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Taking Matters into Their Own Hands: The MST and the Workers' Party in Brazil²

Brazil's Movement of Landless Rural Workers (Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra do Brasil—MST) has long engaged in a subtle form of brinkmanship with the Brazilian state and with the rule of law. The strange combination of audacity and vulnerability that characterizes this strategy is even more delicate in the context of the fourth straight mandate of the MST's erstwhile political ally, the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT). The great hope born in the MST that a PT administration would wholeheartedly support agrarian reform and thus make the MST strategy of land occupation and civil disobedience mostly unnecessary was to be utterly disappointed. When Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva was elected PT president in 2002 he brought with him an historical commitment to agrarian reform and much supportive rhetoric as well. However, Lula carried out no systematic agrarian reform at all and oversaw the formation of barely more land settlements than his conservative predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Lula's PT successor, Dilma Rousseff, has done less still. As a result the MST must both challenge and yet tacitly support the PT for fear of the alternatives, all of which are worse. In this article I will first outline the general predicament of the MST's relationship to the state and then discuss the broken alliance between the MST and the PT. I will conclude that the MST effectively implements a strategy that all at once creates authentically socialist agricultural settlements while simultaneously using the state to forward its goals.

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The MST's Relationship with the State: Reform or Revolution?

The MST seems to be a fairly classic example of an organization that employs civil disobedience, especially systematic and sustained land occupations, to obtain what are essentially reformist goals. According to this view, peaceful civil disobedience preserves and indeed strengthens the rule of law precisely by strategically breaking the law. The reformist interpretation of the MST thus argues that when the MST occupies private property it is engaging in a form of civil disobedience with the goal of realizing a modernizing agrarian reform that is, in fact, explicitly promised in the 1988 Constitution of the Republic of Brazil.

Indeed, with rapid urbanization and industrialization in the twentieth century nearly everyone, starting in the 1950's, recognized the need to reform Brazil's semi-feudal agricultural sector. This was so not only in order to feed an increasingly large urban population but also to increase export revenues and bring much-needed foreign cash into the economy. Articles 184-186 of the 1988 Constitution spell out the details of an agrarian reform catalyzed by the principle that all rural land must fulfill its "social function" or be expropriated and redistributed by the state. In fact, these notions of social function and expropriation were even affirmed by the military dictatorship in its first legislative act after the April, 1964 coup. In fact, many think that a key reason for the military coup was to avoid a moderate land reform that was being considered by then president João Goulart. With the end of the dictatorship, the buoyancy of the New Republic put agrarian reform back on the agenda. However, when a lack of political will combined with the well-organized resistance of the rural elite to render these constitutional and legal provisions mostly vacuous, land occupation became the only tactical option for rural Brazilians and their supporters. With the help of the Catholic and Lutheran churches, rural "camponeses" began occupying land first and then seeking legal title to it under the auspices of the constitution. The strategy was a great success, leading in 1984 to the emergence of the MST as one of the largest, best-organized and most successful social movements in the world.

The MST, then, depends on the state not only for legalization and protection under the rule of law, but also for badly needed credit and infrastructural support. It is

important to recognize that MST settlements almost literally start with nothing. They are made up very poor families with little or no resources. Thus credit to buy tools, tractors, seed and other necessities of production is essential to their success. The state, for its part, tacitly goes along with this, as embodied in its agency for agrarian reform, INCRA (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária). Of course the degree of support from INCRA varies widely from time to time and location to location. All the same, even with the aid of other MST communities, new settlements are particularly in need of INCRA's support.

The Brazilian state, one might even go so far to say, also relies upon the MST to do its dirty work. It is easier to let the MST take care of the complex, controversial and difficult task of appropriating rural property from politically powerful landowners than for the government to carry out this task itself. Local oligarchs often control law enforcement in their regions and very often do not hesitate to hire thugs and assassins when they need to. Hired gunman, called jagunços in Brazil, have killed 1,934 rural workers and activists in Brazil since 1985 with charges being laid in less than 10% of those cases, and an even lower rate of conviction (CPT, 2015). In short, the implementation of agrarian reform is no easy matter, and government inaction on this front means that rural workers and their social movements are the focal point of rural violence. At the same time the MST's land occupations and well-organized protests embarrass the government and make it vulnerable to criticisms even from moderates that it is not protecting "law and order". President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's right-wing administration (1995–2002) is a good example of this kind of complicity. Cardoso's government thus criticized the MST in public while simultaneously settling a significant number of families, 461,066 over eight years (Dataluta, 2015: 19).

This reformist interpretation of the MST, however, does not do justice to the full scope and ambition of its activities and goals. The MST, after all, draws upon and expands the socialist tradition in at least three ways. First, the Movement self-consciously seizes the means of production. Marx, of course, was only the most famous theorist to note that when workers do not control the land, machines and other infrastructure they need to produce a living for themselves they are forced not

only to sell their labour power on the free market, but more broadly to become dependent upon and exploited by those who employ them. Second, even when MST settlements are divided into family size plots the overall structure of the settlement encourages cooperation, is based on common property and is democratic (worker-managed). Indeed, many settlements are either full cooperatives themselves or organize various kinds of cooperatives within a wider context of labour organization (see Diniz and Gilbert, 2013). Third, the MST appropriates not only the means of production but also provides key services normally provided by the state, especially education and health care. They do this by building health care centers and schools on their settlements, by organizing partnerships with local and regional health and educational institutions, by enabling their own members to become teachers, nurses, doctors and lawyers and by developing various other kinds of professional expertise necessary for a self-sufficient community. It is no exaggeration, therefore, that many (though not all) MST settlements can be considered to be islands of socialism, the ultimate trajectory of which is to challenge capitalism and the liberal state. This is, without a doubt, the MST's ultimate vision. Indeed, as political strategy, the MST's structure neatly evades or, more accurately, postpones addressing the issue of state power and the task of building a broader form of socialism. This is an imperative with implications far beyond that of the MST's context. It is important to recall that the left's attempts to seize state power in the second half of the 20th century were defeated with enormous violence and the dramatic repression of basic human rights. Electoral success met with military coups (c.f. Guatemala in 1954 and Chile in 1973) while guerilla revolutions were repressed with unrestrained brutality. Even the exceptions, Cuba in 1959 and Nicaragua in 1979, were squeezed dry by means of proxy wars (Bay of Pigs, the Contras) and economic embargos. Notwithstanding the hope in this domain created when leftist political parties were elected in Uruguay, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and others, the MST is steadfastly committed to a "civil society" based strategy. That is, the MST's goal is not merely to provide public services to its members because the state cannot or will not, but because self-organization

effectively turns MST settlements into participatory democracies. People govern themselves from within civil society rather than deferring power to the state.

All the same, the MST is aware that politics at the federal level is not something it can ignore and that, indeed, its long-term goals require directly confronting this issue. Aware of this problem, the MST is exploring ways to engage more directly in state politics, especially with its active sponsorship of the Consulta Popular, a mass political organization that attempts to mobilize popular political engagement but that is not subject to the limitations of electoral politics. In the meantime, the pragmatic goal of creating economically and socially viable agricultural settlements is the top priority.

Suffice it to say, the MST has introduced quite a new and complex model of movement organization and activism precisely by basing its political autonomy upon economic autonomy. Marx's theory proves decisive. MST control over the means of production provides a permanent and cooperative base by which the MST can autonomously implement a just economic order within its own boundaries. This economic self-sufficiency robs the right of a key means of coercion against social movements—that we must all make a living. Moreover, this means that the MST's revolutionary goals are in part met by forming economic and politically autonomous islands of socialism. Moreover, the MST's so-called "reformist" relationship with the state is thus revealed to be not a sign of the MST's economic weakness or political moderation, but a brilliant strategy that (a) is based upon an essential autonomy vis-à-vis state power and capitalism, (b) creates a socialist alternative in the here and now, and (c) still uses the state to further its own goals.

The MST and the Workers' Party

The MST and the Workers' Party were both created in the early 1980's as opposition to the military dictatorship mounted. Moreover, they both emerged from and were committed to a similar ideological platform. Despite this, the MST's difficult and complex relationship with the state has not radically changed since the PT came to power in 2002.

In its early years, the MST was fortunate that Fernando Collor, in order to avoid impeachment, had to resign as President in 1992. He was actively hostile towards the movement and may well have succeeded in destroying it had he remained in office for two full terms. When Fernando Henrique Cardoso was elected in 1994, in contrast, he promised to settle 280,000 landless families on rural land but nonetheless ignored the issue of a more comprehensive agrarian reform (See Branford, 2015). However, public pressure following the massacre of nineteen MST activists at Eldorado das Carajás in April, 1996 forced him to change his policy. He thought the MST could be defused if its militants were actually settled on land and thus he sought to expedite and broaden the settlement process. In order to facilitate the achievement of this goal he separated INCRA from the Ministry of Agriculture to give it more autonomy. At the same time, however, he appointed a key opponent of agrarian reform, Raul Jungmann, as INCRA's president. A year after the Eldorado das Carajás massacre, Cardoso also gave in to pressure from the MST when an enormous pilgrimage to Brasília, the National March for Agrarian Reform, eventually gathered some 100,000 demonstrators in the capital. Even if reluctantly, Cardoso agreed to meet with the MST leadership. Emboldened by the success of direct political action, the MST launched a large wave of land occupations early in 2000 followed by a coordinated set of mass demonstrations involving the occupation of public buildings in fourteen state capitals. Cardoso responded with both the carrot and the stick. In his eight years as President more than 450,000 families were settled on land (Dataluta, 2015).³ However, he also worked very hard to undermine the MST. First, he introduced a neoliberal agrarian reform based on the notion of a "Land Bank". Second, he made it illegal to appropriate any land for purposes of resettlement for two years if it had once been occupied by the MST. Third, he cut off or seriously limited credit and technical support to new settlements.

³ It is not easy to calculate precisely how many families were settled nor what kinds of settlements should be counted in such calculations. INCRA (2015) claims that 540,704 families were settled while DATALUTA (2015), a research organization aligned with social movements, gives a figure of 461,066. Miguel Carter, one of the most important scholars of the MST, gives a lower figure still, 402,724 (Carter, 2015). See Carter for a detailed analysis of this issue and revised statistics for all periods under analysis (Carter, 2015 : 414).

It is no wonder then that the MST greeted the election of Lula as President in 2002 with elation and profound optimism. The PT had long maintained a policy of agrarian reform as a central part of its platform. Of course there were also periodic tensions between them, since the latter had its strongest base in the urban labour movement. All the same, every indication was that the new PT administration would enthusiastically support the goals of the MST. True to form, the new PT Minister of Agrarian Development, Miguel Rossetto, asked agrarian reform expert, long-time MST supporter and socialist militant Plínio de Arruda Sampaio to formulate an agrarian reform plan, the result of which was an ambitious scheme to settle one million families in four years. This would require, of course, an extensive expropriation of land that was not meeting its social function. Indeed, Arruda Sampaio's vision was to abolish latifundio agriculture altogether. This seemed quite feasible, since up to one third of Brazilian property had been determined to be either unproductive, to have become property by corrupt means, or both. Moreover, some 4.2 million impoverished and underemployed families, according to a 2010 government study, could have benefited from agrarian reform (Carter, 2015: 415).

This far-reaching plan was precisely what the MST wanted, but it was not to be. Lula, the former union leader, was a pragmatist and a conciliator. He consistently sought consensual solutions to social, economic and political problems—to a fault. Indeed, the writing was on the wall before he was even elected in 2002. Lula went into the 1994 election campaign leading in the polls, but ended up losing when fear-mongering on financial issues turned things around for Cardoso. Up to that point the PT had insisted, for example, that it might refuse to pay Brazil's foreign debt. Because of the 1994 loss, Amir Sader says that the "PT initiated a process in search of governability, which resulted in modifications to its platform, which was very obvious in the case of foreign debt. Initially the PT held that it would suspend payments, then modified their platform to a demand for renegotiation to, at last, the affirmation during the 2002 electoral campaign that it would break no commitments, including payments on the debt" (2007).

In similar fashion, Lula favoured a solution to the agrarian reform issue that brought key constituencies together to work out a compromise. He thus appointed Roberto Rodrigues, an advocate of agribusiness, to be the Minister of Agriculture. In short, the PT tried to square the circle—at once confronting the concentration of land and wealth in the hands of a rural elite and yet strongly encouraging (with subsidies, tax breaks, tariff breaks, and other incentives) the development of large-scale agribusiness. Indeed, state subsidies to agro-business were generous, with each corporate estate receiving an incredible US\$356,729 (on average) as opposed to US\$9,079 per family farmer (Carter, 2015: 415).

The agro-business elite not only promised increased revenue from large-scale export products, but also sought to corner the growing market for biofuels. Rosetto, Rodrigues and Lula could agree to support this sector, but not to take the politically charged step of expropriating millions of hectares of land from powerful constituencies for the purposes of land reform. Rosetto announced that Sampaio's plan to settle one million families would be cut in half. The blow was softened with provisions to legitimize the land claim of thousands of Brazil's most vulnerable rural workers, the *poseiros*. *Poseiros* is the Brazilian term for families that have rented (possessed) the same pieces of land from large landowners for many generations.

By adopting a very conservative reading of the 1988 Constitution's "social function" clause, the PT government tied their own hands in two ways. First, the Constitution asserted that land could be taken by the state if it did not meet any one of four distinct conditions: (1) "rational and adequate use" of that is done such as to ensure (2) the "preservation of the environment", (3) the "observance of provisions regulating labor relations, and (4) "exploitation that favors the well-being of owners and workers" (Art. 186). However, the only criterion actually employed for the sake of state expropriations (and infrequently at that) was the first of these four, meaning that as long as land was productive no amount of ecological damage or labour exploitation would (in practice) justify expropriation. This took place in a context in which the Catholic Church's Pastoral Land Commission identified 63,417 cases of enslaved workers and 2,569 landowners accused of serious labour code violations (between 2003 and 2012) (Carter, 2015: 417).

Second, the PT ensured that their own agrarian reform scheme would be prohibitively expensive by guaranteeing to pay landowners for any expropriated properties. Progressive legal experts have argued that the four conditions of social function determine not just that the state has a right to expropriate someone's putatively private property, but much more radically determines whether a given piece of land can be considered property in the first place. If, therefore, any one of the four conditions are not met by a given landowner, their plot would be exempt from protection under property right and would effectively become state property. In the words of Brazilian legal scholar Carlos Marés, "(A)fter 1988 property that does not fulfil its social function is not protected, or, simply, it is not property at all" (2003: 116). Thus, it makes no sense to compensate people for land that is not, in fact, theirs. The saliency of this issue is amplified by the fact that so much of the land in question was originally obtained by extraordinarily corrupt means. The payment of compensation, which was made even more costly by very high interest rates, amounts to compensation for violating the Constitution of the Republic.

The MST and its allies have thus proposed a more radical and more philosophically rigorous notion that all property is primordially common. This is essentially a secularized version of Catholic teaching on property right. According to the Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT), which is an organization of the Catholic Church in Brazil that does much the same kind of work as the MST, land first and foremost, "belongs to itself and to its Creator". It is "given to man as a gift and a responsibility, for the sustenance and the realization of everyone, without distinction, from the present generation to those of the future" (CPT, 1997: 270). The Conference of Catholic Bishops' of Brazil, of which the CPT is an organ, thus clearly distinguishes between two types of "property". The first, "capitalist property", misuses God's gift for land is thus "used as an instrument for the exploitation of alienated labour". Second, there is property which is used by "the worker himself and his family,... having a social function and respecting the fundamental rights of the worker" (cited in Stedile, 2005: 299). Thus it is not hard to see why CPT's famous slogan, "The land to those who work it", is clearly understood to extend the familial notion of good stewardship to a cooperative

community such as an MST settlement. The MST, a secular organization, does not rely on the premise of “God’s gift”, but holds that the “social function” clause of the constitution demonstrates that land is primordially for the common good of the whole people. The PT, however, chose not to see it this way and affirmed a rather traditional notion of capitalist private property.

Suffice it to say that many factors combined to render the originally ambitious PT agrarian reform plan moribund. In Lula’s first mandate the PT managed to settle under a third of the original goal (just over 300,000 families) (Dataluta, 2014). Arruda Sampaio, bitter and frustrated, left the PT shortly after and ended up running as the presidential candidate of the Partido de Socialismo e Democracia (PSOL) in the 2010 federal elections. In Lula’s second mandate (2006–10), agrarian reform fared much worse still, with only 115,406 families settled (Dataluta, 2014).

Despite this, there are key advantages for the MST to have the PT in power. The PT refuses all the lobbying from agribusiness and other powerful sectors of Brazilian society to undermine or even criminalize the MST. PT leaders even encourage the MST to stay active, occupy land and to make demands. More tangibly, the PT has ensured that INCRA stay reasonably healthy and has made more credit and technical aid available to MST settlers than other administrations would likely have done. The PT also established the very successful Food Acquisition Program (Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos, PAA) by which foods for schools, hospitals and other public facilities are purchased from agrarian reform settlements. Moreover, other PT policies have greatly aided the constituency the MST serves. Lula’s “Fome Zero” (Zero Hunger) campaign (which includes a wide range of initiatives like the Bolsa Familia, community suppers and a host of others) has been a humanitarian success, raising many thousands of people out of absolute hunger. Of course it should be noted that some MST militants consider these policies to be merely a form of “charity” that treats symptoms rather than causes and that undermine the MST’s capacity to recruit militants. For all of these complicated reasons the MST never actively opposes the PT in elections, and many of its

members continue to campaign for the PT, even if in the jaded spirit of avoiding something worse.

Dilma: The Same Old Story

AS in many other nations, Brazil's presidents are permitted to serve only two terms. Lula's policies, his personal charisma and the steady growth of the Brazilian economy dramatically and perhaps permanently changed the Brazilian political landscape. Poor and marginalized Brazilians, who had long voted for conservative populist leaders, are now firmly in the PT camp. Dilma Rousseff, Lula's successor, was thus elected handily in 2010. By every account Dilma's policy in her first mandate (2010–2014) was to all but completely ignore agrarian reform. It was not even included in her signature campaign, *Brasil Sem Miséria*. During this four year period the number of settled families was far less than under Cardoso or Lula. Indeed, Dilma's four year total (26,557) was even less than during the two years (1991–92) that far right-wing Fernando Collor was in power (37,493) (Dataluta, 2015). According to José Batista Afonso of the Pastoral Land Commission, "The government opted for the agro-business model of agricultural development. Furthermore, agreements with the *bancada ruralista* in Congress lead to the sacrifice not only of landless workers settlements, but also the demarcation of indigenous and the regularization of remaining quilombo communities" (Reis and Ramalho, 2015).⁴

Three months into her second mandate, however, there are some signs that Dilma wants to move things modestly in the right direction. As is commonly the case with PT strategy she has sought to placate the rural right by appointing cattle farmer and Senator Kátia Abreu as Minister of Agriculture. As a senator for the state of Tocantins, Abreu not only is a member of the centre- right Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, but is also part of *bancada ruralista*. However, Dilma's other two important appointments indicate a different direction. On December 27,

⁴ The "*bancada ruralista*" is a coalition of right wing, rural deputies that defends the interests of large landowners and agribusiness.

2014 Dilma named Patrus Ananias to the post of Minister of Agricultural Development. Prior to this Ananias was the PT mayor of Belo Horizonte, then a PT congressman. Most importantly, in 2004 he was Minister of Social Development to Combat Hunger (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome) under Lula. Significantly, this meant that Ananias was responsible for the implementation of the Bolsa Familia. Things started looking somewhat better still for the MST when Maria Lúcia de Oliveira Falcón as appointed President of INCRA at the end of March, 2015. She announced that INCRA would settle “120,000 families” before the end of the second mandate (Reis and Ramalho, 2015). Of course it is never precisely clear how the government counts settled families. By INCRA’s statistics Dilma settled nearly that number in the first mandate (107,354), whereas the independent Dataluta counted barely a third of this amount (INCRA, 2015 and Dataluta, 2015). On September 10, 2015 Patrus Ananias stated that he had submitted a plan to Dilma to settle the 120,000 “encamped” families across Brazil. Encamped families refer to those who have occupied land, either through the MST or other social movements, but who have not yet received legal title for it. Three days later the MST published a letter demanding not only that government follow through on its commitment to settle the 120,000 encamped families, but also that it ensure their wellbeing with generous credit and infrastructural support (MST, 2015). Meanwhile, the crisis in the Dilma administration may well be preoccupying the government so much that these goals will never be met.

Conclusion

Whatever modest improvements may take place during the coming years under Dilma, the bottom line for the MST is that the state, including under PT administrations, is all but a lost cause. In the words of MST leader João Pedro Stédile, “We are living through a grave political and institutional crisis, in which the population does not recognize the legitimacy and the leadership of elected politicians. The ten largest corporations elect 70% of the parliament. In other words, representative democracy has been kidnapped by capital, and this has

generated an insuperable political distortion” (Stédile, 2015). With the ever-increasing power of agribusiness and the paucity of proactive agrarian reform from the PT, the gap between the MST’s short-term pragmatic tactics and long term aspirations for radical political change is wider than ever. All the same, the MST was founded in the conviction that the state cannot be trusted to implement a just society.

Members of social movements like the MST must continue to take matters into their own hands—now as much as ever. Specifically, the MST deftly uses the state to forward its own ends and, as we saw, these ends are quite radical. The MST has succeeded in creating economically and politically autonomous communities that have eliminated exploitation and provide for the basic needs of their members. Moreover, the MST has empowered heretofore extremely marginalized people to create nuclei of direct democracy with local, regional, national and international engagement. The MST has thus, within limits at least, succeeded in squaring the circle: it creates authentic forms of socialist community while deferring the question of state power. The PT, which is confounded by its own serious problems, seems to tacitly support the MST even if it cannot do so explicitly at the level of national policy. One might even go so far as to propose that the vitality of the MST is in part created in and through its capacity to challenge the state and make the issue of socialist practice one of the “here and now” rather than of some constantly postponed future. Indeed, some of this dynamism might have been lost if the PT had implemented agrarian reform on its own terms when it first came to power.

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