

## “Mobilization without emancipation”: The Social Struggles of the Landless in Brazil

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Does the land have owners? How can that be? How can it be sold? How can it be bought? It belongs to us. We belong to it. We are its children, forever and ever. It is alive. Just as it creates worms, it creates us. It has bones and blood. It feeds us with its milk. It has hair, fields, grass, trees. It produces food. It brings houses to life. It brings children to life. It takes care of us and we take care of it. It drinks *chicha*, accepting our invitation. We are its children. How can it be sold? How can it be bought? (Arguedas, 1970, quoted in Galeano, 1982: 256)

The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry [...]. [In] the 1930s, the refusal of the peasantry to fade away was still currently used as an argument against Karl Marx's prediction that they would. (Hobsbawm, 1994: 289)

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary social and political history in Brazil has been characterized by distinct social processes, especially since the final years of the military period, that is, the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although similar processes may be found in other Latin American societies, some of the features of the Brazilian experience are surprisingly and even unexpectedly different. As many authors have pointed out, the similarities include: 1) the rapid consolidation of political regimes based on the relatively narrow limits of a primarily electoral democracy; 2) intense social changes (such as rapid urbanization); and 3) economic processes such as chronic inflation (which has only now been partially controlled) and the generalized adoption of “structural

adjustment” policies from the mid-1980s. Recommended by international financial agencies, these policies ended up by integrating the continent's economies, in a forceful and rigid manner, into the international financial and commercial circuits, turning the region into one of the paradigmatic cases of the globalization phenomenon.

Nevertheless, if we examine the social developments in Brazil during this period, there is hardly any doubt that its most emblematic and distinguishing phenomenon was the emergence of social struggles in rural areas, particularly those carried out by the so-called landless. These were unexpected struggles, especially in the light of previous analyses, including those by Marxists, who were generally skeptical regarding the possibility of rural workers and peasants being able to organize politically.<sup>2</sup> The birth of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra* (Movement of Landless Rural Workers) in the early 1980s and its subsequent growth made the acronym MST, as well as its other public icons such as the red flag and the caps typically worn by its militants, gradually known.

The struggles led by the MST, which emerged as a social movement during the process of political transition in Brazil after the late 1970s (a transition that ended with the inauguration of the first civilian president in 1985), are probably one of the most startling ongoing social processes. I will henceforth refer to this organization as the Movement, the MST, or simply, “the landless organization.” (I will only briefly discuss the conceptual distinction between social movement and formal organization, although it is important for the political understanding of the Movement.) Being more active in southern Brazil during the 1980s, the MST gradually became a very visible organization nationwide, setting foot in most of the states and even drawing international attention.<sup>3</sup> However, studies on the subject remain largely insufficient, even though they have expanded considerably in recent years. Studies and interpretations of the Movement have been generally idealizing and superficial, uncritically reporting its public actions, relating them to the landless’ “revolutionary” potential, and thus echoing the laudatory literature of the organization itself. There have also been academic studies focusing on the Movement's restricted action environments, usually rural settlements, on which there is already a great deal of writing. A third group of studies sees the MST from a more ambitious point of view, setting it within a national framework and interpreting it in the light of more recent socio-political and economic developments. However, the number of such studies is still quite small, which reflects the methodological difficulties of such a venture.<sup>4</sup> As a result, it is remarkable that knowledge about the Movement in Brazil (and internationally) is still largely inadequate and partial, and this has led to analytical discrepancies in the understanding of such a social phenomenon, regardless of the theoretical and/or political perspective adopted. Such discrepancies are in fact more complex, as José de Souza Martins pointed out,

because they involve almost every actor engaged in social struggles in rural areas, including the mediation agencies that purport to represent the landless in the arena of "general politics." According to this author, "The silence of the poor is not only a consequence of the cultural enclosure they live in. It also comes from the usurpation of their voice, of their will and hope, by those who, intending to act with generous solidarity, end up imposing a new and more serious silence on them, that of artificial, inauthentic, and anomic speech" (Martins, 2000a: 69).

Although the Movement emerged during the period of the political opening of the military regime in the late 1970s, it was formally born in January 1984, being a social and political product of a set of factors that will be described in the following sections. Such factors include the repressive political conditions and the resulting political activism, as well as the actions of mobilization and politicization carried out by radical sectors of the Catholic clergy; the effects of a vigorous agricultural modernization in the 1970s and the political history of rural communities in southern Brazil (where the movement was first organized); and the political redemocratization begun in 1979 and the social processes that generated a "cycle of protest" in southern rural areas. It may be one of the most fascinating sociopolitical courses ever produced by Brazilian history, since in the past twenty years the MST has been active enough to influence the public agenda on the rural world and carry out collective actions of great repercussion, having become a necessary reference for all Brazilian agrarian matters. Extremely agile, the Movement has also developed organizational processes and internal dynamics that justify its political power. Nevertheless, its internal operational mechanisms are largely unknown, even to researchers in the field, whose attention is more attracted by the MST's external actions and public visibility.

Three initial warnings are needed in order to situate my arguments and clearly define my aims. First, I chose to adopt an analytical distinction, with clear political implications, between the "landless organization," which includes the whole of its main leadership and intermediate militants, directly linked to the organization as its staff, and the broad social base of "landless families." These families include impoverished small farmers, land-owning or not (in this case, land squatters, land tenants, and sharecroppers), who work on tiny lots insufficient for their social reproduction; thousands of poor rural families who wander around the country in search of work and income; and also some agricultural wage workers who have been drawn to the movement in certain agrarian regions. I focus almost solely on the organization and its leadership, its history, strategies, and range of choices and decisions, and not on the landless people under its influence. The reason for this is, as I will argue, that the gap between the social base and the discursive agenda and forms of social action chosen by the leadership is often significant. Thus, the

mobilizing success of the MST lies elsewhere, not in the voluntary and conscious adherence of its social base.

The second aspect to be highlighted here refers to the field of social processes under analysis. It should be stressed that this text neither presents a social analysis of contemporary Brazil nor discusses the country's agrarian issue *lató sensu*. The most important economic or sociopolitical factors are mentioned only to establish contexts and circumstances. The analytical focus is on the organization of the landless; other popular organizations, as well as the relationships and the nature of the conflicts among them, will be given a secondary place (and will sometimes not even be mentioned). The role of the State and its policies will only be discussed in contextual terms, even though they are crucial. Due to the extremely changeable nature of the network of relations between these actors, they will be only occasionally mentioned here, in order to support the arguments put forward.

Finally, as will be seen, empirical evidence is almost totally related to southern Brazil (mostly to the state of Rio Grande do Sul), which sets a third limit for this text. Although reflecting my experience as a researcher, it is important to point out that the empirical examples taken from the MST's history in that state (or in southern Brazil) are largely emblematic and representative and can often be generalized to the rest of the country. Born in southern Brazil, the landless organization has its oldest and strongest branch in Rio Grande do Sul, where virtually all its initiatives were first tried out. It has thus served as a testing ground for the different actions carried out by the organization throughout the years and later repeated nationwide.

Another preliminary note, essential to setting the limits of this text, is related to the concept of emancipation. Differently from other conceptual possibilities (such as the classical Habermasian notion of "emancipatory knowledge"), the idea of emancipation in this text is restricted to an essentially political dimension. It refers, precisely, to the chances that subaltern classes and poorer social groups have of autonomously building their own forms of association and representation of interests and, more importantly, of entering the field of political dispute and exercising their legitimate right to defend their own claims and to seek the realization of their demands without running the risk of elimination or of being politically constrained by rival social groups. This would mean a political system that assimilates social conflict as an integral part of its own nature and legitimacy, different from the Brazilian tradition of dealing with conflict as an anomaly to be fought against by all repressive means. In such an unequal society, if conflict is not an inherent part of politics, subaltern classes will never have the opportunity of altering existing imbalances (and, if the autonomy of forms of representation and the legitimacy of conflict are real, then "emancipatory democracy" could certainly begin to be realized). Therefore, this notion of

emancipation is entirely different from the ambitious idea (nowadays a fantasy) of the correspondence between emancipation and the "great societal transformation" characterized by a deep disruption of the existing order. In other words, in this text emancipation does not mean anti-systemic rupture, or even a vague socialist political order. From a strict perspective, I adopt the idea of the need (quite obvious in the case of Brazil) to grant a real meaning to emancipation through the possibility of participation and political representation—I repeat, autonomously, without resorting to a Messianic leader, to political parties that suffocate the interests of subaltern groups, or other falsely mediating representation. These groups must be present in a political dispute system that accepts them and integrates them in a legitimate way. As I will argue later, the huge success of the MST in mobilizing landless social groups in order to build its architecture of collective actions does not even come close to this (restricted) notion of emancipation—thus the title of my text. Adopting the totalizing perspective of the great political schemes of orthodox Marxist traditions, which play down social difference and alterity, the MST hampers the autonomy of microsocial organizational forms, both local and regional, since they would threaten its national dimension. As a political organization, the MST has actually played a role in preventing the emancipation of the poorest people in rural areas, who end up serving the not always explicit purposes of the organization's leadership.<sup>5</sup>

This text begins by presenting a concise history of this social movement, highlighting the original determinants that gave rise to forms of social protest in southern Brazil, thus generating several rural social movements, among which the landless organization. Then, it presents the most prominent phases and distinctive characteristics of its evolution in the last two decades. I seek to show that the MST's development has led, in recent years, to extremely problematic forms of internal organization, political choices and strategies. It has also produced an extremely problematic "reading of reality," both for other rural organizations and for its own members. These alternatives have been embraced especially because of its political power and ideological orientation. Finally, before the closing arguments, the second section examines a brief number of the Movement's current dilemmas, highlighting some critical and controversial aspects of its political action. Thus, I present and discuss a set of aspects regarding the invisible face of the Movement, still not introduced (and actually not recognized as existing and real by most of the Movement's analysts and supporters), before going on to point out the most notable results of its political and organizational action. I hope, then, that this section helps to broaden the knowledge about this organization, especially its political choices, which seem to stand little chance of building a real emancipation for the poor in rural Brazil.

## A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE MST (1980–2000)

### The original context

Just as in other Latin American countries in the postwar period, it is possible to identify in Brazil several moments in which the poorest rural populations, politically excluded and economically subordinated, were able to exercise their rights to mobilize and organize themselves, entering the tough and complex field of politics, in agreement with what some authors have called "cycles of protest" (Tarrow, 1994). It is generally agreed that, in Brazil, there were two such moments. The first, from the late 1950s until the 1964 military coup, saw the establishment and growth of rural workers' unions, which mobilized mostly wage workers from commercial parts of the country, as well as the rise of peasant leagues, which embraced primarily the demands of small farmers, usually not landowners, and mostly in northeastern Brazil. Furthermore, as a result of the political liberalization characteristic of the period's populism as well as economic changes in rural areas, other actors, such as the state, political parties, and institutions like the Catholic Church, got vigorously involved in the political arena. These actors fought for influence and control over the process of organizing the "rural poor," and also proposed projects for change or continuity that became increasingly polarized. As a result, the agrarian issue ended up being an important detonator of the military coup that defeated the political forces favoring structural changes in the country.

The other significant moment in the (re)emergence of popular movements in rural areas began to materialize in the late 1970s. This decade was characterized, on the one hand, by an unprecedented pattern of rural violence and, on the other, by processes of modernization and capitalist development that were also unprecedented. After this period, the official union movement became more dynamic, and a competing union federation was organized, the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT). Other events in the early 1980s eventually led to the constitution of the MST, which aggressively reintroduced the demand for agrarian reform into the country's political scene. Several forms of regional organization also sprang up, such as movements of rural women, of rural workers threatened by the development of large public works (such as hydroelectric plants), of small farmers demanding access to state policies for the sector, among others. Similarly, as a result of the extraordinary changes in the rural environment, a rapid process of commodification of production activities brought about an increasing social differentiation, a specialization of production and an integration of new agro-industrial complexes formed during that period, generating other interests and the need for new forms of representation as well as encouraging several collective actions by small farmers and rural workers.

Many factors contributed to the emergence and development of these new rural social movements that started in southern Brazil (and especially in Rio Grande do Sul) in the late 1970s and the following years. These factors include aspects related to the history of political participation in the state, the existence of a traditional "organizational culture" in rural communities, and reactive elements such as the opposition to control by local elites. In this section, however, I argue that the social movements in this region are primarily the result of three factors: the political liberalization in the final years of the military regime; the structural changes in the agrarian economy of those states that modernized their agriculture (basically central-southern Brazil) and their social impacts; and the action of progressive sectors of the Catholic Church, which were inspired at first by the increase in rural conflict during the 1970s, and then, during the 1980s, framed by the discursive apparatus of the theology of liberation (Navarro, 1996). The combined effects of these three factors, particularly in southern states, produced concrete results due to the specific characteristics of agriculture in that part of the country. There is a strong presence of family farming, and the Catholic Church's mediators and physical facilities are probably stronger than in other Brazilian states (due to its historical presence among rural communities, recruiting farmers' children for religious careers and also receiving material support to build and maintain churches, parish facilities, and seminaries). The process of agricultural modernization in the 1970s integrated most of those rural families into the different economic and financial spheres. When it was over, it had left growing problems of social reproduction, generating an inevitable alliance between the Catholic Church's rural arm, represented by the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (the Pastoral Land Commission) (with its mediators coming from family farm backgrounds) and the then fledgling popular organizations, such as unions and social movements, including the MST. It was only after their consolidation in the southern states, during the 1980s, that these new organizations were gradually able to spread their action to other states, in the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s.

#### The MST: Stages of its history

An analysis of the history of the MST, even if limited to specific regions of the country, would pose a real research challenge because of its vigorous social history since the early 1980s. Organized at the national level since the mid-1980s, the MST has had the surprising ability to reinvent itself politically, according to context variations, as well as an unparalleled creativity when compared to other movements. It has thus been able to keep afloat and avoid situations of strong undecidedness, such as those experienced by the labor union movement and other rural social movements. It faces challenges that are also proportionally bigger, since its social base is "the poorest

amongst the rural poor," who usually have no permanent occupation or residence, no schooling, and are generally easy targets for all sorts of political manipulation—in the Movement's jargon, the "*lumpen* peasantry," the most fragile rural social groups. Nevertheless, its major challenge is exactly the one derived from the very reason for its existence, that is, exercising social pressure to change a historically rooted land ownership pattern, in which control remains in the hands of a minority of landowners.

Among the social movements that arose during those years of political transition, the MST has the strongest social identity and has been able to define clearly its social base, as well as to motivate it. As a result, it has an important capacity for mobilization and its actions have a strong public visibility. Having become a recognized social actor that takes part in social struggles, its actions have had fairly significant results, since it has forced the creation of thousands of new settlements all over the country—even though the numbers themselves might not be so relevant when compared to the land-demanding population. According to official figures, until the end of 1996, 117,000 families had been settled throughout the country, but, significantly, between January 1997 and June of the following year, another 114,000 families received their plots of land, and the federal agrarian reform programs estimate figures of 400,000 families for the 1999–2002 period. Such results, at least in some sub-regions, have contributed to a better land distribution in several rural areas of the country, creating occupational and land-access opportunities for thousands of families as well as generating new economic dynamics.

From a general perspective, one can probably divide the movement's history into three main phases—at the risk, of course, of oversimplifying, especially from 1994/95 on, when it spread to the rest of the nation and regional differences became significantly greater. The first phase goes from its inception, at the beginning of the 1980s, when the first landless groups were organized, especially in Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, through its formal structuring (in 1984, at the founding congress in the town of Cascavel, Paraná), and its first national congress, in Curitiba (January 1985), until the emblematic year of 1986, which closes this first stage, when it was still primarily a southern movement. During this first period, the MST displayed a strong presence of religious mediators linked to Catholic Church progressive groups, some of them leaders of the movement. In general, it chose less confrontational actions, opting often for negotiation and having the state governments as its main interlocutor until 1985. This year marked the inauguration of the first civilian government, and also a confrontation between the movement and the federal government. In this first stage, non-violent actions were common, due to the presence of the Catholic Church. Agrarian reform became part of the federal government's agenda, since social disputes were militarized. However, those were times when recruiting

farmers with little or no land was easy and the Movement grew quickly, based on the significant support of religious mediators from the Pastoral Land Commission and the operational structure offered by the Catholic Church. Not many settlements were created, but they served as a strong encouragement to enlarging the Movement's mobilizing capacity.

The second stage took place between 1986 and 1993, when the Movement's actions gradually became confrontational (symbolized in the change in the motto, from "Land for those who work on it" to "Occupy, resist, produce"), including several clashes with the police and large landowners' hired gunmen. The new internal orientation favored this kind of tactic, especially after the landless farmers refused to submit to the thus far irrefutable leadership of Catholic Church mediators. Hence, from this point on, these mediators lost their hold on the definition of the Movement's orientation and gradually became mere auxiliaries of the organization. Only the most radical Catholic clergymen remained close to the MST. An episode in the south, among many others, illustrates this phase: the "Matriz Square conflict," which occurred in downtown Porto Alegre in August 1990, when farmers confronted the state military police, displaying a level of violence that surprised the state's public opinion.<sup>6</sup> In sum, these trends reflected the organization's hasty adherence to Leninist ideas, simplified by a small group of leaders, a situation that went so far as to turn its newspaper into a mere tool of "agitation and propaganda."

As a result, it was also in this period that it was decided to organize the movement as a "movement of cadres" (instead of a "mass movement," as was the Church's initial inspiration), gradually ceasing to identify itself as a "social movement," in the sociological sense, and instead shaping itself as a centralized organization.<sup>7</sup> The MST then left the south as its main field of action and transferred its headquarters to São Paulo (where it still is). In these years, the federal government would become its main interlocutor, at least until 1988, when the hopes for broad processes of land expropriation by the government were dropped because the government gradually turned away from the "Democratic Alliance's" initial pledge to do so when it came to power in 1985. At the end of this stage, the Movement went back to confronting state governments. Nevertheless, it was in this period that the MST achieved its best results in practical terms (second only to those it achieved after 1996), with settlements multiplying and a significant number of farmers recruited for its proposed actions.

At the end of the second stage, the MST also went through a relative period of crisis due to the strong presence of opponent forces, such as the short-lived UDR—União Democrática Ruralista (Democratic Rural Union), a confrontational and violent landowner organization. However, another problem arose, which is to some extent still unresolved, related to the rapid growth of the number of settlements. This began to pose an urgent question:

How to organize the production in those areas, making the settlers economically self-sufficient and presenting the areas as "models"? The answer to this question, developed by the Movement in several settlements in several states, was one of the most fascinating exercises in ideology advocacy ever carried out. The MST proposed (and in some cases imposed) the creation of totally collectivized cooperatives—notable evidence of the level of ideological mystification reached at that point.<sup>8</sup>

The third stage covers the years since 1994, in which the MST has had to face new political facts, such as a growing mistrust on the part of other movements due to the different understandings of social life and strategies for political change. The new reality of the increasing number of settlements has also played a role, demanding quick answers regarding the organization of production and of producers in those areas. The important fact, however, is that the MST "conquered" São Paulo in 1994, establishing a foothold in that state and discovering a privileged ground for action, the region of the Pontal do Paranapanema, a huge rural area that is perfect for the struggle tactics of the Movement because it is a public area where most landowners cannot appeal against expropriation (already decided by a final court). Acting with such ease in the most prominent state, and widely broadcast in the media, the Movement expanded its presence in matters concerning agrarian reform and became a crucial interlocutor for that subject and the settlements.<sup>9</sup>

Another reason for the MST's increasing political clout and strength was derived from tragic events involving land occupation in recent years—not entirely surprising, due to both the confrontational stance adopted by the Movement as its chief means of struggle and the usual deployment of military forces to violently repress land occupation. Two such events were particularly decisive in encouraging social pressure in favor of agrarian reform: the events in Corumbiara, Rondônia, in August 1995, and the massacre in Eldorado dos Carajás, in the southern part of the state of Pará, in April 1996.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, several rural workers were murdered by the brutal action of police forces. Those events reflected, to some extent, a strong public tilt in favor of the organization of the landless. The second event had large repercussions, since it was taped and repeatedly broadcast at different moments. Enjoying a strong influence in that context, the MST once more changed its political motto, at its Third National Congress, this time to "Agrarian Reform: Everybody's Struggle."

There is another factor that has been mostly ignored, despite its relative importance for the organization's decisions and current characteristics. In this recent stage, there emerged a "second generation of militants," which received its political education and, in some cases, occupational training in the schools established by the MST in the settlements. This generation is made up of young people coming from all the Brazilian states, and thus reflecting distinct agrarian realities. In addition, in the northern part of the

country (the Northeast, North, and Midwest), the militants are much more open to radical readings of reality, reflecting their own life experiences. As a result, a new group of leaders has come to support and actually carry out collective actions that are more daring and more threatening to the social order. The image of an "inciting" MST, which has been gradually constructed, especially after 1998, probably reflects more the actions of these new regional leaders and less the dominant political perception of the (mostly southern) "first generation" leadership. These are still in charge, but are constantly being confronted by radical young leaders who recently entered the organization's decision-making structure. But there is also a surprising contrast between the discourses of young leaders from different southern states and those from, say, the northeast.

In recent years (since 1994/95), MST actions have expanded in some areas and receded in others (such as Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, the birthplace of the MST). The aim of this chapter not being to discuss the reasons for such variations, it is probably more relevant to present the two major challenges posed to the Movement. First, the problem of democracy, since the organization is approaching a time when it might face growing dissent and conflict, not only internally, but also in its relations with other social movements and organizations within the so-called "popular field" because of deeper political and ideological differences. Having an essentially non-democratic structure, there are also great signs of internal conflicts in which the militaristic ethos and the near-religious devotion of some of its intermediate militants, led by a small group of national leaders, might no longer be able to control the camps and, especially, the settlements.<sup>11</sup> The most evident factor in this regard is precisely the instrumentalism of an ideologically anti-systemic rhetoric, constructed only for internal purposes (to maintain the cohesion of core militants), which has succeeded in developing a monolithic political identity and has guaranteed its political aims and forms of action.<sup>12</sup> It appears to be a charade, maybe incomprehensible to those who learn about the MST only peripherally (or through superficial and impressionistic newspaper articles), which generates curious behaviors among certain distinct but equally equivocated social sectors. On the one hand, conservative sectors react to the leftist rhetoric and to the symbols that, as they see it, "should have been buried under the wall," demanding legal instruments to prevent the MST's occupation of private property. On the other hand, urban social sectors and socialist parties, just as badly informed about the world of rural politics and/or moved only by the "classic" manuals, see in the land occupations and the growth of the Movement a transforming political potential that, in fact, is not part of the expectations of landless rural workers. Those changes are indeed relevant to the democratization of "rural society," but they do not entail political motivations destined to promote ruptures.

The political education of young landless farmers in the Movement's schools has entirely different aims—the sole intention is to make them adhere to a "total" and closed understanding of politics that does not even consider the recent Brazilian political developments, turning instead "inwards," with the chief goal of maintaining discipline, motivation, and cohesion among its intermediate militants. The ideological mystification can sometimes reach a pathetic level in the attempt to reinforce a polarized worldview and a Manichean political interpretation. The Movement's newspaper, for example, is perhaps the best mirror for the changes that have been performed. Being a pluralistic publication until 1986, the national leadership has made it into an "instrument of mass agitation," following classic Leninist recipes. Its journalists were dismissed for lack of confidence and replaced by "popular reporters," a change that was reflected in the publication's pages. As an example of the new ideological orientation, among the numerous deliberate distortions of facts, we can cite an article published in its "general facts" column on the 1991 arrest of US boxer Mike Tyson, charged with rape (and later convicted, after his confession). From the newspaper's "political" viewpoint, and probably to the surprise of its better-informed readers, the fact simply did not happen, the arrest and conviction being due only to the country's history of racial discrimination. In this case, as in most of its political agenda, the leadership resorts to an extreme polarization between "good" and "evil," which is also the product of a discourse inspired by those linked to the Pastoral Land Commission, which serves as its legitimating religious support. Curiously, despite the country's growing social and cultural complexity, as well as the broadening of the political and ideological spectrum after the end of the military regime, the mobilizing instruments of the MST have never managed to transcend the strict limits of a worldview that opposes virtue and vice. Imprisoned within this armor of obvious ideological oversimplification and its merely instrumental aims, it is not surprising that the organization has rarely been able to establish alliances or a common agenda even with other popular rural organizations.

Such a political background obviously keeps the militants from understanding social reality and politics at large. Being superficial and incongruent, it has led to surprising cases of rupture and conflict—especially when the original social identity, produced in the world of "small farming" and uprooted during the period of encampment and land occupation, is reestablished with the arrival at the settlement and the reconstruction of the earlier community life. In such situations, many settlers wish to get away from the organization. However, since dissident groups do not control the means of their support created by the MST, they are quickly separated from the other settlers and, in some cases, even removed from the settlement itself. For this reason, not being able to count on the "virtuous cycle" that upholds the Movement, such dissidents rarely constitute organized groups with power

and public visibility. In the cases when such situations occurred, they became mere appendices of leftist political parties or kept afloat for only a short period of time. In the state of Pernambuco, for instance, in 1996 and 1997, there were at least six "landless movements." None, however, posed a challenge to the MST or stood a chance of surviving for a long time.

The management of the increasing number of new settlements has been yet another challenge for the MST. It is not my aim here to examine the specifics of this issue, but I will point out that the production proposals so far have not led to innovative situations in what concerns the possibilities that impoverished farmers usually face. In this sense, the settlements should be no more than a temporary means of survival for families who have lost their land and once again have access to a lot in the settlement. Most settlements have opted for the typical technologies of "subsistence farming," or, in the case of southern Brazil, "modern agriculture," which demands agro-industrial inputs and productive structures that lead to indebtedness. This model does not offer economic and productive viability to new plot owners, especially in the context of the recent macroeconomic conditions.

A fourth stage in the history of the Movement is probably beginning, maybe prompted by its opening up in 1998, when the difficulties for the organization's action became notably greater. Although the rhetoric used to justify the uncertainties of these years has been pointing to the government's "criminalizing acts," such arguments seem to be distanced from reality (a typical case of self-deception shared by many MST allies). The fact is that the increasing isolation of the MST in relation to other popular rural organizations, and even to some former urban allies, reflects the recent political choices of the organization.

Ironically, the MST's recent history repeats in some ways that of the Peasant Leagues in the years before the 1964 institutional rupture, thus proving the cyclic nature of social processes. From the exacerbation of political rhetoric to extreme forms of social struggle, through the attack on the State and even the puerile adoption of "military schemes," the lessons of past history seem to have been forgotten by the organization's leaders. In the last three years, the movement has opted for a process of political radicalization whose rationale seems impervious to any interpretive framework. The initiatives that have contributed to drawing the Movement away from its former areas of political alliance, and which have thus narrowed its field of action include the invasion of public buildings, the occupation of clearly productive properties (which cannot legally be expropriated), the invasion of ships to denounce the cargo of "transgenic grains," direct confrontation with other rural organizations, acts of political pressure related to very recent and still controversial issues (such as the free trade agreements currently proposed or genetically modified organisms), and the exhaustive repetition of an anti-state discourse. Perhaps the most significant sign of this new stage, in case it is realized, is the

reluctance of the Catholic Church to give the Movement unconditional support (as it has done in the past). The Church has grown increasingly suspicious of the Movement's forms of action and political choices, even though its mediating agency, the Pastoral Land Commission, has been supporting the MST for many years (for the most rigorous analysis of the Commission's activity and recent history, see Martins, 2000: 11–71 and 133–153).<sup>13</sup> Only time will show if such ruptures will be realized in broader terms or if the MST, in light of recent changes in Brazil, will be able to reorganize itself politically and achieve a better understanding of its alternatives and possibilities.

#### THE MST AND THE DILEMMAS OF RURAL SOCIAL STRUGGLE

The Movement's social and political experience, particularly since the mid-1990s, has revealed in an exemplary manner, on the one hand, its extraordinary ability to be proactive as a social actor with a strong presence in political life and, on the other, its current impasses.

In light of the most significant results achieved by the MST, a considerable amount of space would be necessary to list all it has done throughout the years in the different Brazilian rural regions. There are several cases, for example, of formerly economically "dormant" areas, which had scarce productive activities and which became relatively dynamic due to the settlements and the arrival of the MST and its leadership. A new group of "farmers-turned-municipal-leaders" started to pressure local institutions, interfering more strongly in the implementation of government policies and, especially, keeping a closer watch on political practices. There is an immense number of these small revitalized sub-national regions throughout the country, accounting for the appearance of more participatory rural families and, as a result, contributing to the democratization of their respective municipalities. As a consequence, the growing number of settlements in almost every state has led to the political renewal of remote rural areas, slowly democratizing them and generating new social practices, formerly controlled mostly by the large landowners.

The settlements themselves are also more the result of the Movement's pressure than of governmental decision. Although agrarian reform and "the need to change the land ownership structure" has been present in the Brazilian political agenda for a long time, and some governments have been favorable to the implantation of agrarian reform programs, the establishment of an unprecedented number of new settlements in the last five years is directly related to the pressure exerted by the MST (and, in some states, by rural workers' unions). It should also be recognized that there has been a favorable context for the implementation of this policy, resulting from the weakening of the large landowners.<sup>14</sup> In effect, land occupation has been decisive in pushing forward the agrarian reform program. The hundred-odd



occupations in the whole country in the early 1990s grew to 398, in 1996, and reached nearly 600 two years later, showing a slight decrease in more recent years. Symptomatically, this was the period in which the Federal Administration program of settlements was most advanced.

In this sense, the MST's political and organizational efficacy might be limited to three primary sets of results. First, the permanent political debate on the issue of agrarian reform within Brazilian society during the period, an issue that probably would have been weakened or even eliminated without the landless insisting on it. Second, the establishment of a significant number of settlements, which guaranteed land access to an equally significant number of poor rural families. Without such an option, these families would have had to migrate to urban areas during a time of economic doldrums and few job opportunities in the cities.<sup>15</sup> Third, the above-mentioned democratization of public life in small towns due to the constitution of new forms of representation and organization encouraged by the Movement as soon as the settlements are in place. Another related effect is the change in relations between the "rural poor" and the large landowners in some regions, which came as a result of the MST's bold actions. Those relations historically reflected the landowners' clear political domination in the different agrarian regions, which assumed distinct forms of economic subordination by subaltern classes in rural Brazil. In some regions, however, the increasing incidence of the Movement's pressure tool (land occupation) has altered those relations and generated a growing fear among large landowners, who watch the inability of the State to oppose this practice, contrary to what it had done in the past. In areas such as the south, those fears are often clearly expressed in the landowners' reactions when the occupations grow in numbers and in specific regions. This change in the landowners' previous position of dominance is perhaps one of the most remarkable results in the history of the Movement. It increases the chances for expanding the land available for agrarian reform programs, now made easier by the hopelessness of the large landowners, who are increasingly powerless to oppose the occupations.<sup>16</sup>

Having pointed out, in general, the successes of the MST, I will now mention what the literature rarely mentions: the difficulties and problems generated by its forms of action and political choices, which expose its recent history to increasing criticism. Some of these problems are succinctly discussed below:

(a) The formation of a "virtuous cycle" that supports the organization's political action and allows it to carry out a great number of surprising public actions. However, this cycle is based on forms of social control within "its" settlements, where rural families are submitted to the bossing of intermediate leaders, thus replicating the hierarchical pattern that has always characterized social relations in rural Brazil (as shown by extensive research).

What explains this situation is the fact that these leaders are the mediators of the government policies aimed at the settlements and, as a result, access to public funds has been the main mechanism of social control over the settlers. Through this pattern, control is also exercised over those to be recruited—those who are trained to become new militants in the organization (the children of the settlers, for example, submitted to doctrinaire understandings about social life), as well as those who are summoned to join public actions, occupying rural properties, joining marches, invading government buildings, and other initiatives. The agility of the Movement during these years has thus been based on two main pillars: the human resources recruited in the settlements (both to form cadres and to present a quantitatively imposing image in its external actions) and the control exercised by the Movement as a mediator in the use of public funds in the settlements. This has allowed it to choose cadres who are more loyal to its strategic goals and to exert virtually irresistible pressures even on those who do not accept the MST's attempts at hegemony in the settlements. The access to such funds has counted on a range of new policies created during the period in several fields, as well as on the broad support of more radical urban social groups and government officials, who have facilitated the development of specific projects and access to the corresponding funds. The MST undoubtedly has a legitimate right to claim (and to be granted) access to the public policies created in recent years. However, it is curious that the urban social actors to which the organization is connected are almost completely ignorant of their interlocutor, except in what concerns its most visible face—the external actions it carries out from time to time, which have been able to gain the loyalty (often unconditional) of urban segments. Once again, we see the dissonance between the "real MST" and the "virtual MST," a dissonance discussed by Hellman regarding the Zapatista Movement in Mexico. Surprised by the huge international support and solidarity the latter has received, the author justifies it as an "extreme case" that appears as a direct confrontation between the poorest and the most powerful, concealing the analytical problems behind the most visible and public facet of the Zapatistas. Likewise, we could echo the author, regarding the history of Brazil's landless, when she says: "virtual Chiapas holds a seductive attraction for disenchanted and discouraged people on the left that is fundamentally different than the appeal of the struggles under way in the real Chiapas" (Hellman, 2000:1).<sup>17</sup>

(b) As a corollary, throughout the years, the Movement's political practice, following the orthodox Leninist leanings of its main leadership, has been essentially non-democratic, as I pointed out above. None of the leaders, for instance, is submitted to any kind of internal accountability (or external, for that matter), since there are no such mechanisms. Leaders are not publicly elected, but carefully chosen by higher-level cadres, the criteria being loyalty



and submission to the main directives, strictly obeyed on pain of losing one's position within the organizational structure.<sup>18</sup> There are numerous examples that illustrate this curious contradiction between the leadership's public discourse, which demands the democratization of society and its political structures, and the authoritarian internal hierarchy, which accepts no dissent. Two recent cases can be cited. First, deciding to fight the privatization process of the 1990s, a group of militants invaded a toll plaza on a privatized highway in the state of São Paulo and ravaged its facilities. Since opinion polls show most of its users have not been against such road privatization (at the most, they criticize the high charge of the tolls), how can the Movement's leadership be held accountable for an act that, in this case at least, has no legitimacy, lacking any political and social support? Astoundingly, as has happened in other similar actions, the Movement and its allies have been trying to turn the arrest of some of those responsible for this act, now subject to criminal inquiry, into an exclusively political fact, carrying out intense propaganda activity that presents the prisoners as "political prisoners."

Another case, in a different arena, is the recent decision by federal environmental authorities to hold the MST responsible for randomly deforesting some areas in settlements located in northern Brazil, and to impose on it a heavy financial penalty (which merely follows what is mandated by Brazilian environmental law, considered one of the most progressive in the world). Recent news has also revealed the single largest deforestation of a continuous area in the Atlantic Forest in the last fifteen years, exactly at the same time as a large settlement was established in the area (see *O Estado de São Paulo*, April 27, 2001). How can the Movement be made accountable if its formal leaders cannot be identified, since the organization does not as a rule legalize its structures and chooses unknown subordinate militants to publicly take responsibility, thus creating a legal façade for the organization (a strategy that enables the MST to receive public funds, sign agreements, and perform other legal acts)? The fundamental issue here is not related, as it might seem at first, to the organization's methods of political action, which, even though illegal, are often legitimate. Rather, it is related to the crucial challenge of the democratic game, which is the unrestricted possibility of materializing forms of representation that are able to autonomously organize clusters of interests and dispute them openly in the field of political struggles, taking full responsibility for more daring, confrontational, and controversial public actions. The example of the indigenous communities is a case in point. How to recognize the rights of these communities, which are almost always located in areas adjacent to the settlements, especially in Northern Brazil, and use their natural resources for survival? It should be stressed, then, that the Movement's non-democratic practice of banning any debate and compromise with other rural social groups, although notorious, has been downplayed by virtually every sector on the left, as if it were a minor and irrelevant point.<sup>19</sup>

A counterargument to the non-democratic practices of the MST leads us to yet another often posed question: could the Movement's stance be different, given the existing legal structure, the repressive role of the State, the intimidating action of landowners' organizations, and even the cultural disparagement of the "rural" (and its inhabitants), so strong in the Brazilian social imaginary? How is it possible to mobilize extremely poor rural families, without any schooling and regular occupation, sometimes without even a regular place of residence? Is there any other alternative to this kind of organization, centralized, based on strict discipline, which even punishes the "lapses" of the Movement's disciplinary rules? Would not a democratic internal structure end up weakening the Movement and its capacity for engaging in social struggles? Such doubts, in light of Brazilian political history, are certainly quite reasonable and real. Nonetheless, what I am questioning here is precisely the decision of never even trying another organizational form, taking into account either the different regional realities or (more relevantly) the changing political contexts throughout the organization's history. Despite differences in theoretical and political outlooks, even the least sophisticated analyses would probably agree that the Brazilian political system has undergone changes since the early years of the Movement, thus demanding changes also in the forms of struggle. If land occupations represented acts of extreme confrontation with the power structures of the agrarian oligarchies during the 1980s, would that hold true in most states through the 1990s? An anti-system discursive agenda had a clear political meaning during the long night of the generals, from 1964 to 1984 (precisely because it materialized the polarity "us" versus "them," reasserting the "good" versus "evil" moral polarity). Did it make sense, however, in the political context of the 1990s, when governments were put in place after legitimate electoral disputes? The political and ideological dequalification of the State in the former period expressed the opposition of society to military dictatorship. Does it fit the political rationality of the turn of the millennium? By persistently rejecting any democratic experiment, either internally or in its relationship with other rural organizations, the MST makes it impossible to affirm its political possibilities. This situation also highlights the inconsistency between a political regime that democratizes and institutionalizes itself and an organization that insists on an anti-system rhetoric.

(c) Unfortunately, the anti-democratic facet of the Movement's history could easily be demonstrated from other angles. I will briefly mention three other aspects. First, as pointed out above, the social control over the settler families, on which empirical evidence has gradually started to emerge as a result of rigorous sociological research rather than militant preferences. We now know a lot more about the mechanisms used by regional leaders to control the settlements, not only reducing the settlers to subjection through the control of

public funds, but often resorting to open, sometimes physical, intimidation. The formation of totally collectivized cooperatives, disregarding the farmers' social history (many of whom were former small owners), for example, has met with great resistance among rural families and has led to numerous conflicts in the settlements. As an illustration, Eliane Cardoso Brenneisen's careful and original study on rural settlements in southwestern Paraná transcribes the complaint of a woman farmer who left a "socialist cooperative" formed in her settlement, a paradigmatic example of the several situations of social inconformity so common in settlements controlled by the MST. The interviewee, referring to the organizational forms put in place, argues that "the community [collective] work would be kind of a slave thing, everyone stays together, but there's only one boss [...] if you have a milk cow, you have no voice, if you have a pig, you have no voice [...] [there is] a set time to go to work, if a relative arrived at your place, they could only stay for three days [...] we have always worked as employees and never been treated like this" (qtd. in Brenneisen, 2000: 165).<sup>20</sup>

Such behaviors have actually become part of the organization's everyday life, even in epic and very visible public moments. During the March on Brasília in 1997, for instance, the strict control methods used by the leadership became known, and were later described by those who studied the event. In his painstaking study on the March, Chaves reports on the almost military control of the event, the heavy punishments, and the totally centralized decision process. Narrating the case of the expulsion of a participant in the march for allegedly breaking the rules, he says:

There are several ways of restraining expression and distinct forms of social control [...] disagreement tended to be seen as lack of discipline and, depending on its gravity, could lead to expulsion [...]. This fear was present during the National March; however, it is commonplace in the MST settlements: many landless people do everything they have to in order to guarantee the temporary subsistence of their family and the survival of their dream of the land [...]. The silent power of fear, which makes one mute, would become even more oppressive in the final days of the National March. (2000: 217–218)

The second aspect to be stressed refers to the "forced homogenization" of differences and the strong rejection of alterity. The best example might be the subordination of the specific demands of women's groups, forcibly included within "broader struggles" that, if successful, will supposedly guarantee consideration in the future. In the Movement's social and political history, many women with remarkable talent for leadership have not been able to fill important positions, due to the MST's dominant machismo. What is even more perverse is that the only way for them to keep positions and

climb within the organization's structure is to assume the dominant "masculinist" discourse. As a consequence of this gender-based control, which associates patriarchalism and the ideological chimera of "principal and secondary struggles," women's trajectories within the MST have presented a clear contradiction, highlighting the gap between the public egalitarian discourse and internal practices, which conceal and devalue their work. The most broad-ranging research on this issue is categorical in its conclusions:

the relative equity between the sexes in the camps loses any meaning in the settlements, when female participation becomes surprisingly restricted. Data suggest that low participation by women is typical of settlements, not representing a natural female behavior [...]. That is due to the obstacles to participation built from social and gender relations and the code of values that supports them—shared by men and women—which emerge and become predominant in the normal everyday life of the settlements. (Rua and Abramovay, 2000: 286)

The third aspect to be emphasized here is the somewhat surprisingly persistent political posture of categorically delegitimizing the State. This seems hard to understand, above all because the MST is the Brazilian popular movement that enjoys the broadest support, from which, in fact, it derives its main financial resources. Such delegitimation, already stressed by Martins (2000), is part of the discursive architecture of the landless' organization, and is probably based on two main reasons: first, the ideological orientation of its leadership, and second, the above-mentioned "instrumental reason," that is, keeping a unified discourse that strengthens the internal cohesion of its militants and also attracts the support of radical urban groups. But the Movement maintains this posture in different situations, especially those that do not affect its access to public funds, whose interruption could financially compromise its survival. For example, although it does not have a formal existence, as mentioned above, the MST was invited to participate in the National Council for Sustainable Rural Development in July 2000. The organization preemptorily refused the invitation but has continued to demand access to federal public policies implemented by the corresponding ministry under the supervision of that Council. With this goal in mind, it has resorted to all possible forms of action, including confrontational ones (in fact, even when this means openly confronting the other organizations that represent poorer groups demanding equal access to such public funds). Similarly, the Movement has been incapable of recognizing some recent measures concerning the agrarian issue, which are unprecedented in Brazilian history and strike a blow at the power structure represented by large rural properties. Among such measures, for instance, one of the most remarkable is the government decision to cancel the registration of all large properties

whose owners are unable to prove the legality of their titles. At the deadline, the owners of almost 2000 latifundia throughout the country were not able to produce convincing information and had their registrations cancelled (in practice, their rights to the properties). This represents an area of more than 60 million hectares, almost four times as large as the state of São Paulo, which means a huge short-term increase in the supply of land available for agrarian reform, opening numerous opportunities for new settlements. Had the Movement's operating logic been, in recent years, the effective representation of the landless, and its main demand agrarian reform (rather than other objectives, including partisan ones), a dialogue with the federal government, even while keeping critical criteria and political distance, might greatly have expedited the productive occupation of that land.

The quotation below provides evidence of the Movement's ongoing practice of delegitimizing the State. The organization's highest-ranking leader makes a vitriolic attack on the judiciary, in a (public) speech delivered a few years ago. Other such examples could be repeated *ad nauseam*, even in the most recent period, showing the limited notion of politics embraced by the main leaders of the MST since the mid-1980s, when the organization adopted its then new (and still current) political doctrine. João Pedro Stédile, the founder and still most prominent leader of the Movement, probably thinking he would soon be in charge of the government agrarian reform sector since his candidate for the 1994 presidential election had a comfortable lead in the polls, did not hesitate in disparaging every governmental effort on the subject. Regarding justice, he proposed a curious neutralizing mechanism, stressing that

the third element in governmental action is the law, the judiciary. Many have said that "the problem in Brazil is that the judiciary will be a problem" [to carry out the agrarian reform]. You know better than I [...] the judiciary in Brazil is a doormat of the executive, a bunch of toadies, there's no independence of the judiciary from the executive, and it starts with the Federal Supreme Court [...] if the guys are appointed by the president, will any of them criticize him? [...] So, a judiciary that starts like that from the Supreme Court, the little judge out there [in remote places] we buy him out with a barbecue, isn't it? The price gets lower and lower, and when it gets to a public prosecutor, God help him.<sup>21</sup>

(d) Since it is neither possible to discuss the long list of the MST's current political and organizational problems (contrary to the common sense shared by social analysts distant from agrarian realities) nor to detail other controversial and/or non-democratic decisions made by the organization,<sup>22</sup> I will only highlight a final aspect. The strategies chosen by the Movement, its acts of pressure and demands have also ignored a historical and maybe unique

opportunity that was created in the 1990s. The Movement's interests and social and political clout could have been used to achieve much greater results. I am referring to the (re)emergence of "rural development" as a growing demand of rural populations, especially in those regions where rural organizations are more active. For various known reasons, in the 1990s there was a change in the conditions of production in Brazilian rural areas. Together with the political changes brought about by decentralization in the same period as well as new forms of state management implemented by recent governments, they have led to the reappearance of the demand for rural development in several regions. All the organizations (with the exception of the MST) have increasingly adopted a propositional set of ideas aimed at reconstructing forms of rural development that could make local and regional economies more dynamic, establishing new income-generating alternatives and job opportunities, integrating markets, and also influencing municipal or regional political spheres. Thus, the goal of these organizations is to ensure better living conditions for the rural families they represent. The results of their initiatives can already be seen in certain sub-regions, which are beginning to come out of their previous confinement and are developing new forms of social, economic, and political dynamics. The MST has chosen either to ignore all such efforts or, even worse, to fight them, sometimes aggressively, refusing any political alliance with the organizations trying to carry out such changes.<sup>23</sup>

The MST has remained amazingly impervious to many recent changes. As mentioned before, the power of the large landowners has been substantially weakened and they are no longer able to obtain the federal financial support that they always did in the past. Furthermore, poorer farmers (included in the general category of "family farmers") have managed to get unprecedented measures from the State—at first through specific public policies such as the Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar-PRONAF (National Program for the Invigoration of Family Agriculture), and more recently through the establishment of the Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário (Ministry of Agricultural Development), which is, in fact, the "ministry of the rural poor." In this context, it is amazing that the MST has not changed its strategies, remaining resistant (and even hostile) to other organizations of small farmers and rural workers, while dreaming about the "storming of the Winter Palace." All this at a time when the Brazilian rural economy is totally commodified, and rural families are not even remotely interested in political projects that are not, to some extent, reformist. They would never adhere to the projections of political transformation that the Movement's leadership proposes (and teaches at its political training schools in the settlements).<sup>24</sup> This is probably the greatest political impasse experienced by poorer rural families in Brazil: the democratization process has generated an unprecedented capacity for

claims-making in the rural areas, as well as the equally unprecedented presence of rural issues in the public sphere. In addition, there is much more room for political action by the Federal Administration and a weakened opposition (and action) by landowners' organizations. However, as a perverse irony, the organization that developed its strength during this period has itself become increasingly an obstacle to the construction of new and promising processes of rural development. Thus, in the context of the demands of the poorest rural families in the country, the MST assumes an unexpectedly conservative face.

### CONCLUSION

Critical theory has been developed to fight against consensus, as a form of challenging domination and generating the impulse to fight against it. How should one proceed when consensus is no longer necessary and, therefore, its demystification has ceased to be the spring of inconformity? Is it possible to fight resignation with the same theoretical, analytical, and political tools used to fight consensus? (Santos, 2000: 35)

Once social movements are turned into formal organizations such as the MST, they begin to be ruled by a different constitutive logic and to act according to different interests in what concerns both their external relations with other political groups and their own internal relations. In this case, we should stress the close relationship between the social origin of the landless and the opportunities created by the expansion of the organization (including those of political careers) and, more generally, by the extraordinary broadening of forms of upward social mobility. In this sense, the "misplaced" analyses of the MST, that is, those still framed by the political context of the military period or of the immediately following years and usually informed by political-ideological polarities typical of the past but distant from current societal forms, follow primarily the needs of the game of partisan dispute or present obvious analytical misunderstandings.

The title of this chapter—"Mobilization without emancipation": The Social Struggles of the Landless in Brazil—was inspired by Maxine Molyneux's well-known study on gender interests and women's role and participation in the so-called "Sandinista Revolution" in Nicaragua. In that case, a process of sociopolitical rupture carried the promise of emancipation for the women of Nicaragua, who were a significant and active part of the guerrilla armies. However, the author argues that during the revolutionary process and especially after the victory of the insurgent groups the specificity of the political subjects that they represented was submerged in the "general struggle." This presents a clear and crucial political problem, unresolved in this case. According to Molyneux,

much depends upon what is implied by subjects "losing their specificity" and goals being universalized. For the universalization of the *goals* of revolutionary subjects does not necessarily entail a loss of their specific *identities* [...] if the revolution did not demand the dissolution of women's *identities*, it did require the *subordination* of their *specific interests* to the broader goals of [...] establishing a new social order. This raises an important question which lies at the heart of debates about the relationship between socialist revolution and women's emancipation [...] which is that of political guarantees. For if gender interests are to be realized only within the context of wider considerations, it is essential that the political institutions charged with representing these interests have the means to prevent their being submerged altogether, and actions on them being indefinitely postponed. (Molyneux, 1985: 228–229, 251, emphasis in the original)

Although apparently distinct, the recent history of the MST in Brazil is quite similar in what concerns the obstacles to emancipation for the social groups it represents. The specific sociocultural differences between groups of rural families have been ignored, subordinated to forms of mobilization promoted by the Movement. More importantly, the Movement has also disregarded differences in age and gender, in forms of productive integration, in regional agricultural histories, and the types of organization and representation previously experienced (strongly opposed in the name of "unity in struggle"); distinct strategic views and forms of political action are invariably disqualified and rejected on behalf of a supposed political homogeneity, which has never been clearly explained.

The final result in all regions has been, on the one hand, a significant mobilization by the MST, based on the above-described mechanisms and demonstrated in numerous events and actions, and, on the other hand, the failure to generate social subjects with real organizational autonomy, in charge of their own destinies, and thus able to include social and political emancipation amongst their life goals. Therefore, the Movement's history loses its novelty and only replicates the melancholy trajectory of other political groups within the traditional left that, when illuminated by the light of their external actions, reveal themselves as only apparently promising. Under the symbols and icons made up for external use, though, lie the silent mistrust of its subordinate members, unaware of the Movement's own objectives, the production problems experienced in all the rural settlements, the fierce political dispute for organizational hegemony over the rural poor, the disdain for democratic practices, and the reproduction of the social control and the forms of power previously exercised by the large landowners and their representatives in rural Brazil, now under new shapes and disguised by a progressive discourse.

The Movement has taken little advantage of the possibilities for external support, in the face of the social and economic constraints of globalization,

which have increased social inequalities in so many countries, including Brazil. Its sources of international support reflect especially its contacts with institutions within the religious field, which periodically carry out propaganda actions, campaigns, and different forms of protest that are not generally very effective in publicizing the "agrarian problem" in Brazil. In addition, the attempt by the organization to create some form of international cooperation is still very incipient. Initially, the "Coordenação Latino-americana de Organizações Camponesas"—CLOC (Latin American Coordination of Peasant Organizations) was established to this end, but had no practical effect. Recently, an association of South American peasant organizations has been pursued through the "Via Campesina" [www.viacampesina.org], of which the MST is a board member. Apart from this, its campaigns and actions are publicized on Internet sites [www.mst.org.br], also without significant international repercussion. Even the so-called "Alternative Nobel Prize" and the "King Baldwin Award," given by the government of Belgium to organizations working for human rights, have had limited effects in promoting a network of international cooperation that could carry out different actions and exercise more effective pressure. Thus, it seems that, unlike other emerging fields such as the international protests against the organizations promoting free trade or the increasing number of actions related to GMOs (not to mention the environment), an emancipatory "counter-globalization" incorporating the interests of the landless in Brazil has not yet found objective conditions for its realization. One of the reasons might be the nature of the social struggle led by the organization, which probably no longer has the appeal it once had and lacks "novelty" (compare, for instance, the Chiapas case and its innovative particularities, discussed by Hellman, 2000). But another reason for this ineffectiveness, at the international level, is certainly related to the political nature of the MST. In the light of the organization's last twenty years, as I have argued, this diagnosis and evaluation may not be unexpected. The social and political emancipation of the rural poor in Brazil is still a mirage, offered only by the fables of a distant utopian future, which postpone, as has always been the case, the creation of a societal environment where hopes and reality are not separated by unbridgeable chasms.

#### Notes

- 1 I would like to thank a small group of readers of the first version of this chapter, whose comments made it possible to correct inaccuracies and highlight the most relevant analytical points, although they certainly bear no responsibility for my mistakes, interpretations, and arguments.
- 2 Among those who highlighted the political impossibilities of the "peoples without history," including the peasantry, the classic reference is Hobsbawm (1959). Only a few authors within the intellectual left have

presented an alternative interpretation, the pioneering example being Huizer's study (1976). It was only in the 1990s, with the end of the literature inspired by mainstream Marxism, that authors who were more receptive to the idea of active political participation by rural subaltern classes emerged. But a decade earlier, in Brazil, José de Souza Martins (1981) pointed to the problems of the dominant arguments at the time, making clear historical references to the periods of intense political participation of these social groups.

- 3 Among many recent examples, we may cite a long *New York Times* article from April 20, 1997, in its Sunday supplement, called "The Dispossessed," which was abundantly illustrated by the famous photographer Sebastião Salgado. The Latin American edition of *Time Magazine* also featured the MST on its cover, on January 19, 1998.
- 4 There are numerous works on the MST from these different viewpoints, except for the last group of "national studies." Probably the most daring exploration of its history (because it had the organization's support and access to its files and documents), was Fernandes's doctoral dissertation (1999). The results, however, although empirically relevant and revealing, are limited in analytical terms, probably because Fernandes failed to distance himself as a researcher from his role as a disciplined MST militant. A similar case, just as idealizing (for the same reason), is the work of Caldart, although it examines only the "educational" actions of the MST (2000). It is also a doctoral dissertation, which points to the problems between knowledge production and its ideological constraints. To my knowledge, there are no other studies with similar thematic scope, although there are many on partial aspects of the Movement's action, especially case studies on the rural settlements. The latter will be cited only when relevant to support my arguments. For a general view of the studies made on settlements, see the bibliographical references in the articles collected in the book edited by Medeiros and Leite (1999).
- 5 Maria Antônia Souza, however, points to the infinite possibilities developed by social subjects who are peripheral members of the Movement (more often when they are in the settlements than in the camps) in order to oppose the organization's decisions, thus creating "forms of resistance." Her study (Souza, 1999) shows, in an exemplary fashion, this type of alternative built by the landless families, joining an expressive and rigorous number of more recent research studies that have started to break the "enchantment" of most earlier studies. Even without adhering to the myth of neutrality and recognizing the huge difficulty of establishing clear limits between scientific knowledge and ideological commonplace, many prior studies had abandoned the most basic standards of research practice, generating a merely laudatory literature that has contributed little to understanding rural social processes.

- 6 The event had great repercussions due to its violence. At a certain point, a group of landless people cornered a soldier and one of them cut his throat with a scythe. The group ran away after that, so the police incriminated other people without evidence. The MST, in its turn, made the arrest of the accused into a political case, calling its arrested militants "political prisoners," a twist that served its purposes by deflecting the debate away from the soldier's murder.
- 7 This is grounds for great controversy, not only over the concept of "social movement" but also over the differences between a social group organized as a movement and one structured as a Leninist-inspired organization. Although my purpose here is not to examine theoretical and conceptual differences, I should stress that the notion of social movement I espouse is one to which a high degree of participation and a flexible and democratic decision-making structure are essential. Otherwise, it will be an organization such as the MST has become since 1986, and the risks, among others, are those of all non-democratic formal organizations—especially those that see themselves as bearers of political-ideological enlightenment. The necessary reference in this case is Roberto Michels's classic work, whose "Iron Law of Oligarchy" is well known, a thesis that points to a powerful *tendency* in organizational development. The author warned as early as 1911 that "democracy is unthinkable without organization [which is] [...] the weapon of the weak in their struggle against the stronger [...]. [F]rom a means, the organization becomes an end [...]. [W]hoever says organization, says oligarchy" (Michels, *Political Parties*, qtd. in Fox, 1990).
- 8 Some studies on settlements have already examined this curious attempt at "ideologizing production." For example, see Cazella (1992); Navarro (1995); Souza (1999); Pereira (2000); and Brenneisen (2000). It is important to highlight, however, Neusa Zimmerman's study (1989), carried out at the São Pedro settlement in Rio Grande do Sul, which was probably the first to examine, with remarkable sociological insight, the tensions generated in the new areas in the face of the Movement's proposals.
- 9 The importance of being located in São Paulo is evidenced by the greater visibility of the Movement since then in newspapers and magazines as well as in frequent reports in other media. There is another reason for the MST's resurgence in these years: the landowners have probably never been so politically weakened as they are nowadays, not only economically, but also from the point of view of their organizational effectiveness.
- 10 The other recent major event, which generated great repercussion and "cornered" the federal government at the time, was the April 1997 March to Brasília, which culminated in a 100,000-person rally. A thorough study on it can be found in Chaves (2000). In the following years, other acts of pressure—such as invasions of public buildings in several capitals or, more recently (January 2001), the attacks on experimental agricultural units researching genetically modified organisms (GMOs)—gained large coverage by the media, but it is not certain that they had popular support, as in the other cases mentioned.
- 11 There is plenty of evidence of the limited educational focus at the Movement's political training schools. It is obvious that, following doctrinaire mechanisms, the emphasis was not (and has not been) on the universal political education of young landless participants but on reinforcing the MST "mystique," creating a new generation of blindly voluntaristic militants. It comes as no surprise, then, that the Movement's intermediate levels, in their political action, act in a tightly dogmatic and uniform way, tied to a set of minimal political precepts that they cannot give up; otherwise, they would be weakened in interlocution and political disputes for lack of broader political capabilities. It is also not surprising that diversity vanishes in the interpretation schemes used by the organization's cadres, since such complexity would be incompatible with the extremely simplistic political education of the landless militants.
- 12 This instrumental reason becomes even more evident when we realize that, in fact, the MST's history is organized outside the institutional arena only in what concerns the land occupations—which in many states (such as those in the south) have very little impact, for they are considered as simple pressure instruments to guarantee access to other areas of land. As for the rest of its agenda of demands and actions, the Movement, on the contrary, might be the most integrated (to the dominant system) of all social movements and their organizations. The evidence for this argument is so abundant, and probably so notorious, that it is not necessary to point it out. Suffice it to say that, in more recent years, the MST's financial support is guaranteed mostly through public policies. Therefore, nothing could be more contradictory than its discursive delegitimization of the State (Martins, 2000a).
- 13 Not to mention the national campaign for limiting the size of rural properties (in a capitalist regime?), or, even harder to understand, the organization's position regarding the government program called "Banco da Terra" (Land Bank), aimed at providing credit to landless families for land purchase, with World Bank resources. The MST, because of its political force at the time, surprisingly refused even to negotiate with the Federal Government on the limits of that program (which, depending on payment conditions, is attractive to younger rural families as land credit). It chose, on the contrary, the pointless strategy of "denouncing" the program and demanding an "Inspection Panel" to the World Bank, which, unsurprisingly, had no practical effect.
- 14 Contrary to widespread notions, between 1995 and 2001, for example,

the Federal Administration carried out an agrarian reform program that expropriated more land and settled more rural families than ever before, taking all previous governmental initiatives into account. Even though the general figures are extremely significant, they have not relevantly altered the Gini index regarding land distribution in the country, which remains one of the world's highest.

- 15 It should also be pointed out that, in many settlements, the MST has carried out actions of great social value, such as educational initiatives, which have granted access to schooling to thousands of settler children. For general information on the MST's Educational Sector, see Gohn (1999).
- 16 Such a reversal might be seen in the August 14, 2000 headline run by the major newspaper of Rio Grande do Sul, *Zero Hora* (conservative): "Large landowners define resistance plan against the landless' threats." Ten years earlier, such a headline would have switched the words "large landowners" and "landless," which indicates the relative discouragement among landowners in certain regions, who are increasingly unable to use the State apparatus to keep their land assets untouchable.
- 17 Enchanted observations lose all sense of reality. About Chiapas, for instance, Michael Löwy has said "it is a movement freighted with magic, with myths, utopias, poetry, romanticism, enthusiasms and wild hopes, with 'mysticism' [...] and with faith" ("Sources and Resources of Zapatismo," *Monthly Review*, 49(10), March 1998, p. 1–2). Regarding the MST, he was even more categorical, stressing that "it is also characterized by an extraordinary mix of popular religiosity, 'archaic' peasant revolt and modern organization, in the struggle for agrarian reform and, in the long run, for a 'classless society.' This movement [...] has become the most important social movement in Brazil and the main force of opposition to the policies of neoliberal modernization carried out by successive Brazilian governments" ("A mística da revolução," *Folha de São Paulo*, April 1, 2001, Supplement "Mais!," p. 6). Had he at least once come into the Brazilian (or Mexican) remote rural areas or read reference texts in international literature (Moore, 1967, for instance), Löwy would certainly agree with Martins in that "it has yet to be demonstrated, with evidence, that our peasantry has a similar historical virtuality to that attributed to the proletariat in the [Marxist] theory of social change." Martins also stresses that peasant survival will depend on "fulfilling themselves in what preserves and transforms them at the same time: as community and cooperative entrepreneurs guided by the traditional and conservative values of land, work, family, community, and religion" (Martins, 2001: 48–49).
- 18 It must be stressed that such positions represent situations of social mobility that are irresistible for the vast majority of rural youth recruited by the MST. Socially and economically among the poorest in the

Brazilian social structure, it does not take a deeper analysis to see what it means for them to leave their communities in order to occupy "power positions," to take courses, to travel, to benefit from the MST's public visibility, at first in their own regions and later possibly at the national level. The inevitable result has been the creation of a sizable group of intermediate militants who are strongly disciplined and strictly obedient to the main leaders, for they run the risk of being displaced in this ascending social process if they hesitate at any time (or if they dare challenge the decisions made by the "high leadership," something that has been unacceptable in the Movement's history).

- 19 The MST does not formally exist, since its acronym and public image only reflect the political actor. The Movement's formal face is an organization called ANCA—Associação Nacional de Cooperação Agrícola (National Association for Agricultural Cooperation) and its affiliates, the AECAs (the state associations), all legally registered. Besides, the Movement has several cooperatives and some smaller organizations, all qualified to claim lawful access to several funds and thus financially support the Movement in its political struggles. This decentralization is only apparent, since all these organizations are totally hierarchized, reporting to the MST national leadership.
- 20 See the studies by Souza (1999) and Pereira (2000), which also show the numerous ways found by the settlers to resist the imposed organizational formats.
- 21 These words were transcribed from a tape recording of the speech delivered by João Pedro Stédile in May 1994 at the Second State Meeting of the Emater/RS Agrarian Reform Team (II Encontro Estadual da Equipe de Reforma Agrária da Emater/RS), in Veranópolis, Rio Grande do Sul. Stédile, the MST's main leader since its foundation, is the son of Rio Grande do Sul small farmers and was brought into political struggle by the Catholic Church's Pastoral Land Commission during the 1970s. An economist with a post-graduate degree from Mexico, he is ideologically an orthodox Marxist. Although he is a great strategist and has a deep knowledge of the Brazilian rural world, he often turns his public speeches into bravados, of which the most picturesque could be turned into a type of collection of political anecdotes. His leadership, however, is unquestionable, and his followers have even produced a "personality cult" style literature (see the book *Brava gente*, edited by Stédile and Fernandes, 1999).
- 22 It would be quite healthy for the democratic debate to discuss, for example, two other controversial facts in the Movement's history. First, the interference of the MST in the primaries for the Workers Party, in 1998, in Rio Grande do Sul, changed the final result and the choice of the official candidate. The Movement used the old tactic, typical of the clientelist past of agrarian oligarchies, of "mobile ballot-boxes," which were taken to the



settlements in order to get the votes wanted by the Movement's leadership. The second, more recent aspect concerns the decision of introducing the subject of GMOs in its agenda. The organization vowed to destroy "all" experimental plantations, associating such genetic experiments to "globalization" and thus to its symbols, such as the fast-food chain McDonald's, which became targets of its militants' invasions. It would be curious (and politically relevant) to know what the chain's employees think of the threat to their jobs that is given by such attacks, since McDonald's is the country's third largest private employer.

- 23 It has also carried out actions of open provocation to other organizations, such as the notorious attempt to occupy the already expropriated Catende Farm, in Pernambuco, where the state's Federation of Agricultural Workers (Federação dos Trabalhadores da Agricultura) has been developing a promising experiment in democratic and cooperative management with landless families settled on the former latifundium.
- 24 According to José de Souza Martins's enlightening words, "it seems complicated to place the peasantry at the center of a historical project for this society, as if it were a category whose social insertion gave it a dominant role in history, because it is supposed to be a class that represents the possible universality of mankind [...]. As if its historical destiny were everybody's [...]. The contradictions of the peasantry are not resolved in the solitude of its arduous life, but rather in the strengthening of conservative conceptions, as well as in its contradictory integration in a way of living and producing whose logic lies precisely in its destruction as a specific human group. Its worldview is grounded on its own experience of the world. That is its limit and its possibility, essentially marked not only by the struggle for land, but above all by the constantly renewed struggle against historical death" (2000: 49; emphasis in the original).

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