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**THE ORIGINS OF BRAZIL'S LANDLESS  
RURAL WORKERS' MOVEMENT (MST):  
THE NATALINO EPISODE IN RIO GRANDE DO  
SUL (1981-84).  
A CASE OF IDEAL INTEREST MOBILIZATION**

By

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**The origins of Brazil's landless rural workers' movement (MST):  
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## **Abstract**

This paper provides an account of the origins of one of the world's most remarkable peasant organizations, and Latin America's premier social movement: the Movement of Landless Rural Workers, best known by its Portuguese acronym MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra). The history of the MST is intimately entwined with the Catholic Church and the theology of liberation. This study offers a review of a critical episode in the formation of the MST: the 1981-83 landless mobilization at Natalino's Crossing, in Ronda Alta, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state. In terms of theory, the paper argues that Max Weber's concept of ideal interest (or value rational) action advances a cogent explanation for the drive propelling this mobilization and the convergence of Church and peasant actors in the struggle for land reform. Weber's notion of ideal interest behavior—which involves the conscious and consistently planned orientation towards the fulfillment of an unconditional demand—offers a valuable heuristic tool for appraising mobilizations that generate intense social energies and steadfast commitments.

## **Resumo**

Este trabalho descreve e analisa as origens de uma das organizações camponesas mais notáveis do mundo, e o principal movimento social da América Latina: o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, mais conhecido pela sigla MST. A história do MST se encontra intimamente ligada à Igreja Católica e à teologia da libertação. Este estudo oferece uma resenha de um episódio crítico na formação do MST: a mobilização da Encruzilhada Natalino, em Ronda Alta, Rio Grande do Sul, nos anos 1981-83. Em termos teóricos, o paper apresenta o conceito de interesses ideais (ou racionalidade valorativa) de Max Weber para explicar o impulso desta mobilização e a convergência de atores religiosos e camponeses na luta pela reforma agrária. A noção Weberiana de interesses ideais—que envolvem orientações conscientes e planejadas consistentemente para concretizar uma demanda incondicional—oferecem uma valiosa ferramenta heurística para avaliar mobilizações que geram um intensa energia social e compromissos irredutíveis.

*It all happened swiftly, on July 30, 1981. Brazil's military government declared Natalino's road crossing a National Security Area. A swarm of army troops, federal police and national intelligence agents took up their posts and sealed the red-earth country road junction. The dire threat to Brazil's national security was an unusual mile and a-half row of makeshift huts inhabited by more than 600 landless peasant families. Brasilia had sent no less than its top field commander to head the operation, Colonel Sebastião Rodrigues Moura. This military intelligence officer, best known by his nickname Curió, had a curriculum of impressive victories. During the mid-1970s he earned national fame for defeating the communist insurgency in the Amazon region. In 1980 he took charge of the chaotic Serra Pelada gold pit and imposed state order amidst the rush to the world's largest gold mine. At Natalino's crossing Curió's mandate was clear: to dismantle the peasant camp and erase its unsettling example of local resistance.*

*Having endured a bitter winter and four months of abject living conditions, close to 3,000 peasants received the military foray with fear, apprehension and a hint of intrigue. A week earlier, during a lightning visit to the camp, Curió had promised to satisfy its demand for land. Prodded by skeptical voices in the crowd, the colonel took up the challenge with flair. Perched on the camp's rustic podium, Curió plucked a whisker from his mustache and gave it to the peasants as a sign of his manly word. Next to the podium stood a massive twelve-foot cross where the peasants gathered daily to pray, sing and nurture their hope for the Promised Land. An icy wind swept by. There they were, face to face: God and Caesar, the peasant's emblem of liberation and the charismatic emissary of an autocratic state. Drenched with energy, a new star was bursting on the horizon.*

This paper addresses a unique phenomenon: the origins of one of the most important social movements for land reform in world history. The setting for this story is Brazil --the fifth largest country in the world, both in territory and population, the tenth biggest economy and one of the world's most unequal societies. Since the late 1970s, prodded by an array of rural grassroots mobilizations, the Brazilian government has re-distributed land amounting to a territory five times the size of Denmark. In the process, activists created the Movement of Landless Rural Workers, best known by its acronym MST (in Portuguese, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra). By all accounts, the MST is today Latin America's most important social movement. The history of this societal impetus for land reform is intimately entwined with the Catholic Church and the theology of liberation. Nowhere in the chronicle of world religion has a leading religious institution played as significant a role in support of land reform as has the Brazilian Roman Catholic Church.

This text tells the story of how the MST got started. It unfolds a lively narrative of the landless struggle that took place at Natalino's crossing in Brazil's southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul. The 1981-83 landless mobilization at Natalino's crossing is comparable to the 1955-56 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, in that both episodes served to catalyze impressive nation-wide social movements. The events at Natalino's crossing sparked the organization of the MST and heralded in an ongoing, two-decade campaign for agrarian reform in Brazil.

In terms of theory, the paper draws on Max Weber's unexplored notion of ideal interest action to explain the individual motivations and social energy at stake. According to Weber, ideal interest (or value-rational) action involves the conscious and consistently planned orientation towards the fulfillment of an unconditional demand. Weber distinguishes this type of rationality from material interest (or instrumental-rational) behavior. Both types of behavior can be strategic about their means. Analytically, their key difference lies in the nature of their ends. Ideal interest actors hold their ends in an absolute, non-negotiable way, whereas material interest actors determine their ends through a cost-benefit calculus.

The concept of ideal interest action is a useful tool for appraising religious, ethnic, nationalist, ideological and other value-oriented patterns of social action that are characterized by steadfast commitments to their end goals. In the Brazilian struggle for land reform, ideal interest dispositions derived from the religious ethics of fraternal love and peasant moral economy of the land have played a crucial role in motivating church and landless actors.

The first part of the paper covers some of the essential background elements to the story, and describes how the landless camp originated. From there I offer an account of four discernable periods in the Natalino peasant mobilization. All told, the land struggle initiated at Natalino's crossroad took three years and five months before reaching its final conclusion. The final section explores the concept of ideal interest action, and uses it to explain a distinct feature of the

Natalino movement: its intense social energy, steadfast determination, high-risk engagement, and strong convergence of religious and peasant actors.<sup>1</sup>

Ideal interest mobilizations, I argue, present the following qualities: (1) value-oriented behavior, rather than success-driven ones; (2) a behavioral mode based on a fusion of striving and attaining, instead of optimizing; (3) strong feelings propelling and resulting from social action; (4) collective interaction powerfully altering individual calculus; (5) dense symbolic repertoires that stir courage and vitality; (6) partnerships grounded on elective affinities, as opposed to strategic and instrumental alliances; and (7) the observed presence of people acting as though they cannot be bought.

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<sup>1</sup> The Natalino case study is a part of a broader research project on the social mobilization for land reform in Brazil and Paraguay. Between 1991 and 2001, I conducted over three years of fieldwork in both countries. In Brazil, I divided most of my time between Rio Grande do Sul and the Amazonian Araguaia-Tocantins region. During this time I visited 40 different land reform settlements and recorded interviews with about 430 people, mostly peasant and church participants of the seven case studies I selected for comparative review. In doing so, I mingled extensively with hundreds more, enjoying greatly the experience of “soaking and poking,” as aptly termed by Richard F. Fenno. *Home style: House Members in their Districts* (Glenview and London: Scott/Foresman, 1978). Practically all of my interviews were of the life history kind. For the Natalino story, I interviewed 56 direct participants of this episode, including 38 peasants. On average, each interview lasted between two and three hours; some took much longer. No other account of the Natalino mobilization has drawn on such an extensive use of oral history. Adding to this, I was able to draw on a wealth of archival materials and various secondary literature sources to form a rich composite picture of this historic struggle.

## The Setting

Nestled amidst a bucolic terrain of rolling hills, with rich farm fields set on a red clay soil, Natalino's crossing had witnessed, by 1981, substantial changes from the time it served, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a passage point for cattle herds heading north to São Paulo. Located in the north-central region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state and one of the most developed areas of the country, Natalino's crossing now lay amid prosperous mechanized farms with soybeans, wheat and corn fields, and large ranches of untouched prairies, like the nearby 9,200 hectare Annoni estate. Elsewhere in the vicinity, an array of small family agricultural units, largely operated by the descendants of Northern Italian and German immigrants who arrived to Rio Grande do Sul after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and subsequently to Natalino's environs around the 1930s, dotted the scenery. These European immigrants helped forge strong rural communities, with an active associational life and considerably high levels of trust and cooperation. As in other parts of southern Brazil, the development of social capital in this region was quite significant.

At one of the corners of the road junction stood a solid two-story building that had served for thirty years as a general store and canteen. The name for this crossroads came from the original storeowner, Natalino Verardi. Natalino's crossing belonged to the district of Ronda Alta, whose municipal seat was a rural town of 2,300 inhabitants, less than ten miles away.<sup>2</sup>

Natalino's crossing stood a mere six miles away from what was once the main entrance to the Sarandi estate, the epicenter of the January 1962 landless mobilization that shocked Rio Grande do Sul and led to the first land reform expropriations in the history of southern Brazil. The landless camp set up at its gateway was the first of its kind in Brazilian history. It prompted Leonel Brizola, the

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<sup>2</sup> Passo Fundo is the largest urban center in the area with over 90,000 inhabitants in 1980. Closer to Natalino's corner is the town of Sarandi, which at the time had an urban population of 10,000 people. According to the 1980 census, the entire district of Ronda Alta had 14,500 inhabitants, 80% of whom lived in rural areas. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), *IX Recensamento Geral do Brasil, 1980, Censo Demográfico, Dados Distritais, Rio Grande do Sul* (Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 1982).

populist Governor at the time, to travel to the site and personally announce the expropriation of the massive 24,200-hectare estate. Eventually, some 450 families were settled in the area, but more than 600 others who had registered for a homestead were not. This episode left a remarkable legacy in the region. Between January 1962 and early 1964, Rio Grande do Sul experienced an unprecedented wave of land reform mobilizations. These included over a score of landless camps scattered around the state and sponsored by the Landless Farmers Movement (Movimento dos Agricultores Sem Terra, MASTER). These activities, however, were violently repressed in 1963-- following the election of a conservative Governor-- and completely subjugated after the 1964 military *coup d'etat*.<sup>3</sup>

In the following years, and particularly in the 1970s, southern Brazil experienced an accelerated leap towards agricultural modernization. The green revolution ushered in numerous transformations within the countryside. In the north-central regions of Rio Grande do Sul these were spurred by the introduction and widespread diffusion of soybean cultivation. With farm mechanization and chemical pesticide control, traditional labor-intensive farming was abandoned, leaving a growing contingent of rural laborers and sharecroppers at the margins of this new agricultural economy. Increasing costs of production and lower prices for farm products diminished the peasantry's capacity to save, and eventually invest their earnings in additional land purchases for their children, as had been customary. To this must be added a steep rise in land market prices, as a result of the capitalist stimulated rural economy, and the closure, since the 1960s, of southern Brazil's agricultural frontier.<sup>4</sup> As a result, a large number of rural inhabitants were deprived of

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<sup>3</sup> The best account of the landless camp at the Fazenda Sarandi and the MASTER mobilizations is Cordula Eckert, "Movimento dos Agricultores *Sem terra* no Rio Grande do Sul: 1960-1964" (masters thesis, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, 1984). For a general overview of peasant activism in Brazil during the 1960s see, Leonilde Sêrvolo de Medeiros, *Historia dos Movimentos Sociais no Campo* (Rio de Janeiro: FASE, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> For assessments of rural structural transformations in Brazil and Rio Grande do Sul during this period see, Argemiro Jacob Brum, *Modernização da Agricultura. Trigo e Soja* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1988), *Reforma Agrária e Política Agrícola* (Ijuí: UNIJUI Editora, 1988); José Hildebrando Dacanal and Sergius Gonzaga, eds., *RS: Economia e Política* (Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 1979); Guilherme da Costa Delgado, *Capital Financiero e Agricultura no Brasil* (São Paulo: Icone



access to land. Many of these migrated to the cities. But many also remained, however precariously, in their communities of origin.

The growing landless population erupted abruptly on the scene in May 1978, when over 1,100 squatters at the Nonoai native reserve were expelled in a few days time by a warring band of Indians, representing the indigenous Guarani-speaking Kaingang people, the territory's legal proprietors. This sudden, massive exodus created a public drama. State authorities sent half of these families on a government-sponsored colonization program in the Amazon, although a contingent of 128 families refused to go to this distant frontier area and were eventually relocated near the southern border with Uruguay.

More than 400 landless families remained in the Nonoai-Ronda Alta region, however. Between June and July 1978 close to 300 peasants occupied two government-owned farms, the Macali and Brilhante, both remnants of the Sarandi estate. By September, though, public officials had dissuaded the occupants from their takeover by guaranteeing them land if they signed up for it and returned home. These promises were not kept. In May 1979, Ronda Alta's parish priest, Father Arnildo Fritzen, and a handful of young progressives from Porto Alegre, the capital, started organizing the former Nonoai squatters.<sup>5</sup> After holding a series of assembly meetings, a delegation was sent to meet with the Governor, who assured them of a

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Editora, 1985); Luiza H. Schmitz Kleinmann, *RS: Terra & Poder. História da Questão Agrária* (Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 1986); José de Souza Martins, *Expropriação e Violência: A Questão Política no Campo*, 3rd edition revised (São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1991); Zander Navarro, ed., *Política, Protesto e Cidadania no Campo: As Lutas Sociais dos Colonos e Trabalhadores Rurais do Rio Grande do Sul* (Porto Alegre: Editora da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 1996); Sandra Jatahy Pesavento, *História do Rio Grande do Sul*, 6th edition (Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 1992); João Pedro Stédile, ed., *A Reforma Agrária e a Luta do MST* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1997), *A Questão Agrária Hoje* (Porto Alegre: Editora da Universidade/UFRGS, 1994); Stédile and Görgen, *A Luta Pela Terra*; Elomar Tambara, *RS: Modernização & Crise na Agricultura* (Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Two of these young activists were employees at the time of the state government's agricultural bureau. One of them, João Pedro Stédile, later became the MST's most visible leader and one of its principal strategists. The other,IVALDO GEHLEN, subsequently wrote the best accounts available of these mobilizations: "Uma Estratégia Camponesa de Conquista da Terra e o Estado: O Caso da Fazenda Sarandi," (masters thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 1983); and, "Terres de Lutte e Luttés pour la Terre: Etude sur le Mouvement Social pour la Terre et la Réforme Agraire au Sud du Brésil" (Ph.D. thesis, Université de Paris X, Nanterre, 1991).

settlement in thirty days. Five weeks later, with no solution in sight, 110 families made good on their threat and occupied –at 2:30 in the morning, September 7, Brazilian Independence day— the state-owned Macali farm.<sup>6</sup> After a few days of tension and resistance, the Governor acquiesced to the peasant's demands and released the area to them.

Following this decision, two other groups comprising more than 250 families occupied the neighboring Brilhante farm. Both camps suffered police repression and tight controls, yet managed to survive. After the peasants made a number of trips to Porto Alegre, the government agreed, in May 1980, to settle 80 families on this property. Over 100 families, though, remained without land. In early October, this group occupied the nearby Annoni estate but was violently evicted by the police brigade. Twelve peasants were arrested. The episode stirred public opinion and criticism in Porto Alegre. A month later 54 people from the Brilhante camp, including a number of children, traveled to the state capital to press for land. Aided by progressive groups, they camped daily in front of the Governor's palace until they finally obtained assurance of a homestead in Rio Grande do Sul. The 1979-80 struggles for the Macali and Brilhante farms were, in effect, a dress rehearsal for the mobilizations that were to take place in Natalino's crossing.

The main support for these mobilizations came from the Catholic Church, and more specifically, from the parish of Ronda Alta, headed by Father Arnildo Fritzen --a tall, full-bodied, jovial man, born and raised in a nearby German-speaking rural community. As the son of poor family farmers, Arnildo experienced first-hand the joys, hardships and transformations of country life in this part of Rio Grande do Sul. At age 12, Arnildo went to the diocesan seminary. The Vatican's *aggiornamento* in the 1960s had a strong influence on Arnildo, as he pursued his final years of seminary study. Between 1968 and 1971, he devoted his weekends to pastoral work in the shantytowns of Porto Alegre. Through this experience, contact with progressive ideas in theology and politics and the establishment of a like-minded pastoral network, the

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<sup>6</sup> That night, Father Arnildo marched in with the peasants and celebrated a mass the next day to bless their actions. Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 15 August 1994.

peasant-*cum*-seminarian cemented a religious disposition to struggle for social justice. In Arnildo's view the core social problem was class exploitation. By the time he was ordained a priest, in 1971, Father Arnildo was already a determined follower of the nascent theology of liberation. In 1977, much to his chagrin, Father Arnildo was transferred to the marginal parish of Ronda Alta.

Following the principles of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the Latin American bishops meeting at Medellin, Colombia (1968), Father Arnildo ushered in a series of innovations to Church life in Ronda Alta. Prior Catholic practices had been largely traditional. The new priest, however, delegated greater responsibilities to lay people, encouraged the formation of family study groups (also known as the Eclessial Community Base, in Portuguese, "Comunidades Eclesiais de Base", CEBs) to read the Bible together and tie their religious discussions to relevant community and social problems. Father Arnildo invested great efforts in training grassroots leaders. By virtue of his rural origins, enthusiasm, good-natured character, and pastoral option for the poor, Father Arnildo was soon able to build a strong rapport with his peasant constituency.

By contrast, the bishop of Passo Fundo, Dom Claudio Colling, was Rio Grande do Sul's most conservative prelate. The large, heavy-set bishop of German-descent ruled his diocese with regal authority. Politically, he was staunchly anti-communist and nurtured amicable relation with public authorities under Brazil's military regime. With Dom Claudio at the helm, the diocese developed an impressive Church structure, establishing many new parishes, hospitals, seminaries, charity institutions, radio stations, schools and a private university at Passo Fundo. Religious vocations multiplied in the 1950s to mid 1960s. In fact, by the early 1970s, as measured by the number of religious personnel available for pastoral work, Passo Fundo was one of Brazil's best-endowed dioceses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In 1971, Passo Fundo had a ratio of 2,941 inhabitants per priest, while the same figure for Rio Grande do Sul was 4,409 and for all of Brazil, 7,397. *Anuario Católico do Brasil 1970-71*, Vol. 4 (Rio de Janeiro: Centro de Estatística Religiosa e Investigações Sociais, 1970-71).

During the early 1970s a new generation of clergy began to make inroads in the diocese. Like Father Arnildo, they embraced a theology of liberation and sought to re-channel the Church's work towards more progressive endeavors. This inner circle was connected, in turn, with a broader network of progressive pastoral agents in Rio Grande do Sul and across Brazil. One of the principal hubs for this network were the liberation theology workshops offered for clergy, nuns and lay people at the Center for Missionary Orientation (Centro de Orientação Missionária, COM) of the Caxias do Sul diocese.<sup>8</sup> Father Arnildo's coterie had ties to yet another, overlapping and formally established progressive network: the Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT). Originally created in Goiânia in June 1975, this nation-wide ecumenical organization aimed to link together, assist and energize Christians serving among the peasantry. The Rio Grande do Sul chapter of the CPT was established in June 1977, in Caxias do Sul, as result of a meeting at the COM.<sup>9</sup>

Ronda Alta's religious progressivism was not an isolated phenomenon. While not replicated in the neighboring parishes or encouraged by the local bishop, it was well connected with many people, organizations and experiences taking place elsewhere in Rio Grande do Sul and throughout Brazil. Ronda Alta's parish reflected in the late 1970s the emerging tendencies in the progressive wing of the Brazilian Church.

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<sup>8</sup> The COM was started in 1970 to prepare natives of Rio Grande do Sul, or *gaúchos*, heading to northern Brazil for missionary work. Eventually, it came to congregate and spawn thousands of progressive pastoral agents and lay Catholic activists from all over Brazil, notably from Rio Grande do Sul. It is estimated that by 1985, 40,000 pastoral agents had taken part of the workshops offered at COM. Father Ernesto Goeth, "Lições pastorais do Sul 3 na década de 70," *Pastoral da Igreja no Brasil nos anos 70: Caminhos, experiências e dimensões*, (ed., Instituto Nacional de Pastoral) (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1994), p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Father Arnildo and two other priests from this informal group were among the Rio Grande do Sul CPT's founding members. More generally on the *gaúcho* CPT see, Cesar Hamilton Brito Goes, "A Comissão Pastoral da Terra: História e Ambivalência da Ação da Igreja no Rio Grande do Sul," (masters thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 1997). On the history of the national CPT see, CPT, Secretariado Nacional. *A Luta pela Terra: A Comissão Pastoral da Terra 20 anos Depois* (São Paulo: Paulus, 1997); *Conquistar a Terra, Reconstruir a Vida: CPT, Dez Anos de Caminhada* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985).



## The Camp's Origin

By the end of 1980, Natalino's crossing was ripe with anticipation. By radio, television and, especially word of mouth, information on the successful action taken by the Nonoai squatters became widely diffused throughout the region. The experiences at Macali and Brilhante farms "cleared the horizon" and "opened the frontier," in the words of the Natalino participants.<sup>10</sup> About 140 landless families from the Nonoai reserve were still residing in the vicinity. One, headed by a small, slim, dark man of *caboclo* features, decided to set up a hut across the road from Natalino's store. It was the hot and breezy morning of December 6, 1980. There were no vacancies for him at the Brilhante farm. With nowhere to go, meek and mild-mannered Albertoldo Natalio de Vargas, age 27, his wife María Geni, their 7-month-old baby Joãocimar, and María's mother, 66-year-old Dona Robertina, aimed to gain their subsistence on the edge of a dusty road laden with memories and dreams of land.<sup>11</sup>

The recorded and publicly known history of the origins of the Natalino movement recounts that after the building of Natalio's first hut half a dozen families joined him over the course of fifteen weeks. Then suddenly at the end of March 1981, a trickle of new families thickened into a spontaneous land rush --with 80 families camped there by April 5, 266 by April 12, and 500 families by Holy Friday April 17.<sup>12</sup> This version of the settlement's spontaneous origins was explained by the peasants at the camp, broadly portrayed by the press and made official in monographs that have investigated its history. The untold truth, however, contains important differences.

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<sup>10</sup> Angelin Antonio Campignotto (best known as Antoninho), interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, 27 July 1994; and Etelvino Cupinger, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 16 August 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Albertoldo Natalio de Vargas and María Geni de Vargas, interview by the author, tape recording, Salto do Jacuí, RS, 11 September 1994.

<sup>12</sup> "Na beira da estrada, a espera dos sem terra," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 6 April 1981; "Sem-terra vem para depor na Assambléia," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 13 April 1981; "Equipes do Incra e do SINE no acampamento dos colonos," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), April 17, 1981.

Years after the events, I spoke with Father Arnildo at length, and he said:

There is one thing I should state very clearly: *Natalino was induced*. It was not a chance happening. After we organized the occupation and entered the Macali and Brilhante farms, we had an evaluation in August 1980 with the peasant leaders involved in the struggle, some local pastoral agents and other people of good will, including João Pedro Stédile. There we arrived at the conclusion that land reform --though supported by the Church in fifty documents, yet only with documents, and called for on countless occasions by many social and humanitarian organizations-- would only happen if we unleashed this process. That was our thinking.<sup>13</sup>

The leaders formed an *ad hoc* planning group to survey and draw up a list of people who could embark on a new landless mobilization. No more than ten people were involved in this secret effort. The strategy was to gather a critical mass large enough to attract a subsequent crowd, and from there pressure the government for the expropriation of one of the many idle *latifundia* in the vicinity. Those included in this action involved two groups. First, the landless remnants of the 1978 expulsion by the Nonoai Indians, scattered by then throughout the area. Second, the landless families from Ronda Alta's CEBs, including the sons of small landholders unable to buy a farm plot of their own.

In all, about six people were covertly engaged between September and November 1980 in the task of organizing the new landless mobilization. Natalino's crossing was chosen as the campsite because it was at the entrance point to the Macali farm. Thus, the gathering could be represented as one made up by victims of the Nonoai eviction, who deserved a homestead like those granted to others in the

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<sup>13</sup> This aspect of the camp's origins was kept strictly confidential at the time. Not even the main peasant leaders of the movement were aware of it. In the ensuing struggle and intense government hostility towards Father Arnildo, open discussion of these origins would have dealt a serious blow to the movement. Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 8 September 1994; and, Ronda Alta, RS, 3 September 2001. (Italics are mine).

Macali and Brilhante farms. The timing was left unplanned for strategic reasons, so that the families could arrive on different days, in dispersed groups, mostly after the soybean harvest. Hence, the aim was to create the impression of a spontaneous land mobilization and galvanize a subsequent rush. The plan, in fact, worked perfectly. Approximately 150 of the first families that arrived at the Natalino's crossing were part of this loosely organized group, including over 60 Nonoai families. A number of people arriving spontaneously from Ronda Alta had prior experience through the parish CEBs in different organizing and consciousness raising efforts. For this crowd, the Natalino encampment was the sign they were waiting for to take part in the action. These people did not need to be organized to join the struggle, as they were already well motivated.

News of the quickly growing camp at Natalino's crossing had reverberations across the entire region. On the radio, the television news hour, and notably by word of mouth, information spread like wildfire. Very soon it became the center of conversation at the country taverns, general stores and small town street corners. Many went to see the camp out of curiosity. Several, after finding friends and acquaintances there, decided to return and pitch their own precarious tents. On ox carts, old VW bugs, rustic trucks, often under the cover of the night, people brought in their food supplies, kitchen utensils, a change of clothing, mattresses and a piece of plastic tarp. Relatives took relatives; friends called on friends; neighbors nudged their neighbors. There was an air of excitement and anticipation about the event. Expectations at Natalino's crossing were highly optimistic: in two or three weeks' time, at most, the government would guarantee each peasant a homestead. Soon the camp swelled. By the end of July it had over 600 families.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Quite surprisingly, the parish of Ronda Alta's catalytic role in the formation of Natalino's camp is not really acknowledged in the two best monographs on this critical event. The reason for this is relatively simple: neither author used oral history to complement their written sources of information. Telmo Marcon, *Acampamento Natalino: História da Luta pela Reforma Agrária* (Passo Fundo: Editora da Universidade de Passo Fundo, 1997); and Leandro Sidinei Nunes Hoffman, "A Cruz e a Bandeira: A Construção do Imaginário dos Sem Terra do RS, 1981-1987," (masters thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 1997). Bernardo Mançano Fernandes' account is largely based on Marcon's study; see *A Formação do MST no Brasil* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000). Carlos Wagner's brief journalistic description of the creation of the Natalino movement, *A*



The people who joined the Natalino camp represented an assortment of farm workers, land tenants, sharecroppers, odd jobbers and sons of small local farmers. According to a government survey, 93% of the people at the camp were utterly landless. The remainder owned properties of insufficient size to maintain a family.<sup>15</sup> Practically all of the peasants at the Natalino camp lived within a 30 miles radius of the town of Ronda Alta. Over 35% came from the municipality of Ronda Alta alone. Education levels at the camp were quite rudimentary. Almost a third of the family heads were illiterate, while only a handful had finished elementary education. Interestingly, 88% of all household heads indicated affiliation with a local association, notably the Church community (87%), but also the rural trade union (43%) and cooperatives (6%).<sup>16</sup> The landless from Ronda Alta were among those with the highest levels of associational involvement, and most of the movement's leadership actually came from this municipality. In effect, this was the parish where Father Arnildo had already invested four years in consciousness raising among the peasants.

The occupiers' motivations for going to the camp took varying forms and combinations. As a rule, they made individual decisions embedded in a family and rural community context. Elements of a moral economy ethos were pervasive, as people underscored their family needs and rights to subsistence. At the same time, the peasants understood the material benefits they could gain from this venture. Furthermore, kinship, friendship companionship and network ties within the region -- including extended families, neighbors, Church community and rural trade union members, and football teammates and opponents-- helped attract people to the encampment. Many landless made their decision to stay at Natalino's crossing after arriving and enjoying joyous encounter with friends, relatives and acquaintances.

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*Saga do João Sem Terra* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1989), suggests an element of prior organization, but is both incomplete and imprecise in its depiction.

<sup>15</sup> "Os acampados do ponto de vista das autoridades," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 5 May 1981.

<sup>16</sup> These figures were generated from data compilations I produced on the basis of 441 INCRA registration forms administered to each head of household between April and August 1981.

## **From a Makeshift Gathering to a Landless Struggle**

The most striking aspect of the struggle's initial phase was the making of the Natalino movement itself. It was only a matter of days before this *ad hoc* conglomeration of country folk began to establish an internal organization, build a sense of group cohesion and fashion a unifying identity as landless peasants. For the participants, the socialization experience at the camp was novel, enlightening and intense. This internal process combined consciousness raising, spiritual animation and strategic mobilizations. It galvanized a strength and determination that captured national attention and surprised both friends and foes. This first phase of the struggle sparked the formation of a vital support system for the Natalino struggle, with the Catholic Church, notably its progressive network, at its center. But the tentacles of this solidarity movement reached much further and relied greatly on urban-based allies in both civil and political society.

Life at the Natalino camp during the first weeks concentrated on practical, immediate needs as the number of huts mushroomed along the eastern edge of the Passo Fundo-Ronda Alta highway. By the end of April, the landless had set up a well structured, multi-layered, enterprising peasant organization –with specific task teams, sub-unit family groups and mass assemblies. A leadership council, known as the central commission, took on the coordination of camp activities. The movement placed strong emphasis on collective decision-making as fostered by the CEBs model of group interaction –an organizational technique that helped augment people's participation and responsibility for the developments of the struggle, while serving as a critical instrument for the transmission of ideas. Practical undertakings at the camp were entrusted to specific task teams, organized around issues such as food and clothing distribution, negotiation with state authorities, sanitation and health care, water supply, religious worship and internal animation. Everyday in the late afternoon the landless gathered to pray at the foot of the camp's cross. There they held their daily assembly meetings, where they shared the latest news, conveyed words of support from solidarity groups and took collective decisions.

During Natalino's first months, the parish of Ronda Alta, aided with CPT subsidies, invested great efforts in consciousness-raising at the camp. Guided by a theology of liberation, this entailed an important re-working of religious symbols, discourse, prayers and music, most of which was assimilated in a few weeks. The pedagogical experience took its cues from Paulo Freire's critical method, while seeking to animate a constant dialogue, notably in small discussion groups.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the landless chose to re-design the cross that occupied the camp's center space and came to identify themselves with the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and their quest for the Promised Land. They studied Brazil's land reform laws and different aspects of the country's social situation, both to understand their legal rights and the significance of their struggle for agrarian reform. This convergence between the law of God and the nation enabled them to develop greater conviction in the righteousness of their mobilization. It also made them much aware of the political nature of the obstacles they faced. They received countless solidarity visits and gestures of support from across Rio Grande do Sul and the neighboring state of Santa Catarina, distant corners of Brazil and the world beyond. These too cemented their commitment and hopes for triumph against adversity.

Taken together, five elements --need, organization, critical consciousness, mystique and solidarity-- forged the collective identity and fighting disposition that are characteristic of an ideal interest orientation. This pattern of behavior was not planned, but constructed through rich experience. If anything, it was the unintended result of practical undertakings, emotions and ideas that arose in the course of the struggle itself.

Natalino's crossing witnessed at least seven significant mobilizations in this first phase, during which time the landless also made five well-publicized trips to Porto Alegre. Typically, these trips included visits to the State legislature, the offices of the National Colonization and Agrarian Reform Institute (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária, INCRA), attempts to meet with the Governor, and gatherings with

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<sup>17</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, revised edition (New York: Continuum, 2000).

solidarity groups and supportive leaders in civil society. In mid April, a landless delegation also met with the bishop of Passo Fundo, Dom Claudio Colling, to inform him of their camp and request the diocese's support.

The camp's first large gathering with a solidarity delegation was on April 17, Holy Friday, for a *Via Sacra* led by Father Arnildo featuring a massive cross crafted for the occasion. After Easter, receiving visitors became an integral part of the camp's everyday life. The callers came in all stripes and colors: solidarity supporters, curious onlookers, friends and relatives, public officials and press reporters, including from the television outlets. By then, the pastoral visits from Ronda Alta had also become part of the camp's daily routine. Yet Dom Claudio and his conservative cohorts within the diocese avoided the landless camp as much as possible. The diocese of Passo Fundo, nonetheless, continued to provide ample assistance to the landless families, despite the fact that the Natalino struggle had polarized its pastoral agents like no other event. Natalino's conservative detractors, though, represented no more than one fifth of the diocese's clergy.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence of the fighting spirit at Natalino's crossing did not take long to emerge. By the end of April, the women and children led a protest march that made the front page of Porto Alegre's leading newspaper, *Zero Hora*, by banging on empty pots to voice the camp's opposition to the Governor's offer of employment instead of land.<sup>19</sup> Three days later, on May 1, a Labor Day rally and Catholic mass brought scores of trade union leaders, priests and urban sympathizers to Natalino's crossing. This event triggered the creation of the Porto Alegre-based Natalino support committee, a loose coalition of solidarity groups that would play a pivotal role in support of the struggle.<sup>20</sup> Among the committee's many contributions was the

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<sup>18</sup> Another estimated 60% of the diocese's clergy were moderate supporters, while close to 20% were, like Father Arnildo, enthusiastic allies of the landless movement. Father Elli Benincá, interview.

<sup>19</sup> "Passeata das panelas vazias em Ronda Alta," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 29 April 1981. (Includes a front-page photo).

<sup>20</sup> The support committee was established by the CPT, the Justice and Human Rights Movement (Movimento de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, MJDH) and the University Pastoral service (Pastoral Universitaria, PU), and strongly endorsed by a roster of progressive urban labor unions. Liberal,

creation of a news bulletin, *Boletim Sem Terra*, that served to inform a broader network of supporters and spread word of the Natalino struggle throughout Brazil.<sup>21</sup>

The first meeting of the landless with Governor Amaral de Souza, on May 4, 1981, proved to be as unsuccessful as their two later encounters, in July and December of that same year. At the Piratini Palace, the discussion was heated and intense. The Governor reiterated his job offer and insisted it was inhuman to keep people living in such precarious conditions at the camp, especially pregnant women and children. But the peasants responded that it was more dehumanizing to deny land to those who wanted to till it for an honest living. Later, at the INCRA headquarters, the landless insisted on the availability of land in their home state, and presented a list of idle *latifundia* in the region. Why, they asked with moral indignation, would the government deny their right to a small plot to raise their families, if even Brazil's flagship airline, VARIG, was allowed to own a huge, scarcely productive cattle ranch in Rio Grande do Sul?<sup>22</sup> The following week, the landless clashed with the national president of the INCRA, Paulo Yokota, who flew in from Brasilia to deal exclusively with the Natalino issue. Caustic and impatient with the peasants, Yokota repeated INCRA's position: "there are no lands available for settlement in Rio Grande do Sul, only in the Amazon."<sup>23</sup>

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middle-class lay Catholics founded the MJDH as a human rights organization in 1978. Its first president was a High Court judge and active CPT counselor, Celso Gaiger. The University Pastoral service brought together a number of seminarians and college students involved in progressive Church activities in Porto Alegre. At the time, it was strongly influenced by an activist group of Franciscan friars that included, notably, Friar Sergio Görden, who subsequently came to serve as one of the leading MST advisors. Both the MJDH professionals and the PU students were inspired by liberation theology, and had participated in the workshops offered by the COM in Caxias do Sul. Celso Gaiger, interview by the author, tape recording, Porto Alegre, RS, 19 September 1994; Friar Sergio A. Görden, interview by the author, tape recording, Encruzilhada do Sul, RS, 11 March 1995.

<sup>21</sup> The first bulletin was issued in May 1981. Eventually, this news journal became the basis of the MST's own newspaper, *Jornal dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, which celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2001.

<sup>22</sup> For a first hand account of these two meetings see the deposition by the CPT coordinator in Rio Grande do Sul, Father João Bosco Schio, "Depoimento do Pe. João Bosco Schio, do Rio Grande do Sul," *Igreja e Questão Agrária*, ed., Vanilda Paiva (São Paulo: Loyola, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> "A reunião com os colonos fracassou," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 12 May 1981.

All the evidence suggests that Brazil's conservative military government took an early decision to forestall land distribution in Rio Grande do Sul. Their efforts centered on: (1) sidetracking the peasants' demands for land in their home state, with settlement offers in the Amazon region and Bahia, and employment offers in Rio Grande do Sul; (2) denying any land availability in this southernmost state; (3) demoralizing the movement by raising persistent charges of "infiltration" at the hands of opportunists, and accusations of both partisan and ideological "manipulation" of the landless mass; (4) intimidating the peasants with persistent police surveillance, notably through undercover agents operating at the camp. In spite all this, the peasants recognized at the onset that they had no other viable recourse outside the framework of the national and state governments. Land distribution in a modern setting such as Rio Grande do Sul could only be achieved through state intervention. Consequently, the movement adopted a tactic of systematic pressure from below, aimed at altering public policies and contesting the dominant large landholding interest that lay behind them.

As winter approached, weather conditions began to deteriorate in Ronda Alta. With the cold south wind, drizzling rain and red-clay mud, the number of ill people and emergency trips to the hospital increased sharply. On May 29, the camp held an emotional funeral procession for the first infant to die of pneumonia and malnutrition. In the ensuing months, three more children would meet the same fate. Life at Natalino's crossing had plenty of internal woes and difficulties. Keeping the movement together also became a constant challenge. The camp suffered its first secession in July, when 25 Nonoai families decided to set up a separate camp.

The Church intensified its presence at the camp by the end of May. At this time, two nuns assigned by their religious congregation moved in to reside among the landless, to help strengthen the family groups and Bible studies. Between June and July, four bishops came to visit Natalino's encampment, three of whom came through the efforts of the national CPT office. The most impressive visit was that of the small, frail-looking, yet notably charismatic Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, the Spanish-born head of the Amazonian prelacy of São Felix do Araguaia. At a June 21

ecumenical worship service, Dom Pedro vividly described the drawbacks of rural life in the Amazon before a multitude of 6,000 gathered from different parts of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, carrying posters, banners and singing socially minded hymns. Citing the Bible and the laws of Brazil he exhorted the peasants "not to abandon their position" and to fight for land in Rio Grande do Sul. Then, with prophetic intensity he uttered words that sent shivers down the spines of those in attendance: "If you remain united and organized, in the name of God, I promise you the land!" This spiritual injunction echoed most powerfully among the landless.<sup>24</sup>

In early July, Dom Paulo Moretto, the auxiliary bishop of Caxias do Sul, became the first *gaúcho* bishop to both visit and bless the landless mobilization. By contrast, two weeks later Cardinal Dom Vicente Scherer, the archbishop of Porto Alegre and leading religious authority in southern Brazil, gave an extensive press interview endorsing the government's position on the Natalino camp, and conveyed doubts about the existence of a "strict sense of justice" to the peasant's demand for land in Rio Grande do Sul. The Cardinal, nonetheless, indicated he approved a food and clothing drive among the parishes in his archdioceses to help "attenuate their precarious situation," noting that this "did not mean a support for the camp" or the claims put forth by the peasants.<sup>25</sup>

The crowning mobilization at Natalino's crossing during this period took place on July 25, where a *Colono* Day (or Homestead Farmer's Day) protest rally gathered

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<sup>24</sup> "Bispo do Araguaia rezou missa ontem em Ronda Alta," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 22 June 1981. Three Protestant denominations sent representatives to this religious gathering: the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana do Brasil, IECLB), as well as the Methodist and Episcopalian churches. The IECLB, in fact, was the first Brazilian Church to issue an official statement in support of the Natalino movement. "Luteranos pedem que assentamento seja aqui," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre) 14 April 1981. On the IECLB's progressive relation to Brazil's land reform movement see, Sérgio Sauer, "The Land Issue as a Theological Problem: The Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches' social and political commitment to the struggle for land in Brazil," (masters thesis, School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, 1996). More generally on the IECLB see Gottfried Brakemeier, ed., *Lutherans in Brazil, 1990: History, Theology, Perspectives* (São Leopoldo: The Post-Graduate Studies Institute of the IECLB, Estudos Teológicos, Editora Sinodal, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> In the same interview Cardinal Scherer voiced his firm support for family agriculture and called on the government to support this through adequate policies, including a comprehensive agrarian reform. In this, he expressed a broad consensus of principles among the Church hierarchy. "Cardeal apóia solução do Governo para os colonos," *Correio do Povo* (Porto Alegre), 23 July 1981.

around 15,000 people. The event, organized by the CPT, the Rio Grande do Sul Federation of Agricultural Workers (FETAG), a number of rural trade union's and the Natalino movement, was described by the Porto Alegre press as "the largest protest rally held by agricultural laborers" in northern Rio Grande do Sul.<sup>26</sup> At ten in the morning, a procession bearing the landless' heavy cross was held along the mile and a-half length of the camp. In the afternoon, over twenty speakers took part in an open forum. Accordion sounds accompanied religious and political protest songs, some of these created by the camp's own musicians. Troubadours provoked much laughter with their folksy verses satirizing the ruling authorities and landed elite. The closing mass was led by, Dom Tomás Balduino, the energetic bishop of Goiás.

The most impressive journey to Porto Alegre during this period took place at the end of July, when 180 landless loaded four buses to press their case before government authorities. The trip, announced during the July 25 protest rally, raised bold headlines in the local press and prompted alarmed editorials calling for prudence and patience. The state police was placed on red alert. After an extensive discussion with the president of the Assembly, Governor Amaral de Souza finally agreed to meet with the peasants. When he entered the legislative chamber, the entire Natalino contingent greeted him with a loud intonation of the landless anthem, "The Planters Class":

The planters class and the workers class  
eagerly await an agrarian reform  
knowing that it will give solution  
to a precarious situation ...  
The great hope the people behold  
asking Jesus in prayer  
to guide the poor wherever he may tread  
and for each family not to remain without bread.  
That He not allow capitalism  
to take our nation to the abyss  
The inequality that exists is so great

While the rich person does not know how much he earns

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<sup>26</sup> "Sem-terras decidem acampar no Palácio," *Folha da Tarde* (Porto Alegre), 27 July 1981



the poor of the poor live on a penny's sum.<sup>27</sup>

Recovered from this startling introduction, the Governor gave a speech devoid of any new and concrete offers. He denied the existence of idle properties in the state, despite news reports with lists of unproductive estates. The landless felt deceived: "We are fed up with promises." Citing examples of numerous under-utilized ranches in the Ronda Alta region, they insisted: "There is land available in this state." To them, the Governor was simply doing his best to avert a home state solution.<sup>28</sup>

On July 31, after three frustrating days in Porto Alegre, the landless returned to Ronda Alta amid anxious rumors that the military forces now in command of Natalino's crossing would bar their re-entry. At the camp's gates their comrades received them, nevertheless, with an enthusiastic rendition of "The Planters Class." Colonel Curió, in turn, greeted them with a large smile.

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<sup>27</sup> A copy of these lyrics written by Francisco Lázaro, in 1961, can be found in Roseli Salette Caldart, *Sem Terra com Poesia* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1987), pp. 164-165.

<sup>28</sup> "Sem terra só deixam a Capital após solução encontrada," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 30 June 1981. Resources for this mobilization to Porto Alegre were covered as follows: the FETAG paid for the bus transportation; the Church's progressive network offered lodging, mainly through the homes of CEBs members; a Church parish served breakfast; other meals were provided at the State Assembly's cafeteria.

## **Under the National Security Grip**

The 33-day military takeover of Natalino's crossing was the struggle's most dramatic and widely publicized episode. Brasilia had commissioned none other than its finest counter-insurgency specialist, Colonel Curió, to disband the landless gathering. Life at the camp was sharply altered at this time and the movement's internal organization hampered in many ways. The ambiance at Natalino remained tense and apprehensive. Access to the road junction was difficult, and at moments outright forbidden. Yet the prestige, strength and resourcefulness of the people and organizations that took part in the movement's solidarity network overcame Curio's effort to isolate the landless mobilization. The Catholic Church's role in defense of the Natalino peasants proved to be critical.

Natalino's crossing took on the air of an army barrack with the arrival of Colonel Curio's forces during the morning of June 30, 1981. Three roadblocks were immediately set up to control access to the camp and restrict its members' movements. No additional landless families were allowed in. Curió and his top brass, including a score of military intelligence agents, pitched their green barracks across the road from the landless huts. Alcohol was banned. Donations barred. The government alone conducted food distributions, while providing full medical assistance. A flagpole and loud speakers were installed next to the military tents. Every morning, with the national anthem blaring in the background, Curió's men would raise the Brazilian flag, and lower it in a similar ceremony at dusk. The movement's internal organization suffered. Leaders from the central commission found it impossible to hold meetings at the camp. Many task teams were de-activated, the family groups largely de-structured and people forced to spend much of their time waiting in queues to get food or satisfy some other government requirement.

Initially, Curió sought to entice the peasants to accept INCRA's settlement offers in northern Brazil through a well-armed propaganda effort. Yet few peasants, however, were impressed with the glossy films and slide shows. A number of families, in fact, had returned from failed colonization schemes in the Amazon. Their tales of abandonment and misery were already well known at Natalino's crossing.

Curio's seemingly pleasant manners were largely discredited by the end of his first week in Ronda Alta. Afterwards, Curio adopted a more assertive strategy of co-optation and intimidation. He began intense one-on-one pressure on each landless family head, with grand promises, threats and efforts to bribe peasant leaders. Repeatedly, Curio would announce the camp's impending termination, while his men spread rumors of its violent destruction. By mid August, the climate at Natalino's juncture was eerie and tense.

Peasant resistance remained strong despite the pressure. The central commission started to hold secret meetings, usually at night, in neighboring farms and forest clearings and joined regularly by Father Arnildo and other CPT agents. Each person the military personnel convinced to go to the Amazon would become the target of counter-persuasion efforts by peasant leaders. Eventually, Curio had to establish a separate compound where he could comfortably isolate the growing number of families that had signed up for the Amazonian colonization project. Amid this war of words and test of wills, the landless found strength in the movement's religious mystique, regularly animated by Church agents; the bonds of friendship and camaraderie developed at the camp; the well-reasoned conviction that they had to fight for land in Rio Grande do Sul; and the network of solidarity with their struggle.

The first notable visitor to arrive, on August 5, at the militarized camp was Dom Sinésio Bohn, the bishop of Novo Hamburgo --a socially sensitive and sensible man of tact and ecumenical disposition. At Natalino's crossing, Dom Sinésio held a religious service for the landless and agreed to a personal *cafezinho* with Colonel Curio. Four days later, with the door left ajar by the bishop, a delegation of human rights activists, students, CEBs leaders, seminarians and trade unionists were allowed to enter the Natalino area, partake of the Sunday mass and convey expressions of encouragement. The peasants took the opportunity to denounce Curio's threats and corrupt tactics. These comments were widely reported in the press, whereupon the military decided to bar any further entrance of support groups.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In effect, on August 15, Curio blocked the admission of a group of 75 people representing different organizations from Porto Alegre and Pelotas linked to the Natalino support committee. Shortly after, on

The landless persisted in their appeals for solidarity. On August 10, a group of peasants left the camp undetected and traveled to Porto Alegre where they delivered a letter describing their plight at Curió's "military barrack" to the president of the State Assembly, Aldo Pinto. An opposition leader from Brizola's center-left Democratic Workers Party (PDT), Pinto had been a longstanding land reform advocate, even though a cattle ranch owner himself. The next day Pinto traveled to Ronda Alta. After a difficult entry into the camp, he held a meeting with Curió and voiced his protest over the military's "national security scheme." When the colonel made veiled threats of terminating the camp by force, Pinto sternly reminded him that Rio Grande do Sul was not the Serra Pelada, the famous and chaotic Amazonian gold mine where Curió had forcibly imposed state order. Furthermore, he sharply admonished: "don't you dare raise your hand against these farmers!"<sup>30</sup>

In this context of growing apprehension over the fate of the Natalino peasants, seven bishops, including the archbishop of Porto Alegre, Cardinal Vicente Scherer, gathered in Novo Hamburgo on August 13. There, Dom Sinésio Bohn conveyed an alarming report of his recent visit to Ronda Alta. During their private *cafezinho*, Curió told the bishop he had strict orders from Brasilia to extinguish the camp at any cost, even with violence. Moreover, he confessed he had tried to entice, bribe, wear out and scare the landless, but was now realizing he would be unsuccessful with these tactics. Even the children, he complained, refused to take candies from him and pleaded instead for land. "That," he exclaimed, "just knocked me down." Then, with a magnetic look in his eyes, he turned to Dom Sinésio and entreated his support.

I cannot kill these people. They are not violent; they are religiously devout and sincere in their beliefs. If this were a revolution, I would kill. I am a soldier and have fought the Communist guerrillas in the Araguaia. But I can't massacre the people here. We must change the

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August 19, the same occurred to a delegation of 41 Catholic seminarians and priests who had traveled from Porto Alegre to hold mass for the landless. Among the peasants, news of such prohibitions caused much anger and contempt for the military commanders.

<sup>30</sup> Later in the day, the colonel confessed to Pinto that Natalino's crossing had turned out to be his "worst undertaking." "Colonos tem até sexta para decidir. E Curió vai embora," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 12 August 1981.

orders from Brasilia, and for this to happen the Church must intervene.<sup>31</sup>

To avert an act of bloodshed at Natalino's crossing, he insisted, the bishops of Rio Grande do Sul had to issue a statement on behalf of the *colonos*. The letter had to condemn explicitly any possible use of violence. Moreover, it was absolutely necessary that Cardinal Scherer, who was well regarded by the authorities in Brasilia, endorse the letter. The colonel subsequently provided Dom Sinésio with an extensive list of idle ranches in Rio Grande do Sul. The peasants, he said, were right: there was land available for them in their home state. Yet the federal government was not prepared to touch these estates. Its prime objective, in fact, was to exterminate the land reform movement at Natalino's crossing.<sup>32</sup>

Impressed with Dom Sinésio's dramatic account, Cardinal Scherer summoned at once an extraordinary meeting of the Rio Grande do Sul bishops' conference. The bishops' gathering scheduled for August 18, in Passo Fundo, generated immense expectations. The newspapers in Porto Alegre printed bold front-page headlines anticipating the event. Reporters flocked to cover the story billed as "the most important meeting of the *gaúcho* episcopate."<sup>33</sup> For ten hours, 13 bishops and a handful of CNBB priests, deliberated under Cardinal Scherer's command. Despite sharp internal differences, they reached a consensus supporting the landless position. Though quite moderate in tone, the final document called for the application of existing laws and the implementation of land reform in Rio Grande do Sul. The concluding paragraph sent a clear message to Brasilia. It urged national and state

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<sup>31</sup> Dom Aloisio Sinésio Bohn, interview by the author, tape recording, Santa Cruz do Sul, RS, 20 November 2000.

<sup>32</sup> According to Dom Sinésio, Curió's roster of idle *latifundia* in Rio Grande do Sul was even more extensive than the list prepared earlier by the CPT. Dom Aloisio Sinésio Bohn, interview. This important facet of the Natalino story has never been publicly revealed. Not even the main protagonists of the Natalino movement, including Father Arnildo, were aware of this dialogue and its critical implications for their struggle. Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview, 3 September 2001. I owe my first insight into this episode to Friar Sergio A. Görden, personal communication, Encruzilhada do Sul, RS, 11 March 1995.

<sup>33</sup> "Expectativa pela palavra da Igreja," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 18 August 1981.

authorities to “undertake the most adequate measures to satisfy the farmers' demands ... without violence or pressures.”<sup>34</sup>

The next day's massive front-page headline said it all: "Bishops propose *gaúcho* solution for the landless." Inside, the main title underscored: "Bishops want peaceful in-state solution."<sup>35</sup> At the camp, word of the bishop's favorable stance triggered a spontaneous celebration with shouts of euphoria and much singing along the mile and a half corridor of huts.

Three days later, a solidarity delegation broke the military enclosure at Natalino. Headed by a High Court judge, a representative of the Brazilian Lawyers Guild (Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil, OAB), the rector of the Catholic University of Pelotas and prominent lawyers, the delegation of 35 people arrived to Ronda Alta with an habeas-corpus issued by a federal judge guaranteeing their right of free passage. This was the first time ever a Brazilian military countryside operation was confronted with a legal measure of this kind --and actually forced to back down. The landless greeted their visitors with incredulity and joyous emotion, and anxiously sought to denounce the vicissitudes of their "concentration camp." Surprised and unraveled, Curió lowered his guard. Thereafter, Natalino's strict isolation began to fall apart.

By August 24, the landless camp was bustling with visitors. A delegation of opposition politicians (including two federal congressmen and four state deputies) and OAB representatives put the colonel on the spot. That same afternoon, 137 priests and several nuns drove triumphantly into the camp, while the landless greeted them with *vivas*, hearty applause and words of gratitude. The pastoral agents were representing all 13 dioceses of Rio Grande do Sul, in addition to the neighboring diocese of Chapecó, Santa Catarina. At the front of Natalino's cross they celebrated mass and blessed their landless flock with words of fraternal love and encouragement.

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<sup>34</sup> A full copy of the bishops' letter was published in, “‘Fragmento de uma realidade nacional e continental’,” *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 19 August 1981. The original draft for this document was prepared by the two *gaúcho* bishops that had visited and celebrated mass at Natalino's camp: Dom Sinésio Bohn and Dom Paulo Moretto.

<sup>35</sup> “Bispos querem solução pacífica no Estado,” *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 19 August 1981.

Curió's departure from Ronda Alta, on the last day of August, was a front-page story in all the main Brazilian newspapers, featured prominently in national television and radio news broadcasts, and even appeared in the international press. At his closing ceremony, the colonel read a lengthy communiqué prepared by Brasilia that conferred prominent national significance to the events at Ronda Alta. Aside from defending the military government's agrarian policies, it unleashed a frontal attack on the Church's progressive involvement in the Brazilian countryside. The problem in Ronda Alta, it charged, was a result of the CPT's "exploitation of misery" and perverse instigation of a radical land reform. Citing biblical verses, it accused Father Arnildo and other CPT agents of being "false prophets" and deniers of the God-blessed Brazilian fatherland.<sup>36</sup> Shortly after Curió's farewell, a solidarity delegation arrived on the scene to congratulate the peasants on their victory.

By the military's own count, close to two thirds of the Natalino families remained at the landless camp, while 137 had signed up to go the Amazon, and approximately 10% had abandoned the camp, mostly as result of Curió's pressure tactics.<sup>37</sup> Though weakened by desertions and the internal mistrust sown by the federal agents, the Natalino movement survived and gained national fame. Certainly, the national security intervention in Ronda Alta gave more publicity to Brazil's landless cause than any other event. By dramatizing the Natalino struggle, the military operation engendered widespread public sympathy for the landless and stirred political debate on agrarian reform. Viewed in retrospect, the military's high-profile action in Ronda Alta did more than fail: it also backfired.

By no strange coincidence, national spokespersons for the military regime embarked at about the same time on a thunderous critique of the Church, labeling its progressive elements as "Marxists" and "subversives." In their portrayal, land conflicts in Brazil, from the Araguaia-Tocantins region to Rio Grande do Sul, were part of a

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion and complete copy of this document see, Marcon, *Acampamento Natalino*. pp. 145-151 and pp. 213-232.

<sup>37</sup> Marcon, *Acampamento Natalino*, p. 231.

coordinated effort by revolutionary priests to undermine the established order.<sup>38</sup> In effect, the events in Ronda Alta heightened perceptions of an aggravated rift in Brazilian Church-State relations.

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<sup>38</sup> For a general account of this juncture in Brazil's Church-State conflict see, Scott Mainwarring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916-1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 160-164. For a journalistic description see, "A trégua chega ao fim," *IstoÉ* (São Paulo), no. 246, 9 September 1981; "Perigo de explosão," *Veja* (São Paulo), 9 September 1981.



## **Resistance and Survival**

If Curió's presence at Natalino marked the landless struggle's most dramatic phase, the half-year that followed the military's departure was its most frustrating one. During this time state authorities took a hard-line position. They blocked all possible resolutions to the problem and invested considerable efforts to dissolve the camp. State officials assumed that these tough actions would cause the demobilization of the Natalino camp. However, with renewed support from the Natalino solidarity network, growing popular endorsement of the landless cause and the peasant's own, well-organized, stubborn determination, the movement resisted and survived the trials of this period. Unwittingly, the state's own actions (and inactions) contributed to a heightened sense of opposition at the Natalino camp, and, by extension, among the movement's increasing number of sympathizers. In mid March 1982, the Catholic Church made yet another crucial intervention. With the endorsement of the bishops of Rio Grande do Sul, Natalino's suffocating roadside camp was transferred to a private farm purchased through a Church-led solidarity campaign.

The victory celebration at Natalino following Curió's retreat was rather short-lived. The pressing task of re-organizing the camp and re-establishing the support network needed to feed, clothe and provide medical care for the more than 320 families congregated by the dusty road junction became the leading priorities. Within the encampment, the military's policies of bribery and material enticement had fostered an air of mistrust and malaise. In the ensuing months, the secret government agents continued to pursue tactics of this kind, while the police brigade posted at the crossroad kept trying to dissuade the peasants through threats and other forms of harassment. Close to 110 families left the camp in the course of this six and a-half month period.

Soon after Curió's departure, national authorities warned they would impose legal sanctions against some of the peasants' leading supporters, principally Father

Arnildo and Sister Aurélia, of the Ronda Alta parish.<sup>39</sup> The September 8 ecumenical worship service at Natalino, with close to 200 priests, dozens of nuns, CEBs leaders and six Lutheran pastors, presided by Dom José Gomes, bishop of Chapecó, brought a measure of strength and re-affirmation in what was then a rather murky ambiance. At this religious service, the peasants led yet another procession with the cross, offered much singing, and, after sharing biblical passages from the book Exodus, vowed to continue their struggle for land in Rio Grande do Sul.

The next day, however, rumors of Father Arnildo's indictment under the National Security Law had become an imminent threat. That same night Dom Cláudio had his priest rush for an emergency meeting at the Passo Fundo curia. There, in the presence of a state government cabinet official, Father Arnildo was confronted with a *fait accomplis*. The bishop assured the politician (and longtime friend) that Father Arnildo would no longer provide religious services at Natalino. It was around this time that Cardinal Scherer and Dom Cláudio colluded to get Sister Aurelia repatriated to Italy. By all appearances, Cardinal Scherer and Dom Cláudio's intervention was the result of an agreement with military authorities whereby the latter would suspend legal actions against Ronda Alta's pastoral agents, and, in return, the Church leaders would reign in their underlings.<sup>40</sup>

In spite of all this, by mid-September the Natalino solidarity movement was bustling with plans and organizing activities to re-furnish the camp's food supplies. On September 21, four *gaúcho* bishops sympathetic to the landless traveled to Passo Fundo to visit Dom Cláudio and hold a joint meeting with Father Arnildo and the CPT coordinator for Rio Grande do Sul. They discussed the logistics of the Church's activities on behalf of the Natalino peasants, and ratified their commitment of "spiritual

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<sup>39</sup> Sister Bruna Durandi, best known as Sister Aurélia, an Italian national, had been serving in Ronda Alta with two other nuns since 1977. She became a target of the government's wrath due to her regular visits to the camp and her outspoken temperament in support of the Natalino landless.

<sup>40</sup> Pope John Paul II subsequently promoted Dom Claudio to head the powerful archdioceses of Porto Alegre, despite widespread opposition to his nomination among the bishops of Rio Grande do Sul.

assistance and fraternal service" to the landless.<sup>41</sup> The next day, in Porto Alegre, the Natalino support committee re-launched the solidarity campaign at a ceremony in the State capital. Soon thereafter, similar groups were set up in different *gaúcho* cities.

The breadth of support for the landless camp expanded significantly during this phase. At the end of September, a manifesto endorsing the peasant's struggle and signed by over 160 civil society organizations was delivered to Governor Amaral de Souza. In early October, a prominent entourage of PMDB leaders, including Senator Pedro Simon and two federal deputies, visited Natalino's crossing. Thousands of letters and telegrams were sent to Ronda Alta from all across Brazil and overseas to convey words of courage and admiration for the landless. Even Pope John Paul II called the CNBB president, Dom Ivo Lorscheider, to inquire about the Natalino peasants.<sup>42</sup> By early November, the entire bishops conference of Rio Grande do Sul officially entrusted their Caritas office to organize the Church's food collections for Natalino.

Alongside Brazil's political liberalization, resurgence of civil society and effervescence of popular movements, Natalino's crossing became a high point of convergence for a wide range of actors and interests. Most prominent among these allies were those of religious inspiration, notably progressive sectors of the Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches. Their organizations supplied the bulk of resources needed to sustain the struggle.<sup>43</sup> Natalino's solidarity network had its principal anchors in three locations: Porto Alegre, Antonio Prado (a town in the Caxías region) and Ronda Alta. Porto Alegre was the base of the support committee.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Igreja reafirma apoio espiritual aos acampados," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 22 September 1981.

<sup>42</sup> For details on these solidarity manifestations see the support committee's journal, *Sem Terra: Boletim Informativo da Campanha de Solidariedade aos Agricultores Sem Terra* (Porto Alegre), no. 12, 5 October 1981.

<sup>43</sup> Although some aid came from European religious organizations, the greatest proportion arrived from contributions raised in Brazil, particularly in Rio Grande do Sul. An important source of local monetary aid came from religious congregations, which set aside a portion of their proceeds from private schools, hospitals, publishing houses and the like to sustain the Natalino struggle.

<sup>44</sup> This committee organized urban contacts within the progressive religious network, including metropolitan area CEBs, religious congregations, seminary students and Catholic schools. Moreover, it

Antonio Prado housed the Rio Grande do Sul branch of the nationally established CPT. It served as a contact point for bishops, priests, pastors and CPT agents throughout the state and elsewhere in Brazil. As such, it helped coordinate food collections and innumerable fraternal visits to Natalino's crossing. Ronda Alta, in turn, was the spade's tip of this extensive solidarity web. Its parish house was the nexus for relaying information to and from the camp, channeling visits, administering and stockpiling donations, handling medical emergencies and hosting all kinds of strategizing, solidarity and workshop meetings. All told, it is estimated that the core group involved in the activities of the solidarity movement hovered around 50 people.<sup>45</sup> Hundreds more, though, were active participants of this network, while tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people offered contributions of some kind to assist the landless at Natalino's crossing.

In December 1981, 185 landless (including 35 children) generated national public attention with an intensely packed, ten-day visit to Porto Alegre. Although the trip's primary objective was to press the Governor to address their demands, much time was actually spent contacting allies and shoring up support for their cause. The delegates visited religious leaders from the mainstream Protestant churches (Lutheran, Methodist and Episcopalian) and three Catholic bishops; met with trade unionists; and attended a church-packed ecumenical worship service with local CEBs members. As in all other visits to Porto Alegre, leaders of the State Assembly played a crucial role on behalf of the Natalino peasants. It was in the spacious and modern state capitol, located by the centrally placed Praça da Matriz, that the landless took refuge during the day, gave press conferences, held strategy sessions with their allies and ate lunch.

After much insistence and mediation by the president of the State Assembly, the Natalino peasants were granted an appointment to see the Governor, on December 14. Of all their encounters, this, the third, was the most disheartening of

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worked closely with labor organizations, notably the bank workers and metalworkers trade unions, and professional associations such as the lawyer's guild.

<sup>45</sup> Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview, 3 September 2001.

all. Three weeks earlier the state legislature had authorized a land credit program that could have swiftly resolved the Natalino problem. Yet the Governor claimed he had no money for this, even though the legislators had suggested using a small portion of the record profits earned by Rio Grande do Sul's state bank. The three landless representatives were visibly irritated when they left the Piratini Palace and accused the Governor of being rude and deceitful. While they were pleading their case, the Governor was engaged in impolite side conversations, but feigned to be most friendly and courteous with them as soon as the television cameras came in to record the meeting.<sup>46</sup>

Outside, a few yards away, on the terrace of the State capitol, 180 landless peasants sang together and chanted slogans to cheer on their representatives. Despite the heavy odds against them, they exhibited the trimmings of an unbreakable spirit –an ideal interest backbone nurtured through prayers, music, words, symbols and gestures of encouragement woven with a collective sense of striving and attaining. On December 17, the contingent returned for Ronda Alta. Though saddened and resentful, they left for the roadside camp with vows to continue their fight. The four buses carrying the *colonos* had large banners on the sides. One of these read: "Natalino's crossing - the first step towards agrarian reform." As they left the Praça da Matriz, people on the streets stood by to applaud the *sem terra*. Behind, a truck followed with six tons of food donations.<sup>47</sup>

To boost the movement's weary morale, the pastoral agents organized a torchlight Christmas Eve procession. Led by Father Arnildo, the mile-and a half *Via Crucis* gave the landless an opportunity to remember the highpoints of their struggle, revel in its mystique and shore up their commitment. In Porto Alegre, the CEBs celebrated a "Natalino Christmas," using a CPT-prepared guide comparing Jesus' birth with life at the landless camp. In Brasilia, the day after Christmas, a commission of bishops gathered with the president of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops

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<sup>46</sup> "Colonos de Ronda Alta decidem ficar em Porto Alegre," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 16 December 1981.

<sup>47</sup> "Sem-terras voltam a Ronda Alta," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 18 December 1981.

(Conferencia Nacional de Bispos do Brasil, CNBB), Dom Ivo Lorscheider, to discuss the situation at Natalino's crossing. Though weakened, in Ronda Alta and elsewhere, the struggle was still nourished by prayers, plans and hope.

The National Council of Christian Churches (Conselho Nacional de Igrejas Cristãs, CONIC) gave the landless a chance to present their case before the INCRA national president, Paulo Yokota, on January 7. At CONIC's request, Yokota flew to Porto Alegre to discuss possible solutions to the Natalino drama. After meeting privately with Brazil's principal Catholic and Protestant leaders, Yokota held a lengthy discussion with a delegation of five *colonos*. With the talk going nowhere, a disheartened peasant entreated the INCRA president: "We were hoping that God would open your heart to favor a people living under such painful misery." Dom Ivo Lorscheider captured the day's results in a drier but no less poignant tone: "Yokota's allegations did not convince the meeting's participants."<sup>48</sup> Though not immediately successful, events of this kind were precisely what inspired the peasant's anticipation-*cum*-conviction that a solution would soon be found, while keeping the Natalino camp on the public agenda.

The ensuing weeks were difficult ones for the Natalino camp. With all feasible options blocked by the federal and state government, a blaring summer heat, water shortage, precarious health facilities and escalating police pressure on the landless, the increasing number of desertions from the dusty-red camp triggered fears among supporters that the movement would come to an end.<sup>49</sup>

In early February, the government embarked on a mounting attack against the "progressive clergy's" involvement in the Natalino movement. On February 2, during a traditional religious procession near Porto Alegre, Governor Amaral de Souza met with Dom Cláudio and told him of the government's renewed plans to detain Father Arnildo under the National Security Law. This, the politician argued, would be the only

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<sup>48</sup> "Igrejas e Incra debatem questão da terra," "Colono denuncia repressão no acampamento," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 8 January 1982.

<sup>49</sup> According to a state government report, during the first 25 days of January 32 families abandoned Natalino's camp. "Mais colonos estão optando pela oferta de empregos no RS," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 27 January 1982.

way to bring the roadside camp to an end. Dom Cláudio called the Passo Fundo curia later that day and insisted that its authorities remove Father Arnildo from Ronda Alta at once. Fearing an imminent arrest, two priests traveled swiftly to inform Father Arnildo of his predicament. But Arnildo adamantly refused to leave Ronda Alta: "if they are going to arrest me, they can do it here, because I am not going to abandon and betray my people."<sup>50</sup>

Four days later, the state government and federal police announced an official inquiry into Father Arnildo's activities at the landless camp. On February 10, none other than the top Army commander in Southern Brazil criticized the Church's political involvement and "exploitation" of the Natalino camp.<sup>51</sup> The next day *Zero Hora* reproduced an extensive interview with Colonel Curió, in which he charged that Ronda Alta's landless movement was "pre-fabricated" and "led by unscrupulous politicians and class groups interested in subverting order."<sup>52</sup> His comments were amply debated in Rio Grande do Sul. Adding to the flames, two columnists for Porto Alegre's *Folha da Tarde* begun to publish, around this time, a series of articles against Ronda Alta's pastoral agents, with their main target, of course, being Father Arnildo Fritzen.<sup>53</sup>

Against this stormy backdrop, the progressive religious network convened an urgent gathering in Ronda Alta and decided to counteract these hostilities with a mass rally. Close to 7,000 people, including some 50 Catholic and Protestant pastoral agents, attended the February 15 rally in Ronda Alta to express their solidarity with

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<sup>50</sup> Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview, 13 September 1994.

<sup>51</sup> "General culpa Igreja pelos conflitos," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre) 2 February 1982.

<sup>52</sup> "Os colonos de Natalino e a questão agrária no País segundo o coronel Curió," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 11 February 1982.

<sup>53</sup> The titles of these opinion pieces are quite revealing in themselves: "The Pastor of Disgrace" (January 16); "Pharisees in Ronda" (February 6); "Messianic Syndrome (which compares Father Arnildo with Guyana's Jim Jones and Bahia's Antonio Conselheiro, February 16); "Agitation in Ronda Alta" (February 16); "Rural Guerrilla" (February 19), among others. The principal columnist in question was Rogério Mendelski, assisted by Hilário Honorio.

Father Arnildo and the religious sisters working with the sem terra.<sup>54</sup> Natalino's largest public boost, however, came on February 23, when over 20,000 people gathered at the road junction for a CPT-sponsored Land Pilgrimage.<sup>55</sup> The event congregated six bishops, some 300 priests, a number of *gaúcho* opposition leaders, Church delegations from all across Rio Grande do Sul and pilgrims from five Brazilian states. Led by Natalino's immense cross, the crowd partook of a morning *Via Sacra* depicting the suffering and struggle of the landless. During the afternoon, a "People's Open Forum" presented an array of speakers, musicians and troubadours that animated the rally with rhymes, melodies and critical remarks on the condition of Brazil's rural poor. Aside from the unanimous manifestations of support for the landless movement, there were countless expressions of solidarity with Father Arnildo. The day's assemblage concluded with a religious service celebrated by Dom Urbano, Passo Fundo's newly appointed bishop, and a sermon preached by the national CPT president, the Amazonian bishop Dom Moacyr Grecchi.<sup>56</sup>

By virtue of his supportive presence, Passo Fundo's new bishop signaled that he was prepared to take a firm defense of his persecuted priest. Evidently, both Church mobilizations in the later half of February, and the gestures of resistance conveyed in them, had the important effect of considerably raising the authoritarian regime's cost of repression. Afterwards, no other Church agent in Rio Grande do Sul would ever be threatened by the military's National Security Law. In the Brazilian democratic transition's complex dialectic "between regime concession and societal conquest,"<sup>57</sup> here, in a microcosm, stands a clear instance of societal conquest leading to a condition of regime acquiescence.

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<sup>54</sup> *Boletim Sem Terra* (Porto Alegre), Special Edition, 23 February 1982.

<sup>55</sup> The Land Pilgrimage is an annual gathering that started in Rio Grande do Sul, in 1978; and organized by the CPT since 1979 to further the cause of social justice for the rural poor. The best study on this subject is Friar Wilson Dallagnol, *As Romarias da Terra no Rio Grande do Sul* (Porto Alegre: CPT, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> "Mais de 20 mil pessoas participaram ontem da 5a. Romaria da Terra," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 24 February 1982.

<sup>57</sup> Alfred Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 39.



For the *sem terra*, however, the real sigh of relief came in mid-March when the entire encampment was transferred to a 108-hectare property purchased by the Catholic Church. This unique endeavor was first proposed by a *gaúcho* bishop, Dom Jayme Chemello, and ultimately endorsed by all the bishops of Rio Grande do Sul. The process by which this came about was circuitous, time-consuming and riddled with side developments. As with many other initiatives taken during the struggle, the peasants received this idea from their advisors, assimilated it with ease through their own internal discussion process and then pursued it as an initiative of their own. Almost seven months lapsed between the proposal and the realization.<sup>58</sup>

On the afternoon of March 12, after an emotional religious ceremony, the landless carried their cross one last time in a procession along Natalino's red-earth road, singing: "Victory, You will reign! Oh Cross, You will save us!" With the Natalino cross leading the way, they drove 19 miles in a caravan of trucks to their new safe haven, Nova Ronda Alta. A banner at the farm's entrance assured with poetic grace they were entering the "Promised Land." Perched on a hill with lush green trees, overlooking the island-spotted Passo Fundo lake (created by a hydroelectric dam), the new camp offered bountiful shade, water and tranquility --enough to instill a new surge of enthusiasm among the landless.

The Church officials sponsoring the undertaking clearly understood that the measure would only provide a temporary respite, one that would allow the *colonos* an opportunity to continue their quest for land in their home state. On March 25, the Rio Grande do Sul CNBB launched the "People Help People" campaign to raise funds to pay for the Nova Ronda Alta farm. At its official presentation in the Caritas'

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<sup>58</sup> As it happened, Dom Jayme, the bishop of Pelotas, voiced the idea in an informal conversation with a CPT agent at the time of Curió's intervention in Ronda Alta. The bishop suggested then that the Church should convey a prophetic gesture by providing a safe haven for the landless. By November, the proposal had been approved by Natalino's general assembly. Thereafter, the peasants sent delegations to several dioceses in an effort to lobby the bishops they perceived would be most sympathetic to their request. Likewise, the CPT organized "its bishops" elsewhere in Brazil to help foster support for this effort among their *gaúcho* peers. Thus, by the time the episcopate of Rio Grande do Sul convened in Itaici, São Paulo, for the CNBB's annual assembly, in early February, it reached a consensual decision with considerable ease. In the ensuing couple of weeks, a sympathetic lawyer linked to Father Arnildo's parish secretly negotiated the purchase of three adjacent farms. Father Arnildo Fritzen, interviews, 13 September 1994 and 3 September 2001.

auditorium, Dom Urbano announced that all Catholic dioceses of Rio Grande do Sul had agreed to hold a special collection for this undertaking during a weekend in May, while a Lutheran pastor presented the campaign's first pledge on behalf of his church.<sup>59</sup>

Never in the history of Brazil had the Catholic Church undertaken an action of this kind. Though often portrayed as a conservative establishment, in this case the Church of Rio Grande do Sul revealed a different facet. Given the opportunity, it deployed its significant human and organizational resources to defend and uphold the most cherished of all causes among the state's progressive forces. Indeed, had it not been for the Church's intervention it is very probable that the Natalino camp would have, in time, gradually withered away and ended in a tragic defeat. Unlike other regional churches in Brazil, the *gaúcho* episcopate never issued forceful statements denouncing the country's authoritarian regime and gross social inequalities. But when it was entrusted with a chance to display its solidarity and offer its logistical assets, it did so discretely and with a practical disposition of invaluable worth.

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<sup>59</sup> By the final count, over half of the money raised (about US\$200,000) came from foreign sources, notably Germany's Advienat (contributing a third of the grand total) and the French Canadian Development et Paix. "Os fundos da Encruzilhada," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 17 June 1982. Marcon, *Encruzilhada Natalino*, p. 190.

## **A Haven to the Promised Land**

The longest phase of the Natalino movement was also its least tumultuous. With the transfer to the Church's Nova Ronda Alta haven, the camp lost some of its public prominence. By then, though, the struggle had already gained ample recognition and sympathy. In contrast to earlier phases, its pressure tactics involved fewer mass mobilizations. Instead, it relied on persistent lobbying efforts, conducted typically by smaller groups of people. Gradually during this time, state authorities moved to accommodate the demands of the landless. The November 1982 elections, and their democratizing implications, facilitated in many ways the interactions between the state and peasant actors. A final turning point in the struggle took place in September 1983 when the state government announced its purchase of four estates in Rio Grande do Sul. The ensuing decisions over land allocations, however, produced the most difficult feuds within the landless group. Of the 207 families that transferred from Natalino's crossing to Nova Ronda Alta, over 170 were settled in Rio Grande do Sul. Of these, close to 85% received land by November 1983. The remaining thirty-some families had to wait until June and August of 1984.

At the Nova Ronda Alta camp living conditions improved dramatically and the movement acquired an adequate infrastructure to sustain its struggle. The landless had a 108-hectare property of rich soil for their collective use, and received further benefits from the Church, solidarity groups, European religious agencies, the Ronda Alta municipal administration and different state government bureaus. These improvements included roof tiles for the huts, electricity, clean water from wells drilled in the premises, a large vegetable garden, a Volkswagen bus for transportation to Ronda Alta, a large community center, a well-stocked pharmacy, and, after much haggling with the state government, an elementary school for the children. The newfound freedoms from police vigilance allowed for an intensified period of political education and strategizing. During this phase, the landless received a regular stream of national and foreign visitors, including a handful of Brazilian bishops. In July 1982, over 5,000 supporters converged in Nova Ronda Alta for a rally in support of the landless cause.

At the Nova Ronda Alta farm, the landless movement began to extend its outreach activities in support of other popular struggles. Between July 1982 and December 1983, representatives from the Nova Ronda Alta camp, and their principal advisors, were prominently involved in the networking efforts and five crucial assemblies that led to the establishment of the MST.<sup>60</sup> Officially, the MST was founded in January 1984, in the grain-belt city of Cascavel, at the southwestern edge of the state of Paraná. It emerged under the aegis of the CPT as a coalition of peasant groups involved in different and widely scattered land struggles, located for the most part in Brazil's southern half. Undoubtedly, the most widely recognized of all these struggles was Natalino's crossing.

Convinced that a final victory would only be a question of time, the camp's leadership gradually picked up its efforts to obtain land in Rio Grande do Sul. Around this time, the *sem terra* made a point of engaging all four gubernatorial nominees and exacting favorable promises. This newfound consensus among the state's leading political candidates was ratified in their first televised debate, where all emphatically agreed on finding a home state solution to the landless problem.<sup>61</sup>

Nova Ronda Alta's successful finale came as result of a sustained, low-key insistence that the new state government authorities fulfill their campaign promise to the landless group. The November 15, 1982 elections ushered in another conservative PDS Governor, Jair Soares, who won a tight three-way election race with only 34% of the vote. All together, the opposition obtained close to 60% of the State Assembly seats, and was thus able to appoint one of its own to head the state

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<sup>60</sup> Chronologically, these five national and regional events included the following events. (1) July 1982, the first gathering of landless people from Brazil's five southernmost states in Medianeira, Paraná; (2) September 1982, a CPT meeting in Gioania, Goiás, where the idea of creating a national landless organization was first proposed; (3) February 1983 assembly in Chapecó, Santa Catarina, where a provisional MST commission was established for the southern states; (4) October 1983, an assembly of the *sem terra* from Rio Grande do Sul's Três Passos region; (5) December 1983, first Rio Grande do Sul statewide MST convention in Frederico Westphalen. All these events were sponsored and largely organized by the CPT. For further details on these events and their political context see, Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, *A Formação do MST no Brasil* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000); *MST: Formação e Territorialização*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> Vania Beatriz de Quadros, "Os Sem Terra e a Imprensa," (bachelors thesis, UNISINOS, 1983).

legislature. The new president of this assembly, Antenor Ferrari, a PMDB deputy, had been one of the landless' most active supporters. Hence, with Ferrari as a helpful ally, the landless were able to muster further political strength and credibility, and maintain their efforts for land distribution.

Indeed, it was after Ferrari's April 21, 1983 visit to Nova Ronda Alta, when the peasants threatened once again to transfer their camp Porto Alegre, that a concerted effort to find a solution finally got underway. Yet even then, the process proved to be quite complicated, and would require continued resilience and ingenuity on the peasants' part. On April 26, after meeting with Ferrari, Governor Soares announced his administration would purchase and redistribute land in Rio Grande do Sul for the landless families in Nova Ronda Alta. But then the state government started dragging its feet, as one *colono* summed it up: "We buy or don't buy, it won't work, there is no money."<sup>62</sup>

Thus, the peasants decided to intensify their pressure on the Secretary of Agriculture. Starting July 24 through September 26, the *sem terra* posted a permanent contingent at this bureau. They entered early every weekday morning and left at nightfall when it closed.

We occupied the entrance lounge at the Secretary of Agriculture, which is where we had our negotiations over the land areas. We stayed there to pressure, between 11 and 20 people, depending on the negotiation. At night we slept at the Franciscan Brothers' home. We ate there, or sometimes had our meals at the State Assembly, mainly for lunch. We traveled to Porto Alegre every Sunday and returned to Nova Ronda Alta on Fridays. As soon as they opened the bureau for office work, we would step in again, on Mondays ... We were there to disturb them. And that went on and on until they became sick of us and bought us the land.<sup>63</sup>

Actually, even the Secretary of Agriculture, João Jardim, was said to have told Dom Urbano: "I am getting an ulcer on account of having to see those people ask for

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<sup>62</sup> Zolmir Calegari, interview.

<sup>63</sup> Isidoro Assis dos Santos, interview.

land every time I open the door!”<sup>64</sup> The slow grinding strategy paid off. With the cost of repression implausibly high and the public promises already made, the *sem terra*’s headstrong endurance left the state government with few clear options other than making the necessary land purchase. One of the peasants captured this position in a vividly stark phrase: “We cannot kill them, let’s give them land.”<sup>65</sup>

Victory day came on September 26, when the Governor signed a decree purchasing four estates, three of which were for settling the Nova Ronda Alta peasants. At the camp, the landless found out about the day’s great accomplishment while watching the evening news in a small black and white television set outside the nuns’ cabin. The entire camp then erupted into a spontaneous fiesta with people parading around the grounds banging pots and pans, shouting “*Viva a terra!*” “*Viva o povo!*” hugging each other, drinking, singing and dancing into the wee hours of the morning, as the local musicians entertained the crowd with their accordions and guitars.

The next day, the *sem terra* negotiators made their triumphant return from Porto Alegre. At the camp, they held a radiant and joyful assembly. Even the local bishop, Dom Urbano, was there to join the festivities. But the victory, however sweet, was short-lived. Having conquered the land, the peasants were now faced with the decision of how to divide it. Here, the air of unity and camaraderie that had prevailed, in spite of isolated moments of internal tension and personal conflict, suddenly fell apart. Basically, the dispute was over who would remain where. Three groups were settled in Ronda Alta. The largest contingent was relocated to an isolated cattle ranch 150 miles away. Those settled in the distant ranch were in fact the poorest of the lot, and of more indigenous *caboclo* ethnic background. All the best-known leaders of the movement insisted on staying in Ronda Alta.

In retrospect, all the peasants I interviewed recalled this final period at the camp with embarrassment; a few still held on to old grudges. More than one

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<sup>64</sup> José Carlos Oliveira relayed this information to me in, interview by the author, tape recording, Salto do Jacuí, RS, 11 September 1994.

<sup>65</sup> Vilson Müller, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 27 July 1994.

described those events as producing a “disgraceful climate.” Father Arnildo was openly candid about all this. “It is worth noting,” he said,

During the Nova Ronda Alta phase we had a thousand and one internal problems. Because at this point the enemy was no longer present and close by, so many things began to relax ... We lived through moments of terrible tensions, with people fighting among themselves ... I remember that when it was time to distribute the land, to see who would go where, gosh, there was a huge fight. So many guys were walking around with guns and knives latched on to their belts, that once, during a mass service, after October 30, I had to disarm everybody in the middle of the religious celebration. I asked them to bring to the altar their knives and guns because “we were about to kill ourselves. We have fought so long and hard for the land and now we were all losing our wits!” I picked up the Bible and did something I never thought I’d do in my life, like a Pentecostal pastor I extolled: “In the name of God, I implore, I demand that you turn in your guns and knives and bring them here!” A cold wind swept by and silenced everybody. And the people started bringing in their weapons. That calmed things down a bit.<sup>66</sup>

The vast majority of the landless were settled during the month of November. Two smaller groups, nevertheless, lingered into the next year. The last group was settled in August 1984, right around the time the newly established MST embarked on its first land occupation in Rio Grande do Sul.

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<sup>66</sup> Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 13 September 1994. Other pastoral agents residing at the camp during this time offered similar accounts. Sister Carmen Lorenzoni, interview; Sister Lurdes María Rigoni, interview.

## The Ideal Interest Argument

How can we explain the resilience of the Natalino peasants and the intense commitment of the pastoral agents involved? How can we account for the social energy, steadfast determination and high-risk engagement in the course of this struggle? How can we best understand the strong convergence between religious and peasant actors?

Max Weber's concept of ideal interest action, I argue, provides a better explanation of this drive, resilience and conflux than the structural arguments and standard rational actor treatments of this phenomenon. While both structural and rationalist analyses highlight pertinent factors, neither provides an adequate account of the kind of relationship at hand.

*Structural* arguments assume that Church and peasant actors are, in some way or another, pawns of an underlying situational logic. It generally treats religious views and sentiments as an expression of 'deeper,' class-based interests, or as the result of political circumstance. As a result, it has difficulties in accounting for the role of human agency. At best, structural explanations can provide an assessment of the conditions and opportunities for action.<sup>67</sup>

*Rational actor* analyses, though appropriately grounded on the idea of human agency, assume that individuals are trying to maximize benefits. This approach runs the risk of dismissing the experiential process --an elective and interactive affinity of need, ethics, identity and passion-- involved in most Church-peasant alliances, as well as the non-negotiable quality of many of their value motivations. Acts of martyrdom and high risk involvement that are purportedly inspired through religious faith and other convictions cannot be adequately explained by rational actor analysis.

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<sup>67</sup> For sophisticated class-based analyzes of religious phenomena see, François Houtart, "Religion et Lutte des Classes en Amerique Latine," *Social Compass*, XXVI (1979); Otto Maduro, *Religion and Social Conflict* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982).



Indeed, such forms of behavior figure prominently within this pattern of social mobilization.<sup>68</sup>

As laid out by Weber, ideal interest (or value rational) behavior represents a distinct type of orientation for social action that contrasts with instrumental rationality. Ideal interest action involves the conscious and consistently planned orientation towards the fulfillment of an unconditional demand. Material interest (or instrumental rational) behavior, on the other hand, seeks to attain a rationally pursued and deliberate end.<sup>69</sup> Analytically, their key difference rests on the nature of their ends – their absolute quality versus their calculable character, their imperative commitment versus their negotiable disposition. For a distilled representation of this conceptual distinction see Table 1 below.

Table 1.

Rationality Type					
According to the Character of End Goal					
<i>Type of Rationality</i>					
		Value Rational	Instrumental Rational		
<i>Ends</i>	Absolute	*			
	Calculable		*		

<sup>68</sup> A prime example of the rational choice approach to religion, along with all its tautological problems, is Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (eds., Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich), (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1978), pp. 24-26. Throughout his work, Weber uses the terms “ideal interest,” “value rationality” and “value interest” to convey the same idea. For the most part I will employ the ideal interest expression.

Both value-rationality and instrumental-rationality represent an interest form of behavior, inasmuch as they suppose: (1) a goal consciousness, (2) a capacity to distinguish means and ends, and (3) an ability to apply the means instrumentally. From the standpoint of an ideal interest disposition, the absolute ends represent the bedrock of what amounts to a calculative commitment. According to Weber, examples of pure ideal interest orientation,

Would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible costs to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, *a religious call*, personal loyalty, or *the importance of some "cause" no matter in what it consists*.<sup>70</sup>

Ideal interest action is driven by a search for meaning and deliverance, and pursues values, beliefs or identities. As a Weberian ideal type, material interest behavior, in contrast, seeks well-being and enjoyment, and aspires to optimize access to wealth, power, status or pleasure. Practical actions, of course, are apt to represent approximations to these analytic constructs. In real life, material and ideal interests are not dichotomous but can interact in multiple ways through mechanisms of conflict, compenetration and convergence. Table 2 summarizes the main analytic differences between ideal interests and material interests.

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<sup>70</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 25. (Italics mine).

Table 2.

<b>Ideal Interests and Material Interests: A Conceptual Distinction</b>		
<i>Defining Traits</i>	<b>Ideal Interests</b>	<b>Material Interests</b>
<i>Issues at stake</i>	Values, beliefs and identities	Wealth, power, status and pleasure
<i>Overarching quest (1)</i>	Search for meaning, primarily deliverance	Pursuit of well-being and enjoyment
<i>Driving motivation</i>	Fulfill an unconditional demand	Attain a rationally pursued and calculated end
<i>Means and ends (2)</i>	Rationally pursues the end for its own sake. Views absolute ideal ends as rational. Can accept material instrumentality only with respect to the choice of means, not of ends.	Conscious and instrumental assessment of means, ends and secondary results. Views absolutization of ideal ends as irrational. The more absolute it becomes, the more irrational it is.
<i>Mode of action</i>	Fusion of striving and attaining. (3) Seeks to enact or uphold a commitment.	Aims to maximize self-interest and optimize results.
(1) This idea is taken from Wolfgang Schluchter's very brief definition of material interests and ideal interests. <i>The Rise of Western Rationalism: Max Weber's Developmental History</i> , trans., Guenther Roth, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 25.		
(2) This and the preceding defining trait are drawn from Weber's definition of value-rational and instrumental-rational behavior. <i>Economy</i> , pp. 24-26.		
(3) This insight is from Albert O. Hirschman. <i>Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 85.		

Conceptually, ideal ends are not amenable to manipulation for instrumental purposes. Subjective truths, such as beliefs, values, identities and other symbolic attachments, are bound by a basic “consistency constraint,” and thus cannot be adjusted with frictionless ease.<sup>71</sup> Material ends, on the other hand, can be maximized under a utility calculus and thus elicit a different pattern of social behavior.

To detect an ideal interest action the observer must seek, first, to gain a phenomenological understanding of the social actor’s value ends and, then, step back to gauge if the actor’s behavior is actually consistent with these goals. The observer can neither be naive nor cynical about people’s value motivations. Rather this phenomenon requires that one display a broad mind and open pores: a special alchemy of sensitivity, alertness and astuteness. Broadly speaking, this approach coincides with Weber’s *verstehen* sociology, Geertz’s “thick description,” Levine’s “phenomenological” position, and Monroe’s idea of “perspective.”<sup>72</sup>

Briefly, the contention here is that ideal interest dispositions –derived from the religious ethics of fraternal love and peasant moral economy— provide a vital account of the social energy, strength, stamina and Church-peasant rapport generated in the context of the struggle for land reform. Ideal interest orientations have helped: (1) galvanize these social mobilizations; (2) frame its alliances; and (3) tip the contentious balance in favor of its impressive grassroots efforts.

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<sup>71</sup> According to Jon Elster, The “consistency constraint arises because the [value] conception adopted on a specific occasion has to be consistent with [value] conceptions adopted on earlier occasions. If it is not --if the agent opportunistically adjusts his idea of [value] to what serves his interest on any given occasion-- it will be psychologically difficult for him to maintain the belief that he is not motivated by self-interest. Some people may be capable of this feat of self-deception, but most are not. A [value] conception, once adopted, is perceived as binding and objectively valid in a way that constrains frictionless adjustment to new situations.” *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); pp., 347-348. Here, I have slightly altered in Elster’s original statement by changing the words “impartial” and “impartiality” for the word “value,” as noted in the brackets.

<sup>72</sup> See, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Daniel H. Levine, *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

*Moral Economy* is an economic ethic that arises under conditions of struggle for subsistence. Grounded on an ethic of necessity, it insists, that, where the community's economic well-being is concerned, market forces and the profits of individuals should be subdued to non-market principles of distribution.<sup>73</sup> Moral economy is an "identifiable bundle of beliefs," stirred by deep emotions and a sense of outrage,<sup>74</sup> that serves as a legitimizing principle for acts of civil disobedience. It constitutes the basis for direct forms of popular protests that find expression in acts of collective solidarity, are supported by third parties and are occasionally endorsed through some measure of license from state authorities. Such support reflects moral economy's appeal to norms and values that gravitate within the broader community.<sup>75</sup>

*The Religious Ethics of Fraternal Love*, according to Weber, arises in religions of salvation --that is, "all religions that hold out deliverance from suffering to their

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<sup>73</sup> This definition borrows from E.P. Thompson, yet includes an important difference. Unlike Thompson, I am not prepared to accept that moral economy requires market forces be "subdued to custom" alone. See, Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), p. 337. The struggle for subsistence can elicit a much broader set of values and beliefs. Thus, moral economy need not entail a blanket reaction to capitalism. Though it may act in resistance to the incursion of 'free market' practices, its driving stake is not to oppose capitalism *per se*, but to enkindle a non-market ethos on questions that affect the material subsistence of the poor. This conceptual modification is an important one. Conventionally, the moral economy idea was used to describe and analyze pre-capitalist forms of social relations. In particular, it has been applied to interpret forms of popular resistance to the incursion of market practices that upset traditional economic norms and threatened poor people's subsistence in times of dearth. The more encompassing definition of moral economy I uphold here builds on Charles Tilly's suggestion in this regard, as cited in Thompson's text, *Ibid*, p. 338.

<sup>74</sup> Thompson, *Customs in Common*, pp. 337-338.

<sup>75</sup> James C. Scott popularized E.P. Thompson's idea with his well-known study of peasant revolts in Vietnam and Burma, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). This view of peasant uprisings has been sharply contested by political economists, notably by Samuel L. Popkin in, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). My general impression, however, is that the widely touted debate between moral economy and rational choice has been overblown. Moral economy is not incompatible with a rational problem-solving approach. Indeed, despite the emphasis on rational individualism and selected incentives, even Popkin concedes that "self-abnegation" by the leadership (p. 261) and "reasons of ethic, conscience, or altruism" (p. 254) among the followers played a decisive role in mobilizing collective action among the Vietnamese peasantry. This point is well argued in Martin Staniland's review of Popkin's study, *What is Political Economy? A Study of Social Theory and Underdevelopment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 42-57.

adherents."<sup>76</sup> Salvation religions adopt rationalized methods in their quest for redemption. When this method is systematized "in the direction of an ethic based on inner religious faith" a distinct situation is produced whereby religious traditions and short-lived emotions are constrained as a source of conduct. Instead, there a "sacred inner religious state" is developed which places religious ethics as its driving force for action.<sup>77</sup> The practical ethics of this religious state demand of its adherents a universalist brotherhood which "goes beyond all barriers of societal associations, often including that of one's own faith."<sup>78</sup> Externally, this principle of fraternal love is manifest through acts of solidarity and humanitarian service. Internally, it is imbued with an attitude of *caritas*, of love for the sufferer *per se*, for human kind and even for the enemy.<sup>79</sup>

Peasant land struggles that evoke moral economy claims assume an element of ideal interest behavior. Land not only becomes a necessary material commodity for livelihood, but also an ideal end sustained by the peasant's subsistence ethic.<sup>80</sup> This idealization of the land creates a situation whereby a *compenetration* of material and ideal interests takes place. Hence, the struggle for land, although conducted through instrumental collective means, acquires certain absolutist traits --land becomes a non-negotiable end goal.

The religious ethic of fraternal love coexists in an inherent tension with the economically rationalized character of pure market relations. For Weber, the market's

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<sup>76</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (eds., H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 327.

<sup>77</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 578.

<sup>78</sup> *From Max Weber*, p. 330.

<sup>79</sup> *From Max Weber*, p. 330. For further discussion of this religious ethics see Ernest Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931); Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

<sup>80</sup> The fight for land is often intimately linked with a struggle to preserve a peasant lifestyle, identity and community. For references to this rationale, see Luiz Inácio G. Gaiger, "Culture, Religion et Praxis Socio-Politique: La Pastorale de Liberation et le Mouvement des Travailleurs Ruraux Sans-Terre au Sud du Brésil," (Ph.D. thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1991); also, Gehlen, "Terres de Lutte."

impersonal ethos and autonomous orientation towards material commodities stands in sharp contrast to the religious injunction of brotherly love, which views "the 'free' market, that is, the market that is not bound by ethical norms ... [as] an abomination."<sup>81</sup> If rationally pursued, this moral injunction can take on an ideal interest quality.

Faced with a subsistence-oriented land conflict, the injunction of brotherly love –imbued with an attitude of *caritas*– will impel a religious actor to take an ideal stand on behalf of the peasants. Likewise, peasant encounter with a religious view that both legitimizes and bolsters their material demands will draw it closer to the Church. In the midst of a struggle this is much more likely to occur by elective affinity, a mutual compatibility, than by any measure of strategic interest. Facilitating and reinforcing this rapport are the anti-capitalist views and non-market ethos sustained by religious and peasant actors, respectively. This is further compounded by the fact that moral economy actions of collective solidarity find a natural counterpart in the religious ethics of universal brotherhood. At this point, then, a *convergence* of two forms of ideal interest takes place.

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Where does one situate the ideal interest argument in terms of other ideas used to explain social mobilizations? Below, I present a chart that situates the ideal interest concept within the broader contours of this realm of inquiry.

Table 3.

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<sup>81</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 637.

*Analytic Frameworks for Gauging Social Mobilizations*

	<i>Material Basis</i>	<i>Ideational Basis</i>
<i>Drive</i>	material interests	ideal interests
<i>Venue</i>	mobilizing resources	framing processes
<i>Conditions</i>	political opportunities economic & social structures environmental surroundings	climate of opinion ideologies cultures <i>zeitgeist</i>

This table builds on a common heuristic distinction between material and ideational bases for social action. Adding to this, it differentiates three levels of analysis for the study of social mobilizations: (1) *drive* refers to the orientation, end goal and purpose of social engagement; (2) *venue* considers the form, the instrumental means and repertoires assisting the movement; and, (3) *conditions* focuses on the broader circumstances and settings that hold, shape and influence the contentious dynamics. As Table 3 clearly suggests, the ideal interest concept does not aim to replace the other analytic frameworks outlined therein. In fact, a full ideal interest explanation cannot be provided in a vacuum; it must be able to weave and deploy these other interpretive tools in tandem.

Ideal interests looks at a specific type of drive. Its conceptual forte sheds light on two issues that structure the dynamics of contention: purpose and commitment. The ideal interest question always starts with: “Why?” “How come?” And “to what lengths?” Unlike the classic social movement literature,<sup>82</sup> it does not presume that

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<sup>82</sup> Two of the leading texts in this regard are: Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).



interest behavior is merely about achieving success or gaining benefits. Rather, it turns this motivational assumption into a new problem, an open-ended question –a matter requiring proper empirical engagement, empathetic understanding and thoughtful examination. Simply put, the ideal interest argument suggests that venues and conditions can help explain mobilization possibilities and tactics, but not the mobilizing drive *per se*.

## Conclusion

The Natalino episode can be characterized as an ideal interest mobilization based on the following qualities: (1) value-oriented behavior, rather than success-driven ones; (2) a behavioral mode based on a fusion of striving and attaining, instead of optimizing; (3) strong feelings propelling and resulting from social action; (4) collective interaction powerfully altering individual calculus; (5) dense symbolic repertoires that stir courage and vitality; (6) partnerships grounded on elective affinities, as opposed to strategic and instrumental alliances; and (7) the observed presence of people acting as though they cannot be bought. Let us review each of these traits in light of the Natalino story.

(1) *Value-oriented behavior, rather than success-driven ones.* Church actors involved in the Natalino episode were not trying to hold on to their peasant flock and maximize institutional power, but were basically following a religious commandment. In fact, during this time the Church had no religious or political competitors on the scene. Moreover, Church support for the landless engendered many costs and risks. The parish of Ronda Alta, for one, lost material power, resources and social prestige on account of its defense of the *sem terra*. Sharp internal disagreements over the Natalino question, such as those that polarized the diocese of Passo Fundo, fueled great stress within the Church. Despite these costs, many pastoral agents continued to uphold a firm commitment to the Natalino land struggle. Obtaining land for the *sem terra*, though an important objective, was not the driving purpose for their religious involvement. Instead, land was but an expression of a deeper commitment to an ethics of fraternal love and its related principle of social justice. Not benefits, but ideals were the prime engine in their mobilization.

As bishop Dom Urbano Allgayer explained it to me: “We were directly motivated by the Church’s preferential option for the poor. The landless at Natalino were the poorest, the most needy. *We had to give* them all our support.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Dom Urbano J. Allgayer, interview by the author, tape recording, Passo Fundo, RS, 18 December 1998. (Italics are mine).

Similarly, a statement issued by 137 priests who visited the camp under Curió's command, offers a typical illustration: "We have come to Ronda Alta as Samaritans *to give our unconditional support to our brethren* left at the edge of the road and support their decision to obtain a piece of land in Rio Grande do Sul."<sup>84</sup> Father Arnildo Fritzen described the costs of this ethical pursuit as follows: "Those that support the poor by helping them conquer their rights upset traditional arrangements, and, consequently, attract the ire of many. *We knew we had to pay a price for this option.* But all this illuminated us more and more about Christianity's real essence: its struggle against death, against suffering, against injustice, to conquer a better life. We knew we had to go the way of the cross."<sup>85</sup>

For much of the peasantry, their material interest was defined in quasi-existential terms: either land in Rio Grande do Sul or nothing else. Though success driven in this regard, one could hardly ignore the fact that their demeanor was powerfully tinged by a value end goal. "Land is life," an MST leader asserted to me, "Life revolves around the earth. We depend on the land to live, to reap our sustenance. It is also our life. The reason of our struggle is to have land. The earth is magical. She feeds us, she impels us; she bids us to fight. She beckons us; she challenges us. She captivates us; she animates us. She is more than just land."<sup>86</sup> Another *colono* adds to this: "It is said that the struggle for land is always fierce. Of course it is; we can't live without it!"<sup>87</sup> Land, in other words, was more than just a material commodity. The Natalino peasants were not trying to maximize it but striving to secure it: "We want land to survive, not to become rich."

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<sup>84</sup> "137 padres rezam missa em Encuzilhada Natalino," *Zero Hora* (Porto Alegre), 25 August 1981. (Italics are mine).

<sup>85</sup> Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview, Laerte Dorneles Méliga and María do Carmo Janson. *Encruzilhada Natalino* (Porto Alegre: Vozes / Escola Superior de Teología São Lourenço de Brindes, 1982), p. 92. (Italics are mine).

<sup>86</sup> Mario Lill, interview by the author, tape recording, Palmeira das Missoes, RS, 4 December 2000. Translation note. In Portuguese the term for "land" and "earth" is the same word: "*terra*."

<sup>87</sup> Alceu Ferreira, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 1 October 1994.

<sup>88</sup> Certainly, the logic at stake was not that of a real estate market. Here, clearly, “*terra é mais que terra*” (land is more than land).

(2) *A behavioral mode based on a fusion of striving and attaining, instead of optimizing.* <sup>89</sup> The Natalino land struggle was intensely colored by an effort to attain non-negotiable end goals. Most pastoral agents were expressing imperative values; while the majority of the peasants were engaged in an all or nothing fight to obtain land. Strictly speaking, neither of these actors had much to maximize. Church agents, for the most part, pursued steeped-in ideals that could not be easily scaled. Peasants felt they were boxed-in, with no other option available. Optimization requires a preference set. But for all practical purposes, in the course of the Natalino struggle neither pastoral agents nor peasants were willing and prepared to act as if there was one. Instead, their striving was shaped by absolute goals. This conviction, in turn, was strongly affected by the mobilization itself. Thus, the struggle engendered strength, and this strength re-fueled the struggle.

For the landless, resilience came from many sources; in their own words: “The whole unity of the people is the animation of the struggle, where all are living through the same experience, and sharing the same objective in the struggle.”<sup>90</sup> “What particularly gave me strength were the visitors, the people that came to the camp and gave you that energy.”<sup>91</sup> “People say those were times of suffering. But for me they were pleasing. I had a lot of friends; there was a lot of animation in my life.”<sup>92</sup> “We clasped onto our faith during the struggles, with prayers. Along with faith we had an

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<sup>88</sup> Angelin Antônio Campignotto (Antoninho), interview, Méliga and Janson, *Encruzilhada Natalino*, p. 76.

<sup>89</sup> This general insight borrows from Albert O. Hirschman, “Against Parsimony: Three Ways of Complicating Some Categories of Economic Discourse,” *American Economic Review*, Proceedings 74 (1984), p. 92.

<sup>90</sup> Isidoro de Assis dos Santos (Nene), interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 30 September 1994.

<sup>91</sup> Neuza Maria Santini Hoffe, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 27 July 1994.

<sup>92</sup> Lauri Zanquete, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 16 August 1994.

objective. We were there striving for a change, with a sense of certainty. We weren't there to mess around and do any kind of evil. We were there to do good, not only for ourselves, but for the other companions and all of Brazil."<sup>93</sup>

Father Arnildo also experienced a heightened commitment while arduously pursuing his religious injunction:

Seeing that God was with us, *I felt this growing certainty and faith* that, as we became organized, we were going to secure the land. This is the will of God and we are capable of this! Then, when all of Curió's repression came around, we went on resisting. That started *giving me a greater certainty* yet, because it was just like the Biblical text we were reading: "not even the powers of hell are going to break down that which belongs to God, that which is rightful, is well organized, and of His suffering people." These things then *became consolidated into a deep conviction* ... Even in the hours of threat that I'd go to prison, frankly, I was never afraid, because I had the conviction that even if I disappeared, the struggle would continue. Nobody was going to be able to destroy this.<sup>94</sup>

(3) *Strong feelings propelling and resulting from social action.* The struggle at Natalino's crossing was riveted with emotions –anger, joyous eruptions, tearful gatherings, passionate commitments, and powerful moments of religious mystique. The emotional surges and gratification produced as part of this social mobilization were not psychic benefits derived from some utilitarian calculus, but by-products of the engagement itself.<sup>95</sup> The strong, at times, exhilarating feelings at Natalino were the result of the process of striving and attaining by which by which both Church agents and peasants pursued their existential quest. This element of passion was decisive to the struggle, as Father Arnildo made clear: "Without a profoundly religious mystique, the people at Natalino's crossing would not have resisted. The brutality, the violence and the aggression were so great. Living at

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<sup>93</sup> Laurindo Cavassini, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 2 October 1994.

<sup>94</sup> Father Arnildo Fritzen, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 13 September 1994. (Italics are mine).

<sup>95</sup> As Jon Elster well explains, to treat passions and feelings of self-realization as psychic dividends is to incur in the functionalist fallacy of explaining behavior on account of the benefits accrued to the beneficiaries. *Ulysses Unbound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 5.

the edge of the dirt road, maltreated, persecuted and tortured as they were; I have a hard time believing that a group as large as the Natalino landless camp could have resisted were it not for this mystique. During difficult times, the people would inevitably gather by the cross. The cross became a shield, a powerful weapon in the effort to overcome all their barriers. Without this religious mystique, Colonel Curió would have certainly terminated the camp.”<sup>96</sup>

Sister Isabel Grein, who lived at the Natalino camp and subsequently went to work as an organizer for the MST in southern Brazil, described this deep emotional attachment in more personal terms: “When I am with the *sem terra* I have the impression that they are all my family. I have made the landless movement the reason of my life.”<sup>97</sup>

(4) *Collective interaction powerfully altering individual calculus.* Individual rational calculus did not primarily determine the dynamics of the Natalino movement. In fact, individual decisions were strongly affected by a rich dialogical and collective action process that developed among and between the *sem terra* and their leading religious supporters. The intense communication and organizational efforts needed to undertake the struggle required of its participants a re-interpretation of their costs of participation.<sup>98</sup> Individually, people expected to receive land in three weeks. Collectively, a substantial number resisted for close to three years before attaining this. Moreover, in the course of the mobilization itself, keeping the struggle alive and not just pursuing one’s material welfare, became a compelling and shared motivation for many.

Expressions that illustrate how collective interaction powerfully altered individual calculus abound: “Many times I thought of giving up. But then I’d think to myself: ‘if I leave, I am going to weaken the camp.’ I was part of the camp

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<sup>96</sup> Father Arnildo Fritzen, author’s interview.

<sup>97</sup> María Isabel Grein, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 2 September 2001.

<sup>98</sup> This idea is taken from Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal, “Two Logics of Collective Action,” *Disorganized Capitalism: Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics*, ed., John Keane, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), pp. 198-199 and p. 183.

leadership. So, I'd tell myself, 'I am not going to weaken my companions. And besides what would I do? Return to being a farm worker? No, I am going to try to get some land, and continue.'"<sup>99</sup> Another peasant explained: "I would have gone to the Amazon had it not been for Cavassini [one of the camp leaders]. Two of Curió's colonels spoke to me a lot. They tempted me and offered everything. But Cavassini brainwashed me. He told me that everybody liked me, and spoke fancy things about me. Yes, the fellows at the camp pressured a lot."<sup>100</sup> The landless shared a common perception: "Without suffering we won't succeed. We have to unite. One person alone won't secure the land. Fighting together is the way to obtain things."<sup>101</sup>

(5) *Dense symbolic repertoires that stir courage and vitality.* The Natalino Cross, processions, music and singing, the power of words and expressions of solidarity, and prayers were not a mere ideological garb or instrument in the pursuit of a 'real' material interest. Though strategically useful at times, the intense attachment to these expressive codes cannot be seriously explained on account of their rational utility. The peasants and Church agents sincerely believed in these emblems and rituals. People cherished the rich symbolic heritage and energizing language that had become part of their struggle. Natalino's dense symbolic repertoire was an integral aspect of their struggle. It shored up an ideal interest mystique and instilled a joyous *esprit de lute* among the *sem terra*. As such, it allowed human emotions to flourish and galvanize the people involved.

According to the participants of a procession with the Natalino Cross, "When we got to the hill, there was an explosion of joy, everybody laughing, crying, singing, hugging each other, and each one selecting their own little piece of land, since from that hill we could see the Annoni estate, which was land people were

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<sup>99</sup> Leocides Cantoni, interview by the author, tape recording, Santana do Livramento, RS, 21 October 2000.

<sup>100</sup> Luiz do Carmo, interview with the author, tape recording, Salto do Jacuí, RS, 12 September 1994.

<sup>101</sup> Albertoldo Natalio de Vargas, interview by the author, tape recording, Salto do Jacuí, RS, 11 September 1994

hoping to get.”<sup>102</sup> “Afterwards everybody remained cheerful, and then we all spent days talking about it.”<sup>103</sup> “All that served to affirm the people in the struggle.”<sup>104</sup> An older landless man described his feelings when praying by the camp’s cross: “each time I get close to that cross, I forget my fears and feel the need and strength to walk together with my brothers.”<sup>105</sup> Commenting the visit by a progressive bishop, another peasant noted: “The people were super animated after Dom Pedro Casaldáliga spoke ‘in the name of God I promise you the land!’”<sup>106</sup>

Meaningful emblems, rituals and expressions were essential for building Natalino’s fighting mystique. These shored up the inner resources needed to overcome adversity. They invited people to strive with inordinate persistence, including for many, an unyielding sense of hope. In mustering such strong commitments they were able to curtail the free rider dilemma. The presence of dense symbolic repertoires, then, suggests an alternative logic towards collective action than that described in the classic rationalist literature.

(6) *Partnerships grounded on elective affinities, as opposed to strategic and instrumental alliances.* The rapport between religious actors and peasants at Natalino’s crossing was not the result of a strategic alliance, whereby the players agree to join a common effort that maximizes their own benefits. Instead, it emerged as part of an experiential process that brought together a shared and interactive affinity of need, ethics, identity and passion. The ethics of brotherly love elicits a moral economy rationale as both a counterpart and justification for its own disposition. It is the sufferer, not the profiteer that engenders this religious stance. Opportunistic patterns of behavior, where material interests are denuded of ideal

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<sup>102</sup> Sister Bruna Durandi (Aurelia), interview, nd., Méliga and Janson, *Encruzilhada Natalino*, p. 91.

<sup>103</sup> Zolmir Calegari, interview, Méliga and Janson, nd., *Encruzilhada Natalino*, p. 39.

<sup>104</sup> Angelin Antônio Campignotto (Antoninho), interview, Méliga and Janson, nd., *Encruzilhada Natalino*, p. 39.

<sup>105</sup> “Padres visitam colonos sem terra,” *Corrieo Riograndense* (Caxias do Sul), 25 August 1981. The quote is provided by Father Julio Giordani, of the Caxias do Sul CPT.

<sup>106</sup> Etelvino Cupinger, interview by the author, tape recording, Ronda Alta, RS, 27 July 1994.



ones, discourage the ethics of fraternity and other forms of solidarity. Therefore, it was an elective affinity of ideal interests –the ethics of fraternity and subsistence—rather than an instrumental calculus, that glued the Church and *sem terra* together.

(7) *The observed presence of people acting as though they cannot be bought.* Political economists often share the presumption that, given proper material incentives, ultimately all things can be traded-off.<sup>107</sup> At Natalino's crossing, though, not everything could be bought. And this was certainly not for lack of efforts by state authorities, which resorted to frequent bribery and intimidation to disband the landless camp. A rationalist may well argue that the government was not dissuasive enough. Perhaps, but the fact is that the state did invest ample resources in this regard and failed at inducing an attitudinal change among a sizeable number of people. Perhaps it needed to increase the pay-off. Perhaps. Aside from this essentialist speculation, however, the practical truth is that it did not. Hence, the ideal interest dispositions within the movement were able to win the day. *Ergo*, realistically, not everyone could be bought.

Ideal interest orientations come with many stripes and colors. Some of these can be ruthless; others can impel humans to acts of love and great self-sacrifice. Some ideal interests are utterly incompatible with democracy; others can stir its best hopes. The ones examined here are built on steep convictions of justice, a critical consciousness and a dream of making the world a better place.

Ideal interests, then, impact the struggle for change by enkindling social energies, associations, networks, partnerships and activities that can help tip the balance in a given contentious dynamic. Ideal interests can help overcome fear and

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<sup>107</sup> This rationalist proposition is problematic on many counts. For one, it asks an essentialist question, not a practical one. It wants to know what the ultimate cause of human action is, rather than understand its multiple real-life expressions. Secondly, it discards the simple and realistic observation that even if anything could be bought, there would never be enough resources to buy everything up. By this economic count alone, not everything can be bought. Thirdly, it ignores the fact that in some (usually dramatic) cases people have no options to choose from, no viable trade-off points to consider. Fourthly, I am convinced there are people with principled beliefs that cannot be bought, regardless of the pay-off or threats. Indeed, under extreme circumstances people may be prepared to risk or even shed their lives for religious values, ideological beliefs or nationalist identities. Our world has never been short of this.

other demobilizing effect that adversity and a 'realistic' assessment of this may induce. Furthermore, in mustering strong commitments they can curtail collective action's 'free rider' problem. As such, ideal interests may offset mobilization costs by instilling among its adherents an esprit of voluntarism, endurance, dedication and even altruism. Among the weapons of the weak, ideal interests and their symbolic expressions –through songs, chants, drama, marches, flags, prayers, acts of communal solidarity and the power of words-- may well be the most potent resource available. After all, it is through their sparks of idealism and hope that resistance and struggle become a meaningful and worthwhile endeavor.

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