

## **AGRARIAN REFORM IN TIMES OF GLOBALISATION<sup>1</sup>**

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Brazil is a country with a Ministry exclusively devoted to the question of agrarian reform. Virtually all the political parties support the idea and the majority of social scientists who specialise in agrarian studies are committed to explaining the "necessity" for such a reform. Curiously all this occurs at a time when agrarian reform in any meaningful sense of the term - as an initiative involving ample social and/ or economic reform, as an ideological platform, or as an expression of a broad popular movement, has lost its actuality. The question is naturally posed therefore as to how such an apparent social consensus has emerged on the issue of agrarian reform.

In the course of the article we will try to develop the following arguments:

- a) agrarian reform is a historically dated concept, associated with developmentalist and/or revolutionary ideologies which are no longer relevant;
  
- b) the social forces interested in promoting agrarian reform in Brazil have always been limited and in recent decades its base of social support has been restricted to economically and socially marginal groups.
  
- c) agrarian reform is taken on board by political parties, whether of the right or the left, because of and not in spite of its relative irrelevance.

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d) Brazilian social scientists continue to identify themselves with a debate which is polarised around the defence or rejection of agrarian reform, instead of trying to understand how this notion in practice has been constructed and manipulated by different political forces.

e) from a socio-political point of view, the principal consequence of the current mobilisation on the issue of agrarian reform may well be that of modernising and increasing the presence of the State in the countryside and the promotion of palliative social policies which are no substitute for a project of social citizenship.

### Agrarian Reform and its Ideological and Social Context

The struggle for land and for the desappropriation and distribution of large landed property has been a constant in human history. In modern times, it was present in the French Revolution in the peasant uprisings and the aristocracy's loss of control over the State. Napoleon, in his turn, tried to use agrarian reform to mobilise support in the regions subject to his conquer, while "preventive counter-revolutionary agrarian reforms" were attempted in Prussia and Tsarist Russia. In the present century, the Mexican and Russian revolutions, and to a certain extent the Chinese revolution, constitute paradigms for land distribution supported or legitimated by political elites which coopted peasant risings to consolidate their own power.

These "agrarian reforms" served as an inspiration for another type of agrarian reform which has predominated during the present century, particularly in the '50s and '60s, forming part of reformist or social revolutionary ideologies and carried out either by the State or a parallel power structure (guerilla movements in liberated zones). Through the mobilisation of local interests these agrarian reforms make up part of a political project aimed at the generation of social support and the destruction of the dominant sector's power bases. Similarly, they contribute to ideologies of social progress where agrarian reform is seen to be the pre-condition

for the advance of capitalism or socialism. Morally, movements for agrarian reform are based on the notion of land as a social good and on the injustice of large landed property<sup>2</sup>.

The agrarian reforms carried out in recent decades were basically the product of reformist or revolutionary governments and/ or the parallel power structures of the guerilla movements. They can only be understood within ideological contexts whose presuppositions are taken for granted socially by a part of the population as a component of political ideologies within which they acquire a specific meaning. Within the context of these ideologies agrarian reform is not reducible to, or to be explained or justified in terms of the interests and demands of any specific group, but is to be understood as part of a project of societal transformation (developmentalist or social revolutionary) and as a type of societal rationality.

What sense does it make therefore, if at all, to continue talking of agrarian reform in a Brazil dominated by the ideology of globalisation, the weakening of State power, and by the abandonment of developmentalist and revolutionary projects? The elaboration of national projects demands that the new economic and political realities of Brazilian society in the context of globalisation should be taken into consideration. Agrarian reforms are associated with societies whose populations are primarily agricultural, with low levels of capitalisation and agroindustrial development, and with authoritarian political systems or with a high intensification and/or radicalisation of the political process. Brazilian society is emerging from a dictatorship with a political system based on weak parties, low levels of mobilisation, and basically centred on the defence of corporative interests and those of large economic groups.

### The Current Social Context

In recent decades agrarian reforms corresponded to intervention policies based on societal ideologies and pre-supposed the existence of a mass of peasants favourable to such initiatives and a latifundist class still to be broken.

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<sup>2</sup> On the fate of these agrarian reforms Cf. Hobsbawn, E., 1996

All the social science research undertaken in Brazil during the '60s, '70s and '80s converges in the characterisation of this period as one in which the social relations in the countryside underwent drastic change. These studies show that non-salaried forms of dependence (sharecropping, renting) which had predominated until then were largely eliminated. In their place emerged a social structure based either on the large capitalist property or family production, both drawing on temporary wage labour. This led to the emergence of a genuine labour market in the countryside with the elimination of the pockets of captive labour.

In other words, the social base for the traditional agrarian reform, based on the peasantry and rural unions which struggled for the desappropriation of the lands in which they worked, was destroyed. Such a situation no longer exists in Brazil and this is dramatically reflected in the characteristics of those effectively engaged in the struggle for land. The Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST- Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) is not made up of rural unions or peasants situated within the fazendas. It is a movement basically composed of unemployed people from the most diverse regions, often urban unemployed from rural origins, nomads occupying unproductive fazendas<sup>3</sup>. The MST is truly original in the sense that it shares few similarities with the old social movements in favour of agrarian reform.

This new context, in which non-workers (the unemployed) struggle for land, exhausts the bargaining power of the social movement and points up the limits of possible alliances for political pressure. The Landless Movement has no impact on the level of national production, and although it has the sympathy of the rural union super-structure (CONTAG), it is not able to mobilise significant support in the countryside.

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<sup>3</sup> “Não estamos diante de um processo de luta para não deixar a terra, mas sim de um processo para entrar na terra, mantida improdutiva e apropriada privadamente para servir de reserva de valor às classes dominantes. Trata-se, pois, de uma luta de expropriados que, na maioria das vezes, experimentam a proletarização urbana e rural, mas que resolvam construir o futuro baseado na negação do presente”. *Jornal dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, Ano XV - Nº 164, Dez.1996, p.19.

In the same way that the "popular" base of the Brazilian countryside has changed, so also have the characteristics of the dominant class and the family firms. The modernisation of agricultural production means that capitalised rural landowners have converged towards new areas of corporative interest. Public policies on rural credit, subsidies, minimum prices and customs tariffs represent the principle link between the different segments of rural producers. On the basis of these issues, the new leaderships are able to unify the large landowners and even mobilise the support of small farmers. Without doubt, differences of interest exist among the different sectors of rural producers, but such differences emerge in relation to different products and different positions within the agroindustrial production chain rather than in relation to the size of the property and the distribution of landownership.

As a result, at moments of political confrontation at national level, it is the large landowners who not only gain greater support among the elites, as one might well imagine, but are equally able to mobilise a greater presence of medium and even small farmers in demonstrations in the capital, Brasilia.

Social scientists are similarly in agreement in defining the new context of Brazilian agriculture as that of agroindustrial production, where the conditions of production depend on an adequate marketing infrastructure, together with the inputs and machinery to ensure the necessary productivity and quality for market participation. In this context, land is one of the factors of production, a necessary but in no way sufficient condition for viable production. The alternative of a subsistence economy is no longer an option for a population integrated into basic consumption demands which require a minimum of monetary income. The Brazilian population as a whole is permeated with the expectations of urban industrial consumption and the members of the landless movement do not therefore consist of peasants isolated within a culture at the margin of urban influences.

The recognition that the movement for agrarian reform is basically one component of a single problematic, that of the labour market and the promotion of employment appears clearly in the defence of agrarian reform in a recent study undertaken by the FAO. The principal

argument of this study is that rural settlements create an average income superior to that found among the poorest urban sectors. As we shall see, this implies a shift in focus in which the rural problem is seen as part of another problematic, that of unemployment and urban poverty.

The social transformation of the Brazilian countryside signified therefore an undermining of the social base which could demand agrarian reform in the lands on which they worked. And so, today, we have workers who do not demand the land within which they work, which was the traditional focus of agrarian reforms in the past, and who restrict themselves exclusively to the occupation of "improductive" lands. The struggle for agrarian reform limits itself therefore to the distribution of improductive lands and to the colonisation of public lands.<sup>4</sup>

We are dealing with an agrarian reform as the object of struggle of a section of the unemployed via the distribution of improductive lands in an economic context in which the land represents an important but by no means the principal cost factor for a viable production system. In the new agroindustrial context, in addition to the distribution of land, viable settlements require infrastructure, machinery and inputs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The lack of a historical link between the landless and the location of the settlements is possibly the principal factor explaining the high levels of abandonment in the initial years (cf Romeiro, A., Guanziroli, C. Laerte, S, 1994), combined with the maintenance of cultural patterns based on the predatory use of land in Brazil's northern region, where patterns of exploitation are not based on perspectives of sustainable land use.

<sup>5</sup> In 1982 in a study on the new agroindustrialised farming enterprise we argued that capitalised family farmers had modified their demands with regard to economic policy and agribusiness, and that the struggle for land had come to be localised among the more marginalised sectors: "The political demands of the different segments of family farmers tend to become differentiated, because, although all are opposed to capital, their survival depends on different demands and forms of political representation. On the one hand, the integrated sectors channel their economic demands through state institutions and private associations. Their normal horizon of politicisation refers to the ability to become autonomous from the representative organisations in which they are included along with the agroindustrial oligopolies, and create their own organisations. The segments which, on the other hand, become marginalised from the process of economic integration develop demands of a more clearly political order relating to social or political reforms. Their capacity for mobilisation, however, depends to a great extent on the assumption of their demands by broader politico-ideological institutions (political parties, the Church...) not being based

If it were a question of consolidating a modern agroindustrialised agriculture through the distribution of improductive or virgin lands, the issue of potential effective demand would have to be considered, as also the profitability of the necessary economic investments.

In practice, we are no longer dealing with agrarian reform in the traditional sense of the term, whether from an ideological, sociological or economic point of view. Rather the issue is that of creating access to work for unemployed sectors who are still linked to or willing to return to rural life.

### The Political Dynamic

The Brazilian countryside exhibits great regional diversity in terms of social economic and cultural organisation. This diversity, together with a limited "peasant tradition", low penetration of collective political traditions, and last but not least, an open frontier able to absorb part of the demographic overflow, has served to limit the scope of social movements in the countryside.

The period of greatest agitation in the Brazilian countryside coincided with the 1964 coup which repressed the rural political organisations. In the early period of the military dictatorship, policies with regard to the structure of land ownership were the product of contradictory forces. On the one hand, sections of the military eager to undermine the social base of political agitation in the countryside imposed a new agrarian reform legislation, the Land Statute, and

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therefore on their own specific economic weight or their own institutions of representation."Sorj, B. et al, 1982, pp113-114.

also created institutions for the implantation of such a reform.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, this project was rapidly buried under the impact of pressure from the dominant elite and was channelled in the direction, not of an agrarian reform, but of colonisation on new lands particularly in the Amazon.

In this way, the conflict between those who wanted an agrarian reform and those who were opposed to it was resolved in the best style of Brazilian culture, on the basis of which the State assumed the onus, with the bonus being distributed among the dominant class, and the leftovers going to the subaltern classes. Even so, the importance of the opening of roads and infrastructure in the Northern region of the country for the absorption of important segments of the population, particularly of rural origin, in agricultural production, mining and other activities in the urban sectors, should not be underestimated. The new rural conflict shifted towards a confrontation between invaders illegally occupying large tracts of public land and small farmer squatters, and between these latter and the gold-panners against the indigenous indian tribes.

With the first Government of the New Republic (1986-90), the agrarian reform was once again placed on the order of the day as part of the agenda which had been repressed by the dictatorship and which the new democracy and the Constituent Assembly would have to confront. In fact, the Sarney Government settled some 100,000 families, not only in colonisation areas, but also in improductive fazendas which had become the focus of conflict. The Constituent Assembly of 1988 was the platform of attempts to establish legislation which would allow for expropriation for reasons of social interest and in the context of improductive lands, but these ended in failure.<sup>7</sup>

It was during the Sarney Government that the two principal forces which would dominate the coverage of rural conflicts were consolidated : the MST and the UDR. Both are apparently the most radical sectors of broader social forces: the CONTAG (The National Confederation of Agricultural Workers) in the case of the MST and the CNA (The National Agrarian

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<sup>6</sup>On the struggles over the elaboration of the Land Statute cf Bruno, R., 1996, Ch. 9

<sup>7</sup>An account of the struggle for the project of agrarian reform can be found in Graziano da Silva, 1995.

Federation) in the case of the UDR. Independently of any effective link between the militant institutions and the class based federations, the potential for mobilisation and the identification between the militants and their social base is quite distinct.

The CONTAG is a patchwork organisation ranging from rural salaried workers to family enterprises, and has a very low almost non-existent capacity for popular mobilisation and penetration of the political system. Created in the period of the military dictatorship, the CONTAG has always had the agrarian reform as its central unifying platform but it has rarely

been able to engage either its own base, the political parties or the media. The landless are by no means a representative sample of the CONTAG membership. Although it has different characteristics in the different regions of the country, the MST is a movement led by militants with roots in the Church and/or radical leftwing groups, whether of urban or rural origin, and with a public composed of urban and rural unemployed, together with small farmers and minifundists who have lost their lands<sup>8</sup>.

The UDR on the other hand is basically constituted and supported by large cattle ranchers, but in moments of radicalisation it is able to mobilise broad support among the rural landowners and is politically linked to the rural vote in the Congress, which is possible the leading

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<sup>8</sup> The political and intellectual confusion of the MST in relation to the meeting and social forces supporting an agrarian reform in Brazil is clearly reflected in this note of published in the MST journal: “Banco Mundial quer Reforma Agrária neoliberal na América Latina - Na conferência da FAO ficou evidente que o Banco Mundial está pressionando não só o governo brasileiro, mas vários países do Terceiro Mundo, especialmente da América Latina (Guatemala, Colômbia e Brasil), para que realmente efetivem a Reforma Agrária. Eles vão deslocar recursos, mas não confiam no governo brasileiro porque ele o desvia. O que se percebe é que o que eles chamam de Banco de Terras nada mais é do que a Reforma Agrária dentro do estilo neoliberal, onde passariam recursos para os camponeses que negociariam direto com os fazendeiros. Eles querem tirar o Estado por dois motivos: pela corrupção e pela incompetência. Nada mais é do que a velha política neoliberal de tirar o Estado de suas funções sociais”. *Jornal dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, Ano XV - Nº164, Dez.1996, p.17.

Parliamentary bloc. While the methods employed by various of its associates (armed criminal violence against rural leaders and land invaders) do not gain the sympathy of the CNA, cooperation between the UDR and the different representatives of the rural landowners has shown itself to be much more efficient than that between the MST and the CONTAG.

Neither of these two movements has a univocal relation with a particular political party. The leadership of the MST shows general sympathy for the PT but retains its autonomy with regard to this party at the level of local elections, and when judged convenient alliances can be forged with right wing parties. After a failed attempt at launching its own candidate for the presidential elections of 1990, the UDR has become diffused within various parties. Both groups have certain characteristics in common, as a result of the similar social conditions in which they act, fundamentally marked by the low level of State presence. L. A. Payne (1996) speaks of a new "uncivil" right in Latin America, and while the left and right have important and obvious differences, one can perhaps speak more generally of "uncivil social movements" both of the right and the left, which use direct action as a method of mobilising social support and blackmail the State with actions which have a strong media profile. Without doubt both the objectives and the type of violence employed are different. While the UDR uses violence and criminal action against leaders and militants, the MST focusses on the occupation of land, Government offices - generally those of INCRA - and the taking of public functionaries as hostages, (a tactic first used in Brazil towards the end of the period of dictatorship by the Indians against the FUNAI, the organisation charged with looking after Indian rights, with strong media impact).

Agrarian reform in Brazil has two components. One comprises those directly involved, both for and against, and who have therefore direct interests at stake. On the other hand, there are the political parties, the unions and other institutions which participate in the power game and the definition of what a desirable society for Brazil should be.

The Brazil which emerged from the military dictatorship is an urban country, with a complex productive structure, an industrialised agriculture, patterns of consumption defined by publicity

and by the fashions promoted by large-scale industry. At the same time it is defined by huge social cleavages and considerable sections of the population living in the misery of the favelas surrounding the major cities, which have become transformed into foci of marginality and violence. In this Brazil, agrarian reform as part of a traditional project, that is, one based on political polarisation and social conflict, does not present any point of attraction for any sector of the dominant classes nor for the middle classes or the organised industrial workers. This type of agrarian reform would imply a disorganisation of production, in addition to directly affecting industrial interests linked to the agrofood chain, and without mentioning urban industrial interests themselves which have invested heavily in agricultural production. It is no accident therefore that a project for Brazil produced by leading economists for a business group simply ignores the issue of agrarian reform. (Diniz, A., 1990)

The political parties, on the contrary, are generally favourable to the issue of agrarian reform although none stand to gain many votes on the basis of such a platform. Paradoxically, agrarian reform does not generate votes and does not represent a viable alternative either economically or politically, although it can be manipulated to advantage by the different political parties. Right wing parties which have the support of the majority of the rural vote can maintain passive support for the reform to the extent that it is limited to marginal lands and does not represent an effective economic or political threat to their interests. This is even more the case given that we are dealing with a right wing which has historically exhibited extremely changeable traits, prepared to coopt and be coopted, and to make concessions and accommodations to all types of political practices and discourses to maintain itself in power. The left wing, in its turn, sees in the agrarian reform a radical platform of social confrontation which provides a link with its past and a basis for denouncing the Government for the violence in the countryside.

Particularly illustrative is the case of the PT which is the principal defender of agrarian reform, but whose political base is fundamentally urban. For the PT the issue is that of distinguishing its project from those parties which adhere completely to integration within the international economy and deleting social reform from their platforms. The PT is a party which has been

responsible for important innovations in Brazilian politics, in its form or organisation, involving a level of transparency, honesty and consistency in its relations with the public domain strange to most other Brazilian political parties. On the ideological level, however, it continues to defend a programme in which predominates banners of the past, and which in many cases serve as a cover for the corporative interests of its social bases, the salaried groups in the State sector. It also provides the raw material for a rhetoric of social transformation and class confrontation which shows itself to be unviable and unattractive in the urban-industrial sector, but which finds an echo in the countryside given the criminal acts of many rural landowners.

For the other political parties, agrarian reform, to the extent that it is innocuous and restricted to unproductive lands, allows for a demonstration of concern for social problems which in practice they are not prepared to confront or for which they are not ready to commit significant levels of public funding. For the Government, it is a question of showing social sensibility and neutralising an area of social conflict with no particular economic relevance but which has an immediate affect at the level of the media: a massacre of the landless has no affect on production but it has a powerful impact on the images transmitted throughout the world and hurts "Brazil's international credibility". The media impact of rural struggles is clear from a recent article of *The Economist* (November, 1996) on the danger of a backlash in Latin America exemplified in the Brazilian case by "Brazil's landless class with its trigger-happy policy". (p15 op. cit.) No comments are needed on the lack of reference to the landlords.

To a certain extent, agrarian reform serves all the political parties as a substitute for the inexistence of a national project in the new context of Brazilian society. The various social movements, Brazilian civil society, and particularly its political elites, have been unable to transform the struggle for democracy into a project of social citizenship. Society continues to organise itself around corporative interest groups, within which the political parties negotiate. Agrarian reform is a useful platform for demonstrating social concern in a country which has still not found the political will to confront the construction of a society of citizens.

## Social Scientists and Agrarian Reform

The current debate on agrarian reform has its origins in the discussions of the '70s and the beginning of the '80s, still in the throws of the military regime. In this period the social sciences became institutionalised in their present form and developed debates independently of the left-wing political parties, although they were almost always influenced by a marxist theoretical framework. This debate met its limits in its (in)capacity to confront the themes which presented themselves as the major challenges of the end of the century: globalisation, the privatisation of the public sector, the breaking up of corporatist privileges, the organisation of a democratic mass society, and the role of social scientists (Cf. Sorj, B., 1990).

Without going into this debate, which we have synthesised in other studies, we can say that the majority of these writings are based on systemic visions of the development of capitalism in Brazilian agriculture from which political conclusions are then drawn. Looking back on these studies one is impressed by the degree to which they are still strongly anchored in an interpretative theoretical framework for society as a whole on the basis of which the appropriate policies and proposals for the future social structure of Brazilian agriculture are simply deduced.

The debate on socio-economic perspectives became polarised along two axis. On the one hand, there were those who argued that capitalist production relations tended to be dominant in the countryside and that as a consequence the specificity of the agrarian question was diluted into the more general confrontation between capital and labour.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>9</sup>"A distributive agrarian reform at this moment would constitute a proposal of this type, in other words, a historically impossible proposal, as is necessarily the case of any proposal which advocates a reform of capital's contradictions without tackling the issue of capital itself and the contradiction which it expresses: social production and the private appropriation of wealth."Souza Martins,J. 1981, p177.

there were those who defend the permanence of the family production structure and the persistence of specific demands, among them that of access to land.

A second clivage emerged between those who focussed on integration into the agroindustrial complex, transforming family farmers into workers for capital and those who insisted on the permanence of the specific characteristics of family-based production. Although this polarisation did not necessarily result in policy positions relating to agrarian reform, the presence of the agroindustrial complex had a direct bearing on the viability of policies for land distribution.

The political sciences remained generally aloof to rural studies with the exception of generic references to the persistence of authoritarianism and the role of the *latifundio* for the construction of Brazilian capitalism. Debate on, and reference to other experiences of agrarian reform in the world were equally rare, but such provincialism was not a monopoly of this area of the social sciences.

With the arrival of the New Republic, social scientists' political positions seldom accompanied the theoretical debate. Party political affinities and the opportunity to participate in the new democratic governments determined the practical behaviour of many social scientists. To the old propositions in favour of agrarian reform was now added the argument that land distribution would be a road "for achieving citizenship".<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this period the debate on agrarian reform was characterised by "theoretical-deductive" approaches. Rural studies for the most part concentrated on studies of specific cases, with virtually no in-depth research and debate on the rural social structure as a whole, the real conditions of land occupation, or the economic and ecological implications and viability of an integral incorporation of the so-called unproductive lands. Recognition that the large landed property sector as a whole had undergone change, that Brazilian cattle-raising had

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<sup>10</sup>This tendency to rechristen or paint old slogans with the colours of democracy and citizenship characterised and weakened the social sciences in this period.

become modernised, was relativised in the light of the continued use of old authoritarian and violent methods which were used to "denounce" as ideology the image of "modern rural producers" used by the UDR, underestimating the productive power, the communicational ability and the national lobbying power of this sector of the dominant class.<sup>11</sup>

The social scientists have been swept along by the agenda and the political dynamic of the Brazilian State, the MST, and the UDR. The military dictatorship imposed a model by which agricultural policy financed the modernisation of the countryside - and enriched large landowners who diverted part of these low interest loans to the financial markets - with colonisation as the response to the social question. *Agricultural* (economic) policy was separated therefore from *agrarian* (social) policy. The Governments of the New Republic maintained this separation in spite of rhetoric to the contrary. And so, while agrarian policy settled small farmers condemned in their majority to becoming in the future part of the pauperised *minifundist* sector, agricultural policy continued to expel indebted small farmers and *minifundists* with no access to financing. The "minifundist question" is in fact a hot potato with no autonomous political expression (in fact it is generally the large rural landowner who raises the issue to criticise the idea of agrarian reform), and whose solution requires levels of investment and a willingness to become involved in State intervention which no Government has shown itself prepared to undertake. Agricultural policy with an agrarian content and agrarian policy with agricultural content present themselves as the terrain of future reflexion on the part of social scientists who in the last decade have remained too tied to the issues defined by the State, the social movements and the political parties.<sup>12</sup>

### Perspectives

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<sup>11</sup> Such ambiguity in the treatment of the new modernised *latifundios* is present for example in Bruno, 1996

<sup>12</sup>Fernando Henrique Cardosos speeches reveal an understanding (sociological?) of this problem. The challenge for social scientists is to analyse the conditions for passing from political rhetoric to social reality.

In December 1996 the Congress passed legislation relating to the Rural Land Tax and to the Summary Rite for land desappropriation. After negotiating with the rural parliamentary group, which led to a reduction in the levels of tax on productive lands, the Government managed to increase the rate of tax on the large unproductive lands. Similarly the Summary Rite Law was approved which will allow for the rapid disappropriation and distribution of unproductive lands, with the adjudicated price of the land being deposited in justice subject to later negotiation. A Law was also passed which allows for Public Ministry intermediation in situations of conflict. In principle, these measures will permit an acceleration of the process of land distribution, with the tax measures creating funds to finance new settlements, and the new judicial procedure shortening the expropriation process.

Although these reforms may well help the Fernando Henrique Government reach its target of settling 280,000 families, they represent basically one more step in the integration and regimentation of the countryside within the politico-administrative structure of the Brazilian State.

The existence of an open frontier, with a huge quantity of unexploited public lands has, in the course of Brazilian history, provided one of the principal escape valves for the surplus population. The occupation of these lands however occurred to a great extent through the savage mechanisms of the "law of the strongest" in which the State was either absent or had its representatives coopted by the local elites. The Brazilian countryside is still largely outside the reach of the State's controlling mechanisms. The bodies responsible for defining landed property boundaries are inefficient, and the documentation and registration of rural properties is fragile and at times non-existent. The local power structure often controls the police and the judiciary and the assassination of rural leaders and massacres of the landless remain unpunished.

What is at stake in Brazil is the State's capacity to impose rules of political and juridical citizenship in the countryside. The conflict between large landowners and the landless,

particularly in the Northern region, is, in the majority of cases, a conflict over public lands which have been appropriated thanks to the lack of an effective public authority.

The end of inflation (which justified investment in land as a financial asset), the elimination of subsidised credit to large cattle ranchers in the North and the Northeast, and the new land tax on rural properties, converge in contributing to a fall in land prices. The use of tax measures and appropriate legislation as instruments for the regulation and control of land use for speculative objectives is still, however, in its infancy.

A democratic government principal challenge as regards the rural population is still to consolidate the basic rights of social citizenship, ensuring minimum income, education and access to basic health services. The extension of pension rights to the countryside represented a social revolution with possibly greater impact than the land distribution carried out to date by the New Republic.

In many cases, land distribution in Brazil may well be an adequate palliative. But it should not be forgotten, as its own defenders point out, that it is based on the low wages and inhuman conditions for the poor of the urban infrastructure. A significant increase in the minimum wage and improvements in the urban infrastructure will make persistence in, or a return to, the countryside much less attractive.

As long as Brazil continues to be a profoundly socially desarticulated country - with federal governments demonstrating limited social penetration and local economic power groups manipulating public authority, with weak civil organisations largely based in the urban centres and political parties divided between physiologism and programmatic lack of realism - the democratisation of Brazilian society will advance only slowly. The desired alchemy of the Fernando Henrique Government, the modernisation of the state apparatus and the economic structure based on right-wing parties but without losing sight of the social horizon, is in this context possibly the best of viable solutions. Even so, the price is high, and the rapid corrosion

of social integration demands a rhythm of change beyond the limited achievements of a power structure based on the current party political structures.

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