

— SUGARCANE WOMEN

Rebuilding the Past

Memories of tenant farmers shed light on the final days of the sugar plantation settlements

Claudia Izique

Cane Cutter: tales of violence, treachery and fear



In 1966, tenant farmers on the Usina Amália, one of the largest and most traditional sugarcane plantations in the interior of the State of São Paulo, called a strike for better wages and improved working conditions. In the midst of a military dictatorship, the movement led to the expulsion of nearly 4,000 families from the land. The episode would have been consigned to oblivion had it not remained indelibly fixed in the memory of farmers who, thirty years later, would recount tales of violence, treachery and fear to the researcher Maria Aparecida de Moraes Silva. These farmers, Moraes Silva writes, “had fallen into a trap laid by both the landowners and their union.”

The memories of the farmers – and the 208 lawsuits filed against the plantation’s owner, Indústrias Reunidas Francisco Matarazzo, helped Moraes Silva as she reconstructed a period of profound transformation in the history of labor relations in the sugar fields, when temporary labor that took the form of migrant workers and day laborers (*boias frias*) replaced traditional tenant farmers. The farmers’ stories also allowed Moraes Silva to become thoroughly familiar with the daily lives of the families of the time: how the adults cut the cane that the children would pile and tie in sheaves for transport to the mill; days enlivened by weddings, baptisms and the festival of the Three Kings, and nights lulled by the Siriema waltz: “*Your eyes, oh so many colors/From a Hail Mary/ That a rosary formed of bitterness/ I pray all day.*”

The research, begun in 1997, was supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP). The research Project, titled *Sugarcane Women: Memories*, sought to reconstruct the historical experience of women agricultural laborers. Recurring mention of the Usina Amália strike, however, led to the broadening of the study, which the author further justifies in the observation that “no mention is made of the strike in the bibliography of rural proletarianization in São Paulo.” By utilizing what she calls “a networking system,” Moraes Silva was able to identify and communicate with more than 70 former tenant farmers spread over the entire



Workers striking at the Usina Amália mill in 1966 for better working conditions and higher wages

region of Leme, Ribeirão Preto, Barrinha, Santa Rosa do Viterbo and São Simão. “I had to resort to oral histories to retrace the events,” she explains.

Covering a territory of 11 thousand *alqueires* (in São Paulo State, a unit of land measuring 24,220 square meters) the Usina Amália mill was the agro-industrial arm of the Francisco Matarazzo Conglomerated Industries business empire. Besides its sugar fields, Usina Amália housed industrial equipment for processing cane and bagasse, as well as locally-produced eucalyptus, fruits and vegetables. Sugar, alcohol, cardboard, citric acid and canned goods were all produced on site. In the early 1950s, the Usina Amália mill was ahead of its time in making forays into biorefinery technology through its utilization of biomass. Thousands of workers – from agricultural laborers to factory-hands – were employed, all with ties to the local Food Workers’ Union as the laws of the time mandated. Although heads-of-household among the tenant farmers were the official holders of employment contracts, productivity calculations that served as the basis of their remuneration were made by taking into account the unpaid labor of their wives and children.

The more skilled workers had access to schools, hospitals, movies, churches, and even a supermarket – all in the vicinity of the farm – but these resources were beyond the reach of rural workers. The latter lived dispersed throughout more than 20 settlements of 100 to 150 families each, all of them among the cane fields far from the centers of community activities. They were allowed small orchards and vegetable gardens, but the necessary subsistence products were purchased at the grocery store that the landowner himself also owned. These expenditures were deducted from the salary of the head-of-

-household who, at the end of the month, often found himself in the red.

THE STRIKE

Daily life at the mill as well as the 1966 strike are described in an article by Marcos Pivetta titled “The Mansion of the Matarazzos in the California of São Paulo,” published in Issue 61 of the *Pesquisa FAPESP* magazine in January 2001.

Relations between the company and the tenant farmers became more strained with the institution of the 1963 Rural Worker’s Statute, which according to Pivetta rendered the system of contract-retention illegal by equalizing the rights of rural and urban labor. The cane cutters were given the right to holidays, a Christmas bonus, a formal labor agreement (for each worker and not merely for those holding contracts, as Pivetta points out), medical care provided by the National Social Security Institute (INSS) and retirement. During the first year of the military dictatorship, this tension was mediated by the laws governing national security and strikes. According to Maria Moraes Silva, the agricultural laborers of the Usina Amália mill struck on the basis of rights guaranteed under the new statute and were expelled from the land for having incited a movement that was deemed illegal. “As soon as a cane-cutter was dismissed and talked into leaving the farm, his house would be torn down by the landlords,” says Pivetta. Not only the worker’s home, but an entire system of labor relations came tumbling down.

The six-day strike went on for another five years in the memory of some of these former settlers who recollected the lengthy lawsuits and the company’s appeals, from the Santa Rosa do Viterbo Municipal Court all the way up to

the Supreme Labor Court, in Brasilia. “The legal opinions of all of the judges,” writes Maria Moraes Silva in “Strike at the Plantation”, an article published in the compilation *Social History of the Brazilian Peasantry*, “made mention of the discriminatory dismissal of workers, the legality of the strike, the peaceful nature of the events, the rights of the workers, the peaceful nature of the union-organized assemblies, the reasons for demanding the amounts the company failed to pay on the occasion of the collective bargaining agreement approved by the Supreme Labor Court, and the adherence to the Labor Court’s ruling that the movement be terminated.”

Moraes Silva adds that in the meantime “many of the workers, after years of waiting for a legal solution to their predicament, settled with the company for ridiculously-low payments. With the backing of the court, many of the workers were able to remain on the plantation, albeit without employment or means of subsistence as they awaited the inevitable outcome.

These former tenant farmers have no recollection of any legal victory. “They brought vivid accounts of their experiences, permeated with drama, emotion and symbolism, not just descriptions of the past, but a re-creation and re-living of it,” says Moraes Silva.

The favored research subjects – the women – hold on to memories of how hard it was to find work, of being hungry, and of making do with a bowl of manioc soup in times of extreme hardship. As Moraes Silva puts it, these women, “although they did not participate directly in the strike, as wives and daughters, they suffered its consequences.”

Thirty years later, Moraes Silva would meet many of these women again, now as heads of households. To fulfill their new roles, they had to overcome even greater challenges than those faced as tenant farmers, notes Pivetta in an article published in the *Pesquisa FAPESP* magazine in 2000: “Competing with younger men and machines that gradually take over the task of cutting the cane, the female day-laborers faced enormous difficulties finding jobs in the rural areas.” Some of them gathered the cane stumps left behind by the combines or “tried their hand” at pesticides in nurseries housing cane seedlings, while others became domestic servants.

The women also held on to memories of family and extended-family ties and of the neighborliness that prevailed on the outskirts of the towns. “Sociability,” notes Moraes Silva, “grounded in primary interrelationships of interpersonal iden-

tification and self-identification gives way to a sociability that is individualized and aloof. The traditions and culture of “a world gone by” can no longer fit within the confines of the new space. “New places had to be built to protect them, to prevent them from dying,” says Moraes Silva.

There, at what Moraes Silva calls these “places,” one finds the scattered shards of individual and collective histories. “As recollections emerge from the recesses of memory, what was once nebulous gradually takes on distinct, multi-colored forms,” writes Moraes Silva in her 2001 article “Memory in the Fabric of Time.” “Our neighbor would cook up these cornmeal cakes: she’d crack some eggs right there – beat them well – throw in some lard, and then a little cinnamon, with about a half-dozen eggs really well beaten – with her own hands! She’d then thicken everything with cornmeal. They’d come out so soft and delicious. She’d bake them and send a biscuit-bowl full of those cakes to mother.” Thus a memory Moraes Silva relates, a recollection passed on to her by 93-year-old Dona

Onícia, still inhabiting another world and time where loyalty and gratitude were the symbolic manifestations of a unique social group.

DO-IT-YOURSELF

Memory, however, contrives, reconstructs, and reinvents fragmentary remembrances, rendering culture – in the words of historian Peter Burke – a “construction site” of sorts. Some of Amália’s former

tenant farmers continued to partake in the rural tradition of Three Kings’ festivities well into the 1990s. “The meaning behind the festival remained the same: the fulfillment of promises to the Saints for the receiving of grace,” explains Moraes Silva. The wanderings of the kings, the sacred hymns and the joining of the blessed kings’ banners took on new meanings formed out of the symbiosis between the recollection and reinvention of characters brought to life through the story’s narrative. Moraes Silva herself witnessed the banner of the Blessed Kings, a Kings’ festival in the city of Barrinha. The banner, “the one taken around the world,” was with Our Lady the Blessed Virgin, who had no revelers, thus symbolizing another biblical event: the meeting of Mary – embodied in the person of Our Lady – with Jesus as he carried the cross. “*Awaiting the Three Kings/Herod became angry/he called together his secretaries and decreed his decree/ that they proceed to Bethlehem/ and that once there they begin killing/ and that they kill boys/ up to the age of two.*” ■

Reports re-create symbolic manifestations of the social group

PROJECT

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FROM OUR ARCHIVES

Matarazzo’s Big House and Slaves’ Quarters in the Rich Interior of São Paulo, Issue no. 61 – January/February 2001