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## **The landless rural workers' movement (MST) and democracy in Brazil**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the Movement of Landless Rural Workers' (MST) relations with democracy in Brazil. The MST is Latin America's premier grassroots organization and one of the most significant social movements for land reform in world history. Contrary to influential views, this essay argues that the MST is not an "anti-state" or "anti-democratic" organization. MST engagements with Brazil's political institutions are multifarious and dynamic. These include public activism and acts of civil disobedience, lobbying and bargaining, *ad hoc* societal corporatism, electoral participation, and manifold relations with the rule of law. Given the crude realities of Brazil's agrarian struggle –and the actual options available to the MST-- the movement's oppositional demeanor and pressure politics must be understood, first and foremost, as grounded on practical considerations rather than any dogmatic ideology. The MST's contentious edge has been necessary to advance Brazil's agrarian reform and improve the quality of its democracy by: (1) strengthening civil society through the organization and incorporation of marginalized sectors of the population; (2) highlighting the importance of public activism as a catalyst for social development; (3) facilitating the extension and exercise of basic citizenship rights among Brazil's poor; and, (4) engendering a sense of utopia and affirmation of ideals imbued in Brazil's long term, complex and open-ended democratization process. By virtue of birth and necessity, the MST's distinct mark on Brazilian democracy has been that of the tough touch.

## Resumo

Este trabalho examina as relações do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) e a democracia no Brasil. O MST é a principal organização popular da América Latina e um dos mais importantes movimentos sociais pela reforma agrária na história mundial. Contrariando certas opiniões influentes, este ensaio argumenta que o MST não é uma organização “anti-Estado” ou “anti-democrática.” As ações do MST junto as instituições políticas do Brasil são multifacéticas e dinâmicas. Estas incluem o ativismo público e atos de desobediência civil, lobby e negociações, um corporativismo social *ad hoc*, participação eleitoral, e relações diversas com o Estado de Direito. Dada a crua realidade da luta agrária no Brasil –e as opções reais disponíveis ao MST— a conduta de resistência e pressão política deve ser compreendida, em primeiro lugar, como sustentada em considerações práticas antes que em qualquer ideologia dogmática. O perfil contencioso do MST tem sido necesario para avançar a reforma agrária no Brasil e melhorar a qualidade da sua democracia, no sentido de ir: (1) fortalecendo a sociedade civil a través da organização e incorporação de setores marginalizados da população; (2) realçando a importância do ativismo público como catalisador do desenvolvimento social; (3) facilitando a extensão e exercício de direitos básicos de cidadania entre os pobres; e, (4) gerando um sentido de utopia e afirmação de ideais que impregnan o proceso de democratização do Brasil no seu longo prazo, complexidade e consequências abertas. Por virtude de nascimento e necessidade, a marca distintiva do MST junto a democracia brasileira tem sido a do toque duro.

*If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.*

*Frederick Douglass*<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Letter written by Frederick Douglas to an abolitionist associate, in 1849; see Bobo, Kendall, and Max (1996).

two were *sem terra* (landless peasants) and one was a police officer killed during a protest melee in Porto Alegre. The piecemeal and scattered settlement of all the Annoni families was completed only in 1993.<sup>2</sup>

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

This paper seeks to address two basic issues. How does the MST relate to Brazil's political process? And what is the MST's contribution to democracy in Brazil? These queries, however, beg an initial question: what is the MST? Hence, this study begins by offering a brief overview of the MST –the historical context in which it emerged, its evolution, and sources of strength. The following two sections examine the multifarious ways in which the MST engages the broader political process. In doing so, I critique a recurrent appraisal leveled by prominent analysts of this social movement.

Influential Brazilian intellectuals like José de Souza Martins, Zander Navarro and Francisco Graziano argue that the MST's confrontational relations with Brazil's governing institutions are harmful for democracy. For Martins, emeritus professor at the University of Sao Paulo and Brazil's most renowned rural sociologist, the MST is the local equivalent to the English Luddite movement, a short-lived popular uprising in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century famed for wrecking new factory machines. Incited by similar "fundamentalist" beliefs, the MST "refuses to recognize the institutional legitimacy and actions of the government and the state." In fact, according to Martins, the movement's actions and demands represent a "pre-political and precarious attempt to demolish the political order." Navarro, professor of sociology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, describes the MST as an "anti-systemic" and "anti-state" organization, driven by a hardened Marxist disposition toward non-institutional venues of action. Graziano, a former federal deputy (PSDB-Sao Paulo) who was briefly head of Brazil's land reform agency under President Fernando Henrique

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<sup>2</sup> These statistics are from an extensive database I constructed on "Land Mobilizations in Rio Grande do Sul, 1978-2003." Information for this database was compiled from numerous sources, principally archival material found at the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) offices in Goiânia and Porto Alegre. Other documents consulted include INCRA-RS (2003); MST-RS (2003); various issues of the MST's *Jornal Sem Terra*; and various issues of Rio Grande do Sul CPT's *Voz da Terra*. Between 1991 and 2003 I conducted interviews with over 250 land reform activists, social scientists, Church authorities, and relevant government officials in Rio Grande do Sul. I am particularly grateful to Luiz Antônio Pasinato of the CPT office in Porto Alegre for his assistance in gathering valuable statistics.

Cardoso and currently runs an agribusiness consultancy firm, depicts the MST as “an authoritarian guerrilla organization” that is “undermining democracy” with its land occupations, and even abetting “a terrorism of sorts in the countryside.” All three prominent analysts contend that the MST is essentially an “anti-democratic” movement.<sup>3</sup>

In this text I demonstrate that this purported conflict between the MST and Brazil’s democratic institutions is far more rhetorical than real. The MST is not an “anti-state” organization. Quite to the contrary, it demands that the state play a more active role in social development. Furthermore, the movement is continuously engaged in lobbying and bargaining with different echelons of the state, and has taken up numerous projects in collaboration with public authorities. The MST’s sharp impetus is notably conditioned by Brazil’s striking inequality in land distribution, widespread rural poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and ongoing human rights violations in the countryside. Given the nature of this agrarian struggle –and the actual options available to the MST-- the movement’s oppositional demeanor and pressure politics must be understood, first and foremost, as grounded on practical considerations rather than any dogmatic ideology.

Finally, I argue that the MST’s contentious edge has been necessary to advance agrarian reform and improve the quality of Brazil’s democracy. As I explain, the MST has contributed to democracy by: (1) by strengthening Brazilian civil society through the organization and incorporation of marginalized sectors of the population; (2) highlighting the importance of public activism as a catalyst for social development; (3) facilitating the extension and exercise of basic citizenship rights -- civil, political and social rights-- among the poor; and, (4) engendering a sense of utopia and affirmation of ideals imbued in Brazil’s long term, complex and open-ended democratization process.<sup>4</sup>

An amiable and institutionalized MST, as Martins, Navarro and Graziano seem to prefer, would render the movement innocuous and defeat its *raison d’etre*. In light of the crude realities of Brazilian rural politics and the traditional powers accrued by its large landholders, it would be naïve, at best, to expect the MST’s struggle for land reform to require anything less than a ‘tough touch’.

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<sup>3</sup> The citations are from Martins (2000: 18-19, 26); Navarro (2002a: 208, 211; 2002b: 279); Graziano (2004: 304, 72). Also see Martins (2003). The ideas espoused by all three analysts have received ample attention in Brazil’s mainstream media. Martins and Navarro are former advisors to the MST and the Church’s Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT).

<sup>4</sup> This approach to democratization draws on Laurence Whitehead (2002).

## Understanding the MST: context, evolution and sources of strength

The setting for the MST story is Brazil –the fifth largest country in the world, both in territory and population, the tenth leading economy, one of the most unequal societies on the globe in terms of income distribution, with one of the world’s highest patterns of land concentration. According to Brazil’s census bureau, 1% of the landholders controlled 45% of the nation’s farmland, while close to 37% of the landowners held only 1% of this same area.<sup>5</sup> This starkly unequal agrarian structure is a consequence of Brazil’s history. The legacy started with the Portuguese crown’s vast *sesmaria* land grants to privileged colonial families. This inequality has persisted throughout the 183 years following independence from Portugal in 1822; and done so under different regimes –empire, oligarchic republic, military dictatorship, and democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Officially, the MST was founded in January 1984, in the grain-belt city of Cascavel, at the south-western edge of the state of Paraná. It emerged under the aegis of the ecumenical Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT) as a coalition of peasant groups involved in different and widely scattered land struggles taking place in Brazil’s southern half. Undoubtedly, the most widely recognized of all these struggles was the 1981 landless camp at Natalino’s country road crossing, located only a mile away from the Annoni estate in Rio Grande do Sul. The mobilization at Natalino’s crossing is, in many regards, the Brazilian equivalent to the 1955-56 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycotts, which led to the formation of the United States civil rights movement. Indeed, both episodes were propelled by vital religious support and served to catalyze impressive nation-wide movements.<sup>7</sup>

The MST’s genesis in southern Brazil was facilitated by the region’s relatively high levels of rural development, state capacity, education and social capital. The strong family farm legacy, particularly in Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná, a consequence of intense European immigration after the mid 1800s, helped foster a historically active and inventive civil society. More specifically, the movement’s emergence in southern Brazil was spurred by: (1) previous land mobilizations in the late 1950s and early 1960s which set an important historical precedent; (2) an accelerated leap toward agricultural modernization, beginning in the mid 1960s, that left many small farmers outside the land market; (3) the

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<sup>5</sup> This data is from the last agrarian census taken in Brazil; see IBGE (1996).

<sup>6</sup> For helpful historical reviews of Brazil’s agrarian structure and politics, see Raymundo Faoro (1957); Shepard Forman (1975); José de Souza Martins (1997, 1994, 1991, 1990); Alberto Passos Guimarães (1989, 1982); Lígia Osorio Silva (1996); Leonilde Sêrvolo de Medeiros (1989); Marianne Schminck and Charles H. Wood (1992); João Pedro Stédile (1994, 1999); Guilherme Costa Delgado (2005).

<sup>7</sup> On the Natalino movement see Carter (2003, 2005b). For a gripping account of the Montgomery bus strike and the origins of the US civil rights movement, see Branch (1988).

construction of large hydroelectric dams, starting in the early 1970s, that displaced numerous peasant families; (4) enhanced political opportunities for mobilization in the late 1970s, as result of the military regime's gradual *abertura*; and, (5) the progressive engagement of religious agents, inspired by a theology of liberation and Catholic Church innovations ushered after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Indeed, 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 Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup>

Building on a progressive network of Church and rural trade union support, the MST expanded to other regions in Brazil, and by the mid 1990s was present in 23 of the country's 27 federal units. Since this time, the MST has become particularly active in Brazil's impoverished north-eastern region. Presently, an estimated 350,000 families have obtained land through MST struggles, in roughly 1,300 government-sanctioned agricultural settlements. The movement has established 88 cooperatives and 96 food processing plants, of different size and measure of success.<sup>9</sup> In the last two decades, the MST has prodded the Brazilian government to distribute close to seven million hectares or 43,000 square miles –a territory the size of Ireland or the state of Louisiana.<sup>10</sup>

There are many peasant organizations engaged in Brazil's mobilization for land reform. The MST is predominant in the south, where it originated. But the struggle in the northeast and Amazonian region has been led primarily by rural trade unions and various locally organized movements, including informal groups of squatters. Today, about 45% of Brazil's agrarian settlements are in some way connected to the MST.<sup>11</sup> More than 70% of the land that has been distributed since 1979, however, resulted from mobilizations undertaken by peasants groups that were not linked to the MST. This is particularly the case in the Amazonian region where almost 75% of Brazil's land distribution has taken place. All told, since 1979, the Brazilian state has assigned close to 30 million hectares for land reform –a territory

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<sup>8</sup> Key sources on the MST's history and evolution include Branford and Rocha (2002); Carter (2005a, 2005b); Fernandes (2000); Morissawa (2001); Navarro (1996); Ondetti (2002); Wright and Wolford (2003). A helpful review of the Church's involvement in support of the MST can be found in Poletto (2005); Poletto and Canuto (2002); Adriañce (1996); Paiva (1985). More generally on Brazil's progressive Church, see Beozzo (1994); Della Cava (1989) and Mainwaring (1986).

<sup>9</sup> See MST (2004a).

<sup>10</sup> Area occupied by MST settlements is noted in MST (2003).

<sup>11</sup> This figure covers settlements with both loose and dense ties to the MST. See Fernandes (2005).



the size of Italy, or twice the area of New Mexico.<sup>12</sup> The vast majority of these allocations have resulted from peasant land struggles.

The MST gained ample national visibility in the mid 1990s, through the substantial increase of land mobilizations after 1995 and ample media coverage of dramatic developments in the countryside. During this time the mass media gave considerable attention to a series of land occupations in the Pontal do Paranema, an area located in the westernmost edge of São Paulo, Brazil's wealthiest and most populous state. Two massacres of landless peasants in the Amazon region further compounded awareness of the country's agrarian problems. In August 1995, the police executed nine members of a local landless organization, including a seven-year old child, in Corumbiara, Rondônia. The repercussions of this event, however, paled next to the national and international dismay conveyed over the April 1996 police massacre of 19 MST peasants in Eldorado dos Carajás, Pará. Televised footage of the event stirred loud public condemnation of the police bloodbath. This episode galvanized national concern and sympathy for the landless movement. Adding to this momentum, two months later, Brazil's television mogul O Globo aired *O Rei do Gado* (The King of Cattle), a highly popular soap opera that offered a benign, albeit patronizing depiction of the landless struggle. Together, these developments enhanced the MST's public prominence and general recognition as Brazil's leading social movement. By April 1997, opinion polls showed that 94% of the population felt the MST's struggle for land reform was just, and 85% indicated a support for non-violent land occupations as a way to accelerate government reform efforts.<sup>13</sup>

Contrary, however, to what is often portrayed in the media, feared with a sense of paranoia by the right, and romanticized by the idealistic left, the MST is not a large powerhouse in the country's political scene. In fact, it is an organization of poor people, operating with scarce resources, and many of the collective action problems that one usually finds in grassroots organizations of this kind. Indeed, the MST's current might stems in part from an important level of media inflation. Its colorful actions and sharp pronouncements made by its leaders garner regular press attention. In part, this has resulted from the movement's growing ability to generate

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<sup>12</sup> These figures are based on data provided by the Brasília office of the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA), in July 2003. See MDA, INCRA, SND (2003). My calculus for the Amazonian region includes all the states that are part of what is officially known as "legal Amazonia."

<sup>13</sup> These figures are from Ibope, one of Brazil's leading polling firms, and were published by O Estado de São Paulo on April 16, 1997. Ibope polling data for the year 2000 revealed that 91% of the population continued to support land reform, while 63% viewed the MST in favorable terms; see Comparato (2003: 190-191).

its own publicity. On the whole, though, media coverage of the MST has been quite negative, and at times blatantly hostile.<sup>14</sup> The myths and misunderstandings about the MST constructed by the Brazilian press cannot be underestimated.

The MST's strength, while virtual in some respects, is more than simply an imaginary manifestation. Seven factors help explain its real sources of power. First, the movement possesses a large membership and the adroit ability to mobilize masses of people. Currently, there are more than one million adults in Brazil that would identify themselves as members of the MST.<sup>15</sup> The movement has sponsored some of the largest popular mobilizations and protest rallies in recent Brazilian history. In April 1997, for instance, the MST convened a large national march to Brasília, on the first anniversary of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre. The event mobilized tens of thousands of people across the country. On the final day, three columns of marchers converged to the nation's capital from distant corners of the country, gathering a crowd of 100,000 in front of the National Congress—one of the largest demonstrations in the history of Brasília.<sup>16</sup>

Second, since its inception, the MST has not only developed a sophisticated organizational structure and sharpened its strategic capacities, but also fostered inventive means for dealing with its logistical problems. Over the years, the movement has shown a discernible capacity for innovation, and the ability to learn from past mistakes. MST ingenuity is most clear in the way its local activists plan and carry out their generally risky land occupations—non-violent mass mobilizations which are conducted with military-like acumen. The movement has also been creative in its fundraising efforts. In Rio Grande do Sul, for example, the MST established a labor cooperative to help sustain its landless camps. Organized in 1996, CooperTchê supplies workers to agribusiness firms, like the apple industry,

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<sup>14</sup> Informative accounts of the Brazilian media's portrayal of the MST can be found in Berger (1998) and Comparato (2003). Carlos Wagner, a veteran reporter on land reform issues for southern Brazil's leading newspaper, Zero Hora, claims that this daily took a decisively anti-MST position in the early 1990s, and has remained a conservative critic of the movement ever since. Carlos Wagner, interview by the author, tape recording, Porto Alegre, RS, 1 July 2003. Further illustration of this point can be gleaned by reviewing the harsh coverage of the MST in Brazil's best-selling weekly news magazine, *Veja*, an issue discussed in further detail in footnote number 47.

<sup>15</sup> This number is admittedly precarious. The MST has no formal membership roster and no surveys have ever been taken to quantify the movement's actual membership. In June 2004, the MST claimed to have helped settle close to 350,000 families, while mobilizing an additional 160,000 families in its encampments throughout Brazil. Based on these numbers, a conservative calculus of two adults per family would estimate a million plus membership. MST figures are from, MST (2004a). Among movement members, levels of commitment to the organization are variable. The prospects of an enduring rapport are enhanced by the MST's mobilizing experiences, notably its landless camps. The MST is well-known for its efforts to nurture a strong identity and sense of pride among its followers. In doing so, it draws from on an array of symbols and cultivates a sense of "*mística*" (or mystique).

<sup>16</sup> A thorough account of this march can be found in, Chaves (2000); and Dos Santos, Ribeiro and Meihy (1998).

and provides a fraction of the wages to support people at the landless camps and cover their mobilization costs. In 2000, CooperTchê's net profit equaled US\$ 400,000; a fourth of which was used to finance general MST activities in Rio Grande do Sul.<sup>17</sup>

Third, the movement's national coordination, decentralized bodies, and organic leadership, enable it to function in a cohesive yet flexible manner. The MST relies fundamentally on volunteers. It is not a bureaucratic organization. Yet over the years it has improved its level of professionalism. Today, the MST's main national and state offices employ regular staff, albeit at minimal living stipends. Though consistent and synchronized in many of its tactics, the movement allows for regional variation and experimentation. Its leaders are essentially of peasant origin. They reside mostly in agricultural settlements, live modestly, and maintain close ties with their constituency.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, the movement has placed a uniquely strong emphasis on the education of its participants and cadres. This sets the MST apart from most other peasant movements in Latin America. Presently, the MST runs a network of 1,800 primary and secondary schools, attended by 160,000 children. Its 3,900 teachers use pedagogical methods inspired by Paulo Freire and teaching materials developed by the MST's own educational team. Furthermore, the MST has established an adult literacy program, currently serving 30,000 people.<sup>19</sup> The movement has invested much in preparing its activists, creating several training centers for this. In the last twenty years the movement held hundreds of workshops on a range of issues –such as health, education, gender, political economy, ecology-- for more than 100,000 activists.<sup>20</sup> In early 2005 the movement inaugurated its first university, the Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes, named after a renowned Brazilian intellectual, on an attractive campus near the city of São Paulo.

Fifth, the MST has strong ties to, and relies upon, important allies and a resourceful network in Brazilian civil and political society. Moreover, the movement has become adept at capitalizing on pockets of sympathy within the Brazilian state, including those in the land reform institute, INCRA. Civil society support for the MST involves a range of actors, most notably of which are sectors of the Catholic Church and traditional Protestant denominations, national labor and peasant unions,

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<sup>17</sup> This account is based on interviews conducted with the CooperTchê's original mentor, Antoninho Juscelino Mattes, interview by author, tape recording, Porto Alegre, RS, 25 November 2000; and, Viamão, RS, 9 July 2003.

<sup>18</sup> For a relevant discussion of the MST leadership see, Petras and Veltmeyer (2001).

<sup>19</sup> See MST (2004b). For key texts on the MST's approach to education see, Kolling, Cerioli, Caldart (2002); Caldart (2000); and Kane (2001) for a comparative review of popular education in Latin America.

<sup>20</sup> See Carvalho (2005: 24).

progressive NGOs, and elements of the country's educational and cultural establishment. Within political society, the movement historically has enjoyed the backing of the leftist Worker's Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) and other progressive forces. The MST has also benefited from global sources of funding, principally from church agencies in Europe. Furthermore, it has received many national and international distinctions, such as the alternative Nobel Prize in 1991, and the King Baudouin award conferred by the government of Belgium in 1996. The movement maintains ties with many organizations around the globe, including MST solidarity groups established in 14 European and North American countries. Through its affiliation with *Vía Campesina*, an international peasant coalition, the MST maintains contacts with small farmers' organizations in 43 nations.

Sixth, though a poor people's organization, the MST is endowed with a modest supply of material resources –vehicles, offices, computers, cell phones, and the like-- needed to carry out its basic engagements. Its financial means come from a variety of sources. These include monies for development projects administered by the movement, underwritten by national and state governments, as well as international agencies. In addition, the MST receives contributions from its cooperatives and members, through informal union-like dues, usually a 2-3% surcharge on agricultural credits obtained from the federal government. Landless encampments normally secure their food through a combination of sources, such as donations from INCRA, state and local governments, family and friends, and assistance from an array of sympathizers within civil society, including churches, trade unions, and NGOs. By and large, the MST is better endowed in the Brazilian South and poorer in the country's lesser developed regions of the North and Northeast.

Seventh, the ideal interests that permeate substantial aspects of the organization generate a strong sense of identity, intense social energy, and forceful convictions, particularly among the movement's activists. The MST's struggles are driven by more than just material interests. Much of its impetus is derived from what Max Weber defined as an ideal interest (or value-rational) orientation towards social action. Actors motivated by ideal interests are strategically oriented toward the fulfillment of an absolute, non-negotiable goal. MST mobilizations are frequently infused with this quality. Ideal interest behavior is characterized by a fusion of striving and attaining, rather than optimizing.<sup>21</sup> It generates strong feelings that result from and propel its mass mobilizations. Its collective interactions powerfully alter the

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<sup>21</sup> For Weber's brief characterization of value-rational behavior see Weber (1978: 24-26). The concept of "fusion of striving and attaining" is taken from Albert O. Hirschman (1982: 85).

individual calculus and decision making of its members. Moreover, they regularly display dense symbolic repertoires –through flags, songs, chants, marches, theatre, and other ritual gatherings—that stir courage and vitality among its participants. MST members describe these moments as comprising part of their “*mística*.” In conversations with movement activists it is not uncommon to hear them convey expressions of striking emotional attachment, such as: “I love the MST,” “The MST is my life.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Engaging the democratic process: the MST’s public activism and Brazil’s political institutions**

MST relations with Brazil’s political system are multifarious and dynamic. This owes much to the assorted structure of the Brazilian state, including its multiple layers, decentralized institutions and variegated forms of access. Brazil’s federalist regime, strong local governments, distinct electoral system, and intricate bureaucratic apparatus play a key role in shaping the MST’s repertoire for collective action. At any given juncture, the movement’s choice of tactics will be determined largely by the perceived opportunities and challenges at stake. In the MST’s own parlance, its range of strategic options emerges from its own “analysis of the correlation of social and political forces.” This section offers a brief review of the movement’s principal patterns of engagement with Brazil’s political institutions –the MST’s public activism and acts of civil disobedience, lobbying and bargaining, ad hoc societal corporatism, electoral participation, and manifold relations with the rule of law.

*Public activism.* The MST is well-known for its contentious politics, particularly its disruptive mobilizations. Some of these entail lawful protest activities; others involve direct action tactics and civil disobedience. Public activism refers to organized, politicized, visible, autonomous, periodic and largely non-violent forms of social conflict. This pattern of contentious politics is geared essentially towards drawing public attention, influencing state policies, and shaping societal ideas, values and actions.<sup>23</sup>

The MST’s penchant towards public activism is conveyed through an array of protest activities. Most of these include authorized demonstrations such as marches, some of which may extend for several hundred miles, usually to the state capital, or

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<sup>22</sup> Max Weber’s ideal interest concept is treated extensively in Carter (2005b, 2003). Other social movement analyses that underscore the importance of passionate commitments can be found in, Goodwin, Jasper, and Poletta (2001); and Aminzade and McAdam (2001).

<sup>23</sup> Typically, mobilizations of this kind employ an array of modern repertoires of contention –namely, marches, pickets, petitions, group meetings, sit-ins, building takeovers, organized land occupations, rallies, hunger strikes, road blockades, protest camps, and election campaigns. On this theme see Tarrow (1998) and Tilly (1983, 1979).

even to Brasília; hunger strikes; and, the organization of landless camps, generally along the edges of public highways, government-sanctioned areas, or private land holdings that belong to MST sympathizers such as the Church or a charitable farmer. These landless camps, with their makeshift plastic tents, well-organized and disciplined life-style, and red-MST flags flying overhead, are perhaps the most visible, well-known and ingenious repertoires for MST contention. The encampments not only make the demand for land reform perceptible. They also facilitate MST consciousness-raising activities among the landless, enable the preparation of other protest mobilizations, and help the movement recruit and train its new cadre.

*Civil disobedience.* The most controversial tactics employed by the MST entail acts of passive resistance to civil laws. Principally among these forms of public activism are: land occupations of private or public land, sit-ins at government buildings, and highway blockades. On occasion, faced with hunger and dire need, some MST encampments have stopped and pillaged trucks transporting food, a tactic mostly confined to the poor backlands of the Brazilian northeast. These forms of MST engagement are essentially mass-based, non-violent, yet strong-arm tactics. They often violate conventional laws, notably those protecting property rights. State tolerance or repression of these forms of protest depends principally on the political persuasion of relevant authorities, notably the state governors who control the police and other law enforcement officers. Violent police evictions of land and building occupations are not uncommon. Yet most MST acts of civil disobedience end peacefully, usually the result of lengthy negotiations with police, judicial and political officials. These protest mobilizations are invariably geared toward publicizing a demand and bringing state authorities to the negotiating table.

The MST's use of civil disobedience and other non-violent tactics is not accidental. Indeed, its public activism is conditioned by the presence of a relatively strong state, political opportunities for social protest, and the access to substantial mobilizing resources. This milieu structures incentives that incline the movement to bargain with state authorities and build partnerships with other civil and political society actors. The MST's public activism, therefore, is substantially different from other forms of social conflict, namely, organized insurgencies, scattered riots, and what James Scott describes as "everyday forms of resistance."<sup>24</sup> Unlike these patterns of contention, the MST's visible, organized, politicized and nonviolent drive makes it compatible with civil society.

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<sup>24</sup> According to Scott, everyday forms of resistance employ informal and disguised forms of aggression such as poaching, foot-dragging, evasion, anonymous threats, sabotage and arson. See Scott (1985, 1990); also Colburn (1989).

*Lobbying and bargaining.* MST pressure tactics do not emerge in a vacuum, but rather in a context of frustrated petitions and ongoing negotiations with public officials. These dealings can take place at national, state and local levels of government. The MST's most frequent interlocutors are the staff of the Ministry of Agrarian Development and, especially, its land reform agency, INCRA. This stems from the fact that Brazil's agrarian reform laws are a privy of its federal government. If the issue, however, is getting public monies disbursed on time, the target for MST insistence and bargaining could be the Bank of Brazil or the Ministry of Finance. Since 1993, the MST has held fairly regular meetings with all of Brazil's presidents.

*Ad Hoc Societal corporatism.* Yet another mode of interaction with the Brazilian state could be treated as a loosely organized pattern of interest representation, with limited, horizontal (rather than subordinate) access to state resources and policymaking bodies.<sup>25</sup> Over the years, the MST has signed a number of formal agreements with the federal government and other sub-national agencies to carry out a variety of development projects, notably in the field of education and public health. In 2004, for example, it established a natural medicinal plant in state of Ceara, with support from the state-owned oil company, Petrobras. Furthermore, MST representatives have occasionally been invited to take part of government commissions to establish, for instance, guidelines for credit distributions to new land reform settlers. At other junctures, movement leaders have actually taken part of the administration of a local government or even help run a state agency. For example, when the PT won the government of Rio Grande do Sul in 1998; it invited the MST to direct the rural development agency responsible for agrarian reform. In some locales, MST members have taken an active role in municipal councils dealing with health, education and other welfare issues. Over all, this pattern of interaction has emerged only under specific political conditions and resulted in limited policy undertakings. Unlike the societal corporatist experience of labor unions in much of Western Europe, Brazil has no comprehensive national framework for incorporating the MST into the relevant policy-making process.

*Electoral participation.* The MST has been involved in election campaigns and party politics since the mid 1980s. Its longstanding ties to the PT are well-known. While both associations share many members, they have, nonetheless, traditionally run their organizations autonomously. This independence owes much to the fact the MST was founded separately from the PT. It was further reinforced by the PT's early

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<sup>25</sup> My use of "societal corporatism" follows Philippe C. Schmitter's (1974) classic distinction between societal and state corporatism.

decision to eschew ideological tenets from the historic left that would have sought to subordinate the movement to the party. Ties between the PT and MST were solidified in the mid 1980s with the formation of the party's National Agrarian Secretary and the Agrarian Nuclei of the Chamber of Deputies. Both party venues offered a space for dialogue and policy formulation that brought together PT officials, MST representatives, rural trade union leaders, and spokespersons from other progressive civil society organizations. In times of need, PT officials have customarily provided support for MST activists. The PT and MST usually converge strongly when both party and movement are in opposition to the governing authorities. The rapport becomes more problematic when the PT is the party in government, as is currently the situation with the Lula presidency. Overall, these tensions have been partially tempered by the MST's own political sagacity, including its ability to differentiate between foes and allies in the Lula government.

Not all people affiliated to the MST are supporters of the PT. In numerous places, particularly in the North and Northeast of Brazil, many peasants still engage in clientelist politics. By and large, though, the MST cadre has been diehard PT, and within the PT their tendency has been to identify with the party's more radical factions. Whenever possible, the MST will try to run its own PT candidates for local government, although they also have been known to make compromises with other political parties. In Rio Grande do Sul, the MST has been able to elect a four-term federal deputy and a representative to the state assembly.

*Relations with the rule of law.* The MST's relationship with the legal system is an issue of enduring controversy. Prevailing orthodoxy in Brazil assumes that MST land and building occupations are in conflict with the rule of law, and a sign of the movement's disdain for the state. This view, however, oversimplifies what is an altogether complex relationship. It ignores the fact that Brazil's justice system is cripplingly bureaucratic and saturated with class bias; hence much of the MST's difficulties in dealing with the legal system.<sup>26</sup> What is more, the movement's acts of civil disobedience embody many constitutive elements of an alternative legal order. As with many social movements around the world and in history, the MST is very much involved in disputes over legal interpretation and application. The new 1988 Constitution, for instance, upholds agrarian reform and qualifies property rights by their social function. Despite these provisions, most judges insist on applying the Civil Code's absolutist approach to property rights and thus criminalize MST activists.

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<sup>26</sup> An instructive review of the inefficiency and class bias of legal institutions in Latin America, with ample references to Brazil, can be found in Méndez, O'Donnell and Pinheiro (1999).



In a major victory for the movement, a 1996 decision by Brazil's highest court ruled that land occupations designed to hasten reform were "substantially distinct" from criminal acts against property. This ruling acknowledged, in a sense, the legitimacy of the movement's acts of civil disobedience. Far from simply disdaining legality, the MST has actively contributed to shaping the debate on the nature and function of law. In fact, the movement regularly lobbies higher echelons of the judiciary. It possesses an active and expanding network of lawyers willing to run cases as well debate and advance legal concepts. Moreover, its land occupations are often planned with legal issues in mind, by targeting, for example, estates of dubious or illicit proprietorship.<sup>27</sup>

All of these considerations –the MST's disposition towards public activism, civil disobedience tactics, negotiations and lobbying with public authorities, societal corporatist engagements, electoral involvements, and intricate relationship with the rule of law-- highlight the complex nature of the MST's relations to Brazil's political institutions. Ostensibly, they demonstrate that for all its harsh rhetoric, the MST is not an "anti-state" movement, as some analysts would have us believe.<sup>28</sup> Quite to the contrary, the MST has repeatedly taken positions that favor a strong, nationalist, developmental state, oriented towards popular sector interests. These views are exemplified by the movement's forthright opposition to the privatization policies of the Collor and Cardoso administrations; its repeated calls for a moratorium on the foreign debt; strong support for greater social welfare policies; and repeated demands for adequate public resources to finance, equip, and staff the federal government's land reform agency, INCRA.

### **Contributing to democracy: pressure politics, citizenship rights, and utopia**

Throughout its history, the MST has been much more successful in shaping Brazil's public agenda and policy on agrarian reform than it has been in effecting change via electoral participation. Grassroots mobilizations and *pressure politics* have been at the heart of the MST's way of engaging with Brazil's democratic institutions. Electoral processes, while never irrelevant to the movement, have normally taken a back seat to other more assertive and direct tactics. As a civil society actor, the MST's has been mainly oriented towards influencing state policy rather than controlling the state apparatus itself. Put differently, its demands have

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<sup>27</sup> My observations on the MST's relation to the rule of law are greatly indebted to George Meszaros (2005; 2000). On the same topic also see Hammond (1999).

<sup>28</sup> See Navarro (2002a, 2002b), Martins (2003, 2000), Graziano (2004).

been geared primarily towards achieving a societal accountability of government officials.<sup>29</sup>

The MST was born and raised amidst social conflict. “*A gente tem que lutar*” (“We must struggle”) is a lesson learned since the origins of the movement. This idea has become deeply ingrained in the movement’s ethos and self-image. In everyday MST parlance, all of its “*vitorias*” and “*conquistas*” are the result of struggle; not the consequence a state bequest or political concession. The lesson learned in the last 25 years of landless mobilization is simple: pressure the state through public activism, and then negotiate the best deal possible. Afterwards, strive to obtain the next item on the agenda through another round of public activism and bargaining.

MST pressure politics, however ingrained, are not the result of mere ideological assumptions, as critics like Zander Navarro insist. Navarro sustains that the MST has “canonized” collective action as a result of its “fundamentalist” view of politics, fed by what he claims are “vulgar Marxist” ideas.<sup>30</sup> Given the options available, however, the MST’s preference for pressure politics is actually a quite rational strategy for maximizing its effectiveness. Considering the alternative means for accomplishing its objectives –electoral contestation, legislative representation, media influence, lobbying, or armed insurgency— pressure politics is clearly the most reasonable and cost effective option. Elections, for one, are an expensive affair in Brazil, and the MST does not have the funds necessary to put forth a national or gubernatorial candidate, or bankroll other sympathetic candidates.

For its part, legislative representation at the national and state levels offers limited benefits. Day-to-day agrarian policies are essentially controlled by the executive branch. State Assemblies, in particular, have very little power to legislate over agrarian matters since these issues fall mostly under the privy of the federal government. Moreover and most importantly, throughout its history, Brazil’s National Congress has been a major obstacle to progressive initiatives on land reform. This is due largely to the gross overrepresentation of regions where large landholding interests are strongest and clientelism most pervasive.<sup>31</sup> As a result, since re-

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<sup>29</sup> According to Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti societal accountability is a “vertical mechanism of control that,” unlike electoral accountability, “rests on the actions of a multiple array of citizens’ associations and movements and on the media.” Its actions employ both institutional and extra-institutional tools “to expose governmental wrongdoing, bring new issues onto the public agenda, or activate the operation” of agencies responsible for horizontal accountability, such as the judicial branch (2000: 150).

<sup>30</sup> Navarro (2002b: 261, 267, and 279).

<sup>31</sup> According to Alfred Stepan, one vote cast in the under-developed Amazonian state of Roraima has 144 times as much weight as one vote cast in the more progressive, industrial state of São Paulo (2001: 343). A useful historical review of Brazil’s problem of overrepresentation can be found in Snyder and Samuels (2004).

democratization, the largest voting bloc in Congress has been the conservative “*bancada ruralista*.” This multiparty coalition represented by members of the rural elite holds close to 40% of the seats in lower chamber.<sup>32</sup> The legislative arena, in sum, offers few possibilities for effective land reform action.

Other alternatives are equally impractical. The MST has no resources to establish a major media outlet in Brazil. Years of experience have taught the movement that lobbying alone is a toothless instrument if it is not supported by demonstrations and other forms of pressure politics. Finally, the guerrilla alternative would be a suicidal gamble for the MST. Despite a fondness for Che Guevara and other world revolutionary figures, the insurgent path has been widely discarded by the movement. In brief, none of the options reviewed here offer a viable choice.

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

Viewed in historical terms, MST public activism represents a bold reaction to Brazil’s durable inequities in land concentration, and a sensible attempt to overcome longstanding political impediments to agrarian reform. To date, no Brazilian government has instituted a comprehensive agrarian reform program. While there has been an overall trend towards greater land distribution since 1995, this development has not been sufficient to substantially alter the country’s stark land and social disparities.<sup>33</sup> Land reform continues to have many powerful opponents in Brazil. Brazil’s modern agrarian elites appear to be no more receptive to land reform than their traditional predecessors.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, one cannot take the diminished

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<sup>32</sup> Martins (2005).

<sup>33</sup> Land distribution increased considerably during the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002). The trend peaked in 1998, and dropped considerably by 2002. Land distribution figures for the early 2000s were, nonetheless, notably higher than they had been a decade earlier. The estimated number of landless families settled under the Cardoso era appears to be between 350,000 and 400,000, under 6% of the total farming population. Land reform statistics released by the Cardoso administration present a considerably higher figure: 600,000 families settled; a total of 7.6% of the nation’s farm families. These statistics, however, have been thoroughly questioned by various scholars and the Brazilian press. Indeed, there is credible evidence to suggest that government numbers were significantly inflated. For a constructive review of this debate and the achievements under the Cardoso era, see Ondetti (2004).

<sup>34</sup> *Pace* Martins (2000: 48). According to Martins, Brazil’s new agrarian elite had become amenable to land reform by the mid 1990s. Martins’ assessment, though, disregards the underlying and circumstantial economic and land market conditions then. The Real Plan’s successful economic stabilization, in the mid 1990s, coupled with a drop in agriculture prices and exports, as well as generous land values offered by INCRA, made it attractive for large landholders to sell their ranches to the state. Under these conditions and incentives many estate owners converted their properties into profitable liquid assets and provided the Cardoso government with a stock of land for redistribution.

visibility of large landholding associations, such as the *União Democrática Ruralista* (Democratic Rural Union, UDR), as a sign that Brazil's *latifundio* class has reached levels of "unprecedented weakness."<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, opponents of agrarian reform have proven adept at transmuting themselves, while relying on a longstanding array of informal power networks. Today, conservative rural interests entail an assorted group that includes powerful sectors of Brazil's burgeoning agribusiness lobby.

Faced with compelling resistance to land reform, the MST has continued to generate social pressure, and done so even after the election of President Lula da Silva, a longtime PT friend and MST sympathizer. For all its promises, the Lula administration has been slow and hesitant to carry out land distribution. Constrained by a large foreign debt, a tight fiscal budget, and conservative coalition partners, Lula's administration has left the MST and its allies with few options but to shore up public momentum for further reform. Between late March and early May 2004, for example, the MST led a wave of 109 land occupations in different parts of the country. As expected, these mobilizations stirred media attention and prompted new government promises, efforts and funds to further land reform.<sup>36</sup>

For the MST, pressure politics is more than just an instrument for exacting government concessions. The act of struggle also strengthens the movement's internal dynamics. Protest actions ensure that the movement remains active, and galvanize the passions and ideal interests which give the movement its remarkable resilience. MST mobilizations, particularly land occupations, are crucial moments in education of its activists. In a way, they constitute the MST's baptisms of fire. These powerful experiences, along with intense educational workshops, allow the movement to produce new generations of activists. Public activism, in other words, bolsters the movement's social capital, and keeps its ideal commitments and social energy alive.

Far from being a sign of "incongruence" and affront to democracy,<sup>37</sup> MST pressure politics and all the harsh rhetoric that usually comes with it, should be appreciated as a mark of democratic vitality and engagement. Democracy requires an active and resourceful civil society. MST mobilizations have done much to extend

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This particular juncture ended in 1999 with the devaluation of the Real. Contrary to Martins' observation, modern agrarian elites have been far less agreeable to "land reform" in recent years.

<sup>35</sup> Pace Navarro (2002b: 274). Navarro's analysis ignores the fact that the UDR's diminished status in the 1990s was a combined reflection of its success in the late 1980s and its internal disarray in the early 1990s. Class corrosion has not played a salient role in UDR's demise. For a solid review of the UDR's history and internal crisis, see Payne (2000). Throughout Brazil, many large landholding associations have remained particularly strong and active at the sub-national level

<sup>36</sup> See Scolese (2004).

<sup>37</sup> For such a depiction of the MST see Navarro (2002a: 219).

and fortify civil society in many rural areas by organizing and incorporating marginalized sectors of the population into this societal arena. Moreover, its protests on a range of issues –such as the use of genetically-modified seeds, human rights violations in the countryside, and the current economic development model-- have enriched Brazil's public debate and drawn attention to the country's deep problems of social injustice.

In sum, public activism and its pressure tactics represent an efficacious instrument and inspiring pedagogical process for the MST. They enable many of its accomplishments, while instilling a sense of pride, dignity and ownership among those involved in its mobilizations. Herein lays an added source of MST strength: a capacity to balance steadfast ideals with pragmatic solutions to everyday problems. This peculiar interplay enables the movement to both mobilize with great impetus and negotiate with skillful adroit.

The MST has been an important participant in the development of *citizenship rights* in Brazil –in all three contemporary dimensions of this idea: civil, political and social rights.<sup>38</sup> Since its origins the MST has fought for the right to mobilize freely and autonomously, and exercise its democratic right to influence decisions made by public authorities, independent of the electoral process. Through legal measures and publicity efforts, it has defended the basic human rights of hundreds of peasants who have been imprisoned, abused and assassinated for their land reform activism. MST struggles and accomplishments have also inspired many other grassroots mobilizations, both in the countryside and among urban poor. Many popular movements in Brazil –from peasant women to hydroelectric dam victims, small farmers, homeless people, and other landless groups-- have assimilated MST tactics and taken courage from its actions.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, the MST has helped galvanize Brazil's popular sectors and abetted its “transition from clientelism to citizenship.”<sup>40</sup>

Over the years, the MST has fostered numerous achievements –close to 1,300 land reform settlements for 350,000 families, 88 cooperatives, 1,800 schools, innovative educational programs, and new initiatives in agro-ecology. By improving the material conditions and cultural resources of its members, the movement has fortified the social foundations for democracy. When basic needs are met, people are unlikely to sell their votes on Election Day. In fact, the sense of character and dignity forged through long years of MST struggle has nurtured more conscientious citizens and fostered greater public participation in local affairs. By enabling people

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<sup>38</sup> As outlined originally by T.H. Marshall (1992).

<sup>39</sup> See Rosa (2005).

<sup>40</sup> See Fox (1994).

to use their political rights, the MST has helped integrate hundreds of thousands of poor and historically marginalized Brazilians into the democratic process.

MST demands to implement national agrarian reform laws are illustrative of the movement's efforts to bridge two striking gaps in Brazilian society –the abyss between rich and poor, and between the Constitution's social rights and their weak enforcement. The first aims to redress levels of disparity that place Brazil among the five most unequal societies in the world; and have led to the formation of a *de facto* social Apartheid. The second seeks to diminish the historic chasm between the *pays légal* and the *pays réel* –between the country's formal edifice (made “for the English to see,” as noted in a popular Brazilian saying), and its everyday reality. MST insistence on the fulfillment of progressive constitutional entitlements has been an effective instrument for furthering social rights. In doing so, it has created a realistic model of how the poor can become agents of their own development. The MST example shows that stakeholder participation is not a mere technical question in the field of development, but one entangled in power relations and inevitable political consequences. This phenomenon, however, is of no surprise to scholars of citizenship rights. As Charles Tilly reminds us, rights have been construed historically through years of resistance, struggle and bargaining with national authorities –*not* by gentle concessions from the ruling elite or the gradual enlightenment of society as a whole.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the MST contributes to democracy by *engendering a sense of utopia* and affirming many ideals that are part of democracy's long term, open-ended development. As Giovanni Sartori well put it, “what democracy *is* cannot be separated from what democracy *should be*. A democracy exists only insofar as its ideals and values bring it into being.”<sup>42</sup> Democracy is greatly impoverished if stripped of the dreams and desires for liberty, equality and participation that have made it possible.

The MST has been actively engaged in fostering social change and keeping a sense of utopia alive. In recent years, the belief that “another world is possible,” has found a congenial setting at the assemblies of the World Social Forum. This global gathering of progressive and alternative forces emerged as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forums established in Davos, Switzerland, a meeting point for leading financiers, corporate managers and heads of state. The MST has been very much involved with the World Social Forum since its first encounter in 2001. Indeed,

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<sup>41</sup> Tilly (2002).

<sup>42</sup> Sartori (1987: 7).

four of its five gatherings thus far have taken place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, not far from where the movement was actually born.

The MST has made grade strides since its precarious origins in the early 1980s. Today, the movement is a recognized player in the burgeoning global backlash against neo-liberalism, and is a prominent voice in the demand for greater social justice and ecological care. For many people around the world, the MST has become a sign of hope that “another world is possible.”

Democratization is a long-term and open-ended process that cannot be divorced from its democratic ideals.<sup>43</sup> As Max Weber perceptively wrote, humans “would not have attained the possible if time and again (they) had not reached out for the impossible.” A “steadfastness of the heart ... can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. This is necessary right now, or else (people) will not be able to attain even that which is possible today.”<sup>44</sup>

A democracy that does not inspire creativity, new horizons and innovation is a stale democracy. MST dynamism, ingenuity and demands for greater social justice – in a nation afflicted by remarkable inequities— represent a vital democratizing force. Indeed, this has been the role of many social movements around the world and throughout modern history.<sup>45</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Does the MST help strengthen democracy in Brazil? The answer by now should be quite evident. Yes, it does, but not through many of the conventional ways of liberal democratic politics. The Brazilian context is crucial for understanding this.

The initiative for agrarian reform in Brazil has had a very significant societal-led thrust. It has been highly conflictive and has cost hundreds of lives. The impunity over these killings has been astounding. According to the CPT, Brazil’s leading rural human rights organization, between 1985 and 2003 1,349 peasants, including dozens of children, have been killed in different rural conflicts. Only 76 of these assassinations, 5.6% of the total, have been brought to trial. Of these, only 64 of the actual gunmen and merely 15 of those who ordered these crimes have been condemned by the courts.<sup>46</sup> Only two of the 146 police officers responsible for the 1996 massacre of 19 peasants in Eldorado dos Carajás were condemned by a jury trial. All others were formally acquitted.

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<sup>43</sup> This point is persuasively argued in Whitehead (2002).

<sup>44</sup> The quote is from Weber’s essay, “Politics as a Vocation” (1958: 128).

<sup>45</sup> On the historical importance of social movements for democracy see Markoff (1996). More generally, on social movements and democratization see Tilly (2004).

<sup>46</sup> See CPT (2004).

Amidst all these conflicts, important sectors of the Brazilian political and media establishment have often portrayed the MST as a violent and raucous organization, led by radical fanatics.<sup>47</sup> Some of these views have been taken up by news outlets and respected analysts around the world. For instance, in a recent article about contemporary popular movements in Latin America, the editor of *Foreign Policy*, a prestigious journal published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, described Brazil's landless movement as advocating "policy lunacy."<sup>48</sup>

Yet of all the peasant organizations involved in Brazil's land struggles, the MST is certainly the most disciplined and nonviolent. For lack of a serious, comprehensive national land reform policy, peasant groups have been left with few alternatives to strong-arm, pressure tactics. As such, the MST's radicalism should be understood, principally, as a reaction to the adverse conditions that have hampered the implementation of land reform in Brazil.

Agrarian reform is not a "lunatic policy." Almost all substantially developed nations that have achieved discernible levels of social equity have experienced some type of land re-distribution. Notable cases of this are the industrialized countries of East Asia, namely, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and China. In today's Brazil, land reform is a relatively inexpensive way of generating jobs. In a society as starkly unequal as Brazil, with high levels of structural unemployment and underemployment, land distribution could help provide employment and foster conditions for further economic development. Indeed, a recent and very extensive government-commissioned study of Brazilian land reform indicates that it has improved people's living standards and spurred economic growth in many rural areas.<sup>49</sup>

One will find very few hardcore proponents of liberal democracy within the MST. In fact, MST members are far more likely to wear a Che Guevara T-shirt than one emblazoned with the figure of John Locke, Thomas Jefferson or Alexis de

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<sup>47</sup> A good example of this treatment can be found in *Veja* magazine's recurrent portrayal of the MST. *Veja* is Brazil's best-selling weekly publication. Recent articles on the landless movement include the following titles: "As *Madracais do MST*" (The MST's Madrassas), September 8, 2004; "A *Esquerda Delirante*" (The Delirious Left), front cover of the June 18, 2003 issue; "A *Bagunça Promovida pelo MST*" (Disorder Fostered by the MST) April 3, 2003; "A *Tática da Baderna*" (The Riot Tactic), front cover of the May 10, 2000 issue; "A *Esquerda Com Raiva*" (The Left With A Rage), June 3, 1998. MST lawyers sued *Veja* over its May 10, 2001 issue. Later that year, the Brazilian courts charged the magazine with defaming the movement and its leaders and ordered its publishing house to compensate the MST for moral damages. See Sociedade Interamericana de Imprensa (2001).

<sup>48</sup> Naim (2004).

<sup>49</sup> For the results of this major investigation, sponsored by the government's Núcleo de Estudos Agrários e Desenvolvimento Rural (NEAD), carried out by a competent team of scholar, see Leite et al. (2004).



Tocqueville. Within this movement, however, one is apt to find some of democracy's most fervent grassroots practitioners in Brazil.

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

The Annoni community was one of the largest in this overwhelmingly rural district. Hence, MST settlers were able to put forth a PT candidate and win a three-way election with almost 39% of the valid votes. This represented another milestone victory for the MST as it was the first time one of its members was elected mayor of its municipality. The 2000 vote for local government, however, involved a tight re-election contest, as the opposition formed a broad coalition against the left. The PT, nonetheless, won again with 56% of the valid votes, thanks to the MST's efforts among the Annoni settlers.<sup>50</sup> On the surface, such an outcome may be presumed the result of conventional democratic politics. The truth, though, is that the decisive election move was not as gingerly as one might be supposed.

Clientelism and patronage are a longstanding feature of Brazilian party politics.<sup>51</sup> During elections, such traditions often lead to vote-buying, a practice which especially affects the country's poorest social strata. While Brazil has strong legislation to punish such behavior, it has no compelling mechanisms to enforce these laws. In the months preceding the 2000 vote, anti-PT campaigners in Pontão got organized to purchase the support needed to win the election. Days before the election, they went out through the back country roads to offer car tires, money and groceries in exchange for votes. But the PT activists struck back with a string of all-night, gun-in hand roadblocks to prevent their rivals from buying out their more feeble supporters. One night, the roadblock crew fired warning shots towards an approaching vehicle. On another day, the PT militants had the police ground a truck

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<sup>50</sup> The 2004 municipal elections confirmed the PT's predominance with a 58% victory. The election data cited here was provided by Manoel Caetano de Araújo Passos of the Núcleo de Pesquisa e Documentação da Política Rio-Grandense (NUPERGS), at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS).

<sup>51</sup> For useful discussions of Brazilian clientelism see Mainwaring (1999) and Avelino (1994). Brazil's classic study on this issue was written by Leal (1993).

full of spare tires. And in between, they held back a second truck loaded with groceries. Thus, they were able to secure a tense election victory in Pontão.<sup>52</sup>

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

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<sup>52</sup> This account was gathered during a field visit to Pontão and neighboring municipalities shortly after the 2000 municipal elections. Problems with vote-buying or attempts to do so were reported in most of the nearby districts. As such, progressive candidates succeeded only where they were able to apply similar strong-arm tactics to thwart their adversaries' vote-buying efforts.

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