

The more things change, the more they stay the same: Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, Pernambuco, Brazil, 1965-2022¹

*Quanto maior a mudança, maior a estagnação:
Pontezinha e Ponte dos Carvalhos, Pernambuco, Brasil, 1965-2022*

*Cuanto mayor es el cambio, mayor es el estancamiento:
Pontezinha y Ponte dos Carvalhos, Pernambuco, Brasil, 1965-2022*

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Abstract

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In 1965, I spent two months in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, two small towns on the periphery of the Recife. I was part of the Cornell-Brazil Project, a group of American and Brazilian students interested in development in Brazil's Northeast. Nearly six decades later, I returned as a Visiting Fulbright researcher in cooperation with Joaquim Nabuco Foundation (Ministry of Education) where I developed the fieldwork, to learn what had transpired and search for people who were there at that time. This article is based on a fieldwork I conducted in these communities from mid-September to mid-December, 2022. I am particularly interested in how these peri-urban settlements were affected by macro events including their incorporation into the Recife Metropolitan Region in 1973; the end of Brazil's military dictatorship in 1985; and the economic boom of the nearby Suape Port and Industrial Complex, starting in 2007. Did these and other changes at the local and national level result in greater inclusion and opportunity for socio-economic mobility? This exploratory study indicates that although education and healthcare; consumer goods and home construction materials improved, local incomes stagnated. good jobs remained out of reach, and social relations still bear the legacy of slavery. Environmental degradation, densification, erosion of community solidarity

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and increased fear of crime and violence all came up as reducing the quality of life. The lack of significant benefits reveal how difficult social change is within a context of structural inequality.

Keywords: Longitudinal research. socio-economic mobility. Structural inequality. Peri-urban settlements. Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos. Public policy.

Resumo

PERLMAN, J. Quanto maior a mudança, maior a estagnação: Pontezinha e Ponte dos Carvalhos, Pernambuco, Brasil, 1965-2022. *Rev. C&Trópico*, v. 47, n. 1, p. 35-68, 2023. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.33148/CETROPICOv47n1\(2023\)art2](https://doi.org/10.33148/CETROPICOv47n1(2023)art2)

Em 1965, passei dois meses em Pontezinha e Ponte dos Carvalhos, duas pequenas cidades da periferia do Recife. Fiz parte do Projeto Cornell-Brasil, um grupo de estudantes americanos e brasileiros interessados no desenvolvimento do Nordeste brasileiro. Quase seis décadas depois, voltei como Pesquisadora visitante da Fulbright em cooperação com a Fundação Joaquim Nabuco (Ministério da Educação) onde desenvolvi o trabalho de campo, para saber o que havia acontecido e buscar pessoas que estavam lá naquele momento. Este artigo é baseado em um trabalho de campo que realizei nessas comunidades entre setembro e dezembro de 2022. Estou particularmente interessada em como esses assentamentos periurbanos foram afetados por macroeventos, incluindo sua incorporação à Região Metropolitana do Recife, em 1973; o fim da ditadura militar brasileira, em 1985; e o *boom* econômico do vizinho Complexo Industrial e Portuário de Suape, a partir de 2007. Será que essas e outras mudanças em nível local e nacional resultaram em maior inclusão e oportunidade de mobilidade socioeconômica? Este estudo exploratório indica que, embora, educação e saúde, bens de consumo e materiais de construção melhoraram, a renda local estagnou. Bons empregos permaneceram fora de alcance e as relações sociais ainda carregam o legado da escravidão. A degradação ambiental, o adensamento, a erosão da solidariedade comunitária e o aumento do medo do crime e da violência surgiram como fatores que reduzem a qualidade de vida. A falta de benefícios significativos revela como é difícil a mudança social em um contexto de desigualdade estrutural.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa longitudinal. mobilidade socioeconômica. Desigualdade estrutural. Assentamentos periurbanos. Pontezinha e Ponte dos Carvalhos. Políticas públicas.

Resumen

PERLMAN, J. Cuanto mayor es el cambio, mayor es el estancamiento: Pontezinha y Ponte dos Carvalhos, Pernambuco, Brasil, 1965-2022. *Rev. C&Trópico*, v. 47, n. 1, p. 35-68, 2023. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.33148/CETROPICOv47n1\(2023\)art2](https://doi.org/10.33148/CETROPICOv47n1(2023)art2)

En 1965, pasé dos meses en Pontezinha y Ponte dos Carvalhos, dos pequeñas ciudades de la periferia de Recife. Hice parte del Proyecto Cornell-Brasil, un grupo

de estudiantes americanos y brasileños interesados en el desenvolvimiento del Nordeste brasileño. Casi seis décadas después, volví como Investigadora visitante de la Fullbright en cooperación con la Fundación Joaquim Nabuco (Ministério de Educação) donde desarrollé el trabajo de campo, para saber lo que había sucedido y buscar personas que estaban allá en aquel momento. Este artículo está basado en un trabajo de campo que realicé en estas comunidades entre Septiembre y Diciembre de 2002. Estoy particularmente interesada en cómo estos asentamientos periurbanos fueron afectados por macroeventos, incluyendo su incorporación al Región Metropolitana de Recife, en 1973; el fin de la dictadura militar brasileña, en 1985; y el *boom* económico del vecino Complejo Industrial y Portuário de Suape, a partir de 2007. ¿Será que estas y otras mudanzas en nivel local y nacional resultaron en mayor inclusión y oportunidad de movilidad socioeconómica? Este estudio exploratório indica que, a pesar que, educación y salud, bienes de consumo y materiales de construcción mejoraron, la rienda local estancó. Buenos empleos permanecieron fuera de alcance y las relaciones sociales aún cargan el legado de la esclavitud. La degradación ambiental, la consolidación, la erosión de la solidaridad comunitaria y el aumento del miedo del crimen y de la violencia surgieron como factores que reducen la calidad de vida. La falta de beneficios significativos revela cómo es difícil el cambio social en un contexto de desigualdad estructural.

Palabras Clave: Búsqueda longitudinal. Movilidad socioeconómica. Desigualdad estructural. Asentamientos periurbanos. Pontezinha y Ponte dos Carvalhos. Políticas públicas.

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*Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos are rural industrial slums...
they are not communities, but **human trash heaps**.*
Charles Akerman, The Cornell Brazil Project 1966³

*The factory functioned for a century in our beloved Pontezinha,
but it brought horrific tragedies that killed many workers.*
Maria José, October, 2022⁴

1. Introduction

Having spent my professional life arguing against such derogatory discrimination of favelas, I was shocked and saddened to see the same de-humanizing description about “beloved Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos.” I have not found any evidence in either Recife or Rio to justify such attitudes, which are especially pernicious insofar as they justify pernicious and punitive public policies.

3 Quote from Sociology Professor Charles Akerman, who participated in the Cornell Brazil Project in 1966. Published by CIDOC, Cuernavaca. Mexico, 1968.

4 Interview with author.

2. The Backstory: 1965-2022

On my 22nd birthday I found myself living in Pontezinha, a town of 3,000 people on the peripheries of Recife, the state capital of Pernambuco in Brazil's Northeast. Recife is the fourth largest urban area in Brazil. I was there as part of the Cornell Brazil Project. We were 30 students, 15 Brazilians and 15 Americans, drawn by the idealistic hope had been to collectively imagine an authentic Brazilian development model, neither capitalist or communist, at a time when the national government was in limbo (between presidential and parliamentary systems) and social movements were stirring around the country. The project was planned for 1964. The military coup was on April 1st.

Our project was postponed until the following year, when a major national industrialization program in that region was threatening the livelihoods of local fishermen and their families.

Fast forward to September 2022. I am back in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, to investigate changes and continuities after 57 years. This rare opportunity for a longitudinal perspective was made possible thanks to a Fulbright Distinguished Professorship Award hosted by the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, Fundaj, in Recife.⁵

Meeting the people who remembered that earlier time and learning about what had happened in their communities was heartwarming ...but many of their messages were disheartening.

During those many decades the two villages had been incorporated into the Recife Metropolitan Region (1973); Brazil's military dictatorship had come to an end (1985); a new constitution had been passed (1988); the Statute of the City had created a legal framework for urban rights (2001); and Suape, – considered the “*jewel of the economy of Pernambuco*”⁶ – had generated an economic boom (starting in 2007). Suape included shipbuilding; automobile plants and 136 related industries. I imagined that the culmination of all these changes had opened new opportunities for Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, at least for some of their residents.

As I listened to people's stories, walked around with them, attended events and conducted individual and group interviews, I was asking about these macro events on the micro reality of daily life. These communities exemplify an intermediary position on the *folk-urban continuum*⁷, neither cities nor rural settlements. Although there is robust literature on both city and countryside, there is little I could find related to this *in-between* scale.

5 The research for this article was conducted from mid-September to early December 2022

6 <https://www.brazilianchamber.org.uk/sites/brazilianchamber.org.uk/files/webform/civircrm/files/Suape%20-%20Resumo%20em%20Ingles> or the “*crown jewel of Brazil's northeastern seaports*” <https://grandesconstrucoes.com.br/Conteudo/Exibir/suape--crown-jewel-of-brazils-northeastern-seaports>.

7 For more on Robert Redfield's concept of folk-urban continuum, see <http://scih.org/robert-redfield-folk-urban-continuum/>

3. 1962 – 1965: the genesis of the Cornell-Brazil Project

The idea for a joint dialogue among American and Brazilian student activists resulted from a chain of events, starting my freshmen year at Cornell with calls for auditions for a “Latin American Theater Tour.” In the summer of 1962, we travelled around Latin America presenting a revue called, “How to Grow a Musical.”

This was part of a cultural exchange strategy, sponsored by the American National Theater Association, which had started sending students instead of famous figures like Miles Davis. A Cold War initiative to “win hearts and minds” via soft diplomacy. We spent half of our time in Brazil, presenting our show at federal universities across the country⁸.

Talking with students after our performances, we learned that Brazil’s President, Janio Quadros, had renounced his position and sailed for Europe, hoping to be called back with expanded political powers. Failing that, the line of succession was thrown into chaos because Vice President Joao Goulart was seen as too left leaning. Indeed, the powers prevailed in changing over to a Parliamentary system with power in the hands of a Prime Minister and Goulart as figurehead President.

Meanwhile, at the local level, Francisco Juliao was organizing The Peasant leagues; Miguel Arraes, a populist leftist was governor of the State of Pernambuco; Leonel Brizola, in Rio Grande do Sul, was promoting labor unionizing and income redistribution (he even expropriated a US owned electrical utility); and Paulo Freire (1970) had demonstrated his literacy method by teaching 300 sugarcane workers to read and write in 45 days. “Each one, teach one” was a call to all literate citizens to do their part.⁹

Campus discussions called for a totally new form of governance, a uniquely Brazilian development model that was neither Capitalist nor Communist. Student activists were debating structural reforms and contact with “o povo” – especially the rural poor. people. I asked where the povo was and they said “in the interior” – meaning the poor rural areas of the country.

The next summer, thinking about these discussions with the students, I went to the ‘interior’ of Bahia on an undergraduate field studies program in anthropology to live in a fishing village and learn about life of the rural poor. Instead of demands for land reform or structural change, as the students had predicted, I found the fishing and agricultural villages so isolated that they didn’t even know what year it was, much less what political crisis was unfolding at the national level.

I thought how eye-opening it would be for Brazilian and American students to be immersed in the Northeast so the reality could replace their ideological projections. In that context, they could continue the discussion of an authentic Brazilian development model.

That was the beginning of the Cornell Brazil Project. I persuaded my Brazilian history Professor, Richard Graham and the director of Cornell United Religious Work, Bill Rogers to work on the project with me. I raised the first contribution by going to the

8 In light of the Brazilian political vacuum and the threat posed by the Cuban revolution, President Kennedy saw Brazil as the highest priority.

9 Pedagogy of the Oppressed was published in 1970.

office of David Rockefeller, without any appointment and convincing his secretary to let me speak to him. He gave Cornell a grant for \$40,000 to get the project off the ground.

On April 1, 1964, the Military Coup occurred - obliterating democracy in Brazil for the following 21 years¹⁰. This changed every aspect of Brazilian life, including making subversive for students like us to congregate. Social sciences were banned from universities and government spies came into classrooms to be sure the professors were not spreading leftist ideas. (a few years later, when I was at the University of Brasilia, the military ransacked the campus library and burned all books with red covers!). But that's another story. Our project was postponed to 1965.

4. Focus on the Northeast

The Northeast is encapsulated in this quote by Josué de Castro¹¹

The Brazilian Northeast ...once had one of the few really fertile tropical soils. It had a climate favorable to agriculture, and it was originally covered with a forest growth extremely rich in fruit trees. Today, the all-absorbing, self-destructive sugar industry has stripped all the available land and covers it completely with sugar cane. As a result, this is one of the starvation areas of the continent. The failures to grow fruits, greens, and vegetables, or to raise cattle in the region, has created an extremely difficult food problem in an area where diversified farming could produce an infinite variety of foods.

Our project location was selected by Professor Richard Graham, who was travelling on sabbatical in Brazil the year before. He had narrowed down the choice to the Northeast, and to Pernambuco which was being targeted by national policy to spur economic development by attracting industries to the region. The highway between Recife and Cabo had become a minor industrial strip amid huge, antiquated sugar cane plantations interspersed with small towns. The two largest towns in this area were Pontezinha with 3000 people and Ponte dos Carvalhos with 5000. They became the project sites. I believe that Cornell United Religious work had contact with the progressive liberation theology movement and had likely heard of the local priest, who Father Geraldo.

Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos are situated in the municipality of Cabo de Santo Agostinho (Cape Saint Augustine is referred to as Cabo, the Cape), the second largest municipality in the state. It is only 20.5 miles south of Recife, but at that time, it seemed an eternity away. For example, when we arrived in Recife, we did not go directly there. We spent a few nights acclimating in a kind of hostel, called Vila Nobrega, before renting a few kombi busses and going out there.

¹⁰ It seems this had been in the making for years. Apparently, the Latin American desk of the US State Dept. had been training and financing the Brazilian military operations.

¹¹ *Geography of Hunger*, 1952

Before colonization, the area was inhabited by the Caeté Indians. A Spanish ship had briefly docked there in 1500, just before Pedro Alves Cabral famously discovered Brazil, but actual settlement began in 1536¹². It took some 350 years for the little town of Cape St Augustine to become recognized as a municipality. From 1570 on Cabo's economy was based on sugarcane monoculture, cultivated by slaves. Engenho Velho is the oldest sugar cane plantation in the region. Later, as sugarcane became the country's major source of riches, the Cape turned into the economic powerhouse of the country.

The population growth of Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos began in the 1960s with the beginning of a few industries in the area. According to my notes from 1965, the factories there at the time included a distillery making alcohol from sugar cane, a Brama Beer factory (which outsourced the production of bottle caps to smaller enterprises, Willey's Motor Co. and a non-registered gunpowder factory.¹³

Pontezinha's population, when I was there, was about 3,000, and there were approximately 5 people/household. Father Geraldo's church was a focus of community activity and according to a little survey, 60% of the population said they were Catholic. There were four Evangelical churches, and they were growing – although only 30% of residents said they were evangelical. Ponte dos Carvalhos was, and still is larger. It has more developed commerce and a transportation hub. At the time it had 5,000 residents, with about the same number of people per household. Padre Geraldo was also active there – they counted 9 Catholic churches and 50% of the population identified as Catholic. Evangelicals had 6 churches and 40% of the population.

I lived in Pontezinha and do not have as detailed notes on Ponte dos Carvalhos, but it was always the more important place of the two.

The CIDOC report characterizes the villages in 1966 as having: “serious poverty, widespread unemployment, lack of social cohesion, critically high birth rates and infant mortality rates and a disproportionately high percentage of residents under fifteen.”¹⁴ My experience there in 1965 indeed found poverty and unemployment but no lack of social cohesion. In fact, I found trust was high and there was an active civil society. Pontezinha, for example, had an active elected Residents Association, four athletic clubs; and a samba school.

5. Our Arrival and Activities

Our bedraggled group of students arrived at the Recife airport with Professor Graham, Bill Rogers, his wife June and their son. We were met by Padre Geraldo, who

12 The landmark volcanic rock formation at the Eastern tip of the Cape was the first piece of land viewed by the Spanish navigator Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, and he landed there in January 26, 1500, three months before Pedro Álvares Cabral arrived on the Brazilian coast.

13 Unbelievably I had saved handwritten notes, typewritten reports, and a few precious slides of the Cornell Project over all these years, and at least 8 moves. I took the notebooks with me when I went to MIT to do a PhD; I found a safe place to store them while living in Rio's favelas; I took them with me when I went to teach at UC Santa Cruz and then at UC Berkeley in 1973. They somehow made the cut when I moved to NYU in Greenwich Village; they lived in my parent's basement in Roslyn; then came to in Nyack, NY. I found them in when packing to return to Recife!

14 Cidoc publication

stayed over with us at the Youth Hostel, Vila Nobrega. We then piled into kombis and were taken to Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos where we met our Brazilian counterparts who had arrived a few days earlier.

Figures 1 and 2: Group arrival in Recife, 1965 (1);
Bill Rogers and family with Prof. Graham (2)



Source: Taken by the author, 1965.

Figures 3 and 4: Padre Geraldo greeting us at the airport (3);
Rubens Bueno, Director of UCEB(4)



Source: Taken by the author, 1965.

In each place we were warmly welcomed into the community, undoubtedly due to advance praise by Pe Geraldo. Unoccupied houses had been fixed up for us, with sleeping mats on the floor and an outdoor area to cook and wash. The houses were made of wattle and daub.

They had palm thatched roofs, which needed replacing periodically. I remember waking up one morning and wondering why I couldn't open my right eye. Everyone was laughing. A frog had fallen from the roof right onto my face.

Figures 5 and 6: Group walking between towns (5);
Bridge between Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos (6)



Source: Taken by the author, 1965.

Our on-the-ground activity with the community was constructing a schoolhouse using this wattle and daub technique. Wattle refers to the woven lattice of wooden strips and daub is a mixture of wet soil, clay, sand, and straw that is packed into the spaces¹⁵.

We developed this joint project to contribute directly to the communities and to deflect suspicion from government inspectors who would wonder why American and Brazilian students would be living in these villages. We told them we were part of the “Alliance for Progress” an American aid program¹⁶. When we got word that the inspectors were coming, we would bury our books under the floorboards and rush over to the construction site¹⁷.

Figures 7 and 8: Group working on adobe (7); Janice working on the wall (8)



Source: Taken by the author, 1965.

15 This is a building technique used all over the world, going back 6,000 years. Some famous old buildings are made this way.

16 Kennedy created the Agency for International Development and the Alliance for Progress in 1961, which lent \$20 billion to Latin American nations to “promote democracy and undertake meaningful social reforms”.

17 It might be noted that 1) the Brazilian students were opposed to the school building project and 2) that our discussions about an ideal social contract and structural reform were of no interest to community residents.

Figure 9: Bill Rogers inspecting our progress



Source: Taken by the author, 1965.

6. The Way Things Were

The degree of deprivation of those trying to survive on the surrounding sugar plantations is encapsulated in this quote.

“My mother came from a very poor childhood. Her parents, my grandparents had 16 children. Her father was a tractor driver on a sugar cane plantation.

My mother told me, that one day, when she was about 8 years old, she felt like she was starving and she couldn't stand it anymore. She was walking on the road in the sugarcane plantation, Usina Bom Jesus, when she saw the plantation owner's shiny Mercedes Benz, coming towards her His wife was sitting in the back seat. She went out into the middle of the dirt road and stood in front of the huge car. When it stopped the woman asked what was this all about.

My Mom said she was terribly hungry and wanted to leave her home, because there was nothing to eat. The woman told her to get into the car and went to ask her mother, my grandmother, if she would allow her daughter to live with her in the 'Casa Grande', to help in the kitchen. My grandmother who was having a terrible time trying to feed sixteen little ones, was happy to agree.

The rest of this story shows the pathway out of the seemingly dead-end for girls like her:

Once there, the housekeeper taught my Mother how to cook and clean, but not how to read. My mother realized that she wouldn't want me and her other children to repeat living in poverty – and she decided that all of us would study and learn to read. She even told us that women should learn to drive. She said “a woman's first husband should be a job. “ She said, ‘ since the world is not fair, women have to be even more prepared than men. (Told by Ednalva Gomes, Pontezinha, October 25, 2022)¹⁸

7. The Priest, The Fishermen, and The Archbishop

What I remember most vividly about our time in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos is the local parish priest and struggle of the local fishermen to survive.

Father Geraldo (Geraldo Leite Bastos) came to serve these communities in 1961 as a newly ordained priest committed to working with and among the people, so that each person could grow and flourish in community.

Figures 10 and 11: Our group working with Padre Geraldo and community at his Chapel of Santo Antonio (10, 11)



Source: Taken by the author, 1965.

He had already adopted a ministry of poverty and social justice a year before Vatican II and four years before Brazil's military coup when liberation theology became a rallying cry. He began immediately to involve residents in building a school and a chapel; in discussing their thoughts and ideas; and in artistic expression of all types. He started adult literacy programs, vocational training courses, and later a co-operative and a community center.

¹⁸ My grandfather, her father, remained convinced that women shouldn't learn to read or write – so they don't exchange letters with boyfriends. I remember one day he saw me reading it and said it was getting too dangerous. He was able to buy land and build a house for our family in the city. He worked as a shopkeeper at the Mill's 'Barracão, the gunpowder factory's company store. All the workers and their families were' where forced to buy their staple groceries there, using chits the factory gave them in lieu of cash. At the end of the month there was nothing left – and the family was in debt- because everything earned went to pay the company store (Barracão) bill”.

Padre Geraldo used his talent as a painter, sculptor and architect to put into practice his equalitarian stance. He designed the little chapel of Santo Antonio in Pontezinha and the grand modern-looking church in Ponte dos Carvalhos in circular rather than hierarchical layout so that function would follow form. The preacher stands in the middle of the congregation—not on a raised platform. His services always had live music, often guitar playing, as well as singing and dancing. And he painted a huge mural on the back wall of the church that showed the faces of the local church members as radiantly divine.

However, Geraldo did not limit his Pastoral work to the 4 walls of the Church, it went way beyond that. Geraldo's care was for everyone, regardless of creed, origin, or political statement. In the presentation of the play "Nação do Divino" (1970), Dom Helder Camara would write about the Parish of Ponte community as: "in Ponte dos Carvalhos, worship is a consequence of the life of the poor population, in an attempt to share bread and time in the fraternal community, in the care of one another, in the struggle for survival..." (CAMARA, 1970).

In 1970, a large flood destroyed many houses in the region. Dona Madalena, parishioner of Ponte, once confided to me that "in the middle of the night, Father Geraldo left his warm bed, and suddenly he was seen climbing through the rubble to help us". In partnership with the Archdiocese of Olinda and Recife, he helped build countless houses, which were then handed over to those who had been left homeless. Prostitutes, for example, were hit hard. Geraldo didn't think twice: he sheltered them in the Church, while their little houses were rebuilt. None of this caused astonishment in the parish community, since, like the first Christians, it had learned to put everything in common for the good of all.

In Escada, a neighbor city, the reports are also numerous. The parish house, for example, was next to the city police station. When new prisoners arrived and they were subjected to torture sessions, they did not hesitate to shout for Padre Geraldo. Geraldo didn't think twice: he ran to the police station and immediately stopped the torture of those men (FONSECA, 2000).

Figures 12 and 13: Chapel showing exterior, 1965 (12); Chapel interior, 2022 at Mass celebrating 75 years (13)¹⁹



Source: Taken by the author.

19 Santo Antônio da Barra Chapel, in Pontezinha (left outside, and the altar on right). The facade has since been covered with a galpão which destroyed its beauty.

When our group arrived in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos we found a horrific crisis unfolding. We saw baby-sized coffins being carried out to the road. We soon found out why. A recently-opened U\$33,000,000 synthetic rubber plant – Coperbo, was dumping its untreated toxic waste in the Pirapama River killing the fish and crabs which were the livelihood of the community; and polluting the water they used for drinking, bathing and washing clothes. The effluent seeped into the Jaboatão River, which flowed between Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos.

Coperbo was a \$33 million dollars projects of Sudene - The Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast, with backing by USAID. Celso Furtado, the progressive development economist²⁰ was its President [from its founding in 1959 thru 1964. His plan was that job creation in the region would raise salaries, stimulate the economy, and help resuscitate the ailing sugar industry by creating a new market²¹.

That was excellent in theory, but the factories did not create jobs for locals. Instead they brought their own workers from Sao Paulo and failed to offer training to local workers to equip them for the jobs. Furthermore, they located on a river convenient for dumping their industrial waste, but that river provided subsistence for about 900 fishermen.

These fishermen were poor, had large families and were unable to get other work because of illiteracy (a barrier to most industrial jobs), age (some factories allegedly would not hire men over 35), lack of access to farming land, and scarcity of job opportunities of any kind.

By this time, the world-famous Dom Helder de Camera had become Archbishop of Recife and Olinda – and was actively supporting Padre Geraldo and the fisherman. At a meeting with the fishermen, they decided to set up a meeting at Sudene headquarters in Recife and bring a delegation of fisherman and some of us.

Dom Helder presided over the meeting with Sudene leaders, Coperbo managers and engineers and local government. The fishermen and the plant managers confronted one another face to face. The managers said they thought the problem could perhaps be solved in a year and a half. The fishermen stood up and said, “we cannot wait – by then we will all be dead”. Dom Helder stood by the fishermen.

A commission composed of made up of the plant managers and fishermen failed to come to any agreement. Coperbo was about to expand to full-scale operations, dump ingas much as 70,000 liters of toxic waste per day into the river, enough to end all fish and plant life in its waters.

When the fishermen’s urgent requested for permission to march to Coperbo was turned down, Dom Helder requested – and received – permission to conduct a religious procession from Ponte dos Carvalhos to the Coperbo plant. The archbishop’s

20 Among the major works he had published by 1964 were: *Uma política de desenvolvimento econômico para o Nordeste*. [RJ, Imprensa Nacional, 1959]; *Desenvolvimento e subdesenvolvimento*. [RJ, Fundo de Cultura, 1961]; *Subdesenvolvimento e Estado democrático*. [Recife, Condepe, 1962]; *A pré-revolução brasileira*. [RJ, Fundo de Cultura, 1962]; and *Dialética do desenvolvimento*, [RJ, Fundo de Cultura, 1964].

21 Synthetic rubber is made of sugar cane. Coperbo would buy sugar alcohol from plantations covering the entire eastern portion of the state of Pernambuco and its neighboring states. Thus, not only would the sugar plantations of the coastal areas be provided a new and stable market at a time when world sugar prices were falling, but they would also be strengthened in their almost total control of the arable lands of the coast and in their domination of an almost feudal social order outside the major cities of the area.

expression of religious concern with saving lives could not be ignored. He acted in the lineage of non-violent activity of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and the southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The procession took place in August 1965 while our group was still there. It was only hours before the expanded operations of Coperbo were set to begin. The *Diário de Pernambuco* reported some 2000 fishermen, wives and children marched in an ecumenical procession, following a cross draped with a fishermen net. Some carried fish in their hands – symbolizing both their livelihood and Jesus Christ. A few carried placards with religious quotations: “*Blessed are they who seek after justice and righteousness*”, “*The river is our bread*”, and “*Give us this day our daily bread*”.

At the gates of the plant one of the fishermen made a speech, Padre Geraldo made a passionate appeal and Archbishop Dom Helder urged faith and restraint, extolling the moral force of non-violence.

Coperbo, having scrapped previous plans to neutralize their wastes before dumping them in the river, as too costly, responded by promising to make provision to neutralize its waste before dumping it into the river.

Our student project drew to a close at the end of August.

The question remained whether 1000 fishermen fighting for their livelihood with the support of the Catholic church, would succeed – in the time of the dictatorship – against the interests of a rubber plant with ties to the Brazilian government, the United States and the plantation owners.

In terms of 1965 Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, the 1964 military coup had pre-empted the entire discussion of desirable alternative political economic systems. The debates about revolution versus evolution and about strategies to “deepen the contradiction” in order to create dissent or to ameliorate immediate suffering to strengthen future struggles; and discussion of whether revolutions are made by those most downtrodden or those on the way up – became moot points.

That is why, in 1965, we ended up building the school – which met an immediate need and was something concrete we could do while there. But also why supporting the fishermen’s struggle against the rubber factory gave purpose to our presence. And we saw the way the local priest – Padre Geraldo and archbishop Helder de Camera put themselves and the church on the line to support the cause of justice.

8. Still hoping after all those years

I had never forgotten the people I met in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos. There had been no way to keep in touch, and I always wondered whether they were still there and what had happened to them over nearly six decades.

Fortuitously, the opportunity to do this arose in 2019 when Fulbright announced a new Distinguished Senior Fellow Award to be hosted by Fundaj, the renowned Fundação Joaquim Nabuco in Recife. I submitted a proposal to re-visit Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos and take a longitudinal look at what had transpired over this time.

I arrived in Recife on Monday, March 9th, 2020 to begin the first 2-months of the four-month study²². Ten days later, before I had been able to organize a visit to the study sites, Covid had hit Brazil and airports were closing to international travel. I got the last flight out – to NY via Panamá City.

Not until September 2022 was I able to re-start the study. By then, the Federal Government of Brazil had suffered severe budget cuts and there were no longer funds for interns at Federal University of Pernambuco. My study, which had an extremely demanding timeline was cut in half and the research help was no longer available. However, my first two weeks were counted by Fulbright as two months of research time. So I only had two months to complete the full 4-month workplan, according to the Agreement between Fulbright and Joaquim Nabuco Foundation.

9. The Study Plan

My proposal title turned out to be based on false premises.

The reasons for the study were valid – *I wanted to understand how urban expansion affects people as their peripheral communities become incorporated into the metropolis and to explore policy approaches to inclusion of marginalized groups*. I saw this study as a unique chance to take a longitudinal look at what has transpired over nearly 6 decades; fill the knowledge gap about communities on the mid-point in the folk-urban continuum²³; and provide the basis for public policy.

My 4-month study plan was tight but feasible. It included a month to gain entrée into these communities, find people who remembered the time when I was there, and see whether they would be willing to be interviewed. For such an exploratory investigation, I chose an ethnographic approach based upon on-site observation and semi-structured interviews.

Due to the curtailed time frame, I was unable to interview as many community residents as I had hoped. Due to cutbacks at Fundaj, they were unable to schedule my planned talk, workshop, and stakeholder meeting where I might have gotten feedback on preliminary findings. Due to cuts at UFPE, the three student interns I had met in my initial 2-week trip in 2020 could not be replaced.

That disclaimer notwithstanding, every day I was in the field I learned new things. The people I was able to meet were articulate, thoughtful, warm and generous with their time. I ran out of time to follow up all the leads we got. Some take over a month to reach and need several meetings to tell their stories. Without a doubt this topic is worth pursuing. The questions it has raised are greater than the questions than it has answered, which is the sign of a promising preliminary study. The timing is critical. The people who carry the history and can make the comparison from then to now, will not be around forever.

22 My counterpart, Professor Alexandrina Sobreira de Moura, from Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, had arranged for a smooth efficient start: she had designated office space for me; selected three highly qualified student interns - from the Federal University of Pernambuco - who were interested in my topic; and arranged for me to give an introductory lecture on my work.

23 Robert Redfield, the renowned University of Chicago anthropologist. For more on Robert Redfield's concept of folk-urban continuum, see <http://scih.org/robert-redfield-folk-urban-continuum/>

Figure 14: Pontezinha



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

Figure 15: Ponte dos Carvalhos



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

10. Misguided Project Title, Overambitious Research Questions

The original title of this work was: *“50 years of transformation in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos: from subsistence fishing villages to part of a thriving municipality in Metro Recife”*.

The title itself was incorrect. First, Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos were not subsistence fishing villages. In my memory, the plight of the fishermen loomed large, so only when I got to these places did I learn that most people earned a living in small factories, trades, services and local commerce – as well as activities related to sugar cane.

Secondly, the villages did not become part of any thriving municipality. From what I had read about the territorial expansion of Metropolitan Recife, its economic growth from tourism and the SUAPE port, I expected – or at least hoped – to find life opportunities much improved, showing perhaps that the proverbial ‘rising tide’ had lifted all boats.

I had read that: *“Urbanization, industrialization and tourism have transformed the political economy in these communities, dramatically changing the social, cultural, and spatial context.*

My idea was then to find out how these trends have affected Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos. But the literature I found referred to the municipality of Cabo²⁴ and was not relevant for Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos.

The research questions were worthy but overly ambitious for a 2-month – or even a 4-month project. I had wanted to find out:

1. How were Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos and their residents transformed in the past 50 years, since 1965 when I was first there?
2. Are the original residents and/or their descendants among the urban poor living in informal communities? Or has the port and transportation hub development and the tourist industry offered them, their children/grandchildren/great grandchildren access to upward mobility?
 - Given the likelihood that some of these descendants have benefited and some not, what are the explanatory variables for the difference?
 - What endogenous and exogenous factors have played a role in these outcomes?
3. How have public policies helped or hindered the inclusion of these early residents and their descendants in the area?
4. Are there any civil society initiatives or urban social movements advocating for fair play, social justice or citizen’s rights? How are community members being involved? Are any innovative solutions being discussed or tested?
5. What are the leaders and residents of informal communities – especially the youth – doing to assert their culture and identity, defend their rights and expand their access to opportunity?
6. In the broader context, how did macro political and economic changes in the country, state and city impact the people in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos?
7. From the residents’ viewpoint, what improved, what stayed the same and what got worse? Why?

To answer these questions definitively would require a rigorous, well-funded study with institutional support, research assistants and at least a year in the field.

24 One study reports that rapid urbanization and industrialization in Cabo has significantly changed land use, livelihoods and culture, with devastating environmental consequences. Public and private investments in the municipality and its incorporation into Metro Recife coupled with inadequate planning and lack of community participation despoiled coastal ecosystems, reducing or eliminating plant and animal habitats, polluting the water and compromising the aesthetic beauty of the natural and built environment (GEHLEN, 2011).

However, the rich qualitative data we collected revealed insights and understandings that contradicts prevailing notions in the literature and paves the way for further research.

11. Return in 2022 - re-connecting after so many years

11.1. Serendipity opens doors – A Random Connection, a lucky break

From the moment I proposed this research project I knew that the greatest challenge would be finding an entrée into the communities where I didn't know anyone. There was no way I could just arrive and start talking to people, especially in a place where everyone knew everyone else and strangers did not just pass through accidentally. I had anticipated it would not be easy. Unlike my Rio favela research, I did not have names and addresses of the people I met in 1965. I was concerned because when I started my Fulbright Fundaj in March 2020 – for the two weeks before we evacuated due to Covid - I was unable to find anyone who had any connections there.

Two years later, when Fulbright resumed operation, my entrée came from a most unexpected source – the owner of the apartment I rented. Her mother's beloved manicurist, Rosana, was born and raised there and still lived there.

Her cousin, David Everson, the caretaker of the Chapel Santo Antonio that Padre Geraldo built with the community, has spent years recovering the oral, written and photographic history of Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos. He has written – and self-published three books on the topic. The main one, undated, is titled: *Cruzando o Limiar dos Tempos*²⁵.

On September 28 I met Rosana at “Bar do Flash”. Through her and then him I met everyone else I interviewed in both towns. All had been touched by Father Geraldo and were thrilled to have the chance to talk about those days and tell their stories.

11.2. In-Depth Interviews

With that lucky start, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with 41 people, some more than once. With their help, spent a total of 12 days walking around the critical points in and around the communities. The number of interviews in each category is: Pontezinha – 11; Ponte dos Carvalhos 8; Suape – 6; local government – 7; non-profits – 4; and academics – 5.

12. What stands out in my mind

As I draft this article, one of the things that stands out in my mind is the warmth and wisdom, the smarts and strength; and the gracious generosity of the Pontezinha women David convened to meet me and help me with my research. Their sense of

²⁵ Full title: Memorial: Salve, Salve Rainha da Paz. *Cruzando o limiar dos tempos*. It is self-published in paperback with contributions from the church. 177 pages. Although there is no publication date, the most recent reference is from 2015, so the date would be between 2015 and 2022.

themselves and their life trajectories were forever altered by their participation in the collective community work of Padre Geraldo.

They were about my age or younger and we felt an immediate connection. They could hardly believe I had come back after so many decades and were eager to talk with me about the way things were then and what had changed – or not.

It was from these women that I learned what had transpired in Pontezinha.

Figure 16: Women in Pontezinha who helped me understand their community



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

In addition to a few more meetings, these women took me on long walks to historically important parts of the community.

The first one was to the remaining accessible shore of the Pirapana River – the site where fisherman fought the pollution of the synthetic rubber factory, Coperbo, discussed above. Another day we walked to the site of the infamous Gunpowder factory.

Figure 17: Walk to the only part of the river accessible now



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

13. The story of the gunpowder factory

In my interviews with people in both Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, the most traumatic memory that came up repeatedly, was the infamous *Fabrica de Polvera*/Gunpowder Factory. For reasons no one can now recall, it was called *Fábrica Elephante*- the “Elephant Factory.” Perhaps because of its outsized influence there for over a hundred years. It was founded by the Lundgren Group in 1890 and closed in the 1990s. This was no cottage industry. The Lundgren group owned 420 hectares of forest, supplied gunpowder to the Northeast Military Command and sold to dozens of companies that produced fireworks.

The livelihoods in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos revolved primarily around sugar cane. There was some subsistence fishing and crabbing. When the gunpowder factory opened, it was a step up. Better pay. Seemingly better working conditions. Field workers came from the surrounding areas to Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos to seek work at the factory, bringing their wives with them. As Maria Jose explained it:

“the men came to work at the factory for lack of other opportunity to earn money. The only other option was the sugarcane plantations where conditions had not changed much since slavery.”

She continued:

The factory functioned for a century in our beloved Pontezinha, but it brought horrific tragedies that killed many workers. The conditions of work there were inhumane, unhealthy, and dangerous. The men who worked there did not have the slightest safety equipment or training. They worked almost naked, bare-foot and in dangerously high temperatures. They could only have sack cloth tied around their waists. They could not wear shoes, just some kind of slippers. The work was extremely risky due to the high risk of explosions.

Although the owners had vast resources, they never officially registered the factory, never paid taxes, and did not comply with health and safety regulations or workers’ rights. Nor did they improve conditions after the explosions killed workers. They just went on as usual.

People were particularly traumatized by four large explosions. Those with the highest number of victims occurred in 1982 and in 1995. In 1982 three gunpowder granulators exploded. The force was so strong it blew up the bodies of eleven men – and scattered their body parts into the high branches of the trees around the factory.

Only four were ever identified. The remains of the others were scattered within a radius of 200 meters.

The women told me *“The pieces of body parts rotted in the sun. And stank. They closed the factory for 3 days, then had a funeral at the chapel the factory owned and resumed work as if nothing had happened.”*

On April 26, 1995, a chain explosion of seven gunpowder storage sheds left five dead and 38 injured. The accident happened on a Wednesday morning when the employees had already started their work shift. According to the fire brigade, the explosion was heard in a radius of 10 kilometers, it destroyed 500 meters of native forest, and it opened a crater 10 meters deep on the site. The explosion was felt in several neighborhoods in the southern part of the Metropolitan Region. Nearby homes had walls cracked from the impact and roofs damaged.²⁶

Maria told us the story as we were walking around the ruins of the factory:

I was one of the women who worked in the factory... We women made cardboard canisters and had to fill them with gunpowder and seal them at a rate of 70 cartridges per week. If we did not make that quota, we would not be paid. We often had to take home the unfinished work and do it with our kids over the weekend. Can you imagine bringing home gunpowder and stuffing these canisters around the table with your children. It was very dangerous. Should never have been allowed. And I remember how heavy it was walking all that distance to bring this work home on Friday and bring it back on Monday.

The factory was closed in 1991 and sold to a businessman from Rio State. Since then no attempts at building another industry have been made there. Area residents I spoke with believe they are keeping the land for real estate speculation until maximum land values are reached. Meanwhile it is the only open space in a densely packed area of homes and industries where green space has been gobbled up on all sides.

Figure 18: Site of abandoned gunpowder factory



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

²⁶ <http://wikimapia.org/8671295/pt/Antiga-F%C3%A1brica-de-P%C3%B3lvora>

Another afternoon we spent walking around the “Casa Grande” the large house where the factory owner lived and the huge surrounding estate, which has been left unused since the factory closed.

Figure 19: Casa Grande – the factory owner’s home and land



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

Figure 20: The property of the Casa Grande



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

Just as Coperbo struggle exemplified the struggles in 1965, the focus of memory of the people I talked with in 2022 was the gunpowder factory. In fact most every person I met had lost one or more family members, either from explosions or related cancer. As I mentioned above, it is now in ruins, being kept off the market for speculation and there is clearly an illicit enterprise on the grounds whose workers did not want to be photographed.

14. The promise of Suape

By far the most exciting development in proximity to Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos was the creation of the Suape Industrial Port Complex in 1978, right in Cabo. It was originally designed for the transportation of fuels and bulk cereals, replacing the outdated Recife Port. In the 2000s it expanded to include two shipyards, several automotive industries, including Fiat Chrysler and – with Lula’s support – The Abreu e Lima Refinery, a Petrobras refinery, which had been slated to re-locate.

Describing it involves superlatives: It is not only the largest public port in the Northeast but also one of the major ports in Brazil and in Latin America. Its design is based on an integrated system between the deep-water port, (widened and dredged to accommodate the immense containerization ships) and industry. It coordinates ship docking, offloading liquids and grains, shipbuilding, trucking, automobile manufacture – and as now planned, the railroad. It is considered one of the most technologically advanced ports in the world.

Figure 21: Suape Port



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

The total area of the Suape territory is around 3,000 acres, and encompasses five municipalities. It is five times the size of Paris. It is a mixed public private venture, whose President is appointed by the Governor of Pernambuco? Aside from the port itself its industrial part has over 100 companies, exceeding R\$50 billion in private investments and employing over 18,000 people. Even before its boom period, 2008-2014 Suape was the major source of formal jobs for the entire region.

Suape is so large it comprises its own unit on the Human Development index. People in the area live in poverty and are dependent on social programs. About 70% of the families are beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família, Program, which applies a means test to quality. And 79 % of families are single female headed households.

There were already socio-environmental problems in the area before Suape, but its implementation phase of the Suape Port Industrial Complex intensified them.

This is an extreme version of the age-old story of increasing wealth amid increasing poverty. In extensive interviews with people both inside and outside the organization, I tried to grasp the magnitude and impact of Suape, what it had done to cause so much animosity and what it was doing to address the grievances.²⁷

My focus is how Suape affected the people living in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos. In the construction phase, people report there was nearly full employment. Women said it was impossible to find anyone to build or fix anything in the communities because everyone who could do anything useful was busy working. On the negative side, they did not even receive the legal minimum wage. Once the construction was completed, local workers were laid off.

²⁷ I want to thank Bernadete Lopez, Renato Raposo, Joao Alberto Costa Farias, and Carlos Cavalcanti for helping me to understand.

Accounts differ on what training was available, but it was insufficient to prepare workers for the jobs in the port and related industries. Instead of hiring local workers, Suape brought in skilled labor from the petrochemical plant in Camacari, Bahia. Ironically, Areembepe, the fishing village where I did my first field study in 1963 is very close to this plant²⁸. The Bahian workers were paid many times over what local workers made. They needed places to live. To earn some income, many residents in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos moved out of their own homes to stay with relatives so they could rent their homes. Others invested in expanding their homes to create rental units. When these workers left, there was no longer a market and it was difficult to pay back the loans they had taken to enlarge their homes.

Among the most devastating aspects of the influx of Bahian workers was the unanticipated social consequences young women. Flush with money – and spare time on evenings and weekends, the men courted the local girls 13-15 year olds, who did not realize that these men had families back home. Many of these girls became pregnant. By the time their babies were born, many of these fathers had gone home. The infants could not be registered without the father's signature on the Birth Certificates. Most of the girls didn't even know the real names, much less the last names of their baby fathers – nor how to contact them. That led to some 500 so-called Suape Babies whose teenage mothers were left to raise them on their own. According to several people I interviewed, many of them turned to prostitution to support their babies.

In another realm of harm to locals, the deep port dredging and expansion displaced communities of artisanal fishermen who had been fishing those waters for generations. They (a fishermen's coop?) tried unsuccessfully to negotiate for the right to keep their source of livelihood, but in the end were relocated to land with no water access, a particularly cruel result given that there are 24 km of coastline that provide tourist havens for Brazilians and foreigners. From my interviews with Suape personnel, I learned that the Suape agreed to pay the fisherman one minimum salary, in order to compensate for their forced removal from their lifetime livelihood.

In the middle of Suape territory, there is a quilombo – a centuries-old settlement of descendants of slaves. Because of constitutional protections offered quilombos, Suape could not expel the people as it did with the fishermen. But that did not prevent them from putting in a large underground gas pipeline just along the outside boarder. Suape claimed that environmental risks of an explosion were almost nil. Environmental experts and lawyers found there to be a small but significant risk. Eventually Suape conceded that if a gas leak occurred, the explosion would wipe out the entire community.

28 The local fishermen fought against that plant to no avail. And again later when it became T-Bras, a Titanium producer, whose effluent was so toxic that dead fish began washing ashore in massive numbers. Just like the dead fish from Coperbo effluent in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos which floated to the surface and became playthings for the children.

15. Missed Opportunity to be the Region's Hero

I did see one very positive model for Suape to serve the community, in a low cost manner. Joao Alberto Costa Farias, Suape's Director of Land Management and Equity, took me to see the "Sharing Station" project – Estação Compartilhar. Suape had acquired an abandoned home and facing it, a junkyard of rusting cars and rotting garbage interspersed with mud, and weeds. They had turned the small home into a community center and converted the derelict area in front of it into a recreational park. The inside had been re-purposed to accommodate 2 computer stations with wifi connection; a library with books for readers of all ages; a playroom and nap area for toddlers; for a little meeting room and an industrial kitchen where women could learn to commercial cooking to start their own businesses –or get jobs. The space had a nice flow, it was clean, colorful and welcoming. The kitchen was so refreshing that a local policeman was spending his break time sitting there to chat.

Figure 22: Sharing Station



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

Having demonstrated the cost effectiveness of the Sharing Station and seen how it met so many community needs, I expected Suape to have a plan to roll out this model. On the contrary, it was seen as a one-off and treated as in significant.

Suape's scope, resources and power dwarf any enterprise in the region. It has all the strategic planning and management capacity to spread the benefits.

Without great cost it could roll this community project out and at the same time, train and hire residents. That would – in turn – raise the living standards in the surrounding region. Why not invest in improved educational and health systems, social services and cultural programs? And why not accept moral responsibility for the displaced fishermen, quilombo residents and others whose lives were turned upside down by this giant. I did not learn about efforts to remediate the enormous environmental damage. It is easy to imagine the benefits – and good will accrued – of green spaces, soccer fields, athletic programs, and leisure activities for the densely settled communities.

16. Cabo Women's Center started in Ponte dos Carvalhos.

When we asked about social movements or community organizations in Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, the Women's Center in Cabo, kept coming up. On November 8, we met with Nivete Azevedo, Manina Aguiar and Izabel Santos.

According to Nivete the current president, the "Centro das Mulheres do Cabo" was created in 1984, as a direct result of a movement started by poor women in Ponte dos Carvalhos in the 1970s. They were the pioneers in the fight for decent living conditions, starting with access to running water and a concern for women's health.

Even five years after I was there, Ponte dos Carvalhos had no running water in the homes, and only one collective water spigot. The women had to wait on long lines in the hot sun to fill -and then carry – these heavy buckets for all their drinking cooking and cleaning needs. One of the women, Efigênia, organized the Residents Association of Ponte dos Carvalhos trying to protest these conditions. But the leadership of the association was all male. She added, "*they were not concerned with such matters...they ruled their families through subordination and violence.*"

In response the women members of the Residents' Association founded the "Centro das Mulheres do Cabo" (Women's Center of Cabo) with the strong support of Father Geraldo and his co-worker Father Gildo. It is no coincidence that these activist women were also members of the church, as that is where they came to recognize their potential and the power of working together.

By the time the center officially opened in 1984, it had more than 600 women members. Their first actions addressed the absence of healthcare services or hospitals and the urgent need for gynecological care. An inordinate number of women were dying in childbirth –and or losing their newborn babies.

The center hired doctors and nurses who saw the woman there. Funding from an American Foundation in partnership with the Brazilian government enabled 300 women were being seen every month. Their husbands were totally against this – they saw it as an invasion of their wives' bodies which belonged to them alone. Some women had to sneak out to see the doctors.

By the 1990s, in response to abundant evidence of domestic abuse, The CMC created a humane system for women victims, attending to their needs in the moments of post-violence. With funding from a Dutch NGO they hired interdisciplinary team including psychologists, lawyers and social workers. This created a bond,

and led many women to become members, as well as to participate in courses and other political training activities.

By 2000 there around 6,000 members, many of whom were active participants in the founding of the SUS – United Health System – they participated in the first national congress that debated the proposal. Once the SUS opened clinics in the municipalities, the center turned its attention to push for and monitor public policies for women, through political and technical training events that made the NGO a reference for the subject in Brazil. For ten years they also produced a radio program “O Rádio Mulher” or Women’s Station dealing with gender issues, sexual and reproductive rights, and women’s political power.

This all began in Ponte dos Carvalhos, but on the ground there, little has changed.

Unlike the local struggles of displaced fishermen or pulverized factory workers, this initiative had a wide base of support outside of the immediate territory. The Women’s Movement fit into categories of foundation and international agency support. Their success was due to their commitment, solidarity, ability to attract highly educated and skilled professionals and – but most importantly – funding from international foundations and AID agencies. Early on these included the MacArthur Foundation partnering with the National Ministry of Health and Terre des Hommes the Dutch NGO. Later Ministry of Women, the State and Municipal Secretariats for Women, the Malala Fund and Unicef.

17. The Rise of Commerce and the Desecration of the Church

Ponte dos Carvalhos has always been the larger and more prosperous of the 2 villages. The photos below show the comparison. The first is a shot of Pontezinha’s main road.

Figure 23: Side street in Pontezinha



Source: taken by the author, 2022.

The contrast with the following wide commercial boulevard, filled with people, stalls, shops and stores of all kinds in Ponte dos Carvalhos.

Figura 24: Ponte dos Carvalhos



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

We met Genival, a local artist who makes and repairs religious statues and paintings for churches in the region. He was another disciple of Padre Geraldo's and worked with him on the construction of the school, the workers cooperative housing and the church.

Figura 25: Genival in his studio and View of Church of Nossa Senhora do Bom Conselho



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

Later, in a backlash against liberation theology, the Catholic church moved into a more conservative phase –a new Archbishop was named for Recife and Olinda and new priests were sent to Pontezinha and P dos C.

Figure 26: Interior of the Church of Nossa Senhora do Bom Conselho, and, on the right, the painting at the back with faces of congregation



Source: Photos from church archives.

It was through him that we learned of the desecration of the mural Padre Geraldo had painted on the back wall of the church. It was the one showing the faces of the congregants as holy figures. Many of the residents worked on it. After Vatican II, liberation theology gave way to a new wave of conservatism. Popular participation and ministry with the poor dissolved; a conservative Archbishop was sent to replace Dom Helder; and, in turn a reactionary local priest was appointed to Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos.

Genival and others told us that for a long time, this priest hid the mural behind a huge black curtain he had made. Then one day, the curtain came down and – behind it, there was only a black blank wall. He had the mural tarred over, obliterating its message, both sacred and secular.

18. She went from Ponte dos Carvalhos to Princeton – The case of Daisey

Despite all of the barriers to good jobs and the disrespect for the potential of local workers, as revealed by Suape's reluctance to train them, and despite the weakening of community-based organizations, the children and grandchildren of people I knew there clearly have better education and health care and more access to information. Some have gone to university. Some have moved to Recife. But not as many as one would hope. Daisey and her sisters are the exceptions that prove the rule.

On November 27, I went to meet the Santos family in Ponte dos Carvalhos. I had learned about them through an American anthropologist at the University of Pernambuco. One of his PhD students, Daisey, had become a professor there herself and was now the Chair of the Department. She was born and raised in Ponte dos Carvalhos and her family was still there.

As Daisey was tied up for weeks with an accreditation review of her department, she asked her mother and father to invite me to their house instead. I went with the professor, Parry Scott and his Brazilian wife. Jonas and Angela Santos and their

daughter, Socorro, were waiting for us. The story they told us defied the notion that nothing changes.

This couple, who had worked back-to-back shifts in the same factory, had raised four daughters, all of whom managed –, against all odds – to get university degrees.

Socorro, who came to her parents' house that day so I could interview her, had won a fellowship to do a PhD in Princeton. It was so unusual for anyone from the Cabo municipality to go to graduate school, moreover in the United States, that this made the newspapers. Another sister had a degree in physiology; and the fourth one was a teacher.

Figures 27 and 28: Jonas and Angela Santos with daughter Socorro in Ponte dos Carvalhos (35); and Farewell photo with Prof. Scott and his wife



Source: Taken by the author, 2022.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. This now-famous quote was written in 1849 by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr and published in a monthly journal he founded. *Les Guêpes*, His point reflects the central theme in this article: that *even the most turbulent of changes do not affect reality on a deeper level, other than to cement the status quo.*

What I found in this preliminary study, is not a total absence of change, but an absence of change in the fundamental rules of the game and in the incentive systems.

Some aspects of life had improved in these two neighborhoods. Education was certainly better and the children's generation complete more years of schooling. The teachers were better prepared, in part due to the 1994 policy of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to subsidize university education for elementary school teachers without the opportunity to pursue higher education on their own.

In that same year, the SUS – Unified Health System – was established, reaching communities across Brazil, including Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos. It even came to the Quilombos.

Other improvements were evident walking around the towns – homes had expanded upward and outward. Brick and reinforced concrete had replaced more fragile construction materials. On the other hand, the communities had become much denser, with the walls of houses butting against each other, cutting out the cooling breezes provided by spaces between dwellings.

My anticipated findings about the positive impacts of political, economic, and territorial changes were overly optimistic.

Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos had become physically urban without being urbanized. Metropolitan vibrancy eluded them; full democracy excluded them; and economic progress left them behind.

First, I found that inclusion into the Recife Metro Region had not brought the dynamic connectivity or spatial integration that I had imagined. The VLT – light rail – while making commuting times shorter and travel more pleasant, did not result in greater interaction with the cosmopolitan cultural or educational opportunities offered by the big city. Or seeking jobs in the urban labor market.

Second, in terms of political systems, it was heartbreaking to me that the end of the 21-year military dictatorship in 1985 had not led to greater civic engagement. The return to democracy, the bold new constitution of 1988 and the Statute of the City in 2001 which created a legal framework for urban rights, were barely noticed by local residents.

In fact, almost everyone I interviewed said that things continued the same before, during and after the military regime. And the Residents' Associations, which had been the driving force for community action, had withered when they stopped representing their members in struggles for improved conditions, and started functioning as steppingstones into local government jobs.

The third pillar – the economic promise of the Suape Port Industrial Complex had bypassed these communities. Suape's economic boom did not trickle down.

Good jobs remained out of reach, incomes stagnated, workers' rights remained elusive; and full citizenship with its accompanying rights was absent. Locals were hired during the construction phase, but were not trained for or integrated into the more skilled, higher wage jobs. Modern industrialization passed over the heads of the two villages.

Instead of developing a highly educated, technically advanced labor pool, the companies imported workers from the petrochemical plant in Camacari, Bahia. This was the same as discussed above when Sudene-supported Coperbo brought its own labor force from Sao Paulo. This influx of outside labor eroded trust and community solidarity. Adults no longer let their children play in the streets; people no longer sat out in front of their houses in the cool evenings. People spoke of increased crime and violence and their fear of going out after dark.

The same hierarchical work relationships from sugar plantations to the gunpowder factory prevailed in Suape. *The logic of convenience and profit maximization obliterated any concern for the people living nearby.* Without strong government commitment to compensate for the legacy of inequality and to include those affected in decision-making at the bargaining table, market forces will only continue to concentrate wealth and. power.

19. Final Remarks

Reflecting on where to go from here – in terms of research, planning and public policy – brings to mind my multi-generational engagement with the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. It would be revealing to compare the changes in Rio's favelas over a similar timeframe (1968-2002), especially looking at cultural expression, political mobilization, and social media networks.

How is it that these semi-rural/semi-urban communities have remained so isolated from the global commons? What forces are at play such that Pontezinha and Ponte dos Carvalhos, less than an hour from the fourth largest metro area in Brazil, could have such minimal change over five and a half decades?

A recent study of 21 billion friendships shows that “cross-class friendships are a better predictor of upward mobility than early childhood education, school quality, job availability, community cohesion or family structure”. Findings showed that poor children who grew up in places where people have more friendships that cut across class lines earn a lot more as adults than children who don't.²⁹

Could it be that favela residents living in the middle of big cities, have more opportunity to form relationships with higher class contemporaries than residents of small towns on the periphery of those same cities?

What is the cost to society of ignoring or excluding a huge number of citizens – thereby forfeiting the benefits of their intellectual capital, social energy, cultural creativity, and productive power?

²⁹ See David Brooks, What Is It About Friendships That Is So Powerful? New York Times, Aug 4, 2022, Opinion Section. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/04/opinion/friendships-economic-mobility-class.html>

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