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# Book review of *Cattle in the Backlands: Mato Grosso and the Evolution of Ranching in the Brazilian Tropics*, by Robert W. Wilcox.

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with military rule resulted in “the elimination of the military as a major political actor and the abandonment by the conservative parties of their reliance on military support” (142).

Yet, there were differences between the various military governments of South America, which the book highlights (in Chapter 1 and elsewhere), and this is one of its major contributions. Klein and Vidal Luna’s assessment indicates that much like the military governments of Chile and Peru, but less like those of Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay, the Brazilian military administrations combined repressive measures with a reformist agenda and adopted a developmental model in areas such as finance, taxation, welfare, and pension systems that was projected and maintained with changes (for example, in the component of state capitalism) after democratization.

Projecting such an ambitious agenda for a work carries the peril of minor historical mistakes. A partial list of such errors, with my adjustments in brackets: “the CIA-sponsored overthrow of Salvador Allende of Chile in 1970” [1973] (5); the overthrow of Jacobo Árbenz in 1953 [1954] (6); the statement that “the true Dirty War” in Argentina started in 1976 [1974], in “a country where no serious radical forces existed to threaten the establishment” [a misrepresentation of Argentina in the early 1970s] (7–8); a mention of the “Concentración de Partidos por la Democracia” in Chile [“Concertación”] (15); the replacement of president Bordaberry in Uruguay in 1986 [1976] (23); the attribution of the Uruguayan transition to a 1984 plebiscite [instead of the Naval Club Pact, the secret agreement that enabled the transition and was denounced by opposition politician Wilson Ferreira Aldunate] (25).

Overall, this is an excellent book that brings us provocative knowledge about the Brazilian military interregnum of 1964–85, sets it into a broader comparative perspective, and allows us to see what it shared, and did not share, with the other military governments of South America and what made its impact distinctive and long lasting.

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*Cattle in the Backlands: Mato Grosso and the Evolution of Ranching in the Brazilian Tropics.* By Robert W. Wilcox. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pp. 416. \$45.00 cloth.  
doi:[10.1017/tam.2017.139](https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2017.139)

No previous book has so comprehensively treated the history of cattle ranching in Brazil’s Mato Grosso region. In the eighteenth century, ranchers began to occupy the abundant rangelands where the Cerrado savanna of interior Brazil meets the Pantanal, an expansive tropical wetland along the headwaters of the Paraguay River. Over the twentieth century, ranching expanded on the basis of introduced grasses, zebu breeds,

and other innovations until the region became one of the leading producers of beef in South America. As the book's subtitle indicates, Wilcox argues that the ranchers of the Mato Grosso region pioneered techniques to overcome the many impediments to cattle ranching in the Brazilian tropics. But Wilcox reaches beyond this success to represent the expansion in another dimension: in the 1980s, those techniques facilitated the northward expansion of ranching into the Amazon basin, with immense impacts on native peoples and the environment.

Beyond the overarching thesis that the Mato Grosso region served as the prototype for Amazonian ranching, Wilcox develops three main themes over the book's nine chapters. The first involves economic transformations from the pioneering period of the eighteenth and nineteenth century through the capitalization of ranching that began in 1914, spurred by the completion of the first railway to connect Brazil's western frontier to the Atlantic coast and the contemporaneous wartime boom in demand for beef, leather, and other cattle products. Social relations involving land tenure and ranch labor comprise the second theme, including conflicts between ranchers and native peoples and the accumulation of immense properties by cattle barons. The third theme centers on the environmental dimensions related to the other two, including an excellent analysis of the complexities of rangeland burning. An entire chapter explicates the protracted integration of zebu breeds into the region's ranching ecology, not just the material aspects involved but the discursive conflict between the promoters of traditional taurine breeds with European pedigrees and those who believed that zebu breeds from India were much better suited to tropical rangelands. Eventually the zebu breeds, even a distinctly Brazilian one known as *Indubrasil*, became dominant across the Mato Grosso region and, later, the Amazon basin. Perhaps no other aspect of the history of ranching in the Mato Grosso region more clearly supports Wilcox's thesis that its ranchers pioneered critical components of a tropical herding ecology that later expanded northward into Amazonia.

Several maps, a detailed glossary, a timeline, extensive endnotes, and a comprehensive index help readers navigate and appreciate this complex story and the voluminous primary sources that underpin it. Tables (but no graphs) detail geographic differences and historical trends in the quantifiable dimensions of ranching: the changing sizes of herds in each district, exports of hides and of head of cattle, land prices, the extent of ranch properties, and many more. In addition, some 20 photographs, either taken by the author or extracted from archives, bring to life the environments, people, cattle, horses, ranches, railways, river ports, and processing plants discussed in the text.

This book's intensive coverage and analysis of economic, social, and environmental issues necessarily limits attention to other, related topics. For example, despite Brazil's prominence in the African Diaspora, Wilcox barely mentions slavery. Nonetheless, he has certainly provided a commendable foundation for research that engages the current interest in Atlantic history, the African Diaspora, and the role of blacks in establishing novel social and environmental relations in the Americas. The details of ranching ecology, in particular, provide a basis for determining whether some of the

knowledge and practices involved was brought by the thousands of people of African origin who herded cattle across the Cerrado and in the Pantanal and had had experience in the quite similar environments of the African tropics.

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*Emergent Brazil: Key Perspectives on a New Global Power.* Edited by Jeffrey Needell. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. Pp. 322. \$79.95 cloth.  
doi:[10.1017/tam.2017.140](https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2017.140)

In this undeniably optimistic book, Jeffrey Needell unites 15 essays based on one assumption and addressing one question: now that Brazil has finally reached its promised potential, what does such an attainment mean? The collection is the collaborative effort of the Fundação Getúlio Vargas and the Center of Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, and the good fortune to be written before the Zika virus, the 2016 Summer Olympics, and Brazil's recent devastating defeat in the World Cup soccer, as well as the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, and the Operation Car Wash corruption scandals, not to mention the continuing economic downturn. Instead, the essays were written when Brazil's economy was growing, the Brazilian population was benefiting from a redistribution of income, and the country was counted among the up and coming powers of the world.

Leaving aside the usual stress on corruption scandals, ecological disasters and recurrent violence, the authors assert that Brazil has emerged on the world stage, where it now has a place among the more industrialized nations. This assertion sets a more positive tone, and it is helpful that most of the essayists are not overtly prescriptive: they do not tell the Brazilian government what to do. In general, most authors stress that well-planned government policies, the rise of a new and vocal middle class, diversification, decentralization, and the globalization of Brazil's economy and culture, as well as an increasing commercialization, have put Brazil in its due place.

According to the only essay written by a historian, Marshall Eakin, the post-World War II regime of Getúlio Vargas set the stage for the economic and social reforms that made Brazil's current place possible. The rise of technologically advanced industry arose alongside a new middle class. During the military regimes that followed Vargas, these policies were not abandoned. Later, Fernando Henrique Cardoso implemented well-aimed economic reforms that in turn made possible the social policies of Lula. Some essayists, though, stress the role of Brazil's newly vocal population rather than its government in the country's ascendancy.

The Brazilian middle class has indeed grown, and it has become both more vocal and more Pentecostal. "Citizenship" has been a key word during the mass demonstrations,