

# The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

Written by Ellen Monielle Do Vale Silva and Guilherme De Lima Souza

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## The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

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ELLEN MONIELLE DO VALE SILVA AND GUILHERME DE LIMA SOUZA, APR 25 2022

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Along with the historical brutality and devastation catalyzed by the diffusion of the modern/colonial, the social movements, however, consolidate new dimensions of their own senses reinvented in the circumstances and, as established by Porto-Gonçalves (2006, 25), 'they resist because they exist; therefore *re-exist*'. The Latin America driving forces of social movements for territorial struggles are interconnected along collective trajectories in the confrontation of capitalist globalization's predatory effects. Regarding the peasant movement that will be discussed in this paper, more specifically the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), it is important to note that MST has been at the forefront of *re-existence* to the modern/colonial ties, capitalism and deterritorialization (Porto-Gonçalves 2006).

Although in Brazil, the development of capitalism was able to stimulate the concentration of land, in 1984, the rural workers converged at the 1st National Meeting for land democracy, in Cascavel, Paraná. There, they decided to establish a national peasant movement, the MST, with three main objectives: fight for land, fight for agrarian reform and fight for social change in the country (MST, 2021). Thus, in order to analyze the articulation of the MST in its internationalization process, this paper aims to comprise the perspectives that consolidate the transnational actions and dialogues between Latin American peasant movements. The methodology used in the construction of this paper relates to a conceptual and bibliographical review, based on a qualitative and decolonial theoretical approach. Initially, it examined the notions of Anibal Quijano's concepts of coloniality of power and capitalist development, such as Arturo Escobar's conceptions on territory, land and place, connecting to the rise of the MST.

Thereupon, the internationalist articulations of the MST will be historically analyzed, emphasizing the engagements with networks, organizations and epistemologies for the land struggles in Latin America; for instance, La *Vía Campesina* movement and the Liberation Theology, standing out their common demands. In this section, this paper introduces the main struggles that are implied in the peasant movements, such as the complaints about neoliberal globalization and the productive systems of transnational capitalism – which are interconnected and integrated along with demands for land use and land reform. Comprehending the decolonial ideas, as aforementioned, related with territorial and land disputes between social movements and large landowners as a collective point of departure alongside the region, the MST's internationalization process, consolidated since its origins, will be explained as a mechanism of transnational class solidarity and regional resistance strategy to structural dilemmas.

Hence, the MST's actions are discussed as a unifying element of struggles to face transnational challenges of extractivism and decomposition of the peasant economies of Latin America. As said by Escobar (2015) over the Zapatista dictum '*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*', the struggles that are embodied by the MST international engagements in Latin America establish a light on the pluriversal historical narratives of the region that are encountered and reunited as an act of *re-existence* in the capitalist system.

### Coloniality, territory and the rise of MST

# The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

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Within the discussions regarding decolonial thinking, the concept of coloniality of power, initially developed by Quijano, in 1989, is widely used to refer to associations that did not end with the destruction of political-historical colonialism and, therefore, are understood by the maintenance of colonial forms of domination (Ballestrin 2013; Grosfoguel 2008). Based on this aspect, according to Quijano (2002, 4), coloniality of power accounts one of the founding elements of the current pattern of power, settling a social classification around the idea of race.

Quijano (2002) states that the notion and social categorization based on race was originated 500 years ago along with America, Europe and capitalism, as well as Enrique Dussel (1993) highlights the myth that we are experiencing the idea of modernity, conception based on the *beginning* of Latin America in 1492. Consequently, modernity, inseparable and intrinsic to coloniality, is based on the construction, rise and consolidation of the capitalist system of production. With the establishment of its dynamics of relations, the forms of labor exploitation and production-appropriation-distribution, consolidated in the historical constitution of America, were supported by the foundation of this new forging form of production and its new global standard control of work, resources and products (Quijano 2002).

That being said, the expression of colonial domination that was imposed in the course of the expansion of European colonialism is still profound and lasting (Quijano 2002; Mignolo 2003; Escobar 2015). The new historical identities produced around the idea of race, in the modernity/colonial context, were related to the nature of roles and territory/place in the new global structure of labor control (Quijano 1997). Nevertheless, Quijano (1997, 118) expresses that 'both elements, race and division of labor, were structurally associated and mutually reinforcing, although neither was necessarily dependent on the other to exist or to transform itself'.

As the manifestation of power characterizes a type of social relations constituted by the co-presence regarding elements of domination, exploitation and conflict, what is now called *globalization* is the moment placed in the development of such pattern of power. Recognizing this global ordainment and its distribution of resources taking into account the process of formation of the world power, the vast majority of the exploited and discriminated, are exactly the members of the 'races', 'ethnic groups' and 'nations' in which the colonized populations were categorized from the conquest of America onwards (Quijano 1992, 12). On this matter, the enslavement of Black and Indigenous people consolidated by the idea of race was not only a central component of colonialism, but of global capitalism as well.

Furthermore, given this power structure, it is also valid to point out that the moment of globalization, capital expansion and its colonial and dependent links, in practice, manifests itself in an inversion of reality, as emphasized by Florestan Fernandes (1972). According to the author,

(...) as if the central economy were to reproduce itself in the peripheral economy in reverse, to feed not its development, but the development of the dominant economy. As a result, the freedom of the economic agent can be postulated and represented by the same categories of action and thought, prevailing in the central economy – since the ideology of a colonial, neo-colonial or dependent society, maintaining the conditions of *normal* heteronomy, comes to be the ideology of metropolitan society (Fernandes 1972, 174).

Considering this dominant asymmetry of the global 'frenzy' panorama and its capacity of transformation, Milton Santos (1994, 255–256) states that even in places where the vectors of globalization are more operative and effective, the territory creates new synergies, resulting in an expression of its affective and symbolic value. As this globalization frenzy takes control, the territory and its significance as a place has disappeared, creating 'profound consequences on our understanding of culture, knowledge, nature, and the economy' (Escobar 2000, 68). By place, it is understood the commitment and experience of a particular location with some measure of rootedness, limits and connections to everyday life. Even when its identity is constructed, place continues to be important in the lives of most people (Escobar 2010, 30).

Although transnationalized, the struggles concerning the conceptions based on territories demonstrate a defense of particular constructions of place, including its reorganizations (Escobar 2010, 78–79). The Latin America territory is frequently read in dialogue with social movements, their identities and their use as an instrument of struggle and

# The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

Written by Ellen Monielle Do Vale Silva and Guilherme De Lima Souza

social transformation, settling the landless workers experience on the agenda (Haesbaert 2020, 268). The Latin American accelerated process of agricultural modernization, conceived by the high technology of seeds, chemical inputs and agricultural equipment, known as the Green Revolution, gave room for the capitalist accumulation regime to benefit large rural companies.

Thus, the neoliberal conditions created a particularly dire context for the rural population. In this scenario of agricultural modernization reinforced by national development, MST was formally born at the First National Meeting of Landless Workers, in 1984 (Figueroa 2005; Rubbo 2013). Hence, the ties to territory and culture allows social movements, such as MST, the proper setting to develop place-based strategies. This plan of action uses the ties aforementioned to enact a politic *desde abajo*, that allows to interconnect the experience of the Global South due to the typology of policies to which it belongs (Escobar 2010, 32).

In this outline, the domination of space, capital and modernity, which are central to the discourse of globalization, created grounds for movements such MST to re-conceive, re-construct and re-affirm perspectives of non-capitalism, culture and territory/place (Escobar 2000, 69). Escobar (2016, 24) exposes that territorial struggles are producing new types and/or rescuing knowledge for cultural and ecological transition to face this modernity scenario. Expressly, here, the need to highlight that several forces influenced the formation of MST, moreover, Liberation Theology (TdL) played a central role in its form of organization, unconditional support for land occupations and, mainly, in the effect of stimulating an internationalist perspective of the movement through international solidarity.

Also, some broader perspectives, movements and cosmovisions that encounter strong adherence in Latin America and the Global South has its level of importance in shaping the MST, such as the Altermondialist Movement *Fórum Social Mundial* networks that have raised, in a heterogeneous and unified manner, the agendas of environmental protection and in-depth reform of the economic system; and *La Vía Campesina*, one of the main peasant movements of contemporaneity that has been standing out on the international conjuncture confronting the political decision-making related to agriculture (Milani 2008, 290; Silva and Alves, 2021). Therefore, the Landless Workers Movement gradually built several relations with popular movements in Latin America (Rubbo 2013).

Bearing this in mind, the struggle for territory and the politics of place, an expression mentioned by Escobar (2010, 67), are resulting in the emergence of a new form of politics. Thereby, it is necessary to create a new political imaginary based on the possibility of constructing a multiplicity of actions in the plane of daily life, whereas the experiences of subalternized people are necessary to understand struggles and decolonise political constructions of territory/place. Also, territorial strives are, nonetheless, pronounced by a cultural struggle for autonomy and self-determination within a capitalist system and its ties to the context of modernity/coloniality (Quijano 1992; Escobar 2010, 79).

## Transnationalization, Social Struggles and the Landless Workers Movement in a Globalized World

The driving forces of neoliberal globalization, in consonance with centuries of colonial land expropriation over Latin American territories, imply multiple challenges for the confrontation of systematic oppressions and dominations alongside the predatory capitalist mechanisms. Besides years of historical suppression of the colonial economic regimes, from far-right political leaders to the most progressives, the neo-extractivist paradigms of intense land concentration in the power of the agribusiness sectors still determines obstacles for democratic access to the means of production and living for the peasant and traditional communities of the region (Acosta and Brand 2018, 31–54).

This case-scenario suggests the analysis, which is the central point of this paper, that the problems faced and confronted by local social movements encounter similar bases on common struggles and experiences in Latin American. In the same way that the categorization of global peripheries represents a direct reflection of dynamics of the transnationalized capital accumulation system over a collectivity of territories, its resistance should also constitute a space of organized transnational confrontation (Milani 2008, 291–294). Furthermore, as it is pointed out by Escobar (2005, 80), the cooperation among social movements can be a producer of revolutionary identities by the *glocalization* of common struggles, both standing for the local dilemmas and articulating global spheres of action.

# The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

Written by Ellen Monielle Do Vale Silva and Guilherme De Lima Souza

That being stated, since its origins, the MST had constituted significant transnational coalitions with other movements in Latin America, most importantly, assuming the premise that structural problems reinforced by international scales of accumulation entails international responses. The sense of transnationality comprehends the contents and extension of the land conflicts, as part of ways of production that goes beyond national borders, alongside problems that aren't limited to the local scale, which directly implies the necessity of multilateral arrangements between different governments and social actors (Sachs 1998 *apud* Milani 2008, 299).

The transnational action of the MST, despite their local differences in their forms of action and claims with other social movements, becomes a possible space to construct cohesive collective identities with networks of action, increasing the bargaining power of its objectives in the international arena (Bezerra 2004, 121). Moreover, these kind of processes can be described, as is highlighted by Escobar (2015, 22), by the idea of the construction of territorial identities based on the pluriversal existence and resistance of social struggles, converging movements to the defense of an ontological perspective of the world in alternative to the capitalist globalization patterns. The common points of departure regarding the resistance to the predatory effects of transnational neoliberalism, the decolonial approach to the globalization process, and the religious aspects over the access of lands for the poor communities become elements of influence to the international solidarity of class (Rubbo 2013, 75).

The Liberation Theology, as mentioned before, claims through the Universalist perspectives of solidarity with the poor and of humanity in its wholeness, which is reinforced with Christian movements aligned with land struggles and strong critics against the dependency relations of peripheral capitalism materialistic interests that suppress the spirits of communitarianism (Rubbo 2013, 75–82). After all, as it is pointed out by Enrique Dussel (1973, 49) the praxis of liberation originated with service to the Others that are suppressed by the system and, in that case, the historical role of the church in Latin America should be committing to the liberation of the peripheral world. Mostly disseminated in Brazil in the 70s by the Christian social movement *Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT)*, founded during the repressive apparatus of military dictatorship in the country, those internationalist aspects of solidarity and the global south refuse to dependency were fundamental to the foundational scope of the Landless Workers Movement in the next decade.

The first internationalist attempts in the MST were highly conceived through articulations with *La Vía Campesina*, an autonomous transnational social movement that integrates plural groups that struggle with the access to productive land, mostly from Latin America, into the presence in the international arenas of discussion, coalitions and protests (Milani 2008, 298). Thereupon, the participation of the Landless Workers Movement in those spheres was initially perceived on the 'Continental Campaign: 500 Years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance' (1989–1992), international event convened by peasant organizations that alongside with *La Vía Campesina* establishes the creation of the *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC-VC)*.

The CLOC-VC articulations aligned with *La Vía Campesina* international sector proposes perspectives for the collective anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist coalition in the Americas. Above all, the international coordinator brings to light spaces of popular masses mobilization in solidarity with Cuba's revolutionary regime, socialist movements and for the defense of peasant and sustainable agricultural systems affected by neoliberal policies (Batista 2019, 137).

The Continental Campaign represents a point of inflexion in the internationalist trajectory of the MST, despite some previous years of punctual foreign solidarity with social movements and transnational peasant causes, the Brazilian landless movement begins to institutionalize an international relations sector in its structure from the beginning of the '90s onwards (Rubbo 2013). Furthermore, Batista (2019, 154) emphasizes that the Landless Workers Movement also gets to work as an international advocate, gathered with CLOC-VC, for the political themes of integral and popular agrarian reform and peasant rights over transnational frameworks of decision such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization.

This historical process highlights strong evidence that even though Latin America precedes a pluriversal world of social struggles in the local territories, the articulation in scales where MST starts to be composed represents the redefinition of transnational identities, reunited in the defense of the subalternized world (Milani 2008, 298–299).

# The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

Written by Ellen Monielle Do Vale Silva and Guilherme De Lima Souza

From the end of the '90s to the first years of the 21st century, this transnational scope of collective territorial identities is well translated in the so-called Altermondialist Movement, represented with the creation of the *Fórum Social Mundial*, celebrated for the first time in 2001. In this context, the Landless Workers Movement and *La Vía Campesina* started to significantly contribute with the debate of social and political problems, integrating relevant arenas of coalition among anti-neoliberal organizations, parties and movements and reuniting local problems with global revolutionary solutions (Rubbo 2010, 6–7). About the participation of social movements in the mentioned event in the years of 2001, 2003 and 2008, Milani (2008) highlights:

(...) environmental networks and movements in Latin America represent more than 55% of the total of organizations participating in the processes of the *Fórum Social Mundial*, which claims to integrate the banner of sustainable development and environmental defense in their struggles. On the total of 102 organizations and movements from Latin America and the Caribbean, 80 are from Brazil, 4 from Uruguay, 3 from Ecuador, 2 from Argentina, Chile, Panama, Peru, and Paraguay (Milani 2008, 294).

It is clear that the main principle that instigates the transnational action of these social movements in Latin America is to integrate multiple voices and struggles that encounter demands over the impacts of neoliberal politics in the region and its repercussions on the territorial occupation. However, how is it possible to unify such different nationalities and specificities of political claims into one greater purpose? According to Bezerra (2004, 126), the transnational convergence that composes the Altermondialist Movement is built in a process of continuous interactions over time, in which the common identities are reinforced not in a way of equalization of the movements' struggles and requests, but based instead on the perceptions of a similar obstacle to be defeated, in this case, the global neoliberal apparatuses of land expropriation.

## Political Strategies for the MST's International Actions

From its initial articulations in the '80s to the present moment, the Landless Workers Movement has built capacities and interactions to maintain strong transnational relations and to be a sphere of dialogue with the peasant and socialist movements of the subalternized world. The transnational action is mostly encouraged by the values of 'solidarity, humanism and internationalism' for the historical legacy of the working class and the idea that there are no borders for the political resistance to human exploitation (MST 2021). Besides, the MST's national leader Gilmar Mauro points out, in an interview for Rubbo (2012, 26), that the movement historically made efforts for the exchange of political strategies with transnational activists, actions of international political-ideological training workshops and the participation of solidarity actions in countries going through revolutionary moments.

Beyond the participation in wide-ranged organizations like *La Vía Campesina*, the internationalization of the MST is operationalized in multiple forms of action, embracing opportunities for transnational solidarity in its own national territory, but also scattered throughout other countries as well. Apart from self-organized actions observed in the international experience of the movement, the Collective for International Relations (CRI) of the MST has been working to embrace the resistance, construction, improvement and awakening of the peasant and socialist social bases and values among transnational partners (MST, 2021). Those values are well represented also in the testimony of the MST's national leader and responsible for the CRI, Cassia Bechara, in the 2020's National Encounter of Landless Women:

The MST has internationalism in its fundamental principles. We are clear that the construction of socialism can only happen from an international construction of forces (...) This strengthens both our movement and these sister organizations. It strengthens the internationalist feeling of unity of the working class (Poznanski 2020).

Additionally, the transnational principle represented in the MST's struggles for the land is a major factor to understand why the solidarity of class among the Latin America movements is not only a reality, but an autonomous process for the suppression of the colonial past that still maintains its effects in action over the region. In that sense, the articulations and demands that permeate the movement actions, from a national to an international scale, in search for land sovereignty also felt as global demands for peasant revolutionary acts in the Global South. Furthermore, the historical recognition of the MST's political impact had managed to conquer international sympathy

# The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

Written by Ellen Monielle Do Vale Silva and Guilherme De Lima Souza

for the agrarian cause in Brazil, mobilizing the transnationalization of debate and inspiring the constant multiplication of support and solidarity committees and international brigades for the movement in several foreign countries (Rubbo 2013, 147).

At least, until 2015, the Landless Workers Movement had brigades in 'Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, El Salvador, Paraguay, Mozambique, Peru and Bolivia', besides many of them being articulated with support of *La Vía Campesina*, which also collaborated with MST for the construction of the *Instituto Agroecológico Latinoamericano* in Venezuela (Tygel 2015). It's also valid to punctuate the existence of the *Internacional Brigade Apolônio de Carvalho* that operates in the Venezuelan territory since 2006, working on projects of 'agro-ecological production, food sovereignty, seed production, cooperative work, political education and student exchanges' (MST 2021). Therefore, the MST had considerable international experience over the years and consolidated important networks of actions that also worked as inspiration, cooperation and resistance in the globalized world.

## Final Considerations

The ascendancy of capitalism has presented challenges to popular movements in Latin America. Based on the length of what has been discussed so far, it is observed that the MST seeks to disintegrate with the forms of colonial domination and, thus, to interrupt the perspective of identities based on the idea of race and established with the coloniality of power and its context of modernity. Furthermore, the globalized world guided by this scenario involves a new global form of division of labor, while misrepresenting the meaning of territory/place and creating profound consequences in the understanding of the factors that guides it.

The reflections developed with the present analysis highlight the idea that despite being created on a basis of local issues and the particularities for the land access in Brazil, the MST seeks to collaborate with international movements that struggle with common structural problems. Therefore, it is important to point out that the internationalist interests articulated over the MST unveil the rural and land dilemmas that take part of the Latin American context as a peripheral region affected by agricultural-centered and dependent economies, constantly reaffirmed with the capitalist neoliberal globalization forms of production. In this way, participation through international coalitions, movements and networks, beyond the establishment of relations with the Global South, is an act of resistance by raising voices and occupying spheres of decision and advocacy against the predatory effects of transnational capitalism.

Hence, through decolonial lenses, it is clear that the MST re-allocates and re-affirms itself as producers of knowledge and practices, far from the Eurocentric narratives, in the context of territorial struggles. Notwithstanding, recognizing that this entire dispute crosses borders in the capitalist/modern/colonial world, as well as other agrarian movements involved in the struggle for land – the MST expands and solidifies itself internationally through solidarity.

Summarizing the main efforts and methodologies of action executed along the MST internationalist trajectory, it is recognized that the strategies articulated in partnership and cooperation with *La Vía Campesina* and the CLOC-VC movements were fundamental to expand possibilities of transnational presence. The very high presence of Latin America movements in Altermondialist events, such as the *Fórum Social Mundial*, is a direct result of the same process in which MST is inserted. Therefore, it represents an important piece of a bigger process on which the movements articulate the defense of a pluriversal territorial identity as a radical counterbalance for the deterritorialization of colonial modernity. Those elements of collective demand, despite the differences among the social movements of Latin America integrated in the MST agenda are encountered in the idea that a revolutionary process against the neoliberal globalization must construct its bases on an internationalist perspective, otherwise, it won't have the strength to confront a system so transnationalized like capitalism itself.

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# The Internationalization of the Landless Workers Movement in Latin America

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