

## INTRODUCTION

# Alternatives: Between the State Above and the Movement Below

*Peter Rosset*

In part II of this volume we saw how the currently dominant market-based solutions to issues of access to land are unlikely to resolve longstanding problems of landlessness, excessive land concentration, poverty, and exclusion. Yet there are other contemporary approaches to the question of land and territory. These range from the state-led agrarian reforms currently underway in Cuba and Venezuela, to what is often called “land reform from below,” in which grassroots movements use occupations or “reclamations” of land as both a mechanism to access land and a political lever with which to apply pressure on national governments to act on agrarian reform. In this section of the book we review some of these alternatives.

In chapter 12, a group of Cuban and foreign authors summarize what might be called “reform of land reform,” or the second great agrarian reform of the Cuban revolution, entailing the breakup of large, unwieldy state farms and the implementation of a smaller farm model based on more sustainable farming practices. This chapter shows both what can be achieved when a committed state carries out reforms, and how the nature of the agricultural practices used by the beneficiaries (i.e., green revolution–style, chemical- and capital-intensive farming, versus agroecological practices), can make a significant difference to the outcome of reforms.

Chapter 13 is devoted to a snapshot-in-time evaluation of the new agrarian reform being implemented by the government of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. This is a rapidly developing process that is filled with both obstacles and potential and that will have surely evolved further by the time readers have this volume in their hands. A key feature of the Venezuelan story is

the need for, or the absence of, a well-organized peasant or landless movement that can exert effective pressure from below, even when the government is in the hands of a sympathetic president.

The majority of the countries in the world do not enjoy governments committed to state-led redistribution of lands based on expropriation, with or without compensation to former landowners. This is the fundamental cause behind the phenomenal rise in land occupations and reclamations being carried by a new generation of sophisticated social movements around the world. In Indonesia, some 1 million hectares of land have been occupied by landless peasants since the end of the Suharto dictatorship. Of this land, approximately 50 percent was land formerly in crop plantations (such as rubber or oil palm), 30 percent was in corporate timber plantations, and the remainder was a mixture of state-owned land and tourism development areas. About three-quarters of the occupations have been reclamations of land previously occupied by the same villagers before they were displaced, often violently, to make way for the plantations; the other one-quarter have been new occupations.<sup>1</sup>

In Zimbabwe, as many as 11 million hectares have been transferred in recent years, in large part due to land occupations. In Brazil, according to the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), by 2002 some 8 million hectares of land had been occupied and settled by some 1 million people newly engaged in farming.<sup>2</sup> Other countries with escalating land occupations include Paraguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Argentina, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, India, Thailand, South Africa, and others.

One of the central debates in the discussion of contemporary visions of land reform concerns the tactic of land occupation. Chapters 14 and 15 focus on Brazil, where the MST has set the standard for other landless movements both within Brazil and around the world. They are noted for both their success in occupying land (as measured by the amount of land occupied, the number of people settled, and a rate of abandonment of the settlements that remains well below 10 percent of new settlers), and for the sophisticated nature of their internal organization.

The MST uses a two-step method to move people from extreme poverty into landownership and farming (Stédile 1997; Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra [MST] 2001a, 2001b; Mançano Fernandes 2001, 2002; Rosset 2002a; Branford and Rocha 2002; Harnecker 2003; Wright and Wolford 2003). They begin by reaching out to the most excluded and impoverished segments of Brazilian society, such as landless rural day laborers, urban homeless people, people with substance abuse problems, unemployed

rural slum dwellers, or peasant farmers who have lost their land. Organizers give talks in community centers, churches, and other public forums, and landless families are given the opportunity to sign up for a land occupation.

Step one sees these families move into rural “camps,” where they live on the side of highways in shacks made from black plastic, until a suitable estate—typically land left unused by absentee landlords—is found. Families spend at least six months, and sometimes as long as five years, living under the harsh conditions of the camps, with little privacy, suffering heat in the summer and cold in the rainy season. As the MST discovered almost by accident, however, the camps are the key step in forging new people out of those with tremendous issues to overcome. Camp discipline, which is communally imposed by camp members, prohibits drug use, domestic violence, excessive drinking, and a host of other social ills. All families must help look after each other’s children—who play together—and everyone must cooperate in communal duties. People learn to live cooperatively, and they receive intensive training in literacy, public health, farming, administration of co-ops, and other key skills that can make their future farm communities successful. When people used to occupy land directly, they usually failed to stay more than few months. But when they have first been through an MST camp, more than 90 percent of them stay on their land long term.

Step two is the actual land occupation. It usually takes place at dawn, when security guards and police are asleep, and it involves anywhere from dozens to thousands of families rapidly moving out of their camp onto the estate they will occupy. Crops are planted immediately, communal kitchens, schools, and a health clinic are set up, and defense teams trained in nonviolence secure the perimeter against the hired gunmen, thugs, and assorted police forces that the landlord usually calls down on them. The actual occupation leads to a negotiation with local authorities, the result of which may be the expropriation (with compensation) of the property, under the country’s social use of land clause, or the negotiated exchange of the occupied parcel for a different one of equal value. In some cases security forces have managed to expel the occupiers, who typical return and occupy the parcel again and again until an accommodation is reached.

In chapter 14, Mônica Dias Martins examines collective struggle, empowerment, and the meaning of participation in the MST. It is precisely the formation of a highly trained cadre of militants and the personal and political growth that people undergo in the movement, that hold the key to its remarkable success, and she explains how these takes place.

Chapter 15 presents a landmark study of the impacts of agrarian reform settlements in Brazil, which have been created through the collective action of the MST and other movements, leading to the expropriation and redistribution of land by the state (this stands in contrast to the market-led model that also exists in Brazil, which was examined in chapter 11). The authors find that the members of these settlements have significantly improved living standards, and the presence of settlements has had a positive impact on local economic development.

The final chapter pulls together both of these categories of alternatives to neoliberal land policies, as well as historical lessons from earlier periods of agrarian reform. Placing agrarian reform in the context of national development and food sovereignty, the chapter concludes with a series of policy recommendations for the future.