

“What kind of Agrarian Reform, after all?” Revisiting an unfinished debate in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

In the present article, the land reform issue is examined in three angles: state action, the existing demand for agrarian reform, and current academic debates. From the analysis of different perspectives, this article indicates, as a possible answer to its title's question, the concentration of human, financial and logistical resources in the region that ranges from *Minas Gerais* to *Maranhão*. Expropriation and acquisition mechanisms are possible because land is cheaper in northeastern Brazil, considering the country's paucity of resources and the need to maximize the governmental effectiveness. Because of the expressive presence of African descendents, the suggested choices must also include ethnic issues. Land reform could thus become an expressive policy in Brazil that may reduce rural poverty with effective results, from which many social segments may benefit.

Key Words: land reform, regional and ethnic issues.

Introduction

A ghost haunts agrarian reform: Its contradictory implementation is, above all, a debate over its historical opportunities and the need of its actual existance.

Agrarian Reform (AR) has always been part of a historically controversial agenda. It has been a recurrent issue since the middle of the twentieth century, and is considered as an extraordinarily strong, vital and contemporary political theme. Although still being considered as an important public policy against social and economic inequalities, there are many evidences showing that AR is loosing ground as a necessary governmental action for contemporary Brazil. As Scolese points out, “what is really happening is that the demand for land in the country has remained an issue above the will and beyond the power of recent governments” (Scolese, 2005: 9).

For a long time Martins has been insisting that the effort favoring the poor people’s struggles for land has been lost “in the enormous difficulties they have to understand the right moments and circumstances of present history” (Martins 2000: 14). In 2005, the author reaffirmed that the demands of MST (*Movimento dos Sem Terra / Landless People Movement*) were “retrograde and outdated”¹. Based on the history of AR in Brazil, Navarro has also evaluated that “the historical time” of this type of policy has passed away in Brazilian history (Navarro, 2008). José Juliano de Carvalho Filho - an economist from University of *São Paulo* - who in 2003 was part of the Second National Plan for Agrarian Reform team in Lula’s first government, considers that Lula’s first term was “marked by emptying out the proposal and original concept of agrarian reform” and that “the aspirations to implement a process of change in the country have faded away, being slowly and permanently abandoned” (Carvalho Fº, 2007a). And quotes: “the vague compromises that still exist today do not guarantee any promises of a ‘broad, massive and qualified’ agrarian reform in Lula’s next presidency”.

It is rather odd, however, that the international scenario does not necessarily correspond to the signs of such weakening of agrarian reform attempts in Brazil, for the theme has arisen in a few other places around the world, particularly in some African regions². For example, there is a World Bank initiative to discuss and re-fuel the AR debate in these areas, for it is understood that these regions presents specific challenges. South Africa³, where large extensions of land have been taken by European settlers from the native tribes and population, may be taken as a keen example. However, Graziano da Silva, Latin American representative in the FAO, (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization), considers that the “reposition of the role of agrarian reforms in the new movement of regional histories” (Graziano da Silva, 2008) represents its main challenge.

Therefore, the question of what kind of agrarian reform is more adequate for Brazil - considering it as a necessary policy yet - is still restlessly present. As a matter of fact, this same question: “Which agrarian reform?” had been asked more than twenty years

¹ Answering no to the question of whether MST is a autonomous grassroot movement, Martins’ arguments state that they express a contradiction between economic and social development, and that it emerges through the cracks of the political system with apparently short-lasting social demands in an attempt to make things even with history: “It is exactly because it emerges in an outdated historical period that the movement assumes an image of a given autonomy that is not real at all ” (Martins, 2005).

² Leite e Ávila (2007) were the ones who saw these signs at that time.

³ *O Estado de São Paulo*, October 9th, 2003.

ago by the already mentioned Graziano da Silva (1987), one of the most important Brazilian agrarian economists. We borrowed from him the title of this article, which also demonstrates the method we are using to reactivate the debate - namely to compare and analyze the different perspectives at stake in a way that will enable us to indicate possible answers in the final balance of these studies.

This article attempts to examine AR through three angles: 1. State and state action; 2. Social needs for Agrarian Reform and the existing demands; 3. Current academic debates and its characteristics. It is thus divided in three sections and a conclusion. The first section discusses governmental difficulties in implementing AR policies in order to honor political commitments. The second section focuses on the debate over social demands and the possible signs that the pressure made to give way to land access is being reduced. The third section discusses what specialists have to say about this issue and tries to show the difficulties in promoting a more rational dialogue about AR, which in turn hinders both theoretical and practical progress in this area.

1 - A Few Aspects of State Action

By the end of 2004, the Ministry of Agrarian Development admitted that it did not deliver its promises of rural settlements⁴. It achieved only 59% of what had been planned, benefiting 68.3 thousand families, out of a projection of benefiting 115 thousand families, 75 thousand of which were to be settled for AR purposes. In 2005, the federal government affirmed that it had surpassed its settlement goals by contemplating 127 thousand families. However, the federal government was accused of using “cosmetic statistics”, which had also happened in previous governments as well, in order to obtain positive numbers by including settlements that were built by state governments or simply by untangling the bureaucracy of already settled families. Without these elements, the number of families would reach up to 51.3 thousand, representing approximately 40% of what was officially published.

As a reaction to this poor governmental performance, *Folha de São Paulo*, one of Brazil’s most influential newspapers⁵, suggested in its editorial front pages it was time to re-discuss AR policies and review its premises, since only in very specific cases would be possible to include a great mass of families in rural activities and emancipate them economically. If this argument is accepted as true, AR could be considered as a social assistance project rather than a policy for emancipation, and this could be considered in the realms of money-transferring programs, as well as in a closely observed cost-benefit spectrum. In another editorial note, the same newspaper⁶ insisted in the need for accountability of the results of rural settlement policies, and it also predicted that the majority of the settlers would not have enough conditions to support themselves with the money obtained from rural chores. In a condition of money-transfer policies, however, they could be compared to other Brazilians in similar conditions. In being so, those policies would impose the definitions of new social policy directives.

⁴ This also happened in 2005. Ever since that year, the Brazilian media had been criticizing the increasing tension in the rural areas of the country, since more and more land invasions were happening in the first twenty-three months of government (the influential Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* published on January 12th, 2004, 538 invasions against 497 that had been registered in the last three years of the previous government).

⁵ On January 19th, 2006.

⁶ *Folha de São Paulo*, on February 21th, 2007.

Echoing the problems of federal action in this sector, seventeen RA thematic organizations, led by MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* - Movement of the Landless Rural Workers) and by CONTAG (*Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores Agrícolas* - National Confederation of Rural Workers) published in October 2006 a manifest that put pressure on the federal government to settle one million families in a second possible mandate, which correspond to more than twice the number of families that had been settled since 2003⁷.

For Abramovay, the sole evaluation to which this process of creating new settlements seems to submit itself is “highly destructive and translates itself in a war of numbers, from which the present government has not been able to escape (...) as if the success of the system depended exclusively on the number of settled workers” (Abramovay, 2004). This ignites “a cruel process: social movements stimulate settling, promising to the settled ones an horizon where the sacrifices their families go through would be compensated in the future by legally obtained land” (Abramovay, 2004). For this author, another, more enhancing logic should take place – to follow a new contract practice in which settlement implementation and its results would be evaluated in such a way that the final products could bring direct results to the actors involved in that process.

According to Scolese, destining public land and obtaining returned government land areas for AR purposes have become priorities, as far as the goals set with landless workers are concerned. This includes new settlements in free land partitions created by previous governments (Scolese, 2007a). That way, conventional mechanisms of expropriation for social reasons increasingly assumes a supporting role in the process. It has been ignored that a few of these settlements, especially in the Amazonian region, had been abandoned for the complete lack of local infrastructure (electricity, water, roads and drainage systems). Half of the 381 thousand families allegedly settled by the federal government between 2003 and 2006 are in the North region. And though expropriation seems to be the social movements’ preferred method - for it has the ability to change the unequal land distribution structures of the country - the same journalist said, on another report, that because of the pressure coming from the social movements, the Ministry of Agrarian Reform decided to abandon quantitative goals and invest, instead, in improving the quality of settlements. This could be done by implementing infrastructure policies that would increase life standards for settlers. In an attempt to achieve the goals set on 2006, settling on public lands took priority over expropriation, and this change of focus has especially benefited families in the Amazonian region. On the other hand, it has left behind regions in the south, southeast and northeast, which until then, were considered to be governmental priority⁸.

By setting this priority, expanding settlements in the Amazonian region quickly became an environmental issue. British periodical *The Independent*⁹ has denounced that INCRA (*Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* - National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform) had settled many families for AR purposes in

⁷ *Folha de São Paulo*, on October 26th, 2006.

⁸ The environmental impacts caused by the proliferation of settlements in the Amazonian region have been insistently emphasized by the media. A recent newspaper report said that in *Tailandia*, a small town 218 km away from *Belem*, capital of *Pará*, one of the largest states in the Amazonian region, public authority omission allowed landless citizens to devastate 150 thousand hectares of rainforest in 18 new settlements set on the region (*Folha de São Paulo*, March 04th, 2008).

⁹ On August 21st, 2007.

protected rainforest areas, instead of taking them to already cleared lands, and that these families, due to their urban origins and values, had quickly sold their piece of land to large wood-exploring companies. It also accused the governmental agency of encouraging such contracts, since public authorities do not have enough resources to fulfill the needs of recently settled families. A report from TCU (*Tribunal de Contas da União* - the Federation's Accounting Court) recently informed that 18% out of the total area of rainforest clearing in the Amazonian region had been the work of small farmers, who own up to 100 hectares of land, and there are about 750 thousand families settled in this area¹⁰.

Marques, in an important study done in 2007, analyzed budget fund expenses in AR between the years 2000 and 2005. The study points towards an even more complex reality, since a significant amount of money - which has increased between the years of 2004 and 2005 - has been spent in such policies, mainly as far as land ownership is concerned (Marques, 2007). According to this author,

The option for land ownership may be attributed, in the majority of cases, to the impossibility of expropriation due to the lack of official information on the minimum ranges of production that fulfill the social function criterion of land property. Governmental data is simply not updated. Aside from that, there are also difficulties imposed by inadequate legislation on fast track expropriation proceedings, which make such processes even slower and more vulnerable to law suits (Marques 2007: 50)

This study also reveals even more relevant information on the value of the average cost of a single family settlement in each of the five regions of the country, according to land ownership criteria – expropriation, acquisition, and non-costly proceedings. The differences between regions reveal great heterogeneity. Although the cost of the land in Brazil - the relationship between the number of settled families according to each region and the type of land acquisition - runs in the vicinity of \$ 30.977 *reais* or about \$ 12.272 US dollars taking the 2005 exchange rates (Marques, 2007: 35), the effective cost in the south and southeast region is twice as much of that in the north and northeast, being the northeast region the cheapest of them all.

Based on these studies, Scolese (Scolese, 2007c) argues that the average of 31 thousand *reais* for settling each family would be enough to support a couple with three children for 27 years in the *Bolsa-Família* program¹¹. The author mentions a few examples in which the federal government has spent an average of \$ 58.1 thousand *reais* to settle one family on expropriated land in the Southeast, which represents a value almost three times more expensive than what was spent to settle another family on a public area in the North region of the country, which cost \$ 19.5 thousand *reais*.

According to the specialist,

The newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* has crossed data for the governmental goals for this year and the studies done on the regional divisions. The final cost to settle a hundred thousand families would be of about 3.2 billion *reais*, with an average of 32 thousand *reais* per family. This value tends to rise, among other causes because of the realignment in the value of the credits given as public

¹⁰ Folha de São Paulo, 31.01.2008.

¹¹ A federal government social policy that pays a monthly salary to families in order to keep their kids in school rather than working.

policy, such as the one on the acquisition of house building materials, which jumped from five thousand to seven thousand *reais* within that year. Between 2003 and 2006, the majority of the families were settled on the Amazonian region. Nowadays there are about two hundred thousand families (about one million people) living in provisory settlements, and the majority of them are on the south, southeast, northeast and central west regions.

As land prices increase,¹² the total costs for settling soars in the central-southern - and central-west regions as well - and reversely goes down in the northeast.

Aside from expropriation, another rural policy approach would be the so-called “market land reform”¹³. Data collected by Sparovek (Sparovek, 2008) show that project “*Cédula da Terra*” (roughly meaning “Land Ballot”), financed by the World Bank from 1997 to 2002 would have been able to settle 15 thousand families on 399.000 hectares costing \$ 11.975,00 *reais* per family. Pilot project “São José” - implemented in *Ceará* State - financed the acquisition of 23.400 hectares of land to settle 7 thousand families, in an average cost of \$ 6.083,00 *reais* per family. These values, compared to the ones obtained by Marques in the aforementioned studies (Marques, 2007), indicate that “market land reform” is the cheapest of all land acquisition methods, and also mark the northeast as the cheapest of all regions.

Another mechanism to promote AR is ITR - *Imposto Territorial Rural* - (Rural Land Tax) which is a detailed law based on *Estatuto da Terra* (Land Statute, approved in 1964), but it has been facing many implementation difficulties. Mauro Márcio Oliveira, (Oliveira, 1999: 3) has traced the details of this taxation process, which dates back to the country’s first republican constitution, in 1891. For him, there is a paradox in a technological dominated agriculture, for while on one hand it leads to the rising of production when the explored area is reduced, on the other it opens up new doorways for ITR to act, which means punishing the ownership of idle lands¹⁴. In short, the paradoxical situation lies on the punishment of the large estates that have increased production, for they do not need to use all the available land if technological investments are preferentially made. This penalization implies moral values, and that specific tax is more meaningful in dealing with pressure on unproductive land rather than a traditional collecting-money-for-the-State purpose. According to Oliveira,

¹² On January and February of 2008, the average land price in Brasil was \$3.998 *reais* per hectare, with an accumulated value increase of 26.3% in the last 36 months. In the period of one year, value has risen 16.5%. Land used for grain cultivation, especially soybeans, is the most wanted for in market, especially along agricultural borders. In the last 12 months, the highest rates were found in the North Region (26.9%), followed by the Central-West (23.6%), and Northeast (21.3%) regions. South and Southeast regions had the lowest rates, 16.3% and 11.4%, in that order.

¹³ Some studies consider this World Bank proposal inappropriate, stating that it assumes that “social agents act purely on economic bases and that in capitalism rural land speculation represents merely a conjectural situation ... and not an structural one” (Pereira, 2006: 28). Sauer affirms that “the actual Land Ballot experience was not able to break through the strong technical-bureaucratic centralization and paternalism of the Brazilian State” (Sauer, 2006: 303). These arguments stress out frail institutions; protection of governmental agencies, difficulties in negotiating selling and buying, the incapacity of these associations to exercise relevant roles for they were artificially built to attend to formal demands, and a very low degree of information processing about the project.

¹⁴ As Navarro mentions, the basic error of this specific tax is that it directly charges untouched land, which can be contradictory considering all the technological advances that permit high production in very small areas. If this is taken to an extreme, such taxation policy could lead to an inhibition of modern technology. There is also the fact that government actors tend to be unwilling to actually require its payment.

Though it is still makes sense to tax the owners of great extensions of land, it is necessary to reevaluate ITR and make clear the difference between an unproductive land that results from patrimonialism and the idle land derived from productive concentration that technological innovations promote” (Oliveira, 1999: 9).

It is difficult under any circumstance, however, for the central government to collect this specific tax. Governmental tax collection of ITR has fallen 18% in the last ten years, from \$318.8 million *reais* in 1997 to \$260.6 million in 2006. CNA – *Confederação de Agricultura e Pecuária no Brasil* (Brazilian Agriculture and Cattle-Raising Confederation) has concluded that, among other factors, the increasing volume of land expropriation in Brazil has made producers broaden their productive land areas. The more productive the area, the less taxes landowners have to pay¹⁵.

Government has had to face other problems and failures as pointed out by researchers like Gervásio Rezende, who affirms that the State, under the excuse of protecting small farmers, has created barriers to land seizing for those who do not have access to credits, and thus has “suppressed the land renting market, eliminating the possibility of creating opportunities of social and economic ascension for wage-earning workers and small farmers” (Rezende, 2006: 73-4).

As it can be seen, many are the difficulties in implementing public policies in Brazil, which range from the content of the legal structure that refers to AR in Brazil to the slow process and the legal agenda of the country. In dealing with rural modernization, the federal government has been increasingly forced to buy more and more lands, instead of expropriating them, besides having to settle families in the Amazonian region. This analysis indicates that that “market land reform”, which many sectors of the academic field and many social movements oppose, has become, if not the “cheapest”, certainly the most efficient policy as far as traditional expropriating methods are concerned, even knowing that if it is pretty obvious that the access to land is indispensable, this access itself does not solve all problems in this particular social area.

2 - The debate over social demands

The book *Reforma Agrária: o diálogo impossível* (Agrarian Reform: the impossible dialogue), published by Martins in the year 2000, has caused much uneasiness in the academic fields and in other related areas as well. This is not surprising, considering the author’s idea to criticize mediation groups, including MST and CPT – *Comissão da Pastoral da Terra* (Land Pastoral Commission, a left-wing Catholic group tutored by CNBB - *Confederation Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*; Brazilian Bishops National Confederation). The work’s objectives were to point out insufficiencies and limitations on the way RA leaders conceive and explain social reality, in an effort to “understand and expose the use of knowledge in different forms of interacting with social realities” (Martins, 2000: 67).

A short review of this work was written by Marcos Antonio Villa (Villa, 2001) and explicitly shows the uneasiness caused by it. The unusual bitterness of his commentaries on the book were rather surprising, for a closer reading would certainly reveal his

¹⁵ *Folha de São Paulo*, July 15th, 2007.

equivocal understandings in evaluating the social demands related to RA. While mentioning a passage in Martin's book, Villa said:

[...] Martin's theses are thought-provoking and some of them have difficulty standing for themselves. Evidently, demand for land is not an issue only for the 60 thousand families helplessly settled on land that does not belong to them. That would be the same as saying that working class demands are only represented by those who are on strike.

However, contextualized reproduction of the same part of the text would quickly solve doubts about what Martins really had to say, and this is well explained on the following pages of the book:

The fact that the number of settlements and governmental regularizations done by Fernando Henrique Cardoso's team is not even above three hundred thousand does not measure the demand for land sufficiently, because irregular occupation of land by rural families has not diminished. At any rate, there are a few single realistic statistics, which were published by MST itself, which show far smaller numbers than any other statistics we have heard of. *Realistically speaking, the actual demand for agrarian reform is in the hands of the sixty thousand families occupying irregular settlements. Obviously, this does not mean that the social problem of land access is limited to them, but they are, indeed, the ones who express the urgency of agrarian reform in the strongest manner. Needless to say, if there are 4.5 million families without land in the country and only about sixty thousand actually assuming this identity, this is what counts politically.* At the least, we stand before a diversified demand for agrarian reform, which also reflects the country's regional diversities. This may also explain the plurality of mediation agencies and the fact that many of them have sprung up and prefer to bring their demands through the institutional processes of solutions (Martins, 2000: 103, italics added).

After that, what Martins says is exactly that AR is a political agenda and as such it should be addressed in qualitative terms, considering that a quantitative focus and language cannot define its characteristics and fairness. It is not the number of expropriations and not the number of settlements on expropriated lands that will define its importance, because this is a matter of including the excluded members of society in the realms of law and social contract. But it is useful, however, to pay attention to two orientations that, if combined, may help to take away the structural stigma from agrarian reform in the political field:

[...] on the one hand, a routine of building up land stocks for agrarian reform; on the other, a myriad of mechanisms for land acquisition for the exact purpose of building up land stocks. And now a third issue comes along, one that recognizes family agriculture [as] one of the Brazilian society's needs in the public policy arena... a society that repeatedly re-enters the cycle for agrarian reform and demands for land (Martina, 2000: 127-8).

For Martins, imagining that popular struggles alone could be the basis of AR would over-simplify things, since it can also rise from economic needs or elite initiatives, or even by geopolitical State demands or by the capitalist system as a whole¹⁶. However,

¹⁶ However, Brazilian experience has shown that in the current stages of capitalism, traditional methods of agrarian reform are not necessary and would probably not work anymore.

[...] a single group's social demand, especially the type that gives support to smaller groups who by themselves would have no voice, is not politically viable if not by interpretative mediation of other social groups without which no social reform is possible (Martins, 2000: 26).

This evaluation leads the author to affirm that rural issues will only be solved with much negotiation and the resignation of private interests, and above all,

The essential point that is rarely considered, even by very serious and competent people, is that agrarian issues have their own timetable that is definitely not the timetable of any given government. It is not a single path and invariable reality – in different societies, and also in our own, certain historical circumstances come up in the form of tensions and dilemmas that sprout from social, and therefore, from political dynamics (Martins, 2000: 89)¹⁷.

Gasques and Conceição (1998) estimate potential demands for AR by approximately 4.515.810 families, and these numbers are demographically more concentrated in the Northeast region of the country. This number has been updated by Del Grossi and Gasques (2000), who has methodologically sophisticated former referential studies. According to data from PNAD (*Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilio* - National Real Estate and Home Samples) and the Agrarian and Cattle-Raising survey in 1995-1996¹⁸, approximately 65% of Brazilian landowners do not actually own the minimum amount of land set by INCRA standards for rural settlements. Within this percentage, the number of people who have very precarious access to land is alarming. For researchers,

[...] the biggest potential public for agrarian policies is that of families with no access to land whatsoever, composed by wage-earning families in the cattle-raising and farming business. Among rural families with multiple income-generating activities, there is a total of 3.067.361 wage-earning ones, 2.636.014 make a living out of farming activities (Del Grossi; Gasques, 2000: 19)

However, the people who demanded more urgent actions were the landless and unemployed people in the Brazilian rural area who, in 1995, added up to about 64.670 families. At any rate, the number of possible AR beneficiaries may vary, depending on what kind of criteria is used. If we add the number of families that live off of agriculture to the number of unemployed people in the rural area and also to those who have insufficient or precarious areas to harvest we will have a total number of 6.1 million families.

For Navarro (2008), there are many reasons that may explain why the history of AR could be arriving at an end and one of them would be the decreasing of social demands (in a political and not potential sense, meaning when possible beneficiaries organize themselves and turn their interests into a public issue) in many regions of the country.

¹⁷ Although it should be highly considered that, in terms of governmental politics, the State plays a crucial role in determining that timetable.

¹⁸ It is important not to take into total account data that may be too old and not very trustworthy, considering all the change that has happened in the past ten years. A survey that started in 2007, when ready, may allow more assuring and updated analyzes.

This kind of action resembles what Martins defined above and agrees with Del Grossi estimations of the type of people that need urgent rural public policies.

Navarro has written that

[...] it is necessary to admit that considering the agrarian reform as a national issue, in the context of the agrarian development of the last fifty years, has not been faced as a contemporary phenomenon in Brazil for a long time. The need for AR has recently been pushed away from the decisive political agenda, and nowadays simply corresponds to increasing the numbers of rural occupations, which is indeed very important, but only in specific regions, especially in the Northeast. The other regions need this kind of policy only in a few localities (Navarro, 2001: 95).

At the same time, just as Martins had previously stated, Navarro said that “an alliance for rural development” cannot be restricted to the point of view of its participants, for it must also include the majority of the agricultural businessmen and all of its most modernized sectors, not only the popular ones. Finally, many are the reasons that may historically limit the process of rural development.

First of all, the State lacks most of the conditions it had before to lead any kind of intervention in the rural areas like the authoritarian military regime had in the 1970's, when it yielded a technological revolution that has transformed production structures and forged new ways of thinking and behaving in many rural regions. It would also be highly improbable to guarantee political legitimacy in destining public funds to rural areas in the context of the last four decades, when the extraordinary urbanization of the country was taking place, even if it is quite true that, quoting Veiga, “Brazil is more rural than we would think” (Veiga, 2002). Environmental priorities are also very important as far as the management of natural resources is concerned, and would definitely be one of the issues in the strategic agenda of rural development. And last but not least, the final reason would be the democratization of small towns that have innovated public management by increasing participation and social control. This is why Navarro says that nowadays rural development is much more complex than simple land distribution.

As it was stated before in this article, it has been more than twenty years since Graziano began to insist that if agricultural modernization had been implemented in the country, most of the AR debate would not be necessary anymore. He has recently gone back to this debate by saying that “the process of settling families by buying land is too expensive. Hence, expropriation mechanisms are crucial to lower land prices” (Graziano da Silva 2007). He also says that an AR process would make market prices go higher and the process of buying the land more difficult. For Graziano da Silva, confirming what Navarro had also said a few years before, the rural issue in Brazil is not a national but rather a regional issue, where specific policies directed to local social groups in certain regions are necessary. However, in the beginning of 2008, the author insisted on examining another context, different from his past analyses, that implied in the “rebirth of the agrarian issue” and land distribution as one of the central pillars of this new approach. For him, past imbalances added up to new demands that transfer the agrarian problem to another level of debate that would involve new social demands (such as environmental issues and self-sustainable development), renewable energy sources and planned territorial occupation. Up to what range AR may offer answers to such

demands is a challenge for future debates in this agenda, but he does not point out exactly what type of new reality that would be (Graziano da Silva, 2008).

Though this may be a very thought-provoking theme, there are, nevertheless, clear indications of a reduction in social demands concerning the particular issue of land occupation, ranging from reduction in the number of occupations to the number of people taking part in them. Moreover, it would be necessary to discuss the differences between real and potential demands within a democratic framework along with the lack of restrictions to social organizations and the weak presence of new organizations that may demand access to land. All those issues put together could have a broader social effect, as the most recent tendencies in this scenario indicates.

In short, the signs that social pressure for AR are beginning to wear thin are evident. MST, the main actor demanding AR in Brazil, has assumed a surprisingly vague position in its final manifesto issued at their Fifth National Congress, in June, 2007, suggesting that the struggle for AR could be diluted in broader compromises that seemed distant from the day-to-day life of those who participate in the movement, such as making efforts to fight neoliberalism, which in turn show a clear compromise¹⁹ with “*Transacional Via Campesina*” (a social network organization that calls itself in English “International Peasant Movement” with members in fifty-six countries around the world, in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas, and organized many protesting events with MST)²⁰.

MST’s leader João Pedro Stedile has admitted in 2007 that the struggle for AR is facing a new moment in history, but “it must not be reduced to compensation policies or simply distribution of land, like the bourgeoisie has done in all developed industrial countries” but must include “the defeat of neoliberalism and the voracity of international capital, that seeks to control land, seeds, water, human labor and the national market” (Stedile, 2007). On an interview in *El programa de las Americas del International Relations Center*, Stedile affirmed that the RA Project, for which MST has been fighting for the past twenty years, had run out of content and was no longer appropriate. According to this interview, the success that had been obtained by the mobilization of thousands of people - and its impact on the media - could not conceal the fact that in Lula’s government the MST was having a lot more difficulties in mobilizing its adepts against new enemies such as agribusiness (Zibechi, 2007).

Aside from that, recent MST actions may now be judged not by its capacity to mobilize people, but by its crescent weakening. It is true that the creation of organizational coalitions of landless people and peasants has made a few pressures here and there, sometimes with real political relevance, such as the destruction of plantations - along with the depredation of genetic research laboratories - or even manifestations against the privatization of *Vale do Rio Doce*, Brazil’s biggest mining and steel industry, formerly state-owned, which were insistently broadcast on national media. But these types of

¹⁹According to the editorial of the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, on May 11th, 2007, the alliance between MST and Transacional Via Campesina was very strongly criticized as “ideologically primitive” and considered “the invasion and destruction of laboratory equipment, seeds, and general scientific research equipment for genetic improvement as barbaric”.

²⁰ The first formal appearance of Via Campesina, in 1993 - its agenda claims, as Borras Jr. put it, “to defeat neoliberal forces and at the same time develop a better alternative” (Borras Jr. 2004: 10) - was reinforced in April, 2004, when it wrote a petition to UN’s Human Rights Committee demanding the emission and formalization of a “peasant’s rights” document in which democratic territorial control would be most important.

actions are distant from the poor ordinary peasant's everyday life and such demands, as mentioned before, are most likely only stressing out the weakening of the movement's utmost objective²¹. As Navarro has said, MST "has made a choice for radical political action in which rationale seems to be contrary to any type of interpretation framework (...) such initiatives have been moving them away from the original demands and supporting agents, narrowing its field of action"(Navarro, 2002: 200).

By inserting these concerns in its agenda, including the attack on agribusiness, MST has been gradually losing its focus and consequently, its abilities of mobilizing groups and people insofar it has been distancing itself from its grassroots origins and social basis. It is obvious that without them an AR program will surely lose strength and as has already been said, they seem to be lost in a struggle in the field of language that is bound to fail²².

3 - Academic Debate and its controversies

Agrarian Reform discussions in Brazil suffer from excessive ideological contents, and this obstructs a more rational and balanced focus that could be brought about by analytical distance and an effort in discerning militant contents disguised in scientific speech from what is actually precise and scientifically trustworthy. The debate suffers from a self-centered syndrome that mainly shows the struggle for power and control for decision-making positions, as if solely the actions and the grassroots elements were good enough to legitimize any social movement, even if one knows that there are inevitably those who make the decisions and those who execute them. That is why Navarro makes an analytical distinction within the MST between landless organizations and landless families, saying that "there is a gap between the landless people organization, which includes the board of directors and intermediary militants - directly linked to them as staff members - and the huge social basis of landless families" (Navarro, 2002: 190).

In Martins' words:

[...] we have a tradition to fight for agrarian reform in the cities, in urban centers. We are always ignoring much of what is said and done in the rural area. In my opinion, a clear indication of this out-of-step tendency (...) is the fact that when we talk about AR we act as if there is a whole elaborate diagnosis and a political process behind these two words, as if that alone could solve many of the existing problems in the rural areas we have today. (Martins, 2000: 22-3)

And also:

[...] the silence of the poor does not come only from the cultural limits they live in. It also comes from usurping their right to use words and to speak for themselves, their capacity to want certain things and to hope for a better life, by those who intending to

²¹In the editorial pages of *Folha de São Paulo* on April 4th, 2007, is affirmed that the violent acts of MST do not even bother to pretend what they really want, that is to survive as a social group, rather than really implement AR itself.

²² As Bourdieu would say, as long as we are talking about language as an autonomous object and accepting the difference between the language of science and the the science of social uses of language, *we are condemned to search for the power of words in words themselves, that is, where they are not to be found* (Bourdieu, 1982: 103, italics added).

be generously a part of it, end up imposing them a new and graver silence, namely a false, unauthentic and anonymous speech. (Martins, 2000: 69)

MST's anti-capitalist posture, which, by the way, touches the borderlines of irrationality in many aspects, points to agribusiness as if it was their biggest enemy, as discussed in a previous article (Valente, 2008). Facing agribusiness as a synonym of capitalism and at the same time implicitly suggesting that family agriculture or even settlements could represent a whole new social world - supposedly denying a capitalist type of sociability - does not point to a coherent analysis. It is also inadequate to suppose that capitalism is a hegemonic social structure that must be overcome. This shouldn't be seen as a way of falsifying this reality, as if, by the crack of a whip, the relationships of political forces could be completely altered. This perspective, together with the idea that family agriculture is totally opposed to agribusiness, is a false issue and does not stand up for itself as far as theoretical fundamentals are concerned, especially if we consider that theory and practice cannot be dissociated.

That is how the other side of ideological concepts shows its face in the academic worlds, for scholars tend to claim each of them is the only one who knows "what Marx really had to say..." when applying his work to the analysis of the Brazilian agricultural development, and usually their quotes tend to reveal some sort of economic reductionism. Three important and influential authors from the Economics and Sociology fields are going to be discussed in detail here: Guilherme Delgado, José Juliano de Carvalho Filho and Edgard Malagodi. Other analysts also deserve to be mentioned, such as Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira and Juarez Rocha Guimarães. Oliveira (Oliveira, 2001), a geographer, opposes a hypothetical "world of peasants" to that of agribusiness, by using a speech which is positioned well apart from the pertinent field of academic thinking in social sciences. The author disqualifies the academic production of many intellectuals that question the country's criteria to define what is actually "rural", and also disqualifies those who refuse to use militant language when talking about AR. However, the data and analytical resources used by the author are noteworthy; they confirm the fact that the dichotomy between family agriculture and agribusiness is a false dilemma, showing that the presence of family agriculture in agribusiness is inevitable.

The political scientist Guimarães affirms that "agrarian reform in the 21st century must not copy market tendencies. What is at stake are not different ways of production, but different ways of living" (Guimarães, 2006). This is a rhetoric argument that leaves little space for discussion in such an unsteady scenario.

For Guilherme Delgado, an economist of IPEA (*Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada* - Research Institute of Applied Economics) who has been studying the relationship between capital and agriculture in Brazil for a long time, the reality of agribusiness in the country represents a contradiction because it associates the big financial and agro-industrial capital with great land properties, and searches for a territorial and agricultural expansion project that is highly exclusive. This project excludes native americans, AR, non-qualified human labor, protected environmental areas, the social function of land property, among many other elements (Delgado, 2005a). On another opportunity, Delgado comments the 1990's and affirms that the dichotomy of the agrarian debate seems to be deepened:

(...) on one side, we see many people discussing what reflects the old and the new dilemmas of the agrarian issue, and on the other side, the protagonists of

agribusiness who defend an external integration of rural economy, represented by huge international corporations which are the main actors in the commerce and commodities industry. These companies are free of any restriction as far as national policies are concerned, but usually follow the North-American commercial objectives. In that sense, this is much more a business issue than an “agro” one, since there doesn’t seem to be much of a link between this project and national territories or with traditional rural groups in this “golden age of modernization” era. But the deepening of this duality may be helping us in approaching a tighter unity in the agrarian crisis field, maybe due to the very radicalization of this duality (Delgado, 2001).

Though the author defends the opposing grounds between agro-business and family agriculture, we can’t say if he is a militant or even if he sympathizes with what MST has been proposing, but just by supporting this dichotomy, the movement tends to welcome his points of view. As a member of the Brazilian commission for Justice and Peace, an organization linked to CNBB, and as a columnist of the journal *Correio da Cidadania*, he has written articles published by many sectors of Brazil’s civil society. It is clear that by choosing to be seen as an “ordinary economist” and not as a “militant economist”, he is trying to make more influential contributions, even though his thoughts still may remain controversial. For example, he discusses subsistence economy as a field where dominance relationships take place among excluded populations, and though they are exploited by the capitalist economic system, they still withhold political relationships of patrimonialism with traditional local elites (Delgado, 2005b).

According to him, the subsistence sector has not been historically absorbed by capitalism in the rural, the service nor the industrial world, and this probably won’t happen in Brazil either, though it did represent more than half the percentage of human labor in the country by the turn of the twenty-first century. The challenging question for his researches seems to be the future of labor relations in Brazil, since today they also reproduce misery and delinquency. As a contribution to this research, it is worth mentioning that for Martins it would be an error to consider the production of poor farmers an economy of subsistence (Martin, 2000: 32). Instead it should be called simply market economy, which still survives in a few societies, including our own, but only in a residual fashion, for it does not, structurally speaking, mean much to the modern and global economy.

José Juliano de Carvalho Filho (2007a), who has already been mentioned, thinks that AR has shifted from a structural reality to something merely compensatory from 2003 on. Relevant and defining issues, such as the number of settlements, the areas where they should be implemented and expropriation for AR purposes - as the main instruments for rural policy - have begun to be treated in a vague manner, and this has slowed down and broken the process apart. Land credit policies have taken their place, in the way the Bank of the Land used to work, and nothing has been done concerning illegal occupations in the North Region. In his words this would only help the agribusiness, a word that “represents an euphemism for the current stages of capitalism in the rural area, characterized by the increasing of human labor exploitation, by exclusion, by violence, by the concentration of land in the hands of a few and by environmental degradation” (Carvalho F°, 2007a). Agribusiness must not be ignored, but the absence of a clear public intention to implement AR is an important obstacle in achieving this objective, for the current policies are able to act only upon very punctual measures. This situation stimulates violence in the rural area and deteriorates the value

of social issues, but even so, as Carvalho puts it, “the AR proposals that could potentially alter social structures in the farmlands and thus revert situations of injustice and social exclusion have been emptied out throughout time” (Carvalho Fº, 2007a). A few months later, in an interview to *Jornal Sem Terra* (Landless Journal), he suggested that land ownership should be limited, especially because Brazil is known as the second most land-concentrated country in the world, and this situation is even graver because of plantation farming (Carvalho Fº, 2007b). Along this limitation he suggested updating the production rates as well as an agricultural and social-environmental zoning that would limit “the actions of the powerful”, especially sugar cane producers. In short, AR must be a way of integrating all social sectors, bringing about consensus.

Although we should not entirely disagree with Carvalho, his pretensions to break away from sugar cane plantations seem “romantic and nostalgic”, for the technological and productive advances in this sector also promote substantial and progressive changes in the agricultural scene, since they are directly linked to large-scale production and to a rationale based on the optimization of labor processes and profit - not to mention the significance of this field in the country’s GNP.

Edgard Malagodi (Malagodi, 2007), in turn, raises “eleven theses” as counterpoints to the theoretical difficulties and conceptual problems he has noticed in researchers’ debates over agrarian issues. He says they have changed opinions over the years and have started to express their points of view by taking positions against agrarian reform and rural social movements. According to Malagodi, Martins and Navarro had published articles with that type of content in national wide newspapers such as *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Folha de São Paulo* in April 22nd, 2007. Malagodi states that agrarian issues will remain a problem as long as the countryside’s richness remains unshared, and this imbalance is being aggravated by the development of agribusiness²³. According to the author, this is not due to the agrarian structure’s tendency to concentrate lands, since private property of land is not an obstacle to the expansion of rural capitalism, as would have been defended by a shallow materialism or the current’s neoclassic economy. Nevertheless, the existence of land speculation is a risk for the country, since owners of large amounts of land represent a class that exploits rural workers, disrespect labor legislation and count on obtaining huge profits at eventual sales or leases. The agrarian question, according to this author, is a political one: dissimulating a debate over access to natural resources behind a discussion about “who” produces more or better.

That is why, more than ever, a strong environmental aspect emerges and AR could commit itself to the production of cleaner and safer food. However, there is a marked lack of political will to make this reform work, and expropriations only happen where capital investments have failed. For this reason land-issue social movements are necessary to promote this commitment with Brazilian democracy and they must strengthen this struggle with the increased participation of those already settled. Since political issues concern everything and everybody - they are not restricted to a certain sector or only to the rural world - they should lead to the liberalization and to the recognition of the value of labor. And last but not least, Malagodi considers that the conservative part of the academic world subordinates itself to the dominant powers and also expresses regional and local prejudices. The search for spaces where we can have

²³ However, in the article “Agrarian and agricultural issues”, which was published in MST’s website in May 5th, 2007, he says that “we should not arise a conflict between agro-business and Agrarian Reform, from a broader standpoint, and the small farmer must not be excluded from the great markets”, too.

real debates is desirable in order to make academic analyses and all of its fundamental structures clear. The author recommends that, since “Marxists have, to the present day, only interpreted him in many different ways and levels, but what is important now is to transform his political thought into actions that may change the world” (Malagodi, 2007: 17), so that we can keep “a critical idealism and the will to change” (Malagodi, 2007: 19).

His final thesis immediately brings about a practical problem, considering that, epistemologically speaking, idealism is contrary to Marxism, and also that, according to Antonio Gramsci, there is a methodological mistake in assuming that newspaper articles can be the basis of critical arguments, when the real target to be hit are sociologists with consistent work about these themes (which Malagodi admits). For Gramsci, all hegemonic relationships are educational ones, and these educational processes, in the realms of science, must make efforts in order to avoid mistakes such as being unfair with the “opponents”. What should be made in turn is an effort to “understand what the opponents really have to say, and not maliciously hold on to the immediate and superficial meanings of their expressions” (Gramsci, 2001: 123).

We may find in the articles of the criticized sociologists, and especially in the ideas they have expressed on other opportunities, that they do not deny the importance of the agrarian issue at stake, which is at the same time social and political in nature (could it be any other way in a Marxist approach?). However, they do not suppose, as it has been defended in the past, an absolute need for AR in a broad, national, unrestricted, unified way. Both authors defend AR, as well as the importance of rural social movements and the “historical power of peasantry”, and they are also strong and acid critics of the revenue-seeking model of capitalism. Navarro, who announced in 2001 how important environmental issues and has been since looking at MST from a systematic point of view, is very generous at paying compliments to the movement, especially concerning their “virtual capacities and extraordinary abilities to remain active as a strong social actor in the political scene” (Navarro, 2002: 199). And Martins explains:

[...] it is practically impossible to convince militants or social agents from the pastoral organizations or from labor unions that science has its own standards, and that its function is not to take sides but to explain the way things works or do not work in society and what are the problems that derive from that (Martins, 2000: 52)

Finally, the accusation that there might be a conservative academic world subordinated to the dominant powers has made him fall in the same trap Martins mentioned on the above paragraphs, which seems to be “one of the worse fictions of modern day sociology - the militant sociologist” (Martins, 2000: 53). This is because “ethical neutrality in sociological research does not mean, and cannot mean, indifference to the victims of injustice (...). It is a very direct way of pointing out the causes of the problems, and therefore, it points directly to an objective way of overcoming such issues” (Martins, 2000: 54).

On another level, there is also a conclusive argument that comes along, addressing the expansion of the Brazilian rural world. If we consider the performance of large-scale capitalist agriculture, it has been extremely favorable in the past few years, considering exports and currency issuance, including expressive gains in production. The economic relevance of cattle-raising has been proved and represents 41% of the country’s GNP, 10.1% of which result from family-based agribusiness (Crestana; Sousa, 2006: 13). Considering other agricultural and cattle-related products, 81.4% of the beans produced

in Brazil are under the responsibility of family farmers, as is 72% of the production of milk. Also, 97.7% of family farmers are involved in approximately 36.4% of the production of corn. These numbers show that without the contribution of large-scale capitalist agriculture, Brazil would have serious problems concerning payment balance. In the beginning of 2008, the National Confederation of Agriculture and Cattle Raising (CNA) announced positive results for Brazil's rural fields, based on studies published by The Center for Advanced Studies in applied Economy of the University of *São Paulo* (Cepea-USP). Agribusiness' GNP, that connects all the links in the agricultural and cattle-raising sector, has recorded a nominal variation of 7.89% in 2007, which is higher than the country's general GNP, which experimented an increment of 5.4% that year²⁴.

If we add the ever increasing urbanization and the size of the country's available territory for agricultural ends to these numbers, we may conclude that MST's rationale has absolutely no logic and is extremely problematic from a political point of view, if we dismiss other intrinsically ideological aspects. Therefore, the idea of "deconstructing agribusiness" does not seem to have much of a historical chance.

Conclusion - what kind of agrarian reform is still possible?

But "what kind of Agrarian Reform, after all?", we may ask, repeating Graziano Silva's question raised more than twenty years ago. Could this be really another turned page in the history of the country? Probably not, for a few of the following reasons: (a) social demand may have decreased, but it still exists and as such, has a social meaning that must be attended to; (b) public policies for the majority of the poor rural population are implemented at a very slow pace and must be broadened to embrace other areas such as rural education, housing, health care and many others that guarantee the necessary infrastructure to respect human rights; (c) the need for including excluded parcels of the population and exercising citizenship; (d) and finally, the most important argument - which is consensual in the specialized literature - addresses the relationship between AR and poverty reduction, which would justify, by itself, such governmental policies.

What path should be followed? One viable suggestion comes from Navarro's "pragmatic response" (Navarro, 2001), considering some of the arguments discussed in this article and emphasizing the more realistic dimensions of this debate - especially the scarceness of resources and the need to maximize governmental efficiency. The author suggests that AR should be concentrated in a large region, covering the north of the state of Minas Gerais in the Southeast region up to the state of Maranhão in the Northeast. Within these regions, policies should be further concentrated in the areas where the rainfall rates are higher and the quality of the soil is better. Due to the extension of the land and higher possibilities of charging taxes to fund AR policies that would concentrate human, financial and logistical resources, such initiatives could finally become more expressive in Brazil, benefiting social sectors on a larger scale and bringing effective results in the reduction of rural poverty.

²⁴ Gerald Sant'Ana de Camargo Barros (Barros, 2008), the scientific coordinator of *Cepea/Esalq/USP* and responsible for calculating the GNP of *Agro Cepea-USP/CAN* about agribusiness in 2008 evaluates that "although there have been turmoils, perspectives for 2008 are optimistic - even if we consider the reflections of world economy - and there is a secure expectation for agribusiness market in Brazil and worldwide".

Navarro's proposal also has the advantage of facing "two unsolved things in Brazilian history that remain present in our social and political *inquietude*, which are the existence of slavery in the past and landowning, which is its residual consequence" (Martins, 2000: 11). These themes keep coming back in a cyclic fashion to the sceneries of social and political tensions of the country's history and include controversy about university quotas for African descendents and debates over land demarcations where former *quilombos* (communities of fugitive slaves that used to exist in early Colonial and Imperial Brazil) used to be. We can also mention the law project Terra Negra Brasil, destined to those who do not live on former quilombos, proposed by the Ministry of Agrarian Development²⁵.

That way, and as an illustration based on the results of the surveys done with the *Kalunga* community, which is considered the biggest remaining *quilombo* community in Brazil, we can say that the governmental organs know very little about the real world of the former *quilombo* populations in order to implement a consistent public policy. There are no adequate options for territorial recognition, no guarantee for these populations to have access to their social and economic rights and insufficient funding to take the necessary actions. The actions related to the former *quilombo* populations are new and are at different moments of implementation, but one may verify that the efforts in their elaboration have not been considering the production of new information and knowledge in the field, especially the ones gathered by anthropologists. This can be verified in many different ways, beginning by hasty governmental interventions in creating artificial territories, not taking the due timing and reflection on the matter, which is contrary to the conception of territory as a social construction. The main problems of implementing such policies may be linked to the excessive bureaucracy and administrative disorganization, besides the lack of governmental articulation (Valente, 2007).

The relationship between a focused AR action and its impacts in relation to the racial issue can be illustrated by knowing that the first land area to be delivered in project *Terra Negra Brasil*²⁶ was in *Maranhão*²⁷. Besides being very difficult to detect exactly

²⁵ This is part of the policy of giving credits for housing projects in the rural area to young people from eighteen to twenty-eight years of age, a social rural land funding program called *Nossa Primeira Terra* (Our First Piece of Land). It is a policy that encourages the African-descendant youth to apply for the credit and it reassures them that there really is a chance of getting it, meaning it is a specific action that results from a broader universal policy. It is always important to reflect upon specific affirmative actions that are universal in nature, for it would be a mistake to think something is merely local or extremely broad, as if one's nature would exclude rather than contain the other. This would be a dualistic reasoning, which has been so thoroughly criticized, and it would also be a denial of all the knowledge that has been produced about racial issues. And also, opposed to common sense, universalistic policies have not obtained the expected success exactly because there are not many specific actions being articulated.

²⁶ Although the information does not distinguish a specific line of action, 42 thousand families - between the years of 2003 and 2007 - have acquired their own piece of land through PNCF, a program that has given a total sum of 942.9 million reais to agriculturists so they could buy their own land and implement the necessary infrastructure for production. In 2006, *Terra Negra Brasil*, Brazil's first social group to have access to this policy, applied to the Ministry of Agricultural Development in order to have its community recognized as a *quilombo* area and required, at the same time, infrastructure, habitation and transportation improvements.

²⁷ This happened in the farm *Dois Irmãos*, with 460 hectares of land, in the town of *Guimarães*, state of *Maranhão*. The beneficiaries are twenty six youngsters who form *Clube de Jovens Juventude Caminho Aberto* (Open Paths Youth Club). Each one of them will receive thirteen thousand reais to invest in land, in a total amount of 340 thousand reais. The project intends to attend from 3 to 5 million african-descendants who are not from *quilombos* but live in rural areas and do not work on their own land, in

which communities derive from former *quilombo* populations (the debate over self-definition of who is African descendant in Brazil is a delicate one), the innumerable processes of recognition have been suspended in 2008. As it was broadcast²⁸ by the press, the federal government has come to a conclusion that only those who already live on the land may request its property, and “as soon as proceedings start again, the requests for land that is currently occupied by farmers or other rural workers will be disqualified”. With these facts at hand, we can see that the region Navarro has indicated for enhancing AR also has the merit of including *Bahia* and *Maranhão*, two of the states with the biggest African-descendent populations in the country²⁹. Thus, by accepting Navarro’s suggestion the authorities may be able to surpass some problems and conflicts and to attend the urgent demand for land by the African descendent population, cutting across the fields of both AR and the ethnic question.

In a recent article, Martins has said that an expressive proportion of settled people have rented or illegally sold the land they received from government for AR purposes, converting these lands into “land income and speculation at the cost of public social programs, and turning these people into ones who live off of revenue, just like any other large landowner” (Martins, 2008). He also mentions that items that are not related to food may characterize the hunger of the poor, as quoted:

[...] according to the ideology of the federal government’s main rural ally, the MST, the billions [of money] should be spent for stimulating the small farmer’s market and satisfy the hunger of those who produce and of those who consume as well. [The money] should also create local and regional income and employment flows, thus promoting a virtuous cycle in a Keynesian fashion that would be capable of materially supporting the legitimacy of the supposedly alternative economy they represent and the agrarian reform they defend (Martins, 2008).

It has long been known exactly where poverty is more intense in Brazil. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that *Programa Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger Program) has elected the semi-arid area of the Northeast as a priority. To call for AR not to be transformed into a merely assistance-based policy demands strengthening efforts and, consequently, defining a focus for effective action. Due consideration to the basic needs of a population that still lacks staple food and faces everyday misery requires - paraphrasing Origenes Lessa’s novel of 1938³⁰ that predates the first attempts at AR³¹, and ‘without losing one’s tenderness’ - that AR must acquire a pragmatic character. The illusion and dreams contained in the “feelings and collective beliefs” of AR will not bring poverty or hunger to an end. They will just postpone the possible solution.

eight states (*Piauí, Maranhão, Rio Grande do Norte, Pernambuco* and *Bahia* in the northeast and *Paraná, Santa Catarina* and *Rio Grande do Sul* in the south).

²⁸ *Folha de São Paulo*, March 10th, 2008.

²⁹ Considering the representative African descendancy in the state of Minas Gerais as an important element in the analysis.

³⁰ In this classical work of Brazilian literature – *The bean and the dream* –, the protagonist is a poet alienated from the practical aspects of the struggle for survival.

³¹ According to Navarro (NAVARRO, 2008), the debate about AR became visible in two well-defined moments: in the 1950s, only to be interrupted by the coup of 1964; and then in the mid 1990s.

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