

# TAX RELIEF TRAGEDY

THIS is an interesting and important book, which ought to be read by anyone who is concerned with the problems of peasant farmers, the plight of tribal peoples, or the need to conserve the rain-forests of the world.

It is a "must" for anyone who wants to know more about the Amazon, providing an up-to-date account, against the exotic and romantic background of the Amazon Basin, of a perennial cause of dispute in human society viz., conflict over land.

The authors travelled widely in Brazil, in order to get first-hand knowledge of what was happening there, and interviewed, or simply talked to, large numbers of individuals. Their informants included peasants, Indians, Church workers, officials, land-owners and others.

They were assisted by various Brazilians, who carried out interviews with them, or (to a limited extent) for them. They also made use of existing published work, and of press reports.

Altogether, the findings presented here are impressive in their

## *The Last Frontier: Fighting Over Land In the Amazon*

Sue Branford and Oriel Glock: Zed Books Ltd., London, 1985, 336 pages.

scope, and fascinating, though sometimes harrowing, in their detail.

The authors are much to be commended, both for their perseverance in finding out facts, and for their presentation of these facts in a highly readable way. I was sorry to read that Oriel Glock had died shortly before the book was published; it is clear that she must have been a very talented

BY ALEX HARDIE

person, with a strong commitment to her research.

There are three aspects to this book; observation of the problem, diagnosis i.e. explanation of the causes, and prescription i.e. advice as to what should be done. The observation is first-rate, and

the reader gets a very good idea of the life of peasant families, people who, after many years of effort, are just managing to make a reasonable living out of the land they have cleared, when "land-owners" come along and try to evict them, all too often with success.

The sufferings of the Indian tribes are even worse, as they cannot maintain their traditional way of life without their tribal lands, and many of them have died of diseases formerly unknown to them.

In my view, the diagnosis is strong on detail, but weaker on the underlying causes. Certainly, the "land-owners", who may not even be official owners of the land, are greedy and violent, the officials are often corrupt, the government is deplorable, but all this cannot properly be attributed to "capitalism", as the authors seem to imply.

Rather, the economic and political system of Brazil is one of "corporatism", in which private property is allowed, but the government can decide how that property will be used. The rights of individuals are ignored, but there are plenty of hand-outs for wealthy persons, or large institutions, who support the government. In a Brazil in which the freedom of the individual was respected, it would not have been possible to use tax-payers' money to build expensive roads through the Amazon, or to give discriminatory tax relief to companies which "developed" the Amazon.

Yet from this book it is clear that the despoliation of the Amazon could not have occurred without the roads and that only generous tax relief could have induced companies to go there. (In passing, it would be interesting to know how much of the destruction has been financed by cheap loans from international bodies paid for by Western taxpayers). It is also clear that the

## Reformer 'murdered'

SABOTAGE is feared to be behind the death of Brazil's Minister of Land Reform, whose jet burst into flames and plunged into the jungle seconds after take-off.

Sr. Marcos Freire, 56, was aboard a Hawker Siddeley 125 belonging to the Air Force when the crash happened on Sept 9. With him was the President of the National Land Colonisation.

Although the government denied that sabotage was likely the theory was being investigated because Sr. Freire held the most controversial political office in the country.

Since May 1985, when the civilian government announced that it would resettle 7.1m landless families, the landowners have used violence to express their opposition.

Three Catholic priests and 292 peasants, lawyers, farmworkers and

union leaders have been murdered in the last two years by gunmen hired by landowners.

The programme has not succeeded: although 1.4m families were due to be settled by the end of this year, only 25,000 had been by June.

Meanwhile, the landless peasants continue to flood into the *favelas*, the slums of cities. Many take part in drug smuggling.

The drugs barons in Rio de Janeiro have now effectively turned the police into an extension of their gangs. Off-duty officers are hired by the peddlers to kill their opponents.

They now run the *favelas*. Civil law cannot reach into the slums, where the landless peasants are forced to back the drugs bosses in their desperate attempt to stay alive and make a living.



# Fate sealed by the land barons

A HORRIFYING report from Germaine Greer on the plight of the peasantry of North East Brazil, in which the Church accuses the former military government of ex-President Figueredo of genocide was published in *The Independent* (London) on June 15-16.

The bishops maintain that 3½ million people have died in a famine caused not by drought or crop failure but as a result of deliberate government policies in the drive to expand the economy.

A great free-for-all land grab with all its suffering to the dispossessed still goes on under the present so-called democratic rule of President Sarney, who seems unable to cope with a daunting situation involving corruption within the police, violence and co-operation from the army — still the real rulers of Brazil.

Landlessness is hourly increasing, and so is inflation in spite of (and partly because of?) the World

Bank's astronomical loans to aid development schemes and which Brazil has not the slightest chance of repaying and which as usual results in too much of the extra wealth gravitating to the pockets of the landowners.

The Church, as well as financing community schemes to aid their suffering flock, has courageously urged landless rural workers to occupy uncultivated arable land, and organises them to take possession. But this has resulted in nuns and priests, as well as farmers, being killed by hirelings of the land barons.

The details in the report of malnutrition and premature death among the poorest are heart-rending, especially as Brazil has been given billions in real money for development, which has been of little benefit to those in real need. Yet in spite of all this, it is reputed to be the richest country in the Third World.

Another report, which may not provoke quite such deep feelings of revulsion and indignation, is found in the *Kent Property Mail* of June 18, in which a Prudential Property Services survey shows that the cost for young couples of buying a home has rocketed so high that many of them are having to rule out any possibility of having children for years to come, simply because both will have to go to work full time in order to maintain the mortgage repayments.

So if there are still any Malthusians left among us, they may rest a little easier, for there are still forces at work keeping down the figure they dread.

Finally, each of these reports proves in its own way the inexorable law: that those who own and control land hold in their hands the scales of life or death and of happiness or misery over those who do not.

government has failed in its duty. It has not enforced law impartially, or surveyed land properly, or checked whether people were already living on land which it proposed to sell. Brazil does have a very sound law, whereby a person can claim ownership rights to land which he is already occupying. If this law had been used as the basis of land rights, there would have been little conflict. In practice, conflict arose because companies, or wealthy persons, bought land from the government and then found people already occupying it. As a libertarian, I would reject the view that the government of a country owns the land of that country; taking this approach, the Brazilian government was not entitled to sell the land anyway.

The authors give relatively little space to the policies they

would recommend. However, they do favour land reform and what they describe as "rational" development. This is well enough; no sensible reader would want detailed advice on policies, at the end of a book of this length, and these recommendations are reasonable. Who wants irrational development? Even so, the reader will learn that the peasants were gradually settling the Amazon of their own accord, and that their relations with the Indians were usually quite amicable. This being the case, the best policy would be one of non-interference, which would imply no deliberate "development" at all. After all, the past behaviour of Brazilian governments gives no cause for supposing that they could identify, or carry out, a rational development policy. As to land reform; the authors do not mention the one

reform which is needed in Brazil, as elsewhere, land value taxation.

I liked this book very much, and would certainly recommend it. One especially interesting fact can be found on page 27. With reference to the state of Rhondônia, there is mention of the "first national cadaster", which was carried out in 1967. I assumed that this meant that a land ownership survey was carried out in that state in that year, presumably as part of a complete cadaster for Brazil. Elsewhere, I read of satellite photography being used for land surveying. If Brazil can do this, it gives the lie to the claim that a cadaster for Britain would be too expensive to carry out.

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