

Otro Mundo Es Posible

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Carter, Miguel, ed. 2015 *Challenging Social Inequality: The Landless Rural Workers Movement and Agrarian Reform in Brazil*. Durham, North Carolina, USA: Duke University Press.

As European states steadily dismantle their social democracies and the winds of neo-liberalism batter the attempts at progressive social change in Latin America, this is a welcome book for difficult times. It covers an expanse of information and debate on the topics of social inequality, land reform and social movements, specifically the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST) in Brazil, bringing together the contributions of 17 different authors, including the editor, Uruguayan academic Michael Carter, whose experience of Brazil dates back to 1991, and whose analysis figures in several of the chapters.

The question is how successful have the MST (this most radical of rural social movements) and its contemporary governments been in addressing the persistent extremes of land concentration and chronic inequality in this extensive region. High expectations of the MST coexist with critical opinions of its *raison d'être* and its activism, ranging from strategic denigrations by the right, to pessimistic declarations from centrist and neo-liberal sources in politics, the media and the academy, declaring that “the time for land reform has passed”. The book weaves a rich and well-evidenced debate around whether to hold on to hopelessness (there is no alternative) or to hopeful prospects for change (another world is possible).

Carter begins with an excellent discussion of the significance of land reform to both inequality and poverty. He illustrates how conservative ideologues have been unwilling and unable to think outside the box – whether through inertia, intellectual myopia or vested interests. The landless workers’ struggles have generally been conceptualised with very little historical depth, a dearth of empirical facts, and a lack of comparative perspectives. The book’s chapters, logically ordered into four parts, seek to cover these missing aspects.

Part I covers the *Agrarian Question and Rural Social Movements in Brazil* through economics, political economy, social movement evolution and the role of the churches in supporting and campaigning for land reform. The three chapters comprehensively cover data and history not readily available elsewhere in English. Part II begins with Mançano Fernandes discussion of the spread of the MST through all, bar two, of Brazil’s 27 states. He notes that concentrated agrarian ownership persists despite the intensity of popular demand for change. The various phases of MST activism are traced, by Carter, back to 1979 and classified as comprising: “entreating appeals” (1979-1984), “aggressive struggle” (1985-1994) and “sustained critical engagement” (1995-2006). Sigaud, in Chapter 7, describes the struggles in the Eastern, sugar-

cane region of Brazil, showing how MST tactics include not just pressure against the state, but also negotiation and cooperation with it. Finally, Ondetti, Wambergue and Gonçalves Afonso tackle the violent situation around land rights in the Amazon region.

Part III, on MST's agricultural settlements, begins with an overview by Carter and de Carvalho in which the struggle *on the land* rather than *for land* is delineated, using voices from the settlements, a range of detailed tables of history and human rights abuses, and a summary of the MST's impressive range of sectors and collectives (for education, mass organizing, finance, projects, international relations, health, gender and others). The variety of agricultural settlements is illustrated by Bergamasco and Norder for Southern Brazil, and by Calvo-González and Woolford, who tell of camps and settlements in North East and Eastern Brazil. Of note are the diversity of local initiatives and the MST's participatory local democracy, putting to rest accusations that the MST is a "centrally run" and "authoritarian" organization. Controversially, this heterogeneity includes MST local groups that have opted to support bioethanol production.

Part IV, *MST Politics and Society in Brazil*, starts with Sue Branford's analysis of the movement's disillusionment with the Cardoso and Lula governments and the difficulties in achieving land redistribution. The Cardoso government surprisingly redistributed a greater area of land than Lula's. George Mészáros poses a counter-argument to critics who view the MST as a lawless threat to democracy, showing how it has actually democratized Brazil's self-serving legal system, channelling unrest into productive routes for change. Carvalho Rosa closes this section with a look at the MST's influence on other social movements.

The conclusion and epilogue debate the need for radical democracy to counter embedded wealth disparity. This requires transformations to occur on a number of fronts, with a variety of strategies and through a range of alliances. The book thus brings to mind the struggles of other progressive movements in Latin America, such as that in Bogota, Colombia, associated with Mayor Gustavo Petro (Saavedra 2014; Rigueros Saavedra 2013). Despite relentless plots to undermine it, the fact remains that the *Bogotá Humana* government brought 500,000 people out of poverty, just as 50 million people have been brought out of poverty in Brazil since Lula took office in 2003. On the other hand, the recent, real and fabricated difficulties around centre-left governments in Latin America have also brought election losses and seen a revitalised retrograde Right come back into government.

The authors emphasize throughout how the implementation of more socially and environmentally equitable alternatives have been hindered in Brazil, notably by what Delgado terms Brazil's "constrained adjustment" to the new global economy (44). Financial crises have repeatedly been solved by intensifying the agribusiness sector, in order to produce surpluses to pay off debt, leaving little for the domestic economy. This and the colonial legacy of skewed agricultural development, reinforced by the military junta, have left Brazil with turgid institutions and extremes in land ownership. The Partido dos Trabalhadores and MST believe that what is needed is "a return to 'grassroots organizations'" (Fuchs 2015). However, Carter reminds the reader that different interests need to be working congruently to bring about significant change. The links between agribusiness's contribution to exponential climate change and social injustice, highlight the importance of environmentally and socially alternative systems such as agroecology (425). Agroecology has often been sidelined as a 'throwback to the past', which is not 'efficient' enough for turbo-capitalism. The evidence in this book justifies agroecology's role in creating, not just humane food production, but also social justice. The MST has recognised the need for a complete transformation away from depredatory large-scale agriculture (249). In Brazil, family farms produce above 70% of most staple food products but use 74% less pesticides and create 87% of all rural employment. (30; 425)

The book's rigorous analysis affirms the hopeful view that even if social movement and progressive government relationships temporarily break down, they bring essential and inevitable steps in social transformation, not just through the process of building political conscience, but through the strengthening of the social fabric for the next surge of radical change. It is the strength of social movements, working with alternative types of development, which will keep the Left's potential for transformation alive for the next round.

Finally, a number of small points could be critiqued, such as the classification of Colombia as a "democracy" (16), which is highly debatable, but this would be unfair given the thoroughness of all the authors' papers. The length of this book could also be thought to put many non-specialists off the subject, but, actually, the collection makes compelling reading and each writer has evidently made an effort to make even specialist information very accessible. The *rural* is dramatically brought to life, not only by the writing, but also in unmissable photographs by Sebastião Salgado, Max Love de Rocha and others.

References

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