INTRODUCTION

History as Seen from the Countryside

> The area was at the mercy of the waters, presenting a vast scene of ruin and desolation. Wandering along the almost 200 kilometers from Foz do Iguaçu to Guaíra, bordering the Paraná River, was a painful experience. It gave the impression of circulating among the rubble caused by a catastrophe.
>
> —JUVÊNCIO MAZZAROLLO, *A TAIPA DA INJUSTIÇA*

On October 13, 1982, the diversion locks of the Itaipu Binational hydroelectric dam closed for the first and final time. To power the turbines of what would become the largest dam in the world, nearly thirty billion cubic meters of water spread out behind Itaipu. When the flooding stopped two weeks later, the dam's reservoir stood as the biggest artificial lake in existence. Previously, this water would have flowed downstream as part of the Paraná River, the natural dividing line that formed the border between southwestern Brazil and eastern Paraguay. But driven by the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War, the neighboring dictatorships of Brazil and Paraguay had collaborated on a project of unparalleled scale that blocked the river and formed a reservoir covering 1,350 square kilometers, equivalent to roughly half the state of Rhode Island.[1] Shocked by the catastrophic scale of the flooding, observers watched the rising waters slowly engulf what had been some of South America's most fertile agricultural landscapes.

The Itaipu flood was the most important step in completing what Brazil's military government heralded as "the Project of the Century." Shortly after seizing power in a 1964 coup, the dictatorship began pursuing a massive energy complex in the Paraná borderlands; only a decade earlier, Brazil was still generating most of its domestically produced energy from firewood, charcoal, and sugarcane by-products.[2] As the new regime oversaw the murder, torture, and imprisonment of thousands of its own citizens, it also pushed for a hydroelectric dam intended to galvanize a new era of modernization. The dictatorship envisioned this project as the touchstone of Brazil's rise as a global power.

From an engineering standpoint, the Paraná River offered unmatched hydroelectric potential, a strategic location on one of Latin America's largest river systems, and proximity to the industrial zones of São Paulo that enabled the efficient transmission of energy. And, more important, given the authoritarian context of the time, the area surrounding Itaipu was rural and sparsely populated, and its inhabitants had never posed a political threat to the current regime. Government leaders, however, did not anticipate that communities living in Itaipu's flood zone would rise up in response.

Beginning in the 1970s, farmers, peasants, and indigenous groups in western Paraná staged a series of land encampments and protests that occupied national headlines and drew solidarity from many of Brazil's most influential opposition groups. Magnified by the international spotlight cast on the Itaipu dam and propelled by the growth of pro-democracy forces throughout the country, the struggle of these rural borderland communities was elevated into a referendum on the dictatorship itself.

By the time of the 1982 flood, a resurgent wave of opposition had loosened the military's grip on power. Over the previous decade, trade unionists, human rights activists, students, urban shantytown dwellers, progressive clergy, politicians, and grassroots networks across Brazil had mobilized to demand the return of democracy. Seeking to stem the tide of popular protest, the military government initiated a series of political reforms intended to maintain control of the return to civilian rule. The official contours of this transition coalesced around the 1979 policy of *abertura*, the Portuguese word for "opening." The abertura included an amnesty law that allowed exiles to return home, the formation of new political parties, and direct elections in 1982 for all positions except the presidency—elections that took place only a few weeks after the Itaipu flood.[3] The rhetoric and policies of abertura implied that a return to civilian rule was increasingly likely, but daily life under military rule suggested a different reality. Despite the official progress of democratization, repression continued to take many forms, including false imprisonment; abusive labor, economic, and urbanization policies; and, as we shall see, the mass displacement caused by the Itaipu megaproject.

As Brazil's military navigated what would become its final years in power, Itaipu symbolized both the legacy of dictatorship and the incomplete promise of a democratic future. In the face of a potential regime change—the dictatorship handed over power in March 1985—the Itaipu dam stood as a monument to military rule that would remain in place long after the return of civilian rule. As such, Itaipu provided a physical link between dictatorship and democracy. And in the context of abertura, Itaipu also provided an arena where the very notions of dictatorship and democracy were contested by popular movements and military leaders.

For nearly a decade, rural communities mobilized against Itaipu and against the Brazilian state, primarily under the banner of the Justice and Land Movement (MJT, Movimento Justiça e Terra). By calling attention to the mistreatment of local farmers, the MJT undermined the dictatorship's triumphalist narrative of development and progress. Over the course of its two defining events—protest camps in front of Itaipu's offices and construction site in 1980 and 1981—the group withstood a prolonged standoff with military authorities and won a series of concessions, both material and symbolic. After nearly twenty years of dictatorship, Brazil's democratic opening was believed to be forthcoming, but the exact path of the transition remained unclear. With the specter of the flood looming, groups in the Paraná borderlands confronted an appendage of the dictatorship and showcased a particular form of politics and rural resistance.

But the immediate backdrop of dictatorship told only part of the story. Long before the 1964 coup, rural violence and rural inequality had existed regardless of whether Brazil was under military or civilian rule. Western Paraná was no exception. For communities displaced by Itaipu, both the dam and the official period of dictatorship marked less an isolated rupture than an escalation of abusive policies and incidents in the countryside. The flood uprooted over forty thousand people, most of whom were either title-holding farmers, landless peasants, or the Avá-Guarani Indians.[4] For these three key groups, the fight at Itaipu functioned as a protest against dictatorship *and* a larger challenge to the marginalized status of rural Brazil.

From the perspective of the dominated rural classes, democracy represented more than simply the absence of dictatorship, more than a return to the pre-1964 status quo. Rather, these groups interpreted the abertura as an opening in which to create a new social order. These alternative visions for democracy included political rights like those being fought over in the urban theaters of abertura, but they were premised above all on the question of agrarian rights in the countryside. By shifting the focus to experiences like those at Itaipu, the dichotomy implied by the terms *dictatorship* and *democracy* begins to dissolve. As a military-era conflict linked to a long history of repression and contestation in the countryside, the history of Itaipu challenges the official periodization of modern Brazil.

Although these three groups lived in the same marginalized rural part of the country, and although they confronted the same immediate obstacle of displacement, they did not form a unified front. The mobilizations against Itaipu exposed a deeply rooted series of internal conflicts. Along with race, class, and ethnic divisions, hierarchies also emerged from diverging perceptions of land. Despite the importance of the waters that formed the dam's reservoir basin and powered its turbines, in many ways the history of Itaipu is a history not of water but of land. As such, this book knowingly focuses less on the technological details and the ecological consequences of building the world's largest hydroelectric project.[5] Instead, it is guided by the following questions: what did the flooded lands mean to different rural groups, how did those meanings shape these groups' experience both before and after the flood, and why has the fight for land lingered as a constant feature of Brazilian society? These questions are relevant to any number of examples. But as a case study that brings together three different populations in the countryside, Itaipu offers a particularly powerful lens for viewing the history of Brazil from a rural perspective.

During Brazil's uncertain path out of dictatorship, these competing relationships to land determined which groups could be seen as valid stakeholders in the nation's democratic future. In the Paraná borderlands, only the title-holding farmers—almost all of European origin—became visible in national debates over political rights and citizenship. These farmers sought more money for their flooded properties, took the leading role in organizing the MJT protest camps, and successfully forced the government to increase expropriation prices. To be sure, these small-scale farmers continued to occupy a marginalized sector of society even after the flood, but their ability to purchase new lands elsewhere helped them navigate the challenges of displacement.

Landless and indigenous communities, in contrast, had neither the legal nor the social resources of their landed neighbors. Despite participating actively in the MJT, the landless received almost nothing in the final agreement negotiated by the movement's leadership. And aside from a few scattered gestures of solidarity, the neighboring farmers ignored the Avá-Guarani. After being overlooked in the initial fight at Itaipu, these displaced groups formed new movements that mobilized, respectively, for agrarian reform and for indigenous rights. Whereas the MJT disbanded its campaign before Itaipu's flood—once it had secured most of its financial goals—the landless and indigenous demands for structural change in the countryside endured long afterward.

This book follows a dual narrative. On the one hand, the case of Itaipu highlights the continuity of land struggles before, during, and after military rule. The mobilizations at Itaipu belonged to a larger history of collective action in the Brazilian countryside, as the fight for access to land and agrarian reform persisted across time and forms of government. In this sense, the history at Itaipu cannot be reduced to a history of dictatorship. Yet, on the other hand, the size of the dam and its centrality to the military regime also triggered a series of profound changes that were, in fact, conditioned by dictatorship. What changed was not necessarily the nature of the underlying issues but rather the scale: the process of confronting the centerpiece of the military's development program cultivated new levels of political consciousness and connected rural livelihoods to national solidarity networks. To this day, displaced farmers describe their movement as a "big political classroom" and a "laboratory of consciousness" where they learned to fight against authoritarian rule. And despite having their demands overruled within the MJT, many landless peasants still credit the campaign at Itaipu with providing the early catalyst for their subsequent campaigns. This mobilizing effect proved particularly important as the landless communities went on to establish a group in western Paraná that played a pivotal—and almost entirely overlooked—role in the 1984 creation of the Landless Workers Movement (MST, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra), which has since become one of the largest social movements in the Western Hemisphere.[6] Similarly, the Avá-Guarani underwent their own process of politicization, using the highly visible target of Itaipu to amplify the long-standing indigenous struggle for territorial and ethnic sovereignty.

In the context of abertura, each of the displaced groups sought to position itself as a legitimate social force by basing its campaign on the dictatorship's own laws. The landed farmers relied on the 1967 Constitution to advocate for increased financial compensation, and the landless peasants appealed to the 1964 Land Statute to demand agrarian reform. The Avá-Guarani, for their part, cited the 1973 Indian Statute to protect both their territorial rights as Indians and their political rights as citizens—what Tracy Devine Guzmán calls the challenge of how to be Native and national at the same time.[7] By relying on military laws as a source of political currency, rural Brazilians showed that despite their exclusion from the normative progress of abertura, democracy nonetheless existed as a tangible concept to be invoked by any group wishing to advance their hopes for a more equal society.

As we shall see throughout this book, these movements did not always achieve their goals, nor did they all reach a sense of mainstream legitimacy. But for the displaced communities, the process of taking a stand against a violent dictatorship changed the perception—if not always the realities—of what could be accomplished in the countryside.

This evolution of political consciousness constituted an unintended consequence of the Itaipu megaproject. Although designed as an instrument to affirm state power, in practice the project actually *accelerated* collective action against the dictatorship. The dam did achieve most of its geopolitical and financial goals, but this came at the cost of exposing the contradictions between ideologies of state-directed development and democratic citizenship.[8] The peripheral nature of western Paraná meant that before Itaipu's construction, local farmers had had little contact with the military government; in interviews, many farmers recalled that the dam represented their first direct encounter with the military regime, often using the terms *Itaipu* and *government* interchangeably. When the MJT emerged to confront Itaipu, its members initially aimed not to challenge military rule but to defend their lands. The movement, however, soon became increasingly politicized, in large part owing to the work of progressive clergy and opposition leaders at the local and regional level, but also because news of the abertura traveled by word of mouth and through newspapers and radio programs. By providing the impetus for grassroots mobilizations in the emerging context of democratization, the Itaipu dam created opposition to military rule in the very spaces the dictatorship saw as politically benign and thus ideal for its geopolitical ambitions.

It must be noted that the size of Itaipu and its importance to the dictatorship made outright opposition to the dam dangerous and futile. The MJT never objected to the construction of the dam per se but rather to how government authorities treated the displaced communities.[9] The claimed injustice was not that the project would flood smallholders' homes but that Itaipu's below-market compensation package violated the farmers' legal rights. The 1967 Constitution stipulated that expropriations done in the name of the public interest be paid at "a fair price," and the MJT demanded that farmers receive the actual value of the flooded properties—leaving aside, for the most part, the nonfinancial goals of landless and indigenous families. The MJT fought for Itaipu to increase its compensation by an average of roughly US$5,000 per family, a relatively small sum for a project with a budget that soared to nearly US$20 billion. In public, Itaipu's leadership claimed it could not increase land prices because the added costs would slow construction on the dam. These public statements were often couched in Itaipu's stated commitment to treating the displaced communities in a "fair, Christian, and just" manner. Yet internal documents and the context of democratization reveal a different story: the dictatorship knowingly misled the farmers and refused to meet their demands in an attempt to control the narrative surrounding Itaipu. During the abertura the conflict at Itaipu functioned as a battle for public opinion over who held the legitimacy to determine Brazil's future.

From October 1982 onward, the dam and its immense flood zone became a permanent vestige of dictatorship. Even the most inclusive political victories of the abertura appear temporary compared to the long-term impact of Itaipu; direct elections and democratic freedoms might return, but the flooded homes never would. Yet Itaipu also represented a different legacy, one of struggle and rural resistance. And whereas the flood's physical impact was most immediately felt in the surrounding area, the political lessons forged at Itaipu reverberated far beyond the Paraná borderlands.

By exploring the full range of experiences that converged at the Itaipu dam, this book offers a new approach to the social and political histories of modern Brazil. Itaipu was an arena of social conflict as much as it was an energy source and a geopolitical monument. It projected rural livelihoods into national debates over land, development, and political legitimacy. And in what became the twilight of Brazil's dictatorship, the clashes at Itaipu showcased how a relatively small number of Brazilians in a supposedly isolated borderland could articulate a rural-based vision of democracy at a national level.[10]

This book has two primary goals. The first is to show how the dictatorship was experienced in the countryside. Rather than focusing on large urban centers, this book inverts the conceptual and geographic lens often used to study Brazil's era of authoritarian rule. Even as some scholars of the abertura have moved away from the canonical studies of political parties, labor unions, and elite social networks, the overwhelming majority still concentrate on the urban centers of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Brasília.[11] While these cities served as major theaters of democratization, the implication is that events in urban zones reverberated outward at a similar—or slightly delayed—timescale across Brazil. In contrast with much of this literature, I show how rural Brazil served as a pivotal site for both the exercise of dictatorship and the practice of resistance. The history of mobilization at Itaipu offers original insights into how struggles for land interacted with broader themes of dissent and democracy.

The book's second goal is to look *inside* the grassroots movements to reveal the shifting meanings of land and legitimacy. Farmers of European descent, racially diverse landless peasants, and the Avá-Guarani not only confronted Itaipu and the military regime but also, through internal disputes over strategies and demands, defended their own conception of land and its role in their particular goals for a future society. Existing scholarship on the Brazilian countryside, while robust, tends to focus on one particular group: either farmers, peasants, or Indians, almost never in connection to one another.[12] The case of Itaipu, in contrast, brings together a uniquely wide spectrum of rural livelihoods, through which I explore the complexities of politics, identity, and struggle in the countryside. The differences among the displaced communities help explain why certain farmers attained mainstream legitimacy while others, despite mobilizing against the same immediate threat, remained invisible in Brazil's reemerging culture of democracy.

These two interventions situate the fight at Itaipu both within and beyond the transition from authoritarian rule. The political climate of the time helped transform the MJT's struggle for higher expropriation payments into an explicit critique of the military regime. Yet the underlying questions of rural citizenship and agrarian rights did not fit neatly into the dominant framework of the abertura. The main protests in Brazilian cities focused on reversing the repressive policies of military rule, but even before the dictatorship, rural communities had rarely benefited from the political freedoms that democratization would ostensibly return. At Itaipu, displaced communities instead mobilized around an issue that long predated the 1964 coup: land. The farmers connected their struggle to the national fight for democracy, but at its core, theirs was a fight unmoored from the immediate context of dictatorship. The underlying problem at Itaipu—access to land and its impact on political legitimacy—emerged long before and persisted well after the official return of democracy in 1985.

This book ties together some of the most important narratives in the making of modern Brazil: development, authoritarian rule, and social protest. At the same time, the history of Itaipu also makes visible the enduring realities of life in the countryside. Far too often, rural livelihoods have remained overlooked and isolated from the national polity. In spite of this exclusion, rural communities have formed complementary, if not entirely independent, attachments to ideas of nationhood and progress. The point here is not to overstate the political impact of rural Brazilians like those at Itaipu, nor to assert that the countryside holds more or less historical value than urban areas. Instead, the case of Itaipu demands that we take rural experiences seriously and on their own terms.

Rural Visibility and the Meanings of Land

In order to connect the question of land to larger issues of politics and development, the book's conceptual framework revolves around the idea of visibility: how do certain rural communities become seen as legitimate social actors, why are others rendered invisible, and what space does the countryside occupy in national imaginaries? Given that the Itaipu dam was so important largely for the image that the government hoped it would project to the world, the idea of visibility tethers the immediate struggle of displaced farmers to the more endemic issue of inequality and representation in the Brazilian countryside. In the shadow of the military's geopolitical shrine, the farmers, peasants, and Indians defended their particular relationships to land as a means to take a political stand against the military while also attempting to position themselves as a visible social force in a postdictatorship landscape.

The question of visibility is especially important for the scale and timing of the movements at Itaipu. Although the dam displaced over forty thousand Brazilians, only a few thousand people actively participated in the MJT protest camps. And of the roughly seventy-five members of the Avá-Guarani—a small community to begin with—only a handful of male leaders publicly advocated against Itaipu. Compare these numbers, for example, to the millions of industrial workers who joined the paradigmatic labor strikes from 1978 to 1980 in the so-called ABC region of São Paulo, or even the hundreds of thousands of rural workers who mobilized in the sugar fields of Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil at roughly the same time. If not for the enormity of the Itaipu dam, it is unlikely that relatively small groups from rural communities could have achieved national prominence. As the farmers' struggle became more visible, the dictatorship monitored it closely through a myriad of surveillance and intelligence systems. Opposition networks also helped amplify the visibility of the borderland communities; for example, Leonel Brizola, arguably the most outspoken political critic of the regime, personally visited the MJT's encampment at Itaipu, as did Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, the leader of the ABC strikes, with the subsequent landless protests. The movements in western Paraná could not have emerged earlier than they did, as openly confronting such an important branch of the dictatorship was possible only because national opposition movements had already opened the initial fissures of dissent and democratization.

For understanding how the struggle at Itaipu was broadcast nationally, the idea of visibility also matters in a literal sense. Despite the ethnic and regional diversity of the communities that mobilized against Itaipu, the leadership of the

MJT was composed almost entirely of white male small farmers. As a result, and conditioned by the fragile social context of abertura, media outlets and even sympathetic opposition politicians often depicted the MJT as a homogeneous group. This sanitized version portrayed an image of humble southern farmers protecting their right to a simple and dignified life of agriculture—a vision that harkened back to the folklore of *bandeirantes* (frontier settlers) who first "tamed" the wild backlands of Brazil's south and southeast in the seventeenth century. The news showed protesters as ethnically European, predominantly male, and nonthreatening—the latter point a reflection of religious leaders' insistence on peaceful tactics. This ignored how the movement as a whole, and not only its leaders, involved people from a wide spectrum of regional, ethnic, and class backgrounds; men and women; and those who sought to push more confrontational tactics to win long-lasting change. As the abertura amplified debates over citizenship and rights, only certain rural livelihoods attracted mainstream attention.

In his analysis of megadams and environmental activism, literary scholar Rob Nixon reinterprets the idea of the modern nation-state not only as the production of imagined communities—as Benedict Anderson famously argued—but as the exclusion of communities that have been actively *unimagined*.[13] This condition of invisibility emerges from both the physical violence of forced displacement and also the "indirect bureaucratic and media violence" underpinning the policies and discourse of hydroelectric projects, whether in Brazil, Kenya, India, China, or the United States. In Nixon's view, heavily indebted to his reading of Arundhati Roy, the treatment of these unimagined communities results in a status of "spatial amnesia" where, "under the banner of national development, [rural people] are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory."[14] The history of Itaipu offers an important corollary to Nixon's argument: along with the exclusion of select populations, nations also develop through the active unimagining of *places*. The 1982 flood rendered invisible a stretch of Brazil's highly contentious frontier with Paraguay, and the displacement of rural groups—those whom Nixon sees as the actively unimagined—was predicated above all on the loss of land and the destruction of place. Without the inundation of nearly a thousand square kilometers of national territory, the dam would not exist and Itaipu could never deliver its much-heralded progress to the Brazilian nation.

The concept of visibility links the ideas of *imagining* and *seeing*, particularly as theorized by James C. Scott, for whom state-initiated development schemes are inherently misguided attempts to make society more "legible." The Itaipu dam stands as a clear example of Scott's view that such projects emanate from a "high-modernist ideology [that] is best conceived as a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress."[15] Yet the case of Itaipu shows how visibility functions as a two-way framework. More than just chronicling the military's logic at Itaipu—Scott's perspective of "seeing like a state"—this book illuminates how grassroots actors can attempt *to be seen*. In their standoff with the crown jewel of the military state's development program, rural Brazilians in western Paraná asserted their right to be seen and to be respected, not only by the dictatorship but by the full range of nonstate actors involved at Itaipu and in the broader fight for democracy. The crystallization of long-simmering struggles in the context of abertura gave shape to ideas that had previously existed only as imagined possibilities. This process was not always linear or evenly distributed, but marginalized groups during this time endeavored to make themselves visible and to reverse their status as unimagined communities.

To add an explicitly rural dimension to the theme of visibility, I also develop a second concept: the dialectic of land and legitimacy. This idea draws out the impact that different perceptions of land have on the beliefs and actions of various rural communities. While remaining indebted to Thomas D. Rogers's argument that landscapes simultaneously exist as both an environment with physical characteristics and "an idea . . . associated with particular meanings," my proposed framework goes a step further to reveal the broader ramifications of that duality.[16] The dialectic of land and legitimacy allows us to see how relationships to land emboldened people's political and social aspirations while at the same time determining whether or not those aspirations were seen as legitimate. The term *legitimacy*, as used both in my own analysis and by different actors quoted in this book, reflects how one's worldviews are considered valid or acceptable in the eyes of mainstream society. This book shows instances when people and groups assume legitimacy for themselves, and also when legitimacy is granted—or denied—by external forces. As such, legitimacy can be claimed, and it can also be conferred.

The dialectic of land and legitimacy argues that in the Brazilian countryside one's sense of legitimacy was fundamentally linked to a particular relationship to land. In the case of Itaipu, the title-holding small farmers in the MJT considered land to be their *individual property*. The landless workers who went on to build a new movement saw land as the basis of their *collective rights*. And the

Avá-Guarani conceived of land as a *way of life*. Beyond simply describing the different meanings imbued in the flooded lands, this dialectic explains how perceptions of land determined the strategies taken by each group to defend their particular livelihoods. In turn, these forms of social mobilization elicited different responses from the military regime and local elites, with the degree of repression corresponding to the threat that each group posed to the existing social order.

For the title-holding farmers, the idea of landownership as legitimacy came from the personal histories of the families who had migrated from the southern states of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul in the 1940s and 1950s, helping make the region one of Brazil's most fertile agricultural zones. These farmers held the most influence in the MJT, they successfully forced Itaipu to increase its compensation, and, notwithstanding the traumas of displacement, they suffered little repression from the military regime after the Itaipu flood. In many ways, this sequence of events most closely aligns with the official understanding of democratization: after elevating their rural struggle into national debates, and after becoming seen as a valid social force, the landed white farmers celebrated their victory against military rule, and in a certain sense they moved on.

The MJT's almost singular focus on winning better prices neglected the region's landless inhabitants. By July 1981, only a few months after the MJT demobilized its final protest camp, landless farmers had formed an independent struggle seeking to abolish the existing system of land tenure: the Landless Farmers Movement of Western Paraná (MASTRO, Movimento dos Agricultores Sem Terra do Oeste do Paraná). Whereas the MJT used a strategy of protesting in front of their intended target, MASTRO led a series of direct occupations, with hundreds of families seizing control of abandoned or underused lands. Seeking the redistribution of land and national agrarian reform, these communities based their legitimacy around an understanding of land as a collective right for all Brazilians. In response, and determined to protect their properties and the status quo, the military government and wealthy elites reacted violently. During occupations organized by MASTRO in 1983 and 1984, two farmers were killed, and dozens more were beaten, imprisoned, and physically expelled from their homes. These events in western Paraná mirrored a growing trend as hundreds of landless peasants died at similar occupations throughout the country—all this at a time when Brazil was said to be in the final stages of its controlled transition to democracy.

For landless Brazilians, the dialectic of land and legitimacy functioned as both a catalyst of protest and a source of repression. Because the abertura's mainstream political focus did little to disrupt the structural inequalities long embedded in the Brazilian countryside, landless groups mobilized in more radical ways that went beyond the official contours of Brazil's transition. For doing so, they confronted waves of repression that would continue even after the 1985 return of civilian rule.

For the Avá-Guarani, land embodied a fundamentally different set of meanings than it did for their neighboring farmers. Without romanticizing an indigenous community's connection with the surrounding natural world, the idea of land as a way of life underscores the Avá-Guarani's historical and cultural constructions of land. The Guaraní word for "land" (*tekoha*) derives from the root *tekó*, meaning a sociopolitical space that expresses "a way of being, system, a culture, a [set of] law and traditions."[17] In defense of this livelihood, the Avá-Guarani had to contend not only with the Itaipu flood but with the added threat of government policies designed to assimilate indigenous groups into mainstream society. Only legally defined "Indians" had access to federally protected indigenous territory, and the label of "non-Indian" rendered a person invisible in the eyes of the law and removed all rights to land. As part of Itaipu's expropriation process, the government subjected the Avá-Guarani to "indicators of Indianness" that, among other categories, evaluated an individual's skin pigment, language, clothing, and name. Authorities used this survey to claim that only a small handful of actual Indians lived in Itaipu's flood zone. In response, the Avá-Guarani mobilized to have all members of their community acknowledged—in both a literal and an ontological sense. The community used solidarity networks to attract media attention, lobby politicians, and gain allies in civil society. Thanks in large measure to the public pressure generated by the Avá-Guarani, the government soon abandoned the criteria of Indianness as its nationwide policy.

In spite of this victory, however, the community's overall situation changed very little. In June 1982—four months before the Itaipu flood—the military regime relocated the Avá-Guarani to an indigenous reservation, and in the decades since, the community has shuffled between two additional government reserves that barely maintain poverty levels of subsistence. Being seen by mainstream society became a tool for protecting indigenous lands, yet under dictatorship and democracy alike, the Avá-Guarani could not fully shed their status of invisibility.

The Pitfalls of Periodization

The official time frame of Brazil's dictatorship is 1964 to 1985. This includes the initial coup in 1964, the peak of state-sanctioned repression from 1968 through 1974, the start of abertura in 1979, the Diretas Já (Direct Elections Now) campaign in the early 1980s that led the significant—though ultimately unsuccessful—fight for direct presidential elections, and, finally, the transfer to civilian rule in March 1985.

Rather than starting with the coup, I have chosen to begin my history of Itaipu in the late 1950s, nearly a decade earlier, and to end it in 1984, a year before the return of democratic rule. Once we take seriously the premise that 1964 and 1985 did not hold the same weight for all Brazilians and for all spaces within the national territory, we can instead choose markers that more accurately reflect the experience of a given community. A different spatial framework, in this case a rural borderland, requires a different temporality. Consequently, this periodization diverges from the paradigmatic urban events that traditionally serve as the bookends of Brazil's dictatorship.

At Itaipu, this alternative chronology draws out the deeper roots of both the dam and the people living in its shadow. In the late 1950s, the dictatorship of Paraguay's Alfredo Stroessner—in power since 1954—and a series of democratic Brazilian governments began a tense pursuit of a hydroelectric dam on their shared border; this conflict over control of the Paraná River revived a bitter rivalry between the nations that stretched back to the nineteenth century. To understand the binational character of the Itaipu dam, it is essential to trace the early negotiations and geopolitical posturing between Brazil and Paraguay. That these initial forays took place roughly a decade before Brazil's military seized power shows that the allure of megadevelopment transcended political systems: civilian presidents in Brazil, including the leftist João Goulart, who was overthrown in the 1964 coup, were prepared to collaborate with the violent Stroessner regime because it enabled access to the energy potential of the Paraná River. Development projects, much like authoritarian regimes, do not emerge in a vacuum, and we must place both in their appropriate contexts.

From a social perspective, an earlier starting point calls attention to the events that stood as key referents for the groups displaced by Itaipu. The year 1957 witnessed the Squatters Rebellion, an uprising of landless farmers in western Paraná that epitomized the region's history of agrarian radicalization. Many of the communities that later mobilized against Itaipu legitimized their actions around the memory of previous conflicts like the 1957 rebellion. Similar to how the abuses of dictatorship belonged to a longer history of repression in the countryside, so too did resistance under military rule draw from rural struggles before 1964.

The book's main narrative ends in 1984 when Itaipu began producing energy, when the journalist Juvêncio Mazzarollo was released from jail, and when the MST held its founding convention in the Paraná city of Cascavel, around a hundred kilometers from Itaipu. The first two events—the dam becoming operational and the freedom of a journalist imprisoned for criticizing Itaipu—indicated that the abertura might soon reach a successful conclusion. The former offered tangible proof that the structures of dictatorship, in this case a massive source of energy, could transition seamlessly into a new civilian society. The latter, for its part, suggested the return of political rights after two decades of authoritarian rule. But the shared financial ambitions of military and civilian leaders, and the end of overt repression such as the false imprisonment of a journalist, masked the realities that still persisted. Although the abertura provided an opening that made long-held hopes for radical agrarian change seem actionable, the platform of democratization fell far short of addressing rural needs. As protests nationwide made the official return of democracy a growing possibility, the 1984 creation of the MST showed that rural Brazilians did not trust the abertura to improve their livelihoods. By de-emphasizing 1985, even if just by one year, we see how social mobilizations were not defined by the context of dictatorship but were instead amplified by it.

This book's temporal sweep also situates Itaipu within the history of agrarian reform movements in twentieth-century Brazil. Although organized rural labor struggles occurred in all periods of Brazil's history, it was not until the 1940s that movements formed explicitly around the question of agrarian reform.[18] In the late 1950s, two new groups in particular took up the fight for land redistribution: the Peasant Leagues in the northeast and the Movement of Landless Farmers (MASTER, Movimento dos Agricultores Sem Terra) in the south. The struggle for agrarian reform continued to escalate into the 1960s, pushed forward by the Brazilian Communist Party, rural labor unions, and the policies of president João Goulart. After the 1964 coup—precipitated in no small measure by the growing struggle for structural change in the countryside—rural activism was suppressed under the doctrine of Cold War counterinsurgency. In the second decade of military rule, however, the regime supported a resurgence of organized rural labor, seeing it as an effective way of controlling the labor market while investing in the mechanization of agriculture, which led, in turn, to increased rural-to-urban migration and a shift toward seasonal, rather than permanent, employment. The unions made agrarian reform their principal cause, but federal law prevented them from representing workers who were not engaged in agriculture on a full-time basis. Inspired by this cause but unable to join the unions, an increasing number of underemployed and landless rural groups in western Paraná and across the country helped revitalize the long-standing struggle for land—and the strategy of direct-action land occupations—as Brazil's potential democratic future began to unfold.

The Itaipu dam helps reimagine military rule as an experience that cannot be reduced to static time frames or thematic boundaries. To unearth the full significance of what took place at Itaipu, we must extend our view to before the flood, to before the start of dictatorship. Only by tracing the continuities of predictatorship life through the realities of a posttransition democracy can we fully understand the histories in between. By exposing the deeply rooted dynamics of land, legitimacy, and rural struggle, the case of Itaipu challenges the standard chronology of modern Brazil.

Sources

This book draws on research from over thirty archives and databases in Brazil, Paraguay, and the United States. These included large, well-organized government archives, dusty closets in union halls, the holdings of university libraries and church parishes, and declassified digital collections. I also received access to the personal files of nearly a dozen individuals who played various roles in Itaipu's history. Additionally, I conducted forty-five interviews with former leaders and members of the rural struggles (including farmers, landless peasants, and indigenous communities), retired military personnel, politicians on both ends of the spectrum, diplomats, government officials, political activists, and labor leaders.

Most significantly, I gained extended access to the internal holdings of the Itaipu Binational Corporation—something no scholar has previously done. I spent almost two months with the files of Itaipu's executive directory, its legal office, its public relations branch, its internal security, and its communication with politicians, government ministries, media outlets, private businesses, and community organizations. Itaipu's security system was so meticulously embedded in the dictatorship's own surveillance apparatus that the dam's resulting documentation center contains confidential reports on seemingly every political event or social activity in the surrounding region. This archive includes folders devoted to political speeches, press releases, newspaper articles, and communication among Itaipu's leadership, the military police, and the federal government. The timing of my research was another crucial element. Because I conducted fieldwork in the immediate aftermath of Brazil's National Truth Commission (whose report was released in December 2014), I benefited from the emerging trend toward public access to documents from the military regime. In particular, the Memórias Reveladas project through the National Archive offered a vast trove of primary material, and this book is the first to incorporate the declassified documents relating to Itaipu and the farmers' movement. This emphasis on government transparency also allowed greater access than might have otherwise been possible at the archive of Itamaraty, the equivalent of Brazil's State Department. The Itamaraty documents provide detailed information on a previously unstudied secret military project called Operation Sagarana that shows the logistical framework for Brazil's incursion into the contested border zone with Paraguay.

Structure of the Book

To emphasize my alternative approach to periodization, the seven chapters are divided into two sections. The first three chapters proceed chronologically until the Itaipu flood in October 1982. The subsequent four chapters then offer a more syncopated chronology of what took place concurrently with the more visible events before the 1982 flood and before the official return to democracy in 1985. These chapters trace, respectively, the history of the Avá-Guarani indigenous group, the saga of a journalist imprisoned for his coverage of local elites and the Itaipu dam, the trajectories of displaced migrants across foreign and internal frontiers, and the escalating struggles of landless peasants. The aim here is that both the content of the book and the process of reading it will help readers rethink the history of modern Brazil and its assumed temporalities.

Chapter 1 explores the geopolitical standoff between Brazil and Paraguay that occurred as the military governments in both countries jockeyed to control the border region and the waters of the Paraná River. Along with exploring the historical roots of the Itaipu dam, this chapter argues that the border conflict was a catalyst for Brazil's rise as the Southern Cone's most powerful nation. Chapter 2 chronicles a subsequent escalation between a pair of more localized forces: Itaipu and the surrounding communities. Looking at the parallel progress of the dam's construction and the rise of local resistance between the 1973 Treaty of Itaipu and the beginning of 1980, this chapter reveals the importance of public opinion in an era of political uncertainty. While the Brazilian government praised the dam as a beacon of national strength, local populations offered a counternarrative that denounced the military's expropriation policies as a violation of their rights.

Chapter 3 focuses on the MJT land encampments in 1980 and 1981. In the context of abertura, the confluence of opposition figures helped catapult the lives of farmers into national debates over development and political legitimacy. Yet because not everyone threatened by Itaipu benefited from the success of the protest camps, we can trace the simultaneous development of political consciousness and exclusion, what I term the double reality of abertura. The chapter ends with a highly visible example of this divergence: the Itaipu flood of October 1982. Although the displaced farmers had invoked the rhetoric of abertura to advance their fight for land and justice, the Itaipu flood showed that the official contours of democratization could not remove the realities of authoritarian rule most intimate to many of the rural inhabitants of western Paraná.

Chapter 4 marks the start of the second half of the book, where each chapter follows a narrative that predated, overlapped with, and ultimately outlasted the MJT movement and the Itaipu flood. This chapter traces the history of the Avá-Guarani indigenous community that also lost its lands to Itaipu. The indigenous struggle overlapped at key moments with the adjacent farmers' movement but was predicated on a much longer history of repression and cultural exploitation. Overlooked by both mainstream society and the neighboring farmers, the community led a parallel campaign against Itaipu based on a particular understanding of land and its corresponding legal rights. Chapter 5 then follows the story of Juvêncio Mazzarollo, the journalist who became known as "the last political prisoner" when his criticism of Itaipu landed him in jail from 1982 to 1984. For the local elites who felt removed from Brazil's democratization process, Mazzarollo's imprisonment was an attempt to preserve their dwindling power. For national authorities, the coverage of the farmers drew attention away from the triumphalist narrative of Itaipu. And for opposition groups across Brazil and globally, Mazzarollo transcended his role as a dissident journalist to become a rallying point for democracy.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that along with meeting the energy and geopolitical ambitions of Brazil, the Itaipu dam also occupied an important sphere in the dictatorship's policies of agricultural colonization and territorial expansion. This approach materialized in two overlapping ways: the emergence of a mass migration of Brazilians into Paraguay (known as *Brasiguaios*) and the resettlement of the displaced Itaipu farmers in the faraway corners of Brazil, above all to the northeast and the Amazon. From this perspective we see Itaipu as an engine of rural population shifts, with the dam serving as a central arc in the reorientation of the Brazilian countryside. The seventh and final chapter details the history of the region's landless farmers and the formation of MASTRO (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra de Oeste do Paraná). This chapter shows how the contours of visibility can change: in the early stages of abertura, the landless farmers at Itaipu remained almost entirely overlooked, yet through the creation of independent agrarian movements, Brazilians who fought with groups like MASTRO and later the MST (Landless Workers Movement) succeeded in elevating the profile of rural Brazil. Despite the increased claims to legitimacy, violence against landless communities—a reality that long predated military rule—endured long after the official return to democracy. Finally, a conclusion reflects on the meanings of chronology, asking what changes when we rethink notions of "before" and "after," for the Itaipu flood and also for the official period of dictatorship.