

The World Bank's contemporary agrarian policy: aims, logics and lines of action¹

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There's a World Bank (WB) offensive going on over the formulation of the agrarian policy of the national States with a double objective: on one hand, to market land access through the neoliberal change of the state apparatus, in order to favor the free flow of workforce in the countryside, stimulate private investment on rural economy and potentialize the subordinate integration of punctual parcels of the peasantry to the agro-industrial circuit, ruled by big corporations; on the other hand, to alleviate rural poverty in a focused manner, specially on situations where social tensions on the countryside may reach "dangerous" levels for the safety of private capital and/or the stability of the present political order (see World Bank, 2002, 2003 and 2004).

The data testify this movement. Between 1990 and 2004 the WB agreed on 45 loan operations with 32 countries for projects related to its agrarian policy. Counting finished and ongoing projects, we observe that the Latin America and Caribbean region corresponds to 33,3% of the total, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 26,6%, East Asia and Pacific region, 24,4%, Africa and Middle East, 13,4% and South Asia, 2,2%. We also note that the WB has been significantly increasing the approval of such projects: between 1990 and 1994, 3; from 1995 to 1999, 19, totalizing US\$ 700 millions; from 2000 to 2004, 25, totalizing US\$ 1 billion in loans (Suárez, 2005).

At the same time, the WB has been articulating courses and workshops in several countries, both for the state bureaucracy directly responsible for the implementation of policies on rural world and for the select group of WB's partner associations and organizations from civil society, with the aim of exerting — on the words of Antonio Gramsci — an effective *moral and intellectual direction* over the definition and execution of the agrarian policy of the national States. An example of this is that the same *categories of thought* now present (and already predominant?) on the sphere of research and formulation of policies for the rural world (like "social capital", "empowerment", "participation", "decentralization" etc.) are dictated or resignified by the WB. It's valid to say, under the inspiration of Pierre Bourdieu, that this intellectual production has been establishing itself as a *new vocabulary of the thinkable* in terms of public policies, whose logic points to: a) the stimulus to the (self-)organization of social groups according to merely corporative and local interests; b) the praise of partnership between historically and structurally unequal social agents; c) the veto to any consideration over the construction or dispute of more universalistic political projects (class-based, national and/or international).

The WB practically abandoned the agrarian theme during the 1980s, due to the total priority given to macro-economical adjustment programs and the renegotiation of external debt of the Latin-American countries, but came back on getting interested by it over the following decade. Why? According to the author's hypothesis (Pereira, 2004), basically for five reasons: a) the opportunity to depoliticize the treatment of the agrarian problem existent in great part of the southern countries, once the end of Cold War, on its vision, would have weakened the link between the struggle for agrarian reform and a broader ideal of social transformation; b) the need to liberalize the land markets, eliminating the legal barriers to free sale and purchase and the lease of lands, as part of the structural adjustment programs; c) the need to answer to agrarian conflicts and, in some cases, to the action of pro-agrarian reform social movements, aiming to guarantee the safety and political stability of capital; d) the need to create programs and social projects on

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the countryside to selectively compensate for the regressive impact of the structural adjustment policies over parcels of the peasantry; e) the need to guarantee the hegemony over the rural lands market-turning process on the former soviet block, in order to accelerate and consolidate its transition to financial capitalism.

According to the exposed information, we may imply that the contemporary agrarian policy of the WB was designed and has been operating under the marks established by the structural adjustment pushed by the WB and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Therefore, it is subordinated to two antagonistic processes to the labor world: on one hand, the liberalization of the national economies, specifically its poorest portion; on the other hand, the State counter-reform, that substitutes its redistributive role for punctual and focused policies to "alleviate" poverty, which, by their turn, do not alter the bases of inequality reproduction, domination and, overall, exploitation (SAPRIN, 2002).

How does the WB agrarian policy organize itself? Basically, in eight lines of action:

1) Lands renting. This is the priority topic for the WB, especially after the "market-assisted" land reform reached crises in several countries where it was experimented. It implies the suspension of legal barriers, normally created on the bulge of agrarian reforms to protect the small leaseholders. The fact that this kind of social relationship may be identified for decades as a synonym of peasantry exploitation and economic retrocession by *all* Latin-American peasant organizations — not being claimed by any of them — is not taken in consideration by the WB (Baranyi et al., 2004: 50; CGRA, 2004: 7-8). Its main objectives are to increase the productive use of lands and diminish the production costs of agro-industrial corporations. Several researches show that this kind of relationship hasn't been contributing to improve land access by the poor peasantry in Latin America (Carter, 2003; Carter & Salgado, 2001).

2) Purchase and sale of lands. The objective is also to increase the degree of mercantilization of land, allowing, via patrimonial transactions, the exit of "inefficient" rural producers and the entry of "efficient" ones, always through the optics of big agro-industrial capital appreciation.

3) Private titling. It implies the concession of property titles to land workers who occupy and cultivate non-titled lands, including communal, public and reformed areas (i.e., constituted from agrarian reforms). Its priority aim is to diminish the informality on land markets, improving the legal security of transactions. For the WB, it doesn't matter if a people or social group considers the land usage value more important than its trade value, because, on its vision, the universalization of private property to all human societies would be the "apex" of development. In some situations, the titling stimulated the sale of lands by peasants and its later concentration. Besides that, contrary to what the WB claims, there are strong signs that the concession of property titling didn't increase the poor peasantry access to the formal credits market, at least in Latin America.

4) Agrarian legislation change and creation of new management apparatus. It is, in essence, the creation of legal and managerial conditions for the free market transaction of land, simplifying and making cheaper the bureaucratic procedures and guaranteeing the safety of private contracts. By this logic, all the process should be managed by municipal governments. As expected, the WB says nothing about illegal private appropriation of public lands, very common in southern countries, or about the peasants' claims over the retaking of illegally appropriated lands by big farmers.

5) Agrarian conflicts control. It's the creation of mechanisms of neutralization and quick solution of social tensions around hold and property of land, preferentially by municipal governments. The aim is to impede that the accumulation of "low intensity" conflicts come to jeopardize the safety and foreseeing of market transactions and private investments — including foreign ones — on the countryside. On the WB's documents there can't be found a word about the

ever sharper violence against the peasantry and indigenous populations caused by the expansion of private appropriation of land associated with the production of *commodities* for export.

6) Rural property taxation. The WB champions the municipalization of rural taxation and *doesn't* prioritize the support to the implementation of a progressive taxation over land property to restrain land speculation.

7) Land de-collectivization and privatization. It's the privatization and individualization of tenure and property rights in collective or state farms, in order to create formal land markets and, thus, open the property pattern — especially on the societies of Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union — to the entrance of private national and international capital.

8) "Market-assisted" land reform. This model, created and exported by the WB under different shapes, began in 1994 in South Africa and Colombia and 1997 in Brazil and Guatemala, and also inspired or politically reinforced previously-existing programs of purchase and sale of lands in Honduras, El Salvador, Philippines, Mexico, Malawi and Zimbabwe. It consists of a voluntary purchase and sale relationship between private agents financed by the State, plus a variable amount of subsidy destined to complementary socio-productive investments. That is, the State concedes a long-term credit for the rural worker to, alone or in group, buy land directly from the owners, at market prices, and then gives a variable grant for the start of agricultural production. The purchases and sales are completely voluntary. The WB claims that this model would allow landless workers or near-landless to generate enough income to overcome poverty, repay the debt with the State and maintain themselves as "efficient producers" on the agricultural market. If it doesn't happen, the farmer loses his land. This model integrates the WB agenda of selective and punctual rural poverty alleviation policies, severely aggravated by the neoliberal policies supported by the own WB (SAPRIN, 2002). Its presuppositions are the diminution of the expropriative power of the State and the privatization of the access to essential goods and services to the socio-economical reproduction of the peasantry.

Through an ingenious operation of "semantic slide", the WB affirms that this model is a modality of the redistributive agrarian reform. Is this true? No, for the agrarian reform consists of an arbitrary action from the State that, in a short period of time, redistributes to the poor peasantry (i.e., to the landless rural workers and/or near-landless) a meaningful amount of private lands appropriated by a class of big landowners, that may be, inclusively, agro-industrial groups, industrials and banks. Its objective is to democratize the agrarian structure of a country, what presupposes transforming the economic and political power relationships responsible for the reproduction of the agrarian concentration. As a redistributive policy, it implies, at first, a "punitive" expropriation (i.e., through indemnification below market prices) of private lands that do not fulfill their social functions, usually defined by law (El-Ghonemy, 2002 and 2001; Barraclough, 2001). Besides that, as peasant movements from all around the world defend (MST, 1996; Via Campesina, 2002; CNOC, 2004; FIAN *et al.*, 2001; FMRA, 2004), it needs to be accompanied by a set of complementary policies in the areas of infra-structure, education, health and transportation, as well as an agricultural policy that favors the peasantry, based on subsidized credit, public technical assistance and the guarantee of access to consumer markets. In other words, the agrarian reform has as its main goal the redistribution of land and the guarantee of conditions for the economic and social reproduction of the peasantry, attacking the power relationships in society that privilege the big proprietors. It is only viable if it's compulsory, what demands the increase of the redistributive power of the State against the private monopoly of land. Because it is also a national development policy, the agrarian reform requires the strengthening of the role of the State on the provision of essential goods and services to the enhancement of the life conditions of the settled peasants and the good economic performance of the reformed sector.

It's easy to notice that the presuppositions of the "market-assisted" land reform are antagonistic to those of the redistributive agrarian reform. On the first case, land is seen as a mere production factor, a purely economic good, a *commodity*, negotiable as any other. On the second case, land is considered to have a multidimensional character (political, economical and cultural),

reason why the control and property rights over it express, above all, power relationships between groups and social classes (El-Ghonemy, 2002 and 2001; Barraclough, 2001; Borrás Jr., 2004).

Therefore, contrary to what the WB says, redistributive agrarian reform doesn't have anything to do with "market-assisted" land reform. A national development policy that aims to transform the agrarian structure, redistribute a substantial part of the wealth stock privately appropriated and alter the power relationships between groups and social classes doesn't have any similarities with punctual rural poverty alleviation policies backed in patrimonial transactions between private agents financed by the State.

Directed at countries marked by severe agrarian problems and strong social tensions on the countryside, what have the programs oriented by the "market-assisted" land reform model of the WB showed to the moment? Looking at the recent experience in South Africa, Colombia, Guatemala and Brazil, we may notice that they: a) do not contribute to democratize the agrarian structure, nor is it its objective, for they were created merely to alleviate in a selective way the negative social effects caused by the neoliberal policies; b) can't minimally answer the existing demand for land, because they lack the capacity to gain scale due to the payment in cash at market prices, and not in public long-term bonds; c) for the same reason, they are very expensive when seeking for elevated goals; d) generally lead to the indebtedness of poor peasants, who can't afford to pay for the land bought at market prices (Pereira, 2004: 230-53).

On the other hand, in political-ideological terms, the implementation of such programs brought meaningful gains to its support base (Pereira, 2004), because: a) it competed with existing agrarian reform programs, already precariously executed; b) it helped to reinforce the dominant ideology that seeks to legitimate the mercantilization of fundamental social rights; c) it served for the governments to divert in a bigger or lesser degree from the pro-agrarian reform social pressure; d) it strengthened the critics from the right about the economic inefficiency and the political unfeasibility of agrarian reform nowadays; e) it reinforced the recipe diffused by the WB and the IMF about the fiscal unfeasibility of social policies with a universal and redistributive character.

In Colombia, Guatemala and South Africa, programs of this nature have notoriously entered crises and will hardly have conditions to be expanded. As for the Philippines and Malawi, these programs have gained strength. But the big exception on the international level today is really Brazil, whose experience is being replicated now with a bigger intensity in Mexico. In fact, Brazil is the main scenario where the WB seeks to legitimate its model. It's for this reason that, at this point, the WB has prioritized the liberation of loans and "technical advisory" to Brazil. In essence, what's at stake is not the future of one program or another, but the political-ideological struggle over what should be the role of the State in societies marked by grave agrarian problems on the neoliberal context.

These are the eight lines of action from the current agrarian policy of the WB. It is, on its whole, a totally subordinated agenda to the circuit of big agro-industrial capital appreciation. Just so it is that it requires the traditional technological model ruled and demanded by it (mechanization, mineral-chemical inputs and biotechnology). This kind of model is ecologically nefarious and — contrarily to what the pro-"free market" discourse preaches — economically sustained by public subsidies and fiscal exemptions, especially in the central countries. Its prevalence excludes the great majority of the peasantry, because it doesn't need workforce, has highly elevated costs and demands great production volume. Only a small part of the peasantry can be integrated to this circuit, and even then in a subordinated manner (i.e., dominated and exploited) (Rubio, 2003; Teubal, 2001). The WB knows it, reason why its main proposition to "substantially" reduce rural poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean is the pure and simple "assisted migration" (sic) to the cities (2002: 14). Through this logic, only the "fittest" and more "efficient" farmers — according to the WB's criteria — should remain on the agricultural activity. Hence the need to maximize the purchase and sale transactions and the lease of lands, in order to favor the free flow of investment and workforce.

It is this agrarian policy that the WB has been managing to implement in an accelerated rhythm, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and parts of Asia. When we deal with this issue from the southern countries and, above all, the poor peasant's angle, it's not

difficult to notice what the social, political and economical implications of the contemporary WB's agenda to the rural sector are.

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