

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Land Reform in Latin America: Past, Present, and Future

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This essay reviews the following works:

Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform. By Michael Albertus. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xv + 347. \$29.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781107514300.

Challenging Social Inequality: The Landless Rural Workers Movement and Agrarian Reform in Brazil. Edited by Miguel Carter. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. Pp. xxix + 494. \$33.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822351863.

Seeds of Stability: Land Reform and U.S. Foreign Policy. By Ethan B. Kapstein. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xi + 306. \$29.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781316636640.

Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside. By Tore C. Olsson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. xiv + 277. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780691165202.

Watering the Revolution: An Environmental and Technological History of Agrarian Reform in Mexico. By Mikael D. Wolfe. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 317. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822363743.

When LARR was born in 1965 the debate on land reform was gathering force, and to its credit, the first issue carried a research review article by Richard Schaedel on land reform studies.¹ Seventeen years passed before another review essay on land reform was published in LARR. As William Thiesenhusen wrote then, “land reform as an issue is not forgotten.”² This time around, it has taken twice as many years again for this review essay to appear, prompting the question: Is land reform still alive? The five books reviewed in 1982 by Thiesenhusen deal with countries in which land reforms were ongoing. By contrast, the books now under review largely deal with the history of land reform. Is land reform history?

There is some commonality in the books by Tore C. Olsson, *Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside*, which received LASA's Luciano Tomassini Latin American International Relations Book Award in 2019, and Mikael D. Wolfe, *Watering the Revolution: An Environmental and Technological History of Agrarian Reform in Mexico*, as they both deal with Mexico from a historian's perspective. While Olsson undertakes a comparative analysis, exploring the converging and diverging agrarian histories in Mexico and the US South, Wolfe discusses the “environmental and technological history of agrarian reform in Mexico,” analyzing the many linkages regarding water issues between Mexico and the United States. In both books the Cardenista reformist period looms large, and rightly so, as during his presidency in the *sexenio* of 1934–1940 the land reform took a more radical turn and was a turning point in the country's history after the revolutionary years of 1910–1917. While the agrarian

¹ Richard P. Schaedel, “Land Reform Studies,” *Latin American Research Review* 1, no. 1 (1965): 75–122.

² William C. Thiesenhusen, “Land Reform in Latin America,” *Latin American Research Review* 17, no. 2 (1982): 199.

crossings, to use Olson's fitting phrase, from the United States to Mexico were perhaps more powerful than those from Mexico to the United States, the latter were far from insignificant. What is important to stress is that Mexican political and social events, ideas, and government policies also shaped the history of the United States. As both authors show, this has been acknowledged either not at all or only to a minor extent. While these books deal with other issues, in my view this is their more remarkable achievement.

These histories are entangled and interwoven at different levels as events and ideas in the United States and Mexico influenced the actions of reformers, scientists, policy makers, and trade union and political leaders, as well as other actors in both countries. Agrarian developments in the US South with its plantation system and in Mexico with its hacienda system; the similar displacement of small farmers and peasants; and the cultivation of similar crops on both sides of the border invite comparisons and exchange of experiences. Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" from 1933 to the late 1930s and Lázaro Cárdenas's "Six-Year Plan" were periods in which the "parallel histories swerved together and collided, intersecting and intertwining" (Olsson, 39). US rural reformers of the New Deal, among them officials from the US Department of Agriculture and "agrarian intellectuals," were much interested in Mexican *agrarismo*, and there was a veritable pilgrimage to Mexico during this time. A striking figure is Frank Tannenbaum, who as an intellectual and activist fully committed to the Mexican Revolution was well placed to play a key role in these agrarian crossings. Olsson also highlights the largely ignored influence of the rural New Dealers on 1930s' *agrarismo* as Mexican reformers, technocrats and government officials studied the various rural development programs of the New Deal period. In turn, Wolfe also describes the influence on ideas and policies that individuals had on both sides of the border, but principally on Mexico's history of dam building and water management. Bringing into the picture the actions of these key individuals and their associated networks illustrates very powerfully the dynamics of how public policies are shaped and implemented, as well as contested and transformed, through the struggles of individual and social groups. Still, both authors never lose sight of the wider picture.

Another of the crossings that Olsson discusses concerns the origins and spread of the green revolution in Mexico. He persuasively challenges certain myths or misconceptions. Through careful historical research he challenges simplistic views about the role of the Rockefeller Foundation, which was instrumental in the development of the hybrid seeds. It is often held responsible for the negative environmental consequences of the green revolution as well as for favoring capitalist farmers, leading to the displacement of many peasant farmers. While the Rockefeller Foundation, in my view, does bear some responsibility for these negative, unequal, and exclusionary effects of the green revolution, the story, as rivetingly told by Olsson, is far more complex. A group of scientists working for the foundation expressed their doubts about the promise of hybridized corn seed and warned that it "must be purchased anew each year, and the small farmer in Mexico has neither the cash nor the initiative to do so" (Olsson, 125). This early warning is replicated today with even greater force regarding the controversial genetically modified seeds and the spread of transgenic crops.

In the early period of the development of hybrid corn, the Rockefeller team were keen to develop peasant-friendly plant breeding as they were sympathetic to the ejidatarios—the beneficiaries of the agrarian reform—and other peasant groups. But things soon changed. Already at the end of the Cárdenas government a debate started among those who favored the emerging capitalist farmers and those who favored the ejidos, among the latter being the Liga de Agrónomos Socialistas, the Bloque de Agrónomos Revolucionarios, and the Frente Revolucionario de Agrónomos Mexicanos. With the onset of the Cold War, voices within the Mexican government and the Rockefeller Foundation shifted toward emphasizing efficiency and productivity. They saw the small plots of the ejidatarios as unsuited to this aim and looked to the commercial capitalist farms to spread the new green revolution technology and thereby boost production. Within the Rockefeller Foundation it was Norman Borlaug who pushed for this change in orientation, which dovetailed with the aims of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) governments, especially that of President Alemán (1946–1952), which enthusiastically promoted the green revolution. Olsson draws a parallel between the conservative assault on the New Deal in the United States and this policy shift toward the agribusiness sector in Mexico.

While there certainly are agrarian crossings, these are largely dominated by the United States, as US corporate capital and agribusiness with its technological, financial, and marketing power, which even manages to dominate the world food system, is able to influence Mexico's agrarian policy in its favor. Their agricultures are intertwined as US capital invests in Mexican agriculture, Mexican laborers work on US farms, and there is an active trade of food products, inputs, and so on between them. There are also a variety of dynamic professional, academic, and other institutional exchanges that have a bearing on the shaping of ideas and policies. A sequel to Olsson's study could examine these more recent crossings and their impact on the countryside on both sides of the border.

The key message I take from Olsson is his poignant statement that “the destruction of peasant agricultures was the product of political choices, not free market economics or technological determinism” (199). While Olsson, in his rich analysis of the reformers and the remaking of the US and Mexican countryside, does not fully develop a class analysis for interpreting these developments, he certainly points in that direction and provides the materials for furthering such a class perspective, as it is class forces that drive these transformations, albeit not exclusively so, as his book shows.

Mexico’s revolutionary agrarian reform was the first in Latin America to tackle the problem of the grossly unequal land distribution dominated by the hacienda system. Around half of the country’s arable land was distributed to peasants and rural laborers organized in ejidos, which are communal landholdings largely farmed by ejidatarios, as their members were called, as family farm units that they were not allowed to sell or rent. Wolfe’s book is a stark reminder that the control of water can be as important as the control of land, especially in areas that rely on irrigation. During the sexenio of the Cárdenas government, the control and distribution of water was more closely integrated with the distribution of land. While the ejido sector now controlled more land than the private sector, it had far less access to water than the commercial farm sector. Hence the distribution of water had to be aligned with the distribution of land. To begin to deal with the problem of insufficient water to meet demand as well as its unequal distribution, the state embarked on a program of dam building and developing an institutional framework for regulating its use. This turned out to be a far more difficult problem to solve, and in some ways it created new problems and even exacerbated old ones. Wolfe tells this history well and with much detail, although at times he goes back and forth, making it difficult to follow. But Wolfe captures very well the controversies that these “waters of the revolution” generated. He indicts the Mexican *técnicos* for their technological optimism and determinism: “Whatever environmental problems they expected deployment of their hydraulic technology to create, they had unbridled faith that more advanced technology could solve them later. By and large, they would remain ... negligent, at best, and callous, at worst, about how invasive deployment of their technology would prove to be” (Wolfe, 20).

But the key debate for many decades, reflecting the shifting power struggle within the PRI and the government, concerns the character of the agrarian reform, its purpose, and its future. This is aptly discussed by Wolfe, who points out that President Calles (1924–1928) favored an agrarian reform that would create prosperous middle-class farmers and bring social and political stability to the countryside. He did not favor the collective system of the ejido, as in his view ejidatarios lacked the entrepreneurial capacity and drive of such middle class farmers. The pendulum shifted back to the ejidos with Cárdenas (1934–1940), who put social inclusion and equity above technical efficiency and economic productivity. While Calles and his followers envisaged the ejido as a transitioning toward individual private land ownership, Cárdenas and his followers viewed it as a transition to a new socialist economy. The Cárdenas government was the high point of Mexico’s agrarian reform; subsequent governments shifted, with some ups and downs, to increasingly favor capitalist farmers and agribusiness while abandoning the ejidos to their fate but keeping the clientelistic mechanism of control over them so as to assure their allegiance to the PRI. What has happened regarding land concentration in Mexico after the end of the agrarian reform in 1992? Olsson and Wolfe do not pose this question and they discuss only marginally, if at all, the internal dynamics of the ejidos, which through a process of socioeconomic differentiation among the ejidatarios were further undermined. Regarding class analysis, Wolfe unfortunately never clarifies what he means by smallholders. Their origins are unclear, as well as their ethnicity and class position. Did some of these smallholders become medium to large landholders? Were they mainly capitalist farmers, as their employment of wage labor seems to indicate? In short, this ambiguous category needs further analysis. Also missing in both books is an analysis of the gender dimension of the agrarian reform.

The most ambitious book under review for its scope and theoretical ambition is by Michael Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform* (2015). It received LASA’s Bryce Wood Book Award in 2017. Albertus aims to formulate a general political theory of land reform by undertaking a descriptive statistical analysis and developing a series of regression models—first for Latin America, using data from all countries between roughly 1930 and 2008, and then for over forty-five countries in the world using data for the period 1900–2010; this allows him to place the Latin American case in a comparative perspective and to validate his various theses. He also undertakes an analysis of the land reform in Peru during the military government from 1968 to 1980, and in Venezuela from the late 1950s to the first decade of this century during the presidency of Hugo Chávez. Through his statistical analysis he expects to place the study of land reform from a comparative politics perspective on a firmer footing. Albertus is particularly concerned to explore the relationship between land reform and political regime. In doing so he questions the theses put

forward by well-known scholars like Barrington Moore Jr., Alexander Gerschenkron, and Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson. Albertus's study is probably the most comprehensive statistical analysis undertaken so far on land reform, and it makes a key contribution toward the development of a general theory of land reform.

Albertus presents various formulations of his key thesis throughout the book. At its starkest he writes that "the most redistributive variety of land reform occurs under autocratic rule, not under democracy" (1). His assessment of democracy is not the most flattering, as "the spread of democracy has undermined land redistribution and left many disregarded rural population cast adrift" (1). But does he examine to what extent autocratic regimes have prevented land reforms and even reversed them? Many researchers, including some of the authors discussed in this review, are likely to disagree with such a bold statement. Later he explains in a more nuanced manner that "land redistribution is most likely to occur when there are both coalition splits between political and landed elites as well as low institutional constraints to rule. Pressure from below and revolution are also robustly linked to land redistribution" (22). I find his argument about the splits quite promising, and he is right to encourage class-based models of democracy to "incorporate intra-elite splits that enable political elites who directly hold power to act separately from landed and other economic elites outside the government" (25). This has been done in a book that he does not cite and where he will find some validation of his split thesis.³ This thesis, according to Ethan B. Kapstein, *Seeds of Stability: Land Reform and US Foreign Policy* (2017), was previously formulated by Albert Hirschman in the late 1960s (81).

I do find Albertus's definition of land reform and the related typology problematic. He does not provide a general definition of land reform but does so indirectly through his typology. He defines "land redistribution," his first type of land reform, "as the undercompensated or uncompensated expropriation of land from the private sector and the redistribution of that land to the land-poor" (8). However, he fails to mention that the state plays a central role in this process. The second type of land reform he refers to as "land negotiation" and defines as "the acquisition of land from the private sector with market-value or above-market-value compensation and its subsequent transfer to the poor" (8). Again, the state is not mentioned explicitly. His third type of land reform is "land colonization," which is "the state-directed transfer of state-owned land to settlers" (8).

First, in my view land colonization is best not considered as land reform. As he concedes, "land negotiations and land colonization operate under logics distinct from land redistribution" (305). He also admits that colonization is favored by landlords as it relieves the pressure on land redistribution. In brief, it is a typically evasive measure designed to avoid tackling the key inequality in land. Furthermore, some state colonization projects have created a new latifundism as vast amounts of land were transferred, often illegally or by other corrupt means, to close allies to the government in power as happened in Bolivia.⁴

Second, while the land negotiation type of land reform might be included in an analysis of land reforms, it has also mainly been used as an evasive measure. It was the World Bank that started promoting this type of negotiated land reform, from the 1990s onward, in Brazil, Guatemala, Colombia, El Salvador, Philippines, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia but with poor results: only a very small fraction of land was redistributed, benefiting only a tiny fraction of the rural poor. This type of land reform is also referred to as market-led or market-assisted land reform to distinguish it from the state-led land reforms, although the state is also involved in the negotiated land reform but to a far lesser extent.⁵

In his typology Albertus assumes that land is transferred as private property to peasant family households, as when he argues that land reforms "contribute to agricultural growth, given that small farms are typically more productive than large farms" (4). I am puzzled why he makes this assumption, as he knows that in his two case studies, Peru and Venezuela, as well as in many other land reforms, land was also distributed in cooperative, collective, or state property. By ignoring the collective and statist character of several land reforms he fails to discuss the conflicts this generated which eventually lead to the fragmentation of the reformed sector. These conflicts had major social and political implications in the countries concerned. For example, in Peru indigenous communities invaded the collective or state farms resulting from the land reform as they were left out of the land distribution process. These factors allowed the emergence of Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) with devastating consequences for the social and political fabric of Peru. Moreover,

³ Maurice Zeitlin and Richard Earl Ratcliff, *Landlords and Capitalists: The Dominant Class of Chile* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴ Cristóbal Kay and Miguel Urioste, "Bolivia's Unfinished Agrarian Reform: Rural Poverty and Development Policies," in *Land, Poverty and Livelihoods in an Era of Globalization*, ed. A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Saturnino M. Borras Jr., and Cristóbal Kay (London: Routledge, 2007), 44–45.

⁵ For a critical analysis see Saturnino M. Borras Jr., Cristóbal Kay, and Edward Lahiff, eds., *Market-led Agrarian Reform: Critical Perspectives on Neoliberal Land Policies and the Rural Poor* (London: Routledge, 2008).

the statement that “small farms are typically more productive than large farms” is controversial; at least Albertus should have pointed this out and referred to the long-running debate on “the inverse relationship” between farm size and productivity.⁶

In my view, it would have been helpful if Albertus had referred to other typologies so that the reader is made aware of the different ways land reforms can be analyzed, and thereby also clarifying his own reasons for his typology. For example, Alain de Janvry, in one of the most important books written on agrarian issues in Latin America, presents a very elaborate typology of seven land reforms, largely determined by his aim of discussing the different paths of transition to agrarian capitalism or to precapitalism in Latin America.⁷ In a simpler typology of land reform, Michael Lipton distinguished between distributivist land reforms and collectivist reforms.⁸ This typology has the advantage of explicitly including land reforms in which the land is farmed as a cooperative, collective, or state farm. I also think that Olsson and Wolfe would be happier with such typologies, as Albertus’s typology does not fully represent the communal character of the ejido. The limitations of Albertus’s typology is also exposed by his assertion that “Venezuela’s land reform now represents the largest land redistribution program in the Western Hemisphere” (23), a statement which many scholars will not find credible. Though it may well be correct if using Albertus’s characterization of land reform, which includes colonization, it makes little sense and, as in this case, can lead us astray. Kapstein does analyze Venezuela’s agrarian reform, which received much support from the US government, especially arising from the Alliance for Progress driven by the Kennedy administration. But Kapstein (185) does not repeat Albertus’s claim, despite being familiar with his book, and instead provides a table that shows how the percentage of family farms as a percentage of all farm holdings increased from 4 percent before the land reform to 5 percent in 1970 after the land reform. These low figures are puzzling, and Kapstein should have explained what is meant by family farms. Furthermore, Albertus’s claim is also cast into doubt by the 1997 Census, in which 5 percent of the largest landowners still had 75 percent of the land while 75 percent of the smallest landowners only had 6 percent of the land, revealing the limited impact of the 1960s land reform.⁹ Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian revolution and land reform, despite expectations, did not radically change this unequal land distribution.¹⁰ Thus readers may note that something does not quite add up.

Kapstein praises Albertus’s book, and while he agrees with much of his analysis he does fault him for minimizing “the role of foreign powers or multilateral institutions” (81) in his analysis of land reform. Indeed, Kapstein’s focus is on international politics and specifically on US foreign policy, as the subtitle indicates. More significantly, he does not find strong evidence for Albertus’s main thesis that “land reform is more likely under authoritarian rather than democratic regimes” (252). So the debate on Albertus’s thesis has already started and most likely will continue. Herein rests Albertus’s main contribution: providing some strong and controversial theses that stimulate debate and thereby promote further research on land reform.

Kapstein’s riveting account analyzes US foreign policy in the Cold War context, in which the promotion of land reform becomes a significant instrument. The experiences of the United States’ own agrarian history and the New Deal, together with the influence of modernization theory, shaped the thinking of US policy makers. Poverty and inequality were seen as the main causes of rebellions and uprisings. They had to be tackled to avoid the increasing spread of communism after the Second World War. Hence US intervention abroad promoted reform in order to prevent revolution. Through land distribution and the “land to the tiller” policy, the aim was to create a conservative peasantry and a bulwark against communism as well as to promote political stability. Much has been written on US foreign policy, and much of what Kapstein writes is familiar. However, his determined focus on land reform and comparative analysis does shed some new light or contest some existing beliefs. For example, he points out that land reform was not imposed by the United States on a reluctant Japan after its defeat in the Second World War but had its roots in 1920s Japan, and it was the Japanese government that actually drove the land reform effort. While most scholars view the Alliance for Progress as a failure, Kapstein argues that it was a success in Venezuela. But for him,

⁶ For a major debate on the “inverse relationship,” see the special double issue edited by Terence J. Byres, “Redistributive Land Reform Today,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 4, nos. 1–2 (2004): 1–225; and the robust reply by Keith Griffin, Azizur Rahman Khan, and Amy Ickowitz, “In Defence of Neo-classical Neo-populism,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 4, no. 3 (2004): 361–386.

⁷ Alain de Janvry, *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

⁸ Michael Lipton, “Towards a Theory of Land Reform,” in *Agrarian Reform and Agrarian Reformism*, ed. David Lehmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 270.

⁹ Gregory Wilpert, “Land for the People Not for Profit in Venezuela,” in *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform*, ed. Peter Rosset, Raj Patel, and Michael Courville (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2006), 251–252.

¹⁰ See Thomas E. Purcell, “The Political Economy of Rentier Capitalism and the Limits to Agrarian Transformation in Venezuela,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17, no. 2 (2017): 296–312.

success means that the Alliance for Progress together with the backing of the US military succeeded in defeating the nascent insurgency. He also studies the land reform of El Salvador, arguing that it presented the US government with the biggest insurgency headaches. In his view the root cause of insurgency was agrarian inequality, a problem that the 1980 land reform began to tackle, thereby producing one of the main conditions for the peace agreements. This case might provide some lessons for the current peace agreements in Colombia.

Many books have been written on Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST), but the book edited by Miguel Carter, *Challenging Social Inequality: The Landless Rural Workers Movement and Agrarian Reform in Brazil* (2015), deserves a special place for its extensive coverage of the manifold aspects of the MST as well as for the quality of the individual chapters. There are seventeen authors, eleven from Brazil and the remainder based in North-America and Europe. I cannot possibly do justice to the authors in the limited space available for this review given that the book has over five hundred pages divided in sixteen chapters. Carter in his introductory chapter reaches similar conclusions as Albertus as he finds that the most radical land reforms "have taken place in nondemocratic settings, usually after a social revolution or a foreign military occupation" (18). The reasons for this result are similar to those given by Albertus: democracies are restricted in their action by constitutional constraints and mechanisms of due process. But Carter usefully introduces a distinction in political democracies between conservative and progressive approaches to agrarian reform. In a table, he provides ten different criteria to distinguish these two approaches. It may surprise readers to discover that when Carter applies these criteria he finds that Brazil's agrarian reform during Lula's government was essentially conservative.

From the various chapters the view emerges that it was the struggles of the peasant and rural labor movements that got the land process going, and that when the mobilizations and pressures waned so did the expropriation process, although with a possible time lag. As Carter argues, "land reform measures enacted thus far have strived mainly to appease immediate claims, defuse local conflicts, and, above all, avoid major confrontation with large landholders" (24). There is no direct statement that the land reform was made possible by a "split" between the landed and political elite, as we would expect when applying Albertus's thesis. Perhaps the land reform was "conservative" because there never was a complete split between the landed and political elites. As several contributors in this book mention, the various landed organizations remained very powerful and continued to have major influence in shaping government policy. While the MST and other peasant and rural labor movements had access to the Ministry of Agrarian Development, which was responsible for agrarian reform and family farming, the landed elite and agribusiness had access to the far more powerful and better-resourced Ministry of Agriculture. The government of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) had only partial control over the state bureaucracy and had to negotiate in Parliament with various sectors representative of the agrarian elite, thereby making compromises. Hence, it is not surprising that agribusiness and the landed elite received the lion's share of the government resources channelled to the agricultural sector through generously subsidized credit, debt equalization, purchase and price guarantee schemes, infrastructural investments, and so on. In brief, as some of the authors conclude, Brazil's agrarian structure did not change substantially, remaining highly unequal, although the agrarian elite has modernized and transformed Brazil into a world agro-power by becoming an agro-export powerhouse.

Carter entitles his epilogue to the book "Broken Promise," reminding readers of the title of a book by Thiesenhusen.¹¹ While it is true that the PT did not "live up to the party's historic promise of agrarian reform" (Carter, 413), it is only fair to acknowledge the historic achievement of the various peasant and rural worker organizations, particularly the MST, which by organizing and mobilizing the rural poor contributed to the democratization of rural society and the country as a whole. As several contributors mention, this achievement was made possible and facilitated by the PT governments, despite tensions and disagreements between them, as they refused to repress and criminalize these organizations and movements as in the past. Carter analyzes the capacity of the MST for mobilization, which he refers to as "repertoire for collective action," using Charles Tilly's notion of "repertoire of contention." This MST repertoire involved a series of mobilizations such as land occupations and demonstrations, which were most common, as well as protest camps, road blockades, occupation of buildings, long-distance marches, and hunger strikes. Without this repertoire of collective actions, which also involved other rural and urban popular organizations, far less land would have been redistributed and fewer civil, social, and political rights would have been extended to the rural poor and other historically discriminated against and disadvantaged groups. What I find also remarkable is that the MST retained a significant degree of autonomy despite its many dealings with

¹¹ William C. Thiesenhusen, *Broken Promises: Agrarian Reform and the Latin American Campesino* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

various government institutions and the PT. Comparable rural organizations in many other Latin American countries lost legitimacy among their membership as, on becoming entangled in the web of patron-client relationships, they became tools of government policy or pawns of political parties and were no longer able to represent the interest of their members. What I miss in Carter's book is a chapter on gender, as women played a progressively important role within the MST, in the mobilizations, encampments, the new agrarian reform settlements, and so on, as well as by establishing their own rural women organizations.

Is Land Reform History?

What is the future of land reform? Wolfe mentions how in Mexico, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari effectively terminated its agrarian reform in 1992 by revising Article 27 of the Constitution. Wolfe foresees major environmental problems ahead. He chastises various governmental environmental and regulatory institutions for being captured by agribusiness interests and failing to act in the public interest. Olsson also sees that the future challenges are environmental but also demographic. He argues that to tackle these challenges we must get rid of the "artificial dichotomies of Global North and Global South, of First World and Third World" (199), for they are common problems necessitating collective responses. He puts his faith in family and peasant farming as he blames mainly agribusiness for contributing to the environmental and "planet of slums" problems. How feasible is such a proposal? I will come back to this point.

Meanwhile, Albertus is not too hopeful about the future of redistributive land reform due to the spread of democracy, a point that sounds odd but is consistent with his theses that we have already examined. As he writes, "For those living in one of the increasing number of democracies in the world, land redistribution is more or less off the table" (312). Hence, he puts his faith in "making land negotiation and land colonization work." While they may be the only viable option for getting land to the tiller, they do not address the fundamental problem of rural inequality as he readily admits although, in his view, they do ameliorate land conflicts and rural violence. However, as already mentioned, the experience with market-led land reform has been limited and very few frontier regions remain, thereby limiting further colonization. For Kapstein, land reform is certainly not "dead," as some authors assert; but, like Albertus, he acknowledges that the focus is no longer on redistributive policies. Instead, the World Bank, USAID, and other international donors have promoted land registration and titling. It is a neoliberal land policy to regulate land tenure aimed at securing private property rights over land and thereby facilitating the expansion of land markets. This can hardly be considered a land reform and in some instances has facilitated land concentration.

Already in 1978, David Lehmann proclaimed the death of land reform, or so it seemed. He argued that "the issues at stake transcend land reform."¹² Provoked by Lehmann's article and subsequent proclamations of the death of land reform, Lipton discusses such views and concludes, "The debate about land reform is alive and well. So is land reform itself. And so it should be."¹³ I stated earlier that "major agrarian reforms, especially of a collectivist kind, are unlikely to recur," but at the same time I argued that land reform remained on the agenda especially as neoliberalism was furthering an unequal and exclusionary agrarian system.¹⁴ I certainly did not rule out the need for future land reforms but was sceptical that these would be far-reaching, let alone of a collectivist kind. With the pink tide sweeping through several Latin American countries at the beginning of the millennium, new hopes for radical and even collectivist land reforms arose. While almost all pink tide governments, to a greater or lesser extent, set in motion land reform programs, these fell far short of expectations, as already concluded for Brazil by Carter and his contributors.

This is not the place to discuss the reasons for such disappointing outcomes, which are analyzed in the various articles published in a special issue on the agrarian policy of the pink tide governments that I coedited with Leandro Vergara-Camus.¹⁵ But it may be relevant to mention briefly what circumstances make the task for land reform more difficult today. The traditional hacienda or latifundia system has largely disappeared because of earlier land reforms and/or its modernization (sometime as a consequence of land reform). Thus, today we have capitalized and technically advanced capitalist farms dominating Latin America's countryside. These agribusinesses employ far less labor than the large estates of the past, when most workers lived on the farm and had access to a plot of land for their subsistence. These tenant workers have largely disappeared as the modernized capitalist farms employ wagedworkers under precarious labor conditions. Most live outside

¹² David Lehmann, "The Death of Land Reform: A Polemic," *World Development* 6, no. 3 (1978): 339.

¹³ Michael Lipton, *Land Reform in Developing Countries: Property Rights and Property Wrongs* (London: Routledge, 2009), 322.

¹⁴ Cristóbal Kay, "Latin America's Agrarian Reform: Lights and Shadows," *Land Reform, Settlement and Cooperatives*, no. 2 (1998): 8–31.

¹⁵ Cristóbal Kay and Leandro Vergara-Camus, eds., "Peasants, Agribusiness, Left-Wing Governments and Neo-Developmentalism in Latin America: Exploring the Contradictions," special issue, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17, no. 2 (2017): 239–437.

the farm in nearby towns and cities, some are migrant workers, and labor contractors increasingly provide the required workers for agribusiness. Hence, it becomes increasingly difficult to organize rural laborers, and even more so to mobilize them for a land reform, as the main demands of many are better employment conditions and higher wages. There are few mass mobilizations demanding land reform as compared to those before the new millennium. The peasants of today have to confront agribusinesses, which are more powerful than the traditional landlords of the past as they are interlinked in a complex web with industrial, financial, and commercial capital, as well as with foreign capital. Furthermore, this modernization forced more peasants to migrate to the cities or abroad. As urbanization continued to grow, the rural vote has become less important. With the end of the Cold War, and with the threat of communist insurgency no longer on the horizon, neither the dominant capitalist class nor its allies in the United States or elsewhere feel compelled to tackle the remaining and newly emerging inequalities that have arisen with neoliberal globalisation. The main reason why I think that governments, even of a progressive kind, are not inclined to undertake major land reforms is their firm conviction that these modernized, large-scale farm enterprises are more productive than peasant farmers and hence more likely to satisfy the country's food requirements in the domestic markets. Moreover, since the agro-export boom governments have come to depend on the export revenue generated by agribusiness.

With the ecological crisis acquiring greater dimensions, as Wolfe and Olsson point out, the agrarian question in the era of the neoliberal global food system has become a global problem. Carter alerts readers to the environmental and health costs of corporate agriculture and highlights the need to shift to agro-ecological peasant farming. In his view there is an increasing recognition among leading scientists and global policy makers of "the kernels of ecological wisdom found among the alleged 'backward people' and 'historical residues' of modernity—the peasants, indigenous communities, forest gatherers, artisanal fisherfolk and nomadic pastoralists" (Carter, 425). This sentiment has been put into action by La Via Campesina, a transnational agrarian movement that over the last couple of decades has campaigned for a new global food system based on "food sovereignty."¹⁶ A redistributive land reform on a global scale would be required to achieve such aims. Whether this is desirable and possible is a matter for debate but one that is acquiring increasing urgency.

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¹⁶ For a key debate on food sovereignty, see Philip McMichael, "Food Sovereignty, Social Reproduction and the Agrarian Question," in *Peasants and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation and the Agrarian Question*, ed. A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay (London: Routledge, 2009), 294–302; and Henry Bernstein, "Food Sovereignty via the 'Peasant Way': A Sceptical View," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, no. 6 (2014): 1031–1063.

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