

Movimento Sem Terra



'Dramatically populating this landscape and this social and economic reality, wandering between dream and despair, there are 4,800,000 rural families without land. The land is there, before their eyes and arms, an immense half of an immense country, but those people (how many people in all? 15 million? even more?) cannot go there to work, to live with the simple dignity that only one's own labour can confer, because of the lordly descendants of those men who first said - "this land is mine" and found a group of people naive enough to believe them. They surround the land with laws that protect them, police that guard them, governments that represent and defend them, and gunmen paid to kill.'

Jose Saramago

History of Land Management & Resistance in Brazil

Indigenous Land Management

It is a matter of debate when the first people arrived in the lands now known as Brazil. Some claim it was 10,000 years ago, others claim it was much further back than that. Whatever the case, over the long course of its history, Brazil has been home to a huge diversity of peoples and cultures, and so a huge diversity of methods of land management. All we have left from these millennia of activity are snapshots based on relatively scant archaeological, botanical, and geological evidence, as well as the generally confused accounts of the first Europeans invaders.

There are also several hundred thousand indigenous people living in Brazil today, although it would be a mistake to think that the land management of indigenous people today correlate exactly to that of their ancestors, just as it would be to think that medieval or ancient Europeans can be understood by going to the modern European countryside. All indigenous people, even the remaining uncontracted tribes of the Amazon, have had their lives greatly transformed by the European invasion, with the general collapse of pre-hispanic polities and the massive encroachment on lands previously managed by indigenous people. However, the lives and land practices of modern indigenous people are rooted in the traditions of their ancestors, and are the living link with a society far more advanced than our own in terms of land management. We can look at the picture emerging of the pre-invasion cultures of the Amazon Rainforest for an example.

For many people, the Amazon rainforest evokes ideas of an natural world untouched by human hand, with the few scattered tribes who lived there before the arrival of the Portuguese existing in a garden of Eden style 'state of nature', having little effect on their environment. But though this was the idea of the Amazon that was propagated for many centuries (partly as a justification for ignoring indigenous land claims), such a view is no longer shared by historians of the Amazon. Because over the last few decades, a different picture of the Amazon rainforest has begun to emerge, one of in human beings have played a important role in shaping the Amazon rainforest for many thousands of years.

The first clue that lead people to wonder was the diversity and quantity of plants that are useful to human beings, either as food or medicine. When compared to places that are truly free of human beings, it seemed highly unlikely that humans didn't have a important role in the shaping of the rainforest flora. And indeed archaeologists have found that, for at least 8000 years, human beings have propagated certain plants and certain plant phenotypes, creating, over the course of the millennia, the largest and most abundant food forest on earth. Part of the reason European settlers couldn't see this was their own ideas of land management, which for them meant deforestation, tilling, growing cereal crops or the creation of pasture. The Amazonians however, had a much subtler, less interventionist, method of land management.

And the indigenous Amazon cultures have not only had an effect on the plant life but also the composition of the soil. This was discovered by a group of scientists who, while flying over the Amazon in a plane, noticed that certain sections of the Amazon were generally 5 to 10 metres higher than the surrounding area. Upon investigating, they found that the areas with higher growth were full of what they called *terra preta* (black earth); a dark, highly fertile, soil. When looking at the contents under a microscope they realised that it was composed of charcoal, tiny ceramic shards, and many types of organic materials, such as bone, blood, and faeces; everything one would expect to be left over in the wake of a human settlement.

And such was the case in the Amazon for many thousands of years. A community would move to a new piece of forest, clear the understory of trees and bushes, but maintain a closed canopy forest. They would plant the most useful species in their 'gardens' with their settlements, and manage the semi-wild forest in the surrounding area, all the while creating highly fertile soils. Then, after a

number of years, they would move on to a new piece of forest, allowing their giving nature to digest their activities and grow back even stronger.

So the indigenous Amazonian cultures were not only a 'low impact' culture in terms of their ecological footprints, they were a positive impact culture, increasing the fertility of the soil and vitality of the forest (as well as increasing the quantity and diversity of useful plant species). But was this highly beneficial way of life only possible because of the lack of the human beings living the area? Would such a way of life also be capable of supporting large populations? Certainly the image we have of the Amazon is one of a few scattered tribes, without any kind of large urban settlements. However, this image doesn't correspond with the early colonial accounts of the Amazon region, nor with the growing body of archaeological evidence.

The first account of the Amazon river, written by Gaspar de Carvajal in 1542, talks of large cities, well developed roads, monumental constructions, fortified towns, and dense populations - 'There was one town that stretched for 15 miles without any space from house to house, which was a marvellous thing to behold'. For a long time this early account was dismissed as a fantasy, until massive deforestation of the Amazon Basin began revealing archaeological evidence to support de Carvajal's claims. Since the 1960's archaeological sites across the whole Amazon region have been identified, which contain things such as: huge earthen mounds, ditched enclosures, settlements, roads canals, causeways, fish weirs, water reservoirs and raised fields, along with many thousands of geoglyphs carved into the ground. The huge quantity and wide distribution of these new findings reveal a very different world than the pristine virgin forest that had been previously imagined. Instead we see a densely populated area teeming with a vast network of highly connected urban settlement, some of them comparable in size to the average European city of the era.

Although in calling them urban, we need to imagine a different type of urbanism to the one we are accustomed. Instead of highly concentrated grid-like settlements, surrounded by walls and a hinterland of cultivated fields or pastures, we see a decentralised urban network of settlements, all highly connected through trade and communication along roads and canals, in the midst of dense forest and semi-wild cultivated 'gardens'. An archaeologist describes one particular settlement by saying that 'the entire region was organised almost like a lattice-work of roads, north to south and east to west... they were integrated in these multicentric clusters. They always had a single central community, [with]... two major satellites, one to the south, one to the north, [and] two other major satellites to the east and west, and those five communities formed core area... This multi-centric form of urbanism is really quite novel, we haven't seen anything similar to that anywhere else of the planet. It's an alternative form of urbanism. But in terms of integration, regional design and planning, in many respects they were more complex than the ancient Greek polis or the medieval towns and villages.'¹

So it seems that the culture of the Amazon, with their highly advanced forms of land management, that increased soil fertility, bio diversity, and produced a large and diverse yield, were able to support large populations, using novel forms of urbanism. Archaeologists working in the Amazon are now claiming that previous estimates of the population of the Amazon Basin as around 2 million need to be seriously revised, with one team of archaeologists estimating that there was between 500,000 and 1 million people in the area of their research alone, around 7% of the Amazon basin.

The reason why it took so long to realise is that, unlike the 'advanced civilisations' of Eurasia, which left huge stone monuments in areas that are mainly deserts, the indigenous people of the Amazon left little trace of themselves, aside from highly fertile soils and a diverse and thriving ecosystem. In modern society we have tended to look at the Egyptian or Mesopotamia as 'advanced civilisations' because they build huge temples and pyramids, even though these monuments attest to

1 Unnatural Histories BBC

massive exploitation of human beings and wholesale destruction of ecosystems. We sometimes think that cultures who never built those monuments never did so because they lacked the technological ability, rather than made a conscious choice.

Indigenous cultures in the Amazon clearly did not share the same extractivist philosophy as many Eurasian civilisations, instead living according to a philosophy of tread lightly and leave little trace. They may never have created monumental stone structures, but they did always managed to ensure the replenishment and growth of the most important of all abundance of all natural resources; fertile soil, clean air and water, a diversity of useful plants, and robust ecosystems. Perhaps its time that we start measured the progress of civilisations by this standard.

Colonial Land Management & Resistance

Columbus arrived in America in 1492. When it was realised that what had been stumbled upon was a theretofore unknown landmass, the Portuguese and the Spanish Crowns both laid their claims (ignoring the fact that the continent had already been discovered and settled by people many millennia before them). In order to resolve the dispute, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull dividing the Western hemisphere in two, with all lands less than 100 leagues west and south of the Azores and Cape Verde falling under the dominion of the Portuguese crown. This left Portugal with the lands now known as Brazil and Spain with the rest of the Americas.

The first few years of Portuguese settlement of Brazil consisted in little more creating waypoints for Portuguese trading missions to India; storing food, tools, and arms for passing ships. The main economic output during that time was the timber of the Pau Brazil tree, and tropical birds and the skins of exotic animals to be displayed in Europe. It was only after other Europeans discovered the trade routes to India (meaning the Portuguese lost the lucrative trade monopoly) and pirates under the control of other Monarchs started to arrive (putting Portuguese hegemony in Brazil at risk) that the Portuguese began with the exploration and settlement in earnest. The Portuguese crown first attempted to bring the vast territory of Brazil under its rule using the same feudal methods of land management that they employed in Portugal. They divided the country up into 16 enormous *captaincies*; hereditary fiefs granted to aristocratic families to govern in the name of the crown. The task of these families was to settle the land, make it productive, and convert any inhabitants therein to Christianity.

The lands within the captaincies were not the property of these families, they officially belonged to the Portuguese Crown, but they could grant parcels of land, *sesmarias*, to others. Those who were granted *sesmarias* could then grow crops to sell to Portuguese traders. In fact, they had an obligation to be producing every year, or the land would be automatically return to the crown. The political system of captaincies would ultimately fail, the territories too large to be managed by such a small group of families, but the economic model of *sesmarias* would continue until Brazilian independence in 1822. It was thus the system of *sesmarias* which constitutes the first phase of the centralisation of land. Although there was a theoretical limit to the size of the *sesmarias* that could be granted, this was generally ignored, as was the imperative to work the land. Unfettered accumulation by a small class of wealthy colonial settlers with connection to the royal family was the order of the day. Non-white people were barred from receiving *sesmarias* altogether.

Along with essentially owning all the land, most other elements of the economy were also controlled by the Crown. Trade was only allowed with the metropol and so no self sufficient local economy could develop. The colonists were dependent on Portugal for manufactured goods, and in return they would grow crops, or mine precious metals, to be sold back in Europe. In the first centuries of Portuguese colonisation this generally meant sugar. After the Portuguese realised that the hot and humid climate of Brazil were ideal for growing sugarcane, they quickly went about setting up large plantations. Modelled on the Roman slave *latifundias*, these huge monocultural

plantations would provide the model for the next 500 years of Brazilian agriculture, up to our own times.

As there were only about a million Portuguese people at the time of the early settlement, most of whom weren't easily coaxed into travelling across the Atlantic to catch tropical diseases, or work themselves to death in the sugar fields, the colonisers began to enslave the local population. Doing the work of the enslavement were a group known as the *bandeirantes*, mercenary and slavers who were celebrated in Brazilian history books as heroic adventures until quite recently. These *bandeirantes* managed to enslave hundreds of thousands of people, and over the course of the 16th and 17th century, there were roughly 350,000 indigenous enslaved people working in the Portuguese latifundias. As well as working in the sugar fields, after the discovery of gold and diamonds in 1690, many thousands would be sent to work in mines. As can be imagined, conditions in the fields and mines were brutal: days were long, punishments were cruel, food was sparse, and respite almost non-existent. Slaves were often worked to death within a few years. The colonial economy was built on the back of enslaved locals, but not colonisers were happy with this. The Jesuits had their own colonial objectives, and had been busy converting the locals to Christianity. They wouldn't allow these new Christians to be enslaved, especially as many of them were helping the Jesuits in the fields, and harvesting medicinal and edible plants from the forest (vanilla, cacao, guarana, cashew, etc.) to be sold back in Europe to help fund the Jesuit mission.

But while some indigenous people chose to enter into this protection arrangement with the Jesuits, many didn't. They were then left with two options; flee to the interior of the country, where the dense nature offered them protection from the Portuguese, or militarily resist the invasion. Throughout Brazilian history there have innumerable instances of indigenous resistance to the Portuguese invasion. Sometimes these are the struggles of a single communities, sometimes larger regional networks of resistance. They still go on today. Most of them are lost to the sands of history. Only instances that reach a certain size are recorded and retold. For example; the resistance of the Tamoios, a confederation of tribes who allied with the French to fight the Portuguese in 1562. Another example is the so-called *Guerra dos Barbaros* (War of the Barbarians), one of the longest military campaigns waged by the indigenous people against the Portuguese, beginning in 1682 in the north-east of Brazil, and waged by the Cariri people. They fought with guns (taken from defeated Portuguese units or traded by pirates) and resisted colonial invasion for 20 years. They ultimately signed an armistice with the Portuguese, but this would not prevent the ensuing massacre, characteristic of Portuguese dealings with indigenous people. Another celebrated campaign of indigenous resistance was by a network of Guarani in the south of Brazil, who resisted being forced from their lands in the year 1753. For three years they fought against colonial forces until the point of exhaustion, when they were ultimately defeated, and massacred, in February of 1756. Their leader, Sepe Tiaraju, remains a symbol of the plight, and tireless resistance, of indigenous people across America today.

After it became clear that the indigenous population would not be enough to work their vast American colony, the Portuguese began importing slaves from Africa en masse. From the period of 1550 to 1888, an estimated 5.8 million enslaved people from Africa were taken to Brazil, about 45% of all enslaved people brought to the Americas. Far from their homelands, living with people from different cultures, who spoke different languages, the idea was that it would be more difficult for enslaved Africans to escape and organise than it was for their native counterparts. However, it would not take long for Africans to begin mounting resistance to their inhumane conditions. This would sometimes take the form of armed revolt, with uprisings regularly taking place in plantations across Brazil, and sometimes take the form of escape to the Brazilian hinterlands. These escapees would then found free settlements which came to be known as *quilombos*. The word *quilombo* originated in Angola, designating a settlement of people from various tribes who banded together to militarily defend themselves against African slavers. The Brazil *quilombos*, as well as being centres

of resistance to colonial rule, were also villages for people to live and farm. The first reported quilombo was in Bahia in 1575, but the largest and most famous quilombo was Palmares - a group of settlements situated in the north-eastern region of Pernambuco.

Founded around the year 1597, at its height, Palmares probably had around 20,000 inhabitants dispersed across a series of connected settlements. It was mainly populated by black former slaves, but there were also people from other marginalised groups who found refuge in Palmares: indigenous people, prostitutes, poor Portuguese settlers (especially those looking to escape from forced military conscription). Palmares was mainly self sufficient, building houses using local materials, making many of their own tools, and feeding themselves by growing things like beans, cassava, and corn, as well as raising chickens, and hunting and fishing (also there was also trade between Palmares and colonial settlements). An account of a colonial settlers, who visited an abandoned part of Palmares in 1645, recorded that in this one section alone there was 220 buildings, a church, four smithies, and a council house. The organisation of the quilombos is thought to have been rooted in Central African forms of organisation: confederate in nature, with an elected chief who was in charge of the military. Palmares was under constant attack by colonial forces over the length of its existence. Between 1680 – 1686 alone there were six (failed) expeditions to conquer Palmares. Sometimes the *quilombas* (residences of the quilombos) would retreat into the hills, only returning after the mercenaries had left. Other times they would stay and fight.

The most important of the military chiefs in Palmares, still widely celebrated as a hero of African resistance in Brazil today, was Zumbi. Little is known for certain about the life of Palmares' most famous leader. One account from a contemporaneous Portuguese source said that he was born in Palmares, before being captured by a gang of raiders and sold into the service of a Portuguese priest. There he learned to read and write Latin and Portuguese, before, at the age of 15, managing to escape and return to Palmares. Within a few years he had proved his skills as a military leader and was elected chief. There are various other accounts of his life, along with many legends and stories of his heroic deeds. What we can say for certain is that he was leader of the military resistance of Palmares between 1680 – 1695, and defeated the Portuguese in many battles. Eventually, he was defeated and Palmares was destroyed. But, although Palmares was destroyed, the founding of free settlements by escaped slaves continued. In 1988, with the end of the military dictatorship, Brazil ratified a new constitution, and Article 68 granted the collective ownership of all existing quilombos to the ancestors of the quilombas who had settled the land in the proceeding centuries. Today there are hundreds of quilombos around Brazil, mainly inhabited by the descendents of people who had freed themselves from slavery.

Lei de Terras & Messianic Resistance

When Prince Don Pedro broke with the Portuguese, and declared himself emperor of the independent nation of Brazil in 1822, it signalled a new phase in the history of land management in the country. Don Pedro would officially end the sesmaria system of regal grants (partly because there was no more land left to give away), although it would take almost 30 years for a new legal framework to come into effect. This meant that, for the first few decades after independence, land was still managed according the sesmaria system. The only difference was that the land now officially belonged to the Brazilian crown instead of the Portuguese. Three centuries of this system of royal grants meant that all the economically important land (close to the coast, cities, or rivers; fertile; not occupied by indigenous people) were occupied by large *latifundarios* (a class of powerful plantation owners). As was mentioned, although there was an official limit on the possible size of the sesmarias, this limit had been roundly ignored, and a small number of powerful landlords laid claim to plantations many tens of thousands of hectares in extension. By the middle of the 19th century the most important crop was the coffee bean, and the coffee barons were some of the most powerful people in Brazil. They were known as the *coronéis* (coronals), as they were often given command the local National Guard. This regional police forces were officially charged with, among

other things, destroying quilombos and capturing escaped slaves. Unofficially, powerful landholders would also use their small personal armies to expand their territories and enforce their rule.

Labour relations in Brazilian agriculture were also transformed over the course of the 19th century. Since 1819 Brazil had begun to receive non-Portuguese European immigrants, and around the year 1847 the first large waves of migration from Europe (mainly German and Italian) rose over the Atlantic and reached the shores of Brazil. These poor immigrants would slowly take the place of slaves in latifundias across Brazil, so that by the time slavery was officially ended in 1888, there was no huge economic upheaval. In many cases employing highly exploited wage labourers proved to be even cheaper than buying and maintaining slaves. But while the majority of poor people worked the fields of the large latifundarios, there was also a significant class of small holding farmers, known as *posseiros*, who occupied land in between the large latifundias, or lands far removed from areas of economic importance. The state of relative prosperity and independence of the *posseiros* would not last long however. With not much land of economic importance left, and with the *posseiros* having already settled the land and making it economically attractive, the powerful latifundarios started to move in on the territory of the *posseiros*. They did so using two methods: violent expulsion using mercenaries, and litigation. Although many of these *posseiros* had settled the land generations ago, they had never received the official legal grants to do so. Unable to defend themselves in the face of the mercenary attacks and the Brazilian system of 'justice', more and more of these small holders were evicted from their lands. These growing number of precarious wage labourers and dispossessed small holders saw the formation of a new social group in Brazilian societies, landless rural workers, who would later become known as the *sem terras* [the landless].

The ranks of the *sem terra* were swelled with the introduction of the *Lei de Terras* [Landed Property Act] of 1850 and the new system of land ownership that replaced the *sesmaria*. This law saw the feudal arrangements based on royal grants transform into a capitalist market of private property. Included in the law was a stipulation which made purchase, or previously being granted a *sesmaria*, the only legal way of gaining rights to use land. This meant that it was very difficult for small holdings farmers, generally focussed on a local self-sufficient economy and so without much money, to gain access to land. We can compare this to another colonial framework for landownership, the United States, where, after the Homestead Act of 1862, small holdings farmers who occupied and worked land were given title to it. While the US method of landownership also had many grave problems, this act at least ensured that the social landscape of the countryside wasn't a basic division of two parts, a tiny class of hyper wealthy landlords and a huge class of landless poor. While those groups did exist in the US, there was also a large group of relatively well off middle class people. But the *Lei de Terras* in Brazil was not enacted to benefit or produce a middle class.

In fact, the idea was just the opposite. With slavery clearly coming to an end, the landowning class was worried that the former slaves would go out and use their new found freedom to form free communities in far away places, like the escapees were already doing in the quilombos. The *Lei de Terras* was about deliberately restricting former slaves and poor migrant's access to land, so that they would have little choice but to work the land of the latifundarios. It also gave the landlords free hand to move in on the land of the *posseiros*, not only allowing them to expand their holding, but also creating a new cohort of landless wage labourers to work on their new appropriated territory. As well as their legally sanctioned appropriation of land, a new criminal form of land acquisition developed after the *Lei de Terras* – *grilagem*. Grilagem is a word used to denote a variety of illegal methods that wealthy landholders use to acquire land, such as; falsifying documents, bribing officials, deforestation, and murdering indigenous people and poor farmers. Grilagem is still practised on a large scale today in Brazil, and is one of the prime mechanism of the deforestation and destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

The emperor of Brazil was ousted in 1889 and a Republic proclaimed, but this was by no means a progressive revolution. Quite the opposite, it was a reactionary coup instigated by wealthy landlords for whom the outlawing of slavery proved the Emperor could not be trusted. As can be imagined, the situation of the poor and landless did not improve under their rule. The ranks of the *sem terra* continued to grow, and a new type of political movement would emerge to organise the *sem terras* into a political force for the first time. Because the face of these political movements were charismatic religious preachers, they became known as the Messianic Rebellions, the largest of which was the War of Canudos.

By the end of the 19th centuries large groups of landless former slaves and poor wage labourers were roaming around the *sertão*, the semi-arid interior of north-eastern Brazil. Barred from working any land that was owned by *latifundarios*, the *sertanejos* were suffering under debilitating poverty and lacking a clear political direction. It was within this context that the mystic preacher Antônio Conselheiro [Antonio the Counsellor] would emerge as a figurehead of a movement for collective land management and egalitarian distribution. After travelling around the north-east of Brazil for many years, Conselheiro had amassed a following of ex-slaves and destitute farmers. In 1893 Conselheiro and his followers set up a free settlement in the abandoned town of Canudos, renaming it Belo Monte. Belo Monte was open to all who needed refuge, and in just three years it housed over 25,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in Bahia at the time. The settlement was organised on the basis of co-operation, everybody was given access to land, and there was a solidarity economy, with a community fund for the sick and old. Despite the harsh arid conditions, the people of Belo Monte managed to ensure everyone had enough food, and lived in conditions of relative prosperity.

After three years, the powerful people in the region decided that Belo Monte was becoming a serious threat, not only were they refusing to pay taxes, they were establishing a local autonomous economy, whereby people could survive without working in plantations. In 1896 they began a military campaign to crush the free settlement. That they could hold out for over two years against a professional military is a testament to their organisational ability, but the outcome of the war was never really in doubt. After the campaign, the Brazilian authorities would massacre about half the population, including the elderly, children, and the sick, and disperse the rest, condemning them to further wanderings or life of deprivation working in the *latifundias*.

Organised resistance & 20th Century Reform

By the 1950's rural workers had begun to set up organisations to campaign for large scale land reform and co-ordinate direct actions. Two of the most important of these were the *Ligas Camponesas* [the Farmers' Leagues], and *Movimento dos Agricultores Sem Terra* (MASTER). The first *Ligas Camponesas* were set up after the fall of the populist dictator Vargas in the 1945 by the Brazilian Communist Party. In two short years they had set up leagues throughout the country. However, these leagues were dependent on Communist Party, so when the communists were outlawed in 1947, the *Ligas* also disintegrated. The *Liga* as an organisational form lay dormant for several years, until the mid 1950's. During this time, in the north east of Brazil, there existed a form of land tenure in which small farmers worked land owned by *latifundarios* in exchange for a type of rent, known as a *foro*. In 1954, on the *latifundia* known as Galileia in the state of Pernambuco, the landholders decided to triple the rent, and when the tenants weren't able to pay, the landholders tried to have them expelled. But these rural families had had it with the government of *latifundarios*. They were going to make a stand. To help organise their resistance, they founded the *Agricultural Society of Planters and Pastors of Pernambuco*, which, because of its organisational similarity to the former *Ligas Camponesas*, soon became known as the *Liga Camponesa da Galileia*.

And it would not take long for other rural families follow their lead. The *Ligas* again began to spring up across, not only Pernambuco, but all of Brazil. And this time it wasn't under the umbrella

of the Communist Party, but rather rural families organising things for themselves. By 1962 there were 30 Ligas Camponesas in existence, and, over the course of a number of meetings and congresses, a general political consensus about the need for radical land reform had emerged. They began to occupy land, and rallied around the moto of 'Land Reform by Law or by Force' ['Reforma Agraria na Lei ou na Marra']. Landless and poor farmers were beginning to organise in a way that couldn't be ignored, challenging the Brazilian State, which had throughout its history primarily operated in the interests of a small clique of powerful latifundarios.

Along with the Ligas, another important organisation was founded that would have an direct influence on the modern MST movement; MASTER. This was a movement of 300 families in the southern State of Rio Grande do Sul. While MASTER never achieved the same nationwide level of organisation as the Ligas, essentially remaining localised to Rio Grande do Sul, it is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, because of who was undertaking the action, and their aims. Whereas those who founded the Ligas aimed to defend territory that they had already settled, the families of MASTER were landless farmers, aiming to enter into new territory. Also important about Master was their method of political action; occupation through the creation of a *acampamentos* [camps], which will be discussed in greater detail below, would go on to be one of the most important tactics for the modern MST movement. Finally, many of the families who took part in the MASTER movement in this era would go on to be part of the foundation of MST 15 years later. In the first years of its existence, MASTER enjoyed the support of the PTB, the Brazilian Worker's Party, who held the State governorship at the time. But after the PTB lost the election in 1962, MASTER came under attack by the new government, weakening the movement, before it was ultimately outlawed, along with all other grass roots organisations, after the military coup of 1964.

During the period directly proceeding the coup we see the first attempt at land reform to include small farmers in the history of Brazil. Not that the government at the time were particularly radical, but they were pragmatists who realised something had to be done. In the early 1960's, Brazil was a hothouse of social unrest. The economy was faltering, inflation was high, people couldn't afford basic necessities, workers were striking, and we have already seen that rural families were beginning to organise. If the government wanted to prevent what had just happened in Cuba from happening in Brazil, they would have to introduce some genuinely popular measures. The proposed land reform consisted in taking 100km from both sides of all national motorways to redistribute to landless rural workers. The plan included taking some unproductive land from powerful latifundarios; land that the latifundarios have never put to use, despite owning it for generations. Also included in the plan was; a tax on the powerful latifundarios in order to fund critical infrastructure (roads, hospitals, schools, etc.), which was severely lacking in rural areas; as well as a retirement fund for elderly rural workers, which would have amounted to about half the already pauply minimum wage.

This was far from a radical transformation of land management that the rural workers were demanding, but it was a step in the right direction. However, even these modest reforms were too much for the powerful latifundarios. To make matters worse for the government, another part of their reform package, which attempted to force multinationals to reinvest their Brazilian profits within Brazil, made them some influential enemies in the USA. It wasn't long before the self-proclaimed 'defenders of the free world' decided that Brazil needed a new government and a plot was hatched. Sensing that the government was in danger, tens of thousands of people took to the street on March 13th 1964 to show support for reforms, but it wasn't enough. On the 31st of March, just two weeks later, Brazilian troops were dispatched around the country to occupy strategically important points. The following day, April fools day, the President was deposed and a military Junta declared themselves in charge.

Under the military dictatorship the previous government's plan for land reform was never going to be implemented, and anything that whiffed of grass roots self organisation was crushed. The Ligas were closed, many of the leaders were executed or imprisoned. However, the military government, perhaps recognising that their position wasn't so strong, kept land reform on the agenda. Soon after the coup, the military government decreed the surprisingly progressive *Estatuto da Terra*, a law that was seemingly devised to improve the condition of poor farmers. Important ideas introduced in this law include; creating legal distinctions between different types of properties based on their size, stating that private property has a duty to fulfil certain social functions (explored in further detail in the section on the constitution), and well as establishing the validity of appropriating land in certain circumstances. However, as progressive as the law seemed, the military government had little interest in actually implementing it. During the years 1965 – 1981, there were an average of 8 appropriations a years, despite there being over 70 registered contestations. It seems that the true purpose of the *Estatuto da Terra* was not to disempower the powerful latifundarios, but rather to undercut the growing land reform movement, which was particularly dangerous in the years following the Cuban Revolution. In fact, the powerful latifundarios very much benefited from the military regime, and worked very closely with the government organs in charge of agriculture. The real thrust of the military governments land reform was the technological 'modernisation' of agriculture; the introduction of heavy machinery and agro-chemicals. The result of these reforms was to make it impossible for small farmers to compete with large latifundarios, as well as putting even more rural workers out of work. Also during military rule, we see a sharp decline in the condition of wage workers, as well as the re-emergence of slave labour in Brazil (which remains to this day).

But while appropriating the land of latifundarios was never really on the agenda for the military government, something did have to be done about the growing numbers of politically conscious landless peasants. Their main solution to the problem was the 'colonisation' of the 'uninhabited' Amazonian rainforest. The idea, in the words of the military dictator Medici, was to take the 'men without land to the land without men', ignoring the large indigenous and caboclo populations that already lived there. With the colonisation projects, the military government thought they would be killing two birds with one stone. Not only would they defuse the social conflicts over land by sending the landless families to the Amazon, but they would also begin to settle the vast expanse of jungle that makes up almost a third of Brazilian territory, making it economically profitable. As can be imagined, most people were not thrilled by the idea of leaving their places of birth to move thousands of kilometres away to a hostile jungle environment. The ones who did decide to participate in the colonisation projects were then met with the challenges of life in the remote jungle with essentially no technical, medical, educational, or financial assistance from the government. This lack of support meant that most colonisation projects failed. During the same period, the government were giving large parts of the rainforest to national and multinational corporations to exploit. Luckily for those corporations, the failure of the colonisation projects ensured a large base of exploitable labourers would be close at hand to work in the mines and plantations; the families who had been transported to the Amazon region left with little choice to survive.

MST Formation

It is in this context, under a military government intent on crushing grass roots movements, trying to hinder land reform by shipping landless families off to the Amazon, that the Movimento Sem Terra (MST) emerged. The MST's story picks up where the story of MASTER left off, the Fazenda Sarandi in Rio Grande do Sul. In 1963 5000 people from MASTER were expelled from their camps in Sarandi and the surrounding region. To try and placate these families, the State government offered them land in the indigenous territory of Nonoai. As can be imagined, this did not go over well with the indigenous communities who had been granted this territory in 1847. Fifteen tense years later, in 1978, the sem-terras were expelled by the indigenous communities, and told to find another solution to their problems. At this stage, this group of landless families were left with three

options; go join the colonisation projects in the Amazon, become wage labourers, or stay and struggle for land in Rio Grande do Sul. This was a difficult time for these landless families. Even though the majority of them would have liked to engage in the struggle, they lacked the organisational structure to do so. Though some of these families had participated in MASTER, that was over 15 years previously, and since that time, all attempts at self organisation had been brutally repressed. The families eventually dispersed, some to the houses of relatives, others setting up camps on the side of the road, while some simply roamed around the north east of the State without any clear place to go.

One night five of these families called at the door of the Fr. Arnildo, in the Parish of Ronda, to ask for shelter. Father Arnildo was a member of the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT); an organisation founded by Catholic priests, to struggle on behalf of poor rural workers. These priests were inspired by the Liberation Theology movement that had swept through Latin America in the 1960's, lead by Catholic clergy who were inspired by Christ's defence of the meek and humble, and abhorred the condition America's poor. These clergy looked to use their position to help the oppressed in their struggles. During the era of the dictatorship, it was radicals within the Catholic Church who provided some of the only safe spaces for rural and urban workers to gather, reflect and organise. One of these activists was Fr. Arnildo, in the Parish of Ronda, who, along with giving the families who called at his door shelter, mediated a process of political reflection. These families would think about how their plight was not just a result of one latifundario, but rather a huge apparatus of oppression, under which millions of others were also suffering.

As part of the mediation, Fr. Arnildo read to them from the book of Exodus; 'And the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows / And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites / Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. / Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.'"

This resonated with these families and upon leaving the house of the priest, they decided to visit all of the dislocated families scattered across the region, to continue with their political reflections. Over the course of their journeys they came to the conclusion that the only way to transform their realities would be through their own self-organisation and action. They convoked a meeting, bringing together representatives from every family. It was in this meeting that they decided to set up a permanent organisation through which they could resist the latifundarios, and struggle for what is the fundamental right of all people, to live from and with land.

After making this resolution, these families convoked a huge assemble of 1100 families, whereby they made two further decisions; the first, to make a petition to the then governor, calling on him to find them a piece of land to settle in Rio Grande do Sul; the second, if the governor didn't resolve the issue, to return to the Fazenda Sarandi and reoccupy the land that they had been expelled from 16 years previously. After the governor received the petition, he asked for 30 days to decide. After these 30 days were up, on the 7th of September 1979, with no response from the governor, 110 families entered into Macali, a part of the Fazenda Sarandi. They carried a large wooden cross with them, both as a signal of their suffering, as well as their conquest of the land. Later that day, the military arrived and set up a base beside the camp, but the families were resolved to stay. Women and children made a barrier around the camp to prevent violent incursion from the military. Despite the heavy police and military presence, the sem-terra had the support of civil society, and there was no violence. A few weeks later, on the 25th of September, another group of families started a new

camp on Sarandi, in a part known as Fazenda Brilante, opening up a new front of the occupation. But despite these occupations, weeks passed without any resolution from the government. At this point a group of women decided that further action was necessary. To prevent the workers of the latifundarios from being able to work the fields, they put their bodies in the way of the harvesters and refused to budge until the government ceded to their demands, in a brave act of non-violent disruption. With the harvest disrupted, and little time to lose before the crop was ruined, the government came down to negotiate. They had found land in Rio Grande do Sul for some of the families to settle. But there was not space enough for everyone.

This was enough temporarily pause the occupation, but, with many of families still without land, the issue was far from settled. The following year, 1980, saw another occupation of Sarandi, this time in a part known Anoni. To put extra pressure on the government, a group of sem-terras went to the city of Porto Alegre and set up a camp outside government offices. After two weeks of negotiations, the government found more land to give to the sem-terra. But it still wasn't enough. Thousands of people remained in the lurch. In December of 1980 a new occupation began. This time in a place known as Encruzilhada Natalino. The name comes from a small commercial house that existed on the land, who was called Natalino, and also because the first person to set up camp there was named Natalino. He would soon be joined by many more people from across the region. 'Encruzilhada' means 'crossroads', and during this occupation, this nascent movement really did find itself at a crossroads. It was a pivotal moment in the history of MST, as it was the first time the sem-terra would face sustained aggression and concerted attempts to break their resolve. The government decided that they were done ceding ground to these landless farmers, and this time they would settle things their way.

The spring of 1981 saw the camp grow exponentially. While in April of 1981 there were only than 50 families, by June there were 600 families and over 3000 people participating the occupation. They were camped in tents, and some had even constructed houses of adobe, straw and cement bags. These families began organising themselves into groups, sectors and commissions. The central commission were democratically elected to coordinate things and guide the political direction of the camp. There were also other commissions set up to deal with specific issues, such the commission for health, the commission for food, and the commission for negotiations. This form of organisation would be replicated by later occupations who were inspired by what happened Natalino. The sem terra also created a news bulletin for general circulation - *Sem Terra*. This would later become the *Journal do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, which is still in publication today. But despite the best efforts of the sem terra, the conditions in the camp were often difficult. There was a lack of food, accommodation, and tools. And things were made worse by the presence of the military, who were constantly approaching the camps, threatening its inhabitants.

To try put pressure on the government, a group of sem terra went to camp outside government buildings in Porto Alegre, employing a tactic that had been successful during the last occupation. But this time they found that the government was in no mood to negotiate, and a battalion of federal army soldiers were waiting for them. The situation in the city was clearly bad, but worse was to follow. They received word that another battalion of troops was on the way to Encruzilhada Natalino. Upon hearing the news, the sem terra who had just arrived in the city quickly raced back to camp, arriving just ahead of the army. The soldiers then encircled the camp, and blocked the entrances, allowing no one to come in or out. Not even priests were allowed in to give mass. The camp was now under siege. A military tent was set up at the entrance, as were loudspeakers. With the sem terra isolated, the military then began to try and break their resolve.

Through the loudspeakers they made false claims, such as that those who had worked in the city were no longer vocational farmers, and had thus lost their right to land. They demanded that all

families bring a government document to prove they owned no land. They sent spies into the camp to infiltrate the group and lower moral. Because the military had cut the sem terra off from the world, they were obliged to provide some food rations to prevent them from starving. But they were first made to wait in a queue for many hours, during which time the military would play demoralising audios, such as an interview with Archbishop Vincente Scherer saying that the occupiers didn't have a right to land in Rio Grande. There were also constant threats that food rations would be cut unless the occupation was called off. The military began projecting slides and films from the colonisation projects in the Amazon and Bahia, where the government was trying to send them. They then organised transport for a delegation of sem terra to come and see the land. Now suffering under the pressure the military were putting them under, the occupiers agreed to elect a delegation to go and see what was on offer. When they arrived, they were given drinks and a barbecue. But as they went to wash their hands afterwards, the water dried up. And there was no more water to be found anywhere else for miles. On top of that, the soil was devoid of all fertility, and essentially just pure sand, unsuitable for agriculture. When the sem terra refused these barren lands, the military began using more aggressive tactics.

They started to encircle the camp, first with their vehicles, raising huge dust clouds all around, then starting a menacing permanent march around the camp on horseback. They destroyed the water lines coming into the camp. Lines of communication between them and the outside world were tightened further. Local press at the time likened conditions in the camp to that of a concentration camp. The atmosphere was becoming tense and fearful, and many of the occupiers were becoming disheartened. But supporters and allies were beginning to mobilize. They organised a demonstration of support to take place at the camp, which included 137 priests, as well as members of the Order of Lawyers of Brasil, and State and Federal deputies. This made it difficult for the army to employ the usually intimidation tactics. When these allies were prevented from entering into the camp, the sem terra, reinvigorated by this showing of support, went and got the cross that had been planted at the centre of the camp, and used it to smash the military barriers, allowing the supporters to enter the camp. This turned out to be the decisive moment. The occupiers once again hardened their resolve to resist, and the moral at the camp was high. Faced with the continued resistance of the sem terra, as well as mobilisation by civil society, the army retreated on the 31st of August. 1981

The occupation wasn't over, it would take another two years for the government to finally find suitable land to permanently settle all these families. But the successful confrontation with the government and the military had a profound effect on everyone struggling for access to land across Brazil. In the middle of a military dictatorship that had cast a net of fear and violence over all of Brazilian society, they had proved that sustained resistance in the face of government oppression could succeed. As well as providing inspiration, they also created a model of direct action that would be followed by many thousands like them. As we have seen, struggles for land had been happening across Brazil for a long time. But the forms of self-organisation that were developed at Encruzilhada Natalino, as well as the tactics that were employed there (as well as in the previous occupations) to conquer the land, would become key features of a grass roots movement for land reform that was just now being a potent force in Brazilian politics.

In the time that followed the occupation at Encruzilhada, the CPT were important in propagating what had been happening. They began showing films of the struggle to poor farmers in their parishes, and encouraging reflection and debate on the land struggles. This led to more and more groups of sem terra organise themselves, leading to more and more occupations. Pretty soon there were occupations in the States of Santa Catarina, Mata Grosso do Sul, Parana, and Sao Paulo. And it was all these actions combined which constitute the founding of Movimento Sem Terra. While the experience at Natalino was important in crystallising a certain form of the movement, MST did not emerge from a single struggle, but rather 500 years of sustained resistance across all of Brazil. It was not created by a single act, but was rather founded, and is refounded anew, every time a group

of people decide to engage in the struggle for their natural right the live from and with the land. But in 1984, an organisation was created to bring all of these struggles together. The process began in 1982 with a series of national conventions, uniting movements from 16 states across Brazil. The results of these conventions were printed in the *Boletim Sem Terra*;

To Our Companheiros Sem Terra of Brazil

We, landless workers from 16 states of diverse regions of the country, meeting in Goiania, want to communicate this message, to relay the objective of this meeting, as well as to convey its importance.

We want to invite everyone to join the struggle for the conquest and defence of the land and for the rights which have been denied to us.

This valuable meeting had as its objectives: a) evaluate the struggles and the progress of our movements; b) realise the communality of our struggles, both in their positive and negative aspects; c) evaluate how we are resisting, what results we have achieved; and d) find ways of continuing and strengthening our struggles.

All struggle is difficult, because it demands a lot of strength and dedication. We lament and protest against our many companheiros who were murdered, victims of the greed of the powerful. Despite this, our movement has had many victories across the country. Many of our brothers and sisters, after much struggle, succeeded, conquering the ground that is theirs as well as their other rights. We also shouldn't forget that our struggles helps us to become conscious of reality, and realise all of the people who are allied against us.

We verify that in every part of the country there are conflicts over land, and worse still is how these problems are beings resolved. We again lament to say that these problems are resolved with police repression, and this repression is always directed against the most vulnerable.

We workers are victims of a system designed in the interests of large corporations and latifundiarios. If we do not organise ourselves into unions and associations, in our regions, states, and at the national level; if we do not sit together to analyse together our struggles, to confront our current reality, which enslaves the weak, if we don't do this, we will never free ourselves from this life of exploitation and slavery.

We live in a world not designed for humans to prosper. A world that was engineered by an unjust system, and implanted in our country. The land is in the hands of a few, the salaries are low, the laws favour the powerful, power and wealth is in the hands of this minority, clearly revealing that in our way of thinking is a violence against humanity and nature. The system encourages violence and total disrespect of all people. This system, whose aim is not the prospering of human beings, and has been imposed on this land from outside, is the ultimate cause the ills that plague our society; criminality, hunger, theft, child abandonment, prostitution, misery, and other types of violence.

We want to make clear to all our companheiros, the importance of a conscious participation in political decision making, being the problems mentioned are the fruits of injustice and a lack of participation. We invite everyone to reflect and not to be fooled by false promises of those who are only interested in the people during election time.

We would like, through this message, to voice our solidarity with the strikers of Pernambuco and with all of the companheiros across the country who are struggling and suffering. We want to say stay strong, and we invite you all one more time to unite for our rights.

To close, we want to thank all those who are assuming the cause of the workers. A hug to everyone.

Goiania, 26 September 1982.

This initial meeting set the groundwork for a further convention, taking place in January 1984, which would mark the official beginning of the organisation *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* – MST. Since the start of the military dictatorship, the sem terra had organised through the unions or the CPT. While there is no doubting that the efforts of these organisations were essential in the founding of the movement, it was also important that the workers created an autonomous organisation to struggle for their rights. This new organisation set itself a series of goals, the most important of which are:

- 1) *To struggle for land reform*
- 2) *To struggle for a just society based on solidarity, and to put an end to capitalism*
- 3) *Integrate the various types of landless rural workers into one struggle:*
- 4) *To return the land to those who work it, and those who need it to live.*

With these organisational principles decided upon, the first task would be to expand the organisation in those parts of Brazil which hadn't yet organised their land struggles. This would be a process whereby the movement spread from person to person, family to family, community to community. Church groups would get involved, as would unions of rural workers. Meetings were set up in individual homes, as well as in community halls. More and more landless rural farmers began to organise themselves into collectives, and learn about all the struggles of land that were already going on across Brazil. In every corner of Brazil, rural families were creating the conditions whereby they could struggle for access to land. Occupation began to multiply. Those engaged in the struggle began to share their experiences with each other, and learn from others engaged in the same struggles, and reflected upon how their struggles could all be integrated. While there is not the space in this article to explore the particular evolution of all the regional branches of MST across Brazil, those interested can look to the bibliography below.

Organisation

Over the past 40 years MST has continued to grow, both in terms of territory, now spread out across 25 Brazilian States, as well as institutionally, having evolved to encompass ever more aspects of the struggle for radical land reform. Before looking at some of the different instances and sectors of the organisation, the first thing we can note is that all of the organisational forms that MST have developed have arisen directly out of their own experience of the struggle. They were responses to the real organisational needs that presented themselves. That is not to say that theory has no place in the movement, action is undertaken in light of what has already been learned. But it is to say that theory is always rooted in a firm ground of practice. And as soil first provides a tree with nutrients, for it to later enrich the soil that raised it, so too do theories that arise from practice go on to enrich that practice. However, it should be remembered that transplanted theories can sometimes have a negative effect on their new environments, stifling the growth of new life. Theory is helpful in guiding action, but not when it limits our capacity to adapt to new situations that require new ideas and explanations. While theory can guide practice, practice must also guide theory, in a dialectical movement that doesn't distinguish between the ideal and the material. To use a different metaphor: theory and practice are like the mind and body of a single organism, they need to be in equilibrium with each other if that organism is to thrive.

To this effect, MST is organised according to a philosophy of *forma em movimento* [form in movement], according to which one establishes institutions, but also engages in a constant process of analysis and critique, and is prepared to transform pre-established institutions in light of new experiences. So while we are about to look at various sectors and instances of organisation

within MST, we should keep in mind that it is a very dynamic organisation, constantly adapting to an ever changing world, as well as responding to internal developments and critique.

MST operates on many different geographically levels: on the community level, the regional level, the state level, and finally on the national level. On the community level the organisational unit is the *nucleus*. This is the core of MST, around which the other parts are built. The nucleus is composed of up to 500 families, and organised democratically through *community assemblies*. Anyone can speak at the assembly and everyone votes on whatever issue is at hand; adults, youth, men and women. Particular care is given to ensure the participation of women, with all co-ordinating bodies always made up of an equal number of men and women. In these assemblies, community members decide both; how to organise themselves on the local level, and who to send as representatives to the the *Regional Co-ordination*. The Regional Co-ordination a council which takes part in the organising the various activities in the region (such as schools, co-ops, infrastructure projects, etc.), and is the primary referent at the local level for the other instances of organisation (the sectors, the National and State Co-ordinations). Representatives are usually elected with a mandate of two years. The representative's job is bring the will of the community, as expressed in the community assemblies, to the larger instances of government. Representatives who are found not to be doing this can be removed from office at any time. Depending on the norms of each community, re-elections are generally possible after a vigorous process of evaluation.

These norms of representation are replicated at the state and national levels with the *State and National Co-ordinations*, councils of elected representatives tasked with executing the plans and directives agreed upon in the *State and National Meetings*. The State Meeting takes place every year to review and reflect upon everything that has happened in the previous 365 day, both in terms of the wider political situation, as well as what has been happening within the movement. Most of the decisions pertaining to various activity within the state are taken at the State Meeting, along with the election of members to the State Co-ordination. The National Meeting is held every two years to evaluate, formulate and approve the national political positions, as well as reviewing and planning the activities of the organisation. The National Meeting is also where the members of the National Co-ordination are elected, of which there are 120 members. The largest coming together of MST is the *National Congress*, which takes place every five years, and brings together people from all over Brazil. The Congress is not for making the national level decisions, those are mainly taken in the National Meeting, but rather a chance for people engaged in the struggle to share experiences and get to know each other, as well as promoting relations between the organisations and the rest of society.

Parallel to this geographic structure of government, there is are also the sectors, which were created to co-ordinate the various activities of the organisation. While MST was founded by rural families with the aim of conquering a piece of land, the organisation has grown to encompass much more than just this. The conquering of territory is an essential part of the struggle, it is the foundation upon which the rest of the struggle is lain. But after laying the foundation, you then need to build the house. So too with the occupying of territory. MST generally occupies unproductive lands; lands which the latifundario wasn't using, or had never used. So, by its very nature, most of the land that is occupied has very little infrastructure. There is often a lack of basic amenities such as electricity, water, and roads, not to mention schools and hospitals. Generally the Brazilian government does very little to provide these basic services, meaning that it is left up to the people to organise things for themselves. The sectors were the organisational response to this challenge. And since the organisational form was first established, new sectors have been constantly springing up, in order to encompass all of various elements encompassed by a radical community led land reform. The sectors exist at all geographic levels of the movement, from the community to the national. Some of the various sectors are; Health, Human Rights, Gender, Sexuality, Education, Culture, Communication, Training, Projects and Finance, Production, Cooperation, Environment, Youth,

LGBT, International Relations, and the Mass Front. While all of these sectors represent important aspect of the movement, we can highlight a few in particular to get a deeper insight into these sectors.

Education

Along with the occupation of land, education is a central pillar of the MST movement. An emancipatory education not only expands mental horizons, helping people to imagine new realities, and teaching skills to bring those realities about; it also provides important intellectual tools of resistance. To engage in the struggle effectively one needs the ability to read and write, know how to handle basic arithmetic, and how to use communication technologies, the ability to communicate a message effectively to others in society, as well as have a handle on some of the various economic, political and social realities of the world around you. Unfortunately, many rural families in Brazil have little or no access to education. Many have never been to school, and levels of illiteracy are high. This situation was even worse in the 1980's when MST first began to organise education within the camps. This first schools were founded spontaneously within the camps. For many parent involved in the occupations, their children's education was a top priority. To meet this pressing need, the camp founded the Education Sector, in which parents and children would collectively organise the children's education. A group a people at the camp took on the responsibility of educating the children and underwent a process of education to begin teaching at the camp.

In the National Meeting of 1987 this challenge was taken up on the national level, with the creation of the National Education Sector. In the first years, the goals of the Education Sector were more about ensuring access to state schools, but it wasn't long before the movement began to reflect upon the nature of this education, and began asking the question; 'what type of education would most benefit our children and communities?'. This is a question still being posed and elaborated upon today, but over the years some general points of consensus have emerged. A good place to begin to understand the MST philosophy of education is a didactic list of reflections on education published by the Education Sector in 1989:

- 'in a class based society, schools are used to disseminate the ideology of the ruling class.
- the contents and methods of official schools are directed at maintaining the current order
- the work of education is an important political activity for the process of transforming society
- education in the settlements is a process of production and reproduction of knowledge taken from their own realities.
- schools are an integrated part of the life and the organisational ensemble of the settlements, the participation of the families beings an essential part of planning and administration.'

We can elaborate on the first two points. Firstly by highlighting the fact that an important part of official education is imparting a vision of history and a set of values that legitimise the rule of the nation state and the capitalist economy. This transmission is sometimes explicit, in the teaching of history, and sometimes latent (for example, in teaching economics, the explicit teaching is various methods to predict how economies function under certain condition, but the latent teaching is to normalise a particular set of social relations). Much of the teaching (particularly about history, society, politics, etc.) is what Paulo Freire called 'banking education', in which information is 'deposited' in the minds of the students, and students are evaluated on how well they can reproduce the information, without ever being encouraged to critically engage with the subject. Without ever being given the tools to criticize or analyse the version of history and society presented to them, students only ever learn to understand themselves as objects of history and society, without realising that they are also subjects, that they are the ones who make history, and organise society.

To this end, one of the two primary goals of MST education is;

‘1.) To develop the critical capacity of the students:

- using contents that encourage reflection and the acquisition of wider and more differentiated view of the world than the official discourse
- transmitting the history and the meaning of the land struggle in which the settlement arose.’

On the one hand, its important to understand the relativity of one’s own world view, that our way of thinking has been shaped by the society and culture we come from, as well as our positionalities within our own societies; and that there are many other ways for people to understand and imagine society. On the other hand, teaching the history of their own community’s successful struggle for land emphasizes their capacity to actively transform the world around them.

To return to the second point from Education Sectors reflections, we can say that official schools maintain the current order is a number of ways. Firstly, by socialising students to as individuals. Young children are taken out of their community context, and placed in a formal institution in which they are all made to compete with one another in terms of academic achievement. Those who perform well in their individual assessments are rewarded with further access to education, those who fail are punished by being made to repeat, or barred from further access. The very format of such a education, without even looking at the content, socialises children to understand themselves as individuals, alone, in competition with those around them. Whereas children who are brought up in a community context, with people working toward a shared goal, learning according to their own volition, ability, and the needs of the community, take a very different lesson from their educational context.

Another effect of a state education is the normalisation of a hierarchical and disciplinary form of organisation, in which some people speak and others listen; some people decide and others obey; in which those who don’t comply with the institutional disciplinary regime can expect to be punished. People have a natural aversion to arbitrary hierarchies, as well as having to perform boring and menial tasks for hours on end. But these are the conditions that many people must work under in capitalist workplaces, and so schools must prepare students for such a reality.

Finally one the most important functions of state schools is to provide individuals with the skills they need to be integrated into a capitalist labour market. So after 15 years of an almost wholly intellectual education, the first practical bit of education students receive is one or two highly specialised skills which allow them to sell their labour on the labour market. After such an education, students are dependent on capitalist labour markets to earn their daily bread. We can contrast this with the natural education that children receive in autonomous communities. These children learn a huge set of integrated skills; learning how build, to make and repair tools, equipment and clothes, how to work the land, carpentry, ceramic, etc. Different children would naturally tend more to some areas than others, but all would learn a variety of skills that allowed them to live a life far less dependent on global capitalist markets to survive. They would also tend to learn skills that were important for the whole community, rather than ones that would see the greatest individual returns. So along with being generally more practical, broader, and allowing for greater levels of autonomy, a community education has socially orientated, rather than individualistic, goals.

This community orientation can be clearly seen in the second of MST’s two goals for education:

‘2.) developing activities that improve the technical capacities of the students, in order:

- to learn and employ new productive techniques that contribute to collective advancement.
- to provide the knowledge that is essential in the day to day life of the community: agriculture, administration, accounting, etc.’

With this pedagogical programme in hand, MST have gone about setting up over 2000 schools in camps and settlements across Brazil, guaranteeing the education of over 200,000 children and

adults. Some of these schools, the ones that are created in camps rather than settlements, are 'itinerant schools'; semi-mobile schools that can be taken down and put up in short order, according to the needs of the community and the changing situation of an occupation. This ensures that even those engaged in an occupation have access to education. As well as schools for children, the Education Sector works on raising literacy rates. To this end, they organise special adult literacy programmes, which have so far taught over 50,000 adults to read and write. The movement is also making inroads into third level education, having set up a school, *Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes*, dedicated to educating teachers within the movement, as well as undertaking research that is relevant to land reform. Members of MST have also designed over 100 graduate courses on the subject of land reform with various public universities across Brazil.

For a variety of reasons, MST work with the Brazilian government in their campaign for educational reform and expansion. All of MST's schools are part of the Brazilian public school system and are financed by the local municipal government. Although generally state schools have worked with a different understanding of education and pedagogy than MST, there are a number of reasons for this co-operation. To first are the purely practical reasons such as: having access to resources provided by the government, which are essential in undertaking such a large scale educational programme; and having students educational achievement being widely recognised. However the reasons go beyond these practical consideration.

Perhaps most importantly is that MST's pedagogical programme can be implemented within the public school system. It takes place in a community context, is managed democratically by that community, and has contextual contents. The contents of the curriculum are guided by the national curriculum, but, in accordance with Brazilian law on rural education, are connected with the reality of the students (with elements such as agroecology, healthy foods without the use of pesticides, etc.) Another reason, reflecting the broader strategy of the movement, is that by working with the government to reform education, MST can have a larger impact on rural education throughout Brazil than if they were to focus on creating completely autonomous schools within the camps and settlements. MST have developed a model for rural schools that exist within the public school system, and so can easily be implemented in any other rural settings.

A final point is that, although the schools by themselves don't encompass the entire width and breath of MST's pedagogical philosophy, they were never intended to. The movement has never confined education to the schools themselves. An MST education is not only composed of what is learned in the classroom, but also by: participating in occupations, in community assemblies, in the various sectors, engaging in political activism, and in the day to day activities that make up community life. In this sense we can see education taking on its truly political character, not only as the transmission of knowledge and abilities, or even the teaching how to critically assess the world around them, but also in giving people the opportunity to collectively self organise, to create for themselves, in their own communities, a world of their own. The entire movement can be seen as a pedagogical project of people learning and teaching to transform their reality.

Formação & Mass Front

Two somewhat related sectors are *Formação* (for which there is no direct English translation, but it means something like training/education) and Mass front. *Formação* is dedicated to teaching and learning about capitalism; how it arose, its global components, the place of Brazilian rural farmers within the global capitalist economy. This sector is essential in raising the political consciousness of those within the movement. A lot of the time, it can be hard to understand how one's own individual struggle relates to wider socio-economic causes. One sees their landlords raising rents, or bosses lowering wages, and this is clearly unjust. However, the need to put food on the table and a roof over your head means there is little time to do anything but accept the injustice. This individualisation of struggle is the only way a small minority can oppress a large majority, and so

one of the most essential elements of any political movement is to show people the wider causes of their struggle. Once people realise that they are not the only ones going through difficulties; that there are many others just like them, and that their difficulties are all rooted in the same ground, they can begin to organise a collective response. Formação is also responsible for producing and publishing journals, newsletters and books, from members of MST, often in collaboration with allies of the movement; bringing the voice and perspective of those within the movement into the wider world.

Mass Front was created with the aim of expanding the movement by providing people with the knowledge and skills they need to participate. It is the 'front door' through which new families enter the movement. An occupation begins with a group of families going through a learning process, during which they learn the essential knowledge and skills needed to undertake an occupation, such as: their rights regarding the occupation of unproductive land, the skills to resist and negotiate with the state and plantation owners, the organisational skills needed to facilitate collective decision making, etc. Along with transmitting these practical skills and information, the Mass Front is also responsible for the '*trabalho de base*' [work at the base]. This is a process introduced to the organisation by the CPT, designed to awaken people's capacity to critically analyse their own situation and shape their own realities.

In our society, there is a hierarchy of voice. At the top is a tiny group of people who control vast resources and media empires, who have a highly outsized influence on public conversation. They generally use this influence to propagate ideas and values that maintain them in positions of power. Below these people are a slightly larger class of educated professionals, working as journalists, politicians, writers, etc. While this group doesn't have the ability to shape public conversation in the same way as the former group, they do have a voice in society, and can exercise some influence, especially when they manage to harmonise their voices. Below them are people with little or no access to important mediums of communication as individuals, but are still represented in the conversation as a group (with their level of representation generally depending on their class, race, sexuality, etc.). Finally, we have the truly marginalised in society, those with no voice. Those who are sometimes spoken about, but never heard speaking.

Because of this unequal influence of public conversations, some people have the ability to shout over everybody else, so much so that others can barely hear themselves think. Instead of people analysing things for themselves, they simply internalise what they hear repeated all around them. This can even mean that marginalised groups internalise the discrimination they suffer from, believing themselves to be less capable, unable to act, disempowered. To counteract this the *trabalho de base*, inspired by Paulo Freire's work on pedagogy, creates a space for 'the subject to construct their own existence'. Not only for people to realise that it is within their power to transform the world around them (how land, communities, and resources are organised, for example), but also that it is within their power to transform themselves, and their self-understanding and their relation with the wider world. The idea is that everyone should have the ability to actively participate in their own creation and recreation. This work is undertaken by people from the Mass Front who travel all around Brazil facilitating the politicisation and empowerment of people who want to join the movement, as well assisting in new occupations.

Production

The MST movement has the aim of creating an *economy based on an ethic of co-operation*. One name for this type of economy is a shared economy, but there are many different names – social economy, democratic economy, communal economy, etc. While there are sometimes differences between these different ideas, the unifying element is that that work toward creating an economy based on different principles to the capitalist economy. Currently our economy is based on individuals competing with each other for the accumulation of unlimited private wealth. The effects

of such an economy are evident; social isolation, utter destruction of the natural world, grotesque levels of inequality. For these reasons, many people work toward changing the way the economy is organised; to democratise it, to put local economies into the hands of local communities, and to direct the global economy toward a social purpose. While the individual pursuit of wealth is often taken for granted today, for most of our history, we have lived and worked in groups, and understood ourselves as one part of a whole, with relationships but solidarity, mutual aid, and shared purpose, rather than impersonal market transactions. The Production sector within MST aims to promote these kinds of relationship and this kind of the economy.

One example of an economic relationship based on solidarity within MST is the *mutirão*, or collective community action. During a *mutirão*, the community comes together to complete a project on a solidarity basis. The project may be to build something for the whole community, or it may be something for a single member of the community. For example, there may be a *mutirão* to build a house for young members of the community who are moving out of their parents house to start their own family. Nobody earns any money but they do get all of the intangible social and emotional benefits that strong communities ties bring with them, as well as knowing that the community would also come together on their behalf when they needed that.

The *mutirão* is an example of a community economy based on solidarity. This works on a local level, but not everything can be produced from within the community. So in order to bring an ethic of co-operation to the wider market economy one needs a different model. For this, MST looked to the model of the co-operative to collectivise their production. But developing a co-operative model of production to suit their organisation was not a straight forward task. The model of co-operative that existed in Brazil in the 1980's wasn't fit for purpose. Although co-operatives should function to empower small farmers, the model of co-op that most members of MST were familiar with was, in the words of MST, another 'instrument for the exploitation of small landholders'.² They were run more like corporations than co-ops; decisions were taken by whoever held the largest amount of shares; management was top down, with directors issuing orders for a bureaucratic hierarchy of managers to implement; most of the work was done by salaried workers; and the majority of members had no say in deciding what to do with the profits.

MST needed to develop a new type of co-op that would work for the benefit of its members. And after a long process of investigation, analysis, and consultation, in which members of MST travelled across Latin America to learn about various types of community lead co-operatives, the *Sistema Cooperativista dos Assentados* (SAC) was born. Some of the most important differences between the previous models of co-op, and the SAC include; decisions are made by democratic vote of all members; bottom up management, with each sector drawing up their own work plans to present at the assemblies; the work is principally done by members, with minimal work being done by salaried workers; and decisions regarding what to do with profit are made collectively, generally being distributed according to the amount of work done.

Since the establishment of the SAC model, 160 co-operatives have been established under the banner of MST. The agricultural co-ops produce a wide range of produce, such as; rice, beans, corn, wheat, coffee, cocoa, honey, cassava, milk, and an large assortment of vegetables. MST co-ops have become important producers in the region. To give one example, they are the largest producers of organic rice in all of Latin America. And MST have not only set up co-opts for the production of agricultural products, but also co-ops for every link in the production chain from seed to market, with different co-ops to process, package, deliver and sell the produce. The idea behind this is to bring as much as the production process into the rural economy and co-operative system of management as possible, to minimize their exposure to capitalist markets, which normally take the lion's shares of profits from small farmers. With these actions the Production sector works to

improve the material situation for people living in the settlements, how just as important as their level of economic output, MST is the fact that MST is producing co-operative and mutually beneficial social and economic relations in rural Brazil.

Open, Popular, Participatory

There are a few other important elements of the organisational character of MST that we can look at here. Firstly, within the organisation there are no individual positions of leadership. Although certain figures, such as João Pedro Stédile, may have become important public representatives of the movement, there was never a president, or any kind of office which held ultimate authority, and the movement doesn't foster any kind of cult of personality. Instead there are collective duties and responsibilities, in which a groups of representatives (such as the various levels of 'co-ordinations') share in the task of government. There is an obvious practical reason for this. Movements that are centred around one, or a few, important leaders, by be easily dealt with by reactionary forces by murdering or co-opt those leaders, as has happened many times throughout history. Cut of the head and the body dies. By creating a movement with widespread participation, and a high turnover in office, it avoids this danger. But aside from this practical reason, there is also the ideological reason of creating an organisation that is democratic and participatory. MST was not founded as an organisation to assist rural families; it was founded by rural families themselves so that they could engage directly in the struggle on their own behalf. One of the central aims of their campaign of land reform is to empower rural people to become the main political actors in their own lives. Encouraging wide spread participation is not only thought of as a means to an end, a way of ensuring the success of the movement, but is an end in itself.

Everybody is encouraged to participate in the organisation on some level (whether it be in one of the sectors, or assemblies, or the various co-ordinations), and those who participate are given autonomy to make the organisational decisions within their fields of activity. There is *no large bureaucratic apparatus* allowing one group to control everything from the centre, and making sure that there is uniformity throughout the organisation. Administration is decentralised. This is in line with the philosophy of *form in movement*, according to which people make decisions based on their real circumstances. For this a certain level of organisational autonomy is needed. While the overarching political strategies of the organisation are established at the National Meeting, it is up to every state, region, settlement and sector to decide how to implement these political strategies. For example, while it may be decided on a national level that MST production should be co-operative, it is left up to every region to decide how this will operate in practice.

However, while every level of the organisation acts with a high degree of autonomy, the organisation's principles and directives cannot simply be ignored. MST has a clear agenda; radical land reform and the empowerment of small farmers. To effectively work toward these aims the organisation needs some level of co-operation, consistency and continuity. If people just start going out on their own organisational unity disintegrates, along with collective resistance. So after collective decisions in the organisation have been made, people are expected to respect those decisions.

One word that is used to talk about MST as an organisation is 'organic unity' [*organicidade*]. What this term refers to is the level of interaction and connection between the different elements of the movement, as well as between the members and the movement itself. Important in this regard is the level of connection between the settlements (who have gained legal access to land) and the camps (who are struggling for access to land). When organising against powerful opponents such as the state or rich latifundiários, the accumulation of forces of a united mass front is the only chance of success for poor rural families. Organic unity also refers the level of participation of members in the diverse range of activities within the organisation, on the local, regional or national level – such as the various co-ops, assemblies, sectors activities, etc. So what we are talking about is the qualitative

level of integration of members, rather than just the quantitative number of members. Social movements that manage to integrate their members into a variety of different activities, for different elements of the organisation to become part of the daily lives of the members, are much stronger, resilient, and can generally manifest much more political pressure than movements that don't. And the organic unity MST is clearly one of its greatest strengths. From the organisation of access to land, to economic production, to education, the organisation is a central part of the day to day lives of most of the members, as are the day to day lives of the members a central part of the organisation.

Another feature of MST that sets it apart from other similar organisations in Brazil, such as the rural trade unions, is that it is a *popular movement* in which everybody participates; men, women, children and the elderly. In the words of one of the founders of MST Joao Pedro Stendile; 'we perceived that there resided our greatest strength. [Organisations of] men, along with being sexist, are conservative and individualistic. The movement, in so far as it includes the whole family, acquires an incredible potential.'³ By including the whole family it widens the perspective of the movement, brings in a broader set of aptitudes and modes of participation, and deepens the sense of solidarity within the organisation. One example of these wider modes of participation is the creation of an intergenerational *popular culture* of songs, symbols, literature, visual art, and films, based on shared values and a shared vision of the world.

A popular culture is one in which people produce and reproduce culture, participating in the creative expression of their own lives. We can contrast this with a *mass culture*, in which a small class of artists produce culture to be consumed on national or global capitalist markets. Popular culture stems from the people's own lived experience, and adds a sense of beauty, and purpose and dignity to that experience. Since the beginning of the movement in the 80's, there has been an immense cultural output across a diversity of artistic mediums, not only from people within the movement itself, but from supporters of the movement within Brazil. It has helped create a mystique around the movement, and a wide appeal which has crossed the boundaries of rural Brazil and reached a diverse section of Brazilian society.

What has also helped in this regard is that MST is an *open movement*. Although it is a movement founded and led by rural families, it has never excluded anyone who wanted to join or contribute to the movement. Since the beginning the movement has attracted support and assistance from a diverse cross section of Brazilian society: lawyers, priests, journalists, professors, urban workers, etc. And just as opening the movement up to the whole family widens the perspectives and abilities within the movement, opening up to people across society amplifies this effect. Along with adding to the technical capabilities of the movement, building a broad coalition of various sectors of civil society has two important effects. Firstly, it brings a diversity of perspectives to the movement, allowing for a wider view of the struggle of many different marginalised groups in society. Secondly it means that a large array of forces coalesce around the movement, adding to its strength.

Within the organisation, there is no differentiation made between the *mãos grossas* ['thick hands'], and the *mãos lisas* ['smooth hands']. That is between the rural working families, and people from other sections of societies engaged in the movement. Although it's clear that the movement itself aims at land reform that empowers rural families, there was never any question of creating a two tier form of participation. Everybody can contribute according to their will and aptitude. Different people are good at different things, so the first question that is posed to new member is; 'what would you like to do within MST?' One cannot expect a university professor to leave his job in the city to take part in an occupation, but there are lots of other ways in which that professor can contribute. This variety in modes of participation is important to making people feel good within the movement, and wanting to continue participating.

Finally, we can also mention that, along with finding allies from a broad variety of people across society, MST has found allies in many different organisations too. We have already seen that from the very beginning organisations such as CPT, the rural unions, and the lawyers unions played vital roles the establishment of MST. But the movement has also set up links with various other organisations, such as the *Via Campesina*, a global network of small farmers who promote the interests of small farmers and land reform across the world. MST also works in partnership with various state institutions, and also has strong links to the popular political party *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) [worker's party], founded by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. However MST has always ensured that its essential character remained that of a mass movement, and would always remain autonomous from any political parties. This will be explored in greater detail below. In terms of financing, the movement receives some support from national and international NGO's and religious groups interested in promoting land reform, but the main source of funding is MST members who have conquered land and then contribute to the continuation of the movement.

Constitution & Law

Before looking at the different types of political action practised by MST, it is important to understand the legal context in which these actions are taking place. Because although theirs is a direct and forceful method of political action, occupying lands that powerful landlords claim as their own, MST occupations do not contravene any Brazilian laws. Quite the opposite. What the occupations aim to do is pressure the government to enforce the law. Because while rural families engage in the struggle in the Brazilian countryside, others take the struggle to the Brazilian houses of government and courts. Thanks to many years of activism, today there are important legal mechanisms whereby landless rural families in Brazil have the opportunity to gain a piece of land to work for themselves with their families and communities; even if political realities mean that it's not always easy. While the legislation is by no means perfect, and it must be understood in the context of 500 years of some of the most unequal and exploitative forms of land management in the world, some of the Brazilian legislation on land reform is quite progressive and of interest to all those campaigning for land reform throughout the world.

As already mentioned in the section on the history of Brazilian land reform, the first important piece of legislation was the *Estatuto de Terra* in 1964. Some of the important developments of the Estatuto were; creating legal distinctions between different types of property based on size; establishing legal obligations on properties of a certain size; introducing the idea that private property is obliged to fulfil 'social functions'; and asserting the validity of appropriating land in certain circumstances. However, although this legislation was progressive, it didn't find practical implementation during the military dictatorship. The fall of the dictatorship, and the writing of the new constitution, was the next opportunity to give legal impetus to the land reform movement. Passed in 1988, the new constitution included some important articles on land reform, enshrining some of the ideas of the Estatuto in the foundational document of the 'new republic'. The most important element of the new constitution for the budding MST movement was the stipulation included in Article 5, on the right to property; property is obliged to 'serve its social function'. If it fails in this regard, according to Article 184, the government is required to 'expropriate for the purpose of agrarian reform, rural property that is not performing its social function.'

To state that all land has a 'social function' is to say that everyone in society has an interest in how a piece of land is managed, rather than just the individual owner. While to some people this may seem a rather benign, or even obvious, proposition; in the context of European legal history, it is a bold statement. Since the beginning of the modern era, a certain conception of private property has been central to the way that we organise our society. In some countries' constitutions this form of ownership has an inviolability comparable to the right to life and liberty. But what exactly is meant

by the term ‘private property’? Although it has become entirely normalised in our times, what we understand as private property only emerged in the 16th and 17th century in Europe.

Before this time, there were a variety of ways in which European land was managed. Often much of the land was nominally ‘owned’ by the Sovereign, who then granted rights of use to various groups, although how the Sovereign granted these rights was often dictated by custom. Certain kinds of individual (or at least family) ownership of land did exist in some places, but ownership meant something quite different to what it does today. Medieval landlords were rarely unrestricted in the management of land which was nominally theirs. While aristocratic families may have had wide ranging rights of use of a piece of land, these rights were limited by certain restraints and responsibilities, and other groups may have also had held certain rights to the same land. For example, the local aristocratic may have had the exclusive right to hunt in the forest, but a local village would have had the right to collect a certain amount of firewood each winter.

What was new in the idea of private property that emerged in the 16th and 17th century was that individuals should be given unrestricted and exclusive ownership. An individual owner could do with the land whatever they liked, and everybody else was excluded from the use of that land. The idea of ownership conveying duties or responsibilities was minimized, and the law became focussed almost entirely on the rights of the individual owner. All the various types of rights relating to the land (to possess, to use, to profit from, to exclude, and to convey) were bound up in a single person. In historical and sociological terms, this is a very unusual way of managing land.

Most cultures invest communities with rights to land. When individuals or families are afforded rights, they are limited in scope, and come with a set of conditions. Only the Romans, who directly influenced modern property law, had a similar form of individual ownership, although even Roman law was generally more restrictive than the modern concept of private property.⁴ But it is this form of ownership that took hold in Europe, and was made the inviolable centrepiece of the capitalist political economy, before spreading throughout the world on the back of European colonialism.

It is for this reason that the idea of land having a ‘social function’ is important. It is to assert that the land does not exist solely for the benefit of one individual, or for a small group of individuals, but is the common inheritance of all of humanity (and of all living beings). It is to say that there is a higher principle than the individual’s right to do what they want with their property.

But what exactly is the ‘social function’ of land, according to the Brazilian constitution? This is outlined in Article 186;

‘a social function is performed when rural property simultaneously meets the following requirements:

- *Rational and adequate use.*
- *Adequate use of available natural resources and preservation of the environment.*
- *Compliance with the provisions which regulate labour relations.*
- *Development uses which favour the well-being of owners and workers.’*

What has been of central importance to MST is the first requirement; that land must be used rationally and adequately. This is not always easy for Brazil’s elite landlords, some of whom own properties three times the size of Belgium. How can any one person or family hope to even keep an overview of such an extension of land, let alone adequately or rationally manage it? And while thousands of hectares are going unused because the landholder has more property than they know what to do with, millions of people in Brazil are going hungry for lack of land to grow food.

How is it that a system of ‘justice’ could uphold such a situation? How is it that a persons right to absolute and unrestrained use of their property could be worth more than someone’s right to have

enough food to feed themselves and their family? What the 'rational and adequate use' requirement does is set a limit on the rights of private property holders. It removes the right of possession merely for the sake of possession. The Brazilian constitution asserts that if you own a property of a certain size, and you are not using your land for anything that serves a social function, it should be taken from you and given to those who need it. This was an important victory for the land reform movement, and is an essential element in the struggle to conquer territory for landless rural families.

The next important piece of legislation was the *Lei Agraria* (Agrarian Law), which laid out under what circumstances land could be appropriated. The first thing the law was divide rural properties into four types, the first being the 'minifundio', the smallest unit. Its size varies between 5 and 110 hectares, depending on the municipality. Next, there was the 'small property' – between 1 and 4 times the size of the minifundio; and then the 'medium property' – 5 to 15 the size of the minifundio. Finally, there is the 'large property', which is more than 15 times the size of the minifundia. These large properties were further divided into two types: 'productive' and 'unproductive'. 'Unproductive' properties are those that were producing less than the regional average for its size. According to the *Lei Agraria*, large unproductive properties are not fulfilling the social function of land, and thus may be appropriated for the purposes of land reform. And so MST only occupies large unproductive properties, as well as public lands that were illegally acquired through the forging of legal documents (*terras griladas*).

The *Lei Agraria* also established other important procedures for cases related to land reform, such as giving judges a maximum of 120 days to respond to cases brought to them. It was also stated that, in order to make an informed decision, judges should visit the property and decide whether or not it is in compliance with the constitution. If it is, the judge initiates a process of reintegration of land to the owner, if not, the lands are handed over to INCRA, the government body that was established to deal with land reform, who then regularise the occupation, or give the other landless families rights to the land. Other pieces of legislation have established other elements of procedure around the appropriation of land, such as mandating the judge to hear both sides before making a decision, and making it obligatory for a representative from the Ministry of the Public to be present at the hearing. Despite these procedures, local judges regularly make illegal rulings in favour of powerful landlords.

Sometimes these powerful landlords go so far as take criminal cases against a group of *sem terra*, claiming 'property usurpation'. This despite the Brazilian constitution and law being unequivocal about the legality of appropriating large unproductive properties. After corruptible local judges make rulings in favour of the powerful, cases are taken to high courts. In 2000, after absolving a group of 11 MST leaders of accusations of 'property usurpation', 'formation of a criminal gang', and 'theft', the Superior Tribunal of Justice affirmed that mass occupations of land that aim to put pressure on the government to comply with the law, does not amount to property usurpation, and should be handled in light of the Constitution, rather than that of the Penal Code. This created an important piece of jurisprudence that protect occupiers from further illegal litigation.

When land is appropriated and made available to the landless families, what is the legal status of that the land? This is an essential question to the land reform movement, not only in Brazil, but to all land reform movements across the world. Private property is the commodification of land, exposing land to capitalist land markets, exerting a pressure that invariably leads to the centralisation of land in the hands of the few, along with all the associated exploitation of land and labour that comes with it. It is what created the need for land reform in the first place, and so taking the land out of the marketplace is essential to any long term land reform. In Brazil, there are two types of legal situations that exist when land is expropriated. The first is the *Concessão de Direito Real de Uso* [Concession of the Right of Use] (CDRU) with which families have essentially all the same rights as ownership, including the right to convey the land to children or other families who

qualify for the use of the land, as well as other benefits of government policies of land reform (the right to credit, infrastructure, etc.) However, the legal status of the land is ultimately that it is public land designated for use in land reform, and so those who have CDRU cannot sell the land. This means that land won in the struggle for land reform cannot be reappropriated by the powerful landlords.

The second legal status of appropriated land is known as *Titulo de Domínio [Title of Dominion] (TD)*, which is in effect private property of individual families, and is in effect, private property, taking it out of the programme of land reforms, and allowing for the commercialisation of the land (and for powerful landlords to resume their accumulation of Brazilian land). MST as an organisation has come out strongly against TD, but many of their member are put under pressure by others, including INCRA and local landlords, to take the TD and sell their property. During his time as president, Jair Bolsonaro, began a campaign called '*Titula Brazil*', which sought to promote the privatisation of as much land conquered by MST as possible. These families who concede their land then lose out on all the benefits of land reform, with government agencies no longer having the same social responsibilities to them as they do the public land, lose their link with the movement, and become landless once again. Despite the pressure many families are being put under to sell the conquered lands, most within the movement are holding out, seeing that, in the long, or even medium term, selling the land is not in their best interests, but it is a difficult choice. The fact that it is possible that the land can be sold back to the rich means that there will always be pressure applied by landlords and governments on small farmers to sell, and so, while the TD is in existence, the organisation of MST does a lot of *trabalho de base* with all its members so that they understand the full implications of taking the TD.

A final point about the legal basis of occupations is to draw attention to the second social function of land; that property should make '*adequate use of available natural resources and preservation of the environment.*' If we look at some of the common agricultural practices in Brazil, the burning of primary forests, the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizer, the use of heavy machinery, and the creation of monocultural plantations, we see that most Brazilian property stands in grave violation of this social requirement. These practices directly lead to the destruction of the environment, the pollution of natural resources, and the depletion of essential top soil. This means that industrial farming is certainly not preserving the environment, and thus contravenes the Brazilian constitution. The agro-industrial management of land is also in breach of Article. 225 ;

'Everyone has the right to an ecologically balanced environment, an asset for common use by the people and essential to a healthy quality of life, imposing on the Government and the community the duty to defend and preserve it for present and future generations .

§ 1 To ensure the effectiveness of this right, it is incumbent upon the Government to:

I - preserve and restore essential ecological processes and provide for the ecological management of species and ecosystems.'

The Brazilian constitution is thus quite clear that all land that is managed in a way that is harmful to the environment should be relinquished from their proprietor, and given to those who can restore their essential ecological processes and provide for the ecological management of species and ecosystems.

This is thus far not something which has been brought to the Brazilian courts, but the second stipulation could become of incredible interest in the coming years, especially with MST's new foray into agroforestry discussed below. While establishing the illegality of the destructive practices of industrial farming would require a sea change in the collective consciousness of modern society, it is one that drastically needs to take place. While most cultures throughout the world have understood the importance of 'treading lightly', of preserving and respecting the natural world; modern society holds dear to the old Roman right of *abusus*, the right to abuse and destroy ones

property. In Roman times this even included human beings, today it still includes essentially every other class of living being.

How is it that damaging an inanimate object is understood as a serious offence, yet the destruction of life and whole ecosystems is protected by law? As well as the localised suffering caused by the destruction of ecosystems for industrial agriculture and mining, it also poses an existential threat to human beings and all life on earth. Without healthy ecosystems making the ground fertile, the most essential link in the food chain is broken. If we continue down these paths we will end up in a situation where we cannot feed ourselves. Some parts of the world have already reached this point. So while the appropriation of land that is destroying the world's ecosystem may seem like a radical step, particularly to those who dearly cherish their sacrosanct property rights, in the long term, not making any legal interventions to prevent the destruction would be the far more radical choice.

Tactics

Occupation as a Form of Political Action

As we can see, the law in Brazil is very much on the side of the landless rural families. The Estatuto de Terra and the constitution mandates that the Brazilian government appropriates unproductive large properties for the purposes of land reform, and the Lei de Terra gives the exact circumstances under which this should happen. There are millions of hectares of land on large properties that do not fulfil any social function, and so if the Brazilian government actually enforced the constitution there would be little need of any mass mobilisation for landless families to gain access to land. But laws like this are 'only applied when there is social initiative'.⁵ Just as the military government successfully ignored the Estatuto de Terra for their entire reign, most of the post-dictatorship governments of Brazil would also have been glad to sweep the issue of land reform under the rug, and not appropriate any land from powerful landholders, if poor rural families, some of the most marginalised and excluded people in Brazil, hadn't organised. But with the deck of electoral politics stacked against them, they found other ways of inserting themselves into the political process.

The most important of which is occupation, the creation of permanent camps on lands that don't fulfil a social function. The occupation of land should be distinguished from the 'invasion' of land (which is how some hostile elements of the Brazilian media sometimes characterise the actions of MST). To 'invade' is to enter by force a place that is already being used by someone else. To 'occupy' is to fill an empty space, to enter a space without any occupants. However, the term occupy does imply a political dimension that, for example, the related word 'settle' doesn't. To 'settle' land is to tame a wild area, a place outside the boundaries of human civilisation. An occupation may happen in a place without human occupants, but not without human significance, usually occurring on land upon which someone else has laid a claim, even though they do not live on, or work, the land themselves. An occupation is thus a counter claim, a group of people who challenge the right of the absent claimant to the land. In Brazil, powerful latifundiários base their claim on ancestral conquest and forged state documents, while landless rural families base their claim on the natural right of human beings to a piece of land to work and live a dignified life, as well as the Brazilian constitution.

To occupy land is to transform reality. It is a most direct form of political action; creating a space of resistance, a crack in the wall of domination, a challenge to the hegemonic forces that use all means at their disposal bring every clod of earth in Brazil under their dominion. To occupy a space is to alter its social significance, as well as the values and norms that exist therein. It is to give a spatial dimension to an alternative way of organising society, an alternative way of doing politics. It is to offer a look through a window into a new world of possibilities, with new social, economic, and geographic realities. Instead of a world of unending latifúndios, empty spaces ringed off by barbed wire fences, sometimes dotted with monocultural fields and basic huts to house the subsistence and

slave labourers⁶ who work them; we see one of community based family farmers, centred around lively *agrovilas* – the cultural and political centres of MST settlements. Instead of an economy of exploitation and extraction, we get a glimpse of one based on co-operation and self-sufficiency. Instead of a world of downtrodden people, trying to eke out an existence in the downtrodden positions society has prepared for them, we see people with a consciousness in transformation; learning to exist differently, to understand themselves, and their capacity to shape their world, differently.

Process of Occupation

When you have come to the decision to join the struggle and occupy a piece of land, the first step is to enough like-minded people willing to undertake the occupation. The more people you have, the more momentum, and energy your occupation will have, the more attention you will get from the media and civil society, the harder you will be to ignore or repress. There are many people in Brazil who are in desperate need of a piece of land, but engaging in an occupation is a not a decision to be taken lightly. Most of the land that is suitable for occupation is that which has been claimed by the coronéis, some of the most powerful and violent people in Brazil. These land barons generally command groups of armed mercenaries terrorize local populations and violently enforce their wishes. There is also the risk of state repression to contend with, depending on the local and national political situation at any given moment. One horrific example of which is massacre of El Dorado das Carajas that occurred in 1996, when state police murdered 19 people, members of MST who were occupying a plantation in the state of Pará.

The risk of violent repression makes it difficult for some people to fully commit to the struggle. Some people join the struggle in the beginning and then leave. Others (known as ‘*andorinhas*’) come and go, but do not live permanently live in the occupation. There are also those who wait to see how an occupation will pan out, only joining when it has become clear that the occupation will be successful (which naturally generates discussion and conflict between these opportunists and those who put themselves at risk during the struggle). To build strong community ties, and give people the skills and resolve to maintain the occupation, a process of training and education is important. This is the above mentioned *trabalho de base*, where members of MST will go to a new community to share with people their experiences, giving them an idea of what to expect from the occupation, as well opening up a space of skill sharing and learning about negotiation, collective decision making, land reform and the wider political situation. This process is sometimes made difficult by the infiltration of police spies, hoping to hinder the coming occupation. To prevent this from happening the exact locate is usually kept secret from most people until just before the occupation.

When you have gathered a group of people committed to the occupation, the next step is to find a piece of land to occupy. This is not a difficult step. Although MST only occupies large unproductive properties, there are no shortage of those across Brazil. The work of finding them is made even easier by government organs and NGOs who collect and make available information about these lands.

Important when considering what lands are to be occupied is the size of the land in relation to the number of families. Often it is the case that the number of families occupying a piece of land is above the number of lots available, as there is a minimum size of 10 hectares for family plots of land in Brazil’s programme for land reform (10 hectares). So if there is 150 families and 2000 hectare, 50 families will have to be settled elsewhere. This can be decided over the course of the negotiations with the government, who may decide to appropriate an adjacent piece of land, but it is something that must be clearly decided upon by the occupiers beforehand. When the piece of land to be occupied has been decided upon, you need then need to decide which part of the land to set up camp. Usually everyone in an occupation is concentrated in a small space for organisational and

6 the existence of slave labour on Brazilian plantations is a well documented fact (study on slave labour**)

security purposes. The place of occupation is chosen tactically, to ensure easy access and maximum attention. This usually means a place close to the road. One also needs to pick a day and time to start the occupation (either nighttime or dawn usually being most appropriate).

An important part of any occupation is the organisation. Some of the bigger camps can be as large as 3000 people, the size of small towns, and so having clear organisational structures is essential. The organisational memory of MST is very useful in this, offering templates that the camp can adopt, possibly with the assistance of members of MST from other regions. The first thing to do is organise in *nucelos*, groups of 10 to 30 families usually joining together based on the municipality that they come from. Once this organisation unit is established, each *nucleo* divides all the tasks between the groups, creating commissions for food, sanitation, education, religion, finances, etc. As well as these *nucelos*, there is also a general co-ordination commission of the camp, who are responsible for co-ordinating all the different *nucelos* and activities, as well as the organising the struggle, forging links with other groups, and negotiating with the government. The maximum decision making authority in the camp is the general assemble, in which all can participate, and is organised on the basis of democracy, wide participation, and finding consensus and a collective direction.

Along with institutional structures, it's also important to build physical structures to house people, usually constructing temporary shelters such as tents (although sometimes with more durable materials such as wood, adobe, or corrugated iron). Along with houses, other important structures include the assemble hall and the school. Education is always a top priority, and so MST have developed 'itinerant schools' to ensure that all children get an education, even during an occupation. Another important element of any camp is to do what they ultimately came there to do; work the land, start planting things. Occupations can sometimes go on for years, and with food supplies by no means guaranteed, it is important to start producing to ensure the food security of the camp in the long term.

Once the camp is set up, another essential element to set up strong links with the outside world. In the first instance, this might mean with other members of MST, nearby settlements or camps. These settlements can offer solidarity and even material support (such as food, or use of trucks, etc.). Along with other communities within the organisation, there are many other allies in Brazilian society that could offer assistance, such as the CPT, rural unions, friendly media agencies, NGO's, or political allies, such as the CPT. These groups could help with things like supplies, legal expertise, media attention, or political support. This co-operation with civil society is an essential part of any occupation. Although the law is clearly on the side of the *sem terra*, success depends on the amount of people you can mobilize (both inside and outside the camp), the amount of pressure you can bring to bear on the government, as well as the correlation of local and national political forces (if the *latifundiario* is a politician, or very well connected, for example, success will be more difficult to achieve).

There are also other ways of putting pressure on the government, and permanent occupations of unproductive lands are just one part of MST's toolbox (albeit the most important one, the point from which most other tactics are deployed). When an occupation is underway, some occupants may undertake other forms of direct action. Temporary camps may be set up in state capitals, in squares, or outside government buildings. While people occupying land out in the countryside may be kept out of mind, those camped in front of your office cannot. It is also a way of generating media attention, making the struggle visible, and creating connections with ordinary people who live in these cities. Camps may also be set up outside banks to pressure them into fulfilling their legal obligation, as part of the land reform laws, to provide credit to small farmers. Hunger strikes, both open ended and temporary, may also be part of the struggle. They are usually undertaken in front of government buildings. Temporary hunger strikes are another way of putting pressure on the

government and gaining media attention. Open ended hungry are only undertaken when the number of lives at risk is greater than the people undertaking the hunger strike, and require a lot of preparation and support. Mass marches, demonstrations and vigils can also be used as a way of showing strength, the ability to mobilize and gaining attention.

All of these tactics are about generating politic realities that cannot be ignored, forcing the government to the negotiation table, pressuring them to abide by the constitution, appropriate unproductive lands and make them available to landless rural families. Negotiation is often a long process, full of false promises, and so patience and resolve are essential.

Territorialisation

What we have just seen are some of the tactics employed by MST; occupation, building links with civil society, putting pressure on the government to regularise their occupation, etc. These tactics are all elements of a wider strategy for radical land reform. Those within the movement sometimes call the strategy 'territorialisation'. To understand what is meant by this term we can look at some ideas about rural political movements first developed by historian Eric Hobsbawm, and later taken up by Bernardo Mançano Fernandes in relation to MST. When studying different rural movements in Peru in the middle of the 20th century, Hobsbawm identified some important differences between them, the most important of which for our purposes is the distinction between 'isolated' and 'territorial' movements. These movements differ both in terms of geography as well as organisational structure.

Isolated movements have a singular place of action. They are composed of a relatively closed group, sometimes (although not always) without any deliberate form of organisation. They have a pre-determined goal; to conquer a defined piece of land. We can imagine an example; a community, or a group of communities from a small area, who have been dispossessed of their ancestral lands come together to occupy that land, demanding access or ownership. The movement could be organised along the normal community and family structures that already exist, or they could employ a novel form of organisation specifically for the occupation. If an isolated movement is successful, it ends, and the community can live their lives on the newly (re)gained lands. If not, the struggle may continue for a number of years until the participants have become exhausted and the movement dissolves. Whatever happens, the lifespan of an isolated movement is limited. However, if the isolated movement manages to make links with other isolated movements, or if they can join up with a territorial movement that already exists, the movement continues, along with the momentum they created with their struggle.

A territorial movement is one that acts in various places at the same time. That is to say that they reproduce the same or similar actions and forms of organisation across various territories, and there is some kind organisational link between the territories. This could mean, for example, members of the organisation going from one area to the next, bringing experiences, tactics, and forms of organisation. A territorial movement is an open movement, encouraging new members to join, and is expansionist in both its aims and scope. A territorial movement doesn't finish because a piece of land has been won, rather each new piece of land opens up a new frontier for continued expansion. As mentioned, territorial movements generally start from an isolated movement, or a group of isolated movements, with the transition from isolated to territorial movement depending on, among other things, the political consciousness of those involved. Those who manage to take a broader perspective than the immediate needs of their own communities, those who see that they have common cause with others in similar situations, and understand that this common cause is best achieved by large scale co-ordination and co-operation, are the ones that manage to form a territorial movement from a isolated one.

MST is a territorial movement. Beginning from a group of isolated struggles concentrated in the south of Brazil, these rural workers, facilitated by liberation theology inspired members of CPT, managed to broaden their political horizons, seeing that their struggles were not merely the result of local injustices, but also national, and global, injustices. Rural workers all across Brazil were facing the same problems, and they realised that, whether or not they conquered a small piece of land for themselves and their community, their situation wouldn't truly improve until there was a fundamental change in the way society was organised. Even if they gained access to land, there would still be all the other problems that make life in rural Brazil so difficult; lack of infrastructure, lack of basic services such as health and education, lack of political participation, and, crucially, a political economy that centralises the land and economy into the hands of a tiny number of people. The capture of a piece of land would mean little when the conditions that make life for rural communities untenable remain unchanged. This is why MST's programme for land reform is broad; to get at the root of the problems facing rural workers.

This is what distinguishes the *sem terra* from the other major group of independent rural workers in Brazil, the *posseiros*. *Posseiros* are small farmers who build on the frontiers, lands not yet claimed by capital; usually inaccessible public lands, far from roads or other infrastructure. In this way they gain access to a piece of land without having to confront the forces of capital. However, the problem with such an approach is that once these lands do become economically viable, powerful economic actors move in to dispossess the *posseiros*, usually *latifundiários* through the process of *grilagem*. *Sem terra*, on the other hand, occupy lands which have already been commodified, confronting the forces of capital head on. This is why the movement uses the word 'conquered' to designate the lands they have won in the struggle – it has been taken out of the territory of capital, and into a new territory of community led land reform. The recognition that there can be no avoiding the struggle between capital and human beings, that they are already engaged in it whether they like it or not, means that they are able to organise a collective response.

Because to understand MST's strategy of territorialisation, we must put it in the context of another campaign of territorialisation in Brazil that began with the *Lei da Terra* of 1852 – that of capital. What market forces work toward is the commodification of all lands and resources in Brazil, and the creation of a population of producers and consumers wholly dependent on global capitalist markets. The empire of capital, as it is sometimes called, is quite different from the empires that came before it. It is more vast than any that has come before it, stretching across the whole face of the earth, traversing almost all borders, dominating the natural world and the lives of billions of people. Its expansion is not the result of military conquest (although the US military and CIA has regularly intervened on its behalf), but rather the destruction of local economies, and the creation of debt and economic dependency. Although it works in close co-operation with the state, the forces of capital nowhere wield sovereign power. This isn't necessary, as they have all the power legally conferred to them by the rights of private property; the right to exploit, extract, exclude, employ, and destroy all within its territory. The nature of the empire of capital (like many empires before it) is that it must constantly expand or else it enters into crisis. For this reason all lands and all resources on earth must be brought into its territory.

MST's strategy of territorialisation is a counter to the commodification of the earth. It aims to de-territorialise the empire of capital, taking the land off of capitalist markets, de-commodifying it; altering the framework for how these lands can be managed, the rules for what can and can't be done within its territory. Being brought into the territory of radical land reform is not merely a change of ownership, it is a transformation of the world within this territory. The four elements of this transformation are; 1) *raising people's political consciousness*, 2) *changing the management of land*, 3) *reorganising the economy*, 4) *and creating local structures of self government*.

Political consciousness is raised in a number of ways. In the first place, through the trabalho de base, as well as their programme for education (both outlined in detail above), but also, most importantly, through people's active participation in the movement. The raising of political consciousness, the realisation that you have the power to meaningfully participate in the organisation of your society, is not something that others can teach you. It has to be experienced by everybody for themselves. The aim of creating a democratic, participatory, society can only be achieved through democratic participation. So the first element of transformation is highly linked with the second.

Creating local structures of self government means placing democratic assemblies at the centre of the political process. These assemblies are established within geographical areas (a particular community, or region, etc.) as well as areas of human activity (production, education, etc.) Power is highly decentralised, local assemblies organise their own affairs, and all people are able, and encouraged, to meaningfully participate in these assemblies. Regional and national assemblies are created for large scale co-operation, but they are built on a strong foundation of local democratic government.

Changing the management of the land means breaking up the capitalist latifundarios, and establishing family and community farms as the basic social and economic unit of the countryside. An essential part of this process is the de-commodification of land, taking it off of capitalist markets, granting access according to need, and the principle of 'the land is of those who work it'.

The *reorganisation of the economy* within MST territory has many different aspects, and is perhaps the most complex element of strategy. Within its own territory the movement looks to promote a democratic shared economy based on solidarity. However, the movement exists in a world dominated by capitalist markets, and the members of the community are reliant on these markets for essential goods (cars, phones, etc.). So the challenge for those within the movement is; creating a relationship with the market whereby they can meet their basic requirements (not an easy task for small farmers anywhere in the world), while avoiding reproducing the logic of capitalism that they are trying to change.

MST goes about this in a number of ways. Firstly, by organising different elements of their economy (the means of production, delivery, labour, etc.) into democratically run co-operatives. This means that the direction of the economy within MST territory is decided collectively and orientated toward social goals, rather than individual profit. Secondly, those within the movement lower their exposure to capitalist markets by bringing as much economic activity as possible into the rural communities. For example, not only do they produce food, but they also process, package, deliver, and sell it. This minimises the exploitation of small farmers that usually happens on corporate markets.

Finally, another important element of this economic reorganisation is the democratisation of capital, which means 'creating the conditions for settled farmers to have access to capital', with capital referring to 'accumulated means of production.'⁷ This is in many ways their most radical and ambitious aim, and something which cannot take place in MST territory alone, but must take place in all of society. The democratisation of capital would be the end of capitalism as we know it, breaking the system of economic oligarchy. If, instead of the world's economy being in the hands of a tiny elite, it were open to democratic participation, we can imagine that most of the crises that we today face would find their solution.

But this stated aim of MST goes far beyond the scope of the movement. Where they do concretely pursue giving rural workers access to some form of capital, is by pressing the

government of the issue of subsidised credit from banks, and within the government programme for land reform, there are provision for subsidised credit for rural communities to strengthen their local economies.

Territorialisation VS Vanguard Revolution

To better understand the strategy of territorialisation, we can compare it to the 20th century's most important strategy for social transformation – the vanguard revolution. This strategy was most famously expounded by Vladimir Lenin, who was inspired by Karl Marx and the Jacobins of the French Revolution. The strategy also came to include many of the *ad hoc* actions of the Bolshevik party during the October Revolution. The strategy consists in a small group of politically conscious revolutionaries, organised into a strictly hierarchical political party, leading the working class in a violent overthrow of the state and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat. This is meant to be a temporary form of government, in which said small group of revolutionaries, acting on behalf of the workers, guide the revolution through a period of socialism, before eventually arriving at a classless communist society. The establishment of communism thus makes the vanguard party redundant, whereby they are dissolved, and the people are free to govern themselves. This strategy inspired revolutionaries around the world, and sometimes proved successful in putting those revolutionaries in positions of power. However, once in those positions, none of the vanguard revolutionaries achieved their professed aims of bringing about a classless society and dissolving themselves. Instead they essentially all decided to deeply entrench themselves in power, and many of them then went on to create more authoritarian and oppressive societies than those they had replaced.

Although MST is self-consciously part of the Marxist tradition, and aims to bring about the end of the capitalist order, its strategy for social transformation is very different to this one. They do not aim to 'take power'; to seize the reins of state to form a dictatorship of the proletariat. This is not to say they ignore the state. The state is an important battleground in the struggle for radical land reform; the courthouse can be used to legitimise occupied territory, and allies within the houses of government can finance and support the movement. However, their base of operation is the periphery, not the centre. Their transformation is lead from below, not above. Their form of organisation is not that of a centralised and hierarchical political party, but a decentralised and democratic mass movement. They do not think that one group of politically conscious vanguard revolutionaries should lead the rest, but instead work to raise the political consciousness of everyone. Everybody must empower themselves to transform their own lives and their immediate surroundings. They will then be in a position to take this transformation to the next place and help others to do the same. The revolution doesn't occur in one fell swoop, but spreads out gradually across the land.

This strategy of social transformation involves broadening our perspectives on both power and politics. What most people think of when they think of 'power' is sovereign power - the power of the state to make and enforce laws within a particular territory. While this is an important aspect of power, creating the framework within which power functions, it is just one element of modern society's economy of power. Most of the day to day exercise of power is not a matter of decreeing laws, but rather of owning, producing, investing, employing, buying, selling, financing, etc. These activities may not immediately be thought of as 'political', as they have been sectioned off into their own separate field of activity – 'economics'. But although economic activities have been excluded from the political process, that doesn't mean that they aren't political. Capital has managed to remake the world in its own image without ever 'taking power'. While it does need a certain legal framework in order to carry out its territorial expansion, it has managed to bring the majority of the world under its rule by purely 'economical' means; transforming the way land and resources are managed, and the social relations that exist therein.

One person who understood the political nature of the economy very well was Karl Marx, who labelled his own work as 'political economy'. Marx thought that the economy was so central to politics that the state was little more than an ideological appendage (or 'superstructure') of the 'economic base' of society. For Marx, social transformation originates at the base (people's concrete material relations), and then goes on to transform the superstructure, i.e. the state. His key example was the transformation of feudalism to capitalism in Europe. Although the French Revolution provided the dramatic set pieces, the real revolution took place in the proceeding centuries, with the rise of large urban centres of commerce and production, and the people who came to dominate these activities – the bourgeois. These urban centres grew in size and importance until they eventually began to restructure the feudal society that existed around them. A new world was born from the belly of the old. By the time Louis XVI was stepping onto the guillotine, the feudal order had already long since disappeared.

Although Lenin and other vanguardist accepted this idea of social transformation, their strategy is almost entirely focussed on the capture of the state. Their idea was that by taking over the superstructure, they could impose a change upon the economic base. However, going by their own understanding, this is to put the cart before the horse. Upon taking control of the state, the vanguard parties weren't able to imagine any real alternatives to the capitalism. What they ended up doing was reproducing the capitalist society they were trying to supersede, but with only one capitalist – the state. For Marx, the real mechanism of a liberatory transformation was not the capture of the state, but rather ordinary people realising, not only the injustice of the capitalist order, but also their own power to change it. When politically conscious people become aware of themselves as the agents of history, they will resist capitalist exploitation and begin to organise a democratic, co-operative, needs based economy instead.

MST & the Movements for Democratic Autonomy

Movements for Democratic Autonomy

While the vanguard revolution was the most important strategy for social transformation throughout the 20th century, the fall of the Soviet Union marked a turning a point for the Left. Not only did it have a strong psychological impact, it also meant that future vanguard movements wouldn't be able to count on essential supplies and support from the Soviet Union. Combined with these factors was a growing criticism of Bolshevism from within the Left itself. To many it had become clear that the Soviet and Chinese models of revolution did not empower ordinary people or lead to a classless society; it created a new form of hierarchy based on one's position within the ruling party. The confluence of these different factors (along with others, such as the disintegration of working class organisations and communities) lead to a period of soul searching for those on the Left, a period which is arguably still ongoing.

However, in the last couple a decades, a new consensus has been growing. While this new consensus does not come with the same dogmatic assurance of what came before it, the *movement for democratic autonomy* is one that has found resonance in many different places throughout the world. The core principle of these movement is that all people have the right to govern themselves. This is not an assertion that all cultures/ethnicities have a right to their own nation state (which was the concept of 'self-government' in many 20th century anti-colonial movements), but rather an assertion that all people have a right to actively and meaningfully participate in own their government. In practice this means the creation and strengthening of local forms of government (such as community assemblies, workers assemblies, women's assemble, etc.), the decentralisation of political power, and the democratisation of all areas of society. This process of democratisation ultimately amounts to the radically transformation, or even dissolution, of the state as we know it.

However, though the movement takes a critical view of the state, they are against large scale political co-operation. Quite the contrary. However, it does mean they organise this co-operation in

different way. The state is hierarchical, highly centralised, and claims sovereignty over a large territory, which it governs through a vast bureaucracy. In contrast, large scale co-operation within democratic autonomies takes place in a larger decentralised nexus of government, which has no centralised political institution claiming ultimate sovereignty over the rest, and no huge bureaucratic apparatus. Instead all groups in society (every community, town, neighbourhood, women's collective, trade union, co-op, etc.) collectively govern themselves. This includes creating democratic institutions to co-ordinate regional, national, or international projects.

This form of government is not merely a theoretical model, but has been put into practice by different groups throughout the world. We can mention a few important points about two of these movements, the Zapatistas and Rojava, before seeing how they compare with MST.

In 1994 thousands of indigenous mainly Mayan communities staged an armed uprising to remove the Mexican government from a large territory in the jungles and mountains of the southern region of Chiapas. Upon doing so they established an autonomous territory within which they could govern themselves. However, the Zapatistas have no intention of setting up their own Mayan nation state. To them, the state itself is a form of domination; government from above, in which a special class of politician impose government on everyone else. What they decided to do instead, and what they have spent the last 30 years doing, was to develop an autonomous form of government far more democratic than the modern state. In the first place, this meant greatly decentralised political power, giving every community much more autonomy over their own affairs. However, the Zapatistas also saw the benefits of large scale institutions of government. They cover a huge extension of territory and many tens of thousands of people. Combining those forces would be big advantages in constructing their autonomy and resistance. Their challenge was therefore to create a large scale government without it turning into another form of government from above; one in which the people command and the government obeys. This form of government is one which is still in progress, and will always be in progress, as one of the guiding principles is that people constantly adapt their government to changing internal and external conditions, but we can briefly mention some of the mechanisms developed by the Zapatistas to ensure that their government retains a genuinely democratic character.

The Zapatistas have three levels of government; community, municipality, and regional (the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*). The communities are organised by democratic assembly, and the municipal and regional governments are co-ordinated by delegates. The role of the delegate is merely to convey the will of the community, as expressed in the community assemblies, but with the delegation of power comes the risk of the abuse of power typical of state politicians. To prevent this from happening, the Zapatistas have developed a series of mechanism to keep their delegates in check. One such mechanism, central to any truly democratic system of government, is the ability to recall their delegates at any time if they are not properly serving their communities. To ensure that delegates remain firmly embedded in their communities, serving delegates spend half of their time in the communities, living their normal life, and the other half fulfilling their governmental responsibilities. There is no financial rewards for being a delegate, and turn as 'governor' is instead seen as a service to the community. Finally, there is a regular change of government, preventing anyone from staying too long in a governmental role, with the idea that eventually everyone gets a turn as delegate. These mechanism ensure that there is never any separation between the governors and the governed, and this, combined with the decentralisation of decision making power, has created a large scale structure of political co-operation, without the need of a centralising, hierarchical, and bureaucratic state.

Another element of the Zapatistas anti-state posture arises from their own dealings with the Mexican state. Since the Zapatistas established their autonomous government, the Mexican state have done everything in their power to crush them. First with the regular army, then with

paramilitaries, and then with a 'low intensity war', in which they incentivise different groups to attack them. In the beginning the Zapatistas tried to negotiate with the state. They signed the San Andrés Agreement, which was meant to amend the constitution to allow indigenous communities in Mexico to organise themselves autonomously. But despite signing the agreement, the state went back on their word. They continued their military campaign against the Zapatistas, and never implemented the promised constitutional reforms.

After this betrayal, the Zapatistas decided that the Mexican government couldn't be trusted to negotiate anything in good faith. They stopped trying to find any arrangement with the state, and instead went about constructing something that was completely autonomous. As well as their autonomous forms of government, they also organise their own schools, hospitals, and co-operative economy; all with very scant resources. Their position on the state is clear; it is an oppressive form of organisation, it cannot be trusted, no co-operation is possible. One of the basic requirements of being part of the movement is that you do not co-operate with, or accept any form of financial assistance from, the Mexican state.

Another important movement for democratic autonomy is taking place in Rojava, a largely Kurdish region in Northern Syria. In 2012, one year after the outbreak of the civil war, the Syrian government pulled out of Rojava, leaving the defence of the region up to previously underground Kurdish militias - the YPG (People's Protection Units) and the YPJ (Women's Protection Units). These militia were soon put to the test as Rojava came under attack from a number of armed groups, the most serious of which was ISIS. For a period of a couple of years, ISIS took control of large swaths of the Kurdish regions, even making the city of Raqqa their capital, but the YPG and YPJ fought back. In 2015 they managed to expel ISIS from their territory, allowing for the development of an autonomous, non-state, form of government they call 'democratic confederalism'.

This form of government was inspired by the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, the spiritual leader of the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria, who described democratic confederalism as; 'not a state system, but a democratic system of the people without a state.'⁸... 'in contrast to a centralist and bureaucratic understanding of administration and exercise of power, confederalism poses a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils. This understanding of democracy opens the political space to all strata of the society and allows for the formation of different and diverse political groups. In this way it also advances the political integration of the society as a whole. Politics becomes a part of everyday life.'⁹

At first people had to get used to the idea of self government. After the liberation of the Kurdish areas by the YPJ and YPG, 'the people expected the movement to take the initiative, that is, to construct itself as a state. On the contrary, the movement expected, and insisted, that the people develop their own community initiatives, that is, to establish their own autonomy.'¹⁰ However, it didn't take long for people to start organising themselves. The most basic, and essential, political unit of democratic confederalism is the local assembly, which are organised by communes (geographical units), social groups (such as women, youth, Arabs, Christians, etc.), unions, and any other group of people that want to organise themselves. All these groups have the freedom to manage themselves autonomously, so long as that doesn't contravene the basic rules of Rojava's Charter (such as respecting the rights of women and minorities). Within the assemblies there are no delegates and everyone can participate.

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Communes vary in size between 250 y 850 people. A commune may consist of a village, a neighbourhood, or even a single street in a densely populated urban area. All communes set up a variety of commissions to organise their daily lives. These include things like the commission for economy, electricity, education, peace and reconciliation, and self defence. Another organisational unit is the *commingeh*, which is a collective of various communes who are geographically close to one another and come to work on collective projects (such as water supply, electricity, etc.), or to mutually assist each other out of solidarity. Next are layers of government that encompass the canton, the region, and finally a federation of all the autonomous governments in Rojava. Within Rojava, there are six cantons in three regions, and every canton encompass many hundreds communes (for example, the two cantons that make up the region of Cezire encompasses 2551 communes). These layers of government are co-ordinated by democratically elected delegates. At least 50% of all government positions must be filled by women, and minorities must be represented in government, no matter how few in number.

The interplay between the different levels of government is complex, and constantly evolving, but one thing that is important understand is that the federal, regional, and cantonal levels of government are not sovereign bodies that can impose laws on the local levels. Instead, different groups in society come together to communicate, analyse, criticize, and find mutual agreements. Azize Aslan describes a typical meeting in the Assemble of Yekîî; ‘After reading the mutual reports, a section of discussion, opinions and suggestions began. This showed me how autonomy develops: inter-institutional relations within autonomous organizations that democratize through mutual reports and assemblies; as well as dialogue allowing for analysis of the organization, the development of each sector, and the solving of problems with collective knowledge and experience. This is how collective learning begins, along with a mode of producing autonomous decisions.’¹¹

So instead of a vertical chain of command, with a central governing body deciding everything within the territory, we have a huge multiplicity of forms of participatory government, co-operating and interacting in a variety of ways. One writer from the USA wrote; ‘For a former diplomat like me, I found it confusing: I kept looking for a hierarchy, the singular leader, or signs of a government line, when, in fact, there was none; there were just groups. There was none of that stifling obedience to the party, or the obsequious deference to the "big man".... The confident assertiveness of young people was striking.’¹²

As we can see, Rojava is not a form of state government. However its relationship with the state, both theoretically, and in terms of its concrete relations with the state of Syria, is complex. While proponents are critical of the state as an institution, they do not go as far as the Zapatistas, ruling out any possible form of co-operation with the state (or at least the possibility of a ‘peaceful co-existence’). Whether that is out of pragmatism, or a belief that the hegemonic tendencies of state can be transformed, is not entirely clear. Öcalan wrote that; ‘the contradictory composition of society necessitates political groups with both vertical and horizontal formations. Central, regional and local groups need to be balanced in this way....Whether nation-state, republic, or democracy – democratic confederalism is open for compromises concerning state or governmental traditions. It allows for equal coexistence.’¹³

Since 2012, Rojava has been trying to find this equal co-existence with the state of Syrian. They do not claim to have broken away from Syria, but have instead developed their own autonomous and federated form of government from within the framework of the state. This position, while congruent with the theoretically position of Öcalan, is clearly born of martial realities. The Kurds needed military allies, first in their fight against ISIS, and then to defend themselves from Turkish

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invasions. With a large population of revolutionary Kurdish people living in Turkey, the Turkish state see the existence of an autonomous Kurdish government as a threat, and have invaded, and currently occupy, several regions in Rojava. In 2019 the Syrian army was invited in to parts of Rojava's border region with Turkey in an effort to prevent further incursions. However, despite this military alliance, relations between Rojava and the Syrian state are uneasy and often contradictory. The Constitution of Syria and the Constitution of North and East Syria are legally incompatible with each other, and the autonomous governments in Rojava allow the state of Syria no part in the governing of the region, something which the Syrian government can't be happy with. It remains to be seen how relations will evolve between the state of Syrian and Rojava once the civil war has come to an end.

MST

In what ways is MST similar and different to these movements? In the first place, we can see that MST's level of interaction and co-operation with the state is much higher than either the Zapatistas or Rojava. The Zapatistas do not co-operate with the Mexican state in any way, and have had to defend their territory from state attack since they first established their autonomy. Rojava has a more complex relationship with the state. They organise themselves autonomously, and want nothing to do with the state's political institutions, but they have entered into a military alliance with the Syrian government, and they claim that their autonomy exists within the framework of a new type of federated Syria (although this assertion doesn't correspond with the actual state of Syria).

MST, on the other, do not see themselves as creating an alternative to the state of Brazil. Their strategy of territorialisation is about creating a territory outside of the the jurisdiction of capital, rather than challenging the legitimacy of the state. In fact, upholding the legitimacy of the state constitution is an integral part of their struggle, using their constitutional rights to legitimize their occupations in the courts. And it is not only the constitution and courts, MST uses state institutions in a variety of ways; they pressure the government to implement other elements of their programme for land reform, like subsidised credit and the provision of essential infrastructure in rural areas; they work with the government in the creation and expansion of their own programme for rural education.

However, it should be emphasized that despite co-operating with the government in a number of ways, the movement maintains complete autonomy from it. The government has no influence in how they act or organise themselves. This is an important achievement. For many social movements, co-operation with the state means being co-opted by the state, and having to conform to government philosophy and modes of organising. This hasn't been the case with MST, who have retained their character as an anti-capitalist, anti-hegemonic, mass movement.

Another thing to note is that MST's relationship with the state is in some ways contradictory, often treading a thin line between co-operation and confrontation. Much of the 'co-operation' between the movement and the state takes the form of them pressuring, cajoling, and shaming the government into complying with the law and constitution. And even then the movement's alliances with different sectors of civil society are also vital in ensuring state compliance. This is to say nothing of the state's direct attacks on the movement. Because, although they are often forced to go along with MST's programme for land reform, successive Brazilian governments have employed a variety of strategies to try and neutralise the movement; trying to ignore them, co-opt them, violently suppress them (with the murder of sem terra by state forces happening all too often), create divisions within the movement.

So, while it is true to say that MST uses state institutions for the purposes of land reform, it is also true that the relationship between the movement and the government has often been confrontational.

The level of confrontation usually depends on who exactly is in government. When right wing politicians get into government the situation worsens; violent attacks become more frequent, and successful occupations become less so. When progressive politicians get into government, the outlook improves somewhat.

Another important point is that, though the movement has no designs to replace the state, a central part of their movement is building the capacity for self organisation of rural communities through the creation of a parallel structures of autonomous government. These are the community assemblies, the regional co-ordinations, etc. These are not meant to replace state institutions, but rather add a layer of participatory self government to the existing governmental arrangement. This is facilitated by the severe lack of government presence in many rural areas of Brazil, giving the sem terra the space to organise themselves. So in many ways, in terms of their political practice, MST's position is similar to that of Rojava. Both want to increase the level of autonomous organisation of ordinary people, and, rather than break away from the state, both are trying to do it from within existing state boundaries (although the attitude of Rojava toward the state is far more ambivalent than MST's).

However, MST does differ from Rojava and the Zapatistas in that they do not express any explicit anti-state philosophy, and do not explicitly claim to be creating a governmental alternative to the state. This is not to say that they endorse the state as it currently operates. They understand better than anyone that the state has long been a tool in the hands of oppressors, and it is imperative for them to organise themselves outside of state institutions to improve their situation. However, the movement also sees an important role of 'public institutions' in their programme for land reform. João Stendile makes it clear, that 'the press lies when they say we want to replace the state. On the contrary, society's public institutions have to implement land reform, and in this the state is the principle agent.'¹⁴ So while the movement organises themselves independently from the state, they insist that the state must play its part in land reform.

What might be some of the reasons for this difference in attitude toward the state between MST and the other two movements (particularly the Zapatistas)? One thing we can rule out is some kind of ideological difference. Unlike previous generations of radicals, who would argue and schism over differing interpretations of revolutionary theory, these movements do not have any abstract revolutionary dogmas that are meant to determine the entire course of their movement. They instead base their actions upon a constant effort of analysis, self-critique, and adaption to concrete circumstances. And when we look at these circumstances, we see that these movements are facing highly distinct situations, with different challenges and opportunities.

The Zapatistas tried for many years to find a peaceful avenue to end the oppressive situation they were suffering under, all of which failed. The ruling party, PRI, had been running Mexico as a one party dictatorship for the previous 70 years, and the indigenous people of Chiapas hadn't had any voice in government since the Spanish invasion in the 16th century. With no other options available to them, they took up arms to remove the state from their territory and prevent their further obliteration. They then tried to find some kind of arrangement with the Mexican state, and only after constant betrayal did they decide to forge their own completely autonomous path. The position in Rojava was somewhat different, with the Syrian state deciding to retreat from the territory in the context of a wider civil war. The Kurdish forces then successfully defended their territory without the state, and were thus in a position to set up their own form of autonomous government.

MST was born of a very different situation. It emerged in the final years of a crumbling dictatorship and the founding a 'new republic'. It was a time when government institutions were responding to pressure from mass movements and civil society. The sem terra had at their disposal a variety of

peaceful means to affect a large scale social transformation. In particular, the clause in the new constitution that obligates the state to dispossess large landholders for the purpose of land reform became an important tool for the movement. And MST then continued to push to ensure that the scope of land reform went much further than just the appropriation of land. Through their campaigning and direct action, the movement has managed to shape the government agenda on land reform, ensuring that it has been an unignorable political reality for all federal governments, and that land reform has been understood in their terms. And as mentioned, they managed to do all this without sacrificing their own autonomy or being co-opted by the government in any way.

In a situation like this, what would have been the advantages of an armed uprising to establish an autonomous territory? The disadvantages are clear. Along with the huge expenditure of effort and resources to organise any kind of serious armed uprising, they would immediately expose themselves to the brutal violence of the state, to say nothing of the violence of the coronéis. In fact the existence of the state is the main thing preventing the coronéis from taking over the Brazilian countryside and establishing a series of regional military fiefdoms. In taking up arms MST would also likely sever their alliance with civil society, and would certainly stop receiving any state investment. This would put them in a very difficult situation because, at the moment, their biggest problem is not an overbearing state, quite the opposite, it is the fact that they are generally ignored and excluded by Brazilian public institutions. Some of their central struggles are merely for the provision of basic infrastructure. In such a situation, contemplating armed uprising borders on absurdity.

Which is not to say that the attempt to establish a territory outside of the state is a bad decision in itself. For the Zapatistas it was necessary, and has proved highly successful. Though they are working with little resources, they have managed to create for themselves the services that the state usually provides, such as schools and hospitals, and have generally improved the material conditions of those within the movement. Also, by establishing a territory that is completely autonomous from the state, they have been able to develop a novel and highly democratic system of government. MST have also created a kind of parallel autonomous government, but this structure is filling the (massive) gaps left by the state, rather than replacing the state completely. The Brazilian state does still play a role, albeit generally indirect, in the government of MST settlements. So, unlike the Zapatistas, MST don't have complete autonomy to organise themselves, and must also accommodate various aspects of state government within their territory.

However, autonomy is not something that can be understood in absolute terms, but rather as a sliding scale with many sides; autonomy doesn't only refer to one's capacity for political decision making, but also a legal, economic, spiritual, or cultural autonomy (to name but a few). Although they do not have the kind of sovereign power that the Zapatistas enjoy within their territory, the capacity and scope of MST settlements for self organisation is much higher than in normal villages and towns. We see that, while MST is not looking to achieve legal autonomy (as some elements of Brazilian law are already quite favourable to them), they are working to increase the political autonomy of rural communities, raising their capacity for self organisation, as well as their economic autonomy, and cultural autonomy, creating a social space that valorizes the culture directly emerging from the fertile earth of rural Brazil.

So despite taking differing strategic postures toward the state, there are many similarity between MST, the Zapatistas, and Rojava. All these movements work to empower ordinary people, increasing their autonomy and creating a space for self organisation. None of these movements aim to 'take power', but instead look to directly transform their own social, political, and economic realities. Whereas the Zapatistas were put in a position where an armed uprising and the creation of an autonomous territory made sense, and Rojava saw a path of *de facto* autonomy with some accommodation of the Syrian state open up before them, for MST a higher level of interaction and

co-operation with the state best served their interests. Another thing that unifies these movements is that that they are lead by practice, and a process of critical self-reflection. And as these movements arose in response to three distinct situations, and so we should expect their responses to reflect that.

In the 19th and early 20th century, many radical intellectuals sought to develop a kind of unified revolutionary model. Karl Marx (although he did not intend it that way) provided a template with his theory of historical materialism, with Lenin turning it into a clear blueprint for revolution, with others like Mao, or Che Guevara, then adapting this blueprint to their own situations. This process of critical reflection by past revolutionaries was an integral part of the social transformation they brought about (for good or for bad), but, from our vantage point of hindsight and an expanded horizon, the project of finding a single model for transforming society appears misguided. All social movements find themselves in situation with their own local complexities, and it is up for everyone to figure out for themselves how these complexities can be worked out for the benefit of an emancipatory social movement. This is not to say we cannot take lessons from social movements from other movements across the world. But perhaps the most important single lesson that we can take from these three movements is that, rather than trying to fit all situations into a pre-defined mould, it is essential to work with the reality we have in front of us, with all the limitations and opportunities it brings with it.

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