

Territorializing land conflict: Space, place, and contentious politics in the Brazilian Amazon

Cynthia S. Simmons

Department of Geography, Michigan State University, 321 Geography Building, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA (Tel.: + 517-353-9739; E-mail: Simmo108@msu.edu)

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Abstract

Brazil possesses a long history of violent struggle for land, and its most recent phase is occurring predominantly in the Amazon Basin. Consequently, this paper attempts to territorialize land conflict in the Brazilian Amazon, and in so doing, to illuminate the place-specific intersection of historic social, political, and economic circumstance that created a violent landscape in the so-called “South of Pará.” The paper’s premise is that such conflict can be best viewed as resulting from a dialectic between general social processes operating across spatial scales, which create necessary conditions for conflict, and place-specific historical circumstances that transform necessary into sufficient conditions. The paper presents a framework integrating the theory of contentious politics and literatures addressing violence associated with the Amazonian frontier and with resource scarcity (and abundance). The discussion and theoretical application deconstruct the environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms that created violence in the *South of Pará*, and set the stage for the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre in April of 1996.

Introduction

On April 17, 1996, in a confrontation between military police and a large number of landless farmers protesting for agrarian reform in the Brazilian Amazon, 19 protestors were tragically killed (New York Times, April 21, 1996). Although the encounter made national and international news, and brought the injustices suffered by the rural peoples of Brazil to the forefront of world attention, it was by no means the first incident of its kind. Indeed, Brazil has a long history of land conflict stemming from an entrenched pattern of inequality that was established when the Portuguese first arrived in the new world and allocated large tracts of land to the Church and a small number of individuals (Prado, 1967; Warnock, 1987; Chilcote, 1990; Brannstrom, 2001).¹ Nevertheless, fatal encounters like the so-called *Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre* in April of 1996 have historically been most severe in the Amazon region (Simmons, 2004) – the main objective of this paper is to examine why.

Conflict stemming from competition over a region’s natural resources is a fundamental geographic phenomenon observable in many parts of the world (Johnson, 1968; Moore, 1969; Davies, 1971; Gurr, 1971; Huntington, 1971; Paige, 1975; Prosterman, 1976; Midlarsky, 1982; Tutino, 1986; Brockett, 1988; Homer-Dixon and Blitt, 1998; Serageldin, 1995). However, the causal mechanism linking resource scarcity – or abun-

dance – to conflict cannot be easily discerned, and is very much dependent on the historic, socio-political, and economic circumstances of specific places that structure both the value of resources, and power relations that control them (Peluso and Watts, 2001). The importance of space and place in the study of conflict has long been recognized by political geographers (i.e., Agnew, 1987; Massey, 1994; Miller, 1994; Staeheli, 1994; Steinberg, 1994; Moore, 1997; Pile and Keith, 1997), and has more recently emerged as an issue within the discourse on contentious politics (i.e., McAdams *et al.*, 2001; Sewell 2001; Slater 2001; Martin and Miller, 2003). For example, it has been argued that space is (1) essential for political identity formation (McAdam *et al.*, 2001; Wolford, 2003), (2) an important consideration in the formulation of movement strategy (Miller, 2000; Sewell, 2001), and (3) a critical element in the design of practical tactics (Routledge, 1997). In the Amazonian context, what I shall refer to as a conflict “site” represents the intersection of history, social structures, power relations, and circumstance (Massey, 1984; Massey and Allen, 1984; Agnew, 1987; Cooke, 1989; Moore, 1997; Routledge, 1997; Sewell, 2001), as well as the physical space for political engagement (Cox 1997). As such, the geography of land conflict as described in this paper must be recognized as more than a mere pattern or residue of land struggle, but also as integral to understanding why conflict emerges.

Much work has addressed land conflict in the Brazilian Amazon, attributing it to weak tenure institutions (Mueller *et al.*, 1994; Alston *et al.*, 1995; 1997; 2001), the conflictive nature of production and exchange relations (Foweraker, 1981; Wood, 1983; Schmink and Wood, 1992; Walker and Homma, 1996; Walker, 1999; Walker *et al.*, 2000), and the failure of Amazonian development (Mahar, 1979; Ianni, 1979; Smith, 1982; Moran, 1983; Browder, 1988; Hecht 1985; Hall, 1989; Hecht and Cockburn, 1989; Becker *et al.*, 1990; Almeida, 1992; Cleary, 1993; Simmons, 2004). This paper attempts to territorialize land conflict in the Brazilian Amazon by building on the foundations of this work, and incorporating concepts from both the so-called resource access literature and from an emerging framework of contentious politics theory that stresses the importance of *space* and *place*. The premise here is that violence associated with land conflict results from a dialectic between broad regional processes operating across spatial scales that create the necessary conditions of conflict, and the place-based historic circumstances that, together with the general processes, create highly localized *sites*, or *places*, of conflict.

From the outset it is important to note that land conflict in the Brazilian Amazon is a multifaceted phenomenon involving numerous actors including landless farmers, ranchers, indigenous peoples, goldminers, loggers, and fishermen. This paper, however, focuses on the struggle for land, which engages both the landless farmers and large landowners. Although mortality associated with land conflict in Brazil is comparatively low, it is nonetheless an important case given it is occurring in the world's largest tropical rainforest and potentially has considerable environmental impact (Simmons *et al.*, 2002a).

The paper is organized as follows. Section two presents a spatial-temporal perspective on land conflict in Brazil, and in particular the State of Pará (See Figure 1), the State with Brazil's highest levels of land conflict mortality. Section three presents the theoretical framework, which applies the resource accessibility and Amazonian frontier literature to the case of land conflict, and further elaborates the necessity of a place-based comprehension by drawing on the theory of contentious politics in explaining why land conflict is greatest in the so-called *South of Pará*, the premier conflict "site" in the State. Next, section four examines the environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms that transformed the necessary into sufficient conditions precipitating the Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre in 1996. Section five concludes the paper, providing an overview of its theoretical contribution, and raising potential policy implications related to land conflict in the Amazon region.

Land conflict: a spatial-temporal perspective

Land conflict is well-defined by Brazilian human rights groups, such as the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT),

to include verbal confrontation, vandalism, expulsion, physical altercations, and, at the extreme, assassinations (CPT, 1996). According to the CPT, between 1991 and 1998, the struggle for land in Brazil involved 5056 conflicts, 4,401,304 people, and resulted in 376 deaths.² An assessment of land conflict at the national level in 1996, a year for which detailed data is available, reveals that most land occupations occurred in the Northeast, while the South by far had the greatest number of people engaged, with more than half of nation-wide participation. Although conflicts occurred throughout Brazil in 1996, violent conflict was most severe in the Amazon, with three-quarters of the mortalities (Simmons, 2004). Between 1980 and 2003, 1671 landless activists were murdered, including rural workers, lawyers, syndicate and religious leaders, and more than half of these deaths occurred in the Amazon. Within Amazonia, these deaths were overwhelming concentrated in the State of Pará (CPT, 2003).

An assessment of land conflict in Pará from 1964 to 2002 shows that violence intensified in the 1980s, peaked in 1985, and then declined (Simmons, 2004). More than half of all land conflict-related deaths during this period happened in the 1980s, a period of intensive agro-industrial expansion and land consolidation. Although deaths have declined since then, the land struggle between 1992 and 2002 appears to have intensified with numbers of land occupations more than doubling and the number of participant families increasing four-fold (CPT, 1992, 2002).³

Figure 1 presents graduated symbol maps showing land conflict related deaths for counties in Pará for two time periods. The top-left frame shows deaths occurring during the military government, 1964 to 1987, after which a new democratically elected president took office and a new Constitution elaborating agrarian reform policy went into effect. The lower-left frame depicts conflict in the post-military period, a time identified with the resurgence of social and political mobilization around the plight of the landless (Fernandes, 2000). As the figure demonstrates, land conflict is not ubiquitous across the state, and, in fact, the most violent region is the south-eastern quadrant, just below the TransAmazon Highway. Not without reason, the so-called *South of Pará* is widely known as an area rife with violent land conflict (Americas Watch, 1991; Almeida, 1994; Veja, 1996; Amnesty International, 1998).

Although the *South of Pará* has a widespread reputation as a violent region, its boundaries are amorphous. Some have considered it to be synonymous with the so-called *Bico de Papagaio*, or Beak of the Parrot, made up of several counties in Pará that lie along the border with Tocantins and Maranhão States, forming what looks like a parrot beak (Kotscho, 1981). Others describe it broadly as the counties that constitute the south-eastern corner of the State (Americas Watch, 1991; Schmink and Wood, 1992; Campos, 2002). Finally, others correlate the region with its history of land inequality and exploitive labor relations established during various

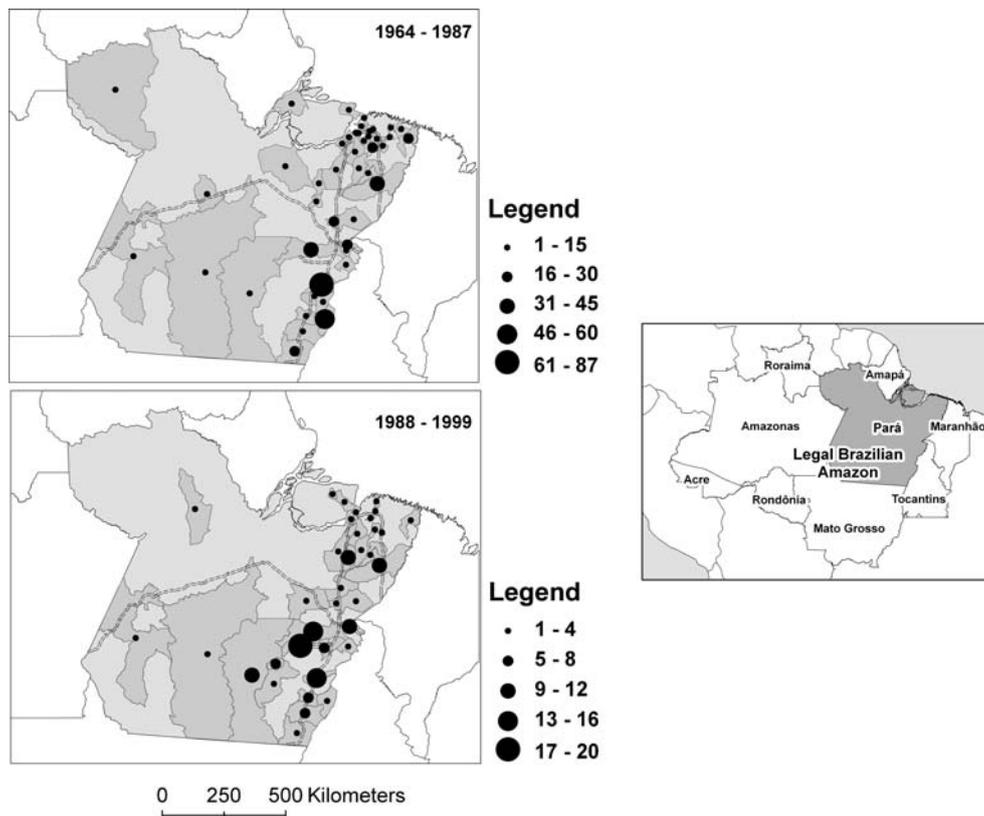


Figure 1. Land Conflict-related deaths in Pará from 1964 to 1987, Military Government, and from 1988 to 1999, Post Democratic Reform.

boom and bust cycles of resource extraction (Foweraker, 1981; Hall, 1987; Emmi, 1999). In this paper, the *South of Pará* will be defined based on the geography of land conflict revealed in Figure 1, as that region below the TransAmazon Highway where conflict is most intense and persistent through time.

Indeed, this region has been the site of several notorious violent clashes over land in recent years, probably the most notable of which was the *Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre* in April of 1996 (New York Times, April 21, 1996). Violence once again emerged in September 2003 when eight squatters were killed in a fight between ranchers and loggers in São Felix do Xingu (Mendes 2003). The severity of the situation is made readily apparent with the recent murder of an American nun, Sister Dorothy Stang, in February 2005 in Anapu, Pará, a long-time advocate for the landless (Rohter 2005). Although violent confrontations have occurred in other parts of the Amazon, few compare to incidents in this region.⁴

Towards theoretical comprehension

In an effort to develop a comprehensive understanding of why violent land conflict is most extreme in the *South of Pará*, the theoretical foundation draws on important contributions from what is referred to here as the resource accessibility and Amazonian frontier theories, which are useful for examining the general processes

that created the necessary conditions for land conflict. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of space and place by incorporating ideas from the contentious politics literature that allows for an understanding of the manner by which the general processes and necessary conditions combine with the place specific history to create the sufficient conditions for conflict.

Resource accessibility theory

Resource accessibility theory, as broadly defined in this paper, encompasses the body of work suggesting competition for resources lies at the heart of conflict. There are two schools of thought here, namely those who think scarcity is the primary causal factor, and those who argue to the contrary that abundance underpins conflict. The main position within the scarcity school stems from the environmental security perspective, which contends that resource scarcity initiates conflict as groups struggle for access and control over limited resources (Ullmann, 1983; Myers, 1989; Brock, 1991). Proponents from this perspective argue that overexploitation of resources leads to scarcity and environmental degradation, which, in turn, aggravates poor social welfare conditions precipitating conflict (Homer-Dixon *et al.*, 1993; Hauge and Ellingsen, 1998; Homer-Dixon, 1999). Population growth puts further pressure on limited resources, increasing their value and encouraging powerful groups to appropriate them through violent means. In the process of resource capture by powerful groups, the

poor are ecologically marginalized as they are expelled from their land and forced to move to less desirable areas. As a result, environmental degradation, population pressure, and ecological marginalization lead to disparities in wealth and power, increased competition, and intensified potential for violence (Homer-Dixon, 1999).

Two criticisms of the environmental school have emerged. The first critique is that resource scarcity merely represents one element in a complex web of causality, in which it not only causes poverty that precipitates conflict, but is itself an outcome of poverty (Carius and Lietzmann, 1999; Lowi, 1999; Noorduyn and DeGroot, 1999). In such a situation, conflict results from the systemic interaction of scarcity and poverty, and is not just a unidirectional outcome of scarcity. The second criticism, which has taken on the breadth of an emerging school of thought within the resource accessibility literature, is that conflict occurs more often than not when resources are abundant (Levy, 1995; Le Billon, 2001; Peluso and Watts, 2001; Hampson, 2002). The argument then, is that resource wealth, not scarcity, provokes conflict (Fairhead, 2001; Le Billon, 2001; Watts, 2001).

Amazonian frontier literature

What remains unclear within both the resource scarcity and resource abundance debate is how resource accessibility in the Brazilian Amazon has been structured within the region's historical political economy (Peluso and Watts, 2001). What is referred to here, broadly, as the Amazonian *frontier literature* accomplishes this task. Although it does not directly address conflict stemming from resource competition raised within the resource accessibility literature, it does consider the circumstances creating resource competition within the frontier, a region defined by abundant resources and weak institutions.

Under the frontier paradigm, conflict stems from immature land tenure institutions (Mueller *et al.*, 1994; Alston *et al.*, 1995; 1997, 2000) and the conflictive nature of production and exchange relations (Foweraker, 1981; Wood, 1983; Schmink and Wood, 1992; Walker and Homma, 1996; Walker *et al.*, 2000). On the frontier, land value is low, property rights ill defined, and investments minimal; however, as settlement proceeds, so too does land squatting, augmenting demand for land and stimulating property values. Consequently, increased demand for land and decreased supply leads to conflict, which accentuates the need for the definition of property rights. Violent outcomes result from government's failure to provide tenure in the face of rapidly rising land rents (Mueller *et al.*, 1994; Alston *et al.* 1995, 1997).

Violent struggle has existed during every phase of frontier expansion in Amazonia, from the very early stages when physical coercion was used to force nomadic nut gatherers to extract resources, and later as violence was used by large-landholders to expel

squatters in the process of land appropriation and consolidation (Velho, 1972; Foweraker, 1981). Land conflict emerges as class struggle between individuals differentiated by material wealth and ability to mobilize political power (Schmink and Wood, 1992). Such conflict has also been described in terms of exploitive relations between capitalist and non-capitalist economies, which coexist as integral parts of a unified regional economy during the process of frontier expansion (Foweraker, 1981; Wood, 1983). The necessary outcome of this process is land monopolization, an essential component for capitalist production, which puts in place the minifundio–latifundio complex providing insufficient land for subsistence farming, and forcing peasants to work part time in order to supplement their livelihood. Farmers expelled from the land due to land consolidation have few choices: they can either push further into the forest in search of land, thus propelling frontier expansion, migrate to the city, or struggle for existence where they are, thereby inciting conflict (Wood, 1983).

Finally, it has been argued that land accumulation, which precipitates land conflict, is a behavioral response to market, as opposed to structural, forces (Walker and Homma, 1996; Walker *et al.*, 2000). Cattle ranching, the main economic activity in much of the Brazilian Amazon, benefits from scale economies, providing incentive for both small and large ranchers to increase herd size and expand pastures. As a result, land concentration emerges on the basis of both the evolution of small ranching operations and the exercise of social power by privileged groups. At some point, land accumulation creates social discord as intensified resource competition leads to violent land conflict (Johnson, 1968; Gurr, 1971; Huntington, 1971; Homer-Dixon, 1999; Walker, 1999; Simmons, 2002; 2004).

Bringing "Place" into the discourse

The resource accessibility and Amazonian frontier literatures identify some of the important general processes that created the necessary conditions precipitating conflict. However, these explanations are not sufficient to discern why conflict occurs in some places and not in others. For instance, abundance of resources (i.e., rubber, brazil nuts, timber) is pronounced throughout much of the Amazon basin. Likewise, land inequality, although exacerbated by government development initiatives in the Amazon, characterizes much of the Brazilian countryside. Finally, weak institutions and exploitive labor relations, as identified in the Amazonian frontier literature, are present throughout the Amazon frontier. Nevertheless, as Figure 1 shows, violence is not ubiquitous, and, in fact, it is most extreme and persistent in the so-called *South of Pará*. The question this paper aims to address is why land conflict is concentrated here.

To answer, the theoretical framework draws on the contentious politics literature, and, in particular, the

work that stresses the importance of *place* to understanding conflict (i.e., Sewell, 2001; Slater, 2001; Martin and Miller 2003). The concept of *place*, and its essential importance for explanations of cultural, economic, and political landscapes, have long been emphasized by geographers (i.e., Massey, 1984; Massey and Allen, 1984; Agnew, 1987; Cooke, 1989; Cox 1997) and has recently become the focus of work examining geographies of resistance (Miller, 1994; Staeheli, 1994; Steinberg 1994; Pile and Keith 1997; Routledge 1997; McAdam *et al.*, 2001; Martin and Miller, 2003; Wolford, 2003, 2004). In this context, place has been described as the *site* where economic, social, and political processes interacting across spatial scales intersect, where daily life is lived, and where meanings and values culminate creating community identities (see Agnew, 1987; Martin and Miller, 2003). As such, the *place* becomes the site of social and political conflict.

The examination of land conflict in the *South of Pará* presented in this paper looks beyond actual instances of conflict to the processes and mechanisms that created a landscape of volatility. Towards this end, focus is on three broad social mechanisms that intersected, and put in place the sufficient conditions for the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre, namely the environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms (McAdam *et al.*, 2001; Martin and Miller, 2003). Environmental mechanisms are the socio-spatially constructed processes and conditions that shape the broad context of contention. In terms of the contention examined in this paper, the socio-spatial construction of land inequality represents the environmental mechanism, providing the basis for the landless struggle, and directly influencing the strategic response by a growing landless movement.

The cognitive mechanisms include the processes or events that shape people's perceptions and understanding of specific landscapes, and set the stage for actions and reactions to contention. With regards to the *South of Pará*, "the place-specific histories of social relations, struggles, and events," revolving around land inequality have imbued the region with meaning, and created conditions ripe for violent interaction (Martin and Miller, 2003, p. 150). Lastly, the relational, or linking mechanisms, are the processes through which previously disparate groups operating often at different spatial scales are connected. The *South of Pará* has a relatively long history of mobilization around the plight of the landless, involving numerous social movements that work across spatial scales integrating local, regional, national, and, often, international interests (i.e., Movement of the Landless Rural Workers – MST).⁵ In response, there has also been mobilization on the part of the large landowners, likewise working across spatial scales and, often, utilizing their political influence with local, state, and federal policing powers to stymie what they view as a direct threat to their economic, social, and political structure (i.e., Union of Democratic Rural Landowners – UDR).

The interaction of environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms in the *South of Pará*

As stated, this paper argues that land conflict is a social expression of a dialect between broad regional processes that create the necessary conditions, and place-based historic circumstances that transform the necessary into sufficient conditions triggering violent action and reaction. In an effort to understand why violent land conflict is most pronounced in the *South of Pará*, we need to deconstruct how these aspatial general processes and place-based historic circumstances interacted and culminated at the local scale to create *sites*, or *places*, of conflict. The discussion here considers the historical social, economic, and political circumstances, and deconstructs the environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms and processes that structured the landscape of contention in the *South of Pará*, setting the stage for the *Eldorado dos Carajás massacre*.

Environmental mechanism

The *South of Pará* is a region with rich resource endowments and a long history of violence. Drawing on the resource accessibility and Amazonian frontier literature, this paper contends that resource abundance and relative resource scarcity, structured through the process of frontier development, interacted at the local scale creating the environmental mechanism, namely land inequality, inciting intense resource competition throughout the region (Simmons, 2004). Beginning in the mid 19th century, the discovery of extractive resources attracted both entrepreneurial individuals intent on making their fortunes and waves of migrants who came to work. To facilitate an emergent extractive economy, the State provided long-term leases on large tracts of forests for rubber extraction, and later allowed similar arrangements (*aforamento perpétuo*) for brazil-nut (Schmink and Wood, 1992). In effect, the State established a pattern of land inequality early on, favoring a few wealthy families with political connections in the state capital Belém (Emmi, 1999). Through successive cycles of resource boom and bust, unemployment grew and a dispossessed subsistence farmer class emerged, intent on obtaining land in the region (Velho, 1972; Foweraker, 1981). Early conflict revolved around exploitive labor relations, and later violence intensified with the struggle for land between large landed interests and the landless (Foweraker, 1981).

For the most part, up until the opening of the Amazon frontier in the mid 20th century, access to this region was limited to areas along numerous rivers. However, construction of the Belém-Brasília Highway in 1956, and later construction of the State road – PA150 in the 1970s, opened the region to wide spread colonization. Accessibility, coupled with government fiscal incentives to promote economic development, attracted large ranchers who staked claims to vast tracts of land along the highways, converted forest to pasture,

and evicted small farmers in their path, creating an additional source of conflict (Foweraker, 1981; Schmink and Wood, 1992).

Further intensification of conflict arose with discoveries of mineral wealth in the Carajás mountains and gold in the Serra Pelada in the late 1970s (Hall, 1987; Cleary, 1993; Godfrey, 1992; Schmink and Wood, 1992). The resource wealth of these mines exceeded that discovered in the 19th century gold rush in California and the Klondike combined (Schmink and Wood, 1992, p. 220). Consequently, efforts throughout the agro-industrial (1980–1985) and post democratic (after 1985) phases of development focused on resource extraction (Hall, 1987). Once again, resource wealth attracted immigration of laborers, goldminers, and landless farmers arriving by bus, rail, or foot, attracting from 80,000 to 100,000 miners at peak production in 1983.

The *South of Pará* received the lion's share of federal government investment in the post World War II development of Amazonia, which provided fiscal incentives to large ranching ventures, and facilitated land accumulation. Despite the expressed intent of development efforts to promote agrarian reform (i.e., the National Integration Plan (PIN) of 1970), land inequality grew throughout the Amazon basin, most notably in this region (IBGE, 1996). Indeed, land inequality measured in terms of percent of county held in largeholdings (i.e., 10,000 ha or more) and gini-coefficients reflecting inequitable land distribution appear to be most severe in the *South of Pará* (Simmons, 1999). In fact, data show that Marabá, the county from which Eldorado dos Carajás was partitioned in 1991, had almost 22% of its land area in holdings greater than 10,000 ha by 1996, and gini coefficient indices reveal that land distribution had become more inequitable with figures increasing from 0.67 in 1985 to 0.70 by 1996 (IBGE, 1996).

Cognitive mechanisms

In addition to the environmental mechanisms that structured the conditions precipitating land conflict (i.e., land inequality), it is necessary to also consider the cognitive mechanisms shaped by the place-based historic circumstances of the *South of Pará*, which engendered the wide-spread perception that the region is synonymous with conflict. Indeed, this place-based history is best viewed as a successive series of *actions* on the part of landless participants to what they perceive as social injustice, and a myriad of social and political movements sympathetic to their plight, and *reactions* on part of large-landowners and the state, often indistinguishable, who view movement actions as a direct threat to the prevailing power structure. These actions and reactions, typically violent on both sides, shaped people's perceptions, imbued the landscape with meaning, and set the stage for the Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre in 1996.

Political violence in Pará has a long history, and starts with the so-called Cabanagem in 1835, which established a blood-stained legacy of distrust and animosity between the landed gentry and the poor throughout the Amazon (Anderson, 1985; Hemming, 1987). The Cabanagem, one of the bloodiest regional battles ever in Brazil, began as a political conflict between the land-based gentry and the Portuguese merchants in Belém, capital of Pará. Later, the struggle turned into an all-out class war between these urban-based mercantilists and their landowning allies, and the landless mestizo population known at the time as *Cabanos*, and later as *Caboclos*. Violence reached far into the rural areas, resulting in more than 30,000 deaths, amounting to *nearly 25% of the entire population*, with some of the bloodiest fighting occurring in the watershed of the Tocantins River, which runs through the heart of the *South of Pará* (Anderson, 1985; Hemming, 1987).

The distrust and animosity between the economic and political elite and landless poor in this region once again intensified in the later half of the 20th century, at the height of the cold war and military government rule in Brazil, when the *South of Pará* became the staging area for a militant maoist student group from São Paulo. Following the revolutionary strategies outlined by Mao Zedung, which were later adapted by Latin American revolutionary figures such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, these student Maoists identified land inequality as the “environmental mechanism” for peasant mobilization, and sought to foment a revolution in the rural back waters of the *South of Pará* (Oliveira, 2000; Campos, 2002).

This would-be insurgency did not go unchallenged, as the military government, acting on behalf of the local power structure and fearing the communist threat so prevalent during the cold war years, declared the region a national security zone. The army deployed an estimated 15,000 troops in what is now referred to as “the war of Araguaia,” killing all 70 activists and an undocumented number of peasants (Oliviera, 2000). Brutal military tactics left a lasting impression on the local population, many of whom continue to fear and distrust the military and government (Branford and Rocha, 2002), a point of view that has buttressed the formation of armed militias.

In further attempts to defuse violent land conflict, the Executive Group for the Araguaia – Tocantins Lands (GETAT), a branch of the military, was established by the federal government and charged with land reform in the region. In an effort to secure the area from future communist mobilization, the government installed two military bases – one in Paraupébas and another in Marabá, both of which still function today. Nevertheless, despite increased military presence, the *South of Pará* continued to experience numerous clashes between caboclo settlers and government troops over the issue of spontaneous colonization, especially violent in Conceição do Araguaia (Anderson, 1985), and between

private militia hired by the large landowners and the landless (Branford and Rocha, 2002).

The perceptions of land conflict are confounded by the legacy of what is referred to in Brazil as *Coronelism*, which established the pernicious poly-valence of economic and political power (Branford and Rocha, 2002). In particular, those with land were also those with political and policing power, allowing exploitive relations between the landowning gentry and landless to go unchallenged, and giving confidence to the prevailing power structure that they can act with impunity. Many contend that *Coronelismo* is still strong in the *South of Pará*, with the large-landowning class pulling the strings of political and policing powers to impede the landless movement (Payne, 2000; Branford and Rocha, 2002; Medeiros, 2002). In fact, throughout the early 1990s the military police were actively involved in attempts to thwart the landless movement, and on one notorious occasion in 1991 they blockaded all routes out of Marabá and arrested the movement leaders (Campos, 2002). In addition, the State government created the Delegation of Land Conflict in 1995 to resolve land conflict and ameliorate tension, although some allege that in fact this organization represents the interests of the landowning elites (Branford and Rocha, 2002; Simmons, 2004). Distrust of the political process engendered by *colonelism* has provided the impetus for the landless movement to take agrarian reform into their own hands by occupying and staking claim to large, and allegedly unproductive, ranches. Likewise, assured of their preferential position with government, the large landowning class has been known to hire private militia and violently retaliate against these land “invasions,” confident that they can act with impunity (Payne, 2000).⁶

Relational mechanisms

The contentious history of the *South of Pará* provided a cognitive mechanism that shaped perceptions of individuals and groups on both sides of the struggle, the landed-gentry and State on one side, and the landless rural workers on the other. One result has been the formation of a relational mechanism involving the broad-based mobilization of many social movements and organizations, and the cross-scalar linking of local landless populations to national and international social movements. The growing reputation of the *South of Pará* as a region of land inequality and entrenched social injustice, and a second wave of violent conflict in the early 1970s stemming from the opening of the Amazon frontier and the discovery of gold in the Serra Pelada, attracted a myriad of social movements such as the CPT, local syndicates of rural workers (STRs), and the Paraense Society for the Defense of Human Rights (SPDH), each drawn to the region by the plight of the landless. The CPT, an organization linked to the Brazilian National Conference of Bishops and responsible for much of the organizing around the landless

movement, was established in 1975 and today has a regional office in Tucumã (CPT, 1997; Petras 1998; Medeiros 2002). The STRs, which gained independence from the State in response to the so-called *New Unionism* movement in Pará, established local offices in Marabá, Xinguara, and Ourilândia do Norte to support rural workers' demand for equal and fair access to land and development aid (Toni, 1999; Medeiros, 2002).

With democratization in 1985, and the increase in political mobilization around the plight of the landless, the *South of Pará* once again became an important region of contention. By 1989 the MST, which was formerly created in 1984 in Southern Brazil, established two regional offices in Marabá and Eldorado dos Carajás.⁷ Shortly after their arrival in the region, the MST, in conjunction with the CPT and STR activists, began efforts at *direct action land reform* (DALR). DALR, as described in this paper, is a strategic response to land inequality and social injustice (the environmental mechanism) that involves mobilization of the landless poor and the pre-emptive, and often contentious, occupation of public or private lands. The lands targeted for occupation are areas that the movement contends are not fulfilling their *social function* in accordance with article 186 of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988; under this constitutional clause such lands are subject to expropriation for agrarian reform (Treccani, 2001; Simmons *et al.*, 2002; Simmons 2002). Overall, between 1990 and 1996, the MST organized numerous land occupations and mobilized nearly 7000 families with the objective of creating settlements (*assentamentos*) on presumably “unproductive” land in the *South of Pará* (Campos, 2002).

Relational mechanisms have not only emerged on the landless movement side. The União Democrática Ruralista (UDR), an association of large landowners united in defense of private property rights, has mobilized in the region to stop the MST's aggressive pursuit of land reform (Payne, 2000; Medeiros, 2002). Although originating in the State of Goiás, the UDR has a strong presence in the *South of Pará* with their unofficial base of operations in the county of Xinguara, from which they organize many of their activities and recruit members (Payne, 2000; Campos, 2002). Although today the UDR has its headquarters in Presidente Prudente in São Paulo State, its members and other interested parties across the country, and across the globe, can get information about recent land occupations and disappropriations, important legislation, and can contact the organization for assistance through their webpage (<http://www.udr.org.br>).

Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre

This paper contends that the general conditions, such as land inequality, and the place-based history of land conflict and political and social mobilization, put in place the environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms that turned the necessary into sufficient

conditions for contention, and set the stage for the massacre in Eldorado dos Carajás on April 17, 1996. On that day in Spring, 19 landless farmers were gunned down in a confrontation between a crowd of protestors for agrarian reform and the military police. Although the accountability of the police and the MST are matters of great debate, as well as the number of protestors killed, the events leading up to the incident are well documented (Campos, 2002; Branford and Rocha, 2002; Wright and Welford, 2004).

Accordingly, on April 10, 1996, a large contingent of some 2000 MST members began a march to the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) office in Marabá to protest the government's decision not to expropriate a ranch that the movement claimed was not meeting the *social function*, as specified in the Constitution. After nearly a week into the march, the tired protestors cut their journey short, linked hands, and effectively created a human blockade across State highway PA150, just outside Eldorado dos Carajás county seat. After several hours the blockade ended, with the understanding that the government would provide food for the protestors and buses to transport them to Marabá, where the leadership would enter negotiations for land settlement with INCRA. However, the blockade resumed the following afternoon when word came down that the government had reneged on the deal. Within hours two battalions of military police arrived on the scene, one from the base in Paraupébas and the other from the one installed in Marabá.

The events that transpired that day are a matter of great debate.⁸ Many suggest that the violence was premeditated, and that the deaths of MST leaders amounted to assassination-style murder (Amnesty International, 1998; Campos, 2002; Branford and Rocha, 2002). Witnesses allege that members of the landed elite gave a list of MST leaders to the military commanders, and that the police were told to remove their identification badges prior to engagement (Amnesty International, 1998; Branford and Rocha, 2002). Others contend that the protestors carried weapons and initiated the confrontation, to which the military police were only acting in self-defense. Despite denial from the military police commanders, the fact remains that 13 of the 19 protestors killed were among the MST leadership, each with what appeared to be gunshot wounds to the head (Branford and Rocha, 2002).

To understand the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre it is necessary to examine both the necessary conditions, and the place specific historic circumstances that transformed them into sufficient conditions for conflict. In this regard, the paper contends that place-specific environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms created a volatile landscape in the *South of Pará*. As outlined above, centuries of resource extraction combined with frontier development processes beginning in the 1960s that favored large-landed interests in the *South of Pará*,

creating extreme land inequality in the conflict site. Indeed, land ownership data show that land inequality is most extreme here, and that land distribution became more inequitable during the period leading up to the massacre (IBGE, 1996).

Next, a long history of contention and violence set in motion the cognitive mechanisms that shaped perceptions of individuals, groups, and the State about the *South of Pará*, setting the stage for the clash between the military police and the landless protestors that fateful day in April 1996. Indeed, early fears of communist infiltration had earlier led to the federal government's installation of two military bases in Paraupébas and Marabá, which put the military police within striking range when they were called to action that day. In addition, military repression in the *South of Pará* for more than two decades had instilled distrust of the military, and hostility on the part of many local residents (Branford and Rocha, 2002, p. 133), which may explain the large number of protestors and their willingness to confront the military. This type of action outside the political process no doubt has been inspired in part by the legacy of *colonelismo*, and local beliefs that the government will not follow through on agrarian reform promises of their own volition. Finally, in response to long standing contention, mobilization on both sides of the landless issue put in place the relational mechanisms linking the struggle to groups across the spatial spectrum. Eldorado dos Carajás is at the center of the *South of Pará*, at the intersection of the main transportation routes (Pa 257 and PA150) along which the protestors were marching to Marabá, and at the heart of political and social mobilization within the immediate range of the MST, CPT, and the UDR. Given the extreme land inequality and social inequity in the *South of Pará*, and the long history of conflict and political mobilization in the region, it is not surprising that the region has experienced a disproportionate share of violent land conflict culminating in the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre of 1996.

Conclusions

In sum, this paper has demonstrated through a case study of land conflict in the Brazilian Amazon that a complete understanding of resource conflict must look beyond broad-scale processes and forces that create resource competition, to a consideration of the importance of *place*, and in particular the place-specific intersection of historic social, political, and economic circumstance. Indeed, land conflict has a long history in Brazil, and its most recent phase has its territorial expression in the Amazon basin, specifically in Pará State. Nevertheless, the geography of land conflict presented here reveals that the occurrence of conflict is not uniform across the study region, but is concentrated in the so-called *South of Pará*, an area accounting for the vast majority of the nation-wide death toll from land

conflict, and notorious for violent confrontations such as the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre of 1996.

The primary objective of this paper is to develop a comprehensive understanding of why violent land conflict is most extreme in the so-called *South of Pará*. Towards this end, the paper argues that conflict as such is best understood as a social expression of a dialect between general processes operating across spatial scales that create necessary conditions for conflict, and place-specific historic processes that transform necessary into sufficient conditions. The theoretical foundation of this paper draws on important contributions from the resource accessibility, Amazonian frontier, and contentious politics literatures. The resource accessibility and Amazonian frontier theories provide important insight into the general processes through which the necessary conditions for land conflict were created. Finally, the paper draws on the contentious politics work to create a framework for examining the manner by which general processes combine with place specific historic social, economic, and political circumstances to transform necessary into sufficient conditions for conflict.

The discussion in this paper deconstructs the environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms that created the volatile and violent landscape of the *South of Pará*, and set the stage for the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre. In particular, resource abundance and scarcity, structured through the process of frontier development in the Amazon, created land inequality, which is the environmental mechanism providing the basis for the landless struggle. The successive layers of class conflict and contention in the *South of Pará* underpin the cognitive mechanisms that shaped perceptions of individuals and gave the region its reputation for violence. This reputation, in turn, attracted large-scale mobilization, and put in place the relational mechanisms that linked the local landless population and large landowners with interests and movements across spatial scales. On April 17, 1996, all of these mechanisms were in *place*, and the stage was set for a violent confrontation.

The Brazilian government is currently experiencing mounting political and social pressure from the growing number of landless and unemployed who are demanding agrarian reform. Political analysts in Brazil suggest that the presidential victory for the Worker's Party (PT) in 2002, highlighted by the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was brought on by growing dissatisfaction of the working class, and strong support from the country's populous movements. The greater landless movement, today involving a multitude of organizations, viewed the political change positively (CPT, 2002; Stedile, 2003), and during the first six months of Lula's presidency the number of organized land occupations increased more than 147% from the year before (Marques *et al.*, 2003). Today, however, these same movements question whether Lula has done enough for agrarian reform (see <http://www.mst.org.br>; <http://www.cpt.org.br>). According to these movements, land is key for political empowerment, and all of these groups are pursuing

DALR campaigns (Stedile, 1997; Fernandes, 2000; CPT, 2002). In response, numerous organizations opposed to agrarian reform have emerged, some willing to use violence (i.e., UDR; Traditional Family and Property – TFP).

Rising tension surrounding the issue of agrarian reform is putting pressure on the current administration, and may greatly influence whether the PT wins a second term in office in 2006. In addition, the potential for violent confrontation remains ever present. In the Amazon region, conflict further threatens to exacerbate deforestation, as the number of *land occupations* in forested areas expands. This presents a serious challenge for the current, and future, administration – how to ameliorate land conflict, preserve forest frontiers, stimulate economic growth, and, at the same time, ensure political stability. Providing a comprehensive plan to address this dilemma is a daunting task, and far beyond the scope of this paper. But one thing is clear, at some point the government will have to directly address land inequality and the discontent of its people, either by taking the difficult steps towards agrarian reform, a politically sensitive endeavor, or providing alternative economic opportunities for the growing landless and unemployed.

Notes

1. The Portuguese crown divided Brazil into 12 Capitánias and gave right of use to donatarias willing and able to settle the land. Under the Seismarias decree large tracts were also given to the church.
2. Data on land conflict can be found at the Official CPT website: <http://www.cptnac.com.br>.
3. CPT data show that between 1992 and 2002 the number of occupations in Pará grew from 40 conflicts to 84, and the number of families participating increased from 4117 to more than 16,000 families (CPT, 1992, 2003).
4. One possible exception is the massacre at Curumbiara in the State of Rondônia in 1995, which involved a confrontation between landless farmers and military police that resulted in 15 deaths and more than an estimated 100 protestors wounded. (New York Times, September 19th, 1995; Amnesty International, 1998).
5. The MST and the CPT for example have offices in the South of Pará, as well as regional, and national headquarters. The MST in particular, has an effective network connecting the Brazilian landless movement with other movements and interests in both the first and third world.
6. It is important to note the power of words in the landless struggle. For instance, the landless movement, represented by the MST and CPT, call their action *land occupation (ocupações)*; while the large landowners, represented by the UDR, call this same action *land invasion (invasões)*. See their respective

website at <http://www.mst.org.br>, <http://www.cpt.org.br>, and <http://www.udr.org.br>.

7. The primary objective of the MST is to mobilize the landless and force the government to follow through on agrarian reform promises (Stedile, 1997; Fernandes, 2000; Morisawa, 2001; Medeiros, 2002).
8. See Veja April (1996), Amnesty International (1998), Campos (2002), Branford and Rocha (2002), and Wright and Wolford (2004) for greater details.

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