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Society and pastoral challenges in Brazil

Three short essays

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- *relationship of religion, culture and society in Brazil*
- *poverty, economy, capitalism*
- *migration*
- *rural workers' movements*
- *pastoral challenges in Brazil*

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“The cross is everywhere”. Remarks on the intimate relationship of religion, culture and society in Brazil

One of the most fascinating aspects of Brazilian social reality is the intimate relationship between religion and culture. They are intertwined in Brazilian life. To experience Brazilian culture, or cultures, means experiencing a distinctively religious world. This may be somewhat less true today, amidst the realities of globalization and free market capitalism, but leaving the centers of banking and commerce one is immediately immersed in a culture where religion is very real and present.

This living presence can be seen in the number of national holidays that are either religious holidays or based on religious holidays. Watching televised interviews with political figures at local, state and national levels almost always reveals a cross, usually Roman Catholic, on the wall behind the speaker. Almost every village, town and city is built around a Roman Catholic church and has a statue of Christ on the highest point close to or overlooking the area. Neighborhoods are oriented around plazas that frequently have Roman Catholic churches. The number of schools and universities sponsored by Churches is beyond number. At a more intimate level, with the lack of government social services many community centers, hospitals, clinics, counseling centers, nurseries and so forth are sponsored by Churches. The vast majority of Brazilians identify themselves as religious, whether they attend church or not. While Carnival has become increasingly commercialized, its religious meaning and power continue to be very present. The list of practical and symbolic expression of religious life in Brazilian culture is almost endless.

The roots of this intimate relationship between church and culture goes back to the “discovery” or “invasion” of Brazil by the Portuguese. Along with the explor-

ers that entered Brazil were priests whose calling was to “convert” the natives to Christianity. This close relationship between political and religious presence, or domination, has continued throughout the history of Brazil. It is often difficult, in fact, to tell the two apart. The central figures in the history of Brazil are to a large degree either politicians, explorers, priests or other religious figures. While the close relationship between political and economic power and the presence of the Church are increasingly criticized, there is no doubt that religion has played an intimate part in almost every facet of Brazil’s history and culture.

Whether the topic is economy, social projects, the landless, the military dictatorship, Biblical interpretation, ecology, new religious movements or the role of women – religion and culture are almost inseparable. While modern religious and cultural forces and influences may conflict, it is almost impossible to discuss one without taking the other into consideration.

In this sense, to look at Churches in Brazil is to explore an integral part of Brazilian culture. As was noted above, this is changing to some degree. There is a greater distance between political, economic and cultural dynamics and the overt presence of religion, or Churches. Brazilian culture is experiencing a growing sense of distrust of the close association of political and economic power and religious institutions. There are growing criticisms that religious institutions have often identified themselves with centers of political and economic power, and that the result has often been a failure to take seriously the needs of many Brazilians.

Still, the rhythm of life in Brazil has a distinctively religious feel. There may be more distance between Church and State, but everyday life is still immersed in a world where religion plays a central role. While Churches and Societies in Brazil may not always cooperate without conflict, they are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to understand one without the other.

The many faces of hunger in Brazil

As I sat down to write a first draft of this presentation I decided to simply tell stories about what I see day to day, what I read in the paper, and what I learn from talking with friends here in Brazil. I thought about the street children who hang around the school I teach in and the post office up the street. They spend much of their times offering to “watch your car” for a small fee. A church agency comes twice a day with meals, and offers to help them get off the street. A few of them recognize me by sight, and know that I am an easy target for a little loose change. And I know them well enough to know that they are hungry.

I thought about the woman who cleans my house once a week, and the houses of several friends. She charges the equivalent of US \$20.00 a day, has five children, and lives in a two room space in a slum not far from here. She pays US \$200.00 in rent. I know that she is not literally hungry, but she is undernourished.

Then I thought about the field workers called *bóias frias* who work in agriculture throughout Brazil. *Bóia Fria* literally means “cold meal”. They get this name from the fact that they leave for the fields at 5:00 am, eat lunch in the fields, and return home around 7:00 pm to eat supper. Breakfast and lunch are always cold and by the time they get home, supper is usually cold. Meals are much the same every day. Rice, beans, a little meat, and a kind of cake made out of corn flower, sugar, and whatever else is available.

Then, to bring matters a little closer to my home, I thought about the refectory at the university where I teach. The food is plentiful, but bland. Though there is much more variety than the food eaten by street children and Bóias Frias, in many ways it is the same. Rice, beans, low quality pieces of chicken or beef, lettuce, tomatoes and usually two or three different fruits or vegetables - usually the same ones day after day.

During my seven years here I have had the opportunity to explore much of central and northern Brazil. On one trip I can remember driving through miles and miles and miles of oranges. I thought to myself at the time: "And I thought Florida raised a lot of oranges!" On another trip I drove through miles and miles and miles of vegetable fields. And on another I drove through almost a days worth of sugar cane.

When I was about 11 my family drove from Houston, Texas to Alberta, Canada. I can still remember the sea of wheat and corn. At 11 years old I did not raise the question of how there could be hunger in the United States with so much food being raised. Now I am raising those questions, and the answers I am finding are deeply disturbing.

A few facts according to the Brazilian Institute for Applied Economic Research:

- 1) Brazil has a population of approximately 170 million. Of that 170 million it is estimated that 32 million are undernourished.
- 2) 70% of all Brazilian families live in what is roughly defined here as a state of misery.
- 3) It is estimated that 9 million families earn only enough to provide basic nourishment - not including housing, clothing, transportation, etc.
- 4) 300,000 children die each year of diseases directly related to lack of or improper nutrition.

A few other facts:

- 1) Brazil is among the top five nations in the world in terms of the production of fruits and vegetables - both quantity and variety.
- 2) Brazil is among the top ten producers of beef.
- 3) Brazil is among the top three producers of sugar cane.

Finally, in the light of these inconsistencies, I have to ask: "why?". The answers are much more complicated than the simple observations that there is a lot of food being grown in Brazil, as in the United States and other countries.

It is estimated that in Brazil 20% of all production of fruits, vegetables and grains is lost through spoilage, theft or mismanagement between the fields and points of collection and distribution. Part of this is due to equipment that is ancient and poorly maintained. Part is because workers have very little motivation when they are miserably paid and often treated much like the machines they operate. The miles and miles of oranges, fruits, vegetables and sugar cane I have seen are largely for export. At the very least, top quality items are exported. The quest for hard capital is the dominant force in Brazilian agriculture. The idea, or ideal, of having the responsibility of feeding a country is not a driving force.

The fields of sugar cane are another story. They exist for two reasons. First, they exist to supply the government subsidized fuel alcohol program which is basically

a disaster due to mismanagement and the world wide drop in crude oil prices over the last twenty years. Second, sugar cane yields raw sugar which is, again, exported. The miles of sugar cane fields at one time also yielded other crops, but sugar cane is much more income generating than tomatoes, wheat or corn.

Though I have seen only the edge of the major cattle growing regions, what I have seen leaves the impression of vast cattle ranches. While beef is relatively abundant and inexpensive in Brazil, it is frequently of marginal quality. It is clear that beef is being raised for export. This has a variety of impacts. First, large areas of forest have been cut down and are being cut down to provide the open grasslands needed to raise cattle. Second, available land is converted from crops to cattle raising because beef is more income intensive. Third, to be economically viable cattle ranches need large tracks of land which puts this “industry” in the hands of the few in Brazil who can afford such ranches.

My interpretation of all of the above is that hunger in Brazil is not a matter of a lack of food. Hunger is the result of a series of political and economic decisions. The heart of these decisions is what I call Savage Capitalism, or profit without perspective. At political and macro economic levels Brazil is trying to economically “develop” at any cost. Not really at any cost, because the suffering caused by the unrestrained search for development is invariably born by the most vulnerable.

The abundance of food in the fields of Brazil is a witness to the abundance Brazil has to offer. The hunger and oppression in the countryside and the city is a witness to political and social decisions to sacrifice the many for the wealth of the few. Or, worse, the sacrifice of the many is based on the hope that economic “development” will soon spread to the many. I see no signs of this happening. What I see is much more hunger, and only a few more nice houses and big cars.

Os Sem Terra – the landless ones

Os Sem Terra, the Landless, or more accurately *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, The Landless Rural Workers Movement, is a political and economic movement in modern Brazil. It is a “popular” movement in the sense that its origins, and the majority of its support, comes from the general public, and not from organized centers of political or economic power.

The movement has a variety of intertwining goals. However, the central issue is the redistribution of land. It has been estimated that twelve percent of the Brazilian population controls fifty percent of the land. While these statistics are estimates, they clearly indicate the disproportionate distribution of land, and related resources, in Brazil.

This is this imbalance that The Landless Rural Workers Movement is confronting. This essay is in no way an in depth presentation of The Landless Rural Workers Movement or of the current economic, political and social situation in Brazil. At best, this paper is a broad summary of these complex and interwoven situations via a general presentation of the historical context and current status of the Landless in Brazil.

Historical context

It is impossible to understand the problem of the Landless without exploring the historical contexts which made possible the problem. Beginning in approximately

1510 South America was, depending on your point of view, explored or invaded by Portugal, Spain and Holland. The dominant force was Portuguese because it established a military, economic and political presence in South America that dominated competition from the Spanish and the Dutch.

In 1510 the Brazilian coastline was composed of approximately 2000 kilometers of rain forest with six or seven bays capable of being used as ports. These geographical realities greatly influenced the Portuguese administration of this newly discovered land. While the Portuguese capital moved several times, it remained in the central part of what is now modern Brazil, and eventually settled in Rio de Janeiro.

The Portuguese presence began with the founding of settlements around the various harbors on the Brazilian coastline. Each of these settlements, and the surrounding region, was ruled by what can be called a governor appointed by the chief officer of the Portuguese King, the Viceroy, located in Rio de Janeiro.

Due to the immense distances and the preoccupation of the Viceroy with international affairs, these governors had close to total control of their regions. The primary interests of the governors was to administer the settlements, which gradually developed into cities, and exploit the natural resources of the region.

In order to do this, each governor appointed a relatively small group of men to manage large territories. These sub-governors were generally political appointees, explorers or military officers whose main preoccupation was settling the land and exploiting natural resources. Over time, they became known as Colonels. Over time, and with the increased complexity of the national and international political situation, the governors became occupied with the administration of the growing cities, and the Colonels grew more independent and powerful. Each Colonel administered his vast region of land, developed a semi-independent economic system and maintained an informal army.

Through the course of time the labor force used by the Colonels varied. At first, indigenous persons and workers imported from Europe were used as labor. Later, slaves were added to the work force. The economic system, even when slavery was abolished in 1888, was based on a form of semi-slavery or indentured servitude. People worked the land governed by the Colonel, were paid a very low wage, and shared some of the harvest.

However, again because of the vast distances and centralization of power, almost all forms of commerce were owned either by the Colonel, his relatives, his administrators or his friends. As such, not only the land, but the means of production and distribution were concentrated in the hands of a relatively few persons. One result of this was that the laborers were kept in state of constant debt and semi-slavery.

This system remained relatively unchanged during the four hundred years between the discovery of South America and the current century. One result of these historical developments is that Brazil entered the 20th Century as an agrarian economy controlled by a relatively few wealthy land and business owners. The vast majority of the population was essentially uneducated and, at most, semi-skilled.

While successive waves of industrialization created a fairly stable middle class, the basic structure of the economic and social systems went largely unchanged. With the advent of industrialization, many rural workers moved to the ever growing cities in search of work.

Between migration to the cities, industrialization and increased international competition for agricultural products the economic situation in rural areas worsened.

Workers became increasingly dependent on farm and business owners, who, in order to maintain their profits, continued to pay very low wages.

Further, state and federal governments focused much of their attention on the growing crises in the cities. As such, few funds were available to build an adequate social or economic infrastructure in rural areas.

The landless ones

The birth and early years of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, The Landless Rural Workers Movement, are quite complex. In summary, the movement began as a collection of disorganized workers movements. Each of these separate movements had different goals. Some worked more for just wages, others on improving working conditions while still others on issues related to health and housing. One factor that contributed to this fragmentation were a series of complex labor laws which inhibited, if not made impossible, labor organization between states.

As such, labor movements of any type were restricted to one state. This made impossible the formation of national labor movements or organizations, and effectively guaranteed that such movements would remain decentralized and economically dependent on a relatively small geographical area.

With the concentration of larger and larger numbers of skilled workers in the cities the power of various labor unions began to grow. In particular, the labor union associated with car manufacturing began to wield considerable power and produce charismatic and politically astute leadership.

Out of these diverse labor movements a new national political party, The Workers Party, P.T., was formed. While initially not influential, the party grew along with the growth of industrialization.

However, the initial political base of the party was in technical labor, such as skilled workers related to medium and heavy technology based industry. This proved to be a very narrow, though influential, political base.

After a series of political successes, this labor movement and its related political party began to expand to include semi - skilled and finally unskilled workers. One of the political successes of this group was the reformulation of laws related to labor unions and movements between states.

With the new possibility of organizing between states and the existence of a national political movement oriented towards workers, new possibilities appeared for agricultural workers to organize. The Landless Rural Workers Movement, Sem Terra, is one such agricultural workers movement. At present it functions on a national level.

While the acquisition of land for workers is a central priority, the movement also works for just wages, improved working conditions and other related issues. However, the issue that has attracted the public attention has been efforts to occupy and cultivate unused land.

While such occupations directly serve the needs of agricultural workers they also touch on the problem of the centralization of land and power in the hands of a few. As such, while there have been relatively few so-called, they have attracted

considerable attention because they challenge the ancient structures of power and wealth.

One result of this perceived threat to the power and prestige of large landowners was the initial violent response to occupations of unused land sponsored by the Sem Terra.

Initially, the movement would quietly settle a small group of farmers on unused land, and possibly inform the local newspaper of its actions. The results of these initial efforts were almost universally the same. After a short while the persons occupying the land were removed by the land owner. This removal was, sometimes, relatively peaceful. The “invaders” were physically removed from the property, but not harmed. At other times, the “invaders” were killed.

As the Sem Terra became more aggressive in their occupations of unused land, reactions became increasingly violent. There is no way to accurately judge the number of persons killed in the attempt to enter unused land or at some point afterward. What is certain is that the number of convictions for murder in such cases is almost non-existent.

In light of these developments, the Sem Terra began to increasingly use the media as both a method to divulge their activities and as a means to protect its members. While local landowners could, with relative ease, control local newspapers, such was much less the case with national television networks or metropolitan newspapers. With the appearance of television cameras and reporters from large newspapers, the numbers of deaths and disappearances dropped. However, with the departure of the media the violence often returned.

In summary, The Landless Rural Workers Movement, Sem Terra, is the outgrowth of a complex political and economic reality. It is relatively well organized, understands how to use the media both to support its political and economic agenda and to protect its members, and is actively challenging the structures of power.

It is very difficult to assess its level of organization or effectiveness. The movement is not highly organized or centralized in the sense of a labor union in the United States or Europe. It is more of a semi - structured group of movements in diverse geographical areas of Brazil. There is not a local Sem Terra group in every agricultural community.

In terms of effectiveness, the movement has been relatively successful at two levels. At the grass roots level, the movement has helped a number of landless agricultural workers to find land. However, it is almost impossible to say how many farmers or how much land. At the level of local, regional and national awareness the movement has been highly effective in raising consciousness regarding the treatment of agricultural workers and resistance at every level of government to deal with the problem. This second level of action may very well prove to be the most important.

Pastoral implications

One of the most notable pastoral aspects of the Sem Terra is its historical and current relation with the Roman Catholic Church. One tendency is to put blame on the Roman Catholic Church because of its active and passive roles in the oppression of Brazil and Brazilians. At an institutional level, its lack of support for workers and its conspiracy with centers of power are well documented. However, such superficial guilt does not take into account the complexity of current and his-

torical events. To simply blame a certain institution is not an adequate response in terms of resolving problems.

Beginning with the period of the military dictatorships, between 1962 and 1978, the Roman Catholic Church experiences a rapid growth in its awareness of the situation of oppression.

Specific elements of the Roman Catholic Church began to actively support human rights and identify the problems of agrarian reform and abuses of power. This was due, in large part, to the support of Archbishop Paulo Arns. While the Roman Catholic Church did not create the Sem Terra movement, it helped to create the political and social consciousness necessary for its development. This included a growing awareness of the needs of rural workers, the problems of rapid urbanization, the lack of voice of the poor in political decisions, and the problem of land distribution in Brazil.

In terms of pastoral action, local Roman Catholic Churches are greatly influenced by the local Bishop. With a growing number of Bishops aware of the necessity of rural workers, support for the Sem Terra grew. This included providing space in churches for meetings, theological reflection on poverty, and political support from local priests. At the practical level, this provided safe space to organize as well as a growing sense of identity and institutional support. With such support, the organization of the movement became increasingly possible.

This was in large part due to the local and national strength of the Roman Catholic Church. While powerful individuals continued to have great political and economic power, this power was somewhat balanced by the awareness and activity of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant churches were less involved in this process, due to their relatively small size, but still were involved as much as possible.

Where the Church became immediately involved was when invasions of land began to occur. When the movement was sufficiently organized, it began the systematic invasion of unused or unoccupied land. While the invaders were initially unprotected in these invasions, with the support of local priests and Bishops, together with media attention, this situation changed rapidly. This support also generated public awareness of the reasons for these invasions, and their non-violent nature.

Currently, the Roman Catholic Church is experiencing a movement in a more conservative direction in terms of political action, in general, and regarding the Sem Terra, specifically. While the support of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church is diminishing, due to theological and political changes, the consciousness generated during the last years has created a political and pastoral base that continues to sustain the movement. Today, many local priests, predominantly in rural areas, continue to actively support the Sem Terra. In areas that have a more “progressive” Bishop, this support is more public. In areas that have more “conservative” Bishops, this support is in the form of meeting space, prayer, and the indirect involvement of the priest. As such, in a variety of ways the Roman Catholic Church continues to be actively involved in the movement.

The presence of Protestant Churches continues to be restricted due to their limited political and social power and influence. While there are a considerable number of Protestant Churches and congregations that support the Sem Terra, such support generally occurs in conjunction with Roman Catholic congregations or other groups, such as Non-Governmental Agencies.

In summary, the presence and influence of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra is growing. While the movement continues to evolve in terms of its philosophy and tactics, the level of cultural and pastoral consciousness of the need for land reform is considerable. Twenty years ago, the question was whether or not land or agrarian reform was necessary. Today, the question is what type of land reform is necessary to satisfy the needs of the landless and when this reform will happen. Change will come slowly. Agrarian reform will not happen in the immediate future. However, the political climate in Brazil has changed in the last decades. Also, the religious climate in Brazil has changed in recent times. From a pastoral perspective, what has changed is the understanding that pastoral action must be both individual and political. This consciousness should serve to sustain O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra.