Thwarted Desires: Life and Exploitation in the Northeast of Brazil in the 1930s

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Graciliano Ramos, *Barren Lives* (*Vidas Secas*).[1]

It is not unusual for a region to acquire a stereotypical negative image. Bihar in the northeast of India. The south of Italy. And then there is the Northeast of Brazil. Sugar and cocoa plantations run like feudal domains by local oligarchs and colonels. Droughts and famines. Bleached bones of dead cattle in the interior. Decaying industries and informal workers. Bandits and migrant labourers. In the heyday of international development studies, the 1960s and 1970s, the backwardness of the region was legendary, on the one hand to be set against the "miracle" of high economic growth in Brazil after the military coup of 1964, and on the other a case study of the efforts to overcome the underdevelopment of the region, notably by one of its most famous sons, Celso Furtado, the first Director of SUDENE, the Agency for the Development of the Northeast.[2] The Northeast had been the heart of Brazil in the colonial period, and Salvador was Brazil's capital for two hundred years. But the region was increasingly marginalised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, displaced economically and politically by the South. In this process it became the victim of regional stereotyping, reflecting the power relations that drove inequality within Brazil. Capital was concentrated in the Southeast, and the country became increasingly polarised. Northeasterners were viewed as backward, and were despised and discriminated against in the South.

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[1] The novel *Vidas Secas* was first published in 1938 by Editora Record, Rio de Janeiro. English translation by Ralph Edward Dimmick under the title *Barren Lives* and published by University of Texas Press, Austin, in 1965. The edition used in this review is Ramos (2016) and page references in the text to the Kindle edition of the English translation.

[2] Celso Furtado was a leading figure in development theory and practice throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and one of the most important contributors to the Latin American structuralist school. Born in the Sertão in the state of Paraíba, he played a central role in the design and application of a development strategy for the Northeast, in which SUDENE was the key state institution. He was subsequently appointed Minister of Planning before being forced into exile during the military regime. For a review of his career and work see for example Mallorquin (2007). Alas today the SUDENE building in Recife, which still stands, is an empty and deteriorating shell.

In his book, *The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast*, Durval Muniz de Albuquerque shows how the image of the Northeast was constructed and reconstructed, both within the region and outside it. "The very idea of region is to be understood as a historical invention" (de Albuquerque 2014, p. 12). A repeated discourse created a reality and a regional identity, which served both local and national political interests. The prevalent notion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of the natural superiority of the South of Brazil, sometimes expressed in semi-racial terms, based as it was on the concentration of European migrants in the South and Southeast, and the claim to a European tradition. Misery and poverty in the Northeast were equally natural, "the direct consequence of the encounter between a harsh natural environment and a degraded race" (*ibid.*, p. 18). Muniz de Albuquerque shows how the identity of the Northeast was reshaped in the early twentieth century, in part as a political movement, with the new image built around nostalgia for traditional society and past glories. This could be seen in the influential political and social writings of Gilberto Freyre in the 1920s and 1930s, and in the novels of authors such as José Lins de Rego and José Américo de Almeida.[3] This literature asserted a distinctive, traditional regional life and culture, rooted in nostalgia for a pre-capitalist past and popular folklore. The agrarian system was built around patriarchal estates, which provided both social inclusion and economic stability. But this imagined harmonious economic and social system was under threat from modernism and capitalism, from the invasive forces of industry and the mechanised plantation.

> Against the stark image of a Northeast rotted out by capitalism, Freyre posed the primordial image of Northeast as garden, as orchard, a space where man and nature cared for each other and protected each other among the fragrant fruit trees and affable tufts of sugarcane. (*Ibid.,* p. 67)

The regionalist movement was expressed in literature, poetry, and music, and to some extent in regional politics, but rather less in the economics, as Northeasterners continued to migrate to the South for work.

But the Northeast was not only the well-watered coastal regions where sugarcane plantations prevailed, but also the backlands and the badlands, the Sertão, the semi-desert interior, "the other side of the world, from whence emerged gaunt fugitives of the droughts and coarse fugitives from justice" (*ibid.,* p. 83). This was a "naked landscape broken only by withered, leafless trees," a place of environmental brutality. "Here was a Brazil brutalised by the sun, violently decomposing, grated by dust and dissolving in the whirlwind" (*ibid.*, p. 84). At the same time, for some authors "the Sertão presented a repository of genuine national traits including salutary communal family-rooted traditions that contrasted with modern capitalist society's individualism and commercialisation" (*ibid.*, p. 88).

[3] For example Freyre ([1937] 2003).

All of this was the Northeast. Traditionalist fiction idealised social relations and highlighted honour and respect for hierarchy. Even the bandits of the Northeast somehow became a Brazilian version of Robin Hood. But another strand of literature was more critical. Probably the best known author in this vein is Jorge Amado, whose novels in the 1930s painted a much more negative picture of social relations and exploitation in the not-so-harmonious plantations and cities of the region; Amado (2010), for instance, illustrates the extreme class divides and struggles and the complex interpersonal relations that they generate, in an explicitly Marxian framework.

Graciliano Ramos' work belongs with this critical vision, but with a very different style from Amado. In *Vidas Secas*, published in 1938, the context is not the sugar and cocoa plantations of the lush coastal regions, but the interior of the region, with its intolerable climate, and the devastation it inflicts on people's lives. The title *Vidas Secas*, literally "dry lives," is translated as *Barren Lives*, which captures much of Ramos's original idea. But *seca* in Portuguese is not only "dry" but also a drought, and drought is the underlying theme of the book, driving those without resources to move hopelessly from place to place in search of livelihood or indeed survival. Ramos' book portrays this through the life of a single family. He shows the constraints they face, their perceptions, their abilities, their social aspirations and failures, the acceptance of a preordained place in an unequal system. Unlike Amado's, Ramos's critique is not explicitly aimed at political change. On the contrary, change does not seem to be possible. But interspersed among the terse chapters are insights into the fundamental inequalities on which the economic system is built, and the perpetuation of exclusion. There is no scope for voice, and in the end the choice is between resignation and exit.

Vidas Secas starts and finishes with an attempt to escape from drought – the escape of a small family with few possessions, walking towards an uncertain destination at the beginning of the book. Fabiano, Vitória, their two sons, and their dog, forced by drought to abandon their last home, are walking through a bleak landscape in the hope of finding shade, food and water. Their pet parrot has already been sacrificed for food. Eventually they come across a ranch, where all is empty and dry. The dog chases and brings back a small animal that they can eat. There is still some water under the sand of a stream. They can occupy the deserted house. A dream emerges.

> It was going to rain. Good. The brush would come back to life; cattle would return to the corral and he, Fabiano, would be the herdsman of the once-dead ranch . . . . It would be a resurrection. The colours of health would come back to Vitória's sad face. The boys would wallow in the dirt of the goat pen. (pp. 10–11)

And in a few words, very few, Ramos depicts hope for a new life. Nothing is said immediately about whose ranch it is, and under what conditions they can stay. That emerges later.

Fabiano was an experienced ranch hand, and proud of it. When the owner came to recover his ranch, and to throw him out, Fabiano offered his services, and he was allowed to stay on. He knew how to handle animals, to tame horses, to look after cattle, to grow some food if there was rain. He compared his situation, as a man of the land, with Tomás the miller, a man of some learning in the place that they had abandoned, who had been completely ruined by the drought. But there is ambiguity, because on the one hand he felt that Tomás could not manage his life when trouble arrived, and on the other hand he respected him, he "talked properly," he "wore his eyes out over books and newspapers" (p. 19), he didn't order people to do things but asked them politely. And so Ramos contrasts the uneducated ranch hand, whose children are equally uneducated, with an alternative image of learning and wisdom. Tomás the miller recurs frequently in the book. Fabiano recognises that he is "dumb," and wishes he could get advice from Tomás. He would love to be able to use words properly to express his desires, like Tomás, but cannot. And Tomás had a real bed. Vitória would so desperately like a real bed like Tomás, rather than always to sleep on an uncomfortable bunk made out of tree branches. And yet Tomás too was ruined by the drought and driven onto the road. Learning was no defence against drought.

The owner came to the ranch from time to time and found fault with everything. "Fabiano was just part of the ranch equipment, a tool of little value; he would be dismissed when he least expected it" (p. 20). In their precarious situation, the family could survive but not much more. Fabiano had fantasies of confronting his boss, but realised that he could not, and that he would never be his own boss. And the ranch owner cheated him, because he could not understand the accounts. Arrangements for his remuneration were based on a share in production, like sharecroppers in so many parts of the world. At the end of the year, "Fabiano received a fourth of the calves and a third of the kids, but as he grew no feed . . . he disposed of the animals." His subsistence plots produced some beans and corn, but when that was gone "there was no place to go but to the boss's cash drawer" (p. 93). And so the ranch owner would buy Fabiano's share of the animals at rock bottom prices, and because he was scared of losing his position he had to give in. And when that money had gone, he went into debt. When the accounts were settled he received nothing. He could never understand how that was possible. Vitória tried to calculate what he was owed, but the boss's figures were always different, and when Fabiano protested he was told the difference was interest. He became angry, but had to submit although he was bursting with rage inside. "They gave him almost nothing for his stock and then on top of that they invented interest. Interest! It was a dirty trick . . . Robbery!" (p. 96).

Nor could Fabiano succeed in other ways. When he tried to sell a pig in town he fell foul of officials demanding taxes. But he didn't understand anything about taxes. Fabiano "felt an immense hatred for something which was a combination of the dry countryside, the boss, the policemen, and the town officials. Really everything was against him" (p. 97). He had an identity and a competence as a herdsman, but his

place in the world was fixed, he was surrounded by forces that were stronger than him. Ramos describes the anger and alienation that Fabiano feels, his inability to stand up for his rights, the alternation between fury, demoralisation and acceptance. But in the end it is acceptance that prevails. He has no choice.

Vidas Secas captures how the agrarian system exploits this category of migrant labour through the story of one family. But Ramos does this by telling the story through the eyes and the thoughts of those concerned – not only Fabiano, but the whole family – Vitória, the two boys, and even the dog. Each has a chapter and a point of view. This is not just a story of the exploitation of Fabiano by the owner of the ranch, but one of how perspectives and possibilities are dictated by the social, economic, and physical environment. Ramos also insists on the limitations imposed by lack of power, lack of learning, lack of ability to express ideas. He returns several times to the fact that Fabiano cannot think things through, and so is limited in his ability to rebel or seek out an alternative path.

Vitória is more of a caricature, and virtually the only woman in the book. She lights the fire, cooks the food, feeds the chickens, sets a trap for the fox, fetches the water, mends the fence, and constantly thinks about the lack of a proper bed. This last is what she would need to be happy. She tries to wear fashionable shoes for feast days, but they hurt her feet. She puts up with her husband when he gets drunk or takes decisions she doesn't agree with. But she sometimes acts as a foil to Fabiano. She organises the way they carry the luggage as they walk on their trek to escape drought. "What a woman!" thinks Fabiano. She plays a supportive role, but she is not an autonomous actor. Again, limited horizons, limited ambitions. In this book, and no doubt in reality, women's options were even more circumscribed than men's in the Sertão in the 1930s.

The children get chapters too. They admire their father for his skills and want to imitate him, though he treats them roughly. But their horizons are limited, they are without schooling and their parents have few answers to their questions. They have a "vocabulary . . . almost as limited as that of the parrot that had died during the drought" (p. 57). They follow their parents, their ambitions limited to reproducing, when they grow up, the lifestyle they know. Even the dog gets a chapter, as Ramos tries to depict its attitudes and feelings – including when Fabiano reluctantly shoots it because it is dying of some disease. Like Fabiano and Vitória, the dog lives in a world with limited horizons, and has dreams, dreams of a world full of rodents that she can hunt.

Fabiano and his family are rural and they have a difficult relationship with the town. When Fabiano went to buy supplies in the market, he was fearful of being cheated. Then he drank too much, lost money playing cards, got into a fight with a policeman and ended up in jail without understanding why. Again there is that bitter rage against a world he does not control, thoughts boiling in his head. "If they

had only given him some schooling, he could understand it. But it was no use. He only knew how to deal with animals" (p. 32). When the family went into town for the feast day, their clothing was awkward, Fabiano got drunk, Vitória couldn't find a place to relieve herself, the boys wondered at the variety of marvellous things, and asked whether they all had names. The family was not at ease in the urban environment. But of course that is where the ranch owner had his office. And when Fabiano tried to get what he was owed by the ranch owner,

> The clerks, the tradesmen and the landowner stole the shirt off his back, and those who had no dealings with him laughed when they saw him go stumbling down the street. (p. 77)

At the end of the book, drought strikes again. The family could not stay on the dried up ranch. They left without telling the boss, because they "could never settle that preposterous debt." And so they set off, regretting the ranch, towards a vague destination, "inhabited areas," but also abandoning their life for something new and unknown. Vitória had dreams.

> They would settle down far away and would take on new ways . . . . They would settle on a small farm . . . . Afterwards they would move to the city and the boys would go to school. They would be different from their parents. (p. 126)

But,

> they were on their way to an unknown land, a land of city ways. They would become its prisoners. And to the city from the backland would come ever more and more of its sons, a never-ending stream of strong, strapping brutes like Fabiano, Vitória, and the two boys. (p. 130)

This book is widely considered as a classic, partly no doubt because of the way Ramos describes the world of the Sertão from the point of view of the exploited worker. Ramos is not unique in this; Amado does the same thing very effectively for other parts of the Northeast and other situations.[4] But it is the sharpness and terseness of the story, the dialectic between hopelessness and hope, between aspiration and reality that makes the book so powerful. It is also because Ramos tries to capture not only the realities of existence but also the reactions of Fabiano and his family, their interpretations, their emotions and desires. For this he drew on personal experience, since he was brought up as a child on a ranch in the interior of the Northeast, to be sure in a family of ranch owners rather than workers, but he was in contact with the workers, and he knew all about the impact of drought because it drove his father out of ranching and into a succession of unsuccessful urban occupations. It is Ramos' attempt to convey the feelings of his characters which brings the situations to life. So when Fabiano again met the policeman with whom he had fought in town, trying to find his way on a rural path, first he almost murdered him, then felt fear, then irritation, then anger about how he had been treated, then awkwardness

[4] E.g. in *Cacau* (Amado [1934] 2010).

and a feeling of having been wronged, then aggression ("he gave a couple more snarls"), feelings of contradiction, and finally abandonment of the struggle and respect for the policeman because "the law is the law." The process ends with Fabiano accepting his place in society, after much mental confusion, and bowing to the authority that he cannot contest.

In the book, many points are reinforced by repetition – especially repetition in the minds of the main actors. They relive the scenes, remembering things that had gone wrong. Vitória repeatedly thinks about her wish to have a bed like Tomás the miller's. Fabiano too constantly thinks about Tomás, but because he is an educated man and Fabiano would love to have his knowledge and ability to use words. In seven of the 13 chapters there are references to Tomás the miller, underlining the bounded horizons of the family.

But repetition is also a way of expressing circularity and the lack of a basis for change in rural society. The landowner benefitted in good times when workers came searching for employment; but the workers were disposable in the bad times, and there was nothing they could do about it. The landowner was likely to survive the drought, but not so the workers. They were caught up in a web of debt and dependency, just like agricultural workers in semi-feudal rural Bihar on the other side of the world during the same period.[5] And while they could, as the last sentence in the book suggests, try their luck in the city, their chances were not good. An endless cycle of migration awaited the worker, who had no rights and no resources. When the family moved on, walking to the next destination, their possessions were so meagre that they could carry them all.

The *município* (county) of Buique, in the interior of Pernambuco, where Graciliano Ramos spent part of his childhood on his grandfather's ranch, and which provided the background for *Vidas Secas*, remains today one of the poorest parts of Brazil. An index of social exclusion for the year 2000, based on indicators of poverty, informality, literacy, and violence, placed Buique among the areas with the most extreme levels of exclusion in Brazil, ranked 5406th out of 5570 *municípios* in the country (Pochmann and Amorim 2003).

Nevertheless, Brazil has changed radically since the 1930s, so Fabiano's story would not be the same today. The illiteracy that so constrained Fabiano's ability to overcome his situation has not disappeared, but has been greatly diminished. The physical environment of the Sertão remains, of course. There were several major droughts in the 1950s and 1960s, which led to waves of out-migration, just like that of Fabiano and his family. In 1963 a new legal framework for rural workers established that workers like Fabiano had rights, in terms of remuneration and working conditions (Wanderley 2011). However it was rapidly followed by the military coup in 1964,

[5] See for instance Patel (1952); on semi-feudalism in India, see Bhaduri (1973), among others.

which reinforced an ongoing phase of capitalist expansion in agriculture, and generated new forms of precariousness among rural workers, as a class of circulating migrants, the *boias-frías*, emerged, many migrating from the Northeast to agricultural work in the South and Southeast of the country.

In the book it is striking that Fabiano was alone. There were no other ranch-hands or agricultural wage workers with whom he could interact. In the 1930s there was no organisation of workers to advance his interests. From the 1950s onwards there was some expansion of rural organisation in Brazil, but this was set back as a result of repression under the military regime after 1964. Then, with democratisation in the 1980s, powerful movements emerged, notably the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*: Landless Workers' Movement), which would surely have helped Fabiano to claim land and defend his rights, as would many of the social and distributive policies introduced by the Workers' Party (PT)-led government from 2003 to 2016.

Even so, the distribution of land remains highly unequal. The expansion of capitalist ranching in the Northeast tended to expel subsistence, small-scale farmers, and if anything reinforced the position of larger landowners (Bicalho and Hoefle 1990). It is understood in the book that the owner of the ranch where Fabiano worked also owned other properties, since he was able to maintain an office in town. It is easy to imagine that he would have shifted over time towards a more commercial operation, based on wage labour rather than a semi-autonomous share arrangement. The mode of production would have evolved from semi-feudal to semi-capitalist. More recently, in some parts of the region, an expansion of irrigation has made it possible to diversify towards higher productivity crops and commercial farming, but again this has advantaged larger farms which hire in labour. Today in rural Pernambuco, 40 per cent of workers in agriculture are wage workers without a signed labour card, and so lacking legal protections and social security.

The other enormous difference with the 1930s is urbanisation. Brazil's population is now essentially urban, and even the state of Pernambuco is 80 per cent urban (2010 Census). Within the state, agriculture employs less than half of workers in rural areas, and less than 10 per cent of the work force overall. The city is no longer some unknown and distant mirage. But the opportunities that it offers remain uncertain, and the majority of workers in Pernambuco, indeed in the whole of the Northeast, are still engaged in some form of informal activity, either as self-employed, mostly in trade or services, or as informal wage workers. The social progress since the turn of the century is real – rising wages, rising formalisation of employment relations, more effective redistribution to the poor – but it is being rapidly eroded since President Dilma Roussef was evicted from power in 2016. *Vidas Secas* is not only of historical interest.

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