

In the search for theoretical approaches to studying attitudes toward antipoverty policy in Passarinho

Ansell, Aaron. 2014. *Zero Hunger: Political Culture and Antipoverty Policy in Northeast Brazil*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. xiii + 239 pp. Pb.: \$32.95. ISBN: 9781469613970.

Abstract

This review article concentrates on theoretical and methodological assumptions of Aaron Ansell's book on antipoverty policy in Passarinho. The main goals are to reveal significant values and vices of his analysis and to suggest how to improve such research. Therefore, the use of meaningful categories in the study is discussed on two planes. The first consists of an evaluation of their application correctness extent. Importantly, these premises must be examined because the quality of research results is determined by them. It would allow judging how high the degree of the results reliability is. The second focuses on considering how to use the Marxist perspective to eliminate the research flaws while simultaneously enhancing its scientific value. The need for the second plane is a result of the theoretical poverty of the study. The critical remarks formulated may be useful at projecting future research on political culture in Brazil.

KEYWORDS: food security, poverty, government policy, economic assistance, Brazil, domestic politics, social conditions

The subject of Aaron Ansell's book is adoption of the first flagship social policy in municipality Passarinho (in Piauí State in Northeast Brazil), the Zero Hunger Programme (*Programa Fome Zero*) by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil's Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT)) after his inauguration as the president on January 1st, 2003. The programme was meaningful for this society because it encompassed cash grants, dietary policies, and development projects that activated governmental and non-governmental political subjects in acting against extreme local poverty. At first, the initiative was received enthusiastically on both the domestic and international levels. Nonetheless, the failure of the programme was revealed quickly, and it became a cause of the policy rebranding into the Family Stipend Programme (*Bolsa Família*). Simultaneously, the political subjects worked to confound the showed hierarchical exchange relationships (pp. 3–4). The problems indicate were both the political context of the study and its subject of interviewed people stances.

The author lived for two years in Passarinho and, in this time, he gathered data, i.e. records of talks with natives on the issues mentioned. Although this material interpreted by Ansell provides a reader with a detailed qualitative study, the interpretation and manner of its construction are worth discussing; some reservations can be formulated.

Importantly, theoretical and methodological assumptions, which constitute the base of every well-conducted analysis, are the main flaw of the book. Admittedly, the author claims that he conducted an ethnographic study of the encounters between politicians and subsistence cultivators (p. 3). He also states that the book offers a study of the Brazilian state's effort to eradicate the hierarchical exchanges in order to provide citizens with social justice and democracy (p. 3). Indeed, Ansell fails to formulate and to apply to his study fundamental methodological premises which have to precede every analysis. At a minimum, the following should be presented: research field and its well-justified temporal, territorial, and subject boundaries; the criteria of the sources selection; a research sample; research problems and hypotheses; methods, techniques, and analytical tools. Otherwise, the volume is the description of the author's stay in Brazil, focused on talks with natives about social and political issues. The value and reliability of the results achieved in this way are low because they are unrepeatable and unverifiable rather than intersubjective.

It is worth noting that Ansell abandons the formulation of methodological reservations in his research, i.e. he fails to indicate the potential impact of, for instance, the interviewer error, interview bias, observer error on the analysis results. The very argumentation is often characterised by an anecdotal approach, which reduces its value (Bryman 1988: 77). This mistake consists of presenting quotations from interviews as evidence for general statements (pp. 144–45). It must be noted that individual opinions may be extreme and unrepresentative for the population analysed (e.g. p. 74). Moreover, they merely show one respondent's properties rather than explore dominant ways of thinking in Passarinho (e.g. p. 192). Therefore, it is incorrect to claim without methodologically proper justification that one opinion is typical for the whole population. Furthermore, the author's narrative comprises a large amount of colloquialisms, e.g., 'booze' (p. 62), and idioms which sometimes may carry more than one meaning, e.g., 'some administrative reshuffling' (p. 3). It is confusing for a reader because it makes semantic fields of categories undetermined. This negligence has various forms. For instance, the author refers to 'psychology conceptual grid' and uses terms such as 'fixation' (p. 17), but these references are often unjustified because they are not linked with theories from which they derive. However, regardless of the type of negligence form, they leave too much interpretative freedom to a reader and, hence, it may be a source of the misinterpretation of research results.

Theoretical also assumptions demand reconsideration. First and foremost, it would be useful to consider the data gathered in the light of a paradigm appropriate to the explanation of the results (Bendassolli 2014: 164). Arguably Marxism offers a categorial grid and explanatory framework that may be applied to improve the analysis by offering tools for the explication and comprehension of the captured changes (Gorman 1981: 404; Gouldner 1974: 17). Substantially, the configuration of basic categories, from the classical Marxist perspective, such as class struggle, class relations, a societal conflict or emancipatory political subject, with analytical categories appropriate to the study, is discussed in the article while considering consecutive chapters. Yet, noticeably, these theoretical proposals are not the only ones, which means that various interpretations of Marxism may provide a potential researcher with an explanatory framework abounding with sophisticated categories.

It is noteworthy that the book consists of seven chapters, and each of them sheds light on different facets of political reality that were the author's concern. The individual chapters demand separate elaborations because they relate to disparate theoretical categories. *Chapter One* locates Lula's election and the Zero Hunger Programme within Brazil's history of democracy, the particular history and social structure of Passarinho, as well as the author's reflection on his own role among the municipality inhabitants. Historical data are described properly on a factual level. However, unfortunately, their interpretation passes over any explanation of how structures facilitate and hinder existence, which may be filled in by the Marxist explanatory framework. It would be useful to use, for example, an anti-reductionist Analytical Marxism approach to study structural constraints (Veneziani 2012: 649). Indeed, structures cease to be acknowledged as determinants but potential change factors.

Nonetheless, the last of the above-listed perspective, concerning the author's self-identification, does not increase the explanatory power of the research because of its incorrect use. Sometimes, it occurs as a justification of an incomplete description of issues. For instance, the author gives a fragmentary account of events that happened on the morning of October 27th, 2002, after the announcements of the election results, and then states: 'I'm not exactly sure how it all looked. I couldn't be with them [people on the streets of Rio de Janeiro – J. R.] that morning because my mother had called two nights before to summon me home to my father's bedside in Los Angeles' (p. 19). Moreover, digressions, e.g. relating the author's father's death, his studies or graduation (p. 46), occur in the disquisition, which is distracting for a reader and blur the research subject.

Ansell presents the programme as an experiment in 'left-wing neoliberalism', a manifestation of the PT's attempts to win an election, and as a policy of national food security. Nevertheless, it would be desirable to extend the adopted categorial grid to improve the cognitive value of the study. The author observes scientific struggles with hunger typologisation, and he aptly criticises these as constructed on the basis of a caloric minimum below which life and activity may be jeopardised (p. 45). Instead, he proposes a distinction between chronic and acute food deprivation. Suffering from acute deprivation consists of insufficient ingestion of calories to function actively throughout the day. Whereas, suffering from chronic deprivation consists of eating enough food to function for days, but the diet lacks basic nutrients to provide a person with sound health and development (p. 45). Indeed, one more category would be useful there if the goal of the chapter would be to gather data significant to political culture measurement, i.e. attitudes toward food security (Sage 2014: 195). Ansell mentions 'food insecurity' (p. 45) but passes over ways of measuring the attitudes (Quandt et al. 2001: 356–376).

These issues are significant as the subject of stances, but their depiction is not a study of political culture. In fact, poverty and hunger are merely variables that may be used in political culture analysis (Wiarda 1989: 148). Despite placing the notion of political culture in the book title, the author abandoned proposing or adopting its definition and then operationalisation. Acknowledgment of this notion as an 'umbrella concept' (Formisano 2001: 394) or 'catch-all term' (Dittmer 1977: 552) causes unscientific and methodologically incorrect comprehension as the subject of research and the research

fields are undetermined (Jackman & Miller 1996: 697). Furthermore, he avoids relating to classical works on political culture, such as that by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963), who have initiated research on pure types of political culture, and the most important works to his study, such as that by Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (2003).

One more point of neglect is worth stressing, i.e. the lack of depiction of the literature on political culture in Brazil (e.g. da Silva Lopes 2014; López 2013; de Albuquerque 2005; Baiocchi 2006; de Castro & Valladão De Carvalho 2003; McDonough, Shin & Moisés 1998; Moisés 1993). It would be valuable to discuss current studies on this issue to capture the societal change, noticed but unexplored by Ansell, in attitudes toward components of political reality (Sheafer & Shenhav 2013: 234; Baker, Ames & Renno 2006: 383). He also fails to present this phenomenon from such obvious Marxist perspective. Nevertheless, the critical examination of works, written on various theoretical backgrounds on this problem, would allow the author to avoid at least the most frequently made mistakes, such as attitudes toward intuitive descriptions of political values (Jin 2015: 29). Furthermore, the systematic comparison of political culture would allow determining the essence of social change in Karl Marx's meaning (Zimmerman 1995: 631). These arguments indicate that the book fails to contribute importantly to studies on political culture, but it may be inspirational for researchers who want to concentrate their future analyses on political culture in Brazil.

In fact, political culture theory concentrates on political attitudes, beliefs, values, and emotions, which may be measured to explain political, structural, and behavioural phenomena such as national cohesion, strategies of dealing with political conflicts, the degree and character of participation in politics, types of political cleavages, relations between representatives and the represented (Almond 1983: 127). Its mediating role between state, market, and society (Somers 1995: 116), discerned by Ansell, is revealed in the disquisition but any examination is omitted.

Chapters Two and Three centre on the relationships between impoverished Passarinho's villagers as well as vertical connections between village families and their municipal patrons. In *Chapter Two*, Ansell plausibly presents horizontal relationships among cultivator households, and he takes his primary interest in their hunger, envy, shared labour as well as egalitarianism. Importantly, he states that the dominant classes of villagers are concerned, while they establish egalitarian labour relations within their population because it relates to their notions about the body and its forces that are perceived as uncontrollable. In fact, these exchanges may be perched; however, they are not indicators of class solidarity (p. 55). The chapter sheds light on interhouse sociality and reveals the ways in which sociability in Passarinho is maintained by rural people via the practices of 'respectful distance', which have a ritual role of managing the permanently hungry neighbours' evil spiritual power. Although the author characterises habits relating to food practices, such as food sharing or food giving (p. 62), and their impact on shaping social relations, he neglects to explore a trajectory of symbolic struggles. These may be examined from a Marxist perspective as domination indicators (Brenkman 1983: 22). Admittedly, the accounts presented provide a reader with a view on

the visibility of hunger in Passarinho but they do not explain its co-relation with political culture. Application of additional theoretical assumptions would enable eliminating this shortage. In fact, the accounts show villagers concentration on attempts to meet their basic vegetative needs. Then, they reveal the core of significant types of political attitudes characteristic of parochial political culture in Almond and Verba's meaning (1963: 19). However, a comprehensive analysis would determine its extent among the municipality inhabitants as well as a type of its configuration with other types of political culture.

Chapter Three shows vertical exchanges. It offers well-interpreted empirical data (p. 78) but passes over a critical discussion of rich specialist, in particular anthropological, literature on the exchange. Indeed, Ansell is aware of this shortage as he excuses himself in the endnote: 'Here I omit discussion of the issue of the interval between gift and countergift and the practice of strategic delay that has been of great concern of anthropologists [...]. These issues are less critical to local distinctions between moral and immoral exchanges for reasons I cannot discuss here' (p. 206). The argumentation is unfinished and does not justify such an omission. These categories applied as analytical tools would enable locating this specific type of exchange in the array of social exchanges (Nugent 2007: 421); therefore, it would be important to determine its distinctive features. In fact, those features are crucial to formulating diagnoses and prognoses concerning their role in political reality. Nonetheless, Ansell puts forward and applies to the analysis a significant dualistic typology of temporal dimensions of gift-giving acts. On the one hand, he perfectly distinguishes the duration of the social relationship that a specific gift presupposes. On the other, he aptly indicates the duration of the activity that a gift sponsors (p. 79). This clear distinction is useful for the analysis of exchange relationships because it allows identifying intersubjectively their distinctive features.

Furthermore, the author sheds light on egalitarian relations between village families, which enable poor people to establish long-term intimate hierarchical connections with political élites. They are collated with short-term exchanges, e.g. vote-buying (p. 69), which abandoned villagers are resigned to having with politicians. In general, the disquisition precisely reveals the structural inequality that determines political exchange and creates convenient conditions of the political arrangements that originate from these inequalities. It would be useful to explain the cores of stability of this structural inequality and shed light on exchange sources, i.e. class struggle specific to the context type (Ollman 1968: 573) and class consciousness (Glaberman 1996: 233). Deep-rooted class relations within a society produce particular forms of class consciousness, and this is worth exploring in this case. In fact, the mode of cooperation in Karl Marx's meaning, as the theoretical category, would enable the determination of distinctive features of the organisation of both people necessities reproduction and their social relations (Barker 2013: 44).

Nonetheless, it is significant that the author properly and convincingly determines both types of hungry people (p. 61) and the extents of political subjectivity as well as aptly sets the requirements of entering intimate relationships with politicians, which have to be met with villagers. Indeed, it would also be a valuable improvement of this chapter to extend it by determining emancipatory attempts by political subjects, which are a

central concept in Marxism (File & Ram 2014: 295–313). Employment of this theoretical category may be useful for identifying existing types of dependence and perspectives on liberation from them. Substantially, the author plausibly states that only those people who direct their strength (*força*) to work for their patron's interests have means to maintain honourable decorum, appropriately self-contained, self-directed, not drunks, not tricksters, able to hide their envy or hunger (p. 77). Although the extents of theoretically captured political subjectivity allow distinguishing various types of such subjectivity on a specific empirical plane, they do not explain possibilities of their alternation (Panayotakis 2004: 123), the relationships of domination and servitude (Ashcraft 1984: 640) which may be explored and explained from a Marxist perspective in an inspiring way. Moreover, the author neglects to show relations between various types of interests, for instance, the relationship between common interest in Karl Marx's meaning, which always is associated with class interest, and patron's as well as villagers' interests (Sabia, Jr. 1988: 52; Wallerstein 1986: 1298).

Ansell thoroughly presents the officials' attitudes toward the Lula government which engage them, toward the programme's rural beneficiaries, and toward their own participation in urban social movements. He claims that liberation theology and secular urban movements developed their predilection to perceive the rural world to be a place of patronage-based social domination. Then, the following three chapters show the techniques that officials used to redirect the beneficiaries' sentimental and practical affections to patronage relations. The first one presents a technique called 'induced nostalgia', which concerns practices used by state officials to link romantic notions of collective labour to idealized visions of the rural past when depicting vertical intimacies as a fall from a golden age. The realisation of the technique is meticulously portrayed in the context of a community-driven development project which was co-related with the management of livestock and romantic models of traditional labour promoted by officials. Accordingly, it reveals a high extent of diversification between villagers' vision of their past and the state officials' narrative.

In addition, the author claims that he strives to complement a scholarly inclination to explore how development aspirations are regimented by an orderly plane of statements, namely, knowledge categories, forms of expertise, modes of diagnosis which population internalise, by underlying the state officials' narratives of nostalgia, redemption, and personal renewal (p. 93). Formulating this goal is worth approval, but it must be preceded with a reflection on a solid typology of narratives. These three types fail to fulfil all types of state officials' narratives possible-to-logic demarcation. For instance, there is a shortage in the proposed typology of the antinomic ideal types in Max Weber's meaning. In this way, they fail to share among them the theoretical category of the state officials' narrative of the whole semantic field, which means that some meaningful expressions of political attitudes may remain outside the research field. Moreover, it may bring about a loss of potentially significant data. Employing typologies to the analyses as an analytical tool should be made with due care, which is lacking in this case, and perfect knowledge of the research subject, which Ansell has. Therefore, this inspiring and potentially useful typology is worth improving rather than rejecting.

Chapter Six scrupulously describes an Afro-Brazilian development project, which is a part of the Zero Hunger Programme. The main goal of this project is to organise and facilitate people who are acknowledged as the descendants of runaway slaves (*quilombolas*), i.e. dark-skinned villagers, on the basis of their shared racial subordination (p. 144). Ansell characterises a subsequent technique while claiming that state officials changed training-session outings into “pragmatic pilgrimages”. In his opinion, they strived to re-socialise community leaders toward a black (*negro*) identity and inspire them to manifest outrage at figures of authority. As he states, the strategic usage of pilgrimage as a social engineering technique was based on the state officials’ experiences of solidarity-enhancing travel from the capital city to the backcountries. They were accompanied by Catholic folk practices throughout the area in which people historically involved in pilgrimage and other kinds of millenarian movements while they believed their patrons had become bankrupt on the moral or spiritual plane (p. 139). This depiction is appropriate on a factual level but merely to a low extent explains the specificity of these social relations. It lacks an explanatory framework which may be adopted from Marxism. Significantly, Marxism assumes that the social world is a permanent making and unmaking of social structures of human needs and capacities (Nilsen & Cox 2013: 64). The structures are formed through the conflictual struggle between social movements from below and social movements from above (Nilsen & Cox 2013: 64–65), and they are subject to change in this way (Young 1999: 268).

On account of the social movements’ significance discerned in explanation of the political subjects’ activities, it would be useful to extend an explanatory framework of the study by their theory (Reiter 2011: 153). In the scope of the proposed paradigm, i.e. Marxism, studies of specific movements exist, but it lacks a comprehensive theory of movements that would explain the emergence, character, and development of social movements (Barker *et al.* 2013: 1–2). Its formulation is a demanding challenge for scholars, and arguably such a theory would increase the value of the study (Khasnabish & Haiven 2012: 409). It would also be interesting to formulate some research questions that arise from a Marxist perspective. For instance, what potentials are there for various types of movements from below to learn and achieve strength from each other? (Barker *et al.* 2013: 3); how can the movements from above strive to expand the social power of ruling élites? (Barker *et al.* 2013: 3); how do ruling élites create and maintain power relations? In fact, the author does not put forward the research questions; therefore, questions proposed reveal variables which must be set, and then they would provide a future researcher with the array of theoretical tools which may be intersubjectively applied. For example, it would be valuable to extend theoretical assumptions on the category of revitalisation movements, which constitutes an analytical tool, because it encompasses not only various types of millenarian movements (p. 139) but food security movements (pp. 28–31; 35; 168) and *quilombo* movements (p. 145) as well. The typology of revitalisation movements constructed on the basis of well-selected criteria is a functional tool for analysing political attitudes toward diversified phenomena (p. 187) (Rak 2015: 122) and for obtaining answers to the research questions in a scientific way.

The last chapter explores municipal political tensions concerning Zero Hunger’s cash grant policy, Food Card (*Cartão Alimentação*), and its modification into the Family

Stipend Programme. Ansell aptly discusses the final technique for dismantling patronage (p. 163), and he maintains that state officials, in conceiving the grant's beneficiary selection process, passed over the mayor's office and humiliated his person by way of public spectacles. Indeed, it would be desirable to explain these tensions using the category of class dominance extents (Nielsen 1993: 1). Substantially, humiliation consisted in treating him as a symbol of patronage exploitation (pp. 163–64). He considers the consequences of the mayor's depreciation for local participation in the Zero Hunger Management Committee (*Comitê Gestor*) established to select the programme beneficiaries. In contrast, he discusses its impact on Passarinho municipal elections in which PT participated. Ansell accurately assesses that these three techniques 'induced nostalgia', 'programmatic pilgrimage', and 'marginalising the mayor' manifested the tensions between the beneficiaries' ideas of political participation and those of the progressive state officials (p. 8).

It is worth noting that state officials' attitudes should to be measured rather than merely depicted (p. 186). The author assumes that attitudes toward, e.g. intimate hierarchy, have different vectors and intensity, while he notices that they occurred in the extreme form of sacralisation (p. 187). It would be worthwhile to employ an analytical tool to study the data gathered. For instance, there may be applied the typology which is made up of two antinomic ideal types, in Max Weber's meaning, of demonisation and sacralisation. Every identified exemplification may be placed between these extremes, in specific distances to each other depending on the extent of a subject of attitude devaluation or revaluation. It would allow determining and comparing dominant types of attitudes in the examined population.

To conclude, the volume may be acknowledged as an important contribution to Latin American political studies as it shows characteristics of the political consciousness of Passarinho inhabitants. In fact, it offers the solid presentation of Zero Hunger's failures and successes in the change of local exchange practices. Importantly, the work sheds light on social change and accurately reveals villagers' attitudes toward political reality. It contains well-interpreted nuances of the empirical data gathered, even if they avoid being comprehensive; and this is the greatest value of the analysis. Nevertheless, the drawbacks depicted and discussed mean that the book must be read particularly critically and charily. However, eventually, Ansell points out issues concerning the political culture in Brazil which are still unexplored, and, therefore, must be studied by using various paradigms, methods, techniques, and devices. Furthermore, the tools proposed may be successfully modified according to the needs of future analyses. Significantly, this is an inspirational quality of the study.

Indeed, this review article provides a researcher with hints relating to that theoretical and methodological assumptions of such studies, and it suggests Marxist theoretical perspective to capture, explore, and explain the most meaningful facets of the empirical reality examined. It is important to remember that the proposed premises are not only possible. Hence, it would be valuable as well to seek new theoretical approaches which can improve the research results.

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