

**THE LANDLESS RURAL WORKERS MOVEMENT
AND DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL**

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*Final Draft Version
April 17, 2009
International Peasant Day*

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On the night of October 29, 1985, more than 200 trucks, buses and cars converged from 32 different municipal districts in Brazil's southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul to occupy a mostly idle, 9,200-hectare cattle ranch known as the Annoni estate. Over than 6,000 people participated in what was then the largest and most thoroughly planned land occupation in Brazilian history. By morning they had erected a sprawling village of black-tarp tents and organized a security team to prevent police eviction. In a matter of days, the peasants established an elaborate internal organization: a network of family groups, a variety of task teams, a coordination council and a leadership committee. Everyday life at the encampment was a busy hive of activities and meetings. Next to a patch of dense forest, the landless gathered daily by a large cross for prayers, religious and protest songs, announcements and hearty words of encouragement from an array of supporters. A vast solidarity network was established to further the cause of the peasants at the Annoni estate. Shortly after the occupation, the local Catholic bishop and 80 priests showed up at the camp to bless the landless struggle.

Approximately 1,250 families obtained a landholding from the concerted pressure and long-sustained mobilization which followed the Annoni occupation. This involved a broad range of essentially non-violent collective action measures, varying from countless lobbying efforts with government officials, including three trips to meet with national authorities in Brasilia, and an array of high-profile protest tactics. The statistics of the struggle undertaken by the Annoni occupants are quite revealing. In the eight years it took to settle all these families, landless people from the Annoni estate were engaged in 36 land occupations; at least 30 major protest rallies; nine hunger strikes; two lengthy marches, including a 450 km, 27-day march to Porto Alegre, the state capital; three road blockades; and nine building takeovers, six of these at National Land Reform Institute (INCRA) and three at the State Assembly. Ten human lives were lost in these struggles, including seven children who died from precarious health conditions at the landless camp. Of the adults, two were peasants and one was a police officer killed

during a protest melee in Porto Alegre. The piecemeal settlement of all the Annoni families was completed only in 1993.¹

Here stands a founding moment of one of the most important and long-lasting grassroots movements for land reform in world history: Brazil's Movement of Landless Rural Workers, best known by its acronym MST (in Portuguese, *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*). By all accounts, the MST is nowadays Latin America's premier social movement.

This article is written in the context of today, where the MST is often portrayed as a menace to Brazil's democratic institutions. It thus seeks to address two basic issues: how does the MST relate to Brazil's political process? And, what is the MST's impact on democracy in Brazil? These queries, however, beg an initial question: what is the MST? Hence, this study begins with a contextual and historical overview of the MST. It then examines the movement's main sources of endurance and power. The following two sections review the multifarious ways in which the MST engages the broader political process and affects democracy.

Influential Brazilian intellectuals like José de Souza Martins, Zander Navarro, Francisco Graziano and Dennis Lerrer Rosenfield argue that the MST's confrontational relations with Brazil's governing institutions are harmful for democracy. For Martins, Brazil's most renowned rural sociologist, the MST is the local equivalent to the English Luddite movement, a short-lived popular uprising in the early 19th century famed for wrecking new factory machines. Incited by similar "fundamentalist" beliefs, the MST "refuses to recognize the institutional legitimacy and actions of the government and the state." In fact, according to Martins, the movement's actions and demands represent a "pre-political and precarious attempt to demolish the political order." Navarro, a fellow sociologist, describes the MST as an "anti-systemic" and "anti-state" organization, driven by a hardened Marxist disposition toward non-institutional venues of action. According to Navarro, the MST stopped being a social movement in the 1990s.

¹ These statistics are from Carter (2007). This article builds on Carter (2009b, 2009c, 2009e), and Carter and Carvalho (2009). An early version of this text was published in 2005 as a Working Paper for the University of Oxford's Centre for Brazilian Studies.

Instead, it degenerated into a “semi-clandestine” organization propelled by the “childish Leninist” ideas of a small revolutionary cadre.²

Graziano, a former federal deputy and head of Brazil’s national land reform bureau under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, depicts the MST as “an authoritarian guerrilla organization” that is “undermining democracy” with its land occupations, and even abetting “acts of agrarian terrorism.” Rosenfield, a philosopher and news columnist, treats the MST as a “paramilitary” organization bent on establishing a Soviet and Cuban-like regime in Brazil. MST calls for land reform, the reduction of record-high interest rates, a system of national plebiscites, and a humanistic form of socialism, merely mask, according to Rosenfield, the movement’s efforts to “suppress the market economy, the rule of law and representative democracy.”³

During the last decade, these four intellectuals have helped sanction recurrent media depictions of the MST as an “autocratic, violent, shady revolutionary organization.” As such, they have endorsed a public image that treats the landless movement as a “threat” to the Brazilian state and its democratic regime. The tacit proposition, here, clearly underpins conservative calls to restrain, and even eliminate the MST.

² Martins (2000: 18-19, 26; 2003; 2007); Navarro (2002a: 206- 211; 2002b: 277, 279; 2007; 2009); also see Navarro in Arruda (2007) and Scolesce (2003).

³ Graziano (2004: 304, 72) (2006); Rosenfield (2006: 247, 252-253, 303, 309, 301, 311). The ideas espoused by all four analysts have received widespread attention in Brazil’s mainstream media. Martins is a professor emeritus of the Universidade de São Paulo and former advisor to the Cardoso government. Navarro is a professor at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul and a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Graziano worked for the Cardoso administration and subsequently served as a PSDB (Party of Brazilian Social Democracy) federal deputy for São Paulo. He then set up an agribusiness consulting office; and is currently the Environment Secretary for the state of São Paulo. Rosenfield teaches at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Martins, Graziano and Rosenfield write regular columns published in Brazil’s leading newspapers. During the last decade, Navarro has given extensive interviews on the MST to major national and international press outlets. Both Martins and Navarro were advisors to the MST and the Church’s *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT), prior to their personal fallouts with these organizations in the late 1990s. A closer review of their critique of the MST can be found in Carter (2009d).

The views espoused by these intellectuals have gained traction in top echelons of state and media power. A telling manifestation of this took place in December 2007, when the High Council of Prosecutors of Rio Grande do Sul unanimously approved a secret report that called on the judiciary to take unprecedented measures aimed at “outlawing the MST.” The decision was followed by various efforts to criminalize and curtail MST activities in this southern state. These included the indictment of eight landless activists under a National Security Law sanctioned by Brazil’s military regime, along with various court orders barring the movement from carrying out marches and other peaceful demonstrations.⁴ Press revelations in June 2008 of the secret judicial plans led to a brief scandal; followed by a temporary lull in state hostilities. Yet by early 2009, the state government had renewed efforts to restrict MST activities in Rio Grande do Sul, notably by shutting down all schools set up in its landless camps. The arguments used by the High Council of Prosecutors to justify the MST’s banishment were crafted on the ideas advanced by Zander Navarro and other academic critics.

This article disputes the extreme caricature and unsubstantiated depictions of the MST presented by these intellectuals and much of the Brazilian mainstream press. It challenges their restrictive view of democracy and patronizing representations of this popular movement. The purported conflict between the MST and Brazil’s democratic institutions is far more rhetorical than real. A sober review of the MST’s actual practice shows that it is far from an “anti-state” or “anti-democratic” organization. Quite to the contrary, it demands that the state play an active part in fostering an inclusive model of development; one that seeks

⁴ An incisive depiction of the state government’s efforts to criminalize the landless movement took place in January 2008, when close to 1,000 police officers, supported by 100 vehicles, helicopters, horses and police dogs surrounded the Annoni settlement where 1,500 MST activists from Rio Grande do Sul were holding their 24th state congress. The ostentatious police apparatus was assembled to carry out a court mandate to investigate whether MST participants were responsible for stealing the equivalent of 120 dollars, a watch and a photo camera from a nearby ranch. After a tense stand-off, the police investigators found none of the allegedly missing goods. For a useful analysis of recent legal efforts to curtail the MST, see Scalabrin (2009); for the High Council of Prosecutors of Rio Grande do Sul report on the MST, see Thums (n/date).

to rebalance the nation's social order and strengthen capabilities among its underprivileged population.

During the last quarter of a century, the MST has undertaken a wide range of public efforts to enhance the quality of democracy in Brazil by: organizing the poor at grassroots level and raising consciousness about their basic rights; supporting election candidates; lobbying and bargaining with state officials; collaborating with public authorities to implement various development projects; and running court cases to defend its members while advocating for progressive legal reforms. The movement's sharp impetus and occasionally rough demeanor must be appraised in light of Brazil's striking disparities of wealth and political power; formidable obstacles to land redistribution; widespread rural poverty; and ongoing violations of basic civil rights in the countryside. Given the nature of its struggle, and the options available, the movement's oppositional politics should be understood as grounded, first and foremost, on practical considerations rather than any dogmatic ideology.

The MST's contentious edge, it is argued here, has contributed to Brazil's ongoing democratization process by: (1) highlighting the role of public activism—a form of social conflict grounded on pressure politics and bargaining with state authorities—in building political capabilities among the poor and catalyzing downward redistribution policies; (2) facilitating the extension of basic citizenship rights, broadening the scope of the public agenda, and strengthening civil society through the inclusion of groups representing the most vulnerable strata of the population; and (3) fostering a sense of hope and utopia through the affirmation of ideals imbued in Brazil's long term, complex and open-ended democratization process.

An amiable and institutionalized MST, as Martins, Navarro, Graziano and Rosenfield seem to prefer, would render the movement innocuous and defeat its *raison d'être*. In light of the crude realities of Brazilian rural politics and the enduring powers accrued by its agrarian elite, it would be naïve, at best, to expect the MST's struggle for social justice to require anything less than a tough touch.

Setting the Context

An incisive appraisal of the conditions that have shaped the MST is crucial for understanding its history and activities. Brazil is the world's ninth largest economy and the globe's tenth most unequal society in terms of income distribution. The wealthiest 10 percent of the population holds 45 percent of the nation's income, while the poorest 20 percent holds less than three percent of this income.⁵ This starkly divided society is the upshot of the country's historical configuration, notably, its oligarchic politics, weak patrimonial state, slave-based economy, and striking land concentration. During the 20th century Brazil underwent an intense process of capitalist modernization, led by an invigorated state. Yet its secular inequities have remained largely intact, especially in the countryside. After more than two decades of political democracy and ongoing mobilization for agrarian reform, the nation continues to exhibit one of the world's highest patterns of land concentration. According to Brazil's land registry, 1.6 percent of the landholders control 47 percent of the nation's farmland, while a third of the farmers hold 1.6 percent of this area.⁶

The nation's stark social disparities are responsible for producing a disjointed, apartheid-like society.⁶ In rural Brazil, a highly modernized and dynamic agricultural economy coexists with a pauperized society in which more than half of the population lives below the national poverty line. The nation is a leading global producer and exporter of major food commodities--notably sugar, coffee, oranges, soybeans, and beef--yet according to a government survey, more than 25 million Brazilians, 14 percent of the population, have suffered from hunger in recent years.⁷ Over the last few decades Brazil has become largely

⁵ UNDP (2007: 282). Brazil's income inequality ranking is based on data for 139 countries, computed by Carter (2009f). According to a study conducted by Campos, Barbosa, Pochmann, Amorin and Silva (2005: 29), the combined resources of the richest 5,000 Brazilian families--that is, 0.001 percent of the population-- amounts to 40 percent of the nation's GDP.

⁶ This data is from the government's 2003 land registry, as published in DATALUTA (2008: 27). For helpful historical reviews of Brazil's agrarian structure and politics, see José de Souza Martins (1997, 1994); Leonilde Sérvolo de Medeiros (1989); João Pedro Stédile (1994); Guilherme Costa Delgado (2009).

⁷ World Bank (2005, 275); IPEA (2005, 56).

urbanized and currently only one-fifth of its population lives in the countryside and works in agriculture.⁸ Still, the number of landless people is estimated between 3.3 and 6.1 million families, while Brazil's unproductive farmland comprises more than a quarter of the national territory.⁹

Brazil's sharp class asymmetries condition the balance of forces in its society and shape much of its political process. Three sets of obstacles, in particular, have thwarted the implementation of a progressive agrarian reform. These are: the enduring influence of the agrarian elite, an oligarchic system of governance, and an acute concentration of media power.

The continuing strength of the landlord class owes much to the policies, legal framework and inactions of the Brazilian state. Government subsidies and technical support to large commercial farmers, instituted after the mid 1960s, fueled the rise of an intense process of capitalist modernization in agriculture. Rural production increased substantially in the ensuing decades. The 1982 debt crisis compelled the state to augment its agro-exports to repay its foreign and domestic creditors. The agrarian elite's privileged access to public resources and protection intensified under these economic policies. Throughout this process, the state continued to protect large landholders through assorted measures, such as negligible taxation on rural properties; state acquiescence to the fraudulent appropriation of vast tracks of the nation's territory (especially in the Amazon); lax enforcement of environmental, labor and agrarian reform laws; judicial favoritism towards the agrarian elite; and highly inflated compensations for most land expropriations. Trade liberalization policies established in the 1990s gave rise to an influential agribusiness sector, operating in close partnership with the world's leading agrifood conglomerates –notably, Monsanto, Syngenta, Dupont, Bayer, Acher Daniels Midland (ADM), Cargill and Bunge— which control global markets for seeds, chemical inputs and agricultural trading.¹⁰ As a result, over the

⁸ CEPAL (2004).

⁹ Del Grossi et al. (2001); MDA (2003, 43 and table 5.1.1.1).

¹⁰ On the power of global agrifood corporations, see ActionAid International (2006).

last two decades Brazil has witnessed the formation of a powerful triple alliance between the national landed elite, the state and global agrifood corporations.

Thus, contrary to the assessments offered by Navarro, Martins and Graziano, Brazil's agrarian elite has not reached levels of "unprecedented weakness," become "more receptive to land reform," or "vanished" as result of their modernization.¹¹ Large landholders in Brazil continue to wield significant economic influence and political clout. Though more modernized and well assimilated into the nation's competitive electoral process, this sector has generally resisted agrarian reform and the adoption of other pro-poor measures aimed at extending effective citizenship rights in Brazil.

Various facets of Brazilian politics bolstered the nation's lopsided distributions of political power. A highly fragmented party system, widespread clientelistic practices, including frequent vote buying among the poor; and the "un-rule of law" among marginalized sectors of the Brazilian population; have historically weakened the political capabilities and representation of popular interests. Enduring patrimonial legacies and a disjointed national bureaucracy have facilitated elite capture of state resources.¹² Adding to this, the over-representation of conservative rural interests in Congress due to the mal-apportionment of legislative seats, have assured the agrarian elite and close conservative allies control of more than a third of the seats in the lower chamber. This multiparty coalition known as the "*bancada ruralista*" has been the largest voting bloc in Congress since Brazil's re-democratization. Their political clout has compelled all

¹¹ Navarro (2002b: 274), Martins (2000: 48) and Graziano (2004: 133). The empirical bases for these assertions are remarkably poor. Navarro, for instance, equates the diminished visibility of a single large landholding association, the Democratic Ruralist Union (*União Democrática Ruralista*, UDR) to the demise of an entire agrarian class, ignoring the breadth of organizations representing rural elite interests, as well as the many informal ways through which this sector has traditionally exercised its influence and power.

¹² On Brazil's party system and political clientelism see Mainwarring (1999); on the "un-rule of law" see Méndez, O'Donnell and Pinheiro (1999), Pinheiro (1997) and Pereira (2000). On the patrimonial fragmentation of the Brazilian state, see Weyland (1996). On the nation's enduring traditional politics, see Hagopian (1996).

recent civilian presidents to appease the large landowners' caucus in order to sustain majority coalitions in the legislature.¹³

These and other features of Brazilian politics have shorn up what Alfred Montero describes as a system of “government by and for the few,” in which minority interests have exhibited a resilient capacity “to block institutional change.”¹⁴ Under these oligarchic arrangements, the distribution of public resources has usually favored dominant interests over the needs of the poor. The following findings serve to illustrate the point. Between 1995 and 2005, landless peasants had an average of one federal deputy for every 612,000 families, while the large landlords had one deputy for every 236 families. The political representation of landlords was therefore 2,587 times greater than that of landless peasants. As a result of these disparities, each of Brazil's largest landlords had access to U.S.\$1,587 from public coffers for every dollar made available to a landless family.¹⁵ The numbers speak eloquently for themselves.

Another powerful obstacle to agrarian reform in Brazil stems from the nation's conservative, oligopolistic media structure. Through its influential role in shaping the nation's public agenda, the mainstream press has done more to buttress the country's political and social inequities than to challenge these conditions. According to estimates, nine family conglomerates generate 85 percent of the country's news information. Though staffed with many competent journalists, the striking concentration of media power and its attendant class biases explain much of the one-sided, mostly negative, and often blatantly hostile coverage accorded to popular movements like the MST.¹⁶ As Guillermo

¹³ In the last three legislatures only two percent of federal deputies were linked to popular organizations in the countryside, such as the MST and CONTAG, see Carter (2009b). On the over-representation of conservative rural interests, see Stepan (2001: 343; 2000), and Snyder and Samuels (2004). On the *bancada ruralista*, see Vigna (2003).

¹⁴ Montero (2005: 51).

¹⁵ Carter (2009b).

¹⁶ Informative accounts of the media's portrayal of the MST can be found in Lerrer (2005), Comparato (2003) and Berger (1998).

O'Donnell explains, in highly unequal societies, "Few issues get onto the public agenda other than those that interest the dominant sectors and classes except concerns for 'public security,' which often entail the criminalization of poverty, and, with it, further repressions in the civil rights of the popular." The "resulting deafness of the agenda" to the need-claims of popular groups, he adds, "is an indication of the low quality of these democracies."¹⁷

Brazilian peasant organizations have sought to overcome such "deafness" through recurrent mobilizations, including 7,078 land occupations between 1987 and 2006.¹⁸ Successive governments have responded to such demands by undertaking various land distribution measures. From 1985 to 2006 close to 825,000 families received a parcel of land, in an area amounting to a total of 41.3 million hectares; a territory as large as Sweden. Brazilian government spokespersons have often touted these land reform initiatives as "the world's largest."¹⁹ The absolute numbers are certainly impressive. Yet Brazil is the fifth largest nation in the globe in population and territory, hence the need for proportional comparisons. Weighed against 16 other Latin American countries that undertook comparable reforms, Brazil actually ranks last in the percentage of beneficiary families (at five percent of the nation's agricultural workforce), and twelfth in land allocation (based on the distribution of 11.6 percent of the nation's farmland).²⁰

These figures are clearly indicative of Brazil's conservative trend in land tenure policies. Since the return to political democracy, all presidents, from José Sarney to Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, have pursued some variation of what could be broadly described as a "conservative agrarian reform." Under all these administrations, the impetus for reform has been essentially reactive and restrained. It has strived mainly to appease rural conflicts, rather than promote

¹⁷ O'Donnell (2005: 59).

¹⁸ Carter and Carvalho (2009).

¹⁹ Graziano (2004: 238); Carta Maior (2009).

²⁰ Land reform figures and comparative rankings are from Carter and Carvalho (2009) and Carter (2009b).

family farming through proactive measures aimed at transforming the rural structure and its power relations.²¹ By treating agrarian reform as an isolated problem, of marginal interest to the nation's development, all governments have engaged in an *ad hoc* distribution process, offering land in places convenient to the state and landowning elite.²² As a rule, all governments have shied from taking measures that would confront or upset Brazil's dominant rural forces: its large landholders and agribusiness conglomerates. As a consequence, Brazil's agrarian reform has had largely negligible effects on the nation's land tenure pattern.

All these mobilizations for land have taken place amid recurrent human rights violations in the Brazilian countryside, as noted in Table 1, and striking levels of impunity. According to the CPT, between 1985 and 2006, 1,465 land reform activists and peasants, including dozens of children, were killed in different rural conflicts. Only 8% of the cases were ever brought to trial, and barely 20 landlords who hired the gunmen to execute such crimes have been condemned by the courts.²³

Table 1

²¹ A major survey of agrarian reform settlements found that 96 percent of all these communities had originated through some form of land struggle, see Leite et al. (2004: 40-43). On average, peasants have had to mobilize for four years in order to gain access to a farm plot, due to the restrictive legal and bureaucratic process required to create a reform settlement, see Carter and Carvalho (2009).

²² This explains the fact that more than 70 percent of all land distributed between 1985 and 2006 has taken place in the Amazonian agricultural frontier (including the neighbouring states of Mato Grosso and Maranhão), where land values tend to be much lower than in the rest of Brazil.

²³ CPT (2007a).

Land Distribution & Human Rights Violations in Brazil, 1985 - 2006								
President	Period	Beneficiary Families			Area Distributed (in hectares)			Human Rights Violations ^(a) Yearly Average
		Total	Yearly Average	Amazon %	Total	Yearly Average	Amazon %	
Sarney	1985 - 1989	92.178	18.436	44	5.091.049	1.018.210	64	312 ^(b)
Collor & Franco	1990 - 1994	57.194	14.299	58	2.895.903	723.976	71	315
Cardoso 1	1995 - 1998	299.863	74.966	31	12.222.613	3.055.653	41	198
Cardoso 2	1999 - 2002	155.491	38.873	28	6.768.771	1.692.193	41	225
Lula 1	2003 - 2006	220.606	55.152	47	14.356.824	3.589.206	73	376
Total	1985 - 2006	825.332	37.515	38	41.335.160	1.878.871	57	284

Source: DATALUTA and CPT, compiled by Carter and Carvalho (2009).²⁴

(a) The figures for *Human Rights Violations* are based on yearly averages per government period of the total number of people that have been assassinated, suffered assassination attempts and received death threats over rural conflicts in Brazil.

(b) Human Rights Violations data for the Sarney period covers only two years, 1988 and 1989.

²⁴ These figures draw on data provided by DATALUTA, which is generated by the Núcleo de Estudos da Reforma Agrária (NERA) of the Universidade Estadual de São Paulo (UNESP). Both the Cardoso and Lula governments have published land reform statistics substantially higher than those generated through DATALUTA's scholarly review of data obtained from the federal land reform agency, INCRA. The figures presented here have not computed the data from 55 extractive reserves created in the Amazonian rainforest (covering an area of 18,339,543 hectares and benefiting 35,957 families); as these huge areas averaging more than 500 hectares per recipient cannot be properly equated to family farmland allocations. For a closer examination of the ongoing debate over Brazil's land reform statistics, see Carter (2009b), Delgado (2009) and Melo (2006: 220-223).

Making History

Brazil's first stirrings for land reform took place in the mid 1950s, in the country's Northeast region. These mobilizations gained broader impetus in the early 1960s and prompted President João Goulart to issue the nation's first agrarian reform law in 1964. Days later, however, a military coup d'état ended Brazil's fledgling democratic regime. The military takeover was strongly backed by the influential landlord class. Popular movements in the countryside and their leftist allies suffered extensive repression during the ensuing years. All remaining peasant associations were subject to state controls. Under the military regime, land reform was confined to a colonization program in the Amazon and largely removed from public debate.

The MST was forged in the context of a second wave of peasant mobilizations that surfaced in the early 1980s. Officially created in January 1984, in Cascavel, Paraná, the movement emerged under the aegis of the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*, CPT), an ecumenical agency linked to the Catholic Church. The CPT nurtured the MST's formation by building a network of activists engaged in different land struggles across southern Brazil.

The movement's origin in the South was facilitated by the region's relatively high levels of rural development, state capacity, education and social capital. The strong family farm legacy, particularly in Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná, a consequence of intense European immigration after the mid 1800s, helped foster a historically active and inventive civil society. Previous land mobilizations, notably during the late 1950s in Paraná and early 1960s in Rio Grande do Sul, had established an important precedent in the region. Moreover, despite many restrictions, the creation of state-sponsored rural trade unions in the 1960s and 1970s helped diffuse basic notions of citizenship rights and nurture a sense of class identity among the peasantry.²⁵

The MST's genesis was shaped, in particular, by the rise of a large contingent of landless farmers in the 1970s. This resulted mostly from population

²⁵ On the history of these rural trade unions, see Maybury-Lewis (1994), Medeiros (1989).

growth in the countryside, the capitalist modernization of agriculture and the state-led construction of large hydroelectric dams. The military regime's gradual *abertura* in the late 1970s created new political opportunities for popular mobilization. These changes, in turn, enabled progressive religious agents – inspired by innovative Catholic trends, including a theology of liberation— to play a pivotal role in re-igniting Brazil's struggle for land reform. Indeed, these and other Church initiatives at the grassroots helped foster an array of rural social movements, the MST being its most prominent offspring.²⁶

The landless movement expanded to other regions of Brazil through the support of a progressive network of Church and rural trade union activists. By 1997 it had established a foothold in 23 of the country's 27 federal units. Nine years later it carried out its first land occupation in the state of Roraima, near the border with Guyana.

After the mid 1990s, the MST became particularly active in the Brazilian Northeast. In 2006, nearly half of its estimated 2,012 agricultural settlements were located in this region. By then, the movement had prodded the Brazilian government to distribute close to 3.7 million hectares or 14,285 square miles; a territory roughly the size of Switzerland or half the state of South Carolina. An estimated 135,000 MST families have benefited from these measures.²⁷

During the last decade, over 90 peasant associations were involved in land struggles across Brazil. The MST and the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (*Confederação dos Trabalhadores Agrícolas*, CONTAG) are the largest and most active of these organizations. The MST is predominant in the South, as well as some states in the Southeast and Northeast.²⁸ In the Amazon, the Center-West

²⁶ Key sources on the MST's history and evolution include Branford and Rocha (2002); Carter (2009a); Fernandes (2000); Ondetti (2008); Stédile and Fernandes (1999); Wright and Wolford (2003); as well as Welch's (2006) useful review of the literature on this movement. On the Church's involvement in support of the MST, see Poletto (2009) and Poletto and Canuto (2002).

²⁷ Estimates of MST settlements are from Carter and Carvalho (2009).

²⁸ The federal units where MST settlements comprise more than half of the state's total settlements are (ranked from the top): Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Sergipe, Espírito Santo, Paraná, Pernambuco, Ceará and São Paulo.

and other Northeastern states, land struggles have been led primarily by CONTAG-affiliated unions and various local movements, including informal groups of squatters. In 2006, over a quarter of Brazil's agrarian settlements were connected to the MST.²⁹ Yet more than 90 percent of the land distributed since 1984 resulted from mobilizations undertaken by peasants groups that were not linked to the MST.³⁰

The MST gained ample national visibility in the mid 1990s. A surge in land mobilizations after 1995 and ample media coverage of dramatic developments in the countryside, notably two police massacres of landless peasants in the Amazon, contributed much to this newfound impetus. The April 1996 slaughter of 19 MST peasants at Eldorado dos Carajás, Pará, triggered a national scandal, and prompted the federal government to accelerate land distribution throughout Brazil.³¹

This episode, in particular, along with the benign depiction of the landless struggle in a highly popular television soap opera, *O Rei do Gado* (The Cattle King), which aired two months after the massacre, helped generate widespread support for land reform. This momentum peaked during the first months of 1997, with the MST's national march to Brasília. Led by 1,300 people, divided into three columns originating in distant corners of the country, the marchers walked for 64 days, some covering as much as 640 miles, before their triumphant arrival into the nation's capital. At the final gathering in front of the National Congress close to 100,000 supporters came to rally for agrarian reform. These events allowed the MST to gain wide-spread recognition as Brazil's principal social movement.

²⁹ Carter and Carvalho (2009).

³⁰ Carter and Carvalho (2009). The disparity between the percentage of MST settlements and area allocated reflects the fact that reform plots in the Amazon are much larger in size than those distributed in regions where the MST is more active.

³¹ A telling illustration of Brazil's "un-rule of law" in the countryside can be gleaned from the aftermath of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre. The first court trial of the 146 police officers charged with killing 19 people, and seriously wounding 70 other peasants, found them all to be innocent. A retrial followed the annulment of the first ruling. Here, only two senior police officers were found guilty; none of which has actually spent time in prison.

Opinion polls taken in April 1997 showed that 94 percent of the population felt that the struggle for land reform was just, while 85 percent indicated a support for non-violent land occupations as a way to accelerate government reform efforts.³² Around this time the MST became one of the leading critics of the neoliberal policies pursued by the Cardoso administration and various state governors.

As noted in Table 1, the Cardoso and Lula administrations substantially increased the pace of land distribution in Brazil. Together, both administrations helped settle 82 percent of all reform beneficiaries between 1985 and 2006. Each of these governments, however, exhibited different dispositions towards the MST and varying policy concerns.

The Cardoso administration multiplied the number of reform settlements, especially between 1996 and 1999, when the government's monetary stabilization program triggered a temporary drop in rural property values. The new agricultural communities instituted during the Cardoso era, however, received meager ancillary support from the government, despite the existence of federal laws mandating the provision of credit, infrastructure and basic services to ensure the development of these reform settlements.³³ During Cardoso's second term a discernable effort was made to restrict MST protest and curb financial support for its activities. Aside from instituting efforts to criminalize landless mobilizations, it instigated a media campaign aimed at discrediting the MST's public image.³⁴ With the backing of The

³² These figures are from Ibope, one of Brazil's leading polling firms, and were published by O Estado de São Paulo on April 16, 1997; see Comparato (2003: 190-191).

³³ A 2002 survey of all land reform settlements created between 1995 and 2001 found that nearly half of these communities were in a "precarious state." Over half of them lacked internal roads or access to public transportation; 55 percent had no electricity; and 77 percent had no access to a secondary school, see Sparovek (2003: 169, 100-114).

³⁴ On President Cardoso's agrarian reform policies and relations with the MST, see Branford (2009), Fernandes (2009), Ondetti (2008) and Comparato (2003). The mainstream media's hostility towards the MST picked up steam under Cardoso's second term and has remained strong during Lula's tenure in office, partly as a way of keeping Lula's left-leaning cabinet members in check. The decade-long media attack explains much of the drop in the MST's popularity, as revealed in an April 2008 poll take by Ibope, which found that 50 percent of Brazilians held a negative view of the

World Bank, the Cardoso government introduced a decentralized, market-based approach to land distribution, which severely undercut the MST's capacity for collective action.³⁵

The election of President Lula, a longstanding MST friend, was greeted with an enthusiastic sense of relief within the landless movement MST. The Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) administration no longer sought to criminalize the movement's protests, despite repeated demands for this by right-wing politicians and the conservative media establishment. Notwithstanding a greater capacity for dialogue with popular movements and increased public funding for family agriculture and reform settlements, the Lula government failed to pursue the more audacious agrarian policies he had ardently defended in the past. The annual rate of land reform beneficiaries during Lula's first term in office was actually lower than that of the Cardoso era. Moreover, 73 percent of Lula's land distributions took place in the Amazonian frontier, often in remote areas, compared to only 41 percent of the Cardoso land allocations.³⁶

Lula's conservative agrarian policies were largely the result of the administration's fear of upsetting agribusiness interests, alienating its conservative congressional allies, and undermining its fiscal austerity policies. Eager to assure a steady flow of hard currency obtained through agro-exports, and increase the production of agro-fuels, the Lula government lent ample support for the expansion of large-scale agribusiness farming. From 2003 to 2007, state support for the rural elite was seven times larger than that offered to the nation's family farmers, even though the latter represent 87 percent of Brazil's rural labor force

country's rural social movements, of which the MST was the most recognizable group, see O Estado de São Paulo (2008).

³⁵ On The World Bank's land policies in Brazil, see Sauer and Pereira (2006); Pereira (2004); and Dias Martins (2004).

³⁶ Under the two Cardoso administrations, the government settled a yearly average of 56,919 families, 1,768 families more than under Lula's first term; see Carter and Carvalho (2009).

and produce the bulk of the food consumed by its inhabitants.³⁷ All this led to a growing disenchantment with Lula within the ranks of the MST. As one leader put it, “Lula has now become a friend of our enemies.”

The MST has made great strides since its precarious origins in the 1980s. The movement, nevertheless, is not the great powerhouse in the nation’s political scene imagined by a number of its detractors and admirers. Although large and broadly extended throughout Brazil, the MST comprises only five percent of the country’s rural inhabitants.³⁸ As an organization of poor people, operating with scarce resources, the MST exhibits many of the collective action problems – logistical shortcomings, strategic errors and human vices-- that can be found in other popular groups of this kind. Amid its many limitations, the MST has demonstrated unusual longevity and sophistication for a popular movement. As such, it has effectively re-written the history of popular movements in Brazil.

³⁷ Carter and Carvalho (2009). Adding to this, the Ministry of Agriculture’s budget to support agribusiness farming during the 2008/2009 harvest was six times larger than the funds allocated for Lula’s flagship poverty reduction initiative, the *Programa Bolsa Família*, as can be ascertained by contrasting data published by MAG (2009) and INESC (2009).

³⁸ Carter (2009b)

Building Capabilities

The MST's endurance and growth owes much to its ability to make the best of the opportunities and obstacles on hand. The nation's political freedoms and competitive elections, for one, have allowed the movement to expand its organizing efforts and petition public authorities. State response to MST demands, however partial and delayed, has enhanced the movement's attractiveness among its actual and potential participants. Moreover, Brazil's apartheid society, with vast numbers of people living in abject poverty, has ensured a large contingent of potential recruits for the MST. In turn, the steep obstacles to agrarian reform have prompted the movement to boost its organizational capacities, in order to extract concessions from the state and make up for inadequate government services. All this has led the movement to engage in a continuous process of pressure politics and bargaining with state authorities. As a result, the MST has developed seven major sources of power, namely, its: 1) mobilization capacity, 2) multifaceted yet flexible organization, 3) strategic creativity, 4) quest for financial independence, 5) resourceful allies, 6) investment in popular education, and 7) mystique and discipline.

1. Mobilization Capacity. The movement possesses a large membership and the adroit ability to mobilize masses of people. In 2006, the MST had an estimated membership of 1.1 million people, supported by 20,000 activists engaged in coordinating movement activities on various issues and levels.³⁹ That same year, the MST led 55 percent of all land occupations in Brazil and was active in more than half of all popular demonstrations in the countryside.⁴⁰ The movement has sponsored some of the largest and most elaborate mass mobilizations in Brazilian history. In May 2005, the MST organized a 125-mile march to Brasília with 12,000 people. The 17-day mobilization was supported by an impressive logistical apparatus: several massive circus tents to lodge all

³⁹ Carter and Carvalho (2009). The number of MST members is precarious, given that the MST has no formal membership roster. Needless to say, levels of commitment among MST members are quite variable.

⁴⁰ Author's calculus based on CPT (2007b: 83-89; 176-199).

campers, 65 transport vehicles, a roving child care center, 325 health workers, and a cooking staff of 415 people responsible serving three meals a day, prepared with food donations from MST settlements scattered across the country. The event even featured a mobile radio station which broadcast programs to the marchers through 10,000 small radio receivers borrowed from the World Social Forum. Never had the world recorded a long distance march as large and sophisticated as this one.⁴¹

2. Multifaceted yet Flexible Organization. The MST is not a stodgy bureaucratic entity. Rather it operates through a complex and scattered network of collective groups. Its multiple instances of coordination—at national, state, regional and local levels—function in a fairly decentralized though cohesive manner. The MST relies fundamentally on volunteers, yet has strengthened its professional support over the last years. The MST's main national and state offices employ full-time staff organizers and technical advisors, albeit mostly at minimal living stipends. Though consistent and synchronized in many of its tactics, the movement allows for regional variation and experimentation. Between 1988 and 2006 the MST created 13 task teams to deal with various facets of its struggle. These multi-layered collectives cover an assorted range of issues, from education, finance, recruitment and grassroots organizing, to health, communication, culture, gender, youth, human rights, international relations, and production and ecology. These task teams are responsible for managing 161 cooperatives, including four credit unions; 140 agro-industries; scores of training centers, news outlets, and artistic groups; and a variety of national and transnational advocacy networks.⁴² The MST's growth and maturation over the last quarter of a century has engendered a highly sophisticated organization that has gradually come to assimilate a more comprehensive, long term and holistic agenda for social change.⁴³

⁴¹ Further details on this march can be found in Carter (2009b).

⁴² Cooperatives and agro-industry figures are from *Revista Sem Terra* (2009: 16).

⁴³ For a closer review of the MST's internal organization see Carter and Carvalho (2009), Fernandes (2009) and Branford and Rocha (2002).

3. Strategic Creativity. The MST has learned to seek and devise homegrown solutions to a wide range of practical problems. This led the movement to develop an inventive ethos, open to experimentation and renewal. MST ingenuity is sharply exhibited in the way its local activists plan and carry out its massive and peaceful land occupations, a generally risky endeavor conducted with tactical acumen. Throughout its history the MST has shown a discernable capacity for innovation and adaptation. All this owes much to the movement's practical disposition, its collective decision-making process, and ability to learn from past mistakes.

Examples of MST's resourcefulness abound. After the mid 1990s, the movement began to reappraise its early attachment to an industrial, chemical-dependent model of agriculture, and began to foster a growing enthusiasm for agro-ecology. The 1997 creation of BioNatur, the movement's first cooperative for organic seeds, established in Rio Grande do Sul, marked a turning point in this process. A decade later, BioNatur had become the largest producer of organic seeds in Latin America, with 117 crop varieties and annual yield of 20 tons of seeds. In the mid 1990s, the MST sought to overcome a period of relative isolation by investing significantly in the creation of various news outlets, in addition to the monthly newspaper established in 1981. Along with a glossy bi-monthly magazine, web page, 30 community radio stations, and news programs distributed to 1,500 radios, the MST helped establish a publishing house, two news agencies and a weekly newspaper, *Brasil de Fato*, sold at newsstands across the country.⁴⁴ In the late 1990s, after extensive lobbying, MST women gained access to child care facilities at every movement gathering; and by 2003 had helped guarantee full gender equality within the organization's leadership structure.

4. Quest for Financial Independence. As a poor people's movement, the MST has faced an ongoing challenge in securing the material resources needed to

⁴⁴ On BioNatur and the MST's communication outlets, see Carter and Carvalho (2009).

sustain its activities. Early concerns about becoming too dependent on a handful of external supporters led the movement to diversify and decentralize much of its fundraising efforts. At the local level, the MST receives regular contributions from its cooperatives and members, and occasional assistance from municipal governments. Aid is also channeled through an assortment of civil society groups, including religious institutions, trade unions, student groups, artists, NGOs and educational institutions. Federal and state governments have funded various educational and agricultural projects, and often provide food rations for the movement's landless camps. Between 1995 and 2005, three associations linked to the MST received 19.2 million dollars from the federal government.⁴⁵ International sources of support for the MST have generally come from church organizations, solidarity groups, foundations, NGOs, as well as development agencies run by governments in Europe, Canada, Cuba and Venezuela. In the early 2000s, the European Union contributed 1.3 million dollars to help build the MST's own university.⁴⁶ Cuba and Venezuela, in turn, have provided full scholarships for 120 MST medical students.⁴⁷

5. Resourceful Allies. The movement's birth and ongoing expansion would not have been possible without the contribution of numerous partners, notably within Brazilian civil and political society. Over time, the movement became adept at capitalizing on sympathetic pockets within the state, including those in the federal land reform agency, INCRA. Its strongest supporters in civil society include liberal sectors of the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, urban and rural trade unions, as well as progressive NGOs, university professors, students,

⁴⁵ During the same period, five societies representing elite rural interests received 509.6 million dollars from the federal government; a sum 27 times larger than that made available to support MST projects in education, agriculture and health. Despite these vast disparities, virtually all of the intense congressional and media scrutiny has been on the monies allocated to MST-related associations, and not those that subsidize the associations controlled by wealthy ranchers and planters. The figures used here were computed from data compiled by Melo (2006: 127, 177).

⁴⁶ Arruda (2005).

⁴⁷ *Revista Sem Terra* (2009: 17).

musicians and actors. The MST has also played an active role in several Brazilian networks such as the National Forum for Agrarian Reform and Justice in the Countryside, the *Consulta Popular*, the Coordination of Social Movements and the Church-sponsored Popular Assembly. Within political society, the movement has enjoyed the backing of left-leaning political parties, notably the PT. The MST's international ties were strengthened considerably during the 1990s. After receiving Sweden's Alternative Nobel prize in 1991, it established solidarity groups in 14 European and North American countries. In 1994, following several years of active engagement with other popular groups in Latin America, the movement helped create the Latin American Coordination of Peasant Organizations (*Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo*, CLOC). Two years later it joined and became a leading proponent of *La Via Campesina*, an international peasant coalition, which by 2008 had expanded to include 168 associations from 69 countries around the globe.

6. Investment in Popular Education. The movement has placed a uniquely strong emphasis on providing an education to its participants and raising popular consciousness. Starting in 1984, the MST set up a network of 1,800 primary and secondary schools, which has served an estimated 250,000 children. The bulk of its 8,000 teachers use pedagogical methods inspired by Paulo Freire and teaching materials developed by the MST's own educational team.⁴⁸ Since 1991 the MST has provided adult literacy classes for more than 50,000 people.⁴⁹ Significant resources have been devoted to the preparation of its cadres. Between 1988 and 2002 over 100,000 activists took part of hundreds of workshops organized on a assorted range of topics.⁵⁰ In early 2005 the movement inaugurated its first university, the *Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes*, named after a renowned Brazilian intellectual, on an attractive campus near the city of São Paulo. Over the last decade, the MST established partnerships with 60 Brazilian universities offering

⁴⁸ Carter and Carvalho (2009). On the MST's approach to education see, Kolling, Cerioli, Caldart (2002); Caldart (2000); and Kane (2001: 90-110).

⁴⁹ *Revista Sem Terra* (2009: 16).

⁵⁰ Carter and Carvalho (2009).

various degrees and special courses for its members. These programs and workshops complement the intense pedagogical experience that takes place during its collective struggles. These moments, in particular, have helped MST participants overcome previous sentiments of disempowerment and fatalism, and foster a strong sense of agency. In this way, the movement has nurtured feelings of dignity, self-confidence and social responsibility among its members.⁵¹

7. Mystique and Discipline. Under the auspices of the Church and liberation theology, the movement learned to cultivate a sense of “*mística*” among its participants. And has done so by creating a rich symbolic repertoire –its flag, songs, chants, theatre, poetry, and stirring speeches— displayed in ritual gatherings that stimulate feelings of shared sacrifice, camaraderie, and idealism, and offer moments of festive commemoration. All this has helped nourish an intense social energy, forceful convictions and strong sense of identity. Among MST activists one often hears expressions of deep emotional attachment, such as: “I love the MST,” “The movement is my family.”⁵²

Alongside these strong dispositions, the movement normally exhibits a well composed and orderly lifestyle. By disciplining passions and other raw impulses into more methodical forms of behavior, the MST has helped nurture what Norbert Elias describes as a “civilizing process.”⁵³ Feelings of enhanced self-control and greater self-esteem have inclined MST participants to channel their contentious behavior through constructive means. The movement’s sense of mystique and discipline are interwoven in subtle ways. Together, they elicit and channel the emotions that give vitality, courage and perseverance to the MST’s struggles. They are its intangible sources of power.

⁵¹ Caldart (2000) and Quirk (2008).

⁵² Elsewhere, I have characterized these forceful convictions as grounded on Max Weber’s concept of “ideal interest” behaviour, whereby actors are strategically oriented toward the fulfilment of an absolute, non-negotiable goal, see Carter (2008, 2003). On the MST’s symbolic repertoire, see Vieira and McGuirk (2007).

⁵³ Elias (1982).

Engaging the Political Process

MST relations with Brazil's political system are multifarious and dynamic. This owes much to the assorted and decentralized structure of the Brazilian state, and variegated forms of access and influence on its decision making process. Brazil's democratic freedoms, oligarchic traditions, federalist regime, strong local governments, distinct electoral system, and disjointed bureaucratic apparatus play a key role in shaping the MST's repertoire for collective action. At any given juncture, the movement's choice of tactics will be determined largely by the perceived opportunities and challenges at stake. In the MST's own parlance, its strategic options emerge from its "analysis of the correlation of forces."

This section examines the predominant forms of MST interaction with Brazil's governing institutions. Contrary to established views in Brazil, it argues that none of these patterns of engagement are essentially "anti-democratic." If anything, such actions display the kinds of contentious practices employed by popular groups engaged in democratizing struggles throughout the modern world.⁵⁴

The MST's prevailing mode of action is grounded on a distinct form of social conflict described here as *public activism*. This approach to social struggle is substantially different from that of an armed insurgency, a scattered riot or what James Scott defines as "everyday forms of resistance," to describe informal, discreet and disguised forms of popular aggression.⁵⁵ Unlike these other patterns of social confrontation, the MST's public activism involves an organized, politicized, visible, autonomous, periodic and non-violent form of social conflict.

Actions carried out through public activism are geared towards drawing public attention; influencing state policies, through pressure politics, lobbying and negotiations; and shaping societal ideas, values, and actions. Typically,

⁵⁴ On the democratizing role of popular sector groups, see Collier (1999), and Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992).

⁵⁵ According to Scott, everyday forms of resistance include actions such as poaching, foot-dragging, evasion, discrete forms of land squatting, anonymous threats, sabotage and arson (1990, 1985). This discussion of "public activism:" builds on Carter (2009c).

mobilizations of this kind employ an array of modern repertoires of contention, such as demonstrations, marches, petitions, group meetings, hunger strikes, protest camps, election campaigns, and acts of civil disobedience such as sit-ins, road blockades, building takeovers, and organized land occupations.⁵⁶ Unlike other approaches to social conflict, public activism's non-violent thrust makes it essentially compatible with civil society and provides a legitimate democratic vehicle for propelling social change.

Public activism requires certain facilitating conditions, notably, enhanced political opportunities for collective action and substantial access to mobilizing resources. Together, these opportunities and resources structure a set of incentives that persuade contentious groups to make demands on the state and bargain with its authorities. Moreover, they encourage the development of partnerships with civil and political society groups in order to strengthen these demands and improve prospects for a successful negotiation. These conditions help channel social conflict into non-violent forms of interaction with the state and other societal forces. The MST's disposition towards public activism is manifested through various patterns of engagement, as detailed below.

Pressure Politics and Civil Disobedience. The MST's contentious politics often involve disruptive mobilizations. Some of these entail lawful protest activities; others involve acts of civil disobedience. The MST's penchant towards pressure politics is conveyed through an array of authorized demonstrations, ranging from long distance marches, hunger strikes to the organization of landless camps. These protest encampments, with their makeshift plastic tents, well-organized life-style, and red-MST flags flying overhead, are perhaps the most visible, well-known and ingenious repertoire for MST contention. The camps not only make the demand for land reform perceptible. They also facilitate MST consciousness-raising activities among the landless, enable the preparation of other protest mobilizations, and help the movement recruit and train its new cadre.

The most controversial tactics employed by the MST entail acts of passive resistance to civil laws. Principally among these forms of pressure politics are: land

⁵⁶ On this theme, see Sidney Tarrow (1998) and Charles Tilly (1979).

occupations of private or public landholdings, sit-ins at government buildings, and highway blockades. These forms of MST engagement are essentially mass-based, strong-arm actions carried out in a non-violent fashion. They generally infringe conventional laws, notably those protecting property rights. State tolerance or repression of these forms of protest depends principally on the political persuasion of state governors, given their control over police enforcement. In the state of Paraná, for example, the MST experienced greater police hostility under the rightist Governor Jaime Lerner than under his left-leaning successor, Governor Roberto Requião, who on several occasions refused to dispatch public forces to evict MST land occupations. Forceful police removal of land and building occupations are not uncommon. Yet most acts of civil disobedience end peacefully, generally the result of lengthy negotiations with police, judicial and political officials. MST protest mobilizations are invariably geared toward dramatizing a public demand and bringing state authorities to the bargaining table.

Lobbying and Bargaining. MST pressure tactics do not emerge in a vacuum. These are usually preceded by a string of failed petitions and frustrated negotiations with public officials. These activities can take place at various levels of government. The MST's most frequent interlocutors are the staff of the Ministry of Agrarian Development and, especially, its land reform agency, INCRA, given the federal government's privity over agrarian reform laws. If the issue, however, is getting public monies disbursed on time, the target for MST insistence and bargaining could be the Bank of Brazil or the Ministry of Finance. Since 1993, the MST has held fairly regular meetings with all of Brazil's presidents.

Associated Networks with the State. Yet another mode of interaction with the Brazilian political system could be treated as a loosely organized, non-hierarchical pattern of interest representation, offering various types of partnerships with the state.⁵⁷ These associated networks have facilitated different points of access to public resources and participation in selective policy-making bodies. Over the

⁵⁷ The term "associated networks" draws on Chalmers, Martin and Piester (1997). It also shares elements of the state-societal arrangements that Schmitter (1974) described as "societal corporatism."

years, the MST has signed a number of agreements with federal, state and local governments, to carry out a variety of development projects, notably in agriculture, education and public health. In recent years the MST has collaborated with the Ministry of Health on programs to prevent the spread of HIV/Aids and promote the cultivation of herbal medicines. In 2004, Petrobras, Brazil's state oil company, financed the construction of the movement's first natural medicine plant, located in the state of Ceará. In addition, MST representatives have served on various government commissions, local administrations, and even helped run some state agencies. After the 1998 election of Governor Olivio Dutra in Rio Grande do Sul, the MST was invited by the PT administration to direct the state's land reform bureau. Overall, though, partnerships between the Brazilian state and popular organizations have been far more precarious, politicized and intermittent than those established by social democratic states in Western Europe, where labor unions, in particular, have become an integral part of the policy-making framework.

Electoral Participation. MST members have actively engaged in election campaigns and party politics since the mid 1980s. For over two decades the movement held close ties to the PT. In Rio Grande do Sul, for example, the MST elected a five-term PT federal deputy and a string of PT representatives to the state assembly. While both associations shared many members, they have historically run their organizations in an autonomous way. This independence owed much to the fact the MST was founded separately from the PT. It was further reinforced by the PT's early decision to eschew tenets from the traditional left that would have sought to subordinate the movement to the party. Ties between the PT and MST were solidified in the mid 1980s with the formation of the party's National Agrarian Secretary and the Agrarian Nuclei of the Chamber of Deputies. Both party venues offered a space for dialogue and policy formulation that brought together PT officials, MST representatives, rural trade union leaders, and spokespersons from other progressive civil society organizations. In times of need, PT officials have customarily provided support for MST activists.

The ties between the PT and MST were stronger when both party and movement were in opposition to governing authorities and neoliberal policies. The PT's victory in the presidential election of 2002 and decision to uphold many of Cardoso's economic and rural policies led the MST to waver on its alliance with the PT. The movement's disappointment with Lula's policies were initially tempered by the MST's pragmatic decision to side with the PT's left and attack the government's neoliberal economic policies, while sparing President Lula himself. In 2006, the movement campaigned for Lula's re-election in an effort to defeat his more conservative opponent. Despite a growing sense of disenchantment with the PT among MST cadres, the movement has continued to support progressive candidates, linked mostly to the PT.⁵⁸

Manifold Relations with the Rule of Law. The MST's relationship with the legal system is an issue of enduring controversy. Prevailing orthodoxy in Brazil assumes that MST's land and building occupations are in conflict with the rule of law, and a sign of the movement's disdain for the state. This view, however, oversimplifies what is an altogether complex relationship. It ignores the fact that Brazil's justice system is cripplingly bureaucratic, saturated with class bias and traditionally pliant towards landlord interests; hence much of the MST's difficulties in dealing with the legal system.⁵⁹ The idea of a fundamental opposition between the MST and the law omits the fact that social movements around the world have also served as architects of an alternative legal order.

The MST has taken an active part in the nation's debates over the interpretation of existing laws. The 1988 Constitution, for instance, upholds agrarian reform and qualifies property rights by their social function. Despite these provisions, most judges insist on applying the Civil Code's absolutist approach to property rights and thus criminalize land reform activists. In a major

⁵⁸ On the historic relations between the PT and MST, see Branford (2009) and Pereira (2009).

⁵⁹ The MST's mistrust of the Brazilian judiciary is broadly shared in this country, where according to the Corporación Latinobarómetro (2007: 101), only 10 percent of the population believes it would be treated equally in a court of law. For a thoughtful analysis of this problem, see Vieira (2007).

victory for MST lawyers, a 1996 decision by Brazil's highest court ruled that land occupations designed to hasten reform were "substantially distinct" from criminal acts against property. Far from simply disdaining legality, the MST has actively contributed to shaping the debate on the nature and function of law. Through a dedicated and expanding network of close to 500 lawyers, the movement and its allies are frequently involved in running legal cases and lobbying higher echelons of the judiciary. In fact, MST land occupations are often planned with legal issues in mind, by targeting, for example, estates of dubious or illicit proprietorship.⁶⁰

All of these considerations –the MST's disposition towards pressure politics and civil disobedience tactics, negotiations and lobbying with public authorities, associated networks with the state, electoral participation, and manifold relations with the rule of law-- highlight the complex nature of the MST's interaction with Brazil's political institutions. Ostensibly, they demonstrate that for all its harsh rhetoric, the MST is not an "anti-state" or "anti-democratic" movement as some analysts would have us believe. Quite to the contrary, the MST and its allies actively underscore the state's central role in defending human rights and rebalancing the nation's social order through downward redistribution policies. This explains the MST's determined opposition to the neoliberal project of public retrenchment, and the resulting concentration of wealth in the hands of powerful economic forces. Democracy, in the MST's view, cannot be limited to a system of elite competition for public office. Rather, it should encompass a range of efforts geared towards developing greater state accountability and responsiveness to popular sector needs. In this way, democracy would help foster a more inclusive and egalitarian society, offering better conditions for the meaningful exercise of citizen participation.

⁶⁰ My observations on the MST's relation to the rule of law are greatly indebted to Meszaros (2009; 2000a; 200b).

Contributing to Democracy

The prevailing critique of the MST, articulated by Martins, Navarro, Graziano and Rosenfield, presents the landless movement as a “threat to democracy.” In their assault on its reform efforts, these authors display what Albert O. Hirschman described as the “rhetoric of reaction,” notably by advancing the argument that the MST jeopardizes a “previous, precious accomplishment.”⁶¹ The sentiments and ideas espoused by these Brazilian scholars are quite revealing in their assumptions and omissions. Three of these include: a restrictive view of democracy, tacit aversion to class conflict, and a-historical understandings of democratization.

Restrictive views of democracy have long intellectual history. Their proponents have traditionally shared a low esteem for the demos and disdain for the excessive participation and mobilization of popular masses. Their tendency to overlook the impact of large social asymmetries on the distribution of political power and state benefits is matched, as David Held observes, by their skepticism towards about the “possibility of a radical re-organization of society.” “Excessive” criticisms of the government on all too many issues, they fear, could harm democracy by infringing “on the smooth functioning of ‘public’ decision-making.”⁶² These sentiments have an affinity with complacent arguments that treat Brazil as a “consolidated democracy,” and thus downplay prospects for qualitative improvement.

Among MST critics, irritation towards its contentious demeanor is often fueled by discrete cultural norms embedded in mainstream Brazilian politics. One of these conventions is grounded on a strong distaste for explicit manifestations of class conflict. As Bolívar Lamounier explains, this aversion stems from the nation’s oligarchic tradition and the ethos of conciliation and political flexibility it fostered among the ruling elite. This disposition bred a “cultural construction (that) vigorously asserted that zero-sum conflict” was inimical to Brazilian society.

⁶¹ Hirschman (1991: 7).

⁶² Held (1987: 160, 176, 184).

Fueled by patrimonial customs and a lack of experience with “principled politics,” the legacies of this conservative, patriarchal view of politics can be found in depictions of popular class struggles as instances of “childish behavior.”⁶³ Many of the terms used to portray the MST suggest a close affinity with this patronizing ethos: “The MST is the perfect incarnation of the political childishness of sectors of our society;” engaged in a “frivolous resistance” and “comedy of errors;” inspired by the “vulgar Marxist” ideas of its leaders; that merely seek to “indoctrinate” and “manipulate” its “little foot-soldiers;” in what only amounts to a “pre-political” movement or a “pseudo-revolutionary” group.⁶⁴

Analyses that represent the MST as a “threat to democracy” are also short-sighted in their historical understanding of democracy and Brazilian society. They discount the fact that throughout world history the main social force against democratization has been the landlord class, not the peasantry.⁶⁵ The Brazilian case certainly fits the mold. A-historical views of contemporary affairs undermine efforts to examine Brazil’s authoritarian legacies and allow people to assume that large agribusiness farmers are nothing like the traditional landed elite. Since the return to civilian rule, however, politicians and associations representing large landholding interests have consistently opposed different initiatives to strengthen citizenship rights among the poor and thus enhance the quality of democracy in Brazil.

Restrictive and a-historical views of democracy have built-in blinders that hamper an appreciation of the many democratic contributions made by popular movements like the MST. In particular, they disregard the fact that social movements can contribute to democratization both as “explicit programs or as by-products of their action.”⁶⁶ The following comments offer a broad assessment

⁶³ Lamounier (1989: 123-124).

⁶⁴ Navarro interview in Arruda (2003); Navarro (2007); Navarro (2002b: 279); Martins (2000: 114); Navarro (2009); Martins (2000: 18); Graziano (2004: 278).

⁶⁵ On the negative democratic impact of landlords, see Moore (1966), Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992), and Huber and Safford (1995).

⁶⁶ Tilly (2004: 142-143).

of the boisterous conduct, civic impact and normative drive that have shaped the MST's contribution to democracy in Brazil.

(1) Public Activism, Political Capabilities and Pro-Poor Policies.

Grassroots organizing, pressure politics and bargaining with state authorities have been at the heart of the MST's way of engaging with Brazil's democratic institutions. Electoral participation, though never irrelevant to the movement, has normally taken a back seat to other more assertive and direct tactics. In doing so, the MST has sought mainly to exercise a form of "societal accountability," by shaping the public agenda and influencing state policy, rather seeking to exert control over the state apparatus itself.⁶⁷

Public activism has become ingrained in the movement's ethos and self-image. The movement, after all, was born and raised amid social conflict. In everyday MST speech, all of its *conquistas* (conquests) are the result of their ability to organize at grassroots and engage in sustained struggle. Its penchant towards pressure politics, however, is not the result of mere ideological assumptions, as critics like Navarro insist. Navarro maintains that the MST has "canonized" collective action as a result of its "fundamentalist" view of politics.⁶⁸ Given its options, however, the MST's preference for pressure politics is actually the most rational strategy available for maximizing its efficacy.

Considering the alternative means for accomplishing its objectives – electoral contestation, legislative representation, media influence, lobbying, or armed insurgency— pressure politics is clearly the most cost effective option. Fielding national election candidates or acquiring a major media outlet is clearly beyond the MST's financial means. Legislative representation offers few tactical advantages given the prerogatives accorded to the executive branch for carrying out land reform and the traditional overrepresentation of conservative rural interests in Congress. The MST is also fully aware that lobbying without pressure politics is usually a toothless instrument. Despite a fondness for Che Guevara and

⁶⁷ The idea of "societal accountability" draws on Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000).

⁶⁸ Navarro (2002b: 261 and 267).

other world revolutionaries, the movement clearly understands that a guerrilla alternative would be a suicidal gamble.

Public activism and its disruptive tactics, then, are the only reasonable course of action available to Brazil's landless peasants. This mode of collective action is first and foremost a practical response, a collective problem-solving measure— not the machination of an ideological agenda. Public activism enables the MST to stir public opinion and gain direct access to policymakers in a way that most institutional mechanisms would render ineffectual or innocuous at best.

Pressure politics, however, is more than just an instrument for exacting government concessions. Collective acts of struggle also strengthen the movement internally. By energizing its participants, they help galvanize the passions, convictions and sense of mystique that gives the MST its resilient character. They also foster feelings of pride and ownership over the results achieved. MST mobilizations, furthermore, sharpen class consciousness, raise awareness of basic rights, build social networks of trust, nurture organizing skills and cultivate new popular leaders. As such, the movement's public activism has played a central role in the long-term development of political capabilities among Brazil's rural poor.⁶⁹

Over the years, the MST has inspired and helped nurture an array of Brazilian popular movements representing peasant women, populations displaced by hydroelectric dams, small farmers, homeless people, and other landless groups, principally those linked to CONTAG's rural trade unions.⁷⁰ In this way, the MST has helped catalyze an unprecedented distribution of state resources among the rural poor, through land purchases, farming and housing credits, infrastructural development, technical assistance, educational programs, and the creation of scores of rural cooperatives and food-processing plants.

All this suggests that public activism should be treated as a crucial instrument for inequality reduction in societies as starkly disparate as Brazil. Such environments, after all, tend to produce daunting obstacles to change. Their

⁶⁹ On the development of "political capabilities over the long run," see Whitehead and Molina's (2003).

⁷⁰ Rosa (2009).

removal requires that they be tackled with concerted, forceful, and disruptive pressure from below. If coupled with a bargaining process at the top, this societal drive can foster an auspicious momentum for progressive reforms. In apartheid-like environments, amiable, top-down attempts to carry-out substantive downward-redistribution measures are likely to produce empty government promises, or meagre reforms, at best.

Far from being a sign of “incongruence” and affront to democracy, as Navarro and other critics suggest,⁷¹ MST pressure politics should be appreciated as a mark of democratic vitality and engagement. Indeed, compared to other manifestations of social tension and conflict—including street gangs, riots, crime and guerrilla warfare—public activism offers a constructive, democratic venue for channeling popular demands and instigating pro-poor development policies.

(2) Citizenship Rights, the Public Agenda and Civil Society Inclusion. The MST has contributed to the development of citizenship rights in Brazil, and done so in all three basic dimensions of this idea: civil, political and social rights.⁷² Since its origins the MST has fought for the right to protest and mobilize freely, and thus exercise its democratic right to influence decisions made by public authorities, independent of the electoral process. Through legal measures and publicity efforts, it has defended the basic *civil rights* of hundreds of peasants who have been imprisoned, abused and assassinated for their land reform activism.

MST achievements in the creation of land reform settlements, cooperatives, agro-industries, education and consciousness-raising have improved the material conditions, cultural resources and political capabilities of its members. As such, the movement has fortified the social foundations for democracy in Brazil. When basic needs are met and awareness of rights enhanced, people are unlikely to sell their votes on Election Day. The sense of character and dignity forged through long years of MST struggle has helped nurture more conscientious citizens and foster greater public participation in local and national affairs. By

⁷¹ Navarro (2002a: 219).

⁷² As outlined originally by T.H. Marshall (1992).

enabling people to use their *political rights*, the MST has facilitated the integration of hundreds of thousands of poor and historically marginalized Brazilians into the democratic process. In doing so, the MST has abetted their “transition from clientelism to citizenship.”⁷³

MST demands to implement national agrarian reform laws are illustrative of the movement’s efforts to bridge a striking gap in Brazilian society –the abyss between the Constitution’s *social rights* and their weak enforcement. The effort to diminish the historic chasm between the *pays légal* and the *pays réel* –between the country’s formal edifice –made, as the popular saying in Brazil goes, “*para o inglês ver*” (for the English to see)— and its everyday reality, amounts to a concerted struggle aimed at overcoming Brazil’s “low-intensity citizenship.”⁷⁴ The process of surmounting such democratic deficits is an eminently political and contentious one. As Charles Tilly highlights, throughout world history, citizenship rights were never created through gentle concessions from the ruling elite or the gradual enlightenment of society as a whole. Rather, these rights are the historical result of years of resistance, struggle and bargaining with national authorities.⁷⁵

The quality of democracy is enhanced through the “complementary and mutually reinforcing tasks” of “strengthening citizen participation and expanding the agenda for public discussion.”⁷⁶ Through its protests and public advocacy, the MST has enriched Brazil’s public debate in many ways. Over the years the movement has incorporated several new themes to its traditional class-based analysis of Brazilian reality, from gender equality to agro-ecology, food sovereignty, youth empowerment and human rights. All these themes have become an integrate part of the movement’s critique of Brazil’s exclusionary and predatory model of development. MST detractors dismiss this line of reasoning as

⁷³ Fox (1994).

⁷⁴ O’Donnell (1994: 166); also see Carvalho (2006: 199-217).

⁷⁵ Tilly (2002); also see Foweraker and Landman (1997).

⁷⁶ Iazzetta (2005: 6). On the quality of democracy, see O’Donnell, Cullell and Iazzetta (2004), and Diamond and Morlino (2005).

a sign of the movement's "undue politicization" and "deviation" from a more "wholesome past," in which its main preoccupation was to gain access to land.⁷⁷ The landless movement's quest for "revolutionary change" in Brazil, the critics assert, is "backward-looking," "anti-modern" and "dangerous."

Other audiences, however, are likely to interpret MST proposals differently. For instance, the movement's sharp critique of the agribusiness model of rural development, with its large-scale industrial farms, intense use of pesticides, reliance on genetically-modified seeds and close affinity to the "fast-food lifestyle," would elicit sympathy from European and North American consumers and activists engaged in the budding counter-culture movement in support of an organic food production system, anchored on local family farms.⁷⁸ Similarly, citizens in most advanced democracies would readily agree with the MST's support for strict gun controls. Leading international human rights organizations have endorsed MST petitions to Congress urging that it federalize human rights crimes in the countryside and ratify a constitutional amendment to expropriate ranches that use slave labor. Efforts to democratize Brazil's media structure, in turn, have put the MST in close collaboration with alternative media networks in various parts of the globe. In light of the world's 2008-2009 financial debacle, it would appear to many that the MST's longstanding disagreement with neoliberal policies of financial deregulation and fiscal austerity were not as "regressive" as portrayed by its adversaries. Indeed, its ongoing support for a grassroots campaign to re-nationalize Brazil's giant mining conglomerate formerly

⁷⁷ For relevant comments of this sort, see Graziano (2004: 73, 103, 278), Martins (2000: 17-39, 112-115; 2007); Navarro (2002a: 201-212; 2007; 2009) and in Scolese (2003); Rosenfield 227, 239, 252-253, 267). Fernando Henrique Cardoso (2006: 70, 79, 541) offers a similar appraisal. He describes the MST as belonging "to a niche of resistance to modernity that is a conveyor of a regressive utopia;" a movement that looks at the world "through the rearview mirror;" and committed the grave mistake of seeking to "politicize" the agrarian question in Brazil.

⁷⁸ MST advocacy for alternative forms of rural development shares core principles and ideas espoused by Michael Pollan (2006, 2008) and other critics of the industrial model of food production and consumption.

known as the *Companhia do Vale do Rio Doce*, privatized at fire-sale prices in 1997, might still prove to be a prescient move.

Recurrent efforts to de-legitimize the MST and dismiss any discussion over the issues raised by the movement counter classic liberal arguments in favor of free speech. As John Stuart Mills long noted, “fear of heresy” and the tendency towards “intellectual pacification” thwart prospects for “social progress.” Such dispositions stifle intellectual creativity and restrict the open discussion and consideration of alternative viewpoints needed to find new elements of truth. They also hamper the development of the mental and moral character forged through vigorous deliberation.⁷⁹ Though constricted in many ways, MST efforts to keep a substantial, rather than a minor, spectrum of dissent alive, have enhanced the quality of public debate in Brazilian democracy.

All together, the struggle to enhance political capabilities among the poor, extend basic citizenship rights, and broaden the nation’s public agenda, has strengthened Brazilian civil society. The organization and incorporation of marginalized sectors of the population into this arena through autonomous popular movements is a relatively novel phenomenon in Brazilian history. Traditionally, civil societal associations and media outlets represented mostly the interests of the upper and middle classes. These interests, no doubt, are still predominant. Yet the inclusion of subaltern actors such as the MST has contributed much to the democratization of this societal space. The long term trend suggests a potential for many innovative developments, provided the conditions for this be secured through the preservation and expansion of Brazil’s political freedoms.

(3) Hope, Utopia and Democratizing Ideals. Contemporary democratic institutions, practices and ideas are the result of a longstanding development fueled by powerful normative aspirations. As Giovanni Sartori put it, “what democracy *is* cannot be separated from what democracy *should be*. A democracy exists only insofar as its ideals and values bring it into being.”⁸⁰ The creative

⁷⁹ Mill (1956: 40-41, 64).

⁸⁰ Sartori (1987: 7).

tension between democracy's real and ideal dimensions has been at the heart of its historical evolution.

MST demands for greater social justice in a nation afflicted by remarkable inequities represent a vital democratizing force for Brazil. From its early days, the movement has helped inspire new horizons and heartened visions of a more just society. In recent years, the belief that "another world is possible," has found a congenial setting at the assemblies of the World Social Forum. This global gathering of progressive and alternative forces emerged as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forums established in Davos, Switzerland, a meeting place for leading financiers, corporate managers and heads of state. The MST has been very much involved with the World Social Forum since its first encounter in 2001. Indeed, four of the first five gatherings have taken place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, not far from where the movement was actually born.

By cultivating a resilient sense of hope and quest for "another world," the MST has bolstered the dreams and ideals of equality, liberty and participation that have invigorated movements for democratization throughout world history.⁸¹ Democratization, as Laurence Whitehead underscores, is a "complex, long term, dynamic and open-ended process," that cannot be frozen in time and place.⁸² Democracy, in other words, is a perpetually unfinished product, open to improvement through contestation, deliberation and bouts of creative inspiration.

A sense of utopia can be crucial for all this. As Max Weber perceptively wrote, humans "would not have attained the possible if time and again (they) had not reached out for the impossible." A "steadfastness of the heart ... can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. This is necessary right now, or else (people) will not be able to attain even that which is possible today."⁸³

⁸¹ On the historical importance of social movements for democracy, see Markoff (1996).

⁸² Whitehead (2002: 6-34).

⁸³ The quote is from Weber's essay, "Politics as a Vocation" (1958: 128).

Conclusion

To confine the MST's place in Brazilian society as one merely engaged in the struggle for agrarian reform is to miss out on the larger picture at stake. The MST is not just a rural phenomenon. Lurking behind the movement's orderly marches and bright red flags is a specter that haunts Brazil's secular inequities. Though often exaggerated, the fears of change it elicits are not groundless. The MST rattles common-held perceptions, norms and customs. It upsets "the natural order of things." It exposes, gives voice and channels tensions that underlie Brazilian society. Some see its agitation as a national anathema. Others sympathize with its disruptive thrust. Among the latter, many consider the movement a powerful Brazilian symbol and inspiration in the struggle to achieve the full promise of equal citizenship rights.

The way the MST has pursued such promise has not always squared neatly with conventional forms of liberal democratic politics. Brazil's starkly unequal society and great obstacles to the political representation of popular sector interests are crucial to understanding the MST's alternative approach to democratization. For lack of a comprehensive pro-poor reform policy in the countryside, peasant groups have been left with few alternatives to strong-arm, pressure tactics. The MST's radicalism, therefore, should be understood principally as a reaction to the adverse conditions that have hampered land redistribution and the adoption of other progressive economic and social policies in Brazil.

According to the Latinobarómetro poll, between 1996 and 2006, an average of only 24 percent of Brazilians claimed they were satisfied with their democracy.⁸⁴ It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find harsh words of contempt within the MST towards the nation's governing institutions and ruling political class. Unlike the majority of Brazilians, who vent their frustrations in more private ways, MST members are inclined to channel their indignation through public activism. Indeed, for all their malaise and disappointment with the

⁸⁴ Corporación Latinobarómetro (2007: 72-74).

political system, within the landless movement one can find some of the most relentless, no-nonsense practitioners of grassroots democracy in Brazil.

This point can be illustrated with a brief follow up to the 1985 Annoni land occupation in Rio Grande do Sul, described at the beginning of this article. By the early 1990s, 354 families had been settled in the Annoni estate. The influx of people into the area led to the creation of a new municipal district named Pontão, which celebrated its second elections for local government in 1996. In Brazil, municipal elections tend to mobilize politicians and voters in intense contests given the substantial powers conferred to local governments.

The Annoni community was one of the largest in this overwhelmingly rural district. Hence, MST settlers were able to put forth a PT candidate and win a three-way election with almost 39% of the valid votes. This represented another milestone victory for the MST as it was the first time one of its members was elected mayor of its municipality. The 2000 vote for local government, however, involved a tight re-election contest, as the opposition formed a broad coalition against the left. The PT, nonetheless, won again with 56% of the valid votes, thanks to the MST's efforts among the Annoni settlers.⁸⁵ At a simple glance one would presume that such outcomes were the result of conventional campaign tactics found in mainstream democracies. The truth, though, is that the decisive election move was not as ginger as this.

Political clientelism and vote-buying are a longstanding practice in Brazil that affects the country's poorest social strata, in particular. The national laws established to punish such behavior are strong, yet the mechanisms to enforce them are actually weak. In the months preceding the 2000 vote, anti-PT campaigners in Pontão got organized to purchase the support needed to win the election. Days before the election, they went out through the back country roads to offer car tires, money and groceries in exchange for votes. But the PT activists struck back with a string of all-night, gun-in-hand roadblocks to prevent their rivals from buying out their more feeble supporters. One night, the roadblock

⁸⁵ Election data is from the Núcleo de Pesquisa e Documentação da Política Rio-Grandense (NUPERGS), of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

crew fired warning shots towards an approaching vehicle. On another day, the PT militants had the police ground a truck full of spare tires. And in between, they held back a second truck loaded with groceries. Thus, they were able to secure a tense election victory in Pontão.⁸⁶

The lessons from all this should be clear by now. Given the crude realities of Brazilian politics and harsh conditions under which agrarian reform must be implemented, one cannot expect the MST's contribution to democracy in Brazil to be anything less than muscle-bound, forceful and rough. By virtue of birth and necessity, the MST's distinct mark has been that of the tough touch.

⁸⁶ This account was gathered during a field visit to Pontão and neighboring municipalities shortly after the 2000 municipal elections. Problems with vote-buying or attempts to do so were reported in all neighboring districts. As in Pontão, progressive candidates had to resort to similar strong-arm tactics to thwart their adversaries' vote-buying efforts.

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