

CHAPTER 14

Learning to Participate: The MST Experience in Brazil

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The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Worker's Movement, or MST) is one of the most combative social movements in contemporary Latin America. The MST emerged during the Brazilian military dictatorship, in 1979, with its first land occupation in Encruzilhada Natalino, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Supported early on during the "redemocratization" days in the aftermath of the dictatorship, by church organizations like the grassroots religious communities and the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Land Pastoral Commission, or CPT), and by the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Confederation of Workers, or CUT) and the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, or PT), among others, the movement spread around the country as land reform was forced onto the political agenda.¹

The MST has become an influential organization, with thousands of activists fighting for agrarian reform with revolutionary passion. Solidarity, social justice, and autonomy are their fundamental ethical values. A variety of types of cooperation characterize the MST's rural land reform settlements. Their leaders are interviewed by the media, and they negotiate with the government. The movement has established a monthly newspaper to communicate its ideas, an educational system based on a "work-and-study" methodology, and an intense process of political-ideological formation through study groups on radical theory. Within some of these groups a newly developed consciousness concerning social, rather than private, ownership of the means of production is emerging.

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The MST experience raises a crucial question in the discourse on social change, which this chapter will address: What is participation? Participation can be a social practice, a pedagogical method, and/or a political act. For the landless men, women, young people, and children of the MST, the learning process begins in the collective ways of working and living in the *acampamentos* (pre-land occupation encampments); flourishes with massive and continuous land occupations and settlements; is strengthened through the educational activities developed and carried out in MST schools; and expands in the collective construction of an alternative proposal, or “project,” for all of Brazilian society. My purpose here is to examine the MST participatory practice, focusing on these four elements that make an integrated whole.

Agrarian Reform: A Contradictory Process

Agrarian reform is not necessarily radical. During the period of the Kennedy administration and the Alliance for Progress, many Latin American governments were put under pressure by the United States to carry out agrarian reform programs as part of a plan of “pacification” designed to undercut potential popular support for armed rebellion.

In Brazil at the beginning of the 1960s, landowners were frightened by a strong movement for agrarian reform led by the Ligas Camponesas (Peasant Leagues) and the Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores na Agricultura (National Confederation of Rural Workers, or CONTAG). During Joao Goulart’s presidency (1962–1964), popular mobilization focused on agrarian reform as the key to democratization and modification of the social structure. This was one of the factors that led to the 1964 military coup, and the subsequent brutal repression of popular organizations. Throughout the years of dictatorship (1964–1985), agrarian reform was considered a national security issue, strategic for capitalistic development and industrialization. Reform has also been used as a state policy to restrain class struggle in rural areas and to transform potentially revolutionary peasants into conservative small farmers. But agrarian reform has also been important to more revolutionary structural changes.

Thus, agrarian reform can be better characterized as a contradictory process of transforming production and power relations that depends, in its formulation and implementation, on the correlation of political forces and the specific course of class struggle (Martins 1994). As conceived by the MST and other movements in Brazil, the concept reinforces the links among economic, social, cultural, political, and ideological conditions, as opposed to the domi-

nant view of land reform as merely an economic issue or a social policy, or even simply an ideological problem.

Official agrarian reforms designed to establish a capitalist class of small farmers through access to rural property often occur simultaneously with an intensive proletarianization of the majority of rural people (loss of means of production, or land). This challenging contradiction helps to explain why agrarian reform cannot be labeled as conservative or revolutionary per se; it is a tool, and what makes the difference is who controls it. The reality is complex, and leads us to analyze agrarian reform as a real-world process in which social classes struggle over the direction of a contradictory process. Its character in contemporary Brazil arises in the context of a new proposal emerging from the hands and minds of thousands of *acampados* (families in temporary camps awaiting the chance to occupy land) and settlers (those who have already gained land), a proposal antagonistic to the dominant agrarian project.

The political-ideological polarization between the MST and the main organization of wealthy landowners, the Uniao Democratica Ruralista (Rural Democratic Union, or UDR)—particularly during the elaboration of the first National Plan of Land Reform in 1985 and the 1988 Constitutional Assembly—has led to the construction of two different models of land reform in Brazil.² Together they express the confrontation between capital and labor. Central issues include the decisions concerning the ownership of the means of production (individual or collective), and the process of distribution of wealth (private capital accumulation or social capital accumulation).

The UDR's proposal defends individual interests and private property, and, to the extent that the bourgeoisie accepts redistribution, it must be through the parceling of the land in hundreds of individual units. This "model of private appropriation" is similar to classical capitalistic agrarian redistribution, which promotes agricultural modernization under the control of agribusiness. In the 1970s, this kind of land reform was implemented in a limited way under the military dictatorship through the establishment of colonization projects, where the so-called *colono* or *parceleiro* "received" individual title to property that allowed the beneficiary to apply for credit and technical assistance. Because each beneficiary family was isolated from others, via the titling of individual parcels, and decisions concerning what and how to produce or to whom and when to sell the harvest were imposed by governmental institutions and agricultural policies, the major benefits of this so-called reform accrued to the hegemonic agro-industrial sector. This is the typical paradigm of agrarian reform accepted by various factions of the dominant classes.

The MST's more flexible "model of social appropriation," on the other hand, is based on cooperative relations among settlers and alternative patterns of land appropriation and use. Through democratic structures of decision making, settlements may vary in form from an individual family basis all the way to collective work, depending on the backgrounds and aspirations of the settlers, the quality of the soil, the kind of crops they produce, the local market structure, and many other factors. For instance, property can be individually owned, but the work and the production done collectively; or work and production can be individual on part of the land and collective on another part; or all the property can be collective. Regardless of these arrangements, families work on part of the land to produce for their own use.

Rural landowners oppose cooperative forms of possession, production, and work. They seem aware that these experiences can escalate from the local to the national sphere and may consolidate new practices of social organization and political participation that could undermine private property rights. In this context, to make a massive and radical proposal for agrarian reform is not simply to call for land redistribution to incorporate more farmers into the capitalist system; rather, it necessarily involves shifting the entire agrarian structure of production, power, and cultural relations. This means that the whole economic-social-political system would have to be changed. Even before the MST became influential, the leaders of the agrarian bourgeois were conscious that any project of collective land occupation and production would represent a challenge to their class interests and to capitalism.

The Brazilian scholar and UDR supporter Miguel Reale Junior (who was minister of justice in Cardoso's government), expressed this class position in the journal of the Sociedade Brasileira Rural (Brazilian Rural Society, or SBR) as follows: "From the end of World War II to the present, it is evident that agrarian chaos doesn't exist in Brazil, rather there is perfect coherency between the structure of landholding and use, the present economic-social system in this country, and the current neoliberal ideology" (Sociedade Rural Brasileira 1985, 9).

The MST

The MST's complex practice is designed to deal with a central question: How can a peasant organization challenge the so-called benefits of free-market capitalism and its ideology, neoliberalism? To analyze the MST's resistance to neoliberalism, it is essential to have a concept of social class. A class-struggle approach allows us to comprehend the limits and the possibilities of the MST's

agrarian reform proposal vis à vis the classical agrarian reform model and Brazilian state policy and legislation.

The specific course of the battle between these two antagonistic models of agrarian reform in Brazil (which began in the 1980s and is still in flux) is the key to understanding why the MST has become the most important source of resistance to the neoliberal project. In brief, the confrontation can be expressed in terms of the duality of privatization versus occupation.

Occupying the Land

Early on the MST developed an efficient strategy of placing pressure on the state through massive and continuous land occupations. Based on the 1964 Brazilian land law, private property can be confiscated (in theory) when it is not cultivated, or when the owner is in violation of labor or environmental regulations. The MST's direct action in occupying properties that fall into these categories takes advantage of this constitutional provision, and thus strengthens it. This strategy has also been effective in publicizing land concentration, the cause of most of the present social problems.

The actual process of carrying out a land occupation, called a *feira* (party) by the movement, has a special meaning for the landless themselves. The decision, which is not an easy one, to seize and settle on a private property, requires maturity, cohesion, discipline, and hope. This action turns peasants who, in the past, had been more or less passive participants in the sociopolitical arena into powerful social actors fighting for agrarian reform and political participation. They call themselves "free workers," and they recover their capacity to create material and cultural commodities, denied to them by both the traditional *latifundios* (large estates) and the modern agribusiness complex, where they were mere workers in the service of capital.

The MST's occupations threaten the ruling classes, who react with violence, while arguing that the occupations are illegal. They believe land seizures will lead to a breakdown of authority in Brazilian society. To maintain public order, representatives of the state often respond to the occupations, which many consider to be efforts to sabotage democratic institutions, by prosecuting MST leaders.

Despite repressive violence, defamatory media campaigns, and attempts at co-optation, the MST promotes mass mobilizations to occupy unproductive properties. Land occupations increased from 119 in 1990 to 505 in 1999, a total of 2,210 occupations in nine years. In the first months of 2000, thirty thousand rural workers occupied 250 *latifundios* as well as federal government

buildings in twenty-one cities, to exert political pressure for land reform. What are challenged by these radical actions are the private property rights guaranteed by dominant law, an important value of capitalist order and its neoliberal discourse. The actions also challenge the government's political performance on the national front and its commitments to structural adjustments imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the international arena.

Collective Working and Living

An MST settlement is the result of a successful occupation, and is conceived of as an economic unit, not just as a legal property holding. Indeed, planning, farm production, and management have been crucial to the success of the MST's alternative proposal of agricultural cooperation. According to the MST's definition, cooperation is "the way to maximize the efforts of each individual worker by doing things together, whether buying machines and tools, raising cattle, or sharing land" (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra 1993, 1996).

For the settlers' organizations, planning means democratic decision making concerning all the major modes of community existence: production, marketing, housing, education, health care, politics, culture, and so on. This is not a simple task, especially if hundreds of persons are involved. During their frequent assemblies, members participate in many ways by making proposals, asking questions, discussing problems, coming to decisions, and singing.³ Normally, the meeting agenda is known in advance and some methodological tools are used to better facilitate participation. Most women and teenagers speak independently of their husbands or parents, as *companheiras de luta* (comrades in struggle). In some of the settlements, a married person is accepted only if both spouses join the organization. The participatory planning process is influenced by the families' previous experiences, the regional and ecological differences in their land, and their access to material conditions of production such as credit, technology, and training. The results vary widely, due to the heterogeneity of situations in the settlements (Medeiros 1994).

The annual balance of income and expenses is presented in a general assembly, and the distribution of profits—for maintenance and repairs of farm machinery, and investment in soil improvement, cattle feeding, computers, home building, teachers' salaries, child care, mobilization, and so on—has to be approved by the majority of the members. Increasingly, many settlers prefer their monetary income not to be divided, but rather to be invested collec-

tively, to maintain the existing means of production, or for new investments or educational, health, and technological assistance to their families. These different kinds of *fundos* (funds) are an experiment in socialized accumulation of capital. Agrarian reform as proposed by the MST also has the potential to become a more egalitarian means of distribution of wealth.

There are two cooperative organizations in Brazil. The Organizacao das Cooperativas do Brasil (Cooperatives' Organization of Brazil, or OCB) represents the large landowners and is linked with the UDR and the SBR. The Confederacao Nacional das Cooperativas de Reforma Agraria do Brasil (National Confederation of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives of Brazil, or CONCRAB) was created in 1994 by a network of agrarian reform cooperatives, and might be thought of as the economic arm of the MST, supporting its social and political mobilizations.

As efficient as the large private farming sector, the MST settlers organize agricultural production cooperatives through CONCRAB at local, state, and national levels. Nevertheless, there is an essential difference between this system and the OCB's. The MST's cooperative structure emphasizes social needs and political results as much as economic returns to the settlers. Credit, marketing support, and technical assistance are offered by the cooperatives to increase settlers' agricultural production, profitability, the ability to market their produce, and to boost living standards (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra 1998). The CONCRAB system has become an instrument for establishing solid relationships among producers and consumers, demonstrating the relevance of agrarian reform for the urban population and guaranteeing relative financial autonomy for the MST, at least compared with other popular organizations that do not have control over their own production.

The concept of collective working and living is the core of the MST strategy to develop sustainable actions of resistance in the settlements. If it weren't for these systems, people might become politically demobilized once they receive land. Peasants who have fought for a place to live and work now could be seduced by the supposed benefits of free-market capitalism. The MST tries to keep the people who have already gotten land politically mobilized, to support further occupations by the still landless, and to keep fighting for larger social change.

Education and Attitudes: Creating the New Man and the New Woman

The overall emphasis of the MST's proposal for changing Brazilian society starts with agrarian reform but addresses a host of other questions having to

do with education, gender issues, and politics. The settlement is conceived of as a place where various forms of democratic relationships are practiced, based on direct action and on agricultural cooperation.

Education is a top priority for the MST, not only as a means to eliminate illiteracy but also to close the technological gap between rich and poor and to combat political misinformation. In a general sense, as Paulo Freire explained, a “settlement, precisely because it is a production unit (there is no production outside the man-world relation) should also be a pedagogic unit” (1983, 58).

To face the challenges posed by the MST’s idea of agrarian reform, the concept of education has unfolded far beyond the formal system. Educational activities the settlers undertake include choosing their own teachers, formulating participatory rules for managing the schools, revising the subjects and methods of the official public school curriculum, organizing brigades (teams of militants who travel from settlement to settlement) for the political-ideological formation of activists, and coordinating training courses for entrepreneurial and technological improvement. The basic MST pedagogic principles are an iterative relationship of practice-theory-practice, which incorporates the lessons from the struggle for land and production and, in turn, helps build a better theoretical understanding of organizers, leaders, and teachers; and a work-and-study methodology, which bridges the dichotomy that opposes manual and intellectual labor.

The MST’s two-year school for vocational level specialists in agricultural cooperation was recently accredited by the Ministry of Education, and in 1995 the movement won a UNICEF award for the quality of its educational program in its six hundred elementary schools and twenty high schools with a total of 35,000 students and 1,400 teachers. Equally as urgent as democratizing access to education for children, is training the massive number of the MST’s participants, numbering more than 500,000 adults. The MST vocational and political training school, the Instituto de Capacitacao Tecnica e Pesquisa da Reforma Agraria (ITERRA), offers short courses on business management for farm enterprises, financial and human resource management, and long-term courses integrating political formation and farming techniques.

Among the many social issues MST militants consider when troubleshooting concrete problems in the settlements is the dominant cultural pattern of public and private relations between men and women. As the landless join the movement, some act as revolutionaries outside the house but maintain a conservative manner inside the family. But daily life in the *acampamentos* and set-

lements teaches them to do things together, to observe their individual attitudes, and to make changes from inside themselves.

Although the MST believes that economic power is fundamental to achieving political power, it realizes that these aspects are intertwined, as well, with the other strands of society; the MST has found, therefore, that most of its efforts are aimed at nothing less than creating a “new man and a new woman for a new society.” In dialectic terms, the new emerges from the old through a creative transformation. Much work has been done to enable women to participate fully in all aspects of settlement society; such a fundamental shift in social relations requires a change not only in women but in men as well.

A famous and popular song at meetings teaches “Pra mudar a sociedade do jeito que a gente quer, participando sem medo de ser mulher” [To change society the way we want, we have to participate without fear of being women]. But what is it to be a woman according to the MST’s conception? It is that, despite any biological differences, the woman’s role in the family, in production, and in society largely results from a historical process of domestication. While this cultural role has been modified over time, most alterations have not taken the interests of women into account. Capitalistic development imposes new functions on her, in terms of the kind of work she can do, the way she behaves, the type of education she can have, the size of her family, and so on. It is necessary to study and debate these issues to strengthen women’s participation and organization.

In the MST, women are typically on the front line during land occupations, and those working at the cooperatives receive equal pay alongside the men. Child-care centers and other community structures such as a common dining area allow mothers and young women to become part of the active labor force. These direct actions are the basis upon which the militants question the traditional sexual division of labor.

In 1997 a national seminar on gender held at Curitiba, Parana, was attended by approximately one hundred landless women from all over Brazil. Over three days they shared experiences and planned activities to increase women’s militancy around social, political, and economic issues. They formed a national collective within the MST and created a *cartilha* (booklet) titled *Landless Woman*, which addresses topics such as land reform, credit, education, health care, the Popular Project (ideas for a different, more just Brazil), and class struggle.

The MST has developed strategies to improve the recognition of gender issues, both within the movement and with regard to the manner in which

state agencies treat women. But changes with regard to interpersonal relations are harder to achieve. Some *companheiros* respect women in the organization, in the struggle, in the political parties, and in production, but they don't seem to think women should be given the same respect at home. The typical relationship is still mostly based on the dominant model of patriarchal family.

One may imagine the tensions within the settlers' families, especially among activist couples. In this context, it is still worth asking how we would like the new woman and the new man to be in a more egalitarian society. The Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges recalls in his poem "Happiness": "Praised be the love wherein there is no possessor and no possessed, but both surrender."

Constructing the Popular Project

Social scientists have tended to focus mainly on the actions of popular movements. But action and conception are equally significant in the MST's efforts to construct an alternative project for Brazil. The day-to-day practices in the land occupations and settlements, the study in MST schools of the historical experiences of other peoples, and the brigades all come together in the Popular Project, a democratic and participatory planning space through which the contribution of the MST's *amigos*—professors, politicians, technicians, students, priests, and others—is organized in a network of groups that meet regularly to work on suggestions coming from the base, and returning ideas to them.

With the underlying aim of confronting neoliberalism with its own political weapons, the MST strategy has been to realize a *consulta popular* (a sort of unofficial, alternative plebiscite) stimulating the population to participate in the formulation of proposed economic, social, and cultural policies for all Brazilians (the Popular Project). There are many ways in which the MST provokes debate about the Popular Project. For example, the movement led a march aimed at denouncing the former Cardoso administration's privatization program as a transfer of wealth to the powerful, and promoting instead the construction of a truly democratic society with social justice, income distribution, and solidarity. From August 3 to September 7, Brazilian Independence Day, in 1998, almost 6,000 workers, organized in more than eighty *colunas* (military-like columns), marched across the country, holding conversations along the way with the local populace in hundreds of small and big cities, discussing problems regarding land, employment, housing, education,

health, and food. They repeated this process in 2005, during the present Lula presidency.

Building the Popular Project involves mass, direct, radical, continuous, and sustainable actions of resistance. And it has to be constructed in a process directed from the base, a base that respects its social heritage, conceives of alternatives for the majority, presents ideas in a simple and convincing way, transforms ideas into projects for structural change, makes people understand and fight for them, and mobilizes forces.

The MST has placed emphasis on the elaboration of an alternative national project on global themes such as employment, education, housing, food, and health. While the Popular Project deals with a variety of problems, agrarian reform remains an essential issue within it. However, according to João Pedro Stédile, an MST leader, the agrarian issue, while central, takes second place to the larger transformation of society, since agrarian reform itself depends on the adoption of a new model of development (interview published in *O Globo*, December 26, 1997). In this analysis, the MST's proposal of agrarian reform for all can only be thoroughly implemented within economic and power structures different from those of capitalism. The immediate challenge, however, is to demonstrate to the Brazilian people that their day-to-day problems are a consequence of neoliberal policies.

The Embryo of a New Society?

What explains the growing credibility of the MST among the Brazilian people? The movement has the declared support of important organizations such as churches and Amnesty International, and the cooperation of intellectuals and artists. Economists emphasize the production aspects of the MST, political scientists its power relations, geographers the issue of the territoriality of MST settlements, anthropologists the cultural heritage, historians the roots of the movement, pedagogues the learning process, and sociologists the organizational features. Each of these views touches on an aspect of this landless movement, but none of them represents it as a whole.

Some people attribute the MST's appeal to more symbolic or emotional sources: a combination of its mystique of militancy and its symbols: the red flag, the movement hymn, and the emblematic figure of Che Guevara. Others argue that it is due to the brigades, inspired by the revolutionary popular armies with disciplinary rules and study groups on Marxist theories.

In addition to the impressive strategy of the *festa* (land occupation), four vital concepts seem to arise from MST practice: a collective way of life that ranges across the spectrum of activities from basic food production to the artistic process, the work-and-study educational method, an expressed respect for a diversity of opinions combined with a unity of perspectives, and an insistent confrontation with the neoliberal project.

The MST practice is being closely observed by the landless themselves and by Brazilian society in general, not as a laboratory experiment in free-market policy (the manner in which Latin America has been used in the past decade) but as the embryo of a new society that can come to life through the combined efforts of the various popular sectors. The MST appears to have the capacity to transform the collective dream of the millions of Brazilians who want a better life into radical actions and perspectives. It remains to be seen whether it will do so.