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## Ideational Bases of Land Reform in Brazil: 1910 to the Present

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Brazil's colonial past conferred upon it a highly unequal landowning structure in which the large majority of the rural population was either landless or land-poor, while many vast holdings were not intensively utilised. Neither independence from Portugal in the early nineteenth century nor the transition from monarchy to republic near the end of that century ameliorated this situation. At least in part because of this underlying structural context, the “agrarian question,” or what to do about a highly unequal rural landholding structure, has been a longstanding source of debate and political conflict. Few issues have been as salient or provoked as much strife.

The agrarian question is different from the issues discussed in the rest of this volume. Most obviously, unlike a social security system, land reform for the most part only benefits the rural population. In addition, the agrarian question has not been just a social question but also an economic one. Indeed, its rise as a national issue in Brazil was driven to a substantial extent by concerns that an unproductive farm sector would

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hinder industrialisation. Still, there is good reason to address land reform as a social issue. Given the frequent exclusion of rural populations from early social security development, land reform can be thought of as a kind of proto-social protection programme for the countryside, providing a measure of income and food security in lieu of cash transfers. Indeed, some would argue that it is superior to cash, since land ownership provides a degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency that cash cannot.

This chapter explores the historical trajectory of the agrarian question in Brazil. It focuses, in particular, on ideas about the nature of the agrarian structure, its consequences and how to address the problems it causes. However, as with other chapters in the volume, it is not simply an intellectual history. Rather, it examines how ideas have interacted with other variables, especially collective actors, legal institutions and policy outcomes. While the emphasis is on ideas advanced by advocates of reform, some attention is devoted to opposing arguments. It draws on both existing scholarly works and a variety of primary sources, including constitutional texts, newspaper reports, documents published by social movement and non-governmental organisations and official land reform data. The chapter fills a significant gap in the scholarship on land reform in Brazil. Although the literature in this area is rich, there are few historical overviews, and those that do exist (Camargo 1986; Linhares and Teixeira da Silva 1999) do not focus specifically on ideas. In addition, those works are now somewhat dated.

A historical analysis virtually demands some kind of periodisation as a way of making sense of the evolution of events, but breaking history into discrete segments is a somewhat arbitrary and artificial exercise. No claim is made that the scheme used here is the only one possible or even the best one for all purposes. Nevertheless, the chapter argues that the trajectory of the agrarian question can be usefully understood in terms of four basic periods, each of which was characterised by a distinct set of political dynamics with regard to this issue.

During the first, which encompasses the 1910s, some of the ideas that would most profoundly shape the agrarian question in Brazil were articulated. However, a political context marked by strong landowner dominance sharply limited their influence. The second period, from the 1920s to the mid-1950s, was characterised by important political

transformations and the recognition of the agrarian question as a pressing issue. Pro-land reform ideas diffused more widely and gained tentative expression in legal institutions, especially the constitution. However, the state did little to alter the structure of landholding, in part because the direct beneficiaries of land redistribution, the rural lower class, remained politically quiescent.

The third period, from the end of the 1950s through the mid-1980s, brought greater conflict over land. It was marked initially by the emergence, for the first time in Brazilian history, of a grassroots land reform movement. However, rather than achieving its goal, the movement contributed to the rise of a repressive military dictatorship that ultimately rejected its demands. Still, the conflicts of the period brought significant institutional advances and the emergence of an intellectual and political movement within the Catholic Church highly favourable to land reform. Both would influence the events of the fourth period.

From the late 1980s to the present, the democratisation of Brazilian politics has helped produce unprecedented increases in both mobilisation for land and actual implementation of land reform. Although the major ideas supporting reform have remained largely the same as in the past, some new rationales have emerged in recent decades, linked mainly to environmental and health concerns. In addition, facing greater threats than before, landowning elites and their allies have engaged in innovative forms of organisation and devised new rhetorical strategies focusing on the modernisation of agriculture and on the failings of the many land reform settlements (see below) that now dot the countryside.

While land reform has clearly reached its historical peak during this most recent period, the degree of change in the agrarian structure remains modest, hardly altering the general distribution of rural property, which remains among the world's most unequal. Overall, then, Brazil is a case in which pro-land reform ideas have deep historical roots and have achieved considerable institutional expression, but in which actual land redistribution has remained superficial, due to a political power balance that has favoured large landowners over the major direct beneficiaries of land redistribution, the rural landless and land-poor.

## Emergence of Pro-land Reform Ideas: the 1910s

Land reform would not become a substantial national political issue in Brazil until the 1930s. However, some of the core ideas behind it emerged earlier. The 1910s constitute a particularly important period in this sense, since they saw the publication of a number of texts providing compelling rationales for state intervention in rural land ownership.

Some scholars trace the origins of the Brazilian agrarian question to late nineteenth-century liberal political elites, like Andre Rebouças, an advisor to Emperor Pedro III who advocated the end of slavery and the distribution of land to former slaves (Camargo 1986: 56),<sup>1</sup> or Rui Barbosa, a legislator and government minister who, following the establishment of a republic in 1889, pushed for reforms that would create a more fluid land market (Linhares and Teixeira da Silva 1999: 71–75). However, a lucid general argument in favour of promoting equitable landownership would only appear some years later.

That argument came from the pen of Alberto Torres, a politician and intellectual known for his nationalist views (Pinto 2010). During the first half of the 1910s, Torres published a series of essays and books that advanced major criticisms of Brazilian society. Many had to do with the political regime established by the 1891 constitution, but he also laid out a sophisticated critique of an economic system devoted to producing a handful of export commodities (mainly coffee, sugar, latex and cacao) on large estates. Torres argued that this system enriched a narrow landowning elite at the expense of society as a whole. Not only did it concentrate the income from agriculture, but it also contributed to high food costs (since the best land was devoted to export crops) and tended to degrade the environment because the easy access of wealthy planters to land discouraged careful use of soils.

Torres advocated reforms that would partially reorient agriculture towards the production of food for the domestic market and promote wider ownership of land. Such a system, he argued, would increase

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<sup>1</sup> Slavery ended in 1888, later than in any other country in the Americas. Rebouças' advocacy notwithstanding, the freed slaves did not receive land.

popular welfare, stem migration of the rural poor to the cities and promote better stewardship of natural resources. Torres did not go as far as to urge expropriation of private land, but he did suggest that the state should take the lead in distributing unused or unclaimed lands in small parcels to the landless and land-poor. According to the author:

“it would make sense to promote...the division of properties in order to disperse wealth, thus consolidating popular welfare. Our politicians have not yet grasped that Brazil needs to strengthen its people, endowing the poor classes of society with that minimum level of security and welfare that comes from owning property...Our policies should move with greater courage – without attacking property or established rights – toward a wider distribution of wealth and a more complete levelling of opportunities and means for action.” (Torres 2002 [first published in 1914])<sup>2</sup>

At roughly the same time that Torres was elaborating his critiques, another author in distant France was launching a broader attack on property rights that would eventually wield significant influence in Brazil, as well as other Latin American countries. Based partially on earlier writings by August Comte, the jurist Léon Duguit argued in a series of lectures delivered in Argentina in 1911 that private ownership of land (and other capital assets) should be understood not as an inalienable individual right but as a “social function” (Duguit 1918). As such, it involves an obligation to use land in ways that benefit society as a whole, which in practice mainly means putting it into agricultural production. If the owner does not fulfil this obligation, the state, Duguit suggested, should have the power to coerce him to do so.

Like Torres, Duguit was not a socialist and did not oppose private property. Nevertheless, he did believe that nineteenth-century liberalism had gone too far in championing individual rights, and he argued for a reorientation of legal codes towards obligations to the collective good. Although Duguit’s ideas about property did not achieve great influence in his native Europe, his emphasis on productive use of assets was potentially more compelling in Brazil, where agriculture remained the core of

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<sup>2</sup>All translations in this chapter are by the author.

the economy and land ownership was concentrated in a small elite who often failed to use their holdings productively. The contrast between huge, lightly cultivated estates and the millions of peasant families who scraped out a precarious living on tiny holdings or on other people's land was destined to make the social function an appealing concept to reformers in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America.

However, at the time of their publication, neither Torres' nor Duguit's ideas appear to have had much impact on Brazilian society. This was probably because the system Torres was criticising, based on the kind of strong property rights regime that Duguit denounced, rested on powerful pillars of support. The decentralised oligarchic system created after the fall of the monarchy had not yet faced major challenges. Despite the trade disruptions caused by World War I, commodity exports continued to be a key source of growth, and the groups who dominated that sector, especially the coffee "barons" of the state of São Paulo, enjoyed great prestige and political influence. Given the low levels of urbanisation and industrialisation, there were few actors capable of forcefully questioning the status quo.

## **Societal Recognition of the Agrarian Question: 1920s to the Mid-1950s**

Political and economic transformations that occurred during the 1920s and 1930s altered the balance of power and thus favoured the wider diffusion and further elaboration of pro-land reform ideas. To some extent, awareness of the agrarian question came to influence legal institutions, most notably the constitutions drafted in 1934 and 1946. However, the awakening of society to this issue had two crucial limitations. First, the prospective direct beneficiaries of land reform did not engage in significant political action. Second, and relatedly, the state did little to promote a more equitable pattern of landholding.

Two events were especially important in destabilising the oligarchical system. First, in 1922 a movement arose within the armed forces that criticised the political regime as corrupt and unresponsive to popular

needs. Made up of junior officers, the *tenentes* (or “lieutenants”) undertook repeated armed rebellions. From 1924 to 1927, a *tenentes* force roamed the interior of the country, seeking support from the population and resisting various attempts to destroy it. Although it ultimately dissolved, the movement constituted a blow to the system’s legitimacy. Second, the stock market crash of 1929 initiated a global economic crisis that undermined Brazil’s export-oriented development model and helped provoke a political regime change. Prior to that point, there had been an informal agreement between the elites of São Paulo and neighbouring Minas Gerais to rotate in controlling the presidency. In an attempt to protect their interests in the face of the crisis, in 1930 São Paulo broke with this arrangement and sought to hold onto the office for a second term. In response, Minas Gerais joined some other states in organising a military coup that brought to power Getúlio Vargas, a wily politician who would deeply influence Brazil’s development.

Vargas led Brazil from 1930 to 1945, mainly as a dictator, and again from 1951 to 1954 as a democratically elected president. During these years, he centralised power in the national executive branch and increasingly used the state to promote industrialisation and diversify the economy away from agriculture. He was also largely responsible for the creation of the country’s social security system and a labour code that extended significant new rights to workers while also imposing corporatist controls on their organisations (Malloy 1979). The Vargas presidencies thus played a crucial role in the rise of the statist development model that Brazil would pursue until at least the early 1990s.

The Great Depression and Vargas’ rise to power favoured the emergence of the agrarian question as a national issue. The collapse of trade and the suffering it caused called into question the benefits of export-led development and diminished the prestige enjoyed by planters and their associates. While the landowning elite remained powerful, other social groups, especially industrialists but also civil servants and urban workers, saw their status rise as a function of the growing emphasis on state-led industrialisation. Political space expanded within the state and the broader society for ideas that questioned the compatibility of the landholding system with public welfare. Consequently, in the early 1930s,

both Torres' ideas and the concept of the social function gained considerable popularity.

Despite having died in 1917, Torres became among the most influential intellectuals of the Vargas era, since his nationalism and rejection of export-based development were in tune with political trends (Bravo 2016). His books were republished, and three works by other authors came out on his life and thought (Rachum 2015: 89). A society was formed in 1932 called the "Friends of Alberto Torres," which included prominent intellectual and political figures. Torres' ideas regarding the rural sector were endorsed by the former *tenentes*, who became key advocates of land reform in the early 1930s and in some cases held influential positions within the state (Camargo 1986; Bravo 2016). To advance their reformist views, in 1931 the *tenentes* created an organisation called the "October 3 Club," which issued a manifesto that reflected many of Torres' views.<sup>3</sup> On the agrarian question, the document asserted that it should be "obligatory for governments to reduce to the minimum possible all forms of latifundia [i.e., large landholdings]" and urged the state to distribute land to the landless (Bravo 2016: 122).

Vargas himself also echoed some of Torres' ideas about rural society, both during the early 1930s and in later years. In speeches, Vargas sometimes underscored the problem of rural-urban migration and the irony of landlessness in a land-rich country; for example, in a 1933 speech he argued that, because of the allure of the cities to destitute rural workers, "the urban proletariat has increased disproportionately, leading to pauperism and all the ills resulting from the surplus of work without permanent jobs" (quoted in Cardoso 2010: 786). In a 1941 address, he asserted that "it is impossible for us to maintain the dangerous anomaly of peasants without their own land in a country where rich valleys like the Amazon remain uncultivated and vast pastures are without livestock." Furthermore, he warned that if rural living conditions did not improve, Brazil could "witness an exodus from the fields and the overpopulation of the cities, an imbalance with unforeseeable consequences, capable of weakening or annulling the campaign for the integral improvement of the Brazilian man" (quoted in Cardoso 2010: 784).

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<sup>3</sup> Its name came from the date on which the 1930 coup d'état was initiated.



Just as Torres had, Vargas and his *tenente* allies called for reforms that would promote more equitable landownership without frontally attacking the institution of private property. Upon taking office, Vargas announced a programme of government, one aspect of which was the distribution of farmland in order to “encourage, without violence, the progressive extinction of the latifundium” (quoted in Rachum 2015: 89). A similar position was laid out in the October 3 Club’s manifesto. Rather than demanding massive expropriation of private estates, it called on the state to “promote the social utilisation of public lands and those that have been illegally occupied and exploited so that, once they have reverted to state control, they can be used to establish cooperative agricultural colonies” (quoted in Bravo 2016: 122). While the *tenentes* would fade as a political force after the mid-1930s, Vargas continued to rhetorically endorse land reform periodically until his dramatic death by suicide in 1954 (Camargo 1986).

Like Torres’ ideas, the social function of property, after being largely ignored in Brazil in previous decades, became the subject of substantial discussion during the early 1930s. Editorials about it were published in newspapers by eminent lawyers and politicians and some major political parties incorporated it into their programmes (Sodré n.d.: 54). It was also a topic of debate during the 1933–1934 constituent assembly and, as discussed below, would have some influence on the resulting constitutional text. The concept was endorsed by actors of diverse perspectives; for example, Antônio Augusto Borges de Medeiros, an erstwhile Vargas ally who sided with the conservative São Paulo opposition after the 1930 coup, argued that property should no longer be “the sacred and inviolable right of the French Revolution of 1789” but rather a “social function” and that, as such, “its exercise is subordinated to the norms and prescriptions that the state assigns it in the name of the public interest” (Medeiros 1933: 34). In its 1932 manifesto, the pro-Vargas October 3 Club asserted that “With regard to property, individual interests cannot be allowed to override the social function” (quoted in Bravo 2016: 121). Finally, João Mangabeira, a prominent legislator who opposed Vargas from the left, was an enthusiastic defender of the concept. In a 1934 editorial, Mangabeira called Duguit “the most profound, the most brilliant, the most original, the greatest of French constitutionalists,” and argued that

in the jurist's Argentine lectures, Duguit "frames the question in such terms and resolves it in such a way that he turns his doctrine, frankly, victorious" (quoted in Maldaner 2015: 72).

While ideas advanced by Torres and Duguit gained considerable prominence after 1930, land reform advocates did not limit themselves to parroting these ideas. One relatively new theme that developed during these decades was the link between land reform and industrialisation. Torres had believed deeply in Brazil's agricultural vocation and showed little interest in promoting industry. However, that position ran contrary to the thrust of state policymaking under Vargas and his successors. Post-1930, the agrarian question was increasingly tied to the ongoing processes of import-substitution industrialisation and construction of a social security system to meet the needs of urban workers (Moreira 1998; Linhares and Teixeira da Silva 1999). For Brazilian manufacturing to prosper, it was argued, it would need a substantial domestic consumer market. That fact that much of the population was made up of destitute peasants was an obstacle to that goal, one that could be addressed through land redistribution. Moreover, by the 1950s, there were growing concerns that insufficient farm production would impede industrial development by stoking inflation and limiting inputs for sectors like food and textiles (Linhares and Teixeira da Silva 1999).

Such arguments were most forcefully articulated by economic nationalists, who played an important role not only in the *varguista* coalition but also in forces to the left of that coalition, especially the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) (Moreira 1998). Although banned from elections during most of this period, the PCB had significant intellectual influence and was increasingly involved in labour organising. Communists tended to frame the problems of the rural sector as reflecting the persistence of "feudal" or "pre-capitalist" economic relations that tied landless families to large landowners (Caminha 2018). Land reform would modernise the countryside by replacing these paternalistic, patron-client types of relations with ones based on market exchange. The PCB supported a more aggressive approach to land reform than other groups. Most of the *tenentes* and other moderate nationalists, including Vargas, called for a gradual transition away from the latifundium-dominated land tenure structure (Bravo 2016). They viewed forcible expropriation of private

holdings as a tool to be used cautiously and seemed to believe that much could be achieved simply by taxing fallow land. In contrast, the communists called for more abrupt and sweeping change.<sup>4</sup> In a manifesto published in 1958, for instance, the PCB endorsed “the radical transformation of the agrarian structure, with the liquidation of the land monopoly and pre-capitalist labour relations” (quoted in Santos 2008: 139).

Duguit’s ideas regarding the social function of property were also not necessarily accepted without debate or in their original form (Maldaner 2015). Even critics tended to acknowledge during these years that private property rights could not be absolute. However, they (particularly conservative Catholic jurists) questioned Duguit’s broader critique of individual rights as vague and dangerous. Rather than *being* a social function, they argued, private property should be thought of as *having* a social function and thus being subject to certain legal constraints on its use (Sodré no date; Maldaner 2015: 65–66). Probably owing to both the logical force of this argument and ignorance of Duguit’s actual writings, which were not easily accessible, this perspective would become the dominant way of understanding the social function in Brazil, as in much of Latin America (Mirow 2010; Ondetti and Davy 2018).

As this discussion suggests, by the 1950s, the agrarian question was well established in Brazil at the ideational level. The belief that rural land inequality exerted a negative effect on the country’s social and economic development was widespread, at least among more informed sectors of society. There was also substantial support for reform of the land tenure structure, although opinions varied considerably regarding the character of that reform. In terms of the onion model discussed in the introduction, the “agrarian question” was a type of social question, implying a general concern about the acute concentration of rural landownership coupled to a call for a solution. The agrarian question gave rise to different “policy paradigms” that framed the issue in different ways and envisaged different policies, ranging from rapid liquidation of all large estates to a gradualist approach based on distribution of public lands and

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<sup>4</sup>It is worth noting, however, that the most prominent PCB leader, Luís Carlos Prestes, was a former *tenente*. Prestes’ embrace of Marxism made him a major exception to the moderate reformism that characterised the *tenentes*.

taxation of unproductive private holdings. The rise of the agrarian question was part of the more general “social question” that was arising as a result of changes set in motion by the global economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s. At the same time, however, it was also an aspect of an emerging societal concern with developing a modern industrial economy that would make Brazil autonomous of foreign powers, that is, an “economic question.”

To a significant extent, societal recognition of the agrarian question came to be reflected in legal institutions. Most importantly, it had some impact on the new constitutions drafted in 1934 and 1946. Influenced by both domestic events and examples of socially oriented post-World War I European constitutions, the 1934 document featured a variety of social, labour and educational provisions symbolising the state’s recognition of the social question. These included several provisions related to land access, an issue ignored by the 1891 constitution. Among other measures, the new constitution:

- 1) Required that agricultural work be the subject of a legal code that would “strive to fix the rural man in the countryside” (i.e. prevent rural-urban migration).
- 2) Required that the federal government, in cooperation with the states, organise “agricultural colonies” for the benefit of people from poorer regions and those lacking work.
- 3) Gave all Brazilians who did not already own property the right to obtain up to ten hectares of land for free by occupying it for ten years and turning it productive.
- 4) Prohibited concessions of more than 10,000 hectares of public land to a private actor without prior authorisation of the Senate.

In addition, the 1934 constitution contained an at least implicit social function clause. The initial draft had included a clause referring explicitly to that concept in a section titled “The Social Order.” It read, “Guaranteed is the right to property, with content and limits to be defined by law. Property has, above all, a social function which cannot be exercised against the collective interest” (Maldaner 2015: 73). Over the protests of João Mangabeira and some other constituents, the clause was moved to

the “Declaration of Rights and Obligations” section and its wording altered to: “Guaranteed is the right to property, which cannot be exercised against the social or collective interest.” These changes shifted the emphasis from social obligations to individual rights. Nevertheless, by asserting that property rights are limited by obligations to society as a whole, it represented a change relative to the 1891 constitution, which had merely allowed the state to seize private property for public projects such as roads or parks.

The 1937 constitution, which framed Vargas’ dictatorial *Estado Novo* (New State) regime, excluded most of the pro-land reform provisions. However, the 1946 document, drafted under a more democratic regime after Vargas’ resignation, restored them, albeit in somewhat different form. The state’s obligations to “fix the rural man in the countryside” and create agricultural colonies were reaffirmed, and the area obtainable through squatting was increased to 25 hectares. In addition, the notion of a social function of property was reintroduced, without, once again, using that term. The section on individual rights stated, “Guaranteed is the right to property, save in the case of expropriation for public necessity or utility, or for social interest, conditional on prior and just indemnity in cash.” In addition, the section on the “Economic and Social Order” indicated that “The use of property will be conditioned on social welfare. The law can...promote the just distribution of property, with equal opportunity for all.” While this language was generally more favourable to land redistribution than the corresponding language in the 1934 constitution, the new stipulation requiring that owners of expropriated land be indemnified in cash imposed a limitation of no small importance (Camargo 1986: 173). Due to this rule, any substantial land reform based on expropriation of private holdings would be vastly expensive to the government that implemented it.

Despite the intellectual rise of the agrarian question and the inclusion of moderately pro-land reform language in the constitution, little was actually done during these decades to alter the structure of rural landowning. Vargas established several colonisation projects on public land. Most were a part of a highly publicised, but practically insignificant initiative during the early 1940s called the “March to West” by which the state tried to populate and develop a part of Brazil’s vast rural hinterland (Lenharo

1986). Following the 1945 democratic transition, a number of bills were introduced in Congress that sought to advance land reform (Camargo 1986: 171–187). Most attempted to provide a statutory basis for the state to expropriate underutilised private holdings, and at least one tried to skirt the constitutional requirement of compensation in cash through a creative interpretation of this provision.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, none of them was ultimately approved. Similarly, as Lavinás points out in this volume, the state did very little during these years to extend to workers in the countryside the social and labour policies that benefitted urban workers. As with land reform, Vargas and his allies made repeated promises to carry out such reforms, but ultimately did not do so (Camargo 1986; Fausto 2006).

The key reason behind the lack of progress was an imbalance of political influence in favour of conservative forces. Vargas' rise to power had both reflected and reinforced the weakening of the rural oligarchy. Nevertheless, landowners retained great power, due to their wealth, their role as suppliers of foreign exchange and their vast political network. In 1932, the São Paulo coffee oligarchy had spearheaded an armed rebellion against Vargas. Although the government eventually triumphed, the conflict lasted three months and took hundreds of lives. Vargas subsequently bowed to São Paulo's demand for a transition towards an elected, constitutional government. This concession was the beginning of the end of the influence of the *tenentes*, the most important social reformist faction associated with Vargas. The conservative turn was consolidated under the *Estado Novo*. The democratic opening of 1945 did not initially revert this situation, since landowners used their influence in Congress to frustrate efforts at land reform. Much of that influence was exercised through the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the more powerful of the two *varguista* parties, which owed its electoral force largely to conservative rural political networks. By the 1950s, relatively few voices openly defended the agrarian status quo. However, various motives were averred for resisting land reform bills, including the importance of protecting property rights, the need to postpone reform until a supposed future time of greater

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<sup>5</sup> A 1952 bill endorsed by President Vargas would have mandated the state to compensate expropriated landowners at the original purchase value of their land, rather than its current market value (Camargo 1986: 180).

political tranquillity and the risk of undermining investment and production (Camargo 1986; Linhares and Teixeira da Silva 1999).

One important underlying reason for the persistence of landowner power was the quiescence of the rural lower class. While Brazil experienced some non-political symptoms of rural discontent, such as millenarian movements and rural banditry (Façó 1991; Martins 1995), no substantial grassroots movement for land reform or other state policies emerged during these years. For the most part, large landowners remained solidly in control of their workforces and communities. To the extent that land reform arose as a national issue, it was because of the actions of urban political elites who sought to use it to advance their own agendas. Had there been a substantial mobilisation of the rural poor, Vargas and his followers might have leveraged it to attempt substantive land reform, or at least extend social and labour rights to the countryside. However, the lack of a significant challenge made such a turn of events unlikely.

## **Mobilisation Without Reform: Late 1950s to Mid-1980s**

What could be thought of as a third period in the evolution of the agrarian question runs from the end of the 1950s until the reestablishment of democracy in the mid-1980s. This period was characterised most notably by, on the one hand, the emergence of a substantial grassroots movement for land reform and, on the other, a conservative reaction that ended up stonewalling the movement's core demand and contributing to the rise of a military dictatorship. Although this period ultimately did not result in significant land reform and was not as fertile ideationally as the previous ones, it was not totally sterile for advocates of this policy. Institutional reforms occurred, which would set a high bar for future authorities. In addition, certain ideas arose that would gradually come to have a significant impact on the struggle for land.

The traditional passivity of the rural lower class came to an end in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Mobilisation began among tenant farmers in the state of Pernambuco and, with the support of leftist politician Francisco Julião, gradually spread to other parts of the poor north-eastern

region of Brazil (Azevêdo 1982; Bastos 1984). Known as the “Peasant Leagues,” the movement was involved in both providing its members with practical assistance with problems like legal defence and medical care and demanding sweeping land reform, which it vowed to pursue “by law or by force.” Another regional movement for land emerged in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil’s southernmost state. Like the Peasant Leagues, the Movement of Landless Farmers (MASTER), was initially a defensive response by poor farmers with precarious land access (Eckert 1984; Wagner 1989). However, with the implicit support of leftist governor Leonel Brizola, it began invading properties considered to be vulnerable to state seizure, due to abandonment or dubious ownership claims.

During the 1960s there also arose a rural unionisation movement. For years, PCB activists had sought to organise rural workers, but their progress was impeded by landowner hostility, lack of a favourable legal structure and the indifference or hostility of governing authorities. Under the left-leaning government of João Goulart (1961–1964), however, the political climate became more hospitable and, in 1963, the Congress passed the Rural Worker Statute, which facilitated union registration. PCB-led unions grew in number, especially in the northeast (Maybury-Lewis 1994; Pereira 1997). Concerned that the rising rural mobilisation would be harnessed by leftist forces, groups associated with the Catholic Church also entered the fray, organising progressive but non-communist unions. State authorities likewise sought to encourage and channel the growing rural labour movement, at least initially as a way of counterbalancing the Peasant Leagues, which had rejected collaboration with Goulart. The unions were more active in organising wage laborers than the Leagues, but the social bases of the two overlapped significantly. Although more focused on bread-and-butter issues than the Leagues, the unions also endorsed land reform.

Nevertheless, the growing clamour for land redistribution did not result in significant reform. President Goulart, who represented the more leftist faction within *varguismo*, introduced legislation that would have allowed a far-reaching land reform, in part by eliminating the constitutional requirement of prior compensation for expropriations in cash (Dezemone 2016: 141). However, Congress refused to pass it, along with some other progressive reforms. Moreover, Goulart’s efforts to use mass



protest to pressure legislators into approving his agenda backfired, helping provoke a military coup in 1964 and the establishment of a conservative authoritarian regime that would last until 1985. Although the regime initially showed signs of wanting to implement its own expropriation-based land reform (including legislation discussed below), it ultimately backed off this proposal. Instead, its agricultural policies focused on promoting technical modernisation, mainly through the provision of subsidised credit to large producers. To the extent they were addressed at all, rural social problems were dealt with through other policies. Reviving a Vargas-era initiative, the regime established a series of agricultural colonisation projects in frontier areas, especially the vast Amazon River basin. In 1971, it also introduced a social security programme, including pensions and healthcare, exclusively for people involved in agriculture and other rural activities. Although the benefits were extremely modest, the programme was extensive and did not require any contribution from beneficiaries (Malloy 1979: 132–134; Houtzager 2008).

To make matters worse for the land reform cause, doubts about the wisdom of advancing it grew within the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), traditionally among its most ardent defenders. As mentioned earlier, the PCB had long stressed the importance of mobilising the peasantry to struggle for land, since breaking up large estates would encourage a thorough transition to capitalism in the countryside (Passos Guimarães 1963). However, that view was increasingly challenged by Caio Prado Jr., a leading Marxist intellectual (Prado 1963, 1966). What distinguished the Brazilian rural society, Prado suggested, was not its feudalism (which he questioned), but the weak ties of the population to land. The Portuguese had established an economy based on vast plantations relying on slave labour. Outside of these estates, few families enjoyed stable access to enough land to maintain an independent family farm, even after the end of slavery. They therefore depended deeply on large landowners for their livelihood, whether in the form of wages or quasi-wage compensation. Thus, with the exception of a few rural areas affected by European immigration, Brazil lacked a landed peasantry. Consequently, Prado believed, calls to mobilise for land redistribution were destined to fall largely on deaf ears. Instead, he urged the PCB to focus its appeals to rural dwellers on labour-oriented demands, such as better wages and working

conditions (Prado 1963). While Prado's arguments probably helped encourage the PCB's embrace of an incremental, union-based strategy in the countryside, the party continued to call for land reform as a long-term solution (Pereira 1997; Santos 2008).

Despite the lack of substantial land redistribution and the wavering advocacy of the PCB, this period did bring some developments with positive implications for advocates of land reform. First, significant advances occurred with regard to legal institutions. In 1964 President Humberto Castello Branco, the first leader of the military regime, decreed the Land Statute, which appeared to mandate a substantial land reform. The law allowed expropriation of private holdings based not only on low productivity but also on sheer size. In other words, even a productive estate could be expropriated if it exceeded a certain number of hectares. A constitutional amendment approved at the same time removed the requirement that expropriated landowners be indemnified in cash and instead allowed compensation in bonds payable over a 20-year span.<sup>6</sup> The law declared that its purpose was to "condition the use of land on its social function," "promote the just and adequate use of property" and "make obligatory the rational exploitation of land" (article 18), among other objectives. In addition, the regime's 1967 constitution became the first in Brazil's history to use the term "social function," stating that one of the principles of the "Economic and Social Order" was "the social function of property" (article 157). Although they went largely unimplemented, these robust legal provisions, as discussed later, established a high baseline for subsequent legislative initiatives.

Second, this era brought some innovative ideas related to the agrarian question. The most consequential arose within the Catholic Church, a crucial institution in this traditionally Catholic country. The church had long been considered a bastion of the status quo. Its occasional advocacy of social reform, including land redistribution, was motivated largely by fears that social grievances would be exploited by godless communists. However, during the late 1960s and 1970s, it developed a strong left

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<sup>6</sup>Payment would be based on values declared for the purposes of the federal land tax. Since landowners had an incentive to minimise the value of their land for that purpose, this rule would tend to exert downward pressure on compensation.

wing of its own. This “popular church” movement was deeply committed to land reform, a policy it came to view as the embodiment of Christian values of fraternity and solidarity with the poor and downtrodden. Not only did the church advocate land redistribution, but Catholic lay activists and priests also became actively involved in organising rural people to struggle for land (Mainwaring 1986; Martins 1991; Adriance 1995).

Central to this process was the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), which, beginning in about the early 1970s, adopted a consistent pro-land reform position. In 1975, moreover, the CNBB founded the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT), an entity devoted to supporting demands for land reform through advice, legal defence, donations and direct involvement in organising initiatives (Poletto and Canuto 2002). Though initially focused on the Amazon, where the military regime’s development initiatives had spurred violent conflict over land, the CPT quickly established local chapters throughout much of the country. It supported efforts to unionise workers and, as will be discussed later, played a fundamental part in creating what would become the key land reform organisation of the post-military era, the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), in 1984. CPT activists used religious symbols and biblical references to frame the struggle, comparing it, for example, to Moses’ decades-long trek through the desert to the promised land. Although the military had little interest in redistributing land, the church’s activism helped revive the agrarian question during the early 1980s, forcing authorities to adopt efforts to quell land-related conflict, especially in Amazonia.

The popular church movement had both international and domestic roots. In part, it was a response to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), a series of gatherings through which the global Catholic Church had resolved to make itself more relevant to the lives of the faithful (Adriance 1986). In Latin America, this call was interpreted as a mandate to develop a “preferential option for the poor” or, in other words, to adopt efforts to materially improve the lives of the poor in the here-and-now, not simply through charity but by supporting political efforts at equity-enhancing reforms. During the late 1960s and 1970s, Latin American theologians, including the Brazilian priest Leonardo Boff, played a fundamental part in the development of “liberation theology,” a

school of thought that argues that the church has a moral and doctrinal responsibility to intervene in society on behalf of the poor. While the popular church movement extended throughout much of Latin America, Brazil was one of the countries most affected by it (Bruneau 1982; Mainwaring 1986).

Thus, although the period analysed in this section was characterised most notably by the state's ultimate rejection of the demands for land reform raised by the Peasant Leagues and other actors of the pre-coup era, by the early 1980s, buoyed by frontier violence and Catholic Church sponsorship, the agrarian question was re-emerging as a national issue. In addition, the military had left a relatively positive institutional legacy, including the Land Statute and a constitution that explicitly recognised private property's social function.

## **Democracy, Protest and Limited Reform: Mid-1980s to the Present**

The period since the return of elected civilian governance in 1985 has been marked by two major shifts related to the agrarian question. First, grassroots mobilisation for land reform achieved a scale and level of organisation unprecedented in Brazil's history. Second, land redistribution by the state, though still limited, also reached its historical peak. These changes are related to the broad context of regime democratisation but do not reflect gains in legal institutions specific to agrarian reform, which arguably deteriorated relative to the military era. The key ideas underpinning the struggle for land have continued to be largely the same as those in earlier eras, but in recent decades the actual implementation of land reform has given rise to a relatively new debate about its virtues and flaws, with advocates often emphasising the environmental and health benefits of smallholder production and detractors disparaging land reform settlements as poverty-ridden shanty towns.

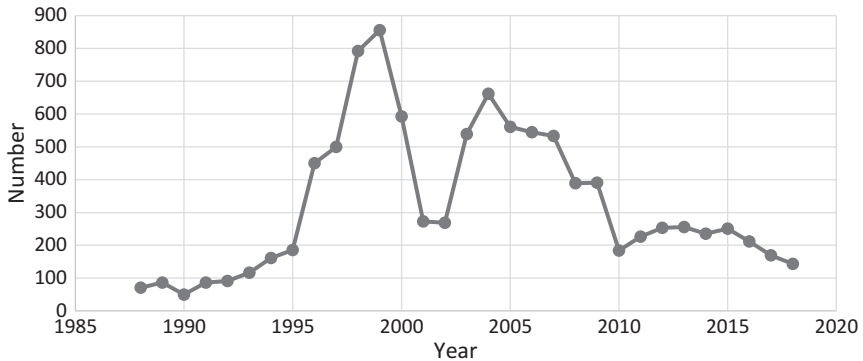
The armed forces' control of the federal executive branch, seized through the 1964 coup, was returned to civilians in 1985.<sup>7</sup> Over the next five years, Brazil extended the suffrage to illiterates (who had previously been denied the vote), approved a new constitution and held its first popular presidential election since 1961. Despite numerous crises and the removal of two presidents by Congress, democracy has survived more than three decades.

Sustained democracy, combined with the support of other civil society actors, helped give rise to a grassroots land reform movement that by the second half of the 1990s constituted a substantial political force (Fernandes 1996; Wright and Wolford 2003; Ondetti 2008a; Pahnke 2018). It was anchored by the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), an organisation combining centralised national leadership with local affiliates throughout the country. The MST arose in the extreme south of Brazil, but gradually expanded to other regions. While its creation was largely a product of activism by the popular church, especially the CPT, it eventually became autonomous of the church. It developed its own secular worldview made up of a heterogeneous mixture of mainly Marxist ideas, as well as its own distinctive tactical methodology, based on massive invasions (or "occupations," as activists term them) of under-utilised private estates and the formation of roadside squatter camps. While overshadowed by the MST, the rural unions also continued to struggle for land and, inspired by the MST's relative success, adopted some of its methods. The movement peaked in the late 1990s, when there were some 850 land occupations nationwide (see Fig. 10.1). In recent years it has declined, due in part to authorities' growing unwillingness to grant land to people who occupy it. Nevertheless, at its peak the movement was undoubtedly a much larger and better-organised phenomenon than its counterpart of the early 1960s.

Land reform has also intensified greatly relative to the past. Official data suggest that some 95% of the families that have benefitted from land reform in Brazil received their land during the current democratic period

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<sup>7</sup>The legislature was only closed for a short period during the early 1970s but functioned under substantial restrictions thereafter. The first post-coup civilian president, José Sarney, was chosen by a special electoral college. It was only in 1989 that a popular election was held for president.



**Fig. 10.1** Land occupations in Brazil, 1988–2018. (Source: The author, data from reports of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT; <https://www.cptnacional.org.br/index.php/publicacoes-2/conflitos-no-campo-brasil>) and the database Dataluta of the Núcleo de Estudos, Pesquisas e Projetos de Reforma Agrária (NERA), Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP; <http://www2.fct.unesp.br/nera/relatoriosbr.php>))

(see Table 10.1). This period also accounts for more than 75% of all expropriated farmland. Clearly, protest actions led by the MST and other groups have played a key role in pressuring the state to redistribute land, mainly by calling the attention of the media and the public to the plight of the landless (Carter 2011). Protest has been relatively effective in part because Brazilians, as opinion polls have consistently shown, generally support land reform (Ondetti 2008a, b; Simonetti et al. 2012) and, in a society with a free press and competitive elections, authorities cannot ignore public preferences entirely.

Nevertheless, reform activity has been inconsistent. As Table 10.1 indicates, the first three presidents of the democratic era (José Sarney, Fernando Collor and Itamar Franco) did not redistribute much land. That trend ended, however, under Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) of the centrist Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB), who settled more landless families than all his predecessors combined and expropriated almost as much private land. His successor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) of the leftist Workers’ Party (PT), also granted land to a substantial number of families but did so mainly by distributing public lands, legalising informal holdings and filling vacancies in existing

**Table 10.1** Land reform in Brazil, 1900–2019

<i>Presidential term</i>	<i>Families Granted Land</i>		<i>Hectares of Land Expropriated</i>	
	Number of families	Percentage of all families	Hectares	Percentage of total land
Pre-1985	45,471	4.7	6,044,955	23.7
Sarney (1985–1989)	68,999	7.1	4,240,141	16.7
Collor (1990–1992)	34,773	3.6	163,902	0.6
Franco (1993–1994)	14,407	1.5	1,101,856	4.3
Cardoso (1995–2002)	408,976	42.1	10,167,614	39.9
Da Silva (2003–2010)	359,476	37.0	3,511,552	13.8
Rousseff (2011–2016)	36,564	3.8	224,216	0.9
Temer (2016–2018)	3,292	0.3	5,344	0.0
Bolsonaro (2019–)	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	971,958	100	25,459,580	100

*Source:* The author, data from Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA)

<sup>a</sup>2019 figures are through July

settlements, rather than expropriation. After da Silva's first term (2003–2006), reform began to tail off, and it has ground to a virtual halt in recent years. Even Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) of the PT did little in this area. These fluctuations arguably reflect the fact that land reform is only materially relevant to a small minority of Brazilians, given that more than 80% of the population now lives in urban areas. Its salience thus tends to surge in response to dramatic events, such as instances of violent repression against land occupiers, only to fade as public attention inevitably shifts to other issues (Ondetti 2008b). Moreover, during the last two decades the expansion of the conditional cash transfer programme *Bolsa Família* has undermined land reform by providing an alternative approach for fighting rural poverty (Morton 2015).

Inconsistent implementation of reform helps explain why land inequality remains high.<sup>8</sup> Current figures are unavailable, but data from the 2006 agricultural census show a level of inequality, measured in terms of the Gini coefficient, almost identical to that of 1985 (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, IBGE). Even within Latin America, which has the most skewed rural land distribution of any region, Brazil ranks among the five most unequal countries, with a Gini of 0.87 (Oxfam 2016: 22).

The institutional framework for land reform has played an ambivalent role in the fate of this policy under democracy (Mészáros 2013; Ondetti 2016). On the one hand, the new constitution ratified in 1988 follows the military era constitution in explicitly adhering to the social function principle and allowing the state to expropriate large rural properties that do not fulfil that function, compensating the owners with bonds. Furthermore, it seemingly sets a higher bar for satisfying the social function, requiring not only “rational and adequate exploitation” of the land but also preservation of the natural environment, observation of labour laws and “exploitation that favours the welfare of both owners and workers” (article 186). On the other hand, Article 185 states flatly that “productive property” cannot be expropriated. Inserted in response to landowner pressure, this article would seem to neutralise the last three social function criteria, since they can only serve as the basis for expropriation if the property is also unproductive. In addition, unlike the 1964 Land Statute, the 1988 constitution does not provide for the possibility of expropriation based on the sheer size of a property. In fact, by stating that productive land cannot be expropriated, it explicitly eliminates that possibility. Thus, although the 1988 constitution is widely known for its pioneering social provisions, with regard to land reform it is a deeply ambivalent document.

The ideas deployed during this period to justify land reform have for the most part been the same ones used by activists in earlier decades: land reform can alleviate rural poverty and hunger, both for humanitarian reasons and to slow down migration to the overcrowded cities; it can increase agricultural output by putting unutilised land into production; it can

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<sup>8</sup> Socio-economic trends, such as the growth of soybean production, which is characterised by strong economies of scale, may also contribute to inequality.



lower the prices of farm goods; and it can dynamise the economy by making consumers out of people who previously earned barely enough to meet subsistence needs. These arguments can be found in the public statements and documents of the MST, rural unions and CPT, as well as in hundreds of books, articles, theses and editorials published by left-leaning intellectuals and land reform activists.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, recent decades have brought some ideational innovations, at least in a relative sense. These have come from both the advocates of land reform and their adversaries, who have grown in organisation. Among defenders of land redistribution, the most novel trend is the attempt to frame land reform as a policy favouring environmental protection and human health. In its early years, the MST leadership sought to mould its settlements into large cooperatives operating essentially as commercial farms, albeit within a socialist framework (Ondetti 2008a: 125–126; Andrade Neto 2015). The commitment to cooperativism has for the most part endured, despite often encountering resistance from settlers (Brenneisen 2002; Devore 2015). Over time, however, the MST's discourse has become increasingly critical of large-scale commercial farming methods, especially the use of technology packages marketed by multinational firms like Monsanto and Bayer, involving chemical fertilisers and pesticides and genetically modified seeds.

Initially, opposition to such technologies focused on the costs involved, which MST leaders argued were prohibitive for small-scale producers, as well as on the physical risks to farmers from applying highly toxic pesticides. Gradually, however, the MST has come to frame its rejection of modern farm technologies more broadly as reflecting a commitment to organic agriculture or “agroecology” (Coordenação Nacional do MST 2010; Bosatto and de Carmo 2013; De’Carli 2013). Since about the mid-2000s, it has increasingly sought to position land reform as a policy in harmony with the growing consumer interest in food that is free of pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). It promotes agroecological practices among MST settlers through courses and internal publications and advertises its achievements externally via urban

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<sup>9</sup>Stédile (2013a) and Stédile (2013b) provide a representative sample of contemporary pro-land reform writings, as well as some anti-reform views.

organic food markets, seminars and participation in pro-organic food coalitions. Among other achievements, it claims to be the largest producer of organic rice in Latin America (Camargo 2017). According to the president of an MST rice cooperative in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, organic production:

isn't just an economic alternative, but a choice for an integral way of life, which views agriculture as an ecological activity for the benefit of both the families that produce and those that consume, with respect to the environment and biodiversity. Ideologically, we don't want to argue with anyone, but it's been proven that when you apply insecticides to crops, what will follow is toxicity." (Quoted in Camargo 2017)

In advancing this position, MST leaders have made common cause with politicians, celebrities, non-governmental organisations and other movement organisations that oppose the growing technification of food production. The MST forms part of such entities as the National Articulation for Agroecology and the Permanent Campaign against Chemical Pesticides and in Favour of Life, both of which promote organic farming within Brazil. It is also part of an international network called La Via Campesina, which opposes chemical and GMO use as part of a broader defence of small-scale agriculture that includes support for domestic production of foodstuffs (i.e. "food sovereignty"), domestic control of land and water resources and land reform (La Via Campesina 2019).

Thus, the largely Marxist emphasis on the class struggle and opposition to capitalism that characterised the MST's discourse for most of its history has gradually given way to one in which "post-material" concerns with the environment and food safety play a larger role. This transformation has been driven by the changing views of Brazilian society as a whole and, in all probability, a desire on the part of the MST to build a broader set of alliances. To some extent, this shift has also been embraced by other entities representing smallholders, such the Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG), which brings together the rural unions, and the CPT (Sabourin et al. 2017: 365). In fact, over the last two decades, there has been a convergence of the land reform and organic farming

movements that has helped make Brazil one of the regional leaders in pro-organic agriculture policymaking (Sabourin et al. 2017).

However, the innovations have not been limited to pro-land reform forces. Faced with unprecedented challenges to their property rights, combined with an inability to fall back on military intervention, landowners have engaged in new efforts to defend their interests. During the mid-1980s, in response to the announcement of a land reform plan by Sarney, the first president of the democratic era, landowners from across Brazil created a peak organisation called the Democratic Rural Union (UDR). The UDR sought to both lobby against land redistribution at the national level and support local efforts to defend rural properties from land occupations. Its association with acts of violence eventually led to its disappearance as a national organisation, but during the 1990s landowning and commercial farming interests gradually constructed a legislative coalition whose breadth and discipline easily exceeded those of most of Brazil's numerous political parties. Since then, the Parliamentary Front for Agriculture<sup>10</sup> has typically controlled 20–25% of the seats in Brazil's Congress and used its weight to advance bills that favour big agriculture with regard to land, labour rights, environmental protection and other areas (Simionatto and Costa 2012; Corrêa 2018).

As part of its efforts to fight off land reform, Brazil's commercial farm sector and its allies and sympathisers in the state, press and intelligentsia have developed a discourse that emphasises stability, efficiency and economic growth. To a large extent, their messaging echoes that of past opponents of land reform. However, some themes are relatively new. First, to a greater extent than in earlier eras, opponents of land reform have argued that, due to the intense process of agricultural modernisation since the military era, the unproductive latifundium has been essentially extinguished from the countryside (Graziano Neto 1999; Navarro 2014; Bergamo 2015). Agriculture, they emphasise, is now the most efficient and internationally competitive sector of the Brazilian economy. At the same time, it employs relatively few people, due to mechanisation and urban-rural migration. From this perspective, land reform is an anachronism, a policy rendered irrelevant by economic progress. As one author

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<sup>10</sup>This group is better known by its informal name, *bancada ruralista*.

puts it, "...the economic and productive changes of the new phase of our agricultural history have laid to rest the Brazilian agrarian question and it is unlikely to be revived" (Navarro 2014: 700).

A second relatively new theme consists of attacks on existing land reform settlements, which barely existed prior to the current democratic period. Critics point out that settlements suffer from low levels of production, widespread poverty and heavy dependence on government income support programmes. Rather than thriving smallholder communities, they are miserable "rural shanty towns" (*favelas rurais*), offering residents few prospects for economic progress. As a result, many settlers end up selling or abandoning their plots (*O Estado de São Paulo* 2014). Opponents of land reform typically attribute these problems to both the settlers' lack of "vocation" for agriculture and the state's failure to provide settlements with adequate infrastructure (e.g. roads, electricity, irrigation), credit and extension services. The proper response to this situation, they argue, is to slow down or even halt the distribution of new land and instead focus on equipping settlements with needed infrastructure and services. To the extent that land reform continues, in their view, it should focus on granting plots to people selected on the basis of their proven experience in agriculture.

Of course, these points are disputed by land reform activists. The apparent productivity of large landholdings, they argue, has much to do with the failure to update the indices of agricultural production used to judge whether a property is fulfilling its social function. Advances in farm technology have made possible greater per hectare yields, yet the indices used date back to the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while acknowledging the poverty of many settlements, they insist that the state ought to improve settlement quality while at the same time also intensifying land redistribution. Nevertheless, the views endorsed by commercial farming interests and their supporters have clearly informed state policies over the last decade or so, as reflected in the sharp decline of land expropriations and new settlements, even under nominally left-leaning governments (Simonetti 2015).

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<sup>11</sup> The da Silva government proposed updating the indices, but backed down under pressure from farm interests (Éboli 2011).

## Conclusions

This chapter has examined the evolution of the key ideas regarding the agrarian question in Brazil, as well as their interaction with actors, institutions and policy outputs. It has argued that the history of the agrarian question can be understood in terms of four periods defined by intellectual and political events that affected how it was understood and acted upon. The characteristics of each period are summarised in Table 10.2.

As the chapter has suggested, most of the core ideas supporting redistribution of rural land were already well established by the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in about the 1910s, land redistribution gradually came to be viewed by many Brazilians as a vital tool for relieving poverty, slowing down rural-urban migration and promoting economic development. To a large extent, these are the same notions propagated by land reform activists today.

Nevertheless, ideas about the agrarian question have not remained wholly static. New arguments have risen in favour of it, emphasising especially its coherence with Catholic social teachings and, later, concerns about the environment and human health. In addition, there have been changes in the criticisms of land reform, most (though not all) of which have come from conservatives. In recent decades, these have gone beyond the traditional emphasis on property rights and stability to underscore both the obsolescence of land reform, given the modernisation of agriculture and the accompanying rural exodus, and the failure of official settlement policy to produce thriving rural communities.

These ideational innovations have occurred not in isolation, but as initiatives in an ongoing political struggle over the distribution of land. For decades, pressure for land reform came mainly from urban middle-class reformers who championed it out of a blend of humanitarianism and concern for advancing industrialisation. Beginning in the late 1950s, however, the potential beneficiaries of land reform, that is, poor smallholders, tenant farmers, sharecroppers and rural wage workers, began to mobilise to demand this policy. Ironically, the result was not so much reform as repression and conservative agricultural modernisation. However, the military years did bring certain changes ultimately

Table 10.2 Land reform in Brazil, 1910 to the present: changing ideas and policies

<i>Period</i>	<i>Political and economic context</i>	<i>New Ideas/Frames (Pro- and anti-reform)</i>	<i>Institutional Innovations</i>	<i>Key Actors</i>	<i>Policies</i>
1910–1920	Stable oligarchic regime dominated by agrarian elites	Pro-reform: social costs of land inequality; social function of property. Anti-reform: none (too little threat to elicit a counter-frame).	None	None	None
1920–mid 1950s	Military revolts; Great Depression; 1930 military coup; import substitution industrialisation	Pro-reform: land reform as tactic for promoting industrialisation and capitalist development. Anti-reform: land reform as a threat to property rights and political stability.	Social function-like clauses of 1934 and 1946 constitutions	Tenentes; urban middle classes; Communist Party of Brazil (PCB); Getúlio Vargas	Limited colonisation of public lands
Late 1950s–early 1980s	Political polarisation followed by military dictatorship (1964–1985)	Pro-reform: liberational theology/preferential option for the poor. Anti-reform: labour rights as an alternative to land reform; technical modernisation as an alternative to land reform	Land Statute (1964); social function clause of 1967 Constitution	Peasant Leagues; rural unions; National Confederation of Catholic Bishops (CNBB); Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT)	Limited colonisation of public lands and occasional expropriation

Mid-1980s-present	Sustained democratisation; market reforms (1990s); rise of moderate left to power (2003–2016)	Pro-reform: land reform and agroecology. Anti-reform: extinction of latifundium; settlements as rural <i>favelas</i>	Social function clauses of 1988 Constitution	Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST); Democratic Rural Union (UDR); Parliamentary Front for Agriculture	Significant land reform but limited change in land inequality
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favourable to land redistribution, most notably an institutional acknowledgement of the legitimacy of this policy and the rise of a progressive movement within the Catholic Church that placed great priority on land reform. The return to democracy since the mid-1980s has helped translate these advances (despite some backtracking in the institutional realm) into an unprecedented increase in expropriation and settlement activity, in part by facilitating the rise of a grassroots movement able to exert substantial pressure on the state.

Nevertheless, Brazil's agrarian structure remains highly unequal. In the last decade, moreover, the state has made little effort to redistribute additional land. Under President Jair Bolsonaro, who came to office in January 2019, land redistribution has even been officially suspended (Maisonave 2019). The contrast between the broad acknowledgement of the importance of land reform in Brazilian society and the lack of actual reform can be understood as a product of the power imbalance between the landless and land-poor, who control few economic or political resources, and the owners of large landholdings, a group comprised of relatively wealthy people who often enjoy considerable influence within the state. While many Brazilians who are not members of either of these categories sympathise with the idea of land reform, their support for this policy is generally too tepid and wavering to overcome the determined resistance of landowners. Thus, Brazil seems likely to remain a country in which the agrarian question is broadly acknowledged ideationally and institutionally, but only superficially addressed in actual policy.

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