



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 Rhodônia, 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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