



Review

The place of pluriactivity in Brazil's agrarian reform institutions

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A B S T R A C T

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Livelihood diversification by Brazil's peasantry has intensified as rural areas have become more integrated with the country's urban fabric and as landlessness and poverty have increased. Despite the growing awareness of pluriactivity by rural households, key agrarian institutions have not addressed this key feature of life of the people they intend to help or mobilize. This review looks at how two main agrarian institutions – the government agrarian reform institute (INCRA) and the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) – avoid or are even hostile to notions of pluriactivity in their affiliated rural settlements. The paper concludes by suggesting that agrarian institutions adopt a territorial rather than sectoral approach to rural livelihoods.

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1. Introduction

Several years ago when I was doing fieldwork in central Brazil, a woman walked into the rural workers union in despair. The year before she and her two grown sons had received land from the federal government's agrarian reform institute, INCRA. She planned to grow food crops to feed her family and maybe raise some cash, but she had not been able to successfully make her land produce that year. To make ends meet, her sons were working as day labourers in the nearby sugarcane fields. When the government inspectors visited, and found her land without crops and her sons gone at work, they threatened to take her land from her. She was, it seemed, not a 'true' farmer, dependent as she was on her sons' off-farm wages. She wanted the union to help her reverse the decision. I do not know what became of her, but I know her balancing act between agricultural production and livelihood diversification was typical of rural households all over Brazil. The reaction to her plight by the Brazilian land reform agency was typical of what Rigg (2006, p. 189) calls a "paradigmatic blind spot" by agrarian officials who do not accept non-local or non-agrarian activities as part of rural livelihoods.

Her case showed that her family's off-farm 'pluriactivity', while typical of rural people's livelihoods, put her in the middle of conflicting definitions of what constitutes rurality in Brazil and what makes some people's lives "agrarian." Livelihood diversification in rural areas has caused debates over agrarian policies, including the future of the peasantry and of agrarian reform. Understanding how it is integrated into the lives of millions of rural people should be part

of a wider discussion about rural development, agrarian reform, and poverty alleviation (Graziano da Silva, 2001). This integration is the norm rather than the exception for rural people. Its absence in agrarian policy and rural social movements leaves the impression that these key agrarian institutions and political actors are out of touch with Brazil's "new rurality" (Graziano da Silva, 2001).

In this paper, I look at literature on how two agrarian institutions in Brazil – the agrarian reform agency INCRA,¹ and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)² – incorporate livelihood diversification into their guidelines. These organizations are powerful actors in discourses and practices of agrarian reform. As Abramovay et al. (2008) say in relation to them, "...the real power of groups derives from their ability to impose changes in the language, agenda, and key issues around which the field in which they operate

¹ INCRA is a federal agency within the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA). It was established in 1970 to conduct agrarian reform, to keep an updated record of rural property ownership, and to manage public lands. The agency is divided into 30 regional superintendencies. Throughout its long history, INCRA has undergone many iterations, including an early emphasis under the military regime on occupying the Amazon for geopolitical reasons. Its mission today includes putting into place a "...new model of settlement (*assentamento*), based on economic viability, environmental sustainability, and territorial development; the adoption of land reform instruments (*instrumentos fundiários*) appropriate to each sector of the public and to each region..." (Brasil, 2009).

² The Rural Workers' Landless Movement (MST) was formed in 1984, and is thus one of Latin America's most enduring grassroots social movements. As a national movement, it has coordinated hundreds of land occupations across Brazil, and settled more than 200,000 families. Its strategy is to occupy unproductive land and to "...organise rural communities of landless people (*sem-terra*)" (Caldeira, 2008, p. 153). As an organisation, its strategy "...implies the setting up of a different, alternative model of production based on cooperative work and production in the rural *sem-terra* communities" (Caldeira, 2008, p. 154).

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is organized” (p. 2910). Yet these groups reflect little on the economic ties and new identities that their constituencies – peasants, landless workers, small farmers and rural militants – establish beyond the agrarian sector. I will argue that not only do they understate livelihood diversification, they can be dismissive or even hostile to it. Policy makers should not only find out more about these strategies (which many are already doing); they need to explore the ways that livelihood diversification are acknowledged by agrarian policy, and how diversification is part of a changing rural territory.

In the next section, I will discuss examples of “de-peasantization” and livelihood diversification in Brazil’s “rural sector.” De-peasantization is an enduring theme in a country with a highly skewed land distribution pattern and a complex agrarian structure. Displacement will contextualize what I argue is a failure by agrarian institutions to incorporate the “new” forms of livelihood diversification in the countryside into their discourse, actions and policies. There has been a spasm of interest in pluriactivity,³ non-farm rural income, and related themes in the last ten years. Much of the empirical work I review here has come out of two scholarly projects: the multi-disciplinary Projeto Rurbano, spearheaded by the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP)⁴; and the Sociedade Brasileira de Economia, Administração e Sociologia Rural (SOBER).⁵

I will then show evidence that agrarian reform and the landless movement have weak regard for or even hostility to livelihood diversification by peasants. I will conclude the article with a brief discussion of a territorial approach to rural development that provides a possible way out of the historical sectoral trap of agrarian policies.

2. De-peasantization and rural livelihood diversification

Two decades of neo-liberal restructuring have brought disorienting change to the countryside across the globe. A combination of falling prices for agricultural goods, a focus on export crops, rising land prices, decreases in subsidies, and disinterest by the government in land distribution have conspired to impoverish and greatly reduce the peasantry (Bryant, 1998; Graziano da Silva, 2001; Steward, 2007; Kay, 2000; Pereira, 1997). One of the most distinctive trends in the rural sector today in Brazil is livelihood diversification of the peasantry, practiced individually or collectively in households. If you add to this the multitudes of landless rural people who also engage in non-agricultural livelihoods you arrive at a situation of great complexity that challenges the primary identification of rural livelihoods and the countryside with agriculture. To survive, and sometimes even to prosper, rural people have increasingly taken up activities outside of agriculture, but without necessarily leaving the countryside. Along with the sectoral amplification of rural livelihoods, individuals and households have begun to integrate rural and urban spaces in ways that have led some people to question these spaces as reference points for development policies (Graziano da Silva, 2001).

Thus, what people once referred unambiguously to as “the rural sector” or the “agrarian question” in Brazil is now open to interrogation (Bebbington et al., 2008, p. 2875). It is common to hear the aphorisms that the *rural* is no longer synonymous with *agriculture*, that the *city* and the *countryside* appear to have become so entwined that they have lost their core oppositional identities, and that “rural development” no longer has meaning (Bebbington et al., 2008).

Some scholars favour the concept of territorial or regional networks over rural development, but policy makers are slow to adapt to this new way of conceptualizing the landscape (Graziano da Silva, 2001; Abramovay et al., 2008): “The greatest challenge is that development overcome both sectoral segmentation (agricultural vs. industrial development), and the city-countryside dichotomy (rural vs. urban development)” (Graziano da Silva, 2001, p. 22).

Although small farmers and peasants have practiced livelihood diversification for centuries (Steward, 2007), this strategy announces profound changes in an agrarian way of life today that might suggest their demise (Bryceson, 2002; Rigg, 2005). Past forms of diversification could be extremely complex but they revolved around a central identity, seasonality, and vitality of the peasantry who practiced them. The complementarity of these activities with agriculture underscored the subordination of non-agricultural work to a peasant way of life. Now, the peasantry is barely holding on and its production is increasingly subordinate to non-agricultural jobs (Reardon et al., 2001; Kay, 2000; Bryceson, 2002; Rigg, 2005). As Bryceson (2002) notes, subsistence activities may linger on, but the economic viability of peasantries has been undermined everywhere by government policies that have made credit, land, and markets inaccessible to them. In most places, Bryceson (2002) also shows, the countryside is aging as younger adults leave for work in towns and cities. But some authors still confine diversification to a secondary role in family-based agriculture: “...we define small-scale farming as family-owned enterprises...where agriculture represents a key component of the overall livelihood portfolio” (Stringer et al., 2008, p. 236).

How key institutions in the agrarian sector perceive of this diversification can make a difference in how people experience the reorientation of agrarian life and how rural policies evolve. If these actors ignore or reject this reality, it is possible their own programs will fail and people will suffer further dislocation. If policy makers are biased in favour of agriculture, they may ignore the need to provide the social, economic and infrastructural resources that could support a broader array of non-agricultural activities in rural areas. Can livelihood diversification alleviate rural poverty, reduce income inequalities, and sustain rural communities? If so (or even if it cannot in its *present* state) then it is critically important that agrarian policies and social movements incorporate livelihood diversification into their strategies (Rigg, 2005; Graziano da Silva, 2001).

Current livelihood strategies in rural Brazil reflect what some scholars refer to as “deagrarianisation”, defined as the “...long-term process of occupational adjustment, income-earning reorientation, social identification and spatial relocation of rural dwelling away from strictly agricultural-based modes of livelihoods” (Bryceson, 2002, p. 726). “De-peasantization” is a related process of decline in the numbers of peasants, defined as people who attain their livelihoods from agriculture primarily with other family members, and whose homes are in rural communities (Bryceson, 2000, p. 2). For some people, both of these processes boil down to the “commodification” of rural land and labour markets (Lahiff et al., 2007) and would thus include many forms of off-farm livelihood diversification. Scholars disagree on the extent to which peasants are disappearing worldwide even though peasants are undeniably experiencing commodification and mobility. For one thing, as noted above, peasants may participate in labour markets as part of a survival strategy to allow their families to retain land and practice subsistence or market-oriented agriculture (Bryceson, 2000, p. 25). Second, continued agrarian settlement and frontier migration are counterpoints to de-peasantization in some countries, including Brazil (Pereira, 1997; Bryceson, 2000; Hecht, 2007). As Pereira (1997, p. 169) says, “...the peasantry is not quietly shuffling off the political stage to accommodate ‘modernity.’” The Brazilian landless movement, (for which the Movimento dos

³ Pluriactivity is used to describe the ways that farm households take part in non-agricultural activities in addition to farming. It can include activities on or off the farm.

⁴ www.ie.unicamp.br/pesquisas/rurbano.

⁵ <http://www.sober.org.br/>.

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