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A JOURNEY WITH THE *MOVIMENTO DOS TRABALHADORES RURAIS SEM TERRA (MST)* ACROSS BRAZIL AND ON TO SOUTH AFRICA

Marcelo Carvalho Rosa

THIS ARTICLE COVERS MY JOURNEY with Brazilian rural social movements over the past twenty years. It is a journey that began at the height of mobilizations for land in the south of Brazil, continued up to the northeast, and finally crossed the Atlantic, recently landing in South Africa. I will discuss the reasons behind this journey – reasons I refer to jointly as the “movement form” (last section of the article). A specific mode of gathering [Law 2004] that has been critical to making the *Movimento dos trabalhadores rurais sem terra*¹ (MST) the most significant Brazilian social movements since the end of the dictatorship (1985) and one of the leading land movements in the world.

In 1994, as an undergrad student, I initiated a research relationship with a group of landless families who were encamped on a bankrupt sugarcane farm on the outskirts of Porto Alegre in southern Brazil. The goal was to tell the stories of a hundred families who were living under plastic tents for four consecutive years. Working together with a group of students, I conducted interviews, participating in meetings and local assemblies until the

families finally received formal rights to that land. For a three-year period, we paid visits to some of the encamped families to discuss concerns about the future of the movement and the settlement.

Some of the militants² I met were in their early twenties and already had plenty of experience in the movement, having travelled to other states in Brazil and to other countries around the world. One of these militants, Milton, was sent to the State of Ceará, Brazil to establish a branch for the movement and mobilize local residents to occupy under-utilized farms. Thanks to this person, my research interests shifted to the mobility of the movement and its militants across the country. Milton’s personal history inspired me to pursue a PhD on the establishment of the *Movimento dos trabalhadores rurais sem terra* (MST) in the State of Pernambuco, a highly disputed area in terms of rural politics. After initially focusing on the personal experiences of political migration from the south to the northeast, I gradually began to understand the transit of those activists as a complex assemblage of heterogeneous elements.

A few years later, I had the opportunity to accompany MST’s militants on a visit to the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) in South Africa. Although I was initially highly optimistic about the international expansion of the

1. Landless Rural Workers Movement.

2. In this paper I decided to use the term “militant” for the Brazilian case and “activist” for the South African movement in order to respect the forms they use in each country. Regardless of the semantics, both words are used to identify the movements cadre.

movement in terms of manufacturing a new political platform in Brazil, what I witnessed and shared with South Africans and Brazilian militants helped me establish certain limits for an international expansion. In addition, the experience allowed me to more fully comprehend the main features of its local success over the past thirty years.

In this paper, I seek to examine how the MST was able to build a new form of political contention in Brazil that affected other movements, the state and even the researchers. First I use the information from the research conducted in Pernambuco from 2000 to 2004 to describe how the MST infiltrated their methods into the rural labor unions. I then show how other groups also competing for land and state resources in the region learned and adapted the MST's models of action. Finally, in the last part of the paper, I share the research findings from the period in which I concentrated on the relations between the MST and the LPM in South Africa (2005-2009).

The establishment of the “form”

Started among *colonos* (settlers) in southern Brazil in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the MST originated from a group of small white farmers who were experiencing a wide range of conflicts that permeated Brazilian society. Its first encampments, described in our collective book [Sigaud, Hernandez and Rosa [2010], involved sons and daughters from these families who were unable to access their own land due to high property prices; families who had been evicted without any compensation by the

State to allow dams be constructed; others evicted from indigenous areas they illegally occupied; and people who had returned after failed colonization attempts in the north of Brazil.

Besides the thousands of families sheltered under the black tarpaulin in the city of Ronda Alta (Rio Grande do Sul), their encampments have become repositories of hope for various political groups from the left that have come to support them. During the MST's initial period (1979-1985), political parties, religious groups and intellectuals came to see the encampments as an exceptional location for political protest and agrarian transformation during the dictatorship. However, it is important to note that these encampments were separated from the struggles for land of the indigenous groups, *quilombolas* (Blacks), and other so-called “traditional groups”.

After the advent of democracy in 1985, the MST expanded to other parts of the country and is now present in twenty-five of Brazil's twenty-seven states. They have occupied unused and underused farms and state buildings, setting up encampments and, more importantly, converting these sites in conjunction with the local and national governments. Over time, the social processes unleashed by this specific category of landless activists have become sources of inspiration for a series of social movements in Brazil and in other countries as well. As authors like Flávia Braga Vieira [2010], Peter Rosset [2013] and Saturnino M. Borrás Jr. [2008] have stressed, the formation of *La Via Campesina*, the world's largest global peasant-rural movements alliance, was inspired by the successes of the MST.

MST and Rural Trade Unions. The Case of Pernambuco

Since their creation in the early 1960s, rural trade unions (*sindicatos de trabalhadores rurais*: STRs) have worked to become the main political representatives of rural people in Brazil. This section will show the important effect that the MST has had on these unions, through the study of its impacts on one of the largest organizations of STRs in Brazil: the *Federação dos trabalhadores na agricultura de Pernambuco*³: FETAPE.

After the 1964 military coup, STRs became the only legal form of political representation for Brazilian workers in rural areas. This exclusive representation rested on two main pillars: first, the struggles to ensure labor legislation was applied in rural areas and second, control over certain state services that it provided to members, such as medical assistance and social security access [Sigaud 1980]. Even though these were the main focus of the STRs, trade union conferences had been debating a series of other problems facing rural populations for the past four decades. Issues such as agrarian reform were always included, but they never became a central topic of discussion [Medeiros 1981].

FETAPE is affiliated with CONTAG. Since its founding in 1963, the *Confederação nacional dos trabalhadores na agricultura*⁴ (CONTAG) has been controlled by a coalition whose leaders had been trained by FETAPE. Thus, many of the decisions that were made at the national level were based on the Pernambuco trade union experience, which had mainly involved workers from the sugarcane plantations.

In 1980, FETAPE became the first labor union to organize a strike by rural workers during the military dictatorship. In the second half of the 1990s, it returned to action, organizing hundreds of land occupations. The involvement of trade union members in Pernambuco with the occupations was instrumental in changing rural trade unionism in the country and it is also a solid point of reference for understanding the important influence of MST's *modus operandi* in Brazil.

During the Fernando Collor de Mello government (1990-1992), the Institute of Sugar and Alcohol was abolished and a series of subsidies that had historically sustained the Pernambuco sugarcane plantations were suspended. In the wake of these measures, the sugar mills in the region entered a period of decline. Working the crisis in their favor, local sugarcane farmers dismissed thousands of workers, in some cases without paying them the severance pay they were legally entitled to. The employers' discourse about how the crisis had forced them to dismiss workers was soon echoed by the unions, which came to associate the demobilization of their traditional supporters with the lack of jobs in agriculture.⁵ The belief in the crisis and its impact was strengthened when, due to the insolvency of many sugar mill owners and landholders, the unions' traditional actions for staking claims (such as strikes) did not

3. Federation of Agricultural Workers of Pernambuco.

4. National Confederation of Agricultural Workers.

5. See "Crise e reestruturação no complexo sucro-alcooleiro do Nordeste", Recife, Anais, 1993, p. 40.

achieve the desired effect. According to union leaders interviewed, in some cases going to court was no longer a guarantee of rights for a sugarcane worker because employers were so indebted that they could not pay their workers even when ordered to do so by the courts. During this period, the annual salary negotiations and labor issue campaigns continued but the demands were not met, as the crisis was used as a justification for non-compliance on the part of employers.

For the most seasoned trade union members, the massive layoffs of workers had another direct impact on union mobilization capacity: much of the revenue of STRs in the region, including those considered the strongest at the time of the strikes in the 1980s, came from union dues automatically deducted from payrolls.⁶ Without these funds, the legal and financial structures many major unions had built up over previous decades rapidly collapsed.

In 1992, one of the most respected union leaders in the southern part of the Zona da Mata region of Pernambuco, Zé Paulo, decided to back some MST activists in the “grass-roots work” they were doing in the region. Working with MST, this trade union leader led the first major land occupation in the Zona da Mata region, taking over the underused land of a sugar mill. After this bold move, other local unions in Zona da Mata joined the struggles for land in an unprecedented association between MST’s activists and union leaders. It is noteworthy, however, that FETAPE did not take part in occupations at any time [Sigaud 2005].

Following the first land occupation in 1993, FETAPE reformed its statutes and established

a department of agrarian policy in order to deal with the land reform issue. At that time, occupations, while becoming more frequent, continued to be organized by local trade unions in an isolated manner. According to the first union leader to head the agrarian policy department, Israel Crispin, there was strong resistance within FETAPE to the type of action traditionally carried out by the landless movement. Crispin argues that the “illegal” nature of the occupations contradicted the federation’s tradition of always acting within legal frameworks due to the constraints imposed by the military dictatorship. The “legalist” approach was necessary to keep the unions free from state intervention and help activists avoid imprisonment and prosecution, both of which had become common after the coup.

The “illegal” can be also understood as outside the common repertoire of union actions – a repertoire that mainly consisted of strikes and lengthy negotiations. Associating FETAPE with a political demand made outside of rural trade unionism by the “landless movements”, required much more than merely establishing a department. For FETAPE, land occupations meant changes to the customary norms forged over more than thirty years of successful union activity.⁷ By supporting but

6. The figures cited by several union leaders stated that the number of workers hired fell from around 240,000 at the time of the 1980 strike, to less than 60,000 in 2000.

7. In research I carried out in the main Pernambuco newspapers, I found various editorials and articles that questioned FETAPE’s involvement in land occupations. Generally, these articles associated occupations with disorder and called on FETAPE to maintain its orderly involvement in politics.

not officially engaging with either the MST or the trade unions that were occupying land, the FETAPE' leaders maintained a certain distance and preserved a division of labor by which landless families were separate from rural workers. As I argued [Rosa 2011a], these actions served as a way to ground the land issues within the labor rights tradition.

FETAPE and the MST remained close until 1995. Until that time, no federal or state agency in Pernambuco would engage in negotiations with farm workers or peasants without the presence of a FETAPE's representative, since union members were regarded as representatives of the local people while MST' activists were seen as alien to the region. That same year, a conflict with the police ended with the FETAPE's representatives fleeing the scene and for the first time, the MST was allowed to negotiate with the *Instituto nacional de colonização e reforma agrária* (INCRA), the federal agency responsible for land reform. For the MST, this marked the definitive split between the two groups. From then on, the MST and the FETAPE's unionists no longer organized joint occupations or demonstrations. Now that it had been recognized as an organization entitled to represent the sugarcane landless workers, the MST increased the number of autonomous land occupations in the Zona da Mata. The increasing number of actions in the region gave the movement a prominent place in leftwing forums and in media headlines as well. MST' land occupations in Pernambuco increased from 15 in 1994 to 73 in 1999.⁸

A new election for FETAPE's leaders was held in 1996. Most of the reps already in

power were reelected, though there was one important change. For the new Department of Agrarian Reform, FETAPE's top echelon invited a young union leader, João Santos, who boasted strong connections with the MST. His familiarity with the MST had gotten the attention of FETAPE's leaders, who realized that he could help get FETAPE involved in carrying out land occupations on its own. The fact that his name appeared on the winning list revealed that the senior FETAPE's members wanted to get more involved in the struggle for land. The shift in FETAPE's strategy sparked an intense competition for occupied areas between the two organizations.

The increased publicity, FETAPE's new strategy and the competition with the MST revealed a new type of demand on rural unionism. Initiated at the state level, these changes were soon reflected in the national debates of the Confederation of Rural Workers of Agriculture (CONTAG). In 1998 the list of candidates running in CONTAG's internal elections once again included a former FETAPE's president. One of the main issues on his agenda was the official support for land occupations carried out by the rural trade unions themselves.

It is thus clear that the change in the Pernambuco trade unions, influenced by the dispute with the MST, directly affected the direction that rural unionism took across the country. In addition to making their demands in more traditional ways, a number of other federations (FETAEMG from Minas Gerais; FETAG-BA from Bahia; and FETAGRI-PA

8. See <http://www.mst.org.br/mstpe/Tabelas/tab.html>.

from Pará, among others) have since begun using the black tarpaulin, flags and encampments to organize land occupations as part of the demand for agrarian reform.⁹ The adoption of the tactics and the symbols established by the MST during the 1980s and 1990s by FETAPE and CONTAG also served to reiterate to State and governmental officials that a certain form of representation was gaining ground in rural areas.

This process did not end with the Pernambuco unions or the national confederation turning into an organization like the MST. Nevertheless, by getting involved in occupations, encouraged by the growing attention that the issue of land reform had been receiving from the State, trade union leaders found an effective way of reviving union life in various regions of the country. In a context marked by the progressive decrease in the number of farm workers, the decision to adopt the model constructed by the MST contributed to greater public visibility for union activities and new channels for dialogue with the State.

The emphasis on the relations between social movements and the State is fundamental to understanding how the land occupations and the “movement form” have become an effective way of constructing claims. These are actions aimed at achieving new rights that depend on the acceptance of state officials. During this period, the struggle for land went beyond territorial redistribution. These and other social movements began to clamour for changes in the bureaucratic structure of the Brazilian State in order to contain the violence of large landholders as well as to meet

the healthcare and educational needs of sectors of rural dwellers, a population historically excluded from government programs.

The Movement Form.

The Consecration of the MST’s Model

The case of Pernambuco also allows us to reflect on how the competition between the MST and trade unions led to new forms of collective action in the region. In early 2004, there were more than 70 organizations in Brazil carrying out occupations in the manner established by the MST [Fernandez 2010: 193]. In Pernambuco alone, 15 groups proclaimed themselves to be movements demanding access to land.¹⁰ In most cases, these consisted of small groups formed by people who had been in contact with the MST or trade unions, but who for a variety of reasons did not fit the profile of activism usually associated with these organizations. They consisted, for example, of older people who already had families and thus could not devote all their time to the MST, or workers who had to spend most of their day at their job.¹¹ Given that it was impossible for such individuals to rise in the MST’s ranks, but aware of the potential of this type of organization, these people began

9. The book edited by Miguel Carter [2015] provides detailed information about the insertion of the MST in other states and movements in all Brazil.

10. The Pernambuco data go back to September 2002 and were provided by INCRA representatives in that State.

11. For a more detailed description of these groups, see one of my publications [Rosa 2011a].

to use family or neighborhood networks to create their own movements with the endorsement of INCRA. Without exception, they all imitate the organizational form of the MST, designing flags, wearing caps with their movement logo and building encampments with black tarpaulin shacks in unused-underused areas and public buildings. These are the features of what I have called the “movement form”.

As they are located in small towns, these groups become a legitimate way to attract the attention of state entities and encourage political participation in small communities where the MST was not welcome. These movements thus created an important space for individuals who, for various reasons, were excluded from traditional interest groups such as trade unions. This is the case of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos trabalhadores brasileiros sem terras*: MTBST) and the Brazilian Rural and Urban Workers Movement (*Movimento dos trabalhadores rurais e urbanos do Brasil*: MTRUB), formed by two leaders barred from the rural worker trade unions in their own cities. In both cases, a quick visit to the MST’s encampments served to familiarize their leaders with the movement form. The Organization of the Rural Struggle (*Organização de luta no campo*: OLC) reflected a similar trend, since it is a FETAPE’s splinter group that was recently absorbed by the Federation of Rural Workers on Agriculture (FETRAF). The head of the OLC was the same union leader who became the head of FETAPE’s Department of Agrarian Reform in 1996. He brought the MST’s movement form of mobilization and staking claims into trade

unions and then used the union structure to create a new rural movement, independent of the two major grassroots organizations in the region.

Most of these groups were created or began organizing land occupations at the end of the 1990s, when the State responded to the occupations carried out by the MST and FETAPE by expropriating large areas and creating a number of rural settlements. Encouraged by the largely positive (but sometimes repressive) state responses to the MST and FETAPE, these groups have used the struggle for agrarian reform as a mediator to bring public attention to the problems of the region, which is still beneath the iron hand of large scale landowners.

In this context, the movement form that prevailed in this and other regions of the country has proven to be an instrument of social significance for individuals and groups that were able to gather the MST and their own singularities. In other words, through this legitimate form of collective action, various groups and individuals came to be seen as legitimate political subjects by agents of the State. Under the labels of “agrarian reform” and “movement”, brought to the region by the MST, an increasing competition for the state resources previously limited to large scale farmers began.

In particular, the case of Pernambuco allows us to break away from the stereotype that people who engage in land movements do so only because they need land to continue to live according to traditional models of social reproduction. Such cases refute reductionist theories, such as those of José de Souza Martins, who

classifies them as “community entrepreneurs oriented by traditional and conservative values of land, labor, family, community and religion” [2000a: 49]. On the contrary, these phenomena suggest that engagement in these movements is linked to certain social processes that break with the traditional patterns of social hierarchy in small towns in the Zona da Mata. According to our research, participation in these movements has helped to shape attitudes that questioned traditional subordination to the authority of the landlord.

As we have found, people turn to these movements because they have an alternative and not for a lack of opportunities. At specific times, they chose to either go to an encampment or to continue doing what they did before. At other times, they choose among encampments set up by the MST, trade unions, or other movements [Rosa 2006]. Contrary to what Martins argues [2000a and b], they are no longer bound by a lack of alternatives because they live in rural areas. Instead, there is evidence that these new institutions represent a possibility for change in the biographies of thousands of people who recognize them as legitimate and who, by becoming part of their struggles, necessarily transform them.

Crossing the Atlantic

In 2005, just after finishing my research in Pernambuco, I traveled to South Africa to accompany MST’s militants on a visit to the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) founded there in 2001. The movements had established contact through international networks of NGOs that supported the World Social Forum and *La Via Campesina*. During my visit, I spent a month with activists from both countries.

Instead of conducting interviews, as I had done in Brazil, my research was based on everyday conversations about the personal lives of the militants and on the sharing of experiences during that month.

When the Brazilians arrived in Johannesburg, they expected to bring the successful movement form with them, so they brought several bags of red t-shirts and flags with the LPM logo made in Brazil. T-shirts and flags were parts of the movement form in Brazil that presented similarities with the politics of contention in South Africa (in this country the red t-shirt was a central element in the leftist protests I have witnessed since then). Authors like Deborah James [2007] confirm that the MST was the main inspiration to form the LPM. In the eyes of NGOs, academics and movement’s activists, the Brazilian movement was a success and when I arrived in South Africa, they wanted the MST to replicate their forms of organization through workshops and visits to the main branches of the local movement.

While some of the MST’s tactics such as marches and sit-ins in public buildings were also part of their repertoires, the rest of the structure was different. The LPM was formed by activists from different local movements and NGOs and most had to act in the name of both, producing an overlap in terms of both demands and funding. The age gap between the two Brazilians and the South Africans was also large (more than twenty years on average), meaning that while the South Americans had joined the movement at very young age and devoted their lives to the movement, their counterparts had families to provide for. The

South African activists could not live exclusively for the movement, as they needed jobs and other ways to make money. The question of the extended family and jobs repeatedly collided with some of the planned LPM activities, leading to delays and adjournments that affected the Brazilians' belief in the viability of the movement, as I have described elsewhere [Rosa 2011b].

However, more important differences overshadowed the ones described above. The connection between the landlessness and racism entirely shaped the form and the demands of the LPM. The land they struggle for was a result of the colonial dispossession based on the creation of reserves (*bantustans*) for the rural black population [Hendricks, Ntsebeza and Helliker eds. 2013]. The legal frame of reserves culminated in 1936 with the restriction of the legal access of black Africans to only 13% of the country's total land surface. The only option to avoid the removal of a reserve was to reside on a white-owned farm, providing labor in exchange of housing and access to grazing land in a system known as labor tenancy.

In 2005, most of the people I met at the LPM's meetings were former labor tenants, who continued residing on white-owned farms. Thanks to a new set of laws passed after the end of apartheid, these residents were entitled to tenure rights on the property where they lived and worked. While the Brazilians landless were mainly families who had no place to reside and who forcefully occupied private farms forming encampments, the South Africans had to resist on the farms they already inhabited. On these farms, there were just a

handful of families in each case and most of the time, these families were scattered across different parts of the property. The tent encampments described by Lygia Sigaud [2000] were never a possibility, since their "struggle" (and their legal right) was to remain in that specific location where their homestead and their ancestors' graves had been built.

When I say "struggle", this refers to the fact that the white South African farmers in the region were rarely happy to comply with the residential rights of dwellers as a permanent condition. In many cases, there was a daily battle to create an untenable situation that forced families into "voluntarily" leaving the farm. By impounding cattle; denying access to water, grass and mud to repair the houses; cutting off electricity and visits from relatives; and imposing other constraints, the owners aimed to create what has been described as a constructive eviction.

Another decisive feature of the LPM's struggle was that, in general terms, their fundamental demands were not for agricultural land under a more traditional frame of agrarian reform. The struggle was actually for the specific piece of land the families had lived on, in many cases for more than a generation or for a land that had been forcefully taken by the State or private farmers. Contrary to the Brazilian encampments constructed by the MST, unions, or the small movements that targeted any unused farmland where they could establish a smallholding, in South Africa (especially in the region of Kwazulu-Natal) each family had their own particular piece of land in mind. How could an encampment be considered in such situations? Which land had to be occupied?

In terms of legitimate dealings with the State, this type of demand was also difficult to defend. Caught between the discourses on rights and the developmental agendas, the members of the LPM had little to offer those who pursued agrarian transformation in South Africa. Besides the fact that the movement campaigned at the national level for the transformation of the agrarian structures in the country (from 2001 to 2005), the immediate concern of the families was to secure or to take back the land. At the time of my research, claims based on ancestors, dreams and heritage or dispossession (very powerful in the 1990s) were increasingly regarded as sentimental or populist approaches and sidelined by governmental officials and scholars such as Deborah James [2007], Cheryl Walker [2015] and Ben Cousins [2015] in the name of a “rational” policy oriented towards an agricultural agenda.

A closer look to the South African case reveals an important and unexplored component of the movement form in Brazil. To fight against the *latifundio* – the traditional Brazilian large-scale farm regarded as mainly a way to preserve land value and political power – they had to develop a discourse on the productivity and intensive use of land for subsistence agriculture. In offering an alternative to the mainstream agricultural policies in the country, they were able to incorporate certain aspects of state’s agendas to their own agenda and *vice versa*, as demonstrated by Camila Penna [2013]. The same can be observed in the case of the scholars who saw the MST as solid and fertile ground for an alternative model of rural development [Carter 2015]. In

South Africa, however, this never happened. The LPM’s actions on the ground were generally ignored both by the State and scholars, who are still waiting for a “real” local MST to emerge, what they call a “real movement from the ground”.

After three visits by different representatives, the MST decided not to return to South Africa, as the LPM was unable to adapt their practices to at least some of the features of what we have called the movement form. The activists confessed to me on several opportunities that the LPM was not a “proper movement” (meaning a movement like theirs).

The Movement Form as a (Limited) Mode of Gathering

When I first thought about the “movement form” as a way to deal with the MST’s legacy in Brazil, I was very much inspired by the work of the social anthropologist Lygia Sigaud [2001, 2005; see also Sigaud and L’Estoile 2001]. I worked with Lygia Sigaud in Pernambuco when she developed the idea of the “encampment form” to describe the act of encampment and its technology as a language built by the movements. From my point of view, Sigaud’s idea of “form” was inspired by the Durkheim’s and Mauss’s writings on social forms, but also influenced by Weber’s definition of legitimacy. It was a performance that had become compulsory for all those involved with agrarian reform claims in Brazil, meaning both a social obligation and an institutionalized practice. In following with Sigaud’s findings, my own “movement form” was no different in 2004 [Rosa 2011a and b].

I sought to describe an assemblage of relations that ended up compelling individuals, movements and the State to follow the same procedures, to speak the same language.

After a decade of new readings and research, I am convinced that the notion of “form” can be interpreted from another perspective. Together with the reproduction of certain characteristics – encampments, flags, hats and occupations – there was significant inventiveness among all those movements and unions. Each of them read the *MST* according to the situation and connected it with other “tools” creating new arrangements according to what John Law [2004] calls “modes of gathering” things. According to the author, all modes of gathering are partial, circumstantial and “connote[s] the process of bringing together, relating, picking, meeting, building up or flowing together” [2004: 160]. These modes, which we can easily consider methods of contention, are performative in the sense that they enact the subjects they describe, thus bringing them within certain boundaries and limits. Instead of merely forcing people to embrace a model of contention and negotiation, the movement form became a means of transport. It has led activists across the country and internationally, from one movement to another, taking state officials to certain rural areas. Moreover, it has also allowed researchers to create their own concepts, advancing the understanding of the question of land far beyond a simple case of poverty and inequality in rural areas.

The merits of this specific form resided, of course, in their capacity to connect local people with the State in Brazil. As the work of

Camila Penna [2013] has described, the heterogeneous state officials rapidly understood through the *MST* that this form would be also useful to describe their own actions. With state policies as their main goal, the movement form reinforced the need for investment in INCRA, including funds but also the hiring of new staff for that institution.

The trip across the Atlantic revealed that such gatherings are desirable but not always feasible. In South Africa, I perceived the ambiguous desire of local activists to produce the same effects, in a completely distinct environment. Although the form was very effective in inspiring local activists (from movements and NGOs) and scholars, there were certain new elements and others missing at the gathering, thus producing a completely different effect.

While the land was the same, a land converted into an agrarian mean of production and source of subsistence through labor, the movement form was easy to spread and adapt to specific groups and situations. That form enabled the State to act in the name of development, providing credit, subsidies and education to “modern” rural citizens regardless of the flag they were waving.

What I had never considered before working in South Africa was that the movement form never reached out or was fully embraced by the Brazilian indigenous or black rural groups.¹² If we take the case of South Africa

12. Nashieli Loera, from UNICAMP, is currently doing research among indigenous group encampments in Brazil. Her research results will certainly contribute to this debate.

seriously, the racial and indigenous questions cannot be simply merged into the modern State-citizen relation based on the rural and agrarian development discourses. Encampments,

tents and flags are effective symbols but only when they are able to enter into an effective dialogue with the set of expectations described herein.

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Abstract

Marcelo Carvalho Rosa, *A Journey with the Movimento dos trabalhadores rurais sem terra (MST) across Brazil and on to South Africa*

The paper analyses the role of the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in building a specific form of contentious politics for rural struggles the author refers to as the “movement form”. Following the author’s journey over the past twenty years with MST’s activists across Brazil and in South Africa, it seeks to present the conditions that allowed certain features of the MST’s *modus operandi* to be incorporated by other groups at the national and international levels. While recognizing the valuable contributions of the movement to an innovative assemblage in terms of the state-landless relations, the author presents the limits of the MST’s approach to land claims, which cannot be reduced to merely agriculture.

Keywords

Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), Brazil, South Africa, rural trade unions, agrarian reform

Résumé

Marcelo Carvalho Rosa, *Voyage au cœur du Mouvement des travailleurs ruraux sans terre (MST) via le Brésil et l’Afrique du Sud*

L’auteur s’intéresse ici au rôle qu’a joué, au Brésil, le Mouvement des travailleurs ruraux sans terre (MST) dans la construction d’une forme spécifique et controversée de politique en faveur des ruraux, que l’auteur appelle « forme-mouvement ». Le sociologue est allé à la rencontre d’activistes au Brésil et en Afrique du Sud. Il montre comment certaines composantes du *modus operandi* du MST ont été adoptées par d’autres groupes, tant au niveau national qu’au niveau international. Tout en reconnaissant ce que ce mouvement a apporté d’essentiel en termes de relations entre l’État et les sans-terre, l’auteur met en évidence les limites de cette approche en termes de revendications territoriales, qu’on ne saurait réduire à la seule agriculture.

Mots clés

Mouvement des travailleurs ruraux sans terre (MST), Brésil, Afrique du Sud, syndicats ruraux, réforme agraire