THE **ELEMENTARY FORMS** OF **CORRUPTION:**

MORAL IMAGINATION AND **POLITICAL CHANGE** IN **BRAZIL**

Aaron Ansell

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Hau Books are published by the
Society for Ethnographic Theory (SET)

www.haubooks.org

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HAU Books
Chicago

Cover: Cover Image by Daniele Meucci

Cover design: Daniele Meucci
Layout design: Deepak Sharma, Prepress Plus Technologies
Typesetting: Prepress Plus Technologies (www.prepressplustechnologies.com)

ISBN: 9781914363160 [paperback]
ISBN: 9781914363184 [e-book]
ISBN: 9781914363177 [PDF]
LCCN: 2025930431

Hau Books
Chicago Distribution Center
11030 S. Langley Ave.
Chicago, IL 60628
www.haubooks.org

Hau Books publications are marketed and distributed by
The University of Chicago Press.
www.press.uchicago.edu

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

To
Samuel and Oliver

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to those who facilitated this book.

I have enjoyed dialogue with members of my home Department of Religion & Culture at Virginia Tech, particularly Brian Britt, Ananda Abeysekara, and Matthew Gabriele, as well as support from a collaborative research grant from the Commonwealth of Virginia that assisted with the later stages of my research. My thanks as well to Michael Stamper, and his team at the Virginia Tech Library, for helping me to prepare the map that appears early in the book.

Several of my fellow Brazilianists helped me along the way. Maya Mayblin first encouraged me to write this book and gave me useful notes on the entanglement of religion and politics, something I will never illuminate as well as she does. Sean Mitchell and John Collins helped me frame the project for publication. John impressed on me the value of gritty ethnography. Sean, my consummate sparring partner, read the manuscript and saved me from publishing at least one embarrassing error—to remain locked in his heart forever! Jorge Mattar Villela and Ana Claudia Marques let me share my work with their colleagues and students at the State University of São Paulo. Flávio Eiró, Martijn Koster, Katerina Hatzikidi, and Andreza Souza provided venues where I gained useful feedback on my arguments about Brazil's "New Right," as did colleagues at the Brazil Seminar at Columbia University. Talks with Dain Borges honed my insights into the ethical sensibilities of *sertanejo* patronage.

Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta turned my attention from patronage to corruption by inviting me to participate in an Anthropology of

Corruption Symposium hosted by the Wenner Gren Foundation. Sylvia Tidey, whom I met at the Symposium, has helped me develop my ideas about corruption both through her own writings and through our co-hosted podcast, "Under the Table." I owe special thanks to Paul Kockelman and Michael Herzfeld for their comments on early drafts of my introduction. Donna Goldstein and Kristen Drybread both helped me develop the gradient degradation approach to corruption.

My friends and field assistants in Brazil have been extremely patient and generous with me since I began my work there. Among those in Piauí State's Workers' Party, Jascira Lima stands out as an acute interlocutor who never shies away from pressure-testing my ideas and integrity. I also benefited from the work of several field assistants in "Passarinho" Municipality whom I will mention by first name only for reasons of confidentiality: Jorge, Edson, Adenisio, Arnaldo, and Natália. I ask the many others from the region who facilitated my research to forgive me for not mentioning them. They are too numerous to count.

At Hau Books, my editor Erik Baehre, expressed confidence in the project from the beginning, guided my interpretation of my reviewers' comments (themselves excellent), and helped me understand the relation between corruption and social change. I am also grateful to Deborah Durham for her initial interest in the project, as well as the wonderful artist, Daniele Meucci, who designed the book's cover image.

As I wrote this book, tragedy struck two of my interlocutors. Mike Valentine continued to give me advice and support even as he grieved the sudden passing of his dear son, Levi. Sid Greenfield commented on several chapters and continued our dialogues despite losing his beloved Ellie. I am honored to continue Sid's legacy—a career dedicated to the empathetic study of those strategies that disadvantaged Brazilians use to find dignity in the world.

My mother, Batya, read and helped make the book more accessible to non-specialists. My brother, Phil, provided keen guidance on the book's introduction. My wife, Sabrina, and our sons, Samuel and Oliver, patiently endured my absorption in this project and showed true excitement at the prospect of its conclusion.

It was from the rind of one apple tasted
that knowledge of good and evil,
as two twins cleaving together,
leapt into the world.
—John Milton

Introduction

I was sleeping with my head against the bus window when the ticket collector tapped me on the shoulder. I really didn't want to interact with anyone. Exhausted and hungover from a night in the bohemian quarter of Teresina, the capital city of Piauí State, I was getting nauseous from the unpaved roads that had been bouncing me from there to the dry scrublands, what Brazilians call the *sertão* (badlands[1]). My field site lay ahead, a small municipality called "Passarinho." Most of the 5000 or so residents there lived without electricity or running water and farmed corn and beans on rainfed, drought-afflicted farms. They jokingly called their municipality "a hole in nowhere" and seemed amused that an urbane North American anthropologist had come to live there the year before, in 2003. "Aaron, it's you!" The ticket collector recognized me. It was Raimundo, a young, Afro-Brazilian evangelical from Passarinho's town hub. He took the empty seat beside me. I'm ashamed of what happened next, which went something like this:

Raimundo: Aaron, I'm glad you're back.
Aaron: Thanks. I'm happy to get back to my research in Passarinho.
(*A few seconds pass*.)

1. Unless otherwise specified, I have translated all written and oral (Brazilian) Portuguese text to English myself. Any errors in this regard are entirely my own. I have also employed pseudonyms and other anonymizing devices to protect the confidentiality of my field consultants.

Raimundo: I know Rodrigo (the mayor) disappointed you, but he is a good man.
Aaron: He is corrupt (*corrupto*).

I should never have said that. I had no direct evidence for the charge, and anyway, anthropologists are not supposed to condemn the people we study, much less judge them by Western ethical standards and categories of malfeasance such as "corruption." But Raimundo remained unfazed.

Raimundo: It is true he has his defects. But when mother got sick last year, he was present for us. Even living in Princesa [the neighboring town], he is always by our side, giving strength (*força*) to us in our hour of need.

Raimundo fully understood the Western concept of corruption (*corrupção* in Portuguese) that I had rudely deployed against his mayor. He knew the term referenced things such as bribery and embezzlement, kickbacks and confidence scams. He also knew that others had accused Rodrigo of such things—both his *sertanejo* neighbors and the progressive government officials from Teresina and Brasília who had taken an interest in his municipality during the last year, the year "Lula" (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) was elected president.

While Raimundo understood the Western concept of corruption, he did not care to apply it to Rodrigo. Instead, Raimundo evaluated the mayor's merits based on how his "presence" (*presença*) was felt in people's lives. As a family man (*pai de família*, lit. "family father"), it was Rodrigo's duty to channel God's blessings into the lives of his children, and he could do something similar among his municipality's inhabitants, his metaphorical children. He could dedicate every ounce of his energy to those who were loyal to him. In Raimundo's way of seeing things, corruption mainly referred not to bribery or embezzlement but to a fatherly politician's absence (*ausência*) from the lives of his dependents. And that was most certainly not the case for Rodrigo.

This book is about the politics of corruption and corruption accusations. Focusing on corruption provides a useful window onto Brazilian political culture. One reason for this is that Brazilian anticorruption discourse has risen to the fore during the last twenty years. A second, more general reason is that observing transgressive behavior makes visible the coercive power of what Émile Durkheim called "the rules." These rules are usually imperceptible because we are so deeply conditioned by them

that they seem indistinguishable from our own impulses. They become noticeable "as soon as I try to resist. If I attempt to violate the rules … they react against me … or they cause me to pay the penalty" (1982: 51). A still more radical interpretation of Durkheim's claim would hold that these norms do not preexist their transgression, but are rather reflexively constituted by their transgression. Accordingly, people begin with an "*underdetermined* moral imaginary [that] condemnations of corruption" help to elaborate (Muir and Gupta 2018: S8, my emphasis). When we accuse someone of corruption, we do more than allude to a preexisting norm; we posit, depict, expand or refashion our norms. It follows from this that by tracking people's shifting orientations to corruption we can tell the story of their evolving moral imagination.

Sertanejos' understandings of corruption have changed considerably since my bus-ride encounter with Raimundo. This book is an ethnographic history of those changes, which began in the mid-twentieth century and took several turns since. I begin my account in earnest in 2003 and end it in 2022. As I relate that history, I address a more general question: Why do people change their understandings of corruption, and why might one group of people absorb and identify with another group's ideas about corruption?

I assume at the outset that what we mean by "corruption" is not always clear. Anthropologists have noted that corruption sometimes appears to be a secular-legal category, while at other times, the term seems like the "secular avatar" of a more religious take on the world (Anders and Nuitjen 2007: 1). One such argument goes that political corruption is a version of what Mary Douglas (1966) called "secular defilement," the idea that our "pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse cherished classifications" (36–7, quoted in Bratsis 2003: 15). Indeed, one of corruption's most common definitions, "the misappropriation of public resources for private gain" (Fukuyama 2014: 83), implies no condemnation of either public or private interest, but only insists that both should "stay in their proper place" (Bratsis 2003: 15; and see Shore and Haller 2005: 5). The observation that corruption often feels like spiritual contamination, that it offends our moral hygiene, constitutes a crucial disciplinary insight too often overlooked by scholars outside anthropology. But the distinction between public and private interests is not everywhere regarded as the most "cherished classification." It was certainly not central to Raimundo's sense of political morality. Therefore, a transcultural analysis of corruption requires a more open, more neutral framework for modeling how people use money and

other resources in ways that violate sacred distinctions and thus "erode the very grounds of sociality" (Muir 2021: 99).

My approach to corruption begins with the question of which distinctions are central to a society's cherished representations of itself, as well as central to the moral flow of its currencies. As a provisional definition, we might understand corruption as the transgressive rerouting of the proper flow of moral currencies in ways that erode the categorical distinctions sacred to a given society. I build toward a more thorough definition later in this introduction, one that I hope will help me to study the relationship between corruption and politics in a way that is open to cultural and historical contingencies.

I need such a theoretical lens in order to track the variety of corruption discourses (often accusatory) that abound in the *sertanejo* region of Piauí State and Brazil as a whole. Between 2003 and 2022, Brazil saw a flurry of corruption talk and numerous corruption scandals and sting operations. Hundreds of politicians were impeached and/or convicted of corruption-related offenses. On the one hand, anti-corruption "lawfare" (using the courts to disqualify political opponents) became a vehicle for virulent Left-Right polarization. On the other hand, Left- and Right-wing politicians stood together on all fours in fear of the anti-corruption crusaders among them who espoused legislation with actual teeth. *Sertanejos*, for their part, were sickened by the widespread "robbery" (*robaleira*) among politicians at the national level but were often willing to excuse the shenanigans of individual politicians whom they admired. They seemed to use the very term *corrupção* in ways that did not track with the reportage of the major media outlets. They were also quick to denounce their own local (municipal) politics as "dirty" (*sujo*). Indeed, the *sertão* (and the *nordeste* [Northeast]) is notorious for its longstanding culture of illicit political patronage. But what *sertanejos* meant by "dirty" or "corrupt" and what the journalists and urban middle classes meant by those terms never seemed to overlap completely or achieve semantic stability. Knowing that a neat semantic parsing of terms is always a fool's errand, I nonetheless want to distinguish the different moral impulses undergirding different senses of "corruption," impulses that map to particular ways of viewing one's own group, of legitimating power, of guiding the maturation of one's children, and so forth. These moral impulses have been very much in flux in the *sertão*, and *sertanejo* people have come to see corruption, and indeed themselves, in new ways during this roughly twenty-year period. This is the place where I situate my analysis of the various and shifting ideas about corruption on offer in Brazil today.

The Setting

The story I tell in this book is set at the municipal scale of social life in rural Piauí State, though through this prism I hope to show larger-scale processes (state, national, and international) at work. Passarinho Municipality fits within two, partially overlapping territorial categories, the *nordeste* (Northeast) and the *sertão* (badlands). The Northeast refers to one of Brazil's five official regions that were formally established during the early-twentieth century as part of a diffuse nation-building project. Literary and government discourses simplified the cultural and environmental features of each region to encourage Brazilians to celebrate their nation's internal diversity. The Northeast was the hub of Brazil's colonial sugar economy and the port of entry for enslaved Africans forced to work in the sugar mills. Sugar production was slow to mechanize and so the Northeast became known for its economic backwardness and for a certain quaint traditionalism. *Nordestinos* were celebrated as an honest, wizened, and hospitable people, but also demeaned for their allegedly atavistic "elements such as banditry, messianism, and traditional clientelist" [aka patronage] politics (Albuquerque Jr. [1999] 2014: 23). Despite its many urban areas, the Northeast assumed a rural connotation in Brazilian national culture in contrast to the country's urban-associated, "unsentimentally modern" Southeast, especially "São Paulo [that] appeared the cradle of a proper … 'civilized, progressive and developmentalist' nation" (Albuquerque Jr. [1999] 2014: 19). Many *nordestinos* continue to migrate to São Paulo (and other southern cities) looking for work. There they face discrimination from urbanites who regard them as unlettered, unruly, and dangerous hicks (Pessar 2005; Dent 2009; Blake 2011; Albuquerque, Jr. [1999] 2014).

The *sertão* is sometimes conflated with the *nordeste* in the Brazilian imagination because this territory is mostly located in the interior hinterlands of the northeastern states. But the term "*sertão*" (originally a surname) refers to an ecological niche that Brazilian legislators in 1946 demarcated as the "drought polygon," an area of low rainfall and semi-arid shrubland encompassing roughly 780,000 square kilometers. During the heyday of the northeastern sugar economy, the *sertão* was the "corral and slaughterhouse" that supplied beef and leather goods to the sugar plantations and coastal city dwellers. It was the *sertão*'s periodic droughts that drove much of the migration from the Northeast to Brazil's South and southeastern cities. Thus, the figure of the drought-afflicted *sertanejo*

became the prototype of the *nordestino* migrant.[2] Because of the conflation and pejoration surrounding these terms, most ethnographers studying this part of Brazil avoid using them to designate their research subjects (Villela 2020). I use the term *sertanejos* because the people I came to know in Piauí State had proudly appropriated the *sertanejo* identity, fashioning it into a perch from which they could view and critique national events.

Piauí State is usually regarded as one of the poorest and most rural in the Northeast. Unlike its neighbors, it is almost entirely landlocked *sertão*. With a mere two kilometers of coastline and only a meager coastal plain amenable to thirsty crops, Piauí never developed a significant sugar economy or tourist sector (Santos 1980: 41). It remains, as many say, the state that Brazil forgot. I would add that it is the state that Brazilians remember that they have forgotten, the place that epitomizes the nation's defining failure to ameliorate the human suffering at its core. This may be one reason President Lula initiated his anti-poverty programs in Piauí. If the sins of centuries of government neglect could be redeemed there, perhaps they could be redeemed for the nation as a whole.

The Project of the Book

This book is an ethnographic history of *sertanejo* political culture organized into four "moments." The first moment is characterized by the norms of political patronage, that is, a politics that views good leaders (mainly men) as generous and attentive father figures, a politics that stretches

2. The stereotypes of the *nordestino* arguably derive from those of the *sertanejo*. The latter were famously codified by the journalist, Euclides da Cunha, who wrote poignantly of the central government's violent reaction to a *sertanejo* insurrection in the northeastern state of Bahia between 1893 and 1897. Euclides da Cunha laments that, "(c)aught up in the sweep of modern ideas, we abruptly mounted the ladder, leaving behind us, in their centuries-old semidarkness a third of our people in the heart of our country … blind copyists that we were … we merely succeeded in deepening the contrast between our mode of life and that of our own native sons" ([1902] 1944: 161). Euclides da Da Cunha's account of the massacre at Canudos was published as a book, *Os Sertões*, that would enshrine elite urban Brazilians' efforts to establish their own modern bona fides through invidious comparison with their nation's internal "other." The book was later heralded as the "bible of Brazilian nationality."

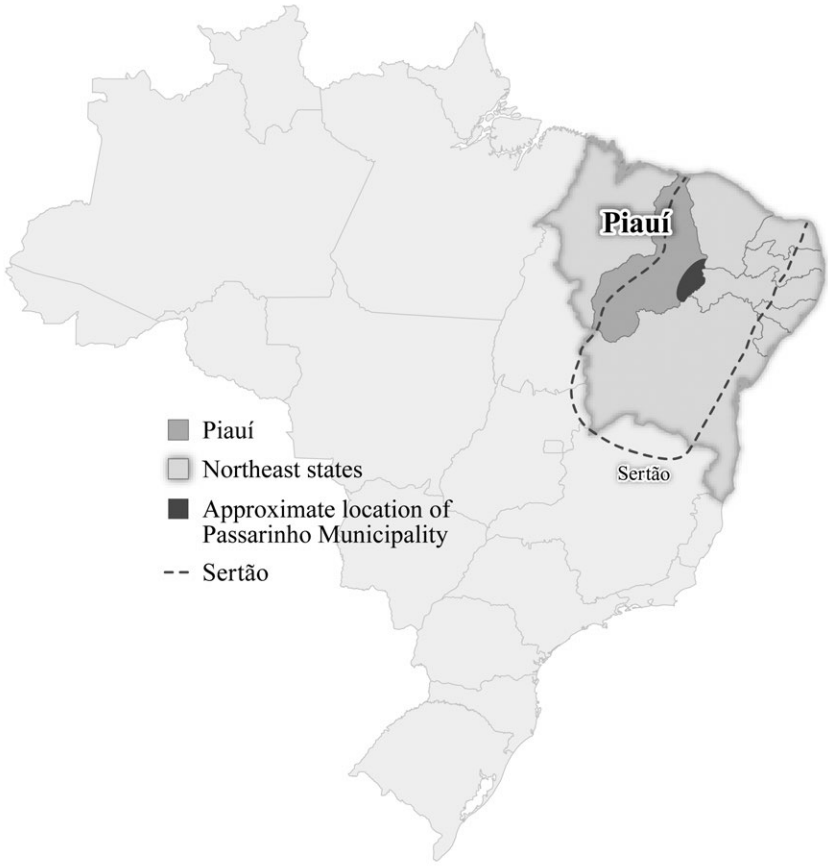

Figure 1. Map of Brazil Indicating the Position of the *Sertão*, the Northeast, Piauí State, and the Approximate Position of Passarinho Municipality (source: http//:freevectormaps.com/brazil/BR-EPS-01-0002?ref=atr).

back to the colonial era and that continues into the present (Chapter One). The second moment began during the mid-twentieth century, when some *sertanejos* classified patronage itself as a form of corruption and espoused a new, more egalitarian politics of friendship, what I call "amicopolitics" (Chapter Two). The third moment began during Brazil's redemocratization during the 1980s, following two decades of military dictatorship (1964–85). The avatars of this third moment regarded both patronage and amicopolitics as forms of corruption in the modern sense of a "misappropriation of public resources for private gain." This moment peaked during the administration of the progressive Workers'

Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, hereafter "PT") from 2003 to 2016 that implemented massive, and generally successful, anti-poverty policies. While implementing these policies, front-line PT officials imparted to the *sertanejo* population a model of corruption that emphasized universal rights, grass-roots insurgency, and the expansion of resource streams to include both political rivals and certain long-neglected populations, e.g. rural Afro-Brazilians (Chapter Three).

Then, the fourth moment happened. It began after my main field stint had ended. Brazil had entered an economic and political crisis. Many PT leaders (Lula included) fell from grace following a series of kickback and bribery scandals. A new political force arose. The so-called "New Right" combined religious conservatism and heavy-handed security politics, a Christian-authoritarian alliance of the "Bible and the bullet" (*a bíblia e a bala*). It was simultaneously an elite and a populist movement, Brazil's answer to what in the United States is called the "Alt Right," the movement associated with President Donald Trump. Leading the New Right was the former military captain, Jair Bolsonaro, who fashioned himself as the "Tropical Trump." Indeed, Bolsonaro was a key figure in the world's new cast of authoritarian populists, joining the likes of Trump, Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in The Philippines, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and many others. Bolsonaro served one term as president from 2018 to 2022 during which he railed against the PT's "communism" and mobilized ideas about corruption that conflated antipoverty policy with an attack on the cherished heteropatriarchal family (Chapter Four).

The moral sensibilities associated with each of these four moments were never fully replaced by their successors. Rather, each emerging set of norms came to live alongside its predecessors, creating an environment of increasing ethical pluralism where the discourses of each ethical regime blurred into one another (Gupta 1995). Figure 2 presents a timeline for these four moments that depicts the endurance of the earlier moments into the later ones, as well as some significant national events that I will discuss throughout the book.

Because the old norms live alongside the new ones, this book is also an ethnography of present-day ethical pluralism in today's *sertão*. PT liberalism and New Right authoritarianism currently exist as rival moral formations not only to one another, but to the traditional ethics of *sertanejo* patronage and its local cousin (and rival), amicopolitics. The ideas of the national Left and the Right both push in their own way against the personalism central to patronage and amicopolitics. *Sertanejos* regard these cosmopolitan critiques of their local "political game"—a game they

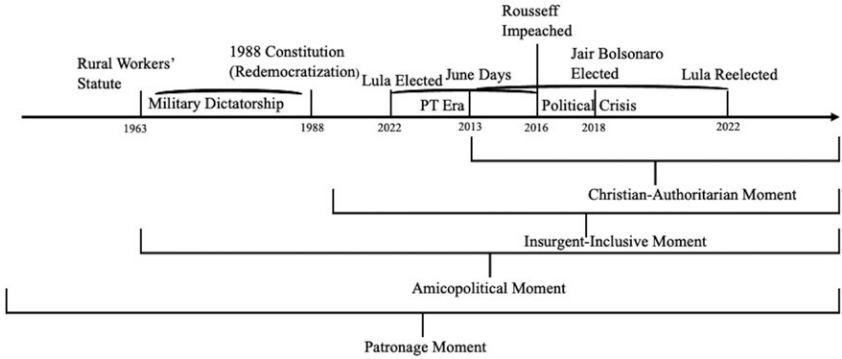

Figure 2. Timeline of Four Political Moments in Southeast Piauí State.

often call "dirty"—as both alluring and threatening (see Perutti 2022: 194–201). These critiques are alluring because they chime with the local grievance that personalist politicians often disappear when people need them most; they are threatening because it is the values of patronage and friendship that demand of local leaders that they "feed" their supporters (whether through policies or their own wallets) instead of "eating" wealth themselves (Piliavsky 2020: 29; Olivier de Sardan 1999).

This book therefore confirms and elaborates an important finding documented by other anthropologists studying corruption, which is that patronage ethics continue to exert a moral pull on people who otherwise hope to transcend personalism in the name of universal rights and administrative impartiality. Studying anti-corruption discourse in Indonesia, Sylvia Tidey (2023) finds that bureaucrats strive to do "the right thing" (impartially distribute resources) but feel bound to the patronage ethics of "care" for kin. Similarly, Daniel Jordan Smith shows how ordinary Nigerians have come to see patronage both as a form of corruption that holds back progress and as a useful "buffer against the capriciousness of the state" (2007: 19). Nigerians are, in fact, nostalgic for the "familiar mechanisms of reciprocity" associated with patronage (2007: 19), mechanisms that they counterpose to more impersonal, market-oriented forms of corruption (called "419") committed "without care for … obligations to others" (2007: 223).

These ethnographic insights suggest that the moral imagination of *sertanejo* patronage can serve as a critical vantage point from which people can view the foolishness of modern bureaucracy, including its anti-corruption measures. More than anyone, Michael Herzfeld has shown how such bureaucracies disavow patronage principles (loyalty, reciprocity,

etc.) while secretly relying on them to fortify national solidarity (Herzfeld 1992, 1996, 2022). It is because patronage is derided as atavistic corruption that it binds unruly citizens to one another in a mischievous "fellowship of the flawed" (Herzfeld 2018: 46). Thus, the critique of patronage can increase the feeling of national authenticity among those who participate in its underground rites. They become the first to risk life and limb in defense of the homeland.

Herzfeld's insight explains the ambivalence that Brazil's political Left and Right both show towards the *sertanejo* heartland, "the vigorous core of our nationality" (Cunha [1902] 1944; and see Blake 2011). Both the progressive and reactionary faces of Brazilian modernity claim to oppose the "backward" political culture of the *sertão*, yet both seek *sertanejo* endorsement. Certainly, Lula and Bolsonaro alike posed for photos wearing the leather cowboy hats and other traditional accessories associated with the region. Each wanted to appear the obvious heir to the nation's authentic lifeblood, even as they promised to clean up the dirty politics of the *sertão* and to enlighten (*esclarecer*) its "centuries-old semidarkness" (Cunha [1902] 1944: 61).

Corruption as an Object of Ethnographic Study

While practices of corruption abound in my account, I am less concerned with these first-order facts (bribery, embezzlement, kickbacks, etc.) than with the second-order facts concerning people's reactions to these infractions. I agree with Cris Shore and Dieter Haller (2005) that what makes corruption interesting "is not so much the 'reality' of its existence as the fact that it is widely believed to exist, the complex narratives that enfold it, and the new relationships … that those narratives create" (6). I do not mean to minimize the harms actual corruption has inflicted on people in Brazil and elsewhere in the world. Certainly, the 2015 leaks of the Panama Papers revealed how the richest in the hemisphere hid their money, defrauded innocents, and avoided taxes, and how the regulatory environment was too weak to stop them (Goldstein and Drybread 2018). But as bad as all that is, the reactions against corruption, including some "good governance" measures advocated by the United Nations, Transparency International, and other multilateral agencies, have had unintended consequences for many democracies. As it turns out, if you can frame a political adversary as corrupt, you can take them out of the game without ever having to

critique their policies. My fellow anthropologists have also shown that anti-corruption measures can fuel violent political purges (Nugent 2018), ruin popular confidence in states whose social services may be improving (Parry 2000), render elite power networks more impermeable (Osburg 2018), highlight the futility of legal remedies to kickbacks (Sharma 2018), insulate "nonmafioso" colluders who hold elected office (Schneider 2018), and replace democratic competition with reciprocal witch-hunting (Musaraj 2020). Because corruption provokes such moral disgust and panic, "the ability for the public's perspective to be perverted and manipulated with regard to corruption is somewhat high" (Goldstein and Drybread 2018: 300). All of this highlights the importance of studying corruption at the level of social perception and (over)reaction, attending to the way people define corruption and rouse one another to battle against it.

I discuss perceptions of corruption as "cultural models" (DeAndrade 1987), or better, "*folk* models" (Silverstein 2006). A model is just a set of ideas that simplifies some complex aspect of our world and guides our actions toward it. And "folk" refers here not to a quaint or provincial society but to the categories residing in the minds of *any* people we study. Thus, the Western definition of corruption ("the misappropriation of public resources for private gain"), amounts to just another folk model, a model native to Western culture. Anthropologists distinguish such culture-internal ("emic") folk models from the culture-external, analytic ("etic") models that we sometimes use to guide our arguments, especially when we argue in transcultural terms. To avoid confusion, I reserve the term "model" for the way Brazilians discuss moral structures and their corruption. When referencing my own analytic categories, I use the term "framework."

My analytic framework links folk models of corruption to the imagination of proper currency distribution. By linking corruption to such norms, I participate in the "ethical turn" in cultural anthropology. If one asks of the anthropologist "Where do we find ethics in culture?" the answer one typically gets is "Not just in sacred texts, codes of law, or juridical institutions." Ethics are not restricted to—indeed, do not even originate from—a distinct domain of culture; "at heart ethics is not a discrete phenomenon [but one that is] immanent to human speech and action" (Lambek 2015: 16). Ethics mainly reside in the criteria we follow when evaluating one another's behavior (Lambek 2015: 16). These criteria are often highly implicit and unexamined, existing at the level of our visceral reactions (Haidt 2012). We simply regard some ways of talking

and acting as "cringy" (in today's parlance), and we may come to associate these with certain social stereotypes. We then elaborate styles and personas that distance us from the cringy ones. Our mimicry of these styles and personas "produce[s] the effect of … a certain ethical inflection" in our own behavior (Keane 2016: 155). We then develop modes of talking and listening that attune us to certain personas, styles, voices, and bodily gestures that we associate with virtue or vice (e.g., Hirschkind 2006; Agha 2011; Lempert 2012). Granted, it's not all so implicit. Most social groups engage in some kind of explicit ethical "objectification" (as Webb Keane calls it), generating codified laws or scriptures or just uttering ordinary words and phrases that convey moral judgments directly (Keane 2016: 64–5). As such, my analyses of *sertanejo* folk models of corruption involves attention to *sertanejos*' implicit as well as explicit moral evaluations.

The Ethnographer's Positioning

My data come from my main 22-month (2003–2005) field stint, as well as subsequent fieldwork that I conducted during multiple, month-long return trips to Passarinho (and the neighboring municipality, Princesa) between 2010 and 2015. I first entered the region as an American doctoral student. I had done a summer of Portuguese language training in Rio de Janeiro (in 2001) where, already interested in leftist politics, I came under the wing of the General Secretary of the PT (state level). This man educated me in Brazilian political history and informed me that Lula's victory in the upcoming presidential elections of 2002 was inevitable. I was enamored by Lula's biography—a child-migrant from the Northeast turned working-class union leader who became an avid opponent of Brazil's military dictatorship and then a three-time candidate for the presidency. I wanted to know what sort of policies Lula, after finally winning the presidential election, would actually implement to help the country's poorest people. The answer came soon enough: President Lula would fight hunger through a massive anti-poverty program ("Zero Hunger") that his administration would pilot in the most economically depressed municipalities of Piauí State (then run by a PT governor). I managed to get research funding to live in those municipalities so I could study the Zero Hunger program's roll-out among the rural poor. My main conclusion was that the PT administration used its anti-poverty measures to dismantle the folk culture of patron-client politics and

instill the norms of democratic citizenship, an argument that I return to in this book (Ansell 2014).

Because I entered Passarinho with the blessing of the PT administration and because I dialogued amicably with its front-line officials, residents of Passarinho often considered me an extension of the PT state. They used me as an intermediary to pass information and requests to the officials overseeing Zero Hunger. When the municipal elections occurred in 2004, many in Passarinho came to identify me with the local opposition that, for a time, had allied with the PT at the state and national levels. This gave me a ready-made group of friends (the opposition coalition) and enemies (the mayor's incumbent coalition), despite my insistence on my neutrality vis-à-vis municipal electoral politics. Ordinary farmers allied with the opposition would ask me to transmit various requests for favors to that coalition's wealthy leader, casting me in the role of a local political broker, not unlike the role I played vis-à-vis the PT officials. Thus, my position was contradictory: I became a kind of low-level patron even as I supported a policy that sought to end patronage. From this perspective, I was a corrupting element of the PT-led Zero Hunger program. My friends in the PT state government perceived my conflicted position clearly. It was a situation most had experienced themselves in their relationships with the rural populations they engaged during their policy-implementing forays from the capital to the *sertão*. They treated me with bemused compassion and abundant patience.

This dynamic persisted throughout my subsequent trips to Passarinho during my summer breaks from my university jobs. I would visit for about four weeks every other year through 2015 (when my first son was born). I intended to return to study local residents' reception of the national scandal ("Operation Car Wash") that exposed massive corruption in the PT government and then later to study local perceptions of the Bolsonaro administration. But the COVID-19 pandemic happened, and travel became difficult. To study the political shifts between 2016 and 2020, I resorted to remote surveys, social media engagement, and one-on-one conversations by trading audio files via WhatsApp. The reader will notice that Chapter Four, where I address the corruption models that arose during this period, is more ethnographically "thin" than the others.

Before outlining this book's chapters any further, let me elaborate the framework I use to study the folk models of corruption that were (and still are) coexisting in Brazil's *sertão*.

Corruption as the Degradation of a Sacred Gradient

In positing a transcultural framework for studying corruption, I am admittedly out of step with many anthropologists who are skeptical of efforts to establish any general, analytic ("etic") model of corruption. Some of us have argued that corruption is fundamentally "transgressive in its capacity to elide definition," or that its "shadowy fields of activity … defy precise categorization" (Muir and Gupta 2018: S5; Pardo 2004: 1). A more pointed version of this argument holds that we should not define the term at a transcultural level because its "negative bias and its clearly Western and Christian moral inflections are nowhere so clearly indicated as in the various 'corruption measures' whereby powerful or influential Western countries now judge everyone else" (Herzfeld 2018: 43).

From this relativist perspective, corruption is simply not a transcultural phenomenon. Ethnographers might see evidence of local preoccupations with corruption in non-Western cultures, but those preoccupations evince what Rolph Trouillot calls a "North Atlantic universal," a pseudo-universal category that appears "native" to other cultural settings only because Western norms have already found their way to such places (Trouillot 2003: 23; quoted in Muir and Gupta 2018: S8). As a category, corruption's provincially European origins become apparent once we recognize that it refers to practices that violate the "necessarily abstract form of political subjectivity" (Muir and Gupta 2018: S12) that emerged during the European Enlightenment. This abstract, generic subjectivity is ensconced in the West's cherished distinction between the public and the private spheres. In contrast, Western thought "renders illegitimate the very notion of particularistic appropriation and non-universal claims," claims about interpersonal loyalty, reciprocity, and love that make up most of human sociality (Muir and Gupta 2018: S12). This is why patronage and nepotism are often tolerated. They constitute an all-too-human "eruption of sociality into governance" (Piliavsky 2014: 29). Thus, to impute the category of corruption to non-Western peoples is an act of "facile and misleading nominalism," an attribution of some essential human trait where none exists (Muir and Gupta 2018: S8). The alternative recommended by advocates of this position is to understand our object of study as a neocolonial category on-the-move and in conversation with non-Western norms, what Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta aptly call "the social life of corruption."

I agree that we should trace the movement of the Western corruption model to see how people elsewhere alloy it with their preexisting norms

and ideas of malfeasance. Indeed, that is part of my project in the second half of this book.

But many anthropologists are still haunted by the intuition that there are strong parallels between the Western model of corruption and certain models of malfeasance in other societies. Sarah Muir implies as much when she draws on Nancy Munn's (1986) ideas about witchcraft in New Guinea to help her understand corruption in Argentina. Accordingly, both witchcraft and corruption "named a mode of radical negativity … the intuition that (people) harbored within themselves an uncontrollable force, at once foreign and yet deeply familiar, that threatened to erode the very grounds of sociality" (Muir 2021: 99; and see Blundo 2007). Corruption discourses also resemble witchcraft accusations in their frequent reference to flowing currencies (money, bodily fluids, etc.) that the accused is said to reroute improperly. In one classical account of witchcraft in Africa, the witch steals some of their victim's soul and shares it with other witches in "ghoulish feasts" (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976: 14). And the parallel extends beyond witchcraft; medieval accusations of Jewish blood libel alleged the murder of Christian children to "drink their blood in order to eliminate or alleviate the symptoms of Jewish male menstruation" (Resnick 2000: 244). I think these parallels suggest a common human worry about certain transgressions that threaten not only valued persons (non-witches, Christian children, etc.), but the morally charged distinctions that constitute "the very grounds of sociality." These parallels highlight the need for a broader framework for studying such transgressions.

As a first step towards such a framework I reaffirm Durkheim's foundational claim that some things are "sacred" in the sense that they help a group to experience itself as a whole. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 1995), Durkheim argues that the sacred "is devoted entirely to the ideals to which the cult is addressed" as a collectivity, in contrast to those ("profane") things that are "entirely for ourselves [as individuals] and our sensuous interests … our egoism" (321). I don't suggest we take this sacred/profane distinction at face value. Durkheim's critics are right to note that he wrongly generalizes the distinctly Western "conflict between the (egoistic) inclinations of the individual, and the moral commands which society enjoins upon him" (Giddens 1971: 224). But one can salvage Durkheim's understanding of the sacred—that which is devoted to the ideals of the collectivity—by regrounding this insight on one of Durkheim's unstated premises. The premise, elucidated by Maurice Bloch, is that every society must contend with the

"indeterminacy concerning the physical boundaries of individuals," that is, with the fact that we continually "go in and out of each other's bodies," not just through birth and sex but through symbolic representations that we impart to one another (Bloch [2007] 2015: 288, 287). This implies that individuals within a group shade into one another with respect to any feature, that they are positioned along gradients that differentiate them from one another, not in absolute terms but by degree. And to the extent that these graded differences are collectively understood and morally charged, they may well guide the distribution of wealth and other meaningful currencies. In sum, the neo-Durkheimian approach I build from takes morally charged gradients to be a central feature of a group's self-understanding.

Here, the term "gradient" refers to "the way qualities vary in their intensity over space and time, and the ways such variations relate to causal processes" (Kockelman 2016: 390). In his pioneering work theorizing the social relevance of gradients, Paul Kockelman lays out the way gradients organize certain force fields that direct the flow of objects:

> just as an altitude gradient specifies a force field which may channel the flow of rocks, dirt, and debris along certain paths, a temperature gradient specifies a force field which may channel the flow of heat along certain paths, and a concentration gradient specifies a force field which may channel the flow of air (and other gases) along certain paths. (2016: 409)

Kockelman's anthropology highlights more social gradients: Two friends meet. One is "well-dressed" while the other is "exceedingly well-dressed." Shame flows across the gradient of fanciness towards the one who is (only) well-dressed, incentivizing her to dress better next time, to dress more like her friend, to reduce the graded distinction between them (2016: 402). Thus, gradients have a self-cancelling dimension (2016: 410). Action is needed to sustain them, to prop them up in the face of this constant self-cancellation.

This self-cancelling tendency is evident in the daily blessings *sertanejos* pass along from senior to junior kin. Such blessings presuppose a gradient organized by the principle of divinely sanctioned gerontocracy; the old are closer to God and heaven. Blessings flow across that gradient from the old to the young, reducing the difference in their divine grace so that the young can safely grow to replace the old. The self-cancelling tendency of this gradient is part and parcel of social reproduction, but so

too is the continued propping up of the gradient. To maintain the gradient, the greater divinity of the senior kinsperson over the junior must be affirmed to the same degree that their conferral of blessing reduces the spiritual distance between them. Thus, *sertanejos* do not just request a blessing from their seniors when they greet them afresh each day; they lower their bodies when making this request. They enact their subordinate status such that their request can be seen as a conferral of respect on the senior, so they can buttress the gradient from below. (Indeed, to lower oneself is to assume the very posture of bearing a load.) Respect and blessing function as currencies that flow in opposing directions and their complementary flow sustains the gradient at a certain equilibrium.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss the gradient-sustaining dynamic implicit in each of the four moments of the *sertão*'s evolving political culture, as well as the stereotypical transgressions against these gradients. I compare these four gradients using the terms "principle" and "currency." By principle, I mean the moral postures that people should adopt in order to make themselves worthy of belonging within a community. Each of the normative moments that I analyze in this book's chapters revolves around a specific, gradient-defining principle embodied as a personal virtue, such as the attentive presence of a good patronal politician, or the egalitarian unity of a politician-friend, or the social inclusion of a citizen-leader, or the industrious discipline of a muscular Christian father. People embody the principles that direct the flow of key currencies in moral ways. These currencies include cash, jobs, medical care, development projects, leniency before the law, and so forth—all of which *sertanejos* group together under general headings. A good patron and a good political friend distribute some of their own *força* (vitality) to others. An inclusive leader and a Christian father distribute *direitos* (rights) to others. Each currency is its gradient's main virtue figured in alienable, sharable, circulatable form. They are "social" currencies in that they contain the spirit of the giver in the gift (Mauss [1950] 2015) and the spirit of the social whole in the giver (Durkheim [1912] 1995).

It is confusing that *sertanejos* use the same terms to refer to currencies that belong to multiple gradients: *força* for patronage/amicopolitics and *direitos* for insurgent-inclusion/Christian authoritarianism. But this is hardly accidental. While patronage and amicopolitics stand opposed in some regards—the former is hierarchical, the latter is egalitarian—they share a traditional cosmology that attributes more world-making power to some people than others. Similarly, while Brazil's PT-led Left and its New Right oppose one another—the former valorizes minorities, the

latter valorizes majorities—they share a modernist cosmology that attributes world-using prerogative equally to all citizens.

For each gradient, *sertanejos* identify prototypical transgressions that disrupt the proper flow of those currencies. They often refer to these with the cognate term *corrupção*, or they may use other categories of malfeasance, for example *desvio de recurso* (resource rerouting), *covardia* (jealous, group-destroying cowardice), *moleza* (softness, renunciation of agency), etc., which pertain to the wrongful rerouting of these flows by agents who divert them away from their proper destination, who staunch them up, or who receive them without exerting the requisite opposing force field (e.g. respect)—all of which undermine the gradient and increase social entropy ("anomie" for Durkheim). Such is the agency of a "parasite" that "takes without giving; that which lives on by living off; that which upgrades itself by downgrading others" (Kockelman 2016: 411). I take this to be corruption at its most elemental: *the degradation of a sacred gradient through the transgressive rechanneling of a social currency.*

One common theme I develop throughout my history of these four moments is that each successive gradient imagines itself as a revolutionary retort to its predecessor. Each inverts a key element of its predecessor. Within the framework advanced here, these inversions are essentially acts of corruption that found a new gradient based on different (indeed opposing) principles. And each act of foundational corruption paints the distributional logic of its predecessor as corrupt. In the revolutionary milieu, one gradient's normal currency flow is, for the other, the very essence of corruption. Seen in this way, corruption is one way of putting radical critique into practice.

The following account of *sertanejo* political dynamics is full of acts of corruption that implicitly critique existing moral gradients and inaugurate new gradients based on opposing principles. Prior to the PT's arrival in the *sertão*, there was already a slow-motion revolutionary inversion of patronage associated with the rise of amicopolitics. Junior politicians were fed up with self-aggrandizing seniors, so they sought to found new coalitions based on more egalitarian relations. Amicopolitics nonetheless preserved the personalist character of patronage, the idea that a good leader shares some of their *força* (vitality) with loyal followers. This personalism was subsequently assaulted by the PT's revolutionary call for leaders to set aside personal alliances and distribute state resources more inclusively, to recognize the rights of their rivals and other excluded minorities. Later, Jair Bolsonaro and his ilk recast the PT's principle of inclusion as a form of corruption and inaugurated a reverse distributive

logic that excluded everyone but the "good citizens" who sustained the heteropatriarchal family.

There is nothing exotic about this. Aren't we all residents of worlds founded on corruption? The biblical forefather, Isaac, had twin sons. Esau, the manly and hirsute hunter, was born first and so was entitled to the birthright. But the more domestic Jacob, beloved by his mother, tricked his blind father by wearing goatskin to resemble Esau's arms and so grabbed the blessing that should have been his brother's (Genesis 27). Thus, the Hebraic descendants of Abraham ceased to be unruly hunters and were reborn as a regulated people of the Book. And what about our Hellenistic forbearers? The titan Prometheus tricked Zeus. He crept into the workshop of Hephaistos and Athena and stole fire so that humanity could enjoy divinely creative powers, an act that closed the vast gulf (eroded the gradient) between humans and the gods. Our civilizations arise from acts of corruption that reroute key currencies toward our new world at the expense of our old one.

In the following chapters, I track the way acts of corruption transform one sacred gradient into another. I use this gradient degradation framework to distinguish successive folk models of corruption and to do so systematically, by juxtaposing their respective principles, currencies, and transgressions. This is how I write the ethnographic history of the *sertanejo* moral imagination. It is an ironic history in two senses. First, the new, PT-backed norms of impersonalism that took hold in the *sertão* led many to judge the PT itself as corrupt (after many of its politicians were revealed to have violated those norms). Second, and conversely, it was the lingering norms of patronage that would ultimately lead many *sertanejos* to forgive Lula and the PT and bring about the eventual defeat of the New Right.

Plan of the Book

In Chapter One, I examine the first "moment," that of patronage hierarchy, taking as an exemplary figure the person of Rodrigo, the mayor during my early fieldwork. I show how Rodrigo sat at the apex of a moral gradient organized by the principle of *presença* (presence), a gradient that channeled the flow of fatherly *força* (vitality) to voters (metaphorical children). In this patronage mindset, *corrupção* signified fatherly absenteeism and the resulting rerouting of *força* to non-kin, as well as acts of usurping the prerogatives owed to senior kin and politicians. I recount

the arrival of the PT officials in 2003 and Rodrigo's anger at them for usurping his right to distribute federal anti-poverty resources as he saw fit.

In Chapter Two, I show how even before the PT officials arrived in 2003, *sertanejos* had begun to find fault with their own patronage hierarchies. A host of macro-historical factors (liberation theology, the fragmentation of cattle estates, federal labor laws, etc.) had inspired this reflexive self-critique. *Sertanejos* began to use the term *corrupção* to refer to local politicians whose self-aggrandizement caused "disunity" within their own electoral coalitions. The fatherly Rodrigo was voted out. The new mayor, Henrique, embodied an alternative political ethics of friendship, what I call "amicopolitics." This is the second "moment," the rise of an amicopolitical ethics founded on reciprocal agrarian labor. Here, I warn against the scholarly conflation of friendship and patronage, which confounds studies of agrarian politics in Brazil and elsewhere. Because there was already a local critique of patronage brewing in their midst, *sertanejos* would eventually syncretize the PT-backed ideals of equal citizenship rights with their own, more personalist amicopolitical ethics.

In Chapter Three, I focus on the "moment" that began with Brazil's redemocratization (following a military dictatorship) and then intensified during the PT era. Under the PT administration, state and federal officials inculcated *sertanejos* with a more Western "insurgent-inclusive" model of corruption, a model predicated on the distinction between the public and private spheres and on the value of grassroots agitation. A new cast of local politicians embodied parts of this insurgent-inclusive ethics, revealing how the PT's messages succeeded in causing *sertanejos* to rethink the rights and wrongs of patronage and amicopolitics alike. Specifically, I focus on the way PT policies put pressure on and transformed the *sertanejo* political vocabulary, changing the meaning of terms like "vote buying," "proposal," and "obligation."

In Chapter Four, I rewind the clock to 2013, to the onset of a political crisis marked by corruption allegations against Brazil's established political actors, and the PT in particular. During this fourth "moment," I show how Operation Car Wash discredited the PT and paved the way for the rise of the New Right. Jair Bolsonaro and other New Right politicians celebrated not all citizens but the "good citizen," mainly the heterosexual, gun-bearing, economically self-sufficient father who kept his children from falling into the corrupted life of the *vagabundo* (vagabond). I argue that *sertanejos* found certain aspects of the New Right corruption model alluring but that they ultimately reverted to the familiar

norms of patronage to evaluate the battle between the PT-led Left and the Bolsonaro-led Right in both the 2018 and 2022 elections.

In the end, I hope to show how corruption and anti-corruption discourses are key to *sertanejo*s' struggles over the fate of their political communities. I cannot predict whether they will someday abandon patronage for amicopolitics, insurgent-inclusion, Christian authoritarianism, or anything else. What I can offer is a depiction of how the norms of patronage and amicopolitics, and their respective corruption models, stand in relation to liberal and authoritarian models of corruption, how local corruption models enter into dialogue with Left–Right partisanship, and how some insights of the rustic imagination might buffer *sertanejos* (and other agrarian populations) against the global rise of illiberal authoritarianism.

I also hope, though I won't mention it again, that anthropologists can return to the insights of their own forebearers, those who insisted that all humans share some elementary aspects of their cultural life, including a basic systematicity and a tendency toward both equilibrium and its unbalancing.

CHAPTER ONE

The Politics of Fathers

In 2004, years before my friend Zezinho died of liver failure, his nephew defeated him in an election for the presidency of his village's governing association. That didn't surprise me. I had been living in the house next to Zezinho's for several months, trying to help him cajole his fellow villagers into participating in a community development project introduced by the new PT (Workers' Party) government—and it wasn't going well. What did surprise me was that later that night, Zezinho insisted to me that his nephew, through his very candidacy, had "done a corruption" (*fez uma corrupção*) against him. Why would he frame his nephew's actions in such terms?

This question is central to the goals of this chapter because it suggests that the folk model of corruption guiding Zezinho's remark differs from the transnational, Enlightenment-derived corruption model based on the distinction between public and private spheres. Zezinho's grievance with his nephew made no reference to any "misappropriation of public resources for private gain," as corruption is typically defined in the Western tradition (Fukuyama 2014: 83). Instead, Zezinho's grievance emerged from a patronage model of social organization, a social order based on the values of good fatherhood and the rightful channeling of moral currencies to respectful "children" (literal and metaphorical). Once again, none of this was clear to me at the time. To my eyes, the village election was just a healthy exercise in the rotation of power, democratic decision-making, and so forth. And anyway, the stakes seemed low; the presidency was an unpaid and often thankless position that few people wanted.

Over the next few days, Zezinho would complain to me that his nephew had cheated by enrolling new families in the village association, families living outside the village who nonetheless wanted to partake in the PT's development project. The idea was that the nephew would pay their membership dues for a while if they would vote for him.[1] So, I asked Zezinho,

Aaron:	Is that what you meant when you said he did corruption against you?
Zezinho:	No, no. That is to say, yes; it's all part of it.
Aaron:	But what did you mean? I don't understand.
Zezinho:	How can I explain …

Zezinho's explanation began with the seemingly unrelated complaint that for several weeks, his nephew had "passed me on many mornings and never asked my blessing." It took me some time to sort out the connection between Zezinho's complaint and his allegation of *corrupção*.

Throughout much of Northeast Brazil, it is the responsibility of all decent people (*gente decente*) to greet kin from a senior generation not with words like "hello" or "good day" but with the one-word request, "Blessing?" (*bença*). People often said it with a slight bow and their palms outstretched, facing upward: "Blessing, Father?" "Blessing, Uncle?" "Blessing, Grandma?" "Blessing, Father-in-law?" "Blessing, Godmother?" The senior kinsperson completes their part of the greeting ritual (also sometimes a farewell ritual) by lifting a hand heavenward and saying, "May God bless you." Sometimes, instead of lifting their hand, they place a downward-facing palm over the junior person's upward-facing palm while bestowing the blessing.[2]

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1. The practice Zezinho describes is similar to a common electioneering trick found throughout the *sertão*. It goes like this: A municipal candidate secures additional votes by paying (or promising favors to) residents of a neighboring municipality to change their official address to the candidate's municipality and then to vote for the candidate. The legitimacy of this practice is hazy. The voters in question may have family (usually parents) living in the candidate's municipality and may even live there themselves for part of the year in conformity with the agricultural calendar.
2. Elsewhere, I offer a fuller discussion of *sertanejo* family blessings in which I argue that one effect of these blessings—those occurring between rival politicians who are kin to one another—is to perform a kind of civility

Writing of his childhood in the Northeast, the Brazilian novelist, Luiz Sávio de Almeida, attests to his unfailing solicitation of the blessing each day: "from my grandparents, uncles/aunts, and godparents, people who the family relation sacralized … like a family priesthood (*sacerdote*) … I thus honored the chain of life seated in these people" (Almeida 2006: 145, quoted in Ansell 2018: 26). Almeida's metaphor of the downward hanging chain of life (*cadeia de vida*), with each link serving as a discrete gradation of one's proximity to God, nicely captures Maurice Bloch's ([2007] 2015) neo-Durkheimian assertion that individuals achieve completeness only in relation to one another, that is, only by interlinking with one another ("going in and out of each other's bodies"). Here Almeida puts rhetorical emphasis on the junior kinsperson's (his own) dutiful moral posture ("unfailing solicitation") towards senior kin, which he reanalyzes in terms of how this solicitation reinforced ("honored") this explicitly sacred gerontological gradient. Implicit in his account (but more explicit among my field informants) was the downward-flowing movement of divine blessings across this gradient. Down the "chain of life" flows the divine grace that is never taken for granted in the drought-afflicted *sertão*, as *sertanejos* attest when they claim that they need their seniors' blessing to "open doors" for them, that is, to open up opportunities for them to gain ground in their jobs, health, love lives, etc. *Sertanejos* often say that "without God, we are nothing," a phrase indicating that what people need to perpetuate their families and communities (e.g., rainfall, the fertility of crops and livestock, sexual virility, the survival of birthing women and their newborns) will come only to those who submit to a cosmic order whose guarantors are senior kin. When seniors give junior kin their blessing, they essentially channel God's moral currency down the line of generations.[3]

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that "brings into being … a public sphere with liberal attributes" (Ansell 2018: 23).

3. At another level, the blessing ritual has become an emblem of the *sertão* itself, of the region's quaint traditionalism, something that gives visceral density to the feeling that the *sertão* is the authentic Brazil; the locus of the nation's sweet and welcoming character, superstitious piety, and rugged vitality; "the vigorous core of our nationality" (Cunha [1902] 1944); and the site of Brazil's "deepest wounds" (Rogers 2010). Thus, to engage in the appropriate blessing behavior is to perform one's authentic embodiment of rustic traditionalism, and to forgo the blessing is to associate oneself

Figure 3. Grandfather with his Grandson in Zezinho's Village (photo by Aaron Ansell, 2003).

By not soliciting Zezinho's blessing, his nephew had failed to recognize a senior kinsperson's closer positioning to the source of all good things that divine blessing brings to people. By implication, the nephew was positioning himself closer to God than his uncle, or anyway indicating his effort to grab God's blessings before they reached his uncle, bypassing Zezinho. Such an act of usurpation is not uncommon, and those who perpetrate it are distrusted. Thus, when young people pass their senior kin each day, they run to them and make a show of beseeching their blessing.

Zezinho was familiar with the modern idea that the proper channeling of votes and public resources should be governed by the principle of public interest. Yet it was not his nephew's violation of the public interest that had made Zezinho so upset with his corruption. Instead, Zezinho mainly construed his nephew's transgression against the norms

with the modern temptations of Brazil's cities (drugs, sex, and crime), to abandon the *sertão* and one's "family priesthood."

Figure 4. Extended Rural Family Gathered around the Grandfather (photo by Aaron Ansell, 2003).

of patronage, norms that revolve around and extend the sacred, gerontocratic gradient expressed by kin blessings. The application of the kin gradient to politics abounds in the *sertão*. It is especially prominent in this case because the village-level "politicians" are literal kin (as is often the case). Yet the extension of the kinship gradient into electoral politics happens even when the persons involved are not literal (or even "fictive") kin. Given that junior-senior political alliances are modeled on junior-senior kin relations, it is easy to see why Zezinho would classify the electoral challenge of a once-loyal junior as *corrupção*. Any junior person's usurpation of a senior person's leadership prerogative constitutes a refusal to show the respect (honor) needed to sustain the kin gradient, a gradient that is always in a process of self-cancelling because seniors, by canalizing blessings (praise, state resources, delegated authority), elevate their junior's position relative to their own, preparing them to step into leadership positions in order to perpetuate the group across generational time.

When I first began my fieldwork in 2003, politics in Passarinho Municipality were organized largely around patronage principles, and such principles continue to play an important role in politics there. Family

relations[4] still comprise the core of political coalitions,[5] and succession often transfers from father to son, both literal and metaphorical.

Women have traditionally played the role of intermediary in patronage politics. Often, requests for a fatherly politician's support would be made to his wife, out of the hope that she would prevail upon her husband. Historian Dain Borges speculates that men "may have preferred women as buffers to avoid the potential for offending honor in direct contacts between males" (1992: 225). Women rarely represented their households when their husbands or fathers were present (Heredia 1996). As one local politician (in his fifties) told me in 2004, "When a man and woman approach me together and the woman does the talking, I know the man is worthless." This sexism had already been changing by the time I arrived in Piauí. There were several women serving on town councils in the region. While most female politicians functioned as stand-ins for husbands whose candidacies had been disqualified, a few had become politicians *de força* (of strength), despite the typically masculine coding of strength. "I may be a woman, but I have much force (*força*) in me," said one councilwoman (in 2012). Women politicians also made use of stereotypically feminine expressions of political virtue, such as care (*carinho*) or mercy (*misericórdia*)—as did some male politicians. That said, proper analysis of women's roles in *sertanejo* patronage—indeed, of *sertanejo* "matronage"—lies beyond my scope.

Politicians in this patronage formation enjoy prestige, votes, and favors proportionate to their demonstrated possession of a paternal virtue. *Sertanejos* call this virtue *presença* (presence). A good politician, like a good father, is *presente* in the lives of others, when his personhood manifests in places where he is not physically located. The term has a strongly Christian valence in a region known for messianic leaders who, like Jesus, "walk among the people" and "never leave the people" (Lebner

4. One risk of treating family relations as a model for political relations is that one can be led to naturalize the family as a unit whose members are more or less given. This is not the case anywhere, least of all in the *sertão*, where who one considers to be one's kin is as much a product of political intrigue as it is a cause of political factionalism (Comerford 2003; Lebner 2021; Marques 2013; Shapiro 2019). Sometimes, the loyalties of the vote and of kinship "may converge … but that may or may not happen" (Palmeira 1992: 28).
5. I will use the term "coalition" instead of "faction" because, for many in Brazil, the Portuguese cognate *facção* carries the pejorative sense of a criminal gang.

2012: 506; see also Dullo 2011; Shapiro 2019). A politician's *presença* is evidenced by the improvements he (indeed they're mainly men) makes to the visible landscapes through which people move—watering holes, paved roads, new health posts, and other (infra)structures—and through the life-saving favors that ensure the propagation of future generations. This *presença* is the principal organizing the patronage gradient, the channel across which sacred currency flows.

Sertanejos reckon the currency of patronage in religious terms as an emanation from the fatherly politician's strength and vitality, his *força de vontage* (force of will), or simply *força*. I've come to see it as a person's raw, world-bending agency, a quality that some people possess in greater amounts than others. As the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes remarks, *força* is "an elusive, almost animistic constellation of strength, grace, beauty, and power … similar to … charisma" and linked to gender and wealth, such that "the rich and males have *força* and the poor and females have *fraqueza* [weakness] (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 188, italics added).[6] In everyday talk, *força* is linked to God, as in the alliterative expression, *muita força e muita fé* ("much *força* and much faith"). It is also linked to, and indeed sometimes synonymous with, courage (*corágem*), often the courage to "fight" against the hot sun as one labors in the fields (Comerford 1999). The Catholic theologian, Paul Tillich, links courage to "vital strength" (what sertanejos call *força*) in a way that explicates *sertanejo* thinking on the matter. For Tillich, courage is "the readiness to take upon oneself negatives," "the acceptance of want, toil, insecurity, pain, possible destruction," "for the sake of a fuller positivity." And he goes on, "(t)he more vital strength a being has, the more it is able to affirm itself in spite of the dangers announced by fear and anxiety" (Tillich 1952: 78).

Unlike *presença*, *força* is an alienable quality, something that a person gives away to others. *Força* is the spiritualized energy that animates "favors," "help," "work," and "assistance." It is a part of a person's soul that lives in displacement, out there in the world. Thus, a person both has *força* and gives their *força* away (see Weiner 1992 on the paradox of

6. A person's quantity of *força* is also subject to the temporary effects of depression or sickness, as suggested by the fact that *sertanejos* often greet one another with the question, "How is (*está*) your *força*?" with the verb *estar* (to be) indicating a temporary status. This is further suggested by the fact that people visiting spiritual healers (and there are many in this region) often report as a (temporary) symptom "lack of *força*."

keeping while giving). The greater one's *presença*, the greater the *força* they are expected to possess, put into circulation, and receive as tribute in the form of votes (the main vehicle for poor people's *força*).

For this reason, *sertanejos* tend to imagine *corrupção* as the disabling of *força*'s flow. This can happen when fatherly politicians divert this flow outside the municipality (their figurative family) or when they lack the *força* that their high station demands. Corruption can also take the form of sabotage from below, an uppity act of grabbing of *força* from senior politicians, a charge that imputes to junior politicians a failure to canalize respect upward (as with Zezinho's nephew's refusal to beseech his uncle's blessing).

In elaborating on these themes in the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the municipal level of politics in Passarinho and its adjacent municipalities. *Sertanejos* generally experience politics at this level as the most impactful on their lives. I pay special attention to the figure of "Rodrigo," Passarinho's mayor (1997–2004) when I arrived in the field. Rodrigo was finishing up his second term when teams of PT officials visited his municipality to initiate their anti-poverty policies in 2003. These officials, socialized to a modern model of politics, were reluctant to ally with Rodrigo, whose paternalism they considered antithetical to the empowerment of the poor and the cleaning up of corrupt municipalities. From Rodrigo's perspective, the manner by which the PT officials implemented these policies in his municipality was itself corrupt—and I, the North American anthropologist, was implicated in that corruption.

In the next section, I explore the tension between Rodrigo and the PT officials to clarify the norms of municipal patronage. I then examine the centrality of father–son duos in patronage arrangements and show how politicians exhibit *presença* and *força*. Following that, I reflect on certain patronage-based formulations of *corrupção*—absence, softness, and usurpation—that soured Rodrigo's impression of the PT officials, and myself.

The Men Who Call Themselves Rude Fools

I first met Rodrigo in 2003, the year the newly elected Lula government initiated its flagship anti-poverty program, Zero Hunger. His red Ford F-150 pulled up to the small hotel where I was staying in the town center of Princesa Municipality. A light-skinned man in his early sixties,

Rodrigo got out of his truck and said a few words to the elderly hotel owner, who had fast become my drinking buddy. "This is Passarinho's mayor," he said to me quietly as Rodrigo approached. I stood and extended my hand. Rodrigo's handshake was unlike any other I had experienced in Brazil. Instead of clasping my hand with a warm smile as most men did, he grabbed my fingertips for the briefest instant and sort of cast them aside while averting his eyes. He said nothing and returned quickly to his truck. My hotel-owner friend apologized on his behalf: "He's a rude (*ignorante*) man of the fields." This was a description that Rodrigo himself embraced during the 2004 municipal campaign season when he climbed on stage and said, "I know nothing. I don't know how to read, how to speak. I am an illiterate *burro ignorante* (rude fool), but I know the life of the fields. … I am father to my family. I have love in my heart for the people of Passarinho."

He said little else but was still met with thunderous applause, perhaps because his self-effacing words rang out as authentically *sertanejo*, perhaps because—as the man next to me claimed—the ones clapping were those who "ate at his table," and thus were tied to his fate. The applause may also have come from the audience's identification with Rodrigo's humility, a much-commended trait among those who continually remind themselves that "without God, we are nothing."

Rodrigo's political career began before Passarinho became an independent municipality (in 1997), when it still was one of the many satellite villages (*povoados*) that were part of the larger neighboring municipality, Princesa. Rodrigo's father had been a long-serving Princesa councilman. He hailed from one of the two rival ranching families that had colonized this region of Piauí State in the late 1600s and that—according to lore—had dominated politics since. Although descended from one of these powerful families, Rodrigo's parents were not wealthy. They owned a few medium-sized, rain-fed farms. Some of his kin worked as middlemen, buying goats and sheep from the region's "small farmers" (*pequenos produtores*), livestock that they sold at more distant markets. They had no money to educate Rodrigo, but this was not much of a liability. "Doing politics" at the municipal level was more about driving trucks than reading papers. (Most rural people could not afford trucks; they got around by motorcycle.) Rodrigo used his F-150 to "work for the people" and, when in need of more money or connections, he turned to Princesa's mayor, a wealthy medical doctor. Rodrigo was able to sustain that alliance even after Passarinho broke away to become its own municipality, with him as its first mayor.

When I first asked Rodrigo's supporters what political party he belonged to, many did not know and most found the question irrelevant. "Do you vote for the party or the person?"[7] To know Rodrigo's party affiliation, or that of any other politician, was only to know what higher-level politician channeled resources to him. Affiliation with political parties does not signify any ideological conviction vis-à-vis the Left–Right political spectrum, certainly not at the municipal level. Since redemocratization, most of Brazil's political parties have operated as impersonal labels for personalized networks, "loosely organized [groups], dependent on state resources, and … geared almost exclusively toward electoral purposes" (Mainwaring 1995: 376; and see Samuels 1995: 495). As it was, Rodrigo began his career as a member of the military dictatorship's official ruling party, ARENA, moving back and forth between its two rival internal coalitions, ARENA I and ARENA II. These were the only two options available until the dictatorship declined, at which point Rodrigo affiliated with the official opposition party, (P)MDB, and then with several of the smaller parties that proliferated during the 1980s.

As luck would have it, the PMDB had recently allied with the PT at the state level, throwing its weight behind the PT's gubernatorial candidate, Wellington Dias. Dias won the 2002 state election in an upset and collaborated with President Lula on Zero Hunger's roll-out in Piauí's interior.

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7. The oft-heard rhetorical question, "Do you vote for the party of the person?" expresses more than a culture of political personalism. It also reflects the incentives created by Brazil's electoral institutions. Brazil uses a version of the so-called open-list proportional representation system that allows citizens to vote for legislators either individually or by party label (forgoing the opportunity to vote for individual candidates). David Samuels has shown that this system generates incentives for candidates to seek a personal vote (1995: 495). Indeed, few Brazilians opt to vote for the party label, and those who do so tend to be concentrated in relatively few parties, the PT being one of them. Samuels argues that the reasons for the PT's outsized enjoyment of label voting pertains both to the party's coherent ideological identity and its innovative internal rules that "held collective representatives [affiliated with the PT] accountable to each other and that held elected representatives accountable to the popular base" (Samuels 1995: 507). The PT (and a few other parties) aside, Brazil's "candidate-centric" system may well reinforce a diffuse culture of personalism, leading people to the obvious conclusion that one should "vote for the person."

It was March of 2003, shortly after President Lula and Governor Dias took office, when a team of PT officials came to Passarinho Municipality to implement Zero Hunger's first initiatives. When the team drove into town, they did not contact Rodrigo's office but instead headed straight for the Rural Workers' Union. Such unions are often run by local PT affiliates, as was the case in Passarinho, where the union president was also the president of the party's municipal chapter. Her name was Juraçi, and she had a substantial following of people whose votes she could have if she ran for the town council or even for mayor. Jurací, who was in her late forties, was Rodrigo's younger cousin, one generation down, and she opposed him.

The PT officials interviewed Juraçi and the other union staff, asking them how preexisting federal anti-poverty policies worked in practice in their municipality. The story they heard, which I read about in the team's reports, was that the mayor (Rodrigo) controlled the distribution of the (limited) monthly stipends (e.g., "School Grant"), prioritizing those families who voted for him. The PT officials were determined that Zero Hunger's cash card component ("Food Card") would avoid this fate. They called for an open-air assembly of townspeople to announce the formation of a ten-person Zero Hunger Management Committee in this and other municipalities. The assembly would elect seven of the Committee's members; the other three would be appointed by the mayor. This would make it hard for mayors to control the committees. The idea was to create a neutral deliberative forum, a space "without politics," in which right-minded citizens would use objective criteria (*critérios*) to prioritize the "poorest of the poor" when the first batches of Food Cards arrived from Brasília.

Rodrigo, by all accounts, was incensed. The PT had used the committee to bypass him. This might have been understandable had he been *corrupto*. But in Rodrigo's eyes, he was the opposite. He was a present father to the municipality's inhabitants (his metaphorical children) and a good father to those "sons" who worked directly under him in his chain of command.

Fathers and Sons: The Nested Structure of Gratitude

Patronage politics in Piauí's *sertão* is often carried out by teams of two persons whose roles are reciprocal; they are father and son to one another, sometimes literally (as in biological or adoptive filiation) and sometimes metaphorically, as when the pair are really godfather/godson, uncle/

Figure 5. Management Committee Assistant Interviews a Municipal Resident to Assess their Eligibility for Zero Hunger Program Benefits (photo by Aaron Ansell, 2004).

nephew, or father-in-law/son-in-law to one another. (The junior does not actually address the senior as "father" unless the affiliation is literal.) In cases where the two are not kin in any sense, their political alliance is nonetheless cast in the mold of the father–son relation. The "father" is higher up, more connected, and makes the decisions about how to allocate time, energy, and money to cultivate alliances (and votes). The "son," more energetic, carries out much of the hard work. He also wrangles (*arrumar*) votes for the father, sustaining the *presença* of the man who is the "the source of [his] subordinates' being" (Piliavsky 2020: 28), the man who teaches his sons how to work so he can grow in politics (*crescer na política*).

To "work for the people," municipal politicians use their pickups to bring sacks of seed, rice, beans, and cement to their electors—especially during the biennial campaign season.[8] They freight these farm inputs

8. Brazil staggers its two, four-year election cycles such that the elections for state and federal officials are held in 2002, 2006, 2010, etc., and elections for municipal officials are held in 2000, 2004, 2008, etc.

across miles of dirt roads to remote villages and transport sick and injured people to the local health post or hospitals in nearby cities, sometimes during torrential rains in the dead of night, when travel on those roads is harrowing. Municipal politicians also freight water to village households. They use privately owned flatbed trucks with enormous barrels (*pipas*) strapped to them. They collect potable water from open-air reservoirs within about a 300 km radius, haul it out to villages, and transfer the water by hose into a household's two or three (500-liter) containers.

The household head who receives the water thanks the driver (usually the "son") often profusely and often using the construction "First, we must thank God, then we must thank you." I think by doing so, what they are conveying is something like *We are typically abandoned to a harsh fate, but you stepped in to give us your attention.* The driver's typical reply directs the praise upward to the fatherly senior politician: "Yes, first God, but we also must thank [father's name]. It is with his *força* that we can do this." If father and son are together when they are thanked, they may take the opportunity to direct their thanks up further, perhaps to the mayor.

It is generally in the interest of a junior politician to drum up support for their allied senior politicians (even when they are in no way kin). The more votes they can wrangle for these higher-ups, the more valuable the junior's allegiance will be, and thus the more resources the senior will place at the junior's disposal. Municipal politicians solicit votes for these higher-ups through a series of campaign season rituals. For instance, during the state/federal campaign season, the mayor or councilman typically arrives at the elector's household and says, "[So-and-so] is *our* candidate for state deputy [assemblyperson] and [so-and-so] is our candidate for federal deputy [congressperson]," and they distribute adhesive propaganda photos that they expect the elector will post to their outer wall. The stickers usually feature the official number of the candidate's political party, the same number that appears under the image of the municipal politician. In this way, the stickers accentuate the link between "the municipal political game" (electoral competition) and that of *o governo*.

When *sertanejos* use the term *o governo*, they conflate the state and federal governments as well as the many bureaus and departments related to the court system, energy infrastructure, crop insurance, rural development, etc. It is not that *sertanejos* are insensitive to these distinctions, but they rarely highlight them. As an aggregate term, *o governo*[9] derives

9. In this context, there is some formal equivalence between "God" (in kinship discourse) and *o governo*. Viewing both as infinite sources of currencies is

its meaning from its contrast with the *prefeitura* (prefecture), i.e., the mayor's office. The *prefeitura* is responsible for ensuring the smooth running of day-to-day affairs through small-ticket favors. By contrast, the business of *o governo* is the paving of roads, the construction of dams and reservoirs, and the building of schools and health posts—though municipal politicians are expected to participate in such projects. These big-ticket items require considerable government funds, extensive planning with public and private entities, and endless bureaucratic paperwork. *Sertanejos* keep track of their state deputy's job performance in this regard. As one elderly Passarinho politician told me, "The hardest thing to do in politics is to wrangle votes for a state deputy who does not work." As for federal deputies, these figures are less closely followed than the state deputies. Senators, governors, or presidents are seldom discussed in the municipality and are seen as more remote, preoccupied with other matters, or simply external to the main channel through which the wealth of *o governo* reaches everyday people.

Most of the funds coming from *o governo* take the form of "parliamentary amendments," an ad hoc portion of the annual federal budget allocated to the states each year. Piauí, as one of Brazil's poorest states, has long been highly dependent on these amendments and other federal investments (e.g., anti-drought initiatives) (Santos 1980: 29; and see Leal [1949] 1977). It is the federal deputy who controls the parliamentary amendments, allocating the funds preferentially to his allied state deputies, one or more of whom may be his literal son.

When these schools, roads, or hospitals materialize in small municipalities, the state and federal deputies attend the inauguration, getting on stage with musical accompaniment alongside the mayor and his allied town councilmembers. Lining up on stage, they stand in the order of their offices—federal deputy, state deputy, mayor, councilmembers. For a few brief moments, they may hold hands, a living diagram of the human

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somewhat reckless. *Sertanejos* do not regard *o governo* with such reverence; indeed, *o governo* is often an object of trickery and the butt of a joke. If *o governo* is treated as an infinite source of wealth, it is mainly to justify pilfering its coffers. Indeed, if these coffers are infinite, there can be no harm. This is not to say that political morality only applies to the municipal game where one's politicians are in some sense one's kin. *Sertanejos* hold themselves morally accountable to state and federal authorities, but only insofar as these are particular persons trying to pull the levers of *o governo* (from within) in ways that route resources to the municipality.

chain that has conveyed the new infrastructure to the municipality. Most smile wordlessly while on stage, some admitting to shyness, saying that they "don't know how to talk pretty." (The *sertanejo* dialect is stigmatized throughout Brazil.) Usually, a paid broadcaster[10] (*locutor*) controls the microphone, emphasizing the *força* of the mayor and his allies, their love for the municipality, and so forth.

The human chain continues downward off stage. Household fathers have historically enjoyed the prerogative of "commanding all of the votes" of their wives and co-resident children, delivering these to their own fatherly politician (or to the politician's more approachable son). The more votes his household delivers, the more he can expect his mayor or councilmember to keep his "doors open" to him and his wife throughout his term in office. Villages may have other kinds of "electors with multiple votes," as Moacir Palmeira (1996) calls them, such as association presidents, women known for taking care of others' children, or sometimes the owners of village businesses. These persons act as resource "brokers" by "form[ing] important bridges between a needy population and well-resourced patrons" (Koster and Eiró 2022: 227).

The structure I'm outlining is something of a fractal, like a nested set of Russian dolls. "Sons" at one level are "fathers" to those at the level below (and vice versa). And at all levels, the trait that makes for a good father is *presença,* which is expected to manifest to all those under his aegis.

Signs of Presença and Força

Rodrigo was able to extend his fatherly *presença* throughout Passarinho Municipality very effectively. If he were not, he could have expected

10. A similar outsourcing of rhetorical aggrandizement exists in other patronage societies elsewhere in the world. Judith Irvine, in a study of political speech among the Wolof people of Senegal, writes that the praising speech given by paid, low-ranked "griots" (bards) allows the praised nobles to project the dignity of their rank by remaining "silent and motionless" (Irvine 1989: 261). That nobles are effectively exempt from the burden of proving their worth with words indicates that their status is determined by birth rather than accomplishment. The griots' verbal praise "consists in naming the ancestors and connecting them to kings or village founders or other heroic figures" (Irvine 1989: 261). As with the Wolof nobles (and "chiefs"), the authority of senior Brazilian politicians is presupposed by this participation framework and often attributed to their history of contact and alliance with higher-level politicians.

his junior allies to rise against him and, with some legitimacy, grab his authority.

One reason Rodrigo was so effectual was that he was Passarinho's first mayor. The post-dictatorship Constitution of 1988 had decentralized an important part of the federal budget, putting municipalities in charge of basic health care and primary schooling. For the first time, many municipalities with negligible formal sector employment to allow for steady incomes saw the emergence of over one hundred municipal jobs. Not surprisingly, Brazilian municipalities proliferated during the 1990s, and Brazil saw the emergence of many new *prefeituras* (Tomio 2002). Mayor Rodrigo used the new monies (along with parliamentary amendments) to build one health post in Passarinho's town center, the "Rodrigo [last name] Health Post," and he oversaw the construction of about two dozen primary schools in Passarinho's villages—all of which were called the "Rodrigo [last name] school of [village name]." With every school and hospital serving as a monument to his *presença*, Rodrigo extended his personage into the spaces where children grew to maturity and the sick or injured were saved.

Presença by Imitation

One sign of Rodrigo's *presença* was that his supporters and detractors alike often imitated his characteristic voice and demeanor, lampooning his tendency to mumble in a sing-songy voice, arching his back while shaking his jowls. Throughout the Northeast, such imitation amounts to more than burlesque; it can be an ambitious form of self-presentation, an enactment of, and an attempt to appropriate, a personalized style associated with the person seated at power's epicenter. In an unforgettable vignette from his 2015 ethnography of a UNESCO heritage project in the neighboring state of Bahia, John Collins analyzes an imitative encounter involving that state's most notorious strongman-godfather, Antônio Carlos Magalhães (known as ACM). Collins recounted a parade in which ACM was walking with a group of followers when he passed a young boy, who, standing outside his house, "attempted to incarnate Magalhães. … He mimicked the patriarch's gestures, modes of speech, dress and physical appearance, quite literally anchoring ACM's image in a historical setting." The boy (wearing an ACM mask) then saw ACM passing by and reduced his performance to a mild (and fearful?) wave. "Magalhães smiled, waved, and began in turn to imitate the signature Magalhães gestures the child used to impersonate him." For Collins,

ACM's self-parody guided his followers in "the making of selves and the garnering of influence" (Collins 2015: 90). It was an object lesson in how to draw attention to the signs of one's *presença*. To a lesser extent, in a smaller corner of Brazil, Rodrigo did the same.

Rodrigo's way of speaking reminded me of that of his own patron, the great Mão Santa, whose style of leadership also reveals key aspects of *sertanejo* patronage. Mão Santa was sort of Piauí's answer to Bahia's ACM. He affiliated with numerous political parties throughout his career before becoming governor—Brazil's first governor to be impeached on corruption charges, in 2001 (Alencar 2017). Unlike Rodrigo, Mão Santa was highly educated (a medical doctor), although he emphasized his humble origins, dancing barefoot on dirt floors when visiting rural municipalities, making unannounced visits to the homes of ordinary people, and mixing folksy biblical references with high-brow medical terminology (Miranda 2006: 233–34). Anthropologist Júlia Miranda analyzes Mão Santa's popular image, noting that he cultivated a religious dimension to his medical practice, as if he were a faith-healer who worked through the laying of hands (as his nickname suggests).

Rodrigo, for his part, had no medical expertise, but his own patron-mayor in the larger Princesa Municipality did, and Rodrigo brokered access to that mayor's services. He had to. Princesa had several medical doctors during the time of my research, all of whom had political careers at the municipal, and sometimes the state, level. All of them leveraged their medical talent, services, and hospital resources to amass political followings. If Rodrigo failed to broker those health services, he risked his followers' defection to the opposition candidates who would.

The success of doctor-politicians can be explained by two factors. First, medical expertise gives political candidates a service that they can share at low cost (e.g., a physical exam), one that cultivates intense gratitude during times of need (Ansell 2018). Second, health-related favors carry an aura of sacred power. These two factors work together. In the *sertão*, people know a doctor's time is limited. But they sometimes entertain the idea that a good doctor can cure with his touch, that is, with a favor so minimal in effort that it is a virtually infinite resource. Maya Mayblin (2024) makes a similar argument in her recent ethnography of northeastern priests who themselves become candidates for mayor. Such priests' celibacy re-channels their resources away from particular recipients and outward to "the people." *Sertanejos* vote for priest-politicians because they represent this outward, ever-flowing abundance—like Christ's multiplication of fishes—rather than the more finite capital that allows for other kinds of aid

(54–5). I think that both priest-politicians and doctor-politicians embody the strongest expression of a more general tendency among *sertanejos* to attribute miraculous health- and wealth-generating power to all politicians of great *presença* and *força*. In this way, patronage ethics point to an ideal of universal benefit, even if this ideal is never achieved in practice.

Rodrigo managed some of this magical allure. And because he was largely successful in his capacity to extend his *presença* and *força* throughout Passarinho Municipality, it would be corrupt to usurp his authority, just as my friend Zezinho felt his nephew's challenge amounted to *corrupção*. What then would be the circumstances warranting such a challenge from below? What sort of mayor would Rodrigo have to be to justify the PT's choice to bypass him in its implementation of Zero Hunger?

He would have had to have been the opposite of a "present father."

Expressions of Corruption in a Patronage Formation

The most impassioned grievances I heard about *sertanejo* politicians had nothing to do with whether they may have received kickbacks from public contractors or absorbed some of the municipal budget within their private accounts. Those were peccadillos for which one could forgive a present father. But there was no forgiveness for an absent father or for a fatherly politician who lacked the necessary *força* to "help the people."

I was lunching with Zezinho in his house one afternoon in 2004 when Carlos, a middle-aged man, came in to tell us that Rodrigo was planning to visit the village the following day. "I wonder if someone else will throw another rock at his car," Zezinho's wife, Iracema, mused. She was alluding to an incident that had occurred the previous year, one that was still upsetting for Carlos. "Why did somebody throw a rock at the mayor's car?" I asked. Iracema responded, "Because he does nothing for [our village]. We elected him and he is absent from our lives." Carlos fired back, "But he is the authority! We must treat him with respect." He left shortly thereafter, and I then learned more about his perspective from Zezinho. Rodrigo had invested municipal funds in the village's publicly owned well, outfitting it with a diesel pump and contracting one villager, Carlos, to work part-time as its custodian. "Rodrigo is absent from [our village], but he never left Carlos," Iracema admitted. "He always gives his *força* to him."

The argument that played out that day repeated itself time and again, especially as the 2004 municipal campaign season set on. Had Rodrigo

been "present" in the village? Iracema asked another Rodrigo supporter, "Where do you see his work? The reservoir? It was [the councilman allied with the opposition] who did that!" She continued in that vein, citing objects and incidents that manifested the *presença* not of Rodrigo but of his main opponent, his godson's brother, Henrique. When such-and-such a neighbor got injured, it was one of Henrique's allied councilors who rushed him to the hospital and maybe paid for his pain pills. One of Rodrigo's supporters protested, "Rodrigo sends his tractor to level the dirt road leading to the highway, doesn't he! Every saintly year!" And then Iracema said, "One time a year only! After we get the first big rain and small motorcycles can't pass through, where is he then? The *força* around here is Henrique's!"

Arguments like these suggest that politicians' behavior is judged by the standards of *presença* and *força*. Failures to manifest *presença* or to direct *força* where it belongs short-circuit the cyclical activities by which *sertanejos* adjust to the struggles of life. While *sertanejos* sometimes use the term *corrupção* to refer to these failures, they also make use of a kindred vocabulary with terms like "absence," "treachery," "cowardice," and "weakness"—all of which are inversions of *presença* and *força*.

Regarding absence, it is very common in the *sertão* for mayors of small municipalities to relocate their residences to more urban municipalities that offer movie theaters, better electricity, restaurants, and brothels. The practice hits a raw nerve in the *sertão*, a region notorious for absentee landlordism during its early history[11] (Cunha [1902] 1944: 112; Prado Júnior 1957: 187, Leal [1949] 1977: 2). Observing this phenomenon in the early nineteenth century, Johann Spix and Friedrich Martius (1938) reported that "the owners of these great ranches rarely lived in the *sertão*. They spend their income in more populated districts, often with incredible luxury." Thus, *sertanejos* disparage such relocations as a fundamental dereliction of his most sacred duty.[12]

11. The Piauiense anthropologist Luis Mott (1985) takes issue with this characterization, at least as it applies to Piauí. He notes that absenteeism in this state rarely rose above 10% for most of Piauí's colonial history. But crucially, for the first century of Piauí's colonization (1674–1772), the cattlemen who owned 90% of that state's extensive ranches were absentees (Mott 1985: 98; and cf. Godoi 1999: 80–81 on *terra de ausentes*).
12. In his historical treatment of the northeastern family in the nineteenth century, Dain Borges argues that moral hierarchy was identified with life inside the family, while all that lay "outside [the family in] the rest of …

Absence is a matter of degree. Even when they live in the municipality, politicians (and others) are sometimes said to "walk absently" (*andar ausente*) through town. I heard Passarinho's inhabitants say as much about certain councilors who, after campaigning throughout the municipality just before the election, withdrew into their private lives once reelected. Such complaints often noted the failure of these individuals to say hello "or even look at your face" when passing others in the street. Politicians who walked by absently gave off implicit signs that they were not to be approached for help in solving problems.

For this reason, Rodrigo's supporters constantly affirmed him for having his "doors always open." Even when Rodrigo traveled (usually to Piauí's capital city), people said that his wife, Teresa, never failed to maintain "open doors" to their household. Even in his absence, she would receive visitors petitioning her husband with requests for aid in one form or another and extend warm hospitality to petitioners, serving them coffee, water, biscuits, and juice. In this way, Rodrigo's house functioned as a secondary town hall (*prefeitura*), and indeed one could say the same of the private home belonging to the leader of the opposition faction. And, as anthropologist Daniela Perutti observes in a rural municipality in the midwestern state of Goiás, "the reverse is true … [in] the town hall, [where staff say] 'Make yourself at home,' 'Have some coffee,'" etc. (2022: 175). The crucial point is that such attention and hospitality were not simply niceties; they were the practices by which politicians like Rodrigo and his wife protected themselves from allegations of corrupt absenteeism, proving through the visible status of their house that Rodrigo was "never far from the people," an expression also used to indicate God's permanent proximity. And even those people allied with the opposition coalition, those inclined to find fault with Rodrigo, admitted their admiration for his choice never to relocate his private residence to a larger, more distant city where a man with a mayor's salary could enjoy greater amenities. (People generally forgave Rodrigo for residing in the neighboring Princesa.)

The second cardinal sin in the patronage formation is *moleza* (softness, weakness), at least as an attribute of leaders. This characteristic is

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society was [seen as a] disorganized, anonymous, 'the populace'" (1992: 79). Roberto DaMatta ([1979] 1990), the structuralist anthropologist, makes a similar argument about Brazilian national culture in general, arguing that it is mainly organized by a binary opposition between the hierarchical "house" (read family) and the egalitarian "street," where relations of trust are reserved for the former.

also referred to as relaxed (*relaxado*) or stopped (*parado*). A "soft" person creates a passive danger to the collective moral project of sustaining the downward flow of *força* from higher-ups. Softness does not entail what *sertanejos* call *desvio de recurso* (resource bypass), a term used at times synonymously with *corrupção*. When a soft person holds a position of formal authority, they are said to "just eat their salary" (see Bayart [1989] 2009).

Eating public money is not, by itself, reprehensible. A little embezzlement from public projects (e.g., via kickbacks) is to be expected: "I don't blame him for eating a little because everybody needs to eat a little. But he needs to work." Eating becomes synonymous with corruption when it is not accompanied by action taken on behalf of others; that is, when it is not counterbalanced by the circulation of *força* to "the people." And it makes little difference whether the money eaten in such cases is embezzled funds or simply the salary enjoyed by the politician. Thus, *sertanejos* may allege the corruption of politicians who never embezzle or engage in bribery. Such an allegation follows from the assertion that they "only eat their salary" (*só come seu salário*), the "only" being the operative term; that is, they give nothing of themselves to the people to merit their salary.

It is perhaps for this reason that municipal politicians find ways of showcasing their *força* in public. They may engage in visible, nighttime cavorting to promote their reputations as virile womanizers, sometimes with the tacit approval of their wives. "I'd rather he cheats than be called a sissy (*boiola*)," one said to me. (I heard it proclaimed of one regional politician, by his own allies, that "he could get elected with the votes of his whores alone.") The most reliable stage where politicians perform their *força* is their trucks. These trucks lumber noisily down residential streets with grateful passengers beaming from inside the cabs. The politician gets out, goes around to the passenger's side, helps a passenger out and into their home to rest. In full view of the neighbors, the politician smiles exuberantly, gulps down some water and hops back in the truck as if off to a festival. Such performances signal that they haven't gone soft. And they are attested to by neighbors, who rise to defend their allied politician by pointing to their pickup and saying, "His car never stops."

In sum, *corrupção* in the patronage formation amounts to the inverse of *presença* and *força*. It signals the failure of fathers, often by dint of their own absence or softness, to help those under their aegis to overcome the challenges of life in the *sertão*, to thrive against all odds. It also refers to acts of usurpation by juniors, power grabs that might be legitimate when the senior is soft or absent, but which are reprehensible when he truly projects his *presença* into the world.

Rodrigo, the PT, and the Upstart Anthropologist

Let me return to 2003, when the state officials showed up in Passarinho to implement the Food Card and the other initiatives associated with the Zero Hunger program. Shortly after they had arrived, Rodrigo dispatched his lawyer to a meeting with the officials, where the lawyer made a statement: "The PT says it's about democracy, but you are doing everything top-down. All the mayor received was a message left with his secretary. We didn't even know you were coming" (see Ansell 2014: 168). The moral idiom he seemed to be evoking was that of participatory democracy and grass-roots social mobilization, themes that were part and parcel of Brazil's post-dictatorship discourse of citizenship (*cidadania*). Yet, the lawyer's grievance with the PT's top-down implementation of Zero Hunger seemed to harbor a second meaning, one that was grounded in the hierarchical formulation of patronage. The PT officials' allegedly top-down implementation ignored the structure of political authority "on the ground."

Indeed, the PT officials had enacted none of the patronage protocols through which representatives of *o governo* introduce resources to a municipality. They never took to the stage with Rodrigo to commend his *presença* or *força* in Passarinho or suggest that he had been instrumental in procuring Zero Hunger resources for his municipality. (He had not been.) Instead, the PT officials, by calling an open-air vote for the Management Committee, had implemented an entirely different optics of power, one that snubbed Rodrigo. What's more, Governor Wellington Dias put on his own spectacle that similarly upstaged the mayor. On March 30, 2003, Dias himself arrived in Passarinho to inaugurate the monthly Food Card. He stood outside the Rural Workers' Union and called on the townspeople gathered there to raise their right hands and swear an oath (in front of the cameras) to "get out of poverty" (see Ansell 2014: 166). Projected to the national stage by Piauí's newspapers, the oath signaled the PT's redemption of the *sertão* from the likes of Rodrigo. It was both a foundationalist assertion that a new era had begun and a celebration of ordinary people's agency over their own lives, their capacity to become independent of the paternalism that Rodrigo had been made to symbolize.[13]

13. There was another meaning in this oath-swearing gesture. By holding Zero Hunger's beneficiaries accountable for getting out of poverty, Governor Dias was responding to the prevailing conservative worry that Zero Hunger would merely "give a man a fish instead of teaching them how to fish" (see Ferguson 2005).

What is more, the PT-controlled federal government audited Passarinho's *prefeitura* and discovered "irregularities," including overspending on private contracts, which raised suspicions of kickbacks. Brazil's Court of Accounts followed up on the audit and discovered that the mayor had lost track of roughly twenty thousand dollars from the federal funds earmarked for primary schools. Rodrigo died shortly thereafter. His heirs, who could not account for the funds either, were held financially liable.

The sidelining of Rodrigo and other mayors like him was, in my opinion, a strategic miscalculation on the part of the PT state and federal governments. Implementing Zero Hunger at the municipal level required help from the mayor, not just in Passarinho but in all small *sertanejo* municipalities. The Management Committees did not have their own budgets to pay rent and utilities, to compensate their members for their time and fuel costs, or to hire personnel able to use a computer. Zero Hunger also needed municipal matching funds for many of its housing and potable water projects that the mayors, once sidelined, were reluctant to give. In sum, the PT strategists either underestimated their need for cooperation from the *sertanejo* mayors or overestimated the leverage that Zero Hunger resources would give them over these mayors.[14]

14. Some background information on Wellington Dias's governorship helps make sense of this overestimation. The 2002 election of a PT governor in a conservative northeastern state had been something of a fluke, the product of a rift that had opened between the state's large conservative parties, the once-allied PSDB and the PMDB. The state leader of the PMDB, Mão Santa, had been serving as governor when he was impeached for "vote buying and abuse of economic power," charges levied by his adversary from the right-wing PFL. When his PSDB allies abandoned him, Mão Santa threw his support behind the unlikely left-wing candidate from the PT. The informal alliance between the PT and the PMDB resulted in Dias's victory (Guibu and Kormann 2002). If Dias had realized just how fragile his position was, he might have done more to fortify the delicate alliance with Mão Santa, whose party was well-represented throughout the rural interior, including in Passarinho. Mayor Rodrigo was at that time affiliated with the PMDB and ready to follow Mão's Santa's lead in cooperating with the PT-affiliated Zero Hunger officials. But Dias did not surrender to Mão Santa enough cabinet positions to secure his ongoing alliance. Had the Zero Hunger officials deferred to Rodrigo's position as the head patron of Passarinho and to Mão Santa's leadership of the many other PMDB mayors in Piauí, these PMDB politicians might have

By early 2004, the Zero Hunger leadership in Brasília and Teresina had realized they had another problem. The municipal elections were coming up in October, and they knew the press would be particularly attentive to the PT's performance throughout the *sertão*, and especially in Zero Hunger's pilot municipalities. Historically, the PT had been weak in the *sertão*, but the party hoped that Zero Hunger would win over the electorate, showing the rest of Brazil that Lula's flagship program was a success. Once the PT strategists in Brasília and Teresina realized that PT candidates were unlikely to win on their own, they planned to impose coalitions between these candidates and those of the catch-all PMDB (Rodrigo's party), the most prominent party in the *sertão*. But despite the state-level alliance between the PT and the PMDB in 2002 (the one that got Dias elected), most PMDB politicians were reluctant to ally with the PT in 2004 for these municipal elections. Mão Santa himself said in late 2003 that "There are only three things a person does once in their life: be born, die, and vote for the PT" (SenadoNoitícias 2003). Zero Hunger officials understood full well that their implementation strategy had alienated many a mayor. In March of 2004, many front-line officials argued that they needed to change tactics and "consolidate the list of beneficiaries (*Cadastro Único*) of income transfer programs … as an instrument … for the intervention of the public authority," that is, the *prefeituras* (Relatório Final 2004: 29). That same year, President Lula replaced Zero Hunger's technocratic director with a more politically able figure, who quickly diminished the role of the Management Committees and returned control over the Food Card beneficiary selection process to the mayors. But the damage had been done.

Certainly, Rodrigo did not forgive the PT administration. To his eyes, the PT had committed an act of corruption, a transgressive assault upon the same moral gradient that Zezinho's nephew had undermined by usurping his uncle's association presidency. They had bypassed him and given a resource—discretion over the selection of the Food Card beneficiaries—to Juraçi and others with lesser *presença*.

Rodrigo and the Hapless Anthropologist

Rodrigo disliked me from the beginning and eventually authorized a local bully to thump me on my head with a wooden club. I fled Passarinho

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embraced Governor Dias and the PT and given more support to the Zero Hunger program.

before that beating took place and then returned when my field assistant, Gilberto, told me that "things [had] cooled off," that is, that the 2004 municipal election had passed, and the fervent polarization of the municipality had subsided.

But let me back up. Rodrigo's dislike for me was not personal. It was in part a response to my association with the Zero Hunger program. I fully supported Zero Hunger's anti-poverty policies and was greatly impressed by the officials' egalitarian posture toward the program's beneficiaries. While the PT officials understood themselves to be more enlightened (*esclarecida*) than most *sertanejos*, they joked, drank, and flirted with them. They solicited criticism and inquired about the kinds of improvements that *sertanejo* people wanted. They followed up upon hearing from them. In addition to the Food Card program, the Lula administration launched the "One Million Cisterns" program that covered the rural landscape with 6000-liter cisterns, one for each rural household (Lindoso et al. 2018). The administration was fully aware that the filling of these cisterns during drought years would fall to local politicians who would use these water-favors to secure votes (Eiró and Lindoso 2015). To disrupt that pattern, the army (during the Rousseff presidency) organized federal payments for all local, water-delivering truck drivers. In addition to compensating them, the army required that drivers sign a statement promising that they were not elected officials. (Several regional trucker-politicians were prosecuted for lying in this regard.) The PT's "Light for All" program also expanded the electrical grid throughout Brazil, allowing for better toilets, refrigeration, and water pumps for garden irrigation. Piauí especially had been largely "in the dark," unlike many of its neighbors. I saw what the change did to people's lives, just as I saw the obvious nutritional improvements to people's bodies. I couldn't help but admire the PT government and identified with its front-line officials. And the *sertanejos* soon identified me with them, notwithstanding my protestations of political neutrality.

With respect to my place in municipal politics, here too my neutrality was compromised. My field assistant, Gilberto, had served under Rodrigo as a municipal security guard until Rodrigo insisted that he (and other municipal employees) sign a document agreeing to waive his salary for three months. (The *prefeitura* had been in arrears.) Gilberto and others tried to resist the mayor's pressure to sign the document, but his efforts cost him the mayor's favor. Rodrigo could not legally fire Gilberto (who had passed the civil service exam), but he could make his life miserable by reassigning him to guard a malfunctioning water tower in a remote

Afro-Brazilian village. "But Gilberto, while inconvenienced, said the village's "Black people (os negros) befriended me," and he later added, "and I organized a donation campaign to get them clothing and other things." That was Zezinho's village. It was Gilberto who introduced us. He also let me live in his house for several weeks before I rented the home next to his. I soon became his "brother," sometimes requesting the blessing from his mother and father when we visited them, and our constant bickering was the stuff of everyone's great amusement.

Gilberto claimed that he never understood the nature of my doctoral research. In his eyes, I was there "to help the people of the fields." As he saw it, the people of Passarinho needed to vote Rodrigo's group out of power for this to happen. I tried to avoid partisan strategizing, but it was all around me. In and out of my house walked members of the opposition coalition, always ready to do a favor and give me information—especially as the 2004 municipal campaign season "heated up." Rodrigo's allies avoided me for the most part—except for one town bully, who always glared at me menacingly.

One day, the local constable summoned me to the police station, where Rodrigo's lawyer was waiting. The constable and the lawyer told me that I had been meddling in local politics, that I should "respect Brazil's sovereignty" and confine my research to "matters of folk culture." They said they could not protect me if an aggrieved person were to run my motorcycle off the road one day. I took it as a threat at the time. In retrospect, I think they were sincere in their desire to protect me—and they were not wrong in asserting that I had become an intrusive, even a partisan, actor.

An hour after they let me go, another member from the opposition group showed up to my house to warn me that the bully was heading my way, carrying a stick with my name on it. I fled to Teresina, where I studied Zero Hunger from the comfort of an air-conditioned apartment. I returned to Passarinho after the municipal elections had passed and things in Passarinho had "cooled down." Rodrigo's would-be successor had been defeated, and the opposition had won.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how corruption within a patronage frame entails the sabotage of a gradient that runs from higher to lower authorities, each of whom is a fatherly patron "present" in the lives of those

"children" under his aegis. *Corrupção* may be committed by these authorities themselves, taking the form of "absence" or "softness," or against them, as a kind of usurpation of a father's *força*, a grabbing of a sacred currency and a rerouting of it to those who deserve it less.

I've argued that these local categories suggest a parallel between family hierarchy based on senior kins' proximity to God and political authority based on proximity to *o governo* (*presença*). A similar parallel inheres between the divine blessings that flow through senior kin and the *força* flowing from patron-politicians to loyal voters. These parallels account for the widespread cross-symbolism that makes all politicians "fathers." They also account for the religious undertones of political authority. Like the saints, a good patron (especially if he is also a doctor or priest) can work miracles. If reformers everywhere observe a stubborn attachment to atavistic patronage in their nations' heartlands, that may be because there is no request, no favor, that a fatherly patron (like God himself) will rule "out of bounds."

Seen through the lens of patronage, the PT's Zero Hunger implementation strategy could easily be construed as a form of corruption, as the wrongful re-routing of downward-flowing resources away from the municipality's rightful father and toward his lesser adversaries, such as the union leader. Instead of giving Rodrigo the opportunity to nest himself within this new flow of resources, the PT bypassed him. This was no accident. The PT was attempting to undermine the mayor, or rather the mayoral authority that it equated with political corruption. In other words, PT policies like Zero Hunger were intended not only to bring material improvements to *sertanejos*' lives (which they did); they were also meant to dismantle a local form of corruption in the name of transparency and democracy.

Later in this book (Chapter Three), I'll explore the *sertanejos*' uptake of the PT's assault on corruption, showing how the party undermined the patronage norms I've discussed here. But the PT's impact on *sertanejo* political culture is hard to discern because the patronage logic I've been at pains to describe was already under pressure from other factors, even before the officials' arrival in 2003. These other factors, which were more internal to local life, compelled *sertanejos* to reflect critically on patronage politics not from the standpoint introduced by the PT but from the standpoint of friendship. In the next chapter, I explore the emergence of friendship politics (amicopolitics) to complete my analysis of the *sertanejo* political culture that PT officials found when they first arrived in places like Passarinho.

CHAPTER TWO

The Politics of Friends

One morning in January 2004, Gilberto, my field assistant (and next-door neighbor), came to my bedroom window.

"Aaron, wake up! Wake up, man."

"Gilberto, it's still early!"

"Aaron, the truck has arrived with the shingles [for my roof]. I want you to come and help us put them on."

I knew what he wanted, but I wanted to hide under the covers.

When I made my way to Gilberto's backyard, I saw four men unloading the ceramic shingles destined to cover the awning that Gilberto had scaffolded to shade his hammock and chickens. Two were Gilberto's brothers, one was his brother-in-law, and the fourth, he simply called his friend (*amigo*). It took only a few minutes to finish unloading and stacking the shingles. After that, two of the men climbed the scaffold and began laying the shingles that the others were passing them from below. My help was clearly unnecessary at this point, but Gilberto insisted that I remain. A comment he made later helped to explain why: "I hear people saying, Aaron, that you are my 'little father' [*painho*]. I won't endure that shame."

Gilberto was well-regarded among his peers. He was witty, helpful, and fiercely intelligent despite having only a fourth-grade education. While he was technically my assistant, he often directed our activities and mentored me in my interactions with "the people of the fields." But the asymmetry in our relationship remained clear. It was common

Figure 6. Men Loading Roofing Tiles onto a Cart (photo by Aaron Ansell, 2004).

knowledge that Gilberto was only able to afford the new shingles because of the salary I paid him. The hierarchy that situation implied was less about the fact that I, as his employer, directed his activities and more about the fact that in Brazil's *sertão*, to be given a job is to be given a favor, to be cared for by a *painho*. But Gilberto and I were the same age, and he was even ahead of me in his life stage; he was married with a child, while I was single and childless. By orchestrating a scenario in which I labored alongside him, Gilberto repositioned us as equals, as friends (*amigos*). And this was not just a one-time show. Gilberto resisted my efforts to buy his lunch when we were out and about on our many excursions. "You do your part and I do my part," he once told me, as he took out his wallet to pay for his own soda.

I didn't understand why Gilberto would be ashamed of my paternalism, given the prestige associated with being positioned under a more powerful person whose confidence and protection one enjoys. If caring for someone (as a parent) was commendable, why then would being cared for (as a child) be disparaged? To an Anglo-American readership, the answer might seem obvious: Children are dependent; parents are

not. Yet, within the patriarchal idiom discussed in the prior chapter, acknowledging one's need for senior kin and other father figures is not only a show of respect but also an affirmation of one's belonging to a moral community. "Everybody needs a patron for to be is to belong" (Piliavsky 2020: 31). It is only when one steps outside the patronage hierarchy (the moral gradient of *presença*, as I described it in the previous chapter) and frames proper relations as egalitarian that having a "little father" becomes shameful. Gilberto wanted us to behave toward one another as equals, despite our socioeconomic difference. And the equality he wanted was usually not that of a contract between two parties but an equality between friends (and sometimes "brothers").[1] It was a form of equality predicated on our willingness to admit our mutual need for one another, and thus our mutual vulnerability to the world. In my first book, I called this "intimate hierarchy" (Ansell 2014), though I now think that term conflates those vulnerabilities cast in the idiom of patronage with those spoken of as the stuff of friendship.[2]

1. As is the case in many parts of the world, siblingship in Brazil's *sertão* is often used as a metaphor to express close friendship. The reason, I think, pertains to the principle of unconditionality, a lack of choice in the matter. To claim a friend as a "brother" is to renounce one's option to ever part ways with him. Conversely, *sertanejos* sometimes describe a brother or sister as their "best friend." The reason, I think, pertains to the principle of selectivity. To call one's sibling "friend" is to assert that one would opt to associate with the person voluntarily, even if not compelled to do so by the demands of kinship.
2. In my first book, I used the term "intimate hierarchy" to caption relations of mutual vulnerability and mutual support between persons of different economic means. With this concept, I intended to correct a problem in the literature on patronage—the overemphasis on the power asymmetry in these relations that led scholars to infer the constant workings of coercion at election time. While acknowledging that such coercion often occurs, I nonetheless argued that a patron's backstage revelation of need (e.g., for votes, for transgressions to be kept secret, etc.) to a client had a levelling effect on their rapport. In responding to my book, Kees Koonings objected that such expressions of vulnerability likely amounted merely to the "cloaking of power differentials in a display of cordiality" (Koonings 2016: 413–14). He made a good point. But the interactional parity that I was referring to goes far beyond back-slapping cordiality; it implies that the person of inferior economic status enjoys the right to critique the superior, to yell at them in public without fear of being called insolent or disloyal (as exemplified in Chapter Two). Still, Koonings's criticism has led

This chapter is about the idiom of friendship (*amizade*) and the reckoning of electoral politics through that idiom, what I call "amicopolitics." My argument, in brief, is that there has been a general shift away from patronage and toward amicopolitics, although the two are co-present in Brazil's *sertão* (as in many other places) and share important features. Amicopolitics, as I'll argue here, figures the moral gradations of politics differently from patronage and, concomitantly, figures corruption differently. This then is the second "moment" I analyze in this book, the time of amicopolitics, beginning roughly in 1963 with the passage of the Rural Workers' Statute (more below). And as I'll show in the next chapter, this shift impacted *sertanejos*' reception of the PT officials and their anti-poverty policies when these were introduced in 2003.

The most striking feature of amicopolitics is that it is both hierarchical and egalitarian. It is hierarchical in that it ranks people according to principles that afford them greater or lesser prestige and this ranking generally maps to disparities of wealth and power. The person (usually a man) known as the best of friends is the head of a municipal political coalition and often the mayor (or aspiring mayor) and is usually wealthier than most. And there are gradations of friends within the coalition, people differentially recognized for having more friendships than others. It is egalitarian in that these highly placed friends canalize resources (private capital, government jobs, sway over law enforcement, etc.) in ways that sustain and build a community of friends, that is, the coalition, village, or even the municipality reckoned as a group of equals. A good friend's expenditures of resources (figured as *força*) set an example for others to do the same, leading (ideally) to a group whose many dyadic (two-person) exchange relations eventually give rise to a scenario of "generalized exchange" wherein all members of the group give to one another without keeping tabs on individual debts. In effect, each person believes that a favor done for another, even if not paid back by that individual, will eventually return to them from someone else in the

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me to rethink the way "intimate hierarchy" elides key distinctions between a patron's need for votes and a friend's need for money, labor, or other material favors. Here I suggest that political alliances can be grounded in either the intimacies of patronage or those of friendship. This application of one or the other model surely tracks with the degree of socioeconomic distance between them, but they are both available as folk models of behavior between which *sertanejo* people choose when engaging one another politically.

group: This "belief is the basis of trust, and … the whole system exists only because the group adopting it is prepared … to speculate" that each member is equally honorable (Lévi-Strauss [1949] 1969: 265).

As with patronage, amicopolitical ethics rely on the idea of *força*, an abstract term that *sertanejos* use to refer to concrete goods and services—often those given by politicians to electors. But the currency of *força*, while continuing to refer to the physical and metaphysical vitality of powerful people, takes on new meaning in the amicopolitical context. Or better, it has taken on a new source, still God first but then, "us" (*nós*). *Força* comes from, and goes to, those groups that are the most *unido* (united), and the characteristic of "being *unido*" also applies to individuals, that is, those people who excel at holding their group of friends together through selflessness and dependability

To better comprehend the tension between hierarchy and egalitarianism in amicopolitics, I look to Joel Robbins's (1994) essay on "Equality as a Value" in Melanesia. Melanesian societies, while known for their egalitarianism, nonetheless feature "big-men," those who gain influence through the entrepreneurial forging of many egalitarian exchange relations. Like the Melanesian big-men, *sertanejo* politician-friends—I'll call them amicopoliticians—"produce their superiority only through use of the idiom of equality, only by having more equivalent relationships than others. In this case, Orwell's formula that 'some are more equal than others,' is perhaps not a logical scandal" (42). One reason George Orwell's formula (from his 1945 novel, *Animal Farm*) works is that the graded superiority of the amicopolitician (or big-man) is measured in terms of the vibrancy of the egalitarian gifting they inspire among others in the group. Another reason is that the amicopolitician's graded superiority as the first among equals depends on him not showcasing himself as superior. He must figure himself as the center of a circle or as the common nodal point of a lateral network, not as a king atop a mountain.

One way to differentiate between this amicopolitical idiom and that of patronage is to compare two stereotypical responses to a request. When a fatherly patron agrees to a request from a subordinate, the reply is "leave it with me" (*deixe comigo*); when a friend agrees, they say, "That which depends on me will be done," usually shortened to "That which depends on me" (*o que depender de mim*). The former, patronage-styled phrase implies that the agency lies entirely with the patronal superior; the latter, amicopolitical phrase suggests that the agency needed to fulfill the request is distributed across a group of persons. Each has their own part to play, and all parts are translated into expressions of *força*. Each

gift of *força* to another in the group is, at the same time, a centripetal movement of *força* toward the center of the group, a furtherance of the group's moral project, that of getting its candidates elected so they can "bring improvements" to the municipality.

As an amicopolitician uses their *força* to enhance the egalitarian collective, they work against their own superiority, melting into the group as just another friend. The amicopolitical gradient, like all gradients, has a self-cancelling tendency that moral actors work to offset in order to perpetuate the gradient. Wanting their amicopolitician to gain special renown (to win election), others in the group must deploy their *força* to buttress him. They celebrate him in conversations with others, saying that their leader is "liked by all," is "a friend to everyone," is "friend to his friends," and so forth. And when their leader is besmirched by rivals during electoral campaigns (as is inevitable), these ordinary friends rise to defend their reputations, help them keep their promises to voters, and thus reproduce their distinction as the "first among equals," as the English expression goes.[3]

The shift from patronage to amicopolitics inspired a new way of conceiving corruption that constituted a revolutionary inversion of the ethics of patronage. If a good patron uses his *força* to project his presence into the lives of others, a good amicopolitician uses his *força* to diminish his personal importance relative to that of the collective. Accusations of corruption in the amicopolitical paradigm therefore amount to self-aggrandizement at the expense of the group, what *sertanejos* call *desunião* ("disunity"). The person who is guilty of amicopolitical corruption is the one who defies the principle of selfless devotion to the group, a principle normally used, paradoxically, to rank the members of that group.

In the next section, I examine the discourse and practices of one Passarinho politician, Henrique, who became Passarinho's mayor after

3. In December of 2003, a hilarious series of short, satirical videos called "Como é amigo não fale mal do meu prefeito" (Because s/he is a friend don't speak badly of my mayor) were launched from the account @ Valmir3463. Set somewhere in the *sertão*, the videos depicted incidents of someone who becomes irate when they happen upon some failed infrastructure (e.g. a pothole, a trash-ridden street). Just as the person starts to take out their smartphone to film the problem and blame the mayor, another person rushes over and haplessly tries to fix the problem while pleading, "Don't record this. The mayor is my friend. He just called me this second to tell me to fix it. It's not his fault," etc.

Rodrigo's second term ended. I then turn to *sertanejo* constructions of friendship outside the arena of electoral politics, focusing on agrarian labor relations as the basis for political friendships. Following that, I discuss some of the historical factors that likely increased the prominence of amicopolitical ethics over the ethics of patronage during the last half of the twentieth century. I argue that scholars should resist conflating patronage with amicopolitics even in situations where the two sets of norms coexist "on the ground," as they currently do in Brazil's *sertão*. Next, I explore amicopolitical models of corruption, analyzing two accounts of corruption allegations. One of these involves the roll-out of the PT's Zero Hunger program, and the other involves the more routine management of intra-coalitional rivalries during a municipal campaign. Finally, I compare amicopolitical and patronage models of corruption using the gradient degradation framework.

Henrique, Everybody's Friend

It was during one of my first visits to Passarinho's "rural zone" that I first met the municipality's future mayor, Henrique. The man who took me there was Tomás, an agronomist from Passarinho who had once worked alongside the union leader, Juraçí, organizing community development associations in the region's villages. Tomás was also an elected member of Passarinho's Zero Hunger Management Committee and was charged by the committee with canvassing the rural zone to determine each family's level of hardship, information that the committee would use to determine which households would receive the first batches of the program's cash transfer, Food Card. Tomás drove us past a village house where a woman stood sweeping the dust from the earthen area outside her door. "Kill a chicken for us for lunch, Senhora Rita," he said with a smile, and indeed, we returned hours later for a cooked meal, which we ate in a large room with several long tables and benches. It was a sort of cross between a family home and a restaurant, a common blurring of public and private space in this part of Brazil. About six other people (all men) ate at the other tables, talking jovially with one another and mostly ignoring me … except for the one man who sat silently, staring at me with a conspiratorial grin. "This is Henrique. He is *our* candidate for mayor," Tomás said. I grew nervous. Did Tomás intend this "our" to include me, inducting me into a partisan coalition during my first week in the field? As soon as he made the introduction, Tomás withdrew, and so did the

other men at our table, leaving me alone with Henrique. "Everybody likes this guy," one of them assured me as he left.

Henrique was about fifty years old, sun-weathered, and had a scar running down his forehead. He looked to be descended from the Dutch colonizers who ruled this part of Brazil from 1630 to 1654, although I later learned that he was affiliated with one of the two politically dominant, Portuguese-descended ranching families. Like Rodrigo, he had come of age before the decentralization of primary schools to the municipal government, that is, before the children of the rural poor were taught to read. He inherited only a medium-sized ranch but had made a lot of money on the cotton market. By the time I met him, Henrique owned a ranch of over two hundred hectares, many cattle, and a butchery in neighboring Princesa Municipality.

Henrique spoke softly with a wry smile that never left his face. He winked once or twice and peppered his talk with innuendos that were hard for me to decode. I bungled my explanation of what I was doing in his municipality, which made him smile more. "I like your talk. Let me give you a ride back to town," he said. As I got settled in his pickup—it was just the two of us—I asked where the safety belt (*cinto de seugrança*) was. He reached across me and shut my door, looked me in the eye and, with another wry smile, said, "The *segurança* [safety, security] around here is us!"

Henrique always nodded when I insisted that my research required me to remain neutral vis-à-vis his impending election, in October 2004, but he never stopped treating me like a close confidant, even letting me record conversations between us in which he freely discussed the "work" he did for communities, the *força*, favors, and the assistance he gave to people and the votes he received from them in return. He reminded me of my own recently deceased father in his appearance and demeanor, in his aspirations and his shortcomings. I came to feel protective toward him and those feelings surely compromised my intended neutrality vis-à-vis municipal politics.

Henrique's work and favors eventually helped him win the mayorship in a contest against his own brother (Mayor Rodrigo's godson), who was never quite able to inherit his godfather's loyal following. Henrique's allied candidates for town council also defeated his sister, Juraçí, who ran for the council that year. As discussed in the previous chapter, Juraçí was the president of the Rural Workers' Union and the founding president of the local chapter of the PT with which Henrique had once been allied. She (along with Tomás) was the most outspoken member of the Zero Hunger Management Committee.

Henrique considered himself to be a new kind of politician whose way of relating to "the people" differentiated him from the domineering style of Rodrigo's generation. Henrique also inveighed against the region's fanatical partisanship—*sertanejos* call it "the sickness" (*a doença*)—that overtakes small municipalities during campaign seasons. It was important to Henrique that I understood that his *força* was not reserved for his allied electors; he gave his *força* to anyone, including those who adhered to the incumbent, rival coalition. "I am everyone's friend [*amigo*]," he repeated.

I doubted Henrique's claim that he was "everybody's friend." He clearly prioritized his own electors after he became mayor and, even before that, as a candidate who used his own personal funds to "help people." But he wasn't exactly lying to me either. My reading of Henrique's claim is that he was open to friendship with everyone, including Rodrigo's electors, and that he would take the initiative to "help" those who voted for his rival, hoping that they would see his virtue and switch sides. "But I never impose (*impor*) or oblige (*obrigar*)," he insisted.

In the dialogue below (from 2008), Henrique highlights the theme of friendship as we discuss his participation in the region's many charity auctions that villages host to raise money for community members in crisis. Local politicians often donate prizes (mostly cooked chickens, cakes, etc.) to these auctions and then show up at the auctions to bid on those prizes—sometimes against one another in a kind of tournament of generosity. Henrique had a reputation for winning food prizes and then distributing them to those gathered in attendance.

Aaron:	How do you decide who gets to eat these prizes?
Henrique:	I leave it all on the table for everyone to be free to eat and participate. Only those who don't want to eat it refuse to eat.
Aaron:	Ok, but standing around the table are people from your side and people from the other side too …
Henrique:	Not a problem. My politics is like this: There's no "our [people] over here" and "those [people] over there." No, I work differently from those guys [Rodrigo's coalition]. It's my pleasure. I mean, let's forget the question of elections and coalitions. Let's use the word "friends." Everybody is my friend. I don't care whose side a person is on. And the true political conquest is born from this kind of work, this attitude.

Aaron: But if somebody from the other side sees one of their own eating at your table, won't they suspect that this person will leave their side and join yours?

Henrique: Sure, sometimes people are ashamed to come and eat my food because they voted for the other side. But I say, "No, it's not like that. The table is here, feel free." In politics, there are some people who feel ashamed to come close because of their political affiliation. But this has changed a lot over the years, Aaron. When you first arrived, it was one man dominating everything. People from his [Rodrigo's] side pressured people: "I do for you, but you are my prisoner (*presa a mim*) … I do this for you, but you must give me the vote." When I go someplace, nobody comes to request (*pedir*) from me, not one soda, because they know that I give to my friends without anyone asking (*pedir*).

Henrique's final assertion that "nobody comes to request (*pedir*) anything from me" captures a central aspect of his self-description; to be Henrique's friend is to have the benefit of his generosity, at the same time feeling equal to, and uplifted by, Henrique. As his friend, one does not have to *pedir*, a verb that typically refers to interactions with politicians in which the elector visits the politician in their home, receives hospitality in the form of coffee and snacks, and discloses a problem with a plea for help. Reciprocally, during the campaign season, candidates visit electors in their homes, receive similar hospitality, and ask for (*pedir*) the votes of household members. In both cases, the *pedido* contains a confession of need that cultivates a certain mutual trust. But it can also be an act of subservience. Henrique idealizes himself as a politician whose assistance is so proactive that it spares his supporters this embarrassingly confessional posture.

Henrique knew he had to walk a fine line between generosity and self-aggrandizement, especially given how wealthy he was. He sought to distinguish himself from other wealthy politicians who threw their money around to show off. When we discussed charity auctions, he critiqued the region's wealthier politicians who showed up with wads of cash and outbid "the people." It was fine to show off one's *força* when bidding against other elites, he told me. "Even when they win, I'll make them pay 100 *reais* for their roasted chicken! Everything for the people." But he assured me that as soon as "a little group comes to bid, I drop out,"

meaning that when small farmers (from the rival coalition) pool their money to bid against him, he knows the contest will be widely construed as a battle between rich and poor, between ambitious individualism and humble group solidarity, between the old way of hierarchy and the new way of egalitarianism, and so he wisely dropped out of such contests (Ansell 2010).

In general, Henrique's discourse sketched a set of binary oppositions that he used to differentiate his style of friendship politics from Rodrigo's patronage style, a distinction that he then mapped to the region's history, claiming that his way was the new, more emancipatory way of "doing politics." The old imperious politics divided "the people" into "our side" and "their side," while the new politics was "open to all." It's not that Henrique ignored coalitional divides in the municipality; it's that he saw egalitarian friendship as the solution to these divisions. Henrique thought of himself as a man who made continual overtures of friendship to everyone. He put the food "on the table for everyone to be free to eat and participate" even if they usually ate at his rival's table. Henrique insisted that "nobody is locked in [*trancado*] anymore." He would say, "each one votes with their conscience, not out of obligation" (and see Villela 2008: 66–74 on the "conscientious vote" in the *sertão*).

Henrique's discourse resonated with the political philosophy of Danielle Allen. Allen is interested in friendship as a virtue and seeks to pinpoint the contribution that friendship can make to democracy, acknowledging that it can spoil democratic impartiality by motivating favoritism. She defends relations of friendship in political terms by insisting that they can serve as the training grounds where citizens learn how to handle the problem of conflicting desire without recourse to domination (2004: 128). They engage in a form of reciprocity in which each desires both their own fulfillment and that of the other person, what she calls "equitable self-interest," and they engage in forms of equal sharing (of benefits and burdens) and behavioral parity that Allen glosses as "equal recognition from the other" and "equal agency in the relationship" (2004: 129).

Thus, friends who are unequal in terms of wealth or rank may nonetheless assert their moral and behavioral parity in the face of those differences. For Henrique, his wealth did not separate him from "the people"; it was the product of years of fair and honorable dealings with others "even when I was just a street vendor [competing] alongside other street vendors. I gave everyone consideration, and they were considerate with me." Henrique, at his best, identified other people's well-being

with his own, similar to how Aristotle understood the friend as a "second self" (*Nichomachean Ethics* Book 9, par. 5). Indeed, Henrique's wry remark about my unnecessary safety belt echoed Aristotle's argument that "if men are friends there is no need of justice between them," because friendship accomplishes everything that justice does, and more (ibid., Book 8, par. 4). For Aristotle, Allen, and Henrique alike, there is no doubt that friendship can corrode into the minimalist quid pro quo arrangements that destroy polities, but it still offers hope for political redemption—"Only friendship teaches citizens how to start over again with symbolically significant acts that regenerate trust where it has disintegrated" (Allen 2004: 136).

In the next section, I explore friendship in its agrarian context, in the "day-trading" arrangements that I witnessed while living in my friend Zezinho's village.

Zezinho and Rustic Friendship

I met my best friend, Zezinho, in June of 2003, when Gilberto took me to his village, "a little piece of Africa here in the *sertão*," some called it. At the time, Zezinho was the president of his village's development association and would remain so for another year until his nephew defeated him in an election (see prior chapter). Zezinho's village, Caixa de Água, was, unlike most others in this municipality, predominantly Black (though that label is problematic in Brazil[4]). Gilberto and Zezinho were

4. The vocabulary of race and racial differences differs between Brazil and the United States, even if those differences are often overstated. The classical formulation is that race identification in Brazil is a matter of degree. Accordingly, few people are either Black (*Negro*) or White (*Branco*); most understand themselves to be somewhere in between and classify themselves as brown (*mulato/a*) or brunette (*moreno/a*)—to say nothing of other racial groups (e.g., Asian, Indigenous, etc.). This was the famously optimistic theory of the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre ([1946] 1964), whose formulation of Brazilian "racial democracy" amounts to a celebration of racial blurring. But the correlation between poverty and skin color in Brazil is unmistakable, as are expressions of colorism, such as an aesthetic preference for straighter hair. There are also traces of binary (Black or White) racial classification subtending the color spectrum (Sheriff 2001). Up through the mid 1970s, village dances held in Southeast Piauí featured two separate dance halls, *salon dos brancos* and *salon*

also friends. The two had become acquainted while Gilberto was working as a municipal security guard assigned to protect the village's malfunctioning water tower. During his time there, Gilberto worked with Zezinho to organize charity events benefiting the villagers, and later, when the PT officials arrived in Passarinho with Zero Hunger resources in hand, he made sure they (and I) knew about Caixa de Água's poverty. Indeed, Zezinho credited Gilberto with bringing a joint World Bank/Zero Hunger chicken-raising project to his village.

I went to live in Caixa de Água for four months in 2004 to study the chicken project's roll-out. I rented a house next to Zezinho's and ate every meal at his home. His wife, Elena, cooked for us. She and their children ate separately, though she sometimes joined our chats—which often went late into the evenings. Zezinho and Elena operated a sub-rosa home commerce selling liters of cooking oil, white rice, manioc flour, industrialized soap, tampons, and candy. This put me in touch with many village residents and showed me how people sought to forge upstanding lives against the constant backdrop of hardship, exhaustion, and trickery.

My relationship with Zezinho revealed the distinctly agrarian dimensions of *sertanejo* friendship and the way these agrarian friendships fed into electoral politics. Central to rural men's friendships was the routine and frequent exchange of day labor on one another's fields, a mode of reciprocity that, when sustained, became a vehicle for the expression of shared moral commitments that often translated into the realm of electoral politics. I could never participate in those exchanges as I had no land and was hopeless at farm labor. But my relationship with Zezinho was nonetheless influenced by some features of the agrarian friendship prototype, and our constant proximity allowed me to observe how he lived his friendships with other rural men, especially his day-laboring partner.

When I arrived, Zezinho told me that I was welcome to stay in Caixa de Água for as long as I wished but that he expected me to "work for the people" while I was there. In particular, I was to help him procure running water, land titles, and a health post for the village residents. We pursued the water first. As with many *sertanejo* communities, Caixa de Água's women and children collected their drinking water from

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dos negros, and only attractive Black women could move freely between them. Other important English-language sources on race in Brazil include Collins (2015), Hanchard (1994), Mitchell (2018), Roth-Gordon (2016), Sansone (2003), Skidmore (1993), and Telles (2004).

open-air reservoirs and water pits. The region's subterranean water veins were flush but risky if one chose the wrong place to dig a well. However, if we could pipe water from the main reservoir in the village lowlands up 20 meters or so to its most populated area, we could set up another water tower in the midst of it, which could save hours of daily labor. It was no easy endeavor. Every day, Zezinho and I rode my motorcycle an hour to and from the municipal hub to confer with technical specialists and representatives from the mayor's office. (Mayor Rodrigo gave us an audience but was skeptical and reluctant to use municipal resources to help us.)

Zezinho interspersed our work on the water project with his own responsibilities both to his fields and to the association's chicken-raising project. What concerned him most was his relationship with his labor partner, a cousin with whom he had entered into a day-trading (*troca de dia*) arrangement. The two men took turns working together on one or the other's fields. As Zezinho put it, "I join my *força* with his on his fields and then he gives me his *força* on mine." Such relationships often rotate on a yearly basis, though people may choose to renew them. The choice depends on whether the day-trading partner has been *unido* (united) or *desunido* when called upon to go to the fields, whether he has exerted his fullest *força* in the fields or been soft (*mole*), such as by calling for lots of breaks, cutting off early, working slowly, or opting for less physically demanding tasks. Zezinho was moderately satisfied with his cousin but grumbled that he could never prevail on the man to get an early start in the mornings.

By contrast, Zezinho was scrupulous in preparing himself on the nights before working on his cousin's *roça* (field), planning the day's labor and setting aside (or borrowing) the necessary tools. On the occasions when our adventures took him away from the village, Zezinho would notify his day-trading partner personally. (There were no cellular phones, landlines, or computers then.) He would then come back saying that the man had tasked him with the procurement of some material (fencing wire) sold in the town hub while he and I were there, which Zezinho would carry out.

When I asked if he would renew his day-trading arrangement with his cousin, Zezinho demurred. "You know you have a true friend when you work with a man who is always united with you." I pushed back, "Does this man need to be your friend? Can't he just be a good person to work with?" Zezinho replied, "The one thing brings the other. Take our friendship, Aaron," and he proceeded to discuss our relationship as a

model of unity between two people who work to "procure" things for the village so that "one day, God willing, we'll get there," meaning the village will advance in socioeconomic terms.

The people who come together "in *união*" may be separated by wealth, status, or kin rank. I had heard the term applied to families organized along patriarchal lines. But when people would speak of their collective action, they used phrases emphasizing mutual activity, such as "they are all in alliance [*combinado*] with one another." The same was true for cooperation among the members of community development associations (though such cooperation was more fraught). Village neighbors were only too aware of the differences in land and livestock holdings among them, but they downplayed these. Certainly, in discussing our friendship, Zezinho downplayed the tremendous wealth and educational gulf that separated us—though it became salient at certain moments, as it was when I left his village. (I had the means to travel and live elsewhere; he didn't.) Nonetheless, for Zezinho, our *união* was a relation between two men who strived to be equal and allied moral agents despite our economic inequality.[5]

Some nights, Zezinho's cousin would come in drunk and complain of his meager fields and heavy toils, but he shied away from overt comparisons with Zezinho. He would cheer himself up quickly, citing his unwavering faith in God and good grace to have at his side Zezinho, whom he praised while looking at me with intense, blood-shot eyes, laying a heavy hand on Zezinho's small frame. "Anything he says, you can put your faith in it. He's *unido*, a forward-looking man [*homen pra frente*]." Zezinho clearly found him tedious on these occasions, but he never failed to return the compliments in just as manful a tone. One time, when his own words had carried him into the depths, the cousin gestured to the plastic container of fried manioc flour that *sertanejos* sprinkle over their meals.

5. This aspect of *sertanejo* friendship, that of a shared moral enterprise that binds friends together, was captured by the novelist and theologian C. S. Lewis, for whom friendships arose from a common vision of the world. Lewis (1960) writes, "Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have some common insight or interest … among those early hunters and warriors (only a few) saw what the others did not; saw that the deer was beautiful as well as edible, that hunting was fun as well as necessary, dreamed that his Gods might be not only powerful but holy" (65).

Cousin: Look here, *americano*. When the rains are good, life is peaceful here, but when God doesn't send the rains, we have only this [holds up container]. If it weren't for this little thing here, the belly would never fill.

Zezinho: It's true. It's true! We have learned to be strong here. I can work for three days without eating. And my cousin has a lot of *força* as well.

Cousin: Yes, it is like this. But trust in God that the rains will come. God is good.

Frequently, both men would make moral claims about themselves, affirming that they were not "ambitious" to "grow" (in wealth, in politics) because they "were no better than anybody." In this way, the two men maintained an ethic of humble parity and masculine equivalence. What brought parity to their relationship was the willingness of each to labor reliably for the other, for each to bring his *força* to the other man's fields when duty called him.

In this patriarchal, agrarian society, it is male labor in the fields (*roça*), rather than female work in the house (*casa*), that is viewed as prototypical and most expressive of the essence of working people (see Godoi 1999: 90). Thus, rural people call themselves *gente da roça* (people of the fields). And rural Brazilians endow the fruits of labors in the fields with honor that they do not accord to household labor. As the anthropologist Klaas Woortmann notes, the *roça* and *terra* are the sources of abundant, collectively enjoyable, and therefore *moral* wealth. By contrast, "in business (*negócio*) one comes out winning and another comes out losing … only the gains obtained from work on the land (*terra*) … [are] morally legitimate" (Woortmann 1988: 38). Moral exchange among men is thus idealized as a form of agrarian solidarity rather than as a system of debt, credit, and hierarchical dependency.

While both men denied political ambition, the sorts of claims they made had political implications. At the level of village politics, Zezinho's cousin would proclaim that he would always buy his rice at Zezinho's home commerce and would always, now and forever, vote for Zezinho as association president. The same agrarian idioms also informed municipal electoral politics. As Beatriz Heredia notes, exchanges between politicians and ordinary people "involve habitual things, those that make up daily life, such as agricultural labor, loans for tools, help with domestic activities" (1996: 63). What makes amicopoliticians distinct from an ordinary agrarian friend is that the scope of their favors surpasses these

"habitual things"; amicopoliticians procure "goods only acquired outside these communities" with larger amounts of capital that no doubt strain the egalitarian terms of these political friendships. In such a situation, the vote becomes the form of maintaining relational equality through the repayment of what can otherwise not be repaid (Heredia 1996: 63).

This was the vision of political friendship that underlay much of Henrique's discourse. He would speak of himself as though he labored alongside people like Zezinho and other "small producers," joining his *força* with theirs to "improve life" in Passarinho. And he would speak of the votes he received from such people as shows of their *força* which he needed to keep the group united. I wager that the amicopolitical imagination takes the friendships forged through shared agrarian labor as the inspiration for political alliances and the currency flows that maintain their "unity." To be a good friend is to be a "united" person, one who undertakes collaborative ventures for the common good. A friend gives you his *força* when your field demands it. Indeed, a good friend "never measures the *força*," meaning both that he never goes soft (*mole*) or relaxed (*relaxado*) and that he never keeps tabs on the sum of *força* he gives in expectation of any return. And no matter how far he rises, he knows that he is "nothing without God."

The anthropologist Ashley Lebner argues that in Northeast Brazil, friendship is not a secular concept (as I have depicted it) but a Christian one; Christ is the model of a friend who gives material "help" with purity of "intention and 'good will.' And this purity of intention is why … God is the best friend" (2012: 503). Lebner's point is not that *sertanejos* idealize their politicians as altruistic givers, but rather the opposite. Ordinary people want their politicians to aspire to the standard of Christ. They tolerate a certain amount of failure, knowing that "all human friendships are ultimately flawed, false, and insincere" (Lebner 2012: 503). But they nonetheless judge them by the ideal of disinterested help. I think this Christian motif constitutes a separate inspiration for *sertanejo* friendship alongside the agrarian one and I would add to Lebner's insight that this divine inspiration can also be seen in the ideal of tirelessness, that is, that a good friend is one whose body and soul are always animated by the Holy Spirit to help their fellows.

Sertanejos also attribute a forward-looking quality to moral friendships. A good friend is willing to break away from tradition to try new farming techniques, bank loans, churches—new ways of pursuing collaborations, of being united in ways their parents and grandparents had not been. Sometimes these pursuits appear selfish. But they attest to a

person's desire to pursue mutually beneficial relations with others, and thus to the benefits of following them.

That friendship is the province of forward-looking Christians implies that *sertanejos* understand that their world is changing in ways that connect to electoral politics. Something good is happening. They see a virtuous shift from patronage toward friendship as the ideal form of the personal, elector-politician relationship. Many people reported to me several changes already happening in 2003 (before the PT took office). For example, men could no longer command their wives and co-resident children in how to vote. Women and youth "won't accept it anymore," as Gilberto explained—a remark that his sister quickly rejoined with some lament: "and our people don't respect our parents as we once did."

Whether as a celebration or as a critique, the claim that a more egalitarian world was emerging alongside a hierarchical world of patronage was to be heard throughout Passarinho. What was called for was not something radically new but rather an already existing set of egalitarian elements that were finding their moment. The historical conditions had become right. I explore those conditions below.

History Bending toward Friendship

What caused the shift from patronage to amicopolitics? It's not only one thing. It seems that during the last seventy years a coterie of economic, sociological, and governmental factors conspired to push *sertanejos* toward more egalitarian ethics and to induce in them some distaste for paternalistic hierarchy.

The Fragmentation of the Cattle Estates

Prior to the twentieth century, Piauí was largely comprised of extensive cattle ranches that interacted with the state and rural laborers through some form of patronage. The Portuguese crown had given these estates to settlers during the early eighteenth century in an effort to signal the Portuguese hold on this part of the New World in the face of Spanish, Dutch, and French contenders (Silva 2020). These settlers decimated many of the Indigenous groups living in Piauí's *sertão*, forcibly integrating many of them into the rural workforce (Lima 2020: 10). Pistol-carrying cowboys maintained order among tenant farmers on the cattle

ranches and incorporated the workers into the landowners' families as *agregados* (hangers on), godchildren, and other fictive kin relations.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Piauí experienced an export boom that destabilized these estates. Large landowners found global markets for rubber, babassu palm, cotton, and carnauba wax.[6] According to one contemporary, "Piauí abandoned the Civilization of Leather and entered a Civilization … measured in terms of carnauba" (Araújo 2008: 201). Once abandoned, many of the grazing lands were absorbed by the rural poor who became smallholders rather than tenant farmers. Indeed, by the time I arrived in rural Piauí, much of the "rural zone" was owned by smallholder families possessing fewer than 50 hectares each.

There were other economic dynamics that promoted the proliferation of small subsistence farms. The federal government's effort to keep consumer goods cheap for Brazil's burgeoning urban working class led to a policy of import-substituting industrialization (ISI), which taxed imports to protect domestic food production. While ISI protected Brazil's developing southern food producers from more advanced global competitors, it did not protect the less developed northeastern economies from these southern domestic competitors (Martins et al. 1982: 98–9, 109). Piauiense landowners lost economic power, further causing "the number of agricultural establishments [to grow] precipitously … [with a concomitant] reduction in the average size of agricultural establishments" (Martins et al. 1982: 114). Land fragmentation put pressure on the seignorial landowning family with its coterie of dependents and likely contributed to the smallholders' taste for household autonomy from heavy-handed patron-landlords. Today, one hears Piauiense cultivators say that they are "passionate about their farms because I don't like working for others."

The Decline of the "Locked-in" Voter

According to the famous sociologist and statesman Vitor Nunes Leal, the declining economic power of the large cattle estates made the rural elite dependent on state and federal resources to sustain their control over the poor. This certainly didn't bring patronage to an end, but it

6. Carnaúba wax was used in candles, medicines, plaster, soap, phonograph records, and lubricants and had certain applications in Europe's industrial war machines (Araújo 2008: 199).

likely helped the rural poor to gain some leverage within the patronage paradigm.

During their heyday, municipal elites could count on the votes of their "locked in" (*trancado*) electors. This was the so-called "bridled vote" (*voto de cabresto*), a rustic metaphor that indicted the rich for "leading swarms of electors as one drives a herd of donkeys" to the polls (Leal [1949] 1977: 14). But as their estates broke up and the rural poor became smallholders, local elites lost the power to threaten rural families with eviction if they refused to vote for their patrons' chosen candidates. Without this threat to serve as the "bridle" in the mouth of the poor, the local elite now needed to court poor people's votes during increasingly competitive elections. The poor began demanding more goods and services in exchange for their votes. As anthropologist Shepard Forman argued long ago, the "extraordinary sense of submission and obligation" characteristic of what he called "patron-dependency" changed to a more reciprocal alliance between voters and politicians, which he termed "patron-clientelism." The latter implied conditionality and mutually negotiated transactions (Forman 1978: 217, 145; and see Pereira 1997: 124). The ability to bargain afforded some dignity to ordinary people who finally had a political resource they could circulate as they pleased. "I gave my vote to you, but I could have given it to another!" I once heard a destitute rural woman yell to a local politician after he refused her request for money.

Despite the shift toward more competitive "patron-clientelism" (as Forman called it), women, voting-age children, and co-resident junior siblings often remained "locked in" to voting for the candidate preferred by their household's male head. Sometimes, household patriarchs who felt beholden to their fathers and grandfathers would "surrender" (*entregar*) their own votes (and those of their co-resident dependents) to these extended family patriarchs. But this village-level patronage also came under pressure during the late-twentieth century. One factor pushing against it was the penetration of cheap, industrially produced foods. During that period, commercial sugar, rice, and flour from southern Brazil (and later international sources) began to compete with their artisanal counterparts in the *sertão*, especially manioc flour and sugar bricks. Hitherto, these artisanal foods had been produced by extended family labor arrangements organized under senior men. Almost every village in southeast Piauí now has one or two small wooden sugar mills rotting away in disuse on small family farms. Many today are nostalgic for the bygone artisanal sugar production done in *mutirão* (collectively). But nostalgia aside, most *sertanejos* I spoke to

were happy to see the era of domination by extended family patriarchs recede into the past. One rural man told me of how an argument he had with his own father ended with his assertion of his independence: "I told him I would not obey. After all, I was born naked but now I am dressed."

New Working-Class Solidarities

As the fragmentation of the cattle estates proceeded, there were many among the rural poor who found themselves without lands or with lands so meager that they could not eke out a living through subsistence cultivation. Their solution was either to migrate to Brazil's big cities or to work as seasonal wage laborers in the carnauba, rubber, and babassu plantations on the outskirts of small nearby cities. Life in the rural encampments of these export crop plantations entailed socializing with fellow fruit-pickers from other municipalities, people who brought new ways of seeing the world. These relations were untethered by kinship or by shared subordination to fathers and landlords and were conducive to the exchange of new, egalitarian ideas. These encampments became "an open stage for conflicting interests, ideologies and classes: populism, socialism, nationalism, anticommunism, and Christianism" (Sousa 2021: 2).

A similar set of ideological shifts later emerged among those who took up employment in Piauí's infrastructural development projects. During Brazil's "populist era" (1945–64), the Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE) brought together Piauiense from all over the state to build massive dams, reservoirs, railroads, and highways. Many older men I came to know (e.g., Gilberto's father) had spent years away from home on such projects, where they too were exposed to union organizers, communists, land reform activists, and other bearers of more egalitarian worldviews. Moreover, the dignity afforded to this work came not from the capricious recognition of land bosses but from their equal possession of the prestigious employment cards handed out by the state's Labor Ministry, cards that affirmed these laborers' contributions to Brazil as its strong (if obedient) workers (Weffort 1973).

Working-class solidarity was further fomented by rural unionization, which occurred after the passage of the Rural Workers Statute in 1963 (Sousa 2021: 3). Most unionism was not anti-capitalist or revolutionary, but egalitarian solidarity nonetheless developed within the

movement[7] and within the labor-oriented political parties that proliferated during the populist era (French 1989: 17). Union participation also further reduced poor people's dependence on the region's landowning patrons by affording them an alternative sources of material support (maternity benefits, access to attorneys, etc.) during times of need. Moreover, rural union headquarters sprouted up in most municipalities, constituting what was often the first public space where the rural poor could hear critiques of "the bridled vote" and other aspects of patronage domination.

The Emergence of Christian Communalism

Changes in the structure of Catholic theology and worship also militated for equality. When Pope John Paul XXII and the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) reformed the Church to adapt it to the challenges of modernity and secularism, they set in motion processes that undermined the "rustic Christianity" (Queiroz 1973) that had long reinforced patronage hierarchies in the *sertão*. Increasing use of the vernacular in the liturgy and congregational participation in Mass were just the tip of the iceberg. Across Latin America, a new "Liberation Theology" emerged around the figure of Jesus as a working-class revolutionary. While this interpretation of the gospel did not turn Piauí's poor into Marxist militants, it did instill an ethic of mutual aid among the poor as an alternative to the practice of seeking help from "big people" (*grandãos*).

Before this moment, the *sertão*'s "rustic Christianity" had revolved around the practice of pilgrimage to regional shrines undertaken by people offering gifts and promises to saints in exchange for miracles. If a petitioner approached with humble offerings ("ex-votos") the saint would intercede on their behalf, directing God's mercy to their woes (Pessar 2005). In this way, hierarchical "[r]elations of the familial type are perpetuated between the devotees and the saints, mainly between the domestic patron saint and the family that chose it as its patron [*patrono*]" (Queiroz 1973: 85; and see Greenfield and Cavalcante 2006).

The new Liberation Theology sent a different message. Liberationist priests from Argentina, Italy, and Germany entered southeast

7. As a caveat for this claim about the egalitarian solidarities within Brazil's Rural Workers' Unions, I note that the everyday workings of these unions often evinced some patronage dynamics (French 1989: 10; Pereira 1997: 5, 125; Siguad 1996).

Piauí in the 1950s and 1960s and began organizing rural communities around the "biblical concept of justice … and a belief that God is protecting the person who confronts the authorities" (Adriance 1994: 175). There arose what were called Base Christian Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiasticas de Base*, or "CEBs"), which were essentially neighborhood associations organized around village chapels. Their members gathered to pray, discuss their shared and separate challenges, and help one another through fundraising activities (e.g., charity auctions) (Adriance 1994). Some of the CEB's more politicized members critiqued the region's patronage tradition by asserting that "poor people are no longer essentially objects of charity, but agents of their own liberation. Paternalistic aid or assistance is replaced by solidarity" (Löwy 1996: 73).

One member of a Passarinho CEB claimed that his "community"—a synonym for "village" (*povoado*) that came into use during this time—had once approached the erstwhile mayor with requests for village infrastructure while refusing any commitment for votes in exchange. "The priests taught us to keep politics out of the community," he said. This would have been unusual in this region, where mayors could generally count on the votes in those villages they helped.

The CEBs faded away during the 1980s, when an increasingly conservative Vatican undertook measures to undermine them (Löwy 1996: 48). But even as the CEBs atrophied, the village chapels where they met became host to a new secular (yet religiously inflected) organization, the "community development association." (This is the institution I discussed in the previous chapter, the one Zezinho led until his nephew ousted him.) These "associations" arose during the 1990s in response to a paradigm shift in the development strategies undertaken by the World Bank away from large infrastructure projects to small-scale, "community-driven" development (Pozzoni 2007). As such funding became available, local organizers, like the union leader Juraçí and the agronomist Tomás, encouraged rural people to found these associations so they could "come together" (*chegar juntos*) in the spirit of CEB mutual aid to "run after" development projects. These associations meet monthly in the village chapels, opening their sessions with readings from the Bible and discussing village-level problems and opportunities. Like the priests, secular organizers such as Tomás and Juraçí enjoined the villagers to "keep politics out" of their meetings, much to the dismay of an older group of patron-politicians, who, unable to absorb these associations under their own name, dismissed them as

Figure 7. Community Association Meeting Underway in the Chapel of what had been a Base Christian Community in Passarinho Municipality (photo by Aaron Ansell, 2005).

useless. "The only association around here is me," one regional mayor once famously said.

The Post-Dictatorship Constitution and State Decentralization

The final turning point to note here is the promulgation of Brazil's post-dictatorship Constitution of 1988, which created the conditions for poor people to run for local legislative office and thus to reduce the socioeconomic distance between voters and politicians. What was most impactful about the Constitution was neither its affirmation of human rights, nor its restoration of the popular vote after twenty years of dictatorship. Rather, it was the Constitution's decentralization of federal tax revenue during the 1990s that created the conditions for non-elite access to municipal office. The Constitution placed the responsibility for basic health care and primary education under the mayor of each municipality and created a special fund to finance these municipal services (Souza 2001: 533). For the first time, small, impoverished municipalities could

fund a coterie of public sector jobs (directors of planning, agriculture, social assistance, water, etc.). This incentivized the "dismemberment" of sub-municipal territories (e.g., Passerinho) from their larger, parent municipalities (e.g., Princesa), a process that increased the number of municipalities in Brazil by 35 percent; in Piauí, there was a 91 percent increase from 116 in 1998 to 222 municipalities in 2000 (Tomio 2002: 64).

Larger municipalities remained under elite control, but in smaller municipalities, an industrious and well-liked schoolteacher, medium-sized farmer, truck-driver, or small business owner could assemble a following large enough to secure election as a town councilmember. This decreasing socioeconomic gap between elected officials and their voters likely fostered the more egalitarian political ethic of friendship and the condemnation of self-aggrandizing politicians.[8]

Here, I have examined just a few of the historical factors that may explain why the hierarchical principles of patronage have come to share the stage with the more egalitarian principles of political organization that I call amicopolitics.[9] The shift between patronage and amicopolitics may not be an exclusively Brazilian phenomenon. Consider that since the 1930s, Brazil's transition to an ISI strategy of national economic development occurred more broadly across Latin America and elsewhere in the Global South and was often tied to rural unionization (Hirschman 1968). In many places, such as rural India, the penetration of markets and related spread of food commodities to the rural poor likely obviated hierarchically organized artisanal food processing (Gupta and Roy 2017). Also, Liberation Theology was prominent throughout Latin America and spread quickly to Asia (Amaladoss 2014) and Africa (Gichaara 2015). Finally, during the 1980s, military dictatorships across

8. The increased access that non-elites gained to municipal offices in the *sertão* has analogues in many other historical and cultural contexts, including the United States. Francis Fukuyama writes of US cities in the post-Civil War period that clientelism (the exchange of votes for goods or favors) became "a way for ambitious but non-elite politicians to become wealthy and increase their status, while delivering concrete benefits to their supporters" (2014: 146).

9. Other factors militating for egalitarianism in the *sertão* likely include the extension of the vote to all Brazilians, including women (in 1932) and illiterate people (only officially in 1988); the advent of radio and televised journalism; increased literacy resulting from the decentralization of primary education; and, most recently, the ubiquity of smart phones and social media.

Latin America, as well as in southern and eastern Europe, generally gave way to formal democratic governments (Linz and Stepan 1996). In light of this global trend toward egalitarian ideology and labor arrangements, I am led to wonder if the scholarly consensus on patronage has succumbed to a profound misimpression.

Scholars studying patronage (and "clientelism") tend to see domineering oligarchy, vote buying, back-scratching, and conspiratorial nepotism as mutually implying features of patronage. That is, they conflate hierarchical and egalitarian expressions of illiberal political personalism. Scholars critical of this conflation sometimes attribute it to the colonial character of the liberal-modernist gaze, an orientalist perspective in which all political formations that deviate from the West's idealized self-description (equality, impartiality, universality, etc.) get lumped together (see Marques 1999 for an excellent version of this argument). There may be another reason: The reality on the ground during the mid-twentieth century may have been intrinsically deceptive insofar as it combined two forms of political personalism, the longstanding hierarchical patronage elements and the emerging egalitarianism of amicopolitics. This may have given scholars the misimpression that the two comprised a singular, coherent political logic.

But I should issue a caveat. While I have argued that the arc of *sertanejo* history bent from patronage toward friendship due to the processes discussed in this section, it may be that there is a cyclical dynamic afoot as well. Friendship itself is certainly nothing new in the *sertão*, so why would political friendship be new? Perhaps the two political forms alternate, such that it is the destiny of "friends" to accumulate enough prestige to turn into "fathers" who eventually grow soft, monopolize credit, and incur resentment from their followers. These followers then reckon their *união* as the necessary alternative to a powerful father's *presença* and promote one of their own to rival the father figure. The anthropologist Edmund Leach (1954) long ago noted dialectical oscillations between hierarchical and egalitarian political orders within traditional societies. And Meyer Fortes (1949) had already argued that linear transformations, whatever their causes, often take shape through interaction with cyclical ones; what is new maps itself onto what is old and exaggerates certain arrangements characteristic of a given phase of the older cultural cycle, pushing these toward permanence. This, I think, is what has happened in Brazil's *sertão*, where long-standing rustic friendships and cyclical rebellions against aggrandizing father-politicians have been supercharged by linear changes to the rural economy, state formation, urban-influenced social activism, and so forth—all of which militate for

more egalitarian ideals and so push amicopolitics toward permanence while pushing patronage into decline.

Having explored the reasons why the amicopolitical ethic arose against the backdrop of patronage, let me turn to the model of corruption associated with this more egalitarian ethic.

Accusations of Amicopolitical Corruption

From an amicopolitical perspective, corruption entails the disruption of the centripetal movement of friends who wish to "come together" to reallocate their aggregated *força* to "bring improvements" to their municipality. I observed accusations of group-destroying *desunião* (disunity) occurring both in the context of routine electoral politics and in the roll-out of the federal anti-poverty program, Zero Hunger. In both contexts, these accusations were levied at individuals whose greed or political ambition caused a group to fall apart.

The Henrique–Bernardo Conflict

Zezinho and I quickly realized that the water project we had been striving to implement would require far more money and technical expertise than we had at our disposal. We resolved to switch our focus to helping Caixa de Água's residents gain legal titles for the lands on which their families had been squatting for some sixty years. To obtain these land documents, the villagers—most of whom had been "off the grid"—would first need a national identity number (analogous to a Social Security number in the U.S.). Applying for one required the signature of a local authority (judge, police delegate, etc.). It was hard to find anyone willing to spend a day in the remote village of Caixa de Água signing such documents, so Zezinho and I looked for a passenger truck to bring the several dozen villagers in question to the town hub where these officials worked.

Gilberto's godfather, Bernardo, had a flatbed truck that I hoped we might be able to use for free. Bernardo, a retired civil servant in his late forties who looked to be of Portuguese descent, had been the candidate with the most votes for town council in 2004. He belonged to Henrique's opposition coalition. Bernardo had been using his truck to assist villages participating in Zero Hunger/World Bank "community-driven development" projects. He provided free transport for project supplies (wood, bricks, cement bags, chicken wire, etc.) to Caixa de Água for

use in their chicken-raising project (Ansell 2009). Gilberto had great admiration for his godfather's style of "helping the people," as did many others. "Bernardo's truck never sits still, no!" people said, emphasizing Bernardo's indefatigable movement, his constant exertion of his *força* in the service of others. Bernardo was amenable to helping us bring the villagers to the town center on a Sunday morning, but it wasn't his truck that showed up in Caixa de Água; it was one of Henrique's. The two often worked together so I thought nothing of it.

When we arrived in the town, Bernardo was waiting there and he helped to organize the villagers into lines behind a folding card table set up by the police station. Soon after, Henrique found his way there and made a show of approaching the police delegate with a handshake that morphed into a whisper into his ear. (Later, he would hand the delegate a fistful of cash.) "Let's get to work!" said the delegate, and he began the brief interviews with each villager that would culminate in his stamp and signature on the form. Henrique shook hands with several villagers as Bernardo quietly receded to the sidelines. Later, Henrique's rival (Mayor Rodrigo's godson) approached and sat at the table. As the head of the town council, he too could sign the villagers' documents, and sign them he did. I later asked Henrique if his rival was trying to steal the show. He laughed. "He's just trying to do politics on top of our little party here, but nobody will give him any credit (*valor*). They know it is all Henrique and the *americano*." My eyes shot to Bernardo, searching for signs that he felt sidelined, but I couldn't read him.

Days later, I heard from Gilberto that Bernardo had declared he was dropping out of the race and that he would not be seeking reelection as a councilman. His reason? He was furious at Henrique, and not just because Henrique may have made him feel marginalized on that earlier Sunday. Henrique had also taken steps to diminish the number of votes that Bernardo would win by adding an extra candidate to the party ticket (PDT) that year. That candidate didn't stand a chance, but she would have taken some votes from Bernardo—not enough to cost him the election but enough to keep him from shining so brightly as the town councilmember with the most votes that year. To me, the matter seemed a classic case of a vertical patronage conflict with the attendant oedipal undercurrents; a controlling "father" fears usurpation from a rising "son" and thus preempts his ascent.[10]

10. In *Totem and Taboo* (1950), Sigmund Freud's description of ancient oedipal revolution eerily prefigures the shift from patronage to amicopolitics

But my field assistant, Gilberto, saw the conflict between Henrique and Bernardo (Gilberto's godfather) in very different terms. He confronted Henrique with an accusation of *disunião*. According to Gilberto, Henrique was leaving his house when Gilberto pulled up his motorcycle and initiated the following interaction:

Gilberto: Hey, Henrique, I was going to buy your [campaign] shirt today, the one with your name on the front and my godfather's name on the back. Now I can't do that.

Henrique: (speaking angrily) I have my businesses in town. I have my money. I don't need to listen to this.

Gilberto: It's this *desunião* that breaks us, Henrique. Now tell me, are you and [your brother, the rival candidate] all flour from the same sack?

That night, about a dozen of Bernardo's supporters showed up outside his house to beg him to reconsider. I went with them. We stood there for about forty minutes until Bernardo came outside and waded into the group, saying, "Henrique did cowardice [*covardia*] against me. I supported him during the last two elections. We walked hand in hand, working for the people for many years. Who treats a friend like this? There's no way. You all go home now."

I got up to leave and crossed paths with Henrique, who was approaching from the shadows. We nodded at each other in passing, and he approached Bernardo. The next day, I heard that the two men had disappeared inside Bernardo's house, where they remained for hours. "They emerged together, both smiling," one of the coalition members reported. When I asked the man what Henrique had said (or offered) to Bernardo, he winked at me. "Ah, that is between these two men. Nobody will ever know." But clearly, Bernardo had changed his mind, remaining a candidate for town council. Indeed, he went on to win reelection that year as, once again, the most popular candidate. The other candidate who Henrique had encouraged to run had ended up withdrawing, I imagine at Henrique's behest.

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in Brazil's *sertão*: "One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible individually … and … in the act of devouring him … each of them acquired a portion of his strength" (176).

What surprised me most about the way the conflict played out was Gilberto's brash scolding of Henrique, despite the latter's economic superiority. (Gilberto had even threatened not to wear Henrique's campaign shirt.) The substance of Gilberto's reprimand was identical to the one Henrique himself routinely levied against the likes of Rodrigo, an accusation of self-aggrandizement and credit hogging that he captioned as "this *desunião*." *Desunião* is so reprehensible because it "breaks us," meaning it causes a virtuous egalitarian unit (a political coalition) bound by ethical friendship to unravel. By asking whether Henrique and his brother (and rival) were both "flour from the same sack," Gilberto drew attention to Henrique's apparent hypocrisy, that is, to the similarity between Henrique's behavior and that of domineering patron-politicians associated with the incumbent coalition led by the outgoing mayor, Rodrigo.

This is perhaps what Bernardo meant when he described Henrique's introduction of the additional candidate as *covardia*. The indictment of *covardia* (cowardice) amounts to more than an imputation of unmanly fear. It is also about the disruption of an individual's group-affirming *força.* Recall the adjacent phrases Bernardo used to support the claim: "We walked hand in hand, working for the people for many years. Who treats a friend like this?" The imagery suggests the dissipation of an egalitarian partnership. Henrique's alleged transgression concerns his egoistic sabotage of a joint effort, an allegation that Bernardo's supporters regarded as a metonym for the entire coalition's collective efforts. Henrique appeared corrupt to the extent that he demoralized members of his own team, causing the centripetal movement of everyone's *força* to dissipate, to return to the same egoism attributed to the incumbent coalition, the loathed politics of "everyone for himself and God for all" (*cada um por si e Deus por todos*).

Henrique, for his part, did not defend himself by asserting his patronal superiority over Gilberto. He never alleged Gilberto's insubordination, never threw at him the supercilious rhetorical question, *Do you know who you're talking to?* (cf. DaMatta [1979] 1990). Instead, he insisted on his own autonomy: "I have my business in town. I have my money …" Effectively, he said, *I don't have to endure the trouble of leading our coalition*. Henrique's defense assumes that he was not a patriarch with a burden to bear but rather the "first among equals," that is, one of many upright members of an egalitarian group who could step up to lead. In Robbins's terms, he produced his "superiority only through use of the idiom of equality" (1994: 42). The conflict played out entirely in an amicopolitical

idiom within which self-aggrandizing actions that dissolve lateral solidarities are tantamount to corruption.

The Juraçi and Tomás Conflict

Another accusation of *disunião* emerged in an account of the Zero Hunger program's early implementation by Passarinho's Management Committee. Recall from the previous chapter that the members of this committee had been selected by popular vote to do what *sertanejo* mayors had allegedly failed to do, which was to allocate fairly the limited number of federal cash transfers (here, Food Card) by determining who was the poorest of the poor while "keeping politics out" of the committee's deliberations. It was mainly Juraçí (the local union and PT chapter president) and Tomás (the agronomist) who undertook the effort to survey rural households to determine their level of economic need. Each reported back (separately) to the other eight members of the committee with lists of names for the group to rank. (The neediest families would receive the first batches of Food Cards.) The process was proceeding apace when Tomás discovered that Juraçi's list included the names of her husband and daughter. "We said we would not submit our own names!" he protested, to which Juraçí responded that these individuals fit the poverty criteria and that Tomás was, in fact, the one "doing politics" by attempting to enroll only Henrique's electors in the Food Card. (By this time, Juraçí had already broken ranks with the opposition coalition that Tomás helped to lead as Henrique's "right hand.") The conflict between the two "made things awkward for the rest of us," another member of the committee told me during an interview a year later. "Most of us just stopped showing up for meetings."

When news of the situation within Passarinho's committee reached the state-level PT administrators, it alarmed them. Recall that Passarinho was one of Zero Hunger's first "pilot towns," a place where journalists visited to get the scoop on whether the flagship social program of the newly elected President Lula (and Governor Dias) was actually working. The conflict within the committee was even more troubling given that the state-level PT (in alliance with the Dias administration) wanted Juraçi to run for mayor as the lead opposition candidate, believing that her victory at the polls would attest to Zero Hunger's success. At that point, Zero Hunger's state-level director, Adailza, made the trip from Piauí's capital (Teresina) to Passarinho to resolve the dispute and restore the Management Committee to working order.

Upon arriving in Passarinho, Adailza proceeded by sitting the committee members down and hearing from Tomás and Juraçí. Then, according to Tomás, "she put to us a test to see who was in the right." As Tomás (and two others) told the story, the committee members who gathered in the Rural Union headquarters (the committee's meeting place) were sitting on chairs arrayed in a circle with Tomás and Juraçí across from each other. Adailza asked Juraçí to hand the list of names to Tomás. "She got up quickly and tossed me the names with a sour face, barely looking at me," Tomás recounted. Then, after very little time had gone by, Adailza "invented a reason for Juraçí to need the list, so she asked me [Tomás] to hand it to her. I got up and walked over to her with a smile on my face, looking her in the eye, and said 'Here you go.'"

Tomás looked self-satisfied as he recounted his conclusions, "Adailza perceived the difference between the two of us, that Juraçí is completely *desunida*, that she is a person without criteria (*sem critérios*)." This was a criticism (people "without criteria") that I would hear from Tomás many times, sometimes levied against Juraçi and at other times hurled at rivals from Rodrigo's incumbent coalition. He would utter it in tandem with another accusation: They "know only how to tear things down" (*só sabe derrubar as coisas*), meaning they lacked the *união* needed to bring improvement to the municipality.

According to Tomás, Adailza passed judgement in his favor implicitly but obviously. She stated that all the committee members and their immediate families should not be prioritized in the roll-out of the Food Card. Tomás summarized her message: "She told us that everybody on the committee needed to come together [*chegar juntos*] for the sake of all Brazil"; these were words that Tomás claimed where mainly directed at his rival, Juraçí.

I do not know if indeed Adailza willfully put Juraçí and Tomás to such a Solomonic test. What captures my attention in the story is the nature of the supposed test, as Tomás described it. The alleged test was designed not so much to discover what actions Juraçí may or may not have taken with regard to the enrollment of her kin in the Food Card, but more to discover what attitudes and emotional dispositions Tomás and Juraçí exhibited as members of the Management Committee. Which of the two was the more pro-social? Which could smile warmly at their rival? Of course, such a smiling countenance would not, under the circumstances, be genuine, but that was not the point. What allegedly mattered was which party to the conflict could effect an amicable posture for the sake of helping the group get along well enough to carry out its work. Tomás

concluded that Juraçí came off looking like a bitter and selfish liability to the committee's harmony while he came off looking like someone who could rise above his own ego and "repay the bad with the good" for the sake of the collective. He considered Juraçí's *desunião* to be a form of corruption, as evident from his characterization of her as a person "without criteria," that is, a person who disregards the objective standards of fairness that determine access to public resources. Indeed, Tomás's characterization of Juraçi's transgression combines an amicopolitical accusation of her *desunião* with a more liberal-modern allegation of her as a person who fails to act impartially in administrative matters (Rothstein and Teorell 2008). Perhaps the argument underscoring this combination is that self-interested distribution is corrupt because it leads to the dissipation of a moral group—in this case, the Management Committee.

Amicopolitical (versus Patronage) Corruption

Historically, the norms I classify as amicopolitics emerged from the patronage context and shared with patronage some common terminology and sensibilities. Differentiating these two sets of norms is important because a skeptical reader might wonder if the two are simply kindred expressions of political personalism, and thus that any distinction between them is entirely cosmetic and inconsequential. I think the difference between them is consequential because patronage and amicopolitics confer different moral compasses that prime people to react in different ways to historical events. In the next chapter, I argue that amicopolitics primed *sertanejos* to react with sympathy to the PT's messaging about failures of impartiality. To lay the groundwork for that argument, let me try to clarify the key distinctions between amicopolitics and patronage as ethical logics with distinct (if related) models of corruption.

The principle organizing the patronage gradient is *presença*, the expansion of the fatherly politician's self into the lives of his "children." By contrast, the amicopolitical gradient legitimates a politician's power based on their *união*, their demonstrated capacity to bring others together in egalitarian groups so that together, they can pursue collective projects. Unlike the verticality of *presença*, the geometry of *união* is horizontal. A good amicopolitician exerts a centripetal pull on others who are arrayed on the same plane. The two idioms of corruption may sometimes blur in practice (Gupta 1995), and their shared lexicon (*força*) may give rise to all manner of double-voicing, but the two folk models are

nonetheless analytically distinct. Amicopoliticians aspire to equality, patronage celebrates hierarchy.

Patronage and amicopolitics also differ with respect to their use of the idiom of *força* (vitality), the currency of their respective gradients. In a patronage formation, *força* is a divine gift that emanates from the individual (here, a politician) and animates their actions. In an amicopolitical formation, *força* is usually spoken of as *a força do povo* ("the people's *força*"). Here, one common usage of the term "*força*" is especially telling; a candidate's *força* is equivalent to the number of votes they receive. But just as important is the *força* of a coalition as determined by the favors that each member is able to do for others (especially during the campaign season). Within amicopolitical discourse, a politician's *força* comes to them through the centripetal gathering (*união*) of individuals; the group's members strive "to come together" (*chegar juntos*), an oft-used and morally charged phrase. A politician's friends bring together their *força* as they move toward one another, toward the center of the circle where the politician is positioned. Movement toward this person is movement toward each other. Lending their *força* to him, they simultaneously lend it to one another. And the amicopolitician who embodies the group's *união* assumes the burden of redistributing the group's *força* in the form of goods and services, not only to the various members of the group but also to new recruits. Thus, the gradient counterbalances the centripetal movement of *força* toward the group's leader with that leader's outward, centrifugal movement of *força* (his own and that of others under his influence).

These differences between the norms of patronage and those of amicopolitics correlate with two distinct folk models of corruption. In *sertanejo* patronage, *corrupção* involves the disruption of the downward flow of *força* from "present" politicians to their loyal followers. In amicopolitics, the transgressions that corrupt the system are all expressions of *desunião* (disunity, division, dissipation), those actions that cause other members of the group to divert their *força* away from the group and its shared project. A politician's self-aggrandizement or credit hogging is a prototypical expression of this corruption. Thus, Henrique looked upon Rodrigo's allegedly domineering style (and his practice of naming all municipal infrastructure after himself) as a corrupt threat to the municipality. A second expression of amicopolitical corruption involves the promotion of municipal fractionation during the campaign season, that is, the division of the municipality into "our side" and "their side." Thus, Henrique claimed that he was "everybody's friend" and insisted

that the food he won at charity auctions was available for everyone. (And Gilberto criticized Henrique in these same terms, as someone who, like his rivals, prioritized his own political ego over the unity of the coalition.) A third expression of this corruption model concerns the jealous actions that a leader takes to suppress the *força* of a member of their egalitarian group (e.g., political coalition), a suppression that may result in that individual falling away from the group and causing others to do the same. This was the basis of Bernardo's accusation of Henrique's *covardia* (cowardice) against him. Yet, a final expression of amicopolitical corruption can be seen in Juraçí's alleged nepotism in her service on the Zero Hunger Management Committee. According to Tomás, not only did she wrongly prioritize her own kin in the allocation of a scarce resource (something she claimed Tomás had done), but her demeanor was also sour and combative during committee meetings, leading the other members of the group to stay home.

If the coalition leader represents the realization of the focally concentrated ("unified") *força* of morally equal and morally activated friends, corrupt actions are those that set off a cascade effect in which each group member ceases to invest their *força* in the collective. The gradient between proper friends and non-friends (the rival coalition of those who "know only how to tear things down") washes away. Both the case of Juraçi and that of Bernardo demonstrates the point: amicopolitical corruption consists of actions that undo collective efforts to ensure the centripetal concentration of this *força* and that disincentivize people from behaving like friends ever again.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *sertanejo* political culture has moved away from patronage and toward what I call amicopolitics. It has departed from the kinship idiom, in which fatherly politicians bestow their *força* upon loyal juniors (figured as "children"), and toward a friendship idiom. Friends are those who, beyond their accidental neighborly or kinship relations, have found in one another's actions a mirror for their own moral labor. Amicopolitics carries this agrarian morality into the arena of coalitional electoral contestation, framing the coalition as a collective based on lateral, egalitarian bonds, even when those involved are unequal in wealth and position. This inequality, and especially the greater wealth of the leader, is understood as a function of the vast number of

friendships they sustain both in dyadic terms (one-on-one) and in terms of the collective (holding the group together by example). Thus, amicopolitics operates according to the principle of *união* (unity) among people who overcome their own selfishness to channel goods and services—still figured as *força*—to this group.

Sertanejo friendship rose to prominence during the twentieth century due to concurrent economic and political forces, regional, national and global. This process was still gaining ground in the 2000s, during my time in the field. Amicopolitics did not chase older patronage politics off the stage entirely, but rather took up residence alongside patronage and posed a challenge to it.

These two political ethics entail distinct folk models of corruption, the patronage model involving the rerouting of fatherly *força* away from loyal "children," and the amicopolitical model involving the dissipation of friends' *força*. I have attended to this distinction to lay the groundwork for an analysis of *sertanejos*' reception of the anti-corruption policies introduced by PT officials in 2003. The PT introduced its own norms and model of corruption to the *sertão*, a model that interacted with the local corruption models associated with both patronage and amicopolitics, putting pressure on both (though in different ways).

In the next chapter, I turn to the long (thirteen-year) interaction between PT officials and *sertanejo* cultivators in southeast Piauí, paying special attention to how PT anti-corruption efforts changed *sertanejo* political culture.

CHAPTER THREE

The Politics of Citizens

In March of 2004, a PT official named Esmeralda showed up at the village chapel of Caixa de Água to attend a monthly meeting of the community development association. We were close friends, and I had been serving as a sort of intermediary between Esmeralda and the three association presidents in Passarinho Municipality whose villages had been identified by the PT government as *quilombolos*, that is, Afro-Brazilian communities descended from escaped slaves (what in English are called "maroon communities"). All three presidents were struggling to convince their fellow villagers to participate more actively in one of the Zero Hunger development projects that the PT had channeled to their communities. Esmeralda hoped that her visit would rouse male "this village" into such active participation.

One village president, my friend Zezinho, had been looking forward to Esmeralda's visit, believing that her pep talk would not only get the villagers moving but also affirm his own leadership. As it turned out, the fateful election for the association presidency that I discussed in Chapter One was scheduled for that very day. Zezinho was confident that he would defeat the opposition group, led by his own nephew, and that when the election was over, Esmeralda would "stand next to me, and together we will tell them [the participating families] that they must come together [*chegar juntos*] to push the project forward." But that didn't happen.

The election was the first item of business on the meeting agenda, and Zezinho lost. He walked outside to sulk, and Esmeralda arose amid the cheering winners and addressed the gathering. Before mentioning the development project, she offered an impromptu reflection on the election. "Ok, you had this vote. You exercised your democratic rights. But now the election has passed. There is no more Zezinho; there is no more [Zezinho's nephew]. There is just the association."

Esmeralda was worried that the project participants from Zezinho's coalition would withdraw from all project activities and that Zero Hunger's finite resources would fail to reach the most marginalized people (here, rural Afro-Brazilians denominated *quilombolas*), who had historically been excluded from government aid. She also worried that the village association's new leaders would include only members of their own group in project activities and would leave out members of the rival group led by Zezinho. Esmeralda advocated for "social inclusion" (*inclusão social*), a term that had become prominent in Zero Hunger policy discourse and in the rhetoric of the Lula government in general. Indeed, the slogan of President Lula's first administration was *Um Brazil para Todos* (A Brazil for Everyone).

In the prior chapter, I argued that *sertanejo* political norms underwent a significant transformation during the twentieth century, moving away from the politics of fathers (patronage) discussed in Chapter One and toward a politics of friendship (amicopolitics). In this chapter, I argue that another political paradigm took root in the *sertão* during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. I treat 1988, the year the post-dictatorship Constitution was ratified, as the starting point of the third moment examined in this book, the moment when a "politics of citizenship" rose to compete with the amicopolitical and (much older) patronage norms already in existence in the *sertão*. The norms of this new moment further intensified between 2003 and 2016, the era of uninterrupted PT governance at the federal level. (The PT also held control over the governorship of Piauí during most of this period.[1])

1. Governor Wellington Dias (PT) served two consecutive terms (2003–06, 2007–10) in parallel with Lula at the federal level. During the following mandate (2011–14), the PT remained in the governing coalition, but did not directly control the governorship. Dias returned to power during the next state elections and served two more consecutive mandates (2015–18, 2019–22).

Sertanejos came into repeated contact with frontline PT officials who implemented new anti-poverty policies on the ground. As both the intended beneficiaries of these policies, and as the quickly deputized local managers of certain policy resources (mainly cash stipends), Piauí's *sertanejos* absorbed the PT officials' progressive political norms. They learned to think of themselves as "citizens" (*cidadões*) with "rights" (*direitos*)—not new terms for them per se, but new in their meanings (more below). In this new formulation, all citizens were entitled to their rights and to co-lead the polity through rational, uncoerced choices, and even to stand up to the state when necessary. The state, for its part, was to dutifully channel resources down to these citizens as "rights," such that the canalization of resources was rhetorically framed as the "recognition of rights." If the patronage formation was modeled on the counterbalancing of upward-moving respect and downward-flowing *força* (cast in the parent–child idiom), and the amicopolitical formation was modeled on the counterbalancing of centripetally and centrifugally moving *força* (cast in the friendship idiom), this new formation counterbalanced upward-directed democratic "fighting" (for rights) and downward-directed "recognition" (of rights).

In this formation, the distinction between citizen and state leader became a matter of degree, a principled gradient. Indeed, PT officials systematically trained *sertanejos* in how to be leaders (*líderes*) of their local communities, social movements, and civil society organizations. Ideally, such leaders were community representatives who identified not just with their own community, but with the broader category (class, race, etc.) of citizens to which they belonged. The PT understood the process of coming to identify with a broader social group as a necessary condition of fighting for one's rights. As a currency channeled by a socially just state, rights (*direitos*) originated within the citizenry and moved upward in the form of the vote, that piece of the citizen's democratic soul that "reflect[s] [their] general views of what is good for the political community as a whole, not just what is good for one individual voter" (Fukuyama 2014: 86). (Taxes are arguably another vehicle by which citizens put their rights into upward circulation.) Those local leaders who excelled in "fighting for" rights merited positions of leadership because, as leaders, they would then recognize the rights of (and distribute resources to) those broad classes of people they represented. In the ideal version of this gradient, the principle that separated one leadership rung from the one higher up was its leader's degree of *inclusão* ("inclusion").

To my eyes, the principle of *inclusão social* that organized this gradient had three vectors of reference. Esmeralda alluded to the first when she said to the villagers, "no more Zezinho … no more [Zezinho's nephew] … just the association." The PT understood the history of *sertanejo* politics as a history of politicians freezing out the affiliates of rival coalitions from public resources (jobs, welfare stipends, etc.), begrudging them for their oppositional voting. In this sense, social inclusion amounted to the principle of impartiality in public governance (Rothstein 2021; see also Weber 1958). Good leaders were to take into consideration only the objective criteria that should govern the public distribution of state resources: How qualified is this person applying for that municipal job? How needy is this family seeking a spot in that cash stipend policy? Which of our impoverished rural communities has been most historically excluded from state aid and thus more meriting of this small-scale development project, etc.? Thus, the principle of social inclusion required leaders to distribute resources in a way that political scientists refer to as "programmatic," that is, "according to well-defined rules and without regard for partisan characteristics or voting history" (Hicken 2011: 294–95).

Esmeralda's visit also pointed to a second referent of *inclusão social*, the inclusion of long-abandoned marginalized social categories (racial, gender-based, etc.) in redistributive social policy. Indeed, Esmeralda was there that day to bring rights to a *quilombola* community,[2] one of Brazil's

2. The denomination of Afro-Brazilian villages as *quilombos* or *quilombola* communities was not straightforward. These community members had not identified themselves by this term prior to being visited by a racial justice organizer from Passarinho's neighboring municipality in 2004. The local racial justice movement (*Movimento Negro*) that this organizer represented had been contracted by Piauí's state government (the Zero Hunger Coordination Team) to identify those villages that were *quilombos* (and thus eligible for additional program resources). When that organizer visited Caixa de Água (and Passarinho's two other Afro-descended villages), she found that many of the villagers were unfamiliar with the term, *quilombo*, and some even preferred to identify themselves with the intermediate racial category, *moreno* (Brown), rather than *negro* (Black). Yet as she described the historical experience of oppression suffered by many Afro-descended communities, many of the villagers affirmed with conviction that "That's how it was (with us)!" The organizer inspired the villagers to identify themselves as *quilombola* people and to "fight for their rights" by participating in various Zero Hunger programs aimed at improving the

quintessentially excluded populations. Here the term *inclusão* meant something like representational diversity of "vulnerable populations" (favela dwellers, urban trash pickers, etc.) that the state needed to "contemplate" with new redistributive policies.

And finally, when Esmeralda said there is "just the association," she pointed (somewhat more indirectly) to the PT government's ideal of a citizenry organized along lateral lines into a great popular front (as the PT itself had once been). Thus, the third sense of *inclusão* referred to the virtue of expanding oppositional, socially critical postures across an ever-widening scope of people, a process that progressives throughout the world call "consciousness-raising" (*conscientização*) and that PT officials (and the *sertanejos* who took after them) also called "clarifying" (*esclarecimento*). With their eyes open to social injustice (Brazil's long history of social exclusion), the ideal citizen would conduct all matters of politics (voting, allocating local resources, auditing mayors) in a condition of freedom, being "neither constrained by whoever holds the power of coercion … nor prevented from doing what he does wish to do" (Bobbio 1990: 15).

The PT's model of social inclusion had an attitudinal feature as well, a strident, defiant attitude toward authority, an ethic of "fighting for" (*lutando para*), "reclaiming" (*reivindicando*), "redeeming" (*resgatando*), and "running after" (*correndo atrás*) rights, an ethic inspired by Brazil's late-twentieth-century urban struggles. The anthropologist James Holston (2008) referred to this political logic as "insurgent citizenship," a term I find helpful for this chapter's analysis. The PT-led state sought to inspire this insurgent attitude among those citizen-leaders who "included" everyone from their social category by "recognizing their rights," that is, channeling them public resources. Thus, I refer to this constellation of norms as the gradient of insurgent inclusion.

The second argument I make in this chapter is that PT officials inculcated within the *sertanejo* people the gradient of insurgent inclusion by attacking a specific model of corruption, what the officials (along with

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lives and fomenting the solidarities of *quilombolas* (Ansell 2014: 139–45). In Passarinho, several of these *quilombolas* had also received Zero Hunger projects not as *quilombolas*, but as (racially unmarked) impoverished communities. Thus, Caixa de Água was a village whose inhabitants were hailed as *quilombolas* by some Zero Hunger policies and as "family farmers" (*agricultores familiares*) by other Zero Hunger policies.

many social scientists) called *clientelismo* ("clientelism").[3] For most social scientists (those in the PT included), clientelism, or patron–client exchange, refers to a mode of reciprocity by which politicians ("patrons") give material goods to voters ("clients") "in return for electoral support where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you/will you support me [at the polls]?" (Stokes 2009: 648). Accordingly, such reciprocities, whether motivated by pure economic self-interest or more emotive fellow-feeling, amount to failures of impartiality, the very definition of corruption for some policy-oriented thinkers (Rothstein and Teorell 2008).[4] Here *clientelismo* undermines (degrades) the moral gradient organized by the downward flow of resources "without regard for partisan characteristics" (Hicken 2011: 294–95) by rechanneling resources toward those people who are not *inclusivo* in their redistributive practices, people who *sertanejos* eventually accused of being "without [impartial] criteria" (*sem critérios*).

For the PT, the model of clientelist corruption (which I denote by the Portuguese term *clientelismo*) drew on the tradition of political liberalism (i.e., the hard distinction between the public and private sphere, universal rights as the justification for administrative impartiality), but went beyond the liberal tradition. Inspired by the militancy of Brazil's urban squatters' movements, socialists, unionists, racial justice activists, and feminists, the PT officials' model of *clientelismo* decried certain postures and attitudes (complacency, acquiescence, passivity) that stood in the way of people "fighting for" or "running after" their rights. *Clientelismo* degraded the insurgent-inclusive gradient by weakening the resolve of those who should be citizens, but who were induced into passivity through buyoffs of one kind of another. Such corrupted people were content "to eat the crumbs" from their master's table, as some officials

3. While the PT officials did not use the term *clientelismo* in conversation with Zero Hunger beneficiaries (at least, not that I witnessed), they used it with one another. Moreover, their talks with the beneficiaries nonetheless sketched a clientelist model of corruption.

4. Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell (2008) offer this pithy definition of corruption ("failures of impartiality") not as a replacement of the established liberal definition ("the abuse or misuse of public office for private gain"), but as a corrective supplement. They write that the established definition "makes no reference to the kinds of acts that constitute the 'misuse'" and assert that the "breach of the impartiality," which they claim is "universally understood," is what characterizes administrative actions as "misuse/abuse" (171).

said. To channel resources to such people would undermine (degrade) the gradient that only rights-seeking citizens could prop up. Moreover, when corrupted through *clientelismo*, the very currency of this gradient corroded: state resources were no longer *direitos* (rights), but instead crumbs, or less pejoratively, *favores* (favors), *mercadorias* (commodities), or at best *benifícios* (benefits). The same was true for the currency that citizens channeled to the state: votes no longer served as vehicles for the citizen's "general views … for the political community;" they too became favors.

Sertanejos, for their part, largely found these new political norms compelling, rather than seeing them as a foreign imposition from urban elites. (I note some exceptions below.) I think this is because the PT's model of *clientelismo* resonated with the *sertanejos*' own amicopolitical critiques of patronage, critiques that decried the egoistic self-aggrandizement of fatherly politicians who "needed to be owners of everything" rather than ruling in cooperative *união* (unity) with their elector-allies (glossed as "friends"). But the PT's insurgent inclusion differed from *sertanejo* amicopolitics. For the PT, the true citizen allowed for no distinction between crass vote buying and the sort of friendly gifts that promoted mutually beneficial "equitable exchanges," as Danielle Allen (2004) calls them (see Chapter Two). As I will discuss, the idealized citizen would not tolerate any political "proposal" that related to the private interests of individuals or families; instead, such proposals should frame voters as members of "publics" or "communities." And this insurgent-inclusive citizen adamantly refused any transactional obligation (votes given to repay a favor), no matter how gently a politician might have sought to enforce that obligation. Thus, while the politics of citizenship reinforced some aspects of amicopolitics, it also pushed against amicopolitics.

In the next section, I recount the origins of the PT's insurgent inclusion by tracing the history of "rights" and "citizenship" discourses in Brazil. I then show how PT officials implementing the Zero Hunger projects came to focus on the culture-changing goals of their activities in addition to the economic goals associated with the alleviation of rural poverty. Following that, I explore the consequences of the PT's thirteen-year (2003–16) intervention into *sertanejo* political culture by exploring transformations to certain *sertanejo* political concepts (obligation, vote buying, and proposal) that undergirded amicopolitics. Thus, the transformation of these amicopolitical categories points to the *sertanejo* uptake of PT-espoused insurgent-inclusive ethics.

Zero Hunger, Rights, and Insurgent-Inclusion

In May 2004, a young, PT-affiliated lawyer visited Passarinho to observe the rollout of Zero Hunger's component projects and teach its beneficiaries about "food security." She found me in my house, and I briefed her on the various ongoing projects and ultimately took her to meet Zezinho in his village. After the three of us had chatted for a few minutes in Zezinho's house, the lawyer pulled out a questionnaire and proceeded to ask him, "The Food Card you're receiving; is it a benefit (*benefício*) or a right (*direito*)?" Zezinho's eyes shot to me, and I shrugged. "I think it's a benefit, he answered cautiously." She noted his answer and then moved on. When it was all over, she gave him the "correct answers." Food Card (like all other Zero Hunger components) "was a right," she insisted. He nodded and thanked her for teaching him the "correct way."

This "correct way" of viewing Zero Hunger's resources emerged from a fraught history of struggle in Brazil. Zero Hunger expressed the passion and depth of that struggle as well as its limitations.

Rights and Citizenship in Brazil

The Brazilian model of rights ensconced in the post-dictatorship Constitution of 1988 ("Title II") resembles the model advanced by US Justice Thurgood Marshall. This model parses rights into three forms: "political rights" to assemble, vote, and stand for office; "civil rights" to enjoy police protection and equality before the law; and "social rights" to a share of the nation's wealth in the form of health care, education, a social safety net, and so forth (Carvalho 2015: 16–19, 199–211). This codification of rights emerged as a corrective to a history of legal class- and race-based discrimination that had bestowed different gradations of rights on people of different social ranks.

James Holston (2008) documents the unequal affordance of rights in Brazil throughout much of the country's history, what he calls the entrenched regime of "differentiated citizenship." This differentiation worked through a combination of legal measures, such as those excluding illiterate people from the vote; private policies that included the relegation of dark-skinned people to a "service elevator" while wealthier, lighter-skinned people rode in the "social elevator"; and informal practices that consigned the poor to stand in long lines in banks and hospitals while elites were authorized to cut to the front (see Telles 2004: 139–72). According to Holston (and others), poor people operating within such

a regime have only one means to get the resources they need from higher-ups, which is "by establishing old-style clientelistic relations that paid off irregularly, unreliably, inadequately and, if at all, only around elections" (2008: 240). This began to change during the 1970s, when this regime of differentiated citizenship came to share space with a new "insurgent citizenship" born on the outskirts of Brazil's big cities. The very workers who had built those cities, many of them migrants from the *sertão*, were denied access to the amenities they had built and were forced to live in the cities' underdeveloped peripheries. There, they built their own houses, roads, and schools and—based on those experiences—began to think of themselves as equal citizens. They mobilized for rights to the city, not through the old clientelist practices of quid pro quo exchange with state officials but through militant agitation and "rights-based arguments to justify their demands" (Holston 2008: 240, 248–49).

These mobilizations changed the very meanings of "citizen" and "rights" in Brazil. Consider that in the entrenched regime Holston describes, citizenship refers to a state of disparaged anonymity or being a nobody—"any old citizen" (*cidadão qualquer*) (Holston 2008: 4). Such nobody-citizens do not possess rights; they have to go and "seek" (*buscar*) their rights. It is a phrase hurled in abuse, for "proving one's worth to find one's rights is … often impossible," and so, to tell someone to "go find your rights" is to command them to get for themselves something that nobody else wants to give them (2008: 257; and see Caldeira 1984). It's like saying—may the reader forgive me—"go fuck yourself." However, Holston (along with Teresa Caldeira) notes that the meaning of "go seek your rights" changed during the 1970s, as residents of the autoconstructed peripheries came to reckon themselves as property owners, tax payers, and mass consumers, that is, as rights-bearing citizens.[5] When such a citizen "search[es] for their rights, … [she/he] always finds them" (Holston 2008: 266). Nowadays, the phrase "search for rights" amounts to a celebration of a pugnacious democratic agency by which people

5. Holston distinguishes some claims for rights found on the urban periphery from full-tilt assertions of citizenship. This is because some residents of the autoconstructed peripheries retain the idea that property owners enjoy greater entitlement to rights than others (Holston 2008: 260). This leads Holston to characterize this mode of citizenship as "contradictory." He explains that "residents support anonymous citizen equality while also holding that various kinds of social inequality justify the legalization of unequal treatment" (2008: 267).

seize equality before the law as well as the material resources (health care, education, potable water) that comprise one's rights. The same goes for the phrase "redeem your rights" (*resgatar seus direitos*) and "reclaim your rights" (*reivindicar seus direitos*), both of which suggest that rights originate within ordinary people but are somehow robbed from them, and so need to be repossessed.

The Zero Hunger Program

The Zero Hunger program was the Lula government's first effort to design a national policy that would both ameliorate acute material deprivation and create sustainable mechanisms to ensure food security[6] in the long run. The main policy proposal, "Zero Hunger: A Project for a Food Security Policy for Brazil," emerged in 2001 from a PT-run organization called the Citizenship Institute and asserted that "quality food [was] an inalienable right of all citizens and it is the State's duty to create appropriate conditions for the Brazilian population to enjoy this right" (Citizenship Institute [2001] 2011: 13). Zero Hunger's architects framed "the fight against poverty in Brazil [as] part of an integral development approach where social inclusion is the path to ensure sustainable growth and realize the full potential of people" (Aranha 2011: 111). These emphases on rights and social inclusion attested to Zero Hunger's commitment to socio-cultural, not just economic, transformation. Phrased succinctly, the right to food was "a prerequisite for citizenship," the sort of culturally mature ("full potential") citizenship that would shore up Brazil's post-dictatorship democracy (Citizenship Institute [2001] 2011: 18). Phrased more poetically by the PT leader and liberationist theologian, Friar Betto, "Zero Hunger does not want to satiate only the hunger for bread, but also for beauty: to promote the citizenship education of the beneficiaries" (Frei Betto 2003: 57).

From the PT officials' perspective, the Zero Hunger program signaled a break with the developmentalist (and anti-drought) policies of prior administrations. These older policies may have featured some similar

6. The PT government defined "food security" in the Organic Law of Food and Nutritional Security (LOSAN) of 2006 as the realization of all people's right to regular and permanent access to quality food in sufficient quantity, without compromising access to other essential needs, based on health-promoting food practices that respect cultural diversity and that are environmentally, culturally, economically and socially sustainable."

components, such as cash transfers to the poor, World Bank-funded community development projects, and crop insurance, but those similarities were superficial. According to Friar Betto (and numerous others), Zero Hunger broke with the legacy of prior social policies in that it was "a program of *inclusão social* and not *assistencialismo*" (Agência Brasil 2003). Among left-leaning scholars and policymakers in Brazil (and throughout Latin America), *assistencialismo* refers to a kind of welfare statism that disempowers the poor by indebting and subordinating them to state officials. (Think clientelism on an industrial scale!) Myriad program documents contrasted Zero Hunger with "practically the totality of the [prior] social policies directed at the poor [that] have conformed to the logic of political *clientelismo* … that perpetuates a false inclusion," the final phrase bespeaking the influence of the Marxist idea of "false consciousness," an oppressive fiction that the PT sought to debunk (Pontes 2003: 91).

Lula himself articulated a link between hunger and political consciousness in a public statement given shortly before his 2002 victory,

> Regrettably, in Brazil, the vote is not ideological. Regrettably, people do not vote by party. Regrettably, you have a part of society that, due to its high degree of poverty, is led to think with the stomach and not with the head. This is why we see so many food baskets distributed. Because in reality this is a bargaining chip [*peça de troca*] at election time. … This is the logic of maintaining domination that is centuries old here in Brazil. (Lula 2000)

Here Lula's claim of centuries-old domination shows the influence of political liberalism:[7] he affirms universal equality in the face of a semi-feudal oligarchic state. His words also point more obliquely to the

7. My claim that the PT is influenced by the liberal tradition may strike some Brazilian leftists as objectionable. Throughout Brazil (and much of Latin America), the Left regards *liberalismo* as a pejorative term that refers mainly to pro-capitalist affirmations of the free market and opposition to progressive state intervention on behalf of the dispossessed. PT governments were not liberal in this sense: they intervened in the economy on several fronts (e.g. raising the minimum wage, income redistribution) that I will discuss. Yet they retained the most progressive aspect of the liberal tradition, the ideal of a "rights-based state [that] is understood as a state in which public power is regulated by general norms" (Bobbio 1990: 12). The state would respect the legal equality of its citizens by impartial

Marxist diagnosis of private property itself as the blight of the Northeast, as could be heard in the well-worn phrase that many front-line PT officials uttered, "the problem of the Northeast is not the drought [*seca*] but the fence [*cerca*]."

The plethora of policy initiatives comprising Zero Hunger made it hard to understand and evaluate and gave it both an experimental character and an aura of utopian promise. The program expressed what were really two visions of a better future, what the anthropologist Sean Mitchell (2018) discerns as the two utopias available to ordinary Brazilians at the turn of the twenty-first century. Mitchell distinguishes between an older "convergent utopia" of shared and equal rights ("social inclusion," a "government for everyone") and a newer set of "divergent utopias" focused on a politics of "redress that stress[es] identity, history, [and] sovereignty" among different ethno-racial, regional, and gender-based groups (Mitchell 2018: 33). Zero Hunger pointed in both directions. On the "convergent" side, it was organized into three categories that made no ethno-racial or regional distinctions. These were the so-called "emergency policies" like Food Card[8] that transferred monthly cash stipends to people in urgent need (hunger), the "structuring policies"

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distribution, by ensuring equal access to the resources distributed through Zero Hunger and other social policies.

8. One might question whether the Food Card and its successor cash stipend, Bolsa Família, were "identitarian" policies, insofar as both prioritized female over male household heads as their direct beneficiaries. The prioritization of women in these policies reflected two related convictions: first, that in most poor households, particularly in the rural northeast, women assumed the (traditional) role of preparing food for the family, and second, that in virtue of their socialization to this role, women were more trustworthy than men with regard to their expenditure of cash stipends on food items. However, neither of these convictions were compelling for some Brazilian feminists, many of whom critiqued the PT-led "state [that] reinforces [women's] traditional role of caregiver" (Bartholo et al. 2017: 10). But contrary opinions arose in the feminist community when evidence began to mount suggesting that the economic security women enjoyed from Bolsa Família empowered many to expel unsavory or abusive men from their lives (Rego and Pinzani 2014). My sense is that those in charge of Bolsa Família were happy that it empowered women but that this was neither their main intent nor the main consequence of Bolsa Família, a policy fundamentally aimed at reducing malnutrition and extreme poverty.

such as land redistribution and basic income that would help to level out inequalities of wealth, and the "punctual" (or "specific") policies that amounted to small-scale development schemes. Zero Hunger pointed toward more "divergent utopias" by naming several "vulnerable populations" that its punctual policies would prioritize: Indigenous communities, Afro-Brazilian *quilombola* communities, urban trash-picking communities, the squatter settlements of landless workers, and the residents of drought-ridden northeastern communities (Takagi 2011).

The last of these vulnerable populations reconciled these two convergent and divergent utopias by prioritizing the figure of the *sertanejo*, the drought-dislocated wandering migrant (*o retirante*), a figure seen both in semi-racialized terms and as quintessentially Brazilian, that is, a racially unmarked persona. The public-facing imagery of the program nearly always pictured Zero Hunger's beneficiaries as rustic *sertanejos* "escaping" the scourge of the drought, eating full plates of food, or laboring in unison (*em mutirão*) in the fields. Zero Hunger's public-facing rhetoric emphasized the giant *mutirão* (collective labor group) that all Brazilian society would form through various sorts of volunteer work.

The program's very logo, a riff on the Brazilian flag, refigured the national project in terms of food security and the mutualist practice of feeding others. On the left side of Figure 8 is the Brazilian flag: The green background represents the nation's flora, the yellow its gold, the white stars against the blue night its states, and the white strip in the middle bearing the words "Order and Progress" that express the rigid tradition of state positivism.[9] On the right is the Zero Hunger (*Fome Zero*) program logo: The green background is tilted into a tabletop, the yellow cast as a placemat, the blue circle raised into a plate, and the white strip refashioned into a white knife and fork—two food-serving instruments to replace the two-word phrase that was too authoritarian to fit with the PT's insurgent-inclusive ethic. The whole motif suggested a foundationalist reimagining of the national community (Lomnitz 2006) as a collectivity determined to redeem itself from a history in which

9. Positivism is the Enlightenment philosophy (associated with August Comte) that advocates for technocratic governance based on the application of scientific, particularly sociological, knowledge. Positivist thinking became very influential in nineteenth-century Brazil as the Empire gave way to the First Republic (1889) and was associated with advocacy for a heavy-handed, interventionist state with "enlightened despotism" as the term of the day (Merquior 1982).

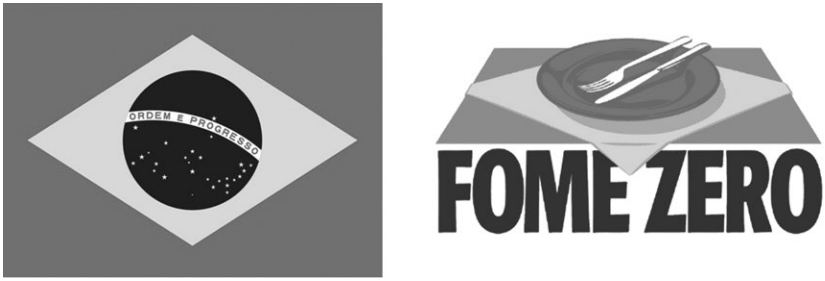

Figure 8. A Comparison of the Brazilian Flag (source: Governo do Brasil, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons) with the Zero Hunger Logo (source: Governo Federal, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

hunger and political oppression (here, *clientelismo* or *assistencialismo*) walked hand-in-hand.

The Fraught Roll-Out of Zero Hunger

Zero Hunger hit major snags in its first year. Its "specific" policies required considerable time, money, and personnel to implement in even a single village. And as for the "structuring" policies, these were simply too radical for Zero Hunger's international financial backers (e.g., The World Bank, UNESCO) to stomach. The Lula administration backed away from these measures and redoubled its focus on the less controversial "emergency" policies. Zero Hunger's main emergency measure, Food Card, was later combined with preexisting cash grants and launched as a new redistributive policy, *Bolsa Família* (Family Stipend), which spread quickly throughout Brazil. Bolsa Família became immensely popular, and scholars around the world have recognized its successful reduction of poverty and inequality. Still, the focus on an "emergency measure," one that harkened back to the *assistencialismo* so adamantly condemned to the past, left the idealistic front-line PT officials feeling betrayed by the ministry that oversaw the program.

The moderate (even feeble) character that Zero Hunger eventually took on was, for many on the Left, a lamentable microcosm of the Lula administration. They were angry at Lula for abandoning a decades-long project that began with the PT's founding during the military dictatorship (1964–85). The PT was first an underground "front" comprised of liberal professionals, university faculty, unionists, Trotskyites, and artists—many of whom believed the defeat of the dictatorship and

the collapse of capitalism would go together (Keck 1992: 79–81). "But when the generals surrendered power to the civilians, capitalism did not fall. We were surprised, and some of us formed other parties," explained Professor Eunice da Cunha, former Education Minister under President Lula's more conservative predecessor (personal communication). A wide cross-section of people also remained in the PT, making the party a cluster of ideologically plural "tendencies" (factions), some advocating socialism as the party's main objective, others advocating for representative democracy (Alves 2018). Thus, the PT was (and is) a party divided between socialists and liberal democrats (Azevedo 1995). It is a division held together by shared opposition to political adversaries and the official wager that "[t]here is no democracy without socialism and no socialism without democracy (Coutinho [1979] 2008)."

But, in practice, there was no even balance between these two progressive philosophies. By 2002, Lula had already changed his campaign colors from the communist-associated red of the PT flag (flown during prior unsuccessful campaigns) to the nation's green, blue, and yellow (see the flag in Figure 8) that signaled his commitment to all Brazil's classes. He distanced himself from the socialist elements of his own party to win over the middle class, while the party's leading conservative tendency ("Articulation") undertook measures (e.g., direct elections of party leaders) to isolate the party's leftist tendencies (Ribeiro 2003: 65). Lula was determined not to raise conservative hackles, mainly those of foreign investors and the neoconservative U.S. president, George W. Bush, who had already proved willing to wage an unprovoked war in Iraq. Lula honored Brazil's international debt; he signed a free trade agreement with the U.S.; and he forestalled land reform indefinitely (Singer 2012). It was no surprise then that Zero Hunger was supported by pro-market institutions like the World Bank, UNESCO, and the International Monetary Fund. A program based on rights, citizenship, and social inclusion posed no threat to the order of things.

Doubling Down on the Fight against Clientelismo

As the front-line PT officials perceived the federal government's drift away from Zero Hunger's more "daring" "structuring" policies, they compensated for that drift by doubling down on their anti-clientelist messages. As a group, they were young, bohemian, and college-educated (mostly social work degree-holders). They came from poor but upwardly mobile families. Their parents had built up Teresina (Piauí's capital) during the

1970s and came to reside on its periphery. Some officials themselves lived there with their parents and were proud of their families' roles in building their homes and militating for urban infrastructure. They were, in sum, the quintessential insurgent citizens Holston describes. They would do their best to introduce Zero Hunger resources as "rights," interrupting the entrenched culture of *clientelismo*.

In their administrative travels to the *sertanejo* countryside, the PT officials were positioned both as cosmopolitan outsiders and as prodigal children returning to their own roots. Sometimes, they saw themselves as a privileged administrative class; at other times, they identified with the beneficiaries.

Let me return to Esmeralda's visit to Zezinho's village. After her preamble concerning the need for both coalitions to come together, Esmeralda described the vision of Zero Hunger in the following terms:

> You need to know that Zero Hunger is your right. It does not belong to Lula or to [Governor] Dias or to your mayor. It is ours—our rights finally recognized by the state. Our tax monies finally returned to us in the form of social policy …

Note how Esmeralda shifts from the second person "your right" to the first person "our rights." Key to her ability to slide back and forth between them is that she refused, as best she could, the role of patron. Esmeralda was able to inhabit the role of citizen in solidarity with Zero Hunger beneficiaries (sometimes called "participants") because, as a former community organizer, she was an ideal model of an insurgent citizen-leader who "seeks rights" for herself and others. More to the point, Esmeralda was not separated from the *sertanejo* program participants by any creditor–debtor relation. Nobody at the chapel owed Esmeralda anything for bringing Zero Hunger resources to them, at least that's what she insisted. Indeed, her vision was the opposite; the state that Esmeralda ultimately represented owed the villagers a certain recognition of their rights, rights originating in the citizenry and channeled upward (perhaps on loan) to the state in the form of "our tax monies."

It was not only that PT officials implementing Zero Hunger wanted to ensure that program resources would flow to insurgent citizens as rights rather than clientelist favors; they also wanted to instrumentalize the Zero Hunger program to inculcate the norms of insurgent inclusion into the *sertanejo* population. In the next section, I illustrate these points anecdotally.

The Tension between PT Insurgent Inclusion and Sertanejo Amicopolitics

The PT's discourse sounded morally upright to *sertanejos*, who had themselves come to critique a generation of domineering political "fathers" who aggrandized and hogged credit, rather than celebrating the collective agency of politically aroused friends. And yet, there were subtle differences between the local amicopolitical critique of patronage and PT officials' critique of *clientelismo*. All this meant that PT officials and *sertanejos* sometimes found themselves nodding at one another's words while perceiving some divergence between their respective understandings of ethical politics. Two cases illustrate this point.

In August of 2004, I was giving a tour of Passarinho Municipality to a Zero Hunger state official visiting from Piauí's capital city when a strange miscommunication occurred. The official, Aline, had made the long trip to implement a theater arts program, "The Happy Face of Piauí," for the municipality's children. She explained to the thirty or so children and adolescents gathered in the state-run high school in the town hub that "[w]e are hungry for more than just food. We are hungry for social inclusion, for the valorization of our folkloric art, our regional dances." Aline introduced the group to their new teacher and then hopped onto my motorcycle and asked me to take her to the three villages with active "productive projects" (World Bank/Zero Hunger-funded community development initiatives). As she did so, she noticed a bumper sticker on the motorcycle parked next to mine. It read, "Those who worry about the worker don't request [*pedir*] the vote." Aline dismounted as she saw the bike's owner approach and pointed to the sticker. "This!" she smiled with a big thumbs up. "This is cool [*bacana*]!" Aline shook his hand and hopped back on my bike. "This is what we need more of," she explained to me. "This is what Zero Hunger is trying to do."

I would speculate that for Aline, the stink on the term *pedir* (request) derived from her model of clientelist corruption. Perhaps she conjured the image of a manipulative politician soliciting a quid pro quo electoral transaction that turned rights into crumbs. What Aline did not know was that the owner of the bumper sticker was none other than Bernardo, the humble councilman I discussed in the previous chapter, the one who had clashed with Henrique (the coalition head and later mayor). Bernardo was hardly opposed to favors and he certainly expected some reciprocity for them. Indeed, his amicopolitical ethics had led him to work tirelessly for his "friends," hauling freight for families and giving money to them for medicines, and appreciating the "consideration" they

showed him when they "set things right down the line," that is, at the polls. For Bernardo, a politician who would "request (*pedir*) the vote" was reprehensible, since they failed so badly to build a reputation through their "work" or "assistance" that they had to approach the voters with their hand out, asking for something that should be given spontaneously to one who is always "friend to his friends." If Aline had understood the bumper sticker the way Bernardo (who had created the bumper sticker himself) intended, she might have seen its message as a symptom of the very clientelist political culture she was out to dismantle.

The second case involved the regional trainings at which Zero Hunger officials taught *sertanejos* how to implement their policies. The officials transported *sertanejo* community representatives to the state capital, lodging them for several days. I tagged along on two of these "programmatic pilgrimages," as I called them (Ansell 2014: 137–72). Both times, the curriculums included modules dealing with how to be a good citizen-leader, how to maintain the solidarity of a community association (*associativismo*), how to demand one's rights (*cobrar seus direitos*), and how to broaden associative ties beyond one's community to other communities and members of one's broader category. During one such trip, representatives from Zezinho's village and from other villages in southeast Piauí State—all denominated *quilombolas* for the sake of the project—were asked to stand and tell the group why they had chosen to come to the training. Each one stood up and proudly said, "I am here to see what I can bring back for my community" and nodded in approval when their counterparts said the same.

But the PT officials (and their allied racial justice activists) were dismayed. They glanced at one another in bemused frustration after each instance. "How do we give them a broader vision?," I heard one official ask her colleagues during a break. Drifting into the conversation, I gathered that there were two things that bothered the officials about the utterance the community representatives had repeated. The first was the small scale ("my community") of their concern. While PT officials regarded community-level benefits as less clientelistic than resources channeled to a single individual or household, they still regarded the village-level group as too narrow and private to constitute the sort of class or race-based public that would ideally consolidate "to fight for their rights" (see Gay 1998 on "semiclientelism" in Brazil). The PT state officials hoped to inspire the dispossessed to show up in numbers and put pressure on state officials, not only the Lula administration but future governments. They envisioned Zero Hunger's "specific projects" as

vehicles for instigating that process. What they wanted to hear from the community representatives were phrases like "our communities" (plural) uttered in tones of righteous indignation.

The officials' second grievance with the utterance ("I am here to see what I can bring back for my community") relates to the construction "to see what I can bring back." The model of agency formulated by this phrase negated the pugnacious spirit of insurgent-inclusion. "To see what" implies that this *what* is already a given, a determinate resource that is already *there* and waiting to be channeled somewhere else. But the officials wanted the community representatives to communicate to them that they (the representatives) would tell the state what to give their communities, because having lived there, they were the experts on their own needs. The officials effectively wanted the community representatives to demand (*cobrar*) those things (potable water, better schools, etc.) from the officials themselves insofar as they were state officials. They wanted the community representatives to address them in tones of defiant irreverence, to "run after" what they wanted, not just to hold their hands open to whatever the state said was ready to give. One PT official reflected, "It's easy to show up with something already made and give it to somebody and get a thank you. What's much harder is to get a person to do something for themselves." And the officials understood the act of running after rights as something that the community representatives should do in unison with one another once they discovered their natural solidarities with broader class- and race-based publics.

The officials hoped their trainings would function as consciousness-raising events at which villagers' revolutionary spirit would awaken and displace the ostensibly subservient political culture of the *sertão*. Instead, what they witnessed was the workings of amicopolitics, that is, a lateral communitarianism whose spatial horizons were local ("my community") and whose modes of agency included the courtship of alliances with individual state officials as strategically useful friends (and sometimes patrons) rather than insurgent agitation.

Taken together, these cases illustrate the ideological tension between *sertanejo* political culture and that of the PT officials. The latter were engaged in anti-clientelist efforts to inculcate within *sertanejo* people a defiant attitude toward authority and a taste for "inclusive" (programmatic) distributive practices. In both cases, there was some mismatch between *sertanejo* amicopolitical ethics and the ethics of PT officials. In the case of Bernardo's bumper sticker, there was a mismatch between amicopolitical and insurgent-inclusive condemnations of politicians' "requests"

Figure 9. Zero Hunger Official from the Piauí State Government Visits the Participants of a Community-Driven Development Project on their Farm in Passarinho Municipality (photo by Aaron Ansell).

for votes. In the case of the trainings, there was a mismatch between beneficiaries' affirmation of community-centered resource procurement and officials' longing to witness *sertanejos* adopt an indignant, agitational posture toward authority—the sort of posture that embodied the seeking and redeeming of rights and the expansion of lateral solidarities far beyond the residential community.

At the same time, however, these cases reveal areas of ideological overlap between PT officials' insurgent inclusion and *sertanejo* amicopolitics. After all, Aline had rightly inferred that Bernardo opposed a politician "requesting the vote" even if she construed that act somewhat differently than he did. And after all, the community representatives who affirmed their intention to bring things back for "my community" shared the PT officials' conviction that village-level solidarity was ethically superior to the individualism stereotypically associated with *clientelismo*.

Stretched out over thirteen years of PT governance, social policies like Zero Hunger maintained this ambivalent relationship with the

sertanejo politics of friendship, at times seeming to reinforce, and at other times contradicting, amicopolitical ethics. And the PT's anti-poverty policies comprised only one of several administrative tools that the PT officials used to dismantle *sertanejo clientelismo*. A comprehensive account of these tools would attend to the PT's role in the non-partisan Clean Vote Campaign of 2008 and 2012,[10] the related reforms to Brazil's electoral codes,[11] and the PT's increasing emphasis on the civil service exam as an impartial (rather than clientelistic) means to fill municipal posts.[12] The key point here is this ambivalent relationship between the officials' political ethics and the ethics of the *sertanejo* people led the latter to assimilate the PT's goals without always perceiving them as different from their own.

In the next section, I discuss the effects of this dynamic on *sertanejo* political culture, particularly on the local meaning of certain terms ("vote

10. In 2010, during the PT era, the Clean Slate Law (*Lei da Ficha Limpa*) passed to prohibit the candidacy of individuals convicted of crimes. This was followed by the 2012 Clean Vote campaign, also called the Conscientious Vote Campaign, which was headed by the Federal Electoral Tribunal, the Organization of Brazilian Attorneys, and the National Council of Brazilian Bishops (an organization with deep historical ties to the PT). The campaign boasted the slogan, "The vote has no price; it has consequence" (Dias 2015). For more on the senses of this and related slogans, see Pedroza (2015).
11. The Clean Vote campaign coincided with the PT administration's expansion and increased enforcement of certain articles (e.g. 41-A) of Brazil's Electoral Code that dealt with the "illicit capture of suffrage," as is said to occur when politicians "donate, offer, promise, or deliver any good or advantage to the voter for the purpose of obtaining a vote" (Santos and Piacentini 2012: 48). During my time in the field, I heard municipal politicians lament that "now, the regional prosecutor will grab you if you so much as give away a cap" during the official campaign period.
12. During the PT era, the number of municipal jobs available expanded, and so too did the percentage of jobs that had to be allocated meritocratically, going to those with the highest scores on the exam (Maia 2021). The PT administration tried to reduce the "clientelistic" allocation of municipal jobs by increasing the ratio of public posts staffed by those people who passed the civil service exam (*concurso público*) to those positions appointed at the mayor's discretion (*cargos de confiança*). These discretionary appointments are a highly coveted resource in a region where stable, salaried work is very rare. The PT thus diminished an important economic lever that mayors could use to induce people to vote for them.

Figure 10. A Group of Women in Passarinho Municipality Pose for a Photo by a Community Garden Funded by the Zero Hunger Program (photo by Aaron Ansell, 2010).

buying," "obligation," and "proposal") that had been important to the moral imagination of amicopolitics.

The Sertanejo Uptake of Insurgent Inclusion

I became very close with a cadre of schoolteachers during my time in Passarinho and kept in touch with several of them in the years that followed. These were the people whose outlook on the world most resembled my own, the people in whose houses I took solace when I was confused or overwhelmed by the cultural distance I felt with the majority of the population. Most had university training and several explicitly identified with what they assumed was my liberal-cosmopolitan critique of local politics. One teacher once remarked to me, "Aaron, our people don't understand that friendship and politics should be kept separate. You and I can be on different sides [electoral coalitions] and still be friends. But most people here cannot. Once you're on the other side, you're not friends."

The schoolteacher wished it were otherwise, that "most people" could be like "you and I." His was not an amicopolitical wish, nor a wish to let politics be guided by the spirit of "equitable exchange" (qua Danielle Allen). He wanted to keep politics and friendship—public and private—separate and distinct.

In 2020, another schoolteacher, Vagner, managed to get elected mayor of Passarinho. Vagner had been the highly competent director of finances under Henrique's successor (turned rival), Renato. Renato, like Henrique, had crafted himself in the amicopolitical mold, as a charismatic friend renowned for his great *força*. Renato had nearly bankrupted the municipality because he was "too open-handed," too generous with the municipal coffers. But Vagner had managed to put the mayor's accounts in order. He reorganized the school bus routes and government contracts to save money, pulling the municipality out of debt. Renato backed Vagner as his chosen successor, even though the latter did not embody a persona of exuberant friendship. And though some found Vagner "uncharismatic" (a charge I found unfair), he won the 2020 election. His victory testified to a PT-induced shift to the political sensibilities of the *sertão*.

But the shift was uneven, and there were dissenters.

In 2012, I was visiting with a town councilman from one of the eight municipalities in southeast Piauí. I had known this man, Pedro, since 2004, when he had begun his time in that office. We were drinking along with Pedro's son, a young man (maybe twenty years old). The conversation turned to the PT and the messages that Zero Hunger officials imparted to him and his fellow municipal politicians. Pedro expressed his admiration for the PT but noted that

> When I transport sick people to the hospital or freight sacks of cement to their homes, the PT thinks this is wrong; they call it vote buying [*compra de voto*]. That's not vote buying. I've bought votes too. Vote buying is when you give somebody cash so they will leave their own candidate and vote for yours. It's no good because half the time, they take your money and still vote for their guy.

In the amicopolitical frame espoused by Pedro, cash gifts were morally suspect, but that was not true for all material gifts that a politician might give to an elector. Transport to the hospital or sacks of cement were morally legitimate expressions of *força*. Moreover, some cash gifts were also considered legitimate; when politicians gave money to help people through specific lifecycle crises (health emergencies, housing

costs for a newly married couple, funeral costs, etc.), they reckoned such money as *força* and regarded the giving of *força* as essential to the establishment of moral, long-term relations (Ansell 2014).

Other anthropologists studying *sertanejo* people have also noticed that cash is the paradigmatic currency of "vote buying," that is, of a purely transactional politics devoid of mutual concern between parties. For Jorge Mattar Villela, the issue comes down to time, the time of a debtor–creditor relation that cannot exist if payment is made instantaneously. "To sell one's vote on the day of the election to any old candidate is to empty out the credit that could otherwise render the voter's prestige more durable" (Villela 2005: 272–73; and see Perutti 2022: 188). Here I regard "prestige," the voter's value in the eyes of the politician, as an analogue for political friendship. To sell one's vote is to deny the potential creditor their time to hold the debt, to see what they will do during that time, whether it will be a cause for intimacy or hostility.[13] Such was Pedro's view. But his son saw it differently.

Pedro's son had been listening to his father distinguish between "vote buying" and moral gifts to electors and he soon took Pedro to task on the matter. "But Dad, isn't it like giving them money for the freight? Isn't it all the same thing [*uma coisa só*]?" he said. For the son, it did not matter if Pedro's gifts were cash or favors, whether they gave these gifts the night before the election or at some other moment in the political cycle. Whenever they were given, whatever was given, these were gifts that engendered a transactional obligation on the part of the elector to vote for him. That, for Pedro's son, was what made them illegitimate acts of "vote buying." His comments captured the spirit of the PT's intended transformation of *sertanejo* political culture, the one expressed by the more expanded sense of the term "vote buying." This suggests that *sertanejos* were becoming morally skeptical about the amicopolitical idea that some political favors were legitimate expressions of friendship rather than crass vote buying.[14] "Isn't it all the same thing?" the young man asked rhetorically.

13. Benoit de L'Estoile offers a similar interpretation, arguing that to give "money" in the *sertão* is to contribute to a person in a narrowly economic sense, but to cultivate friendship is to produce a form of "security [that] is not 'economic' in the narrow sense, but rather pertains more broadly to the conditions necessary to 'live and live well'" (L'Estoile 2014: S71).
14. Anthropologists have noted this same kind of disenchantment with sociable gifting occurring elsewhere in the world at the turn of this century. Alan Smart argues that the Chinese practice of cultivating *guanxi*

In addition to "vote buying," there were other terms within the amicopolitical lexicon whose meanings shifted during the period of PT rule. Here, I review two of them, the first being "obligation" (*obrigação*), as in an elector's obligation to vote for a given candidate, and the second being "proposal" (*proposta*), referring to a politician's promissory utterances made to family heads during campaign-season visits to electors' homes. I argue that the shift in meaning suffered by these two terms suggests that *sertanejo* political ethics are headed in an insurgent-inclusive direction.

The shifting sense of terms like "proposal" and "obligation" also point to the PT's more ambivalent impact on amicopolitics. Insurgent-inclusive citizenship validated preexisting amicopolitical critiques of domineering patronal politicians, even as it condemned any hint of transactionalism between politicians and voters.

Proposals

Sertanejo politicians began using the term "proposal" to refer to a politician's stated intentions—what the politician would do if elected—during the amicopolitical period. The term was itself a corrective replacement for the word "promise" (*promessa*), which older people today recall politicians using up until the 1990s. By the time Henrique took office in Passarinho in 2005, the latter term had fallen out of favor. He remarked, "We politicians use both words. But I am more for the proposal because the proposal is something well-founded [*bem-fundamentada*], well-elaborated. The promise is not." Helping me interpret Henrique's words, my field assistant, Edgar, explained that

> anyone can make a promise and then simply not carry it out. And this is what was done in the past. Nowadays, if a politician visits a house, he does not just enter and make promises. The people don't accept that. The politician becomes a laughingstock. Nowadays, he has to ask permission to enter the house; the wife may serve him coffee; and he asks if he can present his proposal, maybe for either money or employment.

(connections) through gifts and favors lost some of its moral legitimacy during the late-twentieth-century economic reforms. People began to suspect that *guanxi* was, in actuality, motivated by an individual's calculated self-interest rather than by an open-hearted hope for solidarity and began to label it corruption (Smart 2018).

The contrast Edgar and Henrique articulated between "proposals" and "promises" does not map to the liberal distinction between clientelistic favors on the one hand and programmatic (Hicken 2011) social policies on the other. Rather, it maps to a local *sertanejo* distinction between the power dynamics of candidate home visits during the heyday of patronage and the power dynamics of candidate home visits during the more recent era, when amicopolitics was in bloom.

The amicopolitical perspective associates the act of promising goods with the domineering politics of patronage. Politicians who make a promise do not empower their voters. Far from it. As the sociologist Letícia de Faria writes of political promises among the settlements (*assentamentos*) of the Landless Workers' Movement, "if politics is conceived as a promise that's because the arrangements that resolve questions in … the settlement … are at the mercy of the word of the candidates" (2005: 26). When making promises, the patronal candidate need not explain how they will make good on their word, that is, through what means, involving which actors, according to which timelines, and so forth. They merely assert that they will do something that often remains undone. This is why Henrique contrasted the (facile) promise with the "well founded," meaning well-explained, proposal.

I suspect there is still more to the amicopolitical aversion to "the promise." A promise can be a speech act performed by a single speaker; it need not be collaborative, nor even acceded to. In contrast, the proposal is a necessarily cooperative verbal ritual; one party proposes while the other party chooses to accept or decline. This aspect of mutuality chimes with Edgar's implied contrast between the domineering quality of yesteryear's (patronal) campaign visits, in which candidates "just entered" the electors' households, and today's more respectful (amicopolitical) candidates, who "ask permission to enter the house," receive hospitality, "ask if he can present his proposal," and so forth. The entire demeanor of the stereotypic, proposal-offering politician is humble and permission-seeking. The amicopolitician respects the sovereignty of his elector-friend's household. By contrast, the stereotypically patronal politician treats the voters' house as his own, or at least assumes that he is welcome, that he has a right to come in, to offer some tired platitude, and to walk out with the vote. In this way, the term "proposal" was an artifact of the amicopolitical revolution that had already taken hold in Piauí's *sertão* by the time the Zero Hunger officials arrived there.

However, during the PT era, what *sertanejos* considered the appropriate form of candidate–voter interaction during home visits (at campaign

time) changed again. This change came not with a new term but with a shift in the ideal referent of the existing term, "proposal." It is not that the term ceased to refer to a detailed description of plans rendered amicably and subject to refusal. It is more that insurgent inclusion introduced a full-tilt version of a proposal cast in its own image, the image of *inclusão*, of the programmatic proposal that would be of benefit to entire villages or, better still, multiple villages, i.e., to "publics."

One regional radio host (thirty-four years old) complained to my field assistant of his town's local politicians, saying that

> there are few who are concerned with proposals. Most people in this region value *assistencialismo*. Some of the young voters are worthwhile, but many of these people are influenced [to vote for bad candidates] by their families, by the older people.

The radio host's lament revolved around the contrast between virtuous proposals and morally dubious *assistencialismo*, clientelism's kissing cousin. That he would use the term *assistencialismo* (a social scientific concept), suggests that the contrast he draws was not native to the amicopolitical frame. The contrast he draws between *assistencialismo* and *propostas* relates to the question of whether the good things the candidate proposes to do would accrue to the voter as one among many citizens (as rights) or if they would accrue to the voter as a private person who would feel honor-bound to repay that favor with their vote, *força* for *força*.

One problem faced by PT-influenced *sertanejos* was that of discerning whether a visiting candidate's proposal conformed to this insurgent-inclusive ideal or if it was cast in the mold of friendship. By the early 2000s, candidates for local office had become fully aware that a new political morality was emerging in their midst, that while some household heads were looking to secure new roofing tiles during the campaign season, others brooked no talk of private exchange. They had ways of feeling out these household heads before launching into whatever version of their proposal they thought suited the household heads.

One PT-affiliated village association president, Isabel, made this clear to me during an interview in 2012:

Isabel: They enter your house, and they ask, "What do you need here?

Aaron: What does that mean when they say "here?"

Isabel: That's it! They don't make that clear. Does "here" mean in your house or in your community? They don't say. They wait for you to react to them, and then they figure out what you want.
Aaron: And so, when they say *vocês* (the plural "you") …
Isabel: Right, does that mean "you (all)" who live in this house or "you (all)" who live in the municipality?

Isabel's lament was that, however much the political landscape had come to allow for the existence of proper, rights-oriented proposals, the same politicians who offered those proposals were not committed to them in principle. That is, they were not so committed to inclusive and programmatic politics as to preclude them from making recourse to personal reciprocity—if that's what it took to get elected. But it was also the case that an exchange of personal favors for votes may have functioned as the opening overture of a voter–politician relation that migrates in the direction of rights-based citizenship.

Adailsa, a PT-affiliated candidate for town council from Princesa Municipality, described this perspective to me: "We need to respond to people as they are sometimes, not what we want them to be. Then we do the work of building citizenship through our good policy." But while Adailsa was willing to do personal favors to gain the trust of some electors—especially those facing desperate times—she never sympathized with any politician who indicated their expectation for a vote in return for such beneficence. She cast a jaundiced eye toward any proposal that made appeals to reciprocal obligation. The amicopolitical emphasis on "equitable exchange" (Allen 2004) would not sway Adailsa, for whom any political debt was incompatible with rights-bearing citizenship.

Obligation

In the *sertão*, political debt is often spoken of as an obligation (*obrigação*), and people say of politicians that they sometimes "obligate" (*obrigar*) electors to vote for them. In Portuguese (as in English), the term is ambiguous: To say that one feels "obligated" (*obrigado*) is to point either to one's experience of being subjected to another person's imposition, or to claim only that one feels some moral obligation by their own conscience to act in a certain way. A person's obligation to another to reciprocate a favor can be either interpersonally coerced or just experienced internally (as the nagging of one's own conscience).

In the amicopolitical ethic, it is only the coercive, interpersonal obligation that causes worry. The amicopolitical critique of patronage pertains, in part, to the heavy-handedness imputed to metaphorical fathers who enforce (obligate) the electoral loyalty of their metaphorical children. (In some cases, patron-politicians had used physical intimidation or retributive violence to enforce the vote.) The amicopolitical ethic casts off the yoke of domineering fathers, the sort that cracked their knuckles while standing over you at the polls. But amicopolitics offers no revolt against the nagging feeling of being obliged to return a favor. After all, giving and taking between friends in the amicopolitical mode is not about taking advantage of someone else. Such "equitable exchange" (Allen 2004) inheres when a person wants what is good for their exchange partner in addition to themselves; they want "equal agency in the relationship" even between persons separated by wealth or rank (2004: 129). Thus, many friend-styled politicians I came to know in the early 2000s would affirm that they "never imposed, never obligated" voters to post their campaign propaganda stickers to the outer walls of their homes, while they freely acknowledged that those who benefited from their *força* felt an inner moral obligation to "thank" them at the polls.

By contrast, the insurgent-inclusive perspective is not content just to root out coercive intersubjective obligation; it wants to eradicate all intrasubjective feelings of political debt. I suggest that during the PT era, *sertanejos* became increasingly subject to this modern insistence on keeping economic concerns out of everything else in life, including one's vote, which must never be given in payment for any favor.[15]

The effects of the PT's absolutist intolerance of electoral reciprocity on *sertanejo* political culture were contradictory. On the one hand, insurgent inclusion delegitimated the "equitable exchanges" that comprised a key pillar of amicopolitics. On the other hand, it amplified the amicopolitical critique of the patronage domination of yesteryear. Insurgent

15. It is worth noting that the modern liberal influence underlying this perspective is generally quite phobic of any "contact between politics and the logic of the economy that implies the contamination of politics" (Quirós 2011: 638); and on modernity's "rendering [of such] mixtures unthinkable" (see Latour 1993: 42). Benoit L'Estoile offers a similar reflection: "[T]he belief that material conditions of life (production, exchange, and consumption) are logically distinct from political or spiritual ones (even if they happen to be entangled)—is an essential ontological tenet of our contemporary world" (2014: S63).

inclusion lowered popular tolerance for a politician's imposition of electoral debt on ordinary voters. These two contradictory effects derived from the PT's conflation of the two senses of "obligation," that is, intersubjective coercion and intrasubjective conscience.

In 2012, I interviewed a motorist who worked in the regional parish as the priest's driver. Espedito was an Afro-Brazilian man who was active in the Church-affiliated *Movimento Negro*. He wore a PT pin on his lapel and belonged to the local party chapter. We spoke just once while I was waiting to accompany the priest on an errand. Espedito placed my recorder on his dash and turned around to face me as I asked him, "Why do the politicians give out their propaganda stickers at election time?" He took my question for a rhetorical critique of that practice, one he agreed with. Then, he painted a picture of a typical politician–elector interaction of the sort that a candidate initiates by approaching the elector's household.[16]

Espedito began in soft, speedy tones, like he was telling a secret: "A councilman shows up, and he starts to work with the people." Here, Espedito broke into a performance, imitating the voice of a stereotypic candidate. He raised his volume, pitch, and tempo: "Look, I am a candidate for town council. I need you [plural] to vote for me." Espedito's vocal inflection was harsh on my ear, as it would be to the voter's ear. It was the haranguing voice of a bully. Then Espedito shifted into an impersonation of the voter's reply to the bully-politician. His voice took on a sighing, sing-songy intonation that Brazilians would sometimes use as code for shrugging apathy: "No. I already owe a favor to John Doe, to Joe Smith." Finally, Espedito reverted to his default voice to explain to me that the politician, hearing the reply, would now carry a grudge against the voter.

Espedito's talk might easily be taken for an entirely amicopolitical dramatization of the reprehensible bully-politicians of yesteryear (interpersonal coercive obligation), but later in the conversation, he suggested otherwise. He went on to dramatize the bully-politician making an offer in the same rapid-fire, haranguing voice: "What do you need? Anything. A ball of wire." He goes there and gives you a ball of wire. You're obligated now!"

16. A fuller version of my conversation with Espedito appears in an article in which I address the broader implications of those caustic vocal registers heard during *sertanejo* political campaigns (Ansell 2015).

Nowhere in Espedito's dramatization was there room for a polite rendition of the question "What do you need?" as is idealized in the amicopolitical frame. Nowhere was there room for an elector to confess their farming needs, ask for the ball of wire, and politely gesture to their intent to repay the politician "down the line" (i.e., at the polls). It was as if, for Espedito, any inner feeling of transactional obligation or week-willed apathy on the part of the elector invariably pointed to some external coercion on the part of the politician. In effect, Espedito dramatized a two-fold expression of clientelist corruption: the debt-enforcing politician and the spineless elector who refused to fight for their rights as a proper citizen.

All of this suggests a tension in the spread of the insurgent-inclusive critique of *clientelismo*. This new progressive ethic echoed and amplified some precepts of amicopolitics (e.g., behavioral parity between voters and politicians, appreciation for egalitarian solidarities) while undermining others (e.g., material reciprocity, household-based exchange). In fact, it may be that the insurgent-inclusive disapproval of all transactional obligation had caught on so well in the *sertão* not because it was radically different from amicopolitics but because it echoed the amicopolitical critique of bullying patrons.

In sum, *sertanejos*' absorption of the PT's insurgent-inclusive ethics manifested at the level of language, of words whose meanings and contexts of use had become contested and transformed. "Vote buying" expanded its referent to include all manner of goods and services that politicians might give to (or do for) electors, not just cash buy-offs given on the eve of an election. Popular understandings of a politician's campaign season "proposal" to an elector's household changed during this moment as well. To be legitimate, a proposal needed to imply an "inclusive" (programmatic), community-oriented action on the part of the politician, rather than an ad hoc, household-oriented commitment of resources. And where once an ethic of amicable reciprocity characterized virtuous politician–elector relations, such transactional "obligation" lost legitimacy: whether due to external coercion or internal conscience, all obligation came to evince the corrupt *clientelismo* that needed to be stamped out.

Conclusion

In 2013, Lula's successor and prodigy, President Dilma Rousseff, celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Bolsa Família Program. She proclaimed

that Bolsa Família did not generate any sort of state domination over the poor. On the contrary: "In order to transfer money directly into the veins, into the veins of the poorest people, we first unified all of the state (cash transfer) actions and we swept away hundreds of years of clientelist policies in our country" (Braga 2013).

It was an overstatement. Clientelism, that is, the combined norms of patronage and amicopolitics, persisted in the *sertão*. But Rousseff's statement had some merit. PT-led anti-poverty policy (indeed various PT policies) amplified preexisting calls for more egalitarian politics in the *sertão* and also cast moral doubt on those local categories (proposal, obligation, vote buying) that legitimated certain kinds of private electoral exchanges. The PT introduced, or at least fostered, the local uptake of new terms that coded for this moment's insurgent-inclusive political morality, a politics of citizens.

The insurgent quality of this inclusive politics lay in its rebellious spirit. There was a Robinhoodesque nature to it. PT discourse framed the established channels of state distribution as essentially clientelistic (*assistêncialista*), and thus in need of bypass. Hence, Rousseff's emphasis on channeling cash grants "directly into the veins" of the poor. The discourse frames PT action as the negation of a negative type, the corruption of a corrupt system that generates, heroically, a new system, a new moral gradient. The principle of *inclusão social* would organize this gradient, the extension of the sphere of moral concern to those excluded in virtue of either their categorical marginality (e.g., rural Afro-Brazilians) or their non-alliance in the electoral sense. The currency of rights (*direitos*) would flow down this gradient, beginning with Lula and moving downward to those inclusive leaders in charge of smaller, more capillary aggregates—a profusion that reached into the smallest villages, like Caixa de Água. In such places, *sertanejos* came to appreciate a new logic of currency distribution, one in which state resources would reach people even if they voted for the rival candidate for village association president. It was a new distributional logic that required the support of citizens who fought for their rights by, for instance, refusing clientelist favors and voting for those politicians (prototypically those from the PT) who eschewed *clientelismo* (racism, etc.) in favor of social inclusion.

This politics of citizenship continues to stand opposed to the politics of clientelism, which it grasps as corruption. Indeed, citizenship and clientelism each corrupt the other, each bypassing the other's resource circuits and denaturing its currency. In clientelism, politicians reroute state resources away from the public and toward private, contractually-bound

("obligated") individuals, converting rights into buy-offs, or "bargaining chips at election time," as Lula called them. In citizenship, politicians reroute state resources away from those who, on the basis of *presença* or *união*, enjoy the discretion to, say, "be a friend to my friends." This act converts a favor—a unit of personal *força*—into a right, turning something that was once used to forge and cement personal alliances into a form of wealth that affirms equal, if anonymous, membership in the political community.

To the extent that *sertanejos* have taken up this insurgent-inclusive ethics, their prior distinction between patronage and amicopolitics has come to appear fictional to them. According to this perspective, both patronage and amicopolitics contaminate public-minded citizenship with interpersonal obligation. It matters little whether those obligations are reckoned vertically, as deference owed to fathers, or laterally, as reciprocity owed to friends. In making this claim, I join a chorus of scholars and activists who tell stories about the Global South at the turn of the twenty-first century, stories of the shift "from clients to citizens." It is a version of Francis Fukuyama's ([1992] 2006) famous claim that history has ended; that is, that liberal democracy has ascended over other political forms to become a stable reference point for all the world's nations. But that story needs qualification. An identity-conscious activism inspired by liberalism, Marxism, and other progressive traditions assaulted the local patronage ethic by echoing local amicopolitical critiques of domineering politicians and then, having gained the admiration of amicopolitical subjects, this new ethic pushed against amicopolitical categories.

This qualification may sound like academic quibbling, but consider that the *sertanejo* people, once very conservative at the polls, reelected Lula and his successor, Dilma Rousseff, throughout the 2000s. It was because the PT's ethics chimed with the local amicopolitical revolution that the PT's ethical messages sounded like moral rectitude to the *sertanejo* people. The latter did not perceive the officials as unwelcome colonizers but rather as prodigal children returned from the cities to help make life better for them. Ironically, the PT officials' fervent call for insurgent-inclusive ethics often felt to *sertanejos* like a moral zeal for their own familiar (amicopolitical) values, rather than new values. (I've discussed some exceptions, such as the councilman, Pedro.) In sum, the local shift from patronage to amicopolitics that preceded the PT era created fertile soil in the *sertão* for the local uptake of the PT's insurgent-inclusive message. (This is a causal factor that we are bound to overlook if we conflate amicopolitics with patronage.)

Influenced by the PT's norms of insurgent inclusion, the *sertanejo* people became passionate supporters of Presidents Lula and Rousseff and the PT in general—at least at the national level. The practices labeled *clientelismo* continued to flourish in the *sertão*, but so too did the insurgent-inclusive condemnations of those practices. And the PT appeared as the guiding light along the path to a new and cleaner politics.

Then the PT blew it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Politics of *Good* Citizens

In 2019, one of my field assistants urged me to speak to Osvaldo, a town councilmember from Princesa Municipality whom my assistant claimed was the most honest politician in office. We connected through social media and traded messages for a few weeks. A Catholic in his early thirties, Osvaldo had grown up influenced by the parish's Liberation Theology priest and had voted for Dilma Rousseff (PT) both in 2010 and 2014. At the time we spoke, he had been collecting a few dozen food baskets for several families living under tarps along Princesa's urban periphery. Osvaldo insisted the food basket donors leave his name out of it: "Once those families know I did this, they will feel obligated to vote for me." Osvaldo so fully embodied the politics of citizenship (see prior chapter) that I scarcely bothered asking who he had voted for in 2018. But I did ask, and to my surprise, he answered, "Jair Bolsonaro."

Bolsonaro was no garden variety PT opponent. He certainly didn't fit the image of the conventional Right, the buttoned-up business types. Bolsonaro styled himself as a maverick political outsider, even though he had served as a congressman (Rio de Janeiro State) for some twenty years. But he found his moment, rising to become Brazil's "Tropical Trump," a title he embraced. Bolsonaro rose to prominence at a moment of profound economic and political crisis marked by widespread disillusionment with both the PT and the traditional political elite. He soon became the leader of what came to be called the New Right (*Nova Direita*), a political movement committed to protecting "family values" and

moving Brazil in the direction of a Christian republic (Lynch 2020: 26). His 2016 campaign slogan was "Brazil over everything; God over everyone!" For Bolsonaro and the New Right, the promotion of Christian values went hand in hand with a purge of all corruption from the nation—both the pragmatic "old politics of give and take" (*a velha política da toma lá dá ca*) and the "communist" corruption of the Left that would allegedly "turn Brazil into another Venezuela"[1] (Estanislau 2022).

Many on the New Right disparaged the country's northeastern people for their enduring support for the PT. (The PT won about 70% of the presidential vote in the Northeast in both 2018 and 2022.) Indeed, they blamed Bolsonaro's poor showing in the region on the alleged backwardness of the *nordestinos* (Serrão 2022). Some called for a separation of Brazil into two countries so that the developed south could finally be free of the Northeast's drag on their nation's progress (Paulino 2016; Serrão 2022: 192–93). One 2018 Facebook post went so far as to implore of Bolsonaro, "if you win, … cut off the Bolsa Família, and cut them off of the fucking map and let them be an independent place so that communism can stay there, for God's sake" (quoted in Serrão 2022: 190). Such sentiments pertained to class as well as regional hierarchy. A funny adage has it that the "biggest northeastern city is São Paulo" (which is located in the country's southeast), a saying that highlights the vast numbers of northeasterners who migrate to southern cities in search of work and who often join the ranks of the urban poor. Indeed, support for Bolsonaro was lowest among the poor, urban and rural (G1 2018). In one publicity stunt during his 2018 campaign, Bolsonaro seemed to confirm the symbolic equivalence that linked the poor, the northeasterners, and PT supporters. He stood on the main thoroughfare of Copacabana (Rio de Janeiro) during a PT demonstration and handed out chunks of buffalo grass to marchers, saying, "Here, take your Bolsa Família (cash stipend)," a gesture that both equated state redistribution

1. The New Right reference to Venezuela was meant to evoke the specter of an authoritarian socialist state. The election of President Lula in 2002 had been part of a continental shift toward the political Left throughout Latin America, the so-called "Pink Tide." Brazil was considered the moderate expression of this left-leaning political turn, while Venezuela, under President Hugo Chavez, represented its more radical expression. Venezuela suffered economic collapse after 2014 and then a turn toward authoritarianism and human rights abuses under Chavez's successor, Nicolas Maduro (Cheatham et al. 2023).

with vote buying and implied that the poor were essentially livestock—a longstanding pejorative trope for northeasterners (Estadão 2022).

This chapter is concerned with the New Right's moral imagination during Brazil's political crisis, a period spanning roughly from 2012 (the onset of the economic crisis) to 2022 (the end of Bolsonaro's presidency). This moral imagination was both influenced by, and in revolt against, that of the PT. It replicated some of the PT's liberal concerns with administrative impartiality and, rhyming with the PT's emphasis on insurgent citizens, the New Right celebrated a certain kind of bellicose citizen who would fight for their rights. But it was not the long-excluded citizen who fought (with words) to gain access to public resources. Rather, the moral imagination of the New Right centered on the "good citizen."

The New Right's "good citizen" emerged as a counter to the PT's model of universal citizenship and social inclusion. A snippet from a 2018 gubernatorial debate (Piauí State) demonstrates as much. During the debate, Sueli Rodrigues, a left-wing candidate (from a party that caucused with the PT), directs the following remarks to Fábio Sérvio, from Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL):

Rodrigues:	We live in a state of grave violence. … How would your party confront these problems?
Sérvio:	I am a man of the Right. I walk with candidate Bolsonaro. Our positions are firm against violence and corruption. … You can't just go hugging the *bandido* [bandit], understanding him to be a *coitado* [poor little thing]. He's not. And this situation has been made worse by the mistaken social policies [of the PT] …
Rodrigues:	I want to remind you that the people who commit illegal acts do not stop being citizens. They are not enemies of the nation; they belong to our nation. The ones who practice illegal acts need social policies, not a gun to their heads, especially because these people are generally our Black people, people who, after slavery, our state did not so much abandon as put a gun to their heads.
Sérvio:	Well, for me, a citizen is one who is good [*de bem*], one who works, one who faces difficulties and overcomes them, not one who goes out assaulting and killing. … What you're saying divides the country; we want to unite the country under the same flag, but with values, with Christian values … (O Globo 2018a).

Rodrigues claimed the *bandidos* did "not stop being citizens." Sérvio said they did. For him, the citizen "is the one who is good." And because the bandits were not citizens, they did not enjoy the civil rights of citizens, such as *habeus corpus*, due process, and access to redistributed wealth (Carvalho 2021). A New Right expression nicely captioned this perspective: "human rights for right humans" (*direitos humanos para humanos direitos*).

The moral imagination of the New Right was organized along Christian-authoritarian lines. Its protagonist was the family father, not the *pai presente* (present father) of patronage (see Chapter One), but the policeman-father (*pai policial*), though in most rhetoric he was called the family father (*pai de família*). As the prototypical "good citizen," the *pai de família* ensured his nuclear family's economic autonomy (from the redistributive state) and protected his dependents, children especially, from the *bandidos*, the gays, and the communists. He exercised an industrious discipline (my words) that I take as the principle of the Christian-authoritarian gradient. The currency that flowed down this gradient, from Bolsonaro and his junior ilk, through the military and militarized police (and sometimes through megachurch pastors), and eventually downward to family fathers, was "rights" (*direitos*). It was no accident that Christian-authoritarian rhetoric used the same term for its currency as the PT used for its own. Christian-authoritarian "rights" included the suite of rights espoused by the PT. But prototypically, the currency of this Christian-authoritarian gradient was what I call 'war rights,' the permission and means (guns) to use legitimate violence to protect the heteropatriarchal family from those who would harm or corrupt it.

From this perspective, the PT was an agent of *corrupção*; its policies channeled social rights away from good fathers and toward those gays, feminists, bandits, and communist subversives whose deviance undermined the Christian family. The PT even channeled war rights to those *vagabundos* by shielding them from the police. Thus, *corrupção* for the New Right referred to transgressions that involved the rerouting of all rights (war rights especially) in ways that degraded the family as a sanctified institution, both its safety and its self-reproduction, especially acts that impeded a righteous father's violent defense of his family.

Here I show how the Christian authoritarian morality arising during the post-PT era, the fourth moment in my ethnographic history, took shape and impacted national and local politics. And I discuss the forces that led to its defeat at the hands of a reborn (if not wholly redeemed) PT. The data I mobilize in this chapter are different from those

presented in the prior ones. I was unable to travel to Brazil during much of the crisis period (except for a brief trip in 2014 and another in 2015), so I had to resort to remote sources instead of participant observation. I draw on some of the conversations I had when trading audio files with old and new contacts via the social media application WhatsApp, and I followed dozens of *sertanejos* on Facebook. The data include conversations with five Pentecostal pastors—most of them Bolsonaro supporters— working in southeast Piauí State who entertained forthright and searching conversations with me, as did several local law enforcement officials. My three field assistants held (unrecorded) in-person conversations with other locals (at my request) and summarized those for me. My field assistants and I also ran a political attitudes survey comparing the Pentecostals to Catholics in southeast Piuaí State (though our sampling was imperfectly randomized).

In the following section, I review key aspects of the political crisis from which the New Right arose—a crisis revolving around myriad high-profile corruption prosecutions led by the (in)famous sting Operation Car Wash (*Operação Lava Jato*). The PT fared badly during this crisis. Most notably, President Rousseff was impeached and ex-President Lula jailed. I summarize these corruption scandals and show how they produced fertile soil for Bolsonaro and the New Right to grow to prominence.

In the section after that, I explore the meaning of "corruption" for the New Right and argue that its corruption model held some appeal for *sertanejos* in southeast Piauí, particularly the region's evangelicals, who comprised about 20 percent of the state's population as of 2010 (Agência IBGE Notícias 2012).[2] Central to this corruption model is the disparaged figure of the *vagabundo* (vagabond), who threatens the Christian family with violence, sexual depravity, and indolent clientelism.

2. In Brazil as a whole, evangelicals make up about 30% of the population (Otis 2022b). About half of these evangelicals belong to Brazil's Pentecostal congregations that emphasize direct contact with the holy spirit, the second coming of Christ, abstention from alcohol, and adherence to traditional gender roles (Machado and Burity 2014). The neo-Pentecostals are known for adherence to the "prosperity gospel" (the belief that donations to the church will bring about the donor's good fortune), their clever use of new communications technologies, their Holy War against the Devil, and forms of charismatic worship (Souza et al. 2019).

Yet despite the moralistic allure of this Christian-authoritarian corruption model, *sertanejos* (and other northeasterners) supported the PT candidates in the 2018 and 2022 elections. In the final section, I try to explain the region's ongoing support for the PT. I argue that, in the context of Brazil's political malaise and the virulent confrontation between the Left and Right, *sertanejos* resurrected the norms of patronage to help them evaluate national-level politics. Seen through the lens of patronage, the PT candidates (Lula especially) appeared superior to Bolsonaro.

The National Political Crisis and the Rise of the New Right

By 2012, the global economic crisis provoked by the subprime mortgage fiasco in the U.S. had made itself felt in Brazil. Interest rates and unemployment were soaring, the national debt was expanding, Brazil's "country risk" for foreign investment was increasing, and international investment was slowing (Barbosa Filho 2017: 51–6). Many lower-middle-class Brazilians who had prospered under Lula found themselves going bankrupt and unable to pay off the loans they had taken out to purchase consumer goods (Trevizan 2019). President Rousseff handled the economic crisis badly. At first, she maintained the deficit spending policies of her predecessor (and mentor), Lula, "raising the minimum wage and promoting expanded lending by state banks" (Myers 2020). She sought to appease both financial investors and domestic industry, a delicate balance that she could not maintain as well as Lula had (Singer 2020). When Rousseff's policies failed to stimulate the desired recovery, she reversed course with a turn toward austerity measures (which her leftist allies resented), measures that failed to stimulate economic recovery.

The political crisis began when left-leaning protests broke out in June of 2013, initiating a series of high-profile events that I note in the timeline in Figure 11 and will briefly summarize.

The June Days Protests

In 2013, during the height of the economic crisis, the urban public grew outraged as they saw their bus fares rise in several cities while state funds were expended on numerous big-ticket athletic stadiums in anticipation of the 2016 Olympics and World Cup. In June, a "Free Fare Movement" emerged that led a wave of demonstrations across several big cities.

Figure 11. Timeline of Brazil's Political Crisis (2012–2022).

Soon, others on the political Left were drawn to the protests. Their list of grievances expanded to include the government's failure to improve Brazil's public healthcare and school systems, dirty environmental policies, and betrayal of Indigenous people under pressure from wealthy landowners, as well as the widespread corruption that seemed to underlie it all (Carneiro da Cunha and Morton 2013; Odilla 2018). For many commentators in Brazil and abroad, the "June Days" seemed aligned with the global rise in pro-democracy movements, "Occupy Wall Street" in the U.S. (and elsewhere), the "Arab Spring" demonstrations, and the movement of the Indignados in Spain (Romero and Neumen 2013). The televised spectacle of violent police repression (using batons and tear gas) garnered broad sympathy for the protestors and increased animosity toward President Rousseff, despite her stated opposition to the police's tactics. Rousseff was able to win reelection in 2014, but barely. Her popularity, never as high as Lula's, went into freefall after her reelection.

Operation Car Wash and the Spate of PT Indictments

In 2014, quite separately from the June Days, the federal anti-corruption taskforce "Operation Car Wash" began an investigation into a ring of small-time money launderers that quickly revealed the involvement of executives at Brazil's parastate oil giant, Petrobras. The laundering occurred during Rousseff's presidency and involved Lula's appointees to the Petrobras executive board. These executives had been overpaying private state contractors who, in exchange, funneled some of the excess sums into a slush fund that the Petrobras executives then dipped into to make payoffs to allied politicians (Sotero 2023). The investigation into what became known as the *Petrolão* (Big Oil) scandal revealed that many of the contractors were part of "a cartel in the … Brazilian construction

sector, which was sharing out contracts and rigging prices on various projects (e.g. big infrastructure projects, the FIFA World Cup, and the Olympic Games)" (Kurtenbach and Nolte 2017: 5).

Such skullduggery was hardly unprecedented among the Brazilian elite, but historically, bringing people down for it had been very hard. Ironically, the Rousseff administration had made it easier. To "placate an angry [June Days] public," her administration began "fast-tracking laws aimed at rooting out systemic fraud" (Watts 2017). Car Wash investigators would now enjoy the use of "preventative detentions" to hold in jail persons indicted of corruption to squeeze them into making plea bargains in which they would give up the names of their accomplices. There were many plea bargains and many names (Watts 2017); they came from across the political spectrum, although the media (especially the massive conglomerate *O Globo*) focused on those affiliated with the PT (Van Dijk 2017), especially Lula, who stood accused of being Petrolão's mastermind (Britannica 2024).

At the helm of Operation Car Wash was one Sérgio Moro, a square-jawed, southern judge who embodied a sort of by-the-book professionalism. He was tall and handsome, light-skinned, and U.S.-educated, a champion of the law and proper procedure who hailed from Brazil's wealthy, Europeanate southern city, Curitiba. Judge Moro became a national and international hero, giving lectures on fighting corruption in the U.S. and comparing himself to the "untouchable" (*incorruptible*) Eliot Ness, the prohibition-era FBI agent credited with bringing down Al Capone (Affonso and Martino 2015). Under Moro, Car Wash successfully convicted 278 people of corruption-related offenses and secured the return of over $800 million in ill-gotten gains (Brito and Slattery 2021).

Among those convicted were 51 PT officials, including legislators, party cadres, and cabinet members of the Lula and Rousseff administrations. Lula himself eventually admitted the PT's guilt: "I have no shame to say to the Brazilian people that we must apologize. The PT must apologize. The government, that erred, must apologize" (BBC News Brasil 2022). But neither Lula nor Rousseff admitted to any personal involvement, and Judge Moro could not find evidence to indict them. Still, the PT, once the shining protagonist of "ethics in politics," had collapsed into disrepute.[3]

3. When the PT was founded in the late 1970s, its officials created a series of "mechanisms of control (internal to the party) in order to avoid possible rechanneling [*desvios*] on the part of its members. They created

Impeaching Rousseff

While Judge Moro searched in vain for evidence to prosecute President Rousseff, a wave of *Fora Dilma!* (Dilma Out!) street demonstrations broke out across Brazil's big cities. Some protestors wore T-shirts bearing the likeness of Judge Moro, and many held signs calling for Rousseff's impeachment. Some of these signs beseeched Brazil's armed forces to intervene, similar to what they had done in 1964 when conservative demonstrators called for a military coup. But there were no clear grounds for an impeachment.

Three conservative jurists then sent a "denunciation" to the Congress claiming that Rousseff had concealed budget shortfalls to make PT social policies (e.g., Bolsa Família) appear more solvent than they really were (Oliveira 2016). This "tricky accounting" was a common move by Brazilian presidents, but it nonetheless provided the pretext for impeachment, what critics called a "parliamentary coup." Sensing Rousseff's weakness, her vice-president, Michel Temer (from the catch-all Brazilian Democratic Movement Party), turned against her. He and his party flipped to the opposition, siding with the PT's longstanding party adversaries, the PSDB (Brazilian Social Democratic Party) and the array of small, non-ideological parties comprising the so-called *Centrão* (Big Center). But it was Congress's "Evangelical Front" that became the most strident advocate for Rousseff's impeachment, its legislators voting in near unison in favor of it, along with many conservative Catholics (Osborn 2016). Brazil was left in Temer's hands from 2016 until the next election, in 2018. Temer faced his own impeachment on corruption charges, but Congress kept him in power, many of its members trusting that Temer would call a halt to Car Wash's investigations and let many anxious legislators rest easy (Watts 2016).

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a special commission of party incumbents to review cases of infraction committed in relation to ethics and internal party discipline, subjecting to punishment all those who practiced improprieties in the exercise of their functions, be they party officials or legislators" (Almeida 2009: 2). Because of this, the PT enjoyed considerable popular credibility with respect to its anti-corruption platform, especially as a leading voice in the popular call to impeach President Fernando Color de Melo in the early 1990s (Almeida 2009: 3).

Jailing Lula

Judge Moro eventually brought down Lula. The process began in early 2016, while Rousseff was still in office. Moro alleged that Lula had received the keys to a triplex in Rio de Janeiro from Odebrecht, a state construction contractor already under investigation by Operation Car Wash. In reality, the matter was more nuanced. Lula had been renting a beach-front apartment (worth $67,000) in a building that had been bought by Odebrecht. Then, "according to the court, OAS [Odebrecht] remodeled a much bigger apartment, worth about $843,000 when it was finished, and offered it to Lula for the price of his original apartment" (Weisbrot 2017).

Held in detention by Moro, an Odebrecht executive claimed he had made a deal with Lula, who, in exchange for the remodeled apartment, "steered the firm into deals with Petrobras" (Demori and Fishman 2018). Moro reduced the executive's 16-year sentence by 80 percent (Weisbrot 2017).

Moro issued a warrant to detain Lula and then leaked the warrant to the center-right media, so that photographers would be at the ready to let the newspapers feign the optics of an actual arrest (United Nations 2022). He also wiretapped Lula's phones, recording a conversation between him and President Rousseff in which she floated the idea of appointing Lula to her cabinet to shield him from criminal indictment (Pearson 2016). (Brazilian ministers can only be tried by the Supreme Court.) A legal chase ensued, culminating in Lula's trial under dubious circumstances: "Moro had accelerated court dates to ensure that Lula was sentenced by Moro himself and, later, so that an appellate court ruling could come in just in time for the former president to be barred from running in the 2018 elections" (Santi and Martins 2021).

Presiding over Lula's trial, Moro convicted and sentenced the septuagenarian to twelve years in prison. Brazil's Clean Slate Law (*Lei da Ficha Limpa*), ironically passed under the PT administration, prevented Lula from running for office from behind bars (Valle and Machado 2018). For many on the global Left, Lula had become the "world's most important political prisoner" (Chomsky 2018).

An exposé from *The Intercept Brasil* (Glenn Greenwald's periodical) would later reveal that Judge Moro had colluded with the prosecution, confirming the miscarriage of justice at the heart of Brazil's famed anti-corruption taskforce (see Greenwald 2021). (The exposé also confirmed U.S. State Department and Central Intelligence Agency support

for Operation Car Wash.[4]) About nineteen months later, another judge would release Lula on the grounds that he could not be jailed until he had exhausted the appellate process (Associated Press 2019). In 2021, the courts dismissed Lula's case entirely, based on Moro's improper conduct (United Nations 2022). But the damage had been done; Bolsonaro had neutralized Lula as a political threat in the 2018 elections.

With Lula out of the way, politicians from the PMDB, PSDB, and *Centrão* thought they had a clear road to victory in 2018. But they underestimated the scope of the purgative fury they themselves had whipped up among the public, especially the middle classes and evangelicals who now blamed the entire traditional political class for the nation's corruption. "The traditional political class as a whole was defeated" at the polls in 2018, and a new element inherited the anti-corruption mantle and rose to power (Alencar 2018).

The Rise of the New Right and Jair Bolsonaro

We return to the June Days of 2013. While the protests instigated by the Free Fare Movement initially played out as a conflict between leftist demonstrators and repressive police, the scene changed on June 20. On that day, men and women wearing green and yellow football jerseys, clothes indicating affiliation to right-wing nationalism, materialized among the demonstrators (Vice 2016). Journalist Marina Amaral summarized it as "the Right [beginning] to appropriate the movement for citizenship" (Instituto Humanitas Unisinos 2016), emphasizing the need to free Brazil of the alleged corruption of the left-wing PT. The New Right, sometimes called the Extreme Right, was out of the closet.

4. US involvement in Brazil's Operation Car Wash prosecutions is a matter of public record. President Trump's Acting Assistant Attorney General, Kenneth A. Blanco, stated publicly in 2017 that "trust (between Brazil and the US) allows prosecutors and agents to have direct communications regarding evidence. Given the close relationship between the Department and the Brazilian prosecutors, we don't need to rely solely on formal processes such as mutual legal assistance treaties." In 2019, fourteen US congressmembers filed a House Resolution calling for Attorney General William Barr to review actions taken by the Department of Justice to determine if it encouraged or abetted unethical conduct perpetrated by the Lava Jato task force. They were unsatisfied with Barr's response (Mier 2021).

What was the New Right? It was a series of new political players, mostly online libertarian groups such as the Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets, that tended to view all public-sector wealth redistribution as illegitimate, either inherently corrupt or propitious of corruption (Baggio 2016: 13; Fang 2017). These libertarian groups allied with Brazil's conservative Christians, mainly those from the large Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal congregations (Kang 2022). They also allied with law enforcement and significant sectors of the Brazilian military. (The police in Brazil are militarized.)

The movement's most famous intellectual leader was the eccentric and beguiling Christian astrologist, Olavo de Carvalho, who was sometimes likened to President Trump's advisor Steve Bannon and sometimes to the nineteenth-century Russian monk Grigori Rasputin (Duarte 2019). Carvalho's many books and online philosophy course elaborated his central claim that the atheist Left had taken over intellectual and political life in Brazil and was destroying both. The solution lay not only with a battle of ideas but with "destroying the careers and the power of people. You have to be direct, and without respect—that's very important" (Carvalho, quoted in Duarte 2019).

In addition to Carvalho, an entire cottage industry of right-wing artists, intellectuals, and culture producers had blossomed, putting out media products that framed the "defeat of these people" (the PT) as a holy war. They linked their cause to that of the medieval Christian crusaders, a historical trope borrowed from the North American right-wing nationalists whose slogan was "Deus vult" (If God wills it). One such group, "Parallel Brazil," disseminated high-end YouTube films that celebrated the memory and mission of the medieval Knights Templar, "an order both military and religious … [that] protect[ed] the pilgrims headed to Jerusalem" from the dangerous Muslims (Maia 2021). One such film, *Brazil: The Last Crusade*, claimed that the Muslim Moors had taken the Iberian Peninsula so easily because "[t]he Visigoth kingdom did not allow the people of Roman origin to bear arms … [and] that led to the destruction of their own state" (Brasil Paralelo 2019).

While many of these voices were new to the political scene, they tapped into old feelings. Political scientist Marcos Paulo dos Reis Quadros (2020) describes the birth of the New Right as a kind of "supernova" among Brazilian conservatives. Accordingly, Brazil's redemocratization (1985), with its celebration of citizenship and human rights, had delegitimized conservatives due to their greater complicity with the military regime. After the regime fell, the civilian conservatives became an

"ashamed right" (*a direita envergonhanda*). Conservatives stayed at home while the Left took to the streets and the universities to "forge a democracy in its image" (Reis Quadros 2020, Fechamentos do Livro). No longer.

The conflict, online and in-person, between New Right and leftist elements in Brazil became vitriolic in the extreme—a holy war, especially for the Pentecostals whose aim was a spiritual purgation of the Left. Consider the messaging of one of Brazil's most prominent megachurch pastors, Silas Malafaia (from one Assembly of God ministry). In his podcast, Malafaia (once a PT supporter) would urge his followers to keep an eye on their federal deputies to ensure that they acted as true Christian conservatives. In his holy-roller, exorcismal voice, he laments,

> Oh, my God! (Sigh). May God have mercy on Brazil. In the name of Jesus, let these people be defeated and broken into pieces. These people have no moral, political, psychological standing … and worse, they are full of subterfuges that mess with the simplest of our people. (Silas Malafaia Official 2016)

Malafaia's words push not for the defeat of an adversary but for the utter destruction of an enemy that merits no mercy because it lacks all "standing."

Fueled by religious zealotry, the New Right was ripe for a charismatic leader. Bolsonaro fit the bill. His followers called him "the Myth" and said he had been "chosen by God" to "free Brazil from the tentacles of communism" (Martinez 2021). Bolsonaro decided he was up to leading the holy war. A Catholic by birth, he flew to Israel during his campaign, had himself baptized in the Jordan River and emerged professing that God had given him "a mission" to clean up Brazil (Correio Braziliense 2020).

Bolsonaro

Bolsonaro seemed like the kind of person who would want to lead a holy war. Strident and uncensored, he thrived on conflict and chaos. He was loud and irreverent, preferring his Twitter account to legacy media. Bolsonaro was rude to reporters and unabashed in his opposition to "political correctness." Before his political career, Bolsonaro had been an army captain. And he waxed nostalgic for the days when the police, under the military dictatorship, enjoyed considerable powers to keep criminals and

leftist "subversives" in check through abduction, torture, and extrajudicial killing. He venerated the military, the police, and everyday (gun-carrying) "good citizens."

In addition to his open nostalgia for the military dictatorship (shared by Olavo de Carvalho), Congressman Bolsonaro could be heard insisting that "the cop who has not killed is not a cop" and saying he would "rather his son be dead than gay," that a congresswoman who opposed him was not worth raping, and that he had raised his sons better than to bring home a Black woman (Lehman 2018). But however gruesome these comments, Bolsonaro intoned them in a foppishly innocent way that made him somehow magnetic. His uncensored outrage could be funny. Perry Anderson captures Bolsonaro's style well:

> Crude and violent certainly, but also with a boyish, playful side, capable of a coarse, on occasion even self-deprecating good humour far from the glowering bearing of Trump, with whom he is now often compared. (2019: 179)

And like his U.S. counterpart, Bolsonaro was given to hammy, exaggerated gestures, including his signature pistol fingers, an index to his gun politics. As with Trump's rifle hands, these gestures gained their power from the merger of the serious and the burlesque, "intensify[ing] the force of his words, attracting and holding the attention of the wider public as they dominate the news cycle" (Hall et al. 2016: 74).

Bolsonaro had made a name for himself when, still a congressman in 2010, he opposed the PT's proposed measures (what he called the "gay kit") to combat homophobia in public schools, saying, "Attention, country with students who are 7, 8, 9, and 10 years old in the public school system: Next year, your children will receive in school a kit titled 'Combat Homophobia.' In truth, it's a stimulus for homosexuality and promiscuity" (Leite 2019: 125).

Congressman Bolsonaro also railed against Bolsa Família with the same mixture of humor and contempt. In 2010, he called it "vote buying" and implied the PT had used the program to rope people into the "bridled vote" (*voto de cabresto*), as it is called in the Northeast (see Chapter Two) (Mendes 2021). In another interview, Bolsonaro lamented the laziness Bolsa Família allegedly induced among the (northeastern) poor, saying, "Bolsa Família is a lie. In the Northeast, you can't get a person to work in your house [as a domestic servant]. Because if they go to work, they lose their Bolsa Família stipend" (Pereira 2022).

Figure 12. President Jair Bolsonaro Gives his Signature Finger-Gun Salute on the Campaign Trail in 2018 (photo by Heuler Andrew/AFO via Getty Images, source: https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/the-self-defeating-politics-behind-bolsonaros-pro-gun-agenda/).

Once elected president, Bolsonaro had to decide on his administration's economic policy, the thing he knew and cared least about (Grillo et al. 2018). What mattered was that his chief economic minister was the most right-wing possible—whatever that might mean. He retained one Paulo Guedes, a former economic advisor to the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet (Boadle 2019). Guedes brought method to the madness, a move toward "authoritarian neoliberalism," that is, a stripping away of all impediments to unrestrained market access to, among other things, grazing lands for agribusiness. While Bolsonaro's personal behavior was erratic, he and Guedes pursued a coherent project of "weakening environmental agencies, easing and privatizing environmental regulation, and diverting environmental funding to agribusiness" (Deutsch 2021: 825).

However, Bolsonaro's desire to be a popular messiah gave him a developmentalist bent that sometimes put him at loggerheads with Guedes (Schreiber 2020). Bolsonaro promised he would finish the relocation of the Northeast's São Francisco River (begun under Lula) and construct massive desalination plants to irrigate the *sertão*, as the Israelis had done in the Holy Land (O Globo 2018b). As for the Bolsa Família program,

Bolsonaro knew it would be political suicide to end it, but he did make significant cuts to its ranks. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2019, Bolsonaro initially dismissed the virus as a "little flu." He tolerated some social distancing measures but insisted that the megachurches remain open. (Brazilian death rates were extremely high in global comparison.) Eventually, under pressure from Congress, his administration paid out a large sum of money as COVID relief to families through a monthly cash stipend, *Auxílo Emergencial* (Emergency Aid). As the pandemic ended, Bolsonaro made the stipend, now called *Auxílio Brasil* (or *Renda Brasil*), permanent, using it as a replacement for Bolsa Família, which he then cancelled (Ramos 2022).

On the law-and-order front, Bolsonaro held to the New Right adage of "The cop who has not killed is not a cop." He appointed to the position of Attorney General none other than Judge Sérgio Moro, who became the mastermind behind Bolsonaro's "anticrime package," which included giving police officers legal backing if they killed criminal suspects "under fear, surprise, or violent emotion" (Sá e Silva 2022). It wasn't just the cops who were encouraged to double down on protective violence. Bolsonaro "issued more than a dozen decrees loosening restrictions on gun ownership for citizens," restrictions that President Lula had tightened (Otis 2022a). Shooting ranges and rifle clubs soon began popping up throughout Brazil (Otis 2022a).

Bolsonaro also advocated for a constitutional amendment (PEC 33/23) that would revoke certain protections that minors had enjoyed under Brazil's Statute of the Child and Adolescent. If the amendment passed, the state could prosecute minors as adults in certain circumstances. He also tried to lift the Statute's ban on corporal punishment, which Bolsonaro found outrageous: "A father can't … smack their kid's bottom or apply a harsher action. He will be condemned to leave the house!" (Éboli 2018). Indeed, it seems Bolsonaro felt such punishment was key to keeping children on the straight and narrow; still speaking of the Statute, he said, "There is nothing wrong with teaching the value of discipline to our children. … The press is upset because I didn't dress my sons like girls" (Carvalho 2021). Finally, Bolsonaro cut half the funding for the PT-era *Auxílio Reclusão* (Prison Grant) that channeled funds to the families of incarcerated persons (Rodrigues and Benevides 2023), what many on the New Right regarded as "an incentive to criminality in our shitty country made up of corrupt people" (Sanchez and Guilherme 2010).

Bolsonaro's single term as president (2018–22) was itself marred by a series of corruption scandals, several of which involved his sons, Flávio,

Carlos, and Eduardo, who were politicians themselves. The *rachadinha* ("little split") scandal was the most noteworthy of these. Senator Flávio Bolsonaro was discovered to have collected nearly half a million dollars in salary kickbacks from cabinet members (Santos 2021). An aide took the fall and went to jail, and to protect Flávio, President Bolsonaro reassigned the investigating police officials to other duties (Chagas et al. 2020). A separate inquiry revealed that the "Bolsonaro family" had, during the previous thirty years in politics, purchased in cash some fifty-one pieces of real estate worth about US$10 million, which was a sum shown to be "incompatible with the income that Bolsonaro and his sons had obtained as legislators during those decades" (Brasil de Fato 2022). Other corruption scandals included a secret budget with Congress by which Bolsonaro channeled federal monies (about US$4 billion) destined for education and health care to congressmembers from the *Centrão* in exchange for their support of his legislative agenda (Ortiz et al. 2022). In another scandal that became known as "Paid Access" (*Acesso Pago*), Bolsonaro's education minister was discovered to have been channeling federal monies to certain mayors' offices at the behest of three pastors (associated with a branch of the Assembly of God Church) who the mayors had bribed to secure these funds (Medeiros 2022).

Given that Bolsonaro had been carried to power in 2018 by Brazil's post-Car Wash anti-corruption wave, one would imagine these scandals to have cost him dearly in 2022. But while Bolsonaro certainly lost his bid for reelection, opinion polls indicated that many of his supporters were unphased. As one headline read, "Jair Bolsonaro's Corruption Does Not Affect his Votes because It Does Not Cause Resentment in Voters" (Felizardo 2022). And why not? Because while Bolsonaro's New Right supporters may have cared somewhat about the liberal form of corruption (the abuse of public trust for private gain), what really animated them was the unholy form of corruption that threatened the "good citizen."

In the following section, I examine this Christian-authoritarian model of corruption.

The New Right's Corruption Model

The corruption model that emerged from the New Right revolved around a moral gradient organized by the principle of industrious discipline. The nodal points along this gradient were comprised of so-called good citizens, and more specifically, good family fathers (*pai de família*).

A good father did not suckle (*mamar*) from the state's teat but fed his family *pelo próprio suor* (by his own sweat). He was not dependent on Bolsa Família or any state redistribution; rather, others were dependent on him. His wife and children enjoyed his protective violence against threatening outsiders and accepted his authority to correct their behavior—with force, if needed.

This gradient of industrious discipline originated with Bolsonaro himself, a strict family father, and moved downward to ordinary good fathers. The figure of the cop linked the father-president to the father-citizen. The policeman represented the father in state garb. Under Bolsonaro, ordinary citizens were invited to identify with the policeman, just as policemen—especially those killed on duty—were venerated as family fathers. One piece of writing quoted on a Facebook site, "Soldier [Name]" (5.1k followers), celebrated the *pai policial* with a series of formulaic stanzas beginning with the phrase "The *pai policial* is he who …" Here are two examples:

> The *pai policial* is he who sees his child cry while watching him put on his combat boots but needs to leave him because other citizens' children also need his protection…
>
> The *pai policial* is he who, despite his absences, has in his family his admirers, even though every day, news stories defame (*acusem*) his profession in general…

When I accessed this Facebook page in September of 2023, the profile featured its soldier-owner posing for a photo with Bolsonaro himself. The tag lines describing the owner included "Soldier of Christ," "Husband," "Father," "Patriot," "In favor of carrying guns," and "Anti-communist."

The New Right's moral gradient organized the profusion of a new currency, albeit one with an old, familiar name, "rights" (*direitos*). It channeled a form of rights that included, but did not emphasize, those rights advocated by the PT, that is, the right to inclusion (*inclusão*) in the redistribution of public resources. Instead, the rights that Bolsonaro and his ilk would channel to the good citizens were, what I call, "war rights." These included weapons in the literal sense (e.g., a loosening of gun controls) and in the legal sense (e.g., immunity from prosecution for righteous violence). This was the currency needed to mobilize the holy

war against those who threatened the Christian patriarchal family and its heteronormative reproduction.

Fathers and police were both entitled to their weapons; the police needed their qualified immunity and the father needed his guns and his right to use force to bring his children in line. This was the authoritarian gradient of a Christian republic, a polity of good citizens, family fathers all the way down.

The model of corruption emanating from this set of norms focused on those reprobate social personas who had wrongfully received resources or protections that should have gone to the good citizens. These included the *bandido* who assaulted the innocent but who received money from the state (Prison Grant) and remained shielded from police action by "human rights," what Bolsonaro called an "ideology that decriminalized bandits and punished the police, and destroyed families" (Freitas da Silva 2019). (Recall that Bolsonaro had cut that program in half). They included the *homosexual* whose Pride parades had, under the PT, received federal support and protections from anti-gay violence. President Bolsonaro defunded LGBT-related art and removed the LGBT population from the purview of his Human Rights Ministry (Poder360 2019). They included the *feminista* who turned women against men with the "gender ideology" allegedly ensconced in the public-school curriculum, a problem the New Right would redress with its Non-Partisan Schooling (*Escola Sem Partido*) policy (Lima and Hypolito 2020). They included the idler (*vadio*) who wished only to suckle (*mamar*) from the state, whether by receiving its redistributive policies like Bolsa Família or by working at a government job. Bolsonaro would reduce the ranks of Bolsa Família and promote administrative reforms that would cut municipal jobs (Rocha 2021). The most corrupt of them was the "red marginals" who thought they were above the law, who diverted resources (as "rights") to the enemy's side in exchange for votes—those to whom Bolsonaro issued an ultimatum:

> They will have to submit themselves to our laws. Either they leave or go to jail. These red marginals will be banned from our homeland (*pátria*). This homeland is ours. (Forum 2018)

In general, New Right discourse linked together various corrupt personas, creating a composite image of left-wing corruption. One of my Bolsonaro-supporting Piauiense friends reacted in the following

way when I asked what he thought of the recently impeached Dilma Rousseff:

> She's totally *corrupto*. Totally dirty. Do you know that right here in Passerinho, many people get Bolsa Família who don't need it? She's a dyke [*sapatona*]. She's an assassin, a terrorist. The military men even put her in prison. She's a communist. I'll never vote for that dyke.

My friend supported his main claim, that Rousseff was "totally corrupt," not by referencing her "tricky accounting" that had been the official pretext for her impeachment, but by cross-symbolizing her redistributive policies (Bolsa Família), her alleged lesbianism, and her "terrorist" criminality (a reference to Rousseff's participation in the anti-dictatorship guerilla movement during the 1970s[5]).

A similar rhetorical structure emerged in the words of a pastor who conversed with me by WhatsApp:

> Where have you seen a nation with so much *corrupção*? We had thirteen years of an administration that exalted crime and marginalized the citizen. Where have you seen a civilized country where the power of the police is so limited? Where have you seen a country whose laws criminalize free self-defense? Where have you seen one that wants to legalize pedophilia masked as sexual illness? Gay marriage? And many other aberrations. Only in Brazil. For us, the enlightened [*esclarecidos*] Brazilians, this is frustrating. These people do everything to promote ignorance so the people can't free themselves.

Like my friend, the pastor began his accusatory discourse under the heading of *corrupção* and then proceeded to align this term with the full litany of leftist offenses, all presented in parallel with one another. The message seemed to be that the kind of person who would be a homosexual is the same as one who would become a *bandido*, the kind who would take a bribe. And these were all enabled by the type of person who, cut from the same cloth, would "promote ignorance so the people can't free themselves." In the pastor's last phrase, "*These* people" refers to

5. During Brazil's military dictatorship, a young Dilma Rousseff joined a group in favor of open resistance. And by 1969, because of her activities, she had gone underground, moving constantly and changing her name numerous times. In 1970, she was arrested in São Paulo and tortured while in military custody. She was released in 1973 (Agência Brasil 2010).

PT policymakers, while "*the* people" refers to those whose vote led to the election of the PT because they wanted these policies. These votes had essentially been bought by those suckling (*mamata*).

Curiously, the New Right here seems to sway in sympathy with the anti-clientelism of the political Left. Both sides retain some fidelity to classical liberal principle of individual autonomy, but their emphases differ: the Left worries about the coercion of the voter through the promise of public resources, while the Right worries about the laziness of the citizen induced by their consumption of (wasted) public resources.

The New Right linked these various corrupt personas through the composite term *vagabundo*. After studying pro-Bolsonaro residents of Brazil's urban peripheries, anthropologists Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Mury Scalco argued that *vagabundo*

> is an empty signifier and a powerful historical and cultural concept—it derives from the notions of *marginal* (criminal, bandit) and *vadio* (idler)—creating the sense of otherness in Brazil. A *vagabundo* refers to a person who does not work hard, but also a cheater, a criminal. This label has also been employed to frame activists, feminists, LGBTQI+ people, and so forth. (2020: 25; and see Pinheiro-Machado 2019 on "Vagabundo!")

One New Right social media thread, responding to Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro's proposed loosening of gun controls, evoked the figure of the *vagabundo* as follows:

> It used to be that you resolved [fights] with your fists. That ended. Today, we are hostage to the *vagabundos* who gave guns, to those who place themselves above the good people who don't want to be like these *vagabundos* because they don't want to ruin their own lives nor those of their families, killing a victim. … But every citizen should have the right and the option to have a firearm in the house, to defend their family and their honor and the wealth they've earned from their own sweat from their work. (Bolsonaro 2023)

The term *vagabundo* appears twice in the above thread. The first time, it refers to the PT policymakers who "gave guns" to the bad people. The second time, it refers to the bad people, those who ruin their own and others' lives. The term *vagabundo* signals the unification of this

Christian-authoritarian model of corruption, a composite perpetrator of a many-sided, yet integrated, act of transgression.

The Sertanejo Uptake of the New Right's Corruption Model

While Bolsonaro received only ten percent of southeast Piauí's support at the polls in both 2018 and 2022,[6] his allure to many of Piauí's *sertanejos* should not be dismissed. The Christian-authoritarian corruption model that Bolsonaro and his ilk espoused chimed with several aspects of *sertanejo* morality. Both sets of norms posited a moral order that revolved around strong, venerable fathers who enforced loyalty with a heavy hand and were expected to bend or break the law to get things done. Moreover, homophobia and tolerance of police violence were well-established features of *sertanejo* culture that predisposed *sertanejos* to sympathy with New Right political ethics.

There were three reliable bases of Bolsonaro support in southeast Piauí: the commercial elite (fewer than fifty households, by my count), the (militarized) police, and the (neo)Pentecostal Christians (about ten thousand people). In a region of some hundred thousand people, the churches held the main concentration of Bolsonaro votes.

In 2018, a few months before the election, my assistants implemented a long survey of political attitudes among 250 residents of southeast Piauí (from several adjacent municipalities) with the intent to compare the attitudes of PT supporters with those of Bolsonaro supporters. Sampling adults at random (walking door to door in the commercial districts of Passerinho and Princesa and approaching people queuing up at banks during town market days) gave us only small numbers of Bolsonaro supporters.[7] (It also biased the data toward an overrepresentation of urban,

6. The data concerning these electoral results come from the website of Piauí's Regional Electoral Court (Tribunal Eleitoral Regional – Piauí): https://www.tre-pi.jus.br/eleicoes/eleicoes-anteriores/eleicoes-2018/eleicoes-2018-1. I have not included the precise citation to protect the names of the municipalities in question.

7. As for the randomness of our sampling methods, these too were problematic. We intended to approach every third person at church gatherings, but in practice, my assistants approached those individuals who they thought would talk to them (based on their personal acquaintance with these people). Moreover, many congregants, once hearing about the survey, approached my assistants, requesting to take it. Thus, we backed into a

rather than rural, residents.[8]) To find a sufficient number of Bolsonaro supporters to make a comparison, we recruited survey respondents from the congregations of three Pentecostal churches, the Assembly of God (sixty-five respondents), the Pentecostal Church of God and Love (fifteen respondents), and the Christian Congregation of Brazil (ten respondents). (We used convenience sampling within each congregation.) Assuming that church affiliation shapes political attitudes, I reorganized the data into a comparison between seventy-one "Catholics"[9] (practicing and nominal) and ninety "Pentecostals" from the aforementioned churches. (These two sample populations did not differ significantly by income, receipt of Bolsa Família, or age.)

In Table 1, I present some correlations between religious affiliation (Pentecostal or Catholic) and several key political issues broadly related to the (PT's) insurgent-inclusive and Christian-authoritarian models of corruption. To simplify the table, I've recorded only the respondents' first and second most common answers to my questions. (In most cases, the third most common answer for all the questions was "I prefer not to answer" or "I don't know.")

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snowball sampling method, but only with the Pentecostals. Because both Catholicism and a pro-PT stance are default features of this population, recruiting PT supporters to take the survey was something my assistants could accomplish just by walking door to door down the single commercial streets of the municipalities they worked in (mainly Passarinho and Princesa). Thus, there was also some sampling asymmetry between Catholics and Pentecostals with respect to their frequency of church attendance, religiosity, civic engagement, etc.

8. I estimate that the municipalities we sampled were at least 50 percent rural. But our sample was 25 rural to 137 urban residents. Urban people are more exposed to cosmopolitan ideas. They certainly tend to live in closer proximity with college-educated professionals. Our sample is problematic for this reason.

9. Our comparison between Catholics and Pentecostals is biased in an additional regard. There are many self-declared "Catholics" in the region who rarely or never attend church but for whom their Catholic identity indicates an important sign of respect for their parents (from whom they inherited their religion). In processing the data, we included those who said "I never attend church" with our general Catholic population. For this reason, our sample of Catholics includes non-religious people, unlike our sample of Pentecostals.

Table 1. 2018 Political Attitudes Survey Comparing 71 Catholics and 90 Pentecostals (Piauí)

Question	Catholics' Most Common Answer	Catholics' 2nd Most Common Answer	Pentecostals' Most Common Answer	Pentecostals' 2nd Most Common Answer	Statistically Significant Difference
Who is your favorite candidate for president in the upcoming 2018 election?	"Fernando Haddad" (38/71)	"Ciro Gomes" (not PT center-left)[10] (15/71)	"Jair Bolsonaro" (23/90)	"Fernando Haddad" (21/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.0001 Pearson = .0001
Who did you vote for in the 2014 election?	"Dilma Rousseff" (PT candidate) (31/71)	"I did not vote for anyone" (10/71)	"Dilma Rousseff" (PT candidate) (29/90)	"Marina Silva" (evangelical from the Green Party) (23/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio = .0004 Pearson = .0022
Do you know what the terms "Left" and "Right" mean (in the political sense)?	"I am confident that I know what these words mean" (23/71)	"I have heard these terms, but I don't know what they mean" (22/56)	"I have heard these terms, but I don't know what they mean" (37/90)	"I am confident that I know what these words mean" (22/90)	No Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio = .1199 Pearson = .1235

10. Ciro Gomes was a politically experienced, centrist, technocratically adept candidate from the northeast who had served in the Lula administrations. Most people who voted for him in the first round of the 2018 election went on to vote for Haddad in the run-off with Bolsonaro (Paixão 2018).

Question	Catholics' Most Common Answer	Catholics' 2nd Most Common Answer	Pentecostals' Most Common Answer	Pentecostals' 2nd Most Common Answer	Statistically Significant Difference
Where do you fit on the Left–Right political spectrum?	"I don't understand myself in these terms" (17/71)	"Left" (16/71)	"I don't understand myself in these terms" (45/90)	"Right-wing" (21/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.0001 Pearson <.0001
What is your attitude toward LGBT issues?	"Gays and lesbians should be allowed to live as they please and even get married" (19/71)	"Gays and lesbians should be allowed to have relations, but gay marriage should not be legal" (18/71)	"Gays and lesbians should be allowed to have relations, but gay marriage should not be legal" (58/90)	"The law should punish all acts of homosexuality" (15/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.0001 Pearson <.0001
Should private citizens be allowed to own guns?	"No" (44/71)	"Yes" (23/71)	"No" (60/90)	"Yes" (18/90)	No Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.1070 Pearson <.1250

Question	Catholics' Most Common Answer	Catholics' 2nd Most Common Answer	Pentecostals' Most Common Answer	Pentecostals' 2nd Most Common Answer	Statistically Significant Difference
Should the police be allowed to hit those people suspected of crimes?	"They should be punished if they do, even if the subject was a bandit" (27/71)	"It shouldn't be legal, but sometimes it's necessary" (22/71)	"I prefer not to answer"/ "I have no opinion" (41/90)	"It shouldn't be legal, but sometimes it's necessary" (34/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.0010 Pearson = <.0012
What phrase best describes your opinion regarding the punishment of ex-President Lula?	"Lula is innocent and should be released from jail" (22/71)	"Lula is guilty but he did good for the country and should be released from jail" (19/71)	"Lula is guilty and should pay the price, but all politicians are just as corrupt" (30/90)	"Lula is guilty and should pay the price, and he was worse than most other politicians" (19/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.0001 Pearson <.0001
Who is the most corrupt in Brazil?	"They are all equally corrupt" (30/71)	"Michel Temer" (25/71)	"Lula" (29/90)	"They are all equally corrupt" (28/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.0001 Pearson <.0001
If a politician did you a favor, would you feel obligated to vote for them?	"No" (30/71)	"Yes" (28/71)	"No" (68/90)	"Yes" (18/90)	Yes Prob > chi^2 likelihood ratio <.0001 Pearson <.0001

Let me point to two conclusions the survey responses support. First, and most obviously, Pentecostals in southeast Piauí were more likely to express opinions (preferences for Bolsonaro over Haddad, LGBT rights, tolerance of police violence against captured suspects, and beliefs about Lula's guilt and incarceration, etc.) that were more aligned with New Right ideology than were those of the Catholic respondents. I'll not belabor this basic point, except to note the exception. On the question of private citizens' rights to gun ownership, the two groups' opinions did not differ significantly. This suggests an incomplete merger of the religious and law-enforcement branches of the New Right movement in this region.

Second, *sertanejo* Pentecostals were more absolutist in their anti-clientelism than were the Catholics; they more often claimed no feelings of obligation to vote for politicians who did favors for them. This finding chimes with the words of one Assembly of God pastor, who explained to me (in 2018) that

> the people have a compulsion to not look at how politicians perform during their mandates, to not look at their *propostas*. They are people who sell themselves. They sell themselves to the one who gives the most money. And I've tried to remove this idea from their minds because they feel obliged because they've sold their votes. … They don't vote for the feelings they have in their hearts to vote for this person out of their own free will; they vote out of psychological pressure. Pressure because that person helped, and now they arrive on the day of the election and obligate the [other person's] vote.

Another example of this Pentecostal aversion to electoral clientelism (people "selling themselves") came from a Pentecostal corporal who one of my (Bolsonaro-supporting) field assistants interviewed in 2022. My assistant summarized the interview in an audio file he sent me:

> The corporal said ... "Our Brazilian people are so accustomed to corruption, but when Bolsonaro arrived, people stopped selling themselves. The people were accustomed to easy food, Bolsa Família, even though they suffered the consequences of corruption. And our people couldn't even use shaving razors to defend themselves—but not after Bolsonaro arrived. The PT wants its mediocrity, and so it tricked the people with easy food, [the] Light for All [program], the cistern program, and other deceitful things. The goal was to surrender Brazil

> to communism and to disarm our citizens." Then the corporal quoted from the bible. "In the Kingdom of God, there is no food or drink," he said. "Bolsonaro a hero, a courageous man who confronts the corrupt system."

For the corporal, "easy food," like Bolsa Família, is the "deceitful" anesthetic balm that takes the sting out of politicians' corruption. But it weakens "the people," makes them soft, disarms them (even of "shaving razors"), and inures them to "the corrupt system" he hopes Bolsonaro will rectify.

Like my survey results, such remarks may suggest that the anti-clientelism championed by the PT became detached from the political Left during the crisis years, allowing right-wing figures to emerge as its new protagonists. But I imagine many Pentecostals would insist that their aversion to clientelism predated the PT era. Protestant Christianity may have some intrinsically anti-clientelist aspects. While a proper account of these aspects lies beyond my scope, it's clear that Protestantism was born as a campaign against the spoiling of sacred judgment by monetary interests, the Vatican selling God's "indulgences" of sin (Britannica 2021). More mundanely, Pentecostals, at least those in the *sertão*, commend those who resist temptation (alcohol, dancing, capoeira, co-ed soccer). If vote buying were an addiction (*um vício*)—as it was sometimes called—they, more than others, probably felt identity-bound to refuse it.

Even if Bolsonaro's main support came from the Pentecostal community, his message still held appeal for many Catholics, including a few who nonetheless voted for the PT. Longstanding homophobia and fear of mounting urban violence contributed to this appeal.

As for homophobia, the baseline level was fairly high when I began my fieldwork in 2003. There was only one openly gay man (a nurse) in Passarinho Municipality. He lived in the town center, and his only friend was the (female) town prostitute. In the rural zone, most people said they had never met a gay person, often adding "Thank God." When a gay person died, no mention was ever made of their sexual orientation at their wake. "All defects disappear at the hour of death," one woman said.

But by the time the PT era was in full swing, *sertanejos* had begun tuning into the telenovelas beamed from Rio de Janeiro that featured gay relationships cast in respectful tones (Name Risk and dos Santos 2021), as well as the aforementioned anti-homophobic violence campaigns in schools. But the big change occurred in people's routine landscapes. In the town center of Princesa Municipality, young gay couples began to

talk in the plaza while holding hands. Many *sertanejos*, including some identified with the PT, reacted negatively to the new visibility of homosexual relations in their midst. One Pentecostal friend of mine expressed his outrage in an audio file he sent me in 2022:

> It is a nauseating thing, an abominable thing, yeah? It's something that devastates the family. We know that the family is made from the man and the woman, whether they have children or not, and from there grows the family. And we *evangélicos* don't accept this thing.

My survey data suggest that many Catholics (including presumptive PT supporters) also frowned on "this thing," though many (18/71, or 25%) appeared to have confined their objection to gay marriage.

More significantly, *sertanejos* were increasingly frightened of the drug-related criminal violence emanating from Brazil's big cities spreading to the countryside. All rural families made some contact with these cities, often through their adolescent children. These young adults, laboring on the outskirts of the internationally run fruit plantations on the periphery of Petrolina, Pernambuco, slept in encampments where drugs, shootings, sexual assault, and prostitution were common occurrences. *Sertanejos* would watch the televised news detail the crimes and lionize the police who captured the *bandidos*. Moreover, through new social media, they would see uncensored images from a series of gruesome prison riots in 2019 brought on by the "overcrowding and understaffing that make these facilities extremely difficult to maintain humanely," as one reporter at Human Rights Watch put it (Canineu 2019). The images of decapitations led many to sympathize with the iron-fisted president. Even one of my PT-affiliated assistants concluded that "these people—the police just have to kill them." I was shocked to hear him, of all people, say that. "But don't you know who you sound like?" I retorted. He replied, laughing a bit, "I know, I've got a little bit of Bolsonaro in me. We all do."

One final point to make about the *sertão*'s sympathies with the New Right is that, despite the PT's popularity there, this was not a "left-wing" population. When I arrived in Piauí in 2003, no municipal politician had a ready answer to my question "Do you support the Left [*esquerda*] or the Right [*direita*]?" Indeed, virtually nobody used these directional metaphors in the political sense. Even in 2018, when I asked about this "language" (Left v. Right) in my survey, the most common response from both the Catholics and the Pentecostals was "I don't understand

myself in these terms," and when asked if they understood the meaning of these terms, the most common response for both groups was "I have heard these terms, but I don't know what they mean." My Pentecostal field assistant said he had only recently learned about these terms on social media. He said this "language is very useful," but most people are not enlightened (*esclarecida*) enough to "open their minds" to these "true words."

It wasn't just that the terms "Left" and "Right" were new; the idea of ideological polarization was new. Prior to the crisis period, *sertanejos* might have described someone as *conservador* (conservative) or *liberal*, but these were not attributes of competing ideologies of the sort thought to differentiate one kind of politician from another. They related to an individual's moral temperament. Of course, political polarization occurred (and occurs) during every municipal campaign season. But *sertanejo* municipalities did not (and still do not) polarize around contrasting principles; all sides agreed on the principles, such as "present" fatherhood (Chapter One) and "united" friendship (Chapter Two). They simply disagreed as to which individual candidate (and coalition) best embodied those principles. Thus, widespread sympathy for the PT neither arose from, nor entailed, an affinity for "the Left" in the ideological sense.

All this considered, I am led to ask why *sertanejo* voters so overwhelmingly favored the PT-led Left both in 2018 (Haddad) and in 2022 (Lula). The New Right has one answer, which is that Bolsa Família and other redistributive policies functioned as a form of large-scale vote buying. But no independent evaluation of Bolsa Família ever found any evidence to suggest that the PT government preferentially channeled its cash stipend to districts with high levels of PT support (see Fenwick 2015). Moreover, Bolsonaro had chipped away at Bolsa Família, eventually replacing it with the larger monthly stipend, Auxílio Brasil, which went to a greater number of beneficiaries. Why, then, was Bolsonaro not rewarded at the polls in the *sertão* and the Northeast in general? I offer another answer to this question in the following section.

The Reemergence of Patronage Ethics during the Political Crisis

In 2018, the Evangelical pastors who spoke to me about politics all shared the following observation about Piauí's *sertanejo* population: "The people have become *desacreditado* in politics." *Desacreditado* here means

incredulous, that is, faithless or disenchanted. It was the predictable consequence of watching one's heroes (Lula, Rousseff, and the PT in general) revealed as miscreants. As my survey suggested, even among those who loved Lula, many (17/91, or 27%) believed that he had succumbed to the temptations of bribery. Yet most continued to support the PT in the 2018 and 2022 elections against Bolsonaro, a man whose concerns about sexuality and criminality echoed their own. I do not doubt that their disenchantment was real, but it is hard to reconcile with the enthusiastic support most ended up giving to Lula and the PT.

Yet they are reconcilable, if we regard the feeling of disenchantment as a moment of malaise that *sertanejos* passed through by shifting their moral reasoning away from the liberal insistence on the separation of public and private incentives and toward the moral and epistemic foundations of patronage. Patronage had, after all, survived the PT's assault (and the earlier amicopolitical assault), even if it had been driven underground. Morally disoriented by the political crisis, the *sertanejo* people resurrected the patronage moral framework to find ethical clarity and turn the tide of the 2022 election in Lula's favor.

A few months before that election, *The Intercept Brasil* ran a story on political opinions in Guaribas municipality (Piauí), perhaps the most prominent of Zero Hunger's pilot municipalities. (I visited for two weeks in 2005 but never conducted substantial fieldwork there.) The story's author, Nayara Felizardo, noted that Guaribas's pastors predicted an increase in the number of Bolsonaro voters over 2018 (when he received fifty-nine votes) to roughly four hundred. In actuality, Bolsonaro would secure 193 votes there during the run-off with Lula (Felizardo 2022). The increase seemed to be the result of several additional Pentecostal churches as well as the advent of Auxílio Brasil and some welcome federal investments in infrastructure under Bolsonaro. Yet, for the vast majority of Guaribas's inhabitants, none of Bolsonaro's virtues were persuasive. The following are some statements Felizardo gathered from Lula supporters interviewed in the article: "We are crying for Lula. He is a present father. He is a good father"; "If Lula only knew how happy we were when he was released [from prison]"; "For me he is a friend, a brother, a dweller of our own house [*uma pessoa de casa*]"; "Brazil cries for Lula. He is always close to the poor"; and "Look what the Brazilian people have done to Brazil, putting that crazy man [Bolsonaro] there [in power]. And they continue mistreating Lula, a man of God."

Felizardo put the first of these statements, "Lula is a present father," in bold print. The reader may recall from Chapter One that a fatherly

politician's *presença* (presence) was (and is) the organizing principle of the moral imagination of patronage. The greater the father, the more he is able to project his persona across the social space by transforming the landscapes of people's lives through the use of his *força de vontade* (vitality). Within this patronage frame, corruption takes several forms. The first is absence (*ausência*), the wrongful transfer of a father's *força* through the movement of his attention to other places. The second is a junior ally's treacherous usurpation of a senior patriarch's prerogatives. The third is the persecution of a fatherly politician's helpful and energetic son by "those who know only how to destroy." The remarks Felizardo collected suggest that the patronage norms that *sertanejos* in Guaribas invoked to evaluate the electoral contests (2018 and 2022) fostered the imagination of Lula as both a powerful father and an imperiled son.

Lula as Patronal Father

The PT-backed media depictions of Lula as an ideal (present) father occurred in both the 2018 and 2022 elections, but the contexts were very different. In 2018, Lula was in jail and unable to run for office. Though most say the PT's second choice, Fernando Haddad, was a good candidate, he lacked Lula's popularity. PT propaganda tried to frame him as Lula's avatar. One of his campaign slogans was "Haddad is Lula," a phrase that seemed to play into patronage sensibilities in such a way that a politician's *presença* would lead their followers to mimic their personal style. The propaganda would also resonate with the images of political duos (especially in the father–son motif) that featured on municipal campaign propaganda throughout the Northeast. In that motif, the son is the father's more animated avatar, the one who extends his *presença* into the lives of the poor, making personal contact with them. It is interesting to note in this regard that Haddad supporters during the 2018 campaigns donned paper masks featuring not Haddad's face, but Lula's. (Indeed, Haddad himself often wore one.) And Lula wrote to the nation (shortly after being banned from the election), saying, "We are still alive, in the hearts and memories of the people. And our name now is Haddad … My voice is the voice of Haddad"—phrases that also invited biblical allegory, that is, God's paternity and consubstantiality with Jesus (Gonçalves 2018).

By 2022, Lula had been released from jail and could legally stand for reelection. *Papai Voltou* ("Daddy is Back") was a title of the comedic song that went viral that year containing the lyrics, "Lula comes here

and the people are happy. More investment, jobs, and housing. … Papai returns! Papai returns! It's Lula!" These lyrics had been prefigured by PT supporters who likened Lula to Santa Claus (Father Christmas) during the run-up to the 2020 municipal elections: "Let the Spirit of the Little Red Man Fill Our Hearts with Hope for 2020." These humorous motifs traded on the prospect of a now-freed Lula bringing material abundance back to Brazil. His redemptive return also carried the threat of righteous violence, the vanquishing of the corrupt usurper. One telling meme featured a photoshopped Lula with a saber in his hand and the iconic leather hat of the *sertanejo* cowboy on his head sitting astride Bolsonaro, who is crawling on all fours (Maderada 2022).

Such allusions to Lula's fatherhood were not just the stuff of media campaigns; they also seemed to have manifested in casual talk. Luminita-Anda Mandache's (2024) ethnographic work in the northeastern state of Ceará showed as much. "Lula was often referred to as a father or daddy in casual conversations (just Papai or Pai not Papai Lula) this year among friends and acquaintances at the periphery of Fortaleza, oftentimes to my confusion. We'll go to see daddy (when going to a manifestation)/When daddy will come." Mandache's PT-supporting friend, "Luiza," joked of Lula's appearance before a rally in 2022: "You will see dad once again so he can bless you" (2024: 1876).

In sum, the patronage framework that *sertanejos* (and northeasterners in general) activated when evaluating national politics positioned Lula as "a present father," one who loved the people as his own children, channeling his blessings to them in the form of social policies.

Lula as Patronal Son

In the reignited patronage imagination, Lula was not only a present father but also a dutiful and vital son. Lula's biography fit very well into the *sertanejo* narrative of the prodigal son who, driven by drought and famine, leaves the *sertão* for the city as a small child to make his way in the world. A shoeshine boy at first, Lula would make his way to the automobile manufacturing periphery of São Paulo, where he joined and eventually led the metallurgist's union to strike against the dictatorship for both higher wages and political rights, expediting redemocratization (French 2020). Founding the PT and running for president several times before finally taking office in 2003, Lula would "return home" to distribute urban-acquired wealth (as pro-poor policy) to his community (see French 2020). This decidedly northeastern narrative is quite familiar to

all Brazilians, who, as I've tried to note, tend to regard the northeastern *sertão* as the "vigorous core of our nationality" (Cunha [1902] 1944). A 2009 documentary biopic lauding him was titled "Lula, Son of Brazil" and emphasized Lula's childhood journey and conciliatory temperament as a "man of dialogue [and] 'peace and love,'" the attributes of a good son (French and Negro 2011).

In response to Lula's imprisonment, many *sertanejos* offered expressions of solidarity that portrayed Lula as a vulnerable child. One such audio file, made by a rural construction worker from Ceará (a northeastern state bordering Piauí), went viral. My field assistants forwarded it to me when it came across their social media accounts.

> My thoughts go to Lula in his cell in Curitiba, and I ask myself, "I wonder if the little guy (*o bichinho*) is eating. Man, I have this urge to roast a chicken and to bring some to Lula. He would eat the chicken, and then I would put him on the back of my bicycle, and I would pedal him around wherever he wanted to go." (Dolce 2018)

The young man's words depict a child-like Lula, a hungry "little guy" small enough to put on the back of a bicycle, a person who must be protected by those united under his name. Lula was both a present father and a dutiful, hardworking son.

Shortly after his sentencing (July 2017) but before beginning his prison sentence (April 2018), Lula and others in the PT embarked on the month-long "Lula for Brazil" caravan. He processed throughout the northeast for 20 days, "to understand the way the northeast is suffering due to the dismantling of his social policies under the government of Michel Temer," explained a left-wing media outlet (Brasil de Fato 2017). A more conservative periodical accused the PT of "selling the image of Lula as a saint," the "great father of the poor" (Gazeta do Povo 2017). Certainly, the black-and-white photospread that the PT photographer, Ricardo Stuckert, produced from the caravan was unforgettable.[11] The photos depicted Lula in the embrace of poor, sun-wrinkled, dark-skinned people ecstatic with tears. Others showed people clamoring to lay hands on Lula as they would a saint. Knowing Lula was headed

11. In 2024, I tried repeatedly to secure permission from Ricardo Stuckert to publish his photos in this chapter, but by that time he had taken the position of Secretary of Social Communication in the (post-Bolsonaro) Lula administration (beginning in 2023) and could not be reached for a reply.

for prison, some of those gathered at the wake kissed his hands as one would do to a beloved parent upon taking the daily blessing, while others wrapped Lula in their arms. The whole layout seemed allegorical—Jesus walking the *Vila Dolorosa* toward Calvary. Lula's own words at the event suggested that he too saw himself (a septuagenarian) as a youthful herald of a blossoming revolution against a corrupt and usurping elite: "The powerful few may kill one, two, or three roses, but they can never stop the spring from coming" (Marques 2019).

Whether depicting Lula as father or a son, the patronage sensibilities for evaluating him were clearly resurgent, and they had spread from their quintessential northeastern locus to all of Brazil, especially to the poor. This sensibility seemed to them a better cypher for national politics than the Left–Right spectrum. One tweet from a Passarinho truck driver made this explicit:

> I see intellectuals talking of Left and Right. Well, speaking seriously, I don't know much about the meaning of being on the Right or on the Left. And I don't know where this gets me in Brazilian politics. But I know how to discern the one who did most for us northeasterners, and I know how to define who has the most capacity to administer … so for this reason, they can call me a "Left-o-path" [*esquerdopata*], or whatever other name. But I declare my vote for Lula. (December 15, 2017)

Here, the truck driver rejects the political categories (Left and Right) circulating at the national level and asserts instead the knowledge forms of the *sertão*, those tied to the ethics of the *pai presente*. In this way, patronage, long regarded as provincial and amoral, broke free of its local encasement and made itself relevant at the national level. Indeed, had it not been for the Northeast's overwhelming support for Lula in 2022, Bolsonaro would have won their very close run-off (Vieira and Reis 2022).

When President Bolsonaro lost his bid for reelection in 2022, many New Right supporters protested, the agrobusiness truckers paralyzed he highways, and some pastors and members of law enforcement demanded military intervention and undertook a federal takeover inspired by the U.S. Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2022 (Riccardi and Klepper 2023). It failed. To celebrate Lula's victory, the PT supporters from throughout the Northeast waved bundles of buffalo grass over their heads as they rode their motorcycles around their town plazas.

Conclusion

What I've described in this chapter is a particular model of corruption that arose during a moment of crisis. Brazil saw an intensified popular preoccupation with corruption in general—something that anthropologists have reported happening in other crisis contexts elsewhere in the world (Muir 2021; Musaraj 2020).

The crisis itself had economic roots, a national recession occasioned by the shockwaves from the global financial crisis of 2008. In the context of economic turmoil, many who had been financially uplifted by the PT found themselves in dire straits. Then an anti-corruption taskforce empowered by PT-era policies revealed PT officials' (and others') involvement in high-level kickback and laundering schemes. The hands of PT officials were as dirty as anyone else's. *Sertanejos* (and no doubt other Brazilians) became politically disenchanted, and their feelings ran deeper than even the PT's conventional adversaries could anticipate.

From the malaise arose Jair Bolsonaro and the "unashamed" New Right. This new political force celebrated the economically self-sufficient family father who disciplined his children to maintain their Christian values and protected them with lethal violence. The moral gradient central to this order was organized according to the principle of industrious discipline, a phrase I've created to capture the intertwining of economic autonomy and righteous violence at the heart of the New Right's image of the good citizen, an image cast in the mold of Bolsonaro and the (real) police (who kill). Across this gradient flowed a special currency, rights—"war rights," as I've called them. These war rights entailed the permission and support to inflict righteous violence to protect the family from all the *vagabundos*—the gays, the *bandidos*, the idlers/sucklers, the communists. These targets of violence were the outsiders who had wrongly received rights (e.g., funding for LGBT Pride parades) under the PT, allowing them to threaten the family (or anyway, the good father's control over it). They needed to be driven out or destroyed. However sincere the New Right's objections were to bribery, tricky accounting, and kickbacks, those manifestations of liberal corruption did not animate its adherents. Rather, the New Right was whipped up by its own model of corruption in which a communist state redirected a vital currency away from its proper recipients and toward the LGBT community, the idle sucklers, and the bandits.

Such was the fourth and final moment of the *sertão*'s political transformation, a moment marked by the rise of an unleashed political Right,

a politics of "the bible and the bullet" that held some appeal for *sertanejos*. But the allure dissipated when *sertanejos* made recourse to the older norms of patronage—neither Left nor Right—to interpret the conflict around them. In so doing, *sertanejos* asserted the ethics of patronage (a father's *presença*, a returned son's self-sacrifice) on the national stage.

Let me conclude this chapter by pointing out two ironies. First, the PT era fomented the anti-corruption sensibilities that would ultimately turn many away from the party. It even engendered the sensibilities that attracted people to Bolsonaro and the New Right. The PT emphasized anti-clientelism, and those who most internalized that message were those already disposed to moral absolutism. Second, what the PT sought to destroy would come back and save the PT itself. The incomplete project of stomping out patronage (conflated with amicopolitics under the aegis of "clientelism") would furnish the criteria by which *sertanejos* would reaffirm Lula (despite the belief of many that he had in fact committed bribery). The two ironies are inverse to each other. The PT's success created the conditions for its failure, and the PT's failure created the conditions for its success. Let me annotate this point for clarity's sake in the following way: The PT's "success" (transmitting to the poor the insurgent-inclusive politics of citizens) led to its "failure" (popular outrage at the PT's own hypocritical corruption), and the PT's "failure" (its inability to stamp out and destroy patronage utterly) led to its "success" (the reflorescence of patronage as the lens through which Lula would be forgiven and revered).

The story goes on, of course, but I can follow it no further.

Conclusion

In this book, I've described a series of transformations to the moral imagination of the backlands (*sertão*) of Piauí State in the countryside of Brazil's Northeast. I've focused on the *sertanejo* people's political ethics and, more specifically, their ideas about corruption—what they think constitutes corruption and what kinds of corruption they believe are most worth worrying about. I've emphasized these folk models of corruption because, while allegations of *corrupção* increasingly abound in Brazilian politics at all levels, what is meant by this term is often allusive. Brazilians sometimes use the term refer to what Western thinkers typically understand it to mean, "the misappropriation of public resources for private gain," but sometimes not (Fukuyama 2014: 83). Sometimes, *corrupção* takes on very different meanings that I have tried to sort out. And it is not just the single term *corrupção* that I've been at pains to decode. There are a host of other accusatory terms (absent, disunited, cowardly, clientelistic, obligate, vote buying, vagabond) that Brazilians use to assail political opponents, terms that are often paralleled with *corrupção* in their accusatory discourse. All of this indicates that *sertanejos* (like everyone) harbor moral sensibilities that are irreducible to those pegged to the classical liberal tradition with its emphasis on universal formal equality, the distinction between the public and private spheres, and so forth. Thus, by interpreting these alternative models of corruption, I've tried to depict the various moral imaginations that underlie them, models that have emerged at different moments in *sertanejo* history and that now coexist in its ethically plural present.

This project differs from, and is meant to supplement, the one currently predominant in the subfield I've called the anthropology of

corruption. The prevalent approach tracks the transnational, colonizing movement of the hegemonic Western model of corruption, the 'social life of corruption' as it has been termed (Muir and Gupta 2018). While many colleagues in this field have noticed parallels between this Western model of corruption and other models of transgression from other cultures, a systematic comparison of these has not occurred. Indeed, anthropologists have been reluctant to posit a general-order concept of corruption that would establish a framework for exploring its variations within and across cultures. This book builds toward such a general order formulation, wagering that there is a class of moral transgressions that pertains to those offenses that threaten the elementary moral organization of society, a class that differs from those offenses perpetrated against particular members of a society (theft, assault, etc.), against the nation (tax fraud, treason, etc.), or against the divine (blasphemy, desecration, etc.)

If there are multiple varieties of "corruption," this is because there are multiple ways of configuring moral sociality. It is not enough then to assert, following Émile Durkheim, that society is the collective standing opposed to its self-seeking individual members. The specificity of variations in moral configuration must be sought in the way its members come together as an interpenetration of parts going "in and out of one another's bodies" at the level of the sign (Bloch [2007] 2015). That is to say that there are variations in the way members of an imagined social whole shade into one another, take on one another's values and potencies by degree, and distribute facets of themselves to others in order to shore up authority and to socialize others to roles in a self-reproducing whole. To model this neo-Durkheimian outlook, I've recruited the somewhat abstract concept of a gradient, an organized structure by which "qualities [such as power or personal virtue] vary in their intensity over time and space [and across people], and the ways such variations relate to causal processes" (Kockelman 2016: 390). "(J)ust as an altitude gradient specifies a force field which may channel the flow of rocks," so too do the graded differences of virtuous "presence" across fatherly politicians specify the movement of resources from seniors to juniors (2016: 409). And if such movement means that gradients are always, to some extent, cancelling themselves—as rocks sliding will eventually erode their hill, or osmotic movement will eventually equilibrate salinity across a barrier—so too do social distinctions tend to degrade unless propped up by gradient-affirming (pro-social) conduct. Corruption, at its most elemental, amounts to the opposite: those actions that accelerate the collapse or

erosion of the moral gradient that organizes the proper flow of resources. Variations in corruption models track, therefore, with variations in the qualities (here "principles") that are graded and the resources (here "currencies") that flow across these gradients—as these are imagined and represented in the symbolic space of a community. Corrupt actions are those that reroute currencies away from their proper channels, that staunch them up, that denature them, that canalize them to those outside the gradient or to those lower down than those next-in-line, that preempt the gradient-affirming actions of others, and so forth.

This formulation of the moral imagination as gradients and modes of degradation (corruption) has organized my ethnographic presentation of the *sertão*'s history. Each of this book's main chapters has focused on one of four "moments" during which a distinct moral imagination has ascended. The first of these moments I've called patronage. This is where political relations are cast in the mold of transgenerational, patriarchal kinship, such that leaders are metaphorical fathers and their followers (and voters) are their children. The second moment I've called amico-politics. In this formation, leaders arise as the ambassadors of egalitarian groups, people who relate to one another through the idiom of friendship such that, however unequal in wealth and rank they may be, they create binding coalitions in which all members enjoy equal respect (in theory). The third moment I've called insurgent inclusion, a politics in which all people are citizens and thus all share a formal equality by virtue of their mere humanity and their membership in the polity. These citizens come together to demand that those occupying state offices recognize their rights to, *inter alia*, food, health care, education, and so forth. The fourth moment I've called Christian authoritarianism, a politics in which only the religiously upright "good citizens" are entitled to rights because only they belong to the political community. These good citizens demand the means (legal and literal weapons) to protect themselves from those who threaten the reproduction of the heteropatriarchal family. The reader may wish to refer back to the general timeline (Figure 2) of these moments in the introductory chapter.

The gradient proper to the patronage moment is organized by the principle of *presença* (presence). The politician–voter relationship is modeled on the father–son relation within a patriarchal and gerontocratic context. A good father's *presença* amounts to the extension of his generative personhood into the lives of his supporters (qua "children"). He aids junior kin who show him respect and deference by supporting the reproduction of their families, crops, and livestock, and by helping them "to

grow" in their political careers. To be positioned highly on this gradient means that one's *presença* is more extensive in scope, more far-reaching, more profuse across the lives of more people ("children"). As was sometimes said of the good fatherly politician, "He is father to many people."

The gradient I explore in relation to the second moment of amicopolitics is organized by the principle of *união* (unity). It begins during the mid-twentieth century, when life in the *sertão* becomes more egalitarian, with more household autonomy at the economic level, more voluntary associations based on lateral relations, and more egalitarian ideology arriving from the outside. Here, political coalitions are reconceived not as nested, transgenerational families but as groups of friends whose leader is just another friend, the first among equals. A friend-politician—I've termed them amicopoliticians—channels resources preferentially to those friends who are good exchange partners with other friends. He or she—and this is the moment when women become candidates for municipal office—opens their group to outsiders, to all willing to "work for the people" with shared ventures and honest transactions. The amicopolitician also knows that they may be legitimately opposed and respects any coalition member's prerogative to leave their friendship group to join a rival group.

A third moment takes shape at the end of Brazil's dictatorship and, even more intensely, during the thirteen-year PT era (2003–16). The spirit of this moment is that of an insurgent politics of *social inclusão* (social inclusion). Good leaders extend their sphere of concern to all "citizens," both those previously abandoned categorically (e.g., rural Afro-Brazilians) and those passed over because they were the adversary's allies (qua either "friends" or "children"). The personalism of both patronage and amicopolitics gives way to an impartial (if defiant) politics of citizenship, to inclusion by virtue of a shared humanity in need of revolutionary reclaiming. Their supporters follow them to the extent that they demonstrate such civic-minded inclusion and no further; they owe them nothing but an honest evaluation. When resources are scarce, preference is awarded based on impartial assessment of need, merit, or perhaps an indignant, fighting spirit, an attitude of defiance toward authority that propels those in office to recognize the rights of the claimants.

The fourth moment emerges as the PT falls into disrepute, an economic crisis shocks the country, crime surges, and the religious Right reasserts with fervor the heteropatriarchal gender norms that the Left had problematized during the PT era. The new gradient espoused by the reactionary forces that take control of Brazil is organized by the

industrious discipline of the *cidadão de bem* (good citizen). Prototypically, this is a Christian, policeman-like father of a nuclear family who secures his family's livelihood with no help from the state, corrects his children's behavior with a firm hand, and protects with lethal force his wife and children alike from bandits and vagabonds. This Christian-authoritarian gradient symbolically connects Brazil's chief executive to these family fathers through pastors and police, through the directors of rifle clubs and military schools—all of whom are tasked with the discipline and protection of those under their charge.

During each of these four moments, resources are channeled from those positioned higher up to those lower down, and vice versa. These include money, labor (qua "favor"), farm inputs, and other expressions of capital that politicians, in their capacity as present fathers, united friends, inclusive citizens, and industriously disciplined *good* citizens, channel downward to voters. Within each moment, such resources (money, favors, etc.) get rebranded as gradient-specific currencies, that is, as socially relevant forms of wealth that cohere logically with the principles organizing the gradient. Indeed, these currencies are in some sense the alienable (sharable) form of those principles.

Força de vontade (vitality) is the currency that runs across the patronage gradient organized by the principle of presence. Each person's quantity of *força* represents their spiritual endowment, their raw, world-making capacity, a thing that they can alienate and put to the service of others, their metaphorical children. Present fathers propagate *força* downward like the blessings they canalize to those junior kin who request them. Each request for one's *força* (as with requests for blessings) is an act of humble supplication that acknowledges the senior person's closer proximity to the divine source of all *força* and all blessings. *Força* is also the currency that runs across the amicopolitical gradient organized according to the principle of *união* (unity), but its source and pathway are figured somewhat differently. In this more egalitarian moment, *força* remains an individual property, the divine gift of each person, but the *força* that an amicopolitician canalizes downward to their friends is refigured as *força* moving outward (centrifugally) away from themselves. Or better, the leading friend is the one who gathers the *força* that comes toward the center of the group (centripetally) and, acting as its steward, redirects it back toward their friends, their existential (if not socioeconomic) equals.

Rights (*direitos*) comprise the currency of the insurgent-inclusive moment that reached its fullest expression during the PT era and that flowed across a gradient organized by the principle of inclusion. Like the

vector of *força* in the amicopolitical moment, rights originate with "the people" and move upward. The people are not friends but citizens. They are not known to one another personally, or even if they are, that knowledge must be bracketed and held in abeyance. Rights are distributed impartially to all, or at least to all who fit certain objective criteria (e.g., poverty thresholds). They are, in that sense, unconditional. And rights move upward, mainly as people choose their leaders. Rights are invested in the vote, the vehicle that carries them to the state. *Direitos* are also the currency of the subsequent regime that virulently opposed the PT. These are the rights that flow across the gradient of industrious discipline. They are what I call "war rights," that is, the means and permission to do violence against the family-threatening undesirables, at least in self-defense (broadly construed). The state canalizes these war rights to the "good citizens" so they can arm themselves, some from a defensive crouch and some on the attack.

As to what to make of the fact that the same two terms, *força* and rights, are each repeated in what I've claimed are different ethical moments, this bespeaks a dynamic of appropriation and reversal. In the amicopolitical revolution, the negation of patronage is expressed by the inversion of *força*'s flow. Tired of domineering fathers who rule them from on high, those of a new generation hail their politicians as "friends," and vice versa. They relocate the source of *força* so that it comes to move laterally, in and out of a circle of friends, rather than up to down. Similarly, the Christian-authoritarian appropriation of the Left's currency, rights, restricts to the worthy good citizens what had been under the insurgent-inclusive regime a universally distributed currency. That rights could become conditional on behavioral conformity strikes at the very core of the PT's politics of citizens. (Even convicted criminals have rights in that frame.)

During each of these moments, that is, for each of these four gradient/currency combinations, there are corresponding models of transgressive behavior (corruption) that threaten to bring each gradient toward a state of disorder.

Absence (*ausência*) and usurpation (*triação*) together comprise the transgressions proper to the patronage moment, the politics of fathers. They are two sides of the same coin. Absence refers to the corruption of the father, the removal or concealment of the father's generative contact with his junior kin. This usually goes hand in hand with the redirection of paternal attention toward places where it doesn't belong, often to sites of urban luxury. The channel along which *força* flows gets redirected

externally. The other side of the coin, treacherous usurpation, names the sin of the son (more often a literal nephew). The son, instead of letting himself be a conduit for his father's *força* (as it makes its way downward), snatches that *força* away, using it to augment his own, claiming credit that is due to the father in an effort to replace him. Both absence and usurpation cause a failure of fatherly beneficence to arrive where it should. What distinguishes them is simply whose fault it is.

Disunity (*desunião*) is the form of gradient-degrading transgression proper to the subsequent moment of amicopolitics, the politics of friends. Here, disunity usually amounts to a friend's self-aggrandizement, their elevation of themselves and their own interests over those of the friendship group. It is an appropriation of the group members' *força* by their leader. *Desunião* occurs when the leading friend refuses to acknowledge the others' contributions of *força* or when they throttle the good work undertaken by others in the group in order to retain their leadership over a group of would-be equals. Corruption also takes the form of obligating another (coercing their vote), another expression of egoism. Instead of respecting a friend's autonomy to channel their *força* as it suits them, the corrupted friend-politician strongarms their supporter-friend through the invocation of debt. What had been spoken of as a voluntary expression of a moral impulse (following one's friends down a virtuous pathway or returning their *força* out of one's own free will) becomes an instance of bullying. In this sense, the corrupt negation of *união* amounts to either a dispersal of collective *força* or a reversion of the polity to more tyrannical patronage.

Clientelismo names the corrupt transgression associated with the insurgent inclusion of the PT era, the politics of citizens who are all equally entitled to have their rights recognized and redeemed. *Clientelismo* entails the rerouting of these maximally inclusive rights (*direitos*) to exclusive subgroups, either those based on category (wealthy, lighter-skinned elites) or those based on coalition (those whose votes have been secured). *Clientelismo* is thus synonymous with the denaturing of rights as a currency and the degradation of a politics oriented to the general will into a series of personal transactions, whether of money or favor. In this sense, *clientelismo* risks a reversion to personalism, or rather a caricature of personalism in which friendship is merely a mask for either despotism or transactionalism.

In the fourth moment, as the politics of good citizenship arises, the universalism of insurgent inclusion is negated through the concentration of rights—as war rights—in the hands of heterosexual, law-abiding

Christians conceived as bandit-killing police and as soldiers recruited to a holy war. This negation of insurgent inclusion is subject to its own corrupt negation, which is the channeling of war rights to the political enemies ("the communists") who support the assault on the Christian family. Corruption entails the rerouting of these rights to the bandits (by protecting them with due process), to the gays (with the antihomophobic "gay kit"), to the idlers (made indolent by Bolsa Família)—in sum, the *vagabundos*. Corruption also entails the concomitant criminalization of the Christian family's self-protecting violence. The gradient is undermined by stripping away paternal, disciplinary authority; and the subsidizing of all forms of licentiousness and venality.

I've argued that these four ethical visions coexist in dynamic tension with one another, at times amplifying and also negating one another. In general, the insurgent-inclusive politics of citizenship proved more attractive to *sertanejo* sensibilities than did the Christian-authoritarian politics of good citizenship. I wager that this is because the principle of *inclusão* resonated with the amicopolitical principle of *união*. Both were egalitarian. Both sought the expansion of solidarities and a quelling of destructive rivalries. The insurgent dimension of PT liberalism also chimed with the amicopolitical revolt (on behalf of "the people") against patronal aggrandizement. Curiously, however, insurgent inclusion also resonated with a key aspect of patronage, ubiquity. The inclusive leader makes their helpful policies (rights) manifest among all of the once-excluded dispossessed; the present father projects his loving persona down the chain of loyal followers and into the most remote villages, whose unmarked dirt roads the leader knows by heart. The PT's electoral success among northeastern *sertanejos* (in 2018 and 2022) shows that the Left's insurgent-inclusive gradient aligned in more compelling ways with *sertanejo* ethical sensibilities than did the Christian-authoritarian gradient espoused by the New Right.

Thus, I've asserted an irony to this history in that the survival of those personalist sensibilities that the PT tried to stamp out in the name of impersonal universality is what ultimately secured the PT's popularity in the Northeast, and thus the eventual defeat of the New Right.

At the same time, I've cautioned against any sanguine dismissal of the New Right's appeal to *sertanejos* in Piauí or elsewhere. The bond among policeman-fathers is a strong and energetic one. And *sertanejos* are not wrong to notice that murderous criminality poses an ever-increasing threat to their safety. They are not wrong to notice that their gay children now have positive role models on television and even in

their midst and that they may be the first generation of parents unable to shame their children into leading straight-seeming lives. When my PT associate confessed to me, "I've got a little bit of Bolsonaro in me," I didn't doubt that such sentiments were shared by many in this region.

I am left making a plea to progressive scholars and activists that they regard rustic populations in Brazil and across the world as a unique terrain in the global struggle against authoritarian populism. We should not represent this struggle as a battle between the political Left and Right, terms that draw local, bucolic populations into a transnational and cosmopolitan political frame. It is rather the opposite that needs to happen; that is, resistance to authoritarianism should be informed by the insights and aspirations of "provincial" peoples. These insights include those local models of corruption by which *sertanejos* condemn those in high office not only for their graft, bribery, or vote buying, but for their absence from the daily lives of the poor and for the self-aggrandizement that dissipates their coalitions. Fatherly presence and friendly unity can then serve as critical standpoints from which the failings of Bolsonaro and his ilk, along with those of the PT, can be triangulated into focus. Doing so will quickly reveal that these *sertanejo* insights are not so provincial at all. They are part of the stock of human moral discovery and should be mined for their contributions to a truly cosmopolitan ethics.

But our choice to recognize the wisdom expressed by any folk model of corruption should not encourage us to decry the corruption of our own political rivals. We may blow the whistle on graft as "graft," on bribery as "bribery," and so forth, but let's call an end to the general accusation of "corruption." The term conceals more than it reveals. Certainly, the transcultural definition of corruption I've offered here provides no moral guidance. It is not a normative framework that I've developed—no moral compass or yardstick to measure the "real" corruption of anyone. Indeed, it's the opposite. The gradient degradation framework I've put forward reveals the enormous variation masked by the seemingly familiar term "corruption," a variation that occurs across cultures and across the different ideological models available to members of the same culture. The only commonalities I've posited—graded organization, gradient-specific currencies, and degrading transgressions—are formal in nature, more a shared grammar than a shared vocabulary. Their more substantive ethical implications vary widely and may be diametrically contrasting. Consider the contrast between hierarchical patronage and egalitarian amico-politics, or the contrast between the PT's maximal inclusivity (of the

"citizen") and the tightly restricted (minimally inclusive) citizenship of Bolsonaro's Christian-authoritarian frame.

So I think that when we allege another's corruption, we do no more than insist on their guilt for violating *our* moral axioms (whether the accused shares those axioms or not). (Though I suppose we could accuse another of transgression against their own sacred gradient.) And regardless of whether corruption accusations are philosophically dubious, they are a practical mistake. Corruption allegations seem almost to invite the other to flip us the bird, to invert our moral gradient in a charismatic, revolutionary gesture that prolongs a cycle of political intoxication just when we need a return to sobriety.

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