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Posseiros and intruders: property, and the struggle for land in Goiás during the Mauro Borges Teixeira Administration (1961-1964)

Posseiros e invasores: propriedade e luta pela terra em Goiás durante o governo Mauro Borges Teixeira (1961-1964)

Carlos Leandro da Silva Esteve*

RESUMO

No início da década de 1960, em Goiás, ocorreu uma série de conflitos em todo o estado que revelava um acirramento nas disputas pelo direito ao uso efetivo da terra. Protagonizadas por pequenos posseiros, tais lutas foram marcadas pela obstinação com que os pobres do campo defendiam seu direito à terra com base em uma noção de justiça que legitimava as ações de apossamento conquanto estivessem assentadas em práticas que vinculavam o direito à terra ao cultivo efetivo. Um olhar atento sobre esses conflitos ajuda-nos a desnudar a ideia consagrada da existência da propriedade privada absoluta, na medida em que a luta dos posseiros goianos, para além de uma luta pelo domínio da terra, caracteriza-se por uma disputa por novos entendimentos acerca do direito à propriedade e dos usos da terra. Palavras-chave: propriedade; direito à terra; Goiás.

ABSTRACT

In the early 1960s, a series of conflicts in Goiás revealed the worsening of the dispute for the right to effectively use land. Led by small *posseiros*, these struggles were marked by the obstinacy with which the rural poor defended their land rights based on a sense of justice that legitimized land seizures as well as being based on practices that linked land rights to effective cultivation. Examining these conflicts helps us to lay bare the consecrated idea of the existence of absolute private property to the extent that the struggle of *posseiros* in Goiás, as well as a struggle for land ownership, was characterized by a dispute over new understandings about the right to property and land uses.

Keywords: property; land rights; Goiás.

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Between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the following decade Brazilian state governments from different regions formulated agrarian reform projects with the purpose of modernizing their agricultural production at the same time that they sought to attenuate conflicts that had spread through the countryside. A striking and to a large extent defining trait of the period, these projects were based on a concern with stimulating a planned modernization of agricultural, though without it being necessary to change a landholding structure characterized by large properties, and on the collaborative enlistment of rural workers for state reforms, since there proliferated at that moment collective organizations of peasant interests and autonomous actions which tensed the limits of state agrarian reform projects.

This marriage between agrarian reform and state planning aimed at the modernization of agriculture in a technical framework and rationally prescribed in regional developed plans would mark the experiences of states like São Paulo, in the Carvalho Pinto administration (1959-1963), with the Action Plan and its *Agrarian Revision* which promised the distribution of unproductive lands to agricultural laborers (Tolentino, 2011); in Pará, during the Aurélio do Carmo administration (1961-1964) and its projects for the creation of colonial settlements; and in the Mauro Borges administration in Goiás (1961-1964), with the cooperativism of the agro-urban *combinados* and an *Agrarian Reformulation* with a technical profile. Common to these projects was the desire to create a type of rural 'middle class' which would function as an example of prosperity of small landholdings in the countryside, albeit reduced to some model experiences, at the same time that it acted to encourage a cooling of land conflicts arising out of the actions of small *posseiros* (squatters).

Contradicting the directives which guided the agricultural reform projects in Goiás, which believed that all the problems of Goiana agriculture were due to a lack of instruments and technical knowledge, the Goiano *posseiros* used various forms of struggle, acting on the basis of an understanding that the problem resided in the effective guarantee of the possession of land: since there were vacant public lands, since there were vast uncultivated private lands, and since there was a disposition on the part of the Mauro Borges administration to implement, as could be seen in his discourses, agrarian reform in Goiás, then there were no obstacles to direct actions aimed at occupying land.

Unifying these struggles were two struggles: the enrooting of a concept of the right to land associated with the idea of the justice for the rural poor who only wanted to work; and, no less important, a diffuse reading, but based on practice, of the meanings of property under the auspices of the conflicts

triggered by access to land. In other terms, it was during the process of the struggle for the right to land that the poor Goiano *posseiros*, imbued with a sense of justice inherited from the experiences of previous fights, forged their conceptions of the idea of ownership of property.

This sense of justice tensioned the consecrated model of individual private ownership of land, opposing to it forms of autonomous appropriation which challenged the state classification present in the agrarian reform projects of the Mauro Borges administration. Nevertheless, it can be highlighted that it was not rare for this sense of justice to imprint an acknowledged respect on the untouchability of the private notion of land, not questioning its statute, but opening breeches which reproduced other possible readings, such as the need for the customary tie between property and work. These questions were at the root of various conflicts for the right to land in Brazil in the period, and in Goiás achieved great amplitude in the years that preceded the 1964 coup.

We will discuss below some episodes of land conflict in Goiás at the beginning of the 1960s, which reveal conflictual interpretations about the right to land. This approach allows us lay bare the idea of absolute ownership of the land, exactly for a period in which the liberal conception of private and individual property was constituted in a legal landmark within the capitalist logic of appropriation. The struggle for the right to land in Goiás was inscribed in a set of conflicts which occurred in Brazil in the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s in which actions combined belief in the legal spaces of demand for individual strategies and the collective ones of direct confrontation and resistance to the legal and extra-legal forces of repression.

Furthermore, it is of interest to us to discuss under the auspices of the process of the struggle for land in Goiás a conflictual dynamic of the social recognition of the category of *posseiro* in contrast with the condemnation of the word *invader*, or, for us, the *new posseiro*, for whom at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the following access to land was closed due to measures aimed at agricultural modernization. One of the aspects of the vaunted agrarian reformulation of the Mauro Borges administration, as we will see, was the criminalization of the seizure of unoccupied land by small producers.

Before we begin the proposed discussion, it is necessary to hold a brief dialogue with some works which deal with the relationship between rural workers and the impacts of the transformations of Brazilian agriculture in that period. Greater attention will be given, nevertheless, to the authors who help us conceptually think about the question of land ownership in its historical dimension. Following this, we will deal with some experiences of land conflicts

which occurred in Goiás in light of the changes perpetuated in Brazil about the state dealt with the demands for land in a period of worsening conflict between the popular proposals demanding agrarian public policies and the agricultural bias adopted as the consecration of an agricultural model based on the paradigm of mechanization and the technical modernization of Brazilian agriculture.

HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF THE CONCEPT OF PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

In the 1960s and 1970s numerous scholars starting with distinct theoretical orientations dedicated themselves to reflecting on the destiny of large contingents of Brazilian rural workers, men and women dispossessed of their traditional conditions and relations of labor on the land. Arising out a period of intense transformations in Brazilian society, these studies resulted from the need to understand the impacts caused by political, economic, and cultural changes perpetrated by an increasing tightening of the relations between capital and labor in the rural environment. These changes increasingly came to be understood as the consequence of a modernization process which imposed on traditional Brazilian agriculture a model of development which integrated agriculture in industry under the auspices of a capitalist accumulation largely favored by the crystallization of the interests of large landholders within the Brazilian state, as well as in decision making spaces in the ambit of state executives.

Part of these works preached to a greater or lesser extent the historical inexorability of the proletarianization of the Brazilian rural worker in light of capitalist penetration and the dissemination of waged employment within the countryside, whether in a permanent manner (Prado Jr., 2014; Ianni, 1986), or intermittent (Sigaud, 1977), while others sought in the resistance presented, above all by the *posseiros* (Martins, 1981), to perceive the confrontations between distinct concepts of the right to land which opposed forms of possession based on direct ties with effective labor to the expropriating violence of *grilagens* (illegal land seizures through the use of forged deeds) in frontier areas. In the reflections of José de Souza Martins, for example, the *posseiro* acquired fundamental historical importance from the denial of capitalist ownership of the land. This is because land seizures in uncultivated areas through the action of *posseiros* did not imply the payment of a land based income to the large landholder, a necessary condition for the accumulation of capital.

We can therefore infer that although the occupation of land by *posseiros* did not *a priori* question the legal status of private landownership, even imposed in the seizure limits on the expansion of large capitalist ownership. It is interesting to point out that although there is not historically on the part of *posseiros* a denial about the legality of private land ownership, which can be verified in the desire to become landholders, nevertheless, there was in the practice of the claims to and resistance of possession, whether of vacant public lands or uncultivated private lands, the materialization of notions of justice strictly related to modes of life and work which linked cultivation and residency as a model guaranteeing the right to land.

In the analysis of the stratification of Brazilian rural society in the 1950s and 1960s, Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz (1978) highlights the relevance of taking into consideration that a large part of the contingent of Brazilian rural workers of the period belonged to the group of small independent producers, whether they were small landholders, *sitiantes* (subsistence farmers) or *posseiros*. These groups were characterized by the use of family labor in small tracts of land initially aimed at subsistence, but with perspectives of production and the selling of any excess in local markets. It is worth mentioning that when speaking about the *posseiro* de Queiroz highlights the historic conviction shared by rural workers in the *de facto* right to possess and cultivate land “without concerning themselves with whether the legal owner exists or not,” a practice which goes back to Colonial Brazil (p. 103).² It is important to observe in this argument that the recognition by the *posseiro* of legality did not reside in the guarantee of legal title of ownership, but in a notion of law which linked land to its effective cultivation.

More recent studies, formulated in the wake of Thompsonian reflections on laws and rights, have sought to combat the idea of a sovereign and unquestionable existence to land ownership as an absolute value. Rosa Congost (2000; 2007) calls attention to the need for scholars of the question of property ownership to look at the *real condition of effecting ownership*. According to the Catalan historian, this posture is prejudiced whenever approaches are opted for that tends to see a direct relationship between property and the laws which normatize it, to contrary of those who observe the existence of a concrete dynamic which is *implemented* under the auspices of social relations. From this it can be seen that both the definitions and distinct uses of the concept of property and the results of the conflict engendered by these divergences are not given in advance, predefined by any regulations or sacralized conceptions, but depend on the real and historic process of the struggles engaged in.

The emphasis on the plural and unstable, though subject to change, and therefore historic, rights to property, as well as the conviction that this process cannot be comprehended without an approach based on concrete studies which highlight the conflicts existing between the distinct understandings of rights, approximate the reflections of Congost to those of E. P. Thompson (1987; 1998), for whom law consists of a permanent area of struggle in which the correlation of forces in the judicial sphere in favor of the strongest does not imply an anticipated victory, much less an inexorable one.

Contrary to this perspective, the British historian defends that, accepting to participate in the rituals of law, which implies agreeing in advance with its norms and rules, the dominated used these same norms in their favor, tensioning the law by undertaking conflicts in the name of a *justice* constructed to a large extent under the auspices of customarily consecrated practices. Therefore, we have to understand that the reliance on the institutionality of justice by the dominated does not signify an uncontested surrender to legal mechanisms, but an option supported by the belief that these are spaces where the effectiveness of an expected *justice* can be glimpsed.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the resort to the arena of struggles under the auspices of the law does not exclude what Thompson's studies have widely confirmed, other arenas where other forms of confrontation are realized, such as direct actions for the defense and affirmation of a right, disobedience of norms which contradict shared conceptions in practice and violent resistance. This point is of fundamental importance in our reflection to the extent that it lays bare the false dilemma attributed to the poor in the countryside who struggle for land, who have to choose between fighting within the law or, to the contrary, acting outside it. Experience reveals and research has demonstrated that the distinct arenas of struggle have complemented each other.

In relation to the amplitude of the notion of conflict under the auspices of the law, Márcia Motta (2011, p. 23) states that "if we understand the law as a space of struggle it is necessary to recognize that there are various, and not just one, arenas of conflict: the one which refers to debates about the preparation of the law, the space of conflict; the arena which is manifested in the attempts to apply it and the one which is laid bare by the efforts to modify it." In her wake we can affirm that the spaces alluded to are not constituted in separate arenas or in distinct stages of struggle. To the contrary, there are actualized in the same process of strife between conflicting parties which articulate the forms of action and judicial representation to the exercise of pressures and counter-pressures which are distant from the legally recognized norms.

The authors mentioned, although they were dedicated to distinct historic spatialities,³ help us to throw light on other possibilities of thinking about the history of land conflicts in Brazil based on the confrontation between plural conceptions of the meanings attributed by the poor of the countryside to the concept of land ownership. Nevertheless, the posture of the denaturalization of the idea of absolute property (Congost, 2000; Motta, 2011) in favor of an approach which comprehends the different forms of the *realization* of property is required, given that it was verified through daily strategies of access to land and its resources.⁴

THE AGRARIAN REFORM OF MAURO BORGES

In general terms, the so called agrarian policy of the Mauro Borges administration consisted of a synthesis between the technical modernization of agriculture and the appeasement of land conflicts in the state, the dominant question throughout the previous decade. Achieving the former required a profound reformulation of the state apparatus with the aim of making it efficient in terms of the implementation of the measures required for the mechanization of agriculture in Goiás. This premise was present in all the state plans and initiatives formulated in the four years of the Mauro Borges administration.⁵ In relation to the resolution of land conflicts, colonization and technical assistance policies were drafted for the state's rural population in order to prepare them for the new cultivation techniques based on the use of modern raw materials. It was up to the poor in the countryside to assume the role of collaborator with the projects implemented by Goiana state agencies created to carry out the reformulation of agriculture in the state.

The summary constructed by this vision, diffused by various state dissemination channels, dislocated the demands of poor rural sectors for the urgent need for a landholding reformulation to the sphere of agricultural modernization (Silva, 1981), believing that the problem of poor Goiano agricultural workers did not reside in the existence of an agrarian structure which favored the large *latifundiários* (landholders), but in the lack of instruments which allowed the proper use of the soil and an increase in productivity.

In relation to the public policies of the Mauro Borges administration these referred directly to the question of access to land, the solution presented in relation to the great pressure for land seizures and the conflicts which resulted from this during the period was directed occupation involving the creation of spaces for cultivation materialized in the colonial settlement plans. Recognizing

the existence of a large quantity of public lands subjected to various forms of occupation, the state proposed to order access to land through the creation of colonial settlements aimed at receiving landless rural workers from all regions of Goiás (Borges Teixeira, 1965).

State concern with the control and direction of access to land occurred at that moment in light of the numerous conflicts spread through the state. There would be no more tolerance of *new* seizures of land by small *posseiros*, who from then on would be labelled *invaders*, an institutionalized category to which would be channeled the violent actions of the repressive agencies of the state. Recognition of the countryside poor's right to land was restricted to long-term *posseiros* in areas of occupation already consolidated through numerous struggles for permanence on the land.

The arguments adopted by Mauro Borges in his discourses and the way his administration dealt with land conflicts in Goiás are well known: inserted in a homogenous set of subversive manifestations and agitations which sought to destabilize their agrarian reform projects, manifestations of resistance and struggle for the land figured as isolated actions perpetrated by groups foreign to the cause of the agricultural workers and which sought to sow disorder in the rural environment with the aim of preparing foci of agitation throughout the state (Borges Teixeira, 1965).

As a result there emerged violent interventions of the state government, in the sense of equating the demonstrations of dissatisfaction expressed by agricultural worker organizations in various regions of the state, guided by foci which revealed the contradictions present in the agrarian policy of the Mauro Borges administration. Furthermore, these contradictions became even more acute when the question was related to the treatment given to rural workers who were not *classified* (or did not let themselves be *classified*) in the *collaborator* profile in state projects.

In this sense, the concern with demonstrating that the administration had to be recognized for its energetic action in the undermining of rural *agitation* revealed not only the intention of the Mauro Borges administration to present itself as an example of firmness and orderly positive posture in relation to agrarian conflicts. It also served as promotional material to demonstrate that in Goiás the question of land could be solved through efficient mediation by the state, once it was supported by a rational *agrarian reform* project which sought to reconcile the welfare of Goiano agricultural laborers with the industrial productivity of modern agriculture.

It was to emphasize the former aspect that Mauro Borges himself demonstrated on numerous occasions that the affirmative action of the state authorities was never be put in doubt when the evaluation of his posture towards *subversion* in the countryside was involved. The effort to undo any ambiguities about the actions of the state police, duly participating in the general orientation of the agrarian policy of the government, was consubstantiated in the way there appeared in the state discourse, especially after 1963, the question of the reconciling the struggle for land in Goiás.⁶ Reactions to the initiatives of the *posseiros* to the struggle for land involved immediate police repression. There was a clear and undeniable practice of direct violence against the so-called *invaders* in a prompt response to the requests of plantation owners threatened with occupation by groups of small *posseiros*.

Between 1961 and 1964, throughout the entire period which corresponded to the Mauro Borges administration, there were numerous land conflicts in various parts of the state between *posseiros*, gunmen – *jagunços* commanded by local ranchers – and the police. Some were only fleeting confrontations, remaining more a threat of armed confrontation than the effective melee. It is important to note that even those which had less repercussions and obtained circumscribed developments, many of which were frustrated in their intentions, should be understood as parts of a process of the intensifying of initiatives of questioning and the activities of groups of small agricultural workers who believed that they had a right to occupy properties which recognizably possessed extensive areas of uncultivated land, whether owned by the state or privately.

This perspective strengthened and put into practice the conviction that the idea of ownership should not be divorced from the idea of work, in the same way that work, that which experience related to living on and cultivating the land, should not be dissociated from it. We will, thus, turn now to some examples of land conflicts which occurred at the beginning of the 1960s during the Mauro Borges administration.

LAND CONFLICT ON SÃO CARLOS RANCH

The first land conflict which occurred during the Mauro Borges administration which we were able to ascertain occurred in the municipality of Goianésia, in *São Carlos* Ranch, in July 1961. A force of one hundred men sent to Goiânia were part of the military police troops headed by Major Antonio Bonfim Rodrigues dos Santos, joining the police detachments of Goianésia in

the task of *expelling* groups of *invaders* from *São Carlos* Ranch at the request of the rancher, owner of the lands claimed by the *posseiros*.⁷

Furthermore, land conflicts on this ranch had occurred at least three years earlier. At this time the first confrontations occurred between *posseiros* and gunmen hired by the rancher. The owner of *São Carlos* – an old coffee plantation which had belonged to his family since the 1920s, but which in 1961 was in decline due to the abandonment of a large part of the coffee cultivation – lived in *São Paulo*, where he had a sugarcane plantation, and only sporadically came to *Goiás* to look after *São Carlos*. Despite this, the ranch had a permanent guard of around 30 to 40 armed men, plus the few settler families who worked in part of the coffee plantation (Relatório..., 1961).

According to the Report prepared by the Commander General of the *Goiás Polícia Militar* (Militarized Police or gendarmerie), Coronel José Joel Marcos, the owner of *São Carlos*, Sr. Marcos, due to the decline of the coffee plantations on the ranch, had decided to divide up the land into lots of small farms and areas of forest, and sell them to small farmers willing to exploit them. According to reports, this was the probably motivation for the unleashing of a new wave of *invasions*, since there had been a *rumor* that the *São Carlos* land was free for occupation, since the rancher was dividing up and giving up his property. This *rumor* was reinforced by another stating that the *Goiás* state government had contested a large part of the area in question and was willing to distribute the litigated land to new agricultural workers.

Denying any orientation in this sense, the state government upheld a warrant of eviction issued by the legal authorities in *Goianésia* at the request of the owner of *Fazenda São Carlos* and dispatched a police force to guarantee that the order be complied with. In the words of the Commander General, “Through the intermediation of the Secretary of State and Public Security, the General Command of the Militarized Police received the order of His Excellency, the Governor of the State, for the urgent use of force” (Relatório..., 1961).

The troops left *Goiania* on 22 July and counted from the beginning on the complete assistance of the owner of *São Carlos*. His help began as the police left the state capital, when he made available three chartered buses and a jeep, and lasted throughout the time the police remained carrying out their operations, as he paid for the board and lodgings of 95 men and their commanders. According to the report of the Commander General, the *invaders* had around one thousand men spread through the forests on the ranch, who were willing to resist the eviction with their lives.⁸

From the pages of the document cited, we can infer that for the police, the so-called *invaders* composed a homogenous mass of ‘deluded innocents,’ a group enlisted by *agitators*, a small number of communists from the city who had incited the agricultural laborers with false promises that the state government was distributing land in the region. The police report is almost completely concerned with identifying these *agitators*, naming them and describing them in a way that they appeared violent and vengeful. Among those identified as the leaders and responsible for the *invasion*, was a journalist, a dentist, and a former employee of São Carlos Ranch, as well as an agricultural worker expelled from other lands.

From the description of the origin of the large part of the group of the so-called *invaders*, the region of Ceres, an area which like the municipality of Goianésia and São Carlos Ranch was located in the fertile land of Vale do São Patrício, we can suppose that most of them were landless workers, expelled from their possessions, and former settlers from the old *Colônia Agrícola Nacional de Goiás* (Cang). An area of intense occupation since the 1940s, the region of Ceres accelerated the closing of the agricultural frontier in the 1950s, whether through occupation by *posseiros* or through land speculation and the *grilagem* (illegally taken possession) of land (Dayrell, 1974). At the beginning of the 1960s, there were practically no vacant public lands which could be occupied by *posseiros* around Ceres. The news that the state government was going to expropriate São Carlos ranch and distribute lots of lands to agricultural work was undoubtedly a great attraction for the mass of rural workers, especially *posseiros*, having lost possession of their land due to the permanent process of expulsion resulting from the action of *grileiros*.⁹

The actions of the Goiana police in São Carlos did not meet obstinate resistance on the part of the workers who occupied the ranch. From what appears in the Report of Major Antonio Bonfim Rodrigues dos Santos, sent to the Commander General of the Militarized Police of Goiás, on 27 July, five days after the troops left Goiânia for Fazenda São Carlos, the situation was resolved: the *invaders*’ weapons had been apprehended, arrests had been made, the guarantee of order had been reestablished, and on 28 July, the troops returned to Goiânia.

The case of São Carlos Ranch matters less due to the proportion of events that the situation which we can verify in relation than to the ever more evident condition that the government needed to put into practice an agrarian policy which could take into account the large number of landless rural workers in the state. In fact, the land conflicts in São Carlos Ranch, although they had not been

characterized by an organized resistance, and nor had the landless workers achieved any success, are significant because they allow us understand a conjugation of numerous attempts at the occupation of land identified by the absence of effective cultivation, which had their culminating point in 1961, when a significant number of agricultural workers occupied the area under the orientation that they had the right to take possession of tracts of uncultivated lands, unduly taken advantage of by a landholder who did not even live in them.¹⁰

CONFLICT ON THE SALÔBA RANCH

Another focus of dissatisfaction occurred in May 1962, in the municipality of Jussara, in the District of Salobinha, a region close to Diorama, in the north-west of the state. The situation was close to result in serious confrontations between *posseiros* and police troops sent to the location. The conflicts in Jussara had a repercussion throughout the state, with the *posseiros* counting on the mediation of students from *Centro Acadêmico XI de Maio* and the peasant deputy José Porfírio (Diário do Oeste, 1962).

The conflict occurred after an attempt to occupy *Salôba* Ranch, an area of approximately 5,680 *alqueires* (or around 25,000 hectares) of land, which, according to the report published in *Folha de Goiaz* newspaper (1962), belonged to the rancher João Francisco dos Santos. Once again, as in the case of São Carlos Ranch in Goianésia the previous year, the coverage given to the events by the press, as well as the police reports, do not clarify the origin of the rural workers involved in the occupation. Invariably, emphasis was given to the identification of the *agitators*, highlighted as responsible for inciting the masses of *naive agricultural laborers* who let themselves be easily persuaded by promises of land and assistance. In this way, the principal *agitators* in the case of the occupation of *Salôba* ranch were said to be João Nader and the student leader Tarzan de Castro.

It is interesting to highlight that the resistance of strategy adopted by agricultural workers which occupied the ranch were similar to those popularized by the *posseiros* of Trombas at the beginning of the 1950s (Cunha, 2007; Esteve, 2007). This especially involved the construction of trenches along the road which led to *Salôba* Ranch, where armed confrontation was expected with the police troops dispatched to the location. From what it appears the expected confrontation did not occur. According to a report from *Folha de Goiaz*, the Militarized Police troops found the trenches abandoned with some of the *rebels'* weapons.

The inspiration of the experiences of Trombas and Formoso, however, went much beyond the example of the trenches in the forests. At the beginning of the 1960s, José Porfírio de Souza, the principal leader of the struggles in Trombas, helped to create numerous agricultural worker associations throughout Goiás which sought in Trombas and Formoso a model of organization for the struggle for land. Porfírio would also be elected a state deputy for the PTB, and his speeches in the Legislative Assembly heightened the political disputes around the question of agrarian reform. The success of the *posseiros* led by José Porfírio in obtaining title to the land they possessed gave the peasant struggles in Goiás a concrete example which opened perspectives of victories in various fronts of struggle still to be made concrete.

Some characteristics of the land conflicts in Jussara approximated those found in Goianésia. Both *Salôba* and *São Carlos* ranches were areas which in the past had been cultivated, but which at the time of the occupation had entered a period of decline. Both landholders, according to witnesses present in the police reports, had begun the process of dividing and selling part of the lands which corresponded to their properties. Due to this initiative there emerged occupation movements with a significant number of agricultural workers, who appeared to be motivated by the perspective of taking possession of the plots of land deemed to be legitimately 'free' to be occupied.

CONFLICT IN PORANGATU

Less than 15 days after the episode in Jussara, in the municipality of Porangatu, in the north of the state, there exploded the largest land conflict which occurred during the Mauro Borges administration. The numbers were significant: at the beginning of June, around 550 *posseiros* were armed and entrenched in the regions of *Serrinha*, *Amargoso*, *Cana Brava*, and *Serra Azul*, expecting an imminent confrontation with the police force. According to the reporter sent there by *Folha de Goiaz*, Sebastião Abreu, dispatched to accompany *in loco* the unfolding of the conflict, there were three groups of 'litigants' involved in the scenario: numerous groups of *posseiros*, whose land were located in the zone of conflict, ranchers, supposed owners of the disputed lands, and the so-called *invaders*, men who took advantage of the situation to establish themselves in the area (Folha de Goiaz, 1962). The conflicts are said to have principally occurred among *posseiros* and ranchers, whose organized groups concentrated in areas that served them as 'headquarters.' The first

organized their actions from around *Amargoso*, while the latter based themselves around *Serrinha*.

The central question which triggered the land conflict in Porangatu did not differ from that of other conflictual regions in the same period in Goiás. It involved a dispute between *posseiros*, living for many years on the disputed lands, and ranchers who claimed the properties and demanded the intervention of the police to expel the *posseiros* from the lands which they claimed. This expedient was used from the moment when the use of private armed force was no longer enough to expel the *posseiros*. The area in dispute was dependent on the judgment of the discriminatory action which had begun years before, but which had not yet been concluded by the state authorities. Given the undefined situation, the *posseiros* argued that the entire area consisted of vacant public lands, while the ranchers stated that they had purchased the land.

According to a report from *Folha de Goiaz* on 14 June, three days previously around forty ranchers led by João Rodrigues Barboza, president of the Rural Association of Porangatu, met to find a definitive solution to the resistance of the *posseiros* and the state government's lack of definition about an energetic action in defense of property. At that time the ranchers decided to write a 'manifesto' to be sent to the Ministry of War denouncing the threat of disorder in the countryside and stating that the "Goiano state government is impotent to resolve the land problem in the north of the state," for which reason, according to the understanding of the employer sectors of Porangatu, federal intervention was necessary in the north of the state. The ranchers had an approximate number of three hundred 'employees,' strongly armed and organized *jagunços* (gunmen), ready to confront the *posseiros*.

The *posseiros* remained organized in armed groups scattered in trenches and forests in the regions of *Amargoso*, *Vaca-Brava* (or *Cana Brava*), and *Serra Azul*, close to Santo Antônio ranch. From what it appears they were prepared and willing to resist eviction from the land, whether through a confrontation with the gunmen controlled by the ranchers, or against the troops of the Goiana police. They were organized by rural worker organizations in those areas of Porangatu.

As in the episode of *Salobinha*, in Jussara, and São Carlos Ranch, in Goianésia, in the regions of conflict in Porangatu *posseiros* had lived for decades on the disputed land, a factor which points either to the hypothesis of these being areas of vacant state land which were widely *griladas* (stolen through the use of forged documents) and converted into property through the purchase of forged land deeds by astute *grileiros*, or for a process of the

regrouping of lands belonging to the actual property, which implied the expulsion of the *posseiros* from areas that had been left for them to cultivate. The state government implementation of measures to investigate landownership in these localities was based on the assumption that large areas demanded by ranchers as legitimate extensions of their properties were actually vacant lands belonging to the state of Goiás.

POSSEIROS AND INVADERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE STATE

If we observe closely the examples of land seizures in the period, episodes led by *resident posseiros* and *new posseiros*, an initial question is related to the mobilizing initiatives related to armed confrontation in defense of the possession of land. A dual movement, both of resistance to the expectations of expulsions due to the actions of the ranchers and the possibility of taking possession of lands in litigation at the moment when they were contested by the state government, through the investigation of landownership emerged as a perspective for action in relation to the opening of a breach opened during the judicial actions carried out by the state.

A second question is related to the ambiguous action of the state government, caught between meeting the immediate demands for police intervention made by dominant rural groups in the name of the defense of property, and the recognition that that it could not limit its action only to the resort to repression, although they made effective use of this, and they had to extend their attentive mediation to the demands of organized rural workers.

In relation to the first point, we have to be aware of the fact that some of the *posseiros* involved in the conflicts were longstanding occupants of the disputed lands. The characteristic scenario of the North of Goiás, which had been even more intense since the 1940s at least, was formed by the growing incorporation of vacant public lands in areas of private dominion, where a process of the expansion of *latifúndio* was underway without any contestation by public institutions, and which as a rule had a legitimating local apparatus available to obtain property deeds, notably through the process of *grilagem*.

The initiative of incorporating new areas in their dominions through the convenient obtaining of forged land deeds in local notary offices, was faced with the presence on the demanded lands of hundreds of families of *posseiros* long since established through the process of *expulsion – migration – clearance – seizure – cultivation*. This situation is clear in the case of the land conflicts around São Carlos Ranch, in Goianésia, in the regions of Jussara and Diorama,

and in Porangatu. It involved conflicts which exposed attempts of large landholders to take possession of already cultivated areas, through seizures, in regions mainly valorized by the construction of highways during the 1950s.¹¹

It is important that we look at the extremely significant presence of the so-called *invader*. The listed sources give little information about this. The pejorative form which with it is mentioned is present both in the pages of the press and the official communications of the government. State and press agencies representative of the wider interests of the dominant rural and commercial fractions shared the notion that not only was the *invader* a criminal who acted outside the law, since he unduly appropriated both public and private lands, but also did not belong to the same category as the *posseiro*. He was therefore a ‘user’ and ‘usurper’ of the lands of others.

In May 1963 the Institute of Agrarian Development of Goiás (*Instituto de Desenvolvimento Agrário de Goiás – Idago*) published a Communique which made official the distinction between *posseiros* and ‘invaders’:

In order to orient and clarify public opinion, protecting it against untrue reports about land, and synthetically presenting, for the identification by the public, of a primary concept of various human types interested in the land...:

1. *Posseiros* – those who, by themselves or their agents, have a habitual dwelling, linked to effective agriculture in a plot of land. (Effective agriculture is characterized by the existence of: an enclosed and planted field, fenced pasture and provided with a farmyard, or exploitation of crops).
2. Invader – someone who usurps or assumes violently or clandestinely the possession or a property either privately or publically owned, after it has been measured and demarcated.¹²

The criminalization of the *invader* is counterpoised to the recognition, by the state, of ‘legitimate possession.’ And here we have an important question. The legitimacy conferred on the *posseiro* was related to the *habitual dwelling – effective agriculture* pair, characteristics related to a recognized practice of settling on and working the land, consecrated by custom, which could be certified by the *age* of the possession and the effective cultivation of the land. Moreover, since the *posseiros* had taken possession of vacant lands, or – with greater emphasis – which had not belonged to any private dominion *before* being demarcated, they could not be considered as infringing the law, even though they did not have any title to the property, an aspect which historically

differentiated them, in relation to the form of the appropriation of land, from the 'real landowners.'

In relation to the agricultural workers who did not have land at the beginning of the 1960s, the treatment dispensed was entirely distinct. These could not resort in the eyes of the law to the concepts of *habitual dwelling* and *effective agriculture* as the legitimating traits of the occupation of land in dispute. From the perspective of Idago, *invaders* lost the possibility of being considered *posseiros*, since they could not 'prove' that they had long resided on the tract of land demanded. For legal effects and for state recognition, the mark of distinction between *posseiros* and *invaders*, therefore, occurred *before* and *after* the demarcation of the land in litigation. State intervention in terms of the processing clarifying ownership of lands thereby reinforced the identification of the social category of the *invader* as the one who unduly occupied the lands of others, a criminal practice which was supposed to result in their expulsion from the lands in question.

It is interesting that we accompany the historic trajectory of the meanings attributed to the definition of *posseiro* in Goiás, between the 1940s and 1960s. Comparing the way *posseiros* were referred to between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s by the mainstream media and state agents with the concept that came to figure at the beginning of the following decade, we can find a significant change in the status of the term *posseiro* and its distinction from the category of *invader*.

In coverage given by the press to the *grilagens* of land in the region of Gurupi, at the beginning of the 1950s, and above all during the land conflicts in Trombas and Formoso, notably during the period of the greatest intensity of the confrontations, between 1954 and 1956, there was no effort to disassociate the image of the poor *posseiro* from that of the 'usurper' of others' lands. To the contrary, as a rule the *posseiro* was described on the pages of newspapers like *Folha de Goiaz* as the one who invaded lands claimed as privately owned. The attributes of residency and work did not attenuate this characterization, only giving even more urgent contours to the denunciations of the newspapers in order to demand from the state government an energetic response against those who had for a long time unduly appropriated private land. In this sense, the *invader* was both the *posseiro* who picked up weapons to defend their holdings, and the *communist agents* responsible for inciting them.

Our hypothesis is that the significant victory achieved by the *posseiros* of Trombas and Formoso in keeping possession of their lands, the repercussions of the struggle for land as a legitimate right of those families of agricultural

workers, many of them had been in the region since the beginning of the 1940s, the effective support of public opinion in the condemnation of the *grilagem* of land, the crimes committed by *jagunços* under the command of ranchers, and even the abuses committed by the state police, would forge in the years following this conflict a new social representation of the small Goiano *posseiro* (Esteve, 2007). Their image came to be increasingly disassociated from that of the ‘invader’ of lands.

The consecration of a political identity of the category of *posseiro* at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, based on the conjunction of practices of seizures, residency, and cultivation, legitimated by the assumption of a verifiable temporality, on the one hand, altered the social status of Goiano *posseiros*, dissociating them from the image of the usurper of lands and of *invaders*, and, on the other hand, contributed to bringing to the forefront the actions criminalizing landless rural workers, protagonists of new occupations. The occupation and seizure of vacant public lands came to simply signify invasion, subject to all sorts of condemnation.

It was not by chance that this happened. While, on the one hand, as we have seen, the conquest of the social recognition of the *posseiro* came from a trajectory of struggles in previous decades, on the other hand, the criminalization of new practices of seizures contradictorily resulted in the same prestige and the imminence of an expansion of the struggle for the right to land in the state. Rapid compliance with the requisitions of police troops made by ranchers when land conflicts became climatic is therefore not surprising. The Secretariat of Public Security of State had a force prepared to intervene in questions of land conflicts, and did so in the cases looked at here.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed about the episodes presented above it can be affirmed that the violence perpetrated by the state in Goiás at the beginning of the 1960s was directly related to the worsening of land conflicts in the region. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that at the center of the disputes was not only land, but a plurality of understandings about the right to the appropriation of land. This dynamic of distinct forms of appropriation engendered direct confrontations between small *posseiros* and ranchers for the effective exercise of their definitions of property and their inscription in terms of state legitimation.

The study of the conflicts in the countryside in Goiás during the Mauro Borges administration reveals how much the question 'of which group had the right to use the land' depended less on a naturalized conception of property than on its realization in the daily practice of land seizures. In other words, the reading made by the Goiano *posseiros* about *justice* impelled them to occupy uncultivated areas which needed labor for cultivation. In this sense, there was no distinction in relation to the fulfillment of this justice, whether these were vacant public lands or privately owned. For this it was enough that the land was proven to be uncultivated.

In addition, the conflicts examined allow us to exemplify how much private landholding, looking at from a historical perspective, when duly collated as an effective practice and not as a mere judicial definition, refutes any absolute and perfect ending (Congost, 2000). The comings and goings of social subjects in the appropriate spaces for the effective use or demands for rights resulted in the – conflictual – dynamic of social relations present in the historicity of property.

What was in play for the small *posseiros*, therefore, was not the defense of landowning defined by law, but a conflict in the name of the making the right to use land effective on the basis of criteria forged in the customary practices of land seizures which came to have values inseparable from experience and labor, to a large extent woven through local events. The practice of occupations and the motivations present in the land struggles in São Carlos Ranch, *Salôba* Ranch and in Porangatu, at the beginning of the 1960s, shed light on the need to understand these struggles as something more than a mere dispute for dominion in the areas corresponding to the properties. It can be perceived how actions redefined, in the concrete experience of the defense of rights, understandings about the meanings and uses of property by the rural poor.

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NOTES

¹ This research is part of the work done in preparation for the doctoral dissertation in the Post-Graduate Program in History, Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), between 2008 and 2011, when the author received a CNPq grant

² Although he recognized the attachment to customary forms of access to land through the seizure of uncultivated areas as a historic mark of the actions of *posseiros* (squatters) in distinct regions of Brazil, Queiroz did not attribute these authors the political capacity to articulate an efficient defense of their lands against the antagonisms which exposed their condition. Only the peasant organizations of the leagues of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, as well as the rural worker trade unions created after 1963, gave real conditions of gains to the causes of the *posseiros*, since their based were based on the legal path.

³ Congost (2007) did his research about nineteenth century Spain; Thompson deals with the questions of law and customary rights in eighteenth century England, while Marcia Motta has numerous studies about the question of land and the social history of property covering Brazil and Portugal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁴ A very valuable reflection against the idea of the *exclusionary and totalizing latifúndio* as forming a perennial landholding structure in the History of Brazil was written by Ferlini (2010) based on the study of the sugar regions in three centuries of colonization. According to her, instead of a closed and excluding monoculture, the vision consecrated by the post-Independence historiography, there were within the lands granted in the *sesmarial* system during the colonial period a large quantity of small lots parceled or leased within the *sesmarias*. The existence of these small spaces of cultivation, as well as the right of the free poor to occupy them, were subject to the dynamic of the *latifúndio* which might or might not tolerate them, which was done in accordance with their interests in a greater or lesser concentration. What is of interest for our discussion in consonance with the authors cited is the demonstration, in Ferlini's study, that there were distinct forms of occupation and the achievement of ownership in the same space, which occurred sometimes in complementarity, sometimes in a conflictual manner.

⁵ I refer to what I called in another paper the *state agency and organ complex*, which was set up for the implementation of public policies aimed at agricultural developed in Goiás in the Mauro Borges administration. Among the most representative and active were the Institute of Agrarian Development of Goiás (*Instituto de Desenvolvimento Agrário de Goiás*

– Idago), the Goiás Company of Warehouses and Silos (*Companhia de Armazéns e Silos de Goiás* – Casego) and the State Agricultural Company of Goiás (*Companhia Agrícola do Estado de Goiás* – Caesgo). All had their statutes and operational norms organized by the Paulo de Assis Ribeiro Technical Office (ETPAR), a private agency which at the beginning of the 1960s acted as a type of operational arm for agrarian reform projects of the Institute of Research and Social Studies (*Instituto de Pesquisa e Estudos Sociais* – IPES) in the state. For this discussion, see Esteve (2011).

⁶ It is worth mentioning, in consonance with the emphasis we are giving to the diversity of forms of struggle, which the organizational capacity and pressure of popular sectors in the country during the Mauro Borges administration managed to inscribe under the auspice of the state demands for the unionization of rural Goiano trade unions. The Secretariat of Labor and Social Assistance (SETAS), run by the secretary Érides Guimarães, a *petebista* and follower of the party's directives about unionization under the João Goulart administration, which had intensified in 1963 incursions throughout the state with the objective of unionizing local agricultural workers. José Porfírio de Souza, *posseiro*, principal peasant leader in the state, president of the Federation of the Rural Workers of the State of Goiás and a state deputy, supported the SETAS unionization policy, even participating alongside the secretary in various union inauguration ceremonies in the interior of the state.

⁷ *Invasão de Terras em Goianésia*. Ofício 857/61: sent by the Commandant General, Col. José Joel Marcos to the Governor Mauro Borges Teixeira, on 31 July 1961.

⁸ In the Report, Col. José Joel Marcos stated that the *invaders* had various weapons, with among the arms apprehended by the police being .44 carbines, hunting rifles, revolvers, and knives.

⁹ It is important to observe that at this moment a change in the orientation of groups of rural workers organized in agricultural laborer associations was being rehearsed in order to encourage occupations in unproductive areas of large *latifúndios*. This determination would be taken up as a call to arms at the end of 1963 and the beginning of 1964, when the Federation of Rural Workers of the State of Goiás came to stimulate this initiative under the allegation that the unproductive lands belonging to landholders who mostly lived outside Goiás, especially in São Paulo. In relation to this question, see: Letter from Jaime Câmara, SUPRA State *Delegado* to João Pinheiro Neto in February 1964.

¹⁰ There were numerous registration of confrontations in the three previous years, in the following attempts to occupy uncultivated land on Fazenda São Carlos. In these confrontations there were deaths of agricultural workers, employees, and residents of the plantation, and at least one police trooper. The reference appears in *Relatório da Operação São Carlos*, op. cit.

¹¹ Federal Decree no. 53.700, dated 13 March 1964, edited by the Superintendency of Agrarian Reform (*Superintendência da Reforma Agrária* – Supra), exacerbated even more the conflicts between *posseiros* and *fazendeiros-grileiros* (plantation owners who had illegally obtained land deeds) by determining in its first article the disappropriation of a “ten kilometer [band] from federal railway and road axes” (apud STEDILE, 2005).

¹² IDAGO – Comunicado n. 1/63, 9 May 1963. The definition of *posseiro* and ‘invader’ taken as a reference by Idago was based on the 1947 State Constitution, in force during the Mauro Borges administration, which stipulated in article 143 that: “All those who, not being the rural or urban land owners, occupy for ten years uninterrupted, vacant lands of the state, up to an area of one hundred hectares, making them productive through their labor and living in them, shall acquire ownership, through a duly transcribed declaratory sentence.”