

# The Brazilian Landless Movement (MST): critical times<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes core aspects that marked the history of the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST), in recent years. It tries to demonstrate that nowadays the organization is experiencing mounting impasses, in part because of urbanization and its impacts on social perceptions about the trajectory of land reform in Brazil. Typical problematic aspects of the Movement are checklisted and briefly discussed, from organizational choices to the MST's controversial repertoire of struggles implemented to enhance its political clout. The text also refers to challenges recently observed, which threatens the very existence of the organization in the near future.

**Keywords:** Landless Movement in Brazil; MST; land reform; political challenges experienced by the MST

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## INTRODUCTION

Trapped in a series of controversial actions, ranging from the destruction of thousands of orange trees in an invaded commercial farm to shocking news about illegal deforestation in rural settlements, and under the threat of a Congress investigation, not mentioning endless additional actions, many of them carried out under no apparent or reasonable political rationale, the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) is currently facing a challenging juncture in its trajectory.

Those cited actions occurred in the state of São Paulo and are highlighted here as recent illustrations (October 2009) out of a long list of erratic initiatives by the MST over the last ten years. The first mentioned invasion was carried out in a farm of Cutrale, one of the biggest Brazilian exporters of orange juice. Inside the farm, the militants destroyed approximately 7,000 trees of oranges. Using a helicopter, the state police filmed it. Showed later on Brazilian television networks it

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<sup>1</sup> A short synthesis of this article was originally published in *Folha de São Paulo*, 5 December 2009.

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I wish to express my sincere thanks to Jonathan Fox, Aaron Schneider and Mário Riedl for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. Usual disclaimers apply.

produced an enormous wave of criticism. The MST alleged that the farm had been illegally appropriated by Cutrale in the past, but this claim was completely overshadowed by the absurd destruction of that cultivated area<sup>3</sup>. The second case is more emblematic of MST's zigzagging strategy in recent years and refers to an area devastated in one rural settlement where a load equivalent to ten thousand trucks of *Pinus* was sold but a substantial part of the money vanished<sup>4</sup>. Environmental malpractices are nowadays rife in rural settlements, from Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, in the South, to the Northern states, where rural settlements multiplied after the national program of land reform took off in 1995. Settlements in the Northern region have substantially contributed to the high level of deforestation in that part of the Amazon basin. In recent years, the main government goal has been to concentrate its search for new areas for redistribution in that region because of low land prices and the availability of public land. Out of all land collected for land reform in the period 1995-2008, 27% of the total was allocated in only two northern states (Pará and Maranhão). Although not being the single cause, this concentration of settlements has been one of the main causes for deforestation, according to one specialist in the region:

(...) many of the migrants [from other states] seeking land have become 'sem terras' [landless], or members of organized groups such as the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST). Migration from Maranhão has completely transformed the central portion of the state of Pará, centered on [the town of] Marabá. This entire area is now degraded, including every fragment of forest left in the deforested landscape (Fearnside, 2008, p.24).

Another report, published in 2006 by an influential environmental NGO, calls attention to the same problem but is still more emphatic about the impacts of rural settlements installed in the region as a consequence of the national program:

'(...) Since the late 1970s, landless and urban poor have pressured the government for lands (...) The average growth of families in the Legal Amazon participating in agrarian reform projects was 52,500 families per year between 1994 (161,500 families) and 2002 (528,571 families). Each family has user rights to holdings between 50 and 100 ha. The federal government also provides subsidies to agrarian reform settlers in the form of food allowances, money for housing and credit at reduced interest rates. Combined with the adjudication of legal rights, this makes agrarian reform settlers more prone to deforest than small scale settlers elsewhere. Timber sales also make the initial occupation of such projects attractive for landless people. *However, after the depletion of timber resources, household income tends to be relatively low. Thus, many families abandon or illegally sell their lots to seek new settlement areas or migrate to urban centers. An estimated 50-60 percent of land in agrarian reform plots in southern Pará has been illegally sold.* Some of this land becomes consolidated in larger land holdings, which tend to be

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u634605.shtml> [Accessed in 20 October 2009].

<sup>4</sup> *O Estado de São Paulo*, 4 November 2009.

more economically efficient and profitable (Barreto *et al*, 2006, pp.29-31, emphasis added).

These trends and facts ignited a series of reactions. In the Brazilian National Congress there is a strong multi-partisan group of MPs who have rural businesses and act as a coherent lobby (so-called '*bancada ruralista*') whenever threats against their interests come up in the form of government policies, proposed laws and so on. They are said to be an estimate 20% of the total number of MPs and function as a single body when their interests might be affected. In 2007, as an illustration, the group was able to mobilize enough votes in the Congress to defeat a constitutional amendment (PEC 438/2001). That proposal stipulated that any rural property using slave labor would be outrightly expropriated and transferred to the national land reform program. Under the lobby of the '*bancada*', however, MPs turned down this amendment by a large majority.<sup>5</sup> From time to time they try to enforce a legal mechanism called 'Legislative Commission of Investigation' (CPI), which has some power to investigate problems or facts of any sort. The Cutrale incident gave them convincing arguments to formally constitute this legislative initiative in order to shed lights on the internal function of the Movement. One of these investigations was approved in December 2009 and was supposed to work in the following six months.

This scenario perhaps suggests an appropriate timing to offer a succinct balance about the Movement, a quarter of century after its foundation. Since I have been studying the organization even before the meeting that established it in January 1984, I list below arguments and empirical evidence about key subjects, *qua* theses, for those who may have interest in rural social processes in Brazil and, in particular, for those who are curious about the main facets surrounding the history of the Movement. Its roots, in fact, go back to land conflicts in Rio Grande do Sul in the late 1970s (Medeiros, 1989). Only to clarify, from a legal point of view the MST does not exist, for it is not registered in any state domain, like other associations, trade unions, cooperatives or other organizations of civil society. This was a decision taken by its leaders from the beginning and is still its condition to date. In order to enjoy access to public funds and receive international donations, the Movement created several satellite organizations that are legally registered.<sup>6</sup>

The organization was (and has been) easily romanticized in most of the literature. In particular, in texts published outside Brazil apologetic readings about the MST abound.<sup>7</sup> Even rigorous researchers are sometimes taken in by the MST

<sup>5</sup> Folha de São Paulo, 21 October 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Only to illustrate, from 2003 to the end of 2008, it was discovered that 43 NGOs linked to the MST received nearly US\$ 90 million from the federal government (*Folha de São Paulo*, 29 March 2009).

<sup>7</sup> In my view the most accurate account of the MST in English is the book by Branford and Rocha (2002). On the other extreme, reflecting poor and highly ideologized analysis, examples are abundant either in Brazil or abroad. Paradigmatic illustrations by foreign authors are Harnecker (2002); Veltmeyer and Petras (2002), not to list several rosy comments in *New Left Review*, still assuming, two decades after its internal restructuring, that the MST is a social movement (to exemplify this point, check the uncritical interview with the leader of the Movement, published in number 15, May-June 2002, p. 76-104).

propaganda. Wolford, for example, cites that “the movement has organized over 230,000 land occupations and overseen the creation of approximately 1,200 agrarian reform settlements (...) Partially as a result of these successes, MST’s membership has increased from several hundred in 1984 to over one million today” (Wolford, 2003, 500-501). These figures taken from the literature divulged by the Movement are obvious numerical fantasies, in particular the fantastic number about its constituency. The MST is not a membership-based organization and does not list its rank-and-file. Ondetti also argues that “The landless movement had become arguably the largest rural movement in Brazilian history and one of the most influential social movements in Brazilian history, rural or urban” (2006, 61). An overexaggeration, it must be clarified that the largest organization of ‘the rural poor’ in Brazil is (by far) the rural trade union movement of small farmers and petty producers. As early as 1963, for example, the regional trade unions in the states of Paraíba and Pernambuco were able to recruit approximately 100,000 workers in the then dominant sugar cane agricultural regions, thus promoting the biggest rural strike ever in Brazilian history (Martins, 1981; Medeiros, 1989).

In face of so much confusing evidence and the cant of speculative writing about the MST, it may be useful to present a more down to earth checklist of core aspects that describe the Movement and speak more crudely about its political realities and recent developments, apart from suggesting possible outcomes in the near future. It must be noted that some parts of this article are not supported either by published results of research or known empirical facts thus recurring in passing to “arguments of authority”. Whereas this mode of explanation is surely not appropriate in any rigorous scientific endeavor or in academic publications, in this particular case this is unavoidable. This occasional lack of proofs of evidence reflects, in fact, a political strategy by the Landless Movement, which has been quite successful in all phases of its history to control academic research in their (many) sites of action or influence. Limitations to autonomous research in rural settlements or social gatherings and events sponsored by the Movement are notorious and most independent social scientists who study agrarian issues in Brazil have incidents to describe (for a recent illustration, check Deslandes, 2009). Even more crucially, the organization has been highly effective in developing unconditional political alliances with a good number of university researchers, in Brazil and elsewhere, with the practical effect that the latter ones uncritically accept official interpretations divulged by the Movement, reproduced in countless articles and documents, frequently with no factual support. Most of the literature about land struggles and the MST in Brazil, as a result, is apologetic and too distant from social realities.<sup>8</sup> In this article, as emphasized above, I have counted upon my

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<sup>8</sup> As an example, there are dozens of dissertations and PhD thesis by Brazilians that attempt to analyse social processes in rural settlements controlled by the MST. The vast majority, however, are relevant only when describing empirical contexts in different parts of the country but most authors seems incapable of independent analysis centred on a safe distance from their object of study. I am not suggesting the possibility of neutrality here, but an analytical effort to evaluate social processes without the ideological blinkers imposed *ex-ante* by the MST. Anyone familiar with political processes in Brazil is surprised with the swift conformity adopted by researchers (most of urban extraction and unaware of the multifaceted aspects of rural social life and agricultural production)

empirical experience of more than thirty years with the Movement, mainly in the Brazilian South, but also with a series of research experiences in other parts of the country.<sup>9</sup>

It must be also emphasized, as a relevant clarification in these prolegomena that the article appears to be normative in some of its parts. Although this should be avoided as a general principle in academic research, this is inescapable in this specific case. The Landless Movement is one of the most active political organizations in Brazil and, as such, it commonly disseminates political proposals and directives on various aspects of social life. As a political organization but also as a result of its authoritarian internal structure, by definition *all* arguments by the Movement are normative. It is a challenge, as a result, to discuss its social and political trajectory without recurrence to only alternative non-normative faces of those tenets espoused by the organization. Especially when discussing political facets of controversial or difficult empirical verification, this aspect of the article appears inevitable.

This article proposes sixteen theses that either directly focus on the Movement or a related theme that closely reverberate on the organization, the last thesis being a speculation about the immediate future of the MST that is analyzed in the conclusion. Those propositions are contained in three sections which are roughly separated also in a chronological sequence. The first part highlights some key aspects in the history of the Movement, including a brief comment about the most dense and influential moment in its activity, the 'march towards Brasília' in April, 1997. The second section lists changes produced as a result of the MST's proactive role in Brazilian politics in the last ten to fifteen years. In particular, its remarkable operational capacity to build a public image that is far greater than its real dimension. Finally, the third part puts into prominence the problematic course pursued by the organization in the last decade. In fact, events in the period have perhaps demonstrated the fatal combination of two processes: on the one hand, the impact of 'triumphalism', after the successes obtained in the late 1990s and the ensuing lack of an appropriated political vision for the following period and, on the other hand, the impact of urbanization and the diminishing social scope for land reform in Brazil.

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when dealing with the militants of the organization and their uncritical subordination to the "official discourse".

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps I am the only Brazilian social scientist who has ever had the privilege of keeping an office in the MST headquarters. It happened over the 1980s, in the city of Porto Alegre, where the Movement was firstly established, before moving late in that decade to São Paulo. During those years I acted as the regional coordinator of the Brazilian Association for Land Reform (ABRA, in its Portuguese acronym). I proposed to organize a centre of documentation about rural issues with my university students, all volunteers attracted by the then epic political effort by the landless activists and thus enjoyed a close relation with its leaders, discussions, materials, internal disputes, debates about strategies, and so on. I also established many friendships inside the Movement and in the newly formed settlements, a range of personal relations and contacts that I still have the honour to maintain to date. Later on, in the following decade, the organization never allowed again such a free movement inside its spaces of control and gradually established rigid control on all research initiatives.

## The Landless Movement: historical features

*About its nature:* despite the official name, the MST was not a proper social movement for a long time. It soon structured itself as a formal organization after 1984, highly centralized when it concerns the most crucial aspects (such as the route of political struggle or the choices of banners and adversaries), but somewhat decentralized when secondary aspects are at stake, thus freeing the creativity that stimulates local actions. This turn towards a formal structure occurred in the second semester of 1986 and is easily proved: one must only compare the issues of the MST newspaper (*'Jornal dos Sem Terra'*) before and after that period. In December of that year, the leadership purged the then journalists employed by the Movement and hired new ones who from then on transformed the publication into a typical instrument of political propaganda rigidly loyal to the ideological premises of its national leadership. From a plural publication when discussing rural social processes, it rapidly evolved into a one-line newspaper typical of Stalinist-style organizations. On that same occasion, the leadership changed hands, from a dominant rule by Catholic mediators to the landless leaders themselves, who had been nurtured in the precedent years (Navarro, 2002).

This *quasi*-controlled decentralization explains why some local actions sometimes are baffling, either for their audacity or their apparent political nonsense. There are, for example, frequent invasions of toll stations on privatized roads in the Southern state of Paraná, where the current state governor supports a tacit alliance with the Movement and stimulates those actions. In some Northeastern states, on the other hand, the MST promotes regular looting of different goods carried by trucks in the main roads. In Pernambuco, also in that region, the Movement invaded and destroyed in 2006 a farm dedicated to ostrich-raising under the argument that this animal was alien to the Brazilian fauna. Especially in 2007, in Minas Gerais (centre of Brazil) and in Pará (in the North), militants have stormed trains of the biggest Brazilian private firm, Vale do Rio Doce, one of largest mining exporters in the world, demanding its privatization's reversal (privatization occurred in 1997). In Pará this blockade stopped the industrial production of iron ore pellets by Vale and caused an immense financial loss. To finish this action, the MST then produced a long list of demands, including the rise of a state tax. At the moment Vale is supposed to transfer 3% of its net revenues obtained in that industrial activity for the local state and the MST demanded it to be risen to 10%. Curiously enough, the state of Pará is currently governed by the Workers Party and the local governor has systematically ignored legal warrants to enforce the eviction of MST invaders in several rural properties.<sup>10</sup> Much more tragic, however, is the growing number of cases dealing with physical intimidation of settlers in areas under control of the Movement, not to mention a new face of violence shown by militants who are prepared to kill opponents.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gazeta Mercantil, 20 October 2007

<sup>11</sup> See, as an example, the case occurred in Pernambuco, where landless militants murdered four workers who were in charge of a farm they tried to invade. For a brief comment, check <http://jbonline.terra.com.br/nextra/2009/02/28/e280217645.asp> [Accessed in 15 August 2009].

Surveys have demonstrated that public opinion shows a clear disapproval of these actions but the MST seems to disdain it (to be discussed later). Perhaps the gross mistake of all was epitomised in the invasion in 2002 of the medium-sized farm of former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, amidst the presidential campaign of that year. There was a public uproar against this invasion and national leaders were forced to criticize their fellow regional leaders.

From a sociological point of view, social movements entail a flexible leadership and some degree of political spontaneity when implementing a repertoire of social struggles, but since the mid-1980s these are characteristics far from being intrinsic of the MST format. The obvious organizational model that inspired it was the Leninist-type political party. On the other hand, collective bodies structured as organizations, among other features, forcibly establish internal careers, and nowadays the Movement mobilizes a good number of militants who are not able to conduct other activities but social agitation.

It must be noted, however, that it is impossible to estimate the actual number of militants under the sway of the Movement. Even its national leaders have no idea about either how many militants (full-time or not) are registered in the MST payroll or are merely under its influence and organizational umbrella. The reason lies in the limitless forms of attachment to the organization, from those who are linked to the national existing structures (communication, education, propaganda, international relations and so on) to those who work in the states or, even more remotely, proselytize in rural areas and rural settlements on behalf of the Movement and receive a payment from different sources. Frequently, a full-time militant is employed by the government (at different levels in the country), and transfers part of the wages to the organization. There are many cooperatives or NGOs that do the same: they are legal and strive for funds in several public programs, if they are successful, large part goes to the MST. In particular after the mid-1990s, the MST was successful in finding opportunities inside the State and gradually became a 'para-state' organization increasingly dependent on public funds. It meant that selected militants colonized several state spaces in order to extract funds or make pressures to turn those spaces into favorable domains of political influence. Throughout the country that was by then the main strategy: to conquer whenever possible parts of the state in order to promote the organization. These links take several forms, from a humble teacher in a primary school in a remote rural settlement employed by the local municipality to more active militants nominated to run for political positions (city councilors, mayors, and members of parliament). Above all, especially after 2003, when President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva came into power, the MST made huge efforts to allocate as many militants as possible in different positions inside the federal state machine.<sup>12</sup>

*The life and times of the MST:* in practice, the organization was effectively born in the second half of the 1990s, when it forged its *entrée* into the national

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<sup>12</sup> I have commented on this strategy in a long interview published in *O Estado de São Paulo*, 29 April 2007.

agenda of rural issues, in particular land reform. Before that, it was active mainly in the South and relatively unknown in the rest of the country. Also in that occasion, it altered its main funding channels, which were by then covered by the generous purse of European churches. The MST gradually spotted the existing leaks, resources and opportunities within State agencies and programs. This change was particularly materialized after the start of the national program of land reform (in 1995) and the sympathetic openness shown by the Ministry of Agrarian Development (also from that year onwards), not to list other public sources, from which the Movement has increasingly been able to extract funds, via surrogate organizations. Fuelled by these favorable contexts, the MST escalated its actions over the last decade with unparalleled political vigor. Comparato studied the impact of those pressures in the coverage by the mainstream press and demonstrated the surge of news about the Movement in the mid-1990s, with a peak in 1997 (Comparato, 2001, 110). It must be noted that the national program was also launched because of much pressure exerted by the MST. The Ministry, however, under a different name, was an innovation by the first civil presidency after the end of the military regime (in 1985).<sup>13</sup> The MST still receives substantial funds from European donors, but national sources have eventually become the lion's share of its total budget.

Land invasions swelled in those years. From 398 cases in 1996, they jumped to 599 two years later, the highest number of invasions landless groups have ever promoted in Brazil. In the last decade, however, those figures were substantially reduced and in 2009 (January to 15 November) land invasions reached 231 cases – one third of them only in the state of São Paulo. It should be noted that with the years passing these figures about land invasions partially lost their actual meaning and relevance. The Movement detected a gradual reduction in repressive counter-measures taken by the State as a direct by-product of political democratization in the country. As a result, the organization gradually mobilized fewer militants and sympathizers when organizing the invasion of a given property. Figures about participants involved in each land invasion have usually been overestimated by the MST and are unreliable. Even so, anecdotal evidence suggests a clear tendency to mobilize fewer participants, if the second part of the 1990s is compared to the recent period.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The strongest and oldest political force fighting for land reform in Brazil has been the rural trade union organization. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, the MST entered the stage benefitted by a series of favourable events and became much more influential. On competing organizations, check Favareto (2006).

<sup>14</sup> Ondetti has proposed a rather different interpretation about the emergence of the MST into Brazilian politics in the mid-1990s. Relying on the literature about social movements, he argues that *'this study identifies a particular causal mechanism through which repression can trigger greater protest'* (2006, 62) and goes on to suggest that repressive measures against the MST in that decade, in fact, explains why the Movement was reinvigorated later on. In face of the political exuberance of Brazilian democratization in the same period, this analysis does not fit political events on that occasion. Especially in the second part of the 1990s, Brazilian democracy reached a especial moment and a vigorous debate developed on how to deepen new social and political practices in all fields of society. Actions to repress the MST did occur in some states and the massacres of Corumbiara and Eldorado dos Carajás are telling examples. But to establish a causal mechanism



*Missing a political opportunity:* the 'March towards Brasília' in April 1997 was the only event prepared by a popular organization that really embarrassed the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), who was then forced to open the doors of the presidential palace to the delegation of landless representatives headed by the founder of the Movement, João Pedro Stédile. That occasion might have been the finest hour to institutionalize and democratize the MST, then enjoying the apex of its influence and prestige. The march was the biggest public event ever organized by the Movement and is said to have been attended by approximately 100,000 protesters in the capital, Brasília. It was intended to denounce the morose investigations about the massacre of landless workers in the Amazon municipality of Eldorado dos Carajás, in 1996. Since then the MST has annually intensified actions in that month, later called 'Red April' by the press.<sup>15</sup>

The march could have produced far-reaching consequences, if the organization had decided to transform itself into a robust structure to champion the interests of the rural poorest in Brazil. Its leaders, however, insisted on its semi-clandestine status, a bizarre contrast with the rest of the Brazilian society which was then experiencing a vibrant process of democratization. Unsurprisingly, from then on the political dilemmas faced by the MST have multiplied, because this political antinomy could hardly prosper with the years.

There are some who dismiss the depth of recent Brazilian democratization and insist that this possible political decision by the MST might be a trap thrown in order to capture it into the conservative web of Brazilian politics. Whereas the so-called 'democratic order' in capitalist societies is a daunting challenge for radical political organizations (finely discussed, for example, in the writings of Gramsci and others), the argument here follows a different line. From those years onwards gradually developed a growing political inconsistency opposing on the one side reformist, left-leaned organizations and parties and radicalized sectors of Brazilian society, which were betting in a new Brazilian political spring that could boost social transformations the country. On the other side, only the Movement persisted in its semi-clandestine and non-democratic structure, but kept demanding 'democracy' for all political organizations when, at the same time, ignoring this political facet in its internal rationale. It is curious that sympathizers of the Movement still argue that there is here no political contradiction of any sort and insist that Brazilian democracy did not experience any change worth the name in recent times.<sup>16</sup>

*MST's political alliances within Brazilian society:* they flourished by the end of the last decade, but are drying in recent years. It appears that the Brazilian

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making repression as a trigger to enhance the Movement's political might is a false reading about that specific political juncture in Brazil.

<sup>15</sup> About the march, see Chaves (2000). For a recent account about the massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás, check Nepomuceno (2007).

<sup>16</sup> Literature about political democratization in Brazil is abundant, but the recent books by Leonardo Avritzer, one of the most reputed Brazilian political scientists suffice to demonstrate how far has been the scope of those social and political changes in the country (Avritzer, 2009, 2002).

society has become gradually tired of so much non-democratic turmoil by the Movement. Born in the politically promising field built over time by the Workers Party, where it is firmly rooted, even the party appears to be increasingly exhausted with an authoritarian organization that lost its reason of existence and seems to act at random, especially after becoming a weakened actor that does not command its specific agenda anymore. Nowadays the MST receives limited public approval: it is mainly supported by sectors of radicalized Catholics, some trade unions, small groups of researchers in public universities, some factions within the Left-leaned parties and, above all, by sectors of university students.

The most illuminating poll ever carried out about the opinion of Brazilians in relation to the MST and its actions was released by IBOPE in November 2009. IBOPE is the oldest and perhaps the most reputed polling company in Brazil and the statistical rationale of this survey appears to be reliable. If confirmed by additional surveys in the near future, its findings are devastating for the Movement. They interviewed 2,002 citizens in different parts of the country (16 years old and after) stratified according to different classes, levels of income, regions, ages, sex, marital status and levels of schooling (IBOPE, 2009).

It is notable that while the Brazilians strongly support land reform (90% answered that 'The MST must fight for land reform but without recurring to violence and land invasions'), they also clearly condemned the recourse to invasions by the organization (92% answered that land invasions were 'illegal'). It is also relevant to note that the insistence by the Movement over the years in making a political distinction of 'invasion' and 'occupation', arguing that the latter are morally justifiable in face of Brazilian history produced so far hardly any repercussion among Brazilians, for 89% considered those acts as 'invasions' and only 9% as 'land occupations'.<sup>17</sup> It is also relevant that while the sample approves the left-leaned mandate of President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva (80%), those interviewed show, however, the ingrained conservatism of Brazilian society, because the rates of approval that follow shows the Army (79%), the Catholic Church (74%) and the evangelical churches (69%), the police (63%) and so on. The MST has the approval of only 27% of those interviewed and a vast majority associates the Movement with negative images, such as invasions (69%) and violence (53%) and is 'incoherent with its discourse' (67%). Even more relevant, 60% of those interviewed think that the MST creates difficulties for the implementation of land reform in Brazil (32% think, on the contrary, that the organization helps its implementation) and, more broadly, with percentages in the range of 69% to 81% the interviewees asserted that the actions by the MST are harmful to different aspects, such as the political development of Brazil, employment, social development in the country, the economy, exports, foreign investments, and the image of Brazil abroad (IBOPE, 2009, *passim*).

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<sup>17</sup> As an ethnographic observation of political relevance, this nuanced difference in those two words has major political overtones for sociological research about the Movement. The use of 'invasion' (instead of 'occupation') by a given researcher in his/her writing results in an immediate political label attached to this person and compromise any further research in rural settlements or other spaces under the influence of the Movement. In reality, this is a puerile distinction in conceptual terms, but the MST eventually uses it to segment potential allies and independent researchers.

## Land struggles and the dynamics of Brazilian politics

*Public illusions (1):* the apparent size of the MST is by far larger than its real expression and this is one of its most instrumental tools to warrant public visibility. Taking creative advantage of allies and spaces within society (such as friendly trade unions, for example), it heightens facts and events of no major significance, thereby introducing itself as a larger-than-real political force. Foreigners commonly make confusion with this political parallax. Abroad one may read with some frequency the pompous but false phrase about the 'largest social movement in the world'. Not only does the MST appear bigger than its actual size, but it has, in fact, observed a reduction in its capacity of mobilization in recent years. If carefully analyzed, land occupations and other public actions have shrunk in their total over the years and in their size and number of participants. In the past, land invasions in most rural regions would usually require no less than 400-500 participants (so that immediate police repression would be improbable), whereas nowadays one finds successful invasions carried out with less than one hundred participants.

A good historical example is the case of Rio Grande do Sul, where the Movement 'tested' the humor of authorities in the years of 1983-84 and in October 1985 promoted the biggest land invasion ever in that state (approximately 6.5 thousand invaders), a numerical demonstration of the immense political challenges to enter private property in those years. More recently, however, the organization is not mobilizing more than a handful of militants to freely invade any private property in the state, with much constrained police repression and Justice measures taken to re-integrate the property to the owner. In spite of these more cautious comfortable political contexts, not only land occupations by the MST diminished substantially with the passing of the time but also the number of participants in each case, as noted earlier.

Moreover, if it were empirically viable to verify, one would conclude that the majority of these actions mobilize especially members of rural families already settled (that is, landholders), who are usually recruited under a broad spectrum of intimidation forms by MST militants. The word intimidation will surprise uninformed readers. Unfortunately this is a precise term to designate how the MST has forcibly mobilized a significant part of rural settlements families to participate in mass demonstrations and related actions. Nowadays the Movement has partial control of INCRA, the government agency in charge of implementing land reform in the country. In fact it is the MST that decides on who receives public funds in a vast number of settlements. This financial arm is too powerful and easily intimidates poor rural families in the settlements, apart from imposing their actual options in the sphere of political action.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Faced by the ample presence of MST militants in state positions, it is curious that the total land collected for land reform was substantially reduced during the two mandates of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. During the eight years of the previous president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, fiercely criticized by the MST under the shadow of the Workers Party, the annual average of land collected for land reform was 1,284,672 hectares, according to official data of INCRA (with a peak of 2,256,310 hectares expropriated and/or bought for land reform in 1998). Over the seven years

*Public illusions (2):* in recent years the proliferation of landless groups has been observed and new acronyms have invaded the pages of newspapers, thus implying an apparent exacerbation of 'the agrarian question'. Far from reality, these are minor and transient groups, formed only to either secure access to occasional government projects or resulting from the action of an opportunist local leader attracted by a promising context, both possibilities developed outside the MST umbrella and mirroring local particularities. This is the reason why one finds an array of abbreviations in some states, thus reflecting, in fact, creativity to take advantage of local opportunities. However, none of these small groups of landless workers has any chance of surviving the years. The reason is obvious: none of them has the solid government alliances and, most important, the historical support of sectors of the Catholic Church which the MST has enjoyed from its inception. This dual relation secures to the Movement a pool of money and followers, which are the essential ingredients of its political durability. Its presence within government circles assures permanent funds to match its financial needs and its historical association with the Church guarantees the ideological blessing of the most powerful institution that ever existed in the Brazilian history.<sup>19</sup>

*Public illusions (3):* is the MST a 'progressive organization'? *Prima facie*, no one would dispute that claim from various angles. It mobilizes the rural poor and fight for a policy historically cherished by progressive sectors in the country. Moreover, its political orientation is embedded in the Left jargon and its leaders are always repeating words and expressions typical of socialist traditions. I will not insist in discussing neither its choice of an authoritarian format that copied the most traumatic socialist experiences nor the lack of internal democracy that prevents any glimpse of transparency and accountability. Perhaps it is enough to note the following:

(a) Since its foundation the Movement insisted in boasting its goal of 'gender democracy' and its pledge to stimulate equal opportunities for women inside the organization. It is an unfortunate reality, however, that it is an unfulfilled promise to date. Women rarely gained positions in the decision-making structure and personal ethnographic observations have demonstrated that those who became regional leaders were forced to use a 'male language' in order to be heard. Even more serious, they had to abandon altogether any intention of discussing 'gender specificities' (see, for examples of gender discrimination inside the Movement, Rua and Abramovay, 2000, Deslandes, 2009). A revealing evidence of this patriarchal

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of Lula's two mandates, however, that average fell abruptly to 487,117 hectares (with a nadir of incredible 6,478 hectares collected for land reform in 2008). One wonders about the reasons: general incompetence by government agencies, a greater difficulty to collect land in face of higher land prices and/or lower number of properties that could be expropriated according to legal criteria, or, more crucially, a reduced social demand for access to land?

<sup>19</sup> According to NERA, the research unit that collects data on land struggles located at the Universidade Estadual de São Paulo, from 2000 to 2007, 89 landless 'movements' organized at least one land invasion in Brazil. The MST was by far the most active one and responded for the majority of those invasions (see *O Estado de São Paulo*, 17 May, 2009). Only in Pernambuco Rosa (2004) reported the existence of 14 of these small groups organizing land invasions in 2003.

dominance is the literature produced by the Movement, where references to 'typical topics' discussed in feminist circles or women's movements are hardly mentioned;

(b) In recent years, searching desperately for a new agenda, the MST launched attacks on GMOs and all 'conventional models of science', including scathing criticisms on the type of research programs pursued by public agencies of agricultural research.<sup>20</sup> However, these anti-science criticisms are rather puzzling when one observes that in *all* rural settlements under the influence of the organization where soybeans are cultivated, farmers rely on GMO seeds. It is impossible to categorically prove this assertion and it is made after several visits to settlements in various agricultural regions where GMOs could be used and also after confirmation by MST militants. Additional evidence lies the fact that in the 2009/2010 crop soybean GMOs in Brazil may have used to cover nearly 70% of the total area cultivated according to different estimates (*Folha de São Paulo*, 12 December 2009).

(c) It is a merit of the Movement to have developed from the beginning its 'Sector of Education', when one remembers how poor and neglected is this policy in Brazilian rural areas. For some years, the MST summoned militants and implemented a program destined to eradicate illiteracy in settlements under its control, an initiative that was widely applauded. But the Movement also structured those educational initiatives aiming at recruiting and training youth who would eventually become loyal militants. After external criticism on rigid indoctrination, the reaction of the Movement has been to insist in its 'victimization'. It fiercely positions itself against any external evaluation and even refuses the idea of unplanned visits to its schools formed in so many rural settlements.

Again, ignoring for the moment other critical aspects, one may ask if an organization that is so scornful of gender democracy, disputes the very idea of science and promotes political indoctrination of young settlers may still be called a progressive champion of the poor.

*Public illusions (4):* this is a thesis that may be succinctly presented. In short: there is no real coalition of popular organizations with agrarian interests in Brazil under Via Campesina. The idea of small organizations grouped under this collective is ludicrous and causes perplexity to anyone familiar with rural organizations in Brazil. Suggestions found in the literature about the MST's presumable capacity of attracting sister rural organizations do not correspond to political realities.<sup>21</sup> In summary, it is enough to say that Via Campesina in Brazil is the MST *tout court* and the other names cited as part of it refer to virtually non-existent groups or

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<sup>20</sup> The national agency for agricultural research (Embrapa) has often been criticised by the Movement as 'an agent of agribusiness', in spite of the fact that it is highly reckoned (both nationally and internationally) as one of the most successful government research agencies in Brazil.

<sup>21</sup> As an example, see the deplorable book by Desmarais (2007). Although it is also apologetic, the article by Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010) is more accurate when explaining the origins and development of this coalition.

merely satellites of the Landless Movement, in all cases with no social basis worth the name. Only to illustrate the so-called 'Movement of Small Farmers' (MPA), usually cited as an autonomous organization under the umbrella of Via Campesina, is merely the trade union arm of the MST. It was formed in the late 1990s under the inspiration of Father Sérgio Gorgên, one of the main leaders of the Movement in Rio Grande do Sul. It was noted the growing difficulty of mobilizing landless workers in that state (nowadays a negligible social category in that part of Brazil) and the MST then decided to organize the MPA as new political initiative to keep a reasonable influence in the state. Later on it was decided to form branches in other states. Again, this is another example of a political mechanism intended to spin out the idea of 'social support' when, in fact, it is much narrower in reality.

*The 'demonization' of the MST:* frequent denunciations about initiatives that are presumably destined to 'criminalize' the organization are foolish. It is certain that there are sectors of the agrarian bourgeoisie who would wish to liquidate the MST, as a reflection of their historical political truculence, but they are irrelevant in their social expression and geographically too dispersed to represent a real threat to the Movement.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, claims about criminalization sound illogical, in face of endless illicit acts by the MST. Is the model for Brazil a sort of democracy under which the legal predicaments are not contingent on some actors? Victimization is a known (and clever) tactic used by popular social movements or organizations to amass social solidarity and gain leverage *vis-à-vis* political opponents, but the MST has trivialized it to a point that hardly produces any reverberations in the Brazilian society in these days. As discussed earlier after the recent IBOPE survey, the vast majority of Brazilians is capable of discern the visible contradiction of an organization that demands democratic practices for all other political actors and holds democracy in scorn for itself.

*The power of propaganda:* inspired by the 'agit-prop' style typical of former Communist parties, the MST successfully colonized part of civil society in Brazil, whom it dominates and whose resources it uses in its favor. Since it is seen as an 'organization of the rural poor', only a minority within progressive sectors dares to contest its authoritarian political rationale, even if they are unhappy with practices that many times resemble proto-fascist forms of social behavior. Because there is a political capillarity linking the MST, the PT's political field and, more generically, 'the Left', just a few, fearful of political reprisals, confront those practices. Anyone familiar with Brazilian CSOs would probably agree that this is the easiest thesis to prove on empirical grounds.

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<sup>22</sup> On the historical burden of conservatism born out of the political domination by agrarian elites and their contribution to patterns of social behavior and existing institutions, the classic reference is the book by Raimundo Faoro, *Os donos do poder*, originally published in 1958. However, the sharpest analysis on this theme is to be found in Martins (1994).

### Political impasses in difficult times

*The main obstacle to reinvent itself:* the MST does not modify its organizational structure and political rationale because it was born and configured under the control and obsolete vision of its main leader. João Pedro Stédile is, in fact, the boss of the organization, using a more appropriate word. He came from the MR-8 in the late 1970s<sup>23</sup> and it is his orthodox (and rather fragile) Marxism that prevents the MST from being an effective political actor in the Brazilian political system. Under his leadership he fostered a clique that promotes his figure and is capable of bluntly repealing dissenting voices.<sup>24</sup> The Movement's discursive homogeneity is remarkable and such standardization was reached after the installation of its schools of political training, which were established to manufacture a single language for the organization. The first one was formed in the remote village of Braga (Rio Grande do Sul) in 1987. It was later transferred (and multiplied) to different places. These so-called educational sites are in fact spaces to train new militants. After graduation, they blindly repeat the same jargon throughout Brazil. In a country so heterogeneous in many aspects, this uniform and dogmatic reading about rural realities that are so distinct is another eccentricity of the MST, thus confirming its intention of strict control over its militants.

As a compelling illustration of Stédile's centrality, one may cite the second best known MST leader, José Rainha. He dared to confront the 'founding father' some years ago and was eventually exiled in the Pontal of Paranapanema (São Paulo) alongside his 'MST of the B'. Rainha emerged as a leader in the state of Espírito Santo, where struggles for land reform were never intense. He soon moved to lead the MST in the huge area of Pontal do Paranapanema, a western area in São Paulo bordering the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. It is an area that has the potential of settling approximately 20.000 families, if its legal mess were disentangled. Rainha is more pragmatic and does not share an anti-capitalist stance, but his political ambitions are notorious. After internal disagreements, the national leadership of the MST unauthorized any official relations with him but he has maintained the name and the iconography typical of the Movement – hence the ironic reference to his parallel organization. Over its history, the organization has encountered several dissidents in different regions, but they have been quickly expelled and it has never prospered a comrade-like internal discussion about strategies or its organizational rationale.

A related factor to be reckoned with is the role of academics and politicians who are associated with agrarian politics whose initiatives reinforce the MST's doctrines. Not emphasizing those who explicitly position themselves in the

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<sup>23</sup> MR-8 accounts for 'Revolutionary Movement 8 of October' in its Portuguese name. It used to be one of the most Stalinist left-wing groups in Brazil, and was never a major or influential group, but made some noise in the 1980s. Nowadays it is a minuscule group on the verge of extinction.

<sup>24</sup> A good example of this 'cult of personality' is to be found in the book *Brava Gente*, published in 1999 by the Workers Party publishing house, Fundação Perseu Abramo (the authors are João Pedro Stédile and Bernardo Mançano Fernandes).

extreme-left and are unconditional supporters of the MST,<sup>25</sup> most of the more influential political operators in the 'mainstream left' are also extremely cautious when the Movement is discussed and rarely voice public criticisms, though many times are harshly critical when talking behind the curtains. In the academic world usually prevails what the most reputed Brazilian specialist in agrarian issues, the sociologist José de Souza Martins, epitomizes as crude manifestations of 'militant Sociology': in practice, it is

the absolute negation of Sociology as a science. Sociologists following this orientation commonly use 'their Sociology' to impugn the knowledge that does not conform to the interests of his/her political party. Or to give the appearance of [academic] legitimacy to a form of knowledge that was produced without scientific rigor (Martins, in Bastos, 2006, 141).

In order to illustrate this point, maybe a paradigmatic example is the case of Horácio Martins Carvalho, who formerly was a university lecturer in one of the most prestigious Brazilian graduate programs in rural development and over the years has been a frequent consultant for government agencies and Brazilian branches of international organizations. For many years Carvalho has also been a sort of MST spokesman (see, for example, Carvalho, 2002) and his analytical output finds wide dissemination within the Movement. In a recent and still unpublished article, he proposes no less than a renewed search for 'an autonomous peasantry' capable of severing its ties with capitalist markets. If one remembers the deep process of commodification of social life in Brazilian rural areas in the recent period, transforming the country in one of the most decisive agricultural producers in the world, coupled with the process of urbanization that is emptying the countryside, those ideas appear unbelievable. Similar arguments echoing problematic, if not outdated, orthodox Marxist readings about agrarian development are still common among many Brazilian social scientists, thus demonstrating a preference for rhetoric instead of empirical research. In Carvalho's words,

(...) it is my suggestion that the peasantry, whereas permeated by several internal contradictions, when reaffirming itself as peasantry

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<sup>25</sup> Plínio de Arruda Sampaio is an emblematic name of the extreme-left in Brazil when discussing agrarian politics. An icon of the Catholic left, he was the Workers Party candidate in São Paulo in the early 1990s but later on moved to the extreme-left Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSol). He was also president of the Brazilian Association for Land Reform (ABRA) and has always been a sort of MST militant. In relation to the Cutrale invasion initially mentioned, he wrote that

there is a criticism to be made in relation to the occupation of the Cutrale farm. According to the firm, the occupiers destroyed 7,000 orange trees. They made a mistake: they should have destroyed 70,000 (and this would be hardly noted in a farm of one million orange trees), in order to call attention to the fact that the farm illegally occupies public land with the connivance of the Judiciary' (published in Folha de São Paulo, 5 December 2009).



negates capitalism, even when immersed in the latter – hence its ‘relative autonomy’. It is a negation made by praxis as it occurs in production (...) It will be vulnerable to capitalist offensives if this initiative is kept in isolation from the other social struggles by the popular classes (...) the construction of peasant autonomy in face of the dominant classes will be made not only in face of capital and the capitalist class, but also in face of bourgeoisie governments. Cooperation among the peasants themselves and with the other rural and urban popular classes will affirm the peasantry as a social class, an indispensable route to secure the peasant autonomy (Carvalho, 2009, *passim*).

*Social demand for land reform:* although I am one of the few voices to raise this argument, I reaffirm that there is no significant demand for land reform in Brazil anymore, so justifying a program of national ambition.<sup>26</sup> Here lies the fundamental thesis of this article: land reform is a state policy that reflects the mutable nature of social and political processes. Therefore, it cannot be *historically permanent* and gradually loses its appeal with the intensification of urbanization (although focusing on different arguments, see Bernstein, 2002, who also emphasizes ‘the passing of redistributive land reform’ in recent times). The PNAD of 2008 emphatically demonstrated that Brazil is approaching a spatial and occupational threshold with far-reaching economic and political consequences: in its entire history the largest employed population in Brazil had always been the agricultural labor force.<sup>27</sup> That annual data collection has shown, however, that commerce will overcome this historical mark of agriculture sometime this year. Out of a total workforce in the country of 92,395 million employees (2008), 16,100 million were employed in agricultural activities against 16,093 million in the commercial sector (industries employed 13,995 million individuals in the same year). In the 1950s Brazil reached a turning point when there was a majority of dwellers in towns and cities and rural areas were no longer the main place of living and now agriculture is not even the largest employer anymore. This is the direct result of a spectacular process of technological modernization in agricultural activities: for example, whereas production of grains more than doubled and experienced a steady rise in the period 1991/2009 (from 57,9 million of tones to 137,6 million of tones), the corresponding cultivated area observed only a slight change of 26% in that same period, increasing from 37,9 million hectares to 47,6 million hectares (according to official data).

The urgency of land reform is not correlated with the Gini index *per se* but to actual social demand. If the latter observes an increasing reduction in its political appeal with the time, its implementation becomes meaningless, whatever the magnitude of land concentration. The Gini index in Brazil is among one of the highest in the world (0,854 according to the latest official census) but this is a fact that will be part of our long-term rural realities, as soon as land reform becomes marginal in the political agenda. The future of Brazil will surely keep a land

<sup>26</sup> My arguments are further discussed in Navarro (2009).

<sup>27</sup> PNAD accounts for the ‘National Research of Household Sampling’ in its Portuguese acronym. It is an annual data collection under the auspices of the national body in charge of all censuses carried out in the country (IBGE).

structure marked by a strong presence of family-based agriculture fully integrated in capitalist markets (especially in the three southern states) alongside large-scale commercial agriculture (which is so dominant in the huge Center-West region). Perhaps regional projects to restructure land ownership might find some social intelligibility, such as in the Northeastern region, as an example, but nothing beyond that scope (Navarro 2001, Silva 2007).

Social demand for land reform has dramatically fallen in the last fifteen to twenty years but the meaning of 'social demand' accepts different connotations. Is it the 'potential demand' or the one that is politically manifested as 'real demand'? Martins (2000) called attention on this subject, emphasizing that social demand for land reform in Brazil is the one exclusively materialized by encampments organized by landless groups and other public actions in order to put pressure on authorities, so that claimers become visible in the political arena (that is, 'real demand'). This is a rare opinion, however, because most of those who have studied land reform are inclined to embrace potential demand only as its true manifestation. As it is obvious, there is an enormous quantitative difference if one takes into consideration one or another notion and usually advocates of land reform recur to the latter notion (Del Grossi and Gasques, 2000, Silva and Del Grossi, 2000). I understand, however, that the idea of potential demand is untenable in face of political realities in the country and undesirable from the perspective of distinct social interests under democratic regimes. Land reform is a policy that emerged (in the mid-1990s) as a result of democratization and much pressure by distinct social actors. It is only when such a demand becomes politicized, that is, expressed in actions and social struggles ('real demand') that it is materialized in social life and authorities must respond with policy proposals and projects. It does not make much sense to use potential demand for land reform if the presumable interested citizens in its implementation are hardly visible in political terms under democratic regimes (an argument that is only reasonable, it must be insisted, under this democratic premise, which will allow different social groups, including the most subordinate ones, to freely organize themselves and dispute their interests).

On the other hand, no one would be brave enough to raise economic reasons in order to defend land reform, echoing the typical arguments of the 1950s when this policy was emphasized as a condition to boost the internal market. Even social justifications became somewhat empty after the CCT-inspired program 'Bolsa Família' was instituted in 2004 under the presidency of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (2003-2010). It has been relatively successful in reducing poverty in the country (Barros, 2009). Moreover, 'Bolsa Família' is strongly contributing to reduce chances of mobilization by the MST. This negative correlation was first suggested by a journalist, Eduardo Scolese, who compared the distribution of 'Bolsa' and land occupations<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> His article was published in *Folha de São Paulo*, 16 April 2007. According to official data, the number of beneficiaries of 'Bolsa Família' jumped from 3,6 million families in 2003 to 12 million in 2009 and the total amount distributed by the government increased from R\$ 7,2 billion to R\$ 32,9 billion in the same period. As a result, according to one specialist, Marcelo Néri, from Fundação Getúlio Vargas, poverty in Brazil was cut in ten percentage points, from 27.5% in 2001 to 16.2% of the total population (in 2008). The same economist anticipates that by 2015, if this policy persists,

One of the most reputed Brazilian experts in rural statistics, Rodolfo Hoffman has added in a recent interview even more nuances about the diminishing importance of land redistribution as a measure to reduce social inequalities. Asked about the impact of this policy in these times, he argued that the levels of wages in the Brazilian countryside are too low, when compared to similar strata in urban areas. This fact, associated with the spatial distribution of the population in urban and rural households, makes a radical reform of the state welfare institutions much more relevant than land reform. In his own words,

The distribution of income of all occupations by employed individuals in Brazil has an average of R\$ 1,036 and a corresponding Gini index of 0.521. For those employed in the agricultural sector these figures are R\$ 615 and 0.531. It is realized, therefore, that inequality is relatively high in that sector. But it is incorrect to think that agricultural incomes have an important effect of increasing inequality in the country. The average payment in agriculture is relatively low and corresponds to 63% of the average payment in industry and 54% in the service sector. Those who are employed in agriculture represent only 11% of the total workforce and receive only 7% of the total income received by all employed individuals. Since the total payment of pensions and welfare benefits corresponds to the double of the total of payments of employees in agriculture, I may affirm that a reform in the welfare system has a greater potential in reducing inequality in income distribution than land reform (...) the total income of pensions and welfare benefits represented [in 2008] 18% of the total declared income in Brazil, whereas the income of those employed in agriculture corresponded to only 7%. This relation changed a lot in the last four decades and will go on changing. It does not mean that land reform should be discarded. It merely means to recognize that the relative importance of land reform is not the same of forty years ago.<sup>29</sup>

However, it will require much courage in government circles to restructure the existing government's rationale in this field because of the strong influence by the MST over the federal agency in charge of land reform. As a curiosity with long term implications it might be noted that the current head of INCRA was recruited by João Pedro Stédile in the early 1980s. With others they founded a small NGO that still exists in Porto Alegre (whose name is CAMP), which was the embryo of the Landless Movement, a revealing detail that illustrates how much enmeshed are these relations. If unchanged, the existing national policy will persist as an institutional surrealism that grossly wastes public funds and is moved only by inertia and social corporatism.

Looming is the dismaying productive performance and evasion of beneficiaries in most rural settlements established in the last fourteen years, when the national program of land reform finally entered the stage. To date, there is not

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only 8% of the Brazilians will be considered to be poor, a quarter of the total that existed in 1993 (see *Correio Braziliense*, 2 January 2010 and *O Estado de São Paulo*, 3 January 2010. Ravallion, on the other hand, comparing the efficacy of such policies in Brazil, India and China, has emphasized the relative success of Brazilian social policies (Ravallion, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Hoffman, Rodolfo. 2009. Desafio de uma geração. *O Globo*, 27 December 2009.

a credible national evaluation of rural settlements that could inform about an array of indicators, social and economic. In the recent period, only case studies commissioned by the Federal Government or occasional research by some university specialists threw some lights on specific settlements or group of settlements in different regions and, regrettably enough, many of these studies were too ideologically-oriented and had clear *ex-ante* conclusions about the overall performance of settlements, in particular those under the influence of the MST. On the other hand, the recent Agricultural Census launched in October 2009 did not offer more lights on this topic and, in fact, because of methodological faults, did not count approximately 800 thousand families (*sic*) in the rural settlements established for the national program of land reform.<sup>30</sup>

In relation to the settlements' productive results a single statistical comparison may be enough: in the period 1995-2008 approximately 80 million hectares were expropriated for land reform (this is an area that corresponds to 1,5 the size of France) and there are now an estimate 8,360 rural settlements occupied by a population of 920,861 thousand families (according to official statistics of INCRA). However, the productive output of these settlements is almost negligible in most of the country, a stark contrast *vis-à-vis* the exuberant output of commercial agriculture (family-based and large-scale taken together). The latter group of farmers cultivates almost the same area and transformed Brazil into one of the most important agricultural players in the world.

The best research on land evasions to date is the unpublished dissertation by Mello (2006). His findings demonstrate that evasion of beneficiaries in rural settlements shows an inverse correlation with social cohesion and nearly no significant relation with material conditions. This is a disastrous finding for the MST, because it recruits landless workers mainly on ideological grounds and/or loyalty to the organization. Social origins and former social networks are irrelevant criteria for the organization. As a result, it can be affirmed that the domination of the MST in rural settlements is, in fact, a factor that stimulates evasion of poor rural families in many regions.

But this is not all. One of the most intriguing studies about land reform in Brazil is the technical report written by Marques in 2007. He works for INCRA and his study compared the costs of implementing land access via two different mechanisms; the legal one, when a property is expropriated and until the new rural settlement is formed there is a long rite of legal steps, and the second one, which is land acquisition. His study demonstrated that the second route to collect land for redistribution is much faster and cheaper and soon became the favourite route taken by the Government. His study indicates that land reform in Brazil, in fact, *is not a process of transferring land rights* (which is the fundamental premise of land reform) but is merely becoming a state mechanism of land acquisition. However, if the costs he surveyed in his research are compared to those of several studies that demonstrated a third mechanism, which is 'negotiated land reform' (sometimes also called 'market-based land reform'), then the picture becomes even more

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<sup>30</sup> See Pedrosa, Maria Thereza Macedo. 2009. Podemos acreditar no Censo? (Unpublished article available in <http://www.assessoriaopt.org/agrario.htm>). For a description about rural settlements in Brazil, perhaps the best book is by Sparovek (2003), but see also Leite (2004).

problematic for advocates of land expropriation (Sparovek, 2009). This third mechanism, proposed by the World Bank some years ago, is by far the cheapest, thus making access to land via expropriation an irrational public policy. Because of political implications, however, Brazilian authorities are not prepared to reckon these differences and promote changes in the course of the national program, insisting whenever possible with the most costly mechanism.

*The greatest political deficit:* which is the actual legitimacy of the MST? Surely no one knows, although there are voices that boast its existence. Its presumable leaders were chosen by whom and when?<sup>31</sup> Were they elected in a public space, as expected in any consolidated democratic order? Without legitimacy and the persistent refusal by the organization to openly discuss and fine-tune its public demands and forms of social struggle, why should society kneel down to the political impositions regularly announced by its leaders? Not being a membership-based organization, which is the social basis of the Movement? Those members of its rank-and-file, either militants or sympathizers, are they voluntary followers because they trust and believe in the MST or because they have no choice, after being recruited in rural settlements controlled by the Movement, where the organization manages (public) resources and politically selects its favored settlers and militants? It is rather unfortunate that hitherto the Movement did not pay any attention to these questions, let alone offered convincing answers to these politically embarrassing themes.

It is not the case of listing the most usual malpractices and analyzing the most emblematic social processes in rural settlements under the control of the MST and promisingly the literature by Brazilian social scientists gradually reaches analytical independence and is now producing reliable findings. After an initial research report I have written in the early 1990s (but never published, though read by many colleagues in the Brazilian academic world), when I discussed the trajectory of the first rural settlement where the MST tried to impose a collective organization of production (Navarro, 1994), in recent years the number of research documents resulting from rigorous and independent research are on the rise. One of these researchers is Eliane Brenneisen, who has written several acute research pieces, since her pioneering dissertation (also concluded in 1994) and, in particular, her PhD thesis, later published as a book (Brenneisen, 2004, 2004a). The collection of articles by Martins (2003) is also a remarkable example of empirical research that focuses on some of the questions briefly mentioned above.

*The major question unanswered:* it is puzzling that Brazilian authorities have never raised the theme of the institutionalization and democratization of the MST. Since it survives primordially on public funds, the State has presumably the right, if not the duty, of demanding that change, at least to make the organization accountable, if society's resources are appropriated by the Movement.

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<sup>31</sup> The national congresses organized by the MST, from the first one (Curitiba, 1985) to the fifth and latest one held in Brasilia (2007) are mainly public showcases and in fact do not deliberate on any relevant issue, following the canons of 'democratic centralism' typical of Leninist organizations. Most importantly, at the end of its latest congress, the final manifesto was typical of these critical times: out of 18 demands listed, only three of them referred to land reform and related themes.

Requirements of transparency and publicity are monotonously required for all political actors but, oddly enough, only the Movement is allowed to keep its position outside the legal constraints of the system. If the MST reacts against this change, because of the original ideological fetish that inspired its foundation, only the state can force or insist on its political integration.

This political pressure on the Movement is necessary not only for the logical reasons stated above, but also to prevent its transformation into an extremist organization. Being encroached by recent developments in the country, the MST's leaders may be tempted to harden its organizational format and launch even more adventurous and irrational actions in different parts of the country. After thirty years of existence, the accumulated political richness of the Movement, on the other hand, cannot be wasted in face of its potential transformation into a marginal small group. Despite its internal authoritarian logic, the MST has contributed enormously for the democratization of social relations in Brazilian rural areas and it would be regrettable if this dense political capital could not be used anymore to enlighten public debates on the possible agrarian development routes in Brazil. The legality of the MST would be an important step forward to enhance social organization in the Brazilian rural areas.

*The main achievement:* in reality, it is not to keep alive the idea of land reform in the national agenda, even if under growing disinterest by the majority of Brazilians. The major victory of the MST is essentially political. That is, to dismantle the correlation of social forces that has always been a trademark in the Brazilian countryside. This is a significant triumph demonstrated by an unquestionable reality: there is no single rural private property protected at the moment, if the MST decides to conquer it. With the process of democratization, the rule of Law in Brazil became more tolerant and even police repression was softened, with no resemblance to the terrifying rural violence of the past. Under these conditions, the organization may invade whatever rural property it so decides, with a good probability of keeping it forever.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> A telling illustration about the confusion of state powers nowadays in Brazil that illuminates how Justice became more tolerant is a recent interview by a federal prosecutor in the town of Ribeirão Preto, in the interior of São Paulo. That town is located at the heart of sugar cane production in Brazil and is a region of large scale rural properties, thus symbolizing 'agribusiness' and the prominence of agrarian capital. According to the Brazilian Constitution, these prosecutors enjoy an enormous power and in practice they pay little obedience to any superior coordinator. The interviewee is a very active prosecutor specialized in environmental issues and, declaring himself a socialist, he insisted that the 'Ministério Público' is a political agent that promotes the Constitution, also separating 'progressive organizations' from other ones, including the MST among the first ones. When asked if land reform was his responsibility, he responded that 'The role of the 'Ministério Público' is clear: to defend the social function of land and a diffuse right to land reform, sing the juridical instruments laid down by the Constitution and several laws for that purpose, also making alliances with sectors of civil society with the same objective'. The 'Ministério Público' is a branch of the Brazilian system of Justice that was greatly enhanced after the Constitution of 1988 and has financial autonomy and legal attributions that given their members almost an absolute freedom of action. See Goulart, Marcelo. 2009. Temos que fazer a reforma agrária que o governo não faz. *Folha de São Paulo*, 21 December 2009. Despite the burgeoning literature addressing the 'judicialization of politics', his confusion here is obvious: land reform is a policy decided by government and the Judiciary should only oversee it from a legal point of view.

The greatest irony, however, is that this decisive turn is occurring when demand for land is rapidly diminishing in all rural regions, eroded by an unstoppable pace of urbanization. The result is a pyrrhic victory: when land reform was finally made viable in Brazil, its implementation gradually stagnated, because those formerly interested in it simply left the countryside.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*What about the future?* Nowadays the MST confronts its twilight and has only one way forward, that is, its institutionalization and internal democratization, transforming itself into a formal organization with a sound mandate in favor of the rural poor. If it decides to maintain its present structure and rationale, it will only accentuate its slow agony. The MST was born to demand access to land for the rural poor, but this policy is gradually passing away.<sup>34</sup> In a recent interview, the MST main leader has even hinted about current political difficulties, stressing that

(...) we are though a moment of reflection, thinking about a new model to put into practice. In the 70s and 80s it was enough to invade lands and so obtaining social support that resulted in political pressure. Nowadays land invasions do not bring allies to our side. Therefore it does not interest us anymore. We are searching for new alternatives to find allies. And the most compatible way so far is an alliance with urban workers".<sup>35</sup>

Though a reference made in passing, it is an illuminating turnaround because social struggles by the rural poor have been historically centered on land invasions, in Brazil and elsewhere. To downplay land invasions as the main political tool for the Movement has the same meaning as abandoning strikes as a form of

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<sup>33</sup> "In the 1950s, 8 million people migrated to the cities (about 24% of the total rural population that was counted in Brazil in 1950); nearly 14 million in the 1960s (about 36% of the total rural population in 1960); 17 million people in the 1970s (approximately 40% of the rural population in 1970). Over three decades the awesome total of 39 million people [migrated to the cities]" (Mello and Novais, 2009, 21). According to the last available census, the urban population in the country is estimated in 85% out of the total. As an illustration, one may check the case of Rio Grande do Sul, where the Movement was born and is still active, recruiting especially settlers from "its settlements" to promote an array of forms of pressure (because the actual landless population demanding access to land drastically diminished in the last three decades). In this state, in the period 1970-2000 the rural population diminished from almost half of the total (47%) to 18% (Lisboa and Bagolin, 2009, p. 54). Official estimates locate only 14% of the total population in rural areas in 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Stédile himself reckoned the impasse experienced by land reform in Brazil. Insisting on his staunch anti-capitalist platform, undauntedly suggested that "only the defeat of neoliberalism will create conditions for land reform in Brazil". See his interview published in *Época*, Rio de Janeiro, 2 July 2007. Another MST national coordinator, Gilmar Mauro (himself a Stédile's follower), echoed this vision, when affirming that the notion of a classic redistributive land reform failed in Brazil and the "new land reform" proposed by the MST would be an environmentally-sound model of producing health food and raw materials. In short, a model for the market and a struggle that aims at economically integrating small farmers. It is a political objective, therefore, far from any anti-capitalist orientation. His interview is in <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u491141.shtml> [accessed in 17 October 2009].

<sup>35</sup> Interview by João Pedro Stédile in *Zero Hora*, 28 January 2010.

pressure for industrial workers. Anyone who is informed about Brazilian politics and the possibilities of materializing that famous rural-urban alliance so much incensed in socialist literature over time knows that this possible political strategy is doomed to immediate failure.

Land reform was implemented for the first time in Brazilian history over the last fifteen years under the existing legal framework but it is definitely reaching its limits of viability in our times. Faced by a challenging juncture, the MST has unsuccessfully tried to disseminate a new agenda so far ('war on science, war on modern agriculture, and war on the agrarian bourgeoisie'). Not a *boutade*, in fact this slogan reflects the impasses swirling the Movement in recent times. An empirical illustration is perhaps enough to demonstrate the political vacuity of those intentions. A large firm that has invested in Brazilian rural areas, after observing some attempts of invasion by the MST, invited its leadership for a meeting in order to exchange their views and check possibilities of collaboration. One influential member of the national MST directorate attended the meeting and his was the opening phrase,

(...) we do not have any interest in negotiating around this table (...) because we are against the presence of [x] in Brazil. It is not our practice to sit with businessmen because of our political methodology (...) It is not personal but a disagreement about the world project you have and ours (...) I am here with the mandate of avoiding negotiations and also to voice our political perspective and our denunciations of problems that are occurring...' (sic).<sup>36</sup>

As obvious, this threat by the MST envoy is nonsensical, especially when one remembers that the organization, in fact, does not exist, from a legal point of view. The firm represented on the other side of the table in the meeting, in its turn, is regularly registered and operates under the rule of Law, being completely accountable not only for its activities in rural areas, but also from all legal aspects. It is difficult to imagine a more surreal dialogue.

Built inside a political cul-de-sac and lack of long term perspectives, this attempt of renewing its agenda shows, in fact, a visible despair, so demonstrated by many preposterous initiatives pursued in different rural regions over the recent period. They are motivated either by its non democratic organizational anachronism or because it insists with an anti-modern ideology. If it persists, the MST will only speed up its demise.

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<sup>36</sup> For obvious reasons additional details about this meeting cannot be revealed. But the meeting was recorded and there is a transcript.



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## O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST): tempos difíceis

### RESUMO

O artigo sintetiza aspectos centrais que marcaram a história do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) nos anos recentes. Tenta-se demonstrar que atualmente aquela organização experimenta crescentes impasses, em parte devido à urbanização e seus impactos nas percepções sociais sobre a trajetória da reforma agrária no Brasil. Problemáticos aspectos típicos do Movimento são listados e brevemente discutidos, das escolhas organizacionais ao controvertido repertório do MST de suas lutas implementadas no sentido de adensar a sua força política. O artigo também discute desafios mais recentemente observados, os quais ameaçam a própria existência da organização no futuro próximo.

**Palavras-chave:** Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra; MST; Reforma Agrária; Desafios políticos enfrentados pelo MST.

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