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LATIN AMERICAN PEASANTS

Edited by

TOM BRASS

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For Amanda,
and for
Anna, Ned and Miles.

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Representing the Peasantry? Struggles for/about Land in Brazil

JOSÉ DE SOUZA MARTINS

INTRODUCTION

Unlike most other countries in Latin America (particularly Andean and central American ones), a longstanding and thus deeply rooted system of independent smallholding cultivation based on an indigenous peasantry has until relatively recently been absent from Brazilian history. Perhaps because of this, peasants in Brazil have been and are currently more prone than their counterparts elsewhere in the continent to the phenomenon known as the 'invention of tradition', a process which in turn generates claim and counter-claim about identity and entitlement based on this.[1] For this same reason, the domestic and international visibility of the struggle for land in Brazil over the last quarter of a century, and especially during the last decade, challenges the social sciences to update their understanding both of the agrarian question and of the peasant struggles in this country.

At the same time, these struggles over land raise important questions concerning the direction and outcome of such conflict: in short, struggles for land are also struggles about wider socio-economic objectives, or the way in which property rights desired by the protagonists are perceived as desirable by those in Brazilian society as a whole. Recent clashes over the issue of land reform suggest that more attention be paid to the role and agenda of non-peasants, or those who are termed here the *agents of mediation* (= mediating groups). The latter designation covers a variety of groups and institutions – especially the Roman Catholic church – that have played a crucial part in making peasant and Indian protest and resistance viable.

It is necessary, therefore, to dispel some of the more misguided assumptions relating both to the land issue in Brazil and to the ensuing conflicts. First and foremost, one should keep in mind that, in the Brazilian

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case, the agrarian problem does not conform to the standard Latin American format. Historically, Brazil's huge landed estates (*latifundios*) focused on producing tropical goods for export, such as sugar and coffee, and were responsible for the development of an agrarian bourgeoisie that played a key role in Brazilian economic development. In cases such as that of the São Paulo coffee area, this class evolved into a dynamic commercial, industrial and financial bourgeoisie, as early as the nineteenth century. It was this segment of the bourgeoisie, of agrarian origin, that was largely responsible for the industrial development of the country's southeast, currently the core of Brazil's economy. It was a bourgeoisie, furthermore, whose social and political vision had a major social and political impact, such as its involvement with the establishment of the University of São Paulo in 1934, currently Brazil's most important centre of higher education and of the production of technical and scientific knowledge.[2]

The contemporary history of Brazil, especially that which started with the 1964 coup d'état, which installed a military dictatorship that lasted for twenty years (1964-85), suggests that agrarian issues generally and the struggles of the peasantry in particular should be examined through a much broader optic: namely, a perspective that is not confined to episodes and events which occur only in the countryside, but one that includes a wider range of different social categories and classes in Brazilian society. In brief, it is difficult to understand peasant struggle until we cease to regard it merely as a current manifestation of an ancient conflict the protagonists of which have their roots in a distant past, and a past, furthermore, which they are intent on recuperating. For this reason, it would be epistemologically and politically inappropriate to reduce the recent history of Brazil's peasant struggles to a stereotype shared historically with the peasantries of Mexico, Central America, Bolivia or Peru. The genesis of and path followed by agrarian conflict in Brazil is very different, and calls for an interpretation compatible with its own socio-economic specificities.

The presentation which follows contains three sections, each of which corresponds roughly to a particular phase in the agrarian struggle. The first examines what might loosely be termed the 'opening of the agrarian frontier', the ensuing cash-crop production (coffee, sugar, rubber) being dependent for its labour supply on a process of international immigration and settlement.[3] The second looks at the subsequent closing of the agrarian frontier, a situation of double dispossession which gave rise to national migration as land usufruct rights hitherto enjoyed by members of the agricultural work force were cut back at the same time as urban employment opportunities became scarce. The third considers the way in which the land question was then reopened, by whom, and why, while the conclusion investigates the arguments and conflicts surrounding what have in effect

become movements by Brazilian Indians and peasant smallholders for the re-possession of and/or the right to work on the land.

I

OPENING THE AGRARIAN FRONTIER

In order to understand what peasant movements consist of in Brazil, as well as to appreciate their aims and difficulties, it is necessary to refer briefly and in passing to the agrarian question. We are all aware of what the agrarian question is in theory: namely, a question about obstacles to accumulation, whereby the existence of land rent blocks the development of capital, and in effect prevents a surplus being generated in agriculture for the purpose of industrialization.[4] Where economic activity depends on the land, and where agricultural land is controlled by a traditional landowning class not directly involved in cultivation, an economically unproductive landlord has the power to demand from the economically productive capitalist what amounts to a charge on accumulation as a condition of setting the agrarian labour process in motion. Such a cost is either passed onto and thus borne by all productive elements in the context concerned, or – more probably – acts as a barrier to capital investment and surplus generation.

In Brazil, however, the modern ownership of land was instituted through the 1850 Land Bill, which had as its purpose the formulation of legal mechanisms that made the cultivation of great landed estates obligatory, especially where coffee plantations were concerned, during the nineteenth century.[5] Its objective was to stimulate a process of primitive accumulation that Brazil did not have, and – in the absence of a large mass of peasants who could be expropriated and then proletarianized – for which the country lacked the necessary pre-conditions. In this respect, it was a different process from the one that took place in European countries, from the reality and history of which the primitive accumulation theory derived. With the abolition of slavery looming, the purpose of the 1850 Land Bill was simple: to create both a shortage of land and a consequent incidence of poverty, so as to ensure the availability to landowners of a work force that was necessary, in large numbers, to tend coffee crops and to maintain the sugar economy. Slave emancipation did indeed take place, in 1888, and deprived plantation agriculture of its captive work force.[6]

By lowering the cost of the agrarian workforce through a system very similar to debt peonage, this measure, to some extent, transferred both the hardships of and the economic burden occasioned by the abolition of slavery onto the new worker. At the same time, it converted surplus portions of this workforce into a reserve army of labour that was essential to the establishment of a cheap source of blue-collar workers necessary for industrialization. In providing medium and small commercial farms, as well as large plantations, with low-cost rural workers, the 1850 Land Bill subsidized the reproduction of the industrial workforce, making it cheaper for industrial capital to employ labour-power. Thus, to some degree Brazil was able to meet its requirements for accumulation from within its own borders, by mobilizing surplus labour for all sectors of the economy (agriculture, industry, trade, banking).

In the Brazilian case, the agrarian question manifests itself on two planes. On one hand, therefore, ownership of the land in a political system that was part of the client-oriented and oligarchic system constituted – at least up to the time of the 1964 *coup d'état* – an economic reward for political loyalty. The republican constitution of 1891 had transferred to the states of the Brazilian federation the ownership of devolved land, and transformed it thereby into the currency of political deals in the market of oligarchic domination. In the more backward areas of the country, land obtained by political means was the source of conflicts with rural workers and consequently of violence against them. On the other hand, land was monopolized specifically in order to enable landowners to exercise control over their work force, and until the 1950s rural labourers were indeed in a relation of dependence on farmers who employed them. With the industrial boom of the 1950s, however, the urban demand for agricultural produce increased the value of land, and rental payments – which hitherto had been a way of obtaining and retaining workers – were now transformed simply into a way of accruing speculative profits.

In this connection, it is important to understand that the current agrarian conflict in Brazil does not stem directly and solely from the undeniable fact of land concentration, notwithstanding the fact that large plantations were and are a focus of struggle. Current agrarian conflict, and political solutions linked to this, stem not from latifundism *per se* as from the transformation in the relations of production that replaced slave labour, and came about as a result of the abolition of slavery in the late nineteenth century. To demonstrate this it is necessary to outline the three different solutions adopted by regional elites in Brazil in order to replace slave labour, and thus to ensure the continuity of large-scale export-oriented commercial agriculture. The key to present agrarian struggles, and to the agrarian question itself, therefore, lies not so much in the system of landholding as in the changes to the labour regime introduced by rural employers.

Land, Slavery and the State

Changes to relations of production within Brazilian agriculture during the nineteenth century were necessitated by the abolition of slavery in the

sugar-producing colonies of the Caribbean, itself an effect of inter-imperial rivalries, and the consequent pressure from England to end the slave trade.[7] Shortly after Brazilian Independence from Portugal in 1825, England obtained from Brazil the right for the English navy to board the slave ships headed toward its ports, freeing the captives in their own colonies and confiscating the vessels. But it was only in 1850 that Brazil finally approved a law forbidding the trafficking and entry of slaves from Africa. This sealed the fate of slavery in Brazil.

At that very conjuncture, Brazil also passed a new Land Bill, replacing the *sesmarias* or land-grant system inherited from Portugal and suspended in 1822. According to this older form of tenure, the occupation of land was free and ownership was conferred by virtue of cultivating the land and residing on it permanently. This earlier form of land title extended only to those who were white, free, and Roman Catholic: that is, to those 'pure' in blood and faith. Final disposition over land, however, was vested in the crown (as embodied in the state), which upheld property rights only where land was cultivated. If land granted remained uncultivated, the crown had the right to reallocate such holdings to other interested parties. In essence, the Land Grant Bill (*Lei das Sesmarias*) of the kingdom of Portugal was, in the early fourteenth century, only a usufruct right to land whereby tenure was conditional on the land being cultivated. It is to this law that the establishment of huge landed estates in Brazil is erroneously ascribed; much rather, the consolidation of such latifundia was linked to the availability of slave labour – provided both by the indigenous population and also by Africans. The land grant (*sesmaria*) itself was merely a secondary factor in the establishment of the large landholdings system prevalent in the country.

According to the new Land Bill of 1850, the Brazilian State gave up its rule over granted land (the *dominium*) and made the grantee the full and unquestioned owner of the land, thereby instituting full ownership rights over land property. It simultaneously abolished previous ethnic prohibitions on landownership, while at the same time restricting access to land by establishing economic barriers. In other words, land was henceforth a commodity, and as such could be purchased, either from a private individual or from the State. This law was premissed on two complementary processes. First, the gradual disappearance of slavery, as a result both of the ending of the slave trade, and of an inability to supplement this shortfall by the employment of a captive indigenous population. And second, the recognition that large-scale farming required massive immigration, or the influx of foreign labour to till the land. The interruption of slave trading, however, led to a substantial increase in the price of slaves, which rendered the abolition of slavery inevitable by 1888, for cost reasons.[8] Two years before abolition, the Brazilian government was already fostering

immigration schemes, which subsequently resulted in the inflow of hundreds of thousands of families – initially from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and Switzerland, and later on from Japan – all of which were relocated in the south of Brazil, and especially in the coffee-growing south-eastern region.[9]

Coffee and the Colonato

In the case of coffee, besides the transformation of work relations, one must also take into account that, at that time, cultivation of this crop expanded toward the west of the province of São Paulo, pushing out the economic frontier and occupying virgin land, especially the highly fertile, so-called 'purple' soil. Together with the labour supply crisis occasioned by the abolition of the slave trade, this resulted in an economic decline of the rich but less productive coffee estates in the south-east area, which depended on the port of Rio de Janeiro. These estates suffered economically because of two factors: the comparatively lower productivity of their coffee plantations and the suspension of the slave trade, each of which combined to undermine the position of slave-owning landlords. In the western area of São Paulo, by contrast, commercially dynamic agricultural production based on a new type of labour relation, the so-called *colonato* system employing immigrants from other countries, became the norm [*Beiguelman*, 1968].

Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, chattel slavery in Brazil was not replaced with free wage labour.[10] Commercial farmers made several attempts to create a new work relations that would, above all, ensure the continuation of export-oriented agricultural production on large landed estates managed on capitalist lines. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, one alternative given serious consideration was the introduction of Chinese 'coolies'. The latter, commercial farmers hoped, would become temporary slaves on coffee plantations. This proposal, however, did not work out. Sharecropping was attempted in São Paulo, but this also failed, due to the high cost of obtaining foreign workers, a result of commercial farmers in Brazil themselves having to pay for the passage of such migrants and their families from Europe to the place of work [*Davatz*, 1941].

Instead of these options (coolies, sharecroppers), commercial farmers finally opted for the *colonato* system, which took root and operated for roughly one century. Although there is still debate about this, the *colonato* system in effect combined what were various different types of working arrangement within a single production relation.[11] On any coffee plantation in Brazil at this conjuncture there were three main kinds of agricultural task requiring manual labour. The first was taking care of the coffee plants, by keeping the plantation weed-free, a task which entailed two or three weedings annually. This work was paid for in cash, a fixed amount

according to the number of coffee bushes treated. Additionally, a contract labourer (*colono*) was allowed to plant subsistence crops – such as corn, beans and even rice – between the rows of coffee bushes. The second task consisted of harvesting the coffee, work that was paid for either in cash, by volume of coffee picked, or under a sharecropping system. Thirdly, a contract labourer had to provide the landed estate with several days of unpaid work per year: this consisted of jobs such as clearing pasture, cleaning and maintaining paths and roads, fixing fences, and putting out fires. Members of the contract labourer's family also received wages for working in the coffee processing area.

The *colono* contract in fact encompassed the whole agricultural labouring family, all of which was involved in working on the farm, even the children.[12] Accordingly, there was a clear preference on the part of commercial farmers for the recruitment and employment not of single workers but rather of agricultural labouring *families*, and large ones at that. These agricultural labouring families lived in 'colonies' of houses sited within the estate or farm; some of the larger coffee estates had several of these colonies located within their boundaries, forming a veritable rural network of villages. Besides a house, the *colono* workers were entitled to a plot of land on which to plant vegetables and raise farm animals (chickens, goats). Finally, they were also allowed to maintain in the farm's pastures – that is, at the owner's expense – two pack animals (horses, mules, donkeys) for working and transportation purposes. The *colonato* relation included, furthermore, the possibility that at harvest-time a contract labourer might himself hire workers on his own account (i.e., recruited and paid for by him), to help him pick coffee both in the amount and in the time stipulated by his contractual obligations to his employer.

The *colonato* was accordingly a diversified and complex contractual relationship, combining salaried work, the payment of rent in the form of labour and goods, and the rendering of labour services free of charge, in addition to direct production of the means of subsistence. It was, in short, a relational form that united elements of a declining peasantry with aspects of an emerging rural working class, and thus a working arrangement in which cash payment represented less than half of overall pay, in general roughly one third. Researchers who maintain that the *colono* relation indicates the existence of a rural proletariat point to behavioural evidence, citing the participation of contract labourers in strikes. Such episodes were few in number, however, and have little significance when considered in the wider context of the large number of contract workers who did not withdraw their labour-power in this fashion. Most importantly, the dispute about whether or not the *colono* was a proletarian overlooks both the fact and the role of the relation as being that of an agricultural labouring family, and not an individual worker. There is much documentary evidence that the recruitment by rural employers of a family as distinct from a single worker was a deliberate act, designed to achieve two particular ends: not just to obtain access to more labour-power at a lower overall cost, but also to use the family itself as a method of social control. Simply put, the *colono* was dissuaded from participating in class struggles due to the fear of seeing himself and his family – especially his wife and small children – evicted from their smallholding.[13]

The main problem facing commercial farmers using this new labour relation was generated by the fact of worker indebtedness, a result of the trip from Europe. Debt condemned all the agricultural labouring family to many years of serfdom, which contract labourers were unwilling to accept. While the imminent abolition of slavery was being debated in Parliament, a revolt by *colonos* from Switzerland contributed to the decision by the Brazilian government to establish state subsidized immigration. In this it had the support of the government of the province of São Paulo, which also instituted a wide-ranging programme of subsidized immigration in order to obtain workers for its coffee plantations.

It was the Brazilian state which instituted rational, effective ways to manage the landed estates' demand for manpower and the organization of supply. It organized the immigration process, appointing and hiring recruitment agents in Europe, and also created hostels in which to house the immigrants temporarily between their arrival in the country and their transferral to farms and/or estates. Since it was the state which paid for the passage of agricultural labouring families, the labour-power embodied in the latter was in effect gifted to the estate owners. This was, indeed, the form taken by the economic compensation that the Brazilian government offered farmers and/or planters for their acceptance of an end to slavery: namely, socializing the costs of obtaining and establishing a substitute work force, without which the territorial expansion of large coffee plantations would have been impossible. This measure was very important, both in creating the internal market and also in providing a first impulse toward industrialization, shortly after the abolition of slavery.

Sugar after Slavery

In the most important sugarcane growing and sugar-producing area of the country, the north-east, the rural labour supply crisis occasioned by the ending of slavery had other characteristics.[14] At that particular conjuncture, the cultivation of sugarcane differed from the cultivation of coffee in many ways. First, because sugarcane was being grown in what was basically the same area as it had since the sixteenth century; coffee, by contrast, had only

become a major crop in the south-east during the nineteenth century, and especially after 1860. This difference in longevity profoundly affected the way in which farmers and workers were habituated to the production regime. Second, for a long time the cultivation of sugarcane was essentially limited to the same part of the north-east, close to the coast. There was a major area of sugarcane plantations also in the inner state area of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but this did not generate the same kind of habituation as was the case in the north-east.

As with coffee, sugar cultivation became a tool for expanding the economic frontier, moving further inland and, over the course of several decades, into new areas of virgin territory covered by native woodlands. Sugarcane production was undertaken by what became over time a well-established planter class, given to conspicuous consumption and the self-image of which was that of an aristocratic agrarian elite, and generally conservative as to property inheritance, social relations, social hierarchy and political outlook. By contrast, coffee produced an agrarian elite that was open to the incorporation of new farmers, precisely because of its rapid and relatively recent territorial expansion. Unlike their well-established counterparts producing sugarcane, therefore, coffee farmers in Brazil were required to start cultivation from scratch: felling the forest, clearing and preparing the soil, seeding the coffee plantation, and waiting for a period of between four and five years before production could commence.[15] All of this groundwork was based on temporary, formally non-capitalist, labour relations; only once all this had been accomplished did the resident *colonos* move in to tend the plantation and harvest the crop.

Because it was older, the cultivation of sugarcane maintained within the great plantations a large mass of creole (*mestizo*) inhabitants descended from Indian freedmen, Indian slavery having been abolished during the mid-eighteenth century. This form of chattel slavery was unknown in the cultivation of coffee. When emancipated, this workforce – equivalent to what the *colono* would become at a later date – did not command sufficient resources enabling them to survive as independent economic agents outside the estate system. For this reason, they continued to live on their former masters' estates, under the paternal regime of the planter class, growing food for their own subsistence on marginal plots of land ill-suited for sugarcane cultivation. In exchange for permission to grow their own crops, these descendants of Indian freedmen paid the landowner labour-rent, an arrangement known as the 'yoke' (*cambão*), whereby they worked for a certain number of days *per annum* in the sugarcane plantation.[16] Although they were allowed to sell surplus product from their plots to anyone they chose, in practice the purchaser was often the landowner himself, who acquired their output at niggardly prices.

Planters were from the outset obliged to acquire black slaves as labour for sugarcane cultivation, not least because of the monopoly over slave trafficking exercised by the Portuguese Crown itself. With the cessation of this trade, slave labour gradually became scarce, both in the sugar-producing north-east and in the coffee-producing south-east, causing the price of such workers to rise. Sugarcane growers began selling their slaves to the large coffee-plantation owners in the south-east, thereby establishing an internal trade in unfree labour. In order to compensate for workers lost in this manner, planters increased the amount of labour-rent their freedmen were required to provide in order to continue having access to smallholdings on the estates. From this emerged a system of tenant farming based on a permanent agricultural worker (*morador*) resident on the sugar plantation, a relational form that lasted until the mid-1950s.

Rubber Tapping in Amazonia

Another area of economic activity possessing its own specific labour regime was the rubber industry located in the Amazon region. Unlike the cultivation of sugar or coffee, rubber was an extractive economic industry based on large tree groves in the heart of the forest. This form of productive activity became more important in the Amazonian region only after 1870, and chattel slavery was therefore relationally insignificant to its economic development. The cultivation and harvesting of rubber depended, much rather, on the labour-power of an internal migrant workforce, composed of impoverished peasants and agricultural workers escaping from the semiarid north-eastern region (not the sugarcane north-east).[17] These migrants were recruited in large numbers and then transported to the Amazon region by labour contractors. Although the latter exercised extra-economic coercion when recruiting workers, usually a process linked to cash advances and debt, the main reason for migration remained hunger and poverty occasioned by severe drought, especially the one that occurred in 1877.[18] Once in Amazonia, these migrants were reduced to serfdom by virtue of debts they owed to the owner's store (*barracão*) that supplied them with staple goods on credit, to be paid for from their accumulated earnings at the end of the agricultural season. Unlike the *colono*, the rubber tapper (*seringueiro*) was a lone worker, living and labouring by himself in the forest, with the owner's store as his sole point of reference.[19] The estate owner forbade the rubber tapper from trading with strangers (either buying from or selling to others), a measure enforced by hired gunmen (*gatos*) who also prevented workers from running away by controlling river access to the rubber-tree groves. Structured by coercion, this type of production relation was in essence a form of slavery: the debt peonage system [*Cunha*, 1946].[20]

Just as the labour regimes of sugar and coffee cultivation differed from

that of rubber production, so the economic crisis of the latter was due to an equally distinct cause: the introduction into the world market in 1911 of rubber produced in Malaysia [*Santos*, 1980]. With its comparatively low level of productivity, the extraction of rubber continued in Amazonia, but now stripped of the economic importance it had enjoyed during the 20 years in which its output had dominated world markets. This was the period in which the ostentation and conspicuous consumption by rubber planters ensured that their lifestyle became in effect a tropical extension of Parisian high society. This was particularly true of the town of Belém, the gateway into the Amazon region, the architectural splendours of which reflected the profitability of the rubber economy. In some areas, estates producing rubber were abandoned by their owners, but the rubber tappers continued to work independently as squatters [*Ianni*, 1978]. The extraction of rubber in Brazil was given a new lease of life during World War II, when the West's access to Malay rubber plantations was cut off. As part of the war effort, the Brazilian government developed an incentive program for rubber and encouraged migration from the semi-arid northeast to the Amazon region. These measures, however, did not bring about any changes in production relations. Much rather the contrary, since the economic revitalization of rubber extraction also resulted in a corresponding revitalization of peonage, or the practice of holding persons in servitude to work off a debt.

Peasant Agriculture in the South

There were yet other areas of agricultural production in Brazil the economic problems of which made a contribution to the formation of what now manifests itself as a crisis of the peasantry. This is particularly true of the important family farming sector composed of privately owned smallholdings in the south of Brazil. At a time when it was recruiting workers in Europe for the commercial coffee estates and farms, the Brazilian government intended that at least some of these immigrants should join agricultural colonization projects where they would become peasant family farmers. Not the least important objective of this policy was an ideological one: namely, to demonstrate to prospective immigrants that by working hard on the plantations they, too, could become independent peasant proprietors. The latter was, quite explicitly, held up as a reward for contributing to the economic well-being directly of commercial agriculture and indirectly of the nation itself. In the south of the country, most of the agricultural workers settled in this manner and for this reason were of Italian, German and Polish origin. Theirs was a self-sufficient agriculture, practised by a peasantry transplanted literally from Europe to the south of Brazil, a form of production that remains fairly important to this day.

Each one of these economic processes – sugar, coffee, and rubber production – had its moment of crisis and, consequently, its experience of social transformation. Except for producers engaged in the extraction of rubber, whose crisis came earlier, those who cultivated sugarcane and coffee plus the peasant family farms in the south all faced economic difficulties, but for different reasons, from the 1950s onwards. It was these economic difficulties that are at the root of the social conflict which eventually forced itself onto the national political agenda in the decades which followed. What is important to understand is that, to some degree, it was the shared chronology of change taking place in distinct agricultural sectors located in different parts of the country that conferred ideological legitimacy on the presence of a uniform problem and political solution: that is, on the notion of a uniform set of problems, a uniform political programme, and a uniform agrarian struggle. In short, a rural movement the mobilization of which managed to hide its diverse causes, and – by implication – the different social consequences of this fact for a seeming unified demand for reform.

II

CLOSING THE AGRARIAN FRONTIER

The main outcome of these crises in the different sectors of the agrarian economy was a process of internal migration and westwards expansion within Brazil itself, and the gradual but ineluctable occupation of land on the frontier. From the nineteenth century onwards, therefore, it was this as much as anything which ensured the survival and consolidation of peasant family farming, acting as a safety valve by absorbing migrants from other parts of the country. The capacity of peasant economy to reproduce itself in this manner only really began to diminish in the period of the military dictatorship (1964–85), in the face of what some have defined as 'closing the frontier'.

New land was accordingly occupied not only by coffee planters from the southeast, but also by poor peasants and agricultural labourers from the north-east, midwest and the south. The latter categories became squatters (*posseiros*) who practised shifting cultivation, which involved clearing a small plot of land and cultivating it for a few years, and then moving on to an adjacent plot, where the same procedure was repeated. This permitted the original site to recover its fertility, thereby enabling the squatter to return and cultivate it once again. Thus practised shifting cultivation was sufficient only to provide the squatter and his family with subsistence, and any surplus product generated by this form of peasant economy was sold locally. Because squatters lacked title to the land they occupied and cultivated in

this manner, their smallholdings were frequently the subject of ownership disputes, particularly with large landlords or agribusiness enterprises seeking to expand their properties by appropriating all peasant family farms in the vicinity.[21] Thus rural conflicts in the south, such as the Contestado revolt (1912/1916) and the uprising in the state of Paraná (1957), and more recently in the midwest and Amazonia, have all involved disputed land rights and titles.[22]

Closing the Urban Industrial Safety Valve

During the period between the 1930s and the 1960s, a rapid expansion of the Brazilian economy meant that migrants from the rural north-east and south-west were able to find urban industrial employment, particularly in the São Paulo region. Agricultural workers who became unemployed as a result of falling coffee prices in the 1930s, migrated to urban areas and found jobs in labour-intensive capitalist enterprises recruiting new workers. After receiving rural migrants from the coffee estates, industry subsequently absorbed those from the north-east who were fleeing drought and poverty, and also those from Minas Gerais, displaced as a result of the expansion of livestock ranching into areas of peasant economy. However, this capacity on the part of Brazilian industry to employ workers expelled from the land lasted only until the coup d'état of the mid-1960s, when the dynamic of accumulation shifted decisively away from a labour-intensive process to a capital-intensive one.

A crucial result of the technical modernization of Brazilian industry at that conjuncture was a decline in the number of jobs available to rural migrants. Such employment as existed was now open only to skilled workers with higher educational and better technical qualifications than those possessed by agricultural labour. Urban areas continued to receive migrants, but increasingly these entered not the better-paid industrial workforce (= the formal sector) but rather the informal sector economy, where wages were low, working conditions poor, and employment insecure.[23] Over the last three decades, therefore, rural migrants have become slum dwellers (*favelados*) living at the margins of subsistence in the shantytowns, a far cry from kind of life offered them by what they perceived until the 1960s as the welcoming city. In short, migration from the countryside in search of urban employment has ceased to be what it once was in Brazil, a safety valve mechanism.

This decline in urban employment opportunities was itself compounded by transformations in the agrarian economy generally, and in the labour regime on sugar and coffee plantations from the 1950s onwards. In an attempt to stave off the effect of capitalist competition, sugar planters in Brazil increased the amount of labour-rent payable by their plantation

workforce. During the 1960s, however, the economic situation improved as a result, ironically, of the Cuban revolution; sugar planters in Brazil benefited from the reallocation by the United States of Cuban sugar quotas to other sugar producing countries. The consequent recovery in the demand for this commodity generated an additional need for plantation labour, and landowners extracted more surplus-labour from their existing permanent workers, converting the latter into rent-paying tenants and the former into a rent-receiving landlord [*Andrade*, 1979].[24] Many smallholding permanent workers, who were unable to meet these demands for additional labour-rent, were evicted from the sugar plantations, only to return subsequently but now as landless casual agricultural labour (*clandestinos*) employed on a temporary or seasonal basis.[25]

A not dissimilar process took place on the coffee estates, where a permanent agricultural workforce was casualized and deprived of its usufruct rights. In well-established and older coffee estates plagued by declining soil fertility, the *colonato* relation was essentially a sharecropping system. To the west of the state of São Paulo, where coffee bushes were by contrast newer, younger, and thus more productive, the *colonato* system combined the characteristics of independent cultivator and wage labourer. Access to land in both coffee growing areas – old and new alike – meant, however, that a *colono* harboured ownership aspirations and perceived his true identity to be that of a peasant farmer. This self-identity sprang from the right of a contract labourer to grow his own staple crops in the rows between the coffee bushes, and either to consume them or sell any surplus produce via the estate owner. From viewpoint of the landlord, this arrangement ensured that the *colono* would regularly and scrupulously clear the coffee groves of competing weeds, if for no other reason than to be able to plant his own crops (corn, beans) in the spaces cleared. Under this system, the *colono* worked simultaneously for himself and for his landowner.

In the course of the century during which the *colono* system prevailed, however, it became clear that growing crops in the spaces between the rows of coffee bushes was counter-productive and thus uneconomic. First, these crops damaged the shallow roots of the coffee bush, affecting the productivity and profitability of this cash crop. And second, the introduction of new and more productive varieties of coffee plant requiring more shade and thus less space between the rows, eliminating the area traditionally cultivated by the *colono*. To compensate for the loss of this usufruct right, *colonos* were provided with alternative plots of land outside coffee estates, which in turn transformed the existing division of labour. As a result of coffee and subsistence crops occupying a separate physical space but coinciding in terms of harvest time, the males in the agricultural labouring

family worked on the coffee estate while the women tended the smallholding.

Ironically, the growth of the domestic market for foodstuffs linked to industrial boom of the 1950s gave an added impetus to the peasant farming side of the *colono* relation and simultaneously undermined this. While the increased demand for foodstuffs cultivated on plots leased from coffee growers generated more income for the *colono* family, therefore, it also alerted landlords to the economic potential of such smallholdings. Estate owners began to phase out the *colono* system and its usufruct component, preferring instead to pay such workers a cash wage. Access to land owned by the coffee estate, and with it the possibility of a higher income, was gradually replaced with wage labour for a cash payment. This trend towards the proletarianization of the rural workforce was strengthened by a federal government policy aimed at rationalizing the cultivation of coffee; subsidies were provided enabling farmers and estate owners either to replace old coffee bushes with new ones, to convert portions of their property into pasture, or to diversify into other commercial crops. Consequently, the need to maintain the *colono* system as a means of securing labour-power for estates and large farms declined accordingly.

These changes were pushed through rapidly, not least because of the opposition by organized rural labour to their implementation, the ending of the *colonato*, and the eviction of erstwhile *colonos* and their families from the estates. When the Rural Worker Bill was passed in 1963, giving legal substance to the agricultural worker fightback, landowners and farmers quickly recognized the *colonato* system as being not just an economic burden but also a threat. The rate of evictions increased, and the now landless workers (*bóias-frias*) were frequently re-employed on a temporary basis by the same landowners, who no longer dealt directly with them but with labour contractors.[26] Accordingly, the transition to a casual agricultural workforce in coffee cultivation, from *colonos* to *bóias-frias*, was in essence no different from the transformation from *moradores* to *clandestinos* in the north-east sugar region.

To some degree, these transformations in the patterns of rural employment were accompanied by changes in the productive forces, a result of the adoption by employers of low-cost subsidized technical, mechanized and chemical inputs. Coffee, for example, continued to be harvested by manual labour, but the task of weeding was accomplished through the use of herbicides. In the sugar plantations, tasks such as the annual tilling of the soil and the planting of the cane crop were mechanized, but harvesting of the cane – as in the case of coffee – was still undertaken by labour-power. In other words, capitalist production in Brazilian agriculture became increasingly fragmented into tasks that still required manual labour, and

those in which it was no longer employed [*Silva*, 1980]. The effects on agricultural labour of this transformed combination of productive forces and social relations of production were profound: the increasing presence of technical/mechanized inputs meant that agrarian capitalists had to exercise greater managerial control over labour-intensive tasks. Rural workers and their families lost not only their limited and conditional access to land, therefore, but also their equally limited capacity to control the rhythm and pace of agricultural tasks. Moreover, as casual labour they faced long periods of seasonal unemployment coupled with migration to distant areas in search of work.[27]

Land Grabbing and Dispossession in Amazonia

Although in Amazonia the extraction of rubber went into economic decline as early as the first decades of the twentieth century, it recovered during World War II when metropolitan capitalist access to the output of Malaysian rubber plantations was interrupted. It survived until 1965, when for strategic reasons the military dictatorship put into practice a sweeping programme of economic development in the Amazon region. By means of a tax incentives policy, the federal government granted a 50% income tax exemption to those companies already installed in other areas which were willing to expand their activities into the Amazon region.[28] Since most investment was in crop and livestock farming, the demand for Amazonian pasture land increased correspondingly. However, territory that the military dictatorship assumed to be empty was the last refuge of the Indian tribes, both indigenous to the region and those which had fled the Portuguese conquest during the sixteenth century. Amazonia was also the location of on the one hand peasant smallholders, consisting of squatters pushed out from the north-east in previous decades, and on the other rubber-tappers working for masters – especially in the territory of Acre – who actually had no title to the land.[29]

The new Amazon occupation policy revealed the precarious nature of landownership and titles in this region.[30] Those who operated rubber estates, and had government leases to this land, acted as if they had property rights and sold these agreements on to companies interested in the federal government's tax incentives. In a similar vein, forged documents appeared claiming title to the land of Indian tribes and peasant squatters, 'property' thus acquired in the Amazon being sold to enterprises seeking tax incentives. In this situation, paper rather than land exercised power: it was on the basis of such power, however, that Indians and squatters were 'legally' evicted from their holdings by capitalist enterprises.[31] The extent of illegal and dubious transfers of land titles in the Amazon region is underlined by the fact that in the year 2000 the federal government nullified titles to some 63 million hectares of landed property.

Such 'legal' acquisitions of land in Amazonia were also enforced by a process of threats, violence and widespread extra-judicial murder.[32] Peasant squatters were evicted, and not infrequently killed, by gunmen hired by old or new 'owners' of land occupied by the former; squatters reacted weakly and only locally, with actions that had little impact on this incursion. Any attempt to organize resistance was undermined by the isolated nature of small villages and peasant family farms, the inhabitants of which were easily picked off by hired gunmen.[33] Unsurprisingly, therefore, the numbers of peasant families murdered soared, particularly during the seventies and the eighties. Because they were relatively more united and organized, tribal populations fought back with more success, and for 20 years a situation akin to tribal war prevailed in the Amazon region. In order to protect themselves from the attempt to deliver 'Indian-free' land to capitalist enterprises, Amazonian tribes closed or destroyed many of the secondary roads opened by the Brazilian state government in order to form a network linked up to the Transamazon Highway. This resistance notwithstanding, many tribal groups suffered huge losses during this struggle to protect themselves and their lands, and some lost as much as two thirds of their numbers during this period.

These facts confound received theory about the way in which agrarian capitalism is reproduced.[34] Contrary to the assumptions made by current theory on the subject of primitive accumulation, capitalist development still entails the dehumanization of the labouring subject, an objective pursued in the Amazon region not by economically backward enterprises but rather by new investment made by companies that are economically among the most dynamic and advanced representatives of the capitalist system.[35] New companies, not infrequently renowned multinationals, major banks, large industrial concerns, and leading commercial conglomerates, have no problem with the widespread employment on their farms of workers for the slow and exhausting work of felling the forest, clearing the soil and seeding the pastures, who are recruited and retained by means of debt peonage relations – that is, slavery through debt (*peonagem*).[36] It is estimated that, during the 1970s, the number of debt peons enslaved by such modern companies may have been as high as 400,000 people [*Branford and Glock*, 1985]. The current assumption made by evolutionist varieties of Marxism, that accumulation generally and the development of the productive forces in particular necessarily and always entails (and, indeed, is dependent upon) a corresponding transformation in the social relations of production relations, or a transition from unfree to free forms of labour-power, is wholly undermined by the trajectory followed by agrarian capitalism in Amazonia.[37] In the latter context not only did capital give a new lease of life to so-called 'feudal' relations, but the resulting traffic of people was both ubiquitous and open: thus, for example, labour contractors supplied farm managers with receipts for the debt peons bought and sold, as if this were a perfectly normal capitalist transaction – which, in a sense, it is.

The Crisis of Peasant Economy in the South

Family farms in the south of the country also faced crisis from the 1970s onwards, as a consequence of problems in ensuring the social reproduction of peasant economy established by Italian and German immigrants during the nineteenth century. These politically conservative smallholders, who were closely linked to right-wing parties because of their strong religious (mainly Roman Catholic) background, found it difficult to obtain additional land for their offspring. Due to the high prices of rural property, such peasant family farms possessed insufficient resources to compete financially with large capitalist enterprises entering the land market, and were consequently unable to purchase new holdings or expand existing ones. However, as long as the offspring of peasant families were able to migrate to and find well-paid industrial jobs in urban locations, this crisis remained dormant.[38] Peasant economy adopted internal regulatory mechanism in order to cope with a declining land base: among the descendents of Italian immigrants who settled in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, for example, this took the form of ultimogeniture, or the institutionalization of property inheritance by the youngest [*Santos*, 1978]. Sons and daughters of the peasant family married in age order, the last one to marry – the youngest – staying on in the parental home and inheriting the land, in exchange agreeing to take care of elderly parents.

Peasants or Workers?

Agrarian struggles in Brazil generated by these different conflicts became organized around two opposed rural identities and policies that were in conflict with one another. One of these was the reassertion of a smallholder identity, which entailed the restoration of peasant economy by means of land reform; this was the path taken by members of the Peasant Leagues, and also by supporters of the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (*Partido Communista do Brasil*, or PC do B). In the view of the latter, the struggle in the countryside would be spearheaded by dispossessed peasants for land, and not by landless agricultural workers exploited through the wage relation. The pro-Moscow Brazilian Communist Party (*Partido Communista Brasileiro*, or PCB) took the opposite view, and argued that the struggle would be a peaceful one, involving the implementation of existing rural labour legislation recognizing the claims of both *colonos* and permanent labourers not as peasants with rights to land but rather as agricultural workers with rights to a decent wage, reduced working hours,

and improved working conditions. In short, groups with a shared political outlook were fighting for different policy objectives (land reform; improvements in pay and conditions) on the basis of socio-economic identities that were equally distinct (peasants; agricultural wage labourers).

This contradictory and thus debilitating approach to rural identity and policy was inherited by those who subsequently became involved in agrarian issues: the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (*Movimento dos Trabulhadores Sem Terra*, or MST) and Church groups.[39] The latter consisted of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches, both of which took up the question of rural crisis and conflict in the early 1970s, when Brazil was undergoing its severest period of political repression. For these Church groups, what was happening in the countryside generally, and in frontier areas especially, was nothing less than the violation of human rights (of Indian tribes, squatters, agricultural labourers, debt peons, and peasants). Up until the 1964 military coup, the Church generally had not only been reluctant to embrace the policy of land reform but also supported the dictatorship due to a fear on its part that agrarian struggles – and that of the Peasant Leagues in particular – threatened the institution of private property. The reason for this change of mind is complex, but has to do with the way in which the right to private property was seen by Church groups as theologically subordinate to (and thus overridden by) the broader issue of human rights. In short, private property came to be seen by Church groups as being at the root of social injustices inflicted by the powerful against the weak, and thus a motive for the wholesale appropriation by the rich of vast tracts of 'unoccupied' land and the murder of the poor and defenceless who attempted to resist this.

This social awareness on the part of Church groups also stemmed from the findings of their pastoral commissions investigating the situation of native populations and migrant squatters in the Amazon region.[40] In the polarized political climate of the dictatorship, the involvement of laymen in pastoral activities established what amounted to a 'popular front', enabling political cooperation between and coexistence among those who opposed the military régime. These associations were necessarily of varied and contradictory origins, not infrequently involving groups that hitherto had nothing in common except a long history of conflict with one another: Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Communists, the latter split along different political allegiances (pro-Moscow; Maoist) and organizational modalities (legal opposition; armed struggle). When the military dictatorship ended in the mid-1980s, two things happened to this politically heterogeneous opposition: on the one hand, the clergy withdrew from direct political involvement, leaving such activity to laymen, and on the other the MST appeared.[41]

III

RE-OCCUPYING THE AGRARIAN FRONTIER?

Not the least of the many ironies informing Brazilian history is the fact that dispossessed peasants and agricultural workers, the main players in conflicts over land, are not actually the main *political* players in the struggle for agrarian reform. The reason for this, which requires some explanation, lies in the way successive waves of rural population have been inserted within the broader discourse about what it means 'to be Brazilian', and the effect of this ideological exclusion/inclusion on the power of, respectively, members of the urban bourgeoisie and (especially) the intelligentsia on the one hand, and peasants, workers and tribals on the other, both to formulate and thus to delineate the parameters of specifically political solutions to the agrarian question in Brazil.

Like many other countries in the so-called Third World, the non-owning and/or impoverished components of the rural population in Brazil have been either excluded from or marginalized in relation to a broadly defined notion of 'belonging to', being 'part of', and thus in a very basic sense defining the nation. In common with other countries colonized by Europe, Brazil was defined largely by a small element of its urban inhabitants, the wealthier class which, in addition to being urban were also citizens, and citizens, moreover, whose outlook was shaped by all things European (culture, fashion, art, literature, music, ideas, politics). An outlook which, in effect, constituted a backwards glance at (not to say a longing for) its colonial past. The inescapable irony here is that the economic reproduction of this 'civilized' Brazil – urban, wealthy, Eurocentric – was underpinned by the surplus labour of a politically unrecognized and unrepresented plebeian 'other' Brazil: the peasants, workers and tribals employed in commercial agriculture the products of which (sugar, coffee, rubber) were exported to Europe, and whose very profitability made a European lifestyle possible for its Brazilian owners.

This notion of Brazilian national identity defined largely by external criteria – a European culture and society that was a colonial heritage – changed in the 1930s Revolution, when nationalism began to drawn from internal cultural phenomena (indigenous/rural/local artistic/musical influences, etc.) in order to construct a non-European self-awareness, or an authentically modern and forwards-looking Brazilian identity. Although this process of redefinition included what amounted to urban nostalgia for elements of plebeian rural tradition and culture – the hitherto excluded 'other' Brazil – the peasants, workers and tribals whose culture this was were themselves nevertheless excluded from both participation as citizens

and an awareness of social/political rights linked to this. It was from the resulting gap – between the recognition of cultural value but the denial of the social and political rights that usually flow from such recognition – that many of the present agrarian disputes and conflicts have received their current impetus.

It is important, therefore, to understand four crucial points about the conflict over land which erupted in Brazil during the 1970s. First, it was a struggle undertaken by members of a rural workforce (especially in the Amazon region) to avoid being expelled from the lands they had occupied under the assumption that these belonged to the government (which would negotiate with them over usufruct rights). Second, theirs was a struggle to obtain or retain access to the means of labour required for survival, and as such had no wider programmatic status, nor did it exhibit a recognizably political form of awareness. Third, the same is true of smallholders in the south and parts of the south-east, who faced impoverishment as a result of being trapped between two rapidly closing frontiers, one in the towns (where secure, well-paid industrial jobs were no longer available to them) and the other in the countryside (where the intergenerational reproduction of peasant economy was blocked by corporate land purchases). And fourth, even casual rural workers, arguably the poorest of the poor, exhibited little interest in joining these struggles for land. All of these categories – squatter, peasant smallholder, potential migrant, and wage worker alike – interpreted politics simply as an act of good will on the part of the state, which in its 'kindness' could (and would) grant the poor land.

Agrarian Struggle for Bourgeois Ends?

The political input to the land issue came from another source altogether, provided by the discourse and agency of those who represented the peasantry, who might be termed the agents mediating peasant struggle: these belonged to party organizations of the left, which saw the struggle for land and agrarian reform as part of a much wider process of class struggle, the end object of which was socialism.[42] Generally speaking, these mediating groups are composed of the bourgeois and intellectual strata, and are frequently religious or party agents, or educators, even though many of them are closely or distantly related to peasant families, especially in the south. This is especially true of the MST leadership and representatives of the Pastoral Land Commission. Furthermore, these groups know that the consciousness of the peasants and rural workers themselves is limited to the immediate objective of survival, and that for this reason it is a consciousness devoid of a wide political dimension.[43] It is precisely because of this that the recent Brazilian history of the politicization of peasant struggles is a history in which the political consciousness of the mediating

agents not infrequently shows no consistent link with the objectives of those who are, in theory, the main players on the rural scene.

As a result, the complex social and political realities of what in essence is a *struggle for land* have been reduced to the struggle for *land reform*, or that which is concerned not with the use but with the ownership of land. This has imbued the struggle for land with the characteristics of a 'from above' struggle in order to realize objectives – such as the manoeuvrings by Church group or political party for advantage and dominance – which have tended to be those of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. This kind of intervention by the middle class gives agrarian struggles generally a particular character: the peasantry makes a rapid transition from the role of an outcast and wholly marginalized 'other' to being incorporated with the status of client. From a culture of outright contempt, therefore, the rural subject is absorbed into a culture of patronage, which is nothing more than just another kind of 'otherness' (and, perhaps, even contempt). Underlying this transition is the idea that the rural poor will always need someone to talk/act on their behalf, a perception which downgrades or dismisses their own actions and utterances as politically inadequate, based as they are on an inability to comprehend the struggles of which they are a part.

It was on these kinds of terms – reflecting 'from above' rather than 'from below' objectives – that 'support' networks composed of bourgeois intermediaries were established in rural Brazil. Unquestionably, these were highly motivated and organizationally efficient, far more so than any networks or organization that workers, peasants and tribals could have put in place on their own. The outcome of this process was that the rural poor were now in a dependent position that was no longer economic or electoral, but rather political and party-related.[44] These bourgeois mediations ensured that the different sources of rural conflict, deriving as they did from dissimilar social relations of production and thus from separate and distinct causes, were consolidated politically under the single and all-embracing rubric of land reform. This overlooked the fact that, except for the case of smallholders in the south, all the other conflicts stemmed from production relations which, in different ways, combined the identity of peasant and wage labourer.[45] That is, a hybrid relational form the economic crisis of which could be solved in two opposing ways: either in a politically forward-looking fashion, by recognizing the subject as a wage labourer, whose class interests were those of a rural proletarian, or in a politically backward-looking fashion, by categorizing the subject as a peasant linked to a landlord by rental payments and whose interests were those of a petty-bourgeois. The first of these two distinct identities structured the programme of the Brazilian Communist Party, while the second informed the views of church groups, the Peasant Leagues, and the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil.

The political and programmatic significance of these two identities is that, as a worker, the labouring subject is committed to collective ownership of the means of labour, whereas as a peasant the same labouring subject is locked into an agrarian reform redistributing land on the basis of *individual ownership* – that is, land as private property. This raises, once again, the element of irony, since it is private property in land – as both church groups and Marxists agree (but for different reasons) – which is at the root of the recent and current agrarian crisis in Brazil: for church groups it gives rise to human rights violations, while for Marxists it constitutes an obstacle to socialism.

Of these two identities, it was the first – that of rural proletarian – which was recognized legislatively by the state before the 1964 military takeover, in the form of the Rural Landworker's Bill: it was this which hastened the eviction from large landholdings of resident permanent workers with usufruct rights, and their conversion into temporary wage labourers who were landless. The second identity – that of peasant – structured the claim by the Peasant Leagues to property rights embodied in a land reform programme, which appeared to landowners to be a harbinger of revolutionary socialism.[46] When the military took over the state, it promulgated a Land Bill which, for the first time in Brazilian history, defined what kind of land could be expropriated and redistributed via a land reform. The intention behind this policy, however, was the realization not of social justice but rather of national security as defined by the military dictatorship: namely, to guard against the possibility of a revolutionary transition to socialism.[47]

Over the longer term, the inability of any group or party successfully to address the question of which of these two identities should guide agrarian policy on the one hand, and political agency in the countryside on the other, has been profound. This failure was also an effect of the Cold War, and the prevailing fear among the Brazilian elite of anything resembling an autonomous mobilization of the rural 'voice from below'. Having ideologically constituted the 'enemy' as a uniform peasantry fighting for land reform, the state under the control of the military then reacted to them as if they were, by criminalizing it as 'subversive' and inflicting violent repression on this fictitious domestic 'enemy'. This fight, waged by the state against what in reality was a non-existent *national* entity, continued after the departure of the military.

For their part, those who opposed the dictatorship – church and leftist groups – have, like the military itself, adhered to this same national chimera. Accordingly, leftist groups and parties have persisted in their attempt ideologically to reconstitute a similarly homogenous peasantry out of a widely varying rural population, and to subordinate this politically to the

struggle of the urban industrial working class. Thus, for example, both the MST and the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or PT) follow this line, while the MST and the Church continue to act as if the rural stereotype conjured up by the military during the Cold War was real. One irony is that, in an important sense, both the right and left have shared a perception of a uniformly revolutionary peasantry because it is a powerful image that legitimizes and fuels their very different struggles. Another irony which deserves mention here is that the re-emergence in democratic Brazil of a specifically indigenist movement, at the centre of which is an emphasis on the politics of *cultural* identity, has been due in part to the success of the military during the era of dictatorship in suppressing other, politically more threatening forms of rural agency based on *economic* identity.[48]

The Emergence of a 'New' Rural Subject? Brazil is not Mexico...

With the end of the dictatorship and the Cold War, and the dismantling of its longstanding discourse and structure of confrontation, a democratic space was created which licensed freedom of expression, and into this gap emerged what might be termed a new rural subject, a 'voice from below' that no longer coincided with the way in which this had been depicted – either by mediating groups or by the military – in the recent past. Because those actually participating in agrarian struggles ceased to identify themselves as peasants or as wage labourers, such mobilizations were now classified as new social movements composed of 'minorities', native peoples and environmentalists, all of whom were engaged in the defence of nature. Thus, for example, indigenous land rights were included in the 1988 Constitution.[49] Rather than belonging to a proletariat and fighting as a member of the rural working class, therefore, the agricultural labourer is currently depicted as a 'new' subject, defined simply in terms of being poor and excluded, and whose agency is no longer aimed at systemic transition but consists instead of a politically less threatening process of quotidian 'resistance'.

Such a definition, however, raises as many problems as it purports to solve, not the least important of which are the following: to what degree is this 'new' subject any more homogenous – and thus a sociologically concrete category – than that which it replaced, the ubiquitous peasant? Is this 'new' rural subject in fact still the 'old' homogenous peasantry, but in a different guise? And, most importantly, what are the demands made by this 'new' rural subject, and how compatible are its programmatic aspirations with those of Brazilian society generally? Those who argue for the existence of a 'new' rural subject are faced with the same dilemma as earlier advocates of a revolutionary peasantry, in that it raises similar difficulties, not the least of which is that mobilization might take place on

the basis of idioms and programmes formulated/constructed once again by 'mediating groups'.

In this connection it is important to recall that both the international media and much academic writing currently draws a parallel between the Zapatista movement in the Mexican state of Chiapas and the MST in Brazil.[50] Although there are a number of similarities between the two in terms of form – such as the active involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in providing each movement with a support network, the possession by both movements of a reasonably efficient level of organization, and the use by each of the same tactics to secure publicity – there is little in common in terms of substance. Unlike its Mexican counterpart, the MST in Brazil is *not* a rural protest movement generated by the continued existence of a large pre-capitalist (= 'feudal' or 'semi-feudal') landholding system that still holds sway in the countryside, much rather the contrary: as has been argued above, the roots of the MST lie in the specifically *capitalist* path of development followed by Brazilian agriculture. For this reason, it is necessary to avoid a facile and unwarranted association with the events in Chiapas.

Another reason for not drawing this parallel is that, by inference, it reduces the diversity and complexity of Brazilian agriculture and agrarian structure, together with the different causes and effects in terms of economic crisis faced by peasants, squatters, agricultural workers, and tribals, to events centred around the MST, merely because it is the latter that generates all the international media publicity and academic interest. Without underestimating the significance of the MST and its achievements, it is necessary to remember that another, equally important, and far older grassroots organization has operated in the Brazilian countryside: that is, the National Confederation of Land Workers (*Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura*, or CONTAG). Historically, the latter has been an authentic 'voice from below', at the centre of the social struggle for land, and representing millions of unionised rural workers. There are also other, less visible but no less crucial, rural organizations and unions that operate at the grassroots within specific localities throughout the country. Rather than the more conservative agency (quotidian resistance) attributed by international 'mediating groups' to the 'new' rural subject, these older trade union organizations have fought – and continue to fight – for systemic change in Brazil.

The international media reaction to the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the MST in Brazil is based on the assumption that these are 'new' social movements, and as such constitute a departure from traditional peasant movements.[51] This, however, is to confuse the form taken by the Zapatista and MST – which is certainly new – with the content of the movements, which is not. That the Zapatistas and the MST have added new tactics to existing forms of struggle is undeniable, especially where the development of international linkages is concerned.[52] The proclamation by Commandante Marcos of the fact of the Zapatista revolt by an email sent to the *New York Times*, at the same time as he actually initiated the revolt itself, is undoubtedly a first in the history of peasant movements.[53] In much the same way, the MST has established contacts with more than two-dozen organizations abroad, especially in Europe, all of which provide it with support.

The existence of both networks stretching to and support in Europe is in part attributable to the political importance there of the burgeoning environmentalist cause. The latter has conferred iconic status on peasants engaged in ('ecologically friendly') subsistence agriculture and tribal populations surviving in forest areas, and consequently these have not only been confirmed in their status as 'new' rural subject but as such have assumed an important role in the anti-capitalist struggle waged in the West.[54] Whilst in a general sense welcome, this ideological development introduces yet another irony: before reopening the frontier, and reoccupying the land, peasants and tribals have first seized the imagination of the elite and the middle class – both at home and abroad – a development that those on the left, beginning with Marx and Lenin, failed to anticipate.[55] That these two agrarian movements in Latin America, the Zapatistas and the MST, have managed to tap into European networks so successfully, not least to secure funding, raises the possibility that the identity of the middle class 'mediating groups' which exercise 'from above' influence on rural mobilization, may have undergone a subtle change, and is now perhaps as much international as it is domestic.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It has been argued here that formation of the agrarian structure in Brazil has been shaped historically by the need on the part of commercial landowners to obtain and secure workers, and that the rural struggles arising from this have, in turn, been determined by two phenomena linked to this, one internal to the rural population and one external to it. The internal phenomenon consists of the sheer variety in the many components of the rural population itself, while the external phenomenon has been the influence exercised on the ideological formation/construction of the agrarian question (and thus also its solution) on the part of bourgeois elements in Brazilian society, specifically those with affiliations to political parties and church groups.

In what might be termed the process of opening, closing, and then reoccupying the agrarian frontier, it has been the control of labour-power

rather than land that has been crucial to the development of a latifundist commercial agriculture in Brazil. The response of the latter to slave emancipation in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the immigration and settlement of European labour combined with internal migration, a process which gave rise, variously, to the *colono* system in coffee cultivation, to tenant farming based on the *morador* in sugar cultivation, rubber tappers in the Amazon, and independent smallholders in the south. In all these cases, usufruct rights of one sort or another (to land, to crops) enabled members of the rural workforce to unite two distinct identities: that of cultivation for oneself with working for others. This coexistence of peasant economy and agricultural labour, and with it the crucial role of the former as a safety valve mechanism for economic crisis and/or depeasantization elsewhere, was broken as capitalist expansion led to the elimination of traditional usufruct rights, peasant dispossession, the invasion of indigenous territory, and the replacement of permanent workers by casual labour, processes completed under the military dictatorship. However, the dual identity of the workforce was reproduced in the agrarian struggles conducted both against the dictatorship and the subsequent democratic government, not least because of the role played by non-peasant 'mediating groups' (the church, political groups and parties) in the ideological reproduction of each, a process that culminated in the emergence of what is now termed a 'new' rural subject.

The problems generated by this 'new' rural subject stem in turn from the internal phenomenon, or the fact that the rural population in Brazil is not only different from its counterparts in the rest of Latin America, but also more differentiated in terms of background, culture, and class. When compared to the history of other peasant populations in Latin America, therefore, that of what is usually termed 'the Brazilian peasantry' is distinct, as are its formation, culture, and institutions. The difficulties experienced by observers attempting to insert a 'new' rural subject – squatters, peasants, agricultural labourers, rubber tappers, and tribals – into a broader pattern of new social movements in Latin America, merely underlines this fact. At the root of this distinctiveness is the variety of rural subjects, whether 'old' or 'new', that constitute the agrarian history of Brazil: Indians emancipated from slavery in the eighteenth century, but retained by their erstwhile masters within a relation of dependence; nomadic Indians and Creoles with no defined rural status since colonial times; modern descendents of nineteenth century European immigrants who settled as *colonos* or independent peasant cultivators; and freed black slaves who became rural wage labourers. These distinct origins, ethnicities and cultures – not to say social relations of production – make it difficult to speak of 'a Brazilian peasantry', whose characteristics, economic interests and political outlook converge in a single project.

Ironically, this internal phenomenon – the variety and distinctiveness of rural Brazil – is in effect denied by those who compose the external phenomenon: elements of the middle class, of rural petty-bourgeois backgrounds but now mainly urban and cosmopolitan in ideology and political outlook, who – as members of church groups and political parties – have influenced the direction taken by rural struggles in a number of significant ways (the provision of networks, support, finance). It is these 'mediating groups' which have tended to amalgamate all the rural subjects, from distinct cultural backgrounds and in equally distinct economic relations, into a uniform 'Brazilian peasantry' with an uniform political interest. The 'voice from below', embodying the diverse origins and different economic demands of the rural subject, have accordingly been overridden by the 'voice from above' belonging to these mediating groups. When the rural subject has been conservative, the mediating group has tended to be radical, and *vice versa*.

This contradiction is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the different interpretations of what is meant by reform of the Brazilian countryside. First, there are unionized groups, such as CONTAG, with a long history of class struggle against capitalists and landlords, and a political ideology that both addresses and simultaneously requires wider systemic change in Brazilian society. Second, there are church-affiliated and church-inspired groups, such as the MST, which see no need for radical systemic transformation, and adhere much rather to a communitarian vision in which capitalist and worker enjoy a tension-free parity of esteem. And third, there are rural subjects affiliated to both of these groups and none, whose actions are based on the need to have access to land as the means of labour, and yet who are guided by family and religious values, and also by the ideology of 'moral economy'.[56]

It could be argued that these values – family, community, land for subsistence, religion – that are usually associated with backwards-looking forms of agrarian tradition and thus seemingly conservative, are much rather the opposite. That is, they are the product of an undeniably modern capitalism, not least because of the crucial distinction made by the rural labouring subject concerned: namely, between *land as the instrument of labour* (to provide work and basic subsistence for himself and his family) and *land that is owned privately* (to provide the owner with profit, as a result of speculation, or generating rent or surplus-value). In short, when considering the issue of land the labouring subject makes a distinction between use-value for himself and his family and exchange-value, by capital for the purpose of accumulation. In this distinction lies, perhaps, a clue to the modernity of the 'voice from below', and also to the way in which family farming in Brazil might be included in a political future.

NOTES

1. The concept 'invention of tradition' is examined and applied to many different case studies (the British Isles, Victorian India, colonial Africa, and Europe) in the collection edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger [1983]. See also McNeish, this volume.
2. Although their class interests include the appropriation of land rent, and thus also a speculative and economically backward role in the development of capitalism, the class position of big landowners in Brazil is more accurately characterized as that of a bourgeoisie. This does not mean one should ignore that, throughout this period, a powerful faction in this class has acted as land speculators, interested in obtaining the gains from land speculation rather than in making land productive. To define all big landowners simply as belonging to a parasitically pre-capitalist category of rent collectors, however, would be to misunderstand their economic significance in the contemporary history of Brazilian capitalist development.
3. It goes without saying that the notion of an economic frontier is contested. See Wagley [1974] and Hennessy [1978] for the examination of the frontier thesis as applied to Latin America. For a different view, see Cleary [1993].
4. In a very real sense the agrarian question has been – in one form or another – at the centre of most debate about industrialization. Its clearest formulation was by Marxists in their arguments about historical transformation, and especially the presence of (non-capitalist or 'feudal') obstacles to economic development in Russia and Germany at the end of the nineteenth century [*Lenin*, 1964; *Kautsky*, 1988]. It has also surfaced periodically in debates about economic development in Latin America [*de Janvry*, 1981].
5. For important accounts of the labour regime on Brazilian coffee plantations prior to the abolition of slavery, see Dean [1976] and Stein [1985].
6. See Bethell [1970] and Scott *et al.* [1988] for details about slave emancipation in Brazil.
7. On this see the classic interpretation by C.L.R. James [1938] and Eric Williams [1944].
8. In other words, slave labour became too expensive. The same kind of argument has been made with regard to the ending of plantation slavery in the antebellum south; its applicability to the latter context, however, has not gone unchallenged – it has also been the subject of critical analysis by economic historians [*Wright*, 1978].
9. For these migrations, and the subsequent history of the migrants involved, see Denoon [1984], Curtin [1990] and Willems [1948].
10. A recent analysis by Freitas [1994] shows how, after the abolition of the slave trade, the attempt in Minas Gerais to enslave free workers ensured that in effect an illicit traffic in unfree labour continued.
11. See Holloway [1980] for the *colonato* contract in São Paulo.
12. For the role of gender and kinship in *colono*/landowner relations on São Paulo coffee estates from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century, see Stolcke [1988] and Stolcke and Hall [1983].
13. This is a familiar threat, and one that has been utilized by landowners everywhere – not just in Latin America - whenever continued usufruct rights to land were part of the production relation governing the employment of an agricultural workforce. In parts of Europe, for example, this kind of pressure still exists, and takes the form of 'tied' housing, a situation whereby an agricultural worker who loses his job also loses his home.
14. For the economic transformation of Brazilian sugar plantations, and in particular how this entailed changes in the labour regime, see among others Reis [1977], Taylor [1978], Schwartz [1985], and Eisenberg [1989].
15. As one coffee grower confirmed to a Dutch researcher [*Meijer*, 1951: 174] during the early 1950s, the reinvestment of profits in agricultural improvement was always linked to whether or not coffee prices were high, and whether or not landowners thought they would remain high. Hence the view that 'when asked what he was going to do with his profits [one fazendeiro] answered that he was going to buy more coffee soils, or, if he thought a crisis within a few years likely, that he would probably suggest the purchase of real estate in one of the big cities. The answer "I am investing a big part of my profits in my existing fazenda, by fighting erosion, laying out new plots in the modern way, replacing badly producing trees by young ones, breeding [coffee plants] on my own seed beds from carefully selected material, improving the harvesting methods, cleaning, fermentation and so on" will rarely be given. "Get rich quickly and forget what comes afterward" seems to be still the attitude of the majority of coffee producers.'

16. According to Julião [1972: 11], '*cambão* is the name given to the dry, leafless and earless maize stalk. It also refers to the piece of wood [= yoke] hung around an ox's neck... Finally *cambão* is the day's unpaid labour demanded by landowners once a week from their peasants as rent for their land...'
17. For the agrarian structure of the Brazilian northeast generally at the mid-twentieth century, see Goodman [1977].
18. For the role of drought in driving poor peasants and agricultural workers out of the semi-arid north-eastern region of Brazil, see de Castro [1952], Hall [1978], and Davis [2001: 377ff.].
19. In the case of rubber production in Amazónas at the beginning of the twentieth century, newly recruited labourers were assigned a low-yielding area, the object being precisely to prevent them from being able to cover their subsistence costs and expenses during this period, and thus making debt a necessary outcome [*Ballivián and Pinilla*, 1912: 245–6].
20. As will be seen below, such relations continue to flourish in the Amazonian region.
21. For more details about the struggles conducted by *posseiros* during the military dictatorship, see Souza Martins [1980].
22. The *Contestado* uprising, which took place in the southern states of Paraná and Santa Catarina, involved some 20,000 peasants, many of whom had been dispossessed as a result of railway expansion.
23. The most influential recent contribution to the debate about the role of the informal sector economy in Latin America is that by de Soto [1989].
24. This change, which reduced even further the already precarious economic condition of the plantation workforce, led to the consolidation of the Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Camponêsas*) demanding a radical agrarian reform programme. It was advocacy of the latter policy that led, in part, to the 1964 military coup. For the role of the Peasant Leagues, see Julião [1972] and also Hewitt [1969]; for the mobilization of rural workers in São Paulo prior to the 1964 coup, see Welch [1995].
25. In an important sense, the expulsion from the sugar plantations of permanent workers with usufruct rights to land, and their transformation into temporary landless labour, completed the process of capitalist transition that began when the slave trade ended. In other respects, however, the plantation work regime continued very much as it was, which suggests that accumulation in rural Brazil was able to proceed without undertaking the kind of radical change usually associated with an agrarian capitalist transition [*Sigaud*, 1979].
26. On the socio-economic characteristics and working conditions of *bóia-fria* labour, see Spindel [1985].
27. It is not unusual for the same migrant workers who harvest sugarcane in the north-east to harvest it in the south-east or in the midwest as well.
28. The amount saved through the tax exemption was to be invested in Amazonia, up to a limit of 75 per cent of the capital of the new company.
29. For peasant economy in Amazonia, see Nugent [1993]. See also his contribution to this volume.
30. There were also state-sponsored land colonization schemes at this conjuncture. For an account of just such a project in Rondônia during the 1970s, see Martine [1982].
31. Indian lands were invaded by large corporations, although the Brazilian Constitution expressly forbids the expropriation of land traditionally inhabited by Indian tribes.
32. For an account of this process, see Mendes [1992].

33. It is significant that, despite being faced with the same kind of violent incursion and expropriation, initially no political alliance was formed between squatters and the Indian tribal groupings who inhabited the Amazon region. To some degree, this was an effect of the mutual suspicions with which each regarded the other (perhaps more accurately, the 'other'). For their part, peasant smallholders who were themselves not infrequently of Indian descent, nurtured prejudicial views about tribal populations, a legacy of colonial missionary teachings. This was reciprocated by Indian groups, which for their part tended to categorize all non-indigenous people as potential enemies, a perception bolstered in the late 1980s when independent gold prospectors (*garimpeiros*) invaded lands in the Amazon that were traditionally part of Yanomami territory.
34. It goes without saying that, whereas Marx himself recognized and drew attention to the violence accompanying the accumulation process, many of his more recent followers have tended to underplay or even ignore this aspect of economic development in the Third World. For an account of the link between violence and agrarian capitalist expansion on the Brazilian frontier, see Foweraker [1981; 1982].
35. For the impact of capitalism on the Amazon region, see among others Barbira-Scazzocchio [1980], Bunker [1988], and Hall [1989].
36. On contemporary forms of debt peonage in the Amazon region, see Souza Martins [1990; 1997] and Esterci [1979; 1987; 1994].
37. Evolutionist marxism is associated most closely with the 'semifeudal' thesis, which insists that capitalist development proceeds through stages each one of which is, in terms of labour regime, an improvement on what came before (see the contributions to the collection edited by Brass and van der Linden [1997] for a discussion of the theoretical issues). Upholding a position that is in its essentials not so different from the Whig interpretation of history so beloved of bourgeois academics, exponents of the 'semifeudal' thesis maintain wrongly that where capitalism exists, ('feudal' or 'semifeudal') unfree production relations are absent, and where the latter are present, capitalism is absent. In the case of Brazil, such a notion was challenged by the justly celebrated analysis of Andre Gunder Frank [1971: 249ff. – 'The Myth of Feudalism'].
38. For more on the crisis of peasant smallholders in the south, see Papma [1992].
39. For more on this, see Souza Martins [1989]. The MST appeared in the mid-1980s as a result of Roman Catholic militants connected with the Pastoral Land Commission, and consequently enjoyed the support of the Church.
40. The impact of bodies such as the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comisão Pastoral da Terra*, or CTP), connected to the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, and the Centre for the Support of the Small Farmer (CAP), funded by the Lutheran Church, should not be underestimated.
41. See Maybury-Lewis [1994] for a useful account of the MST. The latter derived its impetus from struggles conducted by poor and landless agricultural workers from the state of Goiás. These workers started camping out on the strip of government-held land between the barbed wire fences separating farms from the road, an area designed to be used by road maintenance crews and equipment. This strip of land was taken over for a dual purpose: not only for habitation (= the installation of black plastic tents, the squatters' living quarters) but also for cultivation. This tactic rapidly spread and changed, becoming a springboard for the invasion of uncultivated land on neighbouring estates. At first the MST attempted to justify this direct action by invoking existing legislation (the Land Bill), but subsequently used this kind of direct action (land invasions) in order to stimulate state intervention.
42. Dom Tomás Balduíno, retired bishop of Goiás Velho and coordinator of the Pastoral Land Commission, highlights this in a recent interview, observing [*Balduíno*, 2001:18] that 'Indeed, socialism is the horizon...'.
43. The MST is currently engaged in an attempt to formulate a wider political programme, addressing issues such as domestic food security, and the democratization of landownership [*Robles*, 2001]. The emphasis is still very much on what ought to happen in the countryside, rather than the whole of Brazil.

44. The argument that, in place of traditional domination, a new form of clientage had been established by leftist political groups over Brazil's peasants, was put forward initially by Galjart [1964].
45. Hence the view expressed by João Quartim [1971: 85], a member of the Popular Revolutionary Vanguard, not long after the 1964 coup: 'Whether the likelihood of agrarian reform is a political or economic question is, one can now see, really a side issue. What matters is the content of the reform. Though the regime may have nothing to fear any longer from the latifundists themselves and though it may be fully prepared to dispossess them by slowly transforming the old latifundia into large scale capitalist enterprises, they still have everything to fear from an immiserated peasantry. Such a transformation of landless peasants into agricultural wage-earners could only make the situation in the countryside more explosive.' In short, the assumption is that there is only one 'authentic' rural identity – that of peasants. It is an identity, moreover, that is to be built into an agrarian reform programme.
46. Prior to the 1964 coup, a landless workers' movement *(Movimento de Agriculturos Sem Terra*, or MASTER) had appeared in Rio Grande do Sul, backed by the Brazilian Labour Party of the then already deceased President Vargas. At a time when there were no laws in the country supporting this policy, let alone any public bodies addressing social problems in rural areas, MASTER advocated an agrarian reform as a solution to the problem of small farms. These early pressures for change in the land tenure structure of the south were preceded by a movement composed of permanent workers from the north-eastern sugarcane plantations, which peaked with the organization in 1955 of the Peasant Leagues, led by Francisco Julião, from the Socialist Party.
47. Landowners throughout Latin America still feared both the example and the spread of the 1959 Cuban Revolution and – before that – the 1949 Chinese Revolution. However, it is necessary to question the extent to which those leftist groups (such as the Maoists) really were radical in seeking to subdivide the land into peasant smallholdings, thereby institutionalizing an agrarian system based on an indisputably Chayanovian peasant family farm. Historically, the latter unit is one against which Marxists such as Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Kautsky and Preobrashensky all fought, pointing out that, once established, peasant economy would effectively prevent the further socialization of land, and its consolidation in large units of production, state-owned, collectively-run, and centrally administered.
48. This argument has been made recently by Ramos [1991].
49. On the connection between the politicization of indigenous land rights and the 1988 Constitution, see Carvalho [2000].
50. See Harvey [1998] for an analysis of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas.
51. An important aspect of this media exposure is the fact that peasants and tribals, together with their struggles, have installed themselves in literary and cinematic discourse of Western capitalism over the past three decades. Thus, for example, films such as *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), both directed by Werner Herzog, and *The Emerald Forest* (1985), directed by John Boorman, are not only set in the Amazon jungle but have as their sub-text a discourse about 'nature', the 'natural world' and an equally 'natural' group of indigenous inhabitants. Similarly, the film *The Burning Season* (1994), directed by John Frankenheimer, is a fictional portrayal of the struggle by Chico Mendes and the rubber tappers against cattle ranchers and landowners.
52. It is necessary to qualify even this claim to newness, however, given both the fact and the effectiveness of the international campaign mounted in the 1960s to save Hugo Blanco, the leader of the peasant movement in the Peruvian province of La Convención, from the death penalty.
53. Lest the element of irony be missed here, this departure in form is due to the simple fact that all previous agrarian movements in Mexico did not have access to the internet.

54. On this point, see the arguments put forward by the Via Campesina [*Desmarais*, 2002].
55. For more on this point, see Crisenoy [1978]. Such a development also puts in question the perception of Marx [1926] himself that the peasantry was incapable of undertaking political action on any scale other than at a local level.
56. The concept 'moral economy' as used here has the same meaning as when used by Thompson [1993].

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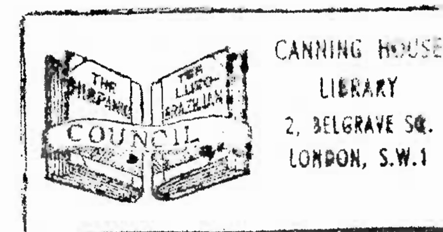
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