

Book reviews

Unequal Development and Labour in Brazil, by Gerry Rodgers, Roberto Vêras de Oliveira and Janine Rodgers. Abingdon and New York, NY, Routledge Inequality Studies, Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2023. 218 pp. ISBN 9781032353906 (print version – hardback); ISBN 9781032353920 (print version – paperback); ISBN 9781003326670 (eBook).

This fine book provides an assessment and analysis of the pattern of unequal development in Brazil, with specific reference to Brazil's Northeast region, which has historically been significantly less developed and poorer than other regions. It is a fascinating, rich and insightful account of both the historical processes that contributed to the “persistent disadvantage” of this region compared with other parts of Brazil, as well as a careful and penetrating analysis of recent policies that either reduced this disadvantage (during the 2003–14 period) or once again led to increasing inequalities (in the period after 2016, in particular). Clearly, therefore, this book will be essential reading for anyone concerned with Brazil's economic development and the living conditions of its people, especially in the Northeast.

In fact, the book is much more than that and deserves an even wider audience, providing an object lesson in how to study inequality, both horizontal and vertical. The thoughtful political economy approach and the recognition of the intermingling of different forces are both admirable. In particular, the systematic way in which the broader trends are presented, dissected and parsed to locate specific factors and show how they have played out over different accumulation regimes and periods of boom and crisis enables a discussion of economic inequality that is not static but dynamic, and recognizes the complex interaction of economic, social, political and institutional forces. The authors are also constantly mindful of the international dimension, whether historically through the nature of colonialism, or subsequently through varying forms of integration with global markets. The focus on labour relations as the organizing principle for the discussion provides a coherence to the narrative.

After setting the stage by describing the extent of regional disparities and the differences that persist between the Northeast and other regions, the second chapter provides a brief historical survey of how this came to be. The Northeast was an important locus of essentially extractive colonial activity. Moreover, after the end of slavery in the late nineteenth century, very different labour market institutions emerged in the Northeast and Southeast regions of Brazil. This was not just hysteresis – it was also policy-driven. SUDENE (Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast) was created in 1959 and sought to integrate the region into the national economy, but on terms that essentially made it subordinate to São Paulo. It helped to create a regional division of labour in which the Northeast provided inputs and migrant labour for the industrial development of the Southeast. The various crises, including the financial crisis of the 1980s that spurred deindustrialization, served to amplify the regional inequalities. The period of neoliberalism that started in the

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1990s reinforced these patterns and even accentuated them through privatization, which sustained old inequalities and created new ones.

The period that the authors characterize as “neo-developmentalism”, from the election of Luis Ignácio Lula da Silva in 2003 until the crisis of 2015, was a deviation from this trend. The Northeast was among the main beneficiaries of policies like increasing minimum wages, extending social protection and placing new emphasis on both public and private investment in less developed regions. But in the subsequent, long-drawn-out crisis, the Northeast suffered disproportionately, much as it had benefited more from the previous policies. Processes like the decline of formal employment that were widespread across the country were even more marked in the Northeast, which already had more informal workers.

The third chapter, on labour regimes, provides a much more detailed elaboration on how these developed and how labour relations continue to play out in the Northeast relative to other regions. The analytical framework here is both innovative and insightful: using elements of the regulation school approach, as well as structuralist, institutionalist and other reference points, the authors highlight the interplay between macroeconomic forces, labour markets, social discrimination based on gender and race, and the requirements of private accumulation. A particularly useful concept in their discussion is that of “labour status”, which depends on various features of the employment relationship: autonomy; continuity and regularity; protection and security; remuneration; skills, qualifications and occupation; representation and voice. These various indicators generate 16 categories of labour status, but these are recognized as being fluid and dynamic. Interestingly, the authors find that the labour regime of the Northeast is highly unequal, even more so than in other regions. Yet, even though it is fragmented and unequal, it is also articulated between its different parts, through outsourcing and interdependence. Thus, it is simultaneously fragmented and integrated, and the patterns and forms of these different parts have been changing with macroeconomic and sectoral policies and processes.

Specific analyses of particular production systems in the fourth chapter provide greater granularity to this argument, as well as a glimpse into the complexity of both production and employment relations. The authors emphasize that dualism as a concept is not really useful because of that complexity, and also because these economic relations are so closely intertwined with social categories. We know that intersectionality is important in understanding labour relations, because gender and race/colour intertwine with social class in the world of work. But there is also “consubstantiality” (a new term for me, apparently referring to the constitutive dynamics of the social relations of power and domination that are so evident in, for example, gender relations).

All this makes for a rich blend, and one that enables quite a profound analysis of the ways in which work and employment interact with economy, society and polity. This analysis also generates several policy recommendations, but these are tempered by the knowledge that, just as inequality in its different forms is “one of the causes of Brazil’s unstable and crisis-prone development trajectory” (p. 185), undoing it will require very significant political and institutional transformations. At a time when a new government in Brazil is seeking to move towards such changes despite the many constraints it faces, this book will be an indispensable guide.

Jayati Ghosh

*Professor of Economics
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA*