
Agroecology, Peasant Autonomy, and the Collapse of Brazilian Neodevelopmentalism

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Résumé

Agroecology has presented a major grassroots challenge to the neoliberal organization of agricultural production via large industrial firms. Much research has been devoted to how this approach to low-capital intensity organic farming can offer a possibility of 'peasant autonomy' or even 'repeasantization' conterminous to the proletarianizing force of agroindustry. In Brazil, the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento Sem Terra, MST) has become a champion of agroecology, since the collapse of its attempts at collectivized agroindustry in the early 2000s. In tandem, the Workers Party governments of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (2003 - 2016) made the agroecology approach a central peg of Brazil's neodevelopmentalist divergence from the Washington Consensus, offering state support and subsidies for small family farming. During Brazil's experience of the Pink Tide, agroecology incorporating the MST was seen as an effective means of providing food sovereignty, against the logic of liberal market provision embedded in food security. Until the Brazilian model entered into crisis, agroecology gave a tangible project for the future of the rural economy. Agroecology has often been studied either as an instance of the reassertion of peasant autonomy and the articulation of a heterodox vision of economic organization. However, the collapse of the neodevelopmentalist project and the reassertion of neoliberalism under Jair Bolsonaro offers a powerful example of how changes within capitalism have overtaken theories of the agrarian economy. Although the agroecology movement is well examined, the dismantling of agroecology projects is less well studied. Based on field research conducted with the MST in 2012 and 2019, this paper examines the rise, consolidation, and ongoing collapse of the agroecology model. It explores the role played by a heterodox theory of economic organization in the political strategy of the MST, its limitations as a moment in the struggle for social transformation, and the consequences of the collapse for attempts to establish a labour-centric model of development in Brazil.

Mots-Clés: Neodevelopmentalism, Social Movements, Agroecology, Peasant Autonomy

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