

Rogers, Thomas D. *The Deepest Wounds: A Labor and Environmental History of Sugar in Northeast Brazil*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010. 302 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index.

Artfully written and drawing from an impressive array of interviews, literary, professional, government, and academic sources, *The Deepest Wounds* is a book that will appeal to undergraduate and graduate students as much as to the specialist selection committees who awarded it the Warren Dean Memorial and Henry A. Wallace prizes (respectively, from the Conference of Latin American History and Agricultural History societies). At a fundamental level, the book teaches us that culture and work cannot be understood without paying attention to environmental change, and that labor movements and environmental shifts at the local level can affect political developments at the national level. At the same time, this rich study of labor and environment in the state of Pernambuco fills a significant lacuna next to the strong English-language historiography on these subjects for São Paulo and the Amazon regions.

The book's title is taken from a Gilberto Freyre quote that blames sugar monoculture, slavery, and *latifúndia* for the social inequalities and environmental and economic decline of Northeastern Brazil. Rogers does much more than revisit Freyre: he puts people back into the equation, opening his book with a cultural analysis of sugar mill owners' understandings and treatment of land and labor, and moving to the contrasting perspectives of workers, agronomists, and state representatives from the colonial period through to the early twenty-first century. Inspired by important insights from historians of another commodity—bananas—Rogers emphasizes how nature and work (environmental and labor history) are entangled, and he argues that we need to study these at the local level to make sense of many changes in the realm of labor movements and state formation at the macro level [see: Steve Marquardt, "Pesticides, Parakeets, and Unions in the Costa Rican Banana Industry, 1938–1962," *Latin American Research Review* 37, no. 2 (2001): 33 and John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2004)]. More than a static backdrop, the environment should be considered a useful category of analysis alongside race, gender, and class dynamics.

The book uses Fernand Braudel's concept of the *longue durée* to demonstrate how planters and workers gradually cleared the forests in the river valleys of the now-ironically-named "forest zone" (*Zona da Mata*) of Northeastern Brazil over the course of four centuries. It was over this long period that plantation owners developed the perspective that the workers—first slaves, and then a combination of sharecroppers, dependent and part-time laborers—were essentially part of the landscape that they ruled over.

Rogers's close readings of interviews, folklore, and life stories allow him to convincingly tease out the counter-perspective of workers, who considered this same landscape as a form of captivity and dependence: "The apparent endlessness of cane fields—the tall, unvaryingly green canes marching over hills and up valleys—metaphorically evoked the reach of planter power" (96). Workers sought access to land for subsistence crops and took pride in being able to do a number of different jobs, but their access to land, work, and lodging remained contingent upon their relations with the boss. Parts two and three of the book show how sugar cane production had a more sudden and expansive impact on the ecology and environment for Pernambucans after planters set up railroads and steam-powered mills in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Mill owners made workers cut down more forests and plant cane on hillsides and in formerly remote areas to feed the new mills. Cane replaced subsistence crops while rivers and streams were re-routed, dried up, or filled with pollution, making fishing less viable as a means to supplement meager earnings as well. Northeastern mill owners tried to squeeze more out of workers, giving them less access to land and setting up new payment schemes based on tasks rather than time in order to try to compete with more modern producers in southern Brazil.

The populist and military regimes of the mid-to-late twentieth century introduced a new set of actors—with a third set of perspectives—to the *Zona da Mata*. Catholic and Communist labor organizers tapped into worker discontent related to the above-mentioned environment and work-regime changes. Representatives of a more interventionist state sought to keep Northeastern sugar and alcohol competitive, and to mediate between workers, farmers, and industrialists. Agronomists flocked to the region, driven by visions of agricultural modernization for the sugar and alcohol industries. State actors and agronomists "operated with the conviction that workers could be contained by bureaucracy and the agro-environment could be perfectly managed through improvement programs, statistical analyses, and maps" (204). In fact, the Green Revolution's fertilizers and irrigation projects wreaked havoc on the environment by contributing to pollution, droughts and floods while new labor laws pushed workers to demand their rights in the courts and in the political arena through massive strikes from 1979 until the end of the dictatorship era.

Most readers may have a sense of the Northeastern sugar industry's weight in colonial and imperial (nineteenth-century) Brazil and may know that the perceived threat of an agrarian revolution in the region in the 1960s contributed to the coup of 1964; fewer will realize how significant the Northeastern sugar worker strikes were in bringing an end to military rule some twenty years later. *The Deepest Wounds* brings to the fore the process of rural unionization that placed sugar workers side by side with the better-known

industrial workers of the South who followed Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva. Today, as oil prices continue to rise and depending on the source, we read about Brazil’s economic promise as an ethanol producer or about labor conditions analogous to slavery, Rogers’s book can teach us some important lessons about Brazil’s first ethanol boom, the Green Revolution’s impact on the environment, and the late-twentieth-century casualization of labor in the sugar industry.

Gillian McGillivray
York University