

Traps of honour and forgiveness: the social uses of law in the Pernambuco forest region

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a lawsuit filed by a worker against his boss, in 1965, in the southern Pernambuco forest region. This case proved to be exceptional compared to the normal run of legal processes in this region of large-scale sugar-cane plantations. The first part reconstructs the social conditions in which the case took shape, examining the meanings behind the behaviour of actors in the unfolding events, and identifying the forms of coercion placed upon them. I also explore the implications of the case. The second part concentrates on the history of social relations in the plantation during the subsequent period, seen in terms of the law, its uses and its effectiveness. The analysis enables a clearer understanding of the dynamics and complexity of some of the processes causing individuals to start to act in response to legal norms.

Key words: Law; Exchange; Rural workers; Northeast Brazil

Following the 1964 Coup d'État, the military launched operations to systematically repress those who had taken an active part in the social uprisings. This crackdown extended to the sugar-cane producing zone of Pernambuco, where unrest had been evident since the 1950s with the *Ligas Camponesas* (Peasant Leagues) followed by the actions of the recently created rural workers unions at the start of the 1960s. These groups had promoted frequent clashes with landowners, strikes and large-scale protests demanding compliance with the labour rights recently extended to rural employees. In Rio Formoso, a municipality on the south coast of the Pernambuco *zona da mata* or 'forest region,' the union was invaded and closed. Union leaders who failed to escape were imprisoned, while others disappeared without trace; union delegates became a target for police and/or military persecution, after being denounced by their bosses – plantation masters and mill owners alike. It was in this context that Amaro Pedro, a union delegate from the Porto Alegre *engenho*,¹ sensing he was in danger, asked for protection from José Bezerra, owner of the Amaragi plantation. A boss with a reputation of being a good man, Bezerra sheltered Amaro Pedro on his lands as one of his *moradores*, or tenant workers, as those living and working on the plantations were called.

Some months after the coup d'état, pressure from Catholic priests acting as intermediaries between workers and the military² led to the unions being reopened and restructured. Strikes and demonstrations over labour rights were unthinkable in this new setting. The military, however, kept

the justice system running and retained the Rural Workers Statute, a law passed by National Congress in 1963 extending labour legislation to rural Brazil. The union leaders therefore worked to encourage the tenant workers to file claims to the Labour Court, based on the new law. In 1965, having re-established his contacts with the union, Amaro Pedro filed a complaint against José Bezerra, at the Mediation Court of the municipality of Escada, for non-payment of a number of labour taxes. The boss was stunned on receiving the court summons. He asked the tenant to be brought to him, who confirmed he was the claimant in the lawsuit.

On the day of the hearing, both parties came face-to-face with the judge. Bezerra was found liable and ordered to pay his debt at the Court. Returning to Amaragi, he instructed the plantation manager to tell Amaro Pedro that he no longer wanted to see him, not even if he greeted him. The following morning, the worker went to meet the boss at his *casa-grande*: with tears in his eyes he asked for his forgiveness and returned the money he had won the day before. Peace was re-established between them.

It was José Bezerra who first told me about this episode. I met him at Amaragi in 1995. He was then 74 years old. He lived on the plantation and had already retired. Management of the farm had been taken over by Roberto, his only son. Almost at the end of an interview about his life,³ the old boss narrated the episode involving Amaro Pedro and, turning our roles upside down, asked me: “How would you explain this? Because I myself have never understood it.” Thirty years after the event, the fact still puzzled him. The day before, he told me, he had recalled the incident with the farm manager.

Bezerra died in 1996. The following year I met up with Amaro Pedro, then 74 years old himself. He was retired too, having left the plantation in 1988. He was living in a small house in the town of Rio Formoso, his oldest daughter having been left to run his smallholding at Amaragi. The story was recounted to me with other details. He had realized the significance of his act as he left the hearing: “What have I done to *Seu Zé Bezerra*?” So he went after the boss, who told him: “Go and work. I won’t hate you or kick you out.” Suing Bezerra was a ‘lapse of judgment,’ a still remorseful Amaro Pedro told me. He never again took his boss to court – and he wept at his death.

The sheltering of a union delegate by a boss during a turbulent moment such as the post-64 crackdown, the episode of the law suit, and the request and granting of forgiveness are somewhat exceptional facts given the usual context of social relations on the sugar-cane plantations. Traditionally, bosses sheltered people linked to them who for some reason were being pursued by enemies or the police. The latter tended to respect the authority of the landowners and kept off the plantations. However, they were not expected to harbour people accused of trying to undermine social and political order on the plantations, as union leaders and delegates had been doing at the start of the 1960s. Suing the boss for violation of labour rights was still an incipient practice among rural workers in the year after the military coup. But neither at that moment, nor in the ensuing years when the practice became more widespread, was it expected that someone who had been supported by the boss, creating a moral debt to him, would then take him to court. In the local view, moral debts tend to annul legal debts. Asking to be forgiven after bringing charges is fairly common in the sugar-cane zone. However, regret is typically expressed during the process of filing the complaint and not after the hearing, which invariably takes place some time later, at least three months. Granting forgiveness to someone who saw the legal process through to the end is unimaginable: normally, the bosses react to those taking them to court with reprisals.

Exceptional cases, or so-called ‘counter cases,’ such as the one involving Bezerra and Amaro Pedro have the virtue of bringing to light what is usually left obscured in analyses centred on norms and

built upon models that, by ignoring elements that fail to fit, end up producing simplified and impoverished views of the social world – as though its functioning were simple and mechanical, when in reality things are much more fluid, as Max Weber and Edmund Leach repeatedly stressed (cf. Leach 1961; Weber 1965). But the exceptional cases only become revealing when examined within the context of the precise sociohistorical configurations in which they occur. This is what I propose to do here: I shall try to reconstruct the social conditions in which the Bezerra-Amaro Pedro case unfolded, recuperating the meaning attributable to their behaviour during the succession of events, identifying the coercive pressures that impinged on them and exploring the implications of the event as a whole. After this, I turn to examine the history of the social relations on the Amaragi plantation during the period following the trial, focusing on the law, its uses and its efficacy. My interest in developing this analysis resides in the possibility of achieving a better understanding not only of the social conditions in which the law, after the proclamation of the Rural Workers Statute, became a regulator of social relations on the sugar-cane plantations, but also the dynamic and complexity of the process that contributed to individuals beginning to act with these legal norms in mind.⁴

The arrival of rights

José Bezerra was a native of Vitória de Santo Antão, a municipality located in the west of the sugar-cane zone. The oldest son of a plantation owner, he arrived in Rio Formoso in 1952, at the age of 32, to lease Amaragi, owned by the Central Barreiros Mill. Carlos, his brother, came during the same period and took out a lease on another property owned by the same mill, the Serra d'Água plantation. They were two from 22 heirs and their departure from the paternal house was certainly related to the minimal chances they had of succeeding in becoming plantation bosses there. The start of the 1950s was a boom period in sugar-cane production, thanks to a favourable international setting which opened new markets for the Brazilian output. The Central Barreiros Mill implemented a policy of exploiting its landholdings to the full: the lands leased to the brothers were still practically virgin. It was left to them to develop the sugar-cane farming and, in compliance with the lease contract, sell the post-harvest produce to the mill. Since the start of colonization, sugar had been produced on the plantation complexes themselves; it was only in the 20th century that it began to be produced in centralized form in specialized mills.⁵ Meanwhile, sugar-cane farming continued to be practiced on the plantations, whether run by the industrial sugar plants, the large landholders or the *rendeiros*, as those who leased lands were known.

At Amaragi, Bezerra found only a few men and needed many more to run a plantation of 1,200 hectares: sugar-cane was – and still is – produced using large contingents of manual labourers. Employing those already found there and the hundreds more that he drew to the site, Bezerra reproduced the same type of social relations he had known since childhood on his father's plantation: tenancy relations.⁶ In the tenancy context, the boss established a personal tie with each of his tenants. A man wishing to work on a plantation would go to the boss to ask him for tenancy. This comprised a house, the right to cultivate a plot of land for his own subsistence and remuneration for the work carried out on the plantation. A worker who became a tenant knew he could count on the boss, who would offer him protection, especially during difficult moments such as sickness and death; he also knew that the boss would give him presents, like clothes at Christmas, fish at Easter and, sometimes, fresh meat. In counterpart, he had to work only for his boss and remain loyal to him. Such things were not said at the moment of requesting or granting the tenancy, nor was any document signed. Everything was implicit and everyone knew the rules of the game. At the *usinas* (mills), on the other hand, the request for tenancy was made to the mill manager and relations with

the boss were more impersonal. However, the mill owners were equally concerned to respect some of the tenancy rules on their plantations as a means of attracting tenant workers to their properties. They too allowed the tenants to cultivate plots of land, therefore, and supported them during difficult moments through the social welfare services introduced at the mills.⁷

From the observer's point of view, the protection and presents amount to employer obligations, just as the duties to not work outside the plantation and to remain loyal correspond to tenant obligations. These were obligations guaranteed by convention and whose legitimacy was founded on the belief in tradition, to cite Weber.⁸ But, for the worker, only his obligations were perceived as such: those of the boss were seen as gifts, signs of his kindness, and the worker therefore felt indebted. For his part, the boss thought of himself as a 'giver:' the tenant's house, the plot of land for cultivation and the presents during the course of the year simply attested to his generosity. Being generous was a value, and the prestige of bosses was measured by the outward signs of their magnanimity.⁹ Since not all the bosses fulfilled their obligations in the same way, some were seen to be better than others. José Bezerra did everything he could to behave as 'a good boss' and succeeded in being recognized as such. This reputation ensured he attracted a steady stream of workers to Amaragi and meant he was able to assemble the labour force he needed.

Amaro Pedro was born at the Canto Alegre plantation in Rio Formoso. He belonged to a family of tenant workers. In fact, the tenants invariably came from families that had worked for the sugar-cane bosses from generation to generation. His mother was originally from another *engenho* – Porto Alegre – and had been raised by the boss's wife at the *casa-grande*. His father's background is unknown. The only thing we know about him is that he had a qualified job: he looked after the pack animals and stables. As often occurred with qualified workers, the bosses competed for his services and he shifted between jobs frequently. Amaro Pedro consequently lived on a number of plantations during his childhood. In 1945, at 23 years old, he found himself on the plantation where his mother had been born and whose owner had just passed away. His widow handed over the management of Porto Alegre to her son and moved to the city of Recife, taking with her Amaro Pedro, who was her godson, and his sister: their parents had died too and she felt responsible for them. Amaro Pedro said that the widow encouraged them to study, but that he preferred to return to Rio Formoso. On his return, he started to circulate among the plantations, a common practice among young unmarried men who were unable to apply legitimately for tenancy, reserved for heads of family. He moved around a lot, always working on private *engenhos* – as the plantations run by a landowner or leaseholder are called, distinguishing them from those run by mill owners – and ended up settling once again at Porto Alegre, where he married and became a tenant.

However, from the start of the 1950s, a series of signs indicated that a change in the tenancy rules was under way. The bosses started to expand sugar-cane cultivation and ways of achieving higher productivity. With this increase in yields in mind, they removed the possibility of tenant workers using plots of land from which they had obtained a large amount of their subsistence, and modified the forms in which their work was remunerated. In addition, they started to neglect their obligations as protectors and 'givers.' This unilateral rupture of the rules of the game created the conditions of possibility for breaking with other rules that the tenants accepted as part of the natural order of things, notably those that obliged them to be loyal to their bosses and never question their authority. Around 1955, an important reaction began to take shape in the western region of the sugar-cane zone with the setting up of the Peasant Leagues.¹⁰

In the years that followed, the reaction of tenant workers spread through the Pernambuco forest region. The Leagues grew into the unions¹¹ that began to be created with the support of militant communists, Trotskyites, left-wing Catholics and federal government authorities interested in

reducing the power of the large landowners.¹² In the rest of the country, the organization of rural workers was amplified with the formation of leagues, associations and unions and, with these, the pressure for regulation of rural labour relations and agrarian reform. It was against this backdrop that the National Congress passed the Rural Workers Statute in 1963, which imposed numerous obligations on bosses and, in cases of conflict, mediation via Labour Courts.

The extension of social rights had an enormous impact in Pernambuco. In the days following the law's approval, as Furtado writes (1964), respect for the new legal framework became a grassroots issue. The political conditions were favourable, thanks to the arrival of Miguel Arraes as state governor. Elected with the support of 'progressive' social forces, Arraes ensured the freedom of political organization and expression in the plantations region. The unions promoted strikes and demonstrations for payment of the new legal obligations, especially the minimum wage and the end of year bonus (an extra month's pay), and supported the first legal processes of tenants against labour right violations. Employees who had never taken their bosses to court started to do so. Five labour courts were therefore set up in the sugar-cane zone. Thanks to the mediation of the governor, the first collective labour contract in the history of social relations was then established between the employee syndicate directors and union leaders representing workers from the *engenhos*.¹³ Among other provisions, the contract included a table setting out the prices and dimensions of agricultural tasks: this comprised the most frequent motive for conflicts on the plantations, since the bosses imposed them unilaterally.

At Amaragi, Bezerra sought to adapt to the new context: he signed the employment record cards, began to respect some of the new legal obligations and did not oppose the union's attempts to organize the election of a delegate from his tenants. His conduct diverged from the general trend in Rio Formoso, where the bosses, as elsewhere in the sugar-cane zone, reacted negatively to the application of the law and union activity. Conflicts sprang up around the respect for 'rights,' a term which the workers used to designate the new obligations imposed on bosses and a category loaded with symbolism.

At Porto Alegre, where Amaro Pedro was working at this time, fellow plantation workers and local union leaders suggested that he take over the post of union delegate. However, he declined. Being illiterate, Amaro Pedro thought he would not be up to the task. His friends insisted: for them, Amaro Pedro, as he himself claimed, had a 'good head,' a 'sound mind.' He therefore decided to help them. Indeed, it is precisely the word 'help' that he uses in describing his union work on the plantation and his job as union delegate. Like elsewhere, the conflicts at Porto Alegre were related to the workload of agricultural tasks, called the *média*, and the corresponding remuneration. When they considered the workload excessive, the tenants would ask Amaro Pedro to negotiate with the boss. If no deal was reached, he would resort to the union. The union delegates went to the plantation. If the impasse remained, they would order the strike. There were also general strikes, which involved workers from the entire municipality, such as those demanding the mandatory extra month's pay at the end of the year.

Only Amaragi remained on the fringe of this social movement: there were no strikes there. Bezerra held weekly meetings with the tenants for them to air their views and grievances, meaning they had no need to strike as Zé Chico, the plantation's old union leader, recounted. Hence, he claimed, whether out of 'respect' or 'fear,' the tenants did not stop work and were therefore frowned upon by other workers from the municipality. In his account given thirty years after these events, Bezerra was still proud to have never had a single strike on his *engenho*. His explanation was that he was 'good.' The 'kindness' argument emphasized by Bezerra comprised a kind of doxa among the tenant

workers of Amaragi and others that lived through this period: some went as far as to say the boss 'didn't deserve' a strike.

The 'communist' witch-hunt

Following the coup d'état, the world fell apart for the union leaders. Amaro Pedro was denounced by his boss as a 'communist' and 'agitator,' the most frequent accusations levelled against those who had taken active part in the protest and campaign movement. The police went to arrest him at Porto Alegre during the night, but he managed to escape and 'run,' in his words, to Amaragi. He sought out Bezerra, who he already knew.

Amaragi was the most productive plantation in Rio Formoso and there was frequently a shortfall in the labour force during harvest periods. With the permission of the bosses, Bezerra sent for workers from plantations where the sugar-cane cutting was already completed. It was in these circumstances that Amaro Pedro began to work at Amaragi: he went there to cut sugar-cane. This casual work undoubtedly provided an ideal opportunity to confirm first-hand Bezerra's fame as a good boss. Amaro Pedro knew that he helped a lot of people at Porto Alegre: he transported sick people to hospitals in Rio Formoso and Barreiros, a neighbouring municipality, in his own car. Bezerra had already been mayor of Rio Formoso between 1958 and 1962, elected in a dispute with the candidate backed by the owners of Cucaú, one of the municipality's mills (*usinas*). Although Amaro Pedro makes no reference to this period of office, it was probably around this time that Bezerra was actively helping people from Porto Alegre. At Amaragi, he heard from people living under the protection of Bezerra say that he was a 'good' man. Furthermore, he saw with his own eyes signs of a 'kindness' that certainly interested him more: there were no restrictions on workers cultivating land; many had their own plots, an ideal for tenant workers and a symbol of a more durable relationship with the boss, as Palmeira points out (1977b). By handing over a plot that had already been cultivated or allowing a tenant to make one in a particular tract of land, the boss also showed symbolically that he appreciated the worker, liked him and wanted him to stay. The tenant felt safer and freer to produce subsistence crops and breed animals for himself and his family. At Porto Alegre, Amaro Pedro lived on the plantation's *arruado*.¹⁴ His wife raised goats, pigs and chickens, but they did not have a field (*roça*),¹⁵ they were not allowed to keep cattle and they had no expectation of acquiring a plot of land.

Then finally Amaro Pedro met Bezerra face-to-face. His account is full of details. After the day's work at Amaragi, as he was returning home by foot along one of the plantation paths that led to Porto Alegre, he bumped into the boss. The latter was accompanied by an *empregado*, employee, a term designating both the manager (the first in the administrative hierarchy after the boss) and the *cabos* (his assistants). Amaro Pedro does not name this employee. Bezerra greeted him – he was usually polite to his tenants; for Amaro Pedro, one of the proofs that he was 'good.' He asked where Amaro Pedro lived, if everything was going well there and what kind of jobs he knew how to do. These were questions that the bosses usually asked when welcoming a prospective tenant. Bezerra then suggested that Amaro Pedro come to live and work with him at Amaragi, saying that he could cultivate land and breed dairy cattle to provide fresh milk for his family every day. He was undoubtedly aware of the prohibitions imposed by the Porto Alegre boss, and the references to the land and cows can be interpreted as a way of seducing Amaro Pedro. It should be noted that inviting someone to become a tenant worker was uncommon; usually it was left to the worker to approach the boss to ask for tenancy. The fact that Bezerra invited Amaro Pedro is not explained simply by his need for extra manual labour at Amaragi. Not just anyone was welcome. It is more likely that

Bezerra had already received word of Amaro Pedro's qualities as a worker, perhaps communicated by the *empregados* who had day-to-day contact with the labour force. The employee accompanying the boss must have pointed out Amaro Pedro before they were close enough to talk. The latter did not say no, but neither did he accept the proposal. We can surmise that he preferred to remain at Porto Alegre where he could continue his union activities. But once the persecutions started, the time had come to relocate to Amaragi.

In his account of the events of April 1964, Bezerra says that 'that man' arrived with two others. In fact, he never pronounced the name of Amaro Pedro, who he invariably referred to as 'that man' or 'the man.' He said, as though presenting the worker to me, that the man did not live with him and that he was a tenant worker of another plantation boss. Bezerra added that this boss was 'somewhat wayward' in relation to Amaro Pedro, that he wanted to kick him out and that he had denounced him. For his part, he had already met Amaro Pedro and considered him a 'good man.' According to Bezerra, Amaro Pedro had said to him:

"*Seu Zé*, I've come to ask for your protection, because you know, you know me, you know that I'm not an agitator. I'm not one and that whatshisname [the Porto Alegre boss] said that I'm an agitator and the police went to get me and beat me to death. I managed to escape, I don't know how my family is. Please send for my family to come here to your *engenho*."

Bezerra replied:

"Look, you're a sound man, I know you and know that you're not an agitator. But whatever the case, you're being pursued by the police. If I send for your family, instead of you being the one chased, it's going to be me. Isn't that right? Because if someone shelters a thief and the police come and you don't let the police take him away... You're the one who ends up being held responsible."

After this conversation was over, he allowed the three men to sleep at Amaragi. The two who had accompanied Amaro Pedro left the next morning and Bezerra never saw either of them again. A week later, he sent a truck to Porto Alegre to fetch 'the man's' family and belongings. The same day, the police arrived at Amaragi in search of Amaro Pedro, accusing Bezerra of sheltering an 'agitator.' Bezerra talked with the police. He said:

"No, this man isn't an agitator. The man you should arrest is the owner of the *engenho*. He's the agitator. Not this man. The man's poor and defenceless. You did this because he's a man with no means of defending himself. Why don't you do it to me? You'd rather persecute a poor man like this, someone who deserves protection from whoever can give it."

The captain (it was actually the army rather than the police that led the repression) insisted that Bezerra order Amaro Pedro to be fetched so he could arrest him. The boss admitted that the captain had the power to give this order, but threatened him at the same time: "You can go [to fetch Amaro Pedro], because you've got a superior force to me. But should you go, I'm going to come back and reunite the people. You won't take the man that easily. And I'll go to the town square and publicly decry you." The captain asked him: "You'd do that?" "Yes. Don't go because I'd do it." The captain went away without taking Amaro Pedro. After this event, Bezerra was summoned by the military a number of times, obliging him to go to Recife to give statements. Since he himself had been in the army and held ex-combatant status,¹⁶ he managed to get the accusations dropped. His trips to the city were closely followed by the tenants of Amaragi. According to the union delegate, they feared for his luck and each time wondered whether he would return. Bezerra concludes this part of his account

describing how he sheltered Amaro Pedro, simultaneously an eulogy to his own kindness in relation to the latter and his courage in confronting the military.

In his account, Amaro Pedro refers to the denunciation made by the boss and the episode of the police search. He makes no reference to either his companions or the conversations that Bezerra mentions. In fact, he says almost nothing about himself. Bezerra is the axis of this part of the account. It is his words and phrases that Amaro Pedro cites. We can presume that he had asked him for a house: the boss, Amaro Pedro claims, told him he could come and that there would be a house for him. The formula attributed to Bezerra was the kind used when accepting a tenant at a plantation. We could be led to presume that nothing more than asking for tenancy, and its acceptance, was involved, had he not referred earlier to the persecution and not subsequently added that the boss told him he had nothing to fear; the police would not harm him because the person giving the orders at Amaragi was himself, Bezerra. Moreover, as in the story told by Bezerra, the police went in search of him at the *engenho*, but did not arrest him thanks to the boss's intervention.

These facts are well known in Rio Formoso. They were certainly transmitted to the younger militants by the older ones and perhaps by Bezerra himself. Today's union leaders refer to these episodes when they narrate the events of 1964. Bezerra is cited as the boss who acted differently to all the others, someone who protected those who were persecuted and in danger. Amaro Pedro appears, then, as the central figure in a case that symbolizes the boss's praiseworthy conduct. However, there is another story told at Amaragi which remains obscured: the imprisonment of Zé Chico, a union delegate. His brother told me about this event in 1995, but omitted to mention the circumstances. In an interview four years later, the union delegate told me that he was imprisoned for fifteen days soon after the coup d'état. The police went in search of him on the plantation on two separate occasions. The first time he managed to escape, but the second time they caught him. According to Zé Chico, Bezerra told him that he only knew about his arrest after the event, and that it was thanks to his intervention with the military authorities that he escaped being tortured. He then referred to rumours that had circulated at the time among the tenant workers at Amaragi: as soon as the police arrived at the plantation, they asked who the delegate was. Apparently Bezerra indicated a tenant who knew where the union delegate lived; the police took this tenant with them and managed to find Zé Chico's small farm. The old delegate had no hard feelings for the boss because of this. He presented various arguments to justify Bezerra's behaviour: he had no choice, he could not deny the existence of a union delegate, and so on. After his imprisonment, Zé Chico returned to Amaragi where he lived and worked until his retirement in the 1990s. Like Amaro Pedro, he lived in a small house in the city of Rio Formoso and kept his farmland at the *engenho*, which in the view of the tenants was one of the most well-kept and attractive on the plantation, covered with an abundant variety of fruit trees, testimony to his enormous personal investment.

Deepening our analysis requires knowing more about these two episodes – the persecution of Amaro Pedro and the imprisonment of Zé Chico – but we are already in a position to compare the conduct of the boss in both cases and extract the implications. Whether or not Bezerra sent someone to show Zé Chico's house to the military is a secondary issue. Even in the commotion following the coup d'état, it is difficult to believe that the police had entered the plantation without Bezerra being aware of the fact. And had he been absent for any reason, the police would not have dared to go in pursuit of Zé Chico on the Amaragi lands without the boss's permission. It is possible to imagine, therefore, that Bezerra was informed. The question raised, then, is knowing why he did not act in the same way: why fail to stop the imprisonment of someone who had been a tenant for years, to whom he had already demonstrated his trust by giving him an area of farmland and with whom he had no quarrel, while in relation to Amaro Pedro, who he hardly knew, he ran risks and confronted the military. Had the episode with Zé Chico occurred after that of Amaro Pedro, when Bezerra had already been

forced to travel to Recife to explain himself before the military authorities, he certainly would have been in no position to confront the police. In this case, he would have been unable to protect Zé Chico. Another possibility: the episode involving Zé Chico occurred first, soon after the military coup. Bezerra was taken by surprise. He was not ready to deal with the situation and felt powerless, unable to do anything. The case of Amaro Pedro would then have given him the chance to redeem himself. Other circumstances, however, afford us an insight into his behaviour concerning Amaro Pedro. Bezerra had already suggested for him to become one his tenant workers. According to his own account, when Amaro Pedro went in search of him, it was to ask him precisely for a house. It was tantamount to finally accepting the earlier invitation. Bezerra was hemmed in. Saying no would mean failing to keep his word. Moreover, if, as the boss recounts, the man asked for protection, his problems were effectively doubled. For someone like Bezerra, who had an image of himself as a 'good man' and wished to preserve this, refusing to protect a worker in danger because of a 'bad' boss was unthinkable. Sheltering Amaro Pedro was a way of maintaining his honour and the self-image through which he wished to be recognized and respected. Zé Chico, on the other hand, had not asked him for protection from the police. Did he think they would not come in search of him? Or perhaps he was too proud to go to the boss for help? It is difficult to know. The two episodes, however, show that Bezerra's power had limits and that the situation was not entirely as he wanted Amaro Pedro to believe: "I'm the one who gives the orders at Amaragi." He was also constrained by the violence of the State and was unable to fulfil his role as protector, apart from preventing Zé Chico from being tortured. The Amaro Pedro case made him a hero, while the Zé Chico episode exposed his weakness; this helps explain why the latter story remained hidden.

From trial to forgiveness

Some months after the military coup, the rural workers union of Rio Formoso was re-opened and in 1965 the new leadership was elected. Workers who had never previously held union functions took office in the process and began to invest progressively in the implementation of legal services within the unions.¹⁷ The labour law remained in force and the Labour Court fully functioning. The military and their civilian allies did not oppose the recourse to the justice system as a means of regulating conflicts; indeed, it may even be said they stimulated them. Still in 1965, the Brazilian Institute of Agrarian Reform (IBRA), then a body linked to the Presidency of the Republic, signed an agreement with the Federation of Pernambuco Farm Workers (Fetape), which amalgamated the rural workers unions in the state, to contract labour lawyers. It was thanks to this agreement that the Rio Formoso Union was able to use the services of a lawyer and start to file legal actions at the Labour Court.

Amaro Pedro states that once he and his family were resettled at Amaragi, he began to work on the plantation, both in his boss's sugar-cane fields and on his own plot. Bezerra had given him an uncleared area to make his small farm. There was just one coconut tree and the rest to do. In his account, Amaro Pedro says that everything went smoothly: he did not bother the boss, neither did the latter annoy him. One day in 1965, without knowing what came over him, he recounts that he filed a lawsuit¹⁸ against Bezerra. We have already discussed the rest of his version above, including his later remorse. In the interview, I continued to ask him questions about the episode. Bezerra, he said, had not been complying fully with the new labour regulations. He therefore went to the union for guidance, the only one from Amaragi to do so. The union leaders advised him to make a claim in the Labour Court and sent him to the lawyer. Indeed, helping workers file lawsuits was seen as the primary function of the unions now that they were unable to organize strikes or demonstrations. The advice they gave is understandable, therefore. But on the *engenho*, Bezerra had different advice for his tenant workers. He said they did not need to go off to the union, that the union was a waste of

time and, in an allusion to the post-coup repression, that everyone had seen the results of becoming involved in union activities.

Going to the union to bring charges against one's boss was not yet common practice in 1965. The violence of the military crackdown had produced a climate of fear in the municipality,¹⁹ meaning a great deal of grassroots work among agricultural employees needed to be done for them to return to the union. Amaro Pedro does not specify exactly when he re-established his links with union comrades. Probably he was one of the first to do so and, having taken part previously in union campaigns, he more than likely felt obliged to help those looking to revitalize the union in the new setting. Aware that union activism would henceforth be channelled via the legal system, Amaro Pedro did what the union leaders expected of him: he agreed to take legal action against his boss; he reaffirmed his intention when he told Bezerra that it really was himself who was taking him to court, as the owner of Amaragi recounts; and he pursued the lawsuit to its end, appearing at the final court hearing.

When the legal action was successfully concluded from the union's point of view, Amaro Pedro asked himself: "But what have I done to *Seu Zé Bezerra*?" He went to his boss and asked for his forgiveness. If he wished to stay at Amaragi, he had no alternative. Given the personalized nature of relations on the plantation, Amaro Pedro would not have been able to continue living there if his boss no longer even wanted to greet him. In his account, he recalls the boss's words only: we know nothing of what he said to Bezerra and there is no reference to the tears or the return of the money won in the Court. It was undoubtedly a ritual of humiliation whose shame prevented him from recalling openly even thirty years after the episode.

The trial and the request for forgiveness seem to have remained a subject confined to Bezerra and Amaro Pedro alone. In the periods in which I was in Rio Formoso (between 1994 and 1999), nobody ever discussed the topic, while the episode of sheltering Amaro Pedro was notorious. The trial was essentially a problem for the boss. It was he who mentioned it during our meeting. Caught in the logic of the supposedly free gift, but which is actually sustained by self-interest, as Marcel Mauss pointed out, Bezerra was never able to comprehend why Amaro Pedro had taken him to court. Sheltering a man on the run from the police was an almost sublime manifestation of his generosity. His expectation was that the counter-gift would be the man's undying loyalty. In these circumstances, the trial could only be viewed as a form of ingratitude. Since Bezerra had seen the man he had sheltered as no more than a 'poor man,' it did not occur to him that 'that man' could have loyalties to anyone else other than the person who had saved his life. Then, when Amaro Pedro went in search of him, Bezerra interpreted his gesture as an admission that taking him to court had been a mistake. It was a victory for him. By forgiving the worker, he reaffirmed his kindness and the social order on the *engenho*, based on the personal authority of its owner, was fully re-established. For his part, Amaro Pedro only referred to the trial because he knew of my interest in this story. He told me his account on the veranda of the house of Roberto, the boss's son, who had arranged Amaro Pedro's visit so he could narrate the events to me in person. Without my prompting, he referred to the trial with Bezerra and described the episode as a 'lapse of judgment' on his part. Given the circumstances, it was unsurprising that he presented the episode in this form: it was the appropriate version for the locale of the conversation. But this undoubtedly also corresponded to the way in which Amaro Pedro retrospectively saw the decision to take his boss to court, since he too acted and reacted according to the logic of the gift: the 'lapse in judgment' concealed the feeling that he had failed to reciprocate the received gift and had thus behaved like an ingrate.²⁰

Protection until the end

After the promulgation of the Rural Workers Statute, the bosses of the Pernambuco sugar-cane zone were forced to submit to obligations previously unknown to them, such as establishing formal work contracts through the signing of employment record cards, paying the minimum wage, remunerated rest days, the end of year bonus, redundancy compensation, and so on. As the state institutions – with the exception of the Labour Courts – had negligible control over the bosses in terms of forcing their compliance with labour legislation, the pressure on the employer class was primarily applied by union leaders, who, from the second half of the 1960s, began to invest systematically in the legal resolution of conflicts. In time, filing a large number of lawsuits against the bosses became a sign of merit in the union field. Those wishing to climb the hierarchy of prestige doubled their investments: they encouraged workers to make claims, placing a range of devices (principally lawyers) at their disposal in order to file lawsuits in the courts and closely following the progress of the trials.

This dynamic contributed to the introduction of the law as a regulatory mechanism of social relations on the *engenhos*. The court statistics show that trials were rarely shelved and that workers were usually victorious in the courts. Many bosses adapted to the laws so as to avoid the legal battles; others began to abide by the rules after the first trial, negotiating friendly deals that took into account the labour legislation. On the other hand, as the cost of the labour force rose as a result, the bosses started to look for other solutions for the workers they needed. They turned to contractors and restricted job opportunities on their land to employees with formal contracts in an effort to reduce welfare payments and the risks of being taken to court, which involved heavy financial outlays and was perceived as a dishonour.

In the 1960s and especially the 1970s, there was a sizeable expansion in sugar-cane farming in Pernambuco, thanks to the federal government's favourable policies in relation to the sugar agroindustry, especially in terms of loans and sugar exports. When this expansion occurred, a large proportion of the labour force employed on the plantations began to be made up of workers hired without labour contracts, the majority of whom lived in the small towns of the sugar-cane zone, since tenancy on the plantations had been closed to them. These workers were called *clandestinos* and recognized themselves as such, in contrast to the *fichados*, or registered workers. Hence, the relation to labour rights acted as a classificatory principle, demonstrating the extent to which these rights had become a reference point for the workers of the region.

In Rio Formoso, the union leaders turned to the help of a left-wing lawyer, assigned the responsibility of exploring the possibilities of legal rulings to protect against the dismissal of those registered workers still living on the plantations. This legal strategy had the effect of ensuring the permanence of several thousand tenant workers on the plantations, but failed to revert the tendency of the bosses to close the doors of the *engenhos* to new arrivals or to refuse to sign work contracts with them.

At Amaragi, Bezerra dismissed no-one and continued to take in new workers on his lands, signing the employment record cards of some and allowing others to live and work on the plantation as *clandestinos*. As during the period prior to the labour laws, the Amaragi boss welcomed the new workers as tenants; he allowed everyone, registered and illegal workers alike, to clear their own fields; he distributed land plots and assumed the role of a protector, acting in line with his image as a 'good man.' This conduct was unusual in the municipality. Bezerra's brother, for example, at the time the leaseholder of two plantations from the Central Barreiros Mill (Serra d'Água and Minguito), systematically destroyed the houses of workers who left the plantation, made no attempt to welcome new tenants and failed to distribute land plots.

In 1979, as the process of redemocratization began in Brazil, there was a return to strike action in the sugar-cane zone. The Unions of São Lourenço da Mata and Paudalho, municipalities located in the metropolitan region of Recife, took the initiative with the support of Fetape and the National Confederation of Rural Workers (Contag), to propose a collective work contract to the employer syndicates. When the bosses failed to reply to the request within the five day period stipulated by law, the union leaders called for a strike. Twenty thousand workers laid down their tools. Another 22 unions, including Rio Formoso's, supported the demand for the collective contract and announced their willingness to join the strike. The representatives of the employers then agreed to negotiate with the union leaders and ended up signing an agreement, benefiting the workers from the entire sugar-cane zone. Among other provisions, this initial agreement set out a 52% wage rise, the fixing of a task table (establishing equivalence between the scale of the tasks and prices) and the extension of some urban labour rights, such as overtime payments. Over the following years, the contracts, 12 months in duration, were renewed within the parameters set by the agreements or following the mediation of the Labour Court, very often with the eruption of strikes involving as many as two hundred thousand workers.²¹

After the first contract, the unions also succeeded in including traditional tenancy obligations in subsequent contracts, such as the allocation of land plots and maintenance expenses for plantation workers' houses; some years later, they included a form of protection for the sick, such as transportation to hospital. This inclusion is explained by the fact that the workers in reality continued to be guided by practices that had traditionally prevailed in the plantations before the arrival of social rights. As I had been able to observe ever since my first field trips at the start of the 1970s, workers complained that the bosses no longer gave them plots of land, did not help them when they were sick and no longer repaired their houses. They believed that this change in behaviour had been caused by the arrival of rights and described it through the language of feelings: the bosses had become filled with a kind of 'hatred' of their tenants. As a result of the collective contracts won in the strikes, some of the tenancy obligations had been imposed judicially: they had become rights.

When the first strike hit Rio Formoso in 1980, the stoppage was on a massive scale. The union leaders, however, did not stop work at Amaragi. Bezerra and his son reacted to the entry of the leaders onto the plantation. During the following years, when other strikes erupted, they gave collective holidays to their workers. In this way, they ensured work ceased and gratified the union leaders, with whom Bezerra and Roberto maintained good relations, and, at the same time, showed the union members and workers who held power at Amaragi. With the strikes, the number of legal actions multiplied in the sugar-cane zone: the leaders encouraged the workers to make use of the justice system to guarantee that the new rights included in the collective contracts were respected. Rio Formoso occupied third place in the number of legal actions in the sugar-cane zone.²² None, though, were registered at Amaragi. The tenants, all union members, did not take Bezerra to court: the recognition that the boss was a 'good man' prevented them morally. For his part, Amaro Pedro remained loyal to Bezerra, although this did not mean he weakened his links to the union. He continued to attend the union meetings and carried out long-term educational work with new workers at Amaragi: he taught them what the union was, its role in the defence of 'rights' and encouraged them to take part in union activities.²³

After the collective contracts came into force, the unions launched a strategic plan to ensure the registration of all the workers and put an end to work without guaranteed rights. The bosses therefore increasingly found themselves forced to sign work contracts with their clandestine workers. In addition, they had to pay more for the labour force they needed on the plantations due to the rise in wages and the re-establishment of the task table. In this context, the use of mechanical

loaders for harvested sugar-cane became more widespread, meeting the need to reduce the number of workers during the milling.

At Amaragi, where since 1983 Bezerra had transferred management of the plantation to his son, several clandestine workers became registered and new machines were purchased to deal with the new setting. Around this time, many workers started to leave the plantation to go to work in São Paulo. Sometimes whole families left; at other times, just young unmarried men whose parents and other family members remained at Amaragi, a kind of 'safe port' should things not worked out as planned. Four of Amaro Pedro's fourteen sons, as well as the husband of his oldest daughter (Quitéria), were among those who departed. The daughter, who lived on a neighbouring plantation, returned with her children to the paternal house at Amaragi and began to work on the plantation. Two years later, her husband returned from São Paulo and went to work on another *engenho*. Quitéria went with him but kept her work contract at Amaragi and left one of her sons there, José Augusto, nicknamed Cabeludo (Hairy), living with his grandfather Amaro Pedro.

At the start of the 1990s, the federal government changed its policy in relation to sugar-cane farming: it suspended subsidies, unfroze increases in interest rates and privatized exports, until then mediated through the Sugar and Alcohol Institute, which had guaranteed the price to producers. In the Pernambuco sugar-cane zone, there were bosses unable to respond to the new setting and went bankrupt; many others underwent restructuring and laid off large numbers of workers. Of Pernambuco's 38 sugar mills, fourteen were no longer functioning in 1997; the productivity attained in the 1980s of almost 26 million tons of cane transformed into sugar dropped to just 15 million tons in the 1997/98 harvest. By the end of the 1990s, of the four mills found in Rio Formoso and the surrounding area, only the Trapiche mill succeeded in restructuring; Cucaú survived on a precarious basis; Santo André no longer worked its plantations; and Central Barreiros, which had been the most dominant mill in Pernambuco in the 1970s, closed its doors. At the outset, the unions did all they could to protect the workers from dismissal. However, as stable work became more scarce, the bargaining power of the unions weakened and the work contracts became more precarious. Legal actions multiplied, but for another reason: from this point on, the aim was to ensure compensation payments for fired workers, rather than claim rights to ensure their continuing employment.

In this new climate, the Landless Workers Movement (MST), an organization created in the 1980s in the south of Brazil to claim the disappropriation of lands through the occupation of farms, began to install itself in Pernambuco. In 1992, MST organized the first large-scale land occupation in the sugar-cane zone. More than a thousand people, most of them workers from the *engenhos*, invaded the lands of the Camaçari plantation in Rio Formoso. The union leaders from the municipality lent their support and took part in the action. Over the following years, other occupations took place in Rio Formoso and in the old district of Tamandaré, which became a municipality in 1996. At first they were the product of a collaboration between MST and the union, and after 1996 were promoted by the two organizations separately.²⁴

At Amaragi, since the end of the 1980s, Bezerra's son, foreseeing the difficulties faced by the sugar-cane agroindustry, launched a business venture with a German entrepreneur and prepared to convert to tourism. Exploiting Amaragi's exceptional location, between the highway and the most beautiful part of the Pernambuco coastline, he turned the *casa-grande* into a farm hotel and began to welcome a large influx of tourists. Bezerra disagreed with the venture but, old and sick, he was unable to do anything. In the mid 1990s, the difficulties of the sugar sector made themselves felt in Amaragi: indebted to the Banco do Brasil and in conflict with the mill, which had confiscated part of the production, Roberto was no longer able to pay his workers' wages.²⁵ At first the workers survived the situation by resorting to the produce of their own plots and fishing; some went to work on a

clandestine basis for other bosses. After a few weeks, hunger set in at the plantation. Roberto ordered three bulls to be killed to distribute meat to the families; he then obtained credit from a market in the town for the workers to acquire supplies there. Suspension of payments was an unheard of situation for the rural workers. Most of them had lived at Amaragi for many years and had never experienced anything like it. To them it seemed that Roberto was primarily responsible for what was happening: they thought he had favoured the farm hotel and neglected the sugar-cane cultivation. The plantation, which had once produced thirty thousand tons of cane, was now producing just six thousand. Nonetheless, the workers expected Roberto to find a solution, performing the function of protector like his father. They also feared that he would leave, though, like other bosses from Rio Formoso were doing, or that the mill would take over the plantation.

Amaro Pedro was no longer working at Amaragi when the crisis erupted. Some years previously he had suffered a stroke, which he had survived thanks to Bezerra who had taken him to hospital – thus saving his life for the second time, according to his own account of the facts. Afterwards, feeling his energy spent, he retired and went to live in a small house in the town so he would be close to medical assistance. Quitéria, the only one of his children to possess a work contract at Amaragi, continued to work on the plantation and take care of her father's farm. The grandson who Amaro Pedro had raised, Cabeludo, was never a registered worker, neither at Amaragi, nor anywhere else. Born in 1970, he came of working age (around 14 years old) at a time when the bosses preferred to hire youngsters via temporary contracts for the cane harvesting period only. In this condition, he moved between various plantations and ended up living in the town with his godfather, who had been a union leader. In the town, he began to do odd-jobs. He kept in touch with the union leaders who he already knew, since his grandfather frequently took him to meetings. In 1992, at the time of the events on the Camaçari plantation, he was unemployed. One of his friends from the union invited him to take part in the land invasion. At first reticent, Cabeludo eventually accepted the invite. As with other workers from the region, occupying a plantation was something beyond his imagining. When forced to leave Camaçari as a result of a large-scale military operation, Cabeludo joined the contingent of around 800 people who followed the MST and union leaders and set up in another location to prepare for a new occupation. There were three occupations in less than a year.²⁶ The group's ranks gradually diminished, but Cabeludo remained a part. By 1997 when I first met him, he was an MST activist, responsible for the microzone covering a number of coastal municipalities (including Rio Formoso), and had taken active part in various land occupations.

At Amaragi, Roberto was unable to pull through the crisis and ended up investing increasingly in tourism. The workers remained on their farm plots and continued to look for work outside the plantation. Although the level of unemployment was high in the sugar-cane zone, Amaragi's workers enjoyed a more favourable situation: they had not been made to leave and could continue to cultivate their own fields. Like in the tenancy arrangements of the past, the boss protected them from the crisis and allowed them to work the land for their own benefit. The federal government had already begun to disappropriate plantations in the area in order to redistribute lands; these disappropriations always took place where they had been occupations organized by MST, unions and other 'movements.'²⁷ In Rio Formoso, the first disappropriation occurred in 1994 (at the Cipó plantation, occupied by MST and the Union) and the second one in 1996 (at the São João plantation, occupied by the Union). Roberto undoubtedly saw disappropriation as a solution to the crisis at Amaragi: with the plantation disappropriated, he would be released from labour obligations with the tenants and could benefit from cash compensations linked to the improvements made on the plantation by his father since 1952. The land compensation, paid in agrarian debt bonds, would go to the plantation's owner, the Central Barreiros Mill. There are signs that an understanding was reached between Roberto and the union leaders and that the latter then asked the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) to disappropriate the plantation, alleging that the lands

were non-productive.²⁸ The disappropriation took place in 1998. In contrast to other *engenhos* in the region, which were almost empty when disappropriated, such as the two belonging to Bezerra's brother,²⁹ at Amaragi there was a population of almost four hundred people. They were families who had been there for decades, some since Bezerra's arrival in the 1950s, and who had remained there thanks, above all, to the protection which had been guaranteed to them by the plantation's owner. It is true that, like the other bosses, neither Bezerra nor his son followed the letter of the law in terms of labour obligations and that they had accumulated endless debts that the tenants refrained from reclaiming out of respect for the obligations imposed by gratitude. But while on other plantations facing a similar situation the moment of disappropriation was also a moment for tenants to settle their accounts with bosses in the courts, this did not happen at Amaragi. Wanting to match his father and the latter's reputation as a 'good' man, Roberto made an unheard of deal with the Union and INCRA: he proposed deducting the labour liabilities from the compensation he was due to receive from the latter Institute so that he could settle his obligations to tenants. To the very end, then, what mattered seemed to be preserving the honour of the boss and avoiding the dishonour of being taken to the courts.

Everything that the law owes to honour

For Bezerra, being recognized and respected as a 'good man' gave meaning to his life and his actions demonstrated a concern to produce and reproduce this image of himself.³⁰ This concern led him to act like the most venerable plantation bosses of the past and respect the norms of tradition, even when other bosses began to neglect their traditional obligations and no longer valued generosity. Inside and outside Amaragi, among his own tenant workers and others, he succeeded in being seen as a 'good man,' a 'man of gold.' The veneration which many workers had and still have for him can be interpreted as a worship of the tradition that founded the legitimacy of tenancy and that Bezerra strove to respect.

The same desire to be recognized as a 'good' man also seemed to underlie his relationship to the law. Although not a fan of the labour legislation, Bezerra sought, as far as possible, to comply with the new rules from the outset. Faced by the threat of seeing his authority questioned by the demand to respect worker rights, a fate that awaited other bosses, he decided to guarantee his tenants payment of the minimum wage and the end of year bonus, as well as issuing them with employment record cards. This initiative allowed him to prevent the protests from arriving at Amaragi and ensured the steadfast continuity of his power over those submitted to him through tenancy relations. In conversation, Bezerra always presented this respect for rights as proof of his kindness, never as his submission to a legal imposition from outside. This perception was likewise shared by the men living on his plantation: he complied with their rights because he was a 'good man.' His domination of the Amaragi tenants was always personalized: his authority was personal and he made himself be obeyed through the respect for tradition in which he succeeded in including the new workers 'rights.'

We now have a clearer understanding of the Amaro Pedro episode, including Bezerra's wish to be recognized as a good man in the context of social conflicts and the emptying of the plantation houses. The world had changed, but Bezerra continued to behave as he did 'before the Rural Labour Statute' and the tenant protests. He ended up sheltering a 'communist' to honour his word, treating him as one of his tenants because he could not act otherwise and later forgave him because Amaro Pedro humiliated himself before him. The episode provides an extreme demonstration of the way in which Bezerra managed relations with his tenants, the 'anachronous triumph of honour,' to cite the

terms used by Duby (1984) in his analysis of Guillaume Marechal, a figure we can compare to Bezerra.

Amaro Pedro was less eloquent than Bezerra and indeed most of the workers I got to know: a man of few words, monosyllabic and discrete. He enjoyed a high status among the union members and his name was frequently cited in the list of those taking part in the campaigns and suffering from military persecution. Yet his role in the heroic struggles of the period when rights were being introduced was never turned by himself into a motive for self-congratulation. These features of his personality mean that we know less about him compared to Bezerra and it is more difficult to define clearly his own wishes, or the meaning that his behaviour had for himself in the sequence of events spanning from the period in which he became a union delegate to his fleeing to Amaragi, and then from the trial to being forgiven. Amaro Pedro certainly had qualities that were recognized by his peers as valuable in terms of confronting the bosses. Becoming a delegate was, then as today, a prestigious position and Amaro took pride in this to the point of turning down Bezerra's invitation, as we have seen. To maintain his position, a man had to give proofs of his capacity. The evidence is that Amaro

Pedro performed his function well, given that he succeeded in building a name and reputation for himself. When the world collapsed around him with the violence of the military repression, those who recognized him as a honourable man could do nothing, since they were equally affected by the State's violence. It was in this context that Amaro asked Bezerra for protection, just as tenants asked the bosses when they believed themselves to be in danger, though not for the same reasons. A man who had worked hard for relations on the plantations to be regulated in another fashion, he had no choice but to behave according to tradition. His life depended on it. Taking the boss to court a year after he had been protected by him was an extraordinary act only when one remains, like Bezerra, a prisoner to the logic of gift and counter-gift. His act can also be interpreted as a product of his loyalty towards comrades from the Union and Amaro Pedro's desire to see the law respected.

It is not the anthropologist's job to cast doubt on the representation of events made by the individuals involved. He or she can, though, formulate hypotheses distinct from native interpretations. It is likely that Amaro Pedro questioned himself from the outset when taking Bezerra to court and that he was tormented throughout the entire period from filing the legal action to the final hearing. But he also had an image of himself to maintain vis-à-vis the union leaders. During the 24 years he stayed at Amaragi, Amaro Pedro did not perform any union functions; he was, though, assiduous in attending the Union's meetings and respected by the union leaders. During this period, he remained loyal to Bezerra and never again questioned his authority. Although his grandson Cabeludo performed a role in the campaigns for land disappropriations, just as Amaro Pedro had performed a role in the campaigns to introduce the new law and rights, this fact cannot be taken as merely the result of the grandfather's participation in the grandson's upbringing. Other social conditions were involved, which cannot be examined here, in order for this to happen. But we are led to presume that Amaro Pedro had contributed to his grandson acquiring a habitus that disposed him to confronting the bosses.

Conclusion

The growing specialization in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, produced by the logics particular to the functioning of scientific establishments rather than the needs of knowledge *per se*, have had perverse effects on the development of the social sciences. Caught in the trap of an intellectual division of labour, a product simply of history, the practitioners of these disciplines end

up believing in the autonomy of the domain of study they choose – religion, politics, cosmology, to mention just a few – in relation to other domains of social life. The latter fall by the wayside when producing their interpretations. This perverse effects seem to be doubled among those specializing in the study of law within the fields of anthropology and sociology, since here this autonomization frequently leads to approaching the object of study from the viewpoint of experts (judges and lawyers) and those individuals and groups interested in the law. This can be observed, for example, in the studies that limit themselves either to the legal norms or institutions, or to the claimant in labour trials, with no concern to relate the facts connected to the law to other social facts. So, for instance, when the issue is explaining the recourse to the courts to regulate conflicts, their focus is either on those making the claim – that is, on their awareness of injustices and their possibilities for accessing legal institutions – or on the content of the legal norms and the function of experts (lawyers and magistrates). It is as though there were no need to go beyond the issue of the law, as though it were possible to understand this practice without exploring the sociogenesis of conflicts and without asking about the social profiles of the individuals involved and the history of their relations – without, in sum, reinserting the facts relating to the law within wider social contexts. When we turn to the writings of some of the ‘founders’ of disciplines like anthropology and sociology, we can see that it was precisely the later specialization that contributed to this situation. The emphasis on relating the facts of law to other social facts, largely ignored nowadays, was formulated as a method resource and practiced, in the period prior to any detrimental specialization, by Marcel Mauss (1991), in his study of exchanges and contracts in archaic societies, and by Bronislaw Malinowski (1970), in his analyses of the customs and coercions involved in the circulation of goods on the Trobriand Islands. Likewise, in the work of Max Weber, a jurist before becoming a sociologist, we find theoretical constructions that insist on the fact that conducts cannot be understood by examining law alone, as well as warnings concerning the potential contamination of the sociological viewpoint by juridical dogmatism.

Grounded in a particular case, I have tried to show that it is possible to arrive at a more adequate understanding of the facts linked to the law once, breaking with the point of view that autonomizes these facts, we expand the analytic context. The introduction of law as a regulator of social relations on the sugar-cane plantations of Pernambuco was initially the effect of a change in the legal framework. But, in contrast to what the specialists would say, this cannot be explained by the existence of new juridical regulations alone, nor just by the functioning of the legal system’s institutions. In the neighbouring sugar-cane regions, in Paraíba and Alagoas states,³¹ the extension of social rights did not lead to the same outcomes. For these social rights to take effect in Pernambuco, a widespread campaign was needed for them to be respected. This campaign involved union directors and leaders such as Amaro Pedro, who helped ensure that the new laws were respected at the Porto Alegre plantation. But the campaign itself becomes comprehensible when we observe that a rupture with tradition had already taken place: this rupture enabled people to mobilize in terms of ‘rights,’ perceived as compensation for the loss of protection once provided by tradition.

From the arrival of workers rights until the 1990s, the introduction of the new laws was a product of union battles, initially through large-scale uprisings (1963-64), later through the juridical regulation of conflicts and everything this supposed, such as teaching workers their rights and implementing an infrastructure allowing them to go to court (1960s and 70s), and, finally, through collective mobilizations over work contracts, which created new employer obligations – new ‘rights’ – and legally enshrined the traditional unwritten obligations. Throughout this period, the respect for rights gradually came to be seen by rural workers as a form of protection, based on the model of protection previously assured them by the bosses under tenancy relations. When the crisis exploded in the sugar-cane zone, many workers felt they were on the brink of losing everything: there was no longer

any protection, neither from tradition nor law. This idea contributed to the desire to occupy the *engenhos* and the start of the invention of a new right: the right to land.

In conclusion, the Amaragi case allows us to develop a more complex understanding of the situation and perceive that there were other social conditions that contributed to the new rights becoming a reality: there, a boss pursuing his wish to be recognized as 'good' respected the new laws so as to preserve his reputation and personal authority – for reasons, therefore, that did not derive from the law. Inspired by this desire, he gave shelter to Amaro Pedro and protected him, likewise Zé Chico. These men, for their part, contributed to the law becoming a tangible fact, dedicating themselves with panache to converting their comrades to the rights issues and unions. In the end, events at Amaragi ran a different course. The traditional protection was ensured until the very end; the *engenho* was not occupied like the others were; the boss settled his debts to the workers. However, as the world is not as simple as those who observe it from dichotomous models tend to believe, Amaragi, the plantation run by personal domination, was also the nurturing ground for a new leader – Amaro Pedro's grandson – who took the path of militancy and, through it, the campaigns for disappropriating the plantations, with all this implied in terms of reducing the differences in power found in the world of the large plantations of the Pernambuco forest region.

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Notes

¹ *Engenho* ('engine:' a reference to the sugar milling machinery) is the most commonly used term in the region to designate the sugar-cane production units. Other terms used are *fazenda* (farm) and *propriedade* (property).

² On the role performed by priests from the Catholic Church during this period, see Palmeira (1977a).

³ On this occasion, I conducted a research study into the social uses of law in the region of the Pernambuco forest region and Amaragi was one of the plantations studied.

⁴ My analysis of the José Bezerra-Amaro Pedro case was based on an account from them both concerning the events, interviews conducted with union delegates, union leaders, bosses and workers from Rio Formoso, as well as observational data and accumulated knowledge of the history of the social relations on the large plantations of the Pernambuco forest region. The case was referred to in Sigaud (1996) and first analyzed in Sigaud (1999a). The present text develops the 1999 study by broadening and refining the analysis.

⁵ On the mill process, see, among other works, Eisenberg (1977) and Correa de Andrade (1989).

⁶ The social relations were structured around the granting of a house; hence the designation 'tenancy relations' (*relações de morada*). Concerning the 'tenancy rules,' see Palmeira (1977b).

⁷ The mill owners used the argument of social protection to attract the labour force, as can be observed in the case of the Catende Mill, the largest in Pernambuco in the 1940s. On this topic, see Catende (1941) and Sigaud (1993:27-28).

⁸ Based on the descriptions of tenancy relations, it is possible to claim that they formed a mode of domination comparable to the type of traditional domination theorized by Max Weber, in terms of the personal nature of relations, the conventional guarantee and the belief in the sacred character of tradition. On this subject see Weber's writings on the juridical system (1964:251-272) and those on the sociology of domination (1964:753-809).

⁹ Generosity as a value and criterion for measuring prestige appears clearly in the memoirs written by bosses (see Bello 1985; Correa de Oliveira 1988; Nabuco 1995).

¹⁰ The protests triggered in the Pernambuco forest region are interpreted here as the reaction of tenants to the changes in the rules of the game of domination. They can be compared to other protests that also originated in ruptures of a traditional order, such as those studied by Thompson (1971), Hobsbawm & Rudé (1973) and Moore Jr. (1967).

¹¹ The setting up of rural workers unions accelerated from 1962 onwards when the Labour Ministry issued the rural unionization decree. On the first unions then created in the forest region, see Wilkie (1964).

¹² See Camargo's analysis (1981).

¹³ Concerning this first agreement, see Callado (1964).

¹⁴ The *arruado* is located on the plantation's courtyard. It designates the row of houses, very often semi-detached, where the workers live.

¹⁵ The *roçado* is the area used for planting short-cycle crops such as maize and beans. It is distinguished from the *roça*, a term used to designate the area planted with manioc varieties (bitter and sweet).

¹⁶ In the Second World War, Bezerra engaged in military service and took part in watch patrols along the northeast coast. This experience gave him the status of an ex-combatant.

¹⁷ For an understanding of the social relations that contributed to the union leaders investing in the juridical regulation of conflicts, see Sigaud (1999b).

¹⁸ The expression used to name the act of making a claim in the courts is *botar questão*, literally 'place a question.' Here, *questão* designates a conflict or misunderstanding.

¹⁹ One of the union leaders elected in 1965 tells that his mother begged on her knees for him not to join the Union directorate. On the plantation where this director lived, three union activists had been tortured and murdered by the military.

²⁰ In 1999, I once again met Amaro Pedro and interviewed him for the second time. He did not speak again about the trial, but added other details about his relationship with Bezerra and on the confrontations with the bosses before the 1964 coup.

²¹ On the strikes in the large plantations, see Sigaud (1980; 1986).

²² In the 1980s, I conducted a census of the labour trials in the Pernambuco forest region and it was then that I discovered the position of Rio Formoso. For more details, see Sigaud (1999b).

²³ One of the workers initiated by Amaro Pedro was José Francisco, the youngest brother of the old union delegate, Zé Chico, who arrived at Amaragi in 1978 coming from a municipality of the sugarcane zone where union work was non-existent.

²⁴ On the land occupations in the Pernambuco forest region, see Sigaud (2000; 2003), Chamorro (2000) and Sigaud et al. (2001).

²⁵ On the crisis at Amaragi, see Sigaud (1996) and Sigaud et al. (2001).

²⁶ On the saga of occupations of those who left Camaçari, see Sigaud (2003) and www.lonasebandeiras.com.br.

²⁷ Movement in this context designates the organizations that promote land occupations. Hence, MST, Fetape and the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) are movements. Pernambuco is the Brazilian state with the highest number of movements. On the logic behind the creation of these movements, see Rosa (2004).

²⁸ Since 1993, according to the rulings of National Congress, land non-productivity of lands is defined by the failure to carry out the property's business activity, a situation in which the law authorizes disappropriation. The task of evaluating land productivity is assigned to INCRA which

initiates the process of disappropriation when non-productivity is determined on the basis of technical criteria.

²⁹ Bezerra described this brother as a 'good man,' but one who did not know how to give, which indicated he did not consider him as good a man as himself. The exodus from his plantation would have been a sign of this difference.

³⁰ It was the works of Norbert Elias, in particular his study of Mozart (1991) and Germany (1996), which called my attention to the importance of taking into account what, from the individual's viewpoint, confers sense on their life, when it comes to interpreting their behaviour.

³¹ This can be ascertained from the works of Novaes (1997) on Paraíba and Heredia (1988) on Alagoas.