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## LAND GOVERNANCE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: FRAMING THE DEBATE SERIES

### **Land Governance in Brazil**

A geo-historical review of land governance in Brazil

by Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, Clifford Andrew Welch, Elienai  
Constantino Gonçalves



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## About this volume

This paper examines the paradoxes of land governance in Brazil by putting them in their historical context, highlighting in particular the continuing subordination of peasant farmers' interests to those of large landholders. It traces the development of the country's regional divisions and systems of land-holding back to colonial times, when Portuguese settlers began carving up the territory. It describes the emergence of large-scale plantation agriculture producing commodities for export, and the evolution of the *latifundios* into today's transnational agribusiness monocultures, which are swallowing up more and more land. Despite various changes of government and sporadic attempts at land reform over the years, large-scale agrarian capitalism has generally enjoyed the support of Brazil's political classes, to the detriment of small-scale peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, and others who, despite producing much of the country's food, are being increasingly marginalised and deprived of their land and traditional ways of life. The paper looks in detail at this phenomenon in each of Brazil's regions and also examines trends such as land grabbing by foreign interests, the growing demand for agrofuels, rural-urban migration, and impacts on the environment. Throughout, it poses the essential question: how can Brazil's vast territory be governed to meet the interests of all, and not just a privileged few?

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# Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the second report in ILC's *Land Governance in the 21st Century – Framing the Debate Series*. The first report focused on Africa, a continent at a key crossroads in the governance of its land and natural resources, with multiple possible pathways – hence the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the debates. This report looks at Brazil, a continent-sized country, with pronounced regional diversities and stark social and economic contrasts and paradoxes. Brazil has experienced spectacular development in its agricultural sector, betting both on large agribusiness farms and on small family farms, which seem to play complementary roles. The country's rural landscape varies from highly modern agro-industrial farm complexes (as in the *Concentrated Region* of Sao Paulo) to poor and under-equipped small farms (as is the case in the Nordeste region). Brazil is today the world's leading exporter of many agricultural commodities, making it a major actor in redefining the order of the global food trade, which traditionally has been dominated by the US and Europe. With the US, Brazil is leading the promotion of biofuels. It is also a country confronting poverty and hunger, in urban as well as in rural areas. Brazilian investors are actively purchasing and renting land in neighbouring countries, but Brazil is also one of the main global targets for foreign land deals. For these reasons, along with the many innovations made by recent governments and the vibrancy of its social movements and intellectual life, Brazil is perhaps the world's richest land governance laboratory. Its experience and approaches to dealing with current challenges are of great relevance to many emerging economies and developing countries. The task facing the authors of this report (Bernardo Fernandes, Clifford Welch, and Elienai Gonçalves) was not an easy one. In line with the objective of the *Framing the Debate Series*, the paper aims to clarify the terms of the land debate in Brazil in a succinct manner without oversimplifying the country's complex reality. The authors have lived up to the task. They have examined key elements of Brazil's history in the past six centuries to shed light on land tenure arrangements observed in the country's various regional contexts. Their analysis of the main threads of current land debates in Brazil devotes particular attention to a

key area of diverging views in the land community – the productivity and economic performance of large commercial farms compared with small-scale family farms. Brazil's agricultural performance is used by proponents of both sides of this debate as ultimate proof of the superiority of one agricultural model over the other. The central role of family farming in Brazil's food security and poverty reduction efforts stressed by Fernandes et al. is in radical contrast with the perspective that credits the country's agricultural performance in recent decades to investments in large-scale farms. The *Brazilian model of high-productivity large farms* is, for example, considered by Paul Collier (2008) to be the main engine for Brazil's impressive increase in crop production and its increasingly dominant role in agricultural commodity markets<sup>1</sup>. For *The Economist* (2010), Brazil is the *first tropical food giant*, thanks mainly to its large farming sector<sup>2</sup>. With this report in the *Framing the Debate Series*, it is clear that the old controversy about the relationship between farm size and efficiency is unlikely to be settled any time soon. One important contribution of the authors relates to the use of what they call the *territorialisation* paradigm to provide a new perspective on territorial disputes that underpin the profound transformation of Brazil's farming sector and rural landscape. Fernandes et al. rightly argue that these disputes go far beyond the ownership of land, as their outcomes determine the way that the land is developed, infrastructure choices and the types of production relationship that will emerge. The crux of the debate is about which development model will prevail. The same analytical tool – which links territory and power – can be of great value in understanding the wider and long-term implications of changes in the control of farmland as a result of the current wave of domestic and foreign land acquisitions in other parts of the world. Another key issue of global relevance discussed in this report is Brazil's dual role in large-scale land concessions

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1 P. Collier. 2008. *The Politics of Hunger. How Illusion and Greed Fan the Food Crisis*. Foreign Affairs. November–December 2008.

2 P. Cremaq. 2010. *Brazilian agriculture. The miracle of the cerrado. Brazil has revolutionised its own farms. Can it do the same for others?* The Economist. 26 August 2010. Accessed at: [www.economist.com/node/16886442](http://www.economist.com/node/16886442)

and acquisitions, both domestically and abroad. Related to this, I find of great interest Brazil's Selo Combustível Social (*Social Fuel Seal*), established to encourage contractual partnerships between companies producing biofuels and small farmers. The experience gained and lessons learned from this tax incentive are certainly worth taking into account in current debates on alternative business models that allow investments without dispossessing small farmers of their land. When discussing these topics and many others covered in this report, Fernandes and his colleagues have opted to take sides in the debate, adopting the perspective of what they call the *agrarian question paradigm*. They have avoided the temptation to caricature the opposing view, which they refer to as the *agrarian capitalism paradigm*, but whether or not they have done justice to this perspective is up for debate. It is clear nonetheless that Fernandes et al. recognise the limitations of a binary analysis, and have candidly discussed the divergences, fragmentation, clashes, and re-composition of key social movements, civil society organisations, and debates within academic circles when confronted with some of these difficult land governance questions. This report in the *Framing the Debate Series* facilitates open debate on land governance policies and practices both in Brazil and globally. The paper is accessible enough to enable wider engagement in the debate. It is also published in Portuguese to reach out to the Brazilian public and the general land community. If needed, a Spanish version will also be made available. I look forward to lively debate, while preparing the third report in the *Framing the Debate Series* on Asia.

*Madiodio Niasse,*

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# Executive summary

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This paper offers a geo-historical review of land governance in Brazil by analysing key paradoxes regarding land use and agricultural policies. These paradoxes include a failure to adopt policies favourable to small farmers, such as agrarian reform, despite the proven productivity and majority status of this category of farmers; the persistence of hunger and rural poverty, despite years of support for an agribusiness sector that claims to be combating both these phenomena; and the fact that, while democratising access to land features prominently in political discourse, agrarian policies have consistently contributed to land concentration and consequent increases in conflict over its control and use.

To better understand these paradoxes, the paper analyses the historical process of regional development in Brazil and the structural and economic conditions that have contributed to the diverse social development of rural areas. This approach is designed to illuminate the country's geographical diversity and significant historical events, as well as change and continuity in the social relationships that define land policies and land use, especially the emergence of new factors and the persistence of old elements. Based partly on data from Brazil's most recent agricultural census (2006), it analyses the evidence to present the major contemporary problems and future prospects for all of the country's regions.

Prominent in the analysis are the roles of key stakeholders associated with agribusiness and peasant farmers. These two

broad groups are presented as distinct political identities that serve to unite diverse entities and individuals. Additional stakeholders are examined in light of their shifting alignments with the varied positions of these two identities. They include government institutions and politicians from municipal to national levels and socio-political organisations at the local, state, national, and international levels, including rural employer and employee associations, indigenous societies, and communities formed by the descendants of enslaved Africans.

As an organising principle, the paper is based on a paradigmatic debate present in Brazilian academic circles to examine different models of rural development, their advocates, impasses, and prospects. The paradigms represent the world views of these entities, their interests and ideologies and their aspirations and desires, which occasionally succeed in becoming real through the territorialisation of public policies.

One is the *agrarian question paradigm*, which utilises the analysis of class struggle to explain territorial disputes and supports development models that allow for peasant autonomy. It holds that land tenure and usage problems are part of the structure of capitalism, so that the fight against capitalism is the struggle to construct alternative world orders where the problems of rural poverty can be overcome by empowering the peasantry.

The other is the *agrarian capitalism paradigm*, which holds that the inequalities generated by capitalist relations are problems that can best be eliminated through policies that deepen

market relations by encouraging peasant *integration* as enterprising *family farmers*. Following this logic, conflicts between peasants and capitalists are rooted in events that are ephemeral rather than structural in nature. The two groups exist in the same political space as part of a totality (capitalist society) where class struggle is considered to be irrelevant. For the agrarian question paradigm, capitalism is the peasantry's principal problem, whereas for the agrarian capitalism paradigm, the peasantry is the problem because peasants are said to be backward and uncooperative.

In this context, conflicts between entities that reflect these paradigms are presented in this paper as influential in determining different models of agricultural development in Brazil. The paper examines how these forces have shaped the history of Brazilian agrarian reform. Although many plans have been proposed by different government administrations, none has been fully implemented. Frustrated, adherents of the agrarian question paradigm have promoted land occupations as an important means of achieving peasant-friendly public policies. In the meantime, advocates of agrarian capitalism have placed serious limits on this form of struggle.

Analysis of the state's role is crucial. Generally, the Brazilian government has taken positions that favour agribusiness, due to the predominance of the agrarian capitalism paradigm among civil servants and government administrators and the aggressive political pressure of conventional agriculture's powerful organisations, leaders, and allies. Occasionally, the pressure of mass mobilisation has provoked the state to create and implement policies helpful to peasant agriculture, but the direct action approach has increasingly been criminalised.

The export commodity development model of agriculture produces high farm yields, but is also responsible for serious social and environmental damage, such as labour exploitation and the destruction of land, water, and air resources. From a critical reading of the environmental impacts of modern agriculture in Brazil, the paper discusses some of the limits for the future of the dominant model.

Among other topics covered in a discussion of probable short-term developments, questions related to agrofuels and land grabbing are examined. Brazil is a so-called *emerging market* country that has not only suffered land grabbing, but also

practises it itself in poorer nations such as Mozambique. Land grabbing is a recent phenomenon with profound historical roots and is characterised by large-scale investments of rich and emerging market countries in the agricultural sector of both emergent and poor nations. Through the acquisition or long-term leasing of agricultural industries or large tracts of land for agricultural production, with an emphasis on export commodities, such as soybeans, or sugar cane to produce agrofuels such as ethanol, critics fear that poorer countries will lose their autonomy and ability to restore food sovereignty. This new element has intensified conflict in some regions and has created new parameters for considering solutions to land tenure and use policies.

Agricultural development clearly is not limited to rural settings and agrarian interests but also influences the urban world, generating new issues that can only be understood from an analysis of the city/country relationship. The paper concludes by discussing trends in Brazilian territorial development that affect both rural and urban spaces.

Since 1985, when more than 20 years of military dictatorship came to an end, Brazilians have built effective ways to defend their democracy. The formation of dozens of peasant organisations and their daily activities have kept debate about the agrarian question on the political agenda. However, the advance of neoliberal policies has destroyed many achievements, increasing subordination of the working classes through compensatory social control policies. The prospects for changing the current model of development are not good, given the growth trends for agribusiness, especially the transnational capital flooding into the market. Nevertheless, as long as debates about agricultural policies and land use continue, the possibility of moving towards a truly sustainable model will remain alive.

# Agrarian Brazil and its paradoxes

Brazil is a continent-sized country, the fifth largest in the world. According to the Brazilian Geographical and Statistical Institute (IBGE in its Brazilian acronym), it covers an area of 8.5 million sq km. The agricultural potential of this vast territory is enormous, but so are its inequalities. These include one of the world's most concentrated land-holding structures, which scores 0.854 on the Gini index (a 1.0 would indicate maximum inequality, where one person or company owned everything), with large national and multinational corporations owning the lion's share of property. These firms control agricultural development policies, enjoying the majority of agricultural credit, monopolising markets at every level, and defining production technologies. Producing predominantly commodities, agribusiness interests in Brazil constitute a hegemonic power that determines agrarian planning and relegates to a subordinate role smallholder farmers who, ironically, are responsible for producing the majority of foodstuffs destined for the domestic market.

As the world's top producer of soybeans, coffee, sugar, beef, chicken, dry beans, oranges, and tobacco, Brazil is one of the world's most important agricultural countries (Welch 2006a). It has a total area of 851,487,659 hectares, but during the 1996–2006 period only 330 million hectares were utilised for agriculture, according to the most recent agricultural census (IBGE 2009a, 2009b). During the 1975–1985 period, the area cultivated was larger, totalling 375 million hectares. This still means that, over these 20 years, Brazil utilised between 39%

and 44% of its territory for agriculture – one of the highest proportions of land under cultivation of any nation on earth.

Persistent rural inequalities become dramatically evident when we contrast family farming with corporate agribusiness farming. The 2006 census recorded 5,175,489 agricultural establishments (households or businesses), of which 84.4% (4,367,902) were family units and 15.6% (805,587) were corporate farms. The total area of the family units was 80,250,453 hectares, while corporate businesses accounted for 249,690,940 hectares. According to the 2006 census, although agribusiness used 76% of the cultivated land, its annual gross product value was only 62% (USD 44.5 billion) of total output, whereas family – or peasant – farmers were responsible for 38% (USD 27 billion) of gross annual value, while utilising only 24% of agricultural land.

Additional statistics reveal more inequality. Even though peasants used only 24% of the agricultural area, they *employed* 74% of people economically engaged in the sector (12,322,225 people), while the richer agribusiness segment employed the remaining 26% (4,751,800 people). This means that every 100 hectares of agribusiness land sustained an average of only two individuals, while the same area of peasant land sustained around 15 people. Employment relations differ significantly between the two segments, as the majority of peasant workers are family members who live on farms, while the majority of agribusiness employees are part-time or seasonal workers

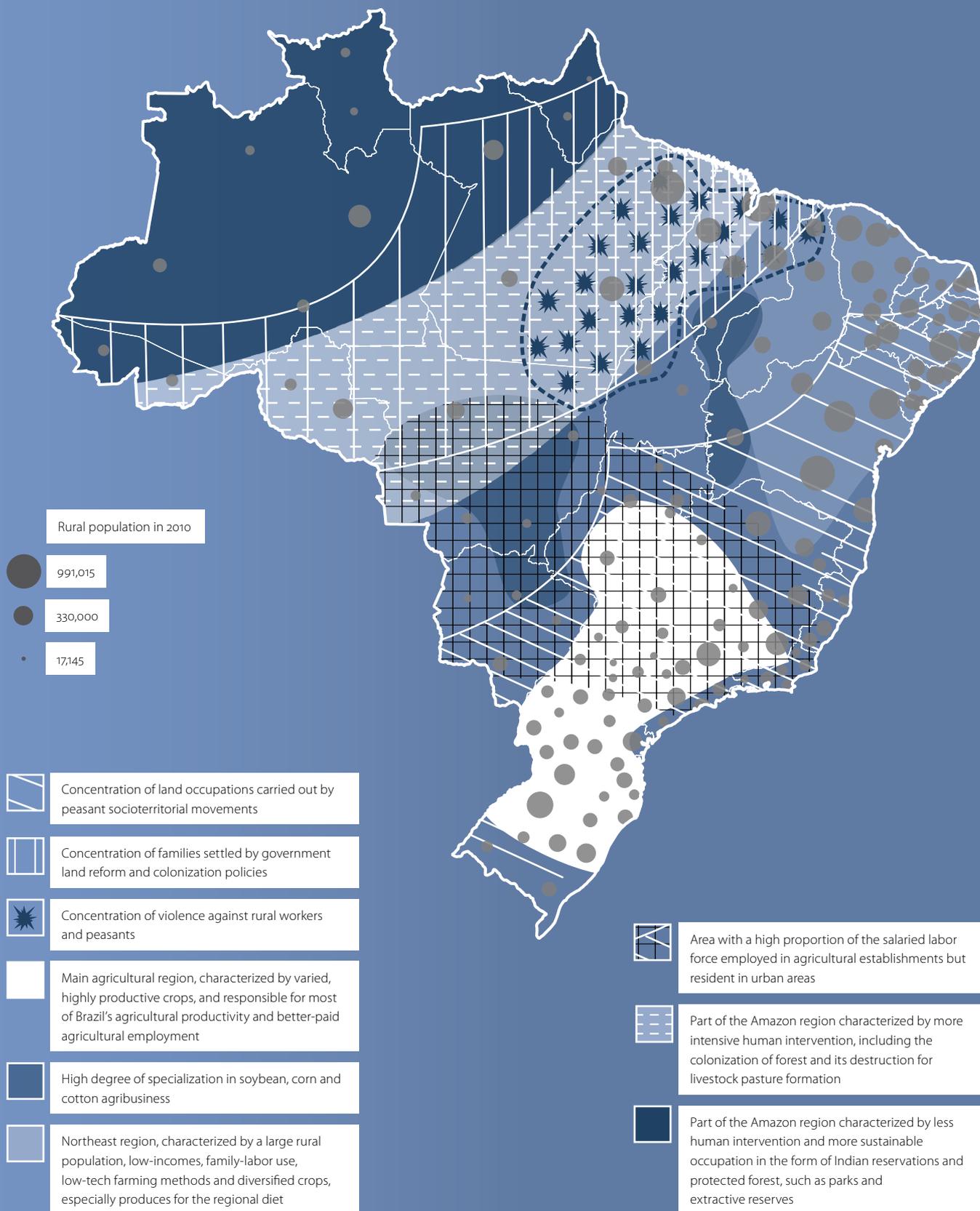


Figure 1: Agrarian Brazil in 2010

who live off-farm in urban areas. This difference alone helps to explain the distinctive forms of territorial occupation represented by the two segments: peasant territory is a place of production and daily life, whereas agribusiness territory is a place of production only.

The paradoxes of country life in Brazil become sharper when analysing the contribution of these two segments in overall production returns. An analysis conducted by economists Eliseu Alves and Daniela de Paulo Rocha (2010) showed that only 8%, or 423,689 of 5,175,489, agricultural establishments generate 85% of the total value of production. This is the agribusiness segment. In the meantime peasants, working on 92% of all farms (4,751,800), receive only 15% of the total value. These figures demonstrate how territorial concentration leads to the disproportionate accumulation of wealth in the hands of relatively few agribusiness firms. Broken down even further, the figures show that 11 million people working on 3,775,826 establishments live off a paltry 4% of all farm wealth. Families working on 2,014,567 farms have annual incomes of below USD 200.

These desperately poor farmers who gain so little from their hard work are responsible for producing vast quantities of the staple crops consumed by their fellow citizens, including 70% of dry beans, 87% of cassava tubers, 46% of corn, 38% of coffee beans, and 34% of rice. They also produce 59% of the pork consumed, 50% of the poultry, 30% of the beef, and 58% of the milk. Inequality is also present in types of production, suggesting that family farms are more diversified and less specialised than agribusiness plantations. For example, just 1.57% of agricultural establishments are responsible for 68.3% of the corn produced, demonstrating how monoculture dominates the agribusiness segment. On the other hand, dairy statistics reflect diversity in the peasant segment, as around 20% of farms produce 73% of the milk.

Land governance in rural areas of Brazil is strongly characterised by concentration, which produces divergent attitudes regarding agricultural development policies. Some defend the elimination of farmers who produce less in terms of quantity, while others call for a reordering of the way in which agricultural wealth is distributed in order to increase the incomes of small farmers. Specific groups lobby for increases

in the subsidies granted to agribusiness, while others advocate for policies such as agrarian reform and favourable credit terms to help facilitate access to land to increase the number of farmers in the sector.

These two visions of development have found paradigmatic expression as each side has struggled to find the means and language necessary to explain the paradoxes of agrarian Brazil in ways that strengthen their own positions. For supporters of agribusiness, such as the Brazilian Agribusiness Association (ABAG), capitalism leads naturally to the elimination of farmers through a competitive process that allows only the fittest to survive. The paradigm of agrarian capitalism explains the problem of inequality as the logical result of the personal failings of individual farmers who lack the knowhow and stamina to survive in the marketplace.

For organisations linked to the international Via Campesina peasant movement, increasing the number of farmers on the land and their level of participation in the agricultural economy is fundamental to correcting the problem of inequality, which is seen as a perversity generated by the very nature of capitalist production. In this paradigm of the agrarian question, capitalists are condemned for imposing relations of subordination and for trying to eliminate the peasantry. In order to fight back, the Landless Workers Movement (MST), one of the most prominent Via Campesina member organisations in the world, has developed land occupation strategies as the principal form of land access. For the past 30 years, pressure from below has kept agrarian reform on the policy agenda of the Brazilian government.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, agrarian Brazil cannot be understood simply as the sum of its agricultural production statistics. Likewise, it cannot be fully appreciated by emphasising only its intensive land conflicts. Figure 1 synthesises a number of dynamic processes to help convey its complexity.

It is a paradoxical picture, with 74% of farmers receiving only 15% of agricultural credits and holding only 24% of agricultural land, but producing 38% of the sector's gross output. Many people working hard on a small piece of land receive little credit and live off the *crumbs* left behind by agribusiness in its rush to accumulate more wealth for itself. The relatively few

agribusiness firms in the country claim 85% of agricultural credits, control 76% of the land area, produce 62% of gross output, and employ 26% of farm labour. This means that a small number of individuals on a large part of the land control a majority of the sector's resources. Through rents, asymmetric contract arrangements, and control over processing and markets, agribusiness reaps income directly from the wealth produced by peasant families, some 2 million of whom subsist on a monthly income of around USD 15. The paradox of Brazilian inequality is expressed by the fact that many of these families are forced to depend on government assistance in order to survive, despite their fundamental contribution in producing 38% of the sector's gross output.

These paradoxes of the present are products of the past, constructions formed by social relations of domination and resistance – relations that have in turn configured the current shape of Brazilian territory.

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# Historical perspectives on the formation of Brazil's regions

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The historian Frieda Knobloch has astutely noted that *colonization is an agricultural act* (1996: 1). Agricultural acts not only punctuate Brazil's history but underlie its transition from colony to nation. The paradoxes of agrarian Brazil began back in 1500 with Portuguese traders humbly stimulating symmetric processes of exchange through barter for brazilwood, or dyewood (*Caesalpinia echinata*), extracted by the Amerindian residents of the territory. The first land governance model of the modern era revolved around the selective cutting of brazilwood by the Tupinambá indigenous people in response to foreign market demand. Over time, this system underwent dramatic alterations. The *discoveries* of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries tempted European powers to secure territory in the Americas. From the 1530s to the 1800s, the Portuguese monarchy sought to secure its domain in the New World by developing new systems of governance to thwart land grabbing by the French, Dutch, and Spanish crowns.

In the nineteenth century, when the son and then the grandson of the Portuguese king ruled the independent Brazilian empire, territorial skirmishes were frequent, not only with external enemies but also with internal challengers, and various systems of land governance competed for dominance. By the twentieth century, however, Brazil's current boundaries and state divisions had generally been established, despite the

continued pressure of foreign demand for land. The mandates of progress in a capitalist world order, enthusiastically pursued by Brazilian elites, dictated the implementation of both large and smaller development projects that incorporated millions of acres into diverse agricultural and industrial schemes.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we can see that the processes of colonising this continent-sized nation involved not only Amerindians and traders, emperors and foreign powers, but also slaves and masters, peasants and landlords, immigrants and entrepreneurs, militants and politicians, and communists and capitalists. Against this complex background Brazil's past and present, as well as an outline for its future, can be portrayed as a narrative punctuated by conflict for the possession, identity, and control of this vast land area.

The trade in brazilwood profoundly influenced sixteenth century representations of Brazil (Rocha et al. 2007). The Atlantic coastline of maps from this period is peppered with place-names marking the locations of inlets and fortress-like trading posts (*feitorias*). The as yet unknown interior was used as a canvas by more creative cartographers to depict the extractive process, with trees felled by Tupinambá men wielding their new iron axes, while others negotiated with European traders on the shore. Women are depicted hunting or caring for



Figure 2: Representation of relations between Brazilian indigenous societies and Europeans in the sixteenth century, in a detail of a map published by Giacomo Gastaldi in 1550

children, and cooking in their traditional longhouses. The scenes are prosaic and, though the maps were a form of propaganda, the sense of a relatively harmonious relationship with the Portuguese outsiders is confirmed by historians of the period (Marchant 1942; Hemming 1978). While such collaboration did not last long, the images capture a moment of Amerindian land usage in response to European demand that was comparatively mild in terms of its impacts on existing social relations and on the environment (Fausto 1997).

Although the right to explore the geographic region of Brazil had been granted to the Portuguese by papal decree as part of the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, other powers that did not respect the Vatican's authority – first France and then the Netherlands – took advantage of Brazil's long coastline and Amerindian control of the land to negotiate their own deals. The Portuguese crown did not accept these incursions and sought to consolidate its hegemony in the Americas through colonisation, which began in the 1530s. The commander Martim Afonso de Sousa was sent to explore and map the

entire coastal area, and the crown established *capitanias* (capitanias) to protect and develop the colony. The colony was divided into 14 capitanias, nine of them divided by straight lines running parallel to the Equator into unmapped space as far as the Tordesillas line, 45 degrees west of the Prime Meridian (see Figure 3). The crown awarded these tracts to minor nobles, military commanders, and bureaucrats close to the monarchy. These *donatários* received charters to populate, develop, defend, and administer the capitanias in the name of Portugal. Those who failed to show progress in fulfilling their obligations lost their privileged right to the captaincy.

The capitania policy has been used by some analysts to ascribe a feudal heritage to Brazil's land governance system, but few historians agree (Guimarães 1968; Fausto 1997). In fact, by the mid-sixteenth century, only two capitanias remained intact – those of São Vicente to the south and Pernambuco in the northeast – and the crown signalled an end to the experiment by constructing a central colonial capital in São Salvador, then a relatively busy *feitoria* on Bahia Bay. From 1549 to the end of

the colonial period, a governor-general, tribute collectors, judicial officials, soldiers, and a coastguard would *guarantee the territorial possession of the new land* (Fausto 1997: 46), despite continued, limited use of the capitania model until its final extinction in 1821.

One important legacy of the capitania system was a series of large estates called sesmarias. These were land grants from the donatários that had been successfully administered by a number of shrewd individuals (Fausto 1997; Motta 2009). The sesmaria system initiated in the colony warrants examination, as it continued to influence property relations into the twenty-first century. The system was first developed in medieval Portugal, dating from 1375. An agrarian law of sorts, it sought to encourage rural development in order to encourage the cultivation of cereals and create work to support rural workers in the countryside, helping to alleviate a food crisis that was aggravated by an exodus of farm workers.

What made the law effective was the nobility's duty to make the land productive. Reviving a chapter of the Justinian Code from the sixth century, it made proprietorship conditional upon effective cultivation of the land. In the fourteenth century, the Portuguese crown established sesmarias principally on abandoned farmland, but by the fifteenth century King Afonso V was utilising the same law to encourage colonisation of frontier areas both to increase production and to secure Portugal's borders against Spanish invasion by the Kingdom of Castile (Motta 2009: 15-17). The motives for using the system in Brazil, where French *pirates* threatened Portugal's sense of its territorial rights, were based on similar concerns.

The term sesmaria initially referred to the date when the right to exploit a given rural area was assigned to a Portuguese nobleman. The Brazilian historian Márcia Motta (2009) has discovered documentary evidence in Europe that offers strong support for this definition, as those who failed to cultivate lands assigned to them were frequently forced to give them up after a certain period. These terras devolutas – *returned lands* – might then very well be given to others, under the same restrictions. In Brazil, however, sesmaria came to signify not so much the date of donation as the actual area donated because, while cultivation was required as a duty, this was rarely policed. Unlike the capitanias, which were at times larger

than European kingdoms, the smaller Brazilian sesmarias did not seem to represent to the crown any threat by establishing rival fiefdoms.

In Portugal, competing landlords often utilised the judicial system to monitor fulfilment of cultivation criteria to frustrate their rivals; in Brazil, the great size of the colony lessened these pressures and its judicial system was too fragile to produce reliable results. Thus, the sesmaria assigned to a nobleman in Brazil became fixed as his property, the launching pad for a highly productive plantation system or a much less productive latifundio (large commercial estate), both of which contributed to problematic social formations. Since hardly any colonial sesmarias were returned to the king, the meaning of terras devolutas also differed in Brazil, referring essentially to lands not yet donated or developed – that is to say, the vast majority of what would come to be independent Brazil in 1822.

The two capitanias that prospered employed a symbiotic formula that characterised much of Brazilian history: a dominant realm based on large land holdings subsidised by the state and dedicated to sugar cane cultivation and the export of sugar and its derivatives, using enslaved labour; and a subordinate segment engaged in supporting the first with the provision of food, slaves, tools, and other services. It overstates the case to argue that the capitania of Pernambuco held the former position while that of São Vicente found itself in the latter, but there is much evidence to support this generalisation. Complicating the picture, São Vicente also produced sugar for export and Pernambuco had its own artisans. Today, Pernambuco has become one of Brazil's poorer states, while São Vicente – now the contemporary state of São Paulo – is by far its wealthiest.

Despite these complexities, the plantation model sustained a highly stratified social formation, with enslaved Amerindians and Africans at one extreme and wealthy planters and sugar mill owners at the other. In the broad middle, some 20% of the population included producers of foodstuffs, including grain farmers and cattle ranchers, along with craftsmen, merchants, transporters, soldiers, and slavers. While most development was concentrated on the Atlantic coastline, where sugar cane grew well and ports were close at hand, colonists also occupied the western interior in a search for mineral wealth,

L I N H A

A Q V I N O C I A L

O

Rio das Amazonas

L I N H A  
D A D E M A R C A C A M

Capitania de João de Barros

Capitania de Francisco bayrelo

Capitania de Jorge dalbuquerque

DE SVA MAOESTADE

Capitania de Francisco givaldes

Capitania do Duque dauero

Capitania de Vasco frz Coutinho

Capitania de Pero de oves

Capitania de João de sausa

R I

D I

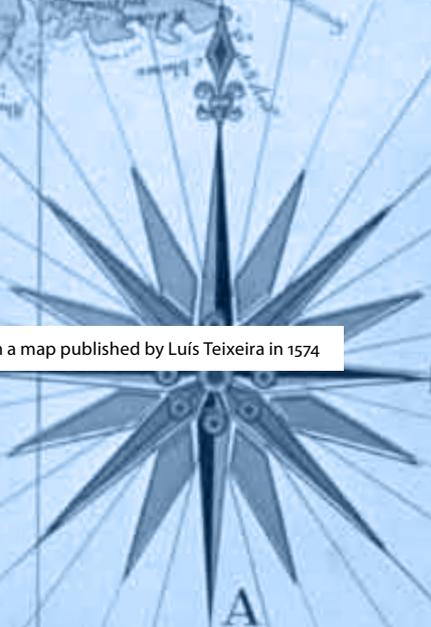
O

A terra do Brasil he aque parte alinha vermelha desta do peru a qual linha he q de marcoam que os reyn de castella ou catholicos dom fernão e dona izabel e Rey dom loão o 2º de Portugal fizerun no descobrimeto geml as capitancias que saõ repartidas per linhas q melhas São mercês que os reys de Portugal dom Joaquel e dom loã an seu filho atterceiro deslenome fizeron a huma que muy bem os seruiram no descobrimeto e conquista das Indias orientoes aque dize de Sua Magestade soy de Fr. Pereira reynaçõ metendo ficando sem erde ficou a Corpa nella sta abohia deo doloz santas e Cidade do Salvador onde affille o gouernador cobispo todas as mais sam Villas. Excepto a cidade de São de bahia no Rio de Janeiro capitania de Pero de Goes a qual Cidade soy tomada aos fruytes pello gouernador Me de Sua as melhores e mais ricas destas Capitancias São de Sua Magestade e a de Jorge dalbuquerque. estas sam as que mais fructificam tem de açúcar ealli tem mais trale de mercaderes tem cada huõ dellez capitancias pella costa do mar se logo as epera e setãõ lante ate chegar a linha da demarcacão comõna repartida dellez seve. he pouada esta terra do Brasil de portugueses quãtõ sezem as Capitancias cõmente ha resta do mar equãde muito se legoas pello setãõ hemuy pouada do gento laterra tem muitas maluerdes em partes della ha Oure alli de Xinas como de louage

TROPICO DE CAPRICORNIO



Scala de 100. legoas repartidas por 2. 10 e 50



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Figure 3: The hereditary captaincies created in Brazil by the Portuguese crown in 1535, in a map published by Luís Teixeira in 1574

people to either proselytise or enslave, and strategic positions to defend. Portuguese with connections to power or extraordinary talents sought to sustain their advantages by acquiring sesmarias, but those with less influence, talent, or ambition also sought land use privileges. With such a vast area to occupy, slash-and-burn exploitation was the rule. Thus, the colonial period produced a trend in which the powerful controlled large areas of land, exploiting small portions intensively while allowing peasants to clear and plant smaller plots, and passing onto future generations the dual system of under-used latifundios and over-used minifundios.

Another legacy of the colonial system, argues the historian Márcia Motta, is the justice system's continued use of the sesmaria grant as a reference point to determine proprietorship (2009: 263-66). In cases of dispute over the legitimacy of a land title, the courts typically order a discovery process to confirm original entitlement by a donatário or the crown. The irony of this search for legitimacy is that, despite the altered usage of the word sesmaria in Brazil, the *cultivate or lose* demand remains legally binding. Thus, rather than confirm the patrimony of a disputed property, discovery of the original sesmaria grant almost always delegitimises the claim of those seeking to document their title, especially since disputed lands are almost by definition undeveloped, under-utilised ones.

The search for original titles became especially important with the Land Law of 1850, despite a delay of nearly half a century in its implementation. Brazil's colonial period had come to an end and the country was by then an independent empire. Imperial law-makers tried to pick their way around governance formulations in a way similar to Great Britain's parliamentary monarchy, attempting to accommodate liberal political economy. Under British pressure to abolish slavery, they designed the Land Law to valorise property in land by regulating its commercialisation and thus aiming to attract immigrant workers with the promise of homesteads.

Many scholars have interpreted the law as being intentionally designed by the ruling class to impede the *via farmer* road to development by insisting that land should be purchased to be titled in a context where the vast majority of Brazilian peasants, immigrants, and freed slaves lacked adequate resources (the term *via farmer* is used to indicate development experiences in

which the predominance of smallholding has influenced a more egalitarian social formation). Moreover, it is alleged that the imperial state also wanted to ensure that freed slaves remained available in a labour market that would become necessary when abolition eliminated the slave-based plantation labour force (Guimarães 1968; Moore 1983; Costa 1985; Martins 1986). In fact, as the historian Lígia Osorio Silva (1996: 127-39) has shown, the law had quite the opposite intent, but the dominant landholding class that controlled parliament resisted its application until the end of the nineteenth century. In the context of yet another political transition – the end of the Empire and the reinvention of Brazil as a republic in 1889 – they succeeded in decentralising control over land governance, passing responsibility for implementing the 1850 law to the newly formed state governments (Silva 1996; Linhares and Silva 1999).

By making the states responsible for land questions, the federal government essentially succumbed to powerful, large-scale landed interests and abandoned the *via farmer*. This reinforced the agriculture-based oligarchy that came to rule Brazil. Depending on the state and region, the power to determine property rights and land usage issues lay in the hands of state legislators and such issues were normally resolved by state governors, many of whom had rural interests. These politicians were dependent on the support of the wealthy, not only for resources but also for votes. With hundreds, sometimes thousands, of workers, planters manipulated the electoral support of their dependants. Their influence and relationship with local and state governments were mediated through a system called *coronelismo*. At the centre of the system sat the coronel (colonel – an honorary rank for a political power broker), who worked to ensure that the planters delivered the vote for their candidates and that the apparatus of the state responded in ways that pleased the power base of the coronel (Silva 1996; Fausto 1997).

Land registration systems were established, and the cut-off date for grandfathering an estate into official existence under the 1850 law was moved from 1854 to 1878, and then to 1900 and 1930, according to the interests of state governments and landlords. Silva details the example of Mato Grosso state, which Portugal occupied when an Indian slave-hunting troop discovered gold in 1719, pushing beyond the Tordesillas treaty

line to establish in 1748 a capitania on the front line of defence against the Spanish vice-royalty of Peru.

In the time of the early republic, Mato Grosso state occupied a peripheral position as home to indigenous peoples and as a supplier of yerba mate tea and beef cattle. Land registry statistics from 1897 show that, of the state's 218,562,300 hectares, only 13,753,011 had been registered, by 1,941 landholders. An additional 1,082 landlords registered the existence of their farms and ranches, but failed to indicate the size of their holdings; Silva estimated these to total 14,139,576 hectares. With a total of 3,023 establishments controlling some 30 million hectares of land, still only 14% of the state's total area was accounted for at the beginning of the twentieth century. Worse still, the governor reported that the possession of only 1,499,342 hectares could be legitimated, so, rather than do the impossible and antagonise the landlords by defining all the rest of the state as public land, the deadline for registering was extended again and again (1996: 267-68).

Brazilian landlords, then as now, were not interested in having the size of their holdings fixed, or even known. As the main form of land clearing at the time was based on inefficient slash-and-burn techniques, landlords depended on having flexible estate boundaries. An established size of holding also raised the possibility of a tax base being fixed, which could cost a property holder precious cash. In the meantime, allowing the boundaries of public land to be determined by state authorities – no matter how tightly the process was controlled by colonels – could create problems for the *freedom* of large-scale landholders. In São Paulo province, however, the nineteenth century boom in demand for coffee helped create a different dynamic in the countryside. As the value of land increased, competition grew among coffee planters and the documentation of estate sizes and boundaries became something to be desired. The state's land registry system eventually achieved nearly complete demarcation of its land area.

The need to document original acquisition and effective utilisation of Brazil's rural areas created a new protagonist in the field of land governance – the *grileiro* or *land shark*. The value of São Paulo's land and planters' fears of losing it to such unscrupulous speculators contributed to making the practice

of *grilagem* particularly common in the state. The land-grabbing *grileiro* was someone who could falsify documents and get them officially registered through *friends* in the land titling establishment. The Land Law of 1850 and its adoption and regulation by the states created a variety of cut-off dates for avoiding the need, when purchasing a property, to demonstrate that its current owner had inherited it from the recipient of a *sesmaria* grant. The cut-off date was also meant to establish the boundaries of *terras devolutas*; i.e. that by positively identifying privately held lands by registering them, the size and location of public land would also be defined. Thus, the *grileiro* and the practice of *grilagem* also served to falsify claims to areas that really belonged to the states (Silva 1996; Linhares and Silva 1999).

As noted, the decentralisation of the system and the influence of the rural oligarchy played out in different ways in different regions of Brazil. In most cases, however, the tendency was one that reaffirmed the *latifundio/minifundio* type of land usage. *Grileiros* added to the size and number of *latifundios* by getting false documents formally recognised that both added land to existing estates and created wholly new ones. In the meantime, small-scale farming survived as a precarious yet integral part of the central narrative of *latifundio* creation. These *minifundios* more often than not lacked titles and were dependent to such an extent on the needs of the *latifundio* that smallholders rarely stayed in the same place for more than a few years and were almost constantly opening up new areas to cultivation (Guimarães 1968; Linhares and Silva 1999).

Brazil's land governance history is too complex to be reduced to a dichotomy of big farms versus small farms. Despite the success of large farmers in thwarting the colonisation goals of the 1850 Land Law, colonisation or the planned settlement of specific areas has played an important role in Brazilian land use since the very beginning. While the colonial government had sought to expel all non-Portuguese Europeans, the Imperial government tried to embrace them and facilitated the arrival of Germans, Swiss, Italians, and other nationalities. The Land Law was intended to help by identifying *terras devolutas* that could be used to establish settlements and generate tax income from the purchase and sale of land. Failing in this effort, the federal and then state governments worked to overcome barriers. In remote Acre state in the Brazilian interior, the federal

government established centres of colonisation and offered services to remove indigenous peoples in order to promote occupation by colonists.

São Paulo state was the largest recipient of immigrants. Although they were referred to as colonos (colonists), most newcomers were destined as replacement workers for the emancipated slaves on coffee plantations. With the gradual decline of coffee plantations in the twentieth century, however, colonisation schemes were established to help colonos to buy parcels of land. In the meantime, the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul invested in attracting settlers, especially from Germany and Italy, to develop grain farms, cattle ranches, and fruit orchards, and these settlers helped the state avoid large/small farm dualism by establishing relatively strong and sustainable farming communities into the 1970s. Other coastal states, such as Santa Catarina in the south and Espírito Santo in the centre-south, also invested in establishing European agricultural settlements. Just to the south of São Paulo, Paraná state received support from British investors to sub-divide huge areas into properties of varied sizes, small, medium, and large. The state of Mato Grosso has already been cited as an example of the peculiarities of the centre-west region. All in all, the concept of regionalism is of primary importance to the study of modern Brazil.

Certain patterns of occupation and development can be noted all the way through from the arrival of the Portuguese to today's republic. There was a basic tendency to occupy first the Atlantic coastline, from the mouth of the Amazon to the mouth of the Rio de la Plata. There was then gradual penetration into the west, which tended to follow river valleys in missions of Amerindian enslavement and reconnaissance, a task that occasionally resulted in the discovery of mineral wealth such as gold, diamonds and other precious stones. These incursions and occupations occurred in differing intensities, depending on climatic conditions, proximity to trade routes, and strategic interests.

While the densely forested Amazon basin to the north remained only lightly populated by descendants of European settlers up until the mid-twentieth century, the crowded northeast was a beehive of activity from the sixteenth century onwards. Heading south, Rio de Janeiro state became the

colonial capital in the eighteenth century and saw even greater growth when the Portuguese court established itself there in 1808. Also in the centre-south region, São Paulo state continued to play an important role in provisioning the colonies with food and enslaved Amerindians until the mid-nineteenth century, when immigrants began to arrive from southern and eastern Europe to work on coffee plantations and British engineers, butchers, railroad builders, and even footballers, among others, contributed to processes that would make São Paulo the wealthiest and most dynamic state in the country.

In the far south, the Portuguese creole gauchos in Rio Grande do Sul held the southern front for Brazil (Love 1971). An area far from the colonial centre and devoid of precious stones or metals, Rio Grande's economy developed around beef farming and agriculture for the domestic market and around Catholic missions among indigenous peoples (Fausto 1997).

After 1930, political changes in Brazil brought a stronger central government that sought to reduce the influence of the rural oligarchy and to centralise development policy. A dictatorship held power from 1937 to 1945, initiating projects and issuing decrees to strengthen capitalism in the countryside (Welch 1999). Among the contributions of this semi-fascist regime were executive orders for the social and political organisation of rural social classes, including association and union structures and a labour court system that was frequently used to regulate labour relations that affected land use. These organisational structures were issues of significant struggle until the 1960s, when the government established local, state, and federal unions for both landlords and peasants. However, this act scared the rural oligarchy, as it signalled a loss of power for them and an increase in the state's control over land, and landlords and their allies in the military reacted by overthrowing the constitutional government in the 1964 coup d'état (Welch 1995). This was unexpected at the time, but the military regime retained control of the government until 1985.

Paradoxically, this new dictatorship secured congressional approval for Brazil's first national agrarian reform law in November 1964. The Land Statute defined agrarian reform as *a combination of measures that seek to promote improved land distribution through modification of land tenure systems, in light of principles of social justice and enhanced productivity* (Bruno

1995: 5). However, just like the Land Law of 1850, the Land Statute of 1964 was written partially to satisfy external pressure, in this case pressure exerted by the United States. In accordance with the prescriptions of the US-backed Alliance for Progress programme, it was drafted by an executive committee of reformers inside the regime to eliminate latifundios and promote family farms through land redistribution and investment in the growth of a rural middle class, but its final composition was heavily influenced by representatives of the rural oligarchy in Congress.

Fearing that the statute would favour peasants, landlords worked effectively to alter its language and objectives in order to support state investment in the modernisation of large-scale agriculture and the consolidation of agro-industries. It became the legal framework for constructing Brazil's *Green Revolution*, a process that unfolded in parallel with the degradation of peasant farming – i.e. expropriation, expulsion, and a flight to urban slums by millions of resident farm workers and peasants (Palmeira 1989; Bruno 1995; Gonçalves Neto 1997). Indeed, the final version of the law expressed the benefits of concentrated landholding, the permanence of landlord power, and the use of public policy to disguise this assault on the peasantry as *development*. It set the stage for years of continued conflict and confusion over land governance, reinforcing contradictions that would fundamentally challenge the re-democratisation process that came with the end of the military regime in 1985 and approval of the New Republic's constitution in 1988.

# Regional divisions and inequalities

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The setting for these struggles was, of course, agrarian Brazil. Writing about territorial differentiation in the country, the geographers Milton Santos and Maria Laura Silveira developed a typology that considers a combination of variables, including situations and characteristics such as *densification* and *rarefaction*, and *spaces that control* and *spaces that obey*, in order to innovate in the analysis of centre-periphery relationships (2001: 259).

Densification and rarefaction are used to analyse the concentration and dispersal of objects and people in different geographic spaces. In relation to agricultural production, these elements can be used to characterise how the intensification of commodity production has transformed municipalities, micro-regions, and even macro-regions. In the Central-west region, for example, soybean expansion has concentrated land in the hands of large corporations, increasing levels of violence and rural-urban migratory flows as a large part of the population has been pushed toward cities, opening the countryside to still more commodity production and generating the type of social cost that is typical of rural capitalist development. According to the Santos/Silveira typology, in this case rural areas have been *rarefied* and urban areas *densified*.

The concept of commanding spaces and obedient spaces serves to describe situations such as the agribusiness monopoly over peasant territory. An international representation of this

tendency can be seen in an unapologetic advertisement that promoted the expansion of the biotech agribusiness transnational Syngenta. The ad showed the borders of a new nation supposedly called the *United Soybean Republic*, which incorporated sections of the national territories of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay – areas where Syngenta's genetically modified organism (GMO) seed has monopolised production.

The same phenomenon has been described as *capitalist territoriality in peasant territory* (Fernandes 2009). Agribusiness corporations clearly capitalise on the wealth produced by peasant families, as the majority of the wealth is captured by firms that industrialise and commercialise peasant crops. These processes intensify inequalities by deepening capitalist wealth concentration, further enabling capitalist control over territories and technologies, and reinforcing capital's subordination of the peasantry. They also lead to devastated environments, where nature is transformed and people lose their autonomy. For advocates of agrarian capitalism, the monopolisation of technology, the rural exodus, and territorial concentration are part of a *natural* process of agricultural modernisation. For analysts of the agrarian question, however, such violent and destructive outcomes could be minimised if the state intervened with policies designed to control the excesses of agrarian capitalism.

The conventional approach to representing regional divisions is that taken by IBGE. This government agency

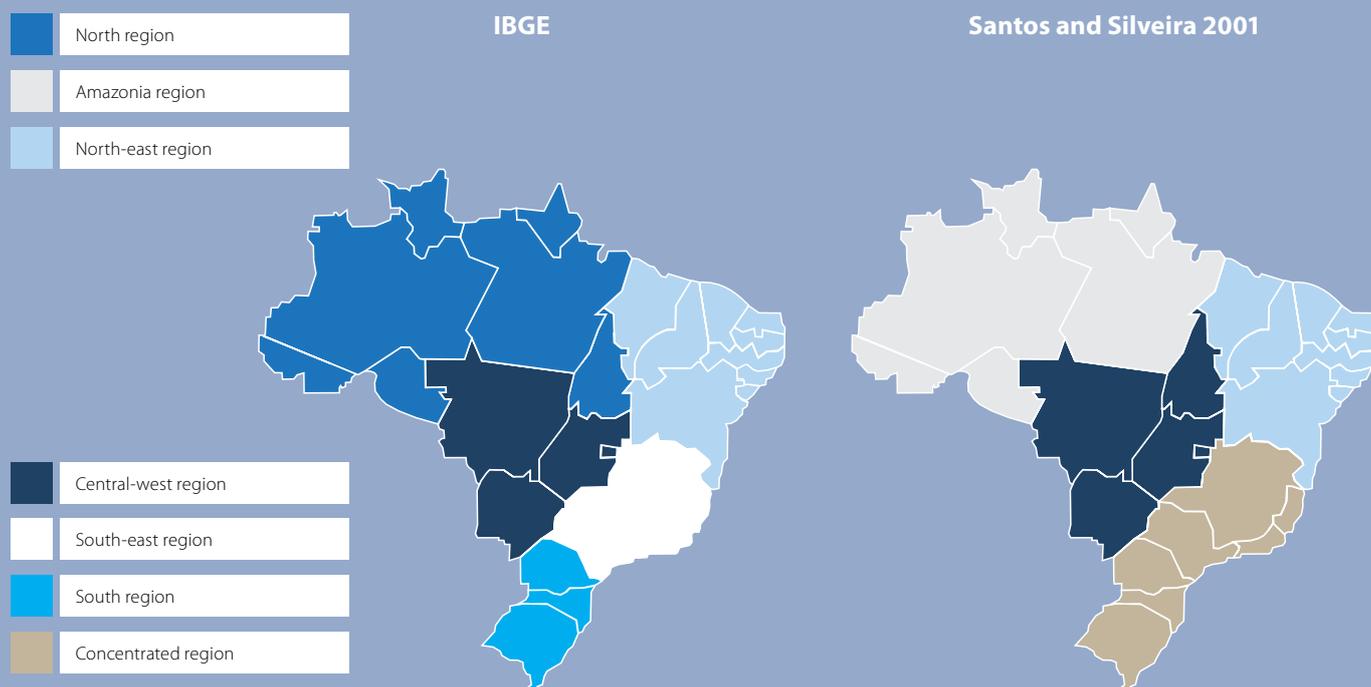


Figure 4: An alternative scheme for dividing Brazil into regions (Santos and Silveira 2001)

divides the country into five macro-regions, described in terms of their locations relative to the capital Brasilia: North, Northeast, Central-west, Southeast, and South. But their definition also depends on a number of socio-political, economic, and historical factors that have produced inequalities between them. This regional division scheme orients government planning principally towards the interests of capital, directing investments in infrastructure, cash flows, and economic dynamism that valorise some areas to the detriment of others, spaces that must survive at a slower pace on scarce resources.

In distinction to the IBGE model, the geographers Santos and Silveira (2001) developed an approach that divides Brazil into four analytically distinct macro-regions. These are the Concentrated Region, formed by portions of IBGE's Southeast and South regions; Amazonia, which differs from IBGE's North region by excluding the state of Tocantins; Northeast, which is to the same as the IBGE macro-region of the same name; and Central-west, which adds Tocantins to IBGE's similarly named sub-division (see Figure 4).

The Santos and Silveira model characterises Brazil principally based on the extent of the spread of capital and on government policy related to the establishment of physical and technological infrastructure. The extensive existence of these elements in southeastern and southern Brazil is the main factor explaining the name attributed to the Concentrated Region. In this area, there are higher levels of urbanisation and population density, more centres of industrial production, and more sophisticated distribution and consumer networks. These networks are integrated on a global scale, in which the financial and technological sectors play significant roles. In a seeming contradiction, it is in the Concentrated Region that the highest number of peasant land conflicts are reported.

Although Santos and Silveira consider the Central-west region to be an *area of peripheral occupation*, it is the second most developed region in terms of their criteria, due to the intense rate of expansion of global agribusiness there, including extensive links to China, the USA, and Europe. The Northeast region remains one of the most difficult to develop, due to a long history of occupation that has enabled a regional oligarchy to centralise power. Here, capitalism and the federal

government have made inroads only in fragmented fashion, establishing a number of industrialised nodes. In this region, peasant agriculture is more representative of general society and has traditionally faced up to large landowners in trying to defend its territory.

The Amazon region is the setting of serious conflict, as indigenous peoples and peasants seek to defend their territories from the aggressive invasion of agricultural firms. These companies do all they can to exploit the area's vast reserves of public land. It is Brazil's largest region and its last agricultural frontier. Amazonia is a strategic region that abuts several foreign countries and is also the focus of world attention due to the vastness of its tropical forest. Paradoxically, it is second only to the Concentrated Region in its volume of air traffic – yet another sign of the intensification of capitalist designs on the region (Santos and Silveira 2001).

This model of regional divisions makes explicit the differences represented by public and private actions. National and transnational corporations act to take control of the spaces that affect their bottom line; governments formulate policies to guide these actions and enforce compliance. Other institutions also participate in producing regional spaces, but to a lesser extent and with limited powers to control outcomes. Such institutions include non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as labour unions and peasant organisations. Most of the time, these entities do not have their own development projects and thus find themselves caught up in those presented by the state or by capital. A capitalist offensive, coupled with supportive government policy, generally determines the logic of territorial organisation.

The different positions of these groups generate constant conflict, which in turn sheds light on the singularities of different models of development. The regional division scheme of Santos and Silveira further helps to evaluate the diversity of land governance in Brazil. Many different variables can be chosen to analyse the regional distinctions of the country's agrarian question in a comparative way. The variables chosen in the sections that follow below include a region's principal commodities, its land tenure system, characteristics of peasant agriculture, and illustrative conflicts.

### **Aspects of the land question in the Concentrated Region**

The Concentrated Region is where the paradox of inequality is most evident. It is the region with the most modernised agriculture, where farmers have the highest level of education, and where there are relatively high levels of access to technical support, but it is also where the incidence of conflicts over land is highest. It would seem moreover that the prospects are not good for a reduction in the number of conflicts since, according to the 2006 agricultural census, peasant farmers' contribution to gross output maintained its standing in the South, but fell in the Southeast region. These are the two IBGE regions that compose Santos and Silveira's Concentrated Region.

It was in this region that agribusiness first established itself. It expanded through growth in commodity production, expelling some peasants and subjecting the rest to the capitalist model. Soybeans, tobacco, sugar cane, oranges, coffee, corn, milk, chicken, pork, beef, and forest products such as cellulose are the region's principal agricultural commodities. To varying degrees, peasants are responsible for the production of these commodities: at the time of the 2006 census, small farms cultivated 85% of the tobacco produced, 80% of the oranges, 45% of the corn, and 42% of the coffee. Their contribution to food crops was also significant, with family farmers growing 75% of the cassava produced in the region and 60% of the dry beans.

Small farmers' produce is almost always integrated within chains of dependency created by large corporations, for everything from basic inputs such as seed and feed to marketing. Due to the powerful presence of agribusiness in the region, peasants have been squeezed out. Even with high rates of land occupation and the use of land reform credits, they have not been able to expand their territory, due primarily to high land prices. According to the 2006 census, family agriculture represents 80% of the number of establishments in the region, but only 30% of the cultivated area.

São Paulo state possesses the world's largest citrus farming industry (617,900 hectares of orchards). Some 95% of production is conducted on groves of less than 35 hectares in size, using mostly family labour. However, industrialisation and commercialisation of the crop are controlled by just four large companies that appropriate the lion's share of wealth from the

production chain. The territorial and technological concentration of these agribusinesses promotes conflict through both exploitation of labour and the expropriation of property, both land and product (Welch and Fernandes 2008). In 2009, in protest against these conditions and further concentration, the MST occupied a huge orange orchard owned by one of the four corporations, the Brazilian firm Cutrale. Normally, unproductive latifundios are the focus of peasant movement protest, but in the Concentrated zone, where agribusiness dominates, the struggle against advanced capitalist agriculture has grown. At an ever more intensive rate, corporations are renting or buying land in the region to produce commodities and squeeze out peasants. Recently, with increased pressure to produce ethanol and biodiesel, the region has become even more conflict-ridden, as competition for land use between foodstuffs and biofuel crops such as sugar cane has intensified.

In addition to the advance of agribusiness over the latifundio, the region is plagued by the more traditional question of *grilagem*. Large areas of public land have been sold to agribusinesses by land sharks who have used false documents to legitimate their proprietorship. In the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, more than 1 million hectares fall into the category of *terras griladas* – currently under the control of either idle landlords or aggressive agribusinesses. These lands are often targeted for reclamation by peasant movements, which mobilise the landless to pressurise government agencies to use the expropriated land to create agrarian reform settlements.

### Aspects of the land question in the Northeast

An unusual feature of the land question in the Northeast region is the lack of infrastructure and technology accessible for use by the majority of peasants. The region is home to 50% of the nation's peasant class. Family farmers living in conditions of extreme poverty – dependent for their survival on government assistance programmes such as the *bolsa familia* (*family purse*) – comprise a large proportion of the 88% of small establishments that occupy 60% of the region's land area. To earn enough to survive, thousands of peasants migrate seasonally to the Concentrated Region to work on the sugar cane, orange, and coffee harvests. Even under these precarious conditions, Northeastern farmers produce 82% of the region's cassava, 79% of its dry beans, 70% of its rice, and 65% of the corn consumed there. Though impoverished, ill equipped, and with few or no resources and little land, peasants in the Northeast are responsible for a large part of the country's food security. Agribusiness is also active in the region as a producer of commodities for export. The Northeast is a markedly agricultural region, characterised by both food production for domestic consumption and the production of agro-exports. Modern forms of *coronelismo* feed off these conditions and allow the political boss system to maintain its grip.

The marginalisation of Northeastern peasants has worsened with increased expropriation of land stimulated by the expansion of soybean plantations in the states of Bahia, Maranhão, and Piauí. Recent processes of land grabbing by foreign firms and governments, including from China and the Arab Middle East, have created new elements to the land question in the region. Another factor is the dramatic growth of the forestry industry, a monoculture that has reshaped the region's landscape with *green deserts* consisting of millions of eucalyptus trees, all destined to produce paper for export. Monocultures such as this expropriate land and subordinate peasants and indigenous peoples.

For those advocating for agribusiness interests, however, the Northeast is a secondary region given its relatively low contribution (20%) to the gross national product (GNP). With so many smaller properties, the region still defies the logic of agrarian capitalism, which values concentration and centralisation. It fails the test as an agribusiness model; however, if peasant resistance were to be successfully broken, the capitalist sector's view of the territory could change dramatically.

### Aspects of the land question in Amazonia

Amazonia was the site of one of the worst massacres of Brazilian peasants in the post-World War II era. On 17 April 1996, in the municipality of El Dorado dos Carajás in the state of Pará, 17 unarmed landless protesters were murdered by the state's military police as they marched peacefully towards the state capital to demand agrarian reform. This part of eastern Amazonia is one of Brazil's agricultural frontier zones and its lands are disputed by Indians, peasants, and agribusiness firms. Beef cattle and soybeans are two of the principal commodity interests laying claim to the area.

The federal government entered the conflict with a strategic view of the region's enormous and sparsely populated forests in responding to pressure from popular movements for agrarian reform. Hence, 40% of all families who have been resettled and 74% of the land dedicated to agrarian reform settlements nationally are located in the region (NERA 2010). Such policies encouraged the Carajás marchers, but the Pará state authorities who ordered the attack showed that they were not part of the programme. The term *faroeste* (*Wild West*) has been coined to describe the lawlessness of the area and the violent nature of frontier disputes between so many rivals. The Carajás massacre is emblematic of a region that boasts the highest incidence of land conflicts resulting in deaths.

In Amazonia, the government has invested in normalising historic land tenure as a means of advancing its land reform goals, even though the registration of squatter tenure is not the sort of reform demanded by peasant movements. Moreover, this *regularisation* policy has resulted in scandalous travesties of justice. It is well known that large landholders have taken advantage of the government's policy by formally sub-dividing their estates among family members and subordinates to obtain legal titles to areas they have never purchased. Despite the contradictions, the Lula government used these practices to bolster its agrarian reform statistics (Santos and Porro 2011).

National and transnational corporations, as well as individual landlords, have generally seen the region's natural resources, hydroelectric potential, mineral wealth, and low population density as opportunities to expand their territories. The government recognises these elements as advantages of

Amazonia and sees the region as one of Brazil's greatest potential resources. Even though its contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) is currently very low, at 4.3%, the very fact that it contains half of Brazil's national territory makes the area intensely attractive to agribusiness interests.

Peasants account for 87% of the region's establishments but occupy only 30% of its territory. They are responsible for producing 89% of its dry beans, 87% of its cassava, 73% of its corn, and 53% of its rice. As in the Northeast region, peasant farming is essential to guaranteeing the population's supply of basic foodstuffs. However, the expansion of commodity production is rapidly reducing the peasants' territorial possession. It may be that the peasant model is actually more sustainable in the Concentrated Region, where the demand for food and proximity to markets are greater.

### **Aspects of the land question in the Central-west region**

The most striking aspects of the land question in the Central-west region are the intensity of the expansion of agribusiness coupled with the relatively low level of representation of the peasantry. While peasants account for 69% of establishments, they control only 10% of the land. Soybean plantations have expanded rapidly since the 1980s, and soy has become the region's principal crop. Agribusinesses are strongest in soybeans, where they are responsible for 98% of production, but they are dominant also in rice and dry beans, with peasants producing less than 25% of the total of both crops. The contributions of small farmers to cassava and coffee production are bigger, at 55% and 62% respectively.

Politically, the Central-west region is punctuated by towns that were founded by agribusiness interests and which adhere to a capitalist perspective. While it is smaller than Amazonia, the Centre-west contributes substantially more to GNP, at 14%. However, the peasantry here seems to be losing its foothold on all fronts. The agrarian reform settlements in the region parallel national standards in terms of the number of families settled, but their economic contribution to the local economy is very low, at 2.9% of regional production. This is a clear example of how expansion of the agribusiness model expropriates peasant land and participation in production. The model of modernised agriculture that is now prevalent has as one of its main objectives the elimination of competition, which means that a strategically important sector for development such as peasant farmers could be eliminated by policies that place value only on agro-export commodities grown as monocultures.

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# Paradigmatic disputes: agrarian question vs. agrarian capitalism

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The paradigm concept is a reference point for analysing the thinking, policies, and territories intentionally produced by certain sectors. Paradigms represent world visions that combine the interests and ideologies, desires and determinations that private actions and public policy make manifest in space, often through the designation of territories that express the intentions of social classes. Social scientists use them as resources for interpreting and explaining reality. In this regard, paradigms are mental constructions utilised to debate ideas and configure immaterial territories that, in the real world, become material through the intricate workings of power relations.

Moreover, paradigmatic readings influence the elaboration of public policies for agricultural development, determining the quantity of resources to be applied in certain regions, territories, sectors, cultures, institutions, and so forth. For this reason, it is of fundamental importance to understand the paradigmatic movement involved from constructing an interpretation to the point of executing a policy. At the same time, scholars and think tanks work to produce interpretations that best represent reality according to their research and are often engaged in the paradigmatic debate. Paradigms by their very nature are not absolute but malleable and, when studied closely, their differences can be clearly understood.

Two paradigms best express the positions of stakeholders in debates about land governance in Brazil. As mentioned earlier, these are the agrarian capitalism and agrarian question paradigms. Stakeholders include diverse civil society organisations (CSOs) and institutions such as local, state, and federal governments, agribusiness firms at regional, national, and transnational levels, and a variety of peasant movements and farm organisations.

On the one hand, the agrarian question paradigm has as its point of departure class struggle to explain territorial disputes and the struggle to defend models of development that enable peasant autonomy. This paradigm's interpretation of reality holds that agrarian problems – especially inequality and threats to the existence of the peasantry – are products of the capitalist structure. To work for the construction of an alternative system is to struggle against capitalism (Fernandes 2008).

The agrarian capitalist paradigm, on the other hand, argues that problems such as inequality and the disappearance of peasant farmers are products of circumstances, especially human error, that can be overcome by means of policies that encourage the *integration* of family farmers into the market system. From this perspective, peasants are viewed as impoverished small farmers who must learn either to swim with the capitalist tide and become part of agribusiness

themselves or sink quietly due to their incompetence. Advocates of this paradigm argue that peasants and capital exist in the same political space, as part of a totality (capitalist society) that does not differentiate between the two, because for them class struggle has no role in reality (Abramovay 1992). Over time, those identified with each paradigm have contributed to the development of distinct interpretations concerning land overnance in rural areas of Brazil.

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# Stakeholders: a long and constant struggle

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It is remarkable to see how the basic framework of the land governance debate has remained as constant as Brazil's territory itself, even though understandings of the paradigmatic nature of the struggle have changed with the institutional identity of the participants. In situation after situation, Brazil's marginalised classes have tried to improve their control over the land, only to find the state aligned against them in alliance with landlords. During the Empire, peasants and the rural working classes in general rose up against the imposition of laws that required the registration of births and participation in a national census, fearful that compliance with these demands would further weaken their autonomy and independence, turning them into wage-slaves working on plantations.

In the meantime, those who were enslaved increasingly rebelled and fought for their emancipation (Palacios 2009). During the first republic, peasants organised themselves to protect autonomous communities, aware (if not always articulate) about the web of capitalist encroachment that sought to absorb them in the cash nexus. Symbolically important conflicts occurred in the northeast at Canudos in the 1890s and in the southeast in Contestado in the years leading up to World War I (Levine 1995; Machado 2004). In each case, the rebellious peasants understood that they

wanted to avoid or escape being *captives* or being *enslaved* by the landlords. While their language was different from ours, they clearly expressed opposition to the agrarian capitalism paradigm and promoted by their actions the principal agrarian question – how should the land be owned and governed to accommodate the interests of all, not just a privileged few?

The power of the rural oligarchy rooted in coronelismo and consolidated in the monopolisation of federal government control by successive São Paulo coffee planter presidencies inspired the newly formed Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) to develop a critique of the country's *questión campesina* in the 1920s. Influenced by the Communist International, the PCB argued that Brazil was in a feudal stage of development that demanded an *agrarian revolution* in order to progress. The party organised a political front – the Bloco Operário e Camponês – to participate in the presidential election of 1930 in alliance with the newly formed Democratic Party (PD).

According to PCB thinkers, the PD united workers and farmers who were dedicated to building nationally controlled capitalism in Brazil, whereas the ruling party – the Republican Party – was supported by large-scale planters who produced crops for an export market controlled by Great Britain and the United States. These planters resembled feudal lords who counted on exploiting peasants in conditions of near slavery

to make their profits and guarantee their dominance. Once the agrarian revolution had built capitalism in the countryside by distributing land, conditions would be ripe for pushing forward a socialist revolution. The 1930 election (which allegedly was rigged, and resulted in a revolution that overthrew the government) did not go well for the PCB-PD alliance, but the communists held onto these arguments into the 1950s, forming a national organisational network called the Peasant Leagues to unite *agricultural workers and poor farmers* in support of the agrarian question paradigm (Welch 1999: 47-54).

From 1949 until 1964, the PCB published the first nationally circulated journal by, for, and about peasants. Initially called *Nossa Terra*, the monthly's name was later changed to *Terra Livre*. It was directed specifically at the problems involved in identifying the difficulties that peasants faced and at mobilising all rural workers to overcome these difficulties through collective action and favourable state intervention. The subtitle on the front page of *Terra Livre* was the old anarchist demand, *Land for those who work it!* Indeed, the journal's articles demonstrated the complexity of the agrarian question paradigm by embracing land reform as the redistribution of the governance of latifundios from landlords to peasants and by proposing various policy reforms consistent with the construction of capitalism, such as easing peasant access to credit and rural extension services.

In 1954, the PCB organised the first national congress for peasants, where delegates founded the Farmers and Agricultural Workers Union of Brazil (ULTAB). ULTAB organisers fought to support peasants through a campaign to organise associations and unions in many Brazilian states. They fought to gain support for legislation such as the Rural Worker Statute (ETR), approved in June 1963, after decades of struggle to include peasants in Brazil's corporatist union structure. ULTAB continued to organise peasants until it was dissolved with the establishment of the National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG) in December 1963.

For politicians, even those in the PCB, the corporatist union structure offered a means of directing the political weight of the rural working classes. For this reason, there were employer groups like the National Confederation of Agriculture (CNA) that supported the ETR. The CNA, as the top tier of the complementary

rural employer union structure that was also established by the statute, expressed confidence that it would be stronger and more agile than the peasant unions (Welch 1999).

In the state of Pernambuco, communists, peasants, and landlords also initially united to found a new movement that became the Peasant Leagues, after the socialist lawyer and politician Francisco Julião became its honorary but intensely active president. From 1959, a network of leagues organised mostly among small sugar cane producers and cutters grew dramatically in the northeast, when the original league won approval from the state government to expropriate the plantation on which its members lived. The organisation had an influence beyond its size by advocating for land reform and supporting the interests of peasants (Montenegro 2002; Stedile 2002). For Julião and his followers, it was far better to have one's own land than to be dependent on wages, a position that differed from the one advocated by the politically stronger PCB. The party held to a more orthodox Marxist concept of stages of development, in which the creation of a rural proletariat was seen as an important and necessary step on the road toward socialism.

The Office of the Superintendent of Agrarian Policy (SUPRA), a new government entity created in 1963, was made responsible for helping peasants and their representatives to establish hundreds of unions. The government's idea was to build a political force to break the hegemony of the rural oligarchy in Congress and thereby advance reforms that would help overcome inequalities. A conventional perspective of the time was that the latifundio was a huge barrier to the country's economic development. It represented a waste of both natural and human resources as well as political and cultural backwardness, especially since it was the economic and power base of the rural landlords' legislative caucus that put the brakes on measures to advance Brazil's capitalist transformation. Until the coup d'état (golpe) in April 1964, which saw a military government take over, SUPRA united rival stakeholders – particularly the PCB and the Catholic Church – in founding dozens of rural worker unions (STRs) and numerous state federations. These were the organisational building blocks of CONTAG, which remains Brazil's largest peasant organisation today.

Among opponents to changes favouring peasants, the resistance of planters, sugar mill owners, and other large commodity farmers and ranchers was so great that not even the conservative 1946 Constitution could stop them from getting their way. It was the rural oligarchy, especially those organised in the Concentrated Region states of Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo, who encouraged and funded civil society groups in support of the 1964 coup. The military leaders of the conspiracy revoked the constitution and embarked on two decades of dictatorship. The regime lost no time in repressing the Peasant Leagues and the rural labour movement in general. The leadership of CONTAG was replaced and almost 80% of the unions had their official registration suspended, while the regime allowed continued registration of explicitly anti-communist unions, most of them linked to the conservative wing of the Catholic Church (Welch 1999; Medeiros 1989).

Nevertheless, against expectations the regime adopted a corporatist perspective, seeing the unions as a useful tool for constructing its hegemony and collaborating with its project to strengthen agrarian capitalism. This *carrot and stick* approach seemed to reap returns for the regime; as the historian José Murilo de Carvalho observed, *the rural electorate [...] supported [the military regime] in all the elections* (2004: 172). After an initial phase of repression, the regime rewarded the countryside for its support by introducing in 1971 the Rural Extension and Technical Assistance Programme (PRORURAL), which inspired a new round of peasant mobilisation through CONTAG's Rural Labour Union Movement (MSTR). Throughout all this, CONTAG's battle cry remained agrarian reform (Houtzager 1998; elch 2009).

With PRORURAL, the dictatorship introduced into the rural environment one of the more profound transformations of social relations in Brazil's history. For the first time, rural areas witnessed an expansion of social services. Through the Rural Assistance Fund (FUNRURAL), the government supported the construction of health clinics, dentists' offices, and legal public assistance programmes in small rural communities. The regime made the STRs responsible for administering funds, thereby helping to stimulate the formation of union branches across the country via the MSTR. Between 1971 and 1978, the number of peasants registered as members of unions jumped from one million to six million, each member the head of a

household of, on average, five people. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the programme continued to work as a form of national welfare programme, sustaining hundreds of rural communities through social security payments made to retired easants and spent in local economies (Houtzager 1998; Gaspari 2002).

These advances for peasants were not well received by all stakeholders. Some landlords and their allies in the conservative wing of the Catholic Church saw the changes as a loss of control for themselves. In the meantime, the progressive wing of the Church, which wholeheartedly embraced Liberation theology (which interprets Christian beliefs in terms of class struggle and liberation from oppression) initially supported the MSTR. Two outspoken church leaders, Archbishop Helder Camara and Bishop Pedro Casaldágia, were inspired by the needs of peasants in their respective regions, Camara in the Northeast region and Casaldágia in the Central-west community of São Felix do Araguaia, where an intense conflict between the pro-peasant armed left and the modernising military regime caused much suffering in the Araguaia River basin area.

In the late 1960s, the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), the product of an ideological dispute earlier that decade within the PCB, chose the Araguaia area to build a guerrilla army of peasants to oppose and attempt to topple the dictatorship. Dozens of militants were sent to the area, but once their purpose was discovered, the government sent troops to eliminate them. The counter-insurgency campaign proved difficult, however, and the military profoundly changed social relations in the area by instituting a *scorched earth* strategy reminiscent of tactics used in the Vietnam War.

The difficult situation faced by the Catholic peasants caused Casaldágia to become a national voice in defence of peasant interests and the instigator in founding a special unit within the Church to support the peasants' struggle to regain control over the land. Founded in the Central-west city of Goiania in 1975, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) soon developed an outlook that diverged fundamentally from that of CONTAG. While the MSTR organised among peasants whose needs were acknowledged by the regime, the CPT worked with a peasantry that seemingly had no place in the military's

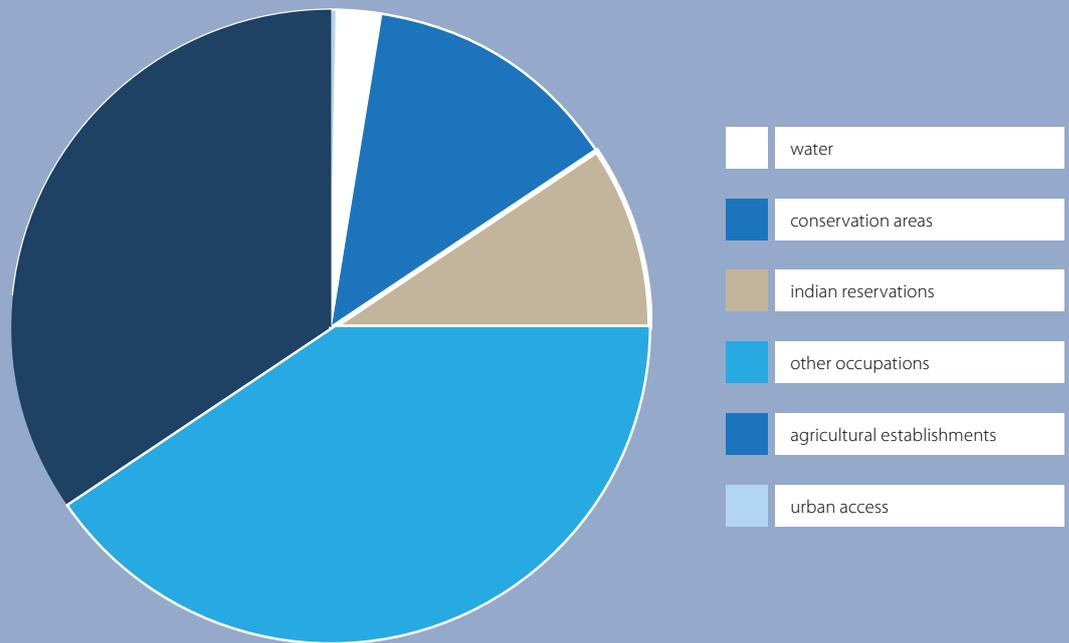


Figure 5: Territorial distribution (hectares)

development plans. In this context, it worked to help peasants resist expropriation and being reduced to the status of serfs (Gonçalves Neto 1997; CPT 1985).

The CPT relied on the structure of the Church to carry out its work; in dioceses where conservative priests held sway, it made little headway. CONTAG was dependent on the state and had difficulties in dealing with peasant demands that could not be handled through official channels. Given the disruptive nature of the dictatorship's plans for transforming the countryside and the limitations of CONTAG and the CPT, the suffering of peasants only increased over time, and new movements were formed to help in their defence. Among those most in need of help were newly landless peasants in general, and those facing the particular problem of flooding caused by a large-scale construction programme of hydroelectric dams.

Beginning in the late 1970s, rebellious leaders within CONTAG unions started to push for change, and the CPT lent a hand by supporting alternative candidates for election to STR leadership posts. In the early 1980s, the newly founded Unified Workers Central (CUT) formed a special national department

to organise peasants, joining the CPT effort to force changes in CONTAG. In the course of these union struggles, important individuals such as João Pedro Stedile and José Rainha Junior cut their teeth and eventually helped form the Landless Workers Movement (MST) as an autonomous organisation in 1984 (Welch 2006b).

Thus, at the beginning of the New Republic in 1985, stakeholders among the peasantry were organised into diverse entities. The oldest of these, CONTAG, was struggling for land reform within the limitations of the state's agrarian capitalist development schemes. The CPT, on the other hand, advocated a concept of agrarian reform that defended a permanent peasant presence on the land; its ally the MST supported the same goal but added to it the *return to the countryside* of peasants and descendants of peasants who had been expelled. In fact, for the MST, anyone who thought they had an agricultural vocation was eligible to participate in the land struggle (Welch 2006b).

From the time of Brazil's first republic (1889–1930), the agrarian capitalism paradigm enjoyed strong support among large-scale planters, cattlemen, and farmers. The National Society of

Agriculture (SNA), founded in 1897, was the first entity set up to represent these interests. Headquartered in the federal capital of the time, Rio de Janeiro, it defended the interests of a relatively undynamic but most traditional of agricultural sectors, the sugar planters and processors of the Northeast. In 1902, coffee planters in São Paulo established the Paulista Society of Agriculture (SPA) to help secure their interests in the development of public policy. The SPA's relative weakness, however, led the largest producers of coffee and cattle in the Concentrated Region to form the Brazilian Rural Society (SRB) in 1919. The SRB's ideological independence and its support from the region's most dynamic growers helped it to consolidate its hegemony in the corridors of power, until the revolution that ended the period and installed Getúlio Vargas in the National Palace (Welch 1999).

As already observed, the government had always supported agrarian capitalism, but its policy proposals did not always enjoy the total support of organisations like the SRB. Vargas tried to weaken the influence of the SRB, for example, by establishing a corporatist organisational structure that excluded the São Paulo group. This led to the creation of the CNA, which Vargas decreed into existence as the representative body of the rural classe patronal (agricultural property owners and employers) in municipally based associations. The idea was to mobilise all rural proprietors and employers – planters and ranchers – in an organisational structure in order to strengthen the sector's involvement in the framing and implementation of agricultural policy. A parallel structure established during Vargas's rule included institutions for regulating the production and marketing of commodities such as sugar cane, coffee, and rubber. The associations were socio-political entities, while the institutions had economic and technical functions (Welch 1999).

The modernising tendency of large-scale planning initiated by Vargas was pursued with even greater determination by the dictatorship 20 years later. While the discourse of both administrations was nationalistic, their practices deepened Brazil's integration with foreign capital. That is to say, the traditional agro-export model supported by the SRB was actually pursued with enthusiasm by the authoritarian bureaucrats of the military regime (Gonçalves Neto 1997). They made real the dreams of the developmentalists of

consolidating the ties between agriculture and industry with the creation of so-called Agro-Industrial Complexes (CAI), which expanded greatly with the implementation of the National Ethanol Programme (PROÁLCOOL) during the 1970s oil crisis (Graziano da Silva 1996). Viewed from the perspective of peasants, however, the worst development of the era was the extension of the agricultural frontier into the Centre-west and Amazon regions. This policy of agricultural colonisation on a vast scale disrupted the lives of an estimated 20 million people (Palmeira 1989).

The neoliberal phase of capitalism brought challenges to the political and organisational structure of the dominant rural class. In the 1980s, suffering from extremely high foreign debt, the Brazilian government submitted itself to structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These multilateral capitalist organisations insisted on reforms to break up the corporatist and developmental architecture that had prevailed in Brazil from the time of Vargas. The commodities institutions were seen as protectionist and were eliminated. The SAPs called for the end of the corporatist union structure, too, although entrenched interests in both the CNA and CONTAG succeeded in staving off fundamental change. The SAPs even threatened Brazil's leading state agricultural research unit, EMBRAPA (Brazilian Agricultural Research Agency), which saved itself by more closely following scientific agendas set by the USA and Europe.

Until the early 1990s, the structural reform of agricultural policies in Brazil meant government abandonment of farmers in favour of *letting the market decide* the commodities, enterprises, and individuals that would survive, as dictated by neoliberal ideologists (Pereira 2010). In response to the threats posed by all this change, the most reactionary of all landlord groups, the Democratic Rural Union (UDR) was founded in the 1980s to fight reform (Bruno et al. 2008).

In this context, foreign investment increased and there was growing involvement by transnational firms largely based in the USA, including familiar names such as Cargill, Bunge, and Monsanto. Around 1990, the word *agribusiness* entered the vocabulary, and by 1993 the Brazilian Agribusiness Association (ABAG) had been established, using the English word in its

name. In 1996, the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso sought to stimulate the sector with the formation of the National Forum on Agriculture (FNA). According to Cardoso, the objective of the forum was *to systematise strategic thought on the improvement of agribusiness; it had the responsibility of generating proposals with broad geographical appeal and support from the representatives of the sector's economic agents, consumers, and workers* (Martinez 2000: 19). In 1998, twelve members of the forum were invited to sit on the National Agribusiness Council (CONSAGRO), the executive body of the FNA. CONSAGRO was to facilitate *articulation and negotiation among branches of government and the private sector, aiming to implement mechanisms, guidelines, and other competitive strategies for the medium and long term benefit of Brazilian agribusiness...* (Martinez 2000).

In the process of democratisation, the first government of the New Republic assumed as part of its mandate responsibility for carrying out land reform. Unfortunately, the unexpected death of the winning presidential candidate Tancredo Neves elevated to power a vice-president – José Sarney – who did not share the same values. Still, some actions were already under way. In May 1985 a committee of workers and intellectuals established the first National Plan for Agrarian Reform (PNRA), establishing goals for the establishment of settlements. However, the rural landlord caucus in Congress, with Sarney's approval, neutered the plan before it reached the president's desk. One original recommendation was to create a new ministry to implement agrarian reform, rather than leave such an important and controversial responsibility to the Ministry of Agriculture (MA). The Ministry of Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (MIRAD) was created in 1985, but by 1989 the rural caucus had succeeded in eliminating it by adding agrarian reform to the portfolio of the MA. Two years later, the MA changed its name to MARA – the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform (Fernandes 2000).

The MARA changed its name again at the start of the twenty-first century, when the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) was established in 2000 after a long political struggle provoked by the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre of 1996. At this time, the MARA became the Food and Agriculture Ministry (MAPA), dropping responsibility for agrarian reform once again. Currently, stakeholder groups work to influence the policies

and actions of these two federal government ministries (Scarso 2010). The most influential agrarian capitalism stakeholders are the ABAG and the CNA, while among peasant organisations Via Campesina is the most vocal on the agrarian question paradigm. Its most active member organisations are the MST, the CPT, the Small Farmer Movement (MPA), the Movement of Those Affected by Dams (MAB), and the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC).

# Political disputes: agribusiness vs. the peasantry

In these rival paradigms, peasant farmers and agribusiness companies come into conflict over their competing models of development and territories on which to apply them. One strong point of contention lies in the identity debate: what is agribusiness, what is the peasantry, and who are family farmers? For agribusiness organisations like the ABAG, agribusiness is a totality, a self-contained system composed of financial sources, scientific knowledge, technological innovation, hired labour, agricultural production, animal husbandry, industrial processing, and marketing, which encompasses all capitalist and non-capitalist farmers, both large and small, defining them as large or small agribusinesses. This view is also embedded in the outlooks of CONTAG and the recently founded Family Farm Worker Federation (FETRAF).

For Via Campesina, however, the totality that agribusiness claims to represent is part and parcel of the discursive apparatus used to construct its hegemony over the countryside. For member organisations of the Via, it has been important to articulate a peasant identity that represents the agrarian capitalism paradigm as a set of systems for the production of commodities by means of large-scale monoculture, mainly for export, that exploits peasant land and labour. Peasants themselves are organised in systems based on self-financing, indigenous knowledge, appropriate

technology, family labour, the small-scale production of diverse crops and livestock, and direct sales to local markets, all of which form a unique logic that is antithetical to capitalism.

Among these identities, only that of the family farmer is defined by law. In 2006, the legislature approved Law Nº. 11326, which defines family farms as those that depend on family labour and are limited in size to four *modules*, a territorial unit that varies in size from municipality to municipality, depending on the predominant forms of agricultural exploitation considered necessary at that scale to support a family of five.

Representing agribusiness as a totality – i.e. everyone is a farmer – is a strategy used by advocates of the agrarian capitalism paradigm to hide inequalities generated by rural power relations. Publications by the institutions that support this view promote the idea of a singular identity – that of *agribusinessmen* – and argue that farmers cannot be divided into capitalists and family farmers (Navarro 2010). But this position could not prevent an important innovation in the 2006 agricultural census. To carry out the census, the MDA demanded that the IBGE perform a separate count of family farmers (as defined by Law Nº. 11326), and for the first time in Brazilian history the results were separated into two categories: family farms and non-family farms (IBGE 2009<sup>a</sup>).

The immediate reaction of the CNA, ABAG, and MAPA to census results based on these categories provided clear evidence of the paradigmatic nature of these stakeholders' discourses and created significant discomfort for the Lula administration, whose pro-agribusiness policies dramatically contradicted its deep roots in peasant movement politics. The CNA's response was the most substantive, contracting a think tank to produce a new analysis of the census data that highlighted the role of agribusiness – an identity that the IBGE had avoided. In *Who Does What in the Countryside – How and Where? The Agricultural Census of 2006: Results – Brazil and Regions* (CNA 2010), the authors filtered the data by using different variables, criteria, and methodologies to show the strengths of agribusiness. Thus, we learn that agribusiness controls 85% of government-subsidised agricultural credit and 76% of arable land, produces 62% of the sector's gross output, and employs about 26% of people economically active in rural areas. These criteria celebrate the scale of agribusiness in Brazil, but they also document its concentrated control over resources and its mediocre performance as a job creator.

The united front of agribusiness stakeholders criticising the census results led to an alignment of Via Campesina, CONTAG, and FETRAF with the MDA in defending the results. The census became a *teaching moment* that clarified the positions of stakeholders and highlighted their differences over development models and land governance strategies. The hegemonic status of agribusiness in Brazil allows little tolerance for alternatives to its model of producing agro-export commodities and domestic foodstuffs in large-scale, integrated systems that depend heavily on pesticides and GMO crops. Via Campesina has formulated responses advocating food sovereignty policies and agro-ecological production methods that enhance the control of the state and small-scale producers (in contrast with large private sector corporations) over food production and distribution.

The scale of what is at stake in these paradigmatic disputes can be seen in the distribution of Brazilian territory, as shown in Figure 5. With some 308 million hectares of land being used in *undeclared ways*, agribusiness seems to fear a loss of territory if land reform is implemented. Territorial disputes between agribusiness and peasant farmers and between agribusiness and indigenous communities have only intensified with the

pressure of global markets to produce more and more soybeans and sugar cane, both of which are now becoming even more attractive due to their role in generating biodiesel and ethanol for an oil-starved world.

# The land reform experience

As we have seen, Brazil has a long history of re-ordering its land governance practices, i.e. of land reform. From the capitanias and sesmarias established by Portuguese kings to the Land Law of 1850, the Land Statute of 1964, and the inclusion of agrarian reform in the 1988 constitution, governments have consistently worked to devise norms for state intervention in the moulding of rural areas. The integration of both small and large producers has also been part of the mix since the colonial period, when smaller units served the domestic market and larger ones shipped commodities abroad as part of the mercantile system. Not just plantations, but also mines, towns, and ports were important in the integration of smaller-scale producers of foodstuffs and of cattle farmers (who were often organised on a larger scale). This basic model has persisted, as has the tendency of large-scale producers and landlords to squeeze out smaller producers. While peasant producers have always found a place for their produce in the market, guaranteeing their place on the land has almost always proved more complicated.

The vast majority of farmers in Brazil today are small family farmers or peasants. Many thousands of them are the product of agrarian reform policies specifically designed to support small-scale producers. Some experiences resulted from policies developed in the early twentieth century. In the 1980s, when world concern was growing over the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, a rubber-tapper named Chico Mendes attracted significant attention on account of his sustainable

production methods. Mendes utilised the structure of Brazil's rural labour unions to organise other tappers in a struggle to save the forest from encroaching cattle ranchers, who were rapidly burning thousands of hectares of forest to the ground in order to create grazing land. The warm and likeable Mendes attracted the support of international environmental organisations. His success in world forums, however, contributed to making him a target for assassination, and in 1988 he was murdered by a local rancher. His elevation to martyr status helped support the movement to establish a new type of agrarian reform settlement, the *extractive reserve* – huge areas of rainforest where access and development were to be limited to sustainable practices such as rubber-tapping (Mendes 1989; Paula 1999).

Mendes's grandfather had originally moved to the state of Acre from the Northeast state of Ceará as part of a colonisation plan promoted by the government to secure the territory from Bolivia. These agricultural colonies became launching pads for Brazil's early twentieth-century rubber boom. In 1938, the Vargas dictatorship encouraged further agricultural colonisation of western Brazil through a project called *Westward March*. Acre itself was a destination for the *rubber soldiers* project, which was designed to stimulate the migration of men from the Northeast to the Amazon to produce natural rubber to help the Allied cause in World War II. The Amazon region was also a target for development by the military regime in the 1970s. The regime eliminated SUPRA as subversive

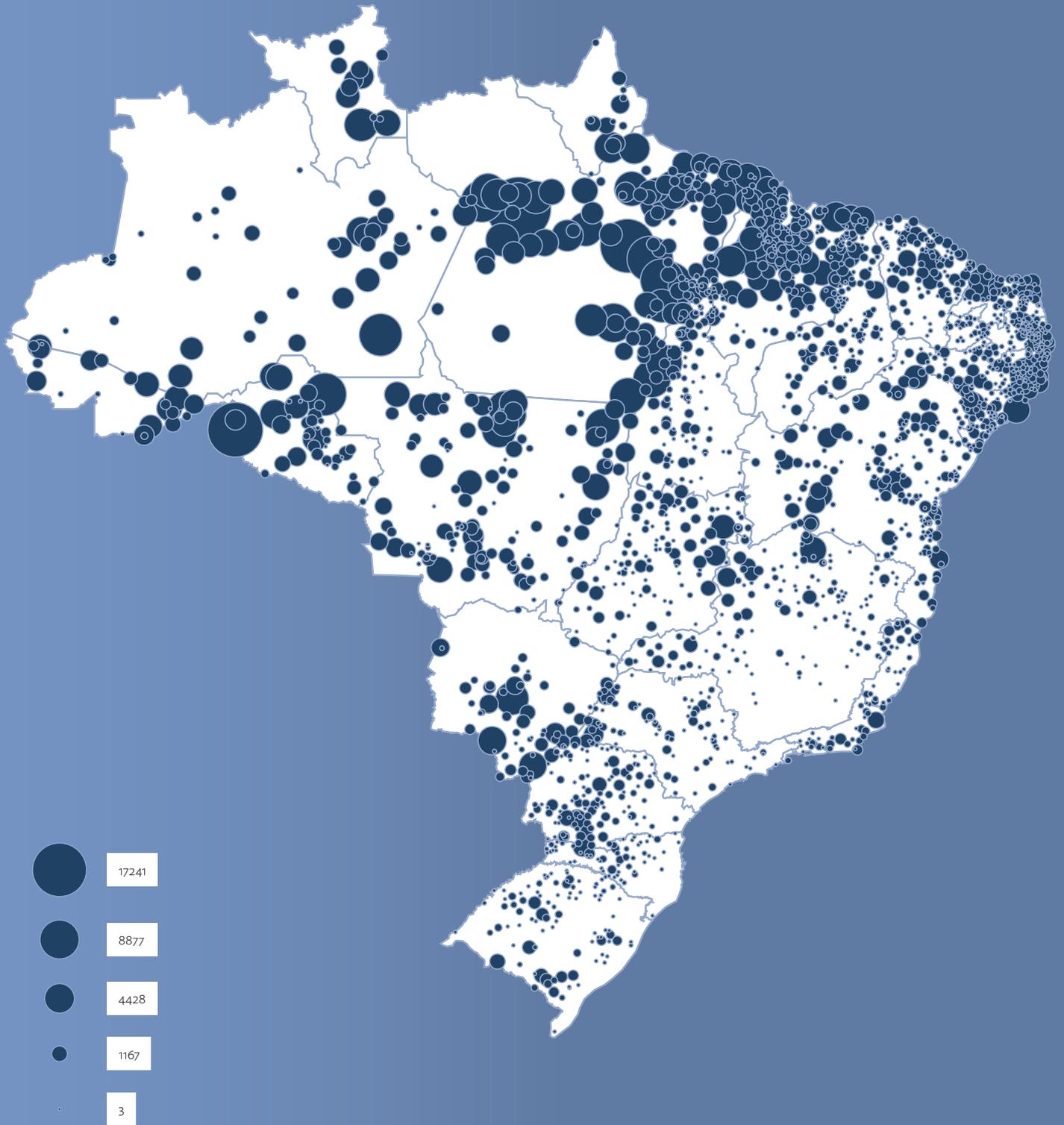


Figure 6: The geography of Brazil's agrarian reform settlements, 1979–2010. Number of families settlers for municipal district.

and created new entities with the Land Statute, but then dissolved these with the creation of the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA) in 1970. For the next 20 years, this institution would pay more attention to the *C* in its acronym than the *RA*, i.e. to colonisation rather than agrarian reform. Thousands of people were encouraged to move from the Concentrated and Northeastern regions to Amazonia, thus accelerating destruction of the rainforest through uncontrolled and under-supported colonisation. The frustrations of many colonists helped to make it a growth area for the MST, and Mendes rode this wave by founding a rural labour union in 1977 (Paula 1999; Welch 1999).

In other parts of the country, the recent history of agrarian reform has followed different courses. By the mid-twentieth century, the once successful sugar cane industry of Pernambuco in the Northeast was in decline. The Peasant Leagues got their start on one such plantation. When the proprietors tried to throw them off the land to turn it into cattle pasture, the peasants organised to get the plantation expropriated and handed over to them. In 1959, the governor obliged them and began a short-lived colonisation scheme designed to get decayed plantations producing again and peasants working. At the time, in many parts of the world, agrarian reform was seen as the best way to prevent agrarian revolution. The model was one of expropriation to keep peasants on land they worked but did not own (Welch 1999). In 2004 the newspaper *Diário de Pernambuco* reported on the experience 40 years after the 1964 coup and found not 150 but 241 families living on the former plantation. They remained poor, but considered that their situation had improved. *Our houses are no longer made of clay, but of cement blocks and stucco*, a long-time resident was quoted as saying, adding that their struggle had been worthwhile (*Diário* 2004).

In the Concentrated Region, São Paulo state passed its own agrarian reform law in 1960. The Agrarian Revision Law was meant to thwart more radical tendencies calling for the expropriation and redistribution of latifúndios. It too used the colonisation model and projected settling between 500 and 1,000 displaced farming families on parcels of land that they had to purchase using subsidised credit. The programme was abandoned with the coup, by which time only 200 families had been settled in two areas. The larger of the two areas

failed to prosper as an agricultural colony due to poor planning; the plots were eventually sold as country retreats for city residents. The second area, however, still continues to support 21 of the original 72 families as a farm community focused on producing and selling fruit to nearby urban markets (Bergamasco and Norder 1999; Bombardi 2004).

In the Central-west region, the latifundiários of Mato Grosso state continued to resist registering their holdings into the twentieth century. From the 1950s onwards, with plans for the relocation of the national capital from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília, the region became a magnet for peasants as well as for land sharks. In the 1960s, studies financed by the USA (USAID and the US Department of Agriculture) in collaboration with the Brazilian agriculture ministry described large parts of the region as *virtually uninhabited and agriculturally undeveloped* (Crawford 1963: iv; Burbach and Flynn 1980). The planning called for the relocation of nearly 250,000 farming families – some 1.5 million people – to the state. In fact, tens of thousands of peasants established themselves in the area in an influx of poor farmers seeking to escape difficult conditions in the east and looking for opportunities beyond the agricultural frontier. This spontaneous settlement constituted a *natural* type of agrarian reform. Under the military regime, however, implementation of the relocation project turned it into a dislocation project that caused hundreds of separate conflicts and produced higher per capita homicide rates than Brazil's national average (Rocha et al. 2003).

In the meantime, colonisation was encouraged through the formation of private companies that received subsidies to commercialise millions of hectares of land. Large swathes were deforested, given over to cattle pasture, and eventually occupied by large, mechanised soybean operations. In essence, the state's *agrarian reform* history is the history of building the hegemony of the agrarian capitalist paradigm. Only under the auspices of Brazil's first PNRA, which set goals for the 1985–1989 period, was a small portion of the state's area – 3.5% – identified as appropriate for expropriation and settlement. In 1987 alone, the federal government settled 43% of the families and 70% of the area projected by the plan for Mato Grosso, before resistance from the state's agrarian capitalists managed to slow the process to a near standstill (Ferreira et al. 1999).

In a study of agrarian reform experiences since the 1988 Constitution mandated the expropriation of lands that failed to *fulfill their social function* due to a lack of productivity, violations of labour law, or illegal destruction of natural resources, the geographer Estevan Leopoldo de Freitas Coca identified 20 different types of government-sponsored agrarian reform settlement present in Brazil today. Among them are settlements designated for traditional populations such as the descendants of runaway slaves (Assentamentos Quilombolas), those that emphasise human economic activity in harmony with environmental preservation, such as non-commercial fishing (Assentamentos Agroextrativistas, Reservas Extrativistas, and Desenvolvimento Sustentavel), and settlements established to resettle peasants displaced by hydroelectric dam projects (Reassentamentos de Atingidos por Barragens). There are many variables to consider in assessing the multi-dimensional characteristics of these settlements. Many were initiated by INCRA at the federal level and transferred to the administrative control of state land use agencies. Many have within them strong representation of social movements – either from CONTAG or the MST – that help settlers to take full advantage of the limited state support that exists, from time to time, for infrastructure improvement, construction materials, and agricultural extension services (Coca 2011).

In some regions, especially the Concentrated Region, clusters of settlements predominate in certain localities and have managed to capture significant market share through the operation of production cooperatives, such as the one in southwestern Santa Catarina state that markets farm products under the Terra Viva brand. In other regions, such as the Northeastern, settlers have pooled resources to build fish farms and to sell fish-based snack meals to consumers, based on a pizza delivery-style system. In certain parts of the Central-west as well as in the other two regions, some settlers have found it difficult to resist pressure to plant sugar cane in recent years, due to rising demand for biofuels (Fernandes et al. 2010).

In all cases, it is important to note that settlers do not become property owners but rather *permissionários*, meaning that they are granted permission by the government to use a settlement lot for renewable periods of 99 years. Some have been accused of selling their lots, but this is legally impossible. Turnover does exist, and a settler might find a buyer for improvements made

– such as a house – but neither the original resident, nor succeeding ones, can sell the land itself.

In addition to the 20 types of agrarian reform settlement established by federal and state governments, there are seven types of financing available through a market-driven agrarian reform programme backed by the government (MDA 2003). These include funding of settlements through World Bank-financed programmes such as the Land Bank, Combat Rural Poverty, and Family Farm Consolidation credit lines. While the state-sponsored agrarian reform settlements described above range in size from around 20 families to more than 500, market-driven projects can often involve just one family. The individual versus collective nature of the market-driven approach is one of the reasons why many scholars and social movements refuse to accept this modality of land policy as agrarian reform (Sauer and Pereira 2006). Unlike state-sponsored agrarian reform settlers, beneficiaries of the market-driven modality often work in isolation from other settlers and lack information and support.

The market-driven programme was instigated by the World Bank in the 1990s to help *combat poverty* and defuse the land struggle (Pereira 2010). The Bank provided seed money for local financial institutions to issue subsidised loans to landless rural workers in order to buy parcels of land and to build homes and outbuildings. The system is that the state finds land, rural labour unions filter candidates, local banks provide loans, and the new farmer starts out saddled with debt. Thus, the modality is devoid of the political and economic content that many believe agrarian reform must have, despite including the social aspect of serving mostly destitute rural workers.

Because the debt burden is so high compared with the beneficiary's resources and their capacity to pay off the loan, the stated objective of turning the worker into a property owner is almost never achieved. In fact, a study conducted in 2005 based on more than 1,500 interviews with beneficiaries in 13 states found that the majority did not even have a copy of their purchase agreement and did not understand the terms of their loans, and that 19% of those facing default proceedings abandoned their homesteads. In addition, 40% had never received any technical assistance and 86% had only sporadic contact with extension services (Ramos Filho 2009: 343-57).

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# Territorial disputes between stakeholders and the state

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From colonial plantations to contemporary agribusiness, the development of capitalism in rural Brazil has involved a permanent process of expropriation and exploitation of indigenous peoples, the descendants of runaway slaves (Quilombolas), river and delta dwellers, rubber tappers, grazers, fisher-folk, and peasants. These rural producers are often described as *traditional*, but this word should not be interpreted as meaning people economically or technologically backward, without social or historical mobility, as if trapped in time. They are traditional because of their cultural resilience and their persistence in maintaining a symbiotic relationship with nature, despite the pressures to change imposed by various modernisation projects.

The advance of agribusiness in Brazil has meant the monopolisation of territory by capital, a process supported by Brazilian governments that have favoured capital over traditional peoples and their territories (Oliveira 1991; Teixeira 2011). The government creates policies for the recognition and development of territories only in response to popular pressure (Fernandes 2000). This attitude is not difficult to understand, as the government faces resistance from powerful players in agribusiness and in Congress, as well as from advocates of the agrarian capitalism paradigm working within ministries. Because policy for the development of these territories is only

partially effective, the more aggressive capitalists are often allowed to determine the social and economic agenda for rural Brazil, homogenising the chain of production as well as the landscape with their monotonous monocultures.

The conflict of interests between traditional peoples and capital is partially expressed by territorial disputes in which the territorialisation of one de-territorialises the other. As agribusiness occupies (territorialises) sparsely populated areas with thousands and thousands of eucalyptus trees, for example, it necessarily forces out (de-territorialises) traditional peoples. Another form of this dispute results not in dispossession but in lost autonomy and control over territorial access or use. This form of dispute is exemplified by the hard bargaining of agribusiness in forcing Quilombolas, peasants, or Indians to temporarily contract away the use of their land to sugar cane or other monocultures, thereby adapting to capital's control over their territories (Fernandes et al. 2010).

According to the Land Struggle Database (DATALUTA), there are 8,620 agrarian reform settlements in Brazil. Some 1,015,918 families live in these settlements, occupying an area of 77,001,370 hectares (NERA 2010). These settlements are distributed throughout all regions of the country. Most of them were established through the pressure of land occupations organised by socio-territorial movements.

Through these direct actions, the movements de-territorialised landlords whose estates were determined by INCRA to be legally subject to expropriation; through occupations, the movements also restrained the territorialisation of agribusiness on public lands. At the start of the twenty-first century, the MST had secured its place as the main peasant movement in the struggle for land and it continues to fight for the settlement of landless families, with an emphasis on securing policies for the development and autonomy of these territories.

The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 guarantees the recognition of territories claimed by the descendants of runaway slaves and of indigenous tribes as compensation for the historical debt incurred by genocide, slavery, exploitation, and expropriation. INCRA is responsible for the recognition and demarcation of the Quilombolas, while the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) is responsible for indigenous territories. According to INCRA, there are 189 Quilombolas communities in Brazil, with 11,918 families living in areas totalling 87,935 hectares. Nearly 1,000 claims to establish quilombos have been filed since the authorities issued procedures for identifying, delimiting, demarcating, and titling these lands in 2004. The region with the highest number of communities is Amazonia, with 59. The Northeast stands a good chance of overtaking it, since 36 communities have already been approved and 462 are under consideration. Of these, Maranhao state alone has 22 communities and 210 cases in progress.

According to FUNAI, 524 indigenous territories are recognised in Brazil, covering a combined area of 107,620,338 hectares, or nearly 13% of the country's total, yet only 252 have been formalised. The region with the most indigenous territories is Amazonia. Other traditional peoples in the region, such as rubber tappers and fisher-folk, are represented by the Traditional Peoples and Communities National Commission on Sustainable Development (CNPCT), an inter-ministerial commission that works on a number of fronts to ensure that the way of life of these populations survives and that the integrity of their territories is protected.

The demarcation of indigenous territories can generate conflict, as happened in the case of a territory in Raposa Serra do Sol in the state of Roraima, Amazonia. The tribal lands here were recognised by FUNAI in 1993, but approved only in 2005.

With colonisation encouraged by the military regime in the 1970s, the area became a stronghold of large-scale rice farmers, despite difficulties in obtaining deeds. Indian resistance was supported by peasant organisations, but agribusiness tried to win over public opinion with propaganda describing the monoculture model as the best way to use the land, seeking to justify its own possession of it. In 2007, however, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Indians and ordered the rice farmers to leave the reserve, a clear demonstration of the importance of state intervention in support of traditional peoples' land governance rights. The rice farmers were forced to withdraw from the reserve and received no compensation, except from the sale of buildings and other improvements. This conflict stimulated significant debate among indigenous leaders, who initially were unsure what to do when the rice farmers refused to leave the area.

Unfortunately, formal recognition of traditional peoples' rights does not stop agribusiness from exploiting their lands. The forests in indigenous reserves in southern Amazonia are under constant attack from the forestry industry, which sells off the wood while clearing land to create soybean plantations. Reserves to the east have to constantly defend their territories against cattle ranchers, who clear the forest to create pasture. These incursions have already seen 1 million hectares of sensitive rainforest felled to benefit beef farmers. In the Xingu River basin, which runs through Mato Grosso and Pará states, agribusiness interests control large areas that abut indigenous territories at the main source of the Xingu River. The highly disruptive, intensive, and toxic agricultural methods of these agribusinesses have led to silting, reduced water volume, pollution, and contamination of fish, affecting the indigenous peoples who have lived along the riverbanks for centuries.

Compounding the situation is the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam on the Xingu in the state of Pará. Construction was due to begin in April 2011, but resistance by local residents, allied through MAB with international human rights and environmental groups such as Greenpeace, has postponed the start date. If it is built, Belo Monte will be the third largest hydroelectric dam in the world, behind only China's massive Three Gorges power plant and the bi-national Itaipu plant on the border between Brazil and Paraguay. Some 640 sq km are due to be flooded, which means relocating

20,000 families living in the municipality of Altamira and another 350 families living in extractive reserves along the river. Indigenous peoples of the Xingu region have accused the Brazilian government of failing to adequately consider the social and environmental impacts of the project, a failure that has been aggravated by failing to consult them. Indian populations will be affected both directly and indirectly; about 24 ethnic groups depend on the river, especially the Juruna people, who will also suffer the impact of increased traffic flows brought by the dam and its roads.

Pulp production is another activity that severely threatens the territories of traditional peoples. In southern Bahia and northern Espírito Santo states, there are several Indian tribes and Quilombolas communities who have come into conflict with transnational forestry firms. The Aracruz Cellulose Co. has failed to de-territorialise previously recognised communities, but it has surrounded them with eucalyptus forests in something resembling a military siege. The vastness of these forests, their intensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and the mechanisation of labour processes are so overwhelmingly contrary to traditional ways that the model practically determines territorial development in the area. Many Quilombolas and Indians have had to give up their traditional hunting, gathering, and farming activities and go to work for the big companies in order to survive. As with the eighteenth-century Black Act in Great Britain, it has become a crime to hunt, fish, and gather wood on land that the traditional peoples had for generations treated as a *commons*. Moreover, the *green desert* created by the forest plantations has essentially eliminated game. What for generations were thriving, self-sufficient rural ethnic villages have become *dormitory communities* for a few new members of the partially employed agro-industrial proletariat.

These are the new land governance realities faced – or soon to be faced – by all traditional peoples in Brazil. Even those who retain possession of the land eventually lose control over it. They can perhaps live on it, but the dominant agribusiness model denies them the ability to pursue economic activities that have proved to be sustainable across the generations. The emphasis on productivity over social and environmental concerns seriously threatens their potential survival. The agrarian capitalism paradigm justifies a constant need for expansion and

innovation to augment productivity levels, and necessitates the installation of infrastructure and the expansion of farmland, which destroys natural resources and turns upside-down the ways of life of traditional peoples. The agrarian question paradigm argues that only the state can intervene successfully to promote alternative models of land governance that support not only the survival of traditional peoples but also the health of the planet and human life in general. This theory is out of step with prevailing neoliberal wisdom.



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# Future land governance trends in Brazil

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## Environmental impacts of the land question

Agriculture was the first human activity to dramatically alter the natural environment. But its impact was relatively small until agro-industrialisation took off in the twentieth century, causing the disruption of natural systems, intensive urbanisation, exponential population growth, and ever worsening environmental destruction. Larger, more concentrated populations increase demand for foodstuffs and produce more greenhouse gases; the clearing of forests and the use of chemical inputs to grow more and more food for city dwellers affect the environment. The rate of global warming has accelerated, raising a series of questions about future development models. The story is no different in Brazil. The urbanisation process took off in the decades after World War II, the population exploded, and, as already discussed, agriculture was transformed to feed not only Brazilians but many other nationalities as well. In the international division of labour, Brazil seems destined to provide ever larger quantities of food and biofuels, with enormous consequences not only for its own environment but also for the world.

The current development model for agriculture boasts higher incomes for producers but little else that is positive. Indeed, the model is clearly responsible for serious environmental and social impacts. The use of agricultural inputs such as chemical pesticides and fertilisers poisons soil, water, and people (Pignata, Machado, and Cabral 2007). In 2010, Brazil was at the

top of the list of pesticide-consuming countries. More than a billion gallons of poisonous chemicals were poured onto crops, raising serious concerns for the environment and for public health.

In 2005, the Brazilian government authorised the use of genetically modified seed, giving way to the powerful agribusiness lobby and recognising the clandestine encroachment of such crops since 1998. Authorisation has opened the floodgates to the legitimate use of GMO seeds in soybean, corn, and cotton production, intensifying in turn the use of toxic chemicals. Genetic modification is said to benefit agricultural production by making plants produce more with less – in particular, less water and less cultivation time. But inputs are still needed and GMO plants are also made to resist the negative consequences of ever larger doses of toxic chemicals. Thus, growth in the use of GMO seeds has also meant a growth in poisons, causing further damage to air, soil, and water resources. Biochemical corporations such as Syngenta and Monsanto have gained at both ends – as both seed and chemical producers – but the human and natural environment has lost through reduced biodiversity, modification of ecosystems, and the contamination of both soil and people.

As transnational agribusiness companies direct their efforts towards increased production of commodities, one result is competition for more fertile and logistically advantageous

areas. Some cultures are displaced by the latest commodity fashion and migrate to other regions. Currently, sugar cane, eucalyptus, and pine are de-territorialising land usages such as beef farming, causing cattlemen to move their operations deeper into Amazonia, where they destroy thousands of hectares of rainforest – the so-called lungs of the planet. Despite the Brazilian government's heightened policing and a consequent decline in rainforest destruction, deforestation is occurring at an alarming rate, especially in the states of Mato Grosso, Pará, and Maranhão. According to Brazil's National Space Studies Institute (INPE), which monitors deforestation via satellites, these states accounted for 75% of the 6,451 sq km of Amazon forest destroyed in 2010 (INPE 2010).

In an attempt to reverse these destructive tendencies, corporations, the Brazilian government, and the international financial community as represented by development banks such as the National Development Bank (BNDS) have promoted the concept of reforestation. However, 90% of new forest consists of eucalyptus and pine trees destined for the axe. These species are planted solely for industrial purposes and will be cut down within a few years. Subsidised by taxpayers, the system generates tremendous profits for transnationals, reflecting the true intentions of Brazil's subsidised forestry programme and belying corporate discourse about renewable resources, sustainability, and reduced production of greenhouse gases. These same corporations and their Brazilian allies worked diligently in 2011 to neuter the country's forestry code by removing or reducing fines for forest destruction, reducing the percentage of forest that landowners are legally required to conserve, and permitting clear-cutting in watershed and other ecologically sensitive areas (SOS Florestas 2011; Brito and Nader 2011).

## Land grabbing

Land grabbing is a recent phenomenon, but it has deep historical roots. The recent process is characterised by the purchase or lease of large tracts of land for agricultural production by foreign powers. Usually, the land is located in poor or emerging market countries, the large investments are made by rich or emerging market countries, and land use is determined by the demands of investors. Brazil not only sells and rents land to foreign investors, but also plays the role of land grabber itself in other, poorer countries.

In Portuguese, land grabbing is called *foreignisation* (*estrangeirização*). The term has connotations of foreign invasion, cultural estrangement, and the loss of territorial control. In Spanish, the term used is *monopolisation* (*acaparamiento*), suggesting that foreigners are cornering the market for the best land. In English, *land grabbing* suggests robbery, like purse snatching on a grand scale. In all three cases the imagery is negative, suggestive of alienation, exploitation, and expropriation. The implications go beyond the question of land control, as those who make these deals must extend their acquisitions to include infrastructure projects needed for them to profit from their investments, typically involving the construction of roads and ports. Socio-economic change is also brought about by accompanying technology transfers, land concentration, reinforcement of agribusiness, and the emergence of new markets.

Land grabbing is part and parcel of the new geopolitics of the agrarian question (Fernandes 2011), where neoliberal policies have introduced new elements to the age-old dilemmas of capitalist agriculture. New elements include deregulation of protectionist legislation, enhanced mechanisms for capital flows, the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and weakened states. These elements combine with the old inequalities of capitalist agriculture to promote the advance of rentier capitalism on a global scale (Oliveira 2010), a combination that has turned the old contradiction of starvation amid plenty into an absurdly repetitive scenario of food crises and *mega-harvests*. Another new element is agriculture's role as a source of energy; the new demand for agrofuels has fostered increased direct government intervention in land acquisition and leasing (Fernandes, Welch, and Gonçalves 2010). As in the past, these new processes lead

to the expropriation of peasants' and indigenous communities' resources and their socio-economic exclusion. Land grabbing employs large-scale, export agriculture models whose production processes depend on mechanisation, further deepening rural poverty (Rubio 2009).

Since 2007/2008, the phenomenon of land grabbing has attracted the attention of scholars in many parts of the world. Studies have been undertaken by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Cotula et al. 2009; Borras et al. 2011<sup>a</sup>; Dirven 2011; Eguren 2011; and Gomez 2011) and the International Land Coalition (ILC) (Ratsialonana et al. 2011; Monachon and Gonda 2011; Bravo 2011; as well as this paper) and meetings have been sponsored by scientific institutions such as the Oakland Institute (Daniel and Mittal 2009), Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS) (Borras and Franco 2010), and the Land Deal Politics Initiative (Borras et al. 2011b).

These studies focus on Africa and Latin America, which have seen the highest levels of land concentration in the world – the heritage of a colonial past based on slavery and plantation agriculture. Herein lie the historical roots of today's global land grab, as Western Europe's colonisation of the Americas, Africa, and Asia was little more than land grabbing on a global scale. Even the participation of transnational capital is not new, as the accumulation of colonial wealth took off when European monarchies authorised enterprising merchants to form trading companies such as the Dutch West India Company, which dominated northeastern Brazil in the seventeenth century (Fausto 1997). Indeed, contemporary land grabbing has been dubbed a new colonialism, because some countries are meeting their food and fuel needs by exploiting vast areas of farmland in other countries without taking into account local needs (Borras et al. 2011b; Fernandes 2011). Analysing the rise of capital accumulation by dispossession – consolidated through the exploitation of mineral and agricultural commodities – as neoliberal international policy, the geographer David Harvey (2003) has called this process *the new imperialism*.

The phenomenon of land grabbing can be examined in the context of at least five different themes. One is the contradiction between the way that agribusiness promotes land grabbing as necessary to feed the world and the reality of worsening food crises. Another is how successive oil crises have sparked

interest in agrofuels, prompting governments and companies to see land grabbing as a way of responding to energy shortages. Third, rich and emerging countries have used arguments of land scarcity – the closing of their agricultural frontiers – to justify land grabbing overseas while maintaining their own land reserves. Another theme is how land grabbers are attracted by the existence of extensive areas of land in poor and emerging market countries that have yet to fall under the capitalist system. A fifth is the way that land grabbing can be understood as both a cause and an effect of disputes between agribusiness interests and peasant farmers, especially conflicts over territorial acquisition and models of agricultural development.

Land grabbing has been debated by agribusiness corporations, governments, and Via Campesina organisations, with each taking different positions. For transnational agricultural corporations active in Brazil, land grabbing as such does not exist. They prefer terms such as *international business deal* or *worldwide interest in agricultural land* (Nassar 2010). They generally defer to the notion of an international market creating possibilities for the expansion of export-oriented agriculture, seeing their investments as *development opportunities* (Cotula et al. 2009). As discussed, the agrarian capitalism paradigm helps to explain these expressions of innocence about markets and ignorance about the expropriation processes of peasant territory that such investments involve.

The Brazilian government has taken contradictory positions. On the one hand, it offers subsidies of various kinds and sizes, from research assistance to loans to help foreigners expand their occupation and intensify their production in rural areas. On the other hand, President Lula's administration expressed concerns about land grabbing and promoted debates about national sovereignty that resulted in measures limiting the ability of foreigners to purchase land. Via Campesina – Brazil expressed scepticism about the government's stance on land grabbing, seeing it as political manipulation. Advocating land reform and the development of peasant agriculture, Via Campesina has generally opposed all forms of land grabbing.

The Brazilian Association of Planted Forest Producers (Associação Brasileira de Produtores de Florestas Plantadas),

the Institute for International Trade Negotiations (Instituto de Estudos do Comércio e Negociações Internacionais), and the Sugarcane Industry Union (União da Indústria de Cana-de-Açúcar – UNICA) all complain that government policies impede the expansion of plantation areas needed for industrial development and stifle market growth. They also complain of government-created barriers that hinder the lease and purchase of land by foreigners, suggesting that such barriers have obstructed investments totalling USD 30 billion in the expansion of corn, cotton, sugar cane, soybean, and forest plantations. In a recent article in an economic journal, agribusiness advocates worried that government measures limiting foreign land deals could be causing investors to direct their funds to Eastern Europe or Africa rather than to Brazil (Salomão and Vital 2011).

To help halt land sales to foreigners in various countries, Via Campesina International has been a leader amongst peasant and indigenous peoples' movements in campaigns to defend the implementation of agrarian reform policies. The organisation's support base, as well as its frame of reference, consists of the peasant and indigenous communities that are so often targeted for expropriation by mega-projects such as hydroelectric plants. Such projects often force out traditional communities through flooding while simultaneously creating conditions for agricultural land grabs through associated energy, transportation, and irrigation developments. To help combat the tragedy of displacement and *progress* from such devastating developments, Via Campesina has created the concept of food sovereignty – the right to produce food on one's own territory. Food sovereignty supports policies to combat the problem of inadequate food supplies through agricultural development strategies that promote cultural diversity, varied pesticide-free crops, family labour, small-scale production, and local markets (Desmarais 2007; Via Campesina 2008).

The Chilean scholar Sergio Gómez (2011) explains how the process of land grabbing leads to increased commodity production. Governments and corporations buy or lease large tracts of land, contributing to its concentration; investors project returns based on exploiting these large areas with commercially viable monocultures such as soybeans and sugar cane. This trend is in direct opposition to the agrarian

reform agenda, which has a political orientation towards the democratisation of land access and the building of citizenship. Since export-oriented agriculture and land sales are important sources of revenue for the bourgeois state, policy-makers tend to embrace the agribusiness agenda while ignoring the implementation of agrarian reform. The production of commodities consolidates land concentration and maintains a reserve of land for expansion, following the demands of international markets.

International markets are not very interested in peasants or indigenous peoples. In fact, the autonomous existence of such communities has no place in the agribusiness production chain. For some commodities, such as oranges for the juice industry, family farming predominates, but the production process is becoming more verticalised (Welch and Fernandes 2008). In today's global model of capitalist agricultural development, only the most precarious forms of integration are reserved for the peasantry, such as part-time waged work and supplier contracts that demand the near total subordination of farmers. For these reasons, Via Campesina is opposed to land grabbing. It is absolutely false to assert that everyone benefits from the international land market – as advocates of land grabbing argue – based on the assumption that countries win when farmers are earning more. Peasant farmers are still an important part of the farmer population, but land grabbing is taking away from them the source of their livelihoods (Daniel and Mittal 2009; Gomez 2011).

Statistics for the first half of 2010 revealed that some 4.2 million hectares of land in Brazil were majority-owned by foreigners. In November 2010, the Folha de S. Paulo newspaper reported INCRA statistics that showed *foreigners buy the equivalent of 22 soccer fields of land every hour* (Odilla 2010). Between the end of 2007 and the middle of 2010, foreigners purchased 1,152 rural properties, totalling 515,100 hectares. The vast majority of the territory controlled by non-Brazilians (69%) was concentrated in the states of Bahia, Goiás, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Minas Gerais, and São Paulo, forming a contiguous swathe of global land grabbing. The phenomenon was also observed in the southern states of Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul, where 10% of the land had been grabbed. In the north, 12% of the Amazon states of Pará and Amazonas had been bought by foreign firms (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Land area held by foreign firms in 2010, by state (1,000s of hectares and percentage of total area)**

State	Area (1,000s of hectares)	%
Mato Grosso	844	20
São Paulo	491	12
Minas Gerais	491	12
Mato Grosso do Sul	473	11
Bahia	368	9
Paraná	299	7
Pará	235	6
Amazonas	232	6
Goiás	230	5
Rio Grande do Sul	113	3
Other states	408	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,184</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA). The data was gathered by the Brasilia-based newspaper *Correio Braziliense* (June 2010).

Purchases by foreigners have driven up the price of land in Brazil. Even with barriers in place, purchases and leasing of land by foreigners helped to increase the national average price of a hectare of land from USD 2,500 in 2008 to USD 2,900 in 2010, a jump of 14% in two years (Lopes 2010). In 2010, land prices saw the largest increase in recent decades (De Chiara 2011). Purchases of estates by agribusiness rapidly territorialise less aggressive neighbours, threatening the land of peasants and indigenous peoples.

The global land grab is seen as a problem by peasant and indigenous movements, but as a solution by agribusiness. For the Brazilian government, land grabbing has both meanings. At a March 2008 public hearing of the Senate's committees on agriculture, agrarian reform and consumer protection, the director of INCRA released a study compiled by the body on foreign purchases of rural properties. According to this report, the National Rural Register System (SNCR) recorded that 33,228 properties, corresponding to 0.64% of all registered properties, were owned by foreigners. The area registered by foreigners was 5,579,784 hectares, representing 0.97% of the total registered area (Hackbart 2008). This number differs from the 4,184,000 hectares shown in Table 1, not only because that data is from 2010, but also because of difficulties in obtaining accurate numbers. The SNCR figures are based on owner declarations,

which raises doubts about their veracity. Under these circumstances, conclusions must be seen as approximate and unavoidably confusing, especially when INCRA statements in 2011 contradicted both figures, suggesting that the real values might actually be three times greater (Cruz and Vaz 2011).

The area of real estate occupied by foreign interests increased from 2.6 million hectares in 1992 (Oliveira 2010) to 5.6 million hectares in 2008 (Hackbart 2008), still representing less than 1% of the total area of registered properties. These figures might not have caused alarm if only Brazil were involved. However, concern was growing about land grabbing in Brazil as it came to be understood as being part of a worldwide phenomenon that could redefine the whole geopolitics of the agrarian question (Fernandes 2010). Just over a year after the release of the INCRA data, President Lula authorised the Attorney General of the Union (AGU) to publish a new interpretation of Law Nº. 5.709/71, which imposes rules for the purchase of rural property by foreigners. These interpretations include a demand that foreign companies must obtain approval from INCRA for new acquisitions. The arguments supporting the change expressed a nationalist preoccupation that an expansion of agrofuel production on a large scale stimulated by foreign investments could threaten Brazil's capacity to produce food and thus contribute to global food crises.

These arguments served both to remove rules and to enforce them. According to the Brazilian geographer Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira (2010: 18), the previous interpretation *established the understanding that any Brazilian entity, even those with either physical or legal foreign participation, including those who contributed any investment amount, need not request authorization to acquire rural properties in the country.* These rules remained in place until 2010. According to the new interpretation by the Lula administration, Oliveira explains, *all future land acquisitions involving foreigners required oversight by INCRA.* This is an important difference between the Cardoso and Lula administrations. While the former allowed an interpretation which opened possibilities for land acquisition by foreigners, the second limited purchases on the grounds that they could drive up land prices. Other threats included intensified land grabbing practices involving money laundering from drug trafficking and other criminal activities, agricultural expansion into areas of environmental protection,

and the purchase by foreigners of properties in border regions endangering national security.

President Lula's change in the rules caused a negative reaction from agribusiness. In 2010, the Estado de S. Paulo newspaper accused Lula of ignoring national interests to defend *the interests of those advocating land reform, such as members of the MST and those who seek to control land ownership in certain regions by claiming they are protecting the rights of indigenous nations* (Estado de S. Paulo 2010: A3). The paradigmatic debate helps to show up these conflicts for what they are, delineating the well-defined positions of agribusiness (which has been represented by the Estado de S. Paulo since the nineteenth century) and the peasantry (represented by Via Campesina since the 1990s), while the government has remained somewhat divided in defining and defending national interests. Towards the end of 2011, Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's first female president and Lula's former chief of staff, expressed concern about the increase in land purchases by Chinese interests (Cruz and Vaz 2011). It was reported that she had asked her staff to prepare an executive order to better define the process of identifying Brazilian companies funded by foreign capital, in order to prevent foreign investors circumventing the new rules.

In 2011, the international NGO GRAIN presented yet another view on land grabbing based on data gathered from a variety of sources and countries. This data indicated that foreign companies had bought or leased 2,995 million hectares in Brazil. According to these statistics, US interests control the largest area, with around 1 million hectares; Argentina is in second place with companies such as El Tejar, Los Grobo, and Cresud controlling nearly 500,000 hectares. China is third with 400,000 hectares, and France, Germany, India, Japan, Canada, the UK, Portugal, and South Korea also feature on the list (GRAIN 2012).

### **Brazilian investment in land grabbing**

The Mexican economist Ruy Mauro Marini defined the concept of *sub-imperialism* as:

“[A] form that a dependent economy assumes on reaching the stage of monopoly-finance capital. Sub-imperialism implies that country has evolved two basic components: 1) a national productive base of average composition on a global scale and 2) a relatively autonomous expansionist policy that, if not marching in step with the hegemony exercised by the predominant imperialist system internationally, accompanies the integrationist demands of the imperialist production system. Put in these terms, we believe that regardless of the efforts of Argentina and other countries to join the sub-imperialist ranks, only Brazil in Latin America fully expresses a phenomenon of this nature” (1977: 12).

When Marini wrote this, the military regime still ruled Brazil. Despite close relations with the US government, the dictatorship continued a long Brazilian tradition of shaping its own foreign policy, diverging from the USA over nuclear energy, human rights, and other policies. Characterising the regime's attempt to navigate an autonomous course as *sub-imperialism*, Marini's definition is useful for understanding Brazilian restrictions on foreign land acquisitions and the contradictory practice of promoting land grabbing by Brazilian companies in poor and emerging market countries through the expansion of commodity production.

Brazilian entrepreneurs have invested in buying land in other countries, mainly in Paraguay and Bolivia, and with the support of the Lula government have also invested in Mozambique in recent years. This paper has tried to demonstrate that land grabbing is a new element of the agrarian question that is directly tied to factors such as the production of agricultural commodities and biofuels. In the paradigmatic debate outlined above, we have seen how these processes have promoted the development of agribusiness with the deployment of infrastructure to produce large-scale, export-oriented monocultures. Destructive processes have almost always preceded these infrastructure developments, with expropriation of the lands of peasants and indigenous peoples

being one of the more common practices. When these people are resettled, their new situation is usually much more precarious than their previous one. Brazil has participated in the global land grab as both a producer and a product of land conflicts.

In Paraguay, 25% of the country's 31 million hectares of arable land is in the hands of foreigners, with Brazilians controlling nearly 5 million hectares, some 15% of this total (Glauser 2009: 36-39). During the period of military rule, many Brazilian peasants forced off their land by modernisation projects migrated to Paraguay, where they bought land. They settled on small farms, usually in the border areas, intermarrying with Paraguayans and becoming known as *brasiguaios*. Brazilian companies also occupied land in various regions of Paraguay, mainly for the production of soybeans, acquiring land from both *brasiguaios* and Paraguayan peasants (Galeano 2009). In the 1980s, many *brasiguaios* tired of the aggression of land grabbers in Paraguay and returned to Brazil, where many of them took part in land occupations organised by the MST.

The presence of Brazilians in Paraguay generated two conflicting processes. So-called agribusiness entrepreneurs expanded the areas of soybean production in the country and, in so doing, stimulated the struggle for agrarian reform. The conflict grew, and in 2011 the Paraguayan government declared that some Brazilian farmers held only *illegal* titles and that they were liable to lose their properties, prompting landless Paraguayans to camp near the Brazilian estates of Ñacunday, Santa Rosa del Monday, and Iruña. Land grabbers in Paraguay are faced with landless peasants and indigenous peoples struggling to recover their territories.

In Bolivia, since the 1980s, large Brazilian companies have focused their investments on the Santa Cruz de la Sierra region, where they produce soybeans and livestock. This part of Bolivia, along with the soybean-growing regions of Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, is featured in the Syngenta advertisement depicting the fictitious *United Soybean Republic*, mentioned earlier. In contrast with Paraguay, there has not been serious conflict between Brazilian and Bolivian peasants. Brazilian investors and growers have been successfully integrated into Santa Cruz social circles (Gomez 2011), and the cohesion of the Santa Cruz agribusiness elite has put the

region at the heart of opposition to the *campesindio* movement represented by President Evo Morales (Mexican philosopher Armando Bartra (2010) has emphasised the need for political alliance between *campesinos* and Indians, and Morales himself was an indigenous peasant union leader before he became president). Morales has promoted thorough reform of Bolivia's political culture to support the peasants and indigenous peoples, who constitute the vast majority of its population, while attempting to contain agribusiness demands.

The Bolivian scholar Miguel Urioste (2011) explains that the Brazilian firm Monica was the first organisation to settle in Bolivia, with properties amounting to 50,000 hectares used for soybean production. According to his research, in 2011 Brazilians held 700,000 hectares in the Santa Cruz provinces of Germán Bush, Velasco, and Angel Sandoval. In addition to soy, Brazilian land grabbers are using the land to rear beef cattle.

Further afield, in Mozambique, in April 2011 the Brazilian company Vale (a public-private venture sold off by the government in 1997) and EMBRAPA launched a partnership for the production of African palm oil on an area of 30,000 hectares (GRAIN 2012). In August 2011, the governments of Brazil and Mozambique announced that the African nation was ceding the use of 6 million hectares to Brazilian agribusiness interests who, with the assistance of EMBRAPA, will produce soy, cotton, corn, and sugar cane (IHU 2011). In February 2012 Arlindo Moura, president of the Brazilian agribusiness SLC Agrícola, announced his company's decision to participate in this initiative. With the help of EMBRAPA, the company planned to plant soy on land leased by the Mozambican government for a *symbolic value* for a period of at least 50 years (Batista 2012).

Further study of current land grabbing processes by Brazilian capital is needed to reach firmer conclusions. In the meantime, FAO negotiators have been working on an accord that will define a code of conduct to regulate foreign investment in agricultural land. It is imperative that this document considers the territorial and livelihood interests of peasant and indigenous communities as an essential part of any plans to implement sustainable development schemes.

## Agrofuels

Global warming, rising oil prices, and the gradual exhaustion of oil reserves, political instability in producer countries, and troubled relationships with importing countries have all combined to encourage the search for alternative, non-fossil fuel sources of energy. One response to this has been the increased use of biofuels.

Most ethanol is derived from sugars found in crops such as sugar cane and corn (ethanol); biodiesel comes mainly from vegetable oils extracted from grains such as soybeans, peanuts, sunflower seeds, and plants such as jatropha and African palm. Brazil has vast tracts of arable land and a tropical climate conducive to the production of these crops. Following the first 1970s oil crisis, the Brazilian government allied with the country's rural elite and transnational corporations to establish a national biofuels programme called PROÁLCOOL. Exploding prices and the additional concerns discussed above stimulated a new round of interest in biofuels in the early twenty-first century.

In 2003, the Brazilian government once again began to encourage the production of ethanol to power the nation's cars. The first step was to introduce incentives for manufacturers to produce flexible-fuel cars with technology capable of running equally well on ethanol as on petrol. According to the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers, flex-fuel cars represented 25% of all vehicles in Brazil in 2010, while 93% of new cars built that year incorporated flex-fuel technology, promising a growing market. Rising demand saw larger areas dedicated to sugar cane production and also attracted investments by transnational agribusiness firms. According to the IBGE, there was a near 40% increase in the amount of land dedicated to sugar cane between 2003 and 2009. In 2003, sugar cane plantations covered 5,377,216 hectares, while by 2009 this had grown to 8,756,576 hectares. Planted areas increased in all regions of Brazil, but especially in the Concentrated Region.

Further growth in sugar cane planting is predicted for the years ahead. According to industry sources, ethanol production in 2010 had the capacity to supply only 45% of the flex-fuel vehicles in Brazil. Producers could thus claim that demand was outstripping supply in order to lobby for authorisation and subsidies to build more ethanol plants (UNICA 2011). The BNDS

has reserved USD 15 billion in financing for the sector. State intervention at this level ensures the sector's vitality for years to come.

In 2004, the government also created a programme to stimulate the production of biodiesel. The National Programme for the Production and Use of Biodiesel (PNPB) mandated that first 3%, and then 5%, of all diesel fuel must be of vegetable oil origin by 2013. In addition, the PNPB aimed to encourage social inclusion by creating tax incentives for industry to buy fuel-producing crops from family farmers. The *Social Fuel Seal* benefited a few peasants on agrarian reform settlements by guaranteeing them an income for crops sold to the biodiesel industry (Fernandes et al. 2010).

The social results of the PNPB have been quite limited, but its economic benefits for capital have been considerable. By 2010, only 109 of the 200,000 family farms projected to benefit had participated in the programme. In those six years, however, tens of billions of dollars were invested in the industry, with industrial infrastructure shooting up from zero to 62 biodiesel plants in 15 states in different regions, producing 14,400 cubic metres of fuel per day. Peasant participation as providers of raw material was claimed to be around 11%. These numbers should increase once funding is secured through public banks. However, farming families are demanding greater autonomy and greater participation in PNPB decision-making and project development. They argue that buyers should accept more diversification in raw materials for biodiesel production, since more than 99% of the fuel produced is derived from soybeans produced by agribusiness (Sakamoto 2010).

## City and country

The process of industrialisation and urbanisation, especially in the decades from 1950 to 1980, caused a massive transfer of population from rural to urban areas; this process was also driven by the modernisation of agriculture. Modernisation was based on a conservative model of development that aimed only to increase agricultural productivity and paid little attention to structural issues such as land concentration, food production, and manpower. These processes are still under way, although now the tendency is for rural families to migrate towards medium-sized cities rather than large ones as they did in the past.

During the initial post-war period, Brazil went from a situation in which the majority of its population lived in the countryside to one now where the vast majority live in cities. Until the 1970s, the famous expression *dois Brasís (two Brazils)*, coined in the 1950s by the French sociologist Jacques Lambert, described well the distinctive realities of rural and urban life. Today, however, the differences are much less striking, as a combination of urban deterioration and the installation of roads, electrification, running water, and cellular phone networks in rural areas have helped to shrink the gaps. In fact, some connected to leading commodities such as sugar and cellulose increasingly present the countryside as a locus of modernisation, industrial activity, and technological complexity.

The countryside, however, is not only a place of production of food and raw materials for domestic and foreign markets. It is also a dwelling place, where millions of people define their culture and identities. In territorial development models, the countryside is presented as a place of business activity that generates capital to reinvest in the expansion of commodity production, while providing opportunities for the accumulation of hard currency to supply the financial needs of urban and industrial capital. The fact that not all of the wealth produced in the countryside stays there is one of the factors that ensures its subordination to the city. In short, the modernisation of the Brazilian economy has linked city and country in a seemingly indivisible whole.

In 2010, according to the IBGE, 84% of Brazil's total population lived in urban areas. The rapid growth of cities has created various social problems arising from uncontrolled occupation

that are so apparent today in cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro: a lack of adequate housing, transport, jobs, sanitation, and medical and hospital care, and an excess of environmental pollution, malnutrition, and violence. Given such precarious conditions in the cities, peasant movements like the MST have recruited successfully among urban populations, finding many people who are attracted to the idea of escaping the city to live in a rural area in the hope of improving their incomes, sense of security, and basic quality of life.

Land reform in this context is an alternative setting for the development of rural and urban spaces. It signifies the democratisation of access to land and the creation of conditions that encourage people to settle or remain in rural areas, including improved infrastructure and services, such as schools, shops, internet services, and entertainment. By promoting rural settlement, land reform slows the growth of cities. By facilitating the return of families of peasant origin to their roots, it contributes to society's overall sense of satisfaction and happiness. To this end, future land reform initiatives should be deployed not as land distribution policies but as part of a holistic land settlement programme that creates conditions for production, leisure, culture, and political participation (Alentenjano 2003). Via Campesina and its member movements advocate policy reform along these lines, pushing for *territorial development* as a town and country alternative to the devastating model of monopoly capitalism.

### **Other trends: regional relationships**

Agricultural development trends in Brazil point in three main alternative directions: 1) further consolidation of the agrarian capitalism paradigm, based on the hegemony of agribusiness and subordination of the peasantry; 2) elevation of the agrarian question paradigm to the status of public policy for territorial development and food sovereignty, as a result of strengthened organisational unity and power of peasant movements; or 3) negotiation of a treaty between these blocs that establishes a system akin to zoning for land uses, which protects large-scale production of commodities for export and small-scale food production for the domestic market.

The continued strengthening of agribusiness suggests a further weakening of peasant society, with an increasing number of farmers insufficiently capitalised to survive. From this perspective, the tendency is for expanded production of commodities in areas expropriated from peasants. Increased political power for the peasantry, coupled with greater support from civil society, could change the direction of the dominant agricultural development model, and consequently expand the contribution of family farm production to gross output. This scenario would guarantee an adequate food supply and the integrity of peasant, indigenous, and Quilombolas territories through a national plan for agricultural production.

Considering the economic success of the agribusiness model, the entrenchment of agribusiness interests, land grabbing by foreign companies, and trends in rich country demands, the prospects for changing the current development model seem slight. And yet, the social and environmental problems created by the agrarian capitalism paradigm and the current agro-industrial model should be causing global society to worry about the future of humanity. The outlook for peasants and indigenous peoples depends not only on their own political power, but on as yet unknown future plans for global development. In this sense, the third direction, involving negotiation and the recognition by government of territorial divisions – zoning for peasant success – may be the best that can be hoped for in terms of future prospects for land governance in Brazil.

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### **About the Framing the Debate series**

The aim of the Framing the Debate series is to facilitate a deeper understanding of land governance debates. Land governance is understood as the formal and informal rules, mechanisms, processes and institutions through which land is accessed, used, controlled, transferred, and land-related conflicts are managed. It encompasses, therefore, land tenure systems, land and agrarian reforms, and land administration.

The terms of the debate on land, agrarian reform, land tenure and administration have become increasingly diverse and complex, as a result of a rapidly and radically changing global context. The greater demand for land, for productive use, human settlements, as well as for environmental conservation and climate mitigation purposes, creates new land governance challenges.

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