

**Challenging Social Inequality:
The Landless Rural Workers
Movement and Agrarian
Reform in Brazil**

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**CHALLENGING
SOCIAL INEQUALITY**



*The Landless
Rural Workers Movement
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The Anthology: A Brief Overview

- The largest and most comprehensive volume on the MST and agrarian reform in Brazil: 17 chapters
- International and multidisciplinary perspective

Main sections of the book

- The agrarian question and rural social movements in Brazil: political economy, history and the role of the Church
- The struggle *for* the land: MST history
- The struggle *on* the land: agricultural settlements
- The MST, politics, and society in Brazil

The Historical and Development Context

- Large landed estates and slavery
- Export-oriented plantation economy
- State patrimonialism and authoritarian regimes
- Capitalist modernization: 20th century
- Peasants and rural workers: last to gain basic rights: trade unions (1962), vote (1985)
- Peasant mobilizations for land reform severely repressed after 1964 military coup
- Military regime: promotes agrarian capitalism
- Agrarian elites: large subsidies and state protection

A Predatory, Violent & Exclusionary Rural Development Model

- Expansion of cattle ranches and agro-industrial farming cause extensive environmental destruction
- Human rights violations and widespread impunity
- Rural exodus to urban shantytowns
- Wealth remains highly concentrated, making Brazil one of the most unequal nations in the world
- Apartheid society: fuels many tensions
- Rural development model: favors agro-exports over food production for local markets

Corrosive Impact on Democracy in Brazil

- Important democratic progress since 1985
- Yet extreme inequality has had a harmful effect on the nation's political institutions
- Perception: the rules of the game are rigged in favor of the privileged few
- Agrarian elite: 2,587 times more representation in Congress than landless peasants, in 1995-2006
- Each of the largest landlords had access to \$1,587 in public expenditures to every dollar made available to landless peasants

The Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST)

- The largest and most sophisticated grassroots movement in Latin America
- Represents the poorest strata of Brazilian society
- Main accomplishments: land, education, civic empowerment, women's rights, agro-ecology
- Global engagement: La Via Campesina



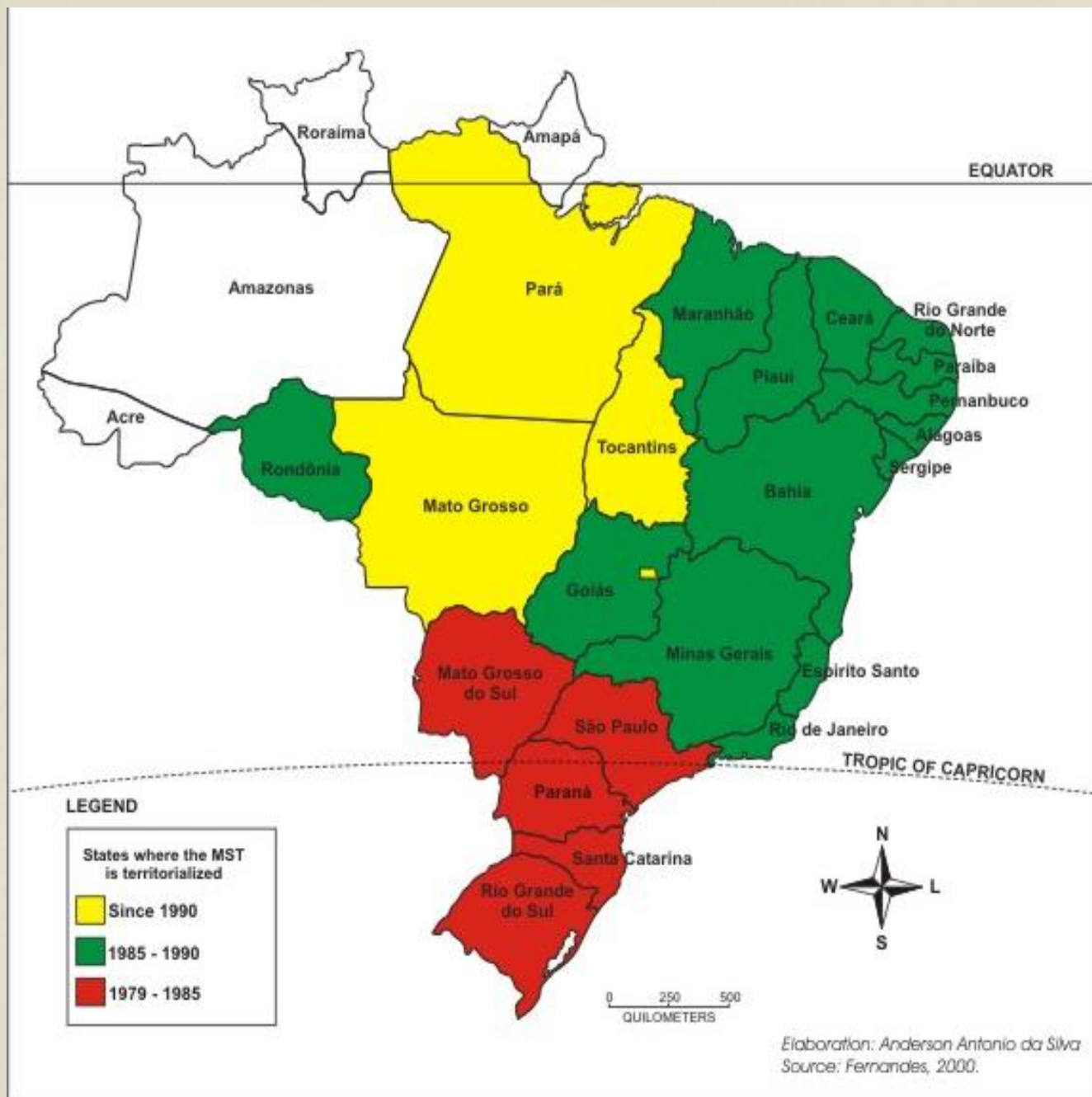


MST History: Four Periods

- The origins of the movement (1979–1984)
- A decade of heightened confrontation and fight for survival (1985–1994)
- The consolidation of a sustained pattern of mobilization (1995–2007)
- A time of retrenchment and resistance (2008—present)











Public Activism

- This concept refers to a distinct form of social conflict
- Main characteristics: organized, politicized, visible, autonomous, periodic, and nonviolent
- Actions seek to: draw public attention; influence state policies, through pressure politics, lobbying, and negotiations; and shape societal ideas, values, and actions
- Employ an array of modern repertoires of contention

Forms of Social Conflict

		<i>Mobilizing Resources</i>	
		Low	High
<i>Political Opportunities</i>	High	Scattered Riots	Public Activism
	Low	Everyday Forms of Resistance	Armed Insurgency

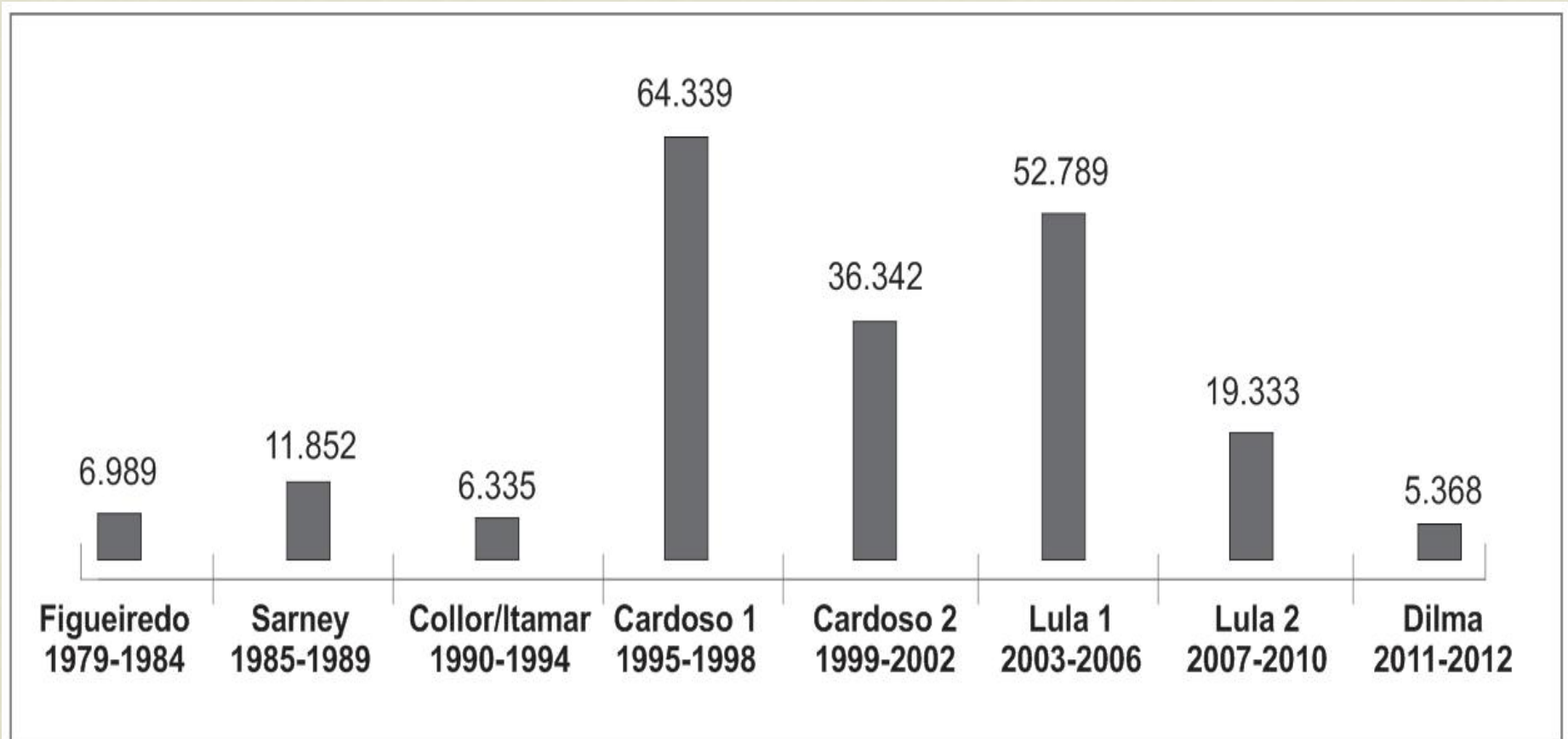




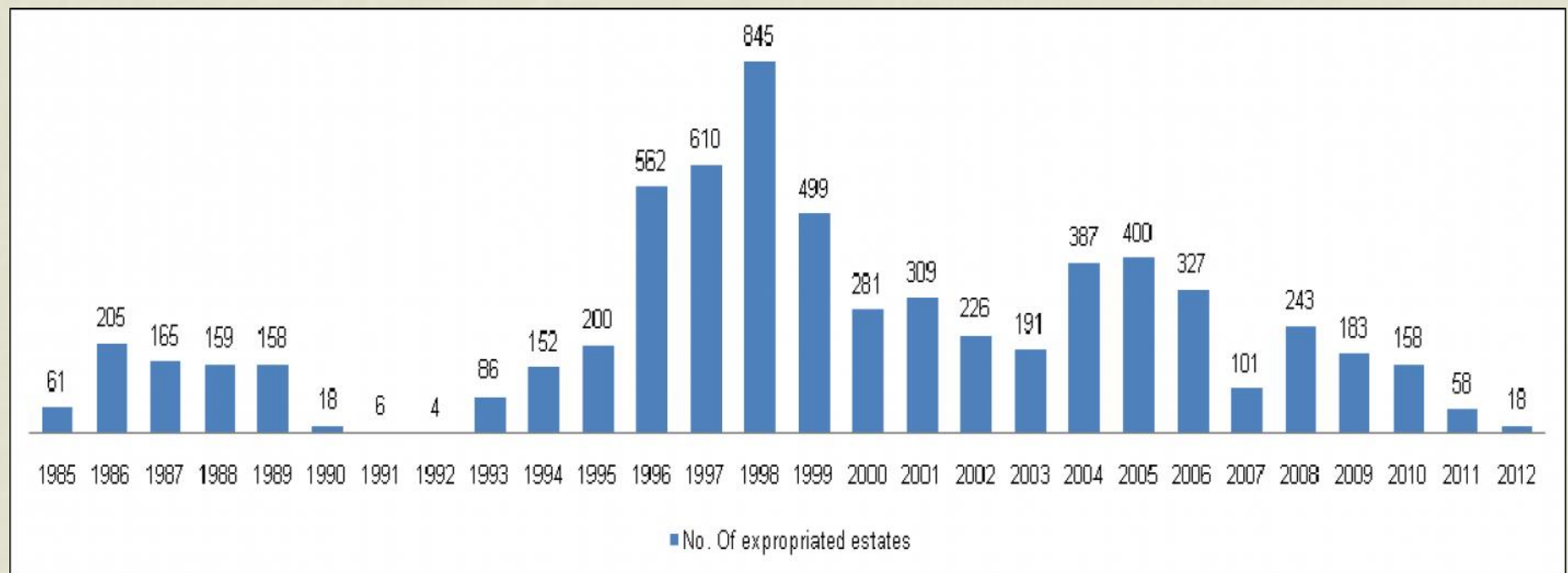
The Land Reform Debacle under the PT Governments

- Excitement over President Lula's 2002 election
- Yet after an initial spike, land redistribution declined sharply in Brazil
- By 2011, land reform absent in President Dilma's anti-poverty program, *Brasil Sem Miséria*
- PT governments' new affinity with the rural elite: shaped by political economy and balance of social forces
- Agro-export boom consolidates the agribusiness sector and the rural elite's historic grip on state institutions
- Conservative onslaught against land reform proponents, especially the MST, raises the cost of pursuing land redistribution

Land Reform Beneficiary Families, 1979 – 2012: *Annual Average per Presidential Period*



Rural Estates Expropriated by the Federal Government, 1985 – 2012



Discernable Trends during this Period

State Reluctance to Distribute Vast Areas of Farmland Available for Reform

- A third of Brazil's national territory: estates with no official land titles - or deemed unproductive by their proprietors.
- Misappropriated land by the agrarian elite: 86.4 million hectares – an area half the size of Iran.

Generous State Subsidies & Concessions for Wealthy Planters

- Between 2003-2012: 88% of all federal agricultural credits went to corporate farms
- A 133% overpayment for each hectare of corporate farm
- Federal funds for landed elite associations
- Tax breaks for agro-exports; pesticide and fertilizer imports

The List of Privileges Continues ...

- Debt renegotiations and infrastructure investments
- Generous compensation for land expropriations
- Huge land concessions for elites under Lula's second term
- *Terra Legal* program in the Amazon: 40 million hectares

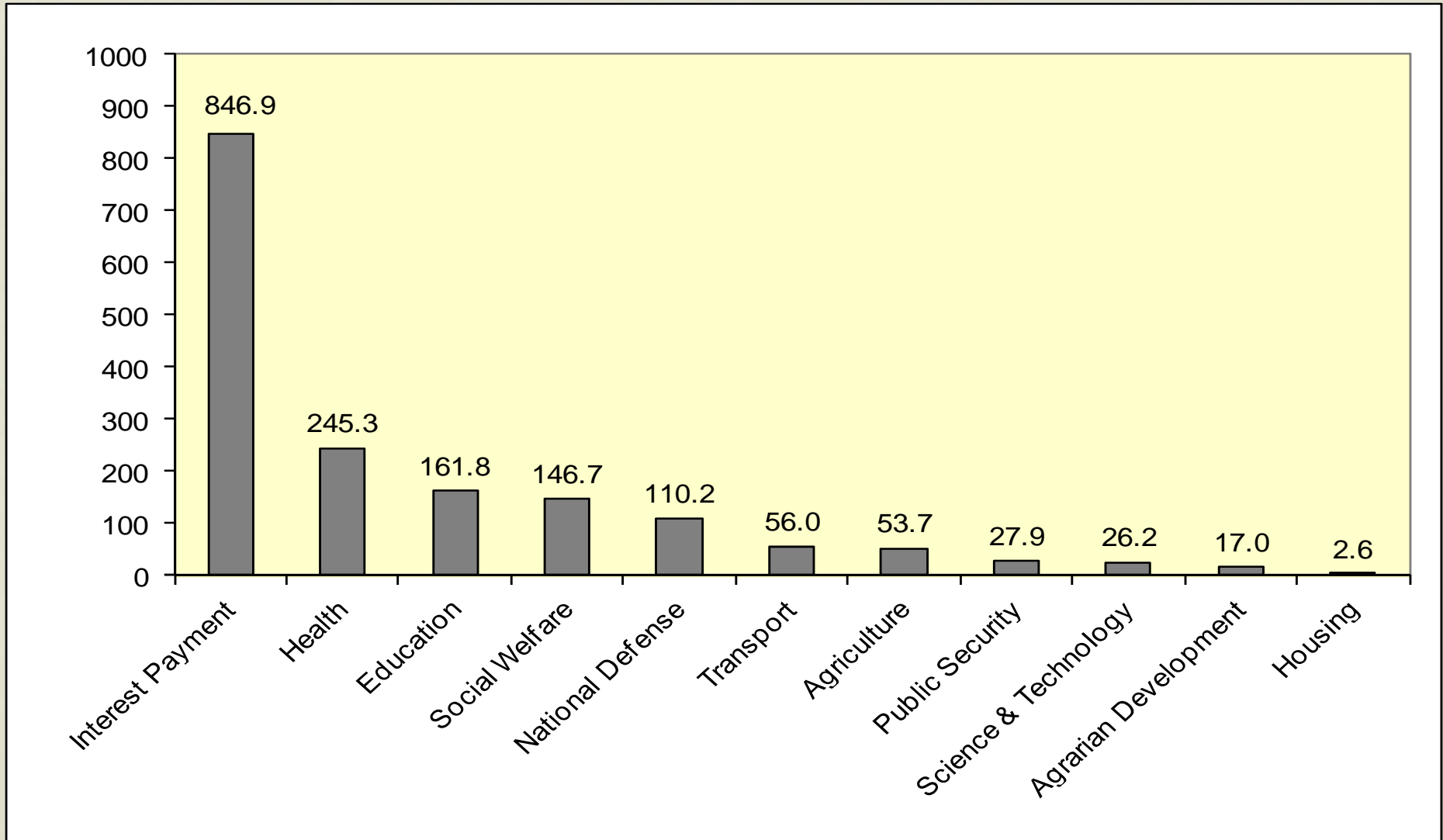
Lax Enforcement of Laws Affecting Landlord Interests

- Reluctance to enforce agrarian laws or recover stolen land
- Negligible taxes on rural properties
- Agrarian elite pardoned \$ 4.3 billion in fines for environmental destruction under the new Forestry Code
- Rural labor laws: only 1% of estates abide by these statutes
- Human rights violations and impunity in the countryside

Acquiescence to the Nation's Corporate and Financial Elite

- PT government's support for the formation of huge Brazilian agro-food conglomerates: JBS-Friboi, Brasil Foods and Ambev
- Broader policy of forging Brazilian global corporate giants ("national champions") - Vale, Petrobras, Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional, Pão de Açúcar and Odebrecht
- Global expansion has been underwritten mostly by Brazil's Development Bank (BNDES)
- Most glaring sign of PT government's submission: gargantuan transfers of public money to financial investors.

Interest Payments on the National Debt Compared to Other Federal Government Expenditures, 2003 – 2012 (in Billion US Dollars)



Together ...

- The colossal bonanza bestowed on financial speculators
- The state's collaboration in the creation of mega Brazilian corporations
- And the significant privileges conferred to the nation's agrarian elite
- Evoke the twisted image of a starkly unequal country offering "socialism for the rich" ...
- Under the rule of a left-leaning Workers Party.

Still, PT Administrations Displease Conservatives

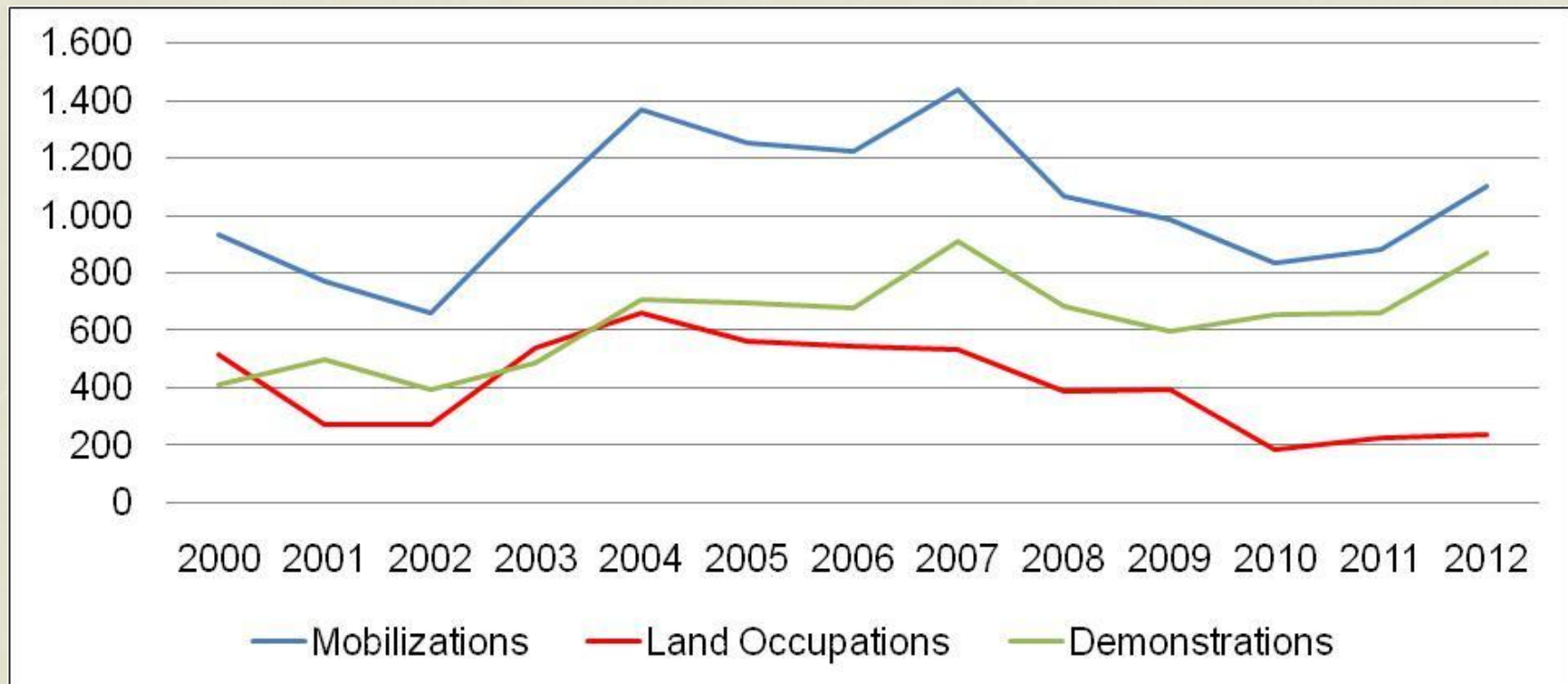
- Resist media and elite pressure to criminalize the MST
- PT officials are generally sympathetic to popular movements
- Social development programs improve conditions for family farmers: food purchases, farm credits, rural electricity and education
- “A first little taste of the nation’s pie”
- Yet Brazil’s social reality remains grim in many respects
- Poverty: 42 million people, 9.4 million in rural areas
- Brazil is the 15th most unequal nation in the world
- Rural areas income disparities: Gini of 0.727
- Stubbornly high land concentration: Gini of 0.856

Land Reform Proponents

- Third major historical defeat: after 1964 and 1988
- Disturbing given the PT's background: many MST activists feel demoralized
- MST: a phase of retrenchment, yet remains active & defiant
- Women assert a greater leadership role
- Continued investment in training activists
- New framings: the Anti-Pesticide Campaign, agro-ecology, public health, food sovereignty
- Trenchant critique of corporate agriculture and the state's support for this exclusionary and highly predatory model of rural development
- MST 6th National Congress: 16,000 delegates, February 2014

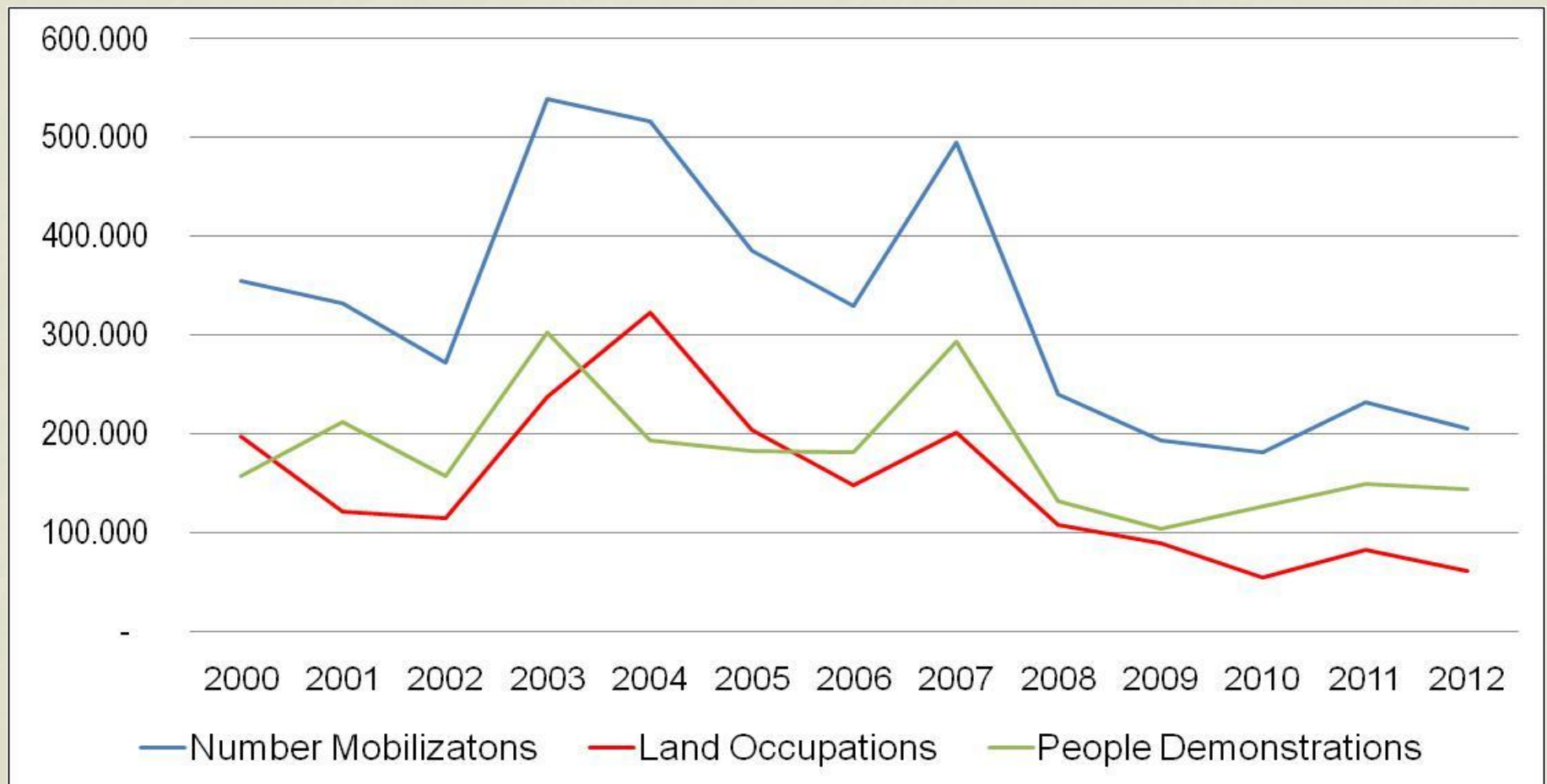
Agrarian Mobilizations in Brazil, 2000 – 2012:

Number of Protest Activities Sponsored by All Peasant Groups



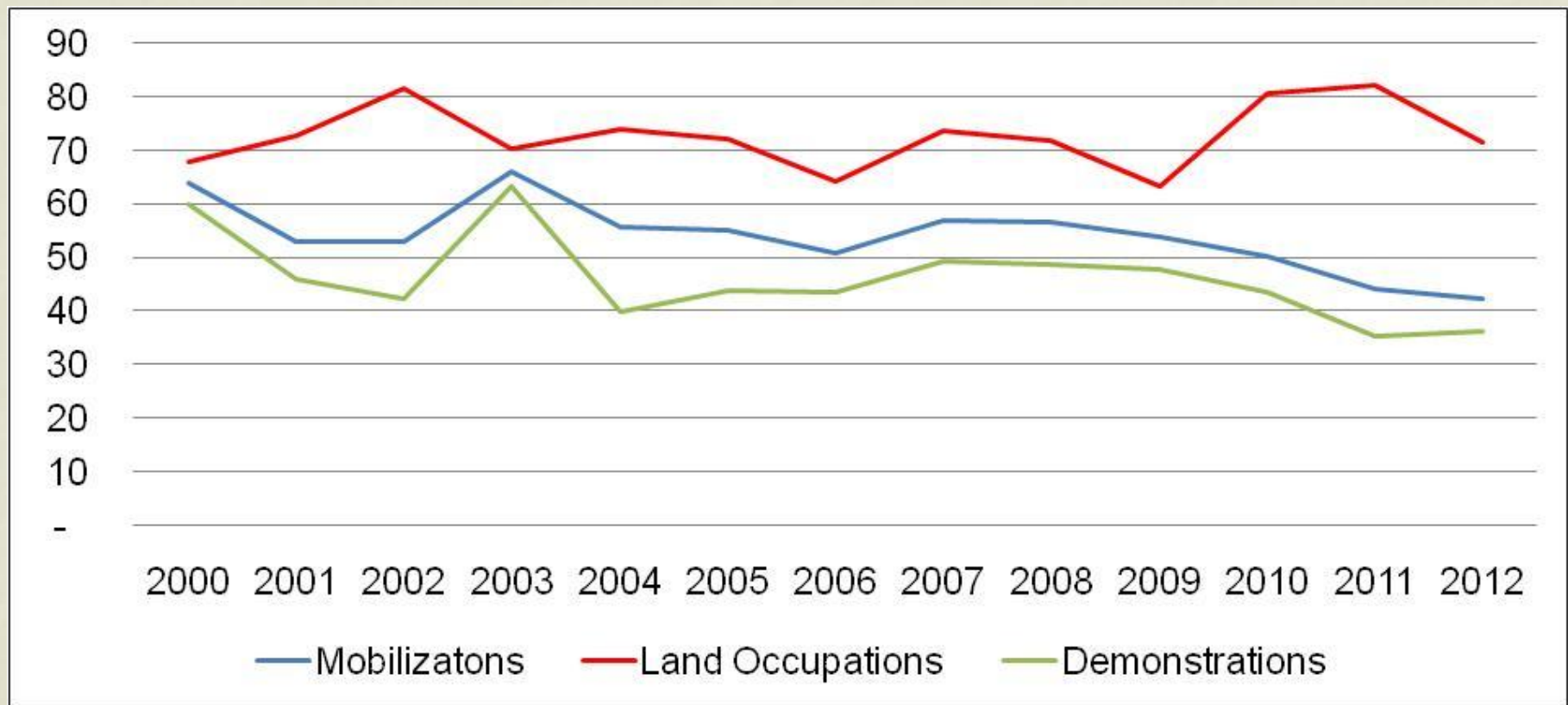
MST Mobilizations, Land Occupations and Demonstrations, 2000 - 2012:

Number of People Involved



MST Mobilizations, Land Occupations and Demonstrations, 2000 - 2012:

Percentage of MST Members Involved



Paradoxes

- **First Paradox:** Implications of the PT government's turnabout on Brazil's agrarian question
- The PT's founding spirit: a close affinity with popular movements and an anti-oligarchic ethos
- New appreciation of the agribusiness sector assumes corporate farming represents a sharp modern break with the country's traditional *latifundios* and plantation economy
- Novelty: capital and technology-intensive production, and modern management practices

This assumption obscures elements of continuity with previous rural oligarchy – its inclination to:

- Hoard vast tracts of land (much of it for speculative purposes)
- Produce mostly export commodities
- Exploit its workers (particularly in the sugarcane industry)
- Rely on the state for support and protection
- Generate wealth for a few
- Hinder efforts to advance human rights and democracy among the rural poor

- New oligarchic thrust dependent on a handful of global firms that dominate the world's rural economy:
- Monsanto, Syngenta, Cargill, Bunge, ADM, Dupont, Bayer and BASF
- A worrisome development
- Mega corporations create enormous power asymmetries
- Undermine basic democratic freedoms and notions of political equality
- Model of capitalism grounded on unbridled corporate power and influence is detrimental for democratic accountability
- “Too big to fail” and “Too big to prosecute” = Too big to be held accountable

- An ironic turn of history
- The PT, Brazil's eminent anti-oligarchic party, when in power, became an enthusiastic promoter of this type of capitalism
- PT governments have reinforced the corrosive and oligarchic sway this model of capitalism has on Brazilian politics
- Added poignancy: consider what the PT has forgone
- Compared to the agrarian elite, peasants and rural workers have historically played a far more constructive role in advancing Brazil's long-term and open-ended democratization process

Peasant Contribution to Democratization

- Challenge the country's entrenched inequalities
- Strengthen civil society: organizing and incorporating marginalized sectors of the population
- Fight for basic citizenship rights – civil, political and social rights – among the rural poor
- Enrich the country's public debate, by keeping a substantial spectrum of dissent alive
- Development model – family farms, cooperatives, vibrant local markets and civil society associations – much more conducive to meaningful democratic politics than corporate agriculture could ever be

Closing Paradox

- First paradox: a serious loss for Brazil's agrarian reform movement
- Second paradox: a new window of opportunity for land reform
- Since the late 2000s, scientists and policymakers at various UN agencies and World Bank: calls for a paradigmatic shift in agriculture
- From large-scale agro-industrial farming, to agro-ecology and smaller land holdings
- Same calls made by peasant groups in Brazil
- Global food system generates half of the green house gases fueling climate change

- Brazil: the world's second largest contributor to green house gases originating from agriculture
- Agribusiness farming responsible for the bulk of these emissions through:
- Deforestation, nitrogen from synthetic fertilizers, methane gases from livestock, food waste, and fossil fuels burned by transporting farm goods
- Environmental costs are compounded by health costs associated with industrial farming: increasing use of pesticides and antibiotics
- New pests, plagues and outbreaks in cancer and neurological diseases

Solid sustainability arguments for a shift to agro-ecology and smaller-scale holdings

Compared to corporate agriculture:

- Family farms are 74% less likely to use pesticides
- Are twice as efficient in their land use
- Produce most of the food consumed in Brazil
- Create 9.1 more employment than agribusiness holdings
- Offer a much higher return on public investments
- For every US\$ 100,000 in government farm credits, family farmers:
 - generate 266% more wealth
 - provide 21.1 more jobs

- The crux of this paradox
- Era of rising concern for the ecological fragility of our planet
- Leading scientists and global policymakers now recognize the kernels of ecological wisdom found among the so-called “backward” people and “historical residues” of modernity:
- The peasants, indigenous communities, forest gatherers, artisanal fisher-folk, and nomadic pastoralists

- This quest for an epochal transformation is not just about the values of agro-ecology
- An implicit recognition that the meek of the earth might have much to teach us ...
- About the ethos of frugality, humility, generosity and respect for the ecological integrity of life

If there is no struggle there is no progress.
Those who profess to favor freedom,
and yet depreciate agitation,
are people who want crops without plowing up the ground.
They want rain without thunder and lightning.
They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.
This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one;
or it may be both moral and physical;
but it must be a struggle.
Power concedes nothing without demand.
It never did and it never will.

Frederick Douglass (1849)



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