

## REVIEWS

*Brazil's Steel City: Developmentalism, Strategic Power, and Industrial Relations in Volta Redonda, 1941-1964.* By Oliver J. Dinius. Stanford, Conn.: Stanford University Press, 2011. Pp. xxi, 352. Illustrations. Tables. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$65.00 hardcover.

This work of Dinius joins pioneering Brazilian studies that have used company and personnel records to understand the business end of an enterprise and its management of employees. The book's most original contribution lies in its combination of business history, knowledge of the production process, and quantification to explore the industrial and labor relations of the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN). Inaugurated after World War II, this famous firm looms large in Brazil: economically as its first steel producer, politically as a symbol of *Varguismo*, and symbolically as a landmark in the country's industrialization.

Unlike the descriptive business and community history of Donald Rady (*Volta Redonda*, 1973), two-thirds of this work focuses on the years before 1950. It begins with the founding of the CSN and then moves on to the challenges and migratory flows occasioned by its construction in Volta Redonda, an isolated village of 2,712 in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro. As the author explains, the CSN began as a construction company that employed 15,000 at its height, and "became a steel producer only in 1946" (p. 99). Chapter 4 covers the subsequent workforce reduction to 8,000, with the gradual shift to steel production. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 include the book's five maps, half its figures and photographs, and three-quarters of its tables, whose data are drawn from an analysis of the personnel records of 94,000 ex-employees (using a sample size of 2,048). Dinius provides rich empirical data on migratory flows, hirings, dismissals and their listed causes, skill profiles across time, work accidents, and suspensions before 1952. The early turnover, extraordinarily high, suggests the difficulties of proletarianizing a labor force of rural origin. Yet this is not fully pursued because of the author's disinterest in the questions of "class formation, political culture, and community" (p. 10) that he believes have monopolized Brazilian labor historiography. Instead, his central concern is with the social engineering of modern capitalist production, including the challenge of acculturating rural migrants to work in a large industrial facility while improving their "work habits in a cultural sense" (pp. 70, 120).

I would have loved to see Dinius do more with this internal company material. Unlike his related 2004 dissertation, the book does not provide the results of the coding of

photographs for skin color undertaken by his “research assistant (who categorized herself as *negra*)” (p. 239). The blast furnace workers in the photo on page 113 are all visibly African-descended, but all we learn, in passing, is that “blacks and *pardos* constituted a majority of the migrants,” largely *mineiros* who locals disdainfully dubbed *baianos* (residents of the more African-descended state of Bahia). His observation about the CSN’s meticulousness in “fixing proper names” (p. 94) is also fascinating, since even the police were frustrated by “the widespread use of saint names and a legacy of slavery [that] made for many duplicate names” (p. 126). Finally, more sustained analysis of the “disciplinary regime” (pp. 115–120) would also have been useful, even if only as a basis for comparison with other Brazilian and Latin American cases.

On the whole, the author is not very interested in what the new “country bumpkins” brought with them. Yet such information might have helped flesh out what Dinius means by the firm’s “paternalism” or even “state paternalism” (pp. 72–77). The CSN, he suggests, “tried to shape workers’ culture by marrying the material benefits of industrial modernity . . . with the spiritual certainty of neo-Thomist social doctrine.” In building the CSN company town, the Catholic Church was accorded a “strong institutional presence” in the context of what is characterized as Volta Redonda’s “staunchly Catholic” hinterland (pp. 70, 95, 81). Although he notes that most workers had “likely never [before] lived in a parish with weekly Sunday mass,” he assumes that they “likely welcomed the Church’s strong presence” because it “helped them find their place in a new social order” (p. 81); we hear nothing further about the Church in subsequent chapters.

Yet it is unfair to judge this work in terms of its depth of engagement with the social networks, interpersonal relations, and cultural dynamics that characterized class formation under CSN’s particular form of domination. Dinius is clear from the outset that this is a study of industrial relations with a focus on steelworkers “as economic actors” (p. 8). The transition comes in chapter 5, “Beware of the Communists,” which takes up the 1946–1948 activities of a newly founded trade union and company-police cooperation in repressing Communist activism. Yet we are not offered a convincing explanation about the 10 percent of the local electorate who voted communist or how the union’s growth—apparently related to attempts to guarantee mill jobs for former construction workers (pp. 101, 136)—tied into the “complex managerial decisions” occasioned by the transition from construction to production. This gap is all the more surprising given the “fundamental differences in the profile of the workforce and the organization of the work” after the transition to steel (p. 99).

The next three chapters advance the thesis that “a profound transformation of labor relations” occurred after a 1952 collective bargaining agreement that set CSN’s workers “apart from their peers in other industries” (pp. 9, 10, 13, 196). Despite government intervention in 1947, the fledgling union, he asserts, negotiated “from a position of equal, if not superior strength” (pp. 146, 206, 226). The result was “dramatically” increased real wages as part of a “union hegemony” that would, over subsequent contracts, verge on “worker control” on the eve of the 1964 military coup. To this reader,

these claims are overstated, and that skepticism would have been shared by the leading U.S. labor specialist James O. Morris, who published a translation of the CSN's 1959 collective bargaining agreement in *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* (1964).

The narrative arc of the final two chapters is of "a defunct union under state intervention [that became] . . . one of Brazil's most powerful labor organizations" by transforming "strategic power into material gain" (pp. 205, 212–213, 236). Its ability to extract "far-reaching concessions on wages and benefits" (p. 11), he argues, derives from CSN's "strategic position . . . in the domestic economy" and the "strategic power" possessed by some workers within the mill based on its "technical division of labor" (p. 9). The first of these has always figured in labor history, but this monograph is distinctive in its attempt to operationalize the second based on concepts developed by John Womack (pp. 152, 245 fn 31, 35, 289 fn 3).

The sixth chapter, "Power over Production," demonstrates Dinius's grasp of the intricacies of producing steel and offers an excellent exposition of the work process. Its key objective is to identify which occupations were "technically strategic," which he insists should not be considered separately from the well-established labor history argument about the highly skilled (pp. 152, 156, 165; his dissertation notes the centrality of skilled workers in founding the union). Curiously, however, personnel records are not used to shed light on who occupied the strategic positions he has identified, their turnover, patterns of rebuke, or structuring of incentives. More importantly, "the absence of any smoking guns" (p. 153) undermines his larger claims for causal significance. "It is less clear," he admits with candor, "how this latent technical strategic power translated into a strong bargaining position the union held throughout the 1950s" (p. 177). Unable to demonstrate claims to centrality, Dinius claims convincingly that "it is not all that important which individuals held strategic positions and whether they played a prominent role in union affairs" (p. 178). His explanation is Delphic: technical strategic power is "the property of an historically specific division of labor in the mill and the national economy . . . [not] the property of the individual worker" (p. 177).

For Dinius, the history of the CSN is "above all a story of the political consequences of economically motivated action" (p. 8). He links this proposition to a dismissal of existing Brazilian labor scholarship on state enterprises like the CSN, which is based, he says, on "the questionable assumption that its capital-labor relations can be meaningfully compared to those at private companies in other industrial sectors" (p. 9). Unfortunately, Dinius misrepresents the position consistently advanced by Brazilians studying this topic for the 1945–1964 populist republic. Above all, their analysis has emphasized the contradictions generated by state ownership, given the inherent politicization of the state's labor relations in the face of economic and governmental instability under conditions of competitive electoral politics (José Ramalho, *Estado-Patrão*, 1989). For Regina Morel, this defined the "vicissitudes lived by a state enterprise" in dealing with its workers, even as her chapter in *O trabalhador carioca* (1995) offered a sensitive reading of modalities of consciousness among CSN employees, and how this shifted from the pioneering generation of workers to those that followed.

To sum up, the trajectory of trade unionism at the CSN has everything to do with politics, even electoral politics, which are present in Dinius's description but not his analysis. During a tumultuous era of presidential resignations and suicides, military interventions, and close elections, the CSN was engaged in efforts to control the levers of local, state, and federal power. This effort intensified as new steel companies emerged, among them COSIPA, also state-owned, in Santos, São Paulo. In *Operários em luta* by Braz José de Araújo (1985), the triangular relationship between COSIPA, labor, and government is the key to the strengthening of the union prior to the 1964 military coup. Going further, Araújo notes that even union victories did not necessarily represent defeats for management. This suggestion is echoed by Regina Luz Moreira's brief description of the 1952 contract signed shortly after Getúlio Vargas's return to power. Hailed by Dinius as transformative, the agreement did contain "conquests" for workers, she writes in her book *CSN* (2000), but it also served as leverage for the CSN's attempt to convince the federal government to authorize price increases for steel.

In its wide-ranging research and emphasis on industrial and labor relations, Dinius's work has the admiration of this reviewer. However, I am saddened that forced interpretations have been combined with willful blindness to the work of Brazilian scholars who might have helped direct a promising project along more productive lines.

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## NATION-BUILDING AND NATIONALISM

*Mexicans in Revolution, 1910–1946: An Introduction.* By William H. Beezley and Colin M. MacLachlan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Pp. viii, 189. Illustrations. Notes. Index. \$20.00 paper.

It never fails to impress when two prolific historians are able to come together and compose an effectual analysis of a complex moment like the Mexican Revolution and do so with elegant economy. William Beezley and Colin MacLachlan's *Mexicans in Revolution, 1910–1946: An Introduction* is an accessible primer to one of the most important events of Mexico's twentieth century. Their arguments are not new, but they ably clarify what is often clouded by discordant interpretations. "The first social revolution of the twentieth century," they explain, "mobilized the majority of the nation's people in a campaign to make the good life lived by the Porfirian elites available to everyone" (p. 11). Overall, Beezley and MacLachlan contend that what began as a political revolution wrought by disunity and regionalism evolved into a social revolution that forged unity through cultural nationalism and a relatively better existence for most Mexicans by the middle of the century.

Keeping in line with more traditional histories of the Mexican Revolution, the first chapter offers the requisite assessment of the Porfiriato as well as elucidation of the