

Movement histories: a preliminary historiography of the Brazil's landless laborers' movement (MST)

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Abstract

Founded in 1984, the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Brazil (MST) has been historicized in several recent publications. This review essay examines seven books that provide historical analysis of the movement. Published in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian in the past six years, these books offer diverse assessments of MST history. The essay contrasts their interpretations of the movement's origins, founding, consolidation, organization, and future prospects. As an institutionalized social movement with more than twenty years of history, the books prove that the MST merits the attention of historians.

Keywords: rural social movements; peasants; agrarian reform; contemporary social history; historicization.

Resumo

Histórias em Movimento: Uma historiografia preliminar do Movimento Sem Terra (MST)

Nascido em 1984, o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) tem sido sujeito de examinação histórica em publicações recentes. Este ensaio documenta e avalia as tentativas preliminares de historizar a organização feita em sete livros publicados desde 1999 nas línguas portuguesa, inglesa, espanhola e italiana. A resenha coletiva oferece uma avaliação dos contrastes nas interpretações dos livros no que se refere às origens, fundação, consolidação, organização, e possibilidades do MST. Como um movimento institucionalizado durante mais que vinte anos de luta, a resenha apóia as publicações em concluir que o MST merece a atenção dos historiadores.

Palavras-chave: movimientos sociais no campo; camponeses; reforma agrária; história social contemporânea; historicidade.

Resumen

Historias en movimiento: una historiografía preliminar del Movimiento Sin Tierra (MST)

Sido nato en 1984, el Movimiento de los Trabajadores Rurales Sin Tierra (MST) de Brazil ha sido tema del examinación histórica en varias publicaciones recientes. Este ensayo registra y examina las tentativas preliminares de historizar la organización hecha en siete libros publicados desde 1999 en los idiomas portugués, inglés, español e italiano. La reseña colectiva ofrece una evaluación de los contrastes en las interpretaciones de los libros en qué se refiere las origens, fundación, consolidación, organización e perspectivas futuras de el MST. Como un movimiento social institucionalizado com más de veinte años de historia, la

reseña apoya las publicaciones en concluir que el MST merece la atención de los historiadores.

Palabras claves: movimientos sociales rurales; campesinos; reforma agraria; historia social contemporánea; historicidad.

BRAVA GENTE: A TRAJETÓRIA DO MST E A LUTA PELA TERRA NO BRASIL. By João Pedro Stédile e Bernardo Mançano Fernandes (São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 1999. pp. 167.)

A FORMAÇÃO DO MST NO BRASIL. By Bernardo Mançano Fernandes. (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2000. pp. 319.)

A HISTÓRIA DA LUTA PELA TERRA E O MST. By Mitsue Morissawa. (São Paulo: Editora Expressão Popular, 2001. 256 pp.)

SIN TIERRA: CONSTRUYENDO MOVIMIENTO SOCIAL. By Marta Harnecker. (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2002. Pp. 124. Also available in English as *LANDLESS PEOPLE—BUILDING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT* at <http://www.rebellion.org/harnecker/landless300802.pdf> [accessed November 1, 2004])

CUTTING THE WIRE: THE STORY OF THE LANDLESS MOVEMENT IN BRAZIL. By Sue Branford & Jan Rocha. (London: Latin American Bureau, 2002. pp. 305.)

TO INHERIT THE EARTH: THE LANDLESS MOVEMENT AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW BRAZIL. By Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford. (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2003. pp. 365. \$15.95 paper.)

LA SCELTA DELLA TERRA: STUDIO DI UN INSEDIAMENTO RURALE DEL MOVIMENTO SEM TERRA IN BRASILE. By Luca Fanelli. (Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 2002. pp. 169.)

Like many politicians, Brazilian president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva identified himself with different citizens by dressing like them. He seemed to delight in donning an Indian headdress or squeezing into a hard hat. Such images fit the populist message of this remarkable man, a man who rose from poverty to become leader of the labor movement that challenged the military dictatorship and helped restore democracy to Brazil, the world's eighth largest economy. But in July 2003 when Lula placed the bright red cap of the Landless Laborers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra [MST]) on his head, all hell broke loose. Subsequent editions of nearly every news vehicle in the country featured alarmed criticism of this fateful act. Words like "rebellious," "revolutionary" and "irresponsible" characterized the reaction as dozens of reporters were sent to the field to document the dangers posed to the country by the MST. The controversy reached the United States, where concerns on Wall Street and in Washington threatened to undermine Brazil's fragile credit rating and international standing. By 2004, the Lula administration had carefully finessed most of the criticisms, supporting the right of the MST to mobilize and pressure the government while simultaneously investing in a conflicting agribusiness development scheme.

What is the MST? In contradistinction to the image projected by the Brazilian press, the collection of recently published books reviewed here describe it as an institutionalized social movement of unprecedented significance for Brazil and the world that does not pose an immediate revolutionary threat to society. On one book's jacket, Eric Hobsbawm, a frequent traveler to Brazil, validates the MST as "the most ambitious social movement in contemporary Latin America" (BRANFORD and ROCHA, 2002) On another's cover,

journalist Studs Terkel describes the MST as “a million or so ordinary people fighting for the right to live ordinary lives” (WRIGHT and WOLFORD, 2003). Founded in 1984, the MST fights for radical agrarian reform; that is, state intervention to reverse historic land concentration trends, distribute good agricultural land to needy workers, and reallocate resources to support small and cooperative farming as fundamental to the development of a stronger, more democratic and just society.

Today, the MST boasts a membership of more than 500,000 families—at least two million people—and has a presence in every state and more than 700 municipalities. The MST runs some 500 farm co-ops in the areas of production, marketing, credit, and technical assistance. It trains most of its own technicians, militants, and leaders. It has succeeded in redirecting government funds to support its administration of 1,800 elementary schools with more than 160,000 students, teaching basic literacy to 30,000 teenagers and adults, and operating a university. In the meantime, some sixty members are studying in Cuba to be doctors (MST, 2004). In twenty years, the MST has become a vast and varied organization with many plans for growth and diversification.

A handful of foreign and many domestic analysts have been following the MST's development since its earliest days. With significant methodological variations, each of the books reviewed contribute to the institutional history of the MST. The first is based on a 1998 conversation between the MST's founding national coordinator João Pedro Stédile and MST consultant Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, a geographer. The second is Fernandes's doctoral dissertation. Morissawa's *A luta pela terra e o MST* is a pictorial history published by the MST. Harnecker, a Chilean-Marxist and scholar living in Cuba, completed the third account. The fourth book, written by English journalists Branford and Rocha, promises to be a favorite for the university market. The historian Wright and geographer Wolford teamed up to produce an innovative book that emphasizes themes important to U.S. college curricula, such as gender and the environment. Luca Fanelli's small, carefully researched book is a fine example of the many monographs the movement has inspired. All the authors but Fanelli historicize the MST by beginning their books with a chapter or two intended to document the roots and origins of the movement. The next chapters recount the MST's formation and consolidation on a national scale. Remaining chapters analyze key features of the MST, such as the practice of land occupation, educational programs, and strategies of production once land is acquired. Concluding chapters evaluate the movement and comment on its future prospects.

Origins

Each of the books describe Brazil's southern most state of Rio Grande do Sul as the cradle of the MST. A common narrative links the rise of the MST to dramatic changes in the primary sector initiated by the agricultural policies of the military regime that took power in 1964. With a commitment to national development, the military sought to “modernize” agricultural production. Rio Grande do Sul was an important setting for the introduction of mechanized soybean production. Credit structures and clientelism led to land concentration, forcing thousands of small and medium farmers off the land to make way for soybeans and other export crops. The displaced farmers had three alternatives: life in cities, looking for work in a saturated labor market; immigration to Paraguay; or migration to subsidized colonization projects designed to develop frontier areas in the central-west and northern Amazon regions of Brazil. The enterprising *gaúchos* (people born in Rio Grande do Sul) tried all of the strategies, yet the cards were stacked against them.

What many really wanted was land to farm in Rio Grande do Sul. A number of families, encouraged by the military, invaded a Kaingang Indian reservation (Nonoai) but were forced out when conflicts resulted. Trying to decide what to do next, some families followed the advice of Stédile, an economist who was then working with a rural labor union. They organized and occupied an unproductive farm called the Fazenda Macali. This 1979

occupation resulted in the expropriation of the land, encouraging a number of copycat land occupations and public manifestations by landless workers and sympathizers between 1980 and 1982.

While the books agree on the structural conditions and regional context for the birth of the MST, they differ in the attention given to its roots in historic rural social movements. Fernandes approaches the roots question with the most radical argument of the five histories. He says the MST must be seen as a “historic struggle” in the context of five centuries of a “busca continua da conquista da terra de trabalho, a fim de obter condições dignas de vida e uma sociedade justa” for and by rural workers (p. 25). Thus, *A formação do MST no Brasil* begins with a chapter on the rural struggles that he believes contributed to the eventual formation of a self-conscious peasantry in Brazil. The sense of continuity expressed by Fernandes comes up again in Morissawa and Harnecker. Morissawa uses images and text to argue that the MST is something of the highest stage of peasant struggle against a long and continuous history of resistance by slaves, Indians, and Messiah-led peasants. Harnecker claims the MST “*hereda una prolongada lucha por latierra*” (p. 10) going back to the beginnings of Portuguese colonization.

Such continuity is not corroborated by the other histories. Each mentions most of the movements Fernandes describes but they are discussed explicitly as “invented traditions,” regional cultural inheritances intentionally revived as such by MST militants to help organize landless workers. For instance, Branford and Rocha describe how MST organizing proceeded slowly in the northeastern state of Alagoas, “working within the cultural traditions of the people” (p. 43). It proved wise there, the authors report, to stimulate militancy among the landless by organizing a pilgrimage to the ruins of Palmares, the seventeenth-century setting of Brazil’s most famous runaway slave community, which was led for a time by a warrior named Zumbi. “The families paid homage to Zumbi, promising to carry on his struggle,” the authors write (p. 43). Wright and Wolford refer to the history of resistance in a six-page section of chapter 2. For them, too, the historic struggles have been used by MST militants to “contextualize the contemporary struggle for land” (p. 124). Militants recall Zumbi’s struggle, they argue, partly to project an anti-racist image to help build unity among Brazil’s racially diverse population. Author Wolford has elsewhere rejected what she calls the “Official Genesis Story” and demonstrated how MST differed from place to place depending on local conditions and personalities (WOLFORD, 2003).

Stédile refers to the list of conflicts assessed by Fernandes in the context of a discussion about historical and theoretical references for the MST. Peasant education is more successful, he says, when examples rather than theories are used. The details of historic struggles have influenced the ideological construction of the movement and its militants, Stédile says. He denies most direct or explicit connections, however. Even in the case of the Landless Agriculturists’ Movement (Movimento dos Agricultores Sem Terra [MASTER]), which operated in Rio Grande do Sul from 1958 to 1963, Stédile emphasizes change rather than continuity. “O MST... não tem muito a ver com a memória histórica do MASTER,” he says (p. 17). Rather than seeing these other movements as roots of the MST, he sees them as examples of related struggles to be examined for lessons. Stédile argues that the specific roots of the MST are to be found in the Catholic and Lutheran Churches which together formed the Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra [CPT]) in 1975 (p. 19). On this point, all authors agree. Dedicated as it was to applying liberation theology to the problems of the rural poor, the CPT united priests and laymen working all over the country on the question of land access and control. Many of these people were strong advocates and steady supporters of the MST from its inception.

The authors tend to differ in the emphasis they place on another oft-cited MST origin, Brazil’s rural labor union movement (Movimento Sindical dos Trabalhadores Rurais [MSTR]). On this score, Stédile is unambiguous: “O início da minha militância política foi nos sindicatos. Na época da ditadura militar [1964–1985], era o sindicato que fazia a luta pela reforma agrária” (p. 29). But Fernandes shows how some unions offered explicit help while the resistance of others forced the landless to form separate organizations that would later unite in forming the MST. The sense of frustration some militants had with the unions

receives emphasis in Wright and Wolford's interpretation (pp. 62–66). The books by Harnecker and Branford and Rocha document, however, that rural labor union leaders constituted more than 80 percent of the delegates who participated in founding the MST.

Founding

In gripping narrative style, Branford and Rocha open their book with a story of the initial meeting of peasant movement representatives that marked the beginnings of the MST. In 1982, Stédile and ten other gaúchos crammed into a VW bus to meet with about a hundred landless militants from neighboring states at a remote Lutheran church. Many had suffered displacement just like the Rio Grande do Sul farmers, but others were victims of the military's ambitious energy development projects that damned rivers and flooded huge agricultural zones, forcing many to flee. Branford and Rocha use the 1982 meeting to depict the semi-clandestine nature of the organizing effort, adding a certain tension to the story. In his effort to be comprehensive, Fernandes discusses the meeting itself in greater detail and also touches on a series of additional organizational meetings held outside Rio Grande do Sul over the course of the next two years. In less rigorous form, Stédile describes what he derived from each of the intermediary regional meetings that culminated with the MST's founding at Cascavel, Paraná (PR), in 1984. Harnecker, Wright and Wolford neglect earlier meetings and start with the Cascavel encounter.

In her preface, Harnecker represents herself as interested in reconstructing the past, but on the question of founding the MST, her book provides the sketchiest of accounts. Wright and Wolford, on the other hand, insert historical background where it seems convenient to what is, in many respects, a compelling travelogue of the movement in three parts of the country, the south, northeast, and the Amazon region. We learn from the other authors, however, how various meetings contributed to building new regional relationships and provided insights that ultimately proved extremely important to the MST's success and longevity. A September 1982 meeting in Goiânia, Goiás, for example, formally brought together the landless and CPT apparatus. Among the CPT members was Brazilian sociologist José de Souza Martins, whom Stédile credits with inspiring the formation of the MST as a mass political organization with a national presence. (In the 1970s and 1980s, Martins worked as a consultant to the CPT while carrying on his duties as one of the University of São Paulo's most prolific scholars.) The Goiânia group formed a national organizing committee to assess the land struggle around the country, contact local leaders, and plan the Cascavel meeting.

The Cascavel encounter united representatives from agrarian reform movements in thirteen states, produced a number of mandates that continue to guide the movement and, as all of the books agree, debated and settled on the MST name. Responding to Fernandes's interrogation, Stédile describes the ideological discussions that went into the decision to adopt the name (pp. 46–49). It included both a process of elimination and profound search for an identity that could unite similar movements from such dissimilar places. The books also describe with relative consistency a number of other crucial decisions reached at the meeting, including a national presence, autonomy from other organizations, independence from political parties, open-membership with special emphasis on women and families, and a participatory, democratic organizational structure, a revolutionary anti-capitalist ideological perspective. Branford and Rocha succeed in capturing the moment, concluding that "With hindsight today, it is evident that, if the participants had taken a different decision on any one of the key questions—and, at the time, it was by no means clear which was the better route to follow on all issues—the dynamic of the movement would have been stalled" (p. 24).

Consolidation

In 1984, the military regime was in its final year and dozens of popular meetings around the country contributed to organizing the MST's first national congress. At the beginning of the next year, some 1,500 representatives from twenty-three states attended the congress in Curitiba, PR. In addition to the farmers, landless laborers and MST militants, congressional delegates also came from civil organizations such as the Brazilian bar association (Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil), the black movement, and the upstart national labor movement (Central Unica dos Trabalhadores). With the presence of Workers' Party president Lula, the congress signaled the broad reach of the MST and the weight that would be given to building alliances. Representatives of peasant movements from other Latin American countries also participated, foreshadowing the global projection the MST was to pursue in the 1990s. Fernandes gives detailed attention to the event, which Stédile, Branford and Rocha, and Harnecker also highlight. Only Wright and Wolford, preferring a grassroots approach, mention it in passing.

And while, the history of the MST cannot be reduced to meetings, these first encounters deserve special attention because they established the basic structure and the guiding principles of the movement. Stédile's *Brava gente* proves insightful about the internal logic of the meetings, at least from his perspective. Fernandes' book is useful because it includes lists of participants and large segments of the concluding platforms. Branford and Rocha provide a vivid summary of the meetings as events and turning points. In the case of the congress, they turn to Stédile's book for several ideas, principal among them the organizers' decision to develop a direct-action approach to agrarian reform and not become dependent upon the new civilian government, despite pressure from some allies to simply support the government and follow its lead. This was a crucial decision, Harnecker emphasizes, as the new president soon revealed his opposition to the MST, working behind scenes to scuttle his government's own national agrarian reform plan. Anticipating trouble, delegates at the first congress coined the phrase, "sem reforma agrária não há democracia," Fernandes reports (p. 90).

Fernandes uses the national congresses as periodization, organizing his chapters in five-year blocks. This is one more way in which his account remains uniquely loyal to the movement. While the book includes analysis and applies the discipline of geography in innovative ways, it comes close to being a MST publication. To write about the consolidation of the MST in the years following each congress, Fernandes traveled to almost every MST state headquarters to interview movement militants and structured his chapters around brief reports from each state or region. The congresses established a "word of order"—in 1990, it was "ocupar, resistir e produzir;" in 1995, it was "reforma agraria, uma luta de todos"—and Fernandes recounts what militants told him about the implementation of these mandates.

The word of order emanating from the MST's first congress that had the most resonance for the consolidation of the movement was: "ocupação é a única solução." The phrase confirmed participants' lack of confidence in government support for land reform. It also underscored the direct-action approach that united the disparate movements in Curitiba. Through the occupation of unproductive land, the *sem-terra* family could become a *com-terra* family (with land, landed). While this is fairly obvious, the authors relate how occupying land became significant for the movement in other ways as well. In ideal circumstances, the process of building the movement began with consciousness-raising meetings with the poor about the injustice of Brazilian society and the role of land concentration in solidifying inequality. Organizers introduced land occupation as a collective act that could begin to resolve these problems, as an action that could build solidarity and contribute to a *sem-terra* identity among participants. Ironically, while the MST goal was land distribution, leaders wanted members to preserve a *semterra* identity until land reform had been exhausted as a solution to the profound misery of Brazilians.

Harnecker devoted her second chapter to land occupation, summarizing a seven-step procedure leading to a successful seizure. For her, the occupation is like a strike, a way of applying pressure to negotiate land distribution. In *Brava gente*, Stédile explains how

significant occupations were to the birth and existence of the MST. Wright and Wolford also capture the centrality of the occupation to the MST, providing a comparative legal context for them. This seems to be designed to convince skeptical undergraduates, nonplussed by moral economy arguments, that MST occupations are a legitimate form of protest. “The Occupation” serves as the title of Branford and Rocha’s fourth chapter. They introduce a number of personal histories about the transformative power of occupations by writing, “For the MST the act of occupying land... is the cornerstone of their movement” (p. 65). The process of land occupation infuses Fernandes’s book. Land occupation is key to the “socio-territorialization” concept he uses to analyze the MST’s national consolidation.

No matter their approach, the books agree that the movement really took off in 1996, more than ten years after its founding. On April 17, in the Eldorado dos Carajás region of the Amazonian state of Pará, military police murdered nineteen militants. Stédile called the massacre one of the “maneiras... involuntárias” that attracted public support for the movement and forced the government to make agrarian reform a higher priority (p. 143). Bar graphs that Fernandes reproduced from CPT sources show how the number of occupations and families involved more than doubled in this context, jumping from 146 occupations in 1995 to 398 in 1996, involving an increase of 30,476 to 62,880 participating families (p. 260). Wright and Wolford place the event in context and comment on the irony of how a thousand previous murders of militants “had never succeeded in seriously arousing the national conscience as El Dorado dos Carajás did” (p. 209). Like the authors of *To Inherit the Earth*, Branford and Rocha devote a chapter to struggles in the Amazon and use the massacre as a starting point, offering the most detailed account of the event itself, its aftermath and implications. Polls conducted after the massacre showed soaring public support for agrarian reform and classified the MST as the fifth most esteemed institution in the country (COLETTI, 2002).

Organization

MST popularity peaked in 1997 with a cross-country protest march that brought thousands to Brasília on the anniversary of the Carajás massacre. But this seeming success inspired a negative reaction on the part of the landed classes and the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. As the books recount, landlords organized armed groups to defend their property rights while the government sought to isolate the MST with an agile divide and conquer strategy. On the one hand, the government aggressively promoted land distribution and settlement projects with an array of groups while isolating the MST and criminalizing the tactic of occupation. In the eyes of the mainstream, the Cardoso government redistributed more land and settled more families than any in history (MARTINS, 2003). To MST militants and sympathizers, however, the late 1990s brought little more than hard times. The authors are divided in their explanations of how and why the MST survived this period but united in emphasizing the movement’s unique organizational agility.

Rare is the “movement” that lasts twenty years or so. By definition, movements come and go but not, it would seem, the MST. Stédile comments that organizational durability may be the MST’s “grande contribuição histórica” (p. 81). The secret for Stédile has been the MST’s ability to balance mass-based movement practice with a flexible, nonpartisan organizational structure, an institutionalized-movement, at one and the same time political and apolitical. He warns fellow travelers: “Vocês não têm futuro se não aplicarem princípios organizativos” (p. 82). These principles involve the devolution of power to numerous thematic collectives that exist at local, regional, state, and national “instâncias,” as Fernandes relates in detail (pp. 245–56). With fluctuating titles, the MST is awash in “secretariats,” “setores” and “frentes” of production, communication, education, gender, health, mass organization and so forth. Periodic national and state meetings help coordinate the activities of these bodies. History has shown that the structure functions and that its impersonal and decentralized characteristics have helped the movement weather tremendous challenges, from the assassination of important militants to persecution by the government.

Harnecker devotes the bulk of her book to organizational questions. Reading her admiring analysis of the MST's dedication to collective leadership, participatory democracy and financial autonomy one has to wonder if she was thinking about Castro's Cuba, Allende's Chile or both as she wrote *Sin Tierra*. Fernandes maps the spread of settlements linked to the MST as a means of demonstrating the formation and national consolidation of the movement as opposed to some seventy additional groups organized in the 1990s. Branford and Rocha include a chapter on the settlements and another on the movement's sustainable and organic production projects.

Wright and Wolford, in contrast, use the settlements they visit as a point of departure for their analysis of the MST. Using a case study approach, Luca Fanelli's *La scelta della terra* examines a single settlement in Paraná to evaluate the movement's fascinating and ultimately problematic experiment with collectivization, *al modelo cubano*. From both books, one gets a wonderful sense of place, a sense of the land and its value for the peasants. On the Palmares II settlement in the Amazon, Wright and Wolford met with several settlers and recounted their experiences and make observations. "Everyone we spoke to, even those who were otherwise unhappy, agreed that producing enough food for the family was easy," they report (p. 244). The MST placed a big emphasis on organization in the settlement, and it helped improve the quality of life and productivity, but some rejected movement pressures to live in villas—where movement theorist argued that class consciousness could be kept alive—rather than spread out on their individual plots, where many actually preferred to live. Fanelli documents the tension between collectivist ideas and individual desires in his detailed account of the Santa Maria settlement in Paranaicity. The collectivist approach to production, which emphasized equal participation and profit-taking, did not sit well with the majority of peasants and was thus abandoned as a national model. Peasant resistance within the movement taught national coordinators that "as formas [of production] não podem ser rígidas, devem ser variáveis," Stédile writes. "Aprendemos que as formas de aplicação da cooperação agrícola deveriam ser flexíveis" (pp. 100–101).

Prospects

Perhaps the single most important question the various authors assess is whether the MST has succeeded in making agrarian reform in Brazil the political, even revolutionary, issue many think it must be in order for radical change to come about. The authors ask if the MST has the potential for moving the question from one of social dimensions (land reform as one way of ameliorating but not ending Brazil's poverty problem) to one of political dimensions (land reform as socialism). The important distinction between agrarian reform as a social or political problem has been examined systematically by USP sociologist Martins (1989; 1997; 1999; 2000). He has praised the MST not as a revolutionary organization but as "o mais consequente movimento de modernização e ressocialização das populações do campo que já houve na história do Brasil" (MARTINS, 1997, pp. 59–60). In other words, it helps resolve the social problem of a portion of Brazil's huge marginalized population by assisting their integration into capitalist society. The first historians of the MST disagree on these questions: some side with Martins, others endorse the organization's revolutionary self-image.

As a founder and chief strategist, Stédile offers something of an official assessment. Responding to a series of questions from Fernandes, Stédile differs with Martins on several crucial points without using the word *revolutionary* or denouncing capitalism. The MST supports reform in the social sense, Stédile says, but sees it as only the most basic of steps in a larger transformative process. The strategic objective of the MST is to end rural structural problems that contribute to poverty and social inequality. To do this, the first step is to distribute land titles, the second is to ease access to capital and the third is to facilitate educational access. From a pragmatic perspective, this cannot be accomplished by openly opposing capitalism and supporting socialism but only by organizing "milhões de pobres do meio rural para que lutem pela solução de seus problemas" (p. 163). The step of land

distribution aligns with government social policy but the MST must struggle to expand agrarian reform so that settlers contribute to “um acúmulo de forças para a continuidade da luta pela reforma agrária mais ampla” (p. 163). Thus, Stédile’s book supports the argument that the MST has a broad political mission to radically alter property relations and thus class relations in Brazil.

Writing as advocates, Fernandes and Morissawa offer a rallying cry for readers who probably are neither peasants nor outside mediators. The summary theme for both is “a luta continua.” These authors see the MST not as the last but as the most recent organizational form the peasantry has taken to resist extinction, an end foretold for centuries by thinkers left, right and center. Fernandes underscores Martins’s argument that characterizes the movement as an important means of economic integration for the rural poor. But he adds to this hypothesis the argument that the movement creates and recreates the peasantry in Brazil and that peasant insertion into the capitalist economy is counter-hegemonic because the peasant mode of production is essentially non-capitalist. Peasant family labor and a greater concern with reproducing the family and the family-farm withdraws the peasantry from expected market laws. Harnecker shares this assessment, describing the MST as a skillfully crafted social justice movement. It uses Marxism to evaluate capitalism, confront it, and construct sustainable systems for fighting poverty. The basis of the new society is not a grand socialist dream, writes Harnecker, but a family where patriarchy is banished by the empowerment of women. For these authors, then, the MST is not a reformist or revolutionary organization but a peasant resistance movement.

An emphasis on the politics of personal transformation summarizes fairly well the final assessment provided by Wright and Wolford. The MST is a pragmatic organization, they argue, and experience has taught militants to distrust theories of rapid and dramatic change and to endorse an eclectic array of ideas that extend from Mao to Gandhi to Chomsky, with Brazilian references such as the educator Paulo Freire prominently in the mix. But the authors come full circle: none of these limitations on the revolutionary prospects of the organization prevent it from having a dramatic impact on people’s lives. “But just doing these things, things that we might take for granted [like having money to buy an appliance or a new pair of shoes], should be seen as revolutionary given where most of these people were coming from,” they conclude (p. 313).

Branford and Rocha end their book by placing the MST in comparative historical perspective with English Diggers, American Populists, Mexican revolutionaries, and Italian peasant leagues. The authors reject Martins’s pessimism about the movement’s ability to pursue revolutionary change. “The movement’s hope,” they note, “is to create an alliance of ‘excluded Brazilians,’ rural and urban, who favor radical change” (p. 281). In their conclusion, they raise the MST from its national context to the international context of the broad-based anti-globalization movement where they see potential for a revolutionary reversal of the Green Revolution, recently re-energized by genetic-engineering and relaxed trade rules. “The MST is well placed to join such a global revolution”, they write. “As some sem-terra themselves are realizing, their future is not as economically unviable peasant communities living in a time warp but as modern, sustainable, green communities” (p. 282). They admit to being idealistic but affirm their belief in the MST’s potential to reinvent itself and play a role in realigning not only Brazil but the global economy as well.

The vehement reaction of the Brazilian media to Lula’s symbolic support for the MST reflected ruling class concerns about potential threats as much as current ones. After twenty years, the MST has become part of the Brazilian socio-political landscape. Opposition to it remains great but its resilience has proven stronger. Few doubt that the organization is here to stay. That it has transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Brazilians, empowering them to uplift themselves with comforts and hopes long buried in the mire of savage capitalist development, is unquestionable. As the authors of these books show, however, there is reason to question what the MST is now and what it will become in the short and long term. Its relationship with the Lula administration has tended to consolidate its role as a social service agency for the rural poor and small farmers. But its relationship with this dubiously

working-class administration also has the potential for launching the movement on a broader and more radical mission. The sense of threat expressed by the mainstream press was not unfounded nor is the hope expressed by the authors of these books for the MST to help bring about a better world.

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Recebido em: setembro de 2006
Aprovado em: setembro de 2006