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Grass-Roots Struggle in the "Culture of Silence": Collective Dialogue and the Brazilian Landless Movement

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Grass-Roots Struggle in the “Culture of Silence”

Collective Dialogue and the Brazilian Landless Movement

College Scholars Senior Thesis

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Introduction

Connections Between Paulo Freire and the MST

The MST, short for *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, is known in English as Brazil's Landless Movement. It is the largest grass-roots agrarian reform movement in Latin America and has succeeded in pressuring the Brazilian government to expropriate and redistribute arable farmland to more than 350,000 landless families of tenant farmers, rural workers, and sharecroppers in Brazil.

Since 1985, the MST has employed a strategy of peaceful land occupations on unproductive plots of public or privately owned land. A clause in the Brazilian Constitution maintains that arable land must be used to meet its "social function," and failure to use good farmland for the cultivation of crops may result in the government's confiscation of the unused land. When the MST discovers a good plot of farmland that is lying unproductive, it organizes families of peasants and rural farm workers to occupy the site and begin cultivating the fields. Although MST settlers protest within the legal boundaries of the Constitution, they are usually met with fierce resistance from landowners and have to fight through court cases in hopes of winning the land title with the help of INCRA, Brazil's federal agency for colonization and agrarian reform.

Education and the development of political consciousness are central to the MST's practices and principles. Most MST settlements have adopted a radical pedagogy developed by Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire who taught adult literacy in rural Brazil in the mid-twentieth century. Freire's pedagogy revolves around teaching critical thinking and genuine communication skills that promote all levels of political

action and social awareness. Freire's ideas have been influential inside the MST's rural classrooms and beyond, shaping the MST's communication skills and patterns of political action as a collective unit.

MST protesters in the remote rural areas of Brazil are vulnerable to violent attacks by those who oppose the movement and its democratizing goals. Disgruntled landowners, state military police, and hired gunmen have all shed MST blood. On occasion, members have been criticized for carrying out actions in the name of the movement that the media or government consider subversive or illegal. While strictly opposed to bloodshed, the MST has in the past destroyed private property as a means of protest, and for years they have organized marches and public demonstrations for the purpose of raising public awareness of movement goals. Throughout its twenty-six years of existence as an official, organized movement, the MST has been engaged in an intricate and fascinating dialogue with the Brazilian government as well as national and international media as well as with other grass-roots organizations. As we examine these intricate relationships, it will be helpful to keep the following questions in mind in order to better understand MST as a social actor engaged in the practice of dialogue:

1. How is the MST presented by external news media sources, and whose point of view does the media represent?
2. What are the differences between representations of the MST by national news sources and international news sources?
3. What are the differences between representations of the MST by mainstream news sources and grass-roots news sources?

4. How does the MST draw allies into the national, international, and global discussion of agrarian reform?
5. What is the MST's praxis for dealing with opposition and circumstances it believes to be oppressive?

After setting up detailed background information on the MST and Paulo Freire, these questions will be explored in an analysis of the MST's relationship with the government and the media during the Cardoso and Lula administrations as well as the movement's relationship with President-elect Dilma Rousseff, who will take office in January of 2011.

Glossary

CEB Comunidade Eclesial de Base
Christian Ecclesiastical Base Community

CNBB Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil
National Conference of Brazilian Bishops

CPT Comissão Pastoral da Terra
Pastoral Land Commission

CUT Central Única dos Trabalhadores
United Workers' Central labor confederation

GMO genetically modified organism

INCRA Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária
Brazil's National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform

MST Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra
Landless Movement

PSDB Partido da Democracia Social Brasileira
Brazilian Social Democracy Party

PT Partido dos Trabalhadores
Workers' Party

agro-ecologia sustainable farming practices

Estatuto da Terra land statute instituted by the military immediately after its rise to power in 1964; allowed for “expropriation” and reappropriation of privately owned uncultivated farmland failing to meet its “social function”

favela urban slum

latifúndio large plantation

Jornal Sem Terra MST's grass-roots newsletter

Ligas Camponesas Peasant Leagues formed in 1955 by landless sugarcane workers in Pernambuco state

Vía Campesina international movement of small peasants' organizations advocating sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty

Table 1: General Statistics for Brazil

Population	193,733,795	International Fund for Agricultural Development	2009
Rural population	27,045,237	International Fund for Agricultural Development	2009
Rural population under poverty line	11,088,547	International Fund for Agricultural Development	2009
Literacy rate	90%	International Fund for Agricultural Development	2007
Total land area	8,459,420 sq. km	International Fund for Agricultural Development; World Bank	2008
Forested area	55.7% of total land	International Fund for Agricultural Development	2007
Arable land area ¹	7% of total land	International Fund for Agricultural Development; World Bank	2007
Agricultural land area	31% of total land	World Bank	2007
Brazilians suffering from hunger	31,500,000	Food and Agriculture Organization	2000
Brazilians suffering from hunger in rural areas	>15,750,000	Food and Agriculture Organization	2000

(www.ifad.org; www.worldbank.org; faostat.fao.org)

¹ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations defines arable land as "land under temporary crops, temporary meadows for mowing or pasture, land under market or kitchen gardens, and land temporarily fallow."

Table 2: Brazilian Land Reform Statistics (published by INCRA)

	Land occupations	Families participating in occupations	Settlements created	Families Settled	Area of settlements (in hectares)
	Ocupações de terra	Famílias em ocupações	Assenamentos criados	Famílias assentadas	Area dos assentamentos (ha)
1979-1987	-	-	436	105.778	7.247.245
1988	71	10.491	123	28.251	2.053.290
1989	86	20.350	115	12.136	696.200
1990	50	7.314	31	3.620	158.755
1991	85	14.990	87	15.464	774.640
1992	93	17.838	167	22.251	1.262.894
1993	116	19.442	74	5.513	196.473
1994	163	23.016	42	10.346	503.141
1995	186	42.746	409	63.622	2.957.220
1996	458	78.263	505	64.964	3.912.346
1997	513	69.453	710	92.296	3.645.960
1998	828	111.396	757	79.481	3.039.558
1999	897	118.620	599	51.379	2.215.473
2000	528	83.790	426	38.463	2.182.712
2001	283	45.537	475	35.606	1.833.080
2002	273	40.966	417	31.857	2.584.210
2003	555	92.883	327	29.553	5.290.618
2004	702	118.225	498	44.548	5.371.812
2005	569	73.283	1.056	124.040	14.523.107
2006	553	58.717	412	53.878	4.104.033
TOTAL	7.009	1.047.320	7.666	913.046	64.552.767
Dados: DATALUTA					
Org.: Eduardo Paulon Girardi					

(www.incra.gov.br : *Atlas da Questão Agrária Brasileira*)

Section I. The Landless Movement

Background and Current State of the MST in Brazil

I.1. Origins of the Brazilian Land Reform Movement

Brazil is South America's largest country by far, in terms of both geography and population. It also has one of the highest concentrations of land ownership in the world, with nearly half the nation's land (45%) being owned by 1% of the population, according to CETIM and the United Nations. For an economy based heavily on agriculture, such a startling statistic indicates more than just high concentration of wealth alongside widespread poverty. Agricultural exports account largely for Brazil's status as an economic world power, but the majority of the land used to grow export crops is owned by a small percentage of the population and sold out to enormous multi-national corporations. Most rural farmers in Brazil rely on subsistence farming, but such an unequal distribution of land means the disenfranchised demographic is not only excluded from wealth but also from essential resources fundamental to human survival.

A high rate of land ownership concentration is nothing new for Brazil, a country with a legacy of large estates that dates as far back as Brazil's incorporation into the Portuguese empire. The first Portuguese, under the command of Pedro Álvares Cabral, arrived on the South American continent in 1500, landing on Brazil's northeastern Atlantic coast. By 1534, the Portuguese king had split Brazilian territory into twelve captaincies, which he awarded to relatives, friends, and loyal supporters of the empire. Since the sixteenth century, Brazil has seen the continuation of a tradition of giant estates

owned by wealthy people who are typically of European descent. Most of these estates are plantation farms, called *latifúndios* in Portuguese, and these are the powerhouses that produce the bulk of Brazil's major exports—sugarcane, coffee, and in more recent years, soybeans.

Yet while the tradition of large estates has consistently dominated the Brazilian economy for centuries, the labor pool has not remained constant. From the mid-sixteenth century to the abolition of slavery in 1888, Brazil's *latifúndio* system relied almost entirely on slave labor. Abolition eventually forced plantation owners to replace slave labor with some other form of cheap labor if they wished to continue farming enormous areas of land with crops like sugarcane that require grueling, intense labor to harvest. Most *latifúndio* owners turned to poor European immigrants with agricultural backgrounds, hiring them as sharecroppers and forcing them to move frequently in order to prevent them from claiming squatters' rights. These temporary rural workers were forced to use all their land plots for crops deemed most profitable by the landowner, and often had trouble growing enough on the side to provide their own families with a sufficient amount of nutritious food (Wright and Wolford 3).

Unlike the slaves of former years, sharecroppers were legally entitled to a public education and a few other basic citizen rights. In rural areas, however, public schools were oftentimes substandard or nonexistent due to the government's general lack of funding and interest in educational programs for the children of the landless temporary workers. Because of high rates of illiteracy and the impossibility of earning enough money to save for the future, sharecropper families often had no means of improving their circumstances. Legally and nominally they were free laborers, but they remained

virtual slaves to a system of labor exploitation that failed to provide them with basic necessities.

The first attempts at organization for grass-roots agrarian reform took place in Pernambuco state located in the Northeastern region of Brazil—which is the country’s poorest region—with the formation of the Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Camponesas*). Organized by landless sugarcane workers in 1955, the Peasant Leagues failed to make much progress before the 1964 military coup d’état plunged the nation into political turmoil that was to last for twenty-one years. Although the Peasant Leagues were quickly squelched by a rightist military regime that preferred a land reform policy of agricultural modernization and frontier expansion, Northeastern sugarcane workers continued to strike and demand improved working conditions during the years of the dictatorship from 1964-1985(Branford and Rocha 44).

Landless people’s discontent was a potentially volatile force in the middle of the twentieth century in Brazil’s Southern region as well, and it was actually in the Southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul that landless rural workers’ seeds of discontent were to first fall on fertile ground. The military’s seizure of power managed to put the brakes on agrarian reform efforts made by the Peasant Leagues, and prospects for any type of social reform at all looked even bleaker after the military regime implemented the Institutional Act No. 5 in 1968, greatly increasing military powers and suspending most civil liberties. It wasn’t until the mid-1970s that pockets of popular resistance began to make much noise against the military government. The first major instances of urban resistance received prompt public attention and press coverage: in 1977, university students went on strike in the big coastal cities, with São Paulo auto workers following in

an even larger series of protests in 1978. Yet by 1975, left-wing resistance was also taking place in the more remote rural areas of Brazil, although it would still be several years before anyone paid much attention to the demands of the disenfranchised rural workers who were tired of the military government's staunch refusal to make any progress on the agrarian reform issue.

The first inklings of rural resistance actually surfaced in the progressive branches of the Catholic Church. In the 1970s, left-wing Catholic priests began to encourage the spread of liberation theology by planting small discussion groups called CEBs (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, or Christian Ecclesiastical Base Communities) in which laymen and clergy could meet to discuss the meaning of the gospel on an equal level with one another. In a period of intense political repression in which the military regime had severely reduced freedom of speech, CEBs were a safe place for not-so-discreet interpretations of Biblical teachings through a more socialist lens. Because the Catholic Church in Brazil stood solidly behind the secular authority of the military regime, progressive Catholics participating in the CEBs could operate in relative safety; the devout Catholic military government was hard-pressed to criticize Church-affiliated groups that were so heavily based on Biblical texts and religious ceremonies.

In 1975, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, a progressive sector of the Catholic Church, established the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* ("Pastoral Land Commission," abbreviated as CPT) in response to land conflicts in the Amazon region. The government may not have seen the CPT or the CEBs as a dangerous threat to military power, but these clergy-led groups were in fact quite subversive, subtle as their methods were. Resistance took the form of a socialist political ideology, but the emphasis

on religious texts and ceremonies made it difficult for a Catholic regime to find particular proof of anti-government tendencies (Wright and Wolford 8-12). Influenced by liberation theology, landless peasants grew restless to act in their own class interests and began mobilizing to take concrete action. The MST was born from this alliance between the progressive clergy and the landless farmers. The group's first mass mobilizations took the form of land occupations in Rio Grande do Sul in the middle of the military dictatorship.

The first occupation in the South was not well planned. Throughout the 1970s in Rio Grande do Sul, an indigenous tribe of Kaingang Indians had been permitting non-Indian settlers to move onto their reservation at Nonoáí, provided that the settlers agreed to pay rent for the land they farmed. Conflict broke out when an influx of settlers moved onto the land and refused to pay rent for their plots, and in 1978 the Kaingang declared war on the settlers, seizing their crops and burning their schools in an effort to expel them from the reservation. After the settler families were effectively driven away, the Rio Grande do Sul state government urged them to move to newly deforested areas of the Amazon region in the states of Mato Grosso, Rondônia, and Pará. About half of the families accepted the government's offer, but they were uniformly disappointed with the climate, which was unsuitable to their traditional farming methods and brought about an onslaught of tropical diseases. Malaria and other tropical illnesses wrought havoc on the settlers, especially their children, who were accustomed to a more temperate climate. Most refused to stay and eventually returned to the much cooler, moderate climate of the Brazilian south (Wright and Wolford 16-19).

The Kaingang ordeal brought to light some of the obvious problems with existing land reform "solutions" such as colonization of the Amazon or infringement of

indigenous lands. Meeting in the CEBs, disgruntled landless and their clerical allies started to assess the problems with settling on Indian land, or with meekly accepting an unsatisfactory government offer. Deciding to approach the situation from a different angle, the farmers and priests began scouting out unused land within the state, hoping to use legal loopholes in the military government's land policy to convince the government to reappropriate plots of unused land to landless families.²

On the verge of the 1980s, occupations were being organized in three locations within the state of Rio Grande do Sul. All three sites were privately owned *latifúndios*, and none were being used for cultivation at the time. Over a period of two years, settlers successfully remained camped on the grounds of the Macali, Brilhante, and Encruzilhada Natalino estates, erecting black polythene tents for shelter and collectively farming the land for food. After months of watching these landless farmers take such bold action, INCRA, the federal agency for land and colonization, legally expropriated the lands and allotted them to the campers. After this major legal victory, the peasants hoped to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the rest of society. They chose to call the movement the "*Movimento dos Sem Terra*," taking for themselves the name that had been given to them by a malicious military colonel who had meant it derogatorily³.

In an effort to organize and plan future occupations, the MST held its first organizing meeting at Cascavel, Paraná in 1984—the same year that the military left

² Because of the *Estatuto da Terra* land statute instituted by the military immediately after its rise to power in 1964, privately owned uncultivated farmland failing to meet its "social function" could be legally "expropriated" and reappropriated to an individual willing to use the land for crop production (Wright and Wolford 23).

³ Colonel Curió (see Wright and Wolford 38-40)

power and Brazil began the process of re-democratization. Since then, the MST has met in three more national congresses. Each congress is an opportunity for the movement to assess its goals and plan concrete changes for the future. In an effort to expand the movement into urban areas, the third National Congress of the MST decided to take their campaign into the cities with the slogan “Agrarian Reform: Everyone’s Struggle” and invited the poor of the favelas, the urban slums of Brazil, to return to the countryside and participate alongside rural peasants in land occupations. The MST grew in membership and spread to the other regions of Brazil. Today, it exists in twenty-three of the twenty-six Brazilian states and is covered regularly by national and local media.

On average, about 380 large estates are occupied per year, and judges end up ordering the expropriation of approximately 80% of the land that is occupied by MST settlers. The waiting period before legal reappropriation is on average about five years, meaning that camped families usually spend about half a decade living in polythene tents while they battle indignant property owners in court, trying to convince INCRA to appropriate the designated land to them. Yet during this time—and even after they are granted a deed to the land—MST activists must continue to cultivate the land they occupy, as this usually is their only source of food. According to the FAO, MST settlers produce approximately 40% of agricultural goods in Brazil, and the more prosperous settlements sell whatever portion of the crop yield exceeds the needs of the families (qtd. in “Los Sin Tierra”).

I. 2. Relationship to the Government, Church, and Grass-Roots

The MST's relations with the government have been constantly shifting since the first occupations took place in the late 1970s. Before the military coup, left-wing president João Goulart had been somewhat sympathetic to the land reform movement, and in 1963 rural unions won the same rights as urban unions. Evidence of Brazil's rural and urban poor organizing and demanding social reform was a factor in the increasing fear held by Brazilian elites and contributed to the military deposing President Goulart and implementing a tightly-run right-wing military regime (Wright and Wolford 4). The two decades of military dictatorship saw strong efforts on the part of the federal government to manipulate the landless populations into accepting unsatisfactory lands in the Amazon region, where the landless workers would be used as a source of cheap labor for deforestation. The first president with legitimate power after the fall of the military regime, José Sarney (1985-1990), promised to settle 1.4 million landless families but succeeded in settling fewer than 90,000 during his term in office. President Itamar Franco (1992-1994) hardly addressed the issue, although he thereby indirectly supported agrarian reform by naming a leftist to preside over INCRA (Ondetti 48). Section IV of this paper will examine in greater detail the MST's relationship with Brazil's two most recent presidents—Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003) and Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010).

Although the MST still retains strong ties of solidarity with the Catholic CPT, sectors of the Lutheran church, and the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or Workers' Party), it retains a strong commitment to preserving its own autonomy, refusing to merge too closely with any existing organization. This includes other grass-roots organizations

as well as religious groups and political parties. In the contemporary era of global communication, ties are much easier to maintain with the grass-roots agrarian reform movements on other continents through global grass-roots networks like Vía Campesina which connect independent social movements that are heterogeneous in their goals and the nuances of their respective ideologies.

I. 3. Ideology and Strategy of the MST

In the short-term, the MST wants land. In the long-term, the MST also has a more abstract goal for Brazil in the face of a new global economy. The ideology professed by the MST openly condemns the neoliberal capitalist system, calling for a transformation of Brazil's economic, political, and social structures.

A political and economic theory that emerged in the 1970s, social theorist and anthropologist David Harvey defines neoliberalism as

“a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (1).

Thus under neoliberal policy, the role of the state is to set up legal structures that guarantee the proper functioning of markets and to create new markets where they don't already exist, leading to the privatization of resources or benefits like land, water, education, and health care. Harvey claims that neoliberalism has gone beyond political theory to become a “hegemonic mode of discourse” that values market exchange as “an ethic in itself” (3). Neoliberalism attempts to bring all human actions into the domain of the market and assumes that a free market and free trade guarantee individual freedoms.

Those who oppose neoliberal ideology and policy argue that it fails to guarantee these freedoms to all individuals, promoting only the interests of private property owners, businesses, and multinational corporations (Harvey 8). This is precisely the argument adopted by the MST, a group that loudly voices an anti-neoliberal ideology. “A Brazil without *Latifúndios*,” is a slogan adopted by the MST to jab at the tradition of production for exportation rather than domestic consumption as well as the trend in recent decades of increasingly powerful transnational agribusinesses holding land in Brazil or holding contracts with Brazilian landowners. The MST demands immediate reappropriation of unused lands for use by landless peasant families who will agree to occupy and cultivate land for domestic food production, but the long-term goal of the movement is to establish a guarantee of food sovereignty⁴ and food security for all Brazilian citizens. The MST also makes clear that the right to cultivate food should not come at the expense of natural resources—which has been a pattern all too common through Brazil’s history as multinational corporations greedily cut through the Amazon and exploit arable farmland.

To meet their short-term goals, MST settlers use two simple, concrete strategies: they organize mass occupations on unused farmland and march in public demonstrations in cities. With each tactic, mass mobilization is seen as the key to catching the attention of the government and forcing them to respond, which the demonstrators hope will result in the government’s compliance with their requests. Also stressed within the MST is how

⁴ Vía Campesina’s website viacampesina.org defines “food sovereignty” as the right of peoples, countries, and state unions to define their agricultural and food policy without the “dumping” of agricultural commodities into foreign countries. Food sovereignty organizes food production and consumption according to the needs of local communities, giving priority to production for local consumption.

education can be used as an ideological weapon. The MST follows the methods developed by educator Paulo Freire and encourages a pedagogy centered on dialogue and the development of skills for critical examination of the individual learner's context in reality. Schools inside MST camps are usually set up with teachers who have been trained in Freirean critical pedagogy and prepared to attempt to awaken student consciousness through literacy programs and political education programs.

Section II. Paulo Freire and Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Rural Illiteracy and Popular Education

II. 1. The Problem of Widespread Illiteracy

When he began working as a teacher in the impoverished Northeast of Brazil during the 1940s, Paulo Freire recorded the failures he observed in Brazil's traditional educational system being carried out in the poorest region of the country. Brazil's Northeast was and remains the region with the highest illiteracy rates in Brazil, and as Freire worked among the people of this region, he began to view the existing public school system as a tool for perpetual oppression and dehumanization of the very people it was supposed to benefit. Freire criticized the Brazilian government for treating illiteracy like a tragic social illness with no viable cure. As he examined Brazil's educational system, Freire began to re-define illiteracy not as a social illness but rather as a "concrete expression of an unjust social reality" ("Educational for Critical Consciousness" 10). Developing literacy programs in remote parts of the Northeastern state of Pernambuco, Freire began to experiment with radical new ways of addressing the unjust social situation facing the rural Brazilian masses.

Paulo Freire began the process of critiquing the educational system in hopes of coming up with solutions to its abundant problems. As he examined the most common styles of classroom teaching, Freire found monologues to be the chief means that teachers used to conduct class lessons. This style of teaching, which assumed knowledge on the part of the teacher and ignorance on the part of the students, seemed to Freire as little

more than a means of maintaining existing power dynamics between the “educated” and the “non-educated.” Freire described this type of pedagogy as a “banking” system in which teachers mistakenly believed they could “deposit” knowledge into their students—requiring no effort on the part of the students to actively synthesize ideas. Traditional textbooks and primers of the time period were published in the coastal cities of Brazil, far removed from the cultural context of the rural northeastern interior⁵ space, and most were full of material that was irrelevant to the lives of rural students. Freire saw these methods as manifestations of the Brazilian government’s disconnect with the reality of its rural population. After years of teaching and developing literacy programs for the rural and urban poor, Freire began publishing his ideas for a radical new pedagogy in the late 1960s. Freire’s first two books *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, published in 1967, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968, call for an ideology and methodology that address the concrete problems in Latin America’s educational system.

II. 2. Freire’s Ideology

Driving Freire’s work in Pernambuco was his desire to forge a theoretical framework applicable to people’s concrete situations. Seeing knowledge as a dialectical movement from action to reflection and reaction, Freire boldly proclaims that all humans, even those with no educational backgrounds or literacy skills, possess significant amounts of knowledge that they manage to acquire from their personal experiences in the world. Freire claims that his own experiences have shown him that most illiterate or

⁵ *interior* is a Portuguese term for rural space, often used as an antonym for *capital* which refers to any state’s capital city

unschooled men and women do not consider their own experiences to be a legitimate source of knowledge and believe themselves to be largely ignorant (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 45).

As he describes subjectivity and objectivity as being in a constant dialectic relationship with one another, Freire claims that the themes found in various historical contexts (i.e., knowledge) cannot exist objectively outside of people, but rather exist *in* people through their relations with the world (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 87). Literacy, then, is a useful form of knowledge if it involves action and reflection. The purpose of becoming literate, Freire argues, is so that one may use literacy as a tool for intervening in one’s own personal context. Coining the term “conscientization⁶,” (“*conscientização*”), he defines the ultimate goal of education as the awakening of a critical awareness of reality. And sharpening one’s awareness of reality leads to concrete action as the student begins to feel compelled to act in order to transform that reality. This act of transformation, says Freire, is the key to liberation from oppressive circumstances (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 31).

To achieve this kind of liberation, Freire calls for a classroom that is set up with power dynamics shared equally between the teacher and students, where both the teacher and the students acknowledge the incompleteness of their own knowledge and attempt to learn by engaging in dialogue with each other. In this dynamic, the student is an active subject participating in the process of his or her education. Liberating pedagogy takes into account the students’ behavior, worldview, and ethics system and allows students

⁶ Freire’s term for the concept is expressed in Portuguese as “*conscientização*”

and teachers to problematize together around real issues in order to arrive at a path towards critical action (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 37). True problematization can only be achieved by means of dialogue, in which students and teachers all take on the role of problem-solvers. This is what Freire argues is the most humanistic approach to education, as it puts teachers in “communion” with students and creates a dynamic where teachers and students become “actors in inter-communication” with each other (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 43, 110).

II. 3. Freire’s Methodology

Freire’s vision of a more democratic education includes encouraging students to develop an impatience for learning and for communicating. This is reflected in the methods he developed through a series of trial-and-error teaching posts that he held while in the Brazilian Northeast, and later in urban Brazil, Chile, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. Freire replaces the traditional school primers with a method that asks students to piece syllables together in order to make the “generative words” that he carefully collected on his own after listening to the vocabulary of a particular community. For example, a generative word for a literacy program in an urban Brazil might be “*favela*⁷,” or “brick,” while a literacy program in rural Brazil might use generative words like “rain” or “plow” that have cultural relevance to the particular student base (“Education for Critical Consciousness” 82-83). Using these words to teach the letters and their phonetic values, Freire familiarized students with written words through the

⁷ Brazilian slum

mediation of their own social context. He developed a codification method in which teachers create representations of a culturally relevant theme, usually a drawing or short narrative, such as an image of a mother and daughter making jugs together or a man hunting birds in a field (“Education for Critical Consciousness” 66, 68, 72). Freire’s goal is to use visual depictions of situations that the group of learners will find pertinent to their own experiences.

Freire’s aim was to create a classroom atmosphere that promoted genuine communication among individuals, and after much experimentation, he found this to be best achieved through informal group discussions based on pictures or brief texts (poetry or short narratives, depending on the learner’s reading level). In the Freirean classroom, all teaching tools are used with the intention of sparking discussions of social problems relevant to the learners’ local communities and their unique life experiences. Thus Freire carefully synthesizes discussion into his pedagogical methods in hopes of promoting genuine thinking about reality, which he so firmly believed could only be achieved through genuine human-to-human communication (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 58).

Section III. Collective Dialogue

Praxis and Collective Conscientization

III. 1. The “Legacy of Mutism” and the “Culture of Silence”

Paulo Freire saw lack of genuine communication reflected in Brazil’s shortcomings as a democratic political system. It was in the context of the classroom that Freire matured as a humanist educator and developed his ideology and pedagogy, but the classroom was only a starting point for a vision of much broader scope. Freire insisted that the acquisition of literacy skills was not an end in itself but the means to a greater end, which was the awakening of critical awareness and the skills to communicate in order to transform unfair circumstances. Observing the legacy of illiteracy in Brazil and its relationship to class oppression, Freire acknowledged having a Marxist influence. This is seen clearly in his desire to alter the country’s entire political and economic structure. Based on classroom observations and his own work as a teacher, Freire described Brazil as a country with a historical legacy of “mutism” by which masses of underprivileged illiterate people were held in a form of oppression that was passed down through the generations. He described those living under such oppressive circumstances as submerged in a “culture of silence,” pointing to roots in the *latifúndio* system and the closed conditions of the Brazilian large estate.

At the time Freire was writing in the 1960s, Brazil was not an authentic democracy. The military coup only shifted the national government further to the right and strengthened the power of the land-holding elite, exacerbating unjust conditions for the illiterates, the landless, and the lowest classes of all kinds. Freire claimed that in order for Brazil to become a true democracy, people would have to experience a sense of community and of participation in solving common problems, but he saw this only becoming possible if the masses bound in silence acquired the tools to become vocal (“Education for Critical Consciousness” 22, 24-25).

“Mutism” is the result of a system in which communication follows a one-way path from the dominant culture to the less powerful. In other words, it’s a system based entirely on monologue: one group speaks, the other group listens. One group makes the rules, the other group follows them. This sort of monologue, in Freire’s mind, was central to the system of oppression. Furthermore, the habits of domination borne by the dominant culture and the habits of dependence by the less powerful tend to be carried over even in aid efforts where paternalism lingers, in a system that presents the less powerful group as “ill” and in need of “medicine”, i.e. aid from the outside.

Freire criticized the practice of “assistencialism,” pointing out that it attacks the symptoms of social ills while neglecting to address their causes. It also dehumanizes people by robbing them of the chance to take responsibility for pulling themselves out of difficult situations. In fact, this type of top-down assistencialism system interprets a healthy democracy as one in which there is popular silence and inaction. This is exactly the type of political system that Freire accused the dominant culture of Brazil—the wealthy elite, the landowners, the politicians—of propagating. By silence, Freire does not

mean the absence of a response but rather a response that lacks critical quality (Freire, “Education for Critical Consciousness” 14, 24).

I

II. 2. Taking Freire’s Methods Outside the Classroom: Political Implications

Although the nature of Paulo Freire’s work kept him closely tied to literacy classes and educational reform, in his writing he made it clear that he thought Brazil needed a reform not only of pedagogical institutions but of other institutions as well if the country ever hoped to effect lasting social and political change (“Education for Critical Consciousness” 33). Freire saw agrarian reform as crucial to changing the power structures in Brazilian society and called for an agrarian reform based on critical thinking leading to transformative action from the group suffering most directly from oppression. Dominant ideology manifests itself in an underestimation of peasants’ creativity and regenerative capacity, disregarding their unique knowledge gained from their unique experiences (Freire, “Politics of Education” 29, 30). The result is something like a “welfare syndrome,” which is counter-effective to fixing a broken system—on the contrary, it propels such a system in the same unhealthy direction (“Politics of Education” 32). As a solution, Freire suggested a literacy method that stimulates people who are submerged in a “culture of silence” so that they might emerge in a new consciousness, aware of their historical context and capable of becoming conscious makers of their own culture. An agrarian reform process that reduces peasants to pure objects of transformation is worthless; instead they need to become subjects.

The shift from existing as the object of an oppressive system to a subject working towards achieving liberation is found in the process of intervention. Freire's entire critique of contemporary pedagogy was based on the failures of the "banking system" of teaching, where students were not required to actively participate in the learning process. Recognizing this, Freire offered a method aimed at teaching individuals skills for intervening in their own life situations. Freire's pedagogy ought to help men and women grasp the themes of their oppression and develop a permanently critical attitude which can lead them to appropriate action. In other words, critical action must come from an "authentically critical position." Critical pedagogue Peter McLaren suggests that although Freire's ideology and methodology revolve around the classroom, there is no reason that counter-hegemonic practices should end there (162).

III. 3. Dialogue and Praxis

Whether applied inside or outside the classroom, dialogue is central to Freire's ideology. In short, it is his antidote to the legacy of "mutism," as it fundamentally alters the nature of discourse between groups of people holding different amounts of power. Where Freire saw monologue as a means of oppression, he praised dialogue as "humanistic" because when it is practiced authentically it requires both participants to be genuine and committed to the process of communication. And central to authentic dialogue is "problematization," or the posing of a problem relevant to the experience of both parties engaged in communication with one another. Whether presenting a problem to someone else or arriving at an understanding of the nature of a problem together

through dialogue, true problematizing necessarily involves all those engaged in an effort to find solutions.

The inability to “codify” abstract oppression is what keeps people from engaging in a dialogue about the problems they face. Thus “codification” is generating a language capable of dealing with oppressive forces and the speakers’ struggle to overcome them. Freire used the term “codification” to describe a teaching methodology in which teachers helped learners translate ideas into visual images, making it easier to initiate a dialogue about the topics.⁸ It is a methodology that clearly uses literacy, and the ability to become articulate in a critical language, as a means to a greater end. McLaren speaks of this language as a “form of power” which can be used to engage the self and others, which has “social consequences and political effects” (159).

Dialogue may be the sharpest tool for developing literacy skills because of its ability to engage the learner, but it is useful in other contexts even after reading and writing have been mastered. The specific type of dialogue that Freire sought when working with the northeastern peasants was one that required “social and political responsibility” on the part of both speakers. If a person has matured in skills of self-expression and has gained a critical understanding of his or her personal role in society along with learning how to read, that individual has become what Freire called a truly “historical” being (Freire, “Education for Critical Consciousness” 24, 18). This means a being capable of learning, sharing knowledge, intervening in history. In other words, taking action.

⁸ Consider the “generative words” described in section II.3.

Thus, whether inside or outside the classroom, dialogue ought to lead to both the ability to reflect critically on reality and the appropriate form of action to improve upon that reality. The term Freire consistently chose to use for this dialectic process was “praxis,” defining it as “not only action but action *and* reflection.” He added that “there is a unity between practice and theory in which both are constructed, shaped, and reshaped in constant movement from practice to theory, then back to new practice.” And the goal of praxis is to arrive at a change in consciousness (Freire, “Politics of Education” 124). Developing his notion of “praxis” in the rural northeast, Freire spoke of the possibility of applying it to the issue of agrarian reform. In his introduction to Freire’s *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Denis Goulet highlights the connection between the agrarian reform movement and Freire’s praxis, stating that the goal of land reform is above all else to arrive at change by transforming people, not just changing the structures of their environment.

III. 4. Land Reform

In his *New Left Review* article “Latin America: The Resurgence of the Left,” James Petras analyzes the Brazilian land reform movement as an effective praxis that demonstrates this careful and constant swing between action, reflection and new action. First of all, he compares the resurgence of the peasants’ movement in the 1990s with its actions in the 1960s, pointing out that the modern movements have not simply “replayed” the actions of the earlier movements. He speaks of differences in tactics, strategy, and organization that demonstrate a creativity that strives to avoid making the same mistakes of the past (Petras 21).

Freire pointed to Brazil's colonial roots and cultural imperialism as key factors in the oppressive circumstances of Brazil's landless class, and those legacies continue to influence the Brazilian land reform movement of today. Petras sees the land reform movement, along with other social movements, as an attempt to adapt Marxism in new types of struggle with the goal of not only altering the national political structure of Brazil, but as a push against neoliberalism on an international level. In Petras' pro-MST Marxist terms, the land reform movement is exercising a "dialectical resistance to the deepening encroachment of imperial demands." Commenting on the Freirean idea of praxis, Petras calls for a "socialist praxis" coming from the agrarian reform movement, linking cultural autonomy and small-scale production with more economic control (43, 47), and McLaren calls for global alliances through cultural and political contact in the form of critical dialogue, emphasizing the importance of multiple observers in dialogue as part of any critical inquiry (179).

The actions of the MST can be interpreted through a Freirean lens of praxis through dialogic encounters between subjects, as the MST develops a critical language for articulating the values and needs of the landless class. The tension between the MST and its opposition, which is often depicted by the media (representing the government and *latifúndio* owners), results in an extended dialogue. Both the media's representation of the MST and the MST's own presentation of itself can be analyzed as "texts." By analyzing news articles, interviews, and slogans, we can glean insight into the nature of communication between South America's largest landless movement, its supporters, and its opposition.

Section IV. Dialogic Encounters

The MST, the Media, and the Government

IV. 1. Media Portrayals of the MST

Paulo Freire's pedagogical vision revolved around a shift in power dynamics in the classroom, which he thought could only be changed through the practice of dialogue. This paper argues that in order to shift the power dynamics between the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra and dominant outside forces—primarily the government and the media—the MST must engage as a subject in dialogue with these forces, struggling against hegemonic representation.

The MST is a controversial movement, and it has not always been portrayed by the media in a positive light. In a 2004 study on competing images of the MST in the media, John L. Hammond examines diverse media treatment of the MST, citing examples of a wide range of positive and negative portrayals of the movement by various news programs, journals, and even a popular *telenovela* soap opera called *Rei do Gado* (“Cattle King”) based on the MST that aired in 1996 and 1997. In his study, Hammond identifies

several trends in media representation of the MST: that news reports rarely present background information on the structural cause of the land reform problem, that the media emphasize the MST's "bizarre and curious" actions and "deviant" behavior by movement actors, and that violence committed by MST participants receives a disproportionate amount of media attention ("MST and Media" 62, 64, 73). He also emphasizes the domination of the Brazilian media by one firm, the relatively conservative *Globo* television news and entertainment network, which also controls Brazil's largest daily paper, *O Globo*. Hammond draws a parallel between the high concentration of land ownership and the high concentration of media ownership, providing a simple explanation for mainstream corporate media's hostility to "progressive movements from below" and claiming that most media representations of the landless movement "foster ideological hegemony, distort movement messages, and marginalize or demonize dissent" ("MST and Media" 66).

Still, characterizing the Brazilian media as diametrically opposed to the MST and the tenets of the MST's agrarian reform agenda is unfair and inaccurate. Although depicting the MST in a sometimes unfavorable light, the media does in fact acknowledge that high land concentration and rural poverty are serious social problems in Brazil. However, a paradox does exist between the general acknowledgement of land-related social problems and the consistent failure of dominating media representations to report on, let alone to offer, suggestions for possible solutions to these problems. While the media does present land-related problems, it dismisses the MST's struggles to solve them. Hammond sees a need for a "collaborative" process of interactions between the

MST and the media that would better accomplish problem-posing and solution-finding (“MST and Media” 65).

Hammond’s hint at the need for “collaboration” and problematization between the media and the MST harkens back to Paulo Freire’s insistence that viable solutions can only be found through a process of dialogue between subjects acting in the role of problem-solvers. While Hammond cites examples of the media presenting landowners as violent and reactionary, he still argues that in spite of this the overwhelming presentation of the land reform issue portrays the MST as a movement using illegitimate tactics to reach a just goal (“MST and Media” 75).

Since the early 1990s, the MST has been more actively seeking a relationship with the media through the creation of its own internal publications, including a newspaper, magazine, and radio show broadcasts in hopes of effectively reporting on its actions and communicating its goals and ideology in its own words. Acknowledging that there is a highly unequal power dynamic between the MST and the media, Hammond offers up that the MST can struggle to alter the discourse on land issues despite being the “weaker participants” in the relationship between the movement and the media (“MST and Media” 70-71, 65-67). One way that the MST attempts to alter land reform discourse is through the publications, speeches and interviews of its individual leaders. Hammond quoted leaders Gilmar Mauro and João Pedro Stédile in his 2004 article, both of whom still contribute regularly to MST publications and have participated in interviews published on the MST’s website (mst.org.br) as recently as November of 2010. Movement leaders can speak out on behalf of the movement as they critique dominant media’s failures to report on underlying problems of land maldistribution and tendencies

to neglect the MST's most notable accomplishments, such as high crop production and successful literacy and education programs (Hammond, "MST and Media" 73).

IV. 2. The Cardoso Administration

Fernando Henrique Cardoso served as president of Brazil from 1995 to 2003, representing the PSDB (*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*, Brazilian Social Democratic Party). With a presidential campaign that focused primarily on ending inflation with his Real Plan, Cardoso's early vision of social reform did not appear to include land reform as a priority. In its 1994 *Jornal Sem Terra* July newsletter, the MST expressed apprehension about Cardoso's candidacy, warning that Cardoso would "bury" agrarian reform (qtd. in Ondetti 69). Indeed, at the time of the election, the agrarian reform movement was receiving relatively little attention from the media.

Mônica Dias Martins analyzes the MST's relationship with President Cardoso in an article called "The MST Challenge to Neoliberalism" that was published in 2000. Martins examines the timeline of MST responses to the 1994 election, pointing out that within a year of Cardoso's presidential victory, the MST assembled in a Third Landless Congress to discuss possibilities for negotiating with the new president. Resulting from the Third Landless Congress of MST members and leaders was a new campaign slogan "Land Reform: Everyone's Struggle," which Martins claims "concretized the popular alliance" with urban culture and the general Brazilian population (40).

Early in Cardoso's first presidential term, two events transpired that drastically altered both the president's relationship to the MST and media coverage of the movement. In the northern Amazonian region, two back-to-back massacres of MST

activists by state military police brought the land reform movement sharply back to the public's attention. The first took place in 1995 in Rondônia state, which borders Bolivia, and resulted in the murder of ten MST members. A second and even bloodier massacre in 1996 left nineteen MST members dead and sixty-nine wounded at the Eldorado de Carajás settlement in the state of Pará (Pereira 51). A local television news crew captured footage of the Eldorado de Carajás massacre on film, and the clip was played and re-played to horrified audiences on national and international news programs. The Brazilian public was shocked and mortified, and the massacres caused a tremendous surge in media attention paid to the MST from 1995-1997. During these years, the Brazilian news journals *Folha de São Paulo* saw a huge spike in MST-related reports, and the popular Brazilian weekly news magazine *Veja* published more articles on the agrarian issue in 1996 than it had in the previous five years combined. In his analysis of media coverage in the five years following these two events, Gabriel Ondetti finds domestic coverage of the MST to be "somewhat mixed" although overall portraying the movement in a positive light. In fact, Ondetti argues that even news pieces that expressed reservations about land reform tended to refrain from completely rejecting the validity or importance of the issue (71-73).

The MST responded to this surge of media attention in its own publication, the *Jornal Sem Terra*, expressing surprise and pointing out that these mainstream newspapers which had made vicious attacks on the MST in the past were now portraying the movement in such a positive light. Perhaps it is not surprising that the catastrophic loss suffered by the MST at the hands of the state police forces garnered sympathy, but some of the stories presented in the mainstream news were actually criticizing the federal

government's role in handling the agrarian question (Ondetti 71). And criticism did not only come from the national media; CNN, the BBC, and the New York Times all covered at least one of the two massacres. The New York Times article covering the acquittal of military police involved in the Eldorado de Carajás massacre was entitled "Acquittals in Massacre Arouse Brazil" and used rhetoric that included specific, graphic details of the event, choosing words such as "machetes," "hacked," and "smashed by a rock."

Anthony Pereira presents a critical analysis of President Cardoso's land policy, suggesting that although land reform became a hot issue during Cardoso's presidency, Cardoso was perhaps guilty of exaggerating his role in the acceleration of land reform. Cardoso did take two noticeable measures in response to the massacres: in 1995 he named a left-leaning president to INCRA, and in 1996 he created a new land reform ministry (Ondetti 82). Pereira claims that the Cardoso administration's "rhetoric" regarding land reform held a "prominent place" among Cardoso's accomplishments (41). The increase in media coverage, and the sympathetic nature of that coverage, did immediately bring about an increase in the government's concessions to the MST as well as an increase in external support from allies. This does not necessarily mean that Cardoso and the MST had similar goals in mind, however; Pereira goes so far as to accuse Cardoso of being fraudulent in bragging about his government's accomplishments with respect to land reform and thus perpetuating "oligarchic domination" (48). When he first took office, Cardoso promised to settle 280,000 landless families by the end of his four-year term. Government figures from 1995-1998 show that the Cardoso administration settled 287,000 families, but the MST disputed these statistics, arguing that the correct figure was only 160,000 families (Pereira 51-52).

Discrepancies like this one emphasize the need for what Peter McLaren, an American critical pedagogue responding to Freire in a 1996 article entitled “Paulo Freire and the Academy,” describes as the need for “multiple observers in dialogue” in the effort to collectively make a “critical inquiry” (158). Pereira is making a similar point when he defines both the MST and the Cardoso government as “actors in a democracy,” each with a “blind spot” that comes inherently with acting as a subject (53). After all—the entire agrarian question revolves around a sort of subjectivity of standards; how much land is too much land for a *latifúndio* to have the right to possess? Who decides the standards for productivity? The line is not clearly defined, but at times MST activists or their supporters make demands that are so high they would hardly be possible to meet under current legal conditions without a revolution. At the same time, Pereira points out that although Brazil has a capitalist democracy, its form of capitalism in the countryside is not very democratic; rural violence by landlords goes uninvestigated, and military police kill activists and go unpunished. Markets are still shaped by political manipulation at the hands of the wealthiest class of rural landowners (Pereira 53, 59-60).

If we are taking Freirean terms like “actors-in-communication” and “dialogue” out of the context of the classroom and applying those terms to collective entities, many other groups can be considered as participants in dialogue around the land reform issue besides the MST, the Brazilian federal government, and the media. Any group that participates in the attempt to solve common problems related to agrarian issues could be counted as an “actor-in-communication” to such an extent that there must be countless such groups that are not even documented or well defined. There are also many groups that *are* documented, well defined, and organized. *New Left Review* contributor James

Petras brings up the MST's strong ties to the Vía Campesina organization, an international organization of peasants and rural workers whose goals are defined on their website viacampesina.org as “the preservation of land, water, seeds and other natural resources; food sovereignty; sustainable agricultural production based on small and medium-sized producers.” For Petras, links with groups like Vía Campesina that discuss ideas and experiences in the global rural space are helping to awaken an emerging “internationalist” consciousness and practice (21).

Other efforts have been made by the MST to forge alliances with urban groups. In an article comparing trends in rural violence in Latin America, Cristóbal Kay calls attention to the MST's efforts to forge alliances with leftist urban organizations and the Workers' Party, calling these efforts “part of a wider project of social and political transformation” (756). While urban workers and rural workers have very different concrete needs and different goals for concrete reform, articulating goals in a more abstract manner as Kay has done speaks to the power of dialogue to bring to the surface similarities in situations of human suffering. Freire's insightful realization that illiterate students needed literacy in order to “codify” the themes of their own experiences is mirrored in the experience of social groups like the MST, the Workers' Party, and Vía Campesina as these groups become better at “codifying” their collective experiences around a discourse that highlights universal themes they share in common.

IV. 3. The Lula Administration

The MST had supported presidential candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known simply as “Lula,” in both the 1994 and 1998 elections when he campaigned against

Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Representing the Workers' Party, Lula himself was of urban working class origins and had been active in trade-union labor movements during the 1970s. The party itself was founded in 1980 and grew out of this trade-union movement that had allied itself with a range of social movements and the left-wing sector of the Catholic Church (Petras 62).

Emir Sader offers an analysis of President Lula in the 2005 *New Left Review* article "Taking Lula's Measure." At the time of the 2002 presidential election, the Workers Party was the largest left-wing political party in the capitalist world. Among other organizations, the Workers' Party and MST both had played an important role in organizing the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2000 and again in 2001. Lula attended and spoke on both occasions. His 2002 campaign used the rhetoric of "prioritizing the social" in an effort to draw support from those who had disapproved of Cardoso's focus on economic reform at the expense of marginalized social movements (Sader 61, 66, 68). At the same time, Lula's campaign seemed highly concerned with putting the Brazilian public at ease about the country's economic situation. During the campaign, in June 2002, Lula released a document entitled "Letter to the Brazilians" in which he pledged to keep the financial commitments of the previous government. The letter, along with the slogan "Lulinha, Peace and Love" and the insistent campaign rhetoric promising "change" and a resumption of development, proved to be effective, and Lula won the election in 2002 (Sader 68-69).

Perhaps expectations from social movements regarding Lula were high, but halfway into his first term he was already being accused of failing to enact effective social reforms. Sader accuses Lula's government from 2002-2005 of acting in accordance

with the letter and failing to meet the promises made in his campaign of social reform (78). In June of 2005, the MST collaborated with CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores* or United Workers' Central labor confederation) and forty other organizations to respond to Lula regarding his government's perceived shortcomings, adopting Lula's same rhetorical strategy in their own "Letter to the Brazilian People." This "Letter" reprimands Lula for failing to change "the neoliberal system in place since 1990" and demands an economic policy that prioritizes the needs of the people, including employment, a reasonable minimum wage, health, education, agrarian reform, and protection of the environment and natural resources (Sader 80).

The MST adopted this tactic again in 2007 when it met in its Fifth National Congress to produce yet another "Letter to the Brazilian People⁹," this time making more specific demands for an end to violence against the *Sem Terra* in the countryside, punishment for those who commit violence against innocent MST activists, and democratization of media promoting political awareness and respect for popular culture. This letter also makes very clear the MST's stance against transnational agribusinesses like Monsanto and Nestlé and against the privatization of water supplies, its commitment to preserving forests and native plants, and its refusal to use or condone the use of GMO¹⁰ seeds. Sue Branford and Jan Rocha, who have conducted extensive field research on the MST in Brazil, published an article in 2003 titled "Another Modernization is Possible," which sums up the MST's "ecologically-informed" farming philosophy. The title of the article is a play on the slogan "Another World is Possible" created for the

⁹ Letter available in English at www.mstbrazil.org

¹⁰ Genetically modified organism

Porto Alegre World Social Forums, and suggests that “modernization” in Brazilian agriculture ought to be approached in a way that does not waste natural resources, exploit labor, or cause environmental degradation. Branford and Rocha point out that while Brazil is one of the world’s largest markets for large multinational agro-chemical industry, many small farmers have an ingrained mistrust of chemical farming products because of farming practices that “poisoned” their land and made them ill in the past, a sentiment that has perhaps been influential in the MST’s commitment to using organic seeds and fertilizers (186-187).

In 2009 Pablo Pellegrini conducted research on the role GMOs play in MST ideology, confirming Branford and Rocha’s description of the MST’s *agro-ecologia*, or sustainable farming practices. Pellegrini also introduces the idea that the MST is a central actor in the dispute against GMOs and farming practices that are harmful to the environment, claiming that the MST’s anti-GMO stance has played a crucial role in the unfolding controversy over GMO use in Brazilian agriculture. In 2003, the MST published a document accusing President Lula of breaking his promise to enact requirements for permanent regulation GMO crops and turning a blind eye to the use of illegal fertilizers in *soybean* crops harvested the previous year in Rio Grande do Sul. The MST, allied with Greenpeace, the CPT, and the *Terra de Direitos* NGO, initiated the “Campaign for a GMO-Free Brazil” in response to the Lula administration’s apparent lack of initiative.

Pellegrini also points out that the MST’s anti-GMO discourse is of a heterogeneous nature which includes arguments grounded in biology, religion, and social ideology. MST arguments attack GMOs for their unknown health effects, their ability to

contaminate plant genes and exacerbate allergies, but the movement has also adopted a religious discourse against GMOs that is supported by the CPT and Pope John Paul II and argues that “playing God” by using products that will have unpredictable future effects is unethical and dangerous. The MST also approaches both the anti-GMO and anti-heavy machinery arguments from a socio-economic angle, stating that both forms of technology would break up the MST’s production model and would modify the movement’s organization and division of labor, thereby undermining its foundations as a social group (Pellegrini 45-46, 54).

Based on this anti-GMO ideology, the MST has taken actions against GMO use which have prompted negative attention from the media. In 2003 the MST occupied a Monsanto research center, constituting a step in a more radical direction for the MST in its tactics of resistance. Yet another occupation in 2006 included the MST and its ally organization Vía Campesina of the Syngenta corporation’s biotechnology experimentation field in Paraná, which resulted in the expropriation of the fields to sixty peasant families (Pellegrini 58).

These arguments are echoed in the voice of MST leader João Pedro Stédile who bluntly accuses Lula’s government of applying the “neoliberal model” to the agrarian sector by giving priority to large land holdings that utilize GMOs, accusing such practices as “destroying biodiversity,” “attacking the environment,” and “compromising natural resources” with a heavy cost to the Brazilian people. Stédile acknowledges that Lula has taken some measures to advance peasant agriculture, such as a biodiesel fuel program, expansion of protection against natural disasters, and subsidized electricity and home construction in rural areas. But Stédile insists that the president’s favorable attitude

towards big business agricultural corporations has worsened the peasants' situation ("Neoliberal Agrarian Model" 50-52).

At the end of the interview, Stédile also brings up the topic of violence, which was so prominent in discussions and media representations of the MST after the two massacres that occurred during the Cardoso administration in 1995 and 1996. Violence towards MST members at the hands of the state may be less of a threat than before, but the Lula presidency has not been free of violent anti-MST attacks by private citizens, which the government (claims Stédile) has handled poorly ("Neoliberal Agrarian Model 52). In November of 2004, eighteen hooded figures shot and killed five MST activists in the Felisburgo massacre in Southeastern Minas Gerais state under orders of the rancher Adriano Chafik. By November of 2006, two years after the tragedy, the MST was still campaigning fiercely for the imprisonment of the gunmen and proper compensation for the families of victims. On November 30, 2006, the MST launched a "solidarity campaign" on its website asking for people to write letters to the governor of Minas Gerais demanding that the killers be brought to justice. As yet, they have not.

A 2009 *Democracy Now!* interview with Augusto Boal, close friend of Paulo Freire and founder of Theater of the Oppressed, revealed Boal's opinions that agrarian reform in Brazil had not changed as much as it needed to during Lula's presidency due to Lula's tendencies to "negotiate" and refuse to commit to the landless movement. As the MST has grown in size and influence, its voice has been heard more and more clearly by the media and the Brazilian government. The MST has improved in its efforts to effectively communicate with both the media and the government through critical reflection as it attempts to find appropriate actions to take in order to improve specific

situations it encounters. On many occasions, this communication, or dialogue, did indeed lead to improvements for the MST as an organization as well as improvements for its individual members. The instances in which these practices were ineffective and failed to bring about transformation beg MST members and supporters to return to Freire's theory of critical reflection so that new solutions may be explored and new actions implemented.

Conclusion

The Future of Land Reform Under a New Administration

On November 1, 2010, Brazilians elected Dilma Rousseff of the Workers' Party as their next president, replacing current Workers' Party president Lula in January of 2011. Commonly referred to by her first name, President-elect Dilma was the MST's candidate of choice in the elections. Throughout the election campaign, the MST openly proclaimed its support for Dilma's candidacy through advertisements and articles posted on the movement's official website, mst.org.br¹¹. On Election Day, the MST's website expressed the MST's overall positive sentiments concerning Dilma's victory, posting an article by writer Leonardo Boff that opens with the triumphant phrase, "We joyfully celebrate the victory of Dilma Rouseff."

Since winning the election, Dilma has made several bold statements indicating her position supporting agrarian reform. On November 3, 2010, Dilma affirmed on *NBR ao vivo*¹² live national television her belief that "[Brazil has] to make a revolution in the

¹¹ The MST has a sister site in English where some translated documents can be found: mstbrazil.org

¹² a federal government news broadcast

countryside,”¹³ stating that Brazil needs to “transform” the small farmer into a property owner and provide proper rural infrastructure for education. Elaborating on how the landless question must be addressed, Dilma explicitly stated her belief that the solution lies in creating millions of small properties that will make Brazil’s rural sector more democratic. In the same speech, Dilma also promised to end police violence committed against the MST, making specific reference to the Eldorado de Carajás tragedy that took place in 1996 during the Cardoso administration. Dilma also made clear in the speech her attitude that land reform is a “question of human rights”¹⁴.

The clarity with which President-elect Dilma expresses her sentiments regarding land reform in general and the MST in particular suggests that public attitudes toward agrarian reform, which are reflected in the media’s representation of both the government and the popular masses, may be in the process of shifting. If this is the case, it seems reasonable to hope that Brazil will recognize the contradiction seen in the past between the media’s acknowledgement of severe social problems alongside its condemnation, or at best its disapproval, of the efforts being made to solve them. If highly concentrated land ownership is a tragedy, and the general sentiment in Brazil is that it is, it is unreasonable for the government, media, or any other entity to consider viable solutions to the problem as invalid or to write them off as illegal without stepping back to problematize around the social issue and the political and economic structures that are in place.

¹³ *“Temos de fazer uma revolução no campo.”*

¹⁴ *“questião de direitos humanos”*

National MST leader Jaime Amorim has interpreted Dilma's victory as a sign that social movements in Brazil are actively mobilizing again after a period of passivity during the Cardoso and Lula administrations. After Dilma's victory was announced on November 1, the MST immediately began planning for a National Coordination meeting in which leaders, including Amorim and João Pedro Stédile, will produce a document with specific demands the MST would like to make of the new Dilma administration. Dilma's victory over opponent José Serra in the second round of elections this November has prevented the PSDB—the party of Fernando Henrique Cardoso—from returning to power at the federal level.

Still, some MST members and supporters fear that in the future Dilma will fail to make agrarian reform as much of a priority as her recent comments imply. The MST's general disappointment with President Lula's response to the agrarian reform issue has provoked the worry that the continuation of PT party policies will fail to produce desired results for landless families. Calling on social movements to act as critical interpreters of promises made so freely by politicians in the rush of election excitement, a *Radioagência* headline re-posted on the MST's website on Election Day reported the celebration of the MST and its allies among diverse Brazilian social movements as they “raise [their] flags to [the] victory of Dilma Rouseff.”¹⁵

In a November 12, 2010 interview with *O Globo* newspaper, Luiz Dulci, President Lula's secretary general and a founding member of the PT, described the present-day transformation of social movements as a change from a defensive to an

¹⁵ “*Movimentos sociais levantam bandeiras com vitória de Dilma Rouseff*”

offensive position. Social movements are no longer fighting against the suppression of rights as they were during Cardoso's presidency. Secretary General Dulci describes social movements' phenomena of universalization and growth as necessary features of a present-day participative democracy.¹⁶

This sort of participation is not possible without the establishment of a genuine dialogue between the MST and all other groups that concern themselves with addressing Brazil's social problems and defending human rights. When the MST and other social actors engage in dialogue, they become capable of reflecting critically on the situations that all are observing. Such critical reflection naturally leads to action, which implies transformation from the state of an "object" in Dulci's "defensive position" to a conscious subject that actively changes the nature of its surroundings. Clear communication is vital if the MST and the Brazilian government wish to collaborate in an effort to solve the problems afflicting Brazil's landless people.

¹⁶ For full text of the interview in Portuguese, see the *O Globo* article "Imprensa criminaliza os movimentos" re-posted at mst.org.br

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