Impacts of rural settlements in Brazilian rural development

Leonilde Servolo de Medeiros

Abstract

This paper aims to portray short, medium and long-term change processes brought about by the establishment of rural agrarian reform settlements in Brazil. The goal was to present the transformations in the lives of the settlers, in the agrarian reform settlements and in the regions where these are located.

The article is based on a selection of academic studies, carried out on different country regions and shows that obtaining land allows families to gain greater stability and rearrange the strategies of family reproduction that result, in general, in an improvement of revenue and living conditions, especially when one considers the situation of poverty and social exclusion in which many of these families were before they entered settlement projects. The researchers also show that the experience of struggling for land, the existence of the settlements as reference spaces for public policies, and the precarious infrastructures, among other problems, make the settlements a starting point for new demands, propitiating the affirmation of new identities and interests, the appearance of forms of organization and the search for places where they can make themselves heard. In this way, settlements bring some changes on the local political scenario.

Finally, the article highlights the inherent difficulties in the Brazilian agrarian reform process. In this country the struggles for land have assumed over time a series of limits imposed by the successive victories of the sector linked to large-scale business production. This segment has managed to progressively protect the right to property, at the same time as it have given itself social legitimacy through its capacity to produce exports, fuel, etc., imposing itself as the real image of ‘progress’ and ‘development’. It also sought to delimit the possible universe of agrarian reform that has come to be seen more as a social compensation policy than as an important axis of development policy.

In the last thirty years Brazil has implemented a rural settlement policy that has given around one million families access to land. Although there are divergences about the use of accounting criteria and the precision of the numbers, there is no doubt that the question of agrarian reform has entered the policy agenda, creating initiatives aimed at both trying to resolve the land conflicts that have exploded, with different degrees of intensity, throughout the country and at creating conditions to improve the living conditions of the people covered by the program.

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The aim of this text is to present some indications about this process, seeking to show both its effects on the lives of beneficiary families and some impasses that involve the settlement policy and which are related to the power structure in Brazil, the legal instruments available and disputes which occur daily at the local and national levels related to the land question.

In the first part we will look at the conditions that have put this question on the policy agenda and given it new meanings in recent years, interlinked with environment and food safety questions, amongst others. Afterwards, we will draw up a balance of the settled families and the support polices that have been consolidated over the last two decades. Following this, based on data from different research projects carried out in recent years, we present some thoughts about the results of these policies in terms of the living conditions of the families settled, in economic, social and political terms. Finally, we will make some reflections on the prospects for the rural settlement policy.

1. Conditions that have placed the land question on the policy agenda

In the last three decades land occupations and encampments have become constant in Brazil, constituting the *par excellence* form of the struggle for land. These actions have been demonstrating the continuity and the amplitude of the land question in the country in a context of an intense technological modernization of agriculture and growing urbanization. In this articulation the role of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* - MST) has been very significant. It has marked its presence through the affirmation of the importance of agrarian reform and through the effort to remove the issue from a narrowly defined rural environment, offering articulations with national projects and models of development. But it is not just MST that has carried out occupations and encampments. Since the middle of the 1990s several trade union federations linked to Contag (National Confederation of Agricultural Workers - *Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura*)\(^2\) and more recently Fetraf (Federation of Workers in Family Farming - *Federação..."

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\(^2\) Contag was created as a national trade union body in 1963, shortly after the regulation of the recognition of the right of rural workers to organize in trade unions. Throughout the period of the military dictatorship that was imposed on Brazil..."
dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar\(^3\) have begun to get involved in these activities. Numerous dissident movements have emerged from MST, Contag and Fetraf. These have more locally based natures. Rosa (2009) uses the expression “the movement form” to indicate how, through this type of action, populations can make their demands public.

Various phenomena are at the root of these actions. One is the persistent high level of the concentration of land holding. Based on the Incra (National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform - *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Agrarian reform*) register, Girardi (2008) highlighted that in 1992 the Gini index was 0.826, while in 1998 it was 0.838, and in 2003, 0.816. The Agricultural Census, based on other methodology, showed similar results, oscillating very little over recent decades as can be seen in Table 1.

### Table 1. Gini Index, Brazil

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Index</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>0.857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>0.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>0.854</td>
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</table>

Source: IBGE Census

The occupation of Brazilian land was marked by the predominance of large productive units, aimed at exports and family based units were made invisible during our history. In the 1950s and 1960s there was a large expansion in the struggle for land, involving principally *posseiros* (squatters) and *foreiros* (they have use of but do not own their land) which placed the agrarian question on the policy agenda. However, somewhat paradoxically, the legislation that regulated the conditions of agrarian reform was only approved after the military coup. The spirit of this law, the Land Statute, was aimed at stimulating the strengthening of rural companies, whether or not they were family based, and eliminating both the *latifúndio* (large landholdings) and the *minifúndio* (very small landholdings). Nevertheless, in relation to the regulation of

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between 1964 and the end of 1984, Contag keep alive the flame of the struggle for agrarian reform that had been constructed in the period before the military coup, but used principally formal demands made to the State to achieve this. Land occupations, although used in some situations before the coup, gained strength and became the main form of pressure for land at the end of the 1970s, giving rise to MST.

\(^3\) Fetraf Brasil was founded in 2005, based on various trade unions, especially in the south of Brazil, that opposed the practices of Contag but could not gain power in the federations in their states. Initially created as Fetraf-Sul, it shortly afterwards assumed a national character. Fetraf, as its name indicates, organized family based farmers who owned land. With its expansion through the country and its competition with other representative entities, it assumed agrarian reform as one of its demands and also started to coordinate land occupations.
expropriation and the possibility of paying landholders in government bonds, very few properties were expropriated during the two decades that followed the military coup. Highlighting the power of the interests linked to landholding, the agricultural policies of the military regime carried out the proposal of modernizing agriculture defended by rural producer associations: ample and cheap credit, fiscal incentives for the occupation of new frontier areas, the creation of the Brazilian Agricultural and Livestock Research Company (Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária - Embrapa), a state agency which became a national reference, the expansion of technical assistance, also through state agencies, the diffusion of agronomic schools, the construction of roads interlinking the country and allowing the expansion of large productive units to regions that had previously, been isolated, etc.

In a short time a profound transformation was carried out: new regions were occupied (some of which had previously been considered inappropriate for agriculture, such as the cerrado – similar to savannah), while new crops and new varieties were introduced. Capital from banks and industry was made available for investments in land, especially in new areas where the state began to make concessions of public lands, privatizing them rapidly (Delgado, 1985).

In this process land rapidly gained in value and small farmers who did not manage to modernize, or who in seeking to do so assumed insurmountable debts, left the countryside. The same occurred with workers on fazendas (ranches), made superfluous by mechanization and the use of chemical raw materials. Lands occupied by posseiros (holders of small lots of land but lacking deeds to their property) and by indigenous populations, especially in the Center-West and North of the country, began to come under severe pressure, in a context in which deforestation for pasture or crop growing was synonymous with development.

Throughout the overwhelming wave of modernization and the resulting proletarianization, the struggle for land continued, though very much in an atomized manner. In some of the country’s regions, especially in the northeast, some rural worker trade unions and Contag began to demand the expropriation of areas in conflict under the terms of the Land Statutes. This entity played an important role in the socialization among rural workers of the demand for agrarian reform and the knowledge of the law that delimited its shape, which produced a progressive identification between agrarian reform and the application of the Land Statute. Also during the 1970s sectors
of the Church strongly influenced by Liberation Theology through the Pastoral Land Commission, began to support the resistance struggles in the countryside.

During the 1980s land conflicts gained public space, giving visibility to the cause of agrarian reform and showing different faces and personalities: atingidos por barragens (people who had lost their land during the construction of dams); seringueiros (rubber tappers) in the North of the country who resisted the substitution of native rubber trees by pasture; quebradeiras de coco (coconut gatherers) demanding free access to native babassu palm groves which had been fenced off; quilombolas (descendents of communities formed by escaped slaves) demanding the right to ancestral lands; and small producers, especially in the south of the country, excluded from the benefits of modernization all constituted the contingent that shaped the political identity of the sem-terra (landless workers). After the occupations that started in the South of Brazil at the end of the 1970s, MST was officially created in 1984, and since then has been the principal force behind the struggle for land in Brazil.

In the struggles for redemocratization the agrarian question gained importance. However in 1985 a proposal for a National Agrarian Reform Plan, based on the Land Statute, encountered strong opposition, especially from interests linked to land ownership. The promise of the new government to settle 1,400,000 families in five years resulted in the settlement of only 83,687. The debate continued and had an impact on the new Brazilian Constitution, approved in 1988. This document incorporated the idea that rural property should fulfill a social function, but also defined that productive land could not be expropriated. It is in this judicial context that some of the current impasses in the current settlement policy have to be understood.

During the 1990s occupations and encampments intensified and became the principal form of the land struggle. They spread throughout the country, pushing the question of agrarian reform to the center of the political agenda, causing the FHC administration to create in 1996 an Extraordinary Ministerial Office for Land Policy, a body with ministerial powers that was soon afterwards transformed into the Ministry of Agrarian Development. Incra, the agency responsible for the operationalization of agrarian reform and previous linked to the Ministry of Agriculture, was subordinated to the new Ministry.

Social pressure forced the intensification of expropriations and the settlement (compared with previous periods) of a significant contingent of families. At the same time attempts were made
to make occupations infeasible, ordering that occupied lands would not be inspected\textsuperscript{4} when, with the support of the World Bank, access to land through the market including the provision of land credit began to be encouraged.

During the Lula administration the pressure and the settlements have continued, though not at the rate expected by the social movements that had supported him.

\textbf{2. Results of the settlement policy}

The data presented in Table 2 are very revealing of the rate of settlements during the period in question and show that, even taking the most pessimistic number (though it is the most consistent one), 920,861 families were settled. Since 2003, 105 land deeds have been issued, regularizing 10,986 families in 96 quilombola territories.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Families settled per government}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Period & Government & Families \\
\hline
1964-1984 & Military Regime & 77,465* \\
1985-1989 & José Sarney & 83,687 \\
1990-1992 & Fernando Collor de Mello & 42,516 \\
1993-1994 & Itamar Franco & 14,365 \\
1995-2002 & Fernando Henrique Cardoso & 391,380** \\
2003-2009 & Luís Inácio Lula da Silva & 529,481*** \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{*} in colonization projects in frontier areas.

\textsuperscript{**} this figure is not the same as appears in the statistics presented at the end of the FHC administration (579,733 families settlement by September 2002), based on the settlement capacities of the areas expropriated, but rather refers to the names appearing in the lists of beneficiaries. This is much more precise information, since it indicates the real number of families with access to land. Many of them, however, were already on the land as posseiros and only had their situation regularized, and strictly speaking do not count as new settlers.

\textsuperscript{***} Beneficiary lists, including regularized posseiros.

Source: Incra and MDA

In terms of regional distribution, although there are settlements all over the country, there is a sensitive concentration in the North, the most recent area of occupation, while there is a strong demand for land in areas that have been occupied longer (South, Southeast and Northeast).

Parallel to the settlement policy, subsidy policies were implemented. Notably the provision of credit, technical assistance, the purchase of production and education. In the case of credit, during the Sarney administration, Procera (*Programa Especial de Crédito para a

\textsuperscript{4} Inspection to determine if a property can be expropriated is the first step in the expropriation process.
Reforma Agrária – Special Credit Program for Agrarian Reform) was created as a specific policy for the families being settled. Following the creation of Pronaf (Programa Nacional de Apoio à Agricultura Familiar – National Program for the Support of Family Farming) and the extension of special credit to family farmers, settled workers came to have access to one of the projects covered by this program (Pronaf A). The technical assistance policy was decentralized and outsourced and more recently during the Lula administration it has also gained an environmental dimension. Another important mechanism was the Food Acquisition Policy, which guaranteed the purchase of the production from a number of settlements. In relation to education, Pronera (Programa Nacional de Educação para Reforma Agrária – National Education Program for Agrarian Reform) was created, aimed especially at the education of young people and adults.

At the same time the diversity of countryside situations came to be increasingly affirmed, implying new forms of settlement: extractivist workers in forest areas, based on the granting of individual land deeds, guaranteeing common access to land, according to traditions, as well as projects based on the principles of environmental sustainability; forms of collective management of land and production, etc. In short, the settlement policy based on the principle of one allotment for each family has had to be made more flexible and incorporate demands and local experiences.

Nevertheless, according to Incra data, in 2008, 179,000 families were given initial credit (start-up), 397,000 families were covered by the National Program of Technical Assistance and Rural Development (Programa Nacional de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural - Pronater), while 24,000 contracts were signed under the Pronaf for Agrarian reform. In other words, there is strong evidence that public policies are still far from reaching all settlements.

Another element has to be taken into account: the lands used for agrarian reform tend to be low quality, since the best land is in the hands of large companies and are productive, in other words they cannot be expropriated.

To understand this scenario it is important to highlight that since the 1980s disputes about agrarian reform were initially disputes about the interpretation of the Land Statute, but since 1988 they have been disputes about the Constitution. How fair value is defined, the social

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5 Data presented to the Agricultural Commission, of the Federal Chamber of Deputies in Brasilia.
function of property and productivity are questions that have marked political and legal debates in which the representatives of agribusiness have made efforts to equalize the social function and productivity, as well as to guarantee that the ‘fair value’ be interpreted as market value. These elements have delimited the scope of the rural settlement policy in Brazil. The case of productivity indices, whose updating can allow an increase in the amount of land available for settlements, is illustrative. The current indices were calculated on the basis of the 1975 Census, at a time when the modernization of agriculture was only starting. Since then there have been significant increases in productivity, but it has not been possible, for political reasons, to update the indices. After all, business agriculture is productive, but it needs a stock of land (part of which can be classified as unproductive) to guarantee expansion. Allowing these lands to be transformed into settlements (or into indigenous reserves or conservation areas) creates impediments to the expansion of large ranches.

Since the 1980s another means has been used to obtain lands is by purchasing them. Initially more used by state governments, it was regulated by decree 433/92, allowing acquisition by the federal government, preferentially in areas of conflict, with payment in government bonds (now valorized on the market). Nevertheless, land is not being found at the rate of demand nor in the places where this demand is.

The reflections above point to some of the difficulties inherent in reflections on settlements as an instrument of development, in a context in which modernized business agriculture aimed at exports and integrated in complex productive chains has enormous political force.

Reflecting on the impacts of settlements also involves reflecting on the potential for expansion of family based agriculture. Nonetheless, we are talking about a context in which, although it can be recognized as inclusive, the settlement policy assumes less of a development strategy character and more of a compensatory policy. Sectors linked to large landholdings (not just the owners, but the whole business chain that involves what is commonly called agribusiness) have managed to protect over time the rights of property, while simultaneously seeking to socially legitimate themselves as producers of products for export and bio-fuels, and imposing themselves socially with an image of progress and development.

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6 According to Brazilian law only the federal government has power to expropriate land for agrarian reform.
Despite these difficulties, the various research projects found an extraordinary vitality in rural settlements.

3. Effects of settlements

Below we present some reflections on what the settlement policy has meant, drawing on research data from various parts of the country.

**Social struggles and the creation of settlements**

In a general form researchers consider land conflicts, encampments and occupations to be the engine of settlement creation. These conflicts are understood as the result of the threat of uprooting, as in the case of the resistance of *posseiros*; of an anomic situation (Martins, 2003); of forms of resistance to exclusion, the product of the crisis of determined productive models that lead to unemployment (Leite et al., 2004). Whatever the emphasis given, the works highlight the relationship between a process involving a crisis in social relations and struggles for land, which in some situations converge on an organized search for ways out, through by answering the call to take part in an encampment and occupation, inaugurated by MST and later by other organizations. In relation to this, Magalhães (2003) calls attention to the weight that the sequential encampment/expropriation/settlement model has gained in the academic imagination, emphasizing that this perception obscures situations in which the struggle for land has other social, historic and spatial landmarks, as is the case of the gradual occupation of land throughout the Northern region of Brazil, but which is also found in other regions in the country.

**Settled families and conditions of mobilization**

There is strong evidence that the settled farmers have different origins and relations to the land: *posseiros; arrendatários; parceiros*; children of small landholders who do not see any possibility of accessing land through traditional methods of inheritance; employees; and workers with urban experience.

*Translator’s Note: arrendamento involves the leasing of (normally small) plots of land for which a value in money is paid, agreed in advance at the time of making the rental contract; parceria, which is somewhat similar to sharecropping, involves a payment in kind of an agreed part of production (commonly half) for the use of the land. In this latter system, importantly, losses as well as profits are divided.*
Some of the research shows that what is involved is a population that faces difficulties being reinserted in the productive process in other activities. They are people with low education levels, with life trajectories marked by migration, various experiences of working in agricultural activities, the construction industry, various services, informal commerce, etc., most often in a temporary form. For them the possibility of access to a lot of land seems to be perceived as a form of achieving autonomy in relation to working for others, always associated with situations of exploitation or slavery (Neves, 1997; Leite et al. 2004), or simply as having a place to live (Sigaud, 2000).

The literature also allows us see that the struggle for land cannot be read as the only alternative for those who have no other possibilities. In various situations it is an option to conserve determined ways of life, to escape the violence of urban peripheries, or to remake a peasant project in a context of technological modernization and growing exclusion (Wanderley, 2003).

Various authors have called attention to the fact that encamping/occupying are decisions that go through political mediations, but which also involve ties of another nature, where kinship and neighbors are necessary references (Sigaud, 2000; Macedo, 2003). The mobility of the settled farmers through the exchange of allotments (both within settlements and between settlements) follows this logic, indicating that the existence of networks of relations, where trust and loyalty are central components which make the struggle itself possible. In other words, it does not involve uprooted persons, as is often stated.

The possibility of the land struggle becoming one alternative amongst others implies considering the conditions that transform the expropriated into a landless worker, which in other words contribute to the formation of a mobilizing political identity. For this, there are recurrent elements that show that the option of taking part in encampments/occupations is the result of a convergence of factors. One is the presence of mediations, organizations that make themselves the spokespersons for workers, producing their interests and bringing them to the public space. This is the case of MST, trade unions, etc, as well as the entities that support the struggle and in some situations speak for these workers, as is the case of the CPT and non-governmental organizations. According to Neves the mediators are central to the reconstruction of expectations that accompany the settlement through its capacity to
generate new classification schemes, new modes of perception, qualification and configuration of physical and social space; transcendence of the localized environment of knowledge of the social world and inscription in new institutions; the denaturalization of the established order and condemnation of the form of domination; a more adequate and understandable objectification of new invisible and incomprehensible forces, because they are external, but essential to the construction of the new form of life; the construction of factors and elements that facilitate the systematization of a hegemonic common sense and an orientation to action; preparation of other representations of the world that can allow the construction and recognition of a new social identity (Neves, 1997: 249).

Nevertheless, collaborators in the denaturalization of traditional authority often contribute to the creation of other forms of domination, generating tensions and conflicts within settlements.

Another important element is what some analysts of social movements call “political opportunities” (Tarrow, 2009): contextual and conjunctural references, such as the practices of public institutions; the legal-judicial context; forms of action of Justice; modes of employer action, whether through their representative institutions, whether through localized action; access to institutions that can give support, etc. As Leite et al. (2004) showed, the constitution in recent years of areas with a higher concentration of settlements is the product of these references, to the extent that the expropriation of an area encourages other groups to follow in the same direction, leading to non-systemic and unplanned expropriations, but in some regions to a certain level of concentration. The analysis of these conditions have been central in allowing the relativization of determined simplistic readings that do not take into account the conditions that generate possibilities and limits for another form of struggle and organization.

Studies have also pointed to the creation of a repertoire of actions (occupations of land, encampments, occupations of public agencies, marches). Monitoring these actions and their developments has been important for verifying the actual definition and hierarchization of those in opposition, forms of learning and the treatment of the conditioning factors of these actions. Works such as Sigaud (2000), Chaves (2000), Brenneisein (2002) have explored this dimension, showing the complexity of the practices involved in the mobilizations and shaping of the sem-terra. They objectify the struggle, dramatize the demands, make visible the public spaces and constitute the conditions that provoke the intervention of the state through the creation of settlements.
Effects on income and work

The perception of settlements as creators of employment for a population with difficulties of insertion in the stable labor market is a recurrent theme in analyses, especially those of economists, and has led to interminable debates about the costs of settlements in comparison with the creation of labor positions in cities, whether in the productive sector or in services.

A landmark in the analysis of this issue was the research sponsored by the FAO (Romeiro et al., 1994). The authors, based on a national sample of settlements, most of which were created during the Sarney administration, analyzed variables such as the generation and distribution of income, capitalization, characteristics of the productive process, the commercialization of production, etc. They concluded that, despite the low productivity in allotments, there was a growing process of market integration. They showed that the beneficiaries came from the impoverished parts of the population, so, even taking into account internal differences, the generation of resources by settlements represented a significant income distribution process. According to the authors the settlements had been shown to be efficient promoters of rural development and of establishing people in the countryside. This study had strong repercussions in the political debate in terms of the effectiveness of agrarian reform, understood as the capacity of settlements to create income for families.

Sparoveck, in research that was also national and almost on a census-like scale and carried out ten years later (when the number of settled farmers had more than doubled), concluded that the income of the settled families was very close to those of employees in regions close to the projects analyzed. Even though he highlighted the precariousness of the living conditions in relation to the benefits obtained and infrastructural difficulties, he highlighted a relative improvement, related to the fact that for these workers, who had lost their jobs and had been replaced by machines and less labor intensive production systems, or had had to sell their lands, being settled had been a better alternative than migration to cities or the wages offered for labor in rural areas (Sparoveck, 2003: 169).

Other studies have been concerned with understanding the effects of settlements on their surroundings, extending the analysis to various non-economic levels. Medeiros and Leite (2004), in an investigation of the impacts of settlements in six states in the country (Acre, Mato
Grosso, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul, São Paulo and Sergipe), noted a growing integration in the market, the possibility of access to credit, which had previously not existed, and access to a greater variety of consumer goods. According to the authors,

the presence of the settlements in the local and regional context has caused important modifications and in general has resulted in an improvement of the living conditions of the families installed there, despite the precariousness of some public services, conflicts in the initial period when the lands were won, and delays in the release of resources (Medeiros and Leite, 2004: 47).

Leite et al. (2004), with the same objectives, focus on six regions that reflect the diversity of the Brazilian reality and have a high concentration of settlement projects (Southern Bahia, the areas around the Federal District, the Ceará Sertão (Backlands), Southeast Pará, Western Santa Catarina and the Sugarcane Zone of Northeastern Brazil), presupposing that this procedure would allow greater possibilities for understanding the ongoing processes of change caused by the concentration of settlements in determined spaces, different from what can be obtained from the analysis of isolated units. This conclusion was very close to the works already mentioned: despite being marked by precariousness, in comparison with their recent past there had been an improvement in the living conditions of families, reflected both in terms of income and in evaluations about improvements in access to education, health, housing, etc. The researchers also highlighted that the settlements caused a redesign of the areas in which they are inserted, leading to modifications in the landscape; the diversification of production, enriching the offer of products to local markets and dynamizing the economic life of small municipalities and districts; population increases, causing in some cases the formation of districts and even new municipalities.

Works analyzing specific cases, such as Zamberlam and Florão (1991) and Benedetti (1998) have confirmed these more general studies, indicating the diversification of production, technological and productive innovations, as well as a significant improvement in living conditions of the settled farmers in comparison with previous conditions.

**Effects on the surroundings**

The experience of struggling for land and the existence of the settlement as a space of convergence for public policies means that they do not constitute a final point for demands, but rather represent a starting point for new demands, leading to the affirmation of identities and
interests, to the emergence of new organizational forms and to search for places where they can make themselves heard (Medeiros and Leite, 2004; Leite et al., 2004). In this way the settlements have brought changes to the local political scene, with the presence of the settled farmers in public spaces (associations, councils) and even in electoral disputes (mayors, local councilors). They have caused alterations in relations between the workers who live in them and local authorities, imposing new issues and forms of action, creating new leaders who dispute space in order to influence policy design. In this way they represent an interesting experience of democratization. Nevertheless, in other situations they can also reinforce traditional clientelist mechanisms to obtain access to existing policies.

New conditions, new disputes

Another effect of the settlements highlighted by the literature is related to the difficulties that have emerged from the confluence of the individual demands of populations with disparate origins, the constrictions of daily life and the proposals of the mediating bodies. The various research projects have shown some impasses faced by a population which, due to its own precariousness, needs spokespersons to make itself heard. In the encampments and settlements new proposals for social organization are experimented, new utopias are created or pre-existing ones are updated. In these spaces transversed by conflicts, interests, desires and aspirations are produced, which are transformed into an agenda of demands. The literature highlights the complexity of this process, showing the different forms of resistance to the settled farmers and the dissidences that are formed within the settlements (Zimmermann, 1994; Franco, 1994; Bergamasco, 1994; Martins, 2003). As highlighted by Medeiros and Estecri (1994: 20) what emerge are “more or less subtle forms of control over workers which in settlement situations appear through impositions of different types”, a question meticulously explored through case studies by Neves (1997) and Brennensein (2002).

Other objects of reflection have been impositions arising out of institutional rules, or created by representation and support organizations that tend to see every settlement as an experimental space, where the desired agrarian reform is tested in confrontation with the possible. Amongst the examples presented by the literature are the concession of use and not the ownership of land, the obligation to have formal ties with an association to obtain access to
credit resources, the prioritization in some situations of collective organization, provoking discrimination against those who opt for individual forms; impositions on the organization of production, the definition of the obligation to live in agro-villages, imposing the rationalization of space foreign to family experience, etc. These forms of control are producers of tension *par excellence*, since they translate the meeting between the distinct aspirations of the settled farmers and the different mediations present (Cazella, 1992; Franco, 1994; Zimmerman, 1994; Ferrante, 1994; Bergamasco, 1994; D'Incao and Roy, 1995; Neves, 1997; Brenneisein, 2002).

Some studies have been concerned with the complexity of identity formation, fundamental in the preparation of a discourse that can produce internal cohesion of the group, as well as its public image. This process involves not just mechanisms through which delegation, the recognition of the capacity to ‘speak on behalf of’, is produced, but also the constitution of what publically appear as group ‘interests’, their concepts, history and forms of action. Taking as a starting point the fact that the more destitute a social group is (in relation to social, political and cultural dimensions, as well as economic), the greater the need for spokespersons (Bourdieu, 1989), the constitution of political representation becomes a nodal point for understanding the development of struggles, demands, relationships with public authorities and internal struggles within settlements, as well as their relationships with other organizations and with local state agencies.

From this perspective the group constitution process is their entrance to the field of political disputes and also its possibility of constituting itself as “social power” (Offe, 1989): it is legitimated in the political scenario, brings demands to the public space and produces sanctions if these are not satisfied (marches, occupations of roads and banks, demonstrations), practices pervaded in general by strong conviction about rights (Magalhães, 2003). The literature also shows that in the daily life of settlements these sanctions can also be manifested in a more subtle form, through the use of mechanisms such as vote bargaining (Sousa, 1996; Nascimento, 2002; Araújo, 2005; Ferreira, 2005). In these cases the leaders become the target of disputes between local political institutions and reproduction links can be created with traditional clientelist mechanisms. In the analysis of the political participation of the settled farmers there is an underlying question referring to the implications of the land struggle.
Highlighting the complex network of relations that ties a settlement to local politics, the impossibility of any simplistic connection between participation in the land struggle and the rupture with favor-based political relations. As shown by Sousa (1996) and Araújo (2005), settlements are constituted in spaces of bitter electoral disputes, mediated by the distribution of favors reiterating the mechanisms of reciprocity that characterize the traditional modes of politics in Brazil.

Life on a settlement can be read as a dispute over the perception and definition of what can be qualified as legitimate to demand at a particular moment, of the forms that can be considered legitimate to be used in the putting forward of demands and in the definition of privileged interlocutors. Thus, political representation only functions because, on the one hand, it is perceived as being identified with the demands of the group and, on the other, because it is legitimated on a daily basis through ritualized practices and the effectiveness of spokesperson action, reiterating the legitimacy that was given to speak for the group. In short, we are dealing with political apprenticeships that cannot be underestimated.

**Effects on the landholding structure**

Although the creation of settlements has implied some form of landholding redistribution at the local level, it has not managed to alter the scenario of the concentration of landholding at the national and state levels, or even in the regions where its presence is greatest. The share of the total area of the rural settlements implemented by Incra in the total of establishments in the states covered by the research of Leite et al. (2004) oscillated in 1999 between 0 and 5%. The only exception was Pará, where the settlements represented 25% of the total area of the state. Considering only the municipalities included in the research (those with the highest concentrations of settlements), the relationship between settlement area and the area of agricultural establishments was significantly higher, but nonetheless it has important variations between regions and between municipalities, varying from only 3% in the south of Bahia to 40% in the southeast of Pará (Leite et al, 2004).

The alterations in the agrarian structure, therefore, are visible at most at the local level, for which reason the rural settlement policy cannot be classified as a profound process of the reform of the landholding structure. This is also proven by the analysis of census data, which,
as seen in item 2, show that the landholding concentration in the country remains very high. In other words, there is a continuous and steadfast concentration of lands that affect both areas that have long been occupied and more recent ones, and which, everything indicates, tend to intensify, taking into account the growth rate of crops that require large production units and advanced technology, as is the case of soybean, corn, cotton, sugarcane, and the political power that this sector has.

4. Final Considerations

In a general form, the data presented by the various research projects we have used highlights, on one hand, the precariousness of settlements, especially in relation to infrastructure and the difficulties of families in guaranteeing their economic and social reproduction. On the other hand, they affirm their positivity in guaranteeing food, housing, access to credit, possibilities of production, market access, education, political participation, etc., for a contingent of families previously exposed to a situation of important economic limitations, processes involving the destructuring of social ties and little or no access to rights.

The interpretation of this data has been disputed by different social forces to demonstrate the success, the limits, and the failure of the settlement policy, and, therefore the validity of the redistribution of land. The data thus become sources that are academically legitimated for the principal arguments of defendants and opponents of agrarian reform. Some emphasize the capacity of settlements to promote improvements in living conditions, as it is an effective instrument of rural development and combating poverty; others call attention to the visible precariousness, supporting the argument that the agrarian reform policy has served to introduce favelas or slums to the rural environment, or that faced with the lack of infrastructural conditions, the settled farmers abandon their allotments.7

Passing over these disputes, there is no way of denying a set of changes caused by this new reality, also inside the state, which began to recognize the conflicts that exploded and tried

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7 In the latter case the arguments are based much more on impressions, since there is little research that seeks to quantify and qualify evasion in settlements. To the best of our knowledge, the only research with a national character that deals with this question was carried out by Bruno and Medeiros (2001). These authors warn about the risks of making generalizations based on a sample with questionable statistical representativity and prefer to take the data much more as indicators of reasons for evasion than definitive and conclusive data about these reasons.
to redirect the demands, re-semanticizing them and creating institutional mechanisms to fit them in (Offe, 1989; Tarrow, 2009). This point of view does not simply involve thinking of state practices and the emergence of new institutions to deal with the new problems that emerged as ‘responses’, but also to consider them as components of a complex political game where the meanings and contents of public policies are disputed. Some research (Palmeira, 1994; Medeiros, 2002) that has been concerned with the question has shown how the demands for land and for settlement policies have resulted in disputes within the state itself, in new formats of public policies, in the incorporation of proposals generated within the scope of supranational organizations, etc.

Rural settlements can be seen as the result of public policies, as well as products of struggles and the organization of rural workers in the search for land. They can be seen from the strict point of view of their costs and economic results, leading to calculations with different levels of sophistication in terms of the costs necessary to settle a family in opposition to other possibilities of creating labor positions. But they can also be seen as a space for the meeting of differentiated forces, involving tensions between visions of the world and processes of social change fed by proposals of social and political mediators and by the form taken (or not taken) by proposals from the state, representative organizations and people who see access to land as an alternative for survival.

The image of the rural space that emerges from these studies has new connotations. It involves an active rural environment, rich in demands and which seems to refuse the conception that it has traditionally been linked to: backwardness and precariousness. From the demands of the settled farmers, as discovered in the bibliography, new themes and questions emerge that indicate the presence of new forms of sociability, but also a series of elements linked to the world of civitas, as a space of rights (health, education, leisure, etc).

‘Recognition’ and ‘rights’ are recurrent terms in social struggles today. Social and political recognition are the conditions of existence of social groups normally homogenized under the term ‘poverty’. Pointing to their struggles, their customs, their territoriality is a form of escaping the anonymity into which the term, dominant in official reports, often throws them. To be perceived as a particular group, with its customs, values, traditions, signifies gaining social existence and the qualification to demand rights. At question is not just survival, but making
demands under determined conditions that guarantee their material existence, but also social and cultural. It means the right to participate in technological advances (including those that are not strictly productive), of having access to the means of communication, to knowledge, to frequent quality schools at all levels, etc. Putting themselves into play as producers, demanding public policies, the settled farmers, the protagonists of struggles for land, also portray themselves as bearers of rights, some consecrated by custom, others that go against custom, cause tension with it and renovate it, while others also imply access to benefits that other groups already enjoy, but which are distant from rural populations. This reveals the presence of active social groups that struggle for a place in society, where they can place themselves as citizens.

References


