THE LANDLESS RURAL WORKERS MOVEMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL

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Abstract: This article takes issue with influential views in Brazil that depict the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), the largest popular movement in this country, as a threat to democracy. Contrary to these assessments, it argues that a sober review of the MST's actual practice shows that it is far from an antistate or antidemocratic organization. Quite to the contrary, the MST demands that the state play an active part in reducing the nation's stark social inequities through the institution of an inclusive model of development. The MST's contentious edge has contributed to Brazil's ongoing democratization process by (1) highlighting the role of public activism in building political capabilities among the poor and catalyzing downward redistribution policies; (2) facilitating the extension of basic citizenship rights, broadening the scope of the public agenda, and strengthening civil society through the inclusion of groups representing the most vulnerable strata of the population; and (3) fostering a sense of hope and utopia through the affirmation of ideals imbued in Brazil's long-term, complex, and open-ended democratization process.

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

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ants at the Annoni estate. Shortly after the occupation, the local Catholic bishop and eighty priests showed up at the camp to bless the landless struggle.

Approximately 1,250 families obtained a landholding from the concerted pressure and long-sustained mobilization that followed the Annoni occupation. This involved a broad range of essentially nonviolent collective action measures, varying from countless lobbying efforts with government officials, including three trips to meet with national authorities in Brasília, and an array of high-profile protest tactics. The statistics of the struggle undertaken by the Annoni occupants are quite revealing. In the eight years it took to settle all the families, landless people from the Annoni estate were engaged in thirty-six land occupations; at least thirty major protest rallies; nine hunger strikes; two lengthy marches, including a 450-kilometer, twenty-seven day march to Porto Alegre, the state capital; three road blockades; and nine building takeovers, six of these at National Land Reform Institute (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária, or INCRA) and three at the State Assembly. Ten human lives were lost in these struggles, including seven children who died from precarious health conditions at the camp. Of the adults, two were peasants and one was a police officer killed during a protest melee in Porto Alegre (Carter 2007). The piecemeal settlement of all the Annoni families was completed only in 1993.

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

This article is written in the context of today, which often portrays the MST as a menace to Brazil's democratic institutions. It thus seeks to address two basic issues: How does the MST relate to Brazil's political process? What is the MST's impact on democracy in Brazil? These queries, however, beg an initial question: What is the MST? Hence, this study begins with a contextual and historical overview of the MST. It then examines the movement's main sources of endurance and power. The following two sections review the multifarious ways in which the MST engages the broader political process and affects democracy.

Influential Brazilian intellectuals such as José de Souza Martins, Zander Navarro, Francisco Graziano, and Dennis Lerrer Rosenfield argue that the MST's confrontational relations with Brazil's governing institutions are harmful for democracy. During the past decade, these four intellectuals have helped sanction recurrent media depictions of the MST as an "autocratic, violent, shady revolutionary organization." As such, they have endorsed a public image that treats the landless movement as a threat to the Brazilian state and its democratic regime. The tacit proposition,

here, clearly underpins conservative calls to restrain, and even eliminate, the MST.

The views these intellectuals have espoused have gained traction in top echelons of state and media power. A telling manifestation of this took place in December 2007, when the High Council of Prosecutors of Rio Grande do Sul unanimously approved a secret report that called on the judiciary to take unprecedented measures aimed to outlaw the MST. Various efforts to criminalize and curtail MST activities in this southern state followed the decision, including the indictment of eight landless activists under a national security law sanctioned by Brazil's military regime and various court orders barring the movement from carrying out marches and other peaceful demonstrations.[1] Press revelations in June 2008 of the secret judicial plans led to a brief scandal, followed by a temporary lull in state hostilities. Yet by early 2009, the state government had renewed efforts to restrict MST activities in Rio Grande do Sul, notably by shutting down all schools set up in its landless camps. The arguments the High Council of Prosecutors used to justify the MST's banishment were crafted on the ideas Zander Navarro and other academic critics advanced.

This article disputes the extreme caricature and unsubstantiated depictions of the MST that these intellectuals and much of the Brazilian mainstream press presented. It challenges their restrictive view of democracy and their patronizing representations of this popular movement. The purported conflict between the MST and Brazil's democratic institutions is far more rhetorical than real. A sober review of the MST's actual practice shows that it is far from an antistate or antidemocratic organization. Quite to the contrary, the MST demands that the state play an active part in fostering an inclusive model of development, one that seeks to rebalance the nation's social order and strengthen capabilities among its underprivileged population.

The MST's contentious edge, it is argued here, has contributed to Brazil's ongoing democratization process by (1) highlighting the role of public activism, a form of social conflict grounded on pressure politics and bargaining with state authorities, in building political capabilities among the poor and catalyzing downward redistribution policies; (2) facilitating the

1. An incisive depiction of the state government's efforts to criminalize the landless movement took place in January 2008, when close to 1,000 police officers, supported by 100 vehicles, helicopters, horses, and police dogs, surrounded the Annoni settlement, where 1,500 MST activists from Rio Grande do Sul were holding their twenty-forth state congress. The ostentatious police apparatus was assembled to carry out a court mandate to investigate whether MST participants were responsible for stealing the equivalent of US$120, a watch, and a camera from a nearby ranch. After a tense standoff, the police investigators found none of the allegedly missing goods. For a useful analysis of recent legal efforts to curtail the MST, see Scalabrin 2009; for the High Council of Prosecutors of Rio Grande do Sul report on the MST, see Thums n.d.

extension of basic citizenship rights, broadening the scope of the public agenda, and strengthening civil society through the inclusion of groups representing the most vulnerable strata of the population; and (3) fostering a sense of hope and utopia through the affirmation of ideals imbued in Brazil's long-term, complex, and open-ended democratization process.

An amiable and institutionalized MST, as Martins, Navarro, Graziano, and Rosenfield seem to prefer, would render the movement innocuous and defeat its raison d'être. In light of the crude realities of Brazilian rural politics and the enduring powers its agrarian elite have accrued, it would be naive, at best, to expect the MST's struggle for social justice to require anything less than a tough touch.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

An incisive appraisal of the conditions that have shaped the MST is crucial for understanding its history and activities. Brazil is the world's ninth-largest economy and the globe's tenth-most-unequal society in terms of income distribution. The wealthiest 10 percent of the population holds 45 percent of the nation's income, whereas the poorest 20 percent holds less than 3 percent of this income (UN Development Programme 2007).[2] This starkly divided society is the upshot of the country's historical configuration, notably, its oligarchic politics, weak patrimonial state, slave-based economy, and striking land concentration. During the twentieth century, Brazil underwent an intense process of capitalist modernization, led by an invigorated state. Yet its secular inequities have remained largely intact, especially in the countryside. After more than two decades of political democracy and ongoing mobilization for agrarian reform, the nation continues to exhibit one of the world's highest patterns of land concentration. According to Brazil's land registry, 1.6 percent of the landholders control 47 percent of the nation's farmland, whereas a third of the farmers hold 1.6 percent of this area.[3]

The nation's stark social disparities are responsible for producing a disjointed, apartheid-like society. In rural Brazil, a highly modernized and dynamic agricultural economy coexists with a pauperized society in which more than half the population lives below the national poverty line. The nation is a leading global producer and exporter of major food commodities—notably sugar, coffee, oranges, soybeans, and beef—

2. Brazil's income inequality ranking is based on data for 139 countries, computed by Carter (forthcoming). According to a study conducted by Campos et al. (2005), the combined resources of the richest five thousand Brazilian families (i.e., 0.001 percent of the population) amounts to 40 percent of the nation's gross domestic product.

3. This data is from the government's 2003 land registry, as published in DATALUTA (2008). For helpful historical reviews of Brazil's agrarian structure and politics, see Delgado 2010; Martins 1994, 1997; Medeiros 1989; Stédile 1994.

yet according to a government survey, more than 25 million Brazilians, 14 percent of the population, have suffered from hunger in recent years (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada 2005; World Bank 2005). Over the past few decades, Brazil has become largely urbanized, and currently only one-fifth of its population lives in the countryside and works in agriculture (Comisión Económica para América Latina [CEPAL] 2004). Still, the number of landless people is estimated between 3.3 million and 6.1 million families, whereas Brazil's unproductive farmland comprises more than a quarter of the national territory (Del Grossi et al. 2001; Ministério de Desenvolvimento Agrário 2003).

Brazil's sharp class asymmetries condition the balance of forces in its society and shape much of its political process. Three sets of obstacles, in particular, have thwarted the implementation of a progressive agrarian reform. These are the enduring influence of the agrarian elite, an oligarchic system of governance, and an acute concentration of media power.

The continuing strength of the landlord class owes much to the policies, legal framework, and inactions of the Brazilian state. Government subsidies and technical support to large commercial farmers, instituted after the mid-1960s, fueled the rise of an intense process of capitalist modernization in agriculture. Rural production increased substantially in the ensuing decades. The 1982 debt crisis compelled the state to augment its agro-exports to repay its foreign and domestic creditors. The agrarian elite's privileged access to public resources and protection intensified under these economic policies. Throughout the process, the state continued to protect large landholders through assorted measures, such as negligible taxation on rural properties; state acquiescence to the fraudulent appropriation of vast tracks of the nation's territory (especially in the Amazon); lax enforcement of environmental, labor, and agrarian reform laws; judicial favoritism toward the agrarian elite; and highly inflated compensations for most land expropriations. Trade liberalization policies established in the 1990s gave rise to an influential agribusiness sector, which operates in close partnership with the world's leading agro-food conglomerates that control global markets for seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and agricultural trading (on the power of global agro-food corporations, see ActionAid International 2006). As a result, over the past two decades, Brazil has witnessed the formation of a powerful triple alliance of the national landed elite, the state, and global agro-food corporations.

Thus, contrary to the assessments of Navarro (2002b, 274), Martins (2003, 274), and Graziano (2004, 133), Brazil's agrarian elite has not reached levels of "unprecedented weakness," become "more receptive to land reform," or "vanished" as result of their modernization, respectively. Large landholders in Brazil continue to wield significant economic influence and political clout. Though more modernized and well assimilated into the nation's competitive electoral process, this sector has generally resisted agrarian

reform and the adoption of other pro-poor measures aimed to extend effective citizenship rights in Brazil.

Various facets of Brazilian politics bolstered the nation's lopsided distributions of political power. Among them, the overrepresentation of conservative rural interests in Congress given the malapportionment of legislative seats have assured the agrarian elite and close conservative allies control of more than a third of the seats in the lower chamber. This multiparty coalition known as the *bancada ruralista* has been the largest voting bloc in Congress since Brazil's redemocratization. Their political clout has compelled all recent civilian presidents to appease the large landowners' caucus to sustain majority coalitions in the legislature. Between 1995 and 2005, landless peasants had an average of 1 federal deputy for every 612,000 families, whereas the large landlords had 1 deputy for every 236 families. The political representation of landlords was therefore 2,587 times greater than that of landless peasants. As a result of these disparities, each of Brazil's largest landlords had access to US$1,587 from public coffers for every dollar made available to a landless family (Carter 2010b, 63).

Another powerful obstacle to agrarian reform in Brazil stems from the nation's conservative, oligopolistic media structure. Through its influential role in shaping the nation's public agenda, the mainstream press has done more to buttress the country's political and social inequities than to challenge these conditions. According to estimates, nine family conglomerates generate 85 percent of the country's news information. Though staffed with many competent journalists, the striking concentration of media power and its attendant class biases explain much of the one-sided, mostly negative, and often blatantly hostile coverage accorded to popular movements like the MST (for informative accounts of the media's portrayal of the MST, see Berger 1998; Comparato 2003; Hammond 2004; Lerrer 2005).

Brazilian peasant organizations have sought to overcome such limited and skewed access to the mass media through recurrent mobilizations, including 7,078 land occupations between 1987 and 2006 (Carter and Carvalho 2010). Successive governments have responded to such demands by undertaking various land distribution measures. From 1985 to 2006, close to 825,000 families received a parcel of land, in an area amounting to a total of 41.3 million hectares, a territory as large as Sweden (Carter 2010). Brazilian government spokespersons have often touted these land reform initiatives as "the world's largest" (Graziano 2004, 238; see also *Carta Maior* 2009). The absolute numbers are certainly impressive. Yet Brazil is the fifth-largest nation in the globe in population and territory. Weighed against sixteen other Latin American countries that undertook comparable reforms, Brazil actually ranks last in the percentage of beneficiary families (at 5 percent of the nation's agricultural workforce) and twelfth

in land allocation (based on the distribution of 11.6 percent of the nation's farmland) (Carter 2010b).

Since the return to political democracy, all presidents, from José Sarney to Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, have pursued some variation of what could be broadly described as a conservative agrarian reform. The impetus for reform has been essentially reactive and restrained. It has strived mainly to appease rural conflicts rather than to promote family farming through proactive measures aimed to transform the rural structure and its power relations.[4] By treating agrarian reform as an isolated problem, of marginal interest to the nation's development, all governments have engaged in an ad hoc distribution process, offering land in places convenient to the state and landowning elite.[5] As a rule, governments have shied away from taking measures that would confront or upset Brazil's dominant rural forces. As a consequence, Brazil's agrarian reform has had largely negligible effects on the nation's land-tenure pattern.

All these mobilizations for land have taken place amid recurrent human rights violations in the Brazilian countryside and striking levels of impunity (table 1). According to the Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra [CPT] 2007a), between 1985 and 2006, 1,465 land reform activists and peasants, including dozens of children, were killed in different rural conflicts. Only 8 percent of the cases were ever brought to trial, and the courts have condemned barely twenty landlords who hired the gunmen to execute such crimes (CPT (2007a).

MAKING HISTORY

Brazil's first stirrings for land reform took place in the mid-1950s, in the country's northeastern region. The mobilizations gained broader impetus in the early 1960s and prompted President João Goulart to issue the nation's first agrarian reform law in 1964. Days later, however, a military coup d'état ended Brazil's fledgling democratic regime. The influential landlord class strongly backed the military takeover. Popular movements in the countryside and their leftist allies suffered extensive repression during the ensuing years. All remaining peasant associations were subject to state controls. Under the military regime, land reform was confined

4. A major survey of agrarian reform settlements found that 96 percent of all the communities had originated in some form of land struggle (see Leite et al. 2004). On average, peasants have had to mobilize for four years to gain access to a farm plot, given the restrictive legal and bureaucratic process required to create a reform settlement (see Carter and Carvalho 2010).

5. This explains the fact that more than 70 percent of all land distributed between 1985 and 2006 has been in the Amazonian agricultural frontier (including the neighboring states of Mato Grosso and Maranhão), where land values tend to be much lower than in the rest of Brazil.

Table 1 Land Distribution and Human Rights Violations in Brazil, 1985–2006

		Beneficiary families			*Area distributed (in hectares)*			
President	Period	Total	Yearly average	Amazon (%)	Total	Yearly average	Amazon (%)	Human rights violations[a] yearly average
Sarney	1985–1989	92,178	18,436	44	5,091,049	1,018,210	64	312[b]
Collor and Franco	1990–1994	57,194	14,299	58	2,895,903	723,976	71	315
Cardoso 1	1995–1998	299,863	74,966	31	12,222,613	3,055,653	41	198
Cardoso 2	1999–2002	155,491	38,873	28	6,768,771	1,692,193	41	225
Lula 1	2003–2006	220,606	55,152	47	14,356,824	3,589,206	73	376
Total	1985–2006	825,332	37,515	38	41,335,160	1,878,871	57	284

[a]The figures for human rights violations are based on yearly averages per government period of the total number of people who have been assassinated, suffered assassination attempts, and received death threats over rural conflicts in Brazil.
[b]Human rights violations data for the Sarney period cover only two years, 1988 and 1989.

Source: DATALUTA and CPT, compiled by Carter and Carvalho (2010).

to a colonization program in the Amazon and largely removed from public debate.

The MST was forged in the context of a second wave of peasant mobilizations that surfaced in the early 1980s. Officially created in January 1984, in Cascavel, Paraná, the movement emerged under the aegis of the CPT, an ecumenical agency linked to the Catholic Church. The CPT nurtured the MST's formation by building a network of activists engaged in different land struggles across southern Brazil.

The southern region's relatively high levels of rural development, state capacity, education, and social capital facilitated the movement's formation. The strong family farm legacy, particularly in Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná, a consequence of intense European immigration after the mid-1800s, helped foster a historically active and inventive civil society. Previous land mobilizations, notably during the late 1950s in Paraná and early 1960s in Rio Grande do Sul, had established an important precedent in the region. Moreover, despite many restrictions, the creation of state-sponsored rural trade unions in the 1960s and 1970s helped diffuse basic notions of citizenship rights and nurture a sense of class identity among the peasantry (on the history of these rural trade unions, see Maybury-Lewis 1994; Medeiros 1989).

The MST's genesis was shaped, in particular, by the rise of a large contingent of landless farmers in the 1970s. This resulted mostly from population growth in the countryside, the capitalist modernization of agriculture, and the state-led construction of large hydroelectric dams. The military regime's gradual *abertura* in the late 1970s created new political opportunities for popular mobilization. These changes, in turn, enabled progressive religious agents—inspired by innovative Catholic trends, including liberation theology—to play a pivotal role in reigniting Brazil's struggle for land reform. Indeed, these and other church initiatives at the grass roots helped foster an array of rural social movements, the MST being the most prominent offspring.[6]

The landless movement expanded to other regions of Brazil through the support of a progressive network of church and rural trade-union activists. By 1997, it had established a foothold in twenty-three of the country's twenty-seven federal units. Nine years later, it carried out its first land occupation in the state of Roraima, near the border with Guyana.

After the mid-1990s, the MST became particularly active in northeastern Brazil. In 2006, nearly half of its estimated 2,012 agricultural settlements were located in this region. By then, the movement had prodded

6. For key sources on the MST's history and evolution, see Branford and Rocha 2002; Carter 2010a; Fernandes 2000, 2010; Ondetti 2008; Stédile and Fernandes 1999; Wright and Wolford 2003. For a useful review of the literature on the movement, see Welch 2006. On the church's involvement in support of the MST, see Poletto 2010; Poletto and Canuto 2002.

the Brazilian government to distribute close to 3.7 million hectares, or 14,285 square miles, a territory roughly the size of Switzerland or half the state of South Carolina. Close to 135,000 MST families have benefited from the measures (Carter and Carvalho 2010).

During the past decade, more than ninety peasant associations were involved in land struggles across Brazil. The MST and the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura, CONTAG) are the largest and most active of these organizations. The MST is predominant in the South, as well as some states in the Southeast and Northeast.[7] In the Amazon, the Center-West, and other northeastern states, CONTAG-affiliated unions and various local movements, including informal groups of squatters, have primarily led land struggles. In 2006, more than a quarter of Brazil's agrarian settlements were connected to the MST. Yet more than 90 percent of the land distributed since 1979 resulted from mobilizations of peasant groups that were not linked to the MST (Carter and Carvalho 2010).[8]

The MST gained ample national visibility in the mid-1990s. A surge in land mobilizations after 1995 and ample media coverage of dramatic developments in the countryside, notably two police massacres of landless peasants in the Amazon, contributed much to the newfound impetus. The April 1996 slaughter of nineteen MST peasants at Eldorado dos Carajás, Pará, triggered a national scandal and prompted the federal government to accelerate land distribution throughout Brazil.[9]

This episode in particular, along with the benign depiction of the landless struggle in the highly popular television soap opera *O rei do gado* (The Cattle King), which aired two months after the massacre, helped generate widespread support for land reform. This momentum peaked during the first months of 1997, with the MST's national march to Brasília. Led by 1,300 people, divided into three columns originating in distant corners of the country, the marchers walked for sixty-four days, some covering as many as 640 miles before their triumphant arrival into the nation's capital. At the final gathering in front of the National Congress, close to one hundred thousand supporters came to rally for agrarian reform. The events

7. The federal units where MST settlements account for more than half of the state's total settlements are (ranked from top to bottom) Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Sergipe, Espiritu Santo, Paraná, Pernambuco, Ceará, and São Paulo.

8. The disparity between the percentage of MST settlements and area allocated reflects that reform plots in the Amazon are much larger than those distributed in regions where the MST is more active.

9. A telling illustration of Brazil's "un-rule" of law in the countryside can be gleaned from the aftermath of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre. The first court trial of the 146 police officers charged with killing nineteen people and seriously wounding seventy other peasants found them all innocent. A retrial followed the annulment of the first ruling, at which only two senior police officers were found guilty. None has spent time in prison.

allowed the MST to gain widespread recognition as Brazil's principal social movement. Opinion polls taken in April 1997 showed that 94 percent of the population felt that the struggle for land reform was just, whereas 85 percent indicated support for nonviolent land occupations as a way to accelerate government reform efforts.[10] Around this time, the MST became one of the leading critics of the neoliberal policies that the Cardoso administration and various state governors were pursuing.

As table 1 shows, the Cardoso and Lula administrations substantially increased the pace of land distribution in Brazil. Together, both administrations helped settle 82 percent of all reform beneficiaries between 1985 and 2006. Each of these governments, however, exhibited different dispositions toward the MST and varying policy concerns.

The Cardoso administration multiplied the number of reform settlements, especially between 1996 and 1999, when the government's monetary stabilization program triggered a temporary drop in rural property values. The new agricultural communities instituted during the Cardoso era, however, received meager ancillary support from the government, despite the existence of federal laws mandating the provision of credit, infrastructure, and basic services to ensure the development of these reform settlements.[11] During Cardoso's second term, a discernable effort was made to restrict MST protest and curb financial support for its activities. Aside from instituting efforts to criminalize landless mobilizations, it instigated a media campaign aimed to discredit the MST's public image.[12] With the backing of the World Bank, the Cardoso government introduced a decentralized, market-based approach to land distribution, which severely undercut the MST's ability to engage in collective action (on the World Bank's land policies in Brazil, see Dias Martins 2004; J. M. M. Pereira 2009; Sauer and J. M. M. Pereira 2006).

The election of President Lula, a long-standing friend to MST, was greeted with an enthusiastic sense of relief in the MST. The Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) administration no longer sought to criminalize the movement's protests, despite repeated demands for this

10. These figures are from Ibope, one of Brazil's leading polling firms, and were published by *O Estado de São Paulo* on April 16, 1997; see Comparato 2003.

11. A 2002 survey of all land-reform settlements between 1995 and 2001 found that nearly half of the communities were in a "precarious state." More than half lacked internal roads or access to public transportation; 55 percent had no electricity; and 77 percent had no access to a secondary school; see Sparovek (2003).

12. The mainstream media's hostility toward the MST has remained strong during Lula's tenure in office, partly as a way to keep Lula's left-leaning cabinet members in check. The decade-long media attack explains much of the drop in the MST's popularity, as revealed in an April 2008 poll by Ibope, which found that 50 percent of Brazilians held a negative view of the country's rural social movements, of which the MST was the most recognizable group (see *O Estado de São Paulo* 2008).

by right-wing politicians and the conservative media establishment. Notwithstanding greater room for dialogue with popular movements and increased public funding for family agriculture and reform settlements, the Lula government failed to pursue the more audacious agrarian policies the president had ardently defended in the past. The annual rate of land reform beneficiaries during Lula's first term in office was actually lower than that of the Cardoso era. Moreover, 73 percent of Lula's land distributions took place in the Amazonian frontier, often in remote areas, compared to only 41 percent of the Cardoso land allocations.[13]

Lula's conservative agrarian policies were largely the result of the administration's fear of upsetting agribusiness interests, alienating its conservative congressional allies, and undermining its fiscal austerity policies. Eager to ensure a steady flow of hard currency obtained through agro-exports and to increase the production of agro-fuels, the Lula government lent ample support to expand large-scale agribusiness farming. From 2003 to 2007, state support for the rural elite was seven times greater than that offered to the nation's family farmers, even though the latter represent 87 percent of Brazil's rural labor force and produce the bulk of the food its inhabitants consume (Carter and Carvalho 2010).[14] All this led to a growing disenchantment with Lula in the MST ranks. As one leader put it during a personal conversation, "Lula has now become a friend of our enemies."

The MST has made great strides since its precarious origins in the 1980s. The movement, nevertheless, is not the great powerhouse in the nation's political scene that a number of its detractors and admirers both imagine. Although large and broadly extended throughout Brazil, the MST accounts for only 5 percent of the country's rural inhabitants (Carter 2010b). As an organization of poor people, operating with scarce resources, the MST exhibits many of the collective action problems—logistical shortcomings, strategic errors, and human vices—that can be found in other popular groups of this kind. Amid its many limitations, the MST has demonstrated unusual longevity and sophistication for a popular move-

13. Under the two Cardoso administrations, the government settled a yearly average of 56,919 families, 1,768 families more than under Lula's first term (Carter and Carvalho 2010). If, however, one were to compute the fifty-three extractive reserves created in the Amazon between 1996 and 2006 (forty-five of which were set up under Lula's first administration), then the yearly average of families settled under Lula increases to 63,004; that is, 5,796 more than the yearly average during Cardoso's two terms. Author's calculations based on DATALUTA (2008); also see Carter (2010b).

14. Adding to this, the Ministry of Agriculture's budget to support agribusiness farming during the 2008–2009 harvest was six times greater than funds allocated for Lula's flagship poverty reduction initiative, Bolsa Família, as can be ascertained by contrasting data published by Ministério de Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento (2009), and Instituto de Estudos Socioeconómicos (2009).

ment. As such, it has effectively rewritten the history of popular movements in Brazil.

BUILDING CAPABILITIES

The MST's endurance and growth owe much to its ability to make the best of the opportunities and obstacles on hand. The nation's political freedoms and competitive elections, for one, have allowed the movement to expand its organizing efforts and petition public authorities. State response to MST demands, however partial and delayed, has enhanced the movement's attractiveness among its actual and potential participants. Moreover, Brazil's apartheid-like society, with vast numbers of people living in abject poverty, has ensured a large contingent of potential recruits for the MST. In turn, the steep obstacles to agrarian reform have prompted the movement to boost its organizational capacities, to extract concessions from the state and make up for inadequate government services. All this has led the movement to engage in a continuous process of pressure politics and bargaining with state authorities. As a result, the MST has developed seven major sources of power: mobilization capacity, multifaceted but flexible organization, strategic creativity, quest for financial independence, resourceful allies, investment in popular education, and mystique and discipline.

Mobilization Capacity

The movement possesses a large membership and the ability to mobilize masses of people. In 2006, the MST had an estimated membership of 1.1 million people, supported by twenty thousand activists engaged in coordinating movement activities on various issues and levels. That same year, the MST led 55 percent of all land occupations in Brazil and was active in more than half of all popular demonstrations in the countryside (calculations based on CPT 2007b). The movement has sponsored some of the largest and most elaborate mass mobilizations in Brazilian history. In May 2005, the MST organized a 125-mile march to Brasília with twelve thousand people. An impressive logistical apparatus supported the seventeen-day mobilization: several massive circus tents to lodge all campers; 65 transport vehicles; a roving child-care center; 325 health workers; and a cooking staff of 415 people responsible for serving three meals a day, prepared with food donations from MST settlements scattered across the country. The event even featured a mobile radio station that broadcast programs to the marchers through ten thousand small radio receivers borrowed from the World Social Forum. Never had the world recorded a long-distance march as large and sophisticated as this one (Carter 2010b).

Multifaceted, Flexible Organization

The MST operates through a complex and scattered network of collective groups. Its multiple instances of coordination—at national, state, regional, and local levels—function in a fairly decentralized but cohesive manner. The MST relies fundamentally on volunteers, but it has strengthened its professional support over the last years. The MST's main national and state offices employ full-time staff organizers and technical advisers, albeit they earn mostly minimal living stipends. Though consistent and synchronized in many of its tactics, the movement allows for regional variation and experimentation. Between 1988 and 2006, the MST created thirteen task teams to deal with various facets of its struggle. These multilayered collectives cover an assorted range of issues, from education, finance, recruitment, and grassroots organizing to health, communication, culture, gender, youth, human rights, international relations, and production and ecology. The task teams are responsible for managing 161 cooperatives, including 4 credit unions; 140 agro-industries; scores of training centers, news outlets, and artistic groups; and various national and transnational advocacy networks (Carter and Carvalho 2010).

Strategic Creativity

The MST has learned to seek and devise homegrown solutions to a wide range of practical problems. This led the movement to develop an inventive ethos, open to experimentation and renewal. The MST sharply exhibits its ingenuity in the way its local activists plan and carry out its massive and peaceful land occupations, a generally risky endeavor conducted with tactical acumen. Throughout its history, the MST has shown a discernable capacity for innovation and adaptation. All this owes much to the movement's practical disposition, its collective decision-making process, and its ability to learn from past mistakes.

Examples of MST's resourcefulness abound. After the mid-1990s, the movement began to reappraise its early attachment to an industrial, chemical-dependent model of agriculture and began to foster a growing enthusiasm for agro-ecology. The 1997 creation of BioNatur, the movement's first cooperative for organic seeds, established in Rio Grande do Sul, marked a turning point in the process. A decade later, BioNatur had become the largest producer of organic seeds in Latin America, with 117 crop varieties and annual yield of twenty tons of seeds. In the mid-1990s, the MST sought to overcome a period of relative isolation by investing significantly in the creation of various news outlets, in addition to the monthly newspaper established in 1981. Along with a glossy bimonthly magazine, Web page, thirty community radio stations, and news programs distributed to 1,500 radios, the MST helped establish a publishing

house; two news agencies; and a weekly newspaper, *Brasil de Fato,* sold at newsstands across the country. In the late 1990s, after extensive lobbying, MST women gained access to child-care facilities at every movement gathering, and by 2003, they had helped guarantee full gender equality in the organization's leadership structure.

Quest for Financial Independence

As a poor people's movement, the MST has faced ongoing challenges in securing the material resources needed to sustain its activities. Early concerns about becoming too dependent on a handful of external supporters led the movement to diversify and decentralize much of its fundraising efforts. At the local level, the MST receives regular contributions from its cooperatives and members and occasional assistance from municipal governments. Aid is also channeled through an assortment of civil society groups, including religious institutions, trade unions, student groups, artists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and educational institutions. Federal and state governments have funded various educational and agricultural projects, and they often provide food rations for the movement's landless camps. Between 1995 and 2005, three associations linked to the MST received US$19.2 million from the federal government.[15] International sources of support for the MST have generally come from church organizations; solidarity groups; foundations; NGOs; and development agencies run by governments in Europe, Canada, Cuba, and Venezuela. In the early 2000s, the European Union contributed US$1.3 million to help build the MST's own university (Arruda 2005). Cuba and Venezuela, in turn, have provided full scholarships for 120 MST medical students (MST 2009, 17).

Resourceful Allies

The movement's birth and ongoing expansion would not have been possible without the contribution of numerous partners in Brazilian civil and political society. Over time, the movement became adept at capitalizing on sympathetic pockets in the state, including those in the federal land reform agency, INCRA. Its strongest supporters in civil society include liberal sectors of the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches,

15. During the same period, five societies representing elite rural interests received US$509.6 million from the federal government; a sum twenty-seven times greater than that made available to support MST projects in education, agriculture, and health. Despite the vast disparities, virtually all the intense congressional and media scrutiny has been on the monies allocated to MST-related associations, not those that subsidize the associations that wealthy ranchers and planters controls. These figures were derived from data compiled by Melo (2006).

urban and rural trade unions, as well as progressive NGOs, university professors, students, musicians, and actors. The MST has also played an active role in several Brazilian networks, such as the National Forum for Agrarian Reform and Justice in the Countryside, the Consulta Popular, the Coordination of Social Movements, and the church-sponsored Popular Assembly. In political society, the movement has enjoyed the backing of left-leaning political parties, notably the PT. The MST's international ties strengthened considerably during the 1990s. After receiving Sweden's Alternative Nobel prize in 1991, it established solidarity groups in fourteen European and North American countries. In 1994, following several years of active engagement with other popular groups in Latin America, the movement helped create the Latin American Coordination of Peasant Organizations (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo, or CLOC). Two years later, it joined and became a leading proponent of La Vía Campesina, an international peasant coalition, which by 2008 had expanded to include 168 associations from sixty-nine countries around the globe.

Investment in Popular Education

The movement has placed a uniquely strong emphasis on providing an education to its participants and raising popular consciousness. Starting in 1984, the MST set up a network of 1,800 primary and secondary schools, which has served an estimated 250,000 children. The bulk of its eight thousand teachers use pedagogical methods inspired by Paulo Freire and teaching materials developed by the MST's own educational team (Carter and Carvalho 2010; on the MST's approach to education, see Caldart 2000; Kane 2001; Kolling, Cerioli, and Caldart 2002). Since 1991, the MST has provided adult literacy classes for more than fifty thousand people (MST 2009, 16). Significant resources have been devoted to the preparation of its cadres. Between 1988 and 2002, more than one hundred thousand activists took part in hundreds of workshops organized on a range of topics (Carter and Carvalho 2010). In early 2005, the movement inaugurated its first university, the Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes, named after a renowned Brazilian intellectual, on an attractive campus near the city of São Paulo. In the past decade, the MST has established partnerships with sixty Brazilian universities offering various degrees and special courses for its members. The programs and workshops complement the intense pedagogical experience that takes place during its collective struggles. These moments, in particular, have helped MST participants overcome previous sentiments of disempowerment and fatalism and foster a strong sense of agency. In this way, the movement has nurtured feelings of dignity, self-confidence, and social responsibility among its members (Caldart 2000; Quirk 2008).

Mystique and Discipline

Under the auspices of the church and liberation theology, the movement learned to cultivate a sense of *mística* among its participants. It has done so by creating a rich symbolic repertoire—its flag, songs, chants, theater, poetry, and stirring speeches—that is displayed in ritual gatherings that stimulate feelings of shared sacrifice, camaraderie, and idealism and that offers moments of festive commemoration. All this has helped nourish an intense social energy, forceful convictions, and strong sense of identity. Among MST activists, one often hears expressions of deep emotional attachment, such as "I love the MST" or "The movement is my family."

Alongside these strong dispositions, the movement normally exhibits a well-composed, orderly lifestyle. By disciplining passions and other raw impulses into more methodical forms of behavior, the MST has helped nurture what Norbert Elias (1982) describes as a civilizing process. Feelings of enhanced self-control and greater self-esteem have inclined MST participants to channel their contentious behavior through constructive means. The movement's sense of mystique and discipline are interwoven in subtle ways. Together, they elicit and channel the emotions that give vitality, courage, and perseverance to the MST's struggles.

ENGAGING THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The MST's relations with Brazil's political system are multifarious and dynamic. At any given juncture, the perceived opportunities and challenges at stake will largely determine the movement's choice of tactics. In the MST's own parlance, its strategic options emerge from its analysis of the correlation of forces. Contrary to established views in Brazil, I argue that its basic pattern of interaction with Brazil's governing institutions is not antidemocratic. The movement's contentious demeanor, if anything, is akin to that of other popular groups engaged in democratizing struggles throughout the modern world (on the democratizing role of popular sector groups, see Collier 1999; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992).

The MST's prevailing mode of action is grounded on a distinct form of social conflict described here as public activism. This approach to social struggle is substantially different from that of an armed insurgency, a scattered riot, or what James C. Scott (1985) defines as everyday forms of resistance (also see Scott 1990). Unlike these other patterns of social confrontation, the MST's public activism involves an organized, politicized, visible, autonomous, periodic, and nonviolent form of social conflict.

Actions carried out through public activism are geared toward drawing public attention; influencing state policies, through pressure politics,

lobbying, and negotiations; and shaping societal ideas, values, and actions. Typically, mobilizations of this kind employ an array of modern repertoires of contention, such as demonstrations, marches, petitions, group meetings, hunger strikes, protest camps, election campaigns, and acts of civil disobedience (e.g., sit-ins, road blockades, building takeovers, organized land occupations) (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1979). Unlike other approaches to social conflict, public activism's nonviolent thrust makes it essentially compatible with civil society and provides a legitimate democratic vehicle for propelling social change.

Public activism requires certain facilitating conditions, notably, enhanced political opportunities for collective action and substantial access to mobilizing resources. Together, these opportunities and resources structure a set of incentives that persuade contentious groups to make demands on the state and bargain with its authorities. Moreover, they encourage the development of partnerships with civil and political society groups to strengthen the demands and improve prospects for a successful negotiation. These conditions help channel social conflict into nonviolent forms of interaction with the state and other societal forces. The MST's disposition toward public activism is manifested through various patterns of engagement.

Pressure Politics and Civil Disobedience

The MST's contentious politics often involve disruptive mobilizations. Some of these entail lawful protest activities; others involve acts of civil disobedience. The MST has conveyed its penchant for pressure politics through an array of authorized demonstrations, ranging from long-distance marches to hunger strikes and the organization of landless camps. These protest encampments, with their makeshift plastic tents, well-organized lifestyle, and red MST flags flying overhead, are perhaps the most visible, well-known, and ingenious repertoire for MST contention. The camps not only make the demand for land reform perceptible. They also facilitate MST consciousness-raising activities among the landless, enable the preparation of other protest mobilizations, and help the movement recruit and train its new cadre.

The most controversial MST tactics entail acts of passive resistance to civil laws, notably through land occupations, sit-ins at government buildings, and highway blockades. These are essentially mass-based actions pursued in a nonviolent way. On rare occasions these have led to some collateral, usually minor, damage to property or to scuffles with the police, often magnified in press accounts of the event. State tolerance or repression of these forms of protest depends principally on the political persuasion of state governors. In the state of Paraná, for example, the MST

experienced greater police hostility under the rightist Governor Jaime Lerner than under his left-leaning successor, Governor Roberto Requião, who on several occasions refused to dispatch public forces to evict MST land occupations. Forceful police removal of land and building occupations are not uncommon. Yet most acts of civil disobedience end peacefully, generally the result of lengthy negotiations with police, judicial, and political officials. The MST's protest mobilizations are invariably geared toward dramatizing a public demand and bringing state authorities to the bargaining table.

Lobbying and Bargaining

The MST's pressure tactics do not emerge in a vacuum. These are usually preceded by a string of failed petitions and frustrated negotiations with public officials. The activities can take place at various levels of government. The MST's most frequent interlocutors are the staff of the Ministry of Agrarian Development and INCRA. If the issue, however, is getting public monies disbursed on time, the target for MST bargaining might be the Bank of Brazil or the Ministry of Finance. Since 1993, the MST has held fairly regular meetings with all of Brazil's presidents.

Associated Networks with the State

Another mode of interaction with the Brazilian political system could be treated as a loosely organized, nonhierarchal pattern of interest representation that offers various types of partnerships with the state.[16] These associated networks have facilitated different points of access to public resources and participation in selective policy-making bodies. Over the years, the MST has signed several agreements with federal, state, and local governments to carry out a variety of development projects, notably in agriculture, education, and public health. In recent years, the MST has collaborated with the Ministry of Health on programs to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and to promote the cultivation of herbal medicines. In 2004, Petrobras, Brazil's state oil company, financed the construction of the movement's first natural medicine processing plant, located in the state of Ceará. In addition, MST representatives have served on various government commissions, local administrations, and even helped run some state agencies. After the 1998 election of Governor Olivio Dutra in Rio Grande do Sul, the PT administration invited the MST to direct the state's land reform bureau.

16. The term *associated networks* draws on Chalmers, Martin, and Piester (1997). It also shares elements of the state-societal arrangements that Schmitter (1974) described as societal corporatism.

Electoral Participation

The MST members have actively engaged in election campaigns and party politics since the mid-1980s. For more than two decades, the movement held close ties to the PT. In Rio Grande do Sul, for example, the MST elected a five-term PT federal deputy and a string of PT representatives to the state assembly. Although both associations shared many members, they have historically run their organizations in an autonomous way. This independence owed much to the fact the MST was founded separately from the PT. It was further reinforced by the PT's early decision to eschew tenets from the traditional left that would have sought to subordinate the movement to the party. Ties between the PT and MST were solidified in the mid-1980s with the formation of the party's national agrarian secretary and the agrarian nuclei of the Chamber of Deputies. Both party venues offered a space for dialogue and policy formulation that brought together PT officials, MST representatives, rural trade-union leaders, and spokespersons from other progressive civil society organizations. In times of need, PT officials have customarily provided support for MST activists.

The ties between the PT and MST were stronger when both party and movement were in opposition to governing authorities and neoliberal policies. The PT's victory in the presidential election of 2002 and decision to uphold many of Cardoso's economic and rural policies led the MST to waver on its alliance with the PT. The movement's disappointment with Lula's policies were initially tempered by the MST's pragmatic decision to side with the PT's left and attack the government's neoliberal economic policies while sparing Lula himself. In 2006, the movement campaigned for Lula's reelection in an effort to defeat his more conservative opponent. Despite a growing sense of disenchantment with the PT among MST cadres, the movement has continued to support progressive candidates, linked mostly to the PT (on the historical relations between the PT and MST, see Branford 2009; H. Pereira 2009).

Manifold Relations with the Rule of Law

Prevailing orthodoxy in Brazil assumes that MST's land and building occupations are in conflict with the rule of law and a sign of the movement's disdain for the state. This view, however, oversimplifies what is an altogether complex relationship. It ignores the fact that Brazil's justice system is cripplingly bureaucratic, saturated with class bias and traditionally pliant toward landlord interests—hence much of the MST's difficulties in dealing with the legal system.[17] The idea of a fundamental opposition be-

17. The MST's mistrust of the Brazilian judiciary is broadly shared across the country, where according to Latinobarómetro (2007), only 10 percent of the population believes it

tween the MST and the law omits the fact that social movements around the world have also served as architects of an alternative legal order.

The MST has taken an active part in the nation's debates over the interpretation of existing laws. The 1988 Constitution, for instance, upholds agrarian reform and qualifies property rights by their social function. Despite these provisions, most judges insist on applying the Civil Code's absolutist approach to property rights and thus criminalizing land reform activists. In a major victory for MST lawyers, a 1996 decision by Brazil's highest court ruled that land occupations designed to hasten reform were "substantially distinct" from criminal acts against property.

All these considerations highlight the complex nature of the MST's interaction with Brazil's political institutions. Ostensibly, they demonstrate that, for all its harsh rhetoric, the MST is not an antistate or antidemocratic movement. Quite to the contrary, the MST and its allies actively underscore the state's central role in defending human rights and rebalancing the nation's social order through downward redistribution policies. This explains the MST's determined opposition to the neoliberal project of public retrenchment and the resultant concentration of wealth in the hands of powerful economic forces. Democracy, in the MST's view, cannot be limited to a system of elite competition for public office. Rather, it should encompass a range of efforts geared toward developing greater state accountability and responsiveness to popular sector needs. In this way, democracy would help foster a more inclusive and egalitarian society, offering better conditions for the meaningful exercise of citizen participation.

CONTRIBUTING TO DEMOCRACY

The prevailing critique of the MST, which Martins, Navarro, Graziano, and Rosenfield have articulated, presents the landless movement as a threat to democracy. The sentiments and ideas these Brazilian scholars espouse are quite revealing in their assumptions and omissions. Three of these include a restrictive view of democracy, a tacit aversion to class conflict, and ahistorical understandings of democratization.

Restrictive views of democracy have long intellectual history. Their proponents have traditionally shared a low esteem for the demos and disdain for the excessive participation and mobilization of popular masses. Their tendency to overlook the impact of large social asymmetries on the distribution of political power and state benefits is matched, as Held (1987, 160) observes, by their skepticism toward the "possibility of a radi-

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would be treated equally in a court of law. For a thoughtful analysis of this problem, see Vieira (2007). On the MST's relation with the rule of law, see Meszaros (2010, 2000a, 2000b).

cal re-organization of society." Excessive criticisms of the government on all too many issues, they fear, could harm democracy by infringing "on the smooth functioning of 'public' decision-making" (Held 1987, 176, 184). These sentiments have an affinity with complacent arguments that treat Brazil as a consolidated democracy, and thus downplay prospects for qualitative improvement.

Among MST critics, discrete cultural norms embedded in mainstream Brazilian politics often fuel irritation toward its contentious demeanor. One of these conventions is grounded on a strong distaste for explicit manifestations of class conflict. As Lamounier (1989, 123–124) explains, this aversion stems from the nation's oligarchic tradition and the ethos of conciliation and political flexibility it fostered among the ruling elite. The disposition bred a "cultural construction [that] vigorously asserted that zero-sum conflict" was inimical to Brazilian society. Reinforced by patrimonial customs and a lack of experience with "principled politics," the legacies of this conservative, patriarchal view of politics can be found in depictions of popular class struggles as instances of "childish behavior." Many of the terms used to portray the MST suggest a close affinity with this patronizing ethos: "The MST is the perfect incarnation of the political childishness of sectors of our society" (Navarro qtd. in Arruda 2003); it is engaged in a "frivolous resistance" and "comedy of errors" (Navarro 2007); it is inspired by the "vulgar Marxist" ideas of its leaders (Navarro 2002b, 279; Martins 2000, 114); it seeks to merely "indoctrinate" and "manipulate" its "little foot-soldiers" (Navarro 2009), in what only amounts to a "pre-political" movement (Martins 2000, 18) or a "pseudo-revolutionary" group (Graziano 2004, 278).

Analyses that represent the MST as a threat to democracy are also shortsighted in their historical understanding of democracy and Brazilian society. They discount the fact that, throughout world history, the main social force against democratization has been the landlord class, not the peasantry (on the negative democratic impact of landlords, see Huber and Safford 1995; Moore 1966; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). The Brazilian case certainly fits the mold. Since the return to civilian rule, politicians and associations representing large landholding interests have consistently opposed different initiatives to strengthen citizenship rights among the poor and thus enhance the quality of democracy in Brazil.

Restrictive and ahistorical views of democracy have built-in blinders that hamper an appreciation of the many democratic contributions made by popular movements like the MST. In particular, they disregard the fact that social movements can enhance democratization through "explicit programs or as by-products of their action" (Tilly 2004, 142–143). The following comments offer a broad assessment of the MST's contribution to democracy in Brazil.

Public Activism, Political Capabilities and Pro-Poor Policies

Grassroots organizing, pressure politics, and bargaining with state authorities have been at the heart of the MST's engagement with Brazil's democratic institutions. Electoral participation, though never irrelevant to the movement, has normally taken a backseat to other more assertive and direct tactics.

Public activism has become ingrained in the movement's ethos and self-image. The movement, after all, was born and raised amid social conflict. In everyday MST speech, all of its *conquistas* (conquests) are the result of the movement's ability to organize at the grass roots and engage in sustained struggle.

Considering the alternative means for accomplishing its objectives—electoral contestation, legislative representation, media influence, lobbying, or armed insurgency—pressure politics is clearly the most cost effective option. Fielding national election candidates or acquiring a major media outlet is clearly beyond the MST's financial means. Legislative representation offers few tactical advantages given the prerogatives accorded to the executive branch for carrying out land reform and the traditional overrepresentation of conservative rural interests in Congress. The MST is also fully aware that lobbying without pressure politics is usually a toothless instrument. Despite a fondness for Che Guevara and other world revolutionaries, the movement clearly understands that a guerrilla alternative would be a suicidal gamble. Public activism enables the MST to stir public opinion and gain direct access to policy makers in a way that most institutional mechanisms would render ineffectual or innocuous at best.

Pressure politics, however, is more than just an instrument for exacting government concessions. Collective acts of struggle also strengthen the movement internally. By energizing its participants, they help galvanize the passions, convictions, and sense of mystique that gives the MST its resilient character. They also foster feelings of pride and ownership over the results achieved. The MST's mobilizations, furthermore, sharpen class consciousness, raise awareness of basic rights, build social networks of trust, nurture organizing skills, and cultivate new popular leaders. As such, the movement's public activism has played a central role in the development of "political capabilities over the long run" (Whitehead and Gray-Molina, 2003, 32) among Brazil's rural poor.

Over the years, the MST has inspired and helped nurture an array of Brazilian popular movements representing peasant women, populations displaced by hydroelectric dams, small farmers, homeless people, and other landless groups (principally those linked to CONTAG's rural trade unions) (Rosa 2010). In this way, the MST has helped catalyze an unprecedented distribution of state resources among the rural poor, through land

purchases, farming and housing credits, infrastructural development, technical assistance, educational programs, and the creation of scores of rural cooperatives and food-processing plants.

All this suggests that public activism should be treated as a crucial instrument for inequality reduction in societies as starkly disparate as Brazil. Far from being a sign of "incongruence" and affront to democracy, as Navarro (2002a, 219) and other critics suggest, MST pressure politics should be appreciated as a mark of democratic vitality and engagement. Indeed, compared with other manifestations of social tension and conflict—including street gangs, riots, crime, and guerrilla warfare—public activism offers a constructive, democratic venue for channeling popular demands and instigating pro-poor development policies.

Citizenship Rights, the Public Agenda, and Civil Society Inclusion

The MST has contributed to the development of citizenship rights in Brazil, and it has done so in all three basic dimensions of this idea: civil, political, and social rights (see Marshall 1992). Since its origins, the MST has fought for the right to protest and mobilize freely, and thus to exercise its democratic right to influence decisions of public authorities, independent of the electoral process. Through legal measures and publicity efforts, it has defended the basic civil rights of hundreds of peasants who have been imprisoned, abused, and assassinated for their land reform activism.

The MST's achievements in the creation of land-reform settlements, cooperatives, agro-industries, education, and consciousness raising have improved the material conditions, cultural resources, and political capabilities of its members. As such, the movement has fortified the social foundations for democracy in Brazil. When basic needs are met and awareness of rights enhanced, people are unlikely to sell their votes on Election Day. The sense of character and dignity forged through long years of the MST's struggle has helped nurture more conscientious citizens and foster greater public participation in local and national affairs. By enabling people to use their political rights, MST has facilitated the integration of hundreds of thousands of poor and historically marginalized Brazilians into the democratic process. In doing so, the MST has abetted their "transition from clientelism to citizenship" (Fox 1994).

The MST's demands to implement national agrarian reform laws illustrate the movement's efforts to bridge a striking gap in Brazilian society—the abyss between the Constitution's social rights and weak enforcement of those rights. The effort to diminish the historic chasm between the *pays légal* and the *pays réel*—between the country's formal edifice, made, as the popular saying in Brazil goes, *para o inglês ver* (for the English to see), and

its everyday reality—amounts to a concerted struggle to overcome Brazil's "low-intensity citizenship" (O'Donnell 1994, 166; see also Carvalho 2006). The process of surmounting such democratic deficits is an eminently political and contentious one. As Charles Tilly (2002) highlights, throughout world history, citizenship rights were never created through gentle concessions from the ruling elite or the gradual enlightenment of society as a whole. Rather, such rights are the historical result of years of resistance, struggle, and bargaining with national authorities (see also Foweraker and Landman 1997).

The quality of democracy is enhanced through the "complementary and mutually reinforcing tasks" of "strengthening citizen participation and expanding the agenda for public discussion" (Iazzetta 2004, 6; also see O'Donnell, Cullell, and Iazzetta 2004). Through its protests and public advocacy, the MST has enriched Brazil's public debate in many ways. Over the years, the movement has incorporated several new themes into its traditional class-based analysis of Brazilian reality, from gender equality to agro-ecology, food sovereignty, youth empowerment, and human rights. All these themes have become part of the movement's critique of Brazil's exclusionary and predatory model of development.

Recurrent efforts to delegitimize the MST and dismiss any discussion of the issues the movement has raised counter classic liberal arguments in favor of free speech. As John Stuart Mill (1956, 40–41, 64) long noted, "fear of heresy" and the tendency toward "intellectual pacification" thwart prospects for "social progress." Though constricted in many ways, MST efforts to keep a substantial, spectrum of dissent alive have enhanced the quality of public debate in Brazilian democracy.

The struggle to enhance political capabilities among the poor, to extend basic citizenship rights, and to broaden the nation's public agenda has strengthened Brazilian civil society. The organization and incorporation of marginalized sectors of the population into this arena through autonomous popular movements is a relatively novel phenomenon in Brazilian history. Traditionally, civil societal associations and media outlets represented mostly the interests of the upper and middle classes. These interests, no doubt, are still predominant. Yet the inclusion of subaltern actors such as the MST has contributed much to the democratization of this societal space.

Hope, Utopia, and Democratizing Ideals

Contemporary democratic institutions, practices, and ideas are the result of a long-standing development fueled by powerful normative aspirations. As Sartori (1987, 7) put it, "What democracy *is* cannot be separated from what democracy *should be.* A democracy exists only insofar as its ideals and values bring it into being." The creative tension between de-

mocracy's real and ideal dimensions has been at the heart of its "complex, long term, dynamic and open-ended process" (Whitehead 2002, 27).

The MST's demands for greater social justice in a nation afflicted by remarkable inequities are a vital democratizing force for Brazil. From its early days, the movement has helped inspire new horizons and heartened visions of a more just society. By cultivating a resilient sense of hope and quest for another world, the MST has bolstered the dreams and ideals of equality, liberty, and participation that have invigorated movements for democratization throughout world history (on the historical importance of social movements for democracy, see Markoff 1996).

CONCLUSION

To confine the MST's place in Brazilian society as a movement merely engaged in the struggle for land or the search for alternative models of rural development is to miss out on the larger picture. The MST is not just a rural phenomenon. Looming behind its orderly marches and bright red flags is a specter that haunts Brazil's secular inequities. Though often exaggerated, the fears of change it elicits are not baseless. The MST rattles commonly held perceptions, norms, and customs. It upsets the "natural" order of things. It exposes, gives voice to, and channels the tensions that underlie Brazilian society. Some view its agitation as a national anathema. Others sympathize with its disruptive thrust. Among the latter, many consider the movement a powerful Brazilian symbol and inspiration in the struggle to achieve equal rights and the full promise of citizenship.

The way the MST has pursued such promise has not always squared neatly with conventional forms of liberal democratic politics. Brazil's starkly unequal society and great obstacles to the political representation of popular-sector interests are crucial to understanding the MST's alternative approach to democratization. For lack of a comprehensive pro-poor reform policy in the countryside, peasant groups have been left with few alternatives to strong-arming and pressure tactics. The MST's radicalism, therefore, should be understood principally as a reaction to the adverse conditions that have hampered land redistribution and the adoption of other progressive economic and social policies in Brazil.

According to the Latinobarómetro (2007) poll, between 1996 and 2006, an average of only 24 percent of Brazilians claimed they were satisfied with their democracy. It should come as no surprise, then, to find harsh words of contempt within the MST toward the nation's governing institutions and ruling political class. Unlike most Brazilians, who vent their frustrations in more private ways, MST members are inclined to channel their indignation through public activism. Indeed, for all their malaise and disappointment with the political system, within the landless move-

ment, one can find some of the most relentless, no-nonsense practitioners of grassroots democracy in Brazil.

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

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