

Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement: a Replicable Strategy for Social Change?

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TIM STOFFEL, MAR 4 2010

Critical Assessment of the Achievements and Shortcomings of Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement – the MST. Does the MST Offer a Strategy for Social Change to be Replicated Elsewhere?

“This isn't just about agrarian reform. It's bigger than a piece of land to work on. It's about changing Brazil, creating a new society, just, equal and brotherly.”

– Padre Renee (a MST leader)[1]

Despite the fact that the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil was founded in 1985 and is therefore more than 20 years old, the available literature is concentrated mainly in articles and these, as well as the few books about the movement are mostly recent publications. The main reasons for that are not only the growth of the movement but also a changing focus of the political and social sciences and the public interest. The MST is counted as a regional force within the world wide anti-neoliberal struggle and is not longer looked at as a pure interest group.

From a Marxist point of view the MST could be seen as a product of the neoliberal politics which were and are implemented in many Latin American countries. These politics as Petras and Veltmeyer (2005, 9) point out are “generating destabilizing forces of resistance in the form of antisystemic social movements”. However, even apart from such a radical analyses, it will be shown that the MST has to be seen as a special kind of political player in the domestic politics of Brazil. It works in cooperation with the state and its institutions and is even partly interlinked with them. At the same time it violates the law and is questioning the government's policies. Actually there are different views and aims within the movement which have to taken into account. It will be shown that this heterogeneity is both a strength of and a challenge for the movement. Furthermore the strategy of the MST, which will be explained in part one of this essay, meets minor and major challenges from within and outside of the movement, as described in part two. Those challenges are obstacles to a success in the fields of social transformation and political change. Therefore it is questionable if the movement's strategy for social change has a future in Brazil. That makes it more unlikely to be a reproducible strategy in other national contexts. It will be argued that there are many aspects and techniques that can be learned from the struggle of the MST, but there is no blueprint for social and political change.

The MST – growing movement with rising aims

A look at the numbers makes clear that the MST is an extraordinary group. With around 1.5 million members and widespread through all over Brazil it can be called a 'mass movement'. And with 350.000 settled landless families the MST looks back on a successful history. But with another 200.000 people waiting to be settled (Petras&Veltmeyer 2003, 113f.) and millions of landless rural workers who are not organized in the MST but also waiting for land, the success of the MST, in relation to the state of Brazil, is a small one. Unlike the rural unions, which partly fight the same struggle, the MST is unified and organized on a national level.[2] The main aim of the MST, to occupy land and enable the beneficiaries to make a living from it, can not change the general inequality in Brazil. Therefore the MST is pushing towards the bigger aim of agrarian Reform.

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However, the occupations are the basis or, as Branford and Rocha (2002, 66) put it, the “organisational matrix” of the movement. With the occupation of idle or contended arable land, the MST takes the law in its own hands. Brazil has one of the most unequal distributions of land in the world, with one per cent of the population owning 45 per cent of the arable land (Carter 2005, 6). The Brazilian constitution from 1988 contains the legal underground for the state-led agrarian Reform via INCRA (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária). But the pace of reform is slow. The number of small farms has even decreased since 1985 (Rosset&Langerin 1997). Therefore the MST started to occupy land which is unused or which legal status is in doubt and tries to negotiate with local authorities, or to force them to legalize the settlements. INCRA buys the land from the owner and ‘distribute’ it to the MST squatters.

These occupations are only a few compared to those, run by the rural unions (Wright/Wolford 2003, 218). Nevertheless about 45 per cent of agrarian settlements are connected to the MST (Carter 2005, 7) and the MST brought the agrarian reform issue successful on the national agenda.

The main aim of the settlements is to cultivate the land to provide the settlers with food and a little surplus, generated by selling food on the local markets. The way in which the local MST cadres run the settlements has changed throughout time. At the beginning the overall strategy was to set up cooperatives for collective farming with the aim to reach economics of scale, and produce just as the big companies (Branford&Rocha 2002, 92 and 93f.). This was not successful, the peasants had to buy their own food and the costs of necessary inputs for these farming techniques were high. But after that experience the settlements are free to organise themselves. The MST leadership just provides ‘guiding principles’ (Ibid., p. 95). However this may not be true for all examples as Navarro (2005, 136) points out. Because of this not all settlements follow the new agro-ecological techniques preferred by the MST. Agro-ecologica is an organic and sustainable farming technique, which abdicates the immense use of chemicals in common farming since the ‘green revolution’. The MST does its own research on agro-ecologica (Branford & Rocha 2002, 213). Via Campensina supports the MST among other things in that field and agro-ecologica, as a concept, is even supported by the DED (German Development Service) and the GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit). According to Branford and Rocha (2002, 90) the MST claims that its settlements “can be a solution to the problems of social exclusion and environmental degradation”. In addition, as Rosset (1999, 11) points out, MST settlements are benefiting small farm economies. Further more he proclaims that “countries with reforms that gave only poor quality land to beneficiaries, and/or failed to alter the rural power structures that work against the poor, have failed to make a major dent in rural poverty”. The attempts of the movement to preserve the quality of their soils through agro-ecology are an important step towards a more sustainable and not manly export orientated agriculture, which can enhance food security. The MST even produces its own organic seeds to “reclaiming control of seeds from multinational corporations” (War on Want 2008a) and fights against genetically manipulated seeds (BBC 2003). But the struggle against Brazil’s agri-business and against the official agrarian politics (see also Wright/Wolford 2003, 276), even under the government of da Silva (see Petras & Veltmeyer 2005, 91. ff.), can not bring change on their own.

In the field of education the movement has some successes as well. It made the struggle for land also a struggle for education (Branford&Rocha 2002, 112). With these self supply of educational service, the movement not only overcame the rural biased lack of it, out of the situation and out of their ideals they developed an own style of education based on the Ideas of Paolo Freire (Martins 2000, 39). And this does also include the teaching of adults, which is also teaching about the movement, exploitation and inequality in rural Brazil (Branford&Rocha 2002, 117), which Zander Navarro judges as indoctrination (ibid. 121), but which is assessed by Petras and Veltmeyer (2005, 23), with a word by Freire, as “conscientization”.

The microcosm of occupations and settlements with the whole system of education, healthcare, and, not at least, agricultural production can be ranked within “practical models of autonomy” (Starr 2005, 123). Such models, like the self organisation of the Zapatistas in Mexico, provide an alternative to the common patterns of socio-economic relationships and production. Even if the MST-led settlements of thousands of people do not change general inequalities, it provides people with a living apart from the growing favelas of the big cities. Rosset (1999, 12) even calculates that the costs of MST occupations for the government (compensation, infrastructure etc.) are less then for the equal number of people moving to urban areas. And Wright and Wolford (2003, 278) assess a viable livelihood to be more important than an inadequate welfare system for the countryside.

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To adequately assess the success and failure of the MST it is important to bear in mind its' twofold structure and strategy. As shown above, the occupation and successful settlements mean nothing without the lobbying and the translation of pressure to the state up to the national level. The successes in the settlements would not be possible without cooperation with the local and national government. The MST leaders are negotiating with the state representatives about food for the encampments and teachers for the settlements (Branford&Rocha 2002, 114). Their measures and politics are orientated towards the state. The MST wants the state to play a more "active role" through redistribution measures, despite all the efforts and successes of building up an alternative (see Carter 2005, 5). The cooperation with the state-system reached its height as the MST leadership called for a stop of occupations to support the election of Lula da Silva (Petras&Veltmeyer 2005, 112).

The movement reached a lot through its pressure politics, they not only urged the former government and the INCRA to legalize many occupations, they also enforced a subsidised credit scheme for agrarian reform settlements (Branford&Rocha 2002, 91) and made the government a partner in a nation-wide education program against adult illiteracy (Ibid., 118). Even if the former one is financially not well equipped and the latter was stopped, these examples show the ability of the movement to influence nation wide politics, at least temporary.

The Challenges for the MST

After a period of close relations between the MST and the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) the MST and many other political groups saw their hopes in the new Lula government disappointed, which led to the 'National March' in 2005 where thousands of MST members marched to Brasilia to demonstrate (Silva&de Lima 2007, 25).

Lula da Silva was hyped by the left for his promise to foster social distribution including a jump ahead in terms of agrarian reform, but he was also notable for the International Financial Institutions and Transnational Corporations (cp. Petras&Veltmeyer 2005, 60). His actual course of action is shaped by budget reductions and a more hostile tone towards the MST. In its fight against genetically modified seeds the movement had the support of the PT government in Rio Grande do Sol (Löwy 2000). But Lula da Silva extended the permission for GM seeds, without any democratic backup (Petras&Veltmeyer 2005, 97).

These politics are putting the MST in a difficult position. Its overall strategy of confrontation and cooperation with the government is at stake, while the new government does not meet the expectations of its supporters. Raúl Zibechi (2008) rates the relationships between social movements and the new 'left' governments in Latin America as one of the most challenging problems for these movements. He compliments the MST on its combination of struggling against the commercial agricultural model and the ongoing cooperation with the Lula da Silva government. However the part time alliance with the PT and da Silva may have weakened the credibility of the MST, but as the ongoing occupations and demonstrations show, the MST is still independent and able as well as willingly to fight. The movement is back to its old strategy. But it is questionable if this strategy can bring an overall change in society and politics, also because of the threats towards the staying power of the movement.

Taking into account the doubts about the long-term prospects and efficiency of the settlement's agricultural production, which is questioned by thinkers from outside and from within the movement (Branford&Rocha 2002, 239), it is unclear if the MST as movement and as a consortium of settlements is able to survive. Moreover one of the biggest challenges is the balancing act of being a movement with, at least, a revolutionary attitude and being a loose farming cooperative. Even if there are links to the urban population (see Martins 2000, 41), the movement is still a peasant's organisation and concentrated in rural areas and on rural topics. The MST settlements started to be a transforming power within society, but twenty years later it is questionable if the MST settlements can survive without an overall change in the Brazilian society and politics (see Petras&Veltmeyer 2005, 91).

Besides that, the movement has to deal also with other challenges from within, too. The outlined strategy of the MST leadership is product of a democratic process, but there are still many different views on the course of action of the MST within the movement, concerning the implementation of agro-ecological farming techniques (see page 4) as well as the overall political course (cp. also Branford&Rocha 2002, 225f.). In addition many members are not interested in the broad and distance aims of the MST, for them the struggle stops with getting land (Wright&Wolford

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2003, 323f.).

Many authors are pointing out the MST's contribution to democracy.[3] This is not indisputable, in so far as the measures of the movement to reach its aims, like pressure politics through occupations, blockades, and demonstrations, are not a genuine part of the electoral democratic process. However, Carters (2005, 5) statement that the MST pressure politics has to be seen "as grounded on practical considerations rather than any dogmatic ideology" contributes to the debate about the possibility of achieving a real change in social redistribution, as in the field of land reform, within the Brazilian democratic system. Haynes (1997, 93) makes the point that there are only limited chances for poor and marginalized people to "improve their lot in a formally democratic system". Anyway, there is a clear contribution to the democratisation of the Brazilian countryside through the movement. Beginning with the general education of peasants, in reading and writing and about their rights, via participatory democracy established in the settlements (Wright&Wolford 2003, 320), extend to "organisation and incorporation of marginalized sectors of the population" as Carter puts it (2005, 1). On the contrary Zander Navarro (2005, 135) blames the movement for "undemocratic social control and a lack of transparency and accountability". This traceable accusation is a blow for the assessment of the settlements as schools of democracy and sustainable living. But they can still be seen as exactly that, because they represent the first widespread attempt to bring these values to the countryside. The critique by Navarro has some truth in it, but the struggle of the MST for land and against the rule of property rights and neo-liberalism is not fought by any other group that successful.

The MST – a model for social movements?

Despite the fact that it is hard to speak about a single overall strategy of the MST, the techniques and experiences of the movement are interesting for other social movements in similar situations. The settlements can be seen as 'showcases of alternatives' as Starr puts it (2005). War on Want (2008b) organized a meeting between members of UNAC from Mozambique and of the MST in Brazil. The visitors were especially interested to learn about agro-ecology and strategies of pressure politics. In Mozambique the most important problem is the diminishing soil quality and the lack of government support for smallholder farmers, quite similar to the Brazilian case. But the inequalities in land distribution are not a mayor problem. As the Mozambique example shows, the struggle against inequality and marginalisation is different for any nation, and sometimes even different within nations, which can be seen in the differences between the North and South of Brazil.[4] Therefore it is unlikely that other movements in comparable positions copying the 'MST concept'. But in those aspects which are similar, other movements can learn from the successes and solutions of the MST as well as from its failures and shortcomings.

MST is also often referred to as part of the reaction against the international agro-industrial corporations (Branford&Rocha 2002, 282). This meets with the self-view of the MST, to be "part of a world wide revolutionary struggle" (Wright/Wolford 2003, 308). In this world wide struggle the MST's combination of creating a viable alternative to the mainstream agriculture and the socio-economic system, together with struggling for a change of the whole society and politics seems to be a reproducible starting point for others. This struggle is often addressed as a 'class-struggle'[5] in which the class of the landowners promotes the neo-liberal project. The "radical action" of occupation by the movement is a challenge of property rights (Martins 2000, 36) and therefore of the state, which guarantees these by law. Challenging these laws, which perpetuate inequalities, without violence and with an alternative at hand, is one of the most important lessons that can be learned from the MST, together with openness to diversity and the ability to change (Branford&Rocha 2002, 262). Therefore copying the strategy or 'concept' of the MST may be less important and possible than an orientation along its basic patterns. The people-led organisation, of land distribution through occupation as well as the production process (Martins 2000, 43) is a form of 'productive resistance' that has the potential to be a lasting way of resisting national and global political pressure on peasants and workers all over the globe.

Conclusion

As illustrated above, The MST does not offer a strategy for social change which can be replicated elsewhere for two reasons. First, as far as one can speak about an overall strategy by the MST it is highly dependent on the concrete situation and constellation of actors and the law in Brazil and therefore hard to transfer to another national context.

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Second, it is questionable if the MST strategy in Brazil will work, in terms of outlasting the pressure on the settlements and on the tactic of occupations as well as in terms of its power to bring a change in society and government politics. But the successes of the MST in terms of sustainable agriculture, basic and critical education, democratisation and resisting as well as cooperating with the government are, even if they sometimes embittered through its shortcomings (e.g. problems of the settlements or a lack of democracy in its own structure) a beacon for the world wide struggle against neo-liberalism. The grass-root approach of the MST may be the future of modern social-struggle as a struggle for social justice and democracy. Pressure politics may seem to be anti-democratic, but they are also expressions of urgent needs and despair.

As shown in part two, the future of the MST is dependent on finding solutions or at least compromises for its contradictory orientations. An improvement in the democratic processes could be a key to ensure the stability of this big movement. But the fact that the MST unites these contradictions under one roof can be assessed as a success. This and the openness towards diversity and change are the strongholds of the MST and the most valuable lessons which could inspire other movements.

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[1] Raney & Heeter 2005

[2] See Wright & Wolford 2003, p. 75 and also Branford & Rocha 2002, p. 22-24.

[3] See for example Carter 2005, Wright and Wolford 2005, Branford and Roch 2002.

[4] See Wright and Wolford 2003, p. 107 and especially Branford and Rocha 2002 p. 255.

[5] See e.g. Martins 2000 or Petras and Veltmeyer 2005.