

Latifundia and Land Policy in Nineteenth-Century Brazil

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Anyone who claimed to have the means and desire to make use of the land was given a grant, customarily one to three leagues in extent (16.7 to 50.1 square miles). The royal grants, called sesmarias, were clearly not homesteads; a labor force would have to be introduced to carry out the manual labor. This was difficult for Portugal to provide. Anyone with the necessary 300 to 400 milreis (375 to 500 U.S. dollars of 1800) to pay for the formalities could obtain a sesmaria. Any immigrant who lacked that amount could squat on unclaimed crown lands. This was illegal, and therefore precarious, but it was seldom punished or even noticed unless another person later acquired a grant over the squatter's land. Some Portuguese did remain on the sesmarias of others as tenants of a sort, but because they had the alternative of squatting, the landowner could not demand much steady labor from them. Hence the introduction of slave labor, first Indian, then African. The latifundium, slavery, and the export trade remained, as the historian, Caio Prado, Jr. has said, for more than three hundred years the principal institutions of Brazilian society.¹

References

Domar, E.D., 1970. The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: A Hypothesis. The Journal of Economic History 30, 18-32.

¹Evsey Domar has made a theoretical statement of the origins of slave labor: given a leisured elite, there cannot exist simultaneously cheap land and free labor. If either of these elements is eliminated, free labor is possible. (Domar, 1970)