
Agrarian moral economies and neoliberalism in Brazil: competing worldviews and the state in the struggle for land

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Abstract. The 1990s was the decade of neoliberalism in Brazil. During the successive administrations of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2003), public enterprises were privatized, import tariffs were slashed, regional free-trade markets were established, and fiscal discipline was prioritized in an attempt to control a massive public debt. As his first term progressed, however, Cardoso was forced to respond to the insistent popular demand for reform of the country's inequitable land-tenure structure. The issue became increasingly visible in the 1990s because of the strength of a grassroots social movement, the Movement of Landless Workers (MST). In response to the demands for agrarian reform, the government offered its support for an essentially neoliberal, market-based alternative to state-led distribution—an alternative favored by official development organizations throughout the Third World at this time. In this paper, I argue that the support for a market-led agrarian reform privileged the agrarian elite in Brazil and delegitimated the MST's struggle, not only because it reinforced the elite's claim to land but also because it legitimated the elite's particular interpretation of productivity and property rights. The claims put forward both by the agrarian elite and by the MST members in the southern state of Santa Catarina derive from what can usefully be considered 'agrarian moral economies'.

"The very idea that the [landless person] can invade what we worked twenty-three years to achieve, and I would lose everything I had sacrificed for ...! I didn't travel, I didn't buy clothes, I didn't do a lot of things so that I could buy this land, and now I could lose it to a bunch of unemployed vagabonds?? I can be kicked around by these people?"

Large farmer in Santa Catarina (interview with the author, 1998)

"God didn't sell the land to anyone, he left it for us. In the time of my parents, land was not sold, you just went there."

MST member and landless farmer (interview with the author, 1998)

Introduction

The 1990s was the decade of neoliberalism in Brazil. Public sectors once considered strategic were privatized, social programs were cut back or withdrawn, trade regulations were slashed, and the economy was opened to foreign investment and imports. These policies, euphemistically referred to as 'international market integration' (Cardoso, 1995; 1999; see also Alimonda, 2000), were defended within Brazil and without as necessary to counteract the massive public debt that had accumulated during previous decades of rapid state-led growth (Bresser Pereira, 1996; de Onis, 2000; Goertzel, 1999).

In Brazil, as in many other Latin American countries, neoliberal policies were adopted in the wake of the return to democratic rule. After twenty-one years of authoritarian dictatorship, indirect elections for the Brazilian presidency were held on 15 January 1985. Perhaps ironically, as space for the mobilization of civil society widened, the increasing desire for a leaner, 'fiscally responsible' state was accompanied by renewed demands that the central government intervene in economic and political

affairs for the purposes of promoting social justice (see especially Dagnino, 2002; also, Avritzer, 2002). One of the most aggressive demands made at this time was for agrarian reform (Medeiros, 1998; Novaes, 1998). In the 1960s popular mobilization for access to land had spread throughout Brazil, emboldened in part by the US-supported land-tenure reforms in Asia after World War 2, and in part by the increasingly radical influence of rural trade unions, various factions of Brazilian Communist groups, and the Catholic Church (Forman, 1975; Maybury-Lewis, 1994; Pereira, 1997; Santos and Costa, 1998). Many governments in Latin America, including those of Guatemala, Chile, Bolivia, and Brazil, implemented or began to implement agrarian reforms at this time (de Janvry et al, 2001). During this period, the dominant, if contested, policy tool used by the state was distribution of land through forcible property expropriations (de Janvry, 1981; Grindle, 1986). Although the theory and practice of land reform were supported by people from many different ideological backgrounds, popular mobilization in the countryside contributed to an atmosphere of instability that provoked right-leaning military coups in Brazil and throughout Latin America, and the issue of equitable access to land remained, at best, unresolved (Hall, 1990; Hecht and Cockburn, 1989; Reis, 1990; Thiesenhusen, 1995).

With the restoration of democracy in Brazil in 1985, widespread demands for access to land returned with renewed force, becoming part of the national political culture largely because of the formation of new social movements struggling for access to land (Gohn, 1997; Novaes, 1998). The most active and well-organized social movement, called O Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (The Movement of Rural Landless Workers, or the MST), began with roughly 1500 members in 1984, invoking Article 186 of the Brazilian Constitution to argue for the right to property that was defined as ‘unproductive’, and therefore not fulfilling its responsibility to the broader ‘social good’ (see Fernandes, 1999; Wright and Wolford, 2003). The MST’s main tactic was the direct action land occupation: movement recruits and activists selected and then occupied a large property—usually one defined legally as unproductive.⁽¹⁾ MST members then squatted on the land to force the government to recognize their claim to its productive use. If the occupation was successful, the government expropriated the property and divided it among the landless poor.⁽²⁾ As of June 2004 the MST had helped to establish well over 1000 land-reform settlements and claimed to represent over one million members throughout the country.

In response to the MST’s demand for state-led agrarian reform, the federal government offered an essentially neoliberal, market-based alternative. From 1997 to 2003 President Fernando Henrique Cardoso championed a Market-Led Agrarian Reform (MLAR) that would distribute land from willing sellers to appropriate buyers with as little government intervention as possible (Borras Jr, 2003). International financial and development agencies, such as the World Bank, supported the implementation of MLARs around the Third World in the 1990s, arguing that they were both more efficient and less expensive than state-led reforms (Borras Jr, 2003; Deininger and Binswanger, 2001; de Janvry et al, 2001).

In this paper, I argue that the support for an MLAR privileged the wealthy farmers—the agrarian elite—in Brazil, not only because it reinforced their claim to land but also because it legitimated their particular interpretation of productivity

⁽¹⁾ On rare occasions, the MST has occupied productive properties in order to make a political point.

⁽²⁾ When the government expropriates a property, agrarian reform officials are required by law to prioritize the settlement of people who were previously associated with the property (former workers). Once those people have been accommodated, the government can determine who else, including MST members, should be settled in the area.

and property rights. The members of the agrarian elite interviewed for this paper situated their claims to land in historical notions of rightful access through hard work, individualism, competitiveness, and ‘playing by the rules’ (of the market). Their opposition to the MST and the idea of state-led agrarian reform was based both in the fact that they had land, and in traditions of production that were intensive, relatively individualistic, and market-oriented. Having survived funding cuts for agriculture in the 1990s, they were disdainful of politics as a means of organizing access to resources. The implementation of the MLAR legitimated this rationalization of possession, even as it delegitimated the discourse put forth by the MST. Contrary to the agrarian elite, the MST situated its claims to land in historical notions of access through hard work, the grace of a socially just God, and collective action, or, ‘land to those who work it (and need it)’ (see also Martins, 2000). People joined the MST, leaving behind familiar lives and enduring personal hardships, because they needed land to continue a traditional way of life which they valued. Their justifications for participation were situated in their community-oriented, spatially expansive, traditions of production and reproduction on the land. The differences between the MST settlers and the large landowners were evident in their description of the movement’s methods: the large landowners referred to the act of taking over a property as an ‘invasion’, the unlawful appropriation of something that did not belong to the invaders and was rightfully theirs because of prior purchase, whereas the MST referred to the takeover as an ‘occupation’—movement members were filling what they saw as an unproductive or unjustly used space. They embraced the act of occupying land, comparing it to what their own grandparents had done generations before. Both of these representations—the agrarian elite’s and the MST’s—derive from what can usefully be considered ‘agrarian moral economies’.

The term ‘moral economy’ is generally attributed to the Marxist British historian, E P Thompson, from his 1971 study of collective protests in 18th-century England. In this seminal essay, Thompson argued that, contrary to previous historical interpretations, the common people of 18th-century England who mobilized around periodic food shortages were not driven by the spasmodic impulses of hunger and fear: rather, they were acting in defensive response to the ways in which the ‘cash nexus’ of the encroaching market violated informal notions of social justice and traditional rights. As Thompson’s work and the contributions that followed demonstrated (particularly Scott, 1976), struggles over material goods are usually more than just “rebellion[s] of the belly” (cited by Thompson, 1971, page 77). Rather, struggles for material goods are contestations between “ideal models or ideology ..., which assigns economic roles and which endorses customary practices (an alternative ‘economics’), in a particular balance of class or social forces” (Thompson, 1993, page 340).

In this paper, I use the term ‘moral economy’ to refer to the moral arguments (ideal models or ideology) used by a particular group of people to define the optimal organization of society, including most importantly an outline of how society’s productive resources (in this case, land) ought to be divided. These moral arguments are constituted through and embedded in historically and culturally specific production relations and are deepened when they are extended horizontally to and supported by a wider community or afforded a “measure of licence” by the ruling state (Thompson, 1971, pages 77–78). The outlines of a given moral economy are most easily visible when the social group’s economic or political position is challenged, or when the productive resource is seen as dangerously scarce.

Although the concept of a moral economy has most often been used to differentiate subaltern—usually peasant—notions of “solidarity, cohesion and mutuality” (Mallon, 1995, page 65) from elite notions of market rationality associated with liberal (and now neoliberal) Western capitalisms, the term is a useful one for understanding both the

agrarian elite and the MST in Brazil.⁽³⁾ Because the term is used here in a way that differs from its original usage by Thompson (1971; 1993) and others in the agrarian tradition such as James C Scott (1976) and Michael J Watts (1983), it is necessary to explain the reasons for my use of the term; these reasons shape the way in which the term is used in the paper. First, considering the narratives both of the agrarian elite and of the MST as ‘embedded’ in moral economies recognizes the diversity in their social and productive motivations or relationships at the same time as it enables a comparison by placing the two groups on equal footing as value laden, historically situated claims to a given set of resources. As Andrew Sayer (2004) points out, working with the concept of a moral economy facilitates

“the study of the ways in which economic activities—in the broad sense, including but going beyond markets and capitalism to *all* forms of provisioning—are influenced by moral/ethical norms and sentiments, and how, conversely, those norms are reinforced, compromised, or overridden by economic forces—so much so in some cases that the norms represent little more than legitimations of entrenched power relations. These influences are present in all economies, not merely pre-capitalist ones, so we should not reserve the term moral economy for the latter” (page 2, italics in the original).

The ability to compare the two groups is particularly important in this case. In Brazil, it is generally the MST members who are considered to be struggling for land. The movement’s struggle is highly visible in part because the members use public strategies such as roadside marches, land occupations, and town-hall demonstrations, but also because they are so clearly struggling against mainstream opinion, the status quo, and hegemonic understandings of property rights. The agrarian elites, on the other hand, are largely invisible actors. Unless they organize open retaliatory campaigns, as they did in the mid 1980s, the agrarian elites are not seen to be actively struggling—either for their land or against alternative claims to land—because their defense of property is situated within the dominant perspective. Identifying the moral economy behind the agrarian elites’ claims to property highlights the various ways in which the elite itself struggles (sometimes desperately) to preserve its own traditional understandings of who belongs on the land and who does not.

The second reason for using the term ‘moral economy’ lies in its emphasis on the social construction and ‘moral heritage’ (Scott, 1976) of seemingly objective claims to resources (Booth, 1994; Sayer, 2004). Although both the MST and the agrarian elite justify their positions and actions by invoking the highest legal authority in the land, the Federal Constitution, this document simultaneously protects the government’s right to expropriate land not fulfilling its social obligations *and* ensures the sanctity of private property. As a result, land law in Brazil is institutionally weak: original ownership claims are difficult to prove; and confusing, occasionally contradictory, legislation exists at the local and national levels (see Alston et al, 1999 for examples). De facto title to land often depends as much on a legal contract as on a given claimant’s access to political or economic resources or firepower (Holston, 1991; Wright, 2001). In this context, both the MST’s and the agrarian elite’s interpretation of the constitution are grounded less in legal convention per se than in a moral economy that outlines the normative framework for ownership: their claims are produced through their relationships with each other and the land.

⁽³⁾ The role of external threats in evoking defense of moral economies probably helps to explain why the concept has more often been applied to subaltern groups than to dominant ones—but see James McCarthy’s (1998) analysis of the Wise Use movement in the American midwest for an excellent exception.

The third reason for using the concept of a moral economy is that doing so helps us to understand how the neoliberal project comes to be so enthusiastically supported even in countries such as Brazil where the existence of deep structural inequalities would seem to mock the assumptions of level playing fields and contractual parity. In embracing the neoliberal MLAR, the agrarian elites in Santa Catarina are not primarily agreeing with neoliberalism per se: they are embracing a theoretical framework that legitimates their own worldview and their own claim to resources. At the same time, in rejecting the MLAR, the MST are not arguing against the marketplace itself, or the utility of price as an indicator of supply and demand. They are objecting to a worldview that labels their own poverty an indication of slothfulness and interprets their request for assistance as a sign of weakness.

The fourth and final reason for using the term moral economy is that no other term works as well. Alternative concepts that offer parallel or similar frameworks might be (this is a necessarily partial list—partial in the sense of being limited and in the sense of including primarily those terms with which I am most sympathetic): ideology, culture or ‘cultural toolkit’ (Swidler, 1986), discourse, lifeworlds (Habermas, 1984), ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971), or moral economy *values* (as suggested somewhat derisively by Thompson in his 1993 essay). These are all useful terms, but at the risk of oversimplifying (as all of these terms have long histories and multiple meanings), it is my argument that they are all either too broad or too narrow. Moral economies are both the expression of and production of a social group’s explicitly normative frameworks outlining the ‘proper’ organization of society and division of (what are perceived as) scarce resources. They contain ideological elements and are historically and spatially situated in concrete material contexts, as is any understanding of ideology, but moral economies go beyond the realm of ideas to incorporate relationships and actions—specifically those which pertain to resource use. They are culturally informed, but do not constitute the whole of culture per se. A moral economy may be produced at the intersection of lifeworld and system, but does not necessarily incorporate the entirety of either—and the separation of the two is unhelpful. Moral economies may represent expressions of ‘common sense’, but they may also be oppositional (to the hegemonic bloc), marginal, or, even, entirely good sense. Finally, moral economies certainly express a certain set of values, but the concept goes beyond the values themselves to include the relationships, processes, and events through which the values are produced.

Having laid out such an ambitious project for the use of term ‘moral economy’, it is unlikely that I will in this paper satisfactorily explore all of the ‘relationships, processes, and events through which values are produced’ but I would like to set the analysis in that direction and encourage more in-depth studies of moral economies. In the rest of this paper, I describe the rise of neoliberalism and the struggle for land in Brazil and then analyze the competing moral economies described in interviews with MST settlers and large landowners in the southern state of Santa Catarina. Interviews cited in this paper were conducted in Campos Novos, Santa Catarina in 1998 and 1999.⁽⁴⁾

⁽⁴⁾ In 1998–99 I lived in Campos Novos, Santa Catarina, and conducted seven months of field research. I interviewed approximately 125 MST settlers and activists in Campos Novos, as well as small farmers not affiliated with the movement and large farmers. I formally interviewed eight large farmers, which is admittedly a small number and more interviews would have been better, but the eight interviews provide a fair snapshot of the agrarian elite’s moral economy in regards to land distribution because those interviewed occupied highly visible and influential positions in Campos Novos: two were founding members of the main agricultural cooperative in town and a third was a vice president for the second, slightly smaller, cooperative. These were important positions in the small, agricultural town.

The 1990s: the neoliberal decade

The increasingly neoliberal economic policies enacted during the 1990s in Brazil marked a dramatic turning point after six decades of protectionism and state ‘mid-wifery’ (Evans, 1979). Under Fernando Collor (president from 1990 to 1992), neoliberal reforms, including currency stabilization, tariff reduction, and active regional market integration, came to be seen as the ‘only game in town’ (Nylen, 1993). Although Collor’s presidency ended early amid corruption scandals and civil mobilization for his impeachment, his early reforms led to the establishment of a regional customs union (Mercosul), creating virtually free trade between Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay in 1995. From 1987 to 1995, trade as a percentage of Brazil’s gross domestic product (GDP) rose from 17% to 27%, and the country’s trade-weighted average tariff fell from 51 to 14 (figures cited by Baker, 2002).

It was in 1995, however, that Fernando Henrique Cardoso assumed the presidency and neoliberal policies became truly dominant in Brazil (Green, 2000). In the 1970s Cardoso was a respected figure of the Latin American left. He was well-known for having articulated a modified dependency theory, referred to as ‘associated dependent development’ (Cardoso and Faletto, 1978), arguing that the timing of Brazil’s entrance into the world economy reproduced its dependent condition, even though it allowed for limited sectoral growth. In the 1990s, however, Cardoso campaigned for the presidency on the basis of a neoliberal “paradigm shift” (Power, 1998, page 51)—a project that drew on the strength of his prior currency-stabilization plan, the *Plano Real* (Real Plan). Implemented in 1994, the Real Plan was immensely popular because it pegged the Brazilian currency to the US dollar and put an immediate end to the hyperinflation that had plagued the country since the late 1980s (Amman and Baer, 2000). Under the plan, controls on bank lending were also put into place to reduce the inflationary practice of state banks lending to the federal government. Price stability and currency appreciation led to increased foreign imports and investment. Foreign direct investment in Brazil increased from less than US\$1 billion in 1991 (net inflows) to a high of US\$30 billion in 1999.⁽⁵⁾ Part of this increase was thanks to continued regional market integration, primarily through Mercosul and other Latin American countries, but it was also thanks to the privatization of public utilities and resource sectors such as the steel industry and the Companhia do Vale Rio Doce (CVRD), one of the richest mineral reserves in the world. Between 1995 and 1998 privatization initiatives generated approximately US\$60 billion for federal and state governments in Brazil (Sonntag, 2002, page 88).

In promoting these policies, Cardoso argued that “the faith [of the 1960s and 1970s] in all-encompassing and ideological solutions has been lost” (Cardoso, 1999, page 44) and that neoliberalism offered the only viable alternative (Cardoso, 1996). Cardoso was hailed by the international financial community as executing the “first stages of a modern capitalist reorganization” (de Onis, 2000). The conservative British weekly, *The Economist*, regularly applauded Cardoso’s firm commitment to privatization, comparing him favorably to England’s Margaret Thatcher (see, for example, *The Economist* 1998). Cardoso was extremely popular throughout his first administration and, after succeeding in having the constitution modified to allow a second term, was easily reelected in the first round of the 1998 elections.

Cardoso and the awkward issue of agrarian reform

One of Cardoso’s greatest challenges during his presidency was the struggle over land distribution (Pereira, 2003; Sorj, 1998). Inequality in landownership was a legacy of

⁽⁵⁾ See the FDI profile on Brazil published by UNCTAD (the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), available at: <http://www.unctad.org/Templates/Page.asp?intItemID=3198&lang=1>

Portuguese colonization, when the first sugarcane plantations were established in northeastern Brazil. Access to land depended primarily on social connections, thievery, outright domination, and the forging of authentic-looking titles (*grilagem*), all of which made 'legal' ownership claims essential to have but difficult to prove or disprove (Brannstrom, 2001; Holston, 1991; Wright, 2001). The predominance of large estates, called *latifundia*, in Brazilian history gave rise to intense debate over the path to development in the countryside (da Veiga, 1990; Graziano da Silva, 1982; Reis, 1990). Scholars such as Alberto Passos Guimarães (1981) argued that modernization of the Brazilian economy required a more equitable land-tenure pattern to generate effective demand and to encourage the adoption of intensive production practices, whereas Caio Prado Jr (1967), an economic historian and vocal member of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), argued that land reform was less important than improving the rural-wage structure. Others such as Ignácio Rangel (1956) believed that state intervention in landownership or rural wages was unnecessary because industrial development would itself draw off excess rural populations (a la Arthur Lewis, 1954) and encourage the adoption of modern technology in agriculture. In 1964 the military government that seized power on the heels of increasing rural mobilization for distribution, opted for this last perspective, ultimately pursuing a polyvalent strategy that emphasized the modernization of agricultural production on large estates, encouraging the adoption of sophisticated technology and methods by providing generous subsidies to the wealthiest farmers (Graziano da Silva, 1982). The military relocated peasant 'agitators', or 'men without land' to 'a land without men'—the largely unexplored Amazon region (Hall, 1990; Hecht and Cockburn, 1989) and infiltrated rural unions and associations with the purpose of demobilizing radical political organization (Maybury-Lewis, 1994; Pereira, 1997).

In the first ten years of military rule, it seemed that the authoritarian economic strategies were working: the 'economic miracle' of 1967–73 saw reduced inflation, increased industrial employment, and rapid national growth rates. Highly modernized agro-industrial complexes turned Brazil into a leading agricultural producer and exporter of goods such as soy, cotton, orange juice, and poultry (Graziano da Silva, 1982; Müller, 1985). By the mid-1970s, however, the miracle was weakening and by 1978–79, the military government was in retreat, having lost one of its primary justifications for maintaining political power: the creation of economic progress and order. As the military government gradually withdrew from power, landless peasants and rural workers began to form squatter settlements throughout the country, concentrated in the southern states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná (Fernandes, 1999).

With the help of sympathetic agronomists, priests, and activists, the people living in these camps developed a sophisticated argument and strategy for accessing land. The MST's success in building an organized social movement was a product of several factors, including the changing political environment, the increased landlessness due to the ongoing modernization of agriculture, mobilization assistance provided by the Catholic and Lutheran churches, and the appeal to a group of people whose cultural practices of production generated a desire and need for continued access to land (Wolford, 2003a; 2003b).

When the MST was first formed, it was forcefully opposed by the landowning elite who formed an organized countermovement called the Rural Democratic Union (the UDR). The main goal of the UDR was to influence the drafting of the new Federal Constitution (1985–88), and to defeat the proposal for inclusion of a progressive agrarian reform plan (da Veiga, 1990; Payne, 2000). The UDR, which came together under the rubric of protecting 'stability and peace', was quite openly prepared to use

any means necessary, however violent, to destroy organization among the rural poor (Oliveira and del Campo, 1985, page 13). In 1993 the UDR officially disbanded, having achieved its immediate goal of disrupting the constitutional battle over agrarian reform.⁽⁶⁾ At this time, the MST began to wage its war for recognition among a broader population in the cities, hoping to win the public support necessary to pressure the newly democratic government to carry out reform. The movement argued that agrarian reform was not solely a rural issue: improving access to land for poor people would alleviate unemployment in the cities, public violence, and overall levels of poverty. Although violent episodes still marked the struggle for land (see Hammond, 1999; Ondetti, 2001), the scaling up of land-related concerns to broader concerns over equality, social justice, and basic citizenship rights made it less acceptable to openly condone physical violence against MST members. As the former Minister of Agrarian Reform, Raul Jungmann, argued in 2000, “the political environment changed from an antagonistic-Leninist one to a more negotiated-Gramscian one” (personal communication, March 2000). This emphasis on negotiation over force privileged ideological legitimacy over outright coercion (de Almeida and Sánchez, 2000, pages 20–23).

When Cardoso campaigned for the presidency in 1994, he promised to address the issue of agrarian reform by settling 280 000 families during his first four-year term. This was more than the number of families settled by all previous federal government administrations combined. Despite these campaign promises, it was evident that economic stabilization and market-oriented reforms—not agrarian reform—were more central to Cardoso’s political agenda (Ondetti, 2001; Pereira, 2003). Cardoso seemed annoyed by the public support for land distribution, calling it a “nineteenth century demand” (cited by Pereira, 2003, page 49), and the budget for agrarian reform was widely considered insufficient to settle even 10 000 families (Thiesenhusen, 1996). It was during his administration, however, that agrarian reform would become an imperative political issue.

In August 1995 a landless encampment in the municipality of Corumbiara, Rondônia, was attacked by military police and ten landless squatters were killed—some of them very clearly executed by the police. In response to the public outcry which followed the incident, Cardoso appointed his personal advisor, Francisco Graziano Neto, to be head of the federal land reform agency, INCRA (the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform) and promised to increase land expropriations. Less than a year later, in April 1996, a group of 1200 landless squatters were marching from their encampment to the capital city of the state of Pará along the state highway. They were surrounded by military police who opened fire, killing nineteen. This time the incident was caught on tape by a local news reporter and the ensuing media coverage caused a national and international scandal. These two incidents were responsible in part for the increased visibility of rural poverty, violence, and the MST (Ondetti, 2001). Cardoso responded publicly and immediately. Twelve days after the massacre, he created a new Extraordinary Ministry of Land Tenure Politics (MEPF Ministério Extraordinário de Política Fundiária) and increased the rate of land expropriations. In 1997, Cardoso settled 80 000 families, almost twice as many as were settled in his first year in office (Cardoso, 1999), and from 1994 to 1998, the annual budget for INCRA was more than quintupled (Seligmann, 1998).⁽⁷⁾

At the same time as Cardoso expanded the state-led program of agrarian reform, he also implemented an innovative market-based approach to agrarian reform in keeping with his overall neoliberal policy reforms. This “new model of land policy [was to be]

⁽⁶⁾ The UDR has recently reorganized branches in São Paulo and Paraná, two active sites of contestation over land distribution.

⁽⁷⁾ In 1994 INCRA’s annual budget was R\$390 million, and in 1998, the agency’s annual budget was R\$2243 million (Seligmann, 1998).

integrated into the market and independent of the government at each stage of the process” (Cardoso, 1995). With an initial loan of US \$90 million from the World Bank, a pilot project called A Cedula da Terra (The Land Title) was established in 1997 in five northeastern states (Ceará, Pernambuco, Maranhão, Bahia, and Minas Gerais). The Cedula da Terra was the forerunner of a decentralized MLAR project, called O Banco da Terra (The Land Bank). The government’s MLAR targeted people who had experience in subsistence agriculture and whose annual income did not exceed US \$15 000 or who did not already own a property that was larger than a ‘family farm’ as defined by local conditions. These ‘rural producers’ were provided with loans of up to US \$40 000 to help them purchase land. The producers were required to form associations with other interested buyers, and negotiations over property were voluntary. Once a price was agreed on, the settlers would receive state-subsidized assistance in establishing local infrastructure, and then they would have twenty years to pay back the loan, with a grace period of three years before interest rates of between 4% and 6% applied. In 1998, the Land Bank became an official program and was organized in collaboration with federal and state government funds.

In principle, the MLAR was expected to be distinct from, and complementary to, state-led agrarian reform based in the forcible expropriation of unproductive properties. The MLAR would target small and medium-sized farmers who were willing to sell their land and able to negotiate an acceptable price with the landless. In practice, when the Land Bank was established in 1998, the government began to withdraw resources from the state-led agrarian reform process.⁽⁸⁾ In 1997, when the Cedula da Terra began, INCRA’s annual budget was R\$2.6 billion and by 2001, it was roughly half that amount. From 2001 to 2003 the official budget for state-led agrarian reform was cut by a further 39%.

The attempt to replace state-led agrarian reform with a market alternative was part of the Cardoso government’s plan for a ‘New Rural World’. In March 2000 Raul Jungmann, head of INCRA from 1997 to 2002, presented the outline for the New Rural World that included (a) decentralization of agrarian reform with emphasis on state-level and municipal-level collaboration; (b) the elimination of special credit geared towards settlers; (c) the incorporation of land-reform settlers into the same government program as small farmers; and (d) expediting the process of ‘liberating’ land-reform settlers from their dependence on the state. In a 1999 document called *The Land Bank* the government argued that the MLAR would be a success because it forced the landless farmer to take personal responsibility for his future:

“[the landless farmers] buy the land in cash and have 20 years to pay the loan. It is good land that they chose by themselves. With the help of the [agricultural extension agents], they negotiate the price with the [landowners] until they get the best offer [possible]” (MDA, 1999, page 7).

As a “poor but rational” consumer and producer, the landless person who works through the Land Bank is “not a passive agent, a non-participant in [an otherwise] administrative process” (MDA, 1999, page 26). In other words, they are rural producers not land-reform beneficiaries, so they do not rely on the state for assistance.

⁽⁸⁾ The MST complained early on that the Land Bank projects were an attempt to derail the state-led agrarian-reform process. Working together as a group under the name the National Forum for Land Reform and Rural Justice, the MST, CONTAG, the CPT, and INCRA union workers registered their complaints with the World Bank’s official inspection panel. Their main arguments were that the pilot Cedula da Terra project would be implemented as an alternative to state-led reforms, and the debt burden imposed on beneficiaries was both burdensome and illegitimate as they felt that as the large landowners did not pay for their land, neither should they.

The government document proudly cites one land recipient as saying:

“Nobody here is going to ask [for] anything from City Hall. We are working and producing, not begging anyone” (MDA, 1999, page 38).

In describing the advantages of purchasing land through the MLAR, the government directly and indirectly compares Land Bank recipients with MST settlers, and it is clear who wins and who loses.⁽⁹⁾ At the end of the document on the Land Bank, an example is given of a land sale that was almost overturned because of the MST:

“The president of the association, Espedito Augusto da Luz, [explains how] the negotiation for the purchase of the farm got so far behind. ‘On the eve of the [deal closing] with the former owner, the farm was invaded by the Landless Movement (the MST). They [the MST] left quickly but they [set up an occupation camp] beside the entrance [the farm], and the negotiations crawled’” (MDA, 1999, page 41).

Another Land Bank participant affirmed,

“[the Land Bank] is better than the normal projects [state-led agrarian reform] because it involves people who always lived off the land. In the invasions, we see a lot of people who don’t have a history of connection with the land” (MDA, 1999, page 41).

The moral economy of the agrarian elite: ‘land for those who own it’

The neoliberal policy of the MLAR outlines and defends a worldview that parallels the moral economy of the agrarian elite in the southern state of Santa Catarina. Santa Catarina was one of the original areas of MST mobilization and continued to be a center of agrarian-reform efforts throughout the 1990s. The municipality of Campos Novos, in the heart of Santa Catarina, developed historically as a center of large-scale ranching and agricultural production (see figure 1). The municipal anthem referred poetically to the region’s agricultural wealth:

“Campos Novos, of such great beauty, vibrant and full of life, with its soybeans as its wealth, and its cattle as its bounty.”

A majority both of the large farmers and of the MST settlers in Santa Catarina had migrated there from the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul. They were descendants of immigrants from Europe who came to Brazil in the 1800s and were differentially successful in their search for land.

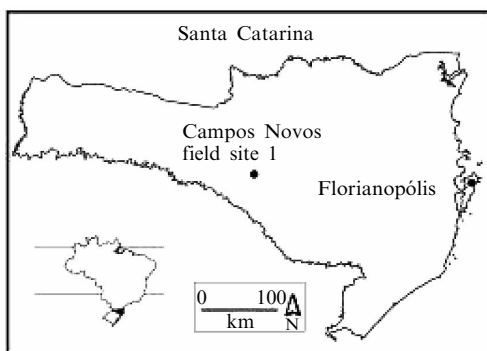


Figure 1. Map of field-research area.

⁽⁹⁾ In the six years since the establishment of the first Land Bank projects, the academic evaluations have been mixed. For positive evaluations, see Deininger (2001); for negative evaluations, see Navarro (1999) and Borrás Jr (2003).

Santa Catarina represented an early frontier in the development of southern Brazil: farming families progressively filled the western areas as demographic pressure, environmental strain, and the expansion of capitalist agriculture spurred the need for new land (Paulilo, 1996; 2003). By the 1970s, however, the agricultural frontier had largely come to an end in Santa Catarina and owning one's own land was increasingly difficult (Testa et al, 1996). The agricultural transformation that hastened the end of the frontier in Santa Catarina was a product of the military's agricultural modernization program in the 1960s and 1970s. Large-scale farmers increased their land area, often by hiring managers to oversee their well-organized farms which were oriented towards international commodity production, principally soybeans, wheat, and small livestock such as poultry and hogs. They had access to generous state funds dispersed through the Regional Bank for the Development of the Extreme South (BRDE), which offered a tax break for all industrialization projects (Mior, 1992). Such interventions, in the context of generalized economic growth (both of demand and supply), pushed the Santa Catarina agro-industries onto both the national and international markets for soybeans and poultry production (Paulilo and Schmidt, 2003), and by the late 1990s most of the large farmers in Campos Novos were highly modernized and productive. In 1999 the municipality was dominated by these large farms: only 2.5% of the property holders owned farms larger than 500 ha, but their land covered the same area as that of the 75% of farmers who owned farms smaller than 50 ha (figures provided by the Mayor's Office of Campos Novos, 1999).⁽¹⁰⁾ The farmers now received very little funding from the state or federal government, instead financing their production through the local business cooperative or agro-industries. These modernized farmers had little to fear from the MST: not only were their properties constitutionally ineligible for expropriation, but also low profit margins in the region were pushing the less productive farmers out of business and many of these were more than willing to sell their land to the government for the purposes of agrarian reform. In 1998 the state INCRA office had twelve offers of properties available for expropriation on its desk.

Despite their relative security as landowners, the agrarian elite in Campos Novos were fiercely opposed to the MST members living in their midst and featured in the media.⁽¹¹⁾ They believed that agrarian reform was necessary to correct inequalities in land distribution in Brazil, but argued that this should be done through the market or on public land. They saw land as a scarce good in light of the closing frontier, and they argued that what available land there was should be preserved for their own children or for deserving small farmers. They situated their opposition to the MST within a moral economy narrative that attributed their traditional rights to land to hard work, personal responsibility, and reliance on the market rather than on 'politics'—where engaging in politics was seen as a lowly form of begging. The landowners believed that their rights had been assured through the market (property rights, consumer rights), and they privileged these over rights assured through the state or civil society (human rights, social rights, or the 'right to have rights'). Well-being was determined by the 'laws' of supply and demand, and the 'forces of competition' rather than by subjective proscriptions for social justice or equality—and so economic success and class position (or inequality) was, by definition, indicative of moral worth. In this perspective, MST members were criticized because they used 'politics' in asking the government for a handout rather than just 'getting to work'—as the wealthy farmers' ancestors had done.

⁽¹⁰⁾ All other figures cited are from the Censo Agropecuario, IBGE, 1995, Santa Catarina, page 32.

⁽¹¹⁾ One agrarian-reform settlement in Campos Novos was particularly visible as it was fairly large (97 families) and straddled the federal highway that cut through the town.

As one farmer said:

“My great grandparents came to Campos Novos from [the state of São Paulo]. They were farmers there and they came here searching for land. I myself helped to lay out the first street when I was five years old. There was nothing here.”

MST members were considered undeserving and inefficient because the very fact of their poverty labeled them as lacking initiative, skill, and capacity. If they did possess initiative, skill, and capacity, the farmers claimed, they would obey the laws of supply and demand and colonize new frontier areas as they and their ancestors had. This moral reasoning—progress through hard work—provided a framework for interpreting a particular person’s landlessness or poverty as a failing of the *individual*, even when in the abstract landlessness and poverty were recognized as difficult societal problems.

The landowners’ criticism of the MST was grounded in their separation of politics from the economy. Although most studies on land-tenure patterns in Brazil argue that inequality in landownership was supported (if not created) by the state (Holston, 1991), the landowners argued that pursuing land redistribution through the government was ‘forcing the issue’ and an unacceptable ‘way out’. As one landowner replied when asked if he supported land reform:

“I think that the kind of land reform politics the [MST] leaders want to carry out has nothing to do with agricultural production. [The MST leaders] just want to cause a disturbance, take over [political power], and upset people. If the government really wanted to carry out agrarian reform, they would buy land from people who wanted to sell A clear procedure like that could work well. [The MST’s way] requires a lot of politics ... with all the [land] invasions. I can’t take it, this is a political land reform.”⁽¹²⁾

Another farmer who was the head of a local agricultural cooperative argued fiercely:

“Why is there such a thing as this? There are some [members of MST], the leaders, who are only interested in politics! To say that they are interested in politics is the same thing as saying that they are corrupt—most of them, most of them. They only use people, these leaders. The MST is a farce, it’s a movement of radical people, it’s not productive.”

The very fact of the MST’s policy of pressuring the state to carry out agrarian reform was evidence for the large farmers that the settlers were attempting to evade the difficult work of making an honest living. As one farmer said:

“If they [the MST members] were farmers, really, they would [already] be producing. These people around here who are holding meetings in the peripheries [of the city] have never held a hoe, they’re only there to make trouble. They are thieves, they are thugs.”

Another farmer who had a 1000 ha farm handed down to him by his parents and who had never visited an MST settlement, argued that struggling for land by taking part in MST activities was indicative of their desire to avoid working:

“I think for me, that [the people in] these settlements are not farmers, they are petty business people who live in the peripheries of the city. They are fooling themselves in this movement—and for what—for a piece of land that they can sell afterwards, for food from the government [*cesta basica*] to eat. And I don’t see these guys working. I only see them in the movement, marching to Brasilia, marching there, invading here, invading there. And the work? I want to know if these people work!”

⁽¹²⁾ Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotes from MST members come from research conducted in Santa Catarina from 1998–99 and 2001.

These farmers were enraged that MST members would receive assistance from the government, because they felt that it was an insult to their own efforts to achieve success through hard work and playing by the rules:

“The media does not value agriculture. The only thing that gets people’s attention is ... landless people killing farmers and invading farms. The very idea that they can invade what we worked 23 years to achieve and I would lose everything I had sacrificed for. I didn’t travel, I didn’t buy clothes, I didn’t do a lot of things so that I could buy land and now I am going to lose it a bunch of unoccupied vagabonds? I can be kicked around by these people? So, that is to say, the values here are a little bit different than [in the USA]!”

The large landowners emphasized the value of individual hard work and self-reliance: individuals were responsible for their own fate, even when the landowners recognized that accidents of birth created significant stumbling blocks for some people. As one farmer said:

“I am using the force of my word to get what I need, [I don’t] abuse anyone, invade anybody’s property ... We should get together all of the workers around here and kick the [MST] out of power. Don’t they do this to us? But we don’t do this. Because we are well brought up, we are decent people. We are people with family and [a love for] our country, which I think MST does not have.”

All of the large farmers insisted that they supported land reform, but argued that working with the state would produce an inefficient reform. At the core of the farmers’ rejection of the MST as political was a belief that accepting state assistance was a sign of weakness and a drain on public resources. As one farmer said of the MST settlers:

“they get governmental assistance, which costs a lot for the nation. It would be easier to leave those people in the city where they can get into whatever trouble they want.”

In turn, having land was de facto an indication of a life dedicated to productive hard work. One farmer argued that MST members ought to do as his own family had done and seek out land in a region where it was available in abundant supply: the grasslands of the center-west or the tropical forest of the north:

“There in the Amazon, how much land is there? In *Ácre*, in *Rondônia*? How many thousands of hectares [of land] does the government have? What about the land that belongs to the priests? Why doesn’t [the MST] use this land? ... We live in a democratic, capitalist country—don’t we? Now it’s easy, it’s all done, everything is close by, the cities have been built. But there where we did all this [work], where my parents and grandparents did all this [work], in the countryside, there was nothing—no streets, nothing! There was no support from the government!”⁽¹³⁾

Large farmers argued that if people were willing to work hard and obeyed the laws of supply and demand, they would find land:

“Agrarian reform is necessary. But this is not the way to do it ... If I don’t have land and I want land to work on, then I have to put my head down and go where there is land available—in *Mato Grosso*. I have to go where there is public land ... You have to go where the work is ... [You can’t say] ‘I want land here because I am Brazilian, because I am a poor little guy [*coitadinho*], because I am a worker, because ...’ It isn’t like this! We have to go where the work and land exist and not demand that it be given to us here.”

The large farmers argued that a state-led agrarian reform threatened Brazil’s ability to produce and export agricultural goods. They insisted that after the trade liberalization of

⁽¹³⁾ This argument lacks some historical and geographical specificity. The military government attempted to send landless farmers to the Amazon in the 1970s, but most of the settlements failed because of the lack of infrastructure, difficulty of transportation and market access, and scarcity of promised government funds.

the 1990s, which increasingly necessitated large-scale production and modern methods, a farm would not succeed without at least “300 hectares or over, otherwise it isn’t even worth buying a tractor”, and ultimately they believed that agrarian reform would have no economic benefits because “nowadays to survive in agriculture a person has to be efficient and must have a good organization, structure, land, knowledge—and a lot more.” As another landowner said:

“In my opinion, I don’t think agrarian reform will be successful in Brazil. Well, I have six partners, we have our employees, and we have 2000 hectares [of land]. People should remember that we support 100 people with our resources, we are a company. Now, a person who has 10 or 12 hectares and doesn’t know how to work the land, with no technical support, what will he do?”

These arguments about the virtues of the market in determining supply and demand led the large farmers to support the concept of a market-led agrarian reform. The purchase of the land signified the purchaser’s willingness to follow the same rules as the large farmers felt they had. As one farmer said:

“This is the way that land reform should be done because then the land will get into the hands of those who really want it, and, therefore, those people will take care of it.”

The MST’s moral economy: ‘land for those who work it’

The moral economy expressed by the agrarian elite did more than simply defend their property rights: it simultaneously delegitimated the ways in which MST members understood their rights to land. The MST’s claim to ‘land for those who work it’ rested on a moral economy that emphasized the centrality of land, community, and the local.⁽¹⁴⁾ Land was believed to be key both to production and to social reproduction, where farmers who produced for their families were the proper stewards of the material environment. One MST activist said, simply: “Land is life.” Access to land signified more than access to soil and water: it signified access to stability, security, a ‘place of one’s own’. As one MST activist said, the search for land was a search for “agrarian reform in general, with education, training, health—a whole bunch of things”. MST members argued that the widespread desire for land was the reason for the movement’s ability to build a national membership. As an MST leader born in Santa Catarina said:

“we picked an issue that united everyone—the land. [Land] is a necessity. Land is the word that unifies. Land became the element of the struggle. You offer the workers the opportunity to have land—but through an occupation [that they participate in].”

Land was necessary both for production and for social reproduction: the sons and daughters of small farmers in western Santa Catarina carved out new land for their families and, in so doing, moved along the edge of a gradually diminishing frontier. MST settlers interviewed in Campos Novos had moved an average of twice each before deciding to join the MST, and their memories of ancestors who cleared the land “with their bare hands”, when it was “nothing but woods” helped to justify their own participation in the movement. The MST members’ moral economy was tinged with

⁽¹⁴⁾ As a political actor, the MST is treated as a unified, coherent voice, representing faithfully the interests and wishes of its considerable membership. In truth, of course, the movement is not always unified, rarely coherent, and represents only a partial set of its members’ beliefs. In other work, I have examined the inner workings of the movement more closely (Wolford, 2003a; 2003b; 2004), but for the purposes of this paper, the analysis will focus on MST settlers interviewed in Campos Novos.

the same righteousness as the agrarian elite's, though derived from a source they considered more authoritative than the marketplace—God:

“God didn't sell the land to anyone, he left it for us. In the time of my parents, land was not sold, you just went there.”

The land was more than employment or food, it was home, and it was history:

“Land means a lot—that's where your life is. I was born on the land ... [and] all I know how to do is work on the land. On the land you don't go hungry.”

In the moral economy of the MST members in Campos Novos, land was also community. The notion of community was based on and in the traditions of farming communities where each person was tied to the land and to each other through relatively noncommercial bonds of solidarity. Small-farmer communities were shaped by production relations: working and living on the land created common interests (the weekend soccer game was mentioned regularly) as well as the need for occasional cooperation. Short-term work parties (*mutirões*) were held in farming communities in southern Brazil when urgent or unwieldy tasks arose, such as the need to build a schoolhouse or repair a neighbor's barn. Many of the landless farmers who joined the MST in Campos Novos were attracted by, and through, the bonds of these rural communities (Paulilo, 1996; Wolford, 2003a). Family members were encouraged to attend MST meetings or participate in an occupation by others who had successfully won land or who believed in the increasing strength of the movement. Many of the first MST leaders in the south were local community leaders who had previously held positions in the Catholic Youth Action groups, the rural unions, or town associations. As one settler recounted:

“In the beginning, it wasn't MST, it was just community leaders.”

One of the MST activists who organized production on MST cooperatives in Campos Novos recounted his original decision to participate in the movement:

“I began in the local churches. And then through the [Catholic] Church, I was able to take a two-year agronomy course with an NGO [nongovernmental organization] that still exists today in [the state of] Paraná [next to Santa Catarina]. I finished that course and already began to see another way of organizing agriculture. At that time, I already had friends who were entering in the movement And then, in 1986, a friend of mine who was a leader of the movement and is in the national leadership today, invited me to participate in meetings. And then I began to participate at the level of my community [in western Santa Catarina], where [because of my work with the Church] I was chosen as the local community leader. And then ... I helped to organize our occupation that was held ... in 1987.”

Embedded in the notion of access to land and community was also the right to food sovereignty—an argument that MST leaders members made at different scales, from the local to the national and international. Food sovereignty implied local control over food from the point of production to consumption. The MST opposed this economic model to the logic of Brazil's agro-industrial corporations that had achieved international success exporting fruits, meats, and grains around the world. In response to the argument that MST members could not effectively compete with large farmers, MST members argued that they were the more efficient producers if one considered the end to be feeding hungry people, providing healthy food, and practicing sustainable production methods rather than earning foreign currency. An illustration of the MST's beliefs in land, community, and the locals is presented in a picture from the 1998 statewide meeting in Santa Catarina (figure 2, over).

The meeting opened with barefoot children walking single file through the seated audience, some carrying candles, others carrying the tools and fruits of working the land—a machete, a handful of beans, corn, a large squash. These were all laid at



Figure 2. Year-end state meeting of the Movement of Landless Workers (MST), Santa Catarina 1998.

the front of the room on an outlined map of Brazil, signifying the construction of a better nation through the practices and values of the MST's new community. The fight for local control over food also led the MST to wage an aggressive campaign against genetically modified seeds being pushed (equally aggressively) by large multinational corporations such as Monsanto. The movement argued, along with many other farmers' movements around the world, that, by creating and patenting new seed varieties that are incapable of reproducing and require specific inputs, corporations threaten the control individual farmers have over production decisions.

All of this—the emphasis on community, land, and food sovereignty—stands in discursive opposition to the society and economy associated with the capitalist market, the *latifundio*, and, at times, various actors within the Brazilian state. The movement argued that those marginal to the centers of decisionmaking were oppressed by a markedly centralized set of elite interests that usually cross cut the three arenas: market, large farm, and state. At different moments, the interests uniting the three were more coherent than at others. During military rule, the collaboration between the state, the large farmers who were considered 'modernization material', and the market was very apparent. Today, after successive neoliberal administrations, the state's direct role in the economy is less clear.

Conclusion

Nation-states—as sovereign political units, as 'imagined communities', and as sites of production and consumption—are fundamentally spatial. The processes and relations guiding the distribution, access, and use of land within the territorial reach of the state are key to its economic, political, and social development. And yet, even as officials in the Brazilian government from José Bonifácio da Silva in the early 1800s to Raul Jungmann almost two hundred years later have affirmed the positive value of equitable landownership, the country's history is marked by the inability to redress the colonial legacies of large-scale landholdings and hierarchical labor relations. There are obvious (if circular) structural impediments to redistribution: the dependence on large-scale

agricultural producers, first as plantation owners and now as diversified, vertically integrated, agro-industrial corporations, makes it difficult to distinguish between the fate of those producers and the fate of the nation as a whole. Agriculture has been an essential 'green anchor' in Brazil's postwar development strategy, and today, profits from agro-industry are needed to continue payments on the country's foreign debt. When a particular set of actors—or an economic sector—is defined as necessary to development, then *their* well-being becomes necessary for development.

What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that normative interpretations of how the world works can themselves become structural obstacles to change. The presentation of a position as morally superior is, in fact, a necessary means of sanctioning or supporting the institutionalization of policies regarding the distribution of resources—particularly when the resource in question is considered (rightly or not) to be scarce. And when the institutional framework governing rights to productive resources is uncertain or misleading, as is certainly the case with Brazilian land law, then normative interpretations of *what the law should mean* are particularly important guidelines for action.

In the case presented in this paper, the moral economy presented by the agrarian elite in Santa Catarina and the federal government's MLAR plan operate as mutual "reinforcement mechanisms" (Karl, 2003). Together, they provide the justifications for neoliberal solutions to the issue of inequality in land tenure, and together they serve as important structural obstacles to equitable land distribution. Although a considerable body of literature on Brazil suggests that the high level of inequality that has existed since colonial times is itself an obstacle to the reduction of poverty and its constitutive 'social' ills—illiteracy, malnutrition, violence, hunger, even racism (Dagnino, 1998; Karl, 2003; Sherriff, 2001; Skidmore, 2004; Weyland, 1996), particularly in rural economies (Barham and Carter, 1996; Martins, 1975; Viotti da Costa, 2000)—neoliberal theorists, including Cardoso, argued that inequality could most efficiently and successfully be ameliorated through the signals of the well-ordered marketplace rather than through state intervention (see Cardoso, 1995; 1996). By focusing primarily on the presence of poverty rather than on the process through which inequality (and therefore poverty) was produced, class differences are reduced to an unfortunate legacy of an insufficiently neoliberal past, rather than being seen as impediments to the neoliberal project (Skidmore, 2004). Disguising the moral elements of the discourse behind the putatively rational and value-free logic of neoliberalism, where property rights are a (post hoc) indication of self-reliance, hard work, and playing by market rules, further serves to delegitimize concerns about distributive justice: the neoliberal policy of market-led agrarian reform privileges the status quo (supporting the owners who defend their right to land in part because they have land) rather than modifying the inequitable distribution of land. Both the moral economy of the agrarian elites in Campos Novos and the neoliberal thinking behind the MLAR ignore the long history of land acquisition through thievery, personal connections, and domination and overlook the obstacles to individual well-being caused by overwhelming inequality in access to land. Both frameworks serve to delegitimize the idea of state-led agrarian reform, and in so doing fortify the structural difficulties to engaging with alternative moral economies and alternative paths to development.

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