

## Farm Labourers and Small-Scale Producers in Latin America

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# Farm Labourers and Small-Scale Producers in Latin America

Jim Handy

Steve Striffler, *In the Shadows of State and Capital: The United Fruit Company, Popular Struggle, and Agrarian Restructuring in Ecuador, 1900-1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2002)

Sue Branford and Jan Rocha, *Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil* (London: Latin American Bureau 2002)

John Hellin and Sophie Higman, *Feeding the Market: South American Farmers, Trade and Globalization* (London: ITDG Publishing 2003)

IN 1994, ERIC HOBSBAWM suggested in his *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* that, “The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century ... is the death of the peasantry.”<sup>1</sup> Hobsbawm was not the first to proclaim the impending end of the peasantry; proclamations predicting or detailing their demise have been common stretching back at least to the era of enclosures in 17th century Britain. But, as Hobsbawm suggests, the second half of the 20th century, marked by increased globalization of trade in agriculture especially since the formation of the WTO, has been a difficult time for small-scale agricultural producers throughout the world. The three books considered here detail this process in the context of increased trade in agriculture throughout Latin America. They do so in very different fashions and with significantly differing messages.

Steve Striffler’s *In the Shadows of State and Capital* is a wonderful and nuanced account of smallholder and rural worker struggles against the United Fruit Company in coastal Ecuador. The book details their temporary victory over the company and their eventual inability to build viable small-scale agricultural hold-

<sup>1</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London 1994), 289.

ings or peasant co-operatives in the context of government neglect and the international market for bananas. Sue Branford and Jan Rocha's *Cutting the Wire* provides a detailed exploration of Latin America's largest peasant organization, the Brazilian *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), focusing on occupations of estates and attempts to build viable settlements after taking possession of the lands. Jon Hellin and Sophie Higman's *Feeding the Market* attempts to explore the challenges and opportunities for small-scale producers in Latin America in the current international market for agricultural goods. While valuable for the various ways it discusses the complexity of production decisions facing Latin American smallholders, it is flawed by a simplistic approach to the role of markets and is intent on making an argument about the value of engagement in international markets that is not supported by the evidence they provide. Taken as a whole, these three works suggest some of the more interesting currents in the literature concerning Latin American peasants, the state, and markets in the 20th century.

Striffler's study focuses on the area encompassed by and surrounding one hacienda in the south coast of Ecuador. In the 1930s the United Fruit Company, as part of its restless search for land not affected by Panama disease, arrived at the south coast of Ecuador, purchased a former cacao plantation, hacienda Tenguel, and transformed it into a "typical" banana enclave. They invested heavily in the region and by the 1950s Tenguel was one of United Fruit Company's most important plantations. Faced with occupations of its property by peasants and workers and problems with disease, the company abandoned Tenguel to worker/peasant "communes" by the 1960s. In the ensuing years, however, United Fruit's successor, Chiquita, along with other major banana marketing firms, have come to dominate the region in another fashion. Now purchasing their bananas from contract banana producers, the banana companies have off-loaded the political, environmental, and production risks, while the workers labour under worse conditions than those imposed by the United Fruit Company a half century earlier. In Striffler's hands, the story of this transition, "From Workers to Peasants and Back Again," as one chapter is entitled, tells us much about the workings of the banana companies, peasant and worker protest, and the role of the state in Ecuador through the 20th century.

Striffler, an anthropologist by training, explores this story through an imaginative use of archives and oral history. One key argument, presented in convincing fashion, is that peasants and workers were able not only to affect the local operations of the United Fruit Company, but also to help determine the ways that the company operated in the international banana market. Peasants and workers took advantage of opportunities afforded them to occupy land claimed by the hacienda Tenguel, withstand pressure from the company and the state, and create peasant co-operatives on the land. This challenge to the company's powers helped prevent the company from shifting production to new lands when disease attacked older sections of the plantation. Partly as a result the United Fruit Company abandoned

production to local contractors, as it had already done to a large extent in its Central American plantations. While ultimately these workers and peasants were encased in even more onerous forms of exploitation by the contract growers, Striffler's point is that even the "failed struggles of subordinate groups shape historical processes" (17) and help determine the nature and functioning of international capital.

One of the most interesting aspects of Striffler's account involves an exploration of the nature of the Ecuadorian state's insertion in this struggle. While the area around Tenguel was a "frontier" region, a region in which the imprint of the company was often more obvious than that of the state, Striffler avoids focusing on the "weakness" of the Ecuadorian state, but rather provides us with a more satisfying exploration of the fragmented nature of the state. The state, he says, was both "geographically thin" and "politically divided." Thus, "there was no 'State' in the sense of a unified actor that could make and implement a coherent set of policies." This is explored most successfully in the discussion of the peasant and worker occupations of land. Peasants were able to use the multiple fractures of the state — among competing agencies, conflicting personalities, even overlapping geographic divisions — to have their communes recognized by at least certain agencies of the state and avoid dispossession by the company. In Striffler's words, some peasants "were, or rather became, experts at navigating the internal divisions within the Ecuadorian state." (30)

On the other hand, Striffler also explores the development of a form of hegemony. In return for having their successful occupations of Company land recognized, peasants needed to accept the creation of peasant communes organized by the Ministry of Social Welfare and identify themselves as "comuneros." While this worked reasonably well for those peasants and workers attempting to get control of land in the region in the 1950s, it contained dangers. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Ecuadorian state's reach became both more penetrative and more coherent. Especially with the military dictatorship that came to power in 1963, independent peasant and worker organizations were increasingly targeted and they were turned gradually into clients of the state. As it did in other countries of Latin America, the state advanced its domination of peasant and worker movements through the agency of agrarian reform in the 1960s and 1970s. Gaining land, once accomplished through peasant/worker co-operation and their own ability to function within the fractures of the state, now became only possible for rural workers on the south coast if they were to join "into state sanctioned organizations, follow a particular set of procedures and work through a defined set of state institutions." (127) This insured that peasant organizations were less able to resist state pressure when in the 1970s, the government shifted its emphasis from agrarian reform to "rural development." In this context, the peasant organizations, once "reluctant rebels," were turned into state clients and then professional managers of state-sanctioned development projects.

This shift, which helped end the process of agrarian reform and allowed local landowners to consolidate holdings, coincided with renewed interest by the banana companies in the Ecuadorian south coast. In Central America in the 1960s, the widespread adoption of the Cavendish banana, which was resistant to Panama disease, had once again shifted banana companies' interest to that region and helped marginalize Ecuador, where the dominant banana type was still the Gros Michel. However, the Cavendish proved to be susceptible to its own disease types, particularly sigatoka negra. Ecuador again became an inviting locale for banana production. By the 1970s, however, the banana companies adapted their model of contract growing, used widely in Central America, to the new conditions on the Ecuadorian south coast. Contracting has tremendous advantages for the banana companies, who control production decisions and the harvest without taking any of the risks of production and without having to discipline labour. Local contract growers, more easily able to influence the Ecuadorian state, have presided over a labour regime for banana workers that is more onerous than that fostered by the United Fruit Company a half century earlier. As Striffler points out, labour discipline in the region is maintained through a form of "disorganization" via a process of devaluing labour to such an extent that no one thinks of themselves as a banana worker and most labour on the plantations for a period of four to five years, with few workers over the age of thirty. As one worker commented, "My father worked this land for a company called United Fruit. A foreign company. There was a union, they provided good houses, and the pay was excellent. Today, I work for an Ecuadorian who pays me shit. But he controls nothing. He contracts with Dole. It is also a foreign company." (195)

At heart this is a depressing story that explores a number of key debates in the historic literature. Striffler tells it in an engaging manner. He refuses to romanticize the peasants and workers of the south coast, but he tells their story with warmth and sympathy, letting them tell their story in their own words on occasion, clarifying the issues and the subjects when appropriate.

The most consistent message that comes from Striffler's interviews with residents of the region about their history is the central importance of their struggle for land. This is a story taken up by Sue Branford and Jan Rocha in *Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil*. The Brazilian MST was forged in the early 1980s by peasant activists, many inspired by the Catholic Church in the three southern states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná. It was a response to mass dispossession of peasant families that accompanied changes to Brazilian agriculture as well as of families along the Paraná River who lost their lands to the construction of dams. From the beginning the MST focused on occupying land that was not being used productively. According to the authors, by the time they were preparing their book, the MST had more than a million members and had won nearly five million hectares of land. In those two decades, the MST has made many mis-

takes, lost more than its share of martyrs, and is trying to do nothing less than revolutionize agriculture production in Brazil.

Branford and Rocha are journalists and authors who have worked for many years in Brazil. This book is drawn from 18 months they spent studying the MST, talking with leaders, visiting settlements, accompanying occupations, and collecting the stories of numerous members. Along the way they have provided us with a wonderful and intriguing picture of Latin America's largest peasant movement. By chronicling the MST's exploration of alternatives to the globalization of agriculture which helped produce the landless, they also provide us with glimpses of an alternative approach to living with and working the land that is generating a challenge to the globalization of agriculture inherent in the WTO. Branford and Rocha divide their work into four parts: detailing the formation of the MST, their struggle for land, the obstacles they face, and the MST's response. In all but one part of this last section they do a remarkable job.

The MST's decision to move from negotiation with the military government that still held power in Brazil in the 1980s to confrontation through occupation of land evolved through a combination of an intuitive process driven from desperation and subsequently from a commitment to careful planning and intensive discipline. Branford and Rocha trace the first occupations from the late 1970s, when 110 landless families assisted by a parish priest involved in the Pastoral Land Commission and a young economist working for the state department of agriculture, Joao Pedro Stédile, invaded the Sarandí estate in Rio Grande do Sul. This occupation set the pattern in many ways for the hundreds that were to follow. After 78 days of surviving in the camp established on the estate, the families were confronted by heavily armed policemen sent to drive them from the land. According to the priest, Father Arnaldo, "The women, with their children, formed a barrier. They told the police commander that, if he wanted to get at their husbands, he'd have to deal with them first. And the commander, bewildered, didn't know what to do. In the end, he and his men left. It was one of the most beautiful things I have seen in my life." (12) Just over a year after their initial occupation, the state government agreed to give them title to the land.

The focus of the first part of the book, indeed the main message of the book itself, is the determination of the MST and its members to get access to land. The MST's own slogans reflect this obsession; in 1990 this was "Agrarian Reform, by Law or by Force." Its other main slogan that year — "Occupy, Resist, Produce" — reflects the three stage process that was central to MST operations. Indeed, the painstaking preparations for massive occupations of idle estates were only the first stage in a very long process. The invading families of the Sarandí estate were lucky. In many other instances, occupying families were driven from the estate more than once. The MST routinely returns to re-occupy such estates. In many instances, peasants needed to live in a camp, usually in black plastic tents with police forces making movement to and from the camp difficult and often dangerous, for many years.

Peasants who invaded the Finca Annoni near Porto Alegre in 1984 lived under police embargo until 1987 and did not get allocated plots of land until 1993. As one of the invaders, Darci Bonato, explained, "I spent nine years in the camp, nine years living under black polythene. But, I don't regret it. If I hadn't done that, I would have worked for 30 years as a farm labourer and ended up without a single hectare. So for me it was a huge victory..." (39)

Two issues immediately spring to mind in considering these occupations: the complex relationship between the MST and the state, and the need for discipline in the camps. As can well be imagined, the MST's decision to force agrarian reform through occupations has been met with a violent response on the part of the government. The level of violence and the extent to which it is accompanied by attempts to co-opt the MST is complicated by local and regional issues and by Brazil's sometimes contradictory transition to democracy. As in Ecuador, the Brazilian state is not monolithic, and the MST, through much of its early years, was engaged in a complicated relationship with the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), which sometimes supported the MST and sometimes opposed its actions. The MST's relations with other agencies of the state were less ambiguous (and more openly hostile) but even here the level of violence and attempts at co-optation varied with different regimes. The Collor government, intent on adopting a neo-liberal economic approach to agricultural production in Brazil, was more hostile to the MST and more prepared to respond to occupations with violence than subsequent administrations have been.

The complexity is heightened by differing state responses to the actions of the MST. It is not too surprising, perhaps, that some of the most violent responses have occurred in the Amazon, especially in the state of Pará, dominated as it is by ranchers. It is more surprising that this violence has been matched in the south in the state of Paraná, especially under the governorship of Jaime Lerner. Those who have read of Lerner as the hero of responsible urban planning in Curitiba may find this quite revealing.

The MST has been careful not to be co-opted into too close an association with even sympathetic government agencies. It has, as an organization, continued to argue that its strength lies in its own internal organization, its commitment to the struggle, and its unwillingness to deviate from its major goal of obtaining land for its members. This has often meant that the MST is perceived as 'prickly' and dogmatic in its relations with even occasionally supportive sectors, such as elements of the church and the Minister of Agriculture under the Cardoso government, Raul Jungmann. This has both risks and rewards for the MST. On the one hand it means that the MST alienates sectors in Brazil, particularly sectors of the government, that might be useful to it. On the other hand, it insures that the MST will not be co-opted and that there is little danger of the movement losing its strength as it gets drawn into implementing government policy as happened to the peasant leagues in Ecuador in Striffler's story. The benefits and dangers of this were clearly shown in the

MST's relations to the Cardoso government. Early in the Cardoso administration, the government promised an extensive agrarian reform. The minister responsible, Jungmann, argued that the MST and the government's agrarian reform program were useful to each other. Pressure from the MST allowed the ministry of agriculture to make demands for funds and attention from the government in ways it would not have been able to do without that pressure. Jungmann also argues that the MST benefitted by having a government committed to agrarian reform. Nonetheless, by 1997, the MST was denouncing the government for not providing "real" agrarian reform and on the anniversary of a massacre of peasant leaders on 17 April 1996, they marched to Brasilia in the thousands and demanded an audience with Cardoso. This demonstration of widespread popular support for the MST completed the rupture with the Cardoso government and the MST was subject to intense police pressure for the rest of the administration. The MST's ability to maintain independence, while building a program that demands government action in the form of agrarian reform, will be interesting in light of the election of Luis Ignácio da Silva (Lula) and the PT party, an old ally of the MST, in the last election.

The other issue is the need for discipline in the MST settlements. Life in the settlements is explored at some length in the book. While very often the settlements are portrayed as real communities, with people united in their struggle and intent on building viable communities together, even when forced to live under plastic, issues of discipline and law and order are often of major importance. The MST has needed to strike a balance between proselytizing for the kind of "new man" that is a central focus of the MST and allowing peasants to get on with their life. As the book demonstrates, but only in brief examples, it sometimes gets this balance wrong and people have complained both about too much control by MST militants and too lax discipline, especially as newer recruits are brought into the camps.

Much of the book focuses on the struggle for land and resisting government pressure. But, Branford and Rocha's account also explores the difficulties the MST encounters in making the settlements produce. The book does a good job detailing the transition in MST thinking from their early desire to make the settlements productive 'modern' farms through a focus on mechanization and the production of market crops to an understanding that MST settlements cannot profitably engage the same international markets that helped marginalize their residents in the first place. The MST has shifted its focus to more sustainable and more diverse agriculture production. While clearly sympathetic to this approach, the authors correctly indicate that the ultimate results of this strategy are still to be determined. One interesting discussion in this section explores the local economic ramifications of an MST settlement and helps explain why the MST often gets support from local mayors, artisans, and business owners in neighbouring towns. The impacts on rural communities when, as in the Pontal de Tigre settlement, the MST occupied a 10,000 hectare ranch that employed five families raising 3,500 head of cattle, and settled close to 10,000 inhabitants engaged in diverse agricultural pursuits can be dramatic.



*Cutting the Wire* is meant for a general audience. The book largely avoids much of the academic debate that might be incorporated in this discussion of the MST, focusing instead on the story and on the lives of those involved. The book is built largely on interviews with MST leaders and settlers. Their words are incorporated into the narrative of the MST and used in a series of sidebars on individuals and their families. As a whole this is effective. The book is a lively read and helps the reader get deeper into the lives of those affected by the landless movement in Brazil than would otherwise be the case. The sidebars are often very effective, helping us understand both the way the MST works and what it means for those involved in it. They are particularly useful in outlining the connections between the struggle for the land and the reclamation of lives that is explicit in the MST focus on education and other kinds of self-improvement courses. For example, the story told by Paulo Venancio de Mattos who left home when he was 7 and found in the MST both land and family outlines the type of cathartic social awareness the MST strives for. Along with his own story he points out how the MST tries to get people from rural slums to join the movement, "And once people understand that the reason they haven't got a decent home and can't feed their families is because the boss takes all the money, then they start to feel angry, to hate the bosses. And this helps to motivate them, helps to change them." (47-48) These personal stories also help explore more fully than the text does the role of women in the MST occupations and what the MST has meant for the lives of rural women who join the movement.

Two areas of inquiry are less impressive in the book. The book devotes some space to the internationalization of Brazilian agriculture and to the MST's various responses to the challenges presented by that process. However, the book does not explore, indeed does not even mention, the MST's involvement in the Via Campesina. The Via Campesina is an international organization of peasants and small producers, including peasant/ small farmer associations throughout Latin America and Asia, North America, and Europe. The MST's response to the globalization of Brazilian agriculture is, thus, framed in consultation and association with a much broader movement. The Via Campesina has helped influence MST policy and has supported the MST in many of their actions.

The second area of the book that is less successful occurs when the authors temporarily abandon their desire to make the work accessible to a broad audience and attempt to place the MST in historical perspective through an examination of what they argue are similar movements historically. A very brief discussion of three periods in British history, each drawn from a different source, and of the populist movement in the United States drawn from Lawrence Goodwyn's work is neither very persuasive nor very useful for the general argument presented in the book. Despite this, *Cutting the Wire: the Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil* is an impressive work providing a clear and easily read narrative of the largest peasant movement in Latin America.

Jon Hellin and Sophie Higman's *Feeding the Market: South American Farmers, Trade and Globalization* is the least successful of the three books considered here. In the course of a 12 month bike trip through Latin America, the two authors visited South American peasants, small producers, and larger scale farmers to explore their relationship to markets. The authors' intent was to investigate how markets could be made to work more effectively for these groups. The book devotes chapters to bananas in Ecuador, coffee in Ecuador and Bolivia, potatoes and quinoa in the Andes, grapes in Argentina and Uruguay, sheep in Patagonia, and forest products in Bolivia, along with a chapter on cocoa eradication in Bolivia.

Sections of this book are very useful and interesting. The discussion of the difficulty quinoa producers face in trying to produce organically when this requires crop rotation with potatoes that are difficult to grow organically, for example, is the kind of detailed and interesting discussion presented in parts of the book. Similarly, the chapter on the very limited opportunities for alternative crops for Bolivia's coca growers facing pressure to eradicate coca and the general lack of success they have experienced when they have tried to grow these alternatives is also informative.

More generally, however, the book suffers from a relatively undifferentiated approach to markets and a determined attempt to make an argument their evidence does not support. The authors intend that their work, in their own words, "provide a basis for a more rational debate about globalization." They go on to argue that, "If the anti-globalization protesters could accept some of the pro-market messages emanating from the farming communities in South America and elsewhere, a more productive protest manifesto would emerge." (217) In order to make the case for this argument, they assert, first, that markets are ubiquitous and, second, that there are a number of examples of incorporation into international markets that have benefitted smallholders in Latin America.

The first of these arguments is both obviously correct and obviously simplistic. The authors argue in the prologue of their book that all of the farmers they spent time with engage with the market, "[a] return to subsistence farming is not on the agenda," and that "globalization is neither inherently good or bad." They then cite Amartya Sen suggesting that "to be generically against markets would be almost as odd as being generically against conversations between people." This is all, of course, reasonable. Farmers and peasants have almost always engaged with the market and few have ever produced solely for subsistence. In that sense, a "return" to subsistence is impossible because it almost never existed in the first place. But, their argument suffers because it does not differentiate in a variety of important ways. The Sen quote that attempts to equate market relations with conversations suggests the difficulties. Virtually all farmers and peasants have engaged in markets, both historically and contemporarily. But, the authors equate, both explicitly and implicitly, markets with globalization. Nothing could be further from a conversation between people than globalized markets. Of course, engaging with the market is also different from being dominated by market relations. In this sense, Karl

Polanyi's observations more than a half century ago — that the 'great transformation' entailed a change from the market being employed as an element of societal relations, to one in which society was organized around the market — are still relevant. The issue is not whether to engage with the market but what roles the market should play in determining societal relations versus other social forces. In this context, the issues of what markets one produces for and to what extent local, regional, and national structures can be used to help determine the existence of varied markets and the terms of engagement with them are essential determinants of how successfully and willingly small farmers and peasants involve themselves in the market. This is at the heart of the debate about agriculture and globalization.

The second argument presented by the authors is most often proven wrong by their own evidence. One small example of the kinds of difficulties the authors get into through their attempt to construct an argument in opposition to the evidence they present occurs in their chapter on the wine-producing regions in Argentina and Uruguay. They point to Argentine wines as an example of a major success in the international market, a success which began with opening up Argentina to wine imports by the Menem administration in the 1990s. One element of that success has been the steady improvement of grape varieties and their quality in Argentina. The authors contrast this with the situation in Uruguay, where similar improvements have not occurred and where the wine industry, therefore, has enjoyed nothing like the boom experienced in Argentina.

But, in the process, many of the small grape growers in Argentina have been forced out of business, with the number of small vineyards falling by more than 67 per cent between 1990 and 2000. Those that continue are increasingly locked into production contracts with large wine producers that are not unlike those between banana producers and the big banana companies in Ecuador and elsewhere. In Uruguay, on the other hand, the government has not liberalized the wine trade and has continued to protect small vineyards that continue to produce mostly cheap national table wine. The authors suggest no solution to this perceived problem, except to say that protecting a domestic market for cheap wine is not feasible and to reiterate that, despite all their evidence, small grape producers might be able to tap specialty markets for branded wine.

Similar difficulties appear in the section on efforts to improve coffee quality in Bolivia as one of the answers to coca eradication. Anyone familiar with the disasters that have befallen even superb and efficient coffee producers in Central America in recent years would find an argument about improving coffee quality as a reasonable avenue to maintain the viability of small producers to be suspect, to say the least.

It is not surprising that the authors adopt the approach they do. Both have worked and published previously for OXFAM UK and some of the chapters in this book were originally produced for OXFAM. Their arguments fit well with OXFAM's recent decision to abandon opposition to the WTO and to work towards making mar-

kets work for the rural poor through the inclusion of a Development Box in WTO negotiations. As part of this shift, OXFAM has focused its attention on Fair Trade campaigns in a number of commodities, especially coffee. The authors spend a large part of their book detailing attempts by farmers in South America to tap these niche markets. What emerges from a close reading of their accounts is not just the environmental and social insustainability of current production for global agricultural markets, but the very limited success farmers have had in producing for these niche markets, the very limited economic benefits they see when they are successful in doing so, and the extreme difficulties farmers have in sustained production for these markets. Despite this, the authors continue to argue, as if their evidence has supported their suppositions, that global markets can be created which provide real opportunities for Latin American small farmers and peasants to engage with them in an environmentally sustainable and socially equitable manner.

Some of the detailed information about production and markets for specific commodities in specific locales in this book is useful. By and large, the book is presented in an engaging and readable fashion. It is ultimately, however, a frustrating book.

The restructuring of agriculture in Latin America that has accompanied the liberalization trend of the last two decades has created numerous difficulties for rural labourers, peasants, and small producers in Latin America. These three books illustrate many of those strains. They also, however, indicate the varied and imaginative ways these groups have responded to these challenges. *Feeding the Market* proselytizes for a false faith. While *Cutting the Wire* and even *In the Shadows of Capital* are not without optimism, they offer more realistic assessments of the prospects for peasants and small producers in the wake of such liberalization.

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