A New Model Society

The Brazilian Landless Movement

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Contents

'If you are unable to believe in the peasants, to commune with them, you will be in your work, at best, a cold technician […] or even a good reformer. However, never an educator of and for radical transformations'

Paulo Freire, Extensão ou Comunicação

My heartfelt thanks to Duff and other comrades at the Friends of the MST (U.S.), and of course to Cassia Bechara of the MST's International Relations Collective, for allowing me to (attempt to) transition beyond a cold technician. To the militants, co-operative members, and people living their daily lives of struggle that welcomed, educated, and motivated me to agitate for a fairer society with renewed clarity and vigour. Sem reforma agrária não há democracia, só ocupaçao é a soluçao!

Foreword

Exactly two weeks before my fieldwork trip to Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro announced that the bodies of assassinated British journalist Dom Phillips and the indigenous rights activist Bruno Pereira had been recovered in the Amazon basin, stating further that 'something wicked' had happened to the pair. A disconcerted Head of Department stopped by my office wishing to know whether the risk assessment that he had signed off for this research needed revisiting. I assured him that my travels would not take me to the State of Amazonas, which presently accounts for nearly two-thirds of land disputes across Brazil's vast area. What I refrained from telling him was that the main research site, Marielle Vive encampment, like hundreds of other camps across the country, was facing eviction four days before my arrival. All told, 142,358 of Brazil's poorest families (approximately half a million women, men, and children) were about to be made homeless – facing the prospect of a forcible ejection from the military police, their schools demolished, crops burnt, and worker co-operative obliterated against the backdrop of the Covid pandemic.

Fortunately, on the 30th of June 2022 the Minister of the Federal Supreme Court Roberto Barroso extended ADPF 828, suspending evictions and removals during the pandemic until October 31st. After a spike in Covid cases it was judged that Federal, State and Municipal governments refrain from any act that violates 'public health, the right to housing, the

right to education, the rights of childhood and adolescence, as well as the right to the city in the face of the current social and economic scenario'. Aside from the pandemic, Brazilians had not escaped the cost-of-living crisis with both food prices and hunger on a sharp increase, and around 60 per cent of the country estimated to be without full access to food. The movement lauded this as a huge 'people's victory' after thousands of their international allies wrote letters and signed petitions in support of the *Despejo Zero* (Zero Evictions) Campaign. Fortuitously, this suspension fell one day after the second round of the general election, which saw a hard-fought Lula victory and thus better prospects for the movement's camps to secure a better future. Yet others were not so lucky. A few days before travelling, the Guarani-Kaiowá community of Guapo'y (in the State of Mato Grosso do Sul) were attacked by military police working in conjunction with private gunmen hired by ranchers. Just two months following the brutal murder of young Alex Gurani in the same region, gunmen shot indiscriminately into the indigenous people, murdering two and wounding many others. The community had reoccupied approximately 350,000 km² of their ancestral land after being forcibly removed from it previously, to make way for deforestation, cattle ranches, and biofuel production.

What began as a topic of interest and an opportunity to escape the ivory tower of university life, rapidly revealed exactly what local activists have been telling us for decades. If you have the audacity to challenge the landed elites and the authorities – not always two distinct entities - you cannot expect to be left in peace to see where such a social experiment

might organically lead. For Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira, defending indigenous peoples and their land, and reporting their tales of suffering from those who sought to invade and exploit the land and resources (not least illegal loggers, miners, and those engaged in unlawful fishing and hunting), was a crime they paid with their lives for. As is the case in all countries, Brazil has a long history of this.

The Canudos War (1893-97) saw a bloody intervention from the state when the landless supply of cheap labour, predominantly ex-slaves, and impoverished farm labourers, began to build a society based upon communal land and property in Bahia. This had followed numerous peasant-led or dominated revolts, notably the Cabanagem Rebellion (1835-1840), the Ronco de Abelha rebellion (1851) and the Quebra–Quilos revolt (1874-1875), and in the South the Contestado rebellion (1912-1916) each of which saw the state rally to quash unrest. More recently, Chico Mendes was killed in 1988 by a shotgun blast both for attempting to unionise exploited rubber tappers and for defending the rights of peasants and indigenous peoples. Chico's name adorns a movement settlement in Tucuruí (State of Pará) home to nearly 200 families. Likewise, 73-year-old American nun Dorothy Stang was shot six times from point-blank range after naming illegal logging companies in a government inquiry into deforestation, following years of defending workers in the Amazon. A former colleague of recently assassinated Bruno Periera at FUNAI (the Indigenous Protection Agency) named Maxciel Pereira dos Santos, died after being shot twice in the head in Tabatinga in September 2019 – a murder that remains unsolved and little investigated.

For these and the thousands more whose names we may, or may not, have heard, the movement struggles. It is often said that those of us in the Global North can help advance struggles in the South[1] which is true, and solidarity in a globalised world is extremely important, but there is also much we can learn in return. Indeed we must, as it is there that the effects of climate catastrophe largely instigated by the north are most sharply felt, and it is there that big capital has been outsourced to exploit natural resources and cheaper labour. These are therefore sites often on the front-line of struggle and resistance to environmental degradation and working conditions. They deserve our attention as there is much we can learn from the movement, and our solidarity. The movement has promoted lively, collaborative, and ongoing dialogue between activists and academic communities, and we must continue to work together in the formation of real, practical strategies for promoting progressive social change.

Reece Garcia
Manchester, March 2023

[1] E.g. Wilder Robles and Henry Veltmeyer (2015) *The Politics of Agrarian Reform in Brazil: The Landless Rural Workers Movement*. Palgrave Macmillan

Introduction

For those that study the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Movement of Landless Rural Workers, or MST) plaudits are not difficult to find. Speaking at the World Social Forum in 2003 Noam Chomsky labelled the MST the most important popular movement in the world. Ondetti (2008) described the MST as perhaps the most impressive example of grassroots political organising in Latin America[2]. Wright and Wolford (2003) noted its incomparable ability to mobilise the poor and hard-to-organise parts of society in a David and Goliath battle that has forced Brazilian governments to live up to previously hollow promises to initiate agrarian reform[3]. Stronzake and Wolford (2016) reflect on the movement's development from a handful of squatters in southern Brazil to become the largest grassroots social movement in Latin American history[4]. It is undoubtedly the largest and most well-organised social movement Brazil has ever produced, transforming the lives of approximately 1.5 million of its people across twenty-three of the country's twenty-six states, inspiring land struggles across the globe in the process.

Bottom-up, they have organised and led land occupations resulting in the redistribution of over 43,000 square miles

[2] Gabriel Ondetti (2008) *Land, Protest, and Politics*. The Pennsylvania State University Press

[3] Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford (2003) *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil*. Food First Books

[4] Judite Stronzake and Wendy Wolford (2016) *Brazil's Landless Workers Rise Up*. Dissent, 63 (2): 48-55

of land, larger than the surface area of Cuba. This has been to the benefit of over 370,000 families with anywhere up to 150,000 people currently living in *acampamentos* and awaiting a resolution[5]. Much of the redistributed land has been transformed from sites of unsustainable agricultural practice, or left unproductive by real estate speculators, into agro-ecologically-driven worker co-operatives in communities practicing participatory democracy[6]. Those that faced a life of precarious waged-labour forced upon them by centuries of colonialism, land enclosure, and more recently globalised neoliberalism, are able to live with dignity, have food security, and control over the production of healthy, organic food. The movement represents a direct affront to the dominant model of agriculture that is presently a chief contributor to impending ecocide.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN) estimates that almost one-third of the world's population does not have adequate access to food[7], while the UN's Environment Programme reports that 17 per cent of food produced for human consumption is wasted - in a system directly responsible for over one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions[8]. And yet governments across the globe appear to be unable, or unwilling, to address these

[5] Claudia Horn (2021) *In Northern Brazil, Landless Families Resist to Persist*. NACLA Report on the Americas, 53 (4): 344-348

[6] David Meek and Rebecca Tarlau (2020) *Educating for Ecosocialism*. NACLA Report on the Americas, 52 (2): 206-213

[7] UNFAO (2021) *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report*

[8] UNEP (2021) *Food Waste Index Report* 2021

crises as they continue to subsidise, and in many cases repress alternatives to, the present agricultural model. The MST is therefore engaged in a battle with the landowning elite, huge agribusiness corporations, and the state – not always three distinct entities. Principally, the movement recognises the central role that land concentration plays in the extremely high levels of social inequality blighting Brazil (and indeed beyond). Much of what the MST and the landless peasants involved have, and continue, to achieve is unprecedented.

Given the huge amount of interest in the movement generally, Ondetti (ibid) argues that relatively little has been written or read in English. While this has changed slightly in the time that has elapsed, it is certainly true that the majority is confined to rather niche academic journals. It is perhaps unsurprising that despite its size and unprecedented longevity very little mainstream attention has been drawn to the MST outside of Latin America. As information dissemination becomes ever-tightened by increasingly authoritarian governments in places like the UK, successful examples of communities that disrupt the neoliberal, capitalist status quo are perceived to be a threat by those extracting the most value from our prevailing social and economic system. The MST demonstrate that another way is possible. This in spite of countervailing forces in Brazil that included its labelling as a 'terrorist organisation' by ultra-conservative President Jair Bolsonaro; an emboldened military police; a judiciary favourably disposed to big capital and landowners, who are able to employ private security forces that execute and torture with impunity; a hostile media; the covid pandemic; and much more. Yet, despite all of the

accolades and the remarkable achievements exemplifying the movements strength, it remains an organisation of poor people operating with scarce resources and the mobilisation problems typical of all grassroots entities .

Why it is important to study the MST

The MST is a social movement engaged in two fights: *a luta pela terra* (a fight for the land) and *a luta na terra* (a fight on the land)[10]. The initial fight is based upon the premise that the earth and its natural resources should be under social control, and whose access should be treated as a right of all workers. Once natural assets are treated as commodities and subject to private appropriation, fair and co-operative social relations are subjugated to those of the appropriators. It follows that a redistribution of land and natural resources is central to a reorganisation of society. In effect, by re-appropriating the means of production, neoliberal capitalist realism can be dismantled 'from below'.

Founder and leader of the MST João Pedro Stédile urges people to avoid seeing the state as the main source of power and authority in society, and thus parliamentary reform as the primary route to worker power. This was confirmed after fourteen years of the Workers' Party being in office at the turn

[9] Miguel Carter (2010) *The Landless Rural Workers Movement and Democracy in Brazil*. Latin American Research Review, 45: 186-217

[10] Broadly defined as a collective effort to pressure relevant authorities for desired change through the use of protest and other forms of direct action, such as land and public building occupations, sit-ins, road blockages, marches and demonstrations

of the century, their terms characterised by many unfulfilled promises and limited agrarian reform. Asserting that people must be the vanguard for progressive change themselves, the movement's central form of action has been the occupation of contestable public and private land in an attempt to establish agrarian reform settlements.

The movement's second fight relates to that on the land, and the formation of communities based upon respect, co-operation, egalitarianism, and a rejection of capitalism and its tenets, such as competitive individualism. From the MST's struggle we gain valuable insights into efforts at transformational change, each of which is dealt with systematically in this text. Principally these are:

1. An overhaul of the present agricultural model that is a significant contributor to the climate crisis, precarious and exploitative labour relations, and simultaneously leaves nearly one in three people without access to adequate and nutritious food. Ironically, those who work in agriculture or live in a rural setting where nature provides the means for healthy subsistence are disproportionately likely to be affected[11]. With approximately 931million tonnes of food wasted annually there is certainly enough food to go around, as there is wealth (with 729 new billionaires emerging across 2021 and 2022), the issue is that we operate a political and economic system that creates these circumstances.

[11] Rémy Herrera and Kin Chi Lau (2015) eds *The Struggle for Food Sovereignty: Alternative Development and the Renewal of Peasant Societies Today*. Pluto Press

Here the principles of agro-ecology and food sovereignty come to the fore as the movement strives for sustainable food production that privileges traditional and indigenous practices over mechanised, chemical-fuelled, monoculture.

2. Major economic and political reform that opens up democracy to those that have been alienated from decision-making for much of history, thus democratising economic and social policy in the countryside. The movement shuns hierarchy and is organised via elected co-ordination bodies with decisions formulated or approved from the rank-and-file members upwards, and the full participation of all members through daily assemblies. The MST's direct action continually pressures the state into improving conditions for those often excluded from political and social power, reinforcing how important social movements are as political actors.

3. A rejection of capitalism and its associated labour relations with food produced by non-exploitative worker co-operatives. This compliments point 1 as part of the wider demand for the right to collectively produce healthy food for the entire population.

4. Upholding a transformational form of education. Inspired by Paulo Freire, their belief is that the oppressed are most likely to become agents of change, via the consciousness needed to transform reality and the conditions surrounding them, with an understanding of their history, determinants of their social realities, and of how things could be different.

> Schools are managed without principal-type figures, as children form *núcleos* with responsibility for each institutions' functioning, promoting collective decision-making and mutuality as opposed to individual meritocracy from an early age.

Ultimately, the movement offers us the most widespread and enduring example of a grassroots-led ecosocialist revolution today. Recognising that socialism requires more than just a socialist government – itself hard to come by – the MST has been attempting to create an ideology in society, to transform social relations and economic structures, and to build mass mobilisation. In one of the most unequal countries on our planet, 1.5million Brazilians are creating a society based upon the 'common good'. Their achievements defy pragmatic expectations. For example, a very trivial percentage of people join the movement because they are Marxists. Indeed, rural peasants in Brazil are typically characterised as politically and religiously conservative. So too theory: most Marxist theories of history disregard rural areas in developing countries as a plausible context for working-class emancipation[12]. And yet, the MST has successfully wrestled back peasant control of the means of production on millions of hectares of land. Their story warrants consideration in any conversation regarding what form our collective, alternative futures could look like.

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[12] Aldiva Sales Diniz and Bruce Gilbert (2013) *Socialist Values and Cooperation in Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement*. Latin American Perspectives, 191 (40): 19-34

Part I:

The Struggle for a Fairer Society

Globally, Brazil possessed the twelfth biggest economy in 2022 with agriculture and associated sectors regularly accounting for nearly one-quarter of national GDP[13]. This is perhaps unsurprising for the fifth-largest country in the world, benefitting from vast fertile land, a favourable climate, and an abundance of natural resources. However, as the Covid pandemic hit in 2019, World Bank data ranked Suriname as the only country outside of Africa to have a higher Gini Index than Brazil[14]. In the same year, the United Nations *Human Development Report* placed Brazil second only to Qatar in terms of highest income concentrated to the wealthiest 1 per cent (who accounted for almost 30 per cent of the nation's total income)[15]. Census data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) offers a periodic reminder that around 1 per cent of landowners control almost half of all rural land. Conversely, half of all rural landowners are in possession of holdings less than 10 hectares in size, equating to approximately 2 per cent of all land. Perhaps the best illustration of how entrenched unequal land concentration is in Brazil, is that the above figures hold true despite the efforts of the MST and other social movements in forcing the redistribution of over 80 million hectares[16] - twice the size of neighbouring Paraguay.

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[13] Data from the *Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil* (Brazilian Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock, or CAN)

[14] The Gini Index measures the degree of inequality in a country via the distribution of family income

[15] United Nations Development Programme (2019) *Human Development Report 2019, Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in human development in the 21st century*

[16] Dataluta Land Struggle Database, Brazil 2017 report

Brazil's trove of natural resources is regularly heralded as key to overturning the deep wealth inequality of its population, a recent example being the emergence of biofuel as an alternative to fossil fuels. As the world leader in the production of sugarcane and soy, with soy seeds and sugarcane used in the production of energy, Brazil was well-placed in the global market to capitalise. However, when George Bush was welcomed to Brazil by President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva in 2007 amid talks of an 'ethanol alliance', the corporations responsible for the neoliberal modernisation of agriculture (and thus the profiteers of environmentally-destructive practices) were already proving to be extraordinarily effective at manufacturing discourses of energy sovereignty, social inclusion and environmental sustainability in their own favour[17].

As such, those who had secured public money to undertake land grabs and utilise both slave and precarious labour, in the process destroying soil quality and polluting indigenous water supplies, were afforded 'new frontiers' to further dispossess peasant land. So too indigenous and peasant labour practices that include social movement-affiliated and community-based farming co-operatives. As the agrofuel debate became mainstreamed as a direct response to neoliberal capitalism's threat to itself, via the exhaustion of finite resources and other ecological and social effects, agri-business opened up new revenue streams to sustain untenable consumption patterns in countries like the US. The unequal access to, and management

[17] See Maya Manzi (2020) *The Making of Speculative Biodiesel Commodities on the Agroenergy Frontier of the Brazilian Northeast*. Antipode, 52 (6): 1794-1814, and François Houtart (2010) *Agrofuels: Big Profits, Ruined Lives and Ecological Destruction*. Pluto Press

of, Brazil's resources is evidenced in the fact that more than half of the rural population lives in poverty, with figures in the poorer North-eastern region approaching 70 per cent[18].

A tale of colonisation and capitalism

The history of Brazil's unequal access to land is not a wholly unfamiliar sequence of events in Latin America. Following its 'discovery' by Pedro Álvares Cabral in April 1500, Brazil was claimed by the Portuguese crown, then headed by King Manuel I. From the 1530s the monarchy began granting plots of land, *sesmaria*, to a small number of privileged colonial families in Brazil as recognition of their service to the crown. Each of these 'captains' were given hereditary rights to these vast swathes of land, and those with connections to the *capitanias* were able to acquire large plots of land too. This is a practice that continued until Brazilian independence was achieved in 1822, ensuring tight Portuguese control of Brazilian land from Lisbon, over 4,000 miles away. Naturally, the *sesmaria* distributed during this period was considered to be the most accessible and fertile, which has had a long-lasting effect in terms of access to wealth.

This inequality was entrenched by the economic system pursued by the colonisers. In the Northeast of Brazil large sugarcane plantations dominated the landscape, built upon the labour of African slaves with slavery in this region well-

[18] Figures from the International Fund for Agricultural Development

established by 1550. Brazil was the last country in the Western world to abolish slavery and accounts, even by conservative estimates, for considerably more than one-third of all African slaves traded - over 4.5 million individuals[19]. Those indigenous to the country were first subjected – unsuccessfully – to forced labour by the colonisers, with many fleeing into the wilderness and many dying of disease and depression. The burgeoning elite who had been gifted land were of course those with the capacity to grow and export large amounts of produce. The land became dominated by plantations and sugar mills harvested by slaves, a second tier of skilled and semi-skilled workers, and the wealthy landowners as head of each 'community'. This societal structure became replicated across the country with coffee planters in the State of São Paulo eventually competing with the sugar barons of the northeast.

Brazilian independence saw questions emerge regarding land distribution as the prior process of *sesmaria* was suspended. Between 1822 and 1850 the title to parcels of public land could be acquired through occupation, purchase, inheritance or donation. This changed with the *Lei de Terra* (Land Law) of 1850 that abolished the right to public land by means of occupation, making purchase the only legal way to procure it. Pereira (1997) contrasts this to the Homestead Act of 1862 in the US where frontier land was granted to anyone willing to settle it[20]. The Land Law was a very deliberate attempt to limit popular

[19] The IGBE census in 2010 revealed that for the first time over half of the population defined themselves as black or mixed-race, amounting to nearly 100 million people

[20] Anthony Pereira (1997) *End of the Peasantry: The Rural Labor Movement in Northeast Brazil, 1961–1988.* University of Pittsburgh Press

access to land, simultaneously confining those without capital to a life of labour, typically on the sugar plantations and mills of the north, and coffee plantations in the centre south. It also reflected a turn by those with decision-making power under the first Emperor of Brazil, Pedro I, to open up land to European immigration, particularly in the south of the country.

There were a number of reasons for this, not least the huge amount of unclaimed public land available, but also the desire of Brazil's elites to secure a cheap supply of labour as the abolition of slavery appeared imminent. So central were they to these efforts that planters from São Paulo state organised the *Sociedade Promotora de Imigração* (Society for Promoting Immigration) and the number of immigrants arriving in Brazil increased four-fold from 33,000 in 1886 to 132,000 in 1888[21]. Unlike the freed slaves, these *colonos* (arriving from countries like Italy, Germany, and Poland) to the southern states of Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul, were typically given plots of land. However, these were insufficient to sustain whole families and the immigrants were often burdened with debt bondage, essentially tying them to the land owned by planters. They were also treated in a fashion befitting the employ of individuals unwilling to relinquish the slave-master position they had been accustomed to, in favour of voluntary paid labour. Word of this ill-treatment eventually spread, for example, the Italian government made it unlawful for citizens to accept subsidised travel to Brazil. The descendants of many of these migrants went on to form part of the initial membership of the MST around 150 years later.

[21] Thomas Skidmore (1999: 72–3) *Brazil: Five centuries of change*. Oxford University Press

Getúlio Vargas took on the presidency following the Brazilian Revolution of 1930, which ousted Washington Luís and prevented the incumbent President, Júlio Prestes, from taking office. His *Estado Novo* (New State) dictatorship focused on industrialising urban areas, which was to be a theme for the ensuing decades. For example, the legacy of Brazil's first president of humble beginnings Juscelino Kubitschek was construction of the new capital Brasília, and building infrastructure to better connect urbanised (and urbanising) areas. Some hope had been generated in the potential for land reform by the 1946 Constitution introduced during Eurico Gaspar Dutra's presidency. It stated that land, public and private, could be expropriated if it was not used in a way that promoted social well-being. As such, land that went unused could in theory be distributed to those without land that could subsistence farm. However, in practical terms this did not extend far beyond well-meaning written sentiments, as the power of countryside landowners was not politically challenged with any great impetus.

Left-wing President João Goulart's *Reformas de Base* (Basic Reforms) put land reform firmly on the map in the 1960s, in response to a spike in activity by the Peasant Leagues and rural trade unions. Such groups alongside the Communist Party had been instrumental in securing his rightful passage to the presidency following the resignation of President Janio Quadros. Goulart had been on an official visit in communist China just as the US had initiated the Alliance for Progress in an attempt to ensure co-operation between themselves and Latin America in the wake of Cuba's revolution reigniting the Cold

War, and many conservatives were wary of him. Among a raft of changes introduced, the creation of the Superintendency of Agrarian Reform (SUPRA) was perhaps the most significant as it attempted to redress the imbalance of power between landless peasants and the rural elites.

Land began being distributed to those without it and the Rural Worker Statute of 1963 recognised rural workers' trade unions and established both state-level labour federations and the *Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura* (National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture, or CONTAG). In a speech attended by some 200,000 spectators on 13 March 1964, Goulart pledged to expropriate and redistribute non-productive properties larger than 600 hectares. This and other reforms, such as his plans to nationalise foreign oil refineries operating in Brazil, and a refusal to support the US in its escalation of hostilities against Cuba during the missile crisis, were not well received in Washington. Indeed, in the climate of Fidel Castro's revolution the traditional conservative ruling class in Brazil were taking no chances, and Goulart was deposed by a US-backed military dictatorship just weeks later, which went on to hold power for the following twenty-one years[22].

This period was characterised both by repression and a huge program of capitalist 'modernisation'[23]. Aside from suspending

[22] By today's standards Goulart was only advocating rather limited agrarian reform (see Meszaros, 2000) yet this was enough for those whose landed interests had been relatively undisturbed up to this point in time

[23] Such was the repression that the initial years of the military dictatorship saw little overt opposition or postulation for change (agrarian or otherwise), with that which did occur tending to be quite isolated - for example, the Araguaia Guerrilla War

national elections in 1967 and Congress the following year, CONTAG and the rural trade unions were effectively taken over by the government with collective bargaining and strikes prohibited. Union leaders suspected of militancy were imprisoned or forced into exile and the Ministry of Labor hand-picked their replacements, also designating worker representation rights to unions of their choosing. There was a drive to invest in and mechanicalize industry both in urban centres and rural Brazil, and the unions were sustained purely to help facilitate this. This effectively translated to a neoliberal equivalent of the colonial *capitanias* in the sixteenth century, with tax breaks and subsidised credit for (wealthy) private providers with the metric of total value of production used to determine state aid. The smallest 50 per cent of farms received 7.4 per cent of the credit in 1969, down to 5.2 per cent by 1979; with the biggest <1% of landowners in receipt of 38.5 per cent in 1979, up from 25.7 per cent the decade before[24]. These so-called *super latifundio* comprising of around 3,000 properties equalled the approximate surface area of neighbouring Columbia, Bolivia, or Peru – larger than almost every country in Western Europe. At the same time, Brazilian media such as Folha de São Paulo reported that more than two-thirds of large landowners simply ignored the taxes that were supposed to contribute to this credit, such as the *Imposto sobre Propriedade Territorial Rural* (Tax on Rural Land Property), alongside huge tax cuts (as much as 50 per cent) on certain agricultural yields.

[24] Osvaldo Coggiola (2015) *Brasil: la cuestión agraria y la lucha del MST*. En Defensa del Marxismo

The polarising structure of Brazilian agriculture became entrenched: on the one hand, large estates engaging in the commercial production of crops such as soy, coffee, sugar, and tobacco for export further concentrated land out of the hands of rural peasants. Small farms producing the majority of the domestically-consumed crops like rice, potatoes, and beans found themselves under pressure of eviction from large landowners and faced rising land prices that many could not afford. Up to this point a 'patron-client' relationship known as coronelismo had existed, whereby tenants, sharecroppers and labourers who lived on large estates worked the land for the landowner in what was essentially a relationship of coercive dependency[25]. Without romanticising the industrial relations of this time, the situation transitioned to one where they were being replaced by (and indeed forced to become) a temporary, precarious, waged labour force – a change many struggled to adapt to. With new opportunities beckoning in the cities many of the rural poor were forced into urban areas, while others accepted land as part of the government's colonisation program, notably in the sparsely populated Amazon basin where indigenous communities lived. A growing rural 'underclass' - those peasants who did not emigrate to the urban centres nor were swallowed up as waged labour on the *fazendas* – shifted towards uninhabited areas further excluded from politics, markets, and so forth; reaching around 9 million persons in number by 1980[26].

[25] Victor Nunes Leal (1977[1949]) *Coronelismo: The municipality and representative government in Brazil*. Cambridge University Press

[26] Coggiola (*ibid*)

There were a number of effects of the dictatorship's 'Brazilian miracle' (1969-1973). The strategy of industrialisation saw approximately 25 million of the rural population move to cities between the mid-1960s and 1980. This formed a huge part of a trend that saw Brazil's urban index of 15 per cent in 1940, climb to a whopping 83 per cent by 2006, making it one of the most urbanised countries in the world[27]. This had consequences for both the 'real' wages on offer in urban centres as this huge reserve army of labour descended upon the cities, and the prospects of those millions who remained in the countryside. The economic 'miracle' began to falter, in part due to a spike in global oil prices that drove up the cost of imports dramatically and a rise in international interest rates increased the costs associated with servicing the country's foreign debt. With austerity measures introduced there was growing political unrest with the military dictatorship in the early 1980s from most parts of society. In the face of escalating foreign debt, inflation and unemployment – and with the Catholic Church openly encouraging active mobilisation things became untenable.

In 1985, the same year that the MST held its First National Congress, the military dictatorship relinquished power. In the twenty years of military power just 185 estates had been expropriated[28]. Tancredo Neves became president, however, after becoming seriously ill mere days after his swearing-in

[27] World Bank figures for Brazil

[28] Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1997) *Reforma Agrária: Compromisso de Todos*. Brasilia: Presidência da República, Secretaria de Comunicação Social

ceremony he passed away one month later. His replacement was then Vice President José Sarney, who announced wide-ranging pledges for land redistribution. In particular, the *Programa Nacional de Reforma Agraria* (National Plan for Agrarian Reform) promised land to 1.4 million landless peasants during his first term. In a continuation of what had gone before, little of this materialised - in fact, fewer than 90,000 families were settled. This was partly due to the influential land-owning classes once again moving to quash such initiatives, whose votes Sarney needed to support his economic reform plan *Plano Cruzado*. Further, in the face of an economic recession Sarney had no wish to overhaul agriculture, which was the one sector that was enjoying healthy growth. His decision to disband the *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform, or INCRA) and give the Ministry of Agriculture responsibility for agrarian reform resulted in bureaucratic chaos given their lack of experience in such matters[29].

Things were to get worse in 1989 when wealthy neoliberal Fernando Collor de Mello beat future president Lula to the presidency, and despite pledging to settle 500,000 families before being elected, it is unclear whether the actual figure exceeded 20,000[30]. Before Collor's impeachment and resignation, the movement faced two-and-a-half years of constant repression with MST leader João Pedro Stédile

[29] Wilder Robles (2018) *Revisiting Agrarian Reform in Brazil, 1985–2016*. Journal of Developing Societies 34 (1): 1–34

[30] José Saramago (1999) *Terra*. Companhia das Letras

claiming, 'If he [Collor] had pressured us just a little more, we would have been destroyed'[31]. Step forward Itamar Franco, and a continuation of the neoliberal model that had wrecked the hope of a post-military dictatorship society based on progressive policies and egalitarianism.

In the mid-1990s the situation changed dramatically. Land reform made a return to the national agenda when Fernando Henrique Cardoso, previously an ostensibly Marxist scholar and social critic, became president. There was the typically uneasy relationship between his administration and the movement, well-illustrated by the fact that Cardoso refused to negotiate with the MST while they occupied land, to which the MST and other social movements applied great pressure on his government. As an example, Comissdo Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission, or CPT) figures indicate that the annual number of land occupations increased from 146 in 1995 to 559 in 1998, and on one particularly well-organised day of action in April 2000, 5,000 landless peasants occupied public buildings across capital cities in fourteen states. The significance of land occupations cannot be understated: for example, of 352 settlements that existed across São Paulo, Pernambuco, Goiás, Espíritu Santo, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Mato Grosso do Sul between 1994 and 1997, 304 had been initiated by land occupations and just 48 by federal government initiatives[32]. Much to Cardoso's embarrassment,

[31] João Pedro Stédile and Bernardo Mançano Fernandes (1999) *Brava gente: a trajetória do MST e a luta pela terra no Brasil*. Fundação Perseu Abramo

[32] O Estado de S.Paulo, 12th October 1998

while he was meeting with world leaders such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton in November 1999, the MST occupied land outside one of his farms named Fazenda Barriguda (which translates as 'potbellied') bringing international attention to the issue of landownership[33].

Cardoso's two terms saw an unprecedented 20 million hectares of private land expropriated, with plots distributed to circa 541,000 families; an average of 67,588 per year[34]. While these figures indicate the clear shift in land re-distribution that took place, the goal had been to diminish the demand for land, rather than the unintended consequence which was to strengthen the MST. Little was done to deviate from the model of capitalist 'modernisation' nor to tackle the lack of democracy in Brazil's countryside[35]. In effect, Cardoso publicly overstated the agrarian reforms being implemented while simultaneously attempting to isolate the MST politically – not least via smears about their activities. Agri-business continued to dominate with multi-national firms buying up many Brazilian producers (notably Monsanto, Dow and Dupont in the latter stages of the 1990s), and small farm-holdings continued to diminish in number. In Cardoso's second term their treatment became more akin to a criminal organisation than a group of citizens exercising their right to pressure the government[36]

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[33] George Meszaros (2000) *No ordinary revolution: Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement.* Race & Class, 42 (2): 1-18

[34] Robles (*ibid*)

[35] Anthony Pereira (2003) *Brazil's agrarian reform: democratic innovation or oligarchic exclusion redux?* Latin American Politics and Society, 45 (2): 41-65

[36] Sue Branford and Jan Rocha (2002) *Cutting The Wire*. Latin America Bureau