

THE CASA AND THE CAUSA

Institutional Histories and Cultural Politics in Brazilian Land Reform

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Abstract: Land reform has been one of the most contentious issues in Brazilian political history. Government administrations since the 1960s have adopted the banner of reform, and the country has implemented vast colonization and redistribution programs, but the objectives and the effects of those programs have varied widely. Throughout this long history, considerable scholarship has focused on the programs themselves as well as on the increasingly radical social movements that have fought for more enduring reform. Most of this work, however, has invoked the state as the site of policy making and political direction and paid little attention to the state workers responsible for actually implementing reform. In this article, I present a qualitative analysis of the agency in charge of land distribution and settlement since 1970, the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA). I argue that understanding the politics of reform requires attention to the political culture within INCRA, which can only be explained through examination of the agency's long history as first a tool of frontier colonization and then a response to social mobilization.

In recent years, writing on the Latin American state has come “back in vogue” (Bersch, Praça, and Taylor 2013, 2). Thirty years into the so-called Third Wave of democracy (Huntington 1991), considerable scholarship has accumulated that analyzes the nature, organization, and effect of state politics within and between countries. New work continues on state structures (Evans and Rauch 1999), state capacity (Geddes 1994; Kurtz and Schrank 2012), good (and good enough) governance (Tendler 1997 and Grindle 2004, respectively; see also Sugiyama and Hunter 2013), participatory democracy (Abers 2000; Baiocchi 2005; Wampler 2007) and institutional change (Schrank 2013). That this is a rich literature is not contested (notwithstanding Fukuyama 2012); this article is not intended to provide an overview. Instead, I echo others in suggesting that until recently, this literature has taken a macro-level, birds-eye view of the state and state institutions (cf. Abers and Keck 2013; Auyero and Joseph 2007; Loureiro, Olivieri, and Martes 2010; Luna, Murillo, and Schrank 2014), resulting in what Javier Auyero and Lauren Joseph (2007) refer to as a “double absence: of politics in ethnographic literature and ethnography in studies of politics” (italics in original, 2). Despite Judith Tendler’s (1997) pioneering work on good governance in the 1990s, and Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent’s call to study “everyday forms of state formation” in 1994, it is relatively recently that work is being done on the civil servants inside the state who implement state policy on the ground.

Animated at least in part by the election of left-leaning or populist leaders

in countries across the region and by the strong participation of social movements or civil society activists in everyday politics (Dagnino 2002), new scholarship in Latin America locates the state (Ferme 2013) in the operations of bureaucrats, professionals, and civil servants as they work with new nonstate actors to implement a variety of public policies and programs (Abers and Keck 2009 and 2013; Dowbor and Houtzager 2014; Loureiro, Olivieri, and Martes 2010; Mathews 2008; Ponce and McClintock 2014; Wolford and French 2016). These studies are beginning to fill in our understanding of the “non-bureaucratic elements of bureaucracy” (Evans 1989, 573, cited in Luna, Murillo, and Schrank 2014, 9) and it is here that this article hopes to contribute. I focus on the “beliefs, desires, hopes and interests” (Ortner 2006, 167, cited in Auyero and Joseph, 2007, 6) of state actors, or what Sharma and Gupta (2006, 27) call the “cultural constitution” of the state.

In examining the everyday micropolitics produced in and productive of the state, Max Weber’s work is very useful, though not in the ways most common to analyses of government and bureaucracy. Weber’s work has been used often in discussions of the Latin American state (cf. Evans and Rauch 1999) and is usually invoked to describe the ideal (“Weberian”) bureaucracy and to judge where Latin American variants fall short (see Bersch, Praça, and Taylor 2013 for a summary of this literature). Moving away from this institutional-structural focus, I use Weber’s work on politics as a vocation and the notion of a calling to think through the ways in which state employees define their work and the meanings they attribute to their efforts. Such an analysis is particularly appropriate in the case of the federal agency in charge of land distribution in Brazil, the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA).

Since its formation in 1970, INCRA employees have been asked to work on one of the most contentious political issues in Brazilian history: the distribution of land. In part because of the contentiousness of the issue, people who work for the agency have taken on their work as a vocation (see also Bruno 2012); or, as Weber ([1918] 2014, n.p.) says, they “nourish [] inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that life has meaning in the service of a ‘cause.’” Radical differences in the way that different INCRA employees define the cause they serve are the enduring characteristic of the agency’s political culture as a whole (Palmeira 1994; Penna 2012). These differences also have material implications, as the different causes with which people identify are produced by—and in turn produce—very different attitudes toward the purported beneficiaries of reform.

In this article I situate these constructions of a calling within the long history of INCRA itself. I present the history of the agency and land reform in Brazil through the eyes of INCRA workers, and as a result it is both subjective and partial. A note on methods is warranted. This study is based on qualitative, in-depth methods, primarily semistructured interviews and extended observation. These methods have both advantages and disadvantages (see Tilly 2007). They are inherently situated in particular people and places and therefore provide insight into perceptions and experiences but make it hard to generalize across INCRA more generally. This study is thus not representative but illustrative; the dynamics present in the two offices I studied illustrate the ways that people find meaning in their work, meanings that are only intelligible if located in time and space.

From 2006 to 2010, I interviewed thirty INCRA workers in the headquarters office in Brasília and fifty in the northeastern state office of Paraíba, located in the city of João Pessoa. I also attended meetings in both offices, observed people at work, and talked at length informally with employees. In 2007, I worked with a team of researchers in João Pessoa to conduct seventy-five interviews with the people who regularly come into contact with INCRA: large farmers, social movement activists and leaders, and land reform beneficiaries.¹ All of my interviews were recorded, translated, and transcribed. In most cases the interviews were transcribed twice to ensure greater accuracy. For all of those who expressed an interest, I returned a copy of their interview transcript to them. In all cases, I promised my informants anonymity as is customary in a qualitative study where opinions are fraught and contested. Once the interviews were transcribed and translated, I used qualitative analysis software (AtlasTi) to code them for common themes and in so doing uncovered the six interpretations of the calling that I describe below. Throughout the article, I draw on quotes from those interviews to illustrate the way in which their perspectives were framed.

COLONIZING THE FRONTIER: CREATING “CITIES OUT OF NOTHING”

INCRA was created on July 9, 1970, as an autonomous agency tied to the Ministry of Agriculture (Decree-Law 1110, Article 4, July 9, 1970).² The military government in power at the time created the agency to oversee the colonization and settlement of Brazil's vast and “underpopulated” northwestern frontier. The march westward was expected to fulfill Brazil's promise as a developed, modern nation, which meant extinguishing peasant protests in the Northeast and dealing with the presumed threat of communist guerrillas known to be hiding out in the Amazon rain forest (Martins 1984, 41; Bunker 1985). Colonization was also a means of combating external influence; the slogan “*integrar para não entregar*” (integrate to avoid delivering [the Amazon to foreigners]) was part of the substantial publicity campaign that accompanied frontier development (Reel 2010, 36). In the early 1970s, Brazilian theaters showed films weekly documenting the bulldozers and trucks cutting through the jungle to build new highways (Drosdoff

1. This builds on my earlier work, which focused on the latter two groups, social movement activists and land reform beneficiaries. Since the mid-1990s, I have worked with, studied, and written about land reform in Brazil and especially the role of social movements. It was only in the mid-2000s that I realized how little I understood the state's role in creating land reform settlements and subjects. I had argued (2010) for opening up the black box of the social movement (long treated as a fairly coherent entity, if not a particularly rational one) but had not extended the same respect or curiosity to the state.

2. INCRA was an amalgamation of several different attempts at colonization and rural development. To improve land distribution in the country, the National Institute of Immigration and Colonization (INIC) was formed in 1954, and the Rural Social Service was created in 1955 as a tool of rural development. In 1962, these two agencies were combined within the Superintendency of Agrarian Politics (SUPRA). In 1964, the National Institute of Rural Development (INDA) and the Brazilian Institute of Agrarian Reform (IBRA) were created by the military government (in conjunction with the Land Statute, Law 4304). INCRA brought together INDA and IBRA in 1970. While INCRA was technically autonomous (an autarchy) within the Ministry of Agriculture, Decree-Law 1164 made it subordinate to the National Security Council (Bunker 1985, 109).

1986, 60–74). As outlined in a regional development document put together by SUDAM (the Superintendancy of Amazonian Development), the objectives of settling the Amazon were no less than to “put Brazil, in the space of a generation, into the category of developed nations; . . . to double by 1980 the per capita income of Brazil (as compared to 1969); and . . . to raise the economy in 1974 to an annual growth rate of between 8 and 10 percent” (SUDAM 1973, 6). Buttressed by a sense of manifest destiny, INCRA employees moved west to settle “men without land in a land without men,” carving out thousands of 100-hectare plots, building houses and towns, and leading markets into relatively untapped regions of the Amazon rain forest (Hecht and Cockburn 1989, 108).

This was a good time to be in INCRA. The agency was very strong during the 1970s in the Amazon. According to one INCRA employee who worked in the Human Resources office and began his career in the INCRA-created town of Rurópolis, Pará, “The agency was controlled by the military and they were rigid. They controlled things because they had to build a whole town.”³ In the Amazon, INCRA employees were responsible for creating “cities out of nothing” as one employee in Paraíba said. Land tenure in the region was transformed by new decrees appropriating for federal purposes one hundred kilometers to either side of all federal highways being constructed or planned (Pompermayer 1979, 230).⁴ For the purposes of colonization, INCRA was given particular jurisdiction over the first ten-kilometer strip on either side of the new highways to settle colonists (Simmons 2002, 245). To get the new families started, INCRA personnel evaluated the migrants who arrived regularly by bus, measured land, gave out one-hundred-hectare properties, and provided six months of salary and food baskets (Smith 1982, 17). INCRA employees were expected to model appropriate behavior for the colonists; the military government listed one of INCRA’s key responsibilities as “creating a group conscience and achieving the goal of making the beneficiaries feel that they are integral to the [colonization and settlement] project” (Ministério de Agricultura and INCRA 1972, 25). INCRA employees chose political officers, including mayors, for the new planned towns (*rurópolis*) and villages (*agropolis*; see Moran 1981, 173). They employed doctors and dentists, organized soccer teams, oversaw the creation of a new cooperative production system, kept the peace, and even trained the settlers to produce “traditional” Amazonian crafts to sell in the off-season (Rosenbaum 1971). An employee in the Paraíba office who started his work in one of the first “rurópolises” in Rondônia said, “INCRA itself tried to show the colonists what they could and could not do. . . . INCRA even intervened in fights between husbands and wives! It was a mess—you don’t even know—all to try and keep people there. . . . INCRA did everything it could to keep people from leaving their lots.” For agricultural extension agents and agronomists finishing their degrees in the 1970s, INCRA had some of the best and most plentiful jobs. Women were especially encouraged to apply as there was a perception that restrictive gender norms would not apply in the Amazon.

3. See Martins 1984 for a discussion of the militarization of agrarian issues in Brazil.

4. Decree-Law 1164 of April 1971 turned over 2,233,865 square kilometers to the federal government, land that had previously belonged to the states (Pompermayer 1979, 230).

To do all of this work, INCRA employees suffered. They camped out in the woods, traveled on dirt roads and washed-out bridges; they got malaria; they were trampled by wild pigs; they worked by candlelight when the power went off every night at 10:00 pm; and they loved it. As one man said, "I was called to work in INCRA in the northern region. . . . I went to Rondônia, the Capital of Malaria. . . . For me it was a very good experience. The struggle was just to go to the field, to go into the forest and sleep with mosquito nets in the settlements. . . . And for me, it was a grand experience." Another employee was an agronomist who began working in the northern state of Acre in the 1970s (first as a teacher and then hired by INCRA in 1983): "Some stayed in Amazonia because they put down roots there, having families, land, something they like there; it is a beautiful region after all. Seventy percent of my profession I learned in Amazonia, for sure . . . I cried when I left."

INCRA workers who went to the Amazon prided themselves on being "adventurous," in the words of a female agronomist who went to Pará in 1976. They got work done; they had the resources and plenty of land to distribute. They were proud of their work and joined other government workers in wearing T-shirts with the saying "Brazil is a Giant" (Drosdoff 1986, 68). As Emilio Moran (1976) writes, "Many agronomists took up the call [to go to the frontier] voluntarily, attracted by the patriotism associated with the move and the substantial 'hardship' bonuses and free housing given by the government. Many of [those who went] were young and ambitious civil servants who saw in the frontier a quick avenue for professional advancement" (20). INCRA employees interviewed were told by internal social workers to "stay away from the farmers' daughters," because "at that time if you worked for INCRA, when you went to the house of a farmer, the only thing [the farmer] didn't do was put the girl in your lap, you know?" But most of them managed to get married, often to each other, and have kids.

The mandate on the frontier was contradictory, however. INCRA was originally tasked with the project of colonization, and there were many employees "decisively committed to furthering the interests of poor rural families and small farmers" (Pompermayer 1979, 235); but by 1974, the official objectives were re-oriented towards measuring public land to be sold to large landed interests (Medeiros and Esterici 1994, 11). Initially, the bulk of INCRA's budget was supposed to be for Integrated Colonization Projects along the TransAmazonian Highway, but by 1972 INCRA announced that it would distribute public lands to private enterprise. When former INCRA president Moura Cavalcanti became minister of agriculture in 1972, he pushed the agency to focus on selling land to large private enterprises (Bunker 1985, 111). In 1974 INCRA president Lourenço Tavares da Silva formally acknowledged INCRA's shift toward large and medium enterprise, and the number of colonists to be settled was reduced to one-fifth of the originally projected hundred thousand families (Bunker 1985, 112). By the mid-1970s, INCRA's two main tasks were at odds: to promote rural settlement through colonization for the poor and to register properties in the Amazon with secure deeds that could be sold to "modernized" farmers from southern Brazil with subsidized state credit. Pompermayer argues (1979, 379; see also Becker 1982; Bunker 1985, 158; Ozorio de Almeida 1992):

Because of its social role and the legitimating functions with which INCRA was entrusted in 1970, it initially commanded great power over policies in the Amazon. In the disputes that followed, however, INCRA became “inefficient” for the purpose of advancing the interests of the rural population. Later, when it had recovered some of its power, the main function of INCRA was changed from that of controlling and distributing land to small producers to surveying and selling it to large entrepreneurs, in which capacity it was supported wholeheartedly by the interests which benefited from that change.

Memories of this period, with all of its contradictions, are very strong within INCRA today. This is not surprising given that in 2006, 70 percent of the agency’s workforce nationwide was over the age of fifty, and most of these people began their careers in the Amazon (CNASI 2006). At the state INCRA office in Paraíba, almost half of the career employees in 2006 (58 of 126) had begun their careers with the agency in the Amazon and only returned to Paraíba in the late 1980s. Nostalgia for the period of colonization ran through the interviews I conducted in Brasília and Paraíba, and it arguably runs through the agency as a whole.⁵

FROM MOSQUITOES TO MARX: DEMOCRACY AND THE REORGANIZATION OF INCRA

By the early 1980s, colonization in the Amazon was coming to an end. There were spectacular project failures, and INCRA was gradually drained of resources (Cleary 1991; Moran 1983; Ozorio de Almeida 1992). The social movements that fought for land distribution in the 1950s and 1960s were reorganizing and beginning to struggle, but they were up against considerable antireform forces in government (Medeiros and Esterci 1994, 17), “big business” in agriculture (Palmeira 1994, 50), and an urban population that now had to be convinced of the utility of distribution (Ferreira 1994, 30). In 1982, the military ceded to civilian rule (direct elections would come in 1985) and in 1984, INCRA’s official dismantling began (Law 7231). Many of the agency’s functions were passed to the Ministry of Agriculture and its activities were restricted to agrarian reform and management of the structure of rural land tenure (*estrutura fundiária*). During this time, there was a struggle to define a new National Plan for Agrarian Reform (PNRA I) but INCRA was not officially included in this discussion (Ferreira 1994, 33). Agribusiness interests managed to lobby for a watered-down version of the plan that focused only on unproductive land such that expropriations could be easily negotiated away (Palmeira 1994, 56–57).

By 1987, the dismantling of INCRA appeared complete: President José Sarney passed a law (Decree 2363) terminating the agency and distributing its functions to two new bodies, the Ministry of Development and Agrarian Reform (MDRA) and the Legal Land Institute (INTER), created to deal with the juridical issues of expropriation. INCRA employees were unceremoniously sent to other public

5. In a recent project to celebrate INCRA’s thirty-five years as the federal agency in charge of agrarian reform, employees were invited to send in stories recounting their work within the agency; of the eleven selected for publication, eight were exclusively stories of working in the Amazon (see *Memória INCRA 35 anos*, Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário 2006).

agencies or “decommissioned,” which meant that they “waited in the wings,” still receiving a paycheck but with no work to do. According to an INCRA official working in Brasília, Sarney did not support agrarian reform, and the best way to get rid of it was to get rid of the *casa* (house): “It’s like this—if INCRA does not exist, then there is no place [for land distribution] and there is no problem.”

The dismantling of INCRA was part of a broader reorganization of public service at the national level (Bresser Pereira 2007), but the reorganization of INCRA generated unexpected resistance. INCRA employees came together with activists from the fairly conservative National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG), the Catholic Church, and the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (MST) to demand that INCRA be reinstated as part of the fight to strengthen agrarian reform during the debate over the new constitution. Public demonstrations began in October 1987 and ran until March 1989. Defense of the *casa* (INCRA) came to be seen as defense of the *causa* (cause).⁶ People interviewed in INCRA referred to this period triumphantly: this was one of the agency’s finest moments—people came together to fight for INCRA, and they won. As a high-ranking official in the Brasília office said:

There was a heavy process of struggle to get INCRA back—huge mobilizations of INCRA and the rural workers and their [grassroots] organizations to reject this decree. . . . And there were massive mobilizations in the states to put pressure on the politicians. . . . There was one mobilization in the National Congress and the workers of INCRA filled the balconies. . . . There were more than a thousand people spilling outside, more than 1,500 people! It was an interesting moment here; it was one of the most interesting moments.

In 1989, after being subjected to six different legislative decrees changing its mandate or structure, INCRA was reinstated. The two institutions created by Sarney in 1987 (the MDRA and INTER) were rendered defunct.

INCRA was only extinguished for two years, but when the employees returned to work, the context for agrarian reform was quite different. Many of the agronomists and extension agents from the Northeast who migrated to the Amazon for work in the 1970s returned home in the late 1980s and 1990s. Back in Paraíba, they were still INCRA employees, but the project now was land reform, not colonization, and creating property involved not just themselves (the state) and the rural poor but also private property owners (whose land was threatened by possible expropriation), Marxist-Leninist social movements organized at the national level (such as the MST), the World Bank, and agro-industrial elites (Fernandes 1999; Wright and Wolford 2003).

INCRA’s main focus would now be on settlement rather than colonization, and instead of working on the frontier where public land seemed to be freely available, the agency would now be expected to expropriate land from large landowners in the heart of settled areas within each state. And instead of fighting Communists, INCRA would now seemingly work for them, as radical Marxist-Leninist social movements became the new mediators for agrarian reform, targeting lands to be expropriated and selecting their own members as beneficiaries (Sigaud 2004).

6. This is a phrase that INCRA employees used often to describe their affiliation to agrarian reform—attending to both the “*casa e a causa*” (the house and the cause).

After 1989, INCRA's workload grew steadily as the number of land reform settlements and settlers increased, but the agency's personnel fell from 12,000 in 1990 to 5,500 in 2006 because of retirement, the decommissioning of INCRA in 1987, the lack of qualified workers, and loss of employees due to early retirement programs that began with Law 8112/90 (CNASI). Today, INCRA has to oversee land registration for properties as well as land distribution and settlement. Carrying out all of these activities requires considerable coordination across technical fields. Over the past fifteen years, INCRA has undergone successive waves of internal reorganization in the name of "rationalizing" coordination and improving efficiency. Every time the executive branch turns over, the incoming president reappoints new division heads in Brasília and superintendents in the state offices (most employees are selected through competitive exams but supervisory positions are "political jobs," *cargos de confiança*). Under both Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva, political appointees executed dramatic divisional reorganization as well.

When Fernando Henrique Cardoso came into office in 1995, he began constructing plans for what he termed a New Rural World (Deere and Medeiros 2006). Cardoso argued that INCRA had to become more flexible to meet the demands of third-party contracts and market signals. According to one longtime INCRA employee in charge of planning, "[Cardoso] said that for this . . . new politics, the organizational design of INCRA will not work . . . and if it doesn't work we will have to change it." In general, the New Rural World was a move toward what Leonilde Medeiros calls a "new institutionality" promoting decentralization, privatization, and the market (in Deere and Medeiros 2007). The first elements of the plan were the National Program of Family Agriculture (PRONAF) and the Fundo de Terras e da Reforma Agrária (the Land Bank) for market-led agrarian reform. Although Cardoso said publicly that the New Rural World was intended to rationalize rural development and would not conflict with the state-led process of land distribution, the program coincided with diminishing resources for INCRA (CNASI 2006) as well as with a new decree in 1998 that effectively criminalized landless social mobilization. Decree 1245 made any property occupied by social movement activists ineligible for expropriation for a period of two years; this made it more difficult for movements like the MST to deploy their most strategic tool, the large-scale land occupation that forced the government to evaluate properties for expropriation.

Internally, Cardoso reorganized INCRA so that there were three main divisions. When Lula came into office in 2003, he reorganized the agency to undo everything that Cardoso had done, a process that took four years. As the same manager of planning quoted above said, "INCRA is always a good *coabia*, a laboratory rat. [The government says,] 'We are going to apply this bitter medicine, so we are going to apply it—to INCRA.'"

7. The organizational structure currently in operation was approved by Decree 5735 in March 2006, although it was not finalized for many years. There are now five national directories (Strategic Management, Administrative Management, Order and Structure of Rural Land Tenure, Land Acquisition and Implementation of Settlement Projects, and the Development of Settlement Projects), as well as the

INCRA employees have not stood quietly for this treatment. Every year since 2004, INCRA offices nationwide have gone on strike for several months, usually between May and August. The strikes have been extraordinarily well supported by INCRA employees, with near-total work stoppages in the headquarters office of Brasília and many of the state offices. The sentiment running through the strike discourse at the headquarters and in Paraíba is that the *casa* has to be reinforced in order to salvage the *causa*: INCRA's organizational and personnel structure has to be fixed before agrarian reform itself can be properly conducted. The official complaints center around low pay rates and insufficient personnel, as summarized in a union statement (CNASI 2006): "The growth in demand [for land and postsettlement development] has not been accompanied by a growth in available material resources, budgets and finances . . . and this has consequences beyond putting INCRA in a precarious state. It means that INCRA can only attend insufficiently to its beneficiaries."

THE CASA AND THE CAUSA: THE MANY POSITIONS OF INCRA

This long and contradictory history of agrarian reform in Brazil has fostered a range of ideological and political positions within INCRA. People justify these multiple positions by invoking their work on the frontier, and the positions have clear material effects; they reflect very different attitudes and relationships with the social movements that have become critical representatives of the rural poor in the struggle for land (Sigaud 2004; Wolford 2010). Some INCRA workers reject these movements and blame them for slowing down distribution and politicizing the process, while others consider them necessary and work closely with leaders to resolve contentious issues.

A former president of the agency at the national level put it this way:

I would say that there are three types of workers in INCRA today. There is the worker who is passionate—or even if not passionate, at least engaged, a person who studies and sees things, who likes their work. This includes some of the old people from forestry, project development, the environmental division, etc. Then there are people who are totally lost and I think that if they could they would work somewhere else. And so, the civil servant who says, "I hate this, I don't like social movements" shouldn't be in INCRA, right? Because we deal with this sort of thing every day, right? And then there is a third group who are, I would call them, tired, you know? People who already did a lot, and they haven't studied the new technology—they want to, but they don't know how to use the computer. . . . Our work here, while these people are here, is to strengthen the house, INCRA—the equipment, the people, the budget—so that we can accomplish our mission.

After interviewing INCRA workers in Brasília and João Pessoa, it is clear that while the perception of divisions among INCRA employees is accurate, the casual invocation of being "tired" or "lost" downplays the passions that ran through the experiences and perspectives of workers in the agency. People strongly defended

central council and the legal office. There are thirty regional superintendencies, and they follow essentially the same form as the national office.

their different positions, arguing that their experiences in the agency justified their perspective on the right way to carry out reform. These different perspectives only become intelligible if they are grounded in the history of frontier colonization and in the contradictory mandate of the agency since its founding in 1970. In what follows, I describe six different groups within INCRA, all of which defined the purpose of their work, and their life's calling, in very different ways.

For the first group of INCRA employees, nostalgia for the frontier results in a disavowal of the contemporary dynamics of reform: this isn't how it was supposed to be. These people are loyal to memory of INCRA but are ambivalent or hostile to the ongoing project of agrarian reform under the new conditions. They resent their conditions of work under the new democratic regime and feel that they, and the land itself, were most productive and most valued during the former colonial period in the Amazon. They remember this as a time when they could work without the interference of "politics." One employee in the Paraíba office who was trained as an agronomist and began work as a topographer in the Amazon said:

This job of being a topographer, it's one of the things I am happiest remembering. Because I felt productive—and, understand, political intentions didn't exist then, and so because of this, things were much more serious then than they are today. . . . Because even at that time we knew that politics would get in the way. . . . Today you have people saying, "Hey, let's get together, I want that property over there that belongs to governor so and so." No, [before, the motto was] let's produce, produce, produce.

I asked him whether there was any conflict in the region at that time; he said:

It was rare because, see here, we are talking about what year—we are talking about 1973, '74, '75, and the military regime was ruling the country. And so when the topographer came, the topographer was a king, even a god. . . . And to this day people miss the military regime . . . because [when it ended] Brazil lost a lot of this efficiency. There used to be a lot of respect—in the same way one would respect a priest, you understand.

By invoking his work as scientific and as expertise in contrast to politics, this employee characterizes the "right" agrarian reform as a technical process where land beneficiaries fulfill certain objective criteria rather than subjective social or political ones. This group has a particularly hard time dealing with social movements because they resent being told how to do their jobs by people outside the proper political lines of authority. As a high-ranking employee in Paraíba, who had begun her career in Brasília, said:

A lot of agronomists left here, Paraíba, after they finished the agronomy course. They were admitted to this project of colonization. Politically, they don't have any responsibility in relation to the politics of agrarian reform. They had done work [in the Amazon] determining which lands belonged to the Union, and so the contact with the worker was something different than [it is now]. It was very different work: they were doing reconnaissance of the entire area, an area that was taxed for the Union; they were doing settlement projects . . . that weren't demanded by the worker, it was the government who offered the land so that they could work there. Now people working here in Paraíba are in these areas of conflict, with workers demanding land where they live.

For a second group of workers, the demonstrations to save INCRA in the 1980s generated a sense of loyalty to INCRA as a *casa* rather than a *causa*. As one man who worked at INCRA for thirty-one years said, “I have been very involved this whole time in INCRA, because *INCRA é minha casa*” (INCRA is my home). Many of the speeches, spontaneous and formal, given during INCRA union meetings invoked the employees’ many years of dedication and service as proof of their dedication to both agrarian reform and to the country.⁸ This feeling of loyalty is particularly visible during union negotiations for improved working conditions when the *casa* becomes the *causa* and some employees threaten others who violate the strike and continue working.

In one instance, I was interviewing an agronomist whom I call Bea, who had begun her career in Pará. We were talking during the strike of 2007, and she and I were alone in one of the offices within the INCRA compound. She had come in to finish paperwork so that a batch of credit agreements could be dispersed to the settlers. The money from Brasília was already in the bank; all that was needed was her signature. As we sat and talked, several male employees came into the room. They were all high up in the union administration, with the exception of one older man who could often be seen around the entranceway of the main INCRA building wearing a sandwich board with strike slogans on front and back; he was wearing it then as he silently followed the others into the room. The men circled the table where we sat and the leader (the president of the union) began to question Bea. What was she doing here? Why was she working? Why was she not supporting the strike? She protested halfheartedly, saying that she wasn’t working, she was leaving soon and she was just talking to the American researcher.

People like Bea constituted a third group in INCRA, people for whom their time in the Amazon cemented their belief in agrarian reform as necessary for social justice. Their nostalgia for the Amazon manifests in an explicit recognition of the political nature of reform. As one of the division chiefs in Brasília who was known as a longtime activist (*militante*) in the struggle for agrarian reform said, “Can I talk technically about agrarian reform—does this exist? Does it? . . . Now, explaining the process of agrarian reform on paper, in an institution like this, as a technical process—this isn’t possible. This process is not real, it is a fiction. Look, I am a technician and I want to explain thing technically, but who do we fight for?” These people argued that once committed to the cause, you had to make up the rules as you go (and you had the right to make up the rules) in order to get anything done.

This administrator argued that INCRA employees had to develop a good relationship with social movement activists because this was a new sort of agrarian reform, one run by the rural workers and not by the state or the large landowner: “We have a very good relationship, between INCRA and the social movements here. This relationship is very important. . . . We have to have a partnership, because in isolation no one can work. . . . If you don’t have this conviction things don’t happen. At this point in our history you have to have ideology, you have to

8. There are two different unions as well as an association that represent INCRA workers, and this has resulted in a high degree of factionalism.

have a sensibility of the social, cultural question." These were the workers who made agrarian reform happen. They were a minority, but they worked constantly to negotiate with social movements, get papers signed, and finesse solutions to new problems that came up every day, problems for which no clear rule (or norm) existed.

A fourth group of employees at INCRA consists of the lawyers hired to decipher the federal law as it applies to particular cases. The lawyers have two main jobs: "First, to take care of the judicial processes, all the processes that involve agrarian reform. And also our function in Paraíba is to orient people in the state office as to the legal underpinnings of their work." Every contract drawn up at the INCRA offices in Paraíba has to go through the lawyers' office. This work has increased dramatically under Lula because of the emphasis on privatization and third-party contracts.

For the lawyers, the law is their calling. They "do not take the initiative," they simply "perfect the legislation," as one INCRA lawyer said. They are trained in a general course of legal study and then take a public test that determines whether they meet the standards of the government and, if so, where they will be placed. Those lawyers chosen to work with INCRA are then put through one week of classes that "show how INCRA works." No one is quite sure (not even the lawyers) how lawyers for INCRA are selected from the general pool: "Maybe by their grades, or demands from the federal level. Or maybe INCRA needs more lawyers." None of the lawyers I spoke to in the Paraíba office had chosen to be in INCRA; all of them, for some reason, would have preferred to work in IBAMA, the national environmental agency. As the head of the legal office said, "I already tried to leave here to go to IBAMA, but I didn't make it—they wouldn't let me go. They said 'you can't leave here because you already have experience.' But it would be interesting for me to learn about environmental law. Afterwards, I would come back here, you know. I think it's cool here [*legal*], I think the material is awesome [*bacana*]."

The lawyers' allegiance is not to INCRA and certainly not to agrarian reform. They are technicians who stand above the process, deferring only to the law. The lawyers are often frustrated with the social movements and the settlers because "the leaders of the associations have a total lack of understanding about the laws—the knowledge they have is absurd—of what they can't do and so they do everything wrong." The grassroots actors expect that the lawyers for INCRA will be able to help them or hurt them in their quest for land, but the lawyers deny that the law allows for ideology: "Brazilian law sets such stringent limits [on what we do] that I have the impression that it would not be all that different if ideologically lawyer A or B was more or less sympathetic to agrarian reform."

This suggestion that the law is neutral, particularly in relation to agrarian issues, is highly debatable. Many scholars have argued that the judiciary is biased in favor of landed elites (Holston 1991; Meszaros 2000), particularly local judges, who may be corrupt and aligned with large landowners. In a twist on this commonly accepted argument that the Brazilian legal system is biased toward the rural elite, however, a member of the Lula government suggested to me in 2006 that social movements and INCRA workers could easily manipulate the law in their

favor. I was interviewing a top official in the Ministry of Agrarian Development, and I asked him why Lula had not lifted the provisional decree (*medida provisória*, MP) put in place by Cardoso to prohibit any property occupied by squatters from being evaluated for the purposes of agrarian reform for two years after the occupation. Social movement activists had demanded that Lula overturn this decree when he took office in 2003. The official suggested that Lula did not withdraw the MP because if he had, the conservative rural block in Congress (the *bancada rural*) would have attacked him, so he left it in place but let everyone know that it was no longer necessary to enforce it. INCRA's lawyers would clearly disagree that the law is so malleable. The end result that "anything goes [for the rural elite], but [for the poor] a strict interpretation of the law" arguably puts agrarian reform and the landless at a considerable disadvantage.⁹

In addition to the four groups described above, there is also a group of people who were hired recently, in one of Lula's two open calls (in 2005 and 2006) for new INCRA employees. These were the first such calls since 1994. These people constitute a fifth group of highly qualified employees within INCRA with university degrees and trained for upper-level (*nível superior*) jobs, generally agronomic scientists with training in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) or social scientists such as anthropologists. They have little experience with the long history of agrarian reform, however, and often see their job as a set of technical processes. As one agronomist hired in 2006 said:

I had no idea how things really would work in INCRA, I only knew in passing what my functions would be here. . . . I had the ideology of working and wanting to work; wherever I went, I would "wear the shirt" of that agency and follow what they are doing. I did not have any idea of how agrarian reform was really carried out in practice. I can personally disagree with certain ways social movements carry out their methods, like occupying public buildings, violence, devastation, breaking things. I don't agree with this, but I am here in a neutral agency. I am not on one side or another. I am here to work; I really didn't know it would be like this. People coming from the outside, occupying lands and public buildings, and that's agrarian reform? I didn't know it was like this when I studied for the entrance exams for the job.

Of those I interviewed, the newly hired agronomists were unanimous in their resentment of social movements, which they argued dictated the rhythm and direction of reform. They were confused by what they saw as attempts to appease social movement leaders and argued that if reform were conducted more efficiently without such interference, expropriations and settlements could be planned according to territorial and demographic capacities rather than "chasing conflicts." As the same agronomist quoted above said:

We have here in leadership positions people with no technical training who were put up for the positions by the movements. These people [in the agency] have decision-making power in an organization that should be preeminently technical, in my opinion; these peo-

9. This phrase is generally stated as "for my friends anything, for my enemies the law." It is a common expression used to describe corruption in Brazil and generally attributed to former Brazilian president and autocrat Getúlio Vargas.

ple come in through political channels, because the government is “social” and puts people in to manage agrarian reform in their own way. I don’t think it’s good when people start to work using more ideology than technical norms. I myself follow the technical norms we have; I don’t politicize anything; I don’t take sides.

Without loyalty to the *casa* or the *causa*, many of these new employees were looking for jobs elsewhere. Approximately half of the people hired nationwide between 2004 and 2006 had already left the agency by 2010, and many of those who were still in the Paraíba office were taking graduate classes to try to compete for job openings in the Ministério Público (the government’s watchdog agency) and IBAMA. As the head of the Settlement Development Division said, “We did three public recruitment exams in 2006. But the same guy that comes in that door for the exam goes right out the other, because if he passes the INCRA exam, he also passes two or three others, and when he looks at the salary range, he’s going to get double elsewhere, so why would he stay here?” These people are also often unnerved by the political aspect of reform. The same director said:

We had someone come in, and on her first day there was an occupation of the INCRA offices; they closed everything up and locked the doors. The people with their little red flags came in, and she went into a panic. I had to call her over and have a chat with her. . . . I said this was a normal situation. I talked to her in the morning and we were let go around 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon. After a while she [left]. She said thanks, but I don’t want anything to do with this. I thought it was funny. She was trained in law and was very smart. Here she was, on her first day, and there was an occupation.

Finally, there is also a group of people “visiting” INCRA (in the words of one such employee). These are political appointees who assume leadership positions at the discretion of the political party that is “given” INCRA during the distribution of postelectoral spoils. These political appointees arrive because of and with a variety of agendas. In general, these agendas reflect the position of the executive office at either the federal or the state level. The practice of appointing new department heads and superintendents after every election is universally despised by career employees because the visitors come into the agency and, in the words of one such appointee, they like to “start over from zero, change everything.” These people are often very committed to agrarian reform, because they care either about reform or about their career, but they are rarely at INCRA for long. These positions are inherently unstable because they are seen as stepping-stones to higher political office.¹⁰ In early 2010, fifteen of the thirty INCRA state superintendents were *exonerado* (liberated) from their positions to seek political office (including the superintendent of the Paraíba office). Every time that a new set of political appointees sweeps through INCRA, the career employees spend time training the new group, meeting with the new division heads to acquaint them with the jobs at hand, and airing their grievances. This is not always a waste of time but it does always take time.

10. I suggested to the person who told me this that INCRA must make a lousy stepping-stone, given the agency’s bad reputation among the general public. She laughed and nodded but insisted that this was still how visitors saw their positions.

**A COMPLICATED CALLING: CULTURAL POLITICS
IN A BRAZILIAN BUREAUCRACY**

With all of the rich work done on the state in Latin America, it is perhaps surprising that more research has not been done on the perspectives of the bureaucrats who make up the state. One reason for this may be disciplinary and methodological. The discipline most engaged with the study of the state, political science, has for a long time eschewed the sort of qualitative methods necessary to break open the state (but see Mosley 2013 for new appreciations of qualitative work in the discipline), while the discipline most known for ethnographic methods, anthropology, has only recently begun to engage more directly with the state (Das and Poole 2004; Ferme 2013; Sharma and Gupta 2006).

There are many questions to answer in exploring the insides of the state, and I have only addressed some in this article. I hope that the analysis of the different perspectives on work within INCRA has shed light on the ways in which institutional histories create layers of meaning and produce sedimented subjectivities within government agencies. The people who work at INCRA are all passionately committed—they see their work as a calling—but some are committed to a political ideal of reform and distribution, some are professionally committed to the ideals of their work and the rules, and others are committed to the *casa* and the majesty of the colonial enterprise. These different groups tend to get along civilly but to disagree quite strongly on fundamental issues of how reform should be conducted.

I do not, in this article, discuss the implications of these callings for everyday practices, although in other work I show how the cultural politics within INCRA shape “participatory democracy by default” (2010) and relationships with social movements (2016). In this article, I focus on the bureaucrats’ own discursive construction of their calling. These constructions matter because people have agency, they do not simply implement policies and programs as spelled out from above. Instead, they interpret and negotiate to get their work done. This is especially true in an agency like INCRA, where what few resources the agency has have devolved to the state level and so much depends on people figuring out a way to get things done, making it up as they go along (Wolford 2010).

Thus, this is not a comprehensive analysis of why reform does or does not work in Brazil or in other places. It is primarily a case study of one particular state branch of a Brazilian federal agency mandated with the distribution and coordination of land settlements throughout the country. This case study highlights the different attitudes of those working within INCRA and the different meanings they associate with land reform and the rural poor or social movements representing the rural poor. This is important because when people talk about the state in studies of land distribution (and more broadly), or about INCRA specifically, they tend to invoke the state, or state agencies, as coherent representatives of a singular state. INCRA is treated as an intentional embodiment of government policy. But over the more than thirty-five years of INCRA’s existence, a complicated political culture has developed such that there is not one INCRA but rather several different INCRA. The contradictory history of the agency as a tool of frontier coloniza-

tion with competing mandates to assist the rural poor and oversee land tenure for the wealthy has shaped multiple and conflicting positions within INCRA as to the “right way” to do reform. Overall, the political culture of the casa (as people within INCRA refer to the institution) is shaped by nostalgia, passion, regret, and contradiction, and this culture influences the way in which people work (or don’t).

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