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Transformation and 'human values' in the Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil

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Abstract

Social movements often seek transformation in wider society, but they are also themselves subject to the fluidity and ephemerality of the environments in which they operate. Academic literature has long held the view that social movements inevitably come to be beset by institutionalisation and a loss of relevance, and in Brazil, where socio-economic change has been so dynamic, the future of the Landless Worker's Movement (*Movimento dos Sem Terra* – MST) has been called into question. This article argues that the MST is responding to changes in its membership, and transformation more widely in Brazil, in a measured way, by drawing upon familiar repertoires of cooperativisation to boost production. The article suggests that decline is not necessarily certain, but as a case study for movements more generally, current MST leadership decisions may be significant in understanding how social movements can best react to unpredictable transformations in wider society.

{MST, transformation, social movements, Brazil, leadership}

Introduction

How social movement organisations (SMOs) react to transformation is of a central importance. Members can feel disenfranchised by a movement that has not evolved to reflect their changing circumstances, and more widely, transnational supporters can cease to empathise with an ideological struggle that is perceived to be out of date. As Randall Collins (2001) notes, 'all movements are transient in one degree or other but we considerably underestimate the extent to which transience and ephemerality is the condition in which social movements exist' (2001: 34). SMOs are continually forced to react to wider societal transformations and for Walker (1994) this is inevitable, as

SMOs are 'precisely *movements*' (1994: 677), organisations in which member participation is often premised upon this very perception that things can change. For Eyerman and Jamison (1995), SMO activity is indeed entirely dependant on the non-institutionalised and transient spaces of debate that SMOs can generate and sustain but there is an important difference to note between *seeking* transformation in society, and how SMOs *react* to transformations foisted upon them.

Social movement theory stresses the importance of transformation in both of these senses, but as regards how SMOs react to transformation, there is a preponderance for the inevitability of institutionalisation. Herbert Blumer's classic theory (1951), identifies the four stages of an SMOs lifecycle: 'social ferment,' 'popular excitement,' 'formalization,' and 'institutionalization' (Della Porta and Diani 2006) while more recent scholars have reworked these stages as 'emergence', 'coalescence', 'bureaucratization', and 'decline' (Macionis 2000). Aware of such gloomy predictions, leaderships of SMOs that can be said to have 'attained' a degree of institutionalisation can become preoccupied with processes of conscious evolution to remain *relevant*. Elizabeth Borland (2006) has highlighted how the movement that coalesced around the 'mothers of the disappeared', a group of women who sought justice for their missing children during Argentina's 'dirty war' – 1976 to 1983 – evolved from initial protests to signify and connote a wholly separate line of dissent, one aimed at the Argentine government in 2001 that encompassed critiques of neo-liberalism and foregrounded human rights activism. Borland details how the *madres* (mothers), made connections between their old and new goals via collective action frames (Snow et al. 1986) and key to the *madres'* continuing relevance has been their flexibility in not only responding to their advancing years and evolving place in society, but also their flexibility in responding to the changing contexts around them. Borland argues that it is explicitly through this evolution of purpose and willingness to tackle new objectives that the movement has managed to survive for over 30 years, not only remaining relevant, but indeed becoming a cornerstone for other movements that articulate similar socio-economic critiques.

However, the *madres* continuing longevity is rare for a social movement. Due to changing circumstances, movements may go into hibernation, (Taylor 1989), disappear, (Minkoff 1995) or even isolate themselves altogether from wider society (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Volatility is not uncommon in social movement politics therefore and more recent social movements have become even more fluid as their members' physical participation has become increasingly mediated by Web 2.0 technologies, such as Twitter, Facebook, Squidoo and Scribd.

Movements such as the Anti-/Alterglobalization Movement (AGM), the Occupy movement or the Global Justice movement all constitute a shift in social movement politics and the coalescence of these movements indicates how

SMOs can respond dynamically not only to wider societal transformation but also to an informed understanding of the history of participatory democracy. Movements like Occupy that have built on the so-called 'new social movements' (Castells, 1997; Laclau, 1985), are consciously working with a legacy of identity politics, consensus decision making and direct democracy. These movements are reflexively seeking to employ technology to drive forward a process through which participants feel better represented and therefore more directly empowered. In this way, Manuel Castells has argued in *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012) how the Arab Spring, the *Indignadas* movement in Spain, and Occupy are all premised on autonomous communication networks, dependant on Web 2.0 platforms. And Juris (2008) takes the argument even further by suggesting that such unprecedented connectivity has enabled 'networking logics' within social movements (2008: 3) that allow for more inclusive and structured democracy, quite distinct from the attempts of democratic decision making in the past.

This is not to say that technology has flattened social movement politics entirely however. In their work on Occupy in two separate geographical contexts (Juris, 2012; Razsa and Kurnik, 2012) these authors make clear that social movement politics still differ in important ways, with Occupy Wall Street practising a model of consensus decision making and Occupy Ljubljana a democracy of direct action. Indeed, technology has promoted the diversity that it is argued is central to these new, more fluid movements but it is important to note that such diversity is premised upon an awareness of past difficulties around identity politics. Maeckelbergh (2009) argues that the 'absolute centrality of "diversity"' to horizontal movements such as the Alterglobalization movement (2009: 20) would not have been possible without struggles waged around race, sexuality, ethnicity and gender over the last 30 years. Movements like the Anti-/Alterglobalization movement or Occupy have successfully built upon the legacy of more traditional SMOs that demand recognition on the basis of a shared identity but it is unclear for how long they will remain a platform upon which demands can be made. These newer, more fluid movements have as yet no longevity to which to refer and indeed much popular discourse questions, in amusingly neoliberal terms, what Occupy 'has accomplished'. Of course, such movements have almost reinvented the very notion of protest and have done so by building from a legacy stretching back at least as far as 1968. They have reacted to transformation within society while also *seeking* to transform and have couched their practice within the prefigurative politics of 21st Century activism.

The Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil (MST), by contrast, is a more traditional SMO that relies on a strong collective identity and more conventional means of mobilising its members. It exists in a country that has undergone radical socio-economic change and as such its longevity is all the more remarkable, despite recent commentary in the Brazilian media alleging the

movement's decline. After all the MST has been in existence for almost 30 years. A transnational SMO, the MST has coalesced around two basic principles; a fairer society, and the necessity for the means to achieve this, agrarian reform (Branford and Rocha 2002; Fernandes 1999), principles that have remained constant since its formation. With 1.5 million members, the MST is the largest social movement in Latin America, and through the use of direct action tactics, which include occupations of public buildings and lands, has managed to redistribute land to over half a million families. The need for a movement concerned with agrarian reform in Brazil is stark. Sauer and Leite (2012) have highlighted that farms smaller than ten hectares represent 47% of the total number but occupy only 2.7% of the total area of farmed land. They go on to detail how 'at the other end of the land area spectrum, farms that are larger than 1000 ha correspond to only 0.91 percent of the total number of farms but concentrate more than 43 percent, or 146.6 million ha, of the total area' (2012: 876).

This amounts to a huge concentration of land in the hands of very few and as Almeida and Sánchez (2000) note, 'it is as if just 35,083 people possessed an area equal to the combined area of France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and Austria' (2000: 29). Furthermore, recent political climates have solidified the concentration of land holdings. Petras and Veltmeyer (2002) have observed that during the 1990s, Brazilian government policy led to a further reconcentration of land and the displacement of over one million peasant families. More recently, Sauer and Leite's data indicates that in 2005, there were 3.1 million families considered as 'landless people' (2012: 877).

In this context, where unscrupulous landowners employ hired gunmen to guard unproductive land, and the only state attempt to check the power of landowners directly resulted in a military coup (Deere, 2003), the MST's most important tactic is occupation of land. Firstly, MST state leadership make note of what they consider to be unproductive farmland. Secondly, landless people are then organised by the movement to encamp this land and thus the *acampamento* (encampment) is formed. While MST members are encamped, the legal process to redistribute the land to the encamped families begins. Once this has been completed (it often takes several years) and the land has passed to the families, the *acampamento* becomes an MST *assentamento* (settlement), and the families are given federal government grants to construct a house and make initial purchases for their livelihood. The MST's politics are informed by a Marxist perspective on political economy, and as such settlers are encouraged to work cooperatively in the *assentamento*. On the ground however, despite leadership preferences for cooperative production, and leadership programmes of *formação* (political orientation, in this sense) that advocate this view, individual *assentamentos* choose which model of organisation they prefer. As such there various models of organisation and I spent time in *assentamentos* that were run a) entirely individually (each family

owning a plot which was in effect a family farm), b) *assentamentos* that were run entirely collectively, (including for tasks such as childcare, cooking and other such non agricultural duties), and c) *assentamentos* which were organised with a diverse mixture of these individual and co-operative models.

The fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted from 2007 to 2009, and another period in 2012. I lived with members of the MST in Santa Catarina, South Brazil, and while questions of change and transformation were common to hear at grassroots levels, they were not usually articulated at larger meetings. Contextually, it is important to locate this work in Santa Catarina. Alongside Rio Grande do Sul, the state is to a large degree where the movement came from, and as such, the movement is established throughout almost the whole state and members enjoy a standard of living much different to MST members in for example, the Amazon, or the North East. More specifically however, in Santa Catarina, transformation is particularly pertinent. As incomes have risen dramatically, market opportunities exist for MST members in the South that perhaps don't exist elsewhere.

More generally however, being Latin America's largest social movement in a country that has experienced such a degree of socioeconomic change, the MST provides a useful example as to how social movements more widely can respond to processes of transformation.

In this article, I will argue that as Brazilian society continues to transform around the MST, the movement faces great challenges to remain at the forefront of radical politics and remain relevant to its members. The first section of the article focuses on how broader socioeconomic trends in Brazilian society have fundamentally altered the type of people that the MST recruits in Santa Catarina. The second section suggests that as new settlers often have different understandings of economy to MST leaders from more traditional backgrounds, subsequent differences of opinion can have a bearing on important questions, such as how best to organise production. In the third section of the article I discuss the response to such debates by figures within the leadership and how a programme of rural industrialisation is seen as not only a means to increase production, but also as a mechanism through which to engage with the economic ontology of new recruits from urban backgrounds. However, for many members of the MST, rural industrialisation recalls the MST's failed cooperativisation programme of 1990, and in the fourth section of the article, I foreground accounts as expressed by MST members who have lived and worked within a cooperativised environment. The fifth section concludes the argument and, in the context of wider sociological projections of social movement decay, questions how the MST, a grassroots social movement, is addressing its core relevance to its base. As change and transformation continue apace, the trajectory of MST can provide an interesting case study for an anthropological reframing of sociological models of decline.

The economy

In analysing the transformation of contexts around the MST, wealth, it seems, is an obvious starting point. Brazil's financial situation today, in a lived, daily sense, is radically different to 30 years ago. Put simply, things have changed in a BRIC country where GDP (PPP) has more than quadrupled since 1984, the year the MST was officially founded. Principally, the extension of the welfare state through conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes has been remarkable. Hall (2008) states that under president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002), and especially since Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva assumed the presidency in 2003, 'targeted assistance in education, health and nutrition, now united under *Bolsa Família*, have expanded rapidly to benefit forty-four million (24 per cent of the total population), absorbing almost two-fifths of the social assistance budget earmarked for the poorest sectors' (2008: 799). Brazil is also no longer saddled with external debt; the relatively recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) bail outs of 1998 and 2002 already seem intangible as Brazil has not only paid off these debts, but has indeed loaned the IMF \$10 billion's worth of its desirable real, a currency which has risen to record highs against sterling and the dollar.

The pitfalls of presenting meaningful economic growth through macro level data have been widely commented upon (Armijo and Burges 2010; de Onis 2008; Pinheiro et al. 2004) and although of course GDP growth has not necessarily brought about a reduction in poverty (Andrews 2004; Ferreira et al. 2009), Brazil's position as a global top ten economy has had an impact on the imagination of MST members and non-members alike. During fieldwork, although it was rare to talk about economic growth in a macro sense, I had conversations with *assentados* (settlers), on 'smaller' considerations, which members connoted with economic stability and therefore the possibility to engage in business opportunities. I was told that in the 1980s, a phone line was so expensive that an entire black market economy was established around acquiring them and renting them out. Members also talked about the prices of basic materials and how due to inflation being more stable, they could be more confident about the worth of any money that they earned, a perception that Wright and Wolford also attest to (2003: 88). The growing availability of consumer credit also seemed to be another factor from which *assentados* derived confidence.

However, these processes of societal transformation, while providing MST members with more opportunities and access to state welfare programmes, have also challenged MST recruitment, coinciding as they have with patterns of internal migration that have transformed Brazil from a country with a predominantly rural population to that of one with a predominantly urban population (Chant 1998; Lucas 2004). Wright and Wolford describe how 'during the time of the dictatorship, Brazil went from being two thirds rural to being two thirds urban' (2003: 57) as part of wider government initiatives to 'modernise'.

This programme of 'modernisation' was particularly noticeable in the South of the country (the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul) where between 1970 and 1980, numbers of tenant farmers fell by 27.3%, sharecroppers by 35.6% and the number of rural squatters by 13.9% (IBGE 1970, 1980 cited in Ondetti 2008: 61). Recruitment for the MST, a rural movement, has therefore increasingly become focused on urban areas. Luizinho, a regional leader for *formação política* (political orientation) talked at length on the challenges posed by the influx of urban settlers.

From the urban people come a ton of vices. Real vices, gambling, drugs. But on the other hand, this is our challenge, to work with people in the *acampamentos* to produce new human beings. But as you know, it's begun to change, because there are no more countryside people in the countryside, all of them have already gone to the city. In fact, we talk about agrarian reform, but there are no more countryside people left around here.ⁱ

Thiago, who was encamped in the late 1990s corroborated Luizinho's perspective, but further expanded on the different economic ontology of the city and the countryside.

To create an *acampamento*, you get people from the *periferia*. I've nothing against them... to lessen their poverty, their inequalities, you have to involve them. The big problem within the MST is that these people from the *periferia* don't have the rural ways, you plant, grow, harvest then sell. It's long term. The people from the *periferia*, they get five reais today and then spend it, get five more tomorrow... but the farmer he has to plan and invest with R\$5,000 or R\$10,000. 80% of the people that the movement is recruiting in Santa Catarina are urban. The *assentamentos* that work out well, N_ for example, was formed by farmers. B_ farmers. H_ farmers. We had an *acampamento* near here, 80 families from the city, two stayed and 78 went home.ⁱⁱ

Within the movement more generally, wider trends of recruiting have had to adapt to new geographical expansions into areas that perhaps have a weaker independent farming tradition. Ondetti (2008) notes that as the movement expanded, MST 'campers tended to become more urban' (2008: 123) and that although INCRA stipulated that the beneficiaries of agrarian reform must be 'rural workers', in practice this criteria was rarely enforced, thereby allowing the movement to induct many people from low wage urban professions into the movement. This was certainly the case in Santa Catarina, where many of the *acampados* that I met were young people from the *morros* (lit. hills, in this sense, slums) of Joinville, the biggest city in the state and Vergara-Camus'

experience of Rio Grande do Sul corroborates this (2005: 7).

As Thiago states, it can be problematic to recruit people who have limited farming skills and such members often have a wholly separate financial rationale, one which is at odds with the economics of the countryside. However, despite these problems, urban recruitment is central to current MST policy and represents the movement's attempts to respond to wider transformations. How a rural social movement justifies this in terms of ideology terms was hinted at by MST members Lúcia and Mirelle, who touched on what Borland defines as 'goal expansion'. For them, the definition of *sem terra* (landless, or landlessness) was ultimately flexible, Lúcia telling me that anyone who owned less than four hectares was *sem terra*. Plainly, what constituted *sem terra* was undergoing a process of brand stretching (Cabral 2000; Pepall and Richards 2002) and often the phrase *sem terra* mutated to *sem oportunidades*, to represent people from urban backgrounds. Therefore, in response to transformations in society more widely, the MST in Santa Catarina has without doubt attempted to enfranchise a greater number of potential members, by building alliances with non rural actors.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the difficulties inherent to assimilating people from such differing background are manifold and the reality of trucking people from an urban *morro* to an isolated rural *acampamento* can be stark. Such contrasts inevitably create many tensions, but I will focus on approaches to models of financial sustainability, a subject with many implicit values, which the leadership see as crucial to the movement's long term future.

Engaging in the market and models of organisation

Cooperativisation has long been central to MST ideology but in Santa Catarina, things are changing. Recruits from urban backgrounds are not only more comfortable with the idea of an hourly wage, but they are also pro-business; more open to engaging in markets, rather than using the land to merely plant food. One such example occurred in the collectivised *assentamento* of B_. The *assentamento's* finances showed unsustainable losses and what was interesting about B_ was that at this time, a new urban intake, including Paulo and Cleiton, had significantly altered its composition of settlers. They understood that the *assentamento* was not financially viable in its present incarnation and initiated a series of discussions within the *assembléia* (*assentamento* committee) to find solutions. One of the *assentamento's* key sources of income was the produce of ecologically friendly bricks, which were then sold to local construction firms. The *assentamento* also produced cheese and other dairy products, all produced and sold collectively. However, even before the arrival of the new urban *assentados*, lack of income had resulted in sidelines being developed and one such was providing labour to build houses for the middle classes in a nearby coastal town. And yet, income was still low and the *assentamento* was facing implosion.

Already, three out of eleven houses were empty and it was proving difficult to find new recruits. I asked Cleiton how he had come to move to B_.

Me, Paulo and Sabine were in an *acampamento*. There were sixty families there. And you know what the conditions are like, no? Life is complicated there. So then, Kleber arrived and an assembly was called. He said that there were vacancies here in B_ and asked if people wanted to come. Out of the 60 families, we were the only volunteers.

It is perceived that all MST members believe in co-operative production, but *assentamentos* that are organised collectively are not popular choices for the majority of *acampados* in Santa Catarina. I asked Cleiton why, when MST members had been encamped for a year or even two years, why more people didn't want to settle in B_. He told me that it was known that B_ was run collectively and that *acampados* wanted their own piece of land. Cleiton disapproved of this mentality, and he also had ideas about the financial possibilities of the B_ site, using collective labour. Among the ideas that this new urban cohort raised were turning the *assentamento* into a roadside restaurant selling *café colonial*, a popular refreshment in areas populated by German immigrants, trading on the *assentamento's* proximity to a federal highway. This suggestion was in fact so unpopular that Cleiton was later forced out of the movement for proposing that he manage the restaurant while everyone else was to cook and serve. Another idea was to create nature trails in the surrounding *mata* (forest) with observation platforms overlooking the sea as part of an eco-tourism project. This project foundered on the lack of capital and intensive labour required to construct the necessary paths. But perhaps the idea with the most traction was that of using the bricks that the *assentamento* produced to manufacture barbeques for sale to supermarkets and smaller traders. However, none of these ideas gained support from the *de facto* leader of the *assentamento*, Kleber, who viewed all of them with suspicion due to the extent of their involvement in a wider capitalist market. For Kleber, the land of B_ was for self-sustenance and not to be used as a base for capitalist production. These tensions eventually resulted in all of Paulo, Sabine and Cleiton leaving the *assentamento*.

The example of B_ is interesting as it highlights to what extent the MST is willing to engage in the wider market. Kleber was comfortable with the collective selling of artisanal cheese to policemen and producing batches of bricks,^{iv} but he wouldn't sanction a more regularised interaction with the market as a producer. The problem for Kleber was that the influx of urban people with different ideas as to what was acceptable had reconfigured notions relating to production and market. And this reconfiguration extends more widely to the MST in Santa Catarina, because as I have already argued, recruitment is now targeted at urban *periferias*, and these members both express and are

understood to have a different economic ontology. Encamped MST members from urban contexts have given me business cards, offered to go into business with me and solicited start-up funding for personal micro-credit schemes. I even became involved at one stage in attempting to negotiate a contract with a Brazilian pharmaceutical firm regarding the supply of organic aloe vera from an *assentamento*.

Therefore, driven by the transformation of Brazil's economic context and importantly, how MST members' perceptions of this context have changed, new questions are appearing on the MST's agenda regarding how best to produce and remain financially viable. Urban settlers, operating with a different economic ontology, are beginning to see *assentamentos* as sites for a business, rather than land with which to engage in agricultural production. But has the movement's leadership re-evaluated its position with respect to this shift? Leaders in the MST adhere to the policy of agro-ecology. Once an *assentamento* has been established, Vergara-Camus describes how the priority becomes to find 'ways to better integrate into the market through the creation of cooperatives, the diversification of production or through participation in the niche market of agro-ecological production (2009: 380). Wright and Wolford detail how to restructure agricultural market engagements, the MST discourages *assentados* from trying to compete with large-scale farming in the production of certain staple commodities, such as corn and instead aim for niche products. This approach, which both Vergara-Camus (2009: 370) and Wright and Wolford (2003: 294) highlight, acknowledges an imperative to engage with a capitalist market, albeit on terms which eliminate the middleman and maintain the long-term fertility of the soil. However, it should be noted that this strategy envisages and encompasses only *agricultural* produce, crucially configuring land as a resource to be *planted*, rather than *exploited* as, for example, a commercial premises.

At the level of MST national leadership, it is also important to note that the model of agro-ecology would ideally be implemented in a collectivised manner. Indeed, despite the rejection of the Settler's Cooperative System (*Sistema Cooperativista dos Assentados* – SCA), the nationwide programme of the cooperativisation of production first rolled out by movement leadership in June 1990, MST leaders that I encountered were still in favour of a similar model of organisation being re-implemented and in its discourse the MST has 'reiterated its long-term commitment to collective production' (Branford and Rocha 2002: 95). Amongst others, both Paulo and Cleiton were supporters of cooperativisation and believed that the main factor behind the base's rejection of the programme following June 1990 and indeed its continuing apathy, was a lack of *formação política*; the idea that members needed to be better educated about the benefits that such a model could bring. Indeed, Ondetti details how as far back as the early 1980s 'the landless movement's leadership in the South had favoured collective production' (2008: 124), wanting to bring about a

situation where working on industrialised co-operatives, members could exchange their 'peasant' identity for a 'worker consciousness' (CONCRAB, 1999: 11 cited in Ondetti, 2008: 124-5).

Despite the leadership's position however, MST members from all backgrounds, but especially recruits from urban areas, have displayed a marked unwillingness to participate in *assentamentos* where production is collectivised. *Acampados* whose economic ontology asserted the use of land as a site for a business were distrusting of cooperativisation and spoke of the dream of owning a piece of land in their own right, similarly to many other settlers who were already established. One settler ashamedly admitted to me that her land was *her* land, and beyond the fence was the rest of the settlement. Surprisingly however, leaders continue to agitate for cooperativisation despite the influx of urban recruits. Over several lengthy conversation we shared, Luizinho explained to me the updated future of the MST's cooperativised model of organisation and how if implemented, it would represent an ideal way for the movement to respond to and integrate itself within a society undergoing rapid transformation.

Leadership response to wider transformation

At first unwilling to speak in depth on movement policy, over time, Luizinho came to speak freely about the future of the MST. We often talked of production, and how best to produce.

You have to get into other markets... when we say that co-ops are a necessity, it's because it will be to the advantage of the *assentamentos* but it also will attract the youth. If we manage to create a form of industrialised cooperativisation in the *assentamentos*, to be able to produce our own inputs, our own raw materials in an industrialised way, for sure, the young people will stay more in the countryside.

At this point, I asked about urban recruits.

Also... give people a monthly salary, get customers. But it's not easy and that's why I say that it is a challenge, and the challenge is to change the method of production.

I asked Luizinho if this model of industrialisation would be similar to the *assentamento* of H_ which is fully cooperativised, paying its members a salary per hour.

Yes, like H_ or the cooperative in São Miguel which produces milk under the brand name *Terra Viva*. These projects will make money, projects like making *cachaça* (a liquor made from sugar cane) or pork derivatives.

And really, the idea is for each co-op to act as a hub of industrialisation. This will increase production.

I then raised the issue of how a similar model to this had caused problems in the past and asked him how these problems could be avoided in the future.

You have to find people who already have a cooperativist mentality. But this can also be taught.

Luizinho was passionate about the MST creating a 'new person' and how this could be accomplished through *formação*. I asked him what he understood *formação* to be.

The teaching of the theoretical has to be linked to practical matters. Work is really important. It's work that changes things, much more than teaching in a theoretical sense. Therefore it's this combined education that has as its role, constructing new human beings – people who think differently, who act differently, who have a different attitude during difficult times.

Luizinho's proposal for a new models of production did seem similar to movement proposals for cooperativisation in 1990 in that he highlighted the possibility of greater production but also the financial necessity to produce at levels beyond mere self-sustenance, which Ondetti argues MST leaders have historically considered to be economically unfeasible (2008: 126). But there also did seem to be an acknowledgement of a greater need to 'commercialise', through agro-ecology, and work within the market. Luizinho hinted at this when he argued that the MST's enemies had changed over time and with them, MST strategy.

Because up to ten, fifteen years ago, our enemy was *latifúndio*. But from 1990 with the model of agro-exportation and agribusiness, our enemy has become the big corporations connected to the production of food, seeds, pesticides... Monsanto, Syngenta, Cargill.

As a result of this change of direction, Luizinho was suggesting that the MST could insert itself into a new market position, that of an industrialised producer of niche goods. And although the model of rural industrialisation seems to contradict the ethos of agro-ecology, specifically the tenet of fundamentally not trying to compete with companies that can deliver similar goods at lower values thanks to greater economies of scale, Luizinho believed in the model's financial viability. His point of view was also shared by an MST member named Roberto. From a rural background, Roberto had grown

frustrated by the lack of cooperativisation in the *assentamento* N_ in which he lived.

In N_ we have thirteen families and about thirty people. We could do a lot together, but it's not like that, we work individually. But it's a question of capital. For example to start a collective which processes pork costs R\$15,000 to R\$20,000. Today I've sold just two litres of milk and twelve eggs... it's not a lot. If we worked together, it would work out better but people don't want it.^v

Roberto was a divisive figure in the *assentamento* of N_, a settlement that had originally been fully cooperativised, and his continuing advocacy of cooperativised production had already created deep tensions.^{vi} For Roberto, his brusqueness in managing people was justified by the collective financial security that his model promised to deliver. Roberto's vision was limited to one *assentamento*, but in envisaging monthly salaries and the aggregation of value through pooled labour, Luizinho was articulating a much broader model, one which he believed would better enfranchise urban settlers throughout the whole movement. Luizinho referenced the *assentamento* of H_ as an example of what rural industrialisation could accomplish yet noticeably absent from his account was any mention of the detail of members' lives within these co-ops and whether they enjoyed working in them. At the time I was speaking to Luizinho, both B_ and H_, the two *assentamentos* in the region where production was organised collectively had empty houses, which families waiting in *acampamentos* were unwilling to fill. Given this reticence, it is pertinent to question how MST members perceive reconfiguring one's identity from that of 'peasant' to that of 'worker'.

Members' experiences of cooperativisation

The *assentamento* of H_ has excellent transport links to big markets and its collective system of production is dependant on both these factors. The *assentamento* itself is defined as 95 hectares but of this, only ten hectares can be farmed.^{vii} With this available land being only enough for one MST family under normal circumstances, and 14 families to support, the MST faced a huge challenge making H_ a viable *assentamento*. Their solution was to transform H_ into a space to produce salad crops in an industrialised manner, creating seedlings in greenhouse style controlled environments, before transplantation to intensely irrigated fields, specifically designed for a relative monoculture. Production in H_ is done to a strict schedule, with allotted times for seedlings to grow and a programme of a certain number of days for each type of salad to mature in the rows of the fields. This is because H_ has a contract with Angeloni, one of the biggest supermarket companies in the south of Brazil for

the supply of salads, a contract that absorbs 90% of the *assentamento's* production. The *assentados* of H_ are paid an hourly wage of just over R\$1 per hour. A typical month will render a monthly salary of some R\$180, compared to the legal state minimum wage of roughly R\$432. However, despite the seemingly low wage, all aspects of life are cooperativised, so *assentados*, beyond working together and producing together, eat together, cook together and clean together. The canteen and provision of all meals costs R\$20 per month and of course collectivised activities such as childcare, are 'free'. *Assentados* also have access to collectively owned property; the *assentamento* has a communal phone line and a communal car. Therefore, even though wages are low, twelve families of *assentados* manage to earn a living on the same amount of land as one family possesses in the *assentamento* of N_. In H_ *assentados* are given one day off per week. Any day taken off work is docked from pay, so work that has been assigned is effectively compulsory. *Assentados* are also required to work from the age of twelve upwards, children usually being assigned cleaning duties, a fact which excites much critical comment from members of surrounding *assentamentos*. I knew that MST members Davi and his wife Jurema, now living in N_ had lived and worked in H_ for a number of years so the first question I asked was why they had left.

Davi: It was internal differences of opinion. The bottom line was that we got worried with this question of... well, the future and what it's going to be like. For example, if I worked there for ten years and had to leave suddenly, I would leave with nothing. I mean, when we arrived there, they welcome you, they get you into it all and they tell you, everything here belongs to us. But it's us in inverted commas, no? Because the day you leave, everything stays there. Nothing belongs to 'us'. It belongs to you only when you're inside.

I asked him to elaborate on this.

When you work there, you deposit money in the central bank of the collective and this money comes from the sweat of your labour. It's for the good of the group. So they've constructed a tool shed, bought a new car, new truck, two tractors... but this is my sweat! And when I leave? I don't even get one bolt of that tractor!

As we spoke, it became clear that this fundamental problem of the collective had left Davi feeling like interchangeable labour and not valued as a person.

Look, collectivism is the best form of progress of moving forward. It's just that you have to have greater flexibility on the human side. Treating people like humans is not valued there. Being human there is just valued

as labour, labour, labour. So when you get ill and you don't produce anything... I felt it badly, because I broke my arm and I spent 40 days out of action. And I picked up on not being valued anymore. It's an administrative thing. They wanted back the money from the hours I couldn't work. I really felt like I wasn't valued.

The concept of *ser humano* (being human) was recurrent in our conversation so I asked Davi what he meant when he used the phrase.

I don't mind so much contributing to the central bank of the collective. You have to have this. Even though I left the co-op, I still think it's the best method and it will eventually work out. The only thing I think is that there should be some changes in the internal politics. Like, lessen the investment in the capital side to raise the investment in being human. Because treating each other well, being human, is the source of everything. And over there (H_) it has been forgotten.

We spoke for a while about how going on a movement mobilisation would be considered as a 'day off' and therefore you would be deducted wages. Both Davi and Jurema commented on how such was the focus on work and meeting the contract, that in fact, people had forgotten about the wider struggle. Davi at one point was even more explicit.

You know what? It's too much work and they think twice before letting someone go on a demonstration. Because if they go, it creates a labour deficit and there, it's work, work, work.

I asked him who he meant by 'they', at which point Jurema laughed.

Davi: There's always someone who speaks louder than others, it's useless to deny it. B_ is Kleber, no? He'll never leave. H_ is Daniele. In the rest of the state as well, the other co-ops, there are always one or two people. So the other families come, they go, but these people stay. It's normal that there is someone who takes the wheel. Daniele for example, he has the technical side. He understands how to plant the salads and how to treat the seeds. And his wife, Nina, she does all the accounting, she knows how many hours everyone has done, so she controls the money. She has a computer, she's taken courses... No one else knows how to do that. So they dominate.

Jurema: We actually came from a co-op to another one here, because back then there was a co-op here.

Davi: It's because I insisted, 'come on, let's come here to Roberto's co-op'. And I was certain that because the people were different, the politics would be different as well. But at the end of the day, the bottom line is that it always ends up the same, you know? (*cai na mesma realidade, sabe?*). You can change the people, but the problems are the same. Someone gives the orders, someone makes the decisions. As a group you decide together, but this 'someone' will always bypass this.

Jurema: I didn't like it. I had just lost one of my children at that time.^{viii} And so I was really depressed, but I had to work in the crèche and the noise that the children made... it was terrible for me. But I had to look after them even though I didn't want to. Because I was a mother, because I had a child in the crèche it was required. Whoever had children... The crèche was staffed by the mothers.

Davi: The women who weren't mothers, weren't required to work in the crèche.

Jurema: I was stuck in the house all the time. I was depressed, I was having treatment. And there were twelve children and I couldn't control them anymore. One day, I was just crying because I couldn't handle it and they could see I was suffering, but nobody... 'No! You have to look after them as you're a mother!'

Davi: It's a lack of humanity.

Jurema: I mean, if you're working and earning per hour... Because you have to clock on and clock off. It's nothing but a company. It's a salads company.

Although both Davi and Jurema had many criticisms about life in H₂ and how they were treated, Davi especially, maintained his commitment to the collective model, at least theoretically, throughout our conversation. He mentioned that the arguments he had fought were perhaps as a result of 'his own defects' and that group work was 'one of the best methods' of organisation. However, he also consistently advocated the need for relationships to be conducted in a 'more human' way and Jurema also articulated concerns pertaining to gender. She was unhappy that as a mother she was obliged to work in the crèche and she also mentioned that she used to work in the kitchen with another woman. She highlighted how if you were a cook, you didn't work in the planting side of the *assentamento* and she seemed unhappy about how tasks had become gendered. A further concern for them both and perhaps the main reason why they left H₂, was a lack of security in the sense of the lack of any pension.^{ix} They

talked of how their situation was much better in N_ as if they had to leave, they would at least have capital and assets to sell. But perhaps their main concern was how one or two people could easily and in their opinion, inevitably, come to dominate a cooperativised environment. In H_, Daniele and Nina were identified as being able to effectively bypass meetings because people were unwilling to voice their opinion and it seemed that this reticence was connected to members' sense of an inferiority in technical matters. In this sense, their experience echoes Kasmir's analysis of the Mondragón cooperative in Spain (1999), where Kasmir argues that '[c]ooperative workers had considerably broader rights to participate in decision making than did workers in private firms, but they lacked the expertise and resources to turn these rights into power' (1999: 383) with the result that 'many co-op workers were disillusioned and disinterested in participating in management' (*ibid.*).

However, it would seem that a certain lack of participation has more serious consequences than being merely wary of speaking in co-op meetings. Although during conversation it was not rendered explicit, Davi made it clear that when he spoke of 'having to leave', this could signify being expelled, as Roberto has attempted to do when Davi left his cooperative. Davi underlined this point when we continued to talk about the *assentamento* of B_ and how Kleber seemed resistant to change.

Against Kleber, either you agree with him, or you leave. And if you leave, you leave with nothing.

And a further subtlety to this lack of a tangible security manifested itself when we started to talk about the second generation and what benefits they might derive from a cooperative model. Davi talked about Daniele and Nina's son in the following terms.

We need to change the internal politics, not in all aspects, just some, in this sense of being more human, no? We have to value the family. For example, do you know Daniele's son? He was growing up when we were there, he was a little kid. Now he's eighteen or nineteen and married. But the marriage broke up because he had no opportunities. He has nothing, no hob to cook with, not even a sink to do his washing up in!

What Davi demonstrates here is that if all property is collectivised, then there is limited possibility of passing assets on to your children. And this lack of security for both them, and their children, seemed a key factor to their two time rejection of a collective model of work. A rejection which echoes the decision that the vast majority of members of the MST made in their collective refusal of the plans for cooperativisation which were put on the table in June 1990. And yet, cooperativisation remains on the agenda, with H_ being held up as an example

by leaders like Luizinho, as to what can be achieved with collective labour *and* a wider implementation of *formação política*.

Conclusion

These are decisive times for the MST. It has endured and remained fundamentally relevant to people's lives and aspirations for 25 years, but there are no guarantees that it will remain so for the next 25. In common with Cuba's socialist revolution, it finds itself at a crossroads (Alzugaray Treto 2009; Pérez 2008; WSJ 2007) as worrying rumours emerge from Brazil. The movement is finished, they say. The movement has no future. The movement's time has passed, it is no longer relevant. And perhaps there is some truth to these whispers, coming, as they do, from people sympathetic to the movement, rather than its monotonously predictable detractors. In 1984, the year of the movement's official foundation, Brazil's yearly inflation rate was 192.12% with foreign debt to banks and governments totalling \$104 billion. The MST's principal challenge amidst this financial chaos was to establish itself and put agrarian reform back on the agenda. Today, with record levels of Brazilian economic growth, the struggle has changed. The welfare state has expanded rapidly to benefit forty-four million (24 per cent of the total population) and the result of such unprecedented social spend has been a 'one-third reduction in land invasions by the MST landless movement during President Lula's first administration',^x Hall notes (2008: 799), while Maria Cecilia Manzoli Turatti, an activist academic and sympathiser of the movement agrees that in the *periferias*, the MST's primary location for recruiting members, welfare state payments could have a significant effect in 'demotivating citizens from choosing to live in the harsh conditions imposed in an *acampamento*' (FSP, 2007a). Indeed, the MST recently declared that 'agrarian reform has reached a standstill all over Brazil',^{xi} so if agrarian reform has stalled, what of the movement's attempts to involve its changing membership demographic in times marked by rapid socio-economic transformation?

Without doubt the MST's *ideological adversaries* have evolved since 1984. Initially large landowners were the enemy but the list has expanded to include the mass media, Nestlé, Parmalat, agribusiness and finally, neo-liberalism itself. Equally, movement policy has shifted over time, from a basic premise to combat the inequality of landholdings in Brazil, to an engagement with the inequalities of capitalism, to a confrontation with agribusiness and global financial systems of capital and latterly to a commitment to organic farming and agro-ecology. But has the MST, as a grassroots social movement, so dependant on the connection to its base, been able to reflect transformation in wider society to remain relevant to its new urban recruits?

Leaders see rural industrialisation as a way of addressing many different problems at one time. It will harness the differing economic ontology that

urban settlers bring to the movement, while also addressing longstanding concerns about financial viability, and perhaps most importantly, put collective production firmly back on the agenda. But just as the plans for full cooperativisation foundered on the lack of buy-in from the base in 1990 to 1991, will rural industrialisation result in a similar fiasco? And even if it is never fully implemented, the formulation of such a policy without consultation of the base begs the question of how involved MST members are this form of collective decision making. After all, without asking, it is impossible to know whether people wish to be transferred from one static, essentialised identity, that of 'peasant', to another, that of 'worker'.

In conversation with MST members, it became clear to me that people join the movement for many reasons. Some believe in the struggle from the outset, some are heartily convinced, while others just want to improve their, or more commonly, their children's prospects. The MST promotes returning to the countryside and reversing the rural-urban pattern of migration, but trying to empathise with what people understand by the 'countryside' seems crucial. *Trabalhando na roça* (working the land) is a common phrase to hear when one speaks to MST members and *a roça* is often imaginatively contrasted with *a cidade*, the city. Gaetano, an older MST member, expressed that being able to plant what you want, when you want, to stay in bed late if you are tired, or work until midnight if you so wish, is a fundamental component of the life of a small farmer, in contrast to the salaried people of the city. I am not suggesting that all members articulate these concerns or configure rural life in this way, indeed I have argued that increasingly the MST is focusing its recruitment on people from urban backgrounds. Nor am I expounding a separate essentialised identity, that of the proudly independent MST 'peasant', committed to a rural style of life and the self-sufficiency that it provides. But members with these views *do* exist, perhaps as MST leaders tacitly admit when they call for greater *formação política* and when Luizinho hints at 'mums and dads not being willing to move away from planting in the field'.

There are also more practical concerns around the longer term, intergenerational viability of the model. Such details as long-term social security, accident insurance or similar technicalities can of course be addressed if the model of rural industrialisation is progressively rolled out by MST leadership and/or members are more regularised within Brazilian employment law. But will it be a genuine response to the changing needs of movement members; will it be an organic evolution of movement direction? As I have already noted, Borland argues that 'long-term movements rely on generational passage of ideology, repertoires and goals' (2006: 129) to remain relevant, but does the MST have the institutional flexibility to respond to emerging dynamics of its own membership and therefore continue to deliver a germane contribution to Brazilian society? Or is it the case that the H_ model, while profitable on paper, does not have the characteristic of 'being human' that Davi and Jurema seek in

order for the model to have legitimacy with the people who are going to work in it?

The MST recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, a landmark achievement. No other comparable movement has managed to remain relevant for so long. But it seems that now, with the demographic of its membership beginning to change, both in terms of age and rural/urban background, that there has never been a greater risk of disenfranchisement and its corollary for a social movement, increasing irrelevance to its own members. Ultimately, the problems in H_ beset many other urban workers' cooperatives but it is the MST leadership's response to these problems that is of the greatest importance. Zald and Ash's (1966) classic article on models of SMO decay predicts a gloomy forecast. An SMO can gain a niche in society, win an operational organisational base and even influence the course of events, but if its growth slows, the organisation risks becoming a 'movement becalmed', vulnerable to growing conservatism within its leadership (1966: 334). The MST is at a crossroads, but although transformation more widely is inevitable, models of social movement decay premised on how movements react to these changes, need not necessarily be. As Tais says:

The movement doesn't have any perspective. Am I going to spend the rest of my life here working in the field? No, I want to work on this question of the second generation. The movement has a very weak plan regarding young people.^{xii}

These inter-generational concerns are perhaps the key to reinvigoration and it seems particularly difficult here to avoid comparisons with more fluid social movements such as the Alterglobalization movement or Occupy that have captured global attention, seemingly propelled by youth and dynamism. Unlike the MST, these movements have supposedly gone beyond the 'perceived need for "unity as sameness"' (Maeckelbergh 2009: 18) that the MST is prone to seeking through its strong collective identity (Flynn 2013) and Polletta (2002) has commented on the subtlety inherent to these movements' decision making processes, a subtlety that is perhaps not the case within the MST as plans for rural industrialisation may indicate. But can movements like Occupy and the Alterglobalization movement really be productively set alongside a more traditional social movement like the MST?

In the first place, it is important to highlight that the original 'occupiers' *were* the MST and that their direct action tactics have been the backbone of *sem terra* politics ever since 1979. It is also the case that the MST is a 'residential movement'; members gain land through the MST and after this process, they live permanently on an MST *assentamento*, subject to the stigma that can attach itself to being a *sem terra*. Put simply, in most cases, MST members are members for life, unlike particularly those who participate in Occupy by

encamping, before returning to a space which they consider a more permanent home. The MST equally does not claim to be the 99%. Its politics of belonging and inclusion have been established in a way that quite separates it from the Alterglobalization movement or Occupy. Unlike these movements, which draw their constituent base almost entirely from the city, the MST primarily represents rural interests, although as I have argued in this article, this situation is beginning to change. This is not to say however that the MST has sought to isolate itself. On the contrary, the movement has sought to create strong transnational links, which have inspired other movements and which have certainly impacted on its ideological direction.^{xiii} But then again, regarding the politics of inclusion, to what extent can Occupy genuinely claim to be the 99%? As David Nugent (2012) makes clear in his commentary on Razsa and Kurnik's and Juris' articles on Occupy, Occupy has had difficulty broadening its base from 'young, educated (and now) underemployed white men and women' (2012: 282) and Juris points to the idea that including ethnic minority and working class populations is one of Occupy's most important challenges.

Occupy provides an interesting case study in this sense for an anthropological reframing of sociological models of decline in movements, but it is inescapable that Occupy only coalesced in 2011 while the MST has been in existence in one way or another since the late 1970s. Indeed, the MST gives us an idea of what a movement may resemble after 30 years of successful mobilisation and how will Occupy's contribution be considered after a similar period of time? The MST has many concrete achievements of the sort that would satisfy those who ask what Occupy has 'accomplished' but interestingly, Juris suggests that it is through the logic of networking and the logic of aggregation, made possible by Facebook and Twitter, that Occupy has 'both *responded* to and helped to *create* new discursive and political conditions of possibility' (2012: 273 my emphasis). Is this how a social movement should go about *seeking* transformation in society, while also *reacting* to transformations foisted upon them? It seems that the actors of the MST's leadership have an important role to play now in the creation of their legacy; a new platform, designed with younger members of the movement, to ensure the MST's continuing relevance and safeguard the undoubted progress it has made in the alleviation of poverty in one of the world's most unequal economies.

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ⁱ Interview with Luizinho – 02/03/2009

ⁱⁱ Interview with Thiago – 11/12/2008

ⁱⁱⁱ For an excellent discussion on landless identity see McNee's 'A Diasporic, Post-traditional Peasantry: The Movimento Sem Terra (MST) And The Writing Of Landless Identity' (2005)

^{iv} R\$450 for a pallet of a thousand, a good market price

^v Interview with Roberto – 09/10/2008

^{vi} The *assentamento* of N_ was originally a full cooperative. However, tensions began to surface and the *assentamento* split into two *núcleos*, one cooperativised and the other comprised of individual plots. Roberto was a member of the former along with Davi. At a certain point Davi decided that he wished to exit the co-op and live individually. Roberto was angry at this decision and calling an assembly, moved that Davi be expelled from the *assentamento* and therefore, the movement. When this motion was not passed, Roberto continued to harass Davi and his family. To put an end to what the families of the whole *assentamento* considered as ill-treatment of Davi, they occupied Roberto's land to make their point.

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- ^{vii} Incra (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária) devolved 95 hectares to the MST for the *assentamento* H_, knowing that 80 hectares could not be farmed, as they were protected *Mata Atlântica* – Atlantic rainforest.
- ^{viii} Jurema was pregnant with twin boys, only one of whom survived the birth.
- ^{ix} All workers in Brazil are supposed to have a *Carteira de Trabalho e Previdência Social* (CTPS), an official personal document recording the employment status of its owner. This document provides benefits to the employee including a pension. Indeed rural workers aged over 60 can have a access to a pension without ever having paid into the system. However, having this documentation is not something all *sem terra* have. I never saw a *Carteira de Trabalho* during my fieldwork and much literature reports similar experience, for example Marli Malinoski in Sul21 is reported a stating 'Quem é sem terra não tem carteira assinada' – Sem terra don't have employment papers (Natusch 2011).
- ^x According to research carried out by the State University of São Paulo, the number of families involved in land occupations by the MST fell from 65,552 in 2003 to 44,364 in 2006 (FSP 2007b; IPEA 2008 cited in Hall 2008).
- ^{xi} <http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=node/579> - accessed 21st March, 2010.
- ^{xii} Interview with Tais – 20/04/2008
- ^{xiii} The shift from a basic occupation of lands to how these lands were to be farmed in an agro-ecological way was certainly influenced by the wider environmental movement and the MST's transnational links to *La Via Campesina*.