended the idea that there had been, “real estate property in the beginning of life in Brazil.” Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1979), 81.

14 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 86.

15 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 124.

16 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 125.

17 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 173.

domination in the countryside. In this sense, “the transition of large ex-slave-labor areas into a regime characterized by servitude or semi-servitude [was made] possible in Brazil due to the availability of land.”<sup>18</sup>

We must bear in mind that Sodré did not invent the idea that feudalism existed outside of Europe. During the famous debate of the 1940s over the transition to capitalism in England, Marxist historians, such as Dobb and Sweezy, “openly stated that European feudalism was a specific case of a wider phenomenon, and historian Takahashi joined them by discussing feudalism in Japan.” According to Grespan, “Werneck Sodré was only adjusting the concept to [Brazilian] reality.”<sup>19</sup>

What is interesting is that, according to Sodré, it is the excess rather than the lack of land that produces the feudal relations: “the availability of land is an undeniable fact—but of appropriated land, not of land yet to be appropriated. There are empty spaces, but there is no property to conquer: there is no transfer of property.”<sup>20</sup> For him, the empty spaces were the object of dispute. They were appropriated by “an ant-like invasion of small farmers or small cattle-raisers, absent from the market as a whole.”<sup>21</sup> In this perspective, the former slaves would have had two destinations: the areas of servitude or semi-servitude—generally the same as those that formerly existed alongside slave regions—and urban areas where local conditions marginalized them as a surplus population.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Sodré neither explains how landed property was monopolized by the few nor the process by which rural feudal relations were consolidated after the end of slavery. As a result, he does not realize that the “ant-like invasion of small farmers” might have indicated a process of *campesinização* (the formation of a peasantry) by poor, free and indentured people searching for land not yet appropriated by landed elites. While Sodré’s arguments might seem naive from today’s perspective, it is important to recall that, when he was writing, the specificities of the Brazilian case and the relationship between free land, the peasantry and political power were not readily apparent. For example, Lenin’s idea of a Prussian way of capitalist development, which helped explain how pre-capitalist

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18 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 247. In a different book he states: The immigration of workers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century would not accelerate the transformation of labor relations, since the latifundio persisted as the majoritary form of land appropriation. Nelson Werneck Sodré, *História da Burguesia Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1976).

19 Jorge Luis da Silva Grespan, “Nelson Werneck Sodré, intelectual”, 205.

20 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 247.

21 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 248.

22 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *Formação Histórica*, 248.



practices, such as the use of extra-economic coercion over rural workers, which were critical in this transition, had not taken root in Brazil.<sup>23</sup>

It is somewhat difficult to understand the reasons for his theoretical choices and his insistence on labeling the social relations that existed in the Brazilian countryside “from time immemorial” as serfdom since there were no major disruptions in that logic of inception and consolidation of feudalism in the countryside. We should ask what texts inspired his views on the countryside, since —as a Marxist— we might expect Sodré to at least indicate the existence of class conflicts between masters and slaves and especially between lords and their “serfs.”

In his book *O que se deve ler para conhecer o Brasil*, first printed in 1943, Sodré dedicated an entire chapter to suggestions on what to read in order to study colonial society.<sup>24</sup> In the introduction he emphasized that “each of the concurrent elements that populated Brazil, the Indigenous, the Africans and the European brought their own social antecedents.” The *senhor de engenho*, who “typifie[d] the privileged class,” originated with the concentration of territorial property.<sup>25</sup> To understand such developments, Sodré recommended reading Antonil, Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão, Antonio Ladislau Monteiro Baena, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Luis dos Santos Villena, the American Charles Boxer, João Dornas Filho, Sérgio Bagú, Paulo Prado and Tito Lívio Ferreira. In this mix of primary sources, both national and foreign, Sodré shows his willingness to draw on a wide range of perspectives. The inclusion of Villena is symptomatic, since said author, who wrote at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was especially interested in understanding why Bahians were so lazy. Sodré highlights the re-publication of *Recopilação de notícias soteropolitanas e brasílicas de Villena*, which he considers to be a key source of knowledge about colonial life despite Villena’s lack of empathy for Bahians.

However, although he recognized the importance of Villena’s work, Sodré does not cite him at all in his own book, *A Formação Histórica do Brasil*: his views of the people are too brief and biased. It is also interesting to notice the importance that Sodré gave to Ambrósio

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23 The discussion about free borders, *campesinato* and capitalism is taken further with the study by Guilherme Velho, *Capitalismo autoritário e Campesinato: um estudo comparativo a partir da fronteira em movimento* (São Paulo: Difel, 1979). However, Guilherme also sets aside the impossibility of a peasant existence in colonial Brazil. He considers —based on Kalervo Oberg— that there had been a marginal *campesinato* in Brazil. For him, the main fact “is that although there had been cases in which repression of the workforce was not evident, it was structurally the dominating trait. For the individual, in general terms, the price of not being connected to it was marginality. Certain areas beyond the effective economic borders became, except for brief moments of bandeirante expansion that gradually disappeared, a locus for these marginals, and thus represents a paradoxical but complementary aspect (just like in Russia) of the system of repression of the workforce,” 116-117.

24 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O que se deve ler para conhecer o Brasil* (São Paulo: Círculo do Livro, s/d.).

25 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O que se deve ler*, 116.

Fernandes Brandão's book, *Diálogos das grandezas do Brasil* of 1618, and to Antonil's book, *Cultura e Opulência no Brasil* of 1711, for the precious information they provide about colonial society.<sup>26</sup> Sodré also relied on a significant number of journals kept by travelers to Brazil. In his bibliographical text, he included a brief biography of no less than sixty individuals who visited Brazil. "There is no one," he wrote, "who can, in truth, conduct a diligent study in Brazil, particularly about the old Brazil, of the colonial phase and even of the imperial phase, without consulting these diaries."<sup>27</sup>

Sodré's recommendations of the 18<sup>th</sup> century books that he considered to be the most important for understanding colonial society are also of interest, but they were not given the same weight as other primary sources in the construction of his *Formação Histórica do Brasil*. While he cites Antonil once to describe the process of pastoral penetration into the interior during the colonial period, he says nothing about the social agents responsible for that expansion. There, in the areas abandoned during the extensive expansion of cattle raising in the Brazilian Northeast, feudal relations arose parallel to the consolidation of slavery.

It is also interesting to note how Sodré's theoretical choices drove him away from contributions by non-Marxist authors. In the second part of *O que se deve ler para conhecer o Brasil*, he dedicated a few pages to the topic of society, acknowledging the importance of studies about the origin, dispersion, and persecution of New Christians, inaugurated by João Lucio de Azevedo. He also emphasized the decisive book by Victor Nunes Leal about the *coronelismo* movement, published for the first time in 1949, and Gilberto Freyre's books, *Casa Grande & Senzala* of 1933, and *Sobrados e Mocambos*, from 1936; works that —save for any mistake —do not appear in *Formação História do Brasil*. In *O que se deve ler* he gave credit to *Casa Grande* for contributing what he called the "external relations of society," i.e. the house, the customs, the norms, "although it lack[ed] an historical method and almost completely abandon[ed] economic aspects."<sup>28</sup> The same could be said for *Sobrados*, since "the work presents the same characteristics as [*Casa Grande*], in what's positive, negative or in what it leaves out."<sup>29</sup>

Sodré did not ignore the manifestations of rebellion in the countryside, yet he remained a product of his own time, acknowledging those manifestations as examples of religious

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26 An interesting study about the contributions of these authors to the understanding of colonial society is the one by Laima Mesgravis, "A sociedade brasileira e a historiografia colonial" in Marcos Cezar de Freitas, org., *Historiografia Brasileira em Perspectiva* (São Paulo: Contexto, 2001), 39-56.

27 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O que se deve ler*, 324.

28 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O que se deve ler*, 227.

29 Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O que se deve ler*, 228.

fanaticism and banditry, just as Rui Facó had done in *Cangaceiros e Fanáticos*,<sup>30</sup> written in 1963, subsequent to the publication of Sodré's *Formação Histórica do Brasil*. His mention of authors who dealt with the topic of rural movements in later editions of *Formação Histórica do Brasil* does not seem to be a mere detail: both Rui Facó's book of 1963, and Mauricio Vinha Queiroz's,<sup>31</sup> of 1968, seem to confirm the incomplete treatment of the political character of rural people.

In short, what draws the most attention in Nelson Werneck Sodré's studies is not merely his insistence that Brazilian society of the 1950's and 1960's had traces of feudalism inherited from its colonial past. Sodré was not alone in promoting such an interpretation, either in Brazil or in Latin America in general. The most revealing aspects of his work, I would suggest, are the way he characterized and qualified free poor people, his limited acknowledgement of their role in the process of land occupation, and his inability to identify the clash or class struggle between the landowners and the rural poor. Sodré attributed the latter's failure to appropriate land for themselves, which prevented the formation of a peasantry, to the rural poor themselves, viewing poverty as a demoralizing characteristic. The "ant-like invasion" oscillated between fanaticism and banditry but it built nothing. When, for some reason, the poor do rise up, their rebellions are marked by their incomplete character.

Sodré's insistence on using the concept of feudalism to explain the maintenance of social relations governed by extra-economic coercion in the countryside had, above all, the function of highlighting the dependent character of the Brazilian worker. He thought that the different paths of development taken by the United States and Brazil, both heirs to societies built on slave labor, made it obviously necessary to understand why Brazil had not experienced a bourgeois revolution, since it was generally accepted that capitalism reproduced "the double encumbrance of the latifundio and imperialist domination."<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, Sodré did not look at the dynamics of struggles by the rural poor more closely. He was also very much a product of his times, taking for granted the views that were accepted as common sense. His readings about the poor, therefore, were unaffected by the *Ligas Camponesas* and the intense popular mobilization of the period that "set the country alight" in the name of land reform.<sup>33</sup> Like many

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30 Rui Facó, *Cangaceiros e Fanáticos: gênese e lutas* (Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 1991).

31 Mauricio Vinhas Queiroz, *Problema agrário, camponeses no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1968).

32 In this sense I tend to agree with João Quartim Moraes "Sodré, Caio Prado e a luta pela terra", in *Nelson Werneck Sodré*, 155-164.

33 The *Ligas Camponesas* were one of the most important rural labour organizations until the Brazilian coup d'état in 1964, when the peasant organizations were deactivated all over the country. Márcia Motta and Carlos Esteves, "Ligas Camponesas: História de uma luta (des)conhecida", in *Formas de resistência camponesa: visibilidade e diversidade de conflitos ao longo da história. Vol. II. Concepções de justiça e resistência nas repúblicas do passado (1930-1960)*, ed. Márcia Motta and Paulo Zarth (São Paulo: UNESP, 2008), 243-257.

of his contemporaries, he saw the popular movements of the period from the perspective of the party, and there are no signs that he had found or highlighted any thread of continuity between the struggles of anything beyond that and of the context of the 1950s and 60s.

However, if that period presented a favorable context in which to reflect on rural social dynamics, the rural agitation also seemed to be explained, according to Sodré, by a theoretical approach that, as mentioned above, had been introduced into Brazil and offered a way to understand the country's past. In this sense, his use of varied sources and authors only served to reinforce the authority of his pre-conceived argument. The essay tradition, common to so many authors of that period, was overshadowed by a theory that was accepted as true a priori. It was up to another author to pay more attention to the rural movements in Brazil while still tied to the notion of Brazilian feudalism. The trajectory and reflections of Alberto Passos Guimarães will thus help us recognize the significant distinctions that existed within Brazil's "feudal" school.

## 2. Feudal Traces, the Latifúndio and the Peasantry: the Originality of Alberto Passos Guimarães

Following Sodré's theoretical line, Alberto Passos Guimarães developed a more complete vision of Brazilian feudalism. Written in 1963 —when it seemed that hopes for a revolution might come true— *Quatro séculos de latifúndio* tried to show the origins and the effects of the extreme concentration of land in Brazil.<sup>34</sup> With a degree of naïve optimism about the possibilities of the land reform proposal under the Goulart administration, the country recognized the urgency of a more equitable distribution of land as indispensable for the development of capitalism on a national basis.<sup>35</sup> *Quatro séculos de Latifúndio* was published for the first time by the small publishing house, Fulgor, in December, 1963. Along with *Civilização Brasileira*, *Tempo Brasileiro*, José Alvaro, and Zahar Editores, Fulgor was considered to be one of the progressive publishing companies in the period prior to the coup d'état.<sup>36</sup> The book was reprinted in 1964 by Paz e Terra, which became famous by publishing books by Marxist authors.<sup>37</sup>

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34 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos de Latifúndio* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1968).

35 João Goulart was the president of Brazil from 1961 until he was ousted by the coup d'état of 1964.

36 Laurence Hallewell, *O Livro no Brasil: sua história* (São Paulo: Edusp, 2005), 539-540.

37 The publishing house was founded by Fernando Gasparian, "As Editoras de Esquerda: Civilização Brasileira e Paz e Terra", *Quitanda do Chaves*, <<http://quitandadochaves.blogspot.com/2008/07>>, 6<sup>o</sup> paragraph. I thank Andréa Galucio for the information about the one responsible for Paz e Terra and for the research which she generously conducted in order to verify the hypothesis that there are no theses about this publishing house in the country.

Subsequently forgotten due to his belief in a revolution that would overcome the traces of feudalism that he identified, the self-taught Alberto Passos Guimarães was born in Alagoas in 1908 and died in Rio de Janeiro in 1993. He was editor at IBGE, responsible for the *Retratos do Brasil* collection, and director of the first census of the *favelas* (slums) in Rio de Janeiro in 1950. In collaboration with Jorge Amado and Oscar Niemeyer, he founded the journal *Paratodos*, and at the invitation of Antonio Houaiss, he took charge of the geography section of the *Enciclopédia Mirador*.<sup>38</sup> Guimarães also published *Inflação e Monopólio no Brasil - Por Que Sobem os Preços?* in 1962, *A Crise Agrária* in 1978 and *As Classes Perigosas: Banditismo Rural e Urbano* in 1982.

In *Quatro Séculos de Latifúndio*, Guimarães's narrative stressed Brazil's persistent agrarian problems and the power of its rural elite. He began his book with a romantic view of Brazil prior to the arrival of Pedro Alvares Cabral (based on the writings of the French traveler, Jean de Léry): "Life in Brazil was full of 'peace and calm' before our history began."<sup>39</sup> He relied on Morgan's classifications to identify the evolutionary phase that Brazilian Indians would have occupied, and surmised that they would not have evolved from anthropophagy to the practice of slavery on their own, since everything indicated that the latter was introduced by the Portuguese. "The inexorable march of colonization went on, leaving in its wake the blood of the native populations."<sup>40</sup>

The idea of an "inexorable march" was sustained by the notion that the institutionalization of private property in the colony consolidated the power of "feudal lords in Portuguese America." Therefore, "the latifúndio originated and developed in Brazil through the use of violence against native populations, whose innate right to landed property was never respected or enforced. It would never redeem itself from this stigma of illegitimacy, which is its original sin."<sup>41</sup>

Guimarães's task was to show not only that the past maintained itself without major disruptions, but also that this past should be characterized as feudalism or at least as traces of it. He thus contradicted the thesis that Brazil had been exclusively capitalist from the its beginnings. In other words, Guimarães had to find a unifying thread for his study and provide it with a theoretical foundation consistent with his desire for social transformation. For him, colonial-era capital, so necessary for the colonization of the country, was unable to transform

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38 A small biography, from which I got this information; it can be read in the thesis by Ieda Lebensztayn, "Graciliano Ramos e a Novidade: o astrônomo do inferno e os meninos impossíveis" (PhD thesis in Brazilian Literature, Universidade de São Paulo, 2009).

39 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 5.

40 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 15.

41 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 19.

the society into a mercantile economy. Instead it had to subject itself and even adjust to the “typical structures of nobility and feudal power instituted in Portuguese America.”<sup>42</sup>

With Portugal's discoveries, its feudal order, which was founded on landed property, was transplanted to the New World, where colonial occupation reproduced the monopolization of the land. However, due to the impossibility of bringing servants to the colony, colonial feudalism “had to go back to slavery, partly due to the exceptionality of the New World's virgin land and partly due to the brutality with which its workforce was treated.”<sup>43</sup>

Guimarães believed that to defend the reconfiguration of Brazil's land-tenure structure was to identify its colonial experience as feudal. By contrast, calling it capitalist would only lead to a non-reformist political strategy like that conducted by Juscelino Kubistschek. Once again, contemporary politics determined the ways in which the past was interpreted. Kubistschek's developmentalist government concentrated on goals to expand agricultural production and improve its productivity: “Major investments were made in purchasing trucks, etc. The results were not foreseen: the failed wheat crops and the crisis of the bean crops.”<sup>44</sup>

The unquestionable reality was, in other words, the feudal monopoly that had taken hold of land ownership in Brazil. This monopoly, in turn, not only guaranteed latifundio owners with economic power but with extra-economic power as well. Thus, what the Jesuit Antonil criticized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century — “he who has borne the title of master seems to want all others to show the dependence of a servant” — reappeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Koster's observations: “the great power of the farmer, not only over his slaves but his authority over free people of the poor classes.” According to Guimarães, such relations have continued into the present through the phenomenon of *coronelismo*.<sup>45</sup>

Guimarães paid close attention to the studies from this period about territorial expansion, delving into the works of Felisbello Freire<sup>46</sup> and Cirne Lima<sup>47</sup> in order to investigate the *sesmarias* system, which regulated the distribution of crown lands. Additionally, he drew on the work of Vasconcellos, *Livro das Terras*, first published in 1856, to discuss how Portuguese legislation regarding crown lands was transplanted and how it strengthened the landed elite's monopoly over the

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42 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 23.

43 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 29.

44 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 29.

45 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 35.

46 Felisbello Freire was born in 1858 and died in 1916. He was a journalist and historian and the author of an exhaustive study of Brazilian territory.

47 Rui Cirne Lima, a Brazilian jurist and lawyer, was born in 1908 and died in 1984. Author of *Pequena história territorial do Brasil (sesmarias e terras devolutas)* (Porto Alegre: Livraria Sulina, 1954 [1935]).

land. “*Sesmarias* legislation, betrayed in its origins by the feudal monopoly, proved unable to serve the purpose expressly stated by the law: to disseminate culture and populate the land.”<sup>48</sup>

While Guimarães’s insistence on characterizing the colony as feudalistic seems to impoverish the work, his arguments are, nonetheless, based on an attentive reading of contemporary authors, such as Cirne Lima and Felisbello Freire, who had already discussed the process of the occupation of Brazil. Furthermore, Guimarães delves into the sources collected by Vasconcelos in order to unveil the laws and illegalities that took place in the settlement process, such as the practice of *arrendamento* (renting) in *sesmaria* areas, even though it was forbidden by the Carta Régia of October 20, 1753.

It is also worth noting his concern to avoid viewing Brazil in monolithic terms and, instead, to highlight the different backgrounds of territorial expansion, thus differentiating between cattle ranches, sugar mills and coffee farms. Regarding the differences between the South and the North, Guimarães also relied on Felisbello Freire’s work to show how territorial concessions in the North were generally larger than those in the South.

Thus, the feudal past and present had territoriality: the Brazilian Northeast. Contrary to Sodré, Guimarães identified the sugar mill as the primary locus of backwardness and thought it necessary to subdivide cattle estates with the advent of the *arrendamento* system. On ranches, where slave labor was not possible due to the absence of continuous and direct surveillance, subdivision would provide “men of lesser means access to explore and, later on, access to property.”<sup>49</sup>

Raising cattle offered a means through which the poor could acquire access to a small piece of land. The economic antagonism between sugar mills and cattle ranches had already been identified by Gilberto Freyre and Roberto Simonsen<sup>50</sup>. Thus, Guimarães put a positive spin on Sodré’s cultureless human anthills, identifying them as “the forerunners of a new formula for land distribution –the small property.”<sup>51</sup>

His accurate perception of the dynamics of occupation of the large latifúndios parallels the effort to understand the formation of the coffee-producing estates, the last to originate from the “entrails of the *sesmarias*.” Guimarães recalled the arguments of travellers who visited Brazil in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reassert the continuity of illegal land occupation by such farmers. The coffee farm based on large-scale feudal exploitation maintained absolute domination over things and men.

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48 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 57. A little later on he states that the end of the system of *sesmarias* on July 17, 1822 “was the recognition of an unbearable situation,” 59.

49 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 69.

50 Roberto Simonsen, *História Econômica do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nacional, 1937).

51 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 73.

Nonetheless, if there were those who believed in the possibility of transforming the coffee farms due to the crisis of slave labor, these latifundios survived even after the introduction of free workers, initiated by Senator Vergueiro in 1857. The continued monopolization of land ownership actually prevented the weakening of these large estates and the consolidation of small properties. The slaves who worked them were already engaged in relations of production that were closer to the feudal model, since they were allowed a small portion of land to farm themselves, from which they provided for their own subsistence and could even sell their surplus production.<sup>52</sup> This kind of “partnership” could not be identified as “a form of transition between the primitive income form and capitalist income,” as Marx had wished. In the Brazilian case, the partnership represented a return to backward, pre-capitalist forms.

The central idea that structures Guimarães's text is that there was a peasant class in formation. The consecutive ‘abortions’ and ultimate failure of this peasantry to materialize were a consequence of the fact that “for 388 years the colonial and feudal latifundio, and its analogue, the slave labor agricultural system, used many of the available artifices to prevent the oppressed human masses [...] from settling permanently.”<sup>53</sup> Guimarães delves into the works of Rocha Pombo<sup>54</sup> and the traveler Saint-Hilaire to sustain the historicity of the “layer of semi-laborers from the countryside [...] without any important function in the productive structure.”<sup>55</sup> Despite the limited productive significance of these “semi-laborers,” Guimarães acknowledged that there had been a class struggle that, according to Rocha Pombo, was a struggle “between working classes and the territorial aristocracy [that] lasted for very long.” Drawing on Pombo, Guimarães stated: “The small *sesmeiros* resisted as long as they could against the preeminence of the big.”<sup>56</sup>

To prove the existence of this historical struggle, the author of *Quatro Séculos* once again referred to the arguments of Pombo, which demonstrated that the sugar mill owners tried to subsist autonomously and were only stopped from continuing to produce *aguardente* (sugarcane alcohol) due to the interests of the Crown and the landed elite, as expressed in the Provision of September 18, 1706. Thus, “indebted to the large landowners, the small *sesmeiros* had to sell them what remained of their land; those who were allowed to remain, living there as *rendeiros*

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52 It is interesting to note that Guimarães' statement about the possibility of a slave holding some portion of land was not emphasized in later studies about the so-called peasant gap.

53 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 105-106.

54 José Francisco da Rocha Pombo was born in 1857 and died in 1933. According to his biographer, he was both an abolitionist and a republican. He wrote tens of books on the State of Paraná, where he was born.

55 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 106.

56 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 106.



(tenant farmers), considered themselves very lucky.” And still: “those who were not trusted with ‘*tomar terras de renda*’ (occupying rental lands) [...] had the consolation of remaining as *agregados*, under the ‘protection’ of the master.”<sup>57</sup>

According to Guimarães, the notion of a process that “depriv[ed] the incipient peasant class” countered Lamego’s idea about the exceptional character of a small-property regime, both in Campos, the area this geographer studied, and in the country as a whole. The obstinate struggle of Brazilian peasants was thus understood as a class struggle since “not even for a single moment, throughout the history of Brazilian society, has the irreconcilable antagonism between the class of latifundio owners and the peasant class been absent.”<sup>58</sup> This antagonism reveals the specificity of Brazilian history where, contrary to other regions of Latin America, in which latifundios originated from the ruin of small properties, in Brazil peasant property originated from the decomposition of the latifundio.

Guimarães also considered Marx’s thoughts about the appropriation of land and the previous contributions of Wakefield to such discussions. The systematic British colonization proposed by Wakefield assumed that it was necessary to stipulate that the price of land be high enough to stop workers from acquiring their own properties. Moreover, the income from land sales should be used to finance the importation of colonists who, without the means to purchase land, would become wageworkers. In other words, Wakefield’s arguments showed that it was first necessary to prevent poor men from acquiring access to land as independent peasants, in order to create a class of rural workers who did not own their means of production. To Guimarães, such an obstruction had been in force since the inception of Brazil’s colonization, since it was forbidden for free and poor workers to own land. Thus, it was the *posseiro* or squatter who struggled to become a peasant. They were the ones who fought the power of the latifundio owners. By acknowledging the importance of the small *posseiro*, Guimarães showed their resistance and obstinacy in the fight over the ownership of land.

By boldly attacking the almighty latifundio system, by violating its draconian institutions, the posse makes history as the strategic weapon with the longest reach and the best efficacy in the century-old struggle against the monopoly of land [...] Intruders and posseiros were the forerunners of small peasant property [...] Due to the repetition of these daring deeds of bravery, for which many paid with their lives, the sacred and until then untouchable colonial and feudal monopoly of land started to fall apart.<sup>59</sup>

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57 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 107.

58 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 110.

59 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 113.

Guimarães acknowledged that the *posse* also formed the latifundio and was aware that the end of the *sesmarias* system in 1822 worsened the situation of irregular land occupation by large farm owners. In his view, however, it was the terribly oppressive system of Brazil's initial centuries that "crushed in its berth the origins of the class of small independent farmers," forcing a large number of poor to become *agregados* and tenants of the sugar mills, and "delayed or obstructed the diversification of crops."<sup>60</sup> Contrary to the perception of his contemporaries about poor free men, Guimarães stated that they were

Not always properly pictured by many of our historians, who frequently see them, just like the rural landowners of that time, as a multitude of lowly outlaws; these 'idle' or 'tramps', at least most of them, were an important instrument for pressure and fighting the then unbreachable right to property of the latifundio owners. We'll find them in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century transformed into 'intruders' or 'posseiros' and once again robbed and oppressed in the course of their daring struggle for the right to a piece of land.<sup>61</sup>

Guimarães thus inverted the arguments of Sodré and so many others of that period, in order to legitimize the extra-legal occupation of the *posseiros* who paved the way for the small property. In other words, it was not the immigrants alone who created the Brazilian peasantry. Prior to their arrival, there were families without resources who formed agricultural units away from the large latifundios and farmed them as peasants. But Guimarães further argued that the decomposition of the large estates, due to the very rhythms of such extensive systems of exploitation, and their careless agricultural practices, enabled the establishment of these small properties.<sup>62</sup>

Still not pleased, he also read the work of the French geographer and professor of the Universidade de São Paulo, Pierre Monbeig, author of *As estruturas agrárias da Faixa Pioneira Paulista*, in order to support the idea that poor farmers "who had recently immigrated or come from the coffee farms" were moving towards new lands. Conversely, capitalist land-colonization companies, as well as squatters, stole public land and promoted violence against the *posseiros*.

It is possible that Guimarães's attentive historical investigation of rural people might have been related to his activities in the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s. The proliferation of the so-called agricultural unionism,

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60 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 114.

61 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 117.

62 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *Quatro Séculos*, 152. Guimarães delves into Caio Prado Junior's article, "Distribuição da Propriedade Fundiária Rural no Estado de São Paulo", *Revista Geografia* 1: 1 (1935): 692-700.

sponsored by the PCB, might also have forced a denser reading about such rural inhabitants. There were many discussions within the party about how to interpret the land reform. They not only “mirrored the application of the general political line of the party to the countryside, but [...] already showed some ‘formulation of theories’ that aimed at better accounting for the specificities of the rural world.”<sup>63</sup> I do not have the space to explore these discussions here, but what is of interest is that Alberto Passos Guimarães’s participation was decisive in revising the PCB’s view about the revolutionary role of the peasant.

In the 1960s, the notion of peasant mobilization was initially unthinkable. To reaffirm the feudal character of Brazilian society seemed like the best way to promote its transformation. Critically, however, *Quatro Séculos de Latifúndio* —which consolidated the notion that the remnants of feudalism both hindered Brazil’s economic development and unveiled the historicity of violence against rural peoples in their century-old struggle against landowners — was published only one year before the coup d’état of 1964.

In a new chapter added to the 1968 edition, after the coup d’état and the promulgation of the *Estatuto da Terra* (Land Statute) of Castelo Branco’s military administration, Guimarães still emphasized the need for land reform, and noticed, as perhaps few did, the conditions for de-nationalizing property contained within the *Estatuto da Terra*, as well as the failure to create devices that would democratize the access to land. In other words, despite the advances represented by the *Estatuto*, a topic discussed by many authors, and despite the need to distinguish between the law itself and how it was later implemented, Guimarães maintained his positive perspective on rural people. In this sense he was very different from his contemporaries as well as others who tried to understand his views later on.

Guimarães’s concern with studying the rural poor man persisted in his subsequent studies. The first of these, *A crise Agrária*, is a sweeping work that summarized the agricultural development of mankind: the stages of agricultural growth, the agricultural revolution, and the degree of rural industrialization.<sup>64</sup> The second, *As Classes Perigosas. Banditismo Urbano e Rural*<sup>65</sup> — clearly inspired by Hobsbawm’s idea of social banditry,<sup>66</sup> a primitive form of social protest in which bandits, by attacking power structures, are considered heroes and champions of justice by rural communities — represents Guimarães’s attempt to understand the issue of violence in the contemporary world. By the time he wrote said book, Guimarães did not have the same prominence that he had had in

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63 Luiz Flávio Carvalho Costa and Raimundo Santos, *Política e Reforma Agrária* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 1998), 19.

64 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *A crise Agrária* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982).

65 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *As Classes Perigosas. Banditismo Urbano e Rural* (Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1981).

66 I refer particularly to the book: Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandidos* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1976).

the years prior to the coup d'état. Nonetheless, he highlighted the limited participation of historians in discussions about the violent character of landowners. Perhaps for this reason, he once again returned to Koster's texts in order to historicize such violence.

I imagined the strange life that I lived and the similarity with the feudal time in Europe sprang to mind, and I couldn't keep from comparing it to the current state of Brazil's interior. The vast power of the farmer, not only over his slaves but his authority over the free people of the poor classes; the respect these barons demanded from those living on their land, the assistance they receive from *rendeiros* in case of offense from an equal neighbor, the dependence of the peasants and their wish for being under the private protection of a rich individual who is capable of freeing him from all oppression and of speaking in his defense to the Governor, or to the Judge; all these circumstances come together to make the similitude even more striking.<sup>67</sup>

It's difficult to know the reasons that led Alberto Passos Guimarães to insist on the enduring violence of the landed elite. One might infer that he followed what happened in the countryside after the 1964 coup d'état: the dismantling of the *Ligas Camponesas* and the slaughter or arrest of mobilized agricultural workers involved. In any case, if *As Classes Perigosas* searched for the historical roots of banditry in the employment of *capangas e jagunços*, or poor men who protected the interests of the large land owners, it also moved away from the oversimplifying and judgmental view of the decision by those men to become the main perpetrators of violence fomented by the landed elite, such as that found in Rui Facó's image of the poor classes as *sementeiras de capangas* (breeding grounds of thugs). This was because "violence became a spontaneous product of the latifundio, in the passage of the desperate poor classes to the 'hell of poverty.'"<sup>68</sup>

Contrary to the common perception among his contemporaries, Guimarães insisted that there was a vast free population that was barred from accessing land in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He even delved into the statistical data produced by Joaquim Floriano de Godói in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to demonstrate the use of free workers in the regions of Minas Gerais, Ceará, São Paulo, Bahia, Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro in 1875, as well as the large number of

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67 Guimarães ends his text with what he considered almost a confidence by Koster: "Even I felt the power that was bestowed in my hands. I had gathered a large number of free workers and property ownership was respected for miles around. Many of these fellows had committed more than one crime under the impression that my protection would guard them, and if I had not expelled a few and threatened others with the rigors of law, much more than illusion for those whose conduct was irregular, I don't know which mischief they would not have been up to", Alberto Passos Guimarães, *As Classes Perigosas*, 109-110.

68 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *As Classes Perigosas*, 153.

“idle” hands in those regions. Compared to 1,434,170 men aged 13 to 45 and employed in agricultural work, there were 650,540 slaves and 2,822,583 idle men in those six provinces.<sup>69</sup>

Guimarães’s perception about the structural character of idleness among poor, free men, and its relation to the monopolization of landholding, was related to the fact that he had worked as an editor and statistician at IBGE and had access to historical information about population growth and the distribution of productive activities within the population. Guimarães also indicated that part of the colonial ideology had taken root, developing the character of the idle man, vagrant and squatter as “a product of the voluntary decision of ‘free’ workers, or that they existed because of their ‘incapacity to work.’”<sup>70</sup> Aware of the contribution of North American historian Peter Einseberg in *Modernização sem mudança*,<sup>71</sup> as well as other authors, Guimarães still insisted on the need to think about violence in Brazil as the result of the past history of monopolization of land by a few and by obstruction of the constitution of peasant units in Brazil.

## Conclusion

The 1964 coup d’état buried the hope for land reform and peasant mobilization in Brazil. In subsequent years, the “feudal” thesis was thoroughly discredited. It was not only seen as the utmost expression of a mistaken interpretation, but one that fell hostage to imported theories derived from other historical contexts. From the 1960s on, Brazilian academics turned largely to Caio Prado Junior’s views (developed from the 1940s) about the countryside and his argument that Brazil was “capitalist ever since its origins.” In his book, *A Revolução Brasileira*, written shortly after the coup d’état, Caio Prado sought to deny the continued existence of traces of feudalism in the country in the the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and to destroy the feudal interpretation of Brazilian history. Caio Prado emphasized the inadequacy of analyzing Brazilian society with classical European models, accusing those who opposed him of developing theory backwards: one “that goes from concepts to the facts, and not the other way around, from these facts to the concepts.”<sup>72</sup> He claimed

that Brazil does not present anything that can legitimately be called ‘feudal traces’. If not for any other reason, at least because for there to be ‘traces’, there should forcefully be a pre-existing ‘feudal’ system of which these would be the remaining traces. Such

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69 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *As Classes Perigosas*, 138-139.

70 Alberto Passos Guimarães, *As Classes Perigosas*, 142.

71 Peter Eisenberg, *Modernização sem mudança* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1970).

72 Caio Prado Junior, *A Revolução Brasileira* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1966), 34.

a feudal or semi-feudal system, or even a system merely related to feudalism in its appropriate sense, had never existed among us and, no matter how much one investigates Brazilian history, it cannot be found in it.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to understand, however, that the way Nelson Werneck Sodré and Alberto Passos Guimarães read the rural past was rooted, above all, in the historic context in which they worked. Furthermore, far from being monolithic and oversimplifying, they tried in different ways to understand Brazil and give meaning (negative or positive) to the historic actions of the rural poor.

Additionally, it is worth re-emphasizing that the decline of the “feudal” school vindicated the notion that Brazil was capitalist from its beginnings. Consequently, Brazilian Marxist theory identified revolution with anti-imperialist struggles, as well as the close relationship between foreign interests and the national bourgeoisie. Neither the absence of land reform nor the country’s subordination to international capitalism — once large landed estates were inserted into it, using external dependency to their advantage — impeded capitalist expansion locally.

Finally, Werneck Sodré and Alberto Passos Guimarães’s different interpretations regarding the persistence of feudal characteristics in Brazil during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are more than historiographical curiosities of the Brazilian left. The opposing views about Brazil’s colonial past was also a theoretical debate that is still pertinent for thinking about Latin America and its relationship with Europe. The importance of examining the past through the eyes of key protagonists of the “feudal” school, especially Alberto Guimarães, is that it helps us reflect on the important question about such ties: historians of the period accepted the general thesis that the ties that developed between Brazil and the rest of Latin America to the center of the consolidating system of global capitalism generated relations of dependence. However, by doing so, they overlooked internal developments such as the struggles of a peasantry-in-formation. By exploring different visions of Brazilian history produced by the left, I show how these interpretations, the product of contemporary political struggles, were more sophisticated and diverse on questions of the peasantry and land reform than was subsequently remembered. Rereading them today helps us rethink how the ties between colony and metropolis in the history of Brazil, and in Latin America in general, encouraged the theoretical mistake of sublimating the history of peasant struggles.

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73 Caio Prado Junior, *A Revolução*, 51.

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