

Feeding agrarian reform with food donations: a Covid-19 story from Brazil

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When one of the teachers of our local school in São Paulo set out for a fearful, but protected trip to the grocery store, she saw one of her students selling candy in the streets. It is hard to tell which was harder: knowing that Covid-19 had so quickly deteriorated the conditions of a middle class family or knowing that, with the restrictions on movement and contact, it would be nearly impossible for this kid to sell his candy. Through Whatsapp messages and zoom calls this news spread and resonated with the whole school community. Already struggling to pay rent and bills, teachers organized to collect money to buy and distribute food kits. Following this effort, I asked myself: are food donations what we should be doing right now? One of the first lessons that I had learnt when I started my undergraduate studies was that charity and agrarian reform stood at the opposite poles of possible solutions to the problems of hunger and inequality in Brazil. Conversations and debates across the academic community so often frame donating to homeless people or philanthropic organizations as a fragile band-aid sloppily placed over a deeper wound that can only be addressed structurally. However, I suspect that surviving in pandemic times has required a very practical and different engagement with these previous categorizations. When millions of people become destitute overnight, joining millions more who were already affected by a recent economic crisis, giving can be a

radical act that opens up the imaginative horizons of transformation precisely because it brings to the fore the dire need for deeper change. It challenges previous conceptions of what is possible and necessary in the short and long terms, and what falls under the realm of individual and collective responsibility.

In the shadow of the new plague, doing what it takes to provide food for people blurs the lines between spontaneous and organized political action, and between charity and agrarian reform. Like the teachers, many others have started to (re)organize to distribute food. Groups of friends are cooking meals for homeless people. People who live in buildings are collecting food for their neighbors. Churches have been busier than ever with members going through phone books to call the people to ask if they need help. Grocery stores became food collection zones. Many city officials and private citizens have established informal exchange points – at a small park or at a particular street corner, with signs that say “Give what you can, get what you need” orienting people to drop or collect food freely. A new phenomenon has taken off on the internet: artists make “lives” on YouTube to support food collection campaigns. More “traditional” social movements also have worked relentlessly to address the needs of populations commonly neglected by the state, which now more than ever have to connect emergency aid with broader activism. Working in the slums, the “Central Unica de Favelas” has distributed food and gas canisters, and the “Projeto Campo Favela” by Insper has collected money donations to address the needs of slum dwellers with produce from small farmers, simultaneously helping both groups. And, it has not been different for one of the biggest social movements in Brazil: o “Movimento Sem Terra - MST”, the movement for “those without land”, which has been fighting for agrarian reform for 36 years now, and has heavily contributed to food collection campaigns.

This ongoing organization of spontaneous food distribution initiatives has nevertheless instigated further reflection on agricultural production chains. Amid a global health crisis where restrictions on movement are starting to curtail known chains of production, the necessity for small farmer production for internal market

consumption has never been more evident. On June 5th, 2020 - World Environment Day, the MST launched the “Emergency Plan for Popular Agrarian Reform”. Up to that point, agrarian reform had been seen as the necessary and enduring solution for a myriad of problems that stem from land concentration first established by Portuguese colonizers in the sixteenth century. Extreme destitution in the cities, racial hierarchies, wealth concentration, deforestation and environmental degradation, among other social maladies, can be traced to the historical development of agribusiness in Brazil, which destroyed native practices of cultivating the land in favor of monocultures for export – at first through slave labor and more recently through increasing modernization and mechanization. This is still the case with the current effort, but what is new about this plan is the emphasis on “emergency”. Amply backed by the most recent food donation campaigns, agrarian reform is no longer only seen as a long-term plan, it is proclaimed as a necessary emergency task. And one that can be accomplished rather quickly. Right now, 800 companies who have approximately 40 billion dollars in debt have control over six million unused acres of land, which could be redistributed by the government. While considering that Bolsonaro’s authoritarian government would never take such measures, people have increasingly asked for his impeachment, partly inspired by the protests against police brutality in the United States and all over the world. Recently in Argentina some of the anti-racism protests also brought up the issue of hunger, showing how activists have linked these issues. The turning point at which Brazil may, at some point in the future, decide to replace its model of agricultural production in favor of democratic land use might be the day when people realized, after having donated till they bled, that it still was not enough to address hunger and inequality without agrarian reform.

In contrast to what has seemed to be genuine outpourings of solidarity and activism, corruption scandals already abound, showing how elites have been able to capture government benefits meant for the most vulnerable, and how government agencies have paid public money to purchase overpriced hospital equipment. But there was

something about the pandemic that shook the previous accommodation with profound inequality. It was the idea that living life as “usual” condemns others to struggle and even die. Agrarian reform may now be a crisis strategy that will allow people to survive and get by, and yet produce much desired and lasting structural change. Covid-19, in all its lethality and threat might be what it takes for Brazilians to implement more clearly and definitely those measures that will help sustain their lives. In this case, donations and agrarian reform would not be opposed, but mutually supportive.