

AN OVERVIEW

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Brazil is one of the most inequitable nations in the world. Its great disparities of wealth have deep historical roots. This volume addresses a critical legacy and enduring aspect of Brazil's social injustice: its sharply unequal agrarian structure. The following chapters probe the causes, consequences, and contemporary reactions to this situation. In particular, they shed light on the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), Latin America's largest and most prominent social movement, and its ongoing efforts to confront historic patterns of inequality in the Brazilian countryside.

This volume offers a wide-ranging picture of the MST and its engagement in the Brazilian struggle for land reform. The sixteen chapters included here were produced and revised between 2004 and 2008, following a conference sponsored by the University of Oxford's Centre for Brazilian Studies. All the contributors to this volume, an assembly of Brazilian, European, and North American-based scholars and development practitioners, have ample fieldwork experience on the subject. In concert, they offer a unique international and multidisciplinary perspective of this phenomenon. Its seventeen authors include five sociologists, two political scientists, two geographers, two anthropologists, an economist, as well as a lawyer, a journalist, and three development practitioners. Among the writers are eleven Brazilians, three Europeans, and three North American-based scholars. Together, they offer a sober and empirically grounded assessment of what is undoubtedly a complex and sensitive subject. The following comments present a brief overview of the anthology.

Chapter 1, "Social Inequality, Agrarian Reform, and Democracy in Brazil," by Miguel Carter sets the MST's mobilization for agrarian reform in a historical and comparative context. It underscores the sharp social disparities and contentious visions surrounding the MST's quest for land redistribution and appraises the movement's influence on Brazil's reform agenda. The prospects for enhancing development and democracy in Brazil, it asserts, are hampered by the nation's extreme and durable social inequities. Over the last three decades the country has experienced a conservative agrarian reform process—largely reactive and restrained in its response to peasant demands; sluggish, minimal, and ad hoc in its distributive measures; and conciliatory toward the nation's land-

lord class. Enduring oligarchic privileges, the underdevelopment of citizenship rights among the poor, and various other shortcomings of Brazil's democratic regime account for the nation's highly lopsided political representation in favor of the rural elite and explain the state's tepid land reform policies. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main positions in Brazil's contemporary debate over agrarian reform.

The ensuing fifteen chapters are divided into four parts. Part I, "The Agrarian Question and Rural Social Movements in Brazil," provides an essential background to the MST story. It examines Brazil's agrarian structure, state policies, and the formation of civil society organizations in the countryside. Part II, "MST History and Struggle for Land" and part III, "MST's Agricultural Settlements," build on a frequently made distinction between the struggle *for* land (*a luta pela terra*) and the struggle *on* the land (*a luta na terra*). The first refers to the mobilization undertaken by landless peasants to demand government land redistribution.¹ The struggle *on* the land takes place after the establishment of an official agricultural settlement. The main efforts during this phase are geared toward developing productive and meaningful rural communities. Each of these parts includes an introductory chapter followed by three case studies. All together, the six case studies cover four of Brazil's principal regions: the south, southeast, northeast, and Amazonian north.

Part IV provides a wide-ranging analysis of the MST, politics, and society in Brazil. It probes the movement's multifarious relations with recent governments and the rule of law. Moreover, it examines the MST's impact on other Brazilian social movements. The concluding chapter appraises current discussions over the MST and the future of agrarian reform in Brazil. In doing so, it presents some of the main findings of this volume. This is complemented by an epilogue and update on land reform trends in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

The Agrarian Question and Rural Social Movements in Brazil

Chapter 2, "The Agrarian Question and Agribusiness in Brazil," by Guilherme Costa Delgado offers a cautionary tale. His review of rural development policies since the 1950s shows how these policies have systematically favored the landlord class, notably during the military regime established in 1964. This government thwarted reforms in land tenure, while subsidizing the territorial expansion and technological modernization of the agrarian elite. This state-led capitalist transformation of agriculture fueled the emergence of a powerful agribusiness class. Large-scale farmers and ranchers gained added economic relevance and power in the aftermath of the 1982 debt crisis. Under Brazil's "constrained adjustment" to the new global economy, agro-exports became a leading source of revenue to repay the nation's foreign creditors. Current prospects for implementing a substantial land reform, Delgado argues, are

undermined by the neoliberal economic model adopted in the 1990s. This is compounded by the state's weak enforcement of agrarian reform laws and negligible efforts to put into effect tax provisions affecting large rural properties.

Chapter 3, "Rural Social Movements, Struggles for Rights, and Land Reform in Contemporary Brazilian History," by Leonilde Sérvolo de Medeiros also underscores the strength of Brazil's large rural proprietors, but, additionally, highlights the emergence of a variety of new peasant movements. These movements were started first in the 1950s and were reignited in the 1980s, during Brazil's political redemocratization. This second cycle of peasant mobilizations ushered in new social categories and public demands and fostered innovative forms of collective action. These peasant groups have sought to assert their public visibility, while demanding governments to fulfill various social rights. The MST's evolution, Medeiros insists, needs to be viewed in the context of previous and present-day struggles for citizenship rights in the countryside.

Chapter 4, "Churches, the Pastoral Land Commission, and the Mobilization for Agrarian Reform," by Ivo Poletto highlights the religious contribution to the organization and mobilization of the Brazilian peasantry. Stirred by the Second Vatican Council's *aggiornamento*, a theology of liberation, and human rights violations in the countryside, particularly in the Amazonian frontier, church agents established in 1975 a Pastoral Land Commission (CPT). The CPT was embraced early on by the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB). Indeed, nowhere in the chronicle of world religion has a leading religious institution played as significant a role in support of land reform as has the Brazilian Catholic Church. Poletto shows how various church initiatives at the grassroots level helped nurture a vast network of rural social movements, the MST being its most prominent offspring.

MST History and Struggle for Land

Chapter 5, "The Formation and Territorialization of the MST in Brazil," by Bernardo Mançano Fernandes presents a broad view of the MST's history and territorial expansion to twenty-four of the country's twenty-seven states. This account presents a unique series of maps and discusses the MST's organizational resources and main mobilization strategies. Land struggles, Fernandes asserts, have been crucial to the development of the MST and the implementation of agrarian reform policies in Brazil. However, the surge in land distribution after the mid-1990s simply reduced the rate of land concentration in the hands of the agribusiness farmers. As a result, existing land reform policies have not altered the nation's agrarian structure in any substantial way.

Chapter 6, "Origins and Consolidation of the MST in Rio Grande do Sul," by Miguel Carter covers the history of the landless movement in one of Brazil's most developed regions. Land struggles in Rio Grande do Sul played a central

role in the MST's formation, while generating many of its innovative practices. The movement's genesis, survival, and ongoing growth, Carter argues, are intimately entwined with its capacity for public activism—that is, an ability to engage in a type of social conflict that is organized, politicized, visible, autonomous, periodic, and basically nonviolent. The MST's orientation toward public activism is shaped by its enveloping conditions, notably its political opportunities and mobilizing resources. Carter builds on this framework and a comprehensive database on land mobilizations to examine the MST's historical trajectory in Rio Grande do Sul, from 1979 to 2006.

Chapter 7, “Under the Black Tarp: The Dynamics and Legitimacy of Land Occupations in Pernambuco,” by Lygia Maria Sigaud offers an ethnographic account of land struggles in the northeast sugarcane region. Since the late 1990s, northeast Brazil has become the most active region in the fight for land. The MST's presence in Pernambuco ushered in a new mobilization technique characterized by Sigaud as the “encampment form.” These precarious camps set up by unemployed rural workers are not an ad hoc gathering but a ritualized and symbolic instrument through which the rural poor have learned to establish entitlement claims. Sigaud demystifies prevailing views that depict these landless movements as intrinsically hostile to the state. The bellicose rhetoric between the state and peasant groups, she contends, masks a relationship that also includes elements of close cooperation and mutual dependency.

Gabriel Ondetti, Emmanuel Wambergue, and José Batista Gonçalves Afonso in chapter 8, “From *Posseiro* to *Sem Terra*: The Impact of MST Land Struggles in the State of Pará,” appraise the MST's expansion into the Amazon region. Pará is noted for the fraudulent appropriation of much of its territory, high levels of rural violence, and a strong tradition of squatter (*posseiro*) land struggles supported by local rural trade unions and the CPT. The MST's early years in southeastern Pará proved to be difficult ones. The April 1996 police massacre of nineteen MST peasants near the town of Eldorado dos Carajás was a turning point in the movement's struggle. The massacre triggered national public outrage and prompted federal authorities to accelerate the pace of land distribution. Though relatively small in number, MST's actions in Pará caused a significant impact in the region. According to the authors, the MST helped revitalize Pará's land struggle and modernize existing “repertoires of contention.” Moreover, it fostered the presence of the federal government in areas of the Amazon frontier where the state had been largely absent.

MST Agricultural Settlements

Land reform settlements differ greatly in their geographic setting, size, family composition, levels of economic development, political awareness, and cultural resources. Chapter 9, “The Struggle on the Land: Source of Growth, Innovation,

and Constant Challenge to the MST,” by Miguel Carter and Horacio Martins de Carvalho provides a synoptic view of the MST’s efforts to enhance its agricultural settlements. These activities, they argue, are shaped by Brazil’s conservative agrarian reform process, which has led to the dispersed and ad hoc distribution of land settlements. Prior to the election of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, public policies were noted for their negligible assistance to these new communities. This situation led the MST to mobilize its settlers to insist that the government provide the houses, agricultural credits, schools, and other benefits established in the agrarian reform laws. In addition, the MST has organized thirteen specialized sectors to address the movement’s various needs. These units—ranging from education, finances, communications, culture, and human rights to health, gender, production, cooperation, and the environment—operate at national, state, and local levels, adding great complexity and dynamism to the movement’s decision-making process. These multiple and creative efforts, Carter and Carvalho conclude, have clearly bolstered the MST’s organizational capacity.

Chapter 10, “Rural Settlements and the MST in São Paulo: From Social Conflict to the Diversity of Local Impacts,” by Sonia Maria P. P. Bergamasco and Luiz Antonio Norder offers a comparative analysis of land reform settlements in Brazil’s most industrialized and urbanized state. While emphasizing the assorted nature and impact of the agrarian reform process in São Paulo, the authors’ findings concur with national surveys that suggest an overall improvement in the quality of life among the vast majority of settlers. The creation of land settlements, they argue, have favored the development of new social and political relations at the local level, while fostering alternative commercial arrangements, innovative technologies, and a gradual consolidation of public policies in support of peasant farmers. In contrast to São Paulo’s highly industrialized agriculture, many of these communities have embraced a more sustainable and ecological model of rural development.

Chapter 11, “Community Building in an MST Settlement in Northeast Brazil,” by Elena Calvo González presents an ethnographic account of the day-to-day dilemmas and frustrations that can take place in a new land reform settlement. Decisions over where to build new houses (together in an *agrovila* or in separate farm plots) and questions concerning the partial collectivization of land and labor stir power disputes within the settlement. Disappointments over the settlement’s inadequate infrastructure contribute to shared feelings of failure and trigger extensive discussions and gossip over who is to blame. In this case study, regional MST leaders are reproached for exercising too much control and faulted for not doing enough. State officials are blamed by all parties, albeit in different ways. All this, Calvo-González observes, takes place amid feelings of nostalgia for the tight-knit community life experienced during the landless encampment.

Chapter 12, “MST Settlements in Pernambuco: Identity and the Politics of Re-

sistance,” by Wendy Wolford analyzes the impact of economic conditions, organizational strategies, and cultural views of the land on an MST community in Pernambuco’s coastal region. The decline of the sugarcane industry in the mid-1990s facilitated the rapid growth of land reform settlements in this area. With the recovery of the sugar industry, after the 2002 surge in world sugar prices, the settlers chose to plant sugarcane instead of the alternative crops promoted by the MST and land reform officials. The MST lost sway over its members as a result of these disagreements. Unlike family farmers in other parts of Brazil, sugarcane workers have been traditionally connected to the land as wage earners, Wolford explains. For them, owning land is mainly about having a space to rest at ease, free from any controls. This individualist ethos hinders the MST’s collective action efforts.

The MST, Politics, and Society in Brazil

Chapter 13, “Working with Governments: The MST’s Experience with the Cardoso and Lula Administrations,” by Sue Branford evaluates the MST’s capacity to adapt to different political scenarios. The Cardoso government, she notes, brought mixed results to the MST: greater land distribution yet scant support for the new settlements. During Cardoso’s second term a discernible effort was made to restrict MST protest and curb financial support for its activities. The 2002 election of President Lula, a longstanding MST ally, gave the movement a welcomed respite. Branford describes the unraveling of Lula’s promise to implement a progressive agrarian reform program. The Lula government, she observes, feared upsetting agribusiness interests, alienating its conservative allies in Congress, and undermining its fiscal austerity program. Still, the Lula administration sharply increased funds for family agriculture and various projects aimed at improving the reform settlements. Faced with a difficult choice, the MST took the pragmatic decision to side with the Worker’s Party’s (PT) Left and attack the government’s neoliberal policies, while sparing President Lula himself.

Chapter 14, “The MST and the Rule of Law in Brazil,” by George Mészáros challenges orthodox ideas that assume a fundamental opposition between the MST’s land mobilizations and the rule of law. Such views, he argues, oversimplify a complex situation and omit a fact relevant to many social movements around the world and throughout history, namely, their role as architects of an alternative legal order. The Brazilian justice system is manifestly unjust, crippling bureaucratic, extremely slow, and saturated with class bias, hence many of the MST’s difficulties with the law. The 1988 Constitution espouses agrarian reform and qualifies property rights by their social function. Yet most judges insist on applying the Civil Code’s absolutist approach to property rights. This closed legal methodology criminalizes MST activists. In a major victory for MST

lawyers, though, a 1996 decision by Brazil's high court ruled that land occupations designed to hasten reform were "substantially distinct" from criminal acts against property. Far from simply disdaining legality, Mészáros concludes, the MST has actively contributed to shaping debates over the nature and function of law.

Chapter 15, "Beyond the MST: The Impact on Brazilian Social Movements," by Marcelo Carvalho Rosa argues that the MST has fueled the development of a new pattern of interaction between the Brazilian state and social movements. It assesses the MST's contribution to the formation of popular groups representing peasant women, people displaced by the construction of hydroelectric dams, small farmers, and homeless workers. Furthermore, Rosa examines the MST's impact on the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG) rural trade unions in the state of Pernambuco. Over the last quarter of a century, the MST's "movement form" and way of making collective demands on the state has become widely diffused throughout Brazil and legitimized by public officials.

The concluding chapter, "Challenging Social Inequality: Contention, Context, and Consequences," by Miguel Carter pulls together key themes and ideas in this volume and analyzes their main implications for social change in Brazil. It examines the principal arguments leveled against the MST's struggle for agrarian reform and delineates the broader contours of the debate at hand. Carter draws on the book's findings to suggest ways in which a sharper understanding of the landless movement can be reached. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the formidable obstacles to land reform in Brazil; the role of public activism in triggering and sustaining reforms aimed at reducing poverty and inequality; and the radical democratic implications of the MST's fight for social justice.

The Epilogue, "Broken Promise: The Land Reform Debacle under the PT Governments," by Miguel Carter provides a succinct assessment of Lula and Dilma Rousseff's conservative rural policies. These developments are set in context and reviewed in terms of their impact on the MST. The text closes by drawing out two paradoxes that emerge from this appraisal and weigh on the future of Brazil's democracy, its peasantry, and the ecological fragility of our planet.

Note

1. The term *peasant* is used in a broad sense throughout this volume. It refers basically to rural cultivators or "people of the land." These agricultural workers may or may not have control over the land they till. When they do, peasants usually engage in family labor practices on a modest parcel of land. For useful reviews of the definition of the peasantry, see Shanin (1987) and Kurtz (2000). The notion of a "landless peasant" deals with a variety of social categories of workers, mostly of rural origin, who aspire to cultivate a small plot of farmland. This concept is treated at length in various chapters in this volume, especially in chapters 3, 4, and 5.