

## Civilization or Reform?

THERESA A. MEADE: *"Civilizing" Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889-1930*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

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*"Day by day Rio's citizens watched as the allocation of the capital's space reflected the divisions that had always separated the population by class, by privilege, by race, and, now more than ever, by culture." (p. 94)*

Rio de Janeiro's entrance into the twentieth century set the stage for decades of growing physical, economic and political distance between the city's elites and its working poor. The city and federal governments embarked on urban beautification and sanitation projects intended to create a European metropolis out of the tropical port city. These reforms further marginalized the poor, who were bullied into compliance with health programs, exiled to squalid suburbs as their tenements were condemned, and alternatively ignored or bilked by the foreign companies charged with building the city's water, lighting and transportation infrastructure. The city's projects presaged a long history of public policies justified as universal goods, but benefiting a privileged minority.

In *"Civilizing" Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889-1930*, Teresa Meade explores the collective response of Rio's poor to the urban

reforms of the first decades of the century, whose design was to eliminate "visible" poverty by driving the poor from the center of the city. Meade ties the principal act of collective resistance against the city's reform plan — the 1904 anti-vaccination revolt — to other protests and revolts during the Republic, and makes a case that these seemingly unrelated and largely disorganized civil actions were directed toward a commonly perceived threat: the increasing social and spatial marginalization of Brazil's working poor.

"*Civilizing*" *Rio* fills a conspicuous gap in the social history of Brazil. The book's strength lies in its focus on popular protests over point of consumption issues — prices, access to housing and transportation, etc. — rather than point of production issues explored in existing labor histories. Consequently, Meade pushes our understanding of the social and cultural consequences of Brazil's dependent development, and the stresses of industrialization and urbanization, from the small but growing industrial labor force and into the broader environment of Rio's working poor.

As Meade shows, Rio's poor, irregularly employed in industry and the service sector and rarely able to keep up with the rising cost of living, lacked the leverage to strike, but at times combined to oppose the confederation of business owners, public officials and foreign companies that was redesigning the city's work, living and recreational spaces to suit their Europeanized tastes. When the cost of reform was passed on to them in the form of transportation fare hikes, enforced vaccination, and the destruction of homes, Rio's poor "protested... with all they had, but that was really only themselves." (p. 192)

Well-integrated to existing North-American and Brazilian scholarship, "*Civilizing*" *Rio* is a compelling empirical test of recent literature on the scientific justification of public power, such as Nancy Stepan's *The Hour of Eugenics*. Meade shows how the "scientific" rationale to such policies as sanitation were extended to rationalize the removal of the poor from central areas of the city. Connecting "scientific" policies over issues of public health to the class-based assumptions that turned urban renewal into an attack on the poor, Meade demonstrates that seemingly irrational or naive protests against mandatory vaccinations were a sensible defense of class interest.

The book goes a considerable distance away from elite discourse on "civilization" and society, settling instead on popular concerns as revealed by newspaper accounts. However, while Meade offers examples of popular resistance to hostile reforms, she largely ignores strategies of accommodation. As families were forced from the city to the suburbs, what options did they consider in deciding where to re-locate? Did families cope with rising food prices by growing their own vegetables, or depending on goods produced by

relatives in the interior? Meade notes shopkeepers extended credit to neighborhoods: how available was consumer credit to Rio's working poor?

Meade describes Rio in the early decades of the century as a city past patron client relations, citing mainly Thomas Holloway's *Policing Rio de Janeiro*. While the rise of a professional police force may have signalled the decline of patron-client relations as the basis for public order, it is hard to imagine clientelism no longer existed during the Republic. Indeed, in *Urban Politics in Brazil*, Conniff describes the clientelistic roots of the city's political machine in the last years of the Republic. Perhaps one of the most violent aspects of expelling poor families from the city center is that it tore them away from established sources of consumer credit, sympathetic patrons, and all the other informal networks that allow the poor to survive. By focusing on protest and rebellion, Meade shows in exquisite detail the circumstances that made life difficult, but shows only a few of the strategies the people of Rio would have to cope with daily hardships.

Meade situates the collective acts of resistance of Rio's public within a global context of lower class struggle, rejecting the model of "pre-modern" and "modern" revolts offered by George Rudé and Charles Tilly. For Meade, struggles in Rio were neither "pre-modern" nor "modern," but represent the most accessible option for members of a loosely knit community with little collective leverage: she likens Rio's protesters not only to Luddites, but to the participants in the 1992 Los Angeles riots. She concludes: "it is only within a broader world context that the individual actions of a few people in Rio de Janeiro make sense, since it is only, ultimately, on the level of the world system that the development of any major city can be understood."

The book's most substantial contribution is not to the study of world systems, but to our understanding of Brazilian society. Though Meade does not discuss the Vargas era, during these years the accumulated protests during the Republic began to have an effect. The seemingly unsuccessful protests directed attention to the conditions of the poor, and shifted the response to the "social question" from policing to the allocation of social services. As Conniff has shown, in the 1930s, the city of Rio gained political autonomy from the federal government for the first time, and engaged in a pioneering experiment in political populism under the hand of mayor Pedro Ernesto Batista. This populism, also adopted by Vargas, tapped public discontent over the arbitrary administration the city experienced during the Republic.

Beyond experiments with mass political participation, city administrators began to realize the social costs of their predecessor's reform plans. Since administrators during the Republic scattered Rio's poor across a vast hinterland, the task of extending public services such as sewage, electricity and schools was made all the more costly to future generations. Hiding the