

not seem to extend much beyond what Latin Americanists have been arguing all along: that popular movements there were a response to local conditions and that it was repression, rather than Soviet malfeasance, that led some Latin American revolutionaries to take up arms.

Aviva Chomsky, *Salem State College*

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**To Inherit the Earth:
The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil**

Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford

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365 pp., \$15.95 (paper)

As Brazil entered the millennium, the political and socioeconomic profile of the world's fifth-largest country had shifted dramatically compared to 1985, when the military returned to the barracks after a twenty-one-year dictatorship. While a visionary 1988 constitution captured many of the dreams of the mass mobilizations of the 1970s, the new republic's policy-making trajectory was far more decisively shaped by the neoliberal market reforms of Washington-led globalization. Moreover, the rapid expansion and modernization of Brazilian agribusiness made the country a powerhouse world exporter of both new and old agriculture products (276–77). To some, the ever-more-urban Brazil of the 1990s seemed light years away from a “traditional” rural world derived from the legacy of plantation agriculture and African slavery (which only ended in 1888).

Few would have predicted in the past decade that agrarian reform would achieve unprecedented political salience by the end of the 1990s. Yet a presidential administration unsympathetic to land distribution as a response to rural poverty would, after an infamous 1996 massacre, award land to six hundred thousand families before leaving office in 2002 (Bruno Konder Comparato, “A Ação Política do MST,” *São Paulo em Perspectiva* [São Paulo: SEADE, 2001]). The decision to do so, despite their reservations, was spurred by the militancy, élan, and zeal of a radical organization known as the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST). With more than a million members, the MST has “faced down police, the military, and private gangs of hired gunmen. They have suffered imprisonment, beatings, and sometimes death. Instead of waiting for the government to meet its long-standing promises,” they repeatedly carried out mass occupations of lands claimed by wealthy landowners until the government met their demands (three hundred fifty thousand families now live in MST settlements) (xiii). The MST's trajectory is all the more remarkable in a globalized world less and less sympathetic to socialistic reform, much less the revolution that serves as the horizon for the MST's radicalism (307, 312).

Founded in 1984 as one of many groups active in the countryside, the MST emerged by the mid-1990s as Brazil's most effective new voice of subaltern protest. The organization's rise to national prominence was based on radicalizing the tactics and strategies of agrarian struggle in a country where hundreds had been killed in fights over land, even when con-

ducted on a less aggressive basis. While injecting new audacity and ambition, the MST was also marked by a tight form of organization and an acute sense of how to push dramatic land occupations to success under adverse economic and political conditions. Throughout, “the MST has acted aggressively and persistently, even to the point where it has clashed with people who consider themselves supporters of the movement. In hindsight, it seems unlikely that any movement less aggressive, less persistent, and less independent of its friends could have finally gotten the ball rolling for agrarian reform in Brazil” (xx). As a successful and “disciplined political organization aimed at land reform” (242), the MST has proven powerfully attractive within Brazil, and it has recently gained a well-deserved international audience through its participation in the alterglobalization movement, from Genoa to Cancún.

For those knowing little about the MST, this wonderfully teachable book by Angus Wright and Wendy Woford offers a deeply informed but readily accessible introduction to its role in contemporary land struggles. As a collaboration between Brazilianists of different disciplines and generations, *To Inherit the Earth* effectively brings the admirable creativity and dynamism of the MST to a general lay audience unfamiliar with Brazil, its history, or the diversity of rural peoples with whom the MST has productively engaged. The authors draw on their familiarity with and research on the MST in the southernmost states of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul, where it was born; in two northeastern states (Bahia and Pernambuco); and in the northern state of Pará in the Amazon region. After a historically informed survey of the politics of inequality in this country of 175 million people, they highlight what they call “history’s geography,” because “the MST has not escaped the geographical influences of regions widely separated by distance and diversity of history, culture, and economic activities. In each region, the movement has faced different challenges; it has had to work in different ways and it has had different measures of success” (xxiii). The core of the book and source of its strengths is to be found in three regionally focused chapters, each of which is interwoven with different problematics: Rio Grande do Sul (the military regime, mass mobilization, and fight for democracy), Pernambuco (slavery’s inheritance, plantation agriculture, and underdevelopment), and Pará (dramatic frontier expansion, economic dynamism, and environmental controversies).

With its unity of message, tight organization, and ideology, the MST lends itself to an external representation, by both opponents and supporters, that projects (or ratifies) a false degree of coherence and solidity. This book, by contrast, foregrounds the rural peoples, in the plural, with whom the organization works. The story is told, not so much from the bottom up *within* the MST, but from within each of the five profiled MST settlements *outward* as their members connect with their respective local worlds (a particular strength of chapters 2 and 3). The book is smoothly journalistic in the best sense, with vivid descriptions of the land and people, including interesting profiles of key leaders, local activists, and followers (some of them less than fully integrated into the MST project). In several cases, they offer fully realized individual portraits that are analytically powerful, as with a dedicated MST activist, Antonio, who eventually goes to work for the local mayor (157–69). His story is part of an analytically sophisticated understanding of the constraints upon the MST’s success, especially in the former sugar-growing *zona da mata* region of Pernambuco, which is addressed in a particularly interesting chapter by the young geographer Woford. Both chapters 2 and 3 also illustrate how divergences in the occupation-to-settlement sequence relate to the challenges the MST faces, after victory, in forming settlements that reflect its commitment to ongoing consciousness raising, participation, and militancy by its now-settled members.

Although the MST's success might be credited to direct mass action and an anti-statist militancy, Wright and Wolford give equal importance to the organization's sophisticated legal and political strategy. In particular, they convincingly present the reader with the argument, prevalent in the scholarly literature, that the MST successfully exploited "the old paradox of land law" in Brazil (xxii), which posits a social function of property and a powerful respect for the "effective use" principle as the basis for land claims (thus facilitating both land grabbing and squatting). Given legally murky titles, the MST is expert at challenging "the history of a title to a piece of land, burdened as many were with a scaly encrustation of fraud," while advancing a wider claim that the "distribution of property and the law upon which it was based constituted a grave social injustice"; for many lawyers, judges, and politicians (24), civil disobedience is thus a legitimate means to achieve a "positive social duty."

However important, a legal strategy alone would not guarantee victory in a land struggle, which requires not only direct action but also "well tested [political] strategies, tactics and alliances" (242). As a sector of the Brazilian Left, the MST and its freelance and union rivals function within a web of cross-class alliances, coalitions, and networks (56, 186, 67). As Brazilian scholars have shown, the MST has shown special talent in staging dramatic media events while connecting to the moral sentiments of urban social classes now distant from the countryside. As Wright and Wolford observe, the MST's success is a healthy by-product of a country that is increasingly democratic in outlook and sentiment, as demonstrated by the 2002 presidential election of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, a former trade union leader who attended the MST's founding in 1984.

Overall, the English-speaking audience now has an abundance of material on the MST's "remarkable and complicated" story, which encompasses "both victories and defeats, brilliant solutions, and ongoing dilemmas" (xxvi). The rank-and-file focus of *To Inherit the Earth*, its special strength, can be complemented by a 2002 journalistic account that focuses more sharply on the MST's practice and ideology as a radical leftist organization: Sue Brantford and Jan Rocha, *Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2002). *Strong Roots*, a 41-minute documentary directed by Maria Luisa Mendonça, also is available (New York: Cinema Guild, Inc., 2001). When combined with Biorn Maybury-Lewis's excellent study of rural trade unionism, *The Politics of the Possible: The Brazilian Rural Workers' Trade Union Movement, 1964–1985* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), interested readers have access to a comprehensive portrait of the rural front in the fight for "an alternative system of politics [and economics], a different way of organizing the fight for the 'right to have rights'" (vii), an important dimension of what has been Brazil's unique trajectory over the past half century.

John D. French, *Duke University*

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