

EPILOGUE

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Broken Promise

The Land Reform Debacle under the PT Governments

The chapters in this volume have dealt with the past, yet also presage the future. In them, murmurings of a great betrayal have been made. And if not a betrayal, at the very least, a striking failure on the part of the governments led by the Workers Party (PT) to live up to the party's historic promise of agrarian reform.

A study I prepared found many signs that corroborate this interpretation.¹ This chapter is not the place to examine these issues at length. Rather, it will provide a general contour of the evidence on hand, then set the findings in context and briefly evaluate their impact on Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST). In closing, I will draw out two paradoxes that emerge from this discussion and weigh on the future of Brazil's democracy, its peasantry, and the ecological fragility of our planet.

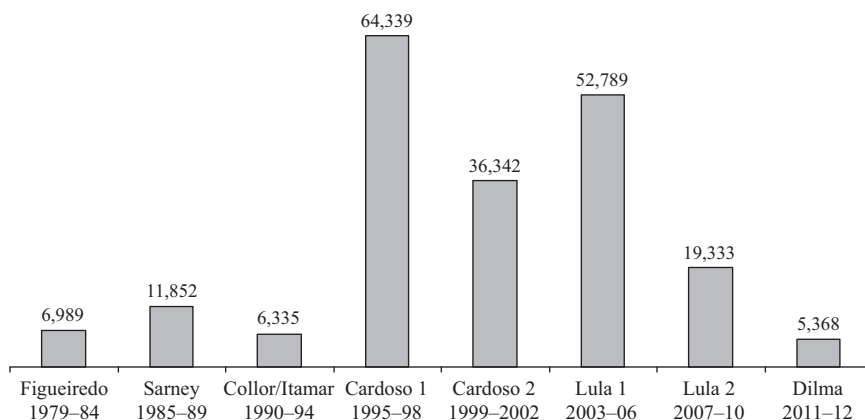
The Evidence

A review of the historical facts related to the PT's rural policies under the governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff go a long way in corroborating the concerns raised throughout this volume. This includes a succinct assessment of land reform activity, the stocks of land available for redistribution and their potential beneficiaries, and the state's manifold relations, under the PT, with the nation's agrarian and corporate elite.

Sharp Decline in Land Redistribution

The evidence on this matter is hard to quibble with. As figure E.1 shows, land reform activity increased under Lula's first term, but experienced a significant drop under his second term. In turn, by 2012, Dilma's administration had benefited fewer families through land distribution than any other Brazil-

Figure E.1. Land reform beneficiary families in Brazil, annual average per presidential period, 1979–2012



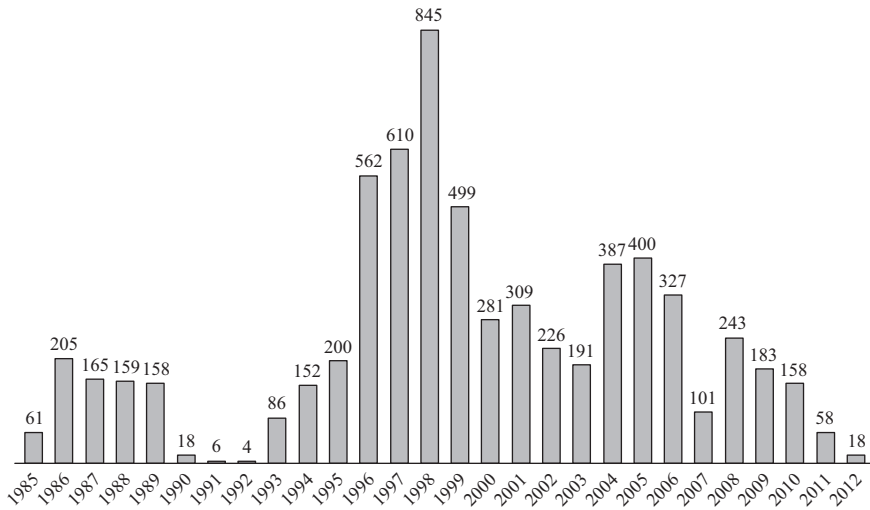
Source: Author’s calculations based on DATALUTA (2013) for figures from 1979 to 2011 and INCRA (2013) for 2012 data.

Note: The numbers published in figure E.1 differ slightly from the statistics presented elsewhere in this book (see Carter; Fernandes; and Carter and Carvalho, chapters 1, 5, and 10, respectively), because they are based on the actual number of land beneficiaries rather than the settlement capacity. Moreover, these figures did not compute DATALUTA and INCRA’s data for 132 forest settlements established in the Amazon region between 1985 and 2012. Though of great importance to the region, these areas overstretch the definition of an agricultural settlement and are in reality much closer to a nature reserve. Compared to the typical family farm plots found throughout Brazil, the size of land allocations in these areas is huge, with an average 998 hectares of land per family. All of these settlements bear an official INCRA title as either a forest or extractive reserve. These 132 forest settlements amount to only 1.5% of all settlements created in Brazil, but their land mass comprises 37.8 million hectares of land, a territory the size of Italy and Austria combined; 45% of all the land distributed from 1979 to 2012. According to INCRA, these territories have the capacity to settle as many as 37,934 families; 3.7% of all such beneficiaries in Brazil. The Lula government created 83% of these settlements and distributed 89% of these forested domains.

ian government since 1979. The data presented in figure E.2, on the number of estates expropriated by the federal government, confirm the overall trend. They also reveal that the period under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso was more auspicious for farmland redistribution than an entire decade of PT administrations.

Land reform was, in effect, banished from Dilma’s 2010 presidential campaign and conspicuously absent in her flagship antipoverty program, *Brasil Sem Miséria*. The plan made no mention of Brazil’s problem of peasant landlessness and historic land inequities, even though half of the 16.2 million Brazilians afflicted by extreme poverty were identified as rural inhabitants.²

Figure E.2. Rural estates expropriated by Brazil’s federal government, 1985–2012



Source: INCRA (2012).

State Reluctance to Distribute Vast Areas of Farmland Available for Reform

One-third of Brazil’s national territory is held in estates that have no official land titles or are deemed unproductive according to signed affidavits by their own proprietors. Even if one were to subtract all the forest areas held in private estates, Brazil would still have 182 million hectares of farmland available for reallocation, a territory twice the size of Venezuela. Under the PT, the Brazilian state has made no concerted effort to enforce the constitution’s requirement that rural properties perform a “social function.” More strikingly, it has not engaged in a serious attempt to recover the 86.4 million hectares of misappropriated land in the hands of the nation’s agrarian elite, a domain half the size of Iran.³

All the while, Brazil held a large number of impoverished people who could have benefited from land redistribution. According to a 2010 government study, this figure involved close to 4.2 million families, a population roughly the size of Australia’s.⁴

Generous State Subsidies and Concessions for Wealthy Planters

The PT’s rural development policies have retained a highly lopsided support for the country’s agribusiness farmers. Between 2003 and 2012, the PT administrations assigned US\$288.1 billion or 88% of all federal agricultural credits, to corporate farms. On average, each corporate estate received US\$356,729 to US\$9,079 for each family farmer. This amounted to a 133% overpayment for each hectare of corporate farm.⁵ The PT administrations also continued to pro-

vide financial assistance to the associations run by Brazil's landed elite, including the Brazilian Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (CNA), the Brazilian Rural Society (SRB), the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB), and related institutes. Under Lula, the funds made available to these privileged groups were twenty-one times larger than the monies channeled to MST-related projects in education, cooperatives, human rights, and health care.⁶

Along with these direct subsidies, the PT administrations facilitated various tax breaks, debt renegotiations, and public investments designed to benefit agribusiness farmers. For instance, it retained the 1996 Kandir law that spares all levies on agricultural exports and approved legislation in 2004 that greatly reduced taxes on fertilizer and pesticide imports. In 2006, Lula deferred the public debts of agribusiness co-ops and granted them special exemptions on federal dues.⁷ Commercial growers have also benefited considerably from state investments in agricultural research, rural extension services, and large infrastructure projects, such as irrigation systems in the northeast, along with roads, railways, and ports, developed mostly to reduce export costs for agro-commodities.

The list of privileges continues. Brazil's landed elite have made a sizeable profit from the government's compensation for land expropriations. This is the upshot of the exceptionally high interest payments of up to 21% annually, close to 15% in real interest rates. These payment rules have allowed landlords to double the real value of their properties in as few as seven years of court litigation. In 2009, interest charges alone consumed 62% of the state's total expenditures on land expropriations.⁸

Under Lula's second term, the government also issued large land concessions to the nation's agrarian elite. In 2008, it set up a program, *Terra Legal*, to provide property titles in the Amazon region for estates of up to 1,500 hectares of land. This was fifteen times larger than the land titles previously allocated for family farm holdings in this part of Brazil. The program was devised to legalize 67.4 million hectares of land in the Amazon, of which an estimated 40 million hectares—an area almost as big as California—were occupied illegally by *grileiros*, or large land grabbers.⁹

In 2009, on the heels of a Federal Supreme Court ruling that led to the eviction of commercial rice farmers from an indigenous reserve in Roraima, Lula ordered that six million hectares of federal land—a domain twice the size of Belgium—be donated to the state government of Roraima to, essentially, assuage the wealthy planters who had threatened to resist the court order. To enact the legal transfer, the government crafted a special provision that dispensed the land's mandatory use for agrarian reform.¹⁰

Lax State Enforcement of Laws Affecting Landlord Interests

Implementation of agrarian, property tax, environmental, and labor laws that touch on traditional rural elite privileges remained considerably weak un-

der the PT governments. Examples of this abound. The general reluctance to fully enforce the nation's agrarian reform laws, or recover the public land taken over by the *grileiros*, were complemented by Lula's decision to backtrack on his promise to revise the greatly outdated productivity index (based on 1975 census data) employed to determine land expropriations, despite a clear legal mandate for this.

What's more, during the Lula administration, Brazil's negligible levies on rural properties declined even further to a trifling 0.06% of the nation's tax base, notably after 2005, when in a bow to landed interests, Lula transferred the authority to collect this tariff to municipal governments.¹¹ Adding to this, US \$4.3 billion in fines issued by Brazil's environmental protection agency, IBAMA, mostly to large rural property owners, were pardoned in 2012 when Dilma ratified a new and highly controversial Forestry Code.¹²

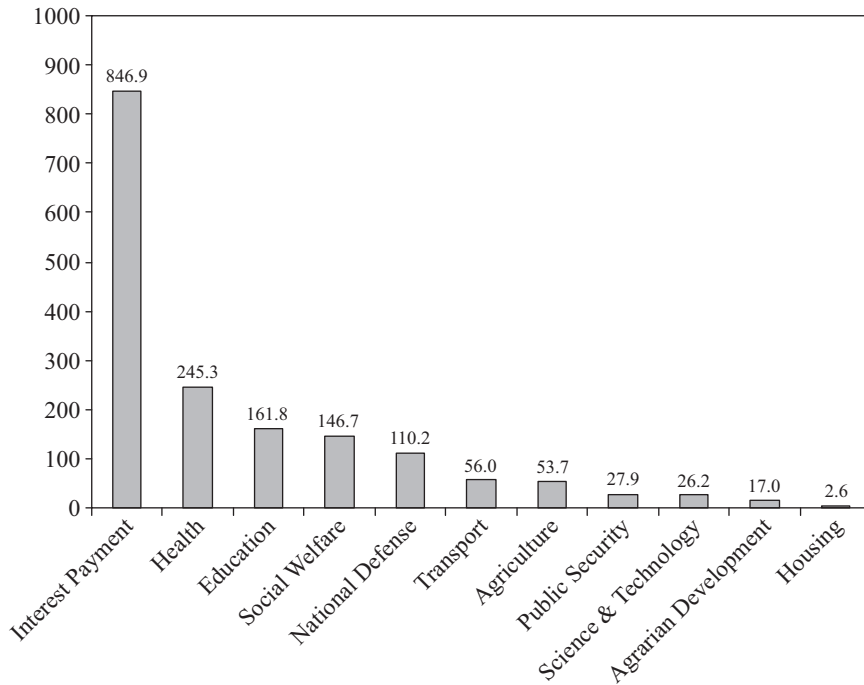
Labor rights also continued to be routinely violated in the countryside. A study conducted by two leading Brazilian universities found that only 1% of the estates surveyed were in compliance with the nation's rural labor laws.¹³ More egregious yet, both traditional landlords and agribusiness firms have been known to commit various abusive practices against their workers, including contemporary forms of slave labor. Between 2003 and 2012, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) gathered information on 63,417 cases of enslaved workers, involved mostly in rural activities. Of the 2,569 estate owners accused of engaging in such practices, a few were compelled by the courts to pay back wages and labor fines. Yet none were ever sentenced to prison or had their landholdings expropriated, which is surprising considering the flagrant violation of constitutional norms governing rural properties.

High levels of impunity have also persisted with regard to the assassinations of peasant, indigenous, and human rights activists in the countryside, where, according to the CPT, between 1985 and 2012, merely 8% of the 1,239 cases of rural violence that led to the assassination of 1,645 people have been brought to trial. And only twenty-two of the landlords responsible for ordering such executions have been sentenced to prison.¹⁴

Acquiescence to the Nation's Corporate and the Financial Elite

The PT's alignment with agribusiness interests and their goal of transforming Brazil into a global agricultural and agro-fuel powerhouse, explain Lula's and Dilma's support for the formation of huge Brazilian agro-food conglomerates, like JBS-Friboi in meat, Brasil Foods in poultry, and Ambev in beverages. In similar fashion, PT governments have backed the formation and global expansion of other Brazilian corporate giants—often referred to as “national champions”—such as Vale in mining; Petrobras in oil and gas; Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional in steel; Pão de Açúcar in retail; Odebrecht in construction, petrochemicals and agrofuels; and Andrade Gutierrez in telecommunications and

Figure E.3. Interest payments on Brazil's national debt, compared to other federal government expenditures, 2003–12 (in US\$ billions)



Source: Banco Central (2013); Senado Federal (2013) INESC (2005, 2006, 2007, 2009)

public infrastructure. Much of this has been carried out in collaboration with the state-owned Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES), which has underwritten their market growth, when not dominance, in various countries across Latin America, Africa, and other parts of the world.

The most glaring sign of the PT's overall submission to Brazil's economic elite can be found in the gargantuan transfers of public money to banks and other financial investors. Between 2003 and 2012, the Lula and Dilma administrations paid US\$846.9 billion in interest rates to the nation's creditors; a sum that totaled 6.4% of Brazil's GDP during this entire period. As revealed in figure E.3, this amount is basically the equivalent of the federal government's combined expenditures on health, education, social welfare, national defense, transport, agriculture, public security, science and technology, agrarian development, and housing over the same decade.¹⁵

The vast transfer of wealth to the financial sector was the end result of the Central Bank's soaring interest rates, among the highest in the world. Real interest rates, in fact, averaged 8% from 2003 to 2012, peaking at 14% during Lula's first year in office.¹⁶

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.

Context, Caveats, and Impact

The PT governments' decision to uphold the interests of the nation's rural elite did not take place in a vacuum. Rather, this was strongly shaped by the enveloping political economy, in particular the fierce financial shakedown during Lula's 2002 presidential campaign, along with an agro-mineral export boom fueled by high international commodity prices and the concomitant consolidation of Brazil's agribusiness sector. This development context reinforced the agrarian elite's historic political clout and grip on relevant state institutions, such as the Ministry of Agriculture. It also galvanized these forces to muster their allies in various public institutions—the National Congress, State Assemblies, Judiciary, Public Ministry (attorney general's office), and the Union's Court of Accounts (TCU or federal comptroller's bureau)—along with numerous civil society organizations, and the corporate news media, to launch a veritable assault against land reform proponents, both within the Lula administration and particularly among popular sector groups.

The climate of animosity stirred against the landless struggle, and, above all, the MST, enabled these conservative forces to raise the political cost of pursuing land redistribution. During this time, the agrarian elite and its supporters invested considerable efforts to criminalize the MST—its leaders, protest tactics, and development projects—both to delegitimize its demands and weaken its mobilization capacity.¹⁷

The PT administrations displeased their conservative detractors on three major points. First, both Lula and Dilma resisted extensive media and agrarian elite pressure to criminalize MST activities. Moreover, throughout this time, a substantial number of PT officials in Congress and in state and municipal governments remained sympathetic to rural popular movements and were inclined to lend a hand in times of need. Finally, the PT boosted state funding for several policies designed to expand welfare assistance, foster economic opportunities, and improve living conditions for family farmers. These included fairly successful initiatives, like the conditional cash transfer program, Bolsa Familia, a boost in agriculture credits for small holders, and the government's Food Acquisition Program (PAA), set up to purchase produce from family farmers. All these policies, along with the government's efforts to extend rural electrification, improve agricultural extension services, fund adult literacy and university

courses for land reform settlers, and provide water access to rural communities in the northeast's dry hinterland, have been widely appreciated by the rural poor, yet were often viewed with mistrust by the rural elite.

Many of these pro-family farm programs remain embryonic, tied up in cumbersome regulations, and short-funded. Compared to the sums provided to corporate farmers, the resources for these programs represent trifling amounts. Still, they offer new tangible benefits that have given Brazil's rural masses, in the words of an MST leader, "a first little taste of the nation's pie."¹⁸

The PT's success in alleviating extreme poverty in Brazil has not revamped the country's grim social reality. In 2012, Brazil still had 42 million people living in poverty, 9.4 million of them in rural areas. The drop in relative income inequality—to a Gini coefficient of 0.522 in 2012, still set Brazil among the fifteen most unequal societies in the world. This decline, however, was offset by an increase in absolute income inequality.¹⁹ In rural areas, income disparities stood at a Gini coefficient of 0.727, higher than that of any other country on the globe.²⁰ Much of this is closely related to Brazil's stubbornly high land concentration, which persisted at a Gini coefficient of 0.856 in 2006, on par with that of the previous decade. In 2006, only 0.9% of the landowners controlled 43% of the nation's farmland.²¹

The MST was hard hit by the PT's land reform debacle. After all, this was the third major historical defeat of a national agrarian reform movement in Brazil. In previous setbacks—the 1964 military coup against President João Goulart and President José Sarney's decision to abandon the land reform plan adopted in 1985—progressives were clearly overwhelmed by conservative forces. Yet this third historical defeat was far more perplexing and disturbing, given the PT's background and vociferous commitment to land redistribution in the 1980s and 1990s. Many MST activists, particularly those who had volunteered great efforts to campaign for Lula and the PT, felt deeply demoralized. As one movement leader explained,

Our defeat took a huge toll on the subjective disposition of our militants. Several began to question if it was still possible to carry out an agrarian reform in Brazil, under a capitalist state, or under the existing Brazilian state. . . . Even those who were skeptical about Lula had pinned their hopes on some progress toward land redistribution under a PT government. . . . All this disappointment has affected people's beliefs and hopes in a popular project for Brazil. Our activists, after all, need more than food and water to survive. They also need to share a mystique, to believe, to have dreams and nurture a sense of utopia, in order to fight for social change.²²

By 2008, the MST had entered a phase of retrenchment and resistance, characterized by a diminished capacity to influence state policies through public activism. A comparison between the first five years of the Lula administration,

2003–07, and the next five years, 2008–12, offers an instructive picture. During the second period, the number of land occupations carried out by all peasant groups in Brazil fell by half (to 1,428 land takeovers) while the number of people involved in these actions declined by 65% (to 140,270 families).²³ In contrast, the number of demonstrations remained roughly the same, which suggests an overall shift in protest tactics, to a greater reliance on marches, sit-ins, and road blockades.

The decline in land occupations, however, varied considerably between regions and states, thus rendering it difficult to establish a distinct national trend. Still, it is generally agreed that the Bolsa Familia program, greater employment prospects, higher minimum wage, and expanded social security coverage, created new opportunities for subsistence among the rural poor. These conditions, in varying ways and degrees, diminished the pool of new recruits available for the MST's landless camps.

More than anything else, though, the drop in the number of landless camps and land occupations was the direct result of the PT governments' decision to curtail its land reform activity, notably after 2007. This situation removed a crucial incentive for poor people to join the struggle for land reform. It compelled landless families to endure several more years of mobilization than originally anticipated, while diminishing the confidence that they would gain a farm plot at the end of this grueling effort. In states like Pernambuco, by late 2012, roughly half of the MST's 15,000 landless families had been encamped for ten years or more. In early 2013, the state's longest surviving contingent of landless peasants reached eighteen years of existence.²⁴

The MST's retrenchment was also affected by significant cutbacks in its access to public resources for various grassroots development projects, especially after 2009. This situation forced the movement to downsize its professional staff by more than half and curb its living stipends for many full-time activists.²⁵

Lula's determination to embrace Cardoso's economic orthodoxy and side with the agribusiness sector put the MST on a tight-rope. For movement leaders, the cost of breaking up with Lula was simply too high. Lula, after all, was a popular president among much of the MST's rank-and-file. Unlike his conservative adversaries, Lula did not treat the movement as a "national threat." To the contrary, his administration offered several programs that were quite advantageous for peasant farmers. Consequently, the MST brass took the pragmatic decision to align with the PT's left and attack the government's neoliberal measures while sparing Lula himself. In 2006 and 2010, the MST campaigned to defeat the PT's more conservative opponents of the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy, PSDB, out of fear for the return of the criminalization policies of the Cardoso era. "If it's bad with the PT," the reasoning went, "it would be worse without it."

For all these setbacks, the MST has remained active and defiant. Various gestures—notably, its continued mobilization, organizational investments

and adaptations, innovative framings, and quest to expand and strengthen its alliances—indicate it is gearing up for the long haul and unlikely to fade away from the national scene any time soon. Crucial in all this will be its ability to mobilize resources and adjust its tactics in a context of diminished opportunities for growth and land redistribution.

A sign of its enduring mobilization capacity can be gleaned from the fact that, even in a period of retreat, between 2008 and 2012, the MST took part in 2,712 protest actions across Brazil, 56% of all such events. During this time it also mobilized three-fourths of all the people involved in land occupations throughout Brazil, that is, close to 100,000 families.²⁶

Since the mid-2000s, some of the movement's most radical actions were spearheaded by MST women, who have assumed a much greater role within the organization. In particular, women played a key part in deepening the movement's critique of the agribusiness complex. As an outgrowth of this process, they joined with other Via Campesina women in organizing a number of direct and symbolic clashes with a handful of global corporations, especially in the pulp-mill sector.²⁷

In a more discrete manner, the MST continued to invest significant resources in developing training centers for its cadres and was running more than forty of these movement schools in 2013. In collaboration with the federal government, it also provided MST members with access to adult literacy courses and special study programs that were set up in sixty-five Brazilian universities and technical schools.²⁸

The movement's budding interest in agro-ecology gained solid footing during the 2000s and led to various undertakings with its Via Campesina allies, including scores of workshops, along with the creation of four institutes for agro-ecological learning and research, in the states of Paraná (2005) and Pará (2009) and in Venezuela (2006) and Paraguay (2008). This trend also comprised efforts to lobby the government for a national program to promote organic farming, which was launched by President Dilma in 2013.

In September 2010 the MST teamed up with seventy-three civil society organizations—including peasant movements, trade unions, universities, and medical research centers, church agencies, NGOs, and consumer groups—to establish a National Campaign Against Pesticides and For Life. The venture helped raise public awareness of the health risks associated with the sharp rise in farm pesticide use in Brazil and drew attention to the grossly inadequate control over the use of these chemicals. In 2009, Brazil became the world's leading consumer of these products, exposing each of its inhabitants to an average 4.5 liters of agro-toxic compounds.²⁹ The antipesticide movement has given the MST a platform on which to forge new partnerships in support of agro-ecology and family farming among urban groups, notably health care professionals, medical scientists, consumer groups, and food industry unions. This campaign

has also offered the MST a novel frame on which to legitimize its calls for an alternative rural development model that addresses the growing concerns over the public health consequences and costs of industrial farming.

The MST's quest to strengthen alliances with popular organizations operating in the Brazilian countryside reached a new climax in August 2012, when it joined twenty-six other associations to celebrate a Unified Meeting of Workers and Peoples of the Countryside, Waters and Forests. The landmark event, held in Brasília with over 7,000 activists representing all of the main popular civil society groups in rural Brazil, commemorated the fifty-first anniversary of a similar gathering in Belo Horizonte, in 1961. A public statement issued at the meeting laid out a trenchant critique of corporate agriculture and the Brazilian state's support for a rural development model based on social exclusion and "an ultra-predatory exploitation of nature."³⁰ Its call for a radical transformation of the nation's countryside illustrates the main demands on which these organizations have converged. They include support for agrarian reform, agro-ecology, and family farming; food, energy, and territorial sovereignty; gender equality; peasant and indigenous-friendly education policies; and the democratization of Brazil's mass media.

Paradoxes

In assessing the broader implications of the PT government's decision to sideline land reform, two critical paradoxes can be discerned. One probes the PT's dramatic turnabout on this issue, its new alliance with the agrarian elite, and the deeper consequences of this for the future of Brazil's democracy. The other explores the prospects of the nation's peasantry in light of the planet's mounting environmental crisis. Both arguments, etched out here in preliminary form, seek to encourage a much-needed public conversation on these matters.

As is well known, the PT has experienced a substantial transformation since its founding in the early 1980s. Over the course of more than three decades, it transitioned "from a labor-based movement to an institutionalized and electoral-professional"³¹ catchall party, nominally on the left of Brazil's increasingly narrow political spectrum. Well into the early 2000s, the party retained discernable elements of its founding spirit, an affinity with popular movements and an anti-oligarchic ethos. After reaching the helm of the Brazilian government in 2003, its tactical détente with the agribusiness sector evolved into a newfound appreciation of its contribution to Brazil's export economy and innovative agro-fuel technology. This new sentiment was facilitated, in part, by the assumption—advanced by some scholars and repeated ad nauseam in the mainstream press—that corporate farming represented a sharp modern break from the country's traditional latifundios and plantation economy, given its capital and technology-intensive production, and modern management practices.

For this assumption to work, however, it was necessary to obscure or ignore the fact that in many crucial aspects the new agrarian elites were not so different from the old. As with the previous rural oligarchy, the new one has revealed an 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, hinder efforts to advance human rights and democracy among the rural poor, and generate wealth for a few. In today's agriculture, this oligarchic thrust is compounded by strong linkages between these corporate farms and a handful of global firms—Monsanto, Syngenta, Cargill, Bunge, ADM, Dupont, Bayer, and BASF—that dominate most of the world's modern rural economy. In effect, the PT's newfound amity with the agribusiness sector mirrors its acquiescence, and even embrace, of other oligopolies in Brazil, related to finance, oil, mining, construction, and mass communication, among other industries.

This is a worrisome development. Mega business enterprises create enormous power asymmetries that undermine, in various ways, basic democratic freedoms and notions of political equality. This model of capitalism, grounded on unbridled corporate power and influence, is detrimental for democratic accountability, as eminent scholars such as Robert Dahl, Sheldon Wolin, Joseph Stiglitz, Robert Reich, and others, remind us well.³² Extraordinarily huge firms—some, in fact, deemed “too big to fail” or even “prosecute”—are a force for de-democratization wherever they control the commanding heights of the economy.

It is an ironic turn of history that the PT, Brazil's once-eminent anti-oligarchic party, when in power, became an enthusiastic promoter of this type of capitalism, both at home and abroad. For in doing so, the PT has reinforced the corrosive and oligarchic sway this model of capitalism has had—and will continue to have—on Brazilian politics.

All this gains added poignancy if one considers what the PT has forgone. Compared to the agrarian elite, its erstwhile allies among the peasantry and rural workers have played a far more constructive role in advancing Brazil's long-term and open-ended democratization process. As Charles Tilly elucidates, this has been accomplished both through “explicit programs” and as “by-products of their action.”³³

The MST and its allies have favored democratization by challenging the country's entrenched inequities and fighting to extend basic citizenship rights—civil, political, and social rights—among the rural poor. In the process, they have enhanced political awareness and capabilities among this population. As a counterhegemonic force, these peasant groups have helped enrich the country's public debate, by keeping a substantial spectrum of dissent alive.³³ More subtle and significantly, perhaps, their approach to economic development—based on family farms, cooperatives, vibrant local markets, and civil society

associations—is far more conducive to meaningful democratic politics than corporate agriculture.

If the first paradox underscores a serious loss for Brazil's agrarian reform movement, the second draws attention to a new window of opportunity for such reforms, albeit one set in a context of dire menace. Since the late 2000s, several UN agencies and the World Bank have issued reports dealing with climate change and agriculture that have essentially made the same calls advanced by the MST and La Via Campesina in support of a paradigmatic shift from large-scale industrial farming to agro-ecology, family farms, and greater food sovereignty.³⁵

The global food system, according to these studies, is responsible for the emission of approximately half of the greenhouse gases that are warming our planet and fueling climate change. Brazil, after China, is the world's second-largest contributor to such gases originating from agriculture. The bulk of these emissions stem from agribusiness farming—namely, through deforestation and the conversion of new farmland, nitrogen use in synthetic fertilizers, methane gases from livestock, food waste, and fossil fuels burned while transporting farm products, within country and overseas.³⁶ The environmental costs of corporate agriculture are compounded by the health costs associated with the increasing use of pesticides and antibiotics in industrial farming, related, in many cases, to new pests, plagues, and outbreaks in cancer and neurological diseases.

The rationale for shifting to agro-ecology and smaller-scale holdings is reinforced by solid environmental and economic sustainability arguments, as corroborated by Brazil's agricultural census data. Compared to corporate agriculture, family farms are 74% less likely to use pesticides.³⁷ They are also twice as efficient in their land use and produce most of the food consumed in this country. Furthermore, family farms create 9.1 times more employment than agribusiness holdings and offer a much higher return on public investments. For every US\$100,000 in government farm credits, family farmers generate 266% more wealth and provide 21.1 more jobs.³⁸

Herein lays the crux of this paradox. In an era of rising concern for the ecological fragility of our planet, many of the world's leading scientists and global policy makers have come to recognize the kernels of ecological wisdom found among the alleged “backward people” and “historical residues” of modernity—the peasants, indigenous communities, forest gatherers, artisanal fisher-folk, and nomadic pastoralists.

In this quest for an epochal transformation, it is not just the values of agro-ecology that are stake. Hidden in all this is 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.

Notes

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1. Carter (2014).
2. *Brasil Sem Miséria's* plan to eradicate extreme poverty in the countryside includes welfare payments, job trainings, technical assistance, microcredit, and state food purchases from family farmers, but no land redistribution. The Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento, CEBRAP's (2012: 23) study on Brazil's social inequality sums up the skepticism toward this program found among academics and grassroots activists: "The fight against inequality here appears to be largely rhetorical." The program seeks "to improve living conditions" among the extremely poor "while at the same time creating positive statistics and electoral dividends. . . . [We see] the technocratic elite staking its bet on a quick-fix agenda, which instead of fighting inequalities contributes to their solidification." Also see Arruda's (2012) interview with João Pedro Stédile. On Lula's and Dilma's rural policies, see Oliveira (2010), Sauer (2014) and Teixeira (2013b).
3. According to Oliveira (2013), INCRA's 2010 land registry included 218,957 large and medium-size rural property with "unproductive" estates, based on information provided by the owners in signed affidavits. Together, these idle farms encompassed a land mass of 190 million hectares, an area three times the territory of France.
4. Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, IPEA (2010: 244).
5. Author's calculations are based on Ministério da Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento (2013) and Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (2009a). More broadly, on the political economy of Brazilian agribusiness, see Delgado (2012).
6. This estimate draws on Melo (2006: 127, 177).
7. Sauer (2010).
8. Brazil's inflation rate between 2003 and 2012 averaged 5.9% annually, according to Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, IPEA (2013), far below the interest payments made for land expropriations. In all such expropriations, landowners received cash payment upfront for all improvements made on the estate, along with agrarian bonds covering 80% of the land value; see Zanatta (2010) and Teixeira (2012).
9. The *Terra Legal* program rescinded legal norms that required its applicants to live and work on their farms, as peasant households normally do. Moreover, no provisions were made to prevent a *grileiro*, or large land grabber, from parceling his land among family members or close associates; see Teixeira (2013), Oliveira (2010), Comissão Pastoral da Terra-Santarém (2010), Biernaski (2009). As Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira (2010: 59), a noted Brazilian scholar on agrarian issues, caustically underscored, "President Lula's [*Terra Legal*] decree earned him a distinct place in the history of Brazil's *grilagem* [public land theft], as the third national ruler, after Emperor Dom Pedro II and the dictator Getúlio Vargas, to have enacted a law in support of the country's *grileiros*."
10. Oliveira (2010: 40–41).
11. Teixeira (2013a).
12. The new Forestry Code, according to The Nature Conservancy, is expected to reduce the nation's conservation area by as much as 40%; see Reuters (2013). The legislation was strongly supported by the agribusiness lobby and the *bancada ruralista*, the powerful rural elite caucus in Congress, and opposed by a wide spectrum of civil society

- organizations and national celebrities, including a host of environmental, peasant, religious, and youth organizations, and prominent scientists and artists. On the value of IBAMA's fines for environmental destruction, see Vaz and Magalhães (2012).
13. The survey on rural labor conditions was carried out by the Federal University of Minas Gerais and the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, see Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada IPEA (2010: 245).
 14. For the number of enslaved workers, see Comissão Pastoral da Terra CPT (2013, 2012, 2005, and 2004). On human rights violations in rural areas, see Centro de Documentação Dom Tomás Balduino (2013) and Comissão Pastoral da Terra (2013).
 15. Interests payments are for both foreign and domestic debt, the latter representing 97.8% of Brazil's sovereign debt; see Banco Central (2013a). Annual average interest rates are based on data from Banco Central (2013b). Federal government expenditures for 2003–6 and 2008–9 are from Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos (2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010), while 2007 and 2010–12 expenditures are from Senado Federal (2013).
 16. The data for real interest rates draws on Banco Central (2013) and Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, IPEA (2013).
 17. For a more detailed assessment of the conservative onslaught, see Carter (2014).
 18. Neuri Rossetto, personal communication, São Paulo, December 15, 2009.
 19. Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, IPEA (2013). On the rise of absolute income inequality in Brazil, amid a decline of relative inequality, see Kakwani (2013). Between 2003 and 2013, the number of Brazilian billionaires swelled by nearly six-fold, from eight to forty-six; see Geromel (2013). In 2013, it was reported that the assets owned by 124 Brazilians alone equaled 12.3% of the nation's GDP; see Exame (2013).
 20. Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, IPEA (2010: 214).
 21. Sauer and Leite (2012: 506). According to INCRA's land registry, large rural estates increased their control of the nation's farmland by 104 million hectares, or 48%, between 2003 and 2010, mostly in the Amazon region; see Teixeira (2011: 5).
 22. Maria Gorete de Sousa, author's interview by telephone, São Luiz, Maranhão, September 24, 2013.
 23. Author's calculations are based on DATALUTA (2013); Centro Dom Tomas Balduino, CPT (2013).
 24. Jaime Amorim, author's interview by telephone, Caruaru, Pernambuco, November 30, 2012.
 25. Gustavo Augusto Gomes de Moura, author's interview by telephone, Brasília, September 23, 2013.
 26. Author's calculus based on DATALUTA (2013); Centro Dom Tomas Balduino, CPT (2013).
 27. On the more assertive role of MST women, see Peschanski (2013).
 28. By 2013, the National Education Program in Agrarian Reform (PRONERA) had benefited close to half million land reform settlers. On the MST's leadership training schools, see Plummer (2008).
 29. ABRASCO (2012: 13–17). On the National Campaign Against Pesticides and For Life, see <http://www.contraosagrotoxicos.org/>.
 30. See Encontro Unitário dos Trabalhadores, Trabalhadoras e Povos do Campo, das Águas e das Florestas (2012). Among the twenty-seven national associations that sponsored this event were CONTAG, CUT, all the Via Campesina movements, FETRAF, the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), church networks like the CPT and CIMI, and various NGOs, including Greenpeace and Oxfam Brasil.

31. Hunter (2011: 307). On the PT's transformation, also see Hunter (2010), Singer (2012), and Kingstone and Ponce (2010).
32. Dahl (2006, 1998), Wolin (2008), Stiglitz (2013), and Reich (2007, 2012).
33. Tilly (2004: 142–143).
34. On the MST's contribution to democracy in Brazil, see Carter (2009, 2011).
35. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, UNCTAD (2013), De Schutter (2010), and International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (2009).
36. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2013: 2–21).
37. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, IBGE (2009b: 217); pesticide use compares farms with plantation areas under and above 100 hectares.
38. Author's calculations are based on Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, IBGE (2009a) and Ministério da Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento (2013).