

## The Emancipation of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers within the Continual Movement of Social Emancipation

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### WHAT THEN?

It would have been difficult for the eighty representatives of the landless rural workers, who came from thirteen states around the country and met during the First National Meeting of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers, in January 1984, in the city of Cascavel (PR), to have guessed that the constitution of this Movement—the MST—would formally initiate one of the most complex, dynamic, and innovative mass social movements of rural workers yet registered in the history of Brazil, or in any other country of Latin America.

Sixteen years later, during the Fourth National Congress of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers, held on 7–11 August 2000, in the country's capital, Brasília (DF), and thus at the center of the nation's political power, 11,000 delegates from twenty-four states and the Federal District itself, twenty-nine representatives from twenty-two foreign peasant organizations, 110 people from outside representing non-governmental organizations or committees of friends of the MST, other guests and personalities who have marked the history of social struggles in Brazil and in diverse countries around the world, met, celebrated, learned, and revived their energies, not only for the confrontations in the fight for land, but now also for agrarian reform and against the economic model in force.

As with many of the other MST conferences, what was witnessed was a festive meeting, of culture, of conciliation, of solidarity, of discussion about political guidelines. During the week in which it was held, it turned into a kind of national reference for all those who were conscious, whether on the side of the dominant classes and the government, or on the side of Brazil's subaltern classes, that this formal meeting of rural workers, the largest yet held in Latin America was, more than anything else, a demonstration of the strength, the firmness, and the renewal of a social movement that has for the last sixteen years politically forced the dominant classes to forward agrarian

reform as a principal theme on the national political agenda. Likewise, for the government technocrats, for broad sectors of the university intelligentsia, and for unions and parties of the center-left, the congress accentuated the demand to rethink the role of the rural subaltern classes within the correlation of political and ideological forces of the country.

The MST congresses are a synthesis of the movement's ways of operating. They are an expression of the solidarity among the social activists who risk their lives in the fight for land, a demonstration of the tenderness between companions of the same ideals, and of the renewal of commitment to shared values. At these meetings the Movement's general policy lines are discussed, but they cannot be characterized as political fora for internal electoral struggles. This is because at these congresses there are no elections and so no possibility for these kinds of struggles to arise. The process of replacement of the members of the board of directors is made in other ways.

So, why do I consider these congresses as a synthesis of the movement's ways of operating? Because, in addition to being large and festive meetings of political debate, the congresses reproduce practices similar to those of the encampments of the occupied lands: all of the delegates camp in large black canvas tents and organize their lives during the period of the conference through collectives called brigades, each in charge of an essential sector: communal kitchens, clinics, daycare centers, centers for study, leisure, security, discipline, culture—all of those areas that are part of the daily existence of people in an ephemeral city more than 11,000 strong. Such a self-governing city was encamped for a week in the country's capital under the attentive eyes of the police and intelligence services.

So, how should we explain the marked and lasting presence of the MST on the national scene if the struggle for land and agrarian reform in Brazil, and the MST itself, confront strong historical enemies that have enormous economic, political, and ideological powers, such as:

—The historical alliance, which stems from the middle of the nineteenth century, between Brazil's dominant classes and the business class that controls the agrarian, industrial, commercial, and banking capital, at national and international levels, and which was always, and now more than ever, against agrarian reform in the country.

—The federal government and the majority of state governments, through the manipulation of public policies and the mass media against the interests of the subaltern classes in the countryside; through a repressive law enforcement apparatus, such as the federal police and the state military police, and, indirectly, through the intelligence services, whether they are explicit, like the Brazilian Intelligence Agency—ABIN—or maintained with apparent discretion, like the intelligence services of the armed forces and the state

military police, all operating in connection with related services in the United States.

—The paramilitary forces, whether those popularly denominated *jagunços* (hired gunmen) or the private security forces hired by the large landowners.

—Multilateral financing agencies like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, which, beyond financing state reform and economic restructuring according to the paradigms of the International Monetary Fund, influence political and ideological opinion at the highest level of federal government over issues such as the implementation of agrarian market reform or the privatization of the education and health sectors, while overlooking the privatization of state economic companies in the process of state reform.

—Large sectors of the center-left intellectual class of the country that, either because of personal disillusionment with politics, or for having been co-opted by moderate sectors of the dominant classes ("transformism," according to Gramsci), adhered either to neoliberal political and macro-economic reforms, or to the dominant ideology that considers the small rural family producers as a production sector without historical prospects.

The support that the MST has garnered from within the country, as well as that which has come from without, is considerable and necessary. However, it is not sufficient to explain the sixteen-year struggle for land, for agrarian reform, or for overcoming the current economic model, nor is it sufficient for understanding the complexity achieved today by the MST, which developed gradually within and through a mass movement. However, we should list its sources of support:

—Progressive sectors of the churches, in particular the Catholic and the Lutheran churches, through the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT).

—Popular social movements from the countryside and the city.

—Rural, commercial and industrial unions, as well as progressive union federations.

—Sections of the urban and rural middle classes.

—A portion of the progressive intelligentsia of several universities, research centers, and governmental organizations.

—National and international non-governmental organizations.

—Committees of solidarity with the Brazilian landless formed in twelve European countries, in the United States (articulated by Global Exchange), and in Canada (through several NGOs).

- Exchange with and support from Latin American peasant organizations through the Latin American Coordinating Committee of Peasant Organizations (CLOC), and Via Camponesa at the world level.
- A majority of Brazilian public opinion.

In July 2001, the Fourth Meeting of the Friends of the MST<sup>1</sup> was held in France, drawing 104 people from thirteen European countries.

In spite of the diversity and loyalty of this support, it hardly demonstrates how the MST has resisted and overcome clashes with such strong opponents. What are the human energies being liberated in the daily social practice of this mass movement that led hundreds of thousands of landless rural working families, a considerable part of them already with land, to feel committed to the ideals and values of their peers and to keep on fighting, even when their immediate objective—getting land—has already been achieved? What participatory procedures were created that allow us to say that this mass movement has not veered towards a formal bureaucratic organization, even if it is understood by some social researchers as a mass social organization?

What are the intimate secrets of the MST that should be unmasked, perhaps revealed, so that they might contribute to a reflection about this surprising and innovative social movement that has been able to keep changing over such a long period of time?

I would like to suggest that the way to find this out is to look into the movement initiated by the MST for the continual social emancipation of subaltern classes in the countryside. It has made an effort to overcome economic exploitation, political domination, and ideological submission or, in other words, the dependency that the families of landless rural workers, or workers with small plots of land, have been submitted to in Brazil. In the historic effort to carry on the social emancipation of the subaltern classes in the countryside, the MST has immersed itself in a process of emancipation from diverse potential powers. Following in the footsteps of various social movements involved in the struggle for land and agrarian reform, the MST has had to emancipate itself from the churches, the unions, the parties, the state, and the centralized bureaucracy.

#### INTIMATE SECRETS<sup>2</sup>

People, groups, and social classes that desire to be, or to become, subjects of their own histories live in a permanent tension between alienation and critical consciousness, between domination and liberation, and between dependence and emancipation. Often, whether because of alienation, or physical or mental repression, people, groups, and social classes conform to their subaltern positions, attempting, however, within their possibilities, to achieve micro-conquests in a continuing process of apparent liberation. For

people and social groups, these micro-conquests can represent liberation, but they may not be aware that such liberties may have been permitted by somebody else, whether a person, group, or social class.

Generally speaking, these personal and social micro-liberations do not actually signify processes of emancipation, and do not necessarily initiate a process of social emancipation. However, in the complex of forms and degrees of dependency, they lead to the emergence of feelings of freedom, sublimated forms of alienation that are found in the economic, political, and ideological spaces consented to by those who dominate.

I would like to suggest that social emancipation is a continuous process. It may have a beginning, and its inception may even be datable, but it necessarily has no end. As such, even in revolutionary processes, people, groups, and social classes are able to let personal and social emancipations<sup>3</sup> flow in permanent movement, one that is always changing and always incomplete. With each social change, and society is always changing, new correlations of economic, political and ideological forces are constituted, giving new shape to old relations of dependence and of emancipation.

I do not think that continuous social emancipation requires the presence of formal mediation in which different interests are represented, whether they are the interests of associations, unions, parties, the state, or the Church. Mediation can, in certain circumstances, be necessary, but it is not indispensable. Mass movements, in seeking to realize objective and subjective ideals, allow personal catharsis, reinvigoration and the discovery of new human, personal, and social values to be affirmed, leading to often unsuspected experiences of personal and social emancipation. Social action, through what we call direct action, can unleash processes of emancipation, or, depending on how emulation is converted into direct action, it can itself be a consequence of ongoing experiences of emancipation. Direct actions by mass movements do not require that different interests be represented in formal mediation.

I would posit the hypothesis that the MST has reinvigorated and given new meaning to the historical process of continuous social emancipation of the subaltern classes in the countryside. This process has resulted objectively and subjectively in the affirmation of the social identity of the landless rural workers, in the rediscovery of a historic meaning for this fraction of the subaltern classes, and in the daily conquest of dignity by the millions of people from the country and the city who are involved in the struggle for land, for agrarian reform, and for change in the economic model in force. This emulation in the process of continuous social emancipation is contributing to the construction of an active citizenship among considerable segments of the subaltern classes in the countryside.

Direct actions—such as the occupation of land and public buildings and prolonged resistance in the encampments—as well as the development of a specific pedagogy in the schools, new techniques and ways of training

militants, the search for alternative forms of governing settlements, the mystiques and values adopted as cultural codes for the affirmation of the identity of the landless, all of these redefine, in the social practice of the struggles for continuous social emancipation, new relations between the state and this sector of civil society.

Therefore, as direct actions by the MST contest and attempt to redefine, against the offensives of bourgeois conceptions and actions, the public space and the dominant conceptions of civil society, everything leads us to believe that the assertion of these segments of the subaltern classes as rightful citizens happens in the social spaces that they themselves create, in a dialectic tension between socially emancipated spaces and the constant attempt, by the dominant classes, to control and influence these spaces.

Thus, the Movement is always in movement, especially in relation to the bourgeois state, to public space, and to civil society, which have been created historically in an authoritarian way. According to Marilena Chauí, in Brazil it is the state that creates society. Even taking into consideration that the MST was created in a political and historical context that was favorable to mass actions<sup>4</sup>—a context that could be summarized as a period of transition from a military dictatorship to a bourgeois liberal democracy—because of the worsening of the situation of the subaltern classes in the countryside (as a consequence of the capital-intensive economic model reproduced by the country's government, which was based on the interests of international monopolistic capital) and because of the amplification, diversification, and intensification of social organizations and movements within civil society, the character of this mass social movement has been the product of a permanent construction. Its values, mystique, strategic political lines, direct actions of land occupation, and continuous experiences of social emancipation have been affirmed, criticized, and transcended in the social effort to construct a mass movement in the countryside unprecedented in the history of Brazil.

The MST was born while trying to emancipate itself from the tutelage of two institutions which, at the same time that they gave it life, could also have stripped it of its liberty: the churches<sup>5</sup> and the rural workers trade unions.<sup>6</sup> Also, in the dynamic of participation with other social movements and organizations set on rediscovering new avenues in the struggle for land, it emancipated itself from the political parties, from the state, and, internally, from the kind of bureaucratic centralism that the search for strategic unity required in a country with territorial and cultural proportions such as Brazil.

We can say that the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) (Comissão Pastoral da Terra) and the rural trade union leaders that were connected with it were responsible, in the context of the debates on the constitution of the MST,<sup>7</sup> for its emancipation from the tutelage of the churches and from the rural trade unions. This political position was made explicit in the First National

Meeting of the Landless Rural Workers, which took place on September 23–26, 1982, in Goiânia (GO),<sup>8</sup> and which included twenty-eight landless rural workers coming from sixteen states, along with twenty-two members of Catholic and Lutheran churches of various Brazilian states.<sup>9</sup> In the presentation of the Letter to the Companions of the Landless of Brazil (Boletim, 1982: 9), they affirmed that:

With respect to articulation, the participants decided that they should strengthen regional connections, that is, starting with the existing categories in the large regions, such as itinerant workers (*bóias-frias*) in the Southeast and the South, the tenants of the South, the squatters of the Center-west, the hired hands of the Pernambuco cane fields, etc. After fortifying this regional articulation, they should then establish a more ample articulation at the national level. To maintain this articulation, a provisional coordinating committee of the landless was elected. Among other tasks, it will organize the Second National Meeting of the Landless to take place between September 1983 and January 1984.

During this first meeting, leaders and advisors of both the CPT and the rural trade unions voiced their concern about the future of the Movement of the Landless, expressing the opinion that it should be established as an independent organization, as much from the churches as from the unions.

The social emancipation of the MST from the CPT was experienced by both as an important process. Important because the CPT, for its part, never ceased showing solidarity, cooperation, and a willingness to come to the defense of MST's actions. In the sixteen years of the history of the MST, the CPT was fundamental, not only in its support of the occupation of unproductive land, but, above all, for its defense of the human rights of people who are persecuted and unfairly treated in the countryside, among them those who have come to be called the landless rural workers.

Recently, during the First National Conference of the Pastoral Land Commission, held in Bom Jesus da Lapa (BA), from 28 May to 1 June, 2001, twenty-five years after its founding, the distinction between "land as a space for production, and land as a space for living" was proclaimed. In the Letter of Bom Jesus da Lapa, once again, one of its most important actions was declared to be the struggle for the liberation of land, supporting and reinforcing, among other propositions, "land occupations promoted by the landless, their movements and organizations" (Maranhão, 2001: 5 ff.).

The emancipation of the mass movement of landless rural workers from the churches and the unions did not signify that religiousness and corporate struggles had been abandoned, nor were the experiences of other social movements and organizations engaged in the struggle for land in Brazil and Latin America underestimated.

At the First National Meeting of the MST, held in 1984, the movement's demands, organizing principles, and forms of struggle were defined. This mass movement's character was already apparent in some of its organizing principles: collective leadership; division of tasks (each person contributes according to his/her capacities and skills); discipline; study; the training of its own cadres; the struggle of the masses (based on the idea that rights established by law do not guarantee victory to the people); and a connection with the grassroots.

These formal definitions established in 1984 have been made concrete, revised, and broadened throughout the history of the movement.<sup>10</sup> It is this permanent praxis that allows us to assert that in the MST everything is in motion, always involving a long process of reflection, mobilization, and action. This characteristic permeates the recognition and correction of errors and deflections. Based on the experience of the landless rural workers themselves, it has been socially accepted that the innovations and corrections (if they are not unfounded) are only to be introduced after having been generally approved by the movement's decision-making structures.

From this point of view, it is not always the case that a correctly formulated criticism can have short-term results. This is because of the complexity and diversity of the leadership structures,<sup>11</sup> because of their collegiate character, and, at the level of the settlements, the diversity of the forms of management, as well as the differences in the way reality is perceived. The understanding of criticism and the changes that may result from it require time, not only in a chronological sense, but, above all, in a cultural one. In fact, a variety of forms of solving the same problem always emerges.

What then are the "intimate secrets" that we should know in order to be able, supposedly, to understand a bit more about this mass social movement that, for more than sixteen years, has been troubling the dominant classes of the country in its struggle for the continuous social emancipation of sectors of the subaltern classes in the countryside? I would suggest that the following aspects be considered: mass action; the form of struggle known as direct action, expressed in the occupation of land; values; mystique; collective management; the training of militants; the autonomy of the movement itself; and its capacity to, involuntarily, constitute itself as a type of network society with a project identity (Castells, 1997: 11).

I wish to suggest that the revelation of these intimate secrets start with direct mass action in the process of land occupation. When the MST opted for direct action as a form of struggle—materialized in the occupation of land—it inserted itself directly into the class struggle against capital. It is frequently affirmed that the struggle of the landless rural workers is against the latifundium. This assertion is not incorrect, but it is insufficient. The expression "latifundium," consecrated in Latin America, signifies a large property comprised of unproductive rural land, and, in the Brazilian case, a rural property that does not fulfill a social function.<sup>12</sup> Excluding the fact that this

assertion does not take in the variety of social levels on which the struggle of the landless rural workers is realized—a struggle that today is much broader, aiming at agrarian reform and a change in the economic model—the fact that the large landowners have always been integrated with the urban business class, whether it be industrial, commercial, or financial, has been scarcely highlighted.

In February of 1985, around the time of the elaboration of the First National Agrarian Reform Plan—the first of what at the time was known as the New Republic (Nova República) (so named by the first civilian federal government elected after the military dictatorship of 1964–1984)—direct access to statistics from the official records of rural property was made possible. One surprising revelation was that the majority of large landholders in the country (the owners of the latifundia) lived in, or had businesses that were based in, the metropolitan region of the city of São Paulo (SP), the industrial center of the country.

Although this had already been pointed to in several studies from the mid-seventies on, the formal verification of this fact, through access to official statistics, indicated that the large rural properties in Brazil were concentrated in the hands of financial and commercial capital, and no longer, as many supposed, in the hands of the rural colonels.

By choosing to occupy large tracts of unproductive rural land, the MST was directly confronting the great financial and commercial interests, national and foreign. By opposing the historical and legal prerogatives of the right to own unproductive land as private property, the movement was, in an indirect way, affirming that it would not wait around for the state to undertake agrarian reform in Brazil. Thus, it emancipated itself from the state. In addition, it broke with the historical practice of various social movements that fought for land, as well as with unions and parties, all of which demanded agrarian reform from the state.

Although the MST did not give up fighting for resources and public services, its emancipation from the state was already evident by the First National Congress,<sup>13</sup> in January 1985, when one of the political recommendations made to the militants was not to expect much from the New Republic. It was at this congress that the conviction was consolidated that agrarian reform would only go forward if there were an occupation of land through mass struggle (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 51).

This understanding of the tutelary character of the state in relation to the subaltern classes—through actions of coercion and the formation of a consensus that both guarantee the hegemony of the ruling classes over the other social classes of the county—was a determining factor in the construction of the internal diversity and complexity of the MST.

Because the areas of land occupied through mass action represented (and still represent) an affront to the legal privileges of the supposedly absolute

right to private property, instituted by custom by the dominant classes, the federal government has always hampered the formulation and application of public agricultural policies related to the areas of land occupied by the MST for agrarian reform.

This circumstance led to the gradual expansion of the struggles for land, which began to encompass the struggle for public agricultural policies compatible with the economic situation of the settled rural workers, struggles for public education and health in the settlements, for the physical security of people living in the settlements as a response to the offensives of repression conducted by the military, civil, and paramilitary police, as well as by hired gunmen, the struggle for access to the mass media, and many others besides.

In a movement comprising such diversified struggles, different MST sectoral collectives were established, such as the mass front, the education front, the health front, the agricultural cooperation front, the gender front, the training front, the cultural front, the human rights front, the media and international relations front—all of them articulated at the level of each federal state and in the Federal District and, finally, at the national level. The establishment of a national leadership structure in Brazil came from the need to construct a unified strategy for struggle but, beyond this, it was determined by two fundamental historical situations: the strong centralizing presence of the federal government, especially in the formulation of public policies, and, as a consequence of this tendency, the consolidation of the national political arena as the only one in which political negotiation, within the dynamics of class struggle, can occur.

We can get an idea of the complexity of these processes of struggle if we take as a point of reference the fact that, at present, there are approximately 1,500 settlements under the control of the MST. In addition, the settlements have differentiated forms of management within a wide range of forms that include everything from presidential systems to entirely collectivized ones (Carvalho, 1998). They experiment with processes of consensual participation and organization (Carvalho, 1994), opposing the dominant governmental logic explicit in programs of sustainable rural development financed by the World Bank, which require the creation of popular organizations<sup>14</sup> so that individuals and/or families can receive subsidized government financing.

The authoritarian strategy of development, from top to bottom, of civil society, conducted through compensatory public policies (financing, either subsidized, or entirely funded by governments) was located on the margins of the macroeconomic reforms promoted by the IMF in order to soften the increasing concentration of income and wealth.

The need to "compensate" has a component of equity and justice associated with a rational distribution of the costs of crisis, stabilization, and

adjustment in the short and medium terms. But it also includes rationality in economic and social reform. In fact, this has to do with the transitory recuperation of distributive equilibriums that were distorted because of the way in which different sectors of society absorbed the costs of the crisis and of the reforms employed to overcome it. (BID, 1993: 26)

To take charge of local, regional, state, and national struggles there are ten active sectoral collectives,<sup>15</sup> to which we referred above, at the national level and at the level of each of the twenty-three federal states and of the federal district, in which the MST is an effective presence. In addition to this, there are on average four to seven regional directorates within each federal state.

Each level of decision-making, from the settlement to the various regional, state, and national directorates, has relative autonomy. The dynamics of study, reflection, and debate over the themes of the national meetings and congresses can be used as an illustration: the themes are debated at all levels, from the grassroots units—composed of neighboring families within each settlement—up to the national directorate.

The hundreds of decision-making centers, related to the mass character of the MST, give this movement its own dynamics: the diversity and velocity of the changes in the correlation of political and ideological forces do not lend themselves to the hardening of bureaucratic organizational structures, either within the directorates or within the sectoral collectives. One of the reasons for this lies in the origins of the MST: the occupation of land.

The occupation of land usually evolves out of a local mass movement and rarely has a micro-regional scope. Hundreds, even thousands of families are mobilized when land is to be occupied—men and women, children, the young and the elderly—in other words, thousands of people. It would be extremely difficult to imagine, however great the discipline in such mass actions might be, that the organization of such an event could be managed by a bureaucratically hardened structure. There are other values that create internal unity within the MST. Perhaps therein resides one of the MST's most complex intimate secrets.

I would suggest that the social identity constructed by the MST among sectors of the subaltern classes from the countryside during the course of their struggle for continuous social emancipation rose out of the political and ideological capacity that the movement demonstrated in consolidating the social identity of resistance,<sup>16</sup> which, traditionally, social movements and organizations involved in the struggle for land end up creating.

At the same time that this resistance identity was consolidated, it was transcended by the broadening of the social planes on which social struggles were taking place. In this contradictory process of consolidating resistance and transcending it, a project identity was being created. This happens "when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build

a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure" (Castells, 1997: 8).

In this social movement, a project identity is under construction. The social awareness that the landless have that merely obtaining land is not enough to achieve their immediate economic objectives is already effective; they are becoming increasingly aware that other social struggles, like education, health, culture, training, etc., are indispensable for their emancipation from two of the three forces that dominate them, i.e., the latifundium and ignorance,<sup>17</sup> and this has already given new meaning to their struggles; they are also slowly coming to understand the third force, capital, due to the processes of social exclusion and the growth of poverty in Brazil.

However, the defeat of capital will demand a broader social identity than that which defines the landless, or even the subaltern classes of the countryside. In order for a project identity to emerge—an identity capable of transforming the whole social structure of the country—there needs to be unity between both rural and urban subaltern classes. In fighting for this unity, the MST is expanding its social and political alliances among the subaltern classes in the city.

As it proposes a project identity, which is necessary for the continuous social emancipation of the subaltern classes of the countryside, we could assume that the MST defends the idea that the landless themselves are the bearers of a social force capable of transforming the social structure of the country. This is an equivocal perception of the MST's strategy, which has given rise to suggestions that the movement was becoming a peasant political party.

I think that this reading of the dynamics of this mass movement fails to understand that the peasant struggle (and that of workers in general) is predominantly determined by necessity and not by utopian aspirations, such as might occur among sectors of the urban middle class. The struggle against capital has come to seem like a necessity to the landless, whether because of the consciousness that they have acquired from those processes of exploitation to which they are submitted when confronting the markets of inputs and products, or as a concrete function of the chronic poverty in which they find themselves, in spite of the improvement they have experienced on other social planes, like education, health, culture, and organization.

The new meanings that the different social planes, derived from the struggles for land, have given to the life of the landless—and which are becoming the basis of their social identity as landless, even though many have already won land—have been guided by the values that the MST has adopted and defended. Allied to these values, which are points of reference for personal behavior and intersubjective relationships among the landless (Carvalho, 1999), the MST has always worked on the development of symbols and mystiques.

Furthermore, I would suggest that this mass movement has been able to develop, internally, a network society. The multitudes that occupy the lands of the big landowners or of the great capitalists; the diversity of people that make up these multitudes of the landless; the hundreds of centers of decision managed and directed by so many different socio-cultural profiles; the attempts by government agencies to co-opt the militants, local leaders, leaders, and friends of the MST; the political and ideological pressures of the dominant classes that try to prevent these multitudes from tearing down the walls of the latifundium and the walls of ignorance; military repression, threats of death and torture, the assassination of leaders and of landless families; the manipulation of public policies, the ideological and financial offensives of the World Bank to establish agrarian market reform—all in all, so many are the dimensions, the social planes and forces that oppose the construction of a social identity of the landless that it would be difficult to suppose that the MST has achieved such conquests through bureaucratic structures or social organizations that are intent on stability or centralized leadership.

One possible piece of evidence of the MST's ability to transcend corporate forms and the liberal mechanisms of political representation lies in the audiences and meetings it holds with government authorities, in which dozens of the landless always appear. There are not just two or three representatives, but collectives of workers, bringing with them the decisions of the masses of workers from the settlements. This practice is, besides, newsworthy to the mass media because of the constant impasses generated by the presence of dozens of workers' representatives in the offices of ministers or the President of the Republic, when institutional protocol demands the presence of only a few.

Some social researchers have studied and interpreted parts of this totality in movement that we call the MST, and, according to their approaches (whether from synchronic or diachronic perspectives), are induced to arrive at conclusions that are not always pertinent. The question of collectivization in the settlements is an emblematic case.

Few are the settlements in this country that practice cooperation in production or in marketing, whether this takes the form of traditional or collectivized cooperatives. What predominates (denoting a debility in the process of organizing production to transcend economic individualism) is the empirical initiative of cattle-raising or traditional family farming.

Up to the end of 2000 there were approximately 250,000 families in around 1,500 settlements that were identified with the MST. This means that an area of seven million hectares was taken from the hands of the capitalists. In these settlements, by June 2001, there were forty-nine Farming and Cattle-Raising Cooperatives—CPAs (collectivist regimes)—in operation, taking in 2,229 families, thirty-two service cooperatives (CPS) involving 11,174 families, and seven more cooperatives, two being for credit, two for work, and three for small producers, which came to a total of 13,473 families



involved in cooperatives. There are seventy SCA agro-industrial units in operation, and twenty-seven more in the planning phase. Parallel to the Settlers Cooperative System (SCA), hundreds of associations of producers have been formed, induced by public policies that consider them essential for receiving subsidized rural credit.

The majority of the forty-nine Farming and Cattle-Raising Cooperatives—inspired by a type of Cuban cooperative—were founded as a form of political resistance, and, at the same time, as an attempt to overcome economic individualism. They were a consequence of two linked (although contradictory) factors: the strong economic, political, ideological, and police repression unleashed against the MST during the Collor de Mello administration (1990–1992), a period in which the MST suffered the strongest political and police persecution, and which demanded defensive retreats in the struggle for land<sup>18</sup> in order to avoid becoming extinct. One of the refuges created was the CPA. The other factor was the necessity to politically confront, through a more complex form of social organization of production, the oligopolistic and oligopsonistic situation of the markets in farming and cattle-raising inputs and products. This situation, imposed on the population by the Collor government, aimed at a complete liberalization of the markets through the elimination of mechanisms like federal government acquisitions and regulatory stocks. The CPAs and, afterwards, the CPSs, were responses to concrete situations experienced by landless rural workers in the settlements.

However, if, from the time of the Collor government and the growth of repressive practices *vis-à-vis* popular movements and organizations, the MST had to search for defensive forms, such as the CPAs, in order to avoid becoming extinct, there was also a reawakening of social energies within the MST itself, which were channeled into diverse offensive activities, among which can be counted the marches.

Between 1989 and 1994, the slogan was “occupy, resist, and produce.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in 1990 and 1991, the actions were concentrated on resistance. The march arose as an initiative to escape the tendency towards isolation induced by the defensive actions of the MST itself, as well as by government campaigns in the mass media. Their objective was “to show society that a social problem could only be solved with the adoption of political measures” (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 151).

The marches became not only political but also educational acts. When the marchers passed through the cities, they looked for the local leaders of the people, called meetings in the schools or neighborhoods, and offered food from the settlements. On days when the marchers stayed to camp near small towns, they, and their lively political actions, drew all the attention.

The marches’ political and pedagogic action made it apparent that a mass social movement could achieve a mobilization of huge proportions and sustain it over time without depending on government, party or union organs

(Martins, 2001). The great march<sup>20</sup> to Brasília, the National March for Agrarian Reform, Employment, and Justice—which took place from February 17 to April 17, 1997<sup>21</sup> during yet another massive attempt by the federal government to isolate the MST from public opinion and from access to the people—reaffirmed the understanding that only mass actions would be able to prevent the political isolation of social movements.

There was a lesson learned in this period: it is possible to maintain offensive tactics even when situations characterized by resistance are being experienced. But for this to occur, it becomes necessary to be together with the people, and to share with them the collective struggle for social emancipation and the reaffirmation of their social identity. In spite of the economic difficulties faced by the landless rural workers, their social identity is always socially re-nourished through the practice of the values and mystique that are found in all MST activities.

The values or virtues (“this force that acts, or that can act [...] an acquired disposition for doing good” [Comté-Sponville, 1995: 7–9]) desired for each MST militant are explicitly assumed without prejudice and without becoming precepts. Seven values are emphasized: solidarity, beauty, valorization of life, the love for symbols, the love of being the people, the defense of work and of study, and the capacity to become indignant (Bogo, 1998: 6 ff.).

In the homes and schools of the settlements, in the training courses, meetings, and conferences, at the front during the occupations, in the encampments, in public acts, in other words, wherever the MST militants are, they are expected to practice the values they hold and share with their comrades. The campaigns to beautify the settlements, when the notion of beauty is debated and reflected on in daily life, is an intimate secret that many of the sectors that are supposed to be on the center-left fail to highlight, especially when considering mass movements. From the occupation of lands by thousands of families—where tension and alertness awaken defensive and survival instincts—to the flower that blooms in the open squares of the settlements, there are many social planes experienced by the landless people that bring them continual personal and social emancipation within the context of a humanization full of meanings and ideals.

In this movement of redemption and reaffirmation of values, the MST mystique becomes a part of life, while at the same time being a form of collective demonstration of feeling. The symbols of this mystique are drawn from diverse sources, such as the contemplative nature of peasant life, the culture of popular music, and religious devotion (Bogo, 2001: 2). Among the various symbols there is the flag, the hymn, the newspaper of the landless, tools, the fruits of tillage, and the cap. The constant memory of dead companions causes their example to be reborn more forcefully in the feelings of each of the landless. Losses like these are felt not only in the bosom of a single family, but by the whole of the MST.



People have learned that, in the movement for the continual social emancipation of the landless rural workers, even though courses for the training of militants are necessary,<sup>22</sup> they are not sufficient. All training collectives have to take into account ten lessons learned in the practice of social struggle: militancy is created through practice, through experience, through science, through culture, through discipline, through example, through sharing and living together, through a spirit of sacrifice, through productive work, and through criticism and self-criticism. Courses and these ten lessons, as well as the personal virtues and qualities of each militant that need to be cultivated, are part of a broad process that is simultaneously an experience of training, learning, and transforming the world.

In all the courses, meetings, and conferences, the mystique recalls the people's fighters who are examples in the history of struggles for liberation and social emancipation. Huge panels showing the faces of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Olga Benario, Mao Tse-Tung, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Zumbi dos Palmares, Carlos Marighela, Paulo Freire, Florestan Fernandes, José Gomes da Silva, and, recently, Milton Santos, among so many others, respond with examples of their lives. Rites like these, sometimes interpreted as worship of the past and anachronism, are valued so that past utopias can be reconstructed and connected to those that are being constructed in the present and those that are to flourish in the future.

The dynamics of the MST is a reflection of its historical practice. Its values and mystique are stressed and reinforced through education in the settlements and the encampments. In the settlements, in July of 2000, there were 1,800 schools of elementary education (grades 1–8) with 3,800 educators and 150 thousand students; there were 1,200 teachers for 25,000 young and adult students; 250 "cirandas" (the name given by the MST to daycare centers), and twenty-five landless rural workers studying medicine in Cuba, as well as dozens of others in higher education in Brazil. The MST's education sector maintains six training courses for educators and technicians, three schools specializing in cooperative management and organization of production, and one adult education program. The MST has established protocols and agreements with twenty-five universities, both public and private, for the realization of different types of courses.

In 1997, with the trajectory of formal education as a reference, the MST began organizing several meetings and national conferences on education. The First National Meeting of Educators of Agrarian Reform (ENERA), held in July of 1997 at the University of Brasília with the support of the university itself, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), had about 700 people in attendance, among them teachers from the settlements and encampments, teachers specializing in youth and adult literacy, and preschool teachers. There were also delegations from nineteen states and from the Federal District (Caldart, 2000: 175).

The activities of the MST are open to the whole of Brazilian society and to foreigners who visit and collaborate with its sectoral collectives. The movement is permeable to different ways of thinking and acting. In order to disseminate its ideas, and also to find ways for continuously constructing a project identity among the popular classes, it uses a variety of means, including the mass media.

Since 1987, the MST has maintained radio programming at the national level, with weekly spots. Because of the importance of radio in the process of rural communication, the MST has acquired time on several private or religious stations in various states of the country, and has given impetus to the creation of community radio stations. Since the year 2000, it has been producing the radio program "Voices of the Earth," which is distributed monthly to all of the MST stations, as well as to Catholic, university, and some commercial stations. Around 2,000 stations receive this program.

In addition to this, at the same time that it has been broadening its radio programming base, it has been developing actions through other means of communication, the majority of them originating within the MST itself. Among these are the following: the *Newspaper of the Landless* (JST—*Jornal Sem Terra*); the *Magazine of the Landless* (RST—*Revista Sem Terra*); posters; exhibits; lectures; song and dance contests; craft and photography exhibits; fairs; poetry, music and song contests; the production and exhibition of films; meetings; and the sale of Landless and Agrarian Reform brand products. It has also developed its internal communications, as well as communication with other organs of national and international civil society through computer networks and Internet navigation. Through this network, there has been an MST site for the last five years.

The mass social movement known as the MST is shaped by this objective and subjective complex of settlements, encampments, decision-making bodies, mass fronts, sectoral collectives, schools, clinics, means of communication, training of militants, values, mystique, symbols, and people who are motivated and mobilized.

This movement has been constructing a social identity of resistance with segments of the subaltern classes from the countryside for sixteen years. It has joined in solidarity with other social movements and organizations, with parties, unions, churches, and personalities, in order to help build a project identity among the subaltern classes from the city and the country. It has shared the utopia of being able to transform the Brazilian social structure through mass action. Why did the MST consolidate itself as a mass social movement? Above all, because it made conquests and achieved practical results on all fronts of its struggle. Its militants, sympathizers, and the whole of Brazilian society can see and verify the victories achieved.

## SEARCHING FOR OTHER WAYS

I believe that some studies on the MST<sup>23</sup> could follow a path that seeks to understand this mass movement from a holistic point of view, in which synchronic and diachronic dimensions are systematically interrelated through certain possible periodizations, though always taking into consideration the totality of Brazilian society in an effort to keep the economy, politics, and ideology from becoming dissociated in the analysis.

I think<sup>24</sup> that attempting to understand the forms of cooperation in the settlements without taking into account changes in public policy with respect to agriculture and, especially, agrarian reform can hardly contribute to the revelation of the intimate secrets of the MST; that to study the pedagogy of the sectoral collective on education without duly articulating it with the conservative models of teaching and learning imposed by the government in the primary public schools can hardly contribute to the revelation of the intimate secrets of the MST; that to interpret the occupation of rural lands and public buildings without drawing on the extensive processes of negotiation between the MST collectives and the governmental authorities that preceded these direct actions can hardly contribute to the revelation of the intimate secrets of the MST; that to attempt to characterize the forms of social participation within a mass movement like the MST without considering that the complex development of contemporary Brazilian civil society took place under the hegemony of conservative liberal ideas, reproduced as much by the churches as by the schools and by the mass media, can hardly contribute to the revelation of the intimate secrets of the MST; that to overlook the fact that the social micro-conquests occurred in the spaces controlled by the dominant classes can hardly contribute to the revelation of the intimate secrets of the MST; and, finally, that to ignore or omit the widespread process of co-opting important sections of the Brazilian intelligentsia can hardly contribute to the revelation of the intimate secrets of the MST.

In order to understand the differentiated character of this mass social movement, I would suppose<sup>25</sup> that the MST, even without being conscious of it, has moved beyond subject-centered reason (Kant), which privileges the solitary ego, towards communicative reason (Habermas), in a consensual agreement achieved through communicative interaction between equals (see Kumar, 1997: 191).<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, the MST, understood as a mass social movement, did not gradually become a social organization of the masses, but, rather, acquired a character similar to a network society, much like the dominant society, which has been transformed by, or adapted to, globalization. I would suggest, like Castells (1997: 362), that

the second and main agency detected in our journey across the lands inhabited by social movements, is a networking, decentered form of organization

and intervention, characteristic of the new social movements, mirroring, and counteracting, the networking logic of domination in the informational society [...]. These networks do more than organizing activity and sharing information. They are the actual producers, and distributors, of cultural codes. Not only over the Net, but in their multiple forms of exchange and interaction.

The central question to be stressed in the understanding of the trajectory and character of the MST lies less in reason than in the movement of continuous social emancipation against domination, and this explains the questions raised by the search for universal self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization.

## IN VIEW OF THIS ...

I am tempted to suggest that the MST not only carries within its own movement the methodological exigency to rethink the nature and character of mass social movements, but that it also causes new elements of inquiry into the relation between mass social movements and mass social organizations to emerge. I propose as a hypothesis that the MST has more characteristics of a type of network society than of a mass social organization. And everything leads us to believe that it questions, involuntarily, as a social practice, the deterministic univocal relation of social movement to social organization.

This kind of network society leads to, in a certain way and with great flexibility, the emergence of a mass of people who are bearers of utopia without always being completely conscious of it, often full of incongruence but with a humanizing energy that confronts, breaks through, and places before the society into which it is inserted propositions, ideas, and aspirations that go beyond those that shape the singleness of neoliberal and, within it, social-democratic thinking. They are not afraid of defending, whether timidly or without complete knowledge of more erudite concepts, the values of socialism.

The rediscovery of new cultural codes for the construction of the social identity of the landless moves through the flow of information and of symbols, which open communication with other subaltern classes in Brazil and other Latin American countries.

In this sense, socialism and the values that it intrinsically presupposes no longer frighten or demobilize broad sections of the subaltern classes in the countryside, today socially identified as the landless.

## Notes

- 1 The three previous meetings were held in, respectively, Spain, Germany, and Belgium.

- 2 The expression "intimate secrets" was used originally by Alencar (2000: 24): "First, I was inspired by Marx, when this philosopher warned that, in order to study a society, we had to search within it for the intimate secrets of the social aspects of production, the social relations of production, as well as who has power, and how and why they keep it. Second, I acknowledge that these two words, secrets and intimate, sound redundant: secret means secrecy, confession, and therefore something intimate and personal. And intimate is what goes on inside a person, it is personal and private."
- 3 This relation between the personal and the social is fundamental for me. Its study, not pertinent to this text or analytical context, should be centered on the dialectic process between the singular and the general, between the individual and society, and between the psychological and the social.
- 4 I should stress that the MST was established during a political moment in which popular mass action was tolerated by the government (1984), but this tolerance ended by 1990 with the election of the Collor government, at which point repressive actions against popular movements and organizations were re-initiated. Since then, this repressive behavior on the part of the dominant classes through their governments has been expanded in various ways by the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (in two different periods). At present, a broad process of economic, political, and ideological suffocation of the popular social movements and organizations in the countryside is unfolding, with the support of the multilateral financial agency the World Bank.
- 5 I am referring to the Catholic and Lutheran Church sectors that, after the Second Vatican Council, postulated a pastoral practice that was called liberation theology.
- 6 Rural workers unions in Brazil have been historically committed, with different degrees of intensity, to the struggle for land and for agrarian reform, in spite of the successive attempts made by the dominant classes to co-opt them, particularly at the municipal level (rural unions are based in municipalities).
- 7 At the time, other alternatives emerged: to establish a committee of the landless within the CPT, and, from another angle, to municipalize the struggle for land and make it subordinate to rural workers unions, which are all based in municipalities.
- 8 Both the meeting that took place in Cascavel (January 1984) and the one in Goiânia (September 1982) were called, because of various circumstances, the 1st National Meeting of the Landless Rural Workers.
- 9 I avoid citing the names of personalities.
- 10 Since then, nine other national meetings and four national congresses have been held.
- 11 Decentralized in the twenty-three federal states and in the Federal District where the MST exists, as well as in the regions within each state down to the most elementary level of the settlements.
- 12 The Federal Constitution of 1988 did not include the expression "latifundium," but it maintained the requirement that private property on rural land had to fulfill a social function. If this constitutional requirement was not fulfilled, private property could be expropriated for the purposes of agrarian reform.
- 13 The decision-making dynamics of the MST present differences in terms of periods, agendas, and the types of participants in meetings and congresses.
- 14 A process that I have called constrained participation and organization (Carvalho, 1994).
- 15 Other collectives have been established, such as a collective on the environment and another on the drought in the northwest of Brazil, among others.
- 16 "Resistance identity: generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society" (Castells, 1997: 8).
- 17 The MST believes that the objective of its social struggle is to tear down three symbolic barriers: that of the latifundium, that of ignorance, and that of capital.
- 18 In the struggle for land, there were two large occupation offensives in 1986 and 1996. Both were responses to governmental ineptitude in the application of agrarian reform and to the Federal Government's attempt to co-opt sectors of the center-left.
- 19 This slogan was altered to "agrarian reform, everyone's struggle" in 1995 (Third National MST Conference) and "Agrarian Reform for a Brazil Without Latifundia," in 2000.
- 20 The landless rural workers started from three states: São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Mato Grosso. There were 1,330 people. They walked for about 1,000 km to Brasília, where they were received on 17 April 1997, by 100,000 people.
- 21 On 17 April, the International Peasant Struggle Day is commemorated. This day was instituted by Via Campesina, a world organization that articulates peasant organizations and movements, in homage to the massacre of nineteen landless rural workers, assassinated by the military police of the government of the state of Pará, in Eldorado dos Carajás (PA), on 17 April 1996.
- 22 Since 1999, the MST, through a protocol established with the State University of Campinas—UNICAMP, has annually been holding huge

courses that last for ten days for young militants. During this period (1999–2001), approximately 4,000 young militants have participated. This practice of intensive training has spread to other Brazilian universities.

23 We should mention that a mass social movement of the landless was formed in Bolivia during the First National Meeting of Bolivian Landless Peasants, held on June 9 and 10, 2001, in Yacuiba, Gran Chaco (América Latina en Movimiento, 2001: 17).

24 This is a task for social science researchers and historians.

25 I ask for the philosophers' tolerance.

26 I do not intend to use Kumar's ideas in a reductionist or mechanical manner. I cite the passage above only as a reference for reflection. I am entirely responsible for the assertion, as well as for its contextualization.

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