

H-Net Reviews

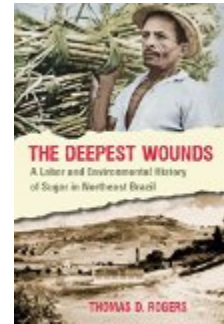
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas D. Rogers. *The Deepest Wounds: A Labor and Environmental History of Sugar in Northeast Brazil*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xvi + 302 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3433-6; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7167-6.

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Wounds and Landscapes: Metaphorical and Real

This excellent and original book shows how agricultural change in Brazil's northeastern sugar industry affected social and political relationships, concepts of identity, and the environment over the course of several centuries. It also tells the story of impoverished workers who have labored under systemic repression and sought to improve their lot by pursuing whatever apertures for advancement presented themselves in their unequal relationship with planters and the state. Thomas D. Rogers breathes life into his absorbing narrative by drawing on a vast array of historical, technological, sociological, and anthropological sources, as well as court records of labor disputes; recently opened secret police (DOPS) files; oral histories of field-workers; memoirs; and interviews with foremen, managers, owners, union officials, agronomists, and environmentalists. He also makes effective use of metaphor, in particular Gilberto Freyre's characterization of sugar-cane monoculture as inflicting the "deepest wounds" on the land and people of the Northeast, deeper even than the wounds of slavery. Rogers employs Freyre's dramatic metaphor to hold the human and environmental dimensions of the story foremost in the reader's mind. Simultaneously, Rogers utilizes "landscape discourse" to show how people "see their surroundings in ways that relate to their ideas of identity, power, and social organization," and to help explain the deep wounds in the *zona da mata*, the cane zone (p. 217).

The book consists of three parts. Part 1, which covers the period up to the 1930s, assesses the role of several

prominent Pernambucans, including Freyre and novelist José Lins do Rego, in elaborating the elite's image of cane culture based on the metaphor of a laboring landscape in which land and laborer are one. The symbol of the cane represented the absolute control of the patriarch, who commanded all that he surveyed. Though Freyre, Lins do Rego, and others recounted with nostalgia the decline of what they regarded as a benevolent paternalism and the rise of an unfeeling capitalism, Rogers recognizes the value of their works for their depiction of the nature of power in the Northeast; in other words, for what they tell us about the world the planters commanded and controlled.

The workers' corresponding landscape metaphor was of captivity, for they were completely dependent on the largess of the planter. Although the *morada*, or tenantry system, did offer a measure of security for workers who were granted access to a house and subsistence garden, it was also true that the planter could and did withdraw his patronage in a heartbeat. With the arrival of the railroad and the *usina*, or large sugar cane factory, the smaller *engenho*, or plantation, declined. Further, as more acreage became devoted to cane, less land was available for workers' homes and gardens, and the more workers saw themselves as captives. Rogers's use of memoirs and interviews with field hands shows clearly that the ways workers perceived their circumstance stood in sharp contrast to the planters' view, which saw workers as merely part of a nonhuman landscape.

Part 2 (covering 1930-63) explains in fascinating detail how relationships between boss and worker, as well as their respective metaphors of control and captivity, were altered by the uneven process of rationalization of agriculture initiated by Getúlio Vargas's regime in the 1930s. Rogers maintains that rationalization was a crucial factor in accounting for the social and political unrest of the 1950s and early 1960s, including the unprecedented strike of two hundred thousand cane workers in 1963. Agricultural changes included the emergence of trained agronomists and engineers, and the move from a tenant to a wage-based system with a standardized system of measures and payment for task-based work. These alterations deprived workers of access to land and provoked widespread discontent. Agricultural modernization; new political groupings, including the work of leftist unionizers; and regional differences, such as the contestation of power between communists in the northern and Catholics in the southern zone, pried open the planters' tightly controlled world, spurring mobilization and rising activism among workers beginning in the 1950s.

Most prior studies have stressed the role of political events and of figures, such as sociologist Josué de Castro, progressive Governor Miguel Arraes, communist labor organizer Gregório Bezerra, and activist Padre Paulo Crespo, in exposing gross injustices and in urging the unionization of rural workers. Rogers, however, places the workers' actions in the context of their reactions to changing work patterns and how these affected workers' daily lives. In so doing, he offers a fresh perspective on this important period.

Part 3 (focusing on the years 1964 to 1979) takes up the story after the coup that ousted João Goulart in 1964 and shows how the dictatorship intervened heavily in cane and other agro-industries, repressed strikes, moved disputes between workers and planters into labor courts, and regularized the use of task tables, or unified standards for job descriptions and payment of wages. These actions represented a new discourse of command, characterized by increasing state control of agriculture, as seen in the massive expansion of cane production for ethanol throughout Brazil. During the 1970s, the landscape dis-

course of science and planning, order and progress, supplanted the planters' laboring landscape.

Neither the planters' nor the military's discourse factored in environmental consequences, nor has any landscape discourse yet privileged the environment. Those in power have continued to inflict wounds on the environment, metaphorical and real, rhetorical and visceral, deeper than even Freyre could have imagined. For example, the dictatorship's vision was based on an imperative of hypergrowth and control. Vastly increased use of fertilizers and expanded acreage for production meant more deforestation, pollution, silting, flooding, and insecticides and herbicides in streams, which, of course, pose serious health issues for wildlife and human beings. The state and its technicians could not control the environment any more than the planters could, no matter how much they expanded production or how many dams they built. The workers suffered the consequences of environmental degradation first, through dislocation, loss of food sources, and illness. However, their discourse in the 1970s, according to Rogers, was that of a class identity based increasingly on their view of themselves as members of a wage-earning class that engaged in collective action to defend their interests, as demonstrated in the strikes of 1979. Workers in no way shared the vision of either the aristocrats or the technocrats.

Rogers's vivid, creative, and reflective account would perhaps have benefited slightly from attention to a few details. For example, it would have been helpful had Rogers brought out the landscape discourse more sharply and consistently in parts 2 and 3, where there is much competing detail. Landscape helps explain how people see themselves and their environment and why they behave as they do; for these reasons, the landscape discourse of the workers in particular could have been carried forward more explicitly. Also, it would have been useful had Rogers ended each chapter with a conclusion instead of only selected ones. However, these very minor criticisms in no way detract from the outstanding quality of this unique, complex, and important story artfully told.

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