Pluralist Identities and Empowering ‘the People’: Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) at the Crossroads

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Abstract

This thesis centres its analysis upon the fascination for the collective at the potential cost of a delimitation of individual expression, within the confines of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). From the perspective of an applied anthropology, and to the end of contributing a constructive critique of the MST, the thesis seeks to ascertain how the movement has structured itself through the micro-actions of its membership around the domain of collective tropes of identity and where this complex set of understandings is leading the movement, both in the immediate, and more long-term, futures. To these ends, the principal focus of analysis is how actors within the movement construct and understand experiences of movement logic and emotion, as they perceive it, in and around their ambit. The thesis is thus orientated from an ethnographic perspective; throughout, actors’ accounts and experiences are privileged to attempt to throw light upon the manifold processes that being a member of the MST renders part of daily life.

The thesis argues that in this extraordinarily dynamic time in Brazil, with socio-economic conditions so different to when the movement was founded, flexibility is going to be key as to whether the MST can endure, remaining relevant to its members and in a position where it can attempt to address its strategic aims. The thesis suggests that the movement faces a signal dilemma regarding the very device on which it has built its success, the unified collective front into which MST members’ identities can be subsumed. This fascination for the collective and its correlates, a hostile attitude to the media and the polarisation that can separate MST members from wider society, is explored through a series of differing contexts and the thesis closes with conclusions embedded within the framework of an applied anthropology; in pragmatic terms, how can the MST best achieve its stated goals at this historically significant point of its trajectory.
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Glossary

À vista: money up front
Abertura: opening, esp. of a ceremony
Acampado: one who is encamped and lives in an acampamento
Acampamento: encampment
Agronegócio: agribusiness
Agrovila: an area of an assentamento where settlers live, their houses close to one another
Alimento: food
Alqueire: a measure of land area
Apoiador: supporter
Aprendizagem: apprenticeship
Arroz: rice
Articulação de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais do Sul (AMTRS): Articulation of Rural Working Women of the South
Assembléia: assembly
Assentado: settler
Assentamento: Settlement
Assistência técnica: technical assistance
Baile funk: a type of dance music from Rio de Janeiro, derived from Miami bass
Barraca: the temporary shelter constructed in the acampamento
Bobo: dumb, ingenuous
Bóias frias: poorly paid day labourers
Bolsa família: a state payment, part of the welfare state mechanism
Bom dia: hello
Bomba: straw
Boné: cap
Bonita: pretty
Borrachudo: black fly
Brigada: brigade
Burguesia: the bourgeois
Burro: stupid
Cachaça: strong alcoholic spirit
**Cadastramento:** registration
**Casinha:** small house
**Castanheira:** chestnut tree
**Cesta básica:** basic foods
**Chamar atenção:** to call attention to yourself, to distinguish yourself
**Chefão:** big boss (*pej.*)
**Chimarrão:** a tea made with *erva mate* commonly drunk in South Brazil and Argentina
**Cidade:** city

**Coletivo Nacional de Mulheres (CNM):** National Women’s Collective
**Coletivo do gênero:** gender collective
**Comissão Nacional de Mulheres (CNM):** National Commission of Women
**Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT):** Pastoral Land Commission
**Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEBs):** Basic Ecclesial Communities
**Coordenação:** coordination
**Crise:** crisis

**Cuia:** vessel from which *chimarrão* is drunk
**Deputados:** members of Brazilian parliament
**Desemprego:** unemployed
**Desviado:** lit. deviated, fig. corrupted
**Direção:** leadership
**Direção estadual:** state leadership
**Direção nacional:** national leadership
**Divergência:** lit. divergence, fig. argument
**Educação:** education
**Encontro:** meeting
**Encontro estadual:** state meeting
**Erva mate:** the herb from which *chimarrão* is brewed
**Escola itinerante:** encampment school
**Expulsão:** expulsion
**Favela:** shantytown in or near a city
**Fazendeiro:** landowner
**Feijão:** black beans
**Firme na cabeça:** lit. firm in the head
**Foice:** long handled scythe
Formação: education, formation, training
Formação política: political education, formation, training
Frente de massa: MST sector responsible for recruitment, assembling *acampamentos* and more generally movement mobilisations
Futsal: indoor football
Gauchesca: a type of folk music that originates from Rio Grande do Sul
Gaúcho: adj. relating to, pertaining to Rio Grande do Sul
Gerontocracia: gerontocracy
Grito: a type of MST ritual where a member makes a call and the attendant crowd make a known response
Guarita: lookout post
Ilha da Magia: Island of Magic
Instancias: centres of leadership
Interior: interior
Invadir: to invade
La Vía Campesina: The International Peasant Movement
Ladrão (pl. ladrões): thief
Latifúndio: property covering tremendous areas, the system of exclusive landholdings
Linda: beautiful
Litoral: coast
Lixo: rubbish
Lona (embaixo da lona preta): plastic sheeting, under the black plastic sheeting that characterises an MST *acampamento*
Lote: lot of property
Lutar: to fight, to struggle
Machismo: chauvinism
Maconha: marijuana
Malandro: shyster
Mal-educado: ill-educated, impolite
Massa: the mass
Mata: forest, jungle
Militantes: activists
Mística: MST ritual, a principal element of MST cultural life and expression
Morro: lit. hill, fig. favela
Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (MMC): The Movement of Peasant Women
Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais (MMTR-NE): The Movement of Rural Working Women
Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB): The Movement of People Affected by Dams
Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (MPA): The Movement of Small Farmers
Movimento sem Teto (MTST): The Movement of the Homeless
Município: township, county
(Tele)Novela: soap opera
Núcleo: unit of people working together
Ocupar: occupy
Pagode: a style of music which originated in Salvador, a subgenre of samba
Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT): The Workers Party
Passe Livre: movement which agitates for fairer public transport prices
Peonagem: feudal servitude
Periferia: the fringes of a city, characterised by insecure housing and marginalisation
Perigoso: dangerous
Planalto: a northern region of Santa Catarina
Por justiça social e soberania popular: for social justice and the people’s sovereignty
Povo: the people
Prefeitura: municipal government and town hall
Problemas conjugais: marital problems
Reforma agrária: agrarian reform
Roça: the countryside
Sector: sector
Sem oportunidades: without opportunities
Sem terra: lit. without land, fig. the MST identity
Sem terrinha: lit. without small land, fig. the unofficial youth movement of the MST
Sertaneja: Brazilian country music
Serviço: unofficial day labour
Sonhando: dreaming
Sorteio: lit. the draw
Terra: land
Tranqüilo: calm
União federal: a type of public land
Uso fruto: full rights of use without ownership

Vagabundo: tramp

Veneno: lit. poison, fig. pesticide

Vereador: town councillor
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This work is their work.
The closing stages of any given project always return an author to its beginnings. It seems like a long time ago that I began my work on the Landless Workers’ Movement of Brazil (MST), but given the nature of this thesis and taking into account that it is written from the perspective of Development Anthropology, it is salient to put into plain words what it was that initially provided the motivation for me to become involved with Latin America’s largest and most polemical social movement.

Having studied English Literature as an undergraduate and then Development Studies as a postgraduate, I became intrigued by the potential interstices of these disciplines and the possibilities for an applied use of artistic expression therein. I was seeking an environment in which I could learn more about how cultural manifestations could be used as a means of protest when a friend suggested that I look into the MST, a movement that I was told, placed a strong emphasis on its cultural politics. It was from this starting point that I became involved in research with the MST and although the project subsequently developed to encompass a wider remit than originally envisaged, my goals and commitments have always remained the same. I wished to understand how the movement empowered its members. I wished to place the opinions and views of the members of the movement before any institutionalised voice. But most importantly, I wished to contribute a constructive critique of the MST, one which might prompt debate as to how the movement proceeds strategically to accomplish its aims.

These aims, which include a commitment to a fairer society through a more effective distribution of wealth and available services, are aims in which I firmly believe and have remained committed to throughout my research. And although I have outlined members’ criticisms of the movement in this thesis, I have done so on the basis that these are pragmatic issues which I feel need to be addressed, if the movement is to continue to enjoy popular support and therefore be in a position to render a meaningful contribution to Brazilian society. Progressive politics requires constructive criticism and I believe the MST to be a dynamic and progressive movement. And it is now, more than ever, that the MST must be truly reformist and take a standpoint to which other movements struggling for social justice, look to for inspiration and leadership.

Manchester, May 2010.
**Introduction**

These are crucial times for the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, the Landless’ Workers Movement (MST) of Brazil. In common with Cuba’s socialist revolution, it finds itself at a crossroads (Alzugaray Treto 2009; Pérez 2008; WSJ 2007). Latin America’s largest social movement recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, a ceremony at which João Pedro Stédile, one of the movement’s founders and a member of its national leadership, reaffirmed the MST’s updated commitment to a new type of ‘grassroots agrarian reform’, a programme which he stated would make the movement new enemies; enemies that grew in size with each mentioned, Nestlé, Parmalat, agribusiness and finally neo-liberalism itself. He warned that the old struggle of merely occupying land and placing people on it would be easy compared to the new lines of battle that were being drawn and he stated that the frontier was now so large that the MST, more than ever, needed to ally itself to other progressive forces; the unions, the Leftist parties, and all the activists that wanted change in Brazil, in order to defeat the capitalist model of domination. Stédile acknowledged that this would be difficult as the Brazilian people were as he phrased it, ‘in a declining period of social activism’. But he ended his speech on a rousing note, invoking past Marxist-inspired revolutionaries:

> As Lenin said, of his Russian experience, sometimes people can learn in 20 days, what they forgot over 20 years.

But could it be the case that people will forget in 25 days, what the movement has been working towards for over 25 years? Worrying rumours emerge from Brazil. The movement is finished, they say. The movement has no future. The movement’s time has passed, it is no longer relevant. And perhaps there is some truth to these whispers, coming, as they are, from people sympathetic to the movement, rather than its drearily predictable detractors.

Wealth, it seems, is the most obvious key. As I will demonstrate later in this thesis, Brazil's financial situation today, in a lived, daily sense, is radically different to what it was in 1984. Put simply, things have changed. For example, Brazil is no longer

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1 For a video of the speech see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjfoyFrQYPQ&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjfoyFrQYPQ&NR=1) - accessed 11th May 2010
saddled with external debt; the relatively recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) bail outs of 1998 and 2002 seem like ancient history. Because, not only has Brazil paid off these debts, it has loaned the IMF $10 billion’s worth of its desirable real, a currency which has risen to record highs against sterling and the dollar. And with wealth has come conditional cash transfer (CCT) and the extension of the welfare state. Hall (2008) states that under president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002), and especially since Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (hereafter termed Lula), assumed the presidency in 2003, ‘targeted assistance in education, health and nutrition, now united under Bolsa Família, have expanded rapidly to benefit forty-four million (24 per cent of the total population), absorbing almost two-fifths of the social assistance budget earmarked for the poorest sectors’ (2008: 799). And the result of such unprecedented social spend? A ‘one-third reduction in land invasions by the MST landless movement during President Lula’s first administration’, Hall notes, while Maria Cecilia Manzoli Turatti, an activist academic and sympathiser of the movement agrees that in the periferias, the MST’s primary location for recruiting members, the CCT payments could have a significant effect in ‘demotivating citizens from choosing to live in the harsh conditions imposed in an acampamento’ (FSP 2007a).

So how does the MST react at this potential crossroads? It has endured and remained fundamentally relevant to people’s lives and aspirations for 25 years, but there are no guarantees that it will remain so for the next 25. Indeed, how many Social Movement Organisations (SMOs) remain relevant for half a century? Will the MST become a mere footnote, a quirk of late twentieth century history, subject to the disquieting macro analysis of ‘being strong when Brazil was “poor”, and fading as people became less uncomfortable’?

Zald and Ash’s (1966) classic article on models of SMO decay predicts a gloomy forecast. They describe an SMO that has gained a niche in society, won an operational organisational base and influenced the course of events but despite this a movement whose growth has slowed, as a ‘movement becalmed’ (1966: 334). And they argue that this type of movement is particularly vulnerable to an ever-increasing rate of attrition and a growing conservatism within the leadership. Will this be the case for the MST? At present, the movement derives much of its power from the collectivised sem terra identity (Chaves 2000; Wolford 2003), a device which makes possible the mass demonstrations

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2 According to research carried out by the State University of São Paulo, the number of families involved in land occupations by the MST fell from 65,552 in 2003 to 44,364 in 2006 (FSP 2007c; IPEA 2008 cited in Hall 2008).
that require thousands of people to appear as one. But is this device, and the polemicised politics that accompany it, so effective in securing the expansion of the movement throughout the 1990s (Ondetti 2008), necessarily the correct approach to take in today’s socio-economic context?

This thesis centres its analysis upon the fascination for the collective at the potential cost of a delimitation of individual expression, within the confines of the Brazilian MST. From the perspective of an applied understanding of anthropology, it seeks to ascertain how the movement has structured itself through the micro-actions of its membership around the domain of collective tropes of identity and where this complex set of understandings is leading the movement, both in the immediate, and more long-term, futures. To these ends, the principal focus of analysis is how actors within the movement construct and understand experiences of movement logic and emotion, as they perceive it, in and around their ambit. The thesis is therefore fundamentally orientated from an ethnographic perspective; throughout, actors’ accounts and experiences are foregrounded to attempt to throw light upon the manifold processes that being a member of the MST renders part of daily life.

In my original research plans, I had intended to focus closely upon the MST’s culture sector, seeking to understand how the movement utilised and controlled artistic expression and why it placed such huge importance on its dissemination. There were three research questions inherent to this project:

1. whether the MST uses artistic expression to create an alternative self-representation and if this is the case, how is this done?
2. how effective is artistic expression in the promotion of a marginal narrative in opposition to government (mis)representation?
3. whether in creating a homogenous cultural self-portrayal, MST art approaches propaganda and restricts both individual tropes of identity as well as non-desirable groupings

As my fieldwork developed, it became clear that the priority of my study no longer fell solely within the culture sector’s sphere of activity. The last of my three original research questions had come to determine the critical focus of my work and therefore, this present thesis, but importantly, the question it posed was now transposed to encompass
a much larger remit that I had first imagined. But what is the environment in which this thesis is articulated, that is, what exactly is the MST?

The MST is a national mass movement organisation, officially founded in 1984 at a meeting in Cascavel, Paraná, which has coalesced around two basic principles; a fairer society, and the necessity for the means to achieve this, agrarian reform (Branford and Rocha 2002; Fernandes 1999). The background from which the movement has emerged is underlined by the fact that 15% (56m ha), of the total area of 376m ha of farmland in Brazil is taken up by 0.03 per cent of holdings. As Almeida and Sánchez (2000) note, ‘it is as if just 35,083 people possessed an area equal to the combined area of France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and Austria’ (2000: 29). Furthermore, recent political climates have solidified the concentration of land holdings. Petras and Veltmeyer (2002) have observed that during the 1990s, government policy led to a further reconcentration of land and the displacement of over one million peasant families. From within this environment the MST has managed to garner over one million members. It has successfully lobbied for the redistribution of 50,000 square kilometres of land, over 100,000 children now study in MST schools and the Florestan Fernandes institution in São Paulo state represents the MST’s first engagement with further education (Branford and Rocha 2002). Achieved within the space of 25 years, these results have caused the movement to be widely held as one of the most successful grassroots organisations in the world. But how have these goals been achieved?

The MST’s primary method of bringing political pressure to bear on the issue of agrarian reform is encampment, or rather, direct occupation. In this process, which chapter three will discuss in further detail, landless people from a certain area are mobilised, recruited and organised by an MST sector called the Frente de Massa and then having joined the movement, are taken to a piece of land that MST leadership has identified as requiring expropriation by the government. In civil law, this process is illegal, as it violates directives surrounding the right to private property and therefore constitutes trespass. But in constitutional law, the process is legal, although hotly debated, due to articles 184 and 186 of the Brazilian constitution of 1988. Article 184 requires the Brazilian government to ‘expropriate for the purpose of agrarian reform, rural property that is not performing its social function’. While the key detail of article 186 is that the criteria for ‘social function’ is to be met in the following ways:

- Rational and adequate use
• Adequate use of available natural resources and preservation of the environment
• Compliance with the provisions which regulate labour relations
• Exploitation which favours the well-being of the owners and workers

In this way, the MST argues that it is justified in occupying unproductive estates as they are not fulfilling ‘adequate use’. It also holds that estates which use genetically modified (GM) crops or excessive levels of pesticide are liable for expropriation as they don’t meet the criteria of preserving the environment. And lastly ‘the well-being’ of the owners and workers is a clear opening to occupy if workers are, for example, being paid less than a minimum wage.

Once MST acampados (people who are encamped) are on the land, the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA), the government department responsible for agrarian reform, is informed and a vistoria takes place. This inspection is conducted by INCRA to determine whether the land meets the criteria for appropriation or not. The process of occupation is lengthy, but as Meszaros (2000b) notes, ‘[r]ecent data show that there is a close correspondence between occupation and eventual settlement. Between 1986 and 1997, for instance, 77% of settlements could trace their origins back to land occupations’ (2000b: 535).

If the process is successful and land is devolved to the movement following the legal process that occurs in Brasília, an assentamento (settlement) is established and families are given roughly 10 ha each on which to live and plant crops. Devolving land is however, just the beginning of the MST’s commitment to landless people. Once settlers have won land, it becomes a priority to provide access to education and health services, for which the movement lobbies in local political circles. In this way, the movement is attempting to fulfil more than just agrarian reform, in that it seeks to create a more just society.

However, in undertaking such actions, the MST has created many enemies not only in the countryside, where as a rural movement, its land occupations are focused, but also in the city, where its direct occupation tactics, expressed through roadblocks and occupations of federal government offices, can cause disruption. In the countryside however, and during the acampamento phase, MST members are often threatened by landowners, hired gunmen or police, in efforts to force an eviction. In this scenario, the movement usually reoccupies, but this type of repression is common and according to
the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT)’s figures, there were 976 murders of rural activists between 1985 and 1996 (Hammond 1999: 476).\(^3\) Therefore the movement operates within extremely dangerous circumstances and especially in locations distant from federal authority, the sense of a lack of democracy or law of rule can be palpable.

Although risk is ever-present in the encampments, the most vulnerable members of the movement are the activists who work for the *Frente de Massa* sector, those who recruit people for occupations. And perhaps because of the threat of violence and repression, the MST is extremely well organised. There are broadly three levels of leadership; national, state and regional and further the movement is divided into different sectors of work. These include; production, cooperation, education, environment, gender, political education, health, culture, communications, human rights and youth. But the movement’s activities are fairly decentralised, in that directives are not issued from national leadership in São Paulo. The MST therefore is known as a grassroots organisation, with leaders insisting that they are merely part of the coordination of any particular activity.

However these activities in the MST’s practical sphere are much informed by a strong perspective on political economy, which is predominantly Marxist. Ideologically, the movement is opposed to ‘advanced capitalism’ (Harvey 1995) and the movement has a strong identity based around an oppositional class character, believing that capitalistic practice will result in the inevitable proletarianisation of the worker. More recently, MST ideology has expanded from classic Marxism to train its fire on new targets, such as foreign direct investment, agribusiness and industrialised farming, and land occupation strategies have shifted accordingly. However certain themes have remained constant since 1984, including the value of collective labour and remaining outside of party politics, although there are close links between the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), the Brazilian Workers’ Party and the movement (Vergara-Camus 2005).

The MST also consciously links itself to organisations or individuals who have struggled for agrarian reform in the past, making explicit links between the movement’s struggles against modern day concentrated land holdings and for example, Zumbi, the leader of a *quilombo* (runaway slave community) executed in 1695 by the Portuguese colonial government (Wolford 2003). This process of historicisation is complemented by linkages to other Brazilian struggles pertaining to land, such as Antonio Conselheiro’s

\(^3\) Meszaros puts the figure at 1,167 assassinations of rural workers and activists in the twelve years to 1998 (2000a: 7).
Canudos rebellion in Bahia which ended in 1897, the Guerra do Contestado in Santa Catarina which was put down in 1916 and the emergence of the Lajes Camponesas in Pernambuco in the mid-20th Century. Further to these historical figures, the MST reinforces its ideological position by invoking heroes of Marxist-inspired resistance from around the world. Commonly depicted personages in movement ritual include Vladimir Lenin, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Rosa Luxembourg. However, aside from where the movement imagines itself relative to figures of the Marxist canon, the movement’s own historical trajectory is of great importance in helping to explain how it came to be so successful in such a short space of time.  

As an organisation, the MST emerged at a particularly fortunate confluence of events. In the late 1950s there were already roughly 270,000 landless families in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil’s most southerly state, (Branford and Rocha 2002) and programmes of land expropriation that had begun in the early 1960s were halted by the military coup of 1964. As the situation of landless families grew worse, their suffering drew the sympathy of the local parish priests. The CPT had become more involved in people’s struggles for land following the second Vatican council and the more general popularisation of liberation theology, and certain elements within the Catholic church slowly became key allies for landless families in the struggle against the military government for agrarian reform, especially through the manifestation and activity of Comunidades Eclesias de Base, Ecclesiastical Base Communities (CEBs). Indeed, before the coalescence of the MST, the CPT was already working with agrarian reform organisations like the Movimento dos Sem Terra do Rio Grande do Sul (MASTER) and the Movimento dos Sem Terra do Oeste de Paraná (MASTRO), the latter of which comprised small holders who had been displaced by the construction of the Itaipú dam.

Therefore, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, landless families were already agitating for a fairer system of land distribution with the assistance of members of the Catholic Church, but arguably, what was key to the emergence of the movement that would become the MST, was the abertura, the relaxation of military government control that started to occur in the late 1970s. This distensão, or loosening, saw the first occupations of land by the nascent, but as yet unnamed MST in 1979, in Rio Grande do Sul, with the assistance of Father Arnildo Fritzen, a local parish priest. In attendance,

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4 For a more complete yet concise summary of why the MST has achieved such success see (Meszaros 2000a).
providing strategic advice was also an economist, who was working for the state department of agriculture; his name was João Pedro Stédile.

More occupations followed, all employing the tactic of direct occupation and in 1982, Brazil held its first fully democratic congressional, state and municipal elections for 16 years. The elected governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Jair Soares, had promised to find land for families who had encamped by the roadside at a place which had come to be known as *Encruzilhada Natalino*, and in September 1983, these families were settled. As it became clear the strategy of direct occupation was proving effective against a weakening military government, more occupations took place and in January 1984 in Cascavel, Paraná, representatives from thirteen states met for three days to discuss the future of the as yet unnamed, MST.

At this meeting and following the ideas of Souza Martins, a land reform academic and key advisor to the Catholic church, Stédile argued that the movement needed to expand beyond the three southern states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná that had traditionally remained somewhat distant from the rest of the country. The invited delegates’ presence at the meeting reflected this approach, and as the tactic of direct occupation and principles of the nascent movement that had been constructed were exported around the country, the MST grew exponentially, expanding into states as far away as the Amazon and the Northeast, to constitute a truly national movement.

**Literature Review**

The MST has attracted an increasing amount of attention, as together with the Zapatistas, the movement has provided a focal point for journalistic coverage tapping into the groundswell of ‘grassroots resistance’ that has occurred to confront globalisation and so-called ‘selfish capitalism’ (James 2007). Academic interest in the movement has come from an interdisciplinary perspective, with only one strictly anthropological PhD dissertation from outside Brazil, having been completed (Calvo Gonzalez 2004). Most of the work published on the MST therefore, has not been the result of in-depth ethnography, despite the use of qualitative interviews and degrees of participant observation.
Within the last seven years, seven key monographs have been published on the MST. _Brava Gente: A Trajectória do MST e a Luta pela Terra no Brasil_ (1999) is the result of a conversation between the MST’s founding national coordinator João Pedro Stédile and Bernardo Mançano Fernandes. _A Formação do MST no Brazil_ (2000) is the doctoral dissertation of Fernandes. _Alfabetização Cultural: a Luta Intima por uma nova Humanidade_ (2004) is the work of Dan Baron Cohen and focuses more on the pedagogical elements of the culture sector’s work. _Sin Tierra: Construyendo Movimiento Social_ (2002) is an e-book by Marta Harnecker and is orientated more from an activist perspective. _Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil_ (2002) by Branford and Rocha is the result of eighteen months travel around Brazil and offers an account enriched by the journalistic experience of the authors. Wright and Wolford (2003) are respectively an historian and a geographer and their narrative of the MST, _To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil_ is the fruit of three years of research and travel. And lastly Ondetti (2008), the most recent text, examines the origins and development of the MST from a political science perspective, making use of extensive macro-level data, complemented by ethnographic accounts. Ondetti argues, from within the literature on social movement theory, that the movement’s success has largely been shaped by making the most of changing political opportunities.

Apart from Baron Cohen’s, all of these texts historicise the movement by beginning with chapters that document its foundation and consolidation. But despite the focus on consolidation and movement history, interestingly none of the texts has an in-depth discussion on the precise nature of the movement’s organisation beyond a broad assumption that it is democratic. Elections are not discussed in depth and nor is the structure of the movement made precisely clear. While both Wright and Wolford and Branford and Rocha devote space to the activities of the _Frente de Massa_ sector, the role of the MST’s cultural politics as directed by the culture sector, or the activities of the gender sector, do not receive much attention. The lack of coverage on MST cultural politics in these works is particularly felt, although McNee’s thesis (2003) provides an excellent analysis on this subject, albeit one from the discipline of Luso-Brazilian Literature and Linguistics.

Perhaps what unites these works best is their tone; all are broadly sympathetic to the movement although some are more critical than others. For example, Branford and Rocha, Wright and Wolford and Ondetti, while all broadly positive, do ask certain questions which could make uncomfortable reading for MST activists. Ondetti’s
repeated use of the word ‘indoctrination’, in particular, may touch a nerve amongst some. But the lack of a sustained critical viewpoint is unusual given that there are significant critics of the MST, even from leftist standpoints. Souza Martins (2002) for example, argues that the MST has become merely another mediator in the struggle for agrarian reform, essentialising the ‘peasant’ and trying to configure itself as revolutionary, seeking a wider social justice. And the lack of real critique within these texts is also replicated in the literature which attempts to place the movement in the wider context of other transnational agrarian reform movements confronting globalisation (Borras et al. 2008; Desmarais 2002; Petras and Veltmeyer 2001; Teubal 2009; Vergara-Camus 2009a; Welch and Fernandes 2009). Such analyses, as I have already briefly mentioned, have often drawn comparisons with the Zapatistas to depict a common front of ‘peasants’ or ‘the indigenous’, struggling against neo-liberalism; a new and radicalised counter-hegemonic politics. These texts are more concerned with larger narratives rather than individual accounts. To this end, Stédile is directly quoted in four of the above works that focus on the wider literature, summarising tropes of struggle and identity to the exclusion of more detailed accounts from the ‘grassroots’.

However, aside from questions of solidarity, what is important about the key monographs on the movement and the literature on the wider context of social movements and agrarian reform, is that fundamentally, these analyses are concerned with structural power, that is the structural conditions that have shaped the movement and determined its relative success. Therefore, engaging with such a perspective, there is little information about individual members’ choices or decisions. Rather the focus is orientated in reverse in that, as Calvo Gonzalez following Touraine (1988) phrases it, these are ‘explanations of the actor by the system’ (2004: 19). All of Branford and Rocha, Ondetti and Wright and Wolford include members’ testimonies in their narratives, but these accounts are not the beginnings of an analysis; rather they presage a point which the authors wish to make. Although all these works contain qualitative data, because they are concerned with structural dynamics, there is little room for the voices of the individuals in their arguments; none of them seek to explain the structure by the actor. And although the contributions to MST literature indicated above have many strengths, there are some very ‘big picture’ questions which they do not address. Internal democracy is not a central theme to any of these studies, all exhibiting an acceptance that the MST is necessarily democratic as it is a ‘democratic’ grassroots organisation. Further, tensions between a collective identity and individual expression are not touched upon.
Therefore, there are gaps in the literature for more ethnographic studies and to a certain extent, these have been filled.

Calvo Gonzalez’s PhD dissertation for example, problematises in many aspects the favourable impressions of the MST espoused in the works above. The field site for the author’s ethnography was an *assentamento* in Bahia and the author delivers an interesting and thought provoking assessment on the problems that membership of the MST have encountered with their leaders. According to Calvo Gonzalez, they ‘face issues of hierarchy within the organisation and witness the use of violence by MST leaders when settlers’ actions are not what the hierarchical leadership expected’ (2004: 237). Further the author argues (with echoes of Souza Martins), that the leadership’s strategic vision is often lacking clarity, resulting in situations on *assentamentos* which can lead to conflict: ‘in practice the technical evaluations of areas for viability as settlements sometimes go undone’ (*ibid.*: 240). However, aside from criticisms of the institutionalisation of the MST the problems in the construction of community that Calvo Gonzalez highlights are more closely related to my research. The author affirms that the MST is in the process of trying to create a ‘new woman/man’ (*ibid.*: 95) and ‘that the MST leadership and the literature on the MST tend to present in terms of problems [a] lack of “correct” consciousness or commitment on the part of settlers’ (*ibid.*: 241). This last point is especially interesting when it comes to the explanation of failure and the discourses the membership and leadership both mobilise when an *assentamento* is beset by problems. Calvo Gonzalez importantly questions the role of the MST as a whole and foregrounds the idea that an ethnography of the movement can reveal quite different realities to works of broader nature. As she states explicitly in her closing paragraph ‘an ethnographic approach that shifts the emphasis from the structural to include the individuals’ trajectories, expectations and aims allows for a more complete picture of the actions and results of social movements, both positive and negative’ (*ibid.*: 242).

Another author who is more critical of the movement and builds analysis from her interviewees is Caldeira (2008; 2009) whose papers, especially on issues pertaining to gender, provide information about MST members outside of any collective identity. Tensions between leadership and members are also concerns of Caldeira’s work and in this, her 2008 paper echoes Souza Martins and McNee, implying that the MST leadership have an idealised sense of what the countryside constitutes and privilege the collective identity too highly. Finally, settlers’ main priority, she argues, is land.
But perhaps the most vocal critics of the movement have come from within Brazil itself, namely José de Souza Martins (1994; 1997; 2000; 2002) and Zander Navarro. The former is the one of the most respected sociologists within Brazil and formerly an advocate of the MST while the latter used to be the MST’s head of research. Navarro in particular, not just in academic publications (for example see 2002), but also in other media, has become the most vocal and strident critic of the MST leadership from the liberal establishment. A recent article published in the Folha de São Paulo (2007b) entitled, ‘Agrarian Comedy’ accuses the MST leadership of tactical incompetence regarding their struggle. Souza Martins also declaims the situation of the leadership and rejects the idea that the central leadership is in any way representative. Indeed, he argues that not only does the leadership operate in terms of patron and client, but that the movement has also come to be characterised by the institutionalisation that Stédile and Issa (2007), a strong advocate of the movement, especially in its cultural politics, deny.

Chaves (2000), has also produced an ethnographically significant account of the movement, accompanying the MST on a national march. In her account, she privileges members’ accounts and throughout, attempts to portray the movement through these micro-instances rather than through descriptions of structural forces. In one section of her account, she controversially notes how the MST leadership in certain aspects, reproduces the common Brazilian discourse that the (predominantly white) south of the country is organisationally superior and harder working than the (much less white) north of the country (2000: 339). Chaves’ observations on race, which are entirely absent from any of the seven key monographs (bar one exception in Wright and Wolford 2003: 221) have been complemented by other significant studies using similar vectors (Zimmermann 1994), while a paper by Silva (2004), shifts enquiry to issues pertaining to gender, which Caldeira extensively builds upon. It is noticeable that the majority of the literature that attempts to build a constructive critique of the movement originates from within Brazil and there does seem to be an interesting disparity between the gaze of those from North America and Europe and those from Brazil itself. Escobar (1992) dryly notes that the ‘production of theory in one place and its application in another is no longer an acceptable practice’ (1992: 35) while highlighting social movement work as a ‘good example of “travelling” theories and theorists in the post-colonial world’ (ibid.).

Further critical analysis of the movement can be found in article form, although again, most are broadly sympathetic, for example Diaz Martins (2000) and Petras and
Veltmeyer (2001). Meszaros’ papers (2000a; 2000b) examine from a sociological and legal perspective, how the Brazilian constitution of 1988 was formed and the differing interest groups that created what he terms a ‘patchwork quilt’ (2000b: 525). He also discusses a new MST strategy, one that has lately expanded even more, of occupying productive lands as a protest against genetically modified crops, for example. Meszaros also highlights why the MST has been so successful, but also details certain paradoxes within the MST, describing it as a ‘pragmatic’ (2000a: 4) movement. The pragmatic nature of the MST is also an angle that Carter (2005) stresses, while Wolford (2003) focuses on the thesis of ‘imagined community’ (2003: 500) following Benedict Anderson (1983), suggesting that the MST’s artistic production is central in the retention of the continuing participation of the com terra, that is, those who now have land as a result of MST membership. Wolford’s paper, similar to her other work on the MST (2004a; 2004b) although premised to a certain extent on qualitative interview data, is similar to the monograph that she co-authored; it explains systems without really asking individual members about their preferences or interpretations of what seems a hegemonic collective sem terra identity.

So what does this present study contribute? Unlike the key monographs that I have listed, this study is orientated to explain the structure of the MST from the actors’ points of view. It is ethnographic and cannot rival for example, Ondetti’s extensive charting of how the movement has prospered in quantitative terms, but it does provide an in-depth portrayal as to the lived experience of the MST, from the individual members who constitute the movement. Unlike other ethnographic accounts however, this thesis provides an overview of the movement, touching on the main spheres of the movement’s activity. This is not to say that it covers all areas of importance. Rather, I hope that this work acts to encourage rather than to foreclose upon similar ethnographic studies on the MST’s education system, for example, or the movement’s viability to produce, areas which a lack of time prevented me from researching. But I believe that more than any other ethnographic study, this work provides a broad analysis of the movement, at this key juncture of its trajectory, by foregrounding questions of internal democracy and plurality of identity versus centralised and institutionalised control. The issue of ‘criticising the movement’ for me is regrettable but inevitable. I am a supporter of agrarian reform in Brazil and without doubt, the MST has placed this struggle on the
map and achieved solid, concrete results. But any movement which is not open to constructive criticism can hardly claim a grassroots mantle, and I believe that in keeping with my ethnographic purpose, any criticisms that I make, derive solidly from within the body of MST members who care about the movement’s future and wish the struggle for agrarian reform to endure, rather than to fade away. It would therefore be rendering a disservice to the MST if this account did not highlight the changing context, both internal and external, and the challenges to the MST’s identity and survival implied by these changes.

Position of the Researcher

Of great importance to my research was the idea of how and upon what basis, I would come to be included within the sphere of the MST and its activity. How I encountered MST members would obviously be crucial in how they viewed me and therefore the manner in which they communicated to me. My interest, from the very beginnings of this project, was to give voice to individuals within the movement, privileging through an ethnographic perspective, accounts or interpretations that might not have conformed to a more ‘official’ line of MST discourse. And to this end, it was important to encounter the movement in the manner in which its own leadership and many academic commentators have styled it, that is, from the grassroots.

I was aware that to work with the MST, to attend meetings and such other activity, permission from the state secretariat was required. In my case, this secretariat was based in Florianópolis, but I deliberately avoided pursuing this course of action when I arrived in Brazil, to conduct my pre-fieldwork. Instead, through contacts at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), principally Elisa Schemes and Bernardete Aued of the Núcleo de Estudos sobre as Transformações no Mundo do Trabalho, I arranged a visit to the assentamento of B_. In this assentamento, I met Kleber and we had a conversation about who I was, what I was doing and the possibility of spending some time in his assentamento. Five months later, I returned to Brazil to conduct my ethnography proper, and again I tried to make contact with the movement through personal contacts rather than go through the state secretariat.
My goal was to attend the 2007 state meeting and through Lyvia Rodrigues of the Programa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária (PRONERA), I was invited by the state leader of the MST education sector to travel to Fraiburgo. At the state meeting, I met Kleber again and recognising that I looked fairly lost, he accompanied me to dinner and introduced me to the brigada Alzemiro de Oliveira. In this group of people, who were all from the Planalto and litoral, I made further friends, including Denis and his father Andre, from the assentamento of N-. This assentamento then became my main base from which I conducted my fieldwork.

The fact that at no point was my presence within the movement officially sanctioned by MST leadership could have been potentially problematic and indeed, at the state meeting of 2008, plans to deny me entry were made by a meeting of senior state leaders. However, I always managed to avoid such confrontations, as over time, I became a fixture of the Santa Catarina MST, coming to be generally accepted through having many friends amongst the membership. I believe that it was these personal ties that made it unpalatable for state leaders to think of barring me from movement activities or curtailing my involvement with the movement, together with the fact that I was, and remain, convinced of certain of the movement’s values (if not their strategies). It would have been impossible to work with the movement in such depth if I had not been an apoiador, a supporter.

However, the fact that I continually avoided being sanctioned by the leadership (registering with the secretariat, taking part in official movement-student alliances etc) perhaps made the state leadership suspicious as to my motives. My activities were not convincing of my loyalty. I asked many difficult questions, wrote copious notes and interviewed people on tape who were perhaps viewed as troublemakers by certain MST leaders. Therefore, balancing this trust deficit between my activity and the state leadership was not easy, (at one point I was accused of being a spy) although I had allies who were militantes and regional leaders. But at all times, it was my friends within the movement, speaking in support of me in my absence, that made this study possible, by giving me that evasive sense of legitimacy.

I therefore conducted my ethnography of the MST using participant observation in a variety of differing contexts. I was invited into personal contexts, such as private conversations, people’s homes, family meals, reunions and celebrations. But I also had access to more formalised encounters, such as pre-arranged performances of mística (MST ritual), movement meetings, state events, protests and collaborative activity with
other social movements. My research also took place in environments of business, such as local markets, supermarkets and factories as well as in arenas of power, for example, local union offices, councillors’ offices, banks and mayoral offices. I took part in as many activities and processes as I could, to gain an embodied sense of what, for example, performing a mística, would render in terms of a sensory experience. I also took part in demonstrations, chants, and solidarity events in the city, as well as more rural activities, such as planting, digging, manure spreading, sipping chimarrão (a tea made from erva mate) in the fields and fishing.

During my ethnography, I conducted unstructured interviews with all manner of movement actors as well as members of wider society. Some of these interviews were more formal than others; I have 30 taped interviews while an uncounted number (more than 50) were rendered into note form, which were more spontaneous. At all times during my ethnography, I always introduced myself as a doctoral researcher from a British university, and adhered to the discipline’s guidelines on continuous negotiation of informed consent.

Returning to the UK, I was confronted with a mass of data. I had a field journal of 70,000 words, my interview transcriptions, hundreds of photographs and hours of video footage. The transcriptions were coded into categories; a process that I then performed with my field journal. As part of my abductive research strategy (Blaikie 2000), my goal was to render the everyday accounts of my interviews and the informal observations of my field journal into a more technical analysis, attempting to reproduce the polyphony of voice in the data as accurately as possible, while necessary rendering the ‘thick’ information of the social world into the neatly compartmentalised language of the sociological.

As a researcher, I asked questions of a broadly investigative nature and garnered qualitative data only. I tried to represent MST members’ views as accurately as possible with the least amount of authorial intrusion or bias. I have no experience of living ‘without land’ and therefore my research placed me in a non-expert position; I sought to learn from the people that I spoke to about an institution of which I had a very limited understanding. Many times, MST members would describe the movement as an aprendizagem, an apprenticeship, and this perfectly summed up my approach to my fieldwork.
Obviously, a degree of bias is impossible to avoid. The very fact that I presented myself as a member of an academic institution from outside Brazil, researching a politically sensitive issue, immediately introduced an input from the academic sphere into the world that was to be researched. However, I hope that by not adopting a detached ‘expert’ position, I have reduced this bias to an acceptable level. Having decided my primary goal was that of establishing ‘understanding’, I felt that the abductive research strategy provided the best synthesis with my topic, objectives and research role. Blaikie (2000) describes its epistemological and ontological assumptions thus:

The ontological assumptions can be regarded as ‘relativist’ rather than absolutist; the idea that there may be a single social reality is rejected in favour of the idea that there may be multiple and changing social realities. […] The epistemological assumptions of the abductive research strategy regard social scientific knowledge as being derived from everyday concepts and meanings, from social constructed mutual knowledge. The social researcher enters the everyday social world in order to grasp these socially constructed meanings.

(2000: 116)

With this logic of enquiry, I felt that intrinsically, the focus would be on the explanations that my respondents offered, rather than the explanations that I as a researcher could construct. This hopefully will privilege their views over mine; a situation that is desirable given my interest in understanding the phenomenon under investigation. I hope that Blaikie’s assertion that attempting to establish an ‘understanding’, is ‘the exclusive preserve of the abductive research strategy’ (2000: 124), explains my choice.

*Argument and organisation of the thesis*

In this introduction, I have put forward the idea that the MST finds itself at a crossroads. There is little argument surrounding the overall beneficial impact of the MST upon marginalised peoples (Branford and Rocha 2002; Leite et al. 2004; Ondetti 2008; Wright and Wolford 2003), but socio-economic conditions in Brazil have shifted since the
movement’s formation in 1984 and are unrecognisable from the context of the movement’s coalescence from late 1979 onwards. It has been argued that CCT payments have made joining the movement a less attractive option, as especially in the periferia, where in Santa Catarina a large amount of MST recruitment takes place, people are choosing to remain in the cities with what Gilmar Mauro, a national MST leader, has described as a mere palliative (FSP 2007a). Although as Ondetti amply demonstrates, occupations grew in number following the transfer of power from Fernando Henrique to Lula, a fact that he attributes to the MST imagining the Lula administration as ‘more vulnerable to pressure’ (2008: 219), it is significant that Ondetti’s analysis only charts MST activity up to 2006. Hall’s statistics are from the period immediately after this, 2006 up to 2008.

The MST has also opened up new fronts of its struggle. The challenge is no longer merely to occupy land and establish families therein, but rather to dismantle or otherwise offer a viable alternative to the dominant models of agribusiness that constitute billions of export dollars of the government’s foreign earnings. The struggle has widened to even include neo-liberalism, a worldwide nexus of cash transfer that the MST argues places Brazil in a fundamentally subaltern position.

What further complicates the MST’s present position is the age of its members. The generation that founded the movement as young men and women have now reached late middle age and their children, the second generation, have been born into land, not having had to face the same struggles as their parents. Vergara-Camus (2009b), in the conclusion of one of his papers, notes that if disillusionment with Lula begins to affect the movement’s faith in its mobilisation policies, ‘whatever the result of this reflection, the MST’s long experience of struggle […] will most likely be at the heart of it’ (2009b: 188) but the MST is constituted of diverse actors and these individuals, despite Navarro’s claims that indoctrinated militantes will always exist, are changing; people who were children in 1984 are now mature adults, and leaders of the same era, are becoming old men.

My argument is that in this extraordinary time, with the movement subject to so many contrasting shifts of the wind, flexibility is going to be key as to whether the movement can endure, remaining relevant to its members and in a position where it can attempt to address its strategic aims. At present, I argue that the movement, because of an over emphasis on the collective sem terra identity, at the expense of more pluralistic

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5 A debatable view, given that Lula has pursued many policies that have left the MST disillusioned, including the heavy promotion of agribusiness (Pereira 2009).
tropes of being, is ill-equipped to diversify its character in order to change the way that it pursues its goals. To render a germane contribution to its members’ lives and importantly to wider Brazilian society, I argue that the movement faces a signal dilemma regarding the very device on which it has built its success, the unified collective front into which MST members’ identities can be subsumed. The fascination for the collective and its correlates; a hostile attitude to the media and the polarisation that can separate MST members from wider society, could be seen by some to be contradictory in a movement which styles itself as ‘grassroots’. The struggle for democracy may be being fought in Brazil by the MST, but how democratic is the movement itself? How tolerant of ‘non sem terra’ visions does movement leadership think it can afford to be?

This thesis is organised as follows. Developing the main argument of an intrinsic lack of elasticity, which compromises the movement’s ability to respond to emerging phenomena, chapter one focuses on instances of MST ritual, including large meetings and performances of mistica, demonstrating that not only is MST ritual perceived to be losing its once visceral force, but that competing interpretations of MST experience, articulated by younger members, are being prohibited from emerging by the actions of state leaders. MST ritual is an important contribution to the construction of the sem terra identity and chapter two foregrounds this concept, asking how this identity is constructed and by whom. The role of MST media relations is discussed and a theory that foregrounds how members can be subject to a polemic interpretation of what it is to be sem terra, embodying an ‘us-versus-them’ discourse is posited. Questions surrounding identity have often been raised in MST literature, but few scholars have investigated why members choose to adopt the sem terra identity so readily and this issue, and more specific notions of clientelism are key to the analysis of Chapter three. This chapter situates itself in the environment of the acampamento, itself an important locus of identity transformation, to privilege accounts which describe how being more sem terra than your neighbour is of great importance regarding the distribution of land that has been won. The particular processes that pertain to the establishment of an acampamento are also described in detail; how sites are chosen, by whom and how they are encamped, are all processes that are discussed. Acampamento life is characterised by camp discipline and of course, one of the most important groups of people in this experience, are the leadership of various levels, and chapter four attempts to draw individual portraits from within this group, which are so often placed under a generic common noun. Issues of internal democracy, the (s)election of leaders and ossification are highlighted in this chapter,
which demonstrates that there is a strong element of self-reproduction in the way that the leadership presently function. The ramifications of such processes of ossification are analysed in chapter five, which provides a case study of what can happen when leaders are no longer accountable to wider membership. This chapter, which details issues pertaining to gender, questions whether the MST is really willing to place its political will behind the gender collective. Following Hartmann’s thesis (1979) on the need for a divorce between the ideologies of feminism and Marxism, this chapter addresses the issue of pluralistic identities and how Marxist movements have historically subsumed women’s struggles into the wider collective identity of the ‘worker’. Continuing with the theme of the collective, Chapter six examines models of collective organisation within the MST and asks how the movement is dealing with the problem of the second generation, taking the argument back to how transience and evolution are necessarily crucial operators for all social movements. The thesis closes with a series of conclusions embedded within the framework of applied anthropology; how can the movement best achieve its stated goals?
December 2007. Santa Catarina, the south of Brazil. Fraiburgo has been chosen by MST state leadership for the annual *encontro estadual*, the state meeting. The city is comparatively well off and just outside it, lies the *Parque da Maçã* (apple park) where the meeting will take place. At the gate is a detail of MST security. I stop and explain who I am. I tell the men that I am expected by Teresa, who is the state leader of the ___ sector (although technically, no sectors have leaders). They disappear to see if my story checks out and leave me waiting. It’s hot and dusty and inside the park I can see preparations being made for the twenty third *encontro estadual*, the reason why I am here. The men come back. It’s a 500 metre walk from the gate to the buildings where the meeting will take place. I’m nervous as this is my first formal interaction with the movement. They tell me that they can’t find her, but that her deputy Mariana is waiting for me, wearing a blue shirt. I drive in, down the long approach. There are two buildings that seem to be gymnasiums or *futsal* (indoor football) courts, built in concrete with tin roofs. The spaces are huge, giving an idea of the numbers of people that are expected to attend.

Mariana welcomes me without asking my purpose. She asks me what I have brought to sleep in and tells me to sleep in the second of the two areas, the first, she tells me is for meetings. She asks me to wait a moment and then returns with a plate and a fork, which she gives to me. It’s dinner time and trying to put me at ease she leads me down to a third building which resembles an enormous *salão de festas*. We join the queue and chat about my journey. Another man, standing next to us, says hello. I have met him before. His name is Kleber and we met some months ago in the *assentamento* where he lives. We start to talk about the movement and eventually we arrive at the head of the queue. I’m worried about serving myself too much but watching everybody tucking in, I fill my plate. The dinner consists entirely of MST produce, trucked in from the surrounding *assentamentos*. There is *arroz e feijão* (rice and beans) which is the Brazilian staple, fried chicken, fresh lettuce leaves and fresh tomatoes. Everything is delicious.

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6 Most Brazilian condominiums in Santa Catarina have a room called a *salão de festas* set aside for parties or gatherings with a built in *churrasqueira* [barbeque].
Eating dinner like this after a long journey and welcomed by these friendly people puts me at ease.

After dinner we wash our plates. There is one tap outside the hall in the middle of a field. A disciplined queue is formed that snakes from the long mess tables and through the large sliding doors. I continue to chat with Kleber as he recognises old friends from past occupations walking by. The camaraderie is obvious as old stories are shared and recycled and new stories are eagerly listened to. I have brought just a sleeping bag so Kleber instantly offers to share his mattress with me. In the hall where everyone is sleeping he seems to know everyone around us and I ask him why this is. He points to a piece of A4 that has been attached to the wall near where we are. It says *brigada* Alzemiro de Oliveira. Kleber explains that the MST within the state is divided into *brigadas* and theirs is Alzemiro de Oliveira: they sleep in the same space together; they will do activities together; they are all from the same geographical area of the state, in this case the *Planalto*, literally, the plateau and the *litoral*, the coast. Everyone in the *brigada* welcomes me and comes to say hello. They seem pleased that I am there with them on the floor of the hall. As we all go to sleep, five hundred people on a concrete floor, I reflect that I am now part of a specific brigade.

Six am. As soon as I wake up, there is breakfast of freshly baked bread, homemade jam and hot instant coffee in the food hall. I sit with my new friends from the brigade. But very shortly breakfast is over and after tidying their *acampamento* in the sleeping hall people have started to migrate to the *mística* which will start the day promptly at eight am. I go to look at the meeting hall, which is still almost empty. It is a vast space and filled with hundreds of empty chairs, facing a stage, raised about ground level. More seating is provided by concrete steps that run down one side of the hall. Above, huge banners have been stretched lengthwise from one end of the hall to the other in a panoply of red, yellow and green. The stage has been decked with flags. The largest are the movement’s flag; red, machete held aloft, instantly recognisable amongst the others and next to it, the national flag of Brazil. A banner runs from the roof to the stage, with the word ‘SOCIALISMO’ printed in red letters on a white background. At the front of the stage are the flags of the organisations with which the MST empathises and expresses solidarity – *Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores* (MPA – the movement of small farmers), *Via Campesina* (The International Peasant Movement),

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7 In addition to the regular meaning of an encampment, *acampamento* is also used as a term to describe temporary sleeping arrangements at movement meetings, marches, demonstrations etc.
Movimento sem Teto (MTST – The Movement of the Homeless), Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB - The Movement of Dam Affected People) and Movimento de Mulheres Campesas (MMC – The Movement of Peasant Women).

All around the hall are memories of the movement’s collective past depicted through the photography of Sebastião Salgado. Here famous images such as ‘Meeting for the Land’s Occupation’, ‘A Massacre, A Wake’ and the omnipresent ‘The Icons of Victory’ are displayed, connected by a long piece of string, each A2 image mounted on black card. The line of images stretches fifty metres, the entire length of the hall. In the far corner is a display area, showcasing the best of MST produce. There are pots of honey, conserves and jams, the greenery of carrots, lettuces and salads, the two litre fizzy drink bottles filled with the heavy feijão. The display itself is covered with smaller images of Salgado’s photography but other images are also represented. Images from the recent occupation of the Brazilian army’s 15,000 hectare site (almost double the area of the city of Paris) at Papanduva are particularly noticeable. Printed and hand painted slogans have been draped over handrails, steps and tables. ‘LUTAR ACREDITAR E TRANSFORMAR – A JUVENTUDE QUE INSISTE EM MUDAR’ (struggle, believe and transform – the youth insist on change) hangs near the back of the hall. ‘A EDUCAÇÃO VAI ALÉM DA SALA DE AULA’ (education goes beyond the classroom) is printed on yellow with blue lettering near the entrance. On a facing wall there is a series of seven images in homage to the massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás, discussed in more detail below, in the middle of which is a declamation of the ‘ASSASSINOS DE CARAJÁS’ (murderers of Carajás).

There are now a few more people around, one strumming an acoustic guitar on the stage and another leading a group of people into the area in between the stage and the chairs. It is still very early. They begin to perform some form of ritual, led through their steps by a woman I recognise from the night before. I’m not watching the rehearsal closely, but some of the participants seem to be wearing blindfolds. The acoustic guitar has become louder and I realise that the music is an accompaniment to the performance. The sound of people’s shuffling feet and sombre chords amplified through the PA echo through the empty hall. More people are coming in now and sitting down on the chairs in small groups. The rehearsal breaks up and the sun already streaming brightly through the high windows, I go back outside.

I wait around outside the main hall as I watch people filtering in. More coaches have arrived in the night and this is the abertura, the official opening of this year’s
meeting. There must be roughly five hundred people passing in front of me. Unnoticed in the dark last night, I can now see that the majority of people are wearing red t-shirts, shorts or jeans and flip-flops. The MST boné (baseball cap) is everywhere. The t-shirts have iconic images of Che Guevara or Fidel Castro on them. Many t-shirts also have song lyrics from Silvio Rodriguez, a Cuban protest singer, or slogans of the movement printed on them. Even people’s motorbikes are decorated with small images of Che Guevara in the same way that cars in the city are ornamented with Virgin Mary/rosary/Jesus loves you images. These people are members of the movement, bussed in from all parts of the state, from the asentamento of Dionysius Cerqueira on the Argentinean border to the asentamento of H_ on the coast and only a short distance from Paraná, to the acampamento of U__ in the region called the Planalto, in the north of the state. Dionysius is an eleven hour drive, H_ and the Planalto around five to six.

The meeting still hasn’t opened. It’s past eight am and people are beginning to fidget, constantly refilling and passing around chimarrão (the ever-present hot tea of southern Brazil), from their chimarrão kits, which consist of a basket which snugly holds a huge flask of hot water, a space for the erva mate (the tea itself is an important product in the region of the Planalto), the cuia (the vessel from which you drink it) and bomba (straw). I have moved to sit with Kleber and his friends from the brigada after they notice me and invite me to come and sit with them. Everyone welcomes me and I am passed a detailed schedule of the programme. It resembles a handout such as one might receive at a management consultancy’s annual meeting or an academic conference. Mine is in black and white and details what time lights are to be switched off, what time conversation must end at night time, what time breakfast will be served, what time the mística is to begin, how each of the following three days will be divided with differing activities and such details. I catch a glimpse of the agenda of Luizinho. He is also part of the Alzemiros de Oliveira brigada and is the regional leader of the __ sector. He is one of the people who have helped organise the meeting. His agenda is colour coded and contains many more details than mine. The chimarrão is passed to me and as I drink I ask what they are writing and passing around. Pretina tells me that it is a grito. I don’t know what a grito is but she tells me to learn it. She says that it is part of being in Alzemiros de Oliveira. I recite the lines a couple of times. She says to me, ‘you’re learning already!’ I ask Luizinho why the MST has brigades. He tells me that it’s because Marx, Che and Mao had them. But now the mística is starting. Some members taking part in it have
already walked into the space between the seated audience and the stage. People fall quiet, everyone watches (see figure 1).

The guitar starts first, with the same amplified sombre chords that I heard when I first came in. The minor progressions are menacing and convey a foreboding atmosphere. Accompanying the low tones, a group of people in the centre are parading. They are wearing the blue blindfolds that I noticed from before. They grasp in an unsighted manner and appear lost. More actors enter from a side door. They are carrying placards and other paraphernalia. One man is carrying a tank on his back with a hose to represent the application of pesticides. Another is wearing a tall top hat coloured in such a way (blue, white, red) to represent the figure of Uncle Sam. The various placards read, ‘agronegócio’ (agribusiness), ‘EUA’ (USA), ‘Coca Cola’, ‘Bancos: BID, Bradesco’ and ‘veneno’ (poison). Another figure is holding a box which represents a television with Globo’s logo attached to one side. These figures encircle the blindfolded actors who are now squatting on the ground and continue to pace around them, all the time accompanied by the ominous chords of the guitar. The placards are waving in the faces of the blindfolded and the television is placed on top of the head of one of them.

Another group of actors then appears. They are dressed in MST clothing and carry agricultural implements such the symbolically powerful joiç (long handled scythe), hoes and rakes. They also carry MST flags which they wave in the faces of the other actors. Those that were encircling have now themselves become encircled by the actors portraying members of the MST. The MST members remove the blindfolds of the actors squatting in the middle of the group and the music changes. A positive song is now being played on the acoustic guitar with a tuneful, soaring vocal accompaniment. The actors portraying the capitalists are symbolically defeated and they are left seated on the floor. Now able to see, the original actors have joined the actors representing the MST in a line behind the capitalists and all of them begin to wave their flags in time to the music. Further actors appear to join this alliance bearing flags of the movimento de mulheres camponesas and the flag of La Via Campesina. The audience begin to clap in time.

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8 Rede Globo is the largest commercial television network in Brazil and the third largest in the world with 120 million daily viewers. Due to its sheer size, Globo has been accused of being too powerful and is perceived by some to wield undue influence. The relationship between the MST and Globo is problematic and commenting on this, Hammond states that ‘it is not surprising that a media system so concentrated in the hands of the wealthy and so tied into the dominant political system often lives up to the stereotype of the capitalist press, hostile to progressive movements from below’ (2004: 71).
to the music as the chords merge into a popular movement song. Many people around me stand to join in with the symbolic triumph that has been portrayed. I am unsure as to whether to stand or sit. The day has begun.

Leaders appear on stage. They greet the audience with an amplified bom dia, good morning. The response is half-hearted, so it is repeated twice more until the audience roars bom dia back to the stage. We are instructed to embrace the person to our left. For most people this warm-up routine is an amusing way to say hello to someone they have met before at an occupation, or perhaps in an acampamento. And now the speaker calls the name of the one of the brigadas. A group at the back of the hall stand up and chant a verse that is unique to their brigada. Now I understand what a grito is. Members of Alzemiro de Oliveira are feverishly trying to memorise theirs in time as each brigade, one by one are reciting theirs to the hall. It seems our turn is coming closer and Pretinha starts to complain about how this one is new and how they keep on changing it. I notice that when the members of the brigadas chant their grito, each member raises their left fist to every second beat. Our turn has come. We shout out our lines and pump our fists. I am conscious that we want to make a good impression on the other brigadas from the state. There is pride involved in being part of Alzemiro de Oliveira. Now a leader begins to speak.

It seems like it is going to be a long speech. After a while, through a lack of sleep I begin to doze off as other people are doing. I catch occasional words, Florestan Fernandes, (a distinguished Brazilian sociologist and socialist politician, twice elected as federal deputy for the Workers Party), Marx, quotes from Che and ideas from Gramsci. Finally the speech comes to a close. It has lasted over an hour. There is some shuffling on the stage and another leader takes the microphone. Another speech begins. Almost everyone is in the hall, although there are a few stragglers outside. But people now don’t really seem to be paying much attention. There’s a constant hubbub of noise and people are constantly sipping chimarrão and chatting to their neighbours. The leader whose name is Everton is outlining the strategy of the movement. He breaks it down into three key points.

1. Take land
2. Continue the struggle for agrarian reform
3. Create a new society
He dwells on the first two points for two minutes and the next hour is spent outlining the third. An alternative society to capitalism must be created. The bourgeoisie must be confronted. He mentions education. It begins through people’s examples of character. We must demonstrate *sem terra* values and behaviours through the way we are. The audience is growing ever more restless and in the middle of his speech he suddenly stops. He raises a clenched fist and shouts ‘MST!’ The audience is suddenly awake and like the question and answer format of the catechism of the Catholic church responds ‘Reforma Agrária Já!’ As everyone settles down, the speech continues in its previous vein and the chimarrão is again passed around. Now we are being asked to learn a specific phrase.

Os sem terrinha são a continuidade, a existência e potencia da mística.
(The young MST members are the future, the existence and the potential of mística)

The phrase is recited twice from the stage before we all repeat it twice at his request. There is another one to learn.

O movimento tem que superar o sistema do capitalismo – é possível realizar.
(The movement has to overcome the capitalist system – it’s possible to achieve)

This phrase is to be written down and everyone does so using the paper and pens from folders that were distributed on each chair. It’s coming toward lunchtime and the trickle of members going to the bathroom and not returning is now growing ever greater. We break for lunch and after the chair scraping and stretching I find myself outside, looking over the cattle pens around the back of the *Parque da Maçã*. There is a young man standing next to me, a student from a private university in the west. He finds out that I am English and doing a PhD. We begin to speak about the performance of the *mística*. He leans close to me and says that the emotion of the experience for him was intense. He says that understanding the meaning of the performance made the hairs on his body stand on end.

December 2008. Fast forward one year. I am in exactly the same place amongst almost exactly the same people. It is the twenty fourth state meeting and I have only been allowed in after a last minute leadership conference which wanted to bar the front gate to
me was dissuaded from doing so. Such is MST politics, that I still don’t know who my ally was. Another *mística* has taken place at the *abertura*. This time, the music is being played over the PA. It is upbeat, positive, corporate. Actors wearing sinister black capes walk across the stage of performance. They are holding placards and showing them to the audience. These read ‘Nike, GM’, ‘Aracruz’, ‘Monsanto’, ‘Banco Itaú’, ‘Coca Cola’, ‘OMC, FMI’, ‘*Latifúndio*’, ‘Agronegócio’, ‘Bayer’ and ‘HSBC’. In amongst these figures suddenly emerges a bird like figure dressed in white, swooping amongst the caped actors, its wings spread out. It wears a hat in the colours of a French tricolour and on its wings is marked ‘*CRISE*’ (crisis) and ‘*DESEMPREGO*’ (unemployment). The music stops and all the figures retreat to form a line facing the audience, the figure with wings at the centre. Something has gone wrong with the sound and there is a long pause during which someone’s toddler runs into the space and stares at the bird. Then more music starts. It is tragic, it communicates pity. Piano overlays a sentimental string arrangement. More figures enter. They have their heads bowed, carrying agricultural tools or sacks over their shoulders. One man, gives his *foice* to his partner and stands in front of the actor carrying the HSBC placard. He claps in the manner signifying that he is a visitor to someone’s front door and wants to converse or sell a product. After clapping he holds out his hand. Nothing is forthcoming and he spreads his hands in a gesture as if to say ‘what can I do?’ All the group do the same but to no avail. As this spectacle continues, a speaker begins to address the audience on the injustices perpetrated on the workers of Brazil. There is another pause as she finishes while a microphone is moved from one side of the stage to the other. The toddler is now pushing a chair over the ground making a loud scraping noise. An older sister comes to pick her up and the toddler starts to cry loudly. Finally, the microphone is ready and a new speaker starts. Feedback obscures what he is saying. He is reading from a piece of A4 and encourages the workers of Latin America to unite while a group of women wave the flags of Latin American countries in front of him. After his speech has finished, the acoustic guitar starts playing a popular song from the stage with which everyone joins in. Large MST flags have been passed around the audience and those who aren’t clapping to every second beat are waving these flags in the air. Some people including the state leadership who are located near me are standing. I look behind me and most of the hall are clapping if not singing. Some people are still seated but hardly any. I begin to film and Alex who is twelve, grins and gives me a ‘thumbs up’. He and his friend Denis aren’t singing. At the end of the song there is a *grito*. A leader on stage shouts through the PA
Reforma Agrária! to which the audience call back as one Por justiça social e soberania popular! Again the man shouts Reforma Agrária! and the audience responds even louder this time, bellowing Por justiça social e soberania popular! There is applause and a break (see figure 2). I turn to a member who is a friend of mine standing next to me. I ask him why he wasn’t singing and clapping. He turns and says he was. I laugh and we walk towards the exit. He says to me in a lower tone of voice, ‘don’t want to get lynched do I?’

Understandings of Ritual: Empowerment through artistic expression?

Ritual has come to play an important role for social movements articulating struggles for change and social justice. As Della Porta and Diani (2006) argue, through ritual, traditional symbolic codes can be subverted or undermined and rules which determine a regularised form of social behaviour can be spontaneously re-invented. They note that ritual does not necessarily have to be associated with large, politically driven celebrations.

All protest events promoted by movements have a ritual dimension, which often assumes a powerfully dramatic and spectacular quality. The forms which demonstrations take, the type of slogans shouted, the banners or placards waved, even the conduct of marshal bodies, are all elements, which, potentially, render the practise of a movement distinctive.

(2006: 110)

In this sphere, and beyond (but not necessarily excluding) slogans or banners, ritual can be used as a tool with which to engage movement members with concepts surrounding identity through ritualistic expressions of art, culture or theatricality. Indeed commenting on Escobar and Alvarez’s (1992) designation of who or what can be included in the definition of social movements, Foweraker (1995) acknowledges that diverse sets of collective action are premised on ‘folk rituals, ethnic traditions and cultural phenomena’ (1995: 38). Della Porta and Diani also note the fundamental role of ritual in social movement theory arguing that ‘rituals represent forms of symbolic expression by which communications concerning social relationships are passed on, in stylized or dramatized ways’ (2006: 109). Collective feelings of belonging are also reinforced through these pathways while movement members are also more able to express their emotionality in more full and discrete modes (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Goodwin et al. 2001).
The struggles of many movements have been inspired and amplified through the use of ritual. Rubin (1994) describes how the COCEI of Mexico employed strategies of political ritual, building on already present oral histories in a culture which had made ritual part of resistance.

Juchitecos remembered and celebrated these events in songs and stories, emphasising the heroism of their parents and grandparents and the activism of Zapotec women in the midst of combat. The ritual contexts and the language in which they told these stories made explicit the continuity of ethnic practice. (1994: 117)

Rubin details how to revive a Juchiteco Zapotec identity, the COCEI made the ritualisation of artistic expression a priority by fostering a cultural arena of radical activity. This arena included producing print media, promoting written and oral forms of the Zapotec language and the establishment of the Casa de la Cultura, a focal point for artistic expression. Rubin argues that this programme not only revived a Zapotec sense of identity and history but also ‘connected young people in poor neighbourhoods to a local cultural institution, to the imagery and practice of radical political demonstrations, and to national artists and intellectuals’ (1994: 131).

Similar events has also occurred within the Zapatista movement in Chiapas where Kampwirth (1996) describes how the movement has utilised ritualised inauguration ceremonies to combine ‘a blend of ancient political rituals with modern protest tactics’ (1996: 262). Barmeyer (2003) has also made a close reading of how in Zapatista communities there are strong ritualistic connections between everyday actions and the wider goals of winning land and liberation. He describes how on significant dates such as the anniversary of Emiliano Zapata’s or Che Guevara’s death, the community would come together to reinforce the collective spirit of resistance. Another such date with heavy ritualistic significance would be the annual celebration of the January 1994 uprising and the commemoration of village heroes who had died in the ensuing battle of Ocosingo. On occasions like these, Barmeyer describes how ‘the prospect of a better future was evoked in speeches, church services were held to ensure divine support for the project, and the entire village repeated an oath of allegiance at the graves of those fallen in combat’ (2003: 127).

In this sense therefore ritualised instances of artistic expression are commonly
associated with protest and demonstration but they can also be connoted with notions pertaining to empowerment. Tanyi-Tang (2001), for example focuses on the use of theatre in Cameroon seeking causal explanation as to how women can use theatre to ‘articulate their… political views to their oppressors – notably men’ (2001: 23). In her ethnography, Tanyi-Tang relates how a performance is staged where the male audience is invited to witness a mime of the hard work of the women. The male audience then watch a man beat his wife in performance and are invited to agree at the play’s conclusion that this behaviour is unacceptable. Tanyi-Tang’s work supports other studies on ritualised political theatricality which conclude that such means of protest can empower their members, notably in movements such as the Mothers of the Disappeared in Buenos Aires (Borland 2008), dispossessed farming communities in Namibia (Mavrocordatos 1998) and Moser’s (2003) study of Peruvian women’s grassroots movements protesting against President Fujimori. Indeed Moser specifically argues that ‘women’s experiences of theatrical protest articulate in four key ways to bring about social change’ (2003: 178) and that ‘the potency of speaking in the public sphere, the power of carnivalesque reversals and inversions, the “positive” form of protest and dissent as well as its potential as a space for bearing witness to state manipulation and corruption—together these elements form an important mechanism which allows marginalized women to express their views on the public stage’, a view echoed by Nogueira (2002), in her analysis of Freire’s (1975) theatrical pedagogy. But on which plane therefore do the MST articulate their programmes of artistic expression and ritual? And to what extent does cynicism play a role in how such programmes are received?

*The culture sector and mística*

According to McNee (2005), the MST’s culture sector’s objectives are both wide reaching and profound.

*to study, stimulate and circulate local rural knowledge and cultural practices, including the medicinal uses of plants, organic methods of cultivation, regional dances and festivals, storytelling and music, cooking and food preservation, crafts and architecture, etc.*
In this way, the MST’s culture sector has been established with the proviso of protecting dimensions of local rural difference from the onset of capitalist modernisation and this programme is distinctly recognisable through performances of *mística* (the representation through words, art, symbolism, and music of the struggles and reality of the MST) that prefigure all MST meetings and occur frequently in MST encampments (Branford and Rocha 2002). However, although *mística* is the most well known mode of MST artistic expression, the culture sector’s programme is also manifested through such diverse activities as the brigades of ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’, the construction of murals, projects of memorialisation and creations of huge visual art instalments. But what exactly is the role of the culture sector? The MST definition of their activity is:

> At demonstrations, marches, occupations, imprisonments, and commemorations of victories and conquests, music, poetry and dance are presented, expressing and strengthening the Sem Terra cultural identity.9

It is also the case that the MST prioritises its cultural output to help achieve its wider goals. Mineirinho, a member of the culture sector leadership states the functions of its work as ‘exploring and amplifying the culture and arts of Brazil’s landless communities so as to open a different sort of dialogue with Brazilian society, helping it to better understand who we are and where we come from’ (McNee 2002). Indeed, this seems to be the central function of how the MST views the use of artistic expression; a medium through which a positive re-engagement with society can be achieved. In his discussion of the role of cultural expression in grassroots development, Kleymeyer (1994) argues that democratic discourse is fundamentally inaccessible in many societies. Frequently people are marginalised from public debate. It is in these situations, he argues, that ‘people turn to various forms of cultural expression […] to make their opinions known, to protest injustices, and in some cases merely to reaffirm a social consensus’ (1994: 29). And activists such as Mineirinho argue that the MST are fully engaged in this attempt to utilise public performance and political theatre for the mobilisation of social justice.

However, although the culture sector is not run from an office in São Paulo, there is a strong uniformity to the activities that are conducted under its ideological

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9 [http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=culturecollective](http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=culturecollective) - accessed 9th June, 2007
auspices by state and regional leaders, working to the culture sector’s programme. The
day-to-day activities of the culture sector are of course conducted in an *ad hoc* manner,
but this occurs within the more publicised and institutionalised framework of what the
sector is trying to achieve. This carefully controlled ideological position of the culture
sector has led Wolford (2003) to argue that it is one of the primary means which the
movement uses to promote a centralised cultural identity. And indeed, Berezin argues
that ritual can privilege the formation of group identity in a process which partly occurs
through emotions shared in public places, for example, through a co-ordinated
programme of cultural activities (1997: 28). And importantly, a strong collective identity
is key to the MST in creating ‘imagined community’, a concept that will be further
examined in the next chapter (Wolford 2003: 500; Carter 2005).

But what sorts of projects are conducted to this end and how are they organised?
Certain events have become institutionalised within the MST’s folklore and none are
more subject to ritual than the massacre at Eldorado dos Carajás. In this incident on 17th
April 1996, which occurred at a roadblock that the MST had organised in the Amazonian
state of Pará, nineteen MST members were killed in a confrontation with military police
and a further two members died subsequently. The date in MST ritual is observed with
*mística* performances in *assentamentos* and *acampamentos* but a huge memorialisation project
was also undertaken as a permanent physical reminder. Baron Cohen (2004) describes
how MST leadership was instrumental in the concept and construction of a very
personal, but suddenly, politically significant memorial. In choosing the nineteen
*castanheira* trees, which were to symbolise the victims of police brutality, leadership
encouraged membership (including people who had lost relatives in the massacre) to find
‘poetic’ trees. The artistic concept was to place disfigured tree trunks, representing the
nineteen dead, around a space of performance, but in the search for suitable material,
some trees were dismissed by leadership as not ‘being mutilated enough’ (2004: 257 my
translation). Thus in the ritual, *castanheira* trees were reconfigured with new, politicised
meanings that were designed to summarise the collective beliefs of a wider group. In
essence, the tree trunks ceased to become trees harvested for nuts, being transmogrified
into symbols of the environmental damaged wreaked by landowners and of course
broken memorials to the movement martyrs.

The *performative* aspect of this memorial sculpture is interesting to note when
bearing in mind Kertzer’s (1988) definition of ritual as ‘action wrapped in a web of
symbolism’ (1988: 9) and perhaps it is this type of image and a myriad of other
comparisons similar, that has prompted in Souza Martins an animosity to the 'revolutionary self-image' (2002: 318) of the MST. The desire to create an image with such tight control over the artistic process however, is perhaps partly due to an important source for the movement's cultural programme.

The MST's origins in such organisations as the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) a movement whose principles derive from liberation theology and the ritual of the catholic church in general has often been noted as contributing to the form of MST political ritual, in particular, mística. Karriem (2009) comments that ‘[a]n enduring influence from liberation theology has been the continued use of the mística or mystique, which reflects Catholic values of suffering and redemption to confront difficulties, strengthen resolve, and provide vitality in the quest for land and a better life’ (2009: 319). And although the MST is officially a secular movement, religious overtones are often apparent in their ritual. I observed a performance of a mística at the 2008 state meeting which figured a couple standing in the centre of the hall (see figure 3). The young man was dressed humbly in a straw hat, t-shirt and shorts, while the young woman was wearing a long skirt, a Che Guevara t-shirt, and a red headscarf. They were both barefoot and carrying a baby which they slowly lifted above their heads. As the baby cried, three younger women approached, one dressed so as to represent an indigenous person, the other two in white dresses. The younger women anointed the baby's forehead with water, before a basket was brought to them with great reverence. From this basket the three younger women proceeded to anoint the baby again, but this time, with seeds and soil. Four more younger women then suddenly took the hands of four members of the audience and lead them onto the stage. I happened to be one and we walked around the original couple with the baby until we were all anointed in a similar manner by the three younger women. Twelve children then circled the five couples with large posters depicting sunflowers that they had drawn themselves. The four younger women who had each taken a member of the audience then tied a red ribbon with black lettering to our wrists. The ribbon read ‘23” ENCONTRO ESTADUAL – MST/SC.

This mística spoke to the audience on a number of levels. The children, emblematic of the future, bore pictures of sunflowers, the symbolic product of the work that members put into the land they owned. The baby, at once sacred and profane was immediately identifiable with Jesus but also received a very naturalistic baptism, one that prioritised the creating elements of agricultural life. The fact that there were three elements was also symbolic, connected to the idea that in a baptism ceremony one
receives Christ’s Spirit, the Holy Ghost, and life in the community. Without a doubt the religious overtones combined with the secular realities had created a powerful symbolic moment for the watching audience and indeed the mística was universally praised afterwards. Moreover, the members of the audience including myself that had been selected to walk around the couple with the baby had not been selected at random. The whole performance had been carefully stage managed by two state leaders and in the role I played, I was being initiated into the movement. I was baptised by the elements that give life to the movement before the wristband was affixed to me, symbolising the idea that now, I was a sem terra. Importantly, the aspersion (the process of sprinkling on the forehead) that all the performers underwent used the MST’s organic seeds. Symbolically, we were being divorced from the mainstream means of production and inducted into a new faith, a faith in a non-capitalist way of life.

But are mística and other instances of MST cultural life always so controlled and stage managed? The movement and many scholars deny that this is the case and instead argue that MST artistic expression is premised upon a creative spontaneity, a case that Stédile himself makes clear in the publication Brava Gente (1999).

Mística: purpose, design, trajectory

One of the key aspects behind the MST culture sector’s programme is the emphasis placed upon pedagogy and empowerment. Profoundly influenced by the work of Boal (2000) and Freire (1975) the culture sector’s rhetoric makes clear that its interest lies in educating a wider audience rather than placing that audience under any form of control. As Issa (2007) highlights in a paper entitled Praxis of Empowerment: Mística and Mobilization in Brazil’s Landless:

The mística not only inspires but also serves as pedagogy of empowerment. This pedagogy relies on symbolism to convey concepts and values to a class characterized by low levels of formal education and/or literacy and therefore is not limited to producing knowledge; it narrates history and experience, reviving the collective memory of the Brazilian peasantry and ultimately contributing to the formation of a collective Sem Terra identity.
Stédile, one of the members of the MST national leadership, refutes accusations of institutionalism. He comments: ‘[w]e realized that if you allow mística to become formal, it dies out. No one receives orders to be emotional; you get emotional because you are motivated as a result of something’ (Stedile and Fernandes 2000: 130). And supporting this thesis Issa quotes an interviewee:

[Mística] is extremely creative and free, and it’s that liberty which makes it mystical. Sometimes we’re asked: Why don’t you write down the místicas? They are so beautiful! And we don’t do it because it’s creative; it’s created in the moment.

(Regilma, interview, April 20, 2006 cited in Issa 2007: 130)

Mística is therefore presented as being devoid of script; it is a spontaneous act. However, there are tensions inherent in the MST’s cultural politics as demonstrated by a separate paragraph of Issa’s text, where the author relates how a national MST leader of the culture sector writes to a colleague, outlining what he feels mística ought to comprise. Issa asserts that the guidelines are not evidence of ‘institutionalisation’ of any sort. Rather, they are ‘simply general considerations used for theorizing and discussing mística; there are no “rule books” or written directives’ (2007: 137). The list of ‘guidelines’ (here paraphrased) is as follows:

1. Mística for entertainment purposes, to convey mystery or to shock is not authentic
2. To be beautiful mística should be brief, solemn and simple and should incorporate symbols, gestures and personal testimonies
3. There should be no surprises; it should be prepared and rehearsed
4. It should not occupy one’s entire focus and it should not become the task of specialists
5. Improvisation should be avoided

This list of observations from Ranulfo Peloso to Ademar Bogo, both senior MST leadership of the MST’s culture sector and similar material has created some concerns
about the movement’s well organised, and widely implemented cultural programmes. For example Zander Navarro in a recent article published in the *Folha de São Paulo* (2007: 22.4.07) entitled, ‘Agrarian Comedy’ accuses the MST leadership of tactical incompetence regarding their struggle. ‘Strategically they have made many common errors, but the leaders of *sem terra* (the landless) prefer the myopia of ideological details rather than an examination of reality’ (2007 my translation). Crucially Navarro has argued that the leadership of the MST exercises control over its membership through the work of the culture sector with ‘indoctrinating mechanisms’ (2002: 11). He has also described the culture sector’s work as inspiring ‘an almost religious devotion’ (*ibid.*). The movement refutes these charges. According to the MST national leadership, their programmes of artistic expression, beyond their educational value inspired by Freire’s pedagogy and more lately ideas pertaining to Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, are in fact specifically targeted at empowerment of the membership.

In this manner, the MST’s culture sector and the concomitant product, MST political ritual is obviously key to the construction of a *sem terra* collective identity and the empowerment that is linked therein. But it is also an important device through which to articulate protest and transmit ideas about the movement’s social struggle to a wider audience. Indeed, Díaz Martins (2000) suggests that the phenomenon of the growing credibility of the MST among the Brazilian middle class is partly due to the solidarity of intellectuals and artists, among them Portuguese writer José Saramago and the internationally exhibited photographer Sebastião Salgado, whose works have been incorporated into instances of MST ritual and from which the movement has also derived much cultural but also financial capital. Both Salgado and Chico Buarque, a popular musician, for example have donated substantial funds to the MST, Buarque through the release of a CD and Salgado through the publication of a striking book of photos, the revenue of which is rumoured to have made a substantial contribution toward the MST institution of further education, the Popular University Florestan Fernandes (Ondetti 2008: 165).

But MST artistic expression’s cultural or financial value aside, it is difficult to understand how a product that is of such value in both capital and social terms is experienced by members. Are members aware of a certain stage management that takes the edge off *mística’s* critical emotional spontaneity? Or are members satisfied with movement ritual, feeling it to embody the way that they experience the movement? I spoke to Thiago on this subject, a *vereador* (town councillor), who worked with rural trade
unions. His first contact with the MST was in 1992, having worked for agrarian reform since 1989. And in 1996 to gain a better understanding of the processes MST members experienced, he moved to live permanently on an acampamento in N_, an acampamento which eventually after seven years of contestation became the assentamento that still exists today. He described his involvement with the MST in an interview.

My first contact was in Rio do Sul, through the CPT (Comissão Pastoral da Terra), the church. And I liked their philosophy and after ’96 we did the basics with the farmers and we carried out the very first occupation in the North Planalto.

Thiago was heavily involved in acampamento life, an environment which many MST leaders describe as being fundamental to the formation of the sem terra identity. However, during the interview, he wanted to point out that although he was closely linked to the movement, he was no longer a member.

I’d say that today I’m not part of the movement, but it’s still part of my life, because it’s a movement that is legitimate, comprehensive, strong... but I’m not a member anymore, I’m a collaborator.

Thiago talked a lot about mística and the importance that it had played when he was encamped with two hundred other families, struggling to get by without the cesta básica (a free weekly delivery of feijão and rice to acampamentos) that now exists in today’s system.

The subjective side of things, guitar, poetry, music... this moves mountains, it transforms, much more than sometimes all of those words. And back then, we did this. Every Tuesday, after the work in the field, we wouldn’t go back to work in the afternoon. One day we’d play guitar, another we’d study, another we’d plan the week, pray... because praying is also part of the subjective, it's also mística – Catholicism, but it wasn’t really to do with this church or that church, it was a spirituality for the struggle.

The purpose of mística for Thiago was very clear.
Mística is something which unites peoples, gets them ready. It unites experience and gives clarity. I reckon the movement grew really big really quick. And we couldn’t look to all its aspects, all the parts of the movement that deserved attention. Something had to get left behind and I don’t know if it’s exactly this, but I reckon one of those things that got left behind was mística. It got put to one side.

But he described mística as going beyond the rather banal and commonplace idea of creating identity and forming imagined community. Indeed, he insisted that the MST had ‘lost a lot of its mística’ and even ‘lost itself’ and that this loss could and was having serious consequences. When I asked about these consequences, Thiago gave me a better idea of how mística, for him, went beyond the formation of identity.

The loss of mística makes the spirit go cold. You lose, I dunno…. Mística takes away fear, mística gives you a… I’m not sure exactly… it’s more like you get cold and you become solely pragmatic. I’m off here to earn some money, I’m off there to get hold of some land… mística purifies the spirit – I’m going to this place because of the people, the crowd, justice. It’s really difficult to explain. You lose that human warmth, you lose your way and in that manner you principally lose your resistance. And you lose sight…

I asked him of what.

Of the goal. It can be whatever goal in the context of the group because you’re working to make the conditions of the group better and your group is always part of something bigger. And that’s what mística guarantees, that your group will be connected to other groups which is the network that is the greater good. The lack of mística brings this pragmatism as a consequence. Mística is a vision of the future, the way you’re part of something bigger.

Many members of the movement that I encountered in the Planalto concurred that the practice of mística was not as strong as it once was. Our conversation turned to patterns of immigration within the state and the notion that a commonly heard refrain in Santa Catarina seems to be true, that ‘there is land, but no people to occupy it’ as Thiago
phrased it. I asked where new members of the movement were being recruited from and Thiago and Lúcia, a member of the movement also present at the interview, suggested that eighty percent of the new members in Santa Catarina were from the *periferia* of the cities. In other words, they were not rural people. They suggested that new members were primarily from urban backgrounds. Indeed Lúcia suggested that this was a possible reason why *mística* had weakened. It seemed that a connection to the land was a fundamental component of being able to participate in and create *mística*. When I suggested that people from an urban background might diversify and enrich the MST’s artistic expression, Thiago only replied that ‘those from forty upwards, they have a relationship with agriculture, but the kids don’t have it, they’ve already lost it. It would be… all opportunities can also be threats no…’

Patterns of immigration offer one idea as to why members of the MST in the *Planalto* feel that *mística* has lost some of its potential. But Thiago’s comments on the spiritual dimension of *mística* fascinated me. It seemed that the intensely rich and communal aspect of MST political ritual was something of extreme importance. *Mística* for Thiago went beyond the mundane. It was the spiritual plane of the movement, its conscience, the manner in which to express transcendent objectives which kept people honest. Of course, it helped to construct community and of course it helped to keep people strong in times of repression, but the very secular direction of the movement required a nascent spiritualism, one based in praxis. Thiago seemed to be indicating that without this dimension removed from production, the MST could be in danger of replicating elements of a society that they were trying to move away from.

In the course of my ethnography it became clear that there were other factors that members cited as to being behind the decline of not just *mística*, but the wider MST cultural programme. And it is certainly possible that there are two problems that interconnect in the minds of MST members in Santa Catarina. The lack of spontaneity in contrast to Stedile’s comments was mentioned as a particular problem. But of more interest is a certain conservatism that tends to foreground *mística* above all other forms of expression. This in turn institutionalises *mística* and makes it the approved form of discourse – institutionalism of discourse rarely leads to greater spontaneity. Speaking to Tais, an MST member and daughter of a local leader in the production sector, this question became much clearer. Her comments echo those of Thiago’s in that she stated that ‘what is really lacking in the movement is investment in respect of culture’. I asked her in what sense.
Today we have mística in the movement. You go to a meeting for young people, to a state meeting, a national meeting and the only thing you see are místicas, and it’s a strong point of the movement you know, but it’s the only thing, and not everyone really feels mística you know. There are people who sing, play guitar, other instruments, really well. Some people who love to dance, you know? This question of mística. We had a meeting of the youth and each assentamento had to prepare something for this meeting. And we prepared a belly dance. I learnt how to do it well, alone, but it was cool. So we put on this show, me and another girl. We created this choreography of a dance, we ourselves put it together and took it to this meeting for the people there. I felt like it was the joy of the meeting, the dance, you know. Like, it was something new, no one had ever done something like this.

Tais told me how all the other acts of artistic expression that people had prepared at the meeting were místicas. I asked her how her idea had gone down with the members of the state leadership some of whom were present.

It was like this, that thing about contradiction. Because a lot of them saw the belly dance as something erotic, which was totally different to my vision. And so they didn’t allow us to present it in that form. We had already prepared everything, we’d got dressed for it, we’d got made up for the dance but we couldn’t do it because the leaders of the meeting thought that people could have seen it like it was something vulgar. So it ended up as a lack of respect.

I asked her why there wasn’t more musical activity, an MST band for example. She thought that it was bizarre that with so many talented people one hadn’t come into being.

There isn’t one! There isn’t! It’s one of those questions, like, I see it like this. It’s this very conservative part of the movement. They invest a lot in orientation, orientation, political orientation and leave this cultural matter to one side. It could be so important to keep young people involved and also to win over more young people from outside, but this approach of music, dance,
even football, it just isn’t there. Guitars are seen by the leaders as to do with America, like rock music. It’s difficult.

This conservative approach to artistic expression is something I found to be commonplace in my time in Santa Catarina. Most big meetings would finish with a party and the music at all parties was gauchesca, a type of gaúcho (from the state of Rio Grande do Sul) traditional folk music to which you dance in a couple. Many of the young people I spoke to liked gauchesca, and at one party I attended, a band played pagode (popular music from Rio which developed in the 1980s), but the question of rock music with connotations of outside influence and possible north-Americanism was never addressed, despite the fact that many young people liked bands such as Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath, Metallica or Nirvana. Tais’ experience of what amounts to censorship was formative in her views on the state leadership. She felt that her means of contributing to the movement’s cultural life had been stymied and devalorised. Indeed, connoting her choreography with an overtly sexual persona has disturbing undertones of how the male leaders in this case viewed the role of women in performance. Therefore some members of the movement feel distantly about MST ritual, perhaps alienated from its conservative aspects or perhaps feeling that a certain spontaneity has vanished from its practice. How do these members therefore engage with a movement in which political ritual is commonplace and omnipresent?

*Cynicism and pragmatism: The politics of withdrawal*

Fundamentally, attendance at heavily ritualised events like the state meeting is not compulsory. No one is forced to attend, although for reasons that I will analyse in chapter three, it can be in your interests to do so. Moreover, during the rituals of the state meeting, the singing, the místicas, the chanting of movement slogans, there is no discipline to force your involvement. During sessions therefore, this results in members taking prolonged trips to the bathroom, stragglers hiding in the sleeping quarters and the constant sipping of chimarrão and constant chatter during speeches. Many members who sing the movement songs with gusto tend to switch off as soon as a leader or outside
expert takes the platform to speak. In these subtle strategies of resistance therefore, how can cynicism be understood?

Navaro-Yashin (2002), following Žižek, argues that people are simply aware of the falsity of ideology. In this manner she assigns more agency to subjects than perhaps there would be in a traditional Marxist critique because for Navaro-Yashin, false consciousness does not serve to explain how people in Turkey, subject to a strong nationalist project behave and interact with statist policy. Instead, she argues that contemporary subjects are aware of the realities of power dynamics inherent to social relations but, ‘the same people take actions upon the world as if they did not know, as if they were deluded by ideology, as if ideology were reality’ (2002: 159-160). For Navaro-Yashin, this behaviour defines cynicism and many of the members I encountered within the MST superficially fitted into the model she portrays, that of a ‘mundane cynicism’; a mode of being that is based on elements of pragmatism. As one of her interviewees states, the Turkish state was no more than ‘her bread and butter’ and her interviewee ‘liked especially to catch politicians tripping over their words or contradicting themselves when they wanted to deliver morally wholesome self-portraits (2002: 168).

However, although Navaro-Yashin’s theory is of value and to a certain extent explains behaviours that I encountered from ‘unwilling’ participants of MST ritual, based on my fieldwork, it can only be applied in a limited way to my experiences of the movement in Santa Catarina. Regarding phenomena that I encountered in this environment, it seemed that cynicism was not employed in exactly the same manner as in the context of Navaro-Yashin’s Turkey, or Žižek’s Eastern Europe and that it was instead nuanced in other manners.

For example, Gaetano, who has been a member of the movement for over ten years told me that he deliberately avoided the state meetings in particular as he didn’t like the way that he perceived the leadership to ‘talk down to the massa (the collective) from the stage’. His views were clearly reflected in his son Alvise’s attitudes. Alvise never wore sem terra clothing outside the assentamento, for example when travelling to work for the prefeitura (town council) where he had a job washing the school buses. However, despite living in one of the few households that I encountered that was explicitly critical of the movement, Alvise was part of the 12,000 strong contingent that marched to Brasilia in 2005 for the national meeting and he showed me his collection of photos of this event with a lot of pride. Therefore, being part (or not as the case might be) of the display of ritual can be misleading. It is clear that cynicism works for MST members on
a variety of levels regarding ritual with some espousing pragmatism (for reasons I will explore in the third chapter), others articulating Navaro-Yashin’s dictum of ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’ and yet others genuinely caught up in the emotionality of MST ritual in the time and place in which it is performed. But certainly what is of importance in Navaro-Yashin’s model is the emphasis on the collective production and collective witnessing of ritual (2002: 129), an emphasis that is certainly shared in the MST.

Almost all movement ritual is articulated in the public domain and with emphasis on the shared collective meaning that is imparted to a group. Obeyesekere (1992) argues that while public displays are configured with ‘interpersonal, communicative value’ (1992: 396), private displays and understandings are connoted with ‘unconscious, deep motivational and intracommunicative significance (ibid. my emphasis) and in this manner therefore, a tableau I witnessed repeatedly at large MST gatherings was the ritual of saluting the state. The timing of this practice varied, but I most commonly witnessed it at the closing of a large meeting. Before the MST ceremonials drew a meeting to a close, the Brazilian national anthem would be played and the whole audience would stand, and offer a gesture of respect to a prominently displayed Brazilian flag. Given how often I heard negative opinions from speakers and leaders about the Brazilian government in MST meetings I found this ritual surprising and even more so, the serious mood which prevailed during its performance. There was no dashing to the bathroom, there was no sipping of chimarrão. Rather this was a genuinely quiet and contemplative space within the meetings’ programmes, albeit one that was performed physically next to one another. It struck me that in the actions of mística and MST meetings in general, there was very little, what might be termed ‘personal’ time, that is, time in which individual members could reflect and think quietly. Rather the general structures were more carefully co-ordinated to leave out these sorts of gaps, whether it be with focus groups, místicas, lunch and dinner or of course, the long speeches filled with rhetoric. Thus, in this space of merely three or four minutes, I asked myself what people were seeing when they heard the word ‘Brazil’, the national anthem and looking at the Brazilian flag. What emotions were they experiencing?

Speaking to members of the movement indirectly about this particular instance of ritual was interesting in that meanings and emotions were extremely varied. One member I spoke to just felt that the national anthem and standing facing the flag was just something you did – part of the programme. But another member I spoke to, Fernando,
had another opinion. He said that when he looked at the flag, it signified Brazil, so I asked him what Brazil meant to him. He replied that Brazil represented the land he hoped to gain. Almost all the members of the movement had respect for the idea of ‘Brazil’ as evinced by the respectful way in which the ritual was performed. Fernando explained that he had joined the movement as he was struggling for his family. He told me that he had five children and although he already had a solid house with fruit trees, he was thinking of the future. He told me that he needed his children to have access to a proper education and he thought that through the movement his children’s futures would be in better hands. I asked him what he felt when he saw the flag. And he said that he was sonhando – dreaming for his children and dreaming for their future.

Therefore, for Fernando, the ritualistic engagement with symbols of the state, seen through the reality of the MST, signified hope. This particular case made it clear to me that departing from Navaro-Yashin’s model, cynicism, in the pragmatic, the mundane, and also importantly the intellectual sense, sometimes had very little to do with how some of the members of the movement interacted with mística, especially the newer members, still in the phase of the acampamento, as Fernando was. His experience was not the jouissance of Lacan and Žižek but rather a complex dévouement, located between an institutionalised and personal set of emotional loyalties.

The MST’s ritual therefore can certainly still contain an important emotional dimension that speaks on planes beyond the practical and Berezin (1997), describing emotion as ‘central to the politics of spectacle’ (1997: 28), notes how this expression of emotion can contain an important cognitive dimension. Geertz (1973) also, in his classic account of the Balinese cockfight remarks on the ‘sentimental education’ (1973: 449) that ritual can exert. And emotions as Berezin notes, ‘may obliterate the old self’ (1997: 28) in a famously ‘liminal space’ (Turner 1977). But, speaking to Thiago and Tais it seemed that such instances of genuine emotional connection through an engagement with movement ritual were becoming increasingly rare as forms of expression had become beset by a lack of spontaneity, a certain conservatism and also perhaps, a sense of being dated and ‘falling behind the times’. And a contrived mística that I witnessed entirely designed by non members for the consumption of an MST audience, confirmed these impressions, being as it was indeed the exact opposite of a spontaneous artistic endeavour, one premised on emotion.
Essentialisation and the ‘product’

_Cuidado, cuidado, cuidado com imperialismo, América Latina é um país de socialismo!_ (be careful of imperialism, Latin America is a socialist country!)

_Brasil, Cuba, América Central, A luta socialista é internacional!_ (Brazil, Cuba, Central America, The socialist struggle is international!)

My experiences of artistic expression during my ethnography in Santa Catarina were broadly similar to those of Tais. I never saw a _mística_ outside of an organised meeting and within the meetings, all the artistic activity that I did see was solely of that genre. Indeed the only form of artistic expression that I ever witnessed in either _assentamentos_ or _acampamentos_ was an _assentado_ playing guitar and his daughter and son-in-law singing MST songs with him.\(^{10}\) I personally took part in MST ritual, participating in several _místicas_, both at the planning stage and also in the performance stage as well as addressing the plenary at the 2008 state meeting. My experience was that _mística_ could be stage managed and bereft of spontaneity as per the recommendations of Bogo, which I detailed earlier in the chapter. Attending performances, there was sometimes a pervasive staleness and a feeling of repetition. Members knew what types of _místicas_ were to be performed, they knew what the content would be and they knew what response was expected. Despite asking members at meetings what they thought of the performances, I never heard an overtly emotional testimony. The most common adjective was either _bonita_ or _linda_, which translates to either nice, or lovely/beautiful. When I spoke to older members, who had encamped in the nineties, their reactions to the _místicas_ performed on their _acampamentos_ seemed much more visceral.

Planning a _mística_ for performance at the 2007 state meeting was an interesting process in that in this instance, it was the students from the universities who were invited to fashion the spectacle for a movement audience. All of these students knew the movement well. They had visited _assentamentos_, they were familiar with the solidarity literature of _Caros Amigos_ and the _Jornal Sem Terra_, they had seen and followed MST actions through various visual media outlets. Asked to create a _mística_, we were supervised. But supervision was not really necessary. Our group constructed the most

\(^{10}\) The _assentado_ concerned played from an MST songbook which contained more than two hundred listed compositions.
‘MST’ mistica possible, replete with all the touchstones of what these outsiders imagined a mistica of the movement should incorporate. We opened to a sinister dirge with Juan from Colombia sitting on a stool wearing the top hat that represents the United States, brandishing a whip and intoning, ‘Work! Work! You tramps, you trash!’. All around him pockets of rural workers were beaten and suppressed by actors wearing similar top hats to Juan’s. Meanwhile, from a corner of the stage, actors representing members of the MST slowly approached the action. As they approached, they freed the workers, some of whom had been bound to each other and drove off the capitalists, converging on Juan. He vainly tried to defend himself, and as the music changed to a more hopeful tone, he was lifted up bodily by the group and removed from the stage as the audience cheered. This performance contained nothing of the nuance that Thiago had spoken of; the subtlety of the other, the symbolism of a wider community, the important emotional and spiritual domain through which people could be transported. It was a product we had fashioned from our limited imagination of what we thought mistica ought to be. It became clear to me that in this way, a reified sem terra ‘mistica’ could now be easily reproduced. I often talked to Lúcia about mistica and as we became closer she mentioned to me how for her, mistica no longer had the same dynamism that it had once possessed.

This coldness, this cooling off, it’s a lack of… there’s less repression now, there was more conflict in the countryside back then, people got together more. We’re both here now chatting easily, you have your stuff, I have mine. But back then, it was tough, really heavy. So people got together and there it was a tool for the people. Nowadays there is no repression and mistica has cooled off as well.

We also talked about the individual nature of the performances.

Ah, I’ll copy that one, let’s do that one that’s already been done. There isn’t that evolution. But before, ten, twelve years ago, mistica was mistica… are you hearing me? Because I came from there. It was like made from me, it came from inside, back in that time. It was what lead me to know the movement and what made me want to join the movement. So, not having conflict, people don’t get together and mistica dries up, you lose it because it’s the same thing.
Conclusion

During my ethnography I encountered members of the movement who told me how important *mística* was to them, and how they had been touched by it as part of a collective experience. Other members also spoke of how performances of *mística* made them feel renewed and re-energised; one such *acampado* mentioned how it was good to go to meetings and feel your commitment redoubled for the struggles ahead. *Mística* was also described by members as removing their fear when they were in situations with the threat of repression and although no one specifically mentioned an emotion pertaining to empowerment, it was clear that in the collective sense of identity that it bestowed, *mística* and other elements of MST ritual were effective in drawing a community closer to one another and diminishing feelings of marginalisation. The force of *mística* however, can perhaps be best expressed by Lúcia, who described to me how two years previously, when she was in hospital and expected to die, it was the force of *mística* that had helped her to survive, even after the pastor had been called to her hospital bedside. But for Lúcia, this event belonged to the past and perhaps thus aware of the true potential of the ritual, she was unhappy at the trajectory that it had taken. She spoke passionately about how *mística* no longer possessed its force to inspire and having spoken to many members of the movement throughout my ethnography including Tais and Thiago, it seemed that the increasingly staged nature of what was supposed to be a visceral experience had alienated its own audience.

Of course there are other factors to be considered here, including the fact that repression is not as intense in Santa Catarina as it was when the movement was first formed. There is less need for the social cohesion, which many of the members that I spoke to confirmed, is something that they drew from *mística*. There is also the fact that encampment, a location where *mística* was reported as so important in the 1990s is not quite the trial that it once was. *Cesta básica* and *bolsa família* programmes mean that at least basic sustenance is possible and the time spent waiting for land to be appropriated is much shorter now, especially if the *acampado* is willing to move to a collectively run *assentamento*. So, the emotional ‘cooling off’ that seems to have occurred with regard to MST ritual has to be viewed in light of these contextual factors. Notwithstanding this, MST ritual, and in particular *mística* certainly no longer exerts the force that it once did according to my informants and Thiago and Tais amongst others hint that central to this
phenomenon is the fact that mística has undergone a gradual process of ossification within the movement. But why has it not evolved and dynamically renewed itself into a form where emotional connection is the norm rather than the exception?

There are several factors to consider here. Firstly there is the notion that Thiago raised, that MST leadership have prioritised other areas of the movement’s growth, leaving what can be termed a vida cultural (cultural life) to one side. There is also the perception amongst movement members that the leadership are overly focused upon mística, that for them, any instance of artistic expression is best configured in this form, to the exclusion of other cultural manifestations such as, for example, dance or music. Conservatism also plays a role here as Tais’ account illustrates. As mística has been invested with an approved notion of what it is to be sem terra, other forms of expression have therefore been connoted in a negative way, rock music being too American, or dance being too sexual. The solidification of an essentialised mística under a state leadership that wishes to preserve the form is therefore a difficult conclusion to avoid.

Gell (1998) argues that an artist’s œuvre consists of individual pieces of artistic expression that are each an ‘index of agency’ (1998: 250). Artistic output is distributed through space but importantly, also through time and Gell distinguishes four differing temporal relations between each instance of art that makes up the catalogue.

• Prospective orientation

1. Strong: Preparatory Sketch → Finished Work
2. Weak: Precursory (not planned as the start of a series) → Further works in a series

• Retrospective orientation

1. Strong: (Past) Original ← Subsequent copy
2. Weak: Original work ← Subsequent work which is recapitulated and developed through a process of stylistic evolution

Following Gell therefore, I would suggest that MST mística follows a retrospective orientation as old místicas are frequently copied outright for new performance and místicas which are not direct reproductions typically follow a close stylistic pattern which has
been established in previous instances. Stédile’s comments on the spontaneity of *mística* articulated around the idea that ‘no one receives orders to be emotional’ are already ten years old and this hints at another inherent problem regarding the form’s lack of evolution. While younger members have been brought up accustomed to MST ritual, they have not taken an active part in the manner of its creation and indeed in certain instances, they have been prevented from attempting to contribute in that their understandings of MST life expressed through art have been censored or otherwise deemed unsuitable. Tais in particular suggested that until the leadership allowed a younger generation to create their own cultural understanding of *their* movement, the form would continue to stagnate, merely representing a reworking of struggles that had already occurred. But why is there such a strong focus on preservation of the form by the leadership and moreover why is there such a strong emphasis on the preservation of the form’s content?

Kertzer’s analysis of a Brazilian military parade conducted during the military dictatorship notes that ‘by bringing together masses of people and presenting them with potent symbols of their social identity [the elites] nourished a sense of nationalism and a sense of their rulers’ legitimacy’ (1988: 74). And it seems to be the case that being the arbiter of ‘movement culture’ does indeed reinforce and legitimate the very role of ‘leadership’. But I believe that there is a more important argument, one which concerns identity. I have discussed how the culture sector’s work is understood to be crucial in constructing a *semiterra* identity and without any doubt, *mística* has a key function within this scheme. And I would suggest that the reason why the leadership are intransigent on the issue of the evolution of *mística* is because they are unwilling to countenance a pluralism of the form which might lead to pluralism within the *semiterra* identity. The fascination of the collective over the individual is an issue that will be at the heart of this thesis and regarding ritual it seems relatively clear that leadership have a preoccupation regarding a key input into the *semiterra* collective identity being subject to ‘corruption’ by an ‘outside’ influence.

Therefore, following conversation with my informants, I would argue that MST political ritual has become less spontaneous, less meaningful and less involving than it was in the remembered past, with potential consequences concerning its continuing relevance to older settlers and the younger generation, their children. It is evident that it once engaged its audience, as testimonies of older members highlight its once visceral quality. However, in the present situation, performers, and importantly those who direct
them, now seek and aspire to create a ‘beautiful’ mística which conforms to official guidelines rather than one which harbours the instinctive expression of a personalised reality. And although issues pertaining to identity have already been foregrounded here, the following chapter will seek to highlight how a lack of progressive evolution regarding identity can endanger a movement’s wider relevance.
October 2008. We’re walking through small streets at the foot of a hill in downtown Florianópolis, the state capital of Santa Catarina. The island on which the city is located is known as the Ilha da Magia, (The Magic Island) but there’s little of our present environment reproduced for the publicity material of the tourist brochures. The small streets end into a single road that begins to slope steeply upwards and together we’re entering Alto da Caieira, one of the so-called favelas or morros that makes up the area known as the Morro da Cruz. I’m walking with 355 children (the official count) plus 70 or so adults and we are all attending the fourth Encontro Estadual dos Sem Terrinha, the junior equivalent of the MST state meeting. In reality, there are well over 500 people and we are walking up a hill which is so tall that the summit is not visible from the single road which goes in and out. Everyone is carrying food and the sack of feijão that I’ve got on my back is beginning to feel heavier and heavier as the sun beats down, reflecting off the cracked asphalt underfoot. A police car goes past and then a bus, with a sign in the front window which says that it only lets people on and off at the top and the bottom. Our destination is a social centre at the summit run by the Maristas, a Catholic religious order focused on education. Our crocodile of children winds up the hill, an unbroken stream of red.

All of the children are wearing an identical plain red MST t-shirt with the MST badge to ornament it. On the back of the t-shirt is the slogan por justiça social e soberania popular printed in white. They are also all wearing a red baseball cap with the MST badge. On the side of the baseball cap is the slogan Reforma Agrária: Por justiça social e soberania popular. Tied around each child’s neck by a piece of string is a rectangular white card. The card states the child’s name, their brigada and the person responsible for them. The piece of card is again branded with the MST logo with a smaller slogan (Reforma Agrária: Terra, Alimento e Educação) printed underneath. To differentiate, each adult is wearing a white t-shirt, similarly branded with the MST badge. The back of this white t-shirt has printed in red 4o Encontro Estadual dos Sem Terrinha and below the slogan Reforma Agrária: Terra, Alimento e Educação is repeated. This slogan is the identifying headline statement of the meeting and is reproduced in all official communication about the meeting. It
appears in blogs, posts to Federal University websites, print media and other outlets. The adults wear a similar red baseball cap but the card that they wear around their neck is red as opposed to white. Although I am one of the supervisors of this meeting, contrary to direction, I am wearing a red sem terra t-shirt instead of white.

It’s strange to reflect on the MST t-shirt, probably the most potent symbol of the sem terra. Arriving two days ago to join the occupation of the state’s legislative assembly (see figure 5) in the Florianópolis business district in a sem terra t-shirt was an out of the ordinary experience. In the city, away from the assentamentos and on my own with people staring at me, I felt like a target for the first time. But now that I am with 500 other people, 500 others wearing exactly the same uniform as me, I no longer mind that people turn to stare. This visit to the favela is the third day in the programme of the meeting. The first day was taken up by the occupation of the legislative assembly and the second by a visit to the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), the federal university. At the university we took part in workshops put on by students and carried out a protest in a reception space.

But now as we continue to climb the hill, I ask Luizinho, one of the main organisers of the encontro, what is the rationale of a trip to the Morro da Cruz. He is carrying a heavy sack of flour and as we climb ever higher into Alto da Caieira and the houses get shabbier, he explains that he sees this trip as an opportunity for the children to see that while many of them desire a move to the city, with its beaches, malls and cinemas, often the reality of immigration from the countryside to the city is quite different. He points out that for most of the people around us, the bus trip to the beach is too expensive to afford, the mall security will not let them enter and the cinemas are far beyond the reach of all but the most wealthy. Luizinho says that he wants the children to see where most rural immigrants end up. I ask him about what is going to happen at the social centre at the summit. He tells me that there will be a lunch but also a theatrical presentation by some children living in the morro. It seems that the visit is about children from different backgrounds sharing their separate experiences. It is clear that a key priority is building bridges; demonstrating to the people in the city that the sem terra and the sem oportunidades (people without opportunity, as Luizinho terms those that live in the favela) are kept in place by the same forces; multinational capital, exploitative work practices and a lack of access to education.

The long crocodile of children must now be halfway up and we begin to pass into less well-kept areas. There is raw sewage running down the side of the street and in
front of us a car appears coming downhill before pulling up. The driver sits in the car watching us with an automatic handgun on the dashboard. Now we’re passing some local young men. The *sem terra* are in between ten and sixteen years old, but the majority are around eleven or twelve. These young men from the *favela* are older, maybe around sixteen and as we pass them, the local boys start to slap and cuff the MST children. One of them pushes over Alex and perhaps conscious that we are on their turf, the adults just tell the children to keep walking. Some of the people in the houses have come out to look at what is happening and as we walk past, we nod and say hello. Most people are friendly but there is some more catcalling as we walk on up the road. Going past a school, some young men start to shout ‘sem terra’ in a derogatory way. I hear the familiar words of opprobrium that are reproduced in the national media, *liso*, *vagabundos*, *ladrões* (trash, tramps, thieves) as we walk past. I look at Luizinho and his expression is set. It seems as though he is determined to ignore what the young men are shouting. The children don’t really seem to notice and in fact when I ask one of them, a little girl called Andrea if she is alright, she says she’s fine. She tells me that before joining the movement, her family lived in a *favela* in the west of the state. She tells me that here is *tranquilo*, calm, much better than where she used to live.

Finally, after an hour’s walk we arrive at the social centre, where the director greets us in a large hall. A street theatre project that the centre runs performs a play remarkably similar to a *mística* about the problems that the young people of the *morro* encounter. After the performance, which is warmly applauded, there are some speeches by the *encontro dos sem terra*’s organisers and the key phrase, repeated over and again is *a nossa luta é a sua luta* – *a luta pela educação* (our struggle is your struggle – the struggle for education). There is a perceptible and immediate sense of ‘us versus them’; two groups of the dispossessed united by similar interests, brought together by shared problems and facing up to a common enemy. It’s interesting to reflect on how these people from very different backgrounds are trying to create shared ground. However, despite the intentions of the programme, it’s obvious there are inevitable cultural misunderstandings. The children of the *sem terra* don’t fully understand the allegorical theatrical presentation of the children from the *favela*. The performance reflects a young boy getting involved in a gang and finally being killed in a shoot out with a rival gang. As one of the theatre group leaders nods his approval from the side of the stage while watching, the *sem terra* children are losing interest and beginning to play amongst themselves. The realities of *baile funk* music and gang violence are too urban for most of them to understand,
although some of the children who have come from urban backgrounds are visibly more interested. We break for lunch as it’s clear that the children are getting tired and restless.

Despite the focus on building bridges, it’s difficult to mix between the two groups in the canteen. The urban children are wearing normal clothes and it’s difficult for even the adults accompanying the *sem terrinha* to bridge the divide with the theatre group workers. The two groups sit more or less apart, the long tables full of children wearing red and eating *feijão*. It isn’t long before we are walking back down the hill to the coaches waiting in the city centre. The children are excited because we’re heading to one of Florianópolis’ beaches and for most of the children, it will be the first time that they have seen the sea. We leave the social centre and walk down the hill. My group of children are slow to leave and the director advises me to rejoin the main group, ‘it’s better to walk together’ she tells me, so we hurry to catch the tail end of our large group.

In amongst the positive reactions there is a little more catcalling from some of the residents and also some more insults from young men in the street. No one responds. We’re almost at the bottom of the hill now and the houses here have proper walls, with tile roofs and neat gardens with gates. My group begin to sing spontaneously, the children’s voices juvenile.

*Bandeira, bandeira, bandeira vermelhinha, educação do campo para todo sem terrinha!!!*

*Bandeira, bandeira, bandeira vermelhinha, educação do campo para todo sem terrinha!!!*

(Little red flag! Rural education for all the little landless!)

Lúcia joins in with them, looking at me and smiling. The children are also smiling now, looking forward to going to the beach and chanting on their way there. Residents, hearing the chant, come out from houses that we pass to see what’s happening. It started with five children but now there are maybe 50 or so singing along. The residents don’t react to the chant; it seems just like something that the MST *would* do – on television, their marches, their occupations, their roadblocks always portray men and women chanting slogans, together in unison. These children are no different. Why would they be? They are all wearing the same clothes, the trademark MST t-shirt and baseball cap. The people catcalling obviously haven’t appreciated the bridge building exercise that was at the heart of this visit. The language they use is so reminiscent of language used a thousand times before to describe the MST. You see it in the magazines,
on the Internet, in the newspapers. It seems that each side is using a complicit vocabulary to comment, directly or indirectly on the other.

Listening to the chant which after a while dies away, the carefully organised uniformity of the 500 or so MST members snakes visibly down the hillside in front of me. Obviously the environment has affected the children. The catcalling and the bigger boys roughing them up has frightened them a little. They decide to sing their song and they feel better, braver, stronger. But I don’t understand how a visit designed to build bridges has ended like this. Although many residents have been supportive, many people with whom the MST state leadership want to identify have not. Luizinho says that people have been brainwashed by Rede Globo, the dominant private sector television network. Formação política (political education/training), he insists is at the heart of it. At the beach and chatting to some state leaders including Perotti, I see the official goals of the meeting printed on the meeting’s information pack.

We meet with the children of the city’s periphery to understand their reality, in some aspects so similar to ours and in this way we will raise common questions of direct action, getting to know each other and education, to the ends of a contact based on solidarity, a contact brotherly and continuous.

Despite the fact that the whole meeting has been very successful and the children have really enjoyed seeing the city and the beach, I can’t help feeling that somehow it has fallen short of its stated objectives. Thinking of the abuse and the antipathy, I find myself asking why so many people, including those with whom the MST is trying to foster a sense of solidarity in Brazil, have such a low opinion of the movement?

**Representation: The Media and the MST**

Without any doubt, one of the principal reasons for the negativity directed toward the MST is the bias present in mass media and this bias is both longstanding and intransigent. Ondetti for example, makes the point that although media coverage of the MST was broadly sympathetic in the mid 1990s (the Eldorado dos Carajás incident marking a particular high), it became much more hostile during the Cardoso
administration, when ‘the government and much of the media frequently went out of their way to point out aspects of the MST that might be objectionable to the average Brazilian’ (2008: 196). Thus, notes Ondetti, ‘by the late 1990s, both *Veja* and the official editorial in the *Folha de São Paulo* had adopted an aggressively anti-MST stance’ (2008: 167). And in part, the presence of such concerted bias is because media ownership in Brazil, like land ownership, is highly concentrated and connections between mass media organisations and government profuse. The media network Rede Globo has a dominant share of the televisial market but also owns one of the country’s largest circulation daily newspapers, the Rio based *O Globo*. The coverage it devotes to news both in print and via television is therefore highly influential and unashamedly conservative. Hammond (2004) states that ‘it is not surprising that a media system so concentrated in the hands of the wealthy and so tied into the dominant political system often lives up to the stereotype of the capitalist press, hostile to progressive movements from below’ (2004: 71). But perhaps most hostile to the MST is the magazine *Veja*. Indeed, such is antipathy between the MST and *Veja*, that de Souza’s *Do silêncio à satanização: o discurso de Veja e o MST* (2004), is solely concerned with this subject.

MST literature describes *Veja* as a ‘racist pamphlet’ but in other terms it is a weekly news magazine with over one million paid subscribers, the fourth most circulated magazine of its type in the world. This influential magazine (Branford and Rocha 2002: 204) is conservative in editorial tone (Ondetti 2008: 145) and has published many controversial articles. These include accusing Lula’s *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) of being funded by the Colombian FARC in the run up to the 2002 electoral campaign but also publishing MST specific material in 2000 which resulted in the magazine being sued for libel by João Pedro Stédile. Following the MST’s recent celebration of their 25th year as a social movement, *Veja*’s coverage was typical. Under a headline reading ‘The 25 Years of the MST: land invasions, mess-ups and challenges to law’ and before a summary of all of its hyperlinked articles criticising the movement, the article stated:

Last Tuesday, the MST celebrated its 25th anniversary. Flying the false flag of its unattainable struggle for agrarian reform, the MST has managed to remain untouchable for the criminal acts that it has committed during the whole time of

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11 [http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=informa86](http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=informa86) - accessed 20th September 2009
its existence. It has been a long time since the organization was no longer satisfied with just a piece of land (my translation).

Therefore mass media has undoubtedly shaped many people’s opinions in Brazil regarding the MST. A survey published in *Veja* on 15th November 2005 stated that 70% of respondents believed that MST’s leaders’ claims were false and 87% surveyed wanted the government to audit the movement’s accounts. And Zobel (2008) an activist writer, claims that ‘because the media in Brazil is controlled by only seven elite families, it has continuously demonized the Landless Workers Movement and painted its participants as dangerous outlaws, even terrorists’. Mass media has even affected MST members’ perceptions of their own movement. Wright and Wolford argue that *asentados* can experience misgivings about the movement due to ‘overwhelmingly sensationalistic and negative media coverage’ (2003: 313) and this portrayal of an influential media was also supported by ethnographic evidence gathered during my fieldwork. The vast majority of non MST members with whom I spoke were indeed opposed to the MST, principally because of the disorder that the movement caused. People’s displeasure was more focused upon the roadblocks and occupations that the movement conducted, rather than the movement’s politics, although many people with whom I spoke also disagreed with the movement on that basis. There was little solidarity in the federal university, and many people I spoke to, from diverse backgrounds, including petrol pump attendants, sandwich shop workers, university professors or bicycle shop owners voiced criticism of the movement and would often cite the analysis that had recently appeared in *Veja* or on Globo news. The portrayal of the *sem terra* as work-shy layabouts, thieving land (cf. Barragán López 1990: 81 regarding similar contexts in Mexico) and disturbing public order was surprisingly prevalent and didn’t in any way conform to any one of the hundreds of *sem terra* members that I met. It became clear that there was a large décalage between public perception and what I encountered in Santa Catarina as regards the MST and the textual manner in which the divide is written is important in this respect.

The Language of the Conflict

The negative portrayal of members of the MST is not a discursive construct that has been created exclusively by media outlets such as Globo, Folha de São Paulo, or Véia. Rather, the narratives that appear in media outlets have been tailored to appeal to an already existing set of commonly felt prejudices and perhaps this is how they have become so successful. In Santa Catarina, as is the case in much of Brazil, people from a rural background are often discriminated against by urban populations. The term mal-educado is often applied to people from a rural background signifying not just a lack of education, but also more importantly, a lack of cultivation, a lack of the manners that characterise more civilised, urban society. There is a strong moral connotation to this description and it can be placed in context alongside words like burro (dumb) or do interior, that is, from the interior. People from the interior are often stigmatised as slow and emotionally primitive and in Santa Catarina, where both the capital, Florianópolis, and the principal city of the state in terms of size and strength of economy, Joinville, are on or very close to the coast, being from the interior is freighted with value associations of a regressive mentality and not being ‘modern’.

In the case of the catcalling that I identified taking place in the favela, it is also instructive to analyse the actual vocabulary used, to elucidate these ideas on the tensions surrounding interior versus coast or urban versus countryside. Words such as vagabundo (tramp) or ladrão (thief) have become popular in the media to describe the MST because they resonate with an urban population whose ideas on labour and employment lie deeply rooted in historical discourses of slavery and emancipation. The vocabulary directed towards the MST implies that they are not productive, that they are not working, that they are stealing land and gaining financially by obtaining something to which they have no right. What is interesting about the insults that urban people use to describe the MST is the overlap between socially constructed and legally constructed boundaries. So for example, the manner in which the movement encamps is almost always configured as an ‘invasion’ (invadir – to invade) in the right wing media as opposed to an ‘occupation’ (ocupar – to occupy) in the left wing media. The vocabulary of the conflict is extremely important in establishing on what grounds the struggle for the readership will take place. Needless to say, in Véia and Globo’s broadcasts, emphasis is placed on the illegality of the MST’s ‘invasions’ and this in turn highlights how they are taking something to which
they have no right. The MST is continually configured as a disrespectful countryside thief, below civilised convention and ignorant of urban people’s respect for the law. It is in this respect then, that the link with slave populations, desperately poor just after the process of emancipation can be discerned. The perceived laziness of MST members (wanting to be given land without working to earn it) is another connection to an urban colonial prejudice against a predominantly rural emancipated black population. However, in the face of these negative discourses, stoked by a media keen to increase circulation figures, the MST in Santa Catarina has an ambiguous strategy towards handling the media.

**MST media strategy**

The MST’s relationship with mass media is complex and can vary based on local factors. Strategically however, Hammond states that ‘the MST emphasizes the need to win public opinion, and has had some success. MST leaders like to say that the battle for agrarian reform will be won in the cities’ (2004: 73). Hammond also argues that ‘the MST has attempted to cultivate the media and influence the way it is framed; it has a conscious media strategy, which has evolved over the life of the movement’ (2004: 71). This point of view is supplemented by Wright and Wolford’s observation on the increasing professionalisation of the movement and how the formalisation of movement activity includes professional ‘media representation’ (2003: 314). In this manner, scholars argue that the MST has frequently used the media in its campaigns to demonstrate the injustices they face. Branford and Rocha (2002: 163) comment on one such example in Paraná, where local media were tipped off about an occupation to highlight the repression that MST members could be subject to. But such appeals to the media, which as Ondetti (2008: 27) notes can galvanise a social movement into broader spheres of dialogue and action, have been sporadic in Santa Catarina.

I spoke to Martelinho, one of the founders of the movement about the interaction between the MST in Santa Catarina and the media and without knowing his role, I asked him who was the state leader responsible for external relations. He replied that he was a ‘one man PR department’ and we spoke about the encontro estadual dos sem terrinha and how it would have been a tremendous opportunity for much needed positive
publicity. I asked him why no journalists had been invited or why no photo opportunities had been organised, and Martelinho’s response did not conform to Hammond’s theory on MST press relations. Martelinho told me that the media were not to be trusted. He said that the media were never invited to MST events as they always twisted what people said and misquoted. I suggested to him that the media as an institution contained many individuals who were sympathetic to the movement and would be glad to try and write a positive article. Martelinho dismissed my suggestion by saying that there was no one in the media who supported the MST. I mentioned to him that I knew of individual journalists who would like access to the movement, access that would provide material for positive articles. Martelinho smiled in a friendly way but changed the subject confirming that although Hammond argues that courting the press within the MST is officially good policy, this does not always happen in practice. But perhaps this is as a result of the overwhelmingly negative coverage that the movement has received. Hammond states:

Most movement activists and sympathetic media critics who have studied the coverage of the MST, argue that […] coverage is uniformly hostile (with some exceptions; for example, Berger 1998; Gohn 2000). They see demonization in virtually all coverage, even if they do not use the term. (2004: 84)

And this is certainly the view of Bruce et al. (2009) in an activist publication which argues that even discounting demonisation, ‘the movement has been largely excluded from media’ (2009: 13) and left without an important voice.

Therefore, it is not clear why there is a lack of positive MST media coverage in Santa Catarina. Has the leadership disengaged from its task to court the media and win the struggle in the city? Or has the prevailing negativity of coverage destroyed any possible relationship? Branford and Rocha lay responsibility squarely with the MST leadership.

The MST has tended to write off the Brazilian press as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘corrupt’. Although there is some truth in this charge, it is also misleadingly simplistic. Just as the MST has benefited over the years from sympathetic individuals within INCRA […] so the MST could turn to far better advantage the handful of well-
placed journalists who argue that Brazil must urgently defuse its social crisis by taking thousands of families back to the land and believe that the MST has an important role to play. Because of the MST’s intransigent refusal to court the press, there is an astonishing degree of ignorance amongst Brazilians in general about the MST.

(2002: 287)

Martelinho is one of the most important people in the Santa Catarina state leadership and although his reluctance to trust journalists is understandable given the generally negative coverage of the movement, it is worth asking why the trust deficit is so large. It is also clearly the case that this intransigent refusal to open up relationships with local press is having an adverse effect on wider society’s view of the movement, as witnessed by the catcalling and insults described in the ouverture. At the heart of this issue lies a damaging polemicism that encourages MST leaders to retreat from building bridges with what they perceive to be uniformly hostile institutions thus rendering members more vulnerable to more negative perceptions in wider society. But from what does this polemicism derive and from where does this ‘us-versus-them’ mentality ultimately find its source?

*MST: A struggle for all Brazil?*

The question of how great a part the MST plays in wider Brazilian society may seem facetious when one considers the movement’s achievements in placing hundreds of thousands of marginalised families on previously unproductive farmland with workable infrastructure. But valid the question nevertheless is when one considers the MST’s interactions with other aspects of wider society and aside from Martelinho’s intransigence when dealing with the media, there is no better example of the polemicism that characterises interactions with the MST than that of the difficult relationship between the movement and the police. I was surprised to find therefore that one of the customers of the B_<i>assentamento</i>_’s shop of dairy products was a local police investigator.
In our interview, in his office at the police station, I firstly asked him what contact he had with the movement.

We don’t have a lot of contact with them you know. A community which is far away, but I reckon it’s something a bit closed. There’s a separation, between the community and them. In general, they live more in the way of their movement, in their ideas. There isn’t an integration with the wider community.

I asked him why this might be.

It’s prejudice, no? I think that’s what it is. Their deal is really, really closed so I don’t really know very much, but from what I’ve seen, there’s an idea, like… let’s put it like this, a parallel society, I understand it like that, it seems that there is an idea of a society parallel to ours, with a socialist ideology.

I asked him why they should play a wider role in the life of the community, the local município.

Despite being in combat with the state, they have to play a part as well in the community. If they participated more directly they could, who knows, even influence the community to vote for certain people, politicians who would give back more to the community. Through their labour, through struggles for the rights of the wider community… because I’ve noticed that they’re more, how shall I put it, more politically minded than the community in general. The movement itself has spread this mentality amongst its members. And because of this they could pass this understanding to the wider community. Who knows, not exactly preaching the socialism of the MST, but more questions of justice, citizenship, accountability on the part of the guys in charge… I think that they could really contribute more, contribute a lot in this sense.

Our conversation turned to his work and various problems that the community suffered from and he mentioned that he had never encountered anyone from the assentamento in this sense. I mentioned that this was different to the media portrayal of the movement’s members as thieves and lixo (trash) and asked him what he thought about this.
No – despite the fact that they are closed, there has been no trouble. And I even understand this, this closed mentality. When a person has fallen on hard times, when he is poorly looked upon, you end up creating a sense of aversion to the social setting in which you live. But in relation to what you see on the television and what I observe over there, there is a difference, there is a disparity. Over there, although there is not this interaction, there is a harmony between them as residents. There is a harmony, there is a refusal of violence, but I put this down to the fact that they are already living in an *assentamento* – they are not encamped.

I asked him what his opinion on the MST more generally in Brazil was.

They say that the struggle is fair, however the MST is concerned with not just the rural question, but justice, this concept of justice and equality for everybody. But the MST wanting to or not has created a new political stance. I’ve observed it, this stance and what they want in fact is a parallel state and this I don’t agree with. In fact what the MST is creating is a parallel state so much so that there are today students in federal and private universities doing courses that are solely intended for developing the movement. So there is an idea of a parallel state, in this manner I have observed and I don’t agree. The MST should be a struggle, a social struggle for the whole of Brazilian society. Members and non-members. But over there they have something closed and I have observed that they have a slightly authoritarian system. So in this way, with this authoritarian domination, I’m totally against it – I think that you lose sight of the movement’s objectives, those goals of social equality – so because of this I have a negative vision of the movement.

What was interesting about this interview was that it was unexpected to hear an ‘enemy’ of the movement being so positive, and as an officer in the police, many MST members and leaders would instantly have identified him as such. Further, the way that he had identified what he thought was an authoritarian system within the movement and disapproved of it as a result was of interest. But perhaps what was most noteworthy was his idea that the MST, as a Brazilian social movement, should be engaging in social justice for *all* Brazilian society and not just its members. Indeed, the investigator’s
comments on the closed nature of the movement and the idea of a ‘parallel society’ resonated with certain impressions that struck me during my fieldwork.

The question of a parallel society

The investigator’s opinions of the MST regarding its isolation are common. There is a growing perception both within and without of the movement that the MST is attempting to create a parallel society and alongside this, the separate identity that such a society would necessarily entail. Media outlets such as the already discussed Veja have used this tactic to create fear of the MST, tapping into feelings connected to Brazilian nationalism but such a phenomenon within SMOs is not new in Latin America. The Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados (Unemployed Workers Movement – MTD) of Buenos Aires shares much of its programme with the MST. It is a leftist organisation of unemployed marginalised workers that favours direct action tactics to gain political capital. Galafassi (2003) notes that their direct action tactics have resulted in them being bracketed with other piquetero movements ‘focusing on strengthening social mobilisation with the aim of building new power and solidarity bonds in a kind of a parallel society’ (2003: 395). And historically in Mexico, Carr (1980) argues that Carrillo Puerto’s system which was explicitly labelled ‘socialist’, in Yucatan in the 1920s, offering the vote to women and empowerment to rural Maya, ‘had all the appearances of a truly parallel society’ (1980: 10) albeit one that was articulated from above, without the involvement of the ‘rural masses’ (ibid.)

But parallel society or no, the notion of being part of something radically different to mainstream Brazilian society within the MST is very strong. On one occasion in the assentamento of B_ I was reading an issue of Veja dating from 10th May 2000, the headline reading ‘The Tactics of Confusion’ and beneath a sub-headline declaring that ‘The MST uses the pretext of agrarian reform to preach a socialist revolution’ (my translation). I asked a recently joined acampado, Cleiton, whether what Veja were saying was true. He laughed and said that it was. I then read out the following section.
The MST wants to take power in this country by the means of a revolution and having done this, implement an outdated socialism, 11 years after the fall of the Berlin wall.

I asked him whether this was correct and again he laughed and said yes, explaining to me that socialism wasn’t outdated and how it would work in a country like Brazil which was primarily rural. He told me that Brazil needed a revolution and agrarian reform was merely a means to an end. I then asked whether he felt part of Brazil society more generally.

We live in a society that is extremely prejudiced, this Brazilian society. And my objective is to contribute in some way to the movement and to people who like me are excluded from Brazilian society.

What is important about this kind of discourse is that it is polemical; many people believe in it passionately and many don’t. Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2002) argue that the process of dis-indentification entails ‘people affirming their social identities by categorizing organizations into groups such as “rivals” or “enemies”’ (2002: 28). They argue that enhancing and preserving self-concepts is as much bolstered by distancing yourself from an organisation as with aligning yourself to one; a positive social identity can be created negatively and defined by opposition to ‘the other’. And perhaps because of such processes of dis-identification, I found that many members of the movement expressed a certain disapproval for people outside of it, often intimating that they were blindfolded by capitalism but that some of these people perhaps didn’t wish the blindfold to be removed, that is, they were not willing to join the movement’s social programme. The greatest opprobrium was of course reserved for the police, the army and the fazendeiros, but sometimes poorer people were also dismissed as being ‘blind’ or ‘ignorant’.

And in this manner, the MST have created a situation where to a certain degree, movement rhetoric encourages a separation with mainstream society, a position which through the process of dis-indentification reinforces an officially sanctioned sem terra movement identity, configured by the leadership. Being a member of the MST can involve taking on a strong collectivised movement identity and most new members, in an unfamiliar environment and commencing a new style of life want to fit in and this can
involve adopting any one or all of diverse approaches. Members can try to assimilate the approved ideology, shout the correct chants, know as many movement songs as possible, volunteer to act in movement *místicas*, take part in occupations and demonstrations, farm in a certain approved way, erect their *barraca* (hut on an *acampamento*) in an orderly manner and of course wear the MST clothes. But importantly they may also choose to distance themselves from non MST society to demonstrate their loyalty to the movement.

Mirelle and I spoke at length about identity within the movement and how important being a member of the MST was for her own understanding of herself.

I entered the movement in ‘96, 15th June 1996. It’s a very important date for me this date because it was the start of understanding a new reality and this new reality transformed by life and my political understanding… my understanding of life. I was always poor and when we went to encamp it was really difficult. We camped up there for 8 years and the first 40 days there was so much rain. There was a huge flood, like the one in Blumenau just past. And the first thing that causes a problem is selfishness, because you don’t have a political understanding on a national level.

I asked her whether she missed that time or whether like others I had spoken to she felt traumatised by it.

I miss it. You know why I miss it? It’s because it inspired me a lot, to imagine, to wake up… I woke up to a new reality, one where we had the ability to change things. I was held back – I managed to gain a freedom – in quotes, of course, because none of us are free. It’s like with my mum, I don’t know whether it’s her background, but she doesn’t speak a lot with people, she *goes* to meetings but she doesn’t really *participate*… so she instilled this mentality in us. Another question is to do with husbands. My dad, beat her, beat her, beat her but she stayed living with him.

I asked Mirelle about the movement clothing that she almost always wore. I asked her when she wore a t-shirt of the movement, whether she felt pride when she walked around the streets of the city. I asked her what the t-shirt represented for her.
The t-shirt represents the struggle, no? I think that, you know Alex, meaning to do so or not, for me who’s in the movement or for someone who’s on the outside, you see that it’s someone else (the person in the t-shirt) and that’s it (the MST) is another society. And if you observe closely, it is another society. But it’s a thinking society…

I asked her whether she was frightened to use the t-shirt.

_Mirelle:_ Not a bit.

_Interviewer:_ But there are people who are afraid.

_Mirelle:_ It’s good to take care of yourself. In this respect well known leaders… but me, I’m not frightened, I don’t look after myself in this way.

_Interviewer:_ But why aren’t you frightened? Because a lot of people are.

_Mirelle:_ You know, if they come to take me, and put me in prison – I’ll go to prison.

Both Mirelle and Lúcia’s houses had MST flags flying from the roof as well as pinned above the door. I mentioned to Mirelle that I had noticed that she had a flag.

There are two. And always on the children’s rucksacks and on Andre’s (her husband) bags as well.

I asked her why she used these flags.

It’s identification no? In fact, the flag is always inside you. I want to identify myself as _a sem terra_. Some people don’t talk to me around here and perhaps it’s because of that.
As we spoke it was clear that Mirelle viewed the MST to be a separate society and indeed she told me that when she had recently given a party of lawyers a guided tour of the assentamento and one of them had asked whether the MST was indeed a parallel society, she had replied that it was. However, Mirelle felt no pressure to distance herself from non MST society in order to reinforce her own movement identity. Perpetually active in the wider community, she was working on a community radio project as well as being active in local politics and involved with an NGO for disabled people. In this sense, Mirelle demonstrates that although there may be pressure to reinforce one’s identity through the repudiation of another, it does not affect all people equally. But in addition to the processes of dis-identification and the need as a new member to ‘fit in’, there are more systemised procedures which encourage divergence between MST members and people in wider society. These mechanisms form the core of the construction of a sem terra identity, an identity that is deliberately of limited compatibility with wider society and importantly an identity that is static. These mechanisms articulate themselves in two separate ways. Firstly, tropes of identity are projected down through the hierarchical pyramid of the movement. And secondly sem terra identity is projected out, as a packaged commodity. But it is to the former that this chapter now turns.

Capitalism is there to destroy you: Collective identities and the mechanics of polarity

Speaking to Cleiton or to Luizinho, it was clear that members’ strong identification with the movement could precipitate an exclusionary view of non members and even perhaps a certain condescension regarding the way that such people led their lives. And Wolford (2003) states the theoretical case behind this by arguing that the fundamental component of the sem terra collectivised identity is premised upon an ‘oppositional class character’ (2003: 507) that places movement members in direct conflict with those who it is assumed have exploited them. There is also a historical element to Wolford’s thesis on the sem terra identity, as she argues that it is linked to Zumbi, Antonio Conselheiro and Che Guevara, configured as a ‘noble line of predecessors’ (2003: 508) and all previous symbols of rural discontent. Importantly Wolford also notes that the sem terra identity, or the ‘imagined community’ as she terms it, is fundamentally an exclusive club, admittance to which requires the practice of certain behaviours. She details behaviours which are
not permissible and states that while movement leaders are not conscious of promoting an ideal settler, ‘outlines of what is considered acceptable behaviour are evident in the imagined community’s guidelines for participation’ (2003: 509). I will return to this issue in more depth in the next chapter in the context of life in MST encampments and settlements, but the crucial point to make here of course is that tolerance for some behaviours means a lack of tolerance for others with all the divisive implications therein.

As has already been discussed in the previous chapter, being part of the MST can be heavily ritualistic and occasions where identity can be shaped from above are frequent. As Della Porta and Diani (2006) note, just because an action is performed away from public view does not mean that it does not constitute a ritual. Indeed, they highlight how ‘procedures signalling the admission of new members into movement organizations often take on the form of genuine rites of passage’ (2006: 111). And one such private space where movement building directed from above occurs is the state meeting. At the state meetings of both 2007 and 2008, the burguesia (the bourgeoisie) were frequent targets in speeches for anything connoted with anti-movement beliefs. Therefore, left undefined, the bourgeoisie were heavily involved in agribusiness but also lived in the city, unless they were the international bourgeoisie in which case, they would either be based in the United States, Europe or Japan. At the 2008 state meeting a university professor invited by the MST leadership spoke for an hour and a half without breaks on how the capitalist society instigated by Fernando Henrique Cardoso had subjugated the working class. He warned the audience that ‘we should never trust the enemy, never allow yourself any amount of trust – capitalism is there to destroy you’ and this form of polemical rhetoric is common in movement discourse at such occasions.

But identity is also subject to formation from above in more confrontational settings. Ondetti notes that as a result of the movement’s direct action policies which involve members being bussed to various demonstrations, occupations and marches, ‘hardship and direct conflict with the state [tend] to promote class consciousness’ (2008: 114). I would argue however that what is experienced by MST members in these formalised spaces of confrontation is far more than a mere sense of upsetting the oppressor. In these highly pressured and binary situations, it is clear who is sem terra and who is not and a member’s movement identity is thereby reaffirmed and reinforced. In such confrontational spaces almost all interaction with the wider public becomes configured with negative connotations as by and large, non MST people are unhappy with the disturbance that they perceive MST members to be causing. There is no room for
dialogue in this space and even less room for constructive pathways towards the realisation of more strategic objectives. Rather, the experience is dominated by organisational identification, a well-established concept in the organisational behaviour literature (e.g., Mael and Ashforth 1992; O’Reilly and Chatman 1986) but importantly Bhattacharya and Elsbach note that ‘identifying with organizations is a way to preserve (or enhance) the self-concept’ (2002: 28).

Further collective identity building in the MST’s actions towards its base can be found in what certain leaders have described and indeed configured as the movement’s initiation ceremony. The process of encampment can last several years and Ondetti describes this environment as conducive to creating ‘organizational loyalty’ (2008: 138) but encampment will only be touched on briefly here as this process will be discussed further in the next chapter.

For members’ children the MST’s education sector also delivers a curriculum which teaches ‘political awareness’ and is heavily biased towards a politically leftist view of the world. MST educational materials specify that the syllabus must make a commitment to developing an awareness of class and a revolutionary outlook (MST 1999). In the escola itinerante of the U_acampamento, (see figure 6) the class were of different ages as would be expected in an acampamento but no child was older than twelve. In the middle of a lesson, Paulo shouted an MST grito, to which the children all clenched their fists, pumped their left arms and shouted the correct response.

Complementing education, and as has already been discussed briefly in the previous chapter, the activities of the culture sector are also extremely important in the formation of a collective identity. Indeed, the stated goal of the culture sector is explicit:

At demonstrations, marches, occupations, imprisonments, and commemorations of victories and conquests, music, poetry and dance are presented, expressing and strengthening the Sem Terra cultural identity.¹⁴

Wolford notes how ‘the early editions of MST’s monthly newspaper, O Jornal Sem Terra (The Landless Newspaper, or JST), were filled with discussions of the new “social citizen” that MST wished to create’ (2003: 505). And this new social identity aspires to prioritise certain personal values above others. For example, vices include ‘individualism’ (where one person ‘puts himself above the organisation’), ‘spontaneity’ and ‘immobility’

(which causes a person to not ‘involve himself with anything’) (Jornal Sem Terra 1991: 3 cited in Wolford 2003). Wolford asserts that movement leaders within the culture sector ‘encourage activists to use mysticism to tie settlers more firmly into the movement’ (2003: 510). This stance is rendered explicit in the MST’s newsletter. ‘The more that the masses attach themselves to their symbols, leaders and the organization, the more they fight, the more they mobilize and the more they organize themselves’ (Jornal Sem Terra 1997: 3 cited in Wolford 2003).

It is this type of direction from above that has led academics such as Souza Martins, formerly a supporter of the movement, to level serious criticisms regarding overly close manipulation of collective tropes of identity. He offers this interpretation as to the culture sector’s activities: ‘It is these “mediating groups” [including the MST leadership] which have tended to amalgamate all the rural subjects, from distinct cultural backgrounds and in equally distinct economic relations, into a uniform ‘Brazilian peasantry’ with an uniform political interest’ (2002: 327).

McNee (2005) has also explicitly noted this idea of uniform identity in the rhetoric of the culture sector. He describes how Ademar Bogo, an important and extremely visible member of the culture sector ‘idealizes a return to what he romantically describes as “peasant culture”, including “pacific coexistence, visiting neighbors, lending and borrowing, folkloric festivals, popular wisdom, and the true sertaneja music”’ (2005: 343). McNee declares this vision to be an ‘essentializing, static approach to culture and tradition’ (ibid.) concluding that the politics of identity within the MST betrays an inherent contradiction: on the one hand, there is a wish to delineate a clear vision of the MST ‘peasant’ attached to folklore, authenticity and the past ‘embodying a timeless pastoral vision of harmony’ (2005: 345), but on the other hand, the cultural politics of the movement demand an agenda that can act as a revolutionary agent for change ‘expanding enlightenment ideals of literacy, science and beauty into the Brazilian countryside’ (ibid.).

Therefore, through encampments, schools, direct action tactics, formal movement events and mústica, there is a tangled but ample skein of occasions in which a homogenous sem terra identity is projected down to the base. But arguably of more importance and of more relevance for the people who were subjected to abuse and catcalls on the Morro da Cruz is the second manifestation of sem terra identity values, projected out as an essentialised package.
In the media saturated reality of the 21st century, Salgado’s photography is extensively used by the movement as has been discussed in the previous chapter. But video is yet more important, not only because of its reach, with technology to burn DVDs so accessible, but also because of the fact that it so effectively projects tropes of sem terra identity both to the base but also outwards to partner organisations and international movements of solidarity. During my time living with the movement I watched many short films on DVD with members keen to show me video that they considered to be very important. The consumer-orientated, market-dominated paradigm of our modern neo-liberalised space has promoted a consciousness and a hunger for commoditised information packaged in a convenient form and the MST leadership have knowingly or otherwise subverted this new opening in the marketplace.

In the remotest acampamentos in Santa Catarina, there are TVs hooked up to DVD players powered by truck batteries that are recharged at a local garage for fifteen reais. In addition to movement video, pirated Hollywood DVDs jostle for members’ attention with evangelical Christian musicals and Pixar children’s films. Therefore the means to diffuse information in this manner are omnipresent and production companies making MST films have responded. The situation regarding how the films are made is unclear, but it seems that as with the culture sector’s network of actors, there is no one fixed team responsible.

What can be stated is that there exists a network of transnational film makers like Estreito Meio Productions or Grassroots International, which are invited to MST events to make films which are then distributed through the movement on DVD and posted on youtube for a more international audience. The recent celebrations of the MST’s 25th anniversary at the assentamento of Anonni, in Rio Grande do Sul, including a keynote speech by João Pedro Stédile outlining a new strategic direction for the movement, was filmed and posted on youtube by Estreito Meio with a subtitled translation. Another film, the documentary Brava Gente filmed in Paraná with the assistance of the state government of Paraná, tells the story of a young girl's journey from birth in an acampamento through to the realisation of her dreams of happiness. The film also depicts her family and how successful they have been in managing their land. In one scene the family are shown getting into a modern clean car (see figure 7), while the narrator, over
sentimental countryside guitar, relates how the proud owner paid for the car with cash up front.

In these films, the interviewees are typically (but not exclusively) presented with only their first name; no family name is displayed and the majority of the interviewees are wearing *sem terra* clothing. In one scene from *Brava Gente*, the interviewee is wearing a red t-shirt, with a design of the Cuban flag in the centre. Superimposed over the flag is an image of Che Guevara and the interviewee also wears a red MST baseball cap with the movement’s logo at the front, while a red MST flag with the same logo flutters in the background over her shoulder (see figure 8).

However, MST videos are not solely concerned with projecting what it means to be *sem terra* into a new space. They also are used to communicate important changes in strategic direction. Another film I saw concerned itself with the importance of agro-ecological farming. This entails not using pesticides on crops, not using genetically modified seeds and using organic fertilisers in place of products from large multinational agri-business firms. The film focused on the impressive success of the MST co-operative COOPERÖESTE, which produces and sells various products under the brand name *Terra Viva*. But the dominant message of the film, which is also apparent in Stédile’s keynote speech filmed by Estreito Meio, is a necessity to change the idiom of struggle from merely occupying land to confronting global capitalism through co-operatives and rural industrialisation.

It is important to highlight the context here. In rural MST areas, information is difficult to challenge due to the lack of the internet or any other point of reference. For example, many members that I encountered asked me about Cuba and whether all that the movement’s leaders said about it was true. In this sort of environment therefore, documentary films that are replicated and shown throughout Santa Catarina hold an important monopoly over information, but also importantly, over the portrayal of *sem terra* identity, a portrayal that has been designed and approved by a centralised body. The upshot of both members wanting to display that they have taken on this identity and such a centralised and essentialised vision of what it is to be *sem terra*, is that when movement members appear in wider society, such as in the Morro da Cruz, MST members are robbed of their individuality, which makes it much easier for them to be dismissed as merely one of a disreputable rabble. Further, it is also perhaps the case that this uniform collectivity heightens the MST’s alien and threatening character, in a society whose everyday social and even political practice so often reflects individuality, mixing
and ‘fudging’ through instances of ‘cordiality’ (cf. Fry 2000 and the importance of the concept of diversity). Perversely therefore, the source from which the movement has historically derived so much strength is also perhaps the reason why the MST is failing to make further headway in the cities and more generally effect a more purposeful engagement with wider society.

**Conclusion**

Questions of isolation or accusations of ‘parallel society’ have been levelled at the MST for most of its 25 years by its critics and it is the case that the movement, in part due to its strong organisational fabric and its desire to create a strong MST identity within the movement, can create a feeling within its members of polemicism, a sense of ‘us-versus-them’. However, the movement also does a huge amount of work trying to build bridges with other movements of similar principles whilst encouraging co-operation with federal universities and on a more local level, grassroots activists. At the large meetings it becomes clear just to what extent the MST is in partnership with a field of diverse actors in the processes of social reform and building social capital. At the state meeting of 2008, a speech was made about the landless of Palestine, and arrayed behind the speaker in a show of solidarity were the flags of Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores, *Via Campesina*, Movimento sem Teto, Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens and Movimento de Mulheres.

But these flags are not just merely for show. During my ethnography, I worked with members of MPA, *Via Campesina*, MMC and members of several different unions in the course of transacting MST business. The MST in this sense is therefore always trying to build alliances with actors which it deems suitable\(^{15}\) and due to its size and influence, especially within Brazil, but also transnationally, the MST can act as something of an umbrella organisation for other causes. Furthermore, these transnational links are of

\(^{15}\) Of course, not all organisations on the left fall into this category. The MST is now such a large and important social movement that on the left wing political scene it can exercise considerable influence. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro has commented on how the World Social Forum’s organisational committee of 2003 reflected these dynamics of power. He notes of the MST’s authority that ‘in spite of the idiom of decentring and horizontality, there are several agents and agencies who have more power than others in the structuring of the ritual as well as more access to the power the ritual produces’ (2006: 13).
great importance and are a source of prestige for the movement. The MST’s operational links with Cuba (student exchange programmes), Bolivia and Venezuela, together with transnational relationships of solidarity with other social movements such as the Zapatistas, are a crucial element in how members of the movement configure their identities as ‘revolutionary’ beyond Brazil.

Therefore, accusations of isolationism are hard to substantiate. But it is important to consider what type of alliances the MST is forming. Are they alliances that fundamentally challenge the principles of a ‘sem terra’ identity? Or are they alliances deemed suitable and compatible by MST leaders; alliances in other words, which contribute to the polemicism that inhibits movement leaders from courting institutions like the media?

In the ouverture to this chapter, I described how MST members suffered insults and catcalls on a visit to a morro designed to build bridges with the urban sem oportunidades, members of wider society facing similar issues of marginalisation as the landless themselves. But why were members of the MST treated in this manner, albeit by a minority of the people that they encountered? As I have described, media coverage of the movement is not helpful, concentrated as it is in the hands of powerful elites, it displays a strong bias against the movement, a message that has become the dominant narrative surrounding sem terra. But, it also seems to be the case that the MST could be doing more to engage with the media and as Branford and Rocha highlight, make capital of well-placed and influential opinion formers that are sympathetic to the movement’s cause. Dis-identification and a sense of polemicism engendered by MST revolutionary rhetoric (for example, viewing the media as a monolithic ‘enemy’) and direct action tactics have rendered engagement with external relations problematic, but fundamentally, beyond issues pertaining to ‘separate society’, one of the central reasons why MST members were dismissed in the morro comes down to the construction of MST identity, the concept of being sem terra.

Dressed as one, and significantly, indistinguishable from one another at a distance, individual members of the movement can be perceived as being subsumed into the sem terra collective identity, articulated through heavily connoted symbols of clothing, choreographed embodied ritual and unified chanting. As Mirelle perceives it, the MST is a separate society, and this identity construct identity creates barriers between members of the movement and people from wider society and manipulates both into a faux stand-off in a polemicised and formalised space of confrontation. Also in this space, the sense
of exclusivity cultivated within the MST, encourages members and leaders to repudiate tropes of ‘non movement’ value in order to reinforce their own sem terra identity through clear use of symbols that mark in a binary fashion who is sem terra and who is not. Importantly however, this sem terra identity is not created in an evolving, spontaneous manner. Rather, on the basis of my research I would argue that it is the result of a centrally managed and carefully constructed ‘imagined community’ (Wolford 2003) intended to vouchsafe member loyalty and lessen potential rates of attrition. As the police investigator comments, sem terra as he perceives it displays the hallmarks of an authoritarian system and this domination was one of the reasons why the MST was problematic for him.

Sem terra identity in this manner is subject to two modes of expression. Firstly, tropes of identity are projected down through the structure of the movement, utilising environments of socialisation where values associated with sem terra can be made known. Such spaces include encampments, large meetings and schools. Secondly, sem terra identity in a preconceived, essentialised form, is projected out as a packaged commodity. This broadcasting bolsters the movement in diverse ways, both to its own members, but also to a wider activist community. To its own members it demonstrates an aspirational brand while also highlighting the fact that the MST is an international actor, a prestigious connotation. To the wider activist community, the MST is portrayed as a pillar of the coalition against neo-liberalism which garners gestures of solidarity and much technical and financial assistance. Of course, what filters down to the base is internally consumed and reproduced by members. Not all members buy into the idea of what a delimited sem terra identity is as defined by the leadership, and others do so strategically or pragmatically, that is, they do so in some respects but not in all. But for some members, especially recent recruits, keen to show they belong and wanting to progress in the movement, consumption and reproduction can heavily inform their self-concept. And yet in this, there is an important cognitive aspect that can precipitate positive outcomes regarding how members consume the aspirational connotation of the brand. Being part of the MST encourages people to believe that they have capacity to re-engage with a country that many feel has dispossessed them. In this way, MST identity can give its members the belief that not necessarily just societal, but also personal transformation is possible. There exists also the empowerment that enables landless people, people who have come from generations of subservience, to actually transgress the legal, but also social barriers that the land reform programme will lead them to encounter.
Despite these benefits however, a commoditised version of *sem terra* identity can also seriously delimit and restrict personal expression, a fundamentally counter productive strategy, if the movement wishes to gain wider public support, especially in the cities. For example, in the delineation of identity through video, the practice of displaying members without their family names, choosing to display members always wearing the uniform of the movement and portraying scenes with ubiquitous symbols of the MST, individual members can seem to transmogrify into a *sem terra* caricature, a reified embodiment of what is in reality, a diverse and complicated group of individuals. The leadership encourages this practice as historically, the movement has derived its power and influence from collective action, and especially in the early years of its formation, any dissention or straying from the collective in the face of repression could have been fatally undermining to the movement’s goals. However, times, governments and world political situations have changed since the movement’s formation. And despite Wright and Wolford’s claims that the movement are trying to appeal to as wide a base as possible by moving into the cities, the leadership still have great influence over what elements of the movement’s identity to privilege and what elements to suppress.

In the cities, potential customers of MST produce, people who could theoretically support the movement and feasibly take part in solidarity action see nothing more in media representations than the collective, a portrayal that fundamentally restricts individuality. Consequently, and returning to the language of the conflict, the movement is much easier to dismiss as a group of resonant collective nouns; tramps (*vagabundos*), thieves (*ladrões*) or shysters (*malandros*). Personal contact of course renders these classifications as nonsensical but the way that the leadership choose to portray the movement can facilitate this easy stereotyping.

Of course it is not the case that there is a simple conflict between rural socialist actors and metropolitan capitalists. Many urban groups with whom the MST has built alliances share the MST’s politics and this is an important aspect of their mutual solidarity. But the structured programme of collective identity formation and attendant consequences on which the police investigator comments has lead to perceptions that the movement is isolating itself and perhaps this is not strategically effective in advancing a wider struggle.

Change in the movement seems slow to manifest itself and as I have already briefly touched on and prefigured in this chapter, *acampamentos* and direct confrontation are still seen by various levels of leadership as the key input into the formation of the *sem*
Terra identity. The acampamento as José, an assentado and Lúcia’s brother told me is ‘how you learn to be a sem terra – this is the environment in which your new identity is formed and this is accomplished much easier when you are in a large group rather than a smaller group’. Chapter 3 will discuss this environment and argue that the fulfilment of a *sem terra* identity is also heavily linked to your material success.
Ouverture

October 2008. Lúcia tells me that André has some business to conduct for the movement in the acampamento of O_. He wants to check on some things and see Estela and her husband, both members of the camp’s coordenação.

‘Let’s go,’ she says.

I collect my stuff and soon, I’m driving with André, Lúcia and Mirelle from the outskirts of the city heading into the farmland of the state down a Federal Highway, jammed with lorries, all laden with agricultural produce. We pass a John Deere showroom, all glistening tractors and machinery, a huge industrialised bakers processing the wheat grown in the area and the ubiquitous motels with their discreet driveways and restricted sightlines. I ask how far we have to go and not wishing to run out of petrol in the middle of nowhere, I stop to fill up. The full tank comes to over R$120 – a quarter of a minimum wage monthly salary. It’s a lot of money. André tells me to get a receipt, he says that the movement will cover the expenses. I protest but he tells me not to worry about it, dispensing with this sort of thing is not a problem, he can handle it.

We continue down the federal highway, leaving the agribusiness behind. We pass a row of big 4x4 pick-ups and the visible signs of logging. I ask what’s happening here. Lúcia tells me that it’s the fazendeiros carrying out illegal work. She explains that a strip of land either side of the federal highway is legally part of the união federal, that it is public land. The trees on this land belong to the people, but the fazendeiros are logging them anyway. I ask why no one makes a complaint to the authorities. Everyone shrugs. There is no point. A complaint can be made, but it will never be listened to. The incumbent mayor is one of the largest of the fazendeiros, his 4x4 is probably one of those parked by the side of the road. The utter lack of recourse strikes me. It is the middle of the day and something transparently illegal is being carried out in full view by the side of a busy road. But just as the scene disappears behind us, so the injustice of this abuse of power passes from our conversation.

We have been driving for some time and now André tells me to slow down as we are approaching the acampamento. We are crossing a sweeping bridge and at the top of the hill as we climb is a cemetery. André indicates to turn here and I brake, the car
sliding over the rough gravel, leaving the asphalt of the highway. I see a roughly drawn hand-painted sign that indicates the estates that can be accessed from this lane. One of them is the Fazenda B, the land where the MST are in occupation. Andre tells me to be careful of the road and mindful of the holes and rocks I slow down. He then chivvies me to speed up, commenting in a matter of fact tone that we don’t want to be thought of as snooping, trying to arrive unobserved. From a tree, I can see a movement flag and then another, tied to a tall pole. Now there are white gates and I pull up in front of them. They are solid four bar gates, freshly painted. On them is black lettering that reads ‘ACAMPAMENTO O_ MST’ (sic). Written vertically is the legend, ‘SEJAM BEM VINDO’. Beyond the gates is a small hut constructed from straight pine branches and the familiar MST lona – black polythene. This is the guard post and next to it hangs a piece of iron with a hammer to strike it in cases of emergency.

As we get out of the car, I notice how the sky above us is a deep blue and the land is a verdant green (see figure 9). On either side of the track in front of us are a number of MST barracas, constructed in the familiar fashion, instantly recognisable from widely distributed images. They have sloping roofs and straight walls and a chimney projects from the stretched black polythene, the smoke coming from a wood burning stove inside. Behind the guard house is a football pitch with goals roughly fashioned from branches. The dried earth pitch slopes gently towards another building, made from wooden planks. This is the school and a path has been cut from the main track and lined with flowers of pink, orange and red. By the door is an enormous banana plant under which hens are pecking the soil. Further down the track are more barracas dotted in amongst animal enclosures and pine trees. A tank that collects rainwater is placed half way between the gate and the last hut and more MST flags are flying from huts nearby. The boundaries of the acampamento are immediately obvious; the land slopes upward to a ridge and here is a plantation of pine trees marking the beginning of somebody else’s land. As we walk, I remember Mirelle telling me that these pine trees are an alien species to Brazil and decidedly unwelcome, not just because they take all the water from the soil but also because they originally come from North America.

As we walk down the track, following Andre, we pass an abandoned barraca, the scraps of the black plastic still nailed to the branches that make up its frame. I ask if a lot of people leave the encampment after a while and Andre tells me that there are always people leaving and new people coming. His answer leaves me unsure as to whether the hut has fallen into disrepair or whether it is under construction (see figure 13).
A few people have arrived now to greet us and we go to sit down in one of the nearest *barracas*. We are welcomed inside by an elderly man, Wanderley and motioned to sit down in his porch, sheltered from the sun by a black plastic overhang. The floor of the hut is a hardened dry earth but it is spotlessly clean, as is the whole area. Inside the hut there is a cooking space and behind that an internal partition of black plastic. Behind this screen is where the family sleeps. As we sit down, Wanderley emerges from the back of his *barraca* with a heavy sack of *feijão*, which he offers to me as a gift. Knowing how short on food *acampados* are, I hesitate to take it, but eventually politeness dictates that I do.

Andre begins to ask how things are going while looking around. Shortly the conversation turns towards a planned protest in Blumenau tomorrow. Andre is asking for the Wanderley’s participation. He is holding a notebook and pen. The way the two men are dressed strikes me. Wanderley’s clothes are darkened with dust and grime and he wears nothing but shorts and a t-shirt. Andre is wearing fashionable jeans and a shirt tucked in. He wears leather boots and a leather belt with a large shiny buckle. It is difficult to identify both these people as members of the supposedly uniform media representation of the ‘landless’. Superficially, there would seem to be nothing that connects them but Andre is a regional leader of the important *Frente de Massa* sector and he waits for his man’s answer. It seems that the journey will be long and Wanderley has to look after his small plantation here. He regrets it, but after an explanation, he doesn’t think he can go. To break the pause, he stands up to find some more hot water for the *chimarrão* we are drinking. With only the four of us there, Andre confides that he needs at least eight people from this *acampamento* to take part in the planned protest. Wanderley returns with the water and conversation resumes.

Leaving Wanderley and the group to talk about the process of turning the *acampamento* of *O_* into an *assentamento*, I wander around the site before heading towards the school (see figure 10). Inside a tall young man greets me. I recognise him, we have met before in passing at the 2007 state meeting. His name is Márcio. We say hello and then I say hello to his class, a group of twelve children aged from seven to twelve years old. He tells me that he is the teacher of the school and that the children are good. The class laughs and smiles as he tells them to take a break. Some of them go outside while others play on the dry earth floor on the other side of the room. I ask the teacher how long he has been encamped. He tells me that it has been six years. He seems glad to take a break and talk but what he says, he says in a tone that communicates the idea that
this length of time encamped has been a burden rather than something to be proud about. I ask him if it is hard work, teaching the acampamento’s children. He says that it isn’t easy, that they have very little materials and that the days can be long. It’s dark in the schoolroom, with only two openings cut into each wall of wooden boards. I wonder what they do when it rains, which it frequently does here in the north of the state. The walls have drawings of Brazil on them and the rough chairs and tables all face his desk, behind which is set of shelves with few books.

In the semi-darkness, I look more closely at Márcio. He looks roughly 23 but when I ask him his age he tells me that he is sixteen. What makes him look older than his years? His face is prematurely lined and his clothes, like everyone else’s in the acampamento are faded from the sunshine and dust. He looks weary, tired. I say that we should sit down and I ask him whether he has always been encamped in O_. He relates that they have already been evicted from this acampamento twice before and that he has been personally evicted five times during his six years. Evicted, I ask? What does that mean? He tells me that in acampamentos often the landowner will forcibly evict you with some hired men, whereupon the movement will organise a new occupation once they have reorganised the evicted acampados. When a forcible eviction takes place, the police can also sometimes be involved and it might take place at night time, Márcio relates. When it happens in this way, people have to leave with nothing he tells me, there is no time to organise transport to take your stove or the furniture that you have. You lose everything and the people evicting you will burn your barraca and destroy the crops that you have planted. He tells me that landowners can be ruthless with the way that they treat acampados of the movement. He relates a story that I have heard before of an incident in the acampamento of U_ where the stream from which everyone drank ran first through the part of the land in which the landowner was still living. To force people off the occupation the landowner put dead animals up river of the sem terra to contaminate the water and cut off all drinking water supplies. It seems that incidents like this are quite common. But evictions, Márcio says, they can be a frightening experience, one that he has suffered already but in Paraná, not Santa Catarina. The situation in Paraná he assures me, is much worse, much tenser than here in Santa Catarina. I ask him where he is from and he says that originally he is from Paraná and that he is here with his father. I ask him what the evictions from O_ were like. He says that they were well organised in that the direção of the acampamento were given a judicial order with a date by which everyone had to leave. In this fashion he says, everyone had time to collect their
belongings and leave in a safe way. I tell him that I have seen some cars and even a truck in the acampamento. Márcio nods, saying that the truck belongs to Polaco but that most of the cars don’t run. Márcio continues by saying that after the eviction, they reoccupied. He tells me that this is the third incarnation of the acampamento and that although everyone leaves safely, each time you come back you have to reconstruct everything, the water, the houses, the school.


It’s hard, he says.

Six years, I say. Why so long? I thought that most people got land much quicker around here. I say that two years was what I often heard from the leaders. He shrugs. He doesn’t know and nor do I. There seems nothing more to do than stay encamped and keep on working. As I walk out into the daylight again, it strikes me that almost all of Márcio’s entire quasi-adult life has been paced to this slow rhythm of encampment. Six years embaixo da lona preta (under black plastic). The well known phrase that is part of official movement discourse makes the experience sound more glamorous than in reality it seems to be.

It’s time to leave. In the car Andre is talking about the land on which O_ lies. He says that it is of a very good quality, that you can grow almost anything on it. I ask him how many families are registered as encamped there. He says that there are 48 families encamped permanently and another 50 or so who come on the weekend and live elsewhere to work during the week. It’s good land he repeats, and in a casual fashion he adds that there is 300 ha of it, good for twenty to thirty families. Twenty to thirty families, I say. So each family gets just over 10 ha? That’s right, he answers. I ask what happens to the other 70 or so families encamped on O_ that won’t be given land in the first instance. They will have to move, says Andre. Encamp again, he explains.

February 2009. I’m back in the acampamento of O_. In terms of appearance, nothing has changed. I’m visiting Márcio and Estela, both of whom I have recently seen at the encontro dos sem terrinha, meeting Estela of O_’s coordenação committee there for the first time. I go up to the school but it’s locked up and no one is around. I say hello to Wanderley as I walk down the track, down past the water tank. Estela is in and when I announce myself she comes out to welcome me with her husband Joãozinho. Inside, we sit down and start to drink chimarrão while Estela proudly shows me all the improvements
they have made to their *barraca*. Through the airy windows I can see an enclosure for
their pigs and she says that there are more than 70 chickens which roam around their
plot that belong to them. Underfoot there is matting and rugs and I’m sitting on a
comfortable bench with my back to the stove. There is a kitchen unit with a sink
opposite to me which Joãozinho shows how he has plumbed into the rainwater
collection system and further back in what is a considerably larger space than
Wanderley’s hut, is a television wired to a car battery, a chest of drawers, and a sofa and
hung material, which serves as partitions to the bedrooms. On a far wall, I see a framed
photo that I think I recognise and when I ask, Estela takes it down to show to me. It is
an enlargement of a widely distributed postcard, the image of which was taken at the
MST occupation of army land at Papanduva. Four children stare at a battalion of
Brazilian army soldiers approaching on foot, in trucks and with an armoured personnel
carrier (see figure 11). I say that it is a striking image and I ask her why she has it framed
in her house. Smiling, she tells me that the boy on the bike is one of her grandchildren.
It’s clear that the personal connection she has to what is a very famous image within the
MST in Santa Catarina is a great source of pride for her.

I ask her how things are going in the *acampamento*. She says that things are alright,
quiet. From meeting Estela at the *encontro dos sem terrinha* and chatting with Lúcia, I know
that Estela has an important role in the running of the *acampamento*. I ask her specifically
what role she fulfils. The couple reply that they are of the *coordenação*. Joãozinho heads
the production sector and Estela leads a *núcleo* of ten people. I ask them how long they
have been encamped. They have been in *O_* for eight months, that is, since the third
occupation. Estela tells me that the day she joined the movement was the 15th April
2007, the first night of the occupation of the army’s lands at Papanduva. Joãozinho
comments to me that although he has only been encamped for eight months, he has the
mentality of someone who has been part of the movement for five or six years. Our
conversation lasts for three hours and is regularly punctuated by the crowing cockerels
strutting outside. Finally, the time comes to leave and I wave goodbye, walking down
the track. They shout and tell me that I must come and visit them once the *acampamento*
has become an *assentamento*, for this will surely happen soon. They tell me that they will
be here, in the same place, easy to find. Suddenly remembering that there are 100
families who have a claim to the land in *O_* that will only fit 30, Estela and Joãozinho
hurriedly add that they only hope to be there, that of course they can’t be sure.
However, they seem optimistically confident of a positive outcome.
A few days later at Lúcia’s house. There is talk of activity up at the acampamento. I hear
rumours of a divergência – a polite term for an argument. Andre seems even more
preoccupied than usual and I hear that he is now in hiding from the police and worried
for his safety. I ask Mirelle what has happened. After much pressing, she finally tells me
that Márcio’s father has been causing problems in O and that Luizinho and Andre went
up there last night to remove him from the movement. I ask her what kind of problems
the father was causing but she won’t say. I ask her if Márcio has had to leave as well but
she won’t say. I then ask her about her husband and why it is rumoured that the police
might be picking him up. She tells me that Márcio’s father, angry at the way he has been
treated is supposed to have threatened to go to the police and reveal Andre and
Luizinho’s names and whereabouts. As regional leaders these men are potential targets.
Mirelle is worried for her husband and frustrated at the silence that seems to be
descending over the subject, I immediately head to O.

The first thing that I notice is that the school is locked up. There are few people
around but I see a group of young men gathered around a barraca and I go to talk with
them. They tell me that they are from the periphery of Joinville, the biggest city in the
state. We are joined from inside the barraca by its owner, a middle aged man named
Marinho. After some conversation I ask about Márcio and his father but nobody will say
anything apart from the fact that there has been an expulso (expulsion). I press for more
information but don’t really get any answers. I ask again what they have done but to no
avail – no one will talk to me about it. All that the group will say is that the coordenação
has expelled them.

I spend a long time talking to this group of young men and after we go and play
football on the pitch with a wrecked, deflated football and it’s only then that I start to
think about Márcio again, looking at the empty school. Márcio worked hard for the
movement. He taught full time and was present at all the important meetings, the
encontro estadual, the encontro dos sem terrinha, interested, engaged, helping out. He had been
encamped for six years but having been expelled, no one even wants to talk about him.
It is as if by suffering the expulso order, he has suddenly become unmentionable, that in a
way, he and his father perhaps never existed at all.

Back at Lúcia’s house, I’m talking to Lúcia, Mirelle and José. I ask them why the
movement places more families in occupation on land than it can sustain as an
assentamento. Mirelle tells me that it is to do with security, that in the face of repression, it
is better to have greater numbers of people for the *acampados’* safety. José then expands this by saying that also the *acampamento* and the systems within it, are how you discover to be *sem terra*. This is the environment in which your new identity is formed and this is accomplished much easier when you are in a large group rather than a smaller unit. The *acampamento* is where you truly learn how to be a *sem terra*, he says. José laughs, ‘It’s a great education.’ My mind flashes back to the encampment. We have just finished playing football and one of the lads from the periphery of Joinville is walking with me back down the track (see figure 12). I am thinking about Márcio, of all that he has given and of all that he has had taken away from him juxtaposed with Estela and Joãozinho’s smiling and assured invitation to come and see them once their plot has been devolved. The mood between us is contemplative. The young man stops and indicates the *acampamento*, the earth, the black plastic, the gates, the crowded proximity of people struggling to get by.

*Nunca pensei nisso*, he states. I never thought of this before.

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**Collective discipline in social movements**

The tension between the seeming need for a rigorous sense of organisation and a trajectory that can empower individual members of social movements is one of the most important areas of scholarship that exists in social movement studies. But the level of collective discipline that comes with rigorous organisation can very much depend on what type of SMO is under discussion in the first place. Zald and Ash (1966) draw a useful initial distinction between ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ SMOs, the former requiring minimum levels of initial commitment, whereas the latter, the ‘exclusive’ organisation, ‘is likely to hold the new recruit in a long “novitiate” period, to require the recruit to subject himself to organization discipline and orders, and to *draw from those having the heaviest initial commitments*’ (1966: 331 my emphasis). They further note that ‘when such an organization also has societal goals of changing society it may be called a vanguard party’ (*ibid*.). And in Cuba, an admittedly extreme example of collective discipline, this organisational rigidity has historically manifested itself, amongst other examples, through carefully choreographed parades and events, centrally managed by the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), the Central Organisation of Cuban Trade Unions
(CTC), and other more informal organisations that seek to structure collective behaviour such as neighbourhood surveillance initiatives (Capper 1996) and block committees (Aguirre 2002). Aguirre (1984) notes that in the run up to the May Day Parades of 1966 the CTC micromanaged all aspects of the celebration stressing the need for ‘uniformity among the participants [and] warning against a desire for individual distinction that might exist within the various unions’ (1984: 553). In these instances personal discipline as a component of collective organisation is a key factor and with echoes of the MST Jornal Sem Terra’s criminalisation of certain personal traits, including those of where one person ‘puts himself above the organisation’, ‘spontaneity’ and ‘immobility’, within the Cuban trade union movement, ‘lack of discipline, wastefulness, inefficiency, and having been punished or admonished at work are considered demerits (Mesa-Lago 1973 cited in Aguirre 1984: 548). Thus, as with all systems of strong collective organisation in SMOs that foreground certain preferential behaviours, a system of incentive and disincentive can be seen to acquire a certain importance amongst SMO’s members as they negotiate what emerge as permissible and undesirable forms of behaviour.

But discipline in collective action is not merely a mechanism through which to control SMO member activity. As Hallas (1996), a Marxist activist author notes:

The discipline that is certainly necessary in any serious organization can arise in one of two ways. It can arise from a system of artificial unanimity enforced by edicts and proscriptions, a system that is counter-productive in a socialist group. Or it can arise from a common tradition and loyalty built on the basis of common work, mutual education and a realistic and responsible relationship to the spontaneous activities of workers.

(1996: 21)

What is interesting about Hallas’ statement beyond his interpretation of how discipline can be created, is his basic premise that discipline is a characteristic of any serious organisation, perhaps meaning an organisation that is serious about change. This view is certainly shared by the founders of the MST, Stédile commenting ‘that organizational durability may be the MST’s grande contribuição histórica [great historical contribution]’ (Welch 2006: 206). But ‘seriousness’ and organisation are not a new combination in SMO theory. Della Porta in her analysis of Lotta Continua (2006), a leftist SMO in 1960s Italy, observes how this organisation’s leadership, aware of its own decentralised
administration, undertook a planned programme of centralisation and consolidation to render itself more effective, expressing this shift with a slogan, ‘the organisation is a process’ (2006: 87). Della Porta details how by 1972, Lotta Continua’s leaders were moving away from ‘the primitivism of previous experience’ and towards the ‘patrimony of militancy, discipline and seriousness typical of the working class’ (Bobbio 1988: 129 cited in Della Porta 2006). But as Hallas notes, the framework of collective discipline within an SMO can not be unilaterally imposed upon its membership by a centralised cadre without a certain form of consent, or at least a long process of normalisation which Foucault (1977) terms the emergence of ‘rules of right’.

In a situation where rules of right have solidified, certain ‘truths’ can be perceived to have emerged and certain behaviours can be identified as acquiring a positive connotation on a taken-for-granted basis within the social system. Actions therefore, and their positive or negative consequences come to reinforce and reproduce relations of power within the system as behaviours are rewarded or punished. In this sense, incentive and disincentive become important vectors of analysis as they come to represent Foucault’s idea of ‘micropenalties’, the practice of ‘making the slightest departures from correct behaviour subject to punishment’ (1977: 178). The opposite of course is also true, and any system of organisational discipline also requires people to be rewarded, when actions are performed in what has come to be termed the ‘correct’ manner. And in this way, as Papa et al (1997) note, ‘people are judged against a norm or average in a way that continually creates ranks. Those judged to be significantly better than the norm are rewarded by the fact of the judgment itself’ (1997: 226).

‘Occupation is the only solution’: Models of MST ‘rules of right’

Regarding its pragmatic policies around organisation and internal discipline, the MST has been criticised for being too controlling, especially in the acampamento phase, a phase on which it places much emphasis. Particularly, attention has been drawn as to why the MST deliberately places more acampados in an encampment than that site can sustain as an assentamento (Calvo Gonzalez 2004). And comments have also been made on the strictures of camp routine as an example of how movement members’ lives have come to be overly micromanaged. Hochstetler (1997) for example, writes of ‘iron discipline in
the occupied lands, where persecutions, expulsions, and fines maintain order. Participants must have authorization to leave the occupation, and the organization takes 10% of any earnings during the occupation’ (1997: 13). She concludes that like ‘every other face of social movements in the 1990s, the MST also looks in two directions’ (ibid.). Such a position can also be readily identified with that of the mainstream Brazilian media which is so partisan that it has demonised the MST’s education programme as an attempt to create Islamic style ‘madrassas’. 16

However, there is no doubt, as has already been alluded to, that the movement is extremely well organised and there is a sense within the movement that their success is directly as a result of this structural integrity. Wright and Wolford for example note that ‘disciplined decision-making and trained leadership are key’ (2003: 219) to MST organisational structure. Further, they comment that one of the key themes of MST mística alongside perseverance and humility is ‘responsibility and discipline’ (2003: 311). And MST discourse is saturated with the responsibility of the individual to the collective and the implied need for personal discipline. A document from the Escola Nacional (National School) phrases it thus:

Thus, through its decentralized infrastructure, members of the Escola Nacional’s community develop expectations/responsibilities of the individual to the collective, as well as of the collective to the individual. These responsibilities then encourage a sense of auto-discipline, since the individual feels accountable to the collective, as well as collective discipline since the collective also feels accountable to the individual.

(Léon 2006)

Ondetti (2008) also comments on the organisational rigidity of the MST immediately noting in his preface the movement’s ‘unusual combination of massive numbers, disruptive tactics, and strong internal discipline’ (2008: xvi). Indeed, implicitly furthering the link between organisational discipline and efficacy, he comments that this combination of numbers and strict order seems to answer some of the central challenges faced by the Latin American left. This sense of order he notes is exclusive to the MST in the sphere of agrarian reform. Non MST groups do not expect the same loyalty from their acampados he argues, and non MST acampados are not subordinated ‘to a broader

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16 “As Madrassas do MST” (The MST’s Madrassas), September 8th, 2004, Veja
organizational logic defined at the state and national level’ (2008: 128). And it is precisely in the encampment, a locus which leaders believe to be fundamentally transformative, that Ondetti highlights the high levels of discipline that characterise MST life.

Campers were expected to be present in the camps and contribute to routine tasks, such as digging latrines, mounting security patrols, and attending organizational meetings. In addition they were supposed to participate in non-occupation protest tactics, such as marches and demonstrations in urban areas; road blockages; and occupations of public agencies, such as state branches of INCRA or the state agricultural secretariat. Campers who were undisciplined or refused to comply with these demands would be expelled from the camp. (2008: 114)

In this situation therefore, Stédile’s epithet that ‘you have no future unless you devote yourself to principles of organisation’ (Fernandes 2000: 82) can be seen to have been realised in practice, but along which axis are these ‘principles’ orientated? What is missing from the literature on the MST as regards the acampamento process, (or perhaps what can be termed internal discipline in the pursuit of a valuable resource), is the acknowledgement of the existence of a de facto clientelistic incentive system that is inevitably created when land is not handed out on a strict first-come-first-served basis, the system that the vast majority of people (both inside and outside the movement) assume the movement employs. After all, acampados can be expelled from the camp for non-compliance with certain laws, as Ondetti makes clear. But that gap in the literature pertains to the other side of the coin – members knowingly displaying positively connoted behaviours in the pursuit of the early award of land. As Zald and Ash’s 45 year old definition of an ‘exclusive’ social movement holds, entrants are judged on their level of participation and leaders draw from those having the heaviest initial commitment. Such a system presupposes a degree of clientelism as of course, there must be a group of people who choose and evaluate who has contributed most and the very existence of such a group allows for personal interactions to impact upon these decisions.

What is of great importance is that the acampamento, as José notes, is where many of the leaders of the movement believe sem terra identity to be forged. In a collective imagination perhaps informed by the formative events of the early 1980s (many of the leaders of that era continue to be a part of national and state leadership today), the
The campamento is thought of as a means of becoming sem terra. In the minds of certain MST leaders, landless people enter the campamento disempowered, vulnerable and weak, and through the scheme of communal living and the moral code that the movement’s leaders place on campamento life, emerge capable, politicised and with opportunity. And to a certain extent, a ritualistic element has become attached to the act of being encamped. It is thought impossible to be sem terra unless you have passed through this process and although in reality the rules are somewhat flexible around this, it is also officially impossible to gain land without having been first an acampado. The ritualistic aspect of the camp is reinforced by the fact that it is also a ritualistic political statement. The refrain that ‘there is land, but no one to occupy it’ is commonly heard amongst leaders because numbers in the camp are important; fundamentally each campamento is a site of political pressure and the more people each has the bigger the declamation of the state of agrarian reform in Brazil.

The centrality of the campamento to the movement is also reflected by its appearance. Its visual aspects have become internalised and self-reproductive, generating an iconic aspect that has come to visually represent the very essence of the MST. In Santa Catarina, all encampments follow certain unwritten guidelines, rules of right, or perhaps terms of best practice in the manner of their construction. The barracas are constructed from branches with a sloping roof and black polythene tightly wrapped around the frame. The school of the campamento is made of wooden boards and has a tin roof. Movement flags are attached to high points, be they trees or perhaps tall poles placed into the ground. And the lona preta (black polythene) of the movement has come to assume a huge symbolic importance.

Therefore, as the campamento is such a symbolically important location as well as being configured as a locus of transformation by both leaders and members, it is valid to question what kind of processes are being internalised in the campamento and towards which understandings members are being transformed. If the campamento holds such a central place in both MST theory and practice, clearly what occurs there is of great interest. For example is such a high level of discipline really necessary for the smooth operation of an encampment? And does it not undermine MST claims of grassroots democracy if selected acampados are being earmarked for land by local leaders while others’ claims languish?
The MST acampamento: A locus of transformation through discipline

There are good reasons for the maintenance of order in MST encampments. Most importantly, there is the threat of the external, be it military, police or merely gunmen hired by landowners to cause trouble, intimidate, or harass. The threat of repression and the insecurity that this causes amongst a group of people who do not yet know each other is a significant factor in the sense of preparation and readiness that one encounters in MST acampamentos. There is also a more strategic aim, one which relates to Stédile’s view on the centrality of organisation that has already been quoted. MST frente de massa are aware of how acampados can be prone to fragmentation in difficult times and a rigorously ordered camp where people have assigned roles and responsibilities makes the chances of a camp staying together much higher, as acampados come to depend on one another, for example, in collectivised patterns of work. Organisation also has a positive public relations aspect, as the absence of brawling or alcohol within encampments is hoped to make local communities more amenable to their presence. This point was made forcibly to me during my fieldwork when I was told that local farmers looking for day labourers much preferred to hire sem terra acampados as they were more trustworthy, dependable and hard working.

However, certainly in the initial stages of the camp, it is the inevitability of some form of repression that drives camp discipline and the need to organise. And although the level of repression in Santa Catarina is at present not as high as it has been, incidents still occur, especially over the border in Paraná, where violence is reported as being much more widespread. In this context therefore, ideas on how an acampamento should conduct itself derive from strong discipline and a sense of community for self-defence. I spoke to Kleber and his wife Rose about what being encamped from 1987 to 1999, their personal experience, was like.

Kleber: The first place we encamped, a big farm, didn’t work out – it wasn’t appropriated. From there we went to C_ and we stayed there 2 years.

Rose: 12 years under black plastic. We suffered a lot you know. We went without food, we starved. There was no cesta básica then, no bolsa família. But we managed, no?
The manner in which Rose spoke hinted that she wasn’t comfortable talking about the subject. Their daughter Tais also spoke of how the family had moved around many times.

_Tais:_ We lived in various _acampamentos_ in the West. We went hungry, it was cold, we lived in fear. There were many children around. In H we had very serious confrontations with the police, and those confrontations really left a mark on me. So much so that the first time I left the _acampamento_ to stay with an aunt in Barra Velha and there was a policeman outside her house, I saw him and collapsed. It took me a long time to live without fear, to become used again to the presence of the police because of the repression that I saw… my parents, my neighbours, people I knew. I was 4 or 5 years old. These things mark you – you wake up, there are policemen in the _acampamento_ destroying everything, bringing down the _barracas_, ripping the polythene… the mums carrying the children into the forest. You’re isolated, in a place far from the city and so they can do what they want; they can’t be held to account.

I asked her whether people had been beaten.

_Ah!_ In amongst the policemen, there were always the landowner’s men, there to beat people, they didn’t respect children, no one. One morning we woke up, encircled by policemen and the men were dragged out by their hair before being beaten up in front of the women and children. They threw tear gas grenades amongst the huts. They placed the women separate from the men in a tent for 15 days. They gave the women and children only one meal a day. Many had to go to hospital because of malnutrition.

Such accounts of violence suffered by MST members are common. To try to understand the issue from both sides, on another occasion I spoke to a landowner whose estate in Pará had been occupied by the MST. This estate of roughly 100 ha had belonged to the landowner’s father and while he was alive seven families had lived on the land with _uso fruto_, that is, total use of the land without ownership but without paying
rent. When he died, the movement occupied the land and Antonia, the property’s owner, felt compelled to take action.

I went to the judge and he gave me carte blanche. He said that they were in contravention of the law and therefore I was doing nothing but self-defence. You have to remember that a lot of the judges in the interior are also landowners so they know that it could be them to be invaded next.

I asked her what carte blanche meant.

In the area where my estate is, there are many farms. It is cattle land and the MST only invaded my farm because it was small and they could get in. They don’t invade the bigger properties because it is more dangerous. Those guys don’t mess around. So my neighbours helped me and put me in touch with some militia. When I met them in my house I was all made up and stuff and there they were, a total bunch of thieves and tramps! Hired gunmen! They said to me, do you want us to kill them? And I was horrified. No, I said, just get them off the land, don’t hurt anybody.

Pará is a very different context to Santa Catarina in terms of repression, but direct violence is just one form of insecurity. The lack of transport and isolation for example can also be a major factor in this sense. Acampamentos are usually located near major roads but public transport is sporadic and therefore mobility without a car can be very difficult. But isolation is just one of a series of factors that makes organisation and the attendant sense of community a priority.

It is also the case that for people who don’t know each other to be able to cohabit, often for long periods of time in a hardship situation, certain communal rules have to be imposed and respected to mitigate inevitable personal friction. For example in O_, some young men from Joinville told me that it was forbidden for men to bring girls back to the acampamento and perhaps the fact that we didn’t even mention the possibility of girls bringing boys back to their barraca reflects a wider societal trend in Southern Brazil. Paulo spoke to me at length on this subject of rules as part of his remit as a member of the frente de massa.
Behavioural rules give a sense of security. The *acampamento* is a space which we try to free from bad influences. All sorts of people go there with all sorts of bad things, so sometimes people fight amongst themselves over small things. Alcohol, sometimes they drink in the *acampamento*... so there are rules that you can’t drink in the camp.

I asked whether people obeyed these rules.

They obey. They obey because if they don’t they are invited to retire from the camp. In fact, they are expelled. We call an assembly. For example, it’s not permitted to have any amount of alcohol within the camp. But there are people who arrive drunk, maybe they’ve gone to the city to drink and they come back drunk. In the camp there are children, young people and so on, and so the drunk guy comes back and perhaps tries to be the tough man, domestic violence and so on. In this case, the camp’s security will take the guy and place him in what we call the *guarita*, which is a lodge where the security people congregate, a lookout post. So, there are rules.

At this point, I asked what sort of other rules there were.

There is also a period of silence and an alarm call to wake people up, for example at 6am. In between 6am and 10pm however you can make whatever noise you want, listening to radios, messing around with pots and pans, whatever, but at 10pm, there must be silence. We have coded calls, done by the number of times the iron gong from the plough that is hung by the entrance is struck. For example it might be that one strike is ‘time of silence’. Two might be ‘alert’ – something strange is happening in the camp. Three might be ‘assembly’. Four might be ‘police in the camp’ and then everyone will come out with their agricultural tools to... *(laughs)* defend themselves.

Paulo’s sense of the importance of organisation and the pride that he took from giving people from the *periferia*, where levels of violence are high and families are often unwilling to let their children play in the street, a safer environment in which to bring up
their families, was one of the key motivations for his work. He spoke with conviction on the subject.

At 6 or 7pm, when night comes, people lock themselves in their houses and they can’t come out until daybreak. This is the reality of the periferia. But in our acampamentos, it’s exactly the opposite. People have freedom, they can chat and socialise much more. People play guitar, sing, mess around. Normally the children can play late into the night, without fear of anything, without the fear of suffering violence, or being hooked on to any sort of drug.

Was it easy I asked, for people to make the journey from the city to the countryside?

The difficulty is to communicate this vision to people. Not in words, but for them to believe and understand what it really is like. I mean even though the social transformation that we want seems delayed, even though agrarian reform is delayed, that people have to wait one year, two years, dunno, four or five years encamped so that they can become assentados and have a better life in a different form – this period in which they encamp is much richer, much more satisfying than if they stay in the periferia counting the days, watching the barbarity of life there happen around them.17

As Paulo suggests, some strictures of camp life are rooted in necessity, but certain scholars have questioned other aspects of the movement’s ‘transformative’ social programme in the acampamento space. Ondetti for example, argues that even more so than in the movement’s formative period, encampments have latterly functioned ‘as spaces for political indoctrination and collective identity building’ (2008: 114). Ondetti also adds that an important part of the role of people like Paulo, militantes in the frente de massa sector is to ‘work the consciousness of campers, cultivating a leftist political perspective and loyalty to the goals, methods and symbols of the MST’ (ibid.). At a more strategic level, Ondetti argues that the purpose of this approach is to strengthen the commitment of MST acampados in order that they will better resist co-option in the future, thus ensuring that acampados remain dedicated to the movement beyond the time

17 For an interesting discussion on leaders’ (idealised) perspectives of life in the countryside versus that of members see Caldeira 2008: 154.
when they have won land. He argues that political indoctrination has also taken place in other arenas, ‘but the camps were a privileged space for it’ (ibid.) due to the fact that acampados are a ‘captive audience’ (ibid.). And because of the confrontational nature of occupation (altercations with landowners for example), he argues that the camp is an ideal environment to make acampados more class conscious.

It is certainly the case that formação política occurs within the acampamentos. Roughly once a month, Luizinho would visit the acampamentos in his region to deliver classes on formação política. I experienced what I perceived to be the results of this one time in O_, whilst chatting to an acampado Polaco, and a friend of his. We were talking about where we were all from and I asked whether the men being both of Polish origin, supported Brazil or Poland at the World Cup. After laughing about the subject both men said Brazil. We continued to talk light-heartedly about football until Polaco told me that football was a device of the bourgeois to make the working classes lose their focus on the necessity of social revolution. I said that I thought that football was just a game whereupon Polaco’s friend agreed with Polaco and told me that I should be careful about playing it too much, or getting too involved in supporting a team. Shortly after this conversation I asked Luizinho whether I could accompany him to a formação política class and he agreed. I also asked him why they were necessary. Luizinho replied that some people took more easily to a co-operative style of life than others. When I asked him about this he said that he blamed this on capitalism and the way that it made people want to lead individual lives. As an example he criticised the way that people didn’t want to complete tasks by certain deadlines. I suggested that this was because people responded negatively to being told what to do. He countered that this was because people had been inculcated by capitalism to respond negatively to orders, because they have no stake in what they are being told to do. Such conversations were commonplace during my fieldwork, and although Ondetti forcefully states the case for indoctrination in the encampments, it is also the case that many acampados merely assent with what seems the prevailing ideology to fit in better into what is a new environment and system. Kleber confirmed what until then had remained a mere impression when he rather ruefully commented that often the spirit of communality that one observed in an acampamento was just a product of necessity rather than a genuine ideological conversion.
Although as I have touched on above, transformation amongst acampados may be somewhat superficial and pragmatic in certain cases, there is little doubt that any carefully organised process requires strategic direction and close leadership. And in the MST where acampados are new to the movement’s rules, this is even more the case than in other SMOs, where prior contact might have better orientated potential members as to what to expect. In this sense, from the first beginnings, where new people are recruited by frente de massa militantes, and bussed into an encampment site, militantes (or ‘leaders’, as acampados term them – these distinctions will be explored in the next chapter) are present at every stage of the process, from building the huts, to establishing security, to ‘helping’ to chose the camp’s coordenação. The acampamento therefore is necessarily a very leadership-centric process and this is reflected in a variety of important ways.

When considering a site for a potential occupation, there are certain criteria. Movement rhetoric focuses on how the MST occupies ‘unproductive’ land and this belief is widespread in activist as well as academic circles (Vergara-Camus 2005: 8; Welch 2006: 200; Karriem 2009: 320). However, in reality, the criteria vary. Firstly, occupations are not necessarily designed to result in land being appropriated. Many are carried out purely for political purposes, to draw attention to particular causes. The occupation of land part owned by Syngenta in Paraná was one such case. It is stated by the MST that on this site, transgenic crops were being sown without a license, and the estate itself was alongside an area of environmental protection. The movement occupied this research facility to draw attention to the issue of transgenic crops and one of the frente de massa leaders, Valmir Mota de Oliveira was shot twice in the chest at point blank range by armed gunmen at the site and killed.18

However, despite occupations almost always having a political dimension, most occupations are carried out to pressure the appropriation of land and as such, there is necessarily a consideration of the potential assentamento’s economic viability. The land targeted for this sort of occupation is not necessarily ‘unproductive’. Rather there is a more pragmatic criteria. Factors include the site’s proximity to the BR (the federal highway); the site’s proximity to a nearby city and therefore its potential access to markets and lastly, the site’s general condition and fertility of the soil.

What also encourages the local *frente de massa* and state leadership to occupy is if the site has doubts regarding any part of its legality. If the site in question has had a confused past in terms of its ownership or if the ownership is in any way disputed, this is an opportunity to mount an occupation. Also, issues to do with subcontracting are examined. For example, if an owner has leased part of his estate without filling in the requisite paperwork, it makes it easier to justify a case to INCRA for expropriation. Foreign owned estates can be targeted as are landowners that abuse the terms of the *união federal* by letting or farming property which encroaches on this public land. So for example the land on which *O_1* is situated was and is a highly productive estate.\(^{19}\)

However, the MST occupied it on the basis that the owner was Japanese (or at least of Japanese origin), that the owner had sublet land without permission and of course that the land was of prime quality with good access to the federal highway system. Beyond these criteria however, it is also the case that in small agricultural communities, personal conflicts play a part in deciding whose land to occupy. I was informed confidentially that the mayor of a small town, a figure toward whom local MST members had a considerable antipathy, would shortly find his lands occupied.

What is important to stress here is that all the decisions regarding where and for what reasons to occupy are taken at a state level. And the fact that *acampamentos* are so well organised is directly because of the tight control that local and state leadership

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\(^{19}\) When discussing appropriation of land it is worth noting that estates are valuable. Although technically selling land that derives from agrarian reform is illegal, it has been reported to happen. Here, I must state that I never encountered even a hint of this type of dealing in Santa Catarina and it was never even mentioned as a possibility by members with whom I spoke. That said, when the *acampamento* becomes an *assentamento*, each family is given roughly 10 ha each. At current prices in Santa Catarina, this amounts to an asset that in terms of land alone is worth in between R$100,000 to R$200,000 depending on situation. When one imagines that the minimum wage in Brazil is roughly R$480 per month, it is possible to calculate that such an asset in the UK could be worth up to £390,000 relative to the UK minimum wage, a not insignificant sum of money. Further, when an *assentamento* is ratified by INCRA, funds are made available to *assentados* for start-up costs. *Assentados* receive R$12,000 to build a house and then a further R$4,800. This second grant is discretionary and can be used for example to buy cows, a fridge or a cooker. However, 4% of all this initial money must be ceded by the *assentado* to the movement. INCRA also arrange for the house to be connected for free to water and power. Power comes directly to the house, but no further. The internal wiring must be done by the *assentado*. To this end, a kit is provided which comprises of four bulbs, four switches, 20 metres of cable and instructions on how to create parallel circuits and other technical information. When I asked members of the MST how these funds worked in practice I was told that one had to wait, that INCRA was not a quick agency to deal with. However I was informed that with R$12,000 it was possible to construct a decent one storey, two bedroom house to a state of completion.
maintain upon them, through methods that will be examined in the next chapter. What
suffices to state here is that the experience of creating and organising an encampment, as
evidenced by Andre’s throwaway comment regarding how many people could expect to
gain land in the first instance and how many would have to encamp again, therefore
necessarily distances leadership from *acampados* and their lived experience of what it
means to encamp. For example, Lúcia told me that when leaders visited encampments,
often they would eat at local restaurants, spending movement money as they didn’t want
to eat the basic food in the *acampamentos*. This distance is important because it indirectly
touches upon the crucial point for the vast majority of *acampados* – how and when they
will gain land, because fundamentally, this is a decision that lies with the leaders of the
movement.

*Members’ perceptions as regards how land is assigned*

The mechanism by which decisions are taken regarding the assignation of land when
*acampamentos* contain more families than land to support them is clearly of great

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20 The distance between the leadership and *acampados* as to how an encampment is on the
one hand conceived, and on the other hand experienced, has perhaps come about as a
result of the over-ritualisation of the encampment process. The political message that
lies behind the act of occupation and the visual imagery that accompanies it has to a
certain extent overridden a key factor, that of the *acampados’* security. The best example
of this is the occupation of Papanduva, an occupation that Estela and Joãozinho took
part in. This land in Northern Santa Catarina, owned by the army and allegedly corruptly
leased out was occupied by the MST on 15th April 2007. There was never any likelihood
of the land being expropriated. Rather, the occupation was conceived of as a political
statement and a deliberately antagonistic affront to the Brazilian army, based in nearby
barracks in Rio Negro, Paraná. Into this combustible situation therefore were placed
many first time members, many of whom had young families with them. The army’s
response to this challenge on their land was direct and uncompromising. A battalion of
mechanised infantry with troops of dogs and horse were mobilised and after a short
stand-off of two nights the *sem terra* withdrew. Commenting on the occupation to me
Andre said that when new members were in this kind of conflict, they tended to panic.
He said that it was at this kind of moment that people needed leadership most to keep
them strong and keep them *lutando*, fighting for the cause.

21 Indeed, when we left the *acampamento* of *O_* I remembered to pick up the sack of *feijão*
Wanderley and his wife had given me. As we left, I mentioned to Lúcia that I wished I
didn’t have to accept the present. She looked at the *feijão* and stated that it was of a very
low quality and that we wouldn’t cook with it in any case. She told me that she had a
much better type at home.
importance both to scholars of the movement, as it gives a clear indication of MST organisational logic, but also to acampados, trying to establish themselves as they are, in a new, secure way of life. I asked Estela and Joãozinho how they thought the process worked in their acampamento of 300 ha, enough land for 20 to 30 families, where 100 families were registered.

Estela: Soon, soon, we’ll have our hands on this plot.

Interviewer: So how much land is there here? 300 ha? Which means 30 families?

Estela: 20.

Joãozinho: From 25 to 30.

Estela: 20!

Interviewer: So 15 ha for each family? But there are 100 families registered.

Teresa: Probably some people will go to other places.

Interviewer: How does the process work of choosing which families stay?

Estela: Well the coordenação meet and they see what’s going on, who can stay, who can go. Probably the oldest people are going to stay.

Joãozinho: Also the people who came from the occupation at Papanduva will have priority.

Estela: Organisation really counts too, you have to be organised.

As I comment in the ouverture of this chapter, Estela and Joãozinho were confident about the eventual outcome of their winning land in the acampamento without having to encamp again somewhere else. Joãozinho was keen to stress that he had the mentality of
someone who had been in the movement for five or six years despite only joining eight months ago and he was also quick to point out that his wife had been part of the Papanduva occupation. It seemed that because this occupation had been so risky, his wife having taken part in it meant that they should be prioritised. Estela and Joãozinho were optimistic about their chances but not all members of the O_acampamento shared their optimism.

On one occasion I fell into conversation with Marinho and some of the young men from the Joinville periferia. Discussion turned to winning land and I asked how decisions were made regarding who of the 100 families registered in the encampment would be able to stay and what were the criteria. The young men were unsure, but gradually a consensus emerged. They said that they thought that priority would be given to the families that had been encamped the longest but also that the age of the person was a factor. However, one young man said that it was also about how people ‘organised’ themselves, whether they ‘organised’ themselves well or not. (In the Portuguese, eles que se organizam bem). I then asked who made these decisions and I was told that it was the coordenação. When I pressed the issue, Andre’s name was mentioned but also Coutinho’s, a state leader who lived in a coastal town some 200 hundred miles away. I asked how often Andre visited the encampment. The answer was once every three weeks. I asked the same about Coutinho and I was told that he almost never visited. One young man then said that when Andre visited, he would ask questions such as, how is he doing? What’s she up to? Are they well? Another 17 year old said that Andre would arrive saying how are you? How are you doing? in a friendly way, but really he would be looking around, seeing if ‘you are doing everything right’. It seemed that their perception was one of powerlessness, waiting for someone else to make important decisions that concerned their lives. As I left, Marinho told me that people were just hoping to be on the list of those who would be allowed to stay.

However, there seemed to be a difference between the views of acampados versus the views of assentados. I spoke at length with Davi and Jurema on the subject and they had a somewhat different idea on the selection process.

_Davi:_ It depends on the draw (sorteio). It’s who has been encamped the longest and those who have the most time are sorted first. You can’t shout out ‘Hey I want this bit here!’ – it’s not like that. It’s drawn. If you’re drawn for this land, you get it. So it’s by luck.
Jurema: And by time.

Interviewer: By luck, what does this mean exactly?

Davi: It’s like, who’s going to win this cup. We put the names in and draw one. So it’s done like that. The coordenação meet and discuss, they see which families have been there longest, which are most prepared… because there are a lot of acampados… problems with everything… So logically, the coordenação looks and evaluates. It’s like this: ‘Look, you’re not ready to win land yet. If we give you some land, you aren’t going to progress. You might be able to produce, to try, but not progress, because you’re head’s not right yet – so you’re going to have to stay encamped longer. We’ll draw (sortear) some others here, those who are more right (firme na cabeça), those who have done more time – those who deserve it more!’

Interviewer: But this is an important power, no?

Davi: Yes, but I agree with it. It think it’s right to look at this side of… this side of who is best prepared.

What was interesting about Davi and Jurema’s view was that as we spoke it changed from being about pure chance, to who was best prepared and then finally to who deserved it more. Time encamped was a factor, but it was clear that for Davi especially what was key was the concept of being prepared and whether you would be able to ‘progress’ – a concept that seems to touch on the idea of personal transformation. For Davi, merely having land was clearly not the only goal; land was rather a means through which to bring about a redevelopment of social consciousness and character growth. With so many conflicting views apparent on the subject, I asked a good friend of mine, another assentado, what he thought.

There is a list that the leadership have which says how long everybody encamped has been a member. This list also has details on the characteristics of these people. The people that create this list are the cadastramento (registration) sector.
I asked what he thought the criteria for selection were.

Some people get transferred into an assentamento before others you know, it doesn’t matter how much time they have been encamped. The leadership discuss everybody and choose the spaces for the people. There is the meeting and so on, but there will only be 30 spaces in say, U_. The meeting decides which families get those 30 spaces. The other 30 families of the 60 that are encamped are given other options – for example spaces in H_ or B_. There will be less than 30 other spaces and some people will have to return to a new encampment. A new encampment will be started, but there is always another encampment.

I said that I had believed that the only factor considered would be time, that is, the longest encamped would get the first placements.

You see people have to partake in the movement to get land. It’s not enough to just be on the acampamento, living there.

In the conversation, I then asked how leaders obtained the information from which to make decisions and it became clear that the acampamentos’ organisational structure was geared to reporting back to state and regional leaders on what was happening in the acampamento. The frente de massa visit acampamentos to recruit members for protests, occupations and demonstrations and members’ attendance at these events and also participation in activities such as the encontro estadual and encontro dos sem terrinha is logged and noted. Also if an acampado engages in undesirable activities such as fighting or drinking, this will be noted by the acampamento’s coordenação and reported back to the regional leader of frente de massa.

Although there are varying perceptions of how land is won, having Davi’s view thus corroborated and this version tallying with what I observed during my time with the MST, it would seem that acampados are fundamentally and perhaps (un)knowingly in direct competition with each other for land and the decisions as to who will be given priority are taken by regional and state leadership committees, based on information gathered from the encampments themselves. But the implicit connection between the group who are evaluated and the group who evaluate means that the system is open to
being rendered clientelistic through the use of discretionary power. For example Lúcia told me that she had once been offered a plot in the *assentamento* of B_, despite the fact that she had never undergone the full encampment process. The place had been offered to her on a personal basis by Kleber, the *chefão* (literally big chief - a term that I shall discuss in depth in chapter four) of the *assentamento* but she hadn’t taken it, out of personal preference. It seems therefore that personal connections can place one at the front of the queue for land in a situation where as Joãozinho phrased it ‘we have to be united for everyone to win together’.

But why are people so keen to acquire land? After all as Paulo asks, what does one or two, or even four or five years encamped in an MST *acampamento* really mean? Is it not preferable to the barbarity of the *periferia*, counting the days?

*A brief description of acampamento conditions*

The *cesta básica* takes care of basic alimentation. This weekly delivery from INCRA comprises of *feijão* and *arroz* (rice and beans) and provides a essential level of sustenance. *Acampados* add to this by planting certain crops. In the *acampamento* of U_, *acampados* had planted fields of corn, salads and root vegetables. Likewise in O_, there were plots of salads, cereals and root vegetables as well as animal husbandry with chickens and pigs. Water is always a problem in *acampamentos* and most tend to use a tank to collect rain water which is then plumbed to various locations. The *acampamento* of U_ had quarters for visitors with hand-fashioned bunk beds as well as a shower enclosure plumbed into the rain water tank immediately above. Beyond washing facilities, drinking water can be problematic however, as landowners have been known to pollute streams from which *acampados* drink. There is almost never any electricity in *acampamentos* and most people rely on truck batteries that are recharged in local garages for their power. Most usually these truck batteries are wired to a single bulb where a single charge can last a month. Wired to a DVD and television, the charge may last ten days. It is expensive to recharge these batteries, the cost being roughly R$15 per charge.

Money is a problem for *acampados* as there are many products that can’t be manufactured and need to be bought. Articles such as hygiene products, clothes, the sheets of black plastic, tools and wiring all need to be paid for (see figure 13). It is
common for acampados to look outside the encampment for paid daily work. This is often hard and badly paid but the acampados have little choice. Such a job might be working on the harvest in a nearby farm. I interviewed Paulo on such a serviço that he had performed.

I went one time picking onions. This is how the bóias frias (day labourers) are exploited. I went with Sabine and Cleiton and the three of us were paid five centavos per metre each. Onions are planted in rows you see. And we were paid five centavos per metre of onions that we dug out of the ground.

I asked him what the work was like.

The work is really hard, like backbreaking because you have to do it on your knees. You see after a while it’s impossible to pull them from the earth standing up. So you are on your knees in the soil using just your hands, no tools. This peonage (peonagem) is a thing that exists not only in the northeast. The work, it makes you feel like an animal.

I observed that five centavos was not a lot of money and he told me that working all day they had managed to earn R$40 between them. I asked him if he knew the profit margin of the farmer.

There are around fifteen, twenty kilos of onions per metre. The farmer at wholesale gets around thirteen reais per 60 kilo bag. So of that 800 metres that we dug up, he would have sold those onions for R$3,500 and he paid us R$40.

Conditions working around the acampamentos are harsh but almost all of the acampados will engage in some form of day labour. Added to the fact that the wages are incredibly low, of all work that the acampados carry out, a percentage of the earnings must be ceded to the communal fund of the acampamento. The figure varies, but in O, it was set at 10% and this can be a source of contention as a part of the money goes to the MST state secretariat and is then disbursed for other activities, for example, covering the expenses that members of the frente de massa incur.
However, outside the necessities of work, and once an occupation has solidified, a dominating factor of *acampamento* life is the boredom that waiting for a federal decision necessarily entails. In Santa Catarina, where repression is at present not too extreme, this lack of activity can bring about fighting and general restlessness. Football is one means to cope with this, as are communal activities such as theatre workshops and performances of *mística*. But tensions occur and accidents are also common. In O_, one of Wanderley’s children had drowned in a small lake, only a few weeks previous to my first visit. The 13 year old boy had dived into the water and died on impact, his body being later found. Living in an *acampamento* therefore can be an insecure life and people are understandably keen to become *assentados*. In Márcio’s case, he had been an *acampado* for so long that that prospect seemed very distant; he never once expressed any optimism of the sort of Estela and Joaozinho.

*Conclusion*

The *acampamento* is central to MST lived experience, both in strategic and practical terms. Clearly, it is the principal means through which the movement exercises political power and maintains itself at the forefront of the struggle for agrarian reform. As the slogan goes, ‘occupation is the only solution!’ But almost more importantly, the process of encampment is also of huge ritualistic importance within the movement. The discourse that to truly become *sem terra*, one must undergo the strictures of *acampamento* life is very strong, particularly amongst echelons of movement leadership. It is in this aspect of social orientation therefore that the *acampamento* arguably has most significance. It is the primary locus of a social transformation that according to MST rhetoric empowers *acampados* and creates a cradle for their rebirth as re-engaged citizens, no longer marginalised by a system that has exploited them. Many *assentados* to whom I spoke described passionately the experience of being encamped and how it had contributed to who they were. But what is the nature of the system from which *acampados* are reborn? And is it a viable basis from which to move forward and undertake the creation of a new society?

Questions of discipline have long been flagged as problematic in the MST scheme of occupation and there is little doubt that order in *acampamentos* is stringently
maintained and regulation can be restrictive. However, on the basis of my research I would argue that such a level of control is generally required and more importantly, welcomed by acampados as in some cases such organisation has certainly contributed to acampados’ intrinsic security. Control within encampments was described by Lúcia as a pragmatic agenda premised fundamentally around the right of movement members to not have to undergo aggressive or otherwise threatening behaviour from their neighbours. And as I have already discussed, this is merely one of a number of reasons why the movement has prioritised organisational coherence over individual liberties at this early stage of movement membership.

But what of prioritising members who contribute more enthusiastically to the movement over their peers when it comes to assigning plots of land? Is it problematic to select people who are committed over those who are less so? In a certain sense, it is entirely reasonable and understandable that state leadership do not assign land entirely upon the basis of who has been encamped the longest. As Davi comments, some people have problems that act as a barrier to them making a success of a piece of land while others are undoubtedly looking to gain a valuable asset without necessarily buying into the ideology of the movement; a separation that for the MST is untenable, given the fact that for movement leaders, land is merely an instrument in a wider programme of social re-education. And fundamentally, as both Davi and Joãozinho hint at, isn’t it fair that those that work harder for the movement and believe in its ideology are rewarded for doing so?

There are several considerations here. Leaders within the movement do not wish to see a social revolution being cynically exploited for personal gain by the unscrupulous, and this is reasonable position to adopt. However, delving into the system through which ‘credit’ can be accrued in the long wait for land, it is the case that many acampados are physically not able to go on occupations and demonstrations that will foreground their claim to land, as they have young families that need their care. And related to this point, it is noticeable that with some exceptions, the vast majority of frente de massa militantes are young, single men (cf. Wright and Wolford 2003). There is also the fact that many MST acampados were visibly uncomfortable with the idea that they had to perform certain approved behaviours to call attention to themselves, and thereby promote themselves above their neighbours. Such a scheme also problematises the notion of being expelled from the movement; there is no right to appeal and in fact, it can be in other members’ interests to gain credibility by denouncing undesirable activity. Gaetano
commented that it was too easy to be cast out of the movement by a leader if there was a personal dispute. But perhaps what lies behind all these arguments is the suggestion that just because an *acampado* doesn’t necessarily fully agree with the prevailing orthodoxy, doesn’t mean that that *acampado* is unable to contribute to the movement. Indeed, perhaps as such a contribution might fall outside of accepted ‘rules of right’, the MST is denying itself a valuable source of internal accountability through constructive criticism and also prohibiting a flow of new ideas. In this sense therefore, linking the winning of land with a system of preferred behaviours, the whole of which is arbitrated by movement leaders, can create a clientelistic phenomenon which can limit constructive criticism, can result in contested decisions and can place *acampados* in competition with each other in a situation which is supposed to reinforce solidarity. Of course, these points may seem academic, balanced as they have to be with factors pertaining to the ongoing organisational integrity of the movement, but being witness to Márcio’s removal, a teacher who had been encamped for six years, whilst at the same time Joãozinho (encamped for eight months) confidently asserted his optimism, demonstrates that such decisions affect the lives of human beings in the most fundamental ways.

Pragmatism and internal debate are clearly negotiable issues but the key issue here is that the *acampamento* is where one learns to be *sem terra*. And what *acampados* ‘learn’ is clearly of importance in determining future perceptions of and potential negotiations with the loose body politic that is *sem terra*.

Members’ subjectivities are various, but it can be asserted with confidence that leaders of various levels unquestionably influence *acampamento* life, if not on a daily level, then certainly in a more structural sense. They are present at the beginning, at all crisis points of eviction and re-occupation and finally, at the end, when the lines are drawn and the plots of land handed out. But who are the leaders and what exactly is their role? The next chapter will address these questions in detail and frame a critique of the men and women who more than anything else, polarise opinion on the MST.
Figure 1: Mística at the 2007 state meeting
Figure 2: Reforma Agrária! – Por justiça social e soberania popular! MST catechism, 2007
Figure 3: Quasi-religious instance of *mistica* – State meeting 2007
Figure 4: MST state meeting, 2007
Figure 5: MST *encontro dos sem terrinha*, 2008
Figure 6: MST acampamento school children, 2008
Figure 7: Still from the documentary *Brava Gente*
Figure 8: Still from the documentary *Brava Gente*
Figure 9: MST acampamento entrance, 2008
Figure 10: MST acampamento school, 2008
Figure 11: MST occupation of Papanduva – Children confronting the army
Figure 12: Football in an MST *asserimento*, 2008
Figure 13: Building materials in an MST acampamento, 2008
Figure 14: The colour red can dominate the clothing of the membership – MST state meeting 2007
Figure 15: The state leadership do not all wear red – video still from leadership affirmation ritual, 2007
Figure 16: Being human – MST *assentamento* party seen from behind the bar, 2009
Chapter 4 – The Leadership, organisation and internal democracy of the MST

Ouverture

The *assentamento* of N_. It’s evening and we’re sitting in Gaetano’s house watching the television. Marina, his daughter, offers to make us all coffee with some fresh bread and butter. Alvise, Gaetano’s son, gets up to help her. It’s late summer time, but in the *Planalto*, it doesn’t get too hot, so the evening is temperate, while the open door allows a slight breath of fresh air. Although I know the family and have met them several times, this is the first time that I have sat alone with them. I am to stay in their house tonight on Lúcia’s recommendation. Being here alone has a special significance that no one in the *assentamento* will fail to note. I think back to earlier in the day when Lúcia said to me, ‘go and talk to Gaetano and Silvia – it would be good for your work. They criticise, they’re not like us, they really criticise the movement, they have other views.’ It seems strange that Lúcia should want me to hear ill of the movement and I remember also that Mirelle has often spoken with pursed lips about Gaetano’s opinions, describing them as ‘strong’, or ‘direct’. But here I am, despite the gossip that I imagine will ensue, following Lúcia’s advice.

Earlier on today, we all ate dinner together before Lúcia, Mirelle and several others went back to their homes, leaving me alone with Gaetano’s family. It seems contrived. But it occurs to me that although perhaps Lúcia isn’t willing to speak badly of the movement too directly herself, she *is* willing to place me in contact with people who might. Perhaps she’s also interested in my work being balanced and she thinks that the straightforward loyalty that Mirelle expresses for the movement tends to dominate our exchanges.

Marina serves the coffee and straightaway departs for a friend’s house, leaving just us three men in the living room. We’re watching ___ play on the television and Gaetano, whose family originally come from ___, speaks enthusiastically about the way they play the game. I say something about how money has ruined football, corrupted the way it should be played and suddenly we’re talking about the movement and financial corruption. The language and sentiment is so direct and unexpected that I’m momentarily taken aback. This is the first time that anyone from within the MST in well over a year has made a sustained critique of the movement to me. While Gaetano
speaks, his son nods forcefully, backing up his father's points with opinions of his own. I think back a few weeks to Alvise proudly showing me his photos of the march to Brasília and the contrast is striking. I haven't done anything specific to prompt this encounter but Lúcia has guessed right and Gaetano's observations are so exhortive that I struggle to keep up.

He firstly tells me that there is a great deal of misuse of monies. He relates how when they become assentados in the new N-assentamento, in addition to paying four per cent of their start-up funds directly to the state leadership, they also paid R$1500 to the movement secretariat for assistência técnica (technical assistance). With indignation, Gaetano tells me that to this day, they have never received anyone in the assentamento dispensing technical advice on how to for example, plant certain crops or manage certain levels of yield. Quickly, the discussion becomes more general and both Alvise and Gaetano bemoan the lack of transparency about how the movement deals with money. I ask them what they mean and Alvise says that he believes the practice of sidelining money at state leadership level to be normal. He intimates that a system exists by which leaders falsify expenses, claiming R$1000 for something that costs R$500 and then splitting the profit halfway with whoever provided the false receipt.

The conversation moves on to being told what to do. Gaetano relates his experience of what life was like in the early days of the assentamento's existence, when everyone worked together as part of a co-operative. I mention that I have heard rumours of fallouts, principally between Davi and Roberto but that I don't know any of the details. Gaetano says many harsh things about Roberto. His wife Silvia is on good terms with the núcleo of the assentamento that remains a cooperative (it comprises of Roberto, Luizinho and Ana) and I point this out to him, but he tells me that what he has to say about Roberto is purely professional, that as a person, he has his faults, but it is more to do with his work for the movement that they are unhappy. Gaetano tells me that when the assentamento operated as a collective, often the person coming up with ideas and therefore giving orders was Roberto. Consequently he was also the person that held the funding for any particular project. Gaetano told me proudly that he would not do what Roberto wanted him to and they used to have large confrontations. Roberto, Gaetano informs me, likes to get his own way and Alvise cites this as an example of how cooperatives look good in theory but fail in practice – 'there is always someone trying to be the boss', he warns me.
The conversation now turns to the formal leadership themselves. Alvise relates his experience from the May 2005 march to Brasília. He tells me how often in the evenings, leaders would disappear from the acampamento that they had set up to go and sleep in nearby hotels. He also tells me that once they arrived in Brasília itself, there was a facility with a pool that was kept locked and only the leadership were allowed to use it. Gaetano interjects and says that leaders are subject to different rules. He says that they spend long periods of time away from home at various events, training camps, demonstrations, setting up new encampments and such. He hints that their families often suffer as a consequence, that men and women in these hardship situations, sleeping alongside each other, can result in infidelity, despite the strict moral code that the leadership tell the members they should adhere to. With a smile, he comments that leaders often go somewhere to solve a problem only to come home and find new ones when they return.

The discussion now turns to the large meetings, which the leadership always attend, and Gaetano express his dislike of the large meetings in general. He says that he doesn’t like the set up of the rooms; the stage with the big leaders talking down to the ‘massa’ below. He says that people are too frightened to say anything, that they only know when to clap at the right times. But then the conversation turns back to money. Gaetano asks me how it is that people who entered the movement so poor have become so rich? He mentions Rafa, the state leader of the ___ sector and the plantation that Martelinho, his father and their family live on. He mentions Menezes, a leader from the west of the state who has a big house and a nice car – how is this possible when he entered the movement with nothing? It seems as though money is a problem for Gaetano’s family and I ask them whether they have ever tried to raise these issues with anyone, either with the regional, or even the state leadership. Gaetano laughs. He points out that the leadership, at both state and regional levels are all friends and it would be foolish to complain to someone about their friend. He explains that in the MST, it is not possible to complain about practices that you observe happening around you. He tells

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22 It must be noted that the title ‘state leader of the ___ sector’ does not formally exist within the MST. Strictly speaking there are no leaders at all in the movement. For example, if Rafa were asked whether he was a ‘state leader’, he would refute this description and suggest that he was merely a member of the coordenação (coordination) of the state, with a primary responsibility for matters __. The term ‘state leader’ is used in this study as a form of shorthand, following the usage of such terms by MST members themselves, who seem in less doubt than researchers as to what the terms constitute in practice.
me that people in the movement have to keep their mouths shut when they see things going on and if not… He leaves this sentence unfinished. Alvise nods his head in agreement with his father. They are both upset and the big *assentamento* dinner they hosted a few hours ago, with its comradeliness and warmth seems a long way away now.

After a pause, Gaetano moves to summarise what they have said. He speaks slowly and sadly and tells me that in the movement, they teach you that certain rights are yours, and that this is what the struggle is all about, gaining access to rights to which poor countryside people have always been excluded. But although they teach you to assert your rights, he says, the right to express your opinion is not one of them. He tells me that a real democracy is one in which people can say what they want and that this is what the MST is supposed to be about. But the right to speech has been curtailed, not by the government, but by the movement itself, by all levels of leadership. Alvise expands on this by explaining that there is no come back, no second chance if a decision goes against you. He tells me that if something goes wrong, or if you have a disagreement with somebody, a full meeting can be called and one party can call for the other to be thrown out of the movement. This strategy, he explains, can be even more drastically implemented in the *acampamento*, where people can be asked to leave much more easily. Once people are in an *assentamento* it becomes more difficult to have a family kicked out, but he tells me that people have tried to make it happen, even in the N_ *assentamento* where we are now.

But now Gaetano returns to the theme of being able to freely express your opinion. He asks me with a smile what I think is happening in Cuba. His son laughs – this is clearly a private joke and I remember a disagreement that Juliana had with Gaetano over whether Cuba was truly a successful socialist state. Without waiting for an answer to his rhetorical question, Gaetano declares in a strident tone complemented with emphatic gestures that the MST is very similar to Cuba in that if you don’t agree with the leaders you will be punished, expelled, or even killed. He speaks about the idea of the leadership promoting a Cuban socialist paradise in more conceptual terms, about how it is a useful vision with which to speak to the people in movement who are suckers, gullible and easily deceived (*bobo*). He says that the vision gives people an unobtainable target and keeps them working towards something which can not be achieved. He bemoans the lack of responsibility that the leadership take in the direction of the membership’s lives or the movement’s trajectory. He says that the leadership always
blame someone else for the movement’s predicament, be it the government, the state, the capitalists, indeed, he comments wryly that there is a new enemy every week.

It seems that responsibility is a real problem for Gaetano and Alvise when imagining the relationship between the two entities they construct as the ‘leadership’ and the ‘membership’. How one group talks to another from a position of strength, establishing parameters for them but aware all the time that the collective is ultimately responsible for making decisions seems a path fraught with difficulties. This theme emerges again when Alvise asks me about what I think of the acampamentos and how they are run. I reply that there seems to be a lot of uniform suffering but great disparities in how long people have to be encamped before they will be able to receive land. Gaetano tells me that he and his family were encamped for over five years and moved many times around the state before they become part of this new assentamento, here in N_. He questions whether it is fair for state leadership to place more people on an acampamento than it would be able to sustain as an assentamento thereby leaving some families disappointed and having to move to another encampment when the land is finally granted. I ask him why the state leadership continue with this policy. He answers that it is connected with mobilisation, being able to create an atmosphere where the collective imperative will educate new members. But he explains that this practice leads to false expectations and a difficult life, one where you are continually on the move, from one encampment to the next. The insecurity is difficult, he says, as every time you move, you have to leave friends and a familiar place and begin all over again. The construction of a hut for your family, planting new crops, a new range of threats, new relationships, new leaders, new cultures is hard work.

We talk late into the night and it seems that Alvise and Gaetano are happy to get these issues out into the open. I begin to wonder with whom they can talk to about these things on a more regular basis. It certainly seems from Lúcia and Mirelle’s comments that their views are well known and I wonder how sustainable their participation in the N_ assentamento is, given the explicit nature of the ‘divergence’ in opinion.

Reflecting on the exchange the next day, it seems a lot to take in. Gaetano has been fiercely critical of the movement and despite his heartfelt conclusions, perhaps it is the case that personal antipathies have coloured his views. For example, I know that there has been tension between him and Roberto in the past. But even so, this is the first time that such negativity has been expressed to me about the movement from
within its membership. In over a year and a half of fieldwork it seems that finally I have reached a place in the community where I am trusted enough to really confide in. But what does this say about the nature of life within the MST? Has it taken so long because, as Gaetano notes, the MST represents an environment where having an opinion is so potentially dangerous? Why has no one else (beyond the usual daily grumblings) been so explicit and detailed in their criticism of the movement to me? Is it the case that members are happy with the way the movement is run? Or is it the case that expressing public dissatisfaction with the way the movement is run is frowned upon and can have serious consequences?

What seems difficult to reconcile are members’ expressions of pride regarding the movement with the criticisms they level. Alvise wanted to show me endless photos of his participation in the famous march to Brasilia in 2005 because he was proud to have taken part in it, although for him, that march was also a source of conflict regarding the way that he perceived leaders to be distancing themselves from non leaders. But perhaps it is precisely because of their pride in the movement and their willingness to engage that members are unhappy when they feel that there is not a viable forum for their critiques. After all, Alvise and many others are unhappy with the direction the movement is taking and this matters deeply to them, because they have a lot at stake through their involvement as members. Put simply, they criticise because they care where the MST is going, and they want it to be successful. In this way, for Alvise, obviously the appropriation of money by leadership was a key issue. He and Gaetano had mentioned Andre’s new car which cost R$23,000, and on which he was rumoured to be paying heavy monthly repayments. When I asked Alvise about this, knowing that scepticism of leaders, especially on matters financial is a common dynamic to encounter in Santa Catarina, he smiled and told me that Andre was a leader and had a salary. I asked him what it was and Gaetano suggested that it was around R$500 per month. This was substantially less than the repayments were rumoured to be and I asked how Andre could afford this. Alvise smiled again. ‘There’s always a way,’ he had said.
The question of internal democracy within contemporary leftist social movements is not new. The range of organisational models from centralised control to more decentralised instances has occupied much space in the debate of SMO theory with scholars like Calderón, Piscitelli and Reyna (1992) questioning whether in the latter scenario, pluralistic efforts can really be effective in challenging well established structures of domination. In a similar manner, involvement of popular SMOs in mainstream electoral politics to foreground democracy is an equally contentious issue for those engaged in projects of social mobilisation. Haber (1993) in his work on Mexico, draws on his analysis of the Salinas administration’s programme of *concertación social*, the courting of popular movements into closer involvement with government, to note claims of co-option and a dilution of the independence that is so fundamental to the essence of many popular movements. Moreover, as Haber touches upon, just because a popular movement is working to foreground democracy does not necessarily mean that it is a democratically organised movement. In his analysis of social movements, Kriesi (1996) demonstrates how ‘oligarchization – the concentration of power in the hands of a minority of SMO members – is the most well known “integrative mechanism” of SMOs’ (1996: 154) and that according to the Weber-Michels model, as SMOs age, oligarchisation is the first process that an SMO will pass through.

Bur for some grassroots SMOs, high levels of internal democracy are not a priority in the first place and they encounter no contradiction in engaging with democratic structures, trying to gain representation for marginalised peoples, from the foundation of a centralised, oligarchic movement structure. Rubin’s early analysis of COCEI (1988) explores such a seeming contradiction and demonstrates how although COCEI participated in a variety of mainstream electoral political processes, the ideology of the movement as a whole ‘did not favor democratic procedure over other forms of organization and decisionmaking’ (1988: 149). Rather, Rubin argues that a centralised leadership incorporated new leaders from within those who participated in movement activity and thereby foregrounded a Leninist ‘democratic centralization’ (*ibid.* ) within its body politic. Rubin argues that a ‘creative tension’ (1988: 142) between guided spontaneity and centralised discipline was what successfully propelled COCEI and it is subject to debate as to whether a similar process is occurring in the MST. Indeed, the
struggle for greater democracy that the MST articulates as a whole within Brazil (Cf. Wolford 2003, Rossiaud and Scherer-Warren 2000) has to a certain extent deflected any focus on how democratic the movement itself actually is.

Despite a lack of analysis on this subject however, there is a deeply sedimented perception amongst both members and non members, that being a grassroots social movement and one that is much more participatory than COCEI, the MST is very much concerned with internal democracy and high levels of member participation in decision-making. Both Branford and Rocha (2002) and Wright and Wolford (2004) describe how the movement is without one centralised decision-making body, rather decisions being made in the assemblies of individual assentamentos. Indeed, Wright and Wolford declare in their introduction that ‘the MST has worked through collective leadership, scrupulously avoiding dependence on a single leader’ (2004: xiv). And Branford and Rocha advocate a similar position, albeit one that seems somewhat at odds with Alvise and Gaetano’s experiences. They describe how, at the Cascavel conference in 1984, the organisational principles of the movement were defined.

The sem-terra were anxious to not let a clique of powerful leaders dominate the movement, so they decided not to create individual posts, such as president, treasurer or executive secretary, but to run the movement as far as possible in a collective way, with a decentralised administration. […] Delegates stressed the need to build a strong internal democracy. Leaders and coordinators must be permanently linked to the rank and file, they said, and every member should participate in decision-making through meetings and small group discussions. (2002: 30)

Further to academic writing, such an impression has also been created through MST discursive practice given the lack of an explicit codified document such as an MST constitution. For example in 1996 to 1997 the novela (soap opera) O Rei do Gado was broadcast by TV Globo in a primetime slot. The novela portrayed land occupiers in a broadly sympathetic light but was still subject to significant criticism from Stédile. Perhaps preoccupied with how the movement is portrayed in terms of its (un)democratic internal organisation, he derided the novela for depicting “‘a half-messianic leader who decided by himself” instead of democratically run assentamentos’ (Hammond 2004: 83). Academic opinion therefore, incidental personal opinions of notable MST personages
and also much activist literature such as Mark’s ‘Taking back the land’ (2001) have insistently associated the concept of democracy with the movement.

However, for all the rhetoric of decentralisation of power and the idea of creating participative democracy, there is some doubt amongst non members but also members as to how the movement organises itself at all levels, including the level of national leadership. Some members that I spoke to were under the impression that this body is not subject to any elections at all. It has also been stated that all members on the national leadership are subject to re-election every two years bar three people, one of whom is João Pedro Stédile (Branford and Rocha 2002: 253). And yet other sources claim that all national leadership candidates are subject to election by the whole movement, as opposed to just the national coordination committee (Doc.visualab 2004). Similarly scholars are unclear as to the basic organisation of the movement, for example how many sectors the movement is divided into. Kerriem mentions how an ‘acampamento or assentamento of 100 families is divided into 10 núcleos of 10 families, with two coordinators – a man and a woman. Other members of the núcleo participate in the health, education, communication, political education, or mass front sectors’ (2009: 320). And while my data gathered in Santa Catarina would certainly contradict Kerriem’s assertion, at least in Kerriem’s and Branford and Rocha’s work (2002: 30), there is an attempt to get to grips with how the movement is organised, which is generally lacking in the wider literature (Caldeira 2008; Caldeira 2009; Carter 2005; Issa 2007; McNee 2005; Meszaros 2000a; Meszaros 2000b; Wolford 2003).

Perhaps this confusion is inevitable in a movement that has rapidly had to implement a large bureaucracy in order to remain operationally effective. After all, it has gone from a regional operation to a national phenomenon in less than a decade. Wright and Wolford note that since its inception in 1984 when it consisted of a few thousand members, rapid expansion has necessitated a professionalisation of its administrative structures. Coping with over a million members, they argue, has even led to a dilution in the early rhetoric of the movement’s revolutionary message, as inevitably practical considerations, they suggest, are somewhat conservative in nature. Indeed, they state that ‘networks [have] to be maintained in order to disseminate information and feedback between and across organizational levels’ (2004: 313). Their perspective also notes that professional activists need to be paid and the bureaucracy of the MST has a high financial cost, a point on which they note Zander Navarro criticises the movement.
It is true that the MST has expanded hugely in a short space of time. However, it is also the case that the organisation of the movement is somewhat poorly documented. While it is the case that differing regional instances of the movement vary greatly in how they are organised, and this militates in favour of the idea that the movement is very much decentralised, I would suggest from my field research that this is due to local practical considerations rather than a lack of centralised control. Indeed, the notion of centralised control versus the concept of internal democracy is a point of much contention in literature surrounding the MST and key to any understanding of any possible leadership-membership dynamic.

The most vocal critics of the movement in this sense have been José de Souza Martins and Zander Navarro. Before a disagreement with Stédile, Navarro was the MST’s head of research but since then he has become a stern critic of the movement, not just in academic publications but also in other media outlets primarily focusing on the MST leadership. An article published in the Folha de São Paulo entitled, ‘Agrarian Comedy’ accuses the MST leadership of tactical incompetence regarding their struggle. ‘Strategically they have made many common errors, but the leaders of sem terra prefer the myopia of ideological details rather than an examination of reality’ (FSP 2007b). He also argues that the MST leadership’s efforts have failed to emancipate their membership as the leadership’s exercise of control over the membership through mechanisms such as the culture sector, is so strong that what should be a pedagogy of emancipation has become mere ‘indoctrinating mechanisms’ whose work inspires ‘an almost religious devotion’ (2002: 11). Navarro is understood to have a personal agenda when criticising the MST as a result of his long standing dispute with his one time colleague, Stédile and therefore his views must be taken within this context. However, Souza Martins has no such personal agenda and indeed, Stédile himself has been much influenced by his work (Branford and Rocha 2002: 135).

Souza Martins defines the organisation of the MST as consisting of two interwoven groups, one broadly acting as patron and the other acting broadly as client. While neither is homogenous, the group that fulfils the role of patron has reconstituted and subordinated a ‘uniformly revolutionary peasantry’ from diverse rural stakeholders in order to mobilise a powerful historical discourse that ‘legitimizes and fuels their struggles’ (2002: 321). Souza Martins describes a situation where ‘the voice from below’, embodying the diverse origins and differing economic demands of the rural subject, has been overridden by the ‘voice from above’ belonging to a mediating group from which
the MST leadership has emerged and now constitutes. He argues that ‘when the rural subject has been conservative, the mediating group has tended to be radical, and vice versa’ (2002: 327). Furthermore, with echoes of Spivak (1994) and more pertinently Pitarch’s (2004) observation of the phenomenon of ‘ventriloquism’ within the EZLN (the absence of the voice of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas and the presence of subcomandante Marcos’ tones), Souza Martins completely rejects the idea that the central leadership is in any way representative.

This kind of intervention by the middle class gives agrarian struggles generally a particular character: the peasantry makes a rapid transition from the role of an outcast and wholly marginalized ‘other’ to being incorporated with the status of client. From a culture of outright contempt, therefore, the rural subject is absorbed into a culture of patronage, which is nothing more than just another kind of ‘otherness’ (and, perhaps, even contempt). Underlying this transition is the idea that the rural poor will always need someone to talk/act on their behalf, a perception which downgrades or dismisses their own actions and utterances as politically inadequate, based as they are on an inability to comprehend the struggles of which they are a part. (2002: 321)

For Souza Martins, once a supporter of the MST, it is not only in these terms of patron and client that the leadership of the sem terra has evolved but it is also how the institutionalisation that Stédile and Issa deny exists has come to be concretised. The view of the late Milton Santos, one of Brazil’s most respected academics seems to embody how a ‘mediating’ class could view a ‘uniformly revolutionary peasantry’.

The sem terra speak for us. They represent us. We can’t protest because we’re afraid of losing our jobs, too frightened to stand up for our ideals. We restrict ourselves to personal projects. And when the MST protests, we feel happy, all of us.
(ESP 2007)

Therefore, if Souza Martins’ theory is in any way accurate, the existence of a patron client model raises some basic practical questions. For example, to what extent do the leaders
of the MST represent the non leaders? And how, as MST literature assures us is the case, are they elected?

‘Without agrarian reform, there is no democracy’: Some practical observations

The question as to what extent the MST is a democratic movement does not have a large amount of critical literature attached to it. However, there have been some practical attempts to engage with the topic, notably by Branford and Rocha. In framing the debate around ‘internal democracy’, they deliberately simplify the opposing positions thus:

Is the MST constructing a genuine democracy in which people freely decide the key issues governing their lives? Or are the leaders cynically manipulating ignorant peasants to gain support for an alien revolutionary cause? (2002: 251)

The critical position, they acknowledge, is very much associated with Souza Martins and particularly Navarro, the latter of whom they quote freely, citing his view that the MST has ‘a policy of indoctrination in the worst sense of the word’. They also quote Navarro’s description of how poor people are recruited by the movement, trained and brainwashed in leadership camps that preach a Marxist doctrine, before being given the power of addressing and therefore controlling large groups of the massa, in the position of a militante. However, this is not where the true centre of power lies. Navarro argues that ‘the leaders control these cadres in draconian fashion. If one of them expresses doubts, he is expelled’ (ibid.).

Through the detail of interviews and participant observation that Branford and Rocha draw their data from, it becomes clear that they do not agree with Navarro’s position. And as proof, they use the scheme of how a new member of the movement encounters its democratic mechanisms from joining, to becoming encamped, to becoming a settler. First of all, they state that in the acampamento, ‘the militantes encourage the acampados to elect a camp co-ordinator’ (2002: 252). This coordinator, whom the authors admit is sometimes picked by the militantes in the absence of an obvious
candidate, then organises the day-to-day running of the camp, with the help of the militantes who tend to stay on location while an acampamento is establishing itself. This organisation they describe as quite particular and complex. First the coordinator divides the acampados into núcleos. Each núcleo then elects two representatives to the camp coordination committee, which runs the camp. This committee then supervises the formation of sectores, such as health, safety, production and so on. The núcleos assign workers to each of the sectores and there is a daily general assembly to report on developments and air grievances.

In Branford and Rocha’s reading, the acampamento coordination committee is taken as the building block of the MST leadership pyramid. The acampamento committee elects two representatives to sit on the board of the regional coordination committee, which in turn elects two more representatives to the state coordination committee. They describe how this body is too large to function effectively, so the state coordination committee then elects the direção estadual, the state leadership, which runs all business on a state level. They cite Stédile’s view that this level of leadership is the key decision-making forum in the MST, an opinion that was backed up by Tais in an interview when I asked her what she meant by ‘leadership’ and whether it included the national committee.

It’s that the national level leadership don’t have much contact with us, I know who they are, but I’m not in contact with them. Really, it’s more the regional and state level leadership who are the people who we see around here.

The state leadership then elects two further representatives to the national coordination committee, but ‘again it is the smaller national council, the direção national, made up of 21 people which is the more powerful body’ (2002: 253). Thus, in their understanding, the acampamento committee underpins the entire leadership structure of the MST. Further, they state that in order to guard against an entrenchment of a cadre or rather to ensure that ‘new ideas from the grassroots are fed into the council’, although national leaders have a mandate of two years and can be then re-elected, ‘the movement encourages a turnover of about one third at each election’ (my italics ibid.). In this description therefore the movement certainly seems democratic with a tight hierarchy of elections that guarantees accountability at all levels. My field experience however, differs somewhat from this portrayal.
Firstly it is important to define what constitutes a leader according to the members with whom I spoke. The term was certainly ambiguous and used in differing contexts for people in different roles, a more in-depth description of which I will sketch later in the chapter. Broadly it was the case that there were leaders *internal* to the organised hierarchy but also people termed ‘leaders’ *external* to this structure. I identified four levels of *internal* leadership hierarchy thus: a semi-formalised local level, for example responsible for the *assentamento* of N_ and surrounding area; a regional level, responsible for example for an area like the northern part of Santa Catarina, the *Planalto-Litoral*, a state level and of course the national level. But the term ‘leader’ was not exclusive to people occupying these formalised roles. Indeed, there was a variety of non formalised positions which seemed to attract the same moniker. *Frente de Massa militantes* for example, were often termed as ‘leaders’ by the *acampados* they encountered, for instance, when helping to establish an *acampamento*. Within the *acampamento* itself, I also heard the camp’s coordination committee’s members being given the epithet ‘leader’ by other *acampados*. The term could also be used to reflect someone’s authority within just a single *assentamento*. If a particular member had a strong vision of how to produce for example, especially within a collective sector of production, he or she could also come to be termed as a ‘leader’. Finally, members with specific technical skills, for example, movement trained agronomists travelling around the state trying to improve production levels were often given the sobriquet as a mark of respect for their superior education level. Indeed, education seemed an important factor in determining levels of respect. One member, whilst talking about schooling, scoffed at Andre’s salary, saying that he had no education and therefore shouldn’t be earning so much.

Therefore, *external* to the organised and well known hierarchy existed a variety of positions which were connoted with ‘leadership’. But even *internal* to the hierarchical leadership structure, positions within each level were not so rigidly ascribed as Branford and Rocha portray. For example, although Rafa acted as state leader of the _ sector, there was no regional leader of culture for the *Planalto-Litoral*. Rather, positions were created on the basis of demand and/or expertise. So, for example Paula, co-managing a medicinal herbs project with the federal university had been appointed a regional leader for the health sector. None of the positions that I encountered were elected in the manner Branford and Rocha describe. And between the sectors, it was clear that the one with most weight was the *frente de massa*. Harnecker describes it thus:
The Mass Front is not just one more sector or activity of the MST, as we have already said, it is its very heart, “pumping blood to the whole movement.” It unites cadres working at the base, and all those who expand the Movement to the whole country.

(Harnecker 2002)

Lúcia indeed confirmed to me that the senior leaders tended to come from this sector, having proved themselves in moments of conflict. Lúcia intimated that this was the best environment in which to win the respect of other leaders, namely, in situations of physical confrontation. A female member of the frente de massa was particularly highly spoken of as she had severely wounded a military policeman’s arm with a foice (the ensuing civil suit brought her yet more fame within the movement). Lúcia said that work of this nature ‘called attention’ to you from the leadership.

The terms coordination and council (coordenação and direção) were at all times used interchangeably by members of the movement in a manner which led me to believe that there was no formal difference. The pyramidal structure which Branford and Rocha describe which elects members to the committee of the level above was not in evidence in my fieldwork. And having spoken to members of the movement, I doubt that it ever fully existed, except in theory. Even then, the model leaves no input for the majority of the members of the movement, those who are already assentados; indeed, the structure they describe is based purely on ‘balloting’ acampados, which seems very unrealistic.

Also, at no stage of my study did I encounter the idea or the reality of elections for leadership positions. Rather, it was clear that the leadership at state level made the decisions regarding who acted in a leadership capacity under them. However, in making these decisions, they relied heavily upon the regional level of leadership, people such as Andre, head of the frente de massa, Luizinho, head of education or Kleber, head of production. These three particular actors had a great deal of discretion in selecting and forwarding potential leaders. For example, I was informed by Lúcia that Andre had a large role in appointing the coordinator of each acampamento in his region, a position which can guarantee that when the land is devolved, your name will be higher on the list to receive land than others. This process revolved around the interaction between Andre and his superior Coutinho, who was variously reported to be either state or national level leader of the frente de massa sector (the former is more likely). Coutinho would deliberate
Andre’s suggestions and together with other members of the state leadership make the decision as to who would head the acampamentos in the Planalto-Litoral area (one of six such areas in Santa Catarina).

Luizinho also performed a similar role for education. He selected and vetted Márcio to be the school teacher in the O_acampamento and because MST education sector workers are state employees, this power of patronage has a significant financial angle. As an MST education sector leader or employee, one receives a salary much beyond what might be typically earned in an acampamento through serviços (manual labour for nearby farmers).

Kleber’s responsibilities were more concerned with trying to ensure that assentamentos in his region remained productive. And despite his own assentamento failing as a co-operative, he had been in this role for seven years. In fact, his presence acted as a barrier to Mirelle who wished to take on this role and had been his unofficial ‘local’ level deputy. But due to the time that he had already served, Kleber was considered unmovable. Kleber’s immutability was behind one of his nicknames in the movement. Many members, while affording him much respect (one member mentioned to me that when he speaks, you listen) also called him chefão behind his back. This significant term derives from the word chefe, which means chief or boss. In the MST it is not accepted discourse to term oneself a leader and therefore the term chefão is purely pejorative, without any connotation of respect. A leader will always say that he or she is part of the co-ordination, or belongs to a certain sector. The ambiguity of the titles however, are no barrier to other members knowing who you are and what you do. As such, chefe is not a term that a leader would ever use to describe themselves and chefão is even more freighted with meaning, signifying ‘big chief’ or ‘chief of chiefs’. It is used to denote a leader who is in charge of everything and has the authority to issue orders. Kleber, due to the longevity of his position and his total control over events in the assentamento of B_had come to be known by this term.

During my research certain members of the movement expressed concern to me about the unchanging nature of regional and state leadership. Branford and Rocha also raise questions over what they term to be the ‘old guard’ of the movement, asking whether this group of people will ‘eventually hand over power to a new generation of democratically elected leaders’ (2002: 254). Strangely, one of the strongest critics of this sedimented and unchanging leadership was Tais, Kleber’s daughter, who together with a friend described the MST to me as a gerontocracia, a type of oligarchical state where the
leaders are substantially older than the majority of the adult population. Tais’ friend Michel described how the ossification of the leadership was a major barrier to emerging ideas before Tais suggested that they had sedimented themselves because they didn’t want to give up the power that they had gained. She pointed out that the vast majority of the state and national leadership were in their forties or older, that is, of the generation who were young men at the time of the conference of 1984 in Cascavel. Tais also mentioned that Paula, dismissed as a mere crony of Kleber by Gaetano, had taken to referring to the state leadership as ‘dinosaurs’. But what keeps this group in the leadership positions if new members are constantly being recruited and elections are at least in theory, taking place?

The ‘mediating group’ of Souza Martins’ portrayal?

Souza Martins describes a mediating group which tends to ‘amalgamate all the rural subjects, from distinct cultural backgrounds and in equally distinct economic relations, into a uniform “Brazilian peasantry” with an uniform political interest’ (2002: 327). And in my research, it certainly seemed as though the formalised state leadership within Santa Catarina had to a certain extent become entrenched as a ‘voice from above’. But how is uniformity of opinion maintained, if it exists at all? And how is the ‘voice from above’ rendered homogenous and monotone?

Maintaining ideological continuity would clearly be of great importance in this paradigm and in this manner the integrity of candidates is at least partially guaranteed by the phenomenon of the leaders themselves choosing junior functionaries without election. Branford and Rocha describe how ‘activists are trained to spot potential leaders within the new recruits’ (2002: 252) as an alternative system to election. In my field research, if there were elections, they were not held openly and many times I was simply informed that someone had been appointed, or much more often, not appointed. It seems that simply, the process is one of determining an epistemologically similar talent, isolating it, and then promoting it. Coutinho and Andre select who they think are appropriate to act as militantes in the frente de massa sector and in this manner, the values that they espouse can be reproduced through selection, creating an epistemic community around the values the MST leadership think the MST should consist of.
To keep individuals within the overall ideology and practice of the management structure, there is a system of evaluation, whereby leaders at local and regional levels submit reports on their activities to their state superiors. For example, at the encontro dos sem terrinha, Lúcia, having volunteered to act as one of the coordinators had to be evaluated by Luizinho, regional head of education, who would then pass this report on to Mariana and Rafa (state heads of __ and __ respectively and also husband and wife), the overall coordinators of the meeting, before being evaluated by them in turn. I was told that evaluation was performed regularly but certainly once a year. The state meeting in this respect is a key event for networking purposes and I will speak more about this in the next chapter. Evaluation is important, in that it renders leaders more accountable. But in the present system, leaders are only really accountable to their peers, rather than the base. Evaluation also guarantees that senior management can dictate policy direction and ensure that this direction is applied and put into practice on the ground. Ensuring ideological and practical continuity in this manner is one of the key facets of succession management (Cf. Hill & Stewart 2007) and through constant appraisal, this can be made more possible.

When observing the leadership interacting with each other, one of the first things that struck me was a general difference in appearance. At the state meetings, junior meetings, rallies, and even in acampamentos, they dressed better than members and were somewhat less likely to use the red, movement style t-shirt that many members wear (see figures 14 and 15). Andre in particular, when visiting the acampamentos in his region, struck quite a contrast. At meetings, the leadership could also be noticed socialising amongst themselves, brought on in part by the fact that they do work very closely with each and have to maintain contact to develop occupations or other strategies. Lúcia described to me how the leadership tended to keep themselves to themselves, creating an inner circle to which she had often been invited. Despite her close involvement, primarily as a facilitator to the state and regional leaders, Lúcia expressed certain reservations about leaders in general. She told me that she didn’t think that they really saw the massa and often they could become self important and closed. She commented to me on one particular occasion as to how Rafa was looking at us as we talked amongst ourselves. She intimated that he disapproved of us talking with each other. However,

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Lúcia would host people from other cities who had come to visit for a leadership meetings or she would call certain members on behalf of various leaders. She also performed many other tasks and told me that the leaders trusted her to be circumspect about their activities.
when on another occasion, I asked her directly what she thought of the leadership being prone to assuming a chefão mentality, she partially agreed but offered a justification.

It has to be like this, no? If not it would become a mess. They are kind of annoying, demanding – ‘it must be like this!’ or ‘let’s do it like this, because it will work out better this way’. But often it does work out better like that. You see the people really look to the leadership. So when there was that big conflict with the army (Papanduva), the people that had come from acampamentos and assentamentos went to Everton and his brother, people like that, and they were saying, ‘what should we do?’ And what they are told, they do, do you get it?’ Go up there? They go up there. We stay down here? They stay down here. So people look to the leadership.

I asked if she didn’t think this was potentially dangerous.

Perhaps sometimes it could be, no? But most of the time the leadership have got their feet on the ground. They know what they are doing. When they say, let’s get out of here’, it’s because it really is dangerous. When they say ‘let’s stay here because it’s going to work out alright’ we stay here.

It is certainly the case that the leadership are generally trusted, especially by the acampados, whose contact with the frente de massa militantes is key in establishing the physical encampment and facing down any threat, but also in establishing the moral code of the movement, a template that if the acampados wish to gain land, they must live their life by. (Cf. Branford and Rocha, p. 243). However, the system of leaders is not clearly understood by acampados. For example in O, acampados were generally only familiar with Andre and Coutinho, the latter of whom perhaps visited only once every six months. The distance between leaders and members, beyond clothing or social circles is also accentuated by the fact that certain leaders, especially of the frente de massa, are sometimes comfortable using firearms, a fact that is concealed from the vast majority of MST acampados.

What further encourages the distance between leaders and members of the movement is the special training that leaders receive. This training is residential and is conducted on sites to which activists must travel. Such training and selection has been
well documented, see for example (Branford and Rocha 2002; Kane 2000; Veltmeyer 1997; Wright and Wolford 2003) and there is controversy as to what it represents.

Wright and Wolford describe how ‘young activists who join up with the MST’s cause spend anywhere from a couple of weeks to several months or even a year in “formation classes”’ (2003: 309-10) where a Marxist ideology is taught and the leaders are shown what is expected of them within the movement. Branford and Rocha describe in detail how training activists was a priority for the movement in its early years as the sympathisers of the Catholic church were gradually replaced by people from within the ranks of the settlers themselves. The centre they visited in Paraná, they describe as ‘no more than a boarding school. […] The youngsters were in the classrooms in the mornings, where they learnt all the normal subjects, spiced up with the MST’s views on the evils of capitalism and the importance of revolutionary struggle’ (2002: 120). But Navarro has criticised these centres on the basis that they indulge in indoctrination. He remarks that with their military style discipline and ideological training what in effect is happening is a process where leaders are created ‘drunk with power’ (cited in Branford and Rocha 2002: 121).

The precise reality of this debate is difficult to ascertain and I was not able to visit such a school during my fieldwork. But it certainly seems that Navarro’s criticisms go too far given my experience in meeting these young men and women, even if the atmosphere of ideological isolation to which leaders are confined might be discomforting to some external observers. What can not be denied however, is that by removing members from their homes and by making the intake primarily consist of young men (the life of a militante is extremely difficult to combine with having a family), a certain separation is engendered between those who train and those who don’t. This is of course a practical necessity, activists have to be trained and naturally, leaders will be drawn from those who show enthusiasm and ‘buy into’ movement practice and rhetoric. But coupled with the system of evaluation and the inevitable socialisation that occurs amongst people that share responsibility for projects and were trained in similar, if not the same contexts, there is the potential for a cadre to emerge.

What further distances the experience of a member from that of a leader is that the leaders are paid. The fact that leaders are paid to spend time away from the assentamento is indicative of the obvious tension that must exist within a movement where it is recognised that new members must be politicised and trained into being what the O Jornal Sem Terra (The Landless Newspaper, or JST), describes as a new ‘social citizen that
[the] MST wishes to create’ (Wolford 2003: 505). And the question of finance is an interesting consequence of this tension.

Data surrounding this question of money was especially hard to come by but I was told two separate accounts which in fact contradict each other. In the first I was told that leaders who live in acampamentos or assentamentos (mainly the latter as I came across no regional or state leaders who lived on an acampamento) were paid a monthly minimum wage, that is around R$450. Leaders who lived in the city, I was informed were paid double this. However, the second account named individuals and specific salaries. Therefore Kleber was supposedly earning R$1,500 per month despite living on an assentamento and Andre supposedly R$800. It is difficult to know what is the more accurate portrayal and Kleber’s salary certainly seems exaggerated in the second account given the fact that it constitutes three times the monthly minimum wage. However, the flexibility of salary I would consider a possibility, as important decisions I encountered regarding the leadership were decided by other leaders and kept hidden from non leaders.

Ossification at the higher levels

I have discussed how evaluation, a degree of separation from the members, selection and a similar formative context are part of the experience of being an MST leader. But what keeps these people in their positions when there is a constant influx of new blood? One of the most important factors is the respect that is accorded to someone who has been in the movement since close to its inception. Kleber for example, commanded respect partly because he joined the movement in 1987 but also because he had been encamped for twelve years and there was a general acknowledgement that encampment now was easier than it used to be. Kleber told me that there was no cesta básica when he was embaixo da lona (under black plastic) and he also commented that repression now was not comparable to repression a decade ago. His suffering then, and that of his family partly constituted the esteem in which he was held. The generation he belonged to (he was 46 at the time of interview and would have been 23 at the time of the Cascavel conference) was also the generation of many other leaders, important figures in Santa Catarina such as Everton, Coutinho, Vitor, Gordão and Wendel. Because these men had faced harsh
repression and emerged victorious, their decisions were less likely to be questioned by a young leader who had entered the movement post 2000 with a clean sheet when it came to ‘combat’. There was no doubt that being part of the movement in the era when it might be commonly possible to be on first name terms with ‘João Pedro’ increased your status.

Further, as I have already stated, during my fieldwork in Santa Catarina, I never encountered the electoral system for leadership roles that Branford and Rocha document. Kleber had been regional leader for production for seven years and when I asked Mirelle and Lúcia about a leader’s terms of office they told me that most often when a leadership role changed, it would be because the person in question needed a break from the work. They left me in no doubt that being a leader meant long hours, travelling around the state, sleeping rough in acampamentos or on people’s floors and being thrown together in close proximity with people you didn’t know.\(^{24}\) In our conversation, they told me that after three or four years, some people would take a break before perhaps returning to the role later on. However, when I asked Mirelle about Kleber’s position, which she wanted to assume, she said that it was impossible he would relinquish it and that therefore it would be impossible for her to do the role. Sharing the role was mentioned as a possibility but nothing more.

I understood it to be the case that it is only in extreme situations that a leader is asked to ‘retire’ and I did not encounter this. In one situation which I will analyse in greater detail in the next chapter, a leader seriously transgressed the MST’s code but was still not asked to relinquish his post. If the movement’s leaders are accountable how could this have happened? It seems that because certain members of the regional and state leadership come from the same generation, have undergone similar experiences of training, have come from similar backgrounds and have been proven alongside each other at moments of crisis, there is understandably a bond between them and this bond means that they are loath to ‘betray’ a fellow member of their group. Further, they work together as professionals, travel together and sleep roughly together. Farming is no longer their primary income, because they spend so much time shuttling around the state, organising occupations, chairing meetings or convening for strategic purposes.

\(^{24}\) Branford and Rocha describe the hardships of leadership and how Jamie Amorim, the then MST coordinator for the state of Pernambuco was from Santa Catarina but had been sent north to assist José Rainha in establishing the movement outside the South (2002: 79).
Indeed, as I have already noted, as a leader you are paid a salary as recognition that you will not have much time to farm.

Essentially, leaders are friends with one another and as such, generally unwilling to promote an outsider and therefore weaken their own position and base of support. During my fieldwork, I witnessed only one change at state leadership level which was Teresa ceding her role as head of education to Mariana. It was unclear whether this was done by ballot of other leaders, but clearly, Mariana’s marriage to Rafa, state leader of the sector was a factor, as was her relationship as daughter-in-law of Martelinho, state leader for external relations. Alliances and consolidation of power are therefore noticeably part of being an MST leader and when Mirelle confided in me that she hoped her son would become successful in the movement and be like João Pedro Stédile, it was clear that there is a ladder there to climb, albeit one with barriers and obstacles just like any other.

The Cadre

I have demonstrated above that there are certain mechanisms which distance the regional and state level leadership from the members who live in the assentamentos and acampamentos and bind these people together as a group. And equally, there does seem to be a certain degree of entrenchment and ideological reproduction within these bodies, as well as a lack of new blood into what some members have termed the gerontocracia. But can we really consider as serious Souza Martins’ charge that an urban mediating group is controlling and directing an essentialised peasantry? Navarro’s thesis that a middle cadre ‘inculcated with Marxism’ (Branford and Rocha 2002) is being kept in strict line by a national executive, I found to be unrealistically homogenous. But Souza Martins’ critique is of much more importance. Answering this charge therefore and on the basis of my fieldwork, I would argue that the principles regarding the organisational nature of the movement as set out at Cascavel in 1984 (not letting a clique of powerful leaders run the movement, creating a decentralised administration) have not been betrayed. There is not one single leader and nor is there a powerful inner clique that govern how MST members go about the majority of their daily lives. Stédile is a vocal spokesperson and he appears at all manner of events be they small workshops for militantes, corporate fundraising
events in high rise hotel conference suites on Ipanema beach, or commemorative events in Sarandí in Rio Grande do Sul. And although he is reputedly unelected along with other members of the original group of seminarians that Martelhinho helped to establish, their presence on the national leadership was not a concern for any of the members that I met in Santa Catarina. The movement also operates with a decentralised administration. Most of the important decisions about Santa Catarina are taken at state level and there is no ‘office’ where these people meet. Communication is conducted by mobile phone and face to face contact, although it helps that many of the state leadership in Santa Catarina are geographically in close proximity. Therefore in these ways, the movement’s leadership does not fit with Souza Martins’ theory. There is also the fact that the MST national leadership (after consultation) tried and failed to implement an across the board programme of collectivisation in June 1990. This project was rejected by the movement’s members with much protest prompting Stédile to reflect that ‘today we draw up “guiding principles” but we leave it to each state or each settlement to decide how and when these orientations will be implemented’ (ibid.: 95).

However, as a result of the structural dynamics that I have outlined above, I believe it to be the case that although there is no elite group in conclave at national level, such a group does to a certain extent exist at state level and through movement norms can exercise a great deal of control over who fills regional leadership positions, what strategies these regional leaders can then pursue but also importantly, the type of people that are forwarded as aspirants to engaging in this structure. That is, if a cadre of ‘middle class, of rural petty-bourgeois background’ (Souza Martins 2002) can be said to exist, then they exist at state level and down, rather than national. However, as Stédile admits, it is precisely this level of the hierarchy that has the most control over members’ every day activities in terms of both ideology and practice.

There is an important caveat here though which is that the two groups of ‘member’ and ‘leader’ are not so clearly delineated as scholars on the MST often portray them to be. There is no ‘urban bourgeois’ versus a massed ‘politically illiterate’ peasantry. In fact, from ‘state level leader’ to the rawest recruit there is a diverse and complex hierarchy in which some members choose to not involve themselves whatsoever. But for those that

25 A cause for concern for many of the members that I spoke to in the Planalto-Litoral as the location that most of the state leaders came from was in the west and members from the Planalto-Litoral felt somewhat underrepresented, despite Coutinho, Martelhino, Perotti and Vitor all being local.
do, (if they are acampados, perhaps on a tacit understanding that land will be granted to them before others), this complex ladder of opportunities presents many different paths and roles. The most telling confirmation of this multiplicity of roles is that the word ‘leader’ is often applied to someone who holds no official position within movement hierarchy at all. So what are the differing steps in this hierarchical organisation? And who are the individuals that constitute this high diverse body that are both termed, and sometimes term themselves, leaders?

Unpicking leaders and members: Some leadership profiles

Further to Souza Martins’ theory of an urban elite is the reality that increasingly the MST is becoming a quasi-urban social movement. It already has strong links to MTST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores sem Teto – The movement of homeless workers) and when I asked various members of the movement what percentage of the new acampados were from urban backgrounds, Thiago in particular was certain that at least 80% of the new intake were not from the countryside. Therefore, a new type of person is entering the movement, young and urban and sometimes already politically aware, but unable to farm. These dynamics have given rise to a new generation of militantes and Lúcia was explicit as to how the state and regional leadership see these people, telling me that if someone comes with experience of a trade union or urban social movement, they are immediately potentially eligible for a militante position in the frente de massa sector (seemingly the first rung on the ladder) as they don’t need to be, in her words ‘formado politicamente’ (politically trained). Thus, people with urban backgrounds are being ‘fast-tracked’ into potential leadership positions and they are not without role models to aspire to.

Typically a leader must have undergone the process of encampment but this evidently can be circumvented. I was told that Mariana, state head of __ was a journalist before she joined the movement and married Rafa, never having encamped herself. Further, it was not clear whether they both still lived on an assentamento or not, although they were technically registered as living in the assentamento of H_. Coutinho as well, an important figure in the frente de massa, I was told had never encamped and lived in São Caetano do Sul, a pretty coastal town near the assentamento of B_. Perotti had encamped,

26 Usually the outskirts of Joinville in my research
but he now lived in Florianópolis, having completed an undergraduate degree in law at UFSC, although his brother still lived in the assentamento of C_. And Vitor also, like Perotti had moved into the city after encampment and settlement, in his case to Blumenau, where the world’s second biggest beer festival after the Oktoberfest occurs. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find out where all the state leaders lived to give a complete picture. Indeed, it was difficult enough just to find out who they were and what they did. But this urban tendency also marked regional leaders as well. Carolina, an important regional leader of the ___ sector due to her proximity to Mariana was from an urban background. And this tendency has also been noted by Branford and Rocha:

At most, a few young sem terra militantes will admit to some unease with the fact that the leaders, none of whom came from sem terra families, do not live with their families in camps or settlements but have homes in the towns or cities. (2002: 254)

Branford and Rocha here are talking about the national level leadership, and although this description was written in 2000 or 2001, it could now partly apply to state level leadership as well.

Into this system therefore come individuals like Paulo. Brought up in the coastal cities of Santa Catarina, Paulo was heavily involved in the urban movement Passe Livre in Florianópolis and upon entering the MST in his forties, was immediately selected as a militante for the frente de massa sector to establish new encampments in the South of the state. As I have mentioned before, this kind of activity is commonly thought of to be the best way to forward yourself for a regional role. The vast majority of MST action happens in and around encampments, whether it be recruiting people to fill them, or organising them once an occupation has taken place. Add to this that the MST’s style of direct action politics (occupying banks, INCRA offices, roadblocks) is still very much a core activity, it becomes clear that frente de massa militantes are kept busy and therefore visible to their superiors. However, despite his commitment to the movement, with his intellectual style and urban clothes, movement members who knew Paulo laughed about

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27 So much so that according to him, his house on a Florianópolis beach was broken into one night by masked police, MST materials heaped together and then set alight, burning his house to the ground.
28 In the course of this work, he and Perotti were arrested by the military police and incarcerated for three days before being released by a district judge on the basis of habeas corpus in February 2010.
the idea of him planting crops. Indeed on one occasion in the acampamento of U_, I overheard someone saying that Paulo seemed more at ease talking with me than with the real members of the movement. But despite difficulties, his progress seemed to be going smoothly, to the point that he was given the opportunity to make an address at the 2009 state meeting. Shortly after this speech, Lúcia stated that although he was doing well, he would need to do a lot more to really catch the leadership’s attention.

Cleiton was another urban individual who saw potential for personal advancement in the MST, especially with regard to the possibility of going to university.29 Extremely well educated, having gone to a private school to complete the equivalent of his A-levels, he desired to involve himself as a militante in the education sector.

I could make myself useful to the MST in various ways. Like working in an assentamento school, working with children, with young people, with adults… Be it in primary school, or high school, teaching reading and writing and so on. I could work also with projects with courses more… courses of training, I could create these courses.

Complimenting this more urban profile are the second generation MST settlers who look to the movement to provide them with employment and opportunity in the countryside. There is a significant ‘second generation’ problem in the movement that I will address in the final chapter but these actors did not want to leave the movement for the city. Rather they were interested to work for the movement in an organisational function, rather than farm at home.

Juliana, Davi’s daughter was one such individual. Her ambition was to become a movement technician, trained in agronomy but from an ecological perspective. Davi told me that she could expect to earn R$1,800 per month in this capacity. Of course being a technician is not strictly speaking a leadership position, but such is the interchangeability of terms, that anyone with expertise who has been trained by the movement can easily be termed a leader. Also, the transition from such a position to state leader of the production sector could be a natural step and it seemed that this was valid.

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29 He was doubtless influenced in this by observing that Tais, Kleber’s daughter had managed to obtain a scholarship to FURBE, a private university in Blumenau. The terms of this scholarship were never fully explained to me, but it seemed that the fact that she was an assentada was part of the deal.
where Juliana aspired to, given the ‘correct’ views that she was already espousing concerning important topics such as Cuba.

Ché was in a similar position to Juliana but his path was already marked differently. He lacked technical skills, although he had graduated from the same MST residential high school as Juliana, but he was slightly older and already being given responsibility at state level. When I encountered him, he had created a new sub-sector for himself and had assumed responsibility for coordinating the non member university student supporters of the movement within Santa Catarina. He combined this role with strident views on political economy and an unspecified responsibility for the youth of the movement. This role, which José had fulfilled for a time in the Planalto-Litoral at a regional level, was a sector that tended to come and go as local enthusiasm amongst young people waxed and waned. What was clear about Ché though from his interaction with the other leaders at the state meeting and his courting of them, was that he was ambitious and looking for new roles to take on.

In this vein, due to the ambiguity surrounding the term ‘leader’ there are yet more roles that can be assumed outside of the rigid formal structure. Some people, like Alvise, choose to opt out of this system altogether and work outside the movement’s structure. Some members like Estela, are elected onto coordination committees within their acampamento, and are termed ‘leaders’ by other acampados. Still others like Roberto are content to have authority at a very localised level, typically within just one assentamento. As I have already noted, many people in the assentamento of N_ had harsh things to say about Roberto and his plans for the total collectivisation of assentamento production, including Lúcia.

His ideas don’t agree with mine. I would never work out right in any co-op run by him. He really orders people around, like he wants to be the chefão. He takes everything very seriously. ‘It has to be like this!’ Pum! Ok, there are times when it has to be like this, but not the whole time.

The conflict that occurred in the N_ assentamento as a result of Roberto’s leadership style will be expanded upon in the sixth chapter but what is important to note here is that Roberto never held any formal position, yet he was still occasionally referred to as a leader, and this title was apparently even more common when the assentamento was still run collectively.
Therefore, there is a diversity of roles both internal and external to the published hierarchy. But importantly for questions on internal democracy, the vast majority of these roles are appointed rather than elected. This is particularly true of the acampamento coordinators (most members’ first encounter with a leadership position) but it is also true of the junior militantes of the frente de massa sector who are selected by people like Andre and then proposed to the state leadership as candidates. This power of patronage is important because it is from the ranks of these young militantes that future regional and state level leaders may emerge, given the way that frente de massa activity chama atenção (calls the attention) of the incumbent state leaders who proved themselves by engaging in frente de massa style activities. Given the lack of elections, the personal nature of appointments, the report system that exists between levels of hierarchy and the sedimentation of an elite group at state level, I would argue that this complex system is inherently clientelistic.

And this clientelism, or phrased in another manner, this lack of accountability, results in an array of perverse situations.

Events like the expulsion of Márcio and his father serve to illustrate the consequences of a system where there is no effective right to appeal. This forcible discipline has also been noted by authors such as Chaves (2000). She describes how whilst accompanying an MST march to Brasília, members were removed from the march by order of the leaders for behaviour that they felt to be incompatible with the movement’s rules. In her ethnography, Chaves notes:

On Friday another sem terra was expelled from the march. Márcio Rogério Toledo, 19, was sent home to São Paulo for ‘not having the moral or ethical condition’ to continue with the group. Friends who tried to intervene with the leaders on his behalf were rebuked and warned of expulsion themselves. (2000: 212, my translation.)

She describes how being the ‘Dom Juan’ of the group, Toledo’s offence had been to sleep with single women in the towns that the march was passing through, although this was not prohibited by the marching rules. Toledo tried to defend himself stating that the leaders ‘are the minority, but they decide everything’ (ibid.) but according to a leader named Bardem, the decision was final as all of the 20 coordinators in the meeting were unanimous. Indeed they concluded that such was Toledo’s behaviour, ‘disrespecting the practices of the march’s organisational committee’ that it was likely that he was an
‘enemy who had been placed to infiltrate them’ (ibid.). When Toldeo demanded another assembly to debate his dismissal he was refused and further threatened. Chaves notes how one member of the leadership stated ‘if he doesn’t leave, we will have to do things that we don’t want to do’ (ibid). His request was refused on the basis that only in cases of a non unanimous decision can a further assembly be called. Chaves also quotes Bardem declaring that in respect of the coordinators’ authority, ‘we have been chosen and therefore we have the backing to make decisions’ (2000: 213). After the decision was taken, Chaves details how although the leadership of the march declared that all members participated in decision-making, any members protesting on behalf of Toledo were banned from doing so and his very name became a closed subject. Toledo himself was escorted by a two man security detail preventing him from giving interviews until he could feasibly return to São Paulo.

While I did not directly witness any event similar to this during my time in Santa Catarina, Márcio and his father serve as an example of the potential consequences of clandestine leadership behaviour. Their removal was effected in one day upon an order that had been made in secret and the subject was kept so quiet that by the time I arrived in O_ (only a day after they were asked to leave), their physical traces had been removed and no one would inform me as to where they had gone or even why they had been expelled. This air of fear was identified and described by Gaetano in a conversation I had with him on the subject.

90% of people today, if they were to speak with sincerity, 90% don’t like to be ordered about. It’s just that there are people, that if you say I want an interview with you, certain things they will hide, they will not say with honesty ‘I don’t like this, or I don’t like that’. For example, over there in O_, they are frightened to speak the truth, to be sincere and criticise… so, around here you can’t be independent, because the guy who wants to be independent…

I asked him why he thought people were frightened to speak with me frankly.

Sometimes it’s complicated like this. Because people are frightened, they don’t want to be sincere. It’s the same thing with Andre, also with politics. There are people who don’t think well of the PT, but there are people who are frightened to NOT vote for the PT… it’s betrayal. But I will no longer vote for them. I’m
independent. I’m not obliged to vote for anyone. I have the right to vote for whom I want.

I mentioned that I wanted to speak to people in O_ about Márcio’s expulsion.

but Alex what do you want… (lowers voice) about expulsions from acampamentos – it’s that there are rules, there are laws that are not very well defined. They aren’t written down. And sometimes guys aren’t too quick to pick up on them. Sometimes a guy criticises things in the wrong way and sometimes he has to go.

Conclusion

Formal members of the MST’s leadership hierarchy seem to be appointed rather than elected. And it could be argued that the venality that my informants noted as pertaining to this system is not advantageous to the movement on a pragmatic level, especially as it gives credence to the authoritarian image of the movement that is projected by the Brazilian media. From the time that I spent interacting with the leadership and observing their career trajectories, what was most striking was that to become a leader, very little connection with the base seemed necessary. Instead, the key arenas to chamar atenção (call attention to yourself) were the big meetings and of course performing competently the tasks to which you had been entrusted. In the case of the big meetings, it was evident that professional networking was taking place. State leaders were at times surrounded by aspirants and a certain group of people tended to sit towards the front (where the leaders sit) in any given session. A connection to the povo (people) was not a basis on which to build a campaign for promotion as any advancement to be sought was within the gift of a small group of individuals. At the 2008 state meeting there were 22 leaders present, representing roughly 5,000 families in the state as a whole.30 And the lack of elections highlights the democratic deficit between these two figures.

Clearly, this tension is always going to be part of any large social movement, where members are represented by others speaking on their behalf and as Rubin (1994) saliently notes discussing the COCEI in Juchitán, ‘democratisation is related to but quite

30 Data from Mariana, head of __ sector, SC
distinct from elections’ (1994: 134). And perhaps this is even more true of the MST, where many members have no interest in leadership and even if they do, come from backgrounds where they have traditionally been denied a chance to speak and are therefore unaccustomed to having their opinion heard. Equally, the context of Brazil and more particularly, Santa Catarina must be taken into account; without doubt, the countryside where the MST operates can be an extremely dangerous and lawless environment. What cannot be doubted is that the leadership of the movement within Santa Catarina does not micromanage the daily lives of the members and here I am mostly talking about the leaders in the formal structure, for example, the regional leader of the production sector as opposed to a leader within the _U_ acampamento committee. There is a great deal of diversity within the state regarding methods of production and each _assentamento _is genuinely free to make its own decisions about how production will be organised and there are several different models. _B_ for example is collectivised in production, but not in other areas like food preparation. _H_ on the other hand is wholly collectivised in all areas whereas _N_ has two _núcleos_ within it, one collectivised and the other consisting of totally individual farmers with their own plots of land. Tensions of course exist and Roberto and Luizinho are part of the co-operative _núcleo _within the _assentamento _of _N_, but they do not try to force, nor do they have the sanctions to impose this way of life on the individual stakeholders that constitute the other _núcleo_, stakeholders that include a fellow leader, Andre.

Therefore, both leaders like Andre and Luizinho who are part of the formalised structure and non formal leaders like Estela, while maintaining a connection with state leadership physically _dwell _amongst other members and as such are accountable in more informal ways (Cf. Hilger’s [2008] analysis of how clientelism functions within democracy). Complaints can be directly raised with them, face to face. And this lack of distance from the members is also a characteristic of leaders like Vitor, who despite living in the city, are quite clearly comfortable amongst the ‘rank and file’ members for whom they work. I also understood venality to be an extremely rare phenomenon and despite rumours and allegations surrounding misappropriation of funds (common in Brazilian society both within and outside the MST), I never witnessed any petty financial corruption myself. The leaders are not rich and contrary to the hugely biased reporting that appears in most Brazilian media outlets, it is highly unlikely that they are making large amounts of money out of the movement.
There is also no doubting the commitment of the leaders that I encountered. They were almost exclusively people who were giving up a great deal of their time to organise movement events, often travelling all over the state in discomfort and sleeping for extended periods away from home. The frente de massa militantes in this sense in particular sacrificed their time and personal safety to try to accomplish the smooth establishment of acampamentos and in these settings were often greatly admired by acampados for their decisiveness and quick thinking. Nor was ideological content of the leaders always an invasive constant. At the encontro dos sem terrinha, Luizinho, who was noted for his strong views on Marxist political economy and his tendency to always divert conversation around to subjects related to this, spent the entire meeting with impressionable young adults. But neither in the debating sessions, nor the plenaries, were his views directly imposed upon the sem terrinha, even when suitable targets presented themselves.31

However, despite all these considerations, there are facets of the MST leadership that are open to critique. The ossification of the state leadership that Tais, Michel and Paula highlighted seems one of the most important points at which to start and this coupled with the lack of substantive elections means that favour and patronage become important vectors in the negotiation of any advancement. This in turn creates a system of clientelism, where favours are fed up and down the chain, encouraging leaders to build networks of people on whom they can rely. And although as I have detailed, in general the state leadership and downward have little impact on the members’ daily lives, when they do have an impact, it can be life changing. No one could argue that the MST leadership dominates the membership’s quotidian existence with an apparatchik led system, but adopting such a position would be to miss the point. Gaetano’s comment that the MST teaches you to have certain rights, but expressing an opinion is not one of them, rings true. And while as Lúcia comments, decisions have to be made to avoid chaos, being on the wrong end of an unfair decision, made perhaps for personal reasons and with no possibility for appeal, worried many members with whom I spoke. After all, there is no pension plan in the movement – if a member is expelled, they lose everything, friends, networks, means of subsistence, in short, they lose the movement, a whole way of life.

31 One such occasion occurred while we were on a coach driving from the morro to the beach. Firstly we passed through Beira-Mar, an upmarket city neighbourhood, brimming with signs of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and then near the beach we passed through Jurerê Internacional, an area synonymous in Florianópolis with the elite.
Stédile comments that the state leadership is the most important decision-making forum in the movement and from my data I believe this to be the case. And to highlight its importance, the next chapter will detail how the consequences of a decision taken by the Santa Catarina state leadership without consultation of the base, resulted in an extremely complicated and fraught situation for an MST member. I believe that this case study, which highlights issues surrounding gender, both explores and details contradictions in the MST’s leadership structure regarding accountability but also tensions that could potentially render the movement less responsive to change and therefore less effective in achieving stated goals of societal transformation.
Chapter 5 – Gender, Marxism and the MST

Ouverture

Fale para ela: Ela tem que lutar se ela quiser nossa ajuda
(Tell her: She has to fight if she wants our help)

November 2008. Andre seems distracted and evasive. Alone, Lúcia and I agree that he has been like this for months now, withdrawn and unfriendly. I ask Lúcia what has happened with Andre. When I first met him, he was dynamic and seemed to always be involved with any ongoing movement business. He was the embodiment of a regional leader of the frente de massa and he travelled all over the state, organising demonstrations, hiring minibuses and collecting lists of acampados to participate in movement activities. Indeed, Mirelle, his wife would comment that she more or less lived on her own, so great was the amount of time that Andre spent involved with the movement’s work. She would also comment that she was worried about him, that he wouldn’t come home for nights on end, and she would be sitting at home imagining that something terrible had happened or that he had perhaps been arrested by the police.

Even in the local area, Andre was a regular visitor in the acampamentos, making sure that operations were running smoothly and that morale had not dropped too low. He helped with my research, answering questions about how the movement stood on certain issues, introducing me to people, allowing me to stay in his house and eat with his family. I first met him at the state meeting in 2007, where we ate together with his son and I was impressed by his obvious passion for the movement. But it seems that this passion has gone and Lúcia doesn’t seem to want to explain what has brought about the change. I ask a few questions more but it clearly isn’t appropriate to pursue the topic so I drop it.

One month later. We’re at the state meeting, Lúcia, José and I. Andre is also here, laughing and joking with Martelinho and Kleber. I walk past them and stop to chat. Kleber is the same as ever, cracking dry jokes with a half smile. Martelinho likewise is as I remember him, boundless energy for a man his age and an indefatigable sense of enthusiasm. But Andre seems revitalised. He smiles at me and engages me in
conversation. We talk about his work in the Planalto and all the details are there, everything makes sense again. The disturbing blankness, the lack of passion, the muddled understanding of who is where and when events are scheduled seems to have totally cleared. The difference is so remarkable that when I encounter Lúcia and José again setting up our mattresses in the hall, I mention to them what I have seen, making a joke about how the state meetings really do revitalise people. Lúcia laughs a little but doesn’t offer any further comment. José merely remains silent, unrolling the bedding in the space reserved for our brigade.

As the meeting goes by, I am further surprised by Andre’s behaviour. He really seems to have rediscovered his brightness and enthusiasm and whenever I see him, he is chatting to an old acquaintance or a member of the state leadership. There is one activity in particular where following a speech by an UFSC academic on the global nature of the struggle, the plenary splits into small groups and issues raised in the speech are discussed and debated. In our group of twenty people, Andre leads the discussion, with Wendel, a senior state leadership figure, present. Our group discussion, which also includes Ché, is skilfully chaired by Andre, and I watch him bringing other opinions into the debate while offering his own reactions to the speech and its relevance to the movement’s activities. Wendel also seems to find Andre’s contribution impressive and I see him agreeing with Andre via a series of visual cues, such as nodding his head or tapping his pen on the folders and A4 provided. Andre’s use of language has also changed. The evasiveness that has characterised his habitual mode of expression has vanished to be replaced with the form of discourse appropriate for an important movement meeting. He is courteously asking the group if anyone else wishes to contribute. He is referencing international politics in Cuba and Venezuela in his own comments. He has an openness about him that I haven’t seen for months.

After the groups split for a coffee break, I see Andre with some friends of his that I don’t recognise. Lúcia mentions that they are contemporaries, people who entered the movement in the mid 90s. Andre smiles and makes a point of greeting me and starting a conversation. It seems strange as he hasn’t done this previously for two or three months, but it’s pleasant to talk to him again despite something forced about his smile and distantly I begin to recognise once again one of the first MST members that I met in my introduction to the movement.
Two months later. Andre has again lost the dynamism that he briefly re-found at the state meeting. He avoids all conversation with me now and when we are in each other’s company, it is incredibly difficult to even make small talk. Lúcia says that he is unbearably surly and totally unaware of what is happening in terms of frente de massa activity in the region. She tells me that he doesn’t come to the house much anymore because Mirelle is now living there as well. I ask Lúcia if Mirelle has moved out from the house she shares with Andre and Lúcia tells me that they are having problems, that it seems as though Mirelle won’t go back to him this time. It is obvious that they have lived apart before and I ask Lúcia how many times this has happened. She answers that it has happened many times. I comment that this is what must have been behind Andre’s strange behaviour in the past months. Lúcia agrees. ‘He was fighting for his position at the state meeting,’ she says. ‘He was going to be dismissed as regional leader of frente de massa. So he had to call attention to himself, he had to do well.’

I ask her in what sense she uses the phrase call attention (chamar atenção) and she replies that the decision on his future was being made on the basis of what the leaders thought of him at the state meeting. Whether they thought he was still up to job or not despite what he had done. I’m still unaware of the exact nature of the problems between Mirelle and Andre so finally Lúcia tells me what has been happening and incidentally, what has so seriously damaged Andre’s career and standing within the movement.

Lúcia relates how last year at some point, Andre started an affair with a woman who was encamped in U_. He was always visiting the acampamento, always finding reasons to visit it and he took no trouble to conceal the affair. This was humiliating for Mirelle, as everybody knew what was happening, even her children, but it also came to the attention of the state leadership. Lúcia tells me how the movement has a strict moral code. This is primarily enforced in spaces of potential tension such as acampamentos, but it can also be vaguely applied to various temporary and less temporary spheres of movement activity (Cf. Chaves 2000, Wright and Wolford 2003). However, Lúcia is dismissive of how the moral code is applied. She tells me despite the fact that it is prohibited to bring girls back to an acampamento, the leaders are commonly cheating on their partners, even sometimes with each other. Therefore despite the strictures, as a general rule she says, if the affairs are kept quiet, then there is a tacit understanding that people will look the other way. Lúcia tells me that Andre has fallen foul of the state leadership as he flaunts his mistress (a young woman) without taking the trouble to keep
things even relatively hushed up. However, it seems that *problemas conjugais* (conjugal problems) are not uncommon. Lúcia mentions how José, Rui, Milanese, Paula and Cleiton have all experienced difficult periods in various relationships within the movement, but Lúcia says that it was the openness with which Andre conducted the affair that caused trouble.

Lúcia tells me that the trouble resulted in Andre being spoken to informally by members of the state leadership. Their advice was to give up his young woman in the *acampamento*. Lúcia says that Mirelle is well known and well respected amongst the state leadership but the situation became more complex when Andre refused to heed his superiors’ informal advice. He refused to give the woman up and tensions started to manifest themselves within the *acampamento* itself, with accusations of prioritisation or favouritism being levelled at Andre amidst perceived preferential treatment. Understandably as Mirelle’s sister, Lúcia speaks in a negative manner of the young woman, saying that she was divisive and caused problems by herself in the *acampamento*, irrespective of her relationship with Andre. But in the end Lúcia says, she was kicked out of the *acampamento* by state level leadership firstly as a means to neutralise what was considered a troublesome personal presence but secondly to distance her from Andre. At this point, I ask Lúcia how long the woman had been encamped in _U_ before she was asked to leave. Lúcia tells me that she had been encamped for over a year.

However, as Lúcia continues, it becomes clear that this was not the end of the affair. Lúcia describes how she believes that Andre has used movement money, designated for *frente de massa* activity to set the woman up in a flat in a nearby town. Lúcia describes Andre as *desviado* (having strayed from the path) using movement money for his own purposes. I ask where this money comes from and Lúcia replies that as a leader of *frente de massa*, Andre has access to capital, whether it be hiring minibuses for transportation or disbursing monies to his *militantes*, to cover their basic expenses when they are travelling around the state on movement business. Lúcia tells me that the money comes from various sources which include trade union contributions as well as direct contributions from sympathetic PT *deputados* (members of parliament). Lúcia says that money is also collected from *acampamentos* themselves as they have a moneybox that receives a collection. It varies from *acampamento* to *acampamento* apparently, but the basic idea is everyone contributes to *militante* activity. Lúcia says that this money, or a portion of it, goes to the state secretariat and it is then re-divided and is then spent. It is therefore these funds that according to Lúcia, Andre has been misusing. She describes
that it has been a combination of the woman in the acampamento, the money available to him but also the power he enjoys that has made him stray from the right way of doing things.

I ask her what the state leadership has been doing about all this and why they removed the woman from the acampamento but left Andre incumbent in his position. I ask if this is a reflection of where the blame lies. She responds that it is difficult to remove a leader, that a special meeting has to be called for and attended by the state leadership in order for someone like Andre to be dismissed. I understand from this comment that removing an acampado(a) is by contrast much easier. She tells me that after Andre ignored the informal advice that friends gave him, the leadership’s first strategy was to remove the woman from his ambit. But after this also failed to derail the affair, due to his visiting her in a flat he had provided, the leadership put him on the equivalent of a six month probationary period which more or less culminated in his performance at the state meeting. They told him that either he stop seeing her or he would face sanctions. She indicates that it was as a result of these conditions that Andre was so much more engaged at the state meeting than otherwise as he was effectively trying to save his career in front of the leadership.

Lúcia seems upset and I think I know why. I ask her what the leadership’s decision was regarding Andre and she admits that it appears he has been given another year’s term as regional leader of frente de massa. I ask her how this is possible given that everyone knows what he has done and in her response, Lúcia’s tone becomes coloured by emotion. She tells me that this is not the first time that Andre has done this, that Mirelle has had to stay with her before. She tells me that Mirelle has often been subjected to abuse by Andre and that it is only the presence of so many other people within the structure of the MST in the Planalto that to a certain extent, keeps him in check; that is, he knows that he is being watched and this controls him. Lúcia tells me of how on one occasion when Mirelle was receiving text messages of support from Thiago, enraged, Andre gathered up her mobile phone and crushed it within his hands, wounding himself, saying that she was alone, that no one would help her. I recall at this point trying to call Mirelle in the past, not getting through and her later telling me that her phone had been broken by her children. Lúcia derides Andre as a hypocrite, someone who just weeks earlier was saying that all members, men and women, need to express their support for the movement in public spaces but back in his own home tries as much as possible to prevent his wife from ever leaving the house. She explains that Andre has
lost his ideology; he has lost the enthusiasm that he used to have for the movement in the early days. She relates how all the MST activity in this area, including the establishment of the N_assentamento was greatly due to Andre’s dedication to the cause. But things have changed. It is Mirelle who keeps Andre going now says Lúcia, it is her passion and belief in the movement that forces him to do even the meagre amount of work that he manages to accomplish.

Unsure of what to say, I ask Lúcia whether she is sure that Andre has stolen money from the movement, as this is a serious charge. She replies that money is coming in to him but that she is not sure how it is being spent. She states that she believes he is stealing it and using it for amongst other things, the maintenance of the woman from the acampamento of U_in Castro, a nearby town.

Later when I am on my own, I reflect on what Lúcia has said. It seems hard to believe in a way but rumours about Mirelle and Andre have been circulating for some time although no one has said anything definitive. I think back to when I first met them and they first offered me their hospitality, to stay in their house and to sleep in their bed. We took a photo of all of us together, with their children and this image seems so at odds with the violence that Lúcia describes. It is true that Andre has been extremely distant in the past few months excepting the state meeting, and perhaps this is because he perceives my allegiance to be with the sisters Lúcia and Mirelle, and that I am somehow positioned against him. But there seem many unanswered questions. For example, why has Andre not been sanctioned by the state leadership? Indeed, why has his term as regional leader of the frente de massa sector been extended rather than curtailed? And why has Mirelle not articulated her rights in this conflict?

Two days later. It’s late in the evening and I’m sitting in the casinha, a small temporary house in Lúcia’s back garden. Mirelle appears to say that everyone has gone to church. I ask her why she hasn’t accompanied them. She doesn’t answer and there’s a pause before she mentions that Lúcia told her that I know about her and Andre. She sits down. The first thing she says is that it isn’t all Andre’s fault, that his violent side is something that he grew up with and has not been able to leave behind. She talks of the scar on his face, and how he was permanently marked by his father beating him when he was a child. She asks me to understand that violence is difficult to escape from, even when you join something new like the MST. She relates how Andre was shot through the hand when they were in occupation in N_ and that even now he can’t fully grip
I say that I still find it hard to imagine him like that, involved in domestic violence. Strangely, for both of us, we talk as if the victim of this affair were someone else entirely.

Mirelle says that marriages have to be worked on and that nothing comes easily, but this time, it is for her children that she is most worried. I tell her that it seems that Andre has been granted another year as a regional leader and I ask her what she intends to do. I know that she is unwilling to stay with Lúcia as Lúcia is still very ill and as their mother lives there as well, conditions are not right for Mirelle and her family. She mentions that there is a possibility of working in an acampamento school in Rio Branco, but that her children are not keen as the acampamento is 90km away from the nearest city and it means going back to a mode of life that they have battled to move away from. As an alternative it does seem a poor choice but Mirelle tells me that it is not possible to move back in with Andre. It is dangerous she tells me. At this point I ask her why it is that the house and land should stay with him, after all, they both struggled for that land together and in fact, Mirelle built large parts of the house herself as Andre was often away on frente de massa business. Mirelle says that because she has left the house, it is more complicated. She tells me that part of it is the fact that Andre wants her to come back, but she will not. I ask if this is a common perspective within the movement, that if women leave their husbands because of ill treatment, it is the women who are being disloyal but Mirelle doesn’t answer.

After a pause, I ask Mirelle why Andre was granted another year on the leadership when everyone knows that he has broken movement rules and continues to do so. Mirelle says that the leadership council vote against her because they are mainly men. She says that the few women on the council are outvoted but also importantly, that the men all know Andre. She says that a lot of them have a background in the frente de massa and she reiterates what other members have told me, that most of the senior leadership tend to come from this background that represents the sharp end of the movement, organising occupations, recruiting new members and so on. She tells me that Andre has also had his time extended because she doesn’t have enough support on the committee, despite some members of the committee promising to come and visit her saying that they know what is going on and that they will support her.

Mirelle explains that if she has to leave the house she will lose everything. It seems impossible to imagine reconciliation and she says that at the age of 33, with three children, the idea of losing everything for which she has struggled for eight years only to
have to begin again is too much. I ask her what will happen to the house and she says that the MST is not like normal life. In an ordinary situation she tells me, the house and land would be sold and the money split for each person but in the MST it is illegal to sell land so that is not a possibility; one person has to stay on the property. We continue talking about the possibilities and gradually I understand that even though she is mother to the children, because Andre has been validated once again by the leadership, because he wants her to come home, and because it is her that has left, in the state leadership’s view, he has a greater claim to the house and land and all that that entails: the means of production, all the property, all the cash tied up in agricultural stock, in short, the sum of what she has struggled for her whole life. Mirelle tells me that leaving her house will mean leaving the assentamento and leaving all her friends. She mentions that it might even mean leaving the state and having to start a new life somewhere else, outside the movement, because she can’t take the children back to an encampment.

I ask her whether she has tried to lobby the state leadership and she says that it is not possible. To cover her bills, to pay for what she eats, she has had to take a job at a motel, washing the sheets and cleaning the rooms for a minimum wage. She tells me that after being part of the movement it is hard to work in a job where she isn’t allowed to have an opinion again and the full time nature of the work means that she doesn’t have time to go to Florianópolis to speak to any of the state leadership. It seems that Andre’s networking has been more effective than that of his wife.

At this point, for the first time since I have known her, Mirelle starts to cry. Mirelle is one of the toughest people that I have ever met, with a tireless, phenomenal, commitment to the movement but now she’s cracking up under the pressure. I watch her as she reaches for a pair of scissors and starts to snip away at bits of skin on her hands. There is a trace of blood before I pull the scissors quickly away from her and she tells me that in the past months she has been having nervous attacks which leave her unable to eat. Shocked, on account of the ever-capable public image that she displays, I tell her that she must go to the doctor and she says that she is going tomorrow at 5 am before work to get some medication to calm her.

I reflect that the totality of this situation derives from the input of multiple factors. Andre has acted outside movement law, but the lack of action from the state leadership has also greatly contributed. They have effectively condoned and endorsed

32 The financial considerations are not small. All in all the total estate has a value in excess of R$200,000, or based on a relative monthly salaries, roughly half a million GBP.
Andre’s behaviour by their lack of sanction and sent out a message that it is acceptable to beat your wife, humiliate her and flout movement rules. It further crosses my mind that Mirelle isn’t even similar to the nameless woman who was kicked out of U_. She has already acted as a local leader and with her persistent enthusiasm and energy, she has created all manner of links with the local community. She has in fact acted as the ideal militante. But it seems clear that there have been other considerations in how this matter was settled. For example, Andre has had the capacity to attend the state meeting and present his case himself. Mirelle on the other hand, working full time, was unable to attend.

Mirelle is still crying but she says something to me that reveals a whole separate dimension to this problem.

‘If he takes my children, I’d have nothing left to live for’.

Without her house, without the means to generate income, with whom will the children stay seems an extraordinarily important question. For now, Denis and William are staying with their father and Claudia is staying with her mother, but it is not clear if this situation is sustainable, especially given that the children are already unwilling to go back to an acampamento, Mirelle’s only offer of work within the movement. I mention to Mirelle that there is already a divorced family in the N_ assentamento and the husband and wife have built separate houses at different ends of their single plot of land. Mirelle shakes her head and tells me that with Andre this isn’t going to happen. She tells me that in this situation, she knows of only one other example, one other woman. She tells me that in the past, a member of the state leadership, the woman in question, had an affair with an assentado. As a result she left her house, abandoned everything and moved to Minas Gerais. Mirelle tells me that now she is on the national leadership. But this woman had to renounce everything – she renounced the land that she had won. It seems drastic and as we say good night, I hope that the situation doesn’t become even worse.

The next day I am driving to Florianópolis with Lúcia across the serra do mar (the mountains of the sea), first through seemingly empty farmland and then through a neat valley full of banana plantations and houses built in the German style, taking her to the hospital in the city for specialist treatment. Eventually conversation inevitably turns toward Mirelle and I ask Lúcia what the state leadership have done regarding the situation. She says that the leadership are waiting for Mirelle to come to them with a
plan of action to move everything forward. Lúcia says that the leadership have let it be known that they can’t help her, unless she helps them.

‘Fale para ela’ (tell her), Lúcia says they have instructed her, ‘Ela tem que lutar, se ela quiser nossa ajuda’ (she has to struggle if she wants our help).

The situation and lack of willingness to intervene seems so incredible to Lúcia that she speculates that it can only be some form of blackmail which has rendered the state leadership so impotent. She theorises as to what possible kind of information Andre could have on the leadership to prevent them from acting. The sense of a conspiracy grows when she relates how whilst talking to Kleber at the state meeting and asking his advice on how to resolve the matter with the state leadership, Kleber recommended that she should approach them through the standard channel, in her case, through Andre.

‘Imagine!’ she says. ‘Through Andre!’

It seems like a bad joke and there’s silence before we speak again.

‘It’s like this,’ says Lúcia. ‘Victims need help… they need support and Mirelle is a victim. The movement says it is against this kind of thing. We even have a sector for gender. They say that we have to struggle for the victims of society. Well, I don’t see much happening in this case, for a victim of our own society, our movement’.

**Marxism, gender and agrarian reform**

The role of women, or more specifically the intransigence with which women’s demands have been met by institutions of various (a)political guises, has long been an issue of interest in Latin American studies and more generally in the social sciences. Analyses of party political cultures (Flora 1984), social capital and development (Molyneux 2002) the state (Molyneux 2000), social movements (Safa 1990) and specifically land usage and reform (Deere and León 2001b) have highlighted what some would argue is a fundamental *décalage* between Marxism and Feminism. This debate is perhaps best expressed by Hartmann’s article on what she characterises as an ‘unhappy marriage’ between the two schools of thought (Hartmann 1979). For Hartmann both feminism and Marxism are vectors that need to be considered in any analysis of a capitalist society, but the latter has subordinated the former as the feminist struggle has been subsumed into the ‘larger’ struggle against capital. ‘Day care is disappearing from left conferences’
(ibid.: 29) she dryly observes to illustrate her perception that questions of gender which she argues are perceived by many Marxists as divisive and therefore a threat to the demands of the (predominantly masculine) collective identity of the ‘working class’, are being dropped to protect the integrity of the ‘wider’ struggle. Hartmann proposes either a healthier marriage or a divorce and the development of an example of the former of these positions is elucidated by Chinchilla’s 1991 paper in which she relates the debate specifically to Latin America. She claims that while schools of feminism and Marxism in Europe are habitually entrenched in partisan defence of their own mode of analysis, ‘feminist activists in Latin America are adding to and converging with new Marxist thinking in important ways’ (Chinchilla 1991). Castro (2001) goes even further by arguing that the real problem is not the perceived inherent tension between feminism and Marxism at all. Instead the incompatibility of the two schools of thought is down to a certain institutionalisation of women’s movements in Latin America, which renders them vaguely complicit with capitalism. Declaring that feminist movements were too stringent on the left in the 70s, she argues that this new feminism ‘in its institutionalized version is becoming too soft on the right-on neoconservatism and neo-liberal policies’ (2001: 34).

However, the debate as to whether there can exist a progressive reformed marriage between feminism and Marxism in Latin America also contains many nuances concerning how this is to be achieved. Amongst the differences of opinion that Caldeira (2009) highlights, some exponents of feminist theory argue that co-operation and bridge building are most important. Ávila (1997) argues that women can work from within organisations along the lines of Hartmann’s theory of marital mediation. However, others such as Chinchilla in an earlier work (1977) have argued that such organisations, for example those that belong to party politics are themselves fundamentally part of the clique of the patriarchy. Tellingly, Alvarez et al. (2003) detail how in certain instances where feminist scholars and activists in Latin America have tried to construct new models of engagement, dialogue has broken down and the question of how to best to manage the tension between Marxism and feminism has remained unanswered. And Jelin (1994), commenting on the human rights movement in Argentina notes that gender differences continue to be a significant theme: ‘the symbols of pain – the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the Abuelas – are women, the more political organizations more male-like’ (1994: 56). But at least in theoretical models, there have been attempts to provide a meaningful synthesis in order to move forward. Dore, (1997) while conscious that the
rise of postmodernism has coincided with the dominance of a neo-liberal economic
model argues that class should remain an important focus but that fundamentally
postmodernist theory’s emphasis on multifaceted subjectivities allows a more nuanced
interpretation of women and politics in synthesis in Latin America. And Reclift (1997)
supports this vision, arguing that postmodernist theory allows us to understand class as
gendered and racialised, thus, making clear that these categories are not mutually
exclusive. Stephen (2001) sounds a cautionary note however when making clear that
while postmodernism has rendered subjectivities more complex in theory, ‘essentialist
categories are alive and well in the political arenas of Latin America’ (2001: 67) and that
women, at least for now, still have to articulate themselves in social structures using
essentialised identities, ‘through the imagined unity of identities that in everyday life are
never experienced as a stable core of self’ (ibid.)

These tensions and the questions pertaining to them have also manifested
themselves in matters concerning agrarian reform and more particularly within the social
movements that have articulated this cause. Deere and León (2001a) describe how
throughout Latin America, until the 1970s, the primary form of organisation of rural
women had been local level mothers’ or housewives’ clubs or centres. This base was
empowered and its ranks were swelled by the spread of liberation theology. Comunidades
Eclesias de Base (CEBs or basic ecclesial communities) organised by local churches at the
level of the parish encouraged an interaction between rural workers and religious leaders,
the leaders being sympathetic to both issues surrounding gender and the need for
agrarian reform (Alvarez 1990). Caldeira argues that this new forum, such a contrast to
the oppressive context of the military dictatorship in Brazil ‘allowed women to break
through the isolation of the domestic sphere’ (2009: 243). However, this being a rural
context she argues that these women were confronted with certain entrenched
mentalities that created important obstacles. She describes how whereas in the city,
women’s demands sat more easily with traditional roles, in the countryside gaining access
to land with its connotations of patriarchy and physical labour presented more problems.
She states that ‘[l]and has always been regarded as an exclusively male mean (sic) of
production, and landownership a male prerogative’ (ibid.) and that women’s role in the
countryside has always been contextualized as strictly that of a carer, helpers and of
course provider of a continuation of a line of progeny.

Despite these obstacles, Deere and León (2001a) note that by the 1980s almost
all of the major peasant organisations and rural trade unions ‘had women’s secretariats of
some sort’ (2001a: 129) and that throughout Latin America, women in rural situations were exerting greater influence over programmes of unionisation and militancy. However, the authors comment that nowhere was this process achieved more effectively than in Brazil where due to certain problems, women in unions began to establish women only organisations in response to concerns regarding for example, being overlooked for positions of seniority. Therefore in the mid to late 1980s the Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais (MMTR-NE) was established in Brazil’s northeast and the Articulação de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais do Sul (AMTRS) was established in the south. Deere and León clearly indicate that this strategy was a response to similar issues raised by Hartmann’s idea of a failed marriage between feminism and Marxism stating that ‘while a number of gains have been made with respect to rural women’s land rights, these have tended to take a back seat to the class-based demand to deepen the agrarian reform’ (2001a: 130).

Further the involvement of women within struggles for land must be placed in the context that until the 1988 constitution, equal rights to title of ownership and concession of use did not exist in Brazilian law (Guivant 2003). And until 2001, it was difficult for a woman to fit INCRA’s criteria for beneficiaries due to preference being given to male heads of household and having a physicalised experience of agricultural labour (Deere 2004). And even now, after INCRA have changed their criteria, women are systematically discriminated against in the Brazilian countryside (Bruschini 1994), (Duquette et al. 2005) with often male hairs being given precedence and options limited to marriage or migration (Stropasolas 2004). However, despite the presence of such structural imbalances, Caldeira argues that many organisations are still not doing as much as they could to narrow the inequality gap between the ways in which men and women experience agrarian reform and she identifies the MST as one of those organisations that has subsumed women’s demands for the ‘greater good’ of the class-based collective.

The MST and gender

In their book, *Empowering women: Land and property rights in Latin America*, Deere and León detail how despite the struggle for women’s rights being seen by many agrarian reform activists as divisive, since 1998, ‘all the social movements have begun to give greater
attention to the issue of women’s land rights in the agrarian reform, partly due to the high visibility of women in land occupations throughout Brazil’ (2001a: 191). They state that ‘demanding joint allocation and titling of land to couples is now policy of the MST’ (ibid: 192) along with the objective that the leadership of the acampamentos and assentamentos be 50 percent female (MST 2000: 58 cited in Deere and León). Indeed in Harnecker’s book Landless People: Building a Social Movement, there is a section titled ‘essential principles guiding the movement’, and within this section she expands on ‘equal participation for women’ thus:

The MST fights against machismo, so entrenched in the peasant world. Women must receive facilities and encouragement to participate at all levels of action, power and representation. It believes any kind of gender discrimination must be eliminated in all of the movement’s activities, and it must fight against machismo in all its facets that hinder working women’s equal rights and conditions. (2002: 111-2)

Carter (2005) also details how issues of gender are central to the movement’s range of interests stating that in the ‘last twenty years the movement held hundreds of workshops on a range of issues – such as health, education, gender, political economy, ecology – for more than 100,000 activists’ (2003: 10). Indeed Branford and Rocha detail how the MST’s commitment to gender equality goes back to the very beginning of the movement, that is, its formalisation in 1984 at the meeting in Cascavel. They relate how at this seminal event, an important realisation was made regarding from where the movement drew its strength. They describe how realising that the whole family was a key input into the MST, it was decided to make the movement independent of the trade unions and therefore give equal rights to ‘all members of the family – old and young, men and women’ (2002: 23). The authors also quote Stédile and describe how he believes this decision was of great importance. ‘We realise today that this is our greatest strength. because men, besides being sexist, are conservative. By including all members of the family, the movement acquires a remarkable potential force’ (ibid). They go on to describe how this decision has manifested itself in practical terms, particularly in the acampamentos. In these environments where a cultural revolution has taken place, women have become a powerful force, despite the resentment of some men, ‘keeping morale high and taking responsibility for important tasks in running the camp’ (2002: 116).
They also make clear just how much the movement has achieved as regards gender equality by detailing the strictures of ‘peasant life’ for MST members before they joined the movement. Through interviews the authors trace the evolution of experience for women in the MST, using interviews from two female members of the national leadership. One of the interviewees recalls how it was relatively easy to be elected to the health or education sectors, but much more difficult to gain access to the frente de massa, production or security sectors as these were configured as masculine roles. But the authors argue that the movement is moving forward and they cite the fact that in 2000, nine out of 21 national leadership positions were filled by women, ‘elected from the base’ (2002: 261). They also state that the leadership is worried by setbacks and to that end encourage the establishment of coletivos do gênero (gender collectives) to discuss these issues.

It is worth stating that Branford and Rocha’s analysis is almost ten years old and that the current official MST position regarding gender is as follows:

The MST understands the need to end inequality in gender relations. Obviously there are gender inequalities within the MST; after all, the movement is not an island within society. The Gender sector facilitates discussion of gender relations within MST and encourages women to engage with and direct the movement-to be subjects and not merely objects of history.\(^\text{33}\)

Among the targets that the movement sets is that in all activities of education and training, men and women should make up equal proportions. The movement also seeks to continue the struggle for joint land titles and right to credit in the name of couples while also trying to establish a situation where each community base has one male and one female coordinator each. But as Wright and Wolford note, amongst the areas of stated activity,\(^\text{34}\) gender is perhaps the area where the movement has made the least development, or perhaps, encountered the most resistance and they relate how Stédile in

\(^{34}\) there is no formal MST sector dedicated to working on issues pertaining to race for example, despite many members and scholars alike declaring it to be a pressing issue. For example Wright and Wolford observe that ‘the MST’s original leadership come from Brazil’s southern regions, where Afro-Brazilians are a small minority, and with forms of racism still very much alive throughout Brazil, the MST has had difficulty recruiting black leadership, though it is officially committed to doing so (2003: 221).
2003 expressed his frustration that particularly at settlement level, the movement had not made significant progress (2003: 256).

Therefore despite obvious variances of opinion, there is a degree of consensus amongst movement scholars that despite many attempts made by the movement to address the question of gender equality, fundamentally the movement does not exist in isolation to Brazilian society and therefore it unfortunately replicates many of the tendencies and behaviours that have historically, been present in the rural communities from which it draws its members. Indeed, Branford and Rocha describe how although some women feel empowered to voice their opinions and explicitly call on other women to do the same, often they are met with silence as ‘particularly in the more remote rural areas, [women] find it difficult to break with ingrained sexist customs’ (2002: 260).

However, not all research on the movement has come to this conclusion and Caldeira for example, highlights the movement’s intransigence on gender issues, connecting it to Hartmann’s theory of Marxist subordination, in a much more explicit manner.

**Criticism of the MST**

In her analysis based on fieldwork conducted in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Caldeira concludes that ‘[d]espite the MST’s public commitment to gender equality as a strategy to undermine what the movement leaders call a “sexist capitalist model”, on the ground, women’s issues are still seen as devise’ (2009: 249). She draws a comparison between what the movement advocates in theory and how it approaches gender issues in practice, noting that between these two positions there is a ‘clear dissonance’ (ibid.). Caldeira argues that the phrase *sem terra* has come to represent a ‘class-in-itself’ (2009: 250), a rural, but increasingly urban poor, whose needs as a working class take precedence over everything else. She states that ‘[o]nly the problems that clearly affect this community as a whole, as a collective or as a class-for-itself are given priority’ (ibid.) and Guivant’s (2003) analysis concurs with this view noting that ‘problems regarded as specifically related to women only seem to gain value when placed within broader economic and political struggles’ (2003: 26). Guivant’s study also resonates with Caldeira’s perspective on women and the family. Caldeira argues that women’s issues are easier to ignore in the MST than they might be otherwise, as women have no primary
identity within the movement. She states explicitly that ‘[t]he family unit is central for
the strategic struggle against the forces of neo-liberalism and imperialism’ and that the
‘MST does not separate women from the family unit’ (2009: 250). Similarly, Guivant
contends that ‘the family is still the natural unit of reference for discussing women’s
issues. Problems faced by single women, widows or separated women in settlements, or
in gaining access to land, for example, are not considered’ (ibid.).

However, in terms of its overall strategic direction regarding gender issues, the
movement has undergone a certain ‘progressive’ evolution, although both Guivant and
Caldeira argue that these policy shifts have not been as transformative as might be
hoped. At present, issues pertaining to gender are articulated through the Coletivo
Nacional de Mulheres (CNM – National Women’s Collective) which is tasked with opening
spaces for the debate of gender issues within the movement, increasing women’s
participation in solidarity organisations like trade unions outside the MST but also the
key issue of lobbying for joint titling of land documents (Deere 2004). At present, this
collective has been consolidated as a sector of activity within the movement but it has
struggled to become part of movement discourse and body politic. Indeed, the
forerunner to the present gender sector, the Comissão Nacional de Mulheres, (National
Commission of Women – CNM) was first established at the formative meeting in Cascavel
in 1984, but as Caldeira notes ‘spaces in debate were not forthcoming and in 1989, this
commission simply disengaged itself and women were advised to look for this kind of
collective structure outside the social movement’ (2008: 250). Perhaps the gender
sector’s lack of traction and somewhat inchoate existence is due to the movement’s
internal organisation which Guivant has termed a ‘strong patriarchal structure which is
also reproduced by the women [the patriarchy]’ (2003: 28) and a national leadership,
some members of which ‘reject the relevance of discussing gender issues’ (ibid.: 24).
Indeed, Caldeira goes further and argues that ‘it is not the will of the movement to

It is certainly true that gender issues have yet to truly permeate the consciousness
of the movement and become pervasive in everyday discourse. I certainly found this to
be the case during my ethnography although it was common to hear women laugh and
joke about how they needed to ‘keep the men in check’ or ‘remember the struggle of the
MST women’. Some women also wore the T-shirts of the MMC, the Movimento de
Mulheres Camponesas, an organisation with whom the MST is technically in solidarity but I
never attended or heard of any meetings that were organised specifically to debate issues
regarding gender and these issues were never a part of any formal state gathering during my fieldwork. Indeed, from her data, Guivant highlights through interviews that this process of change has been somewhat irksome and slow and that the goals of the gender sector are far from being realised. Even in movement publications which tend to optimism rather than pragmatism, the key issue of legal ownership of the land has not been emphasised. Guivant quotes an MST publication which states that:

In the struggle for the land, in occupations and mobilizations, the whole family takes part and therefore, the conquest of the land is an achievement of the family.

(MST 2000: 58 cited in Guivant 2003: 26)

This stance, while acknowledging that both men and women take part in occupations and indeed, it is common to hear stories of how it was the women rather than the men who held firm in Santa Catarina, ultimately subsumes the woman’s role into that of the family, rendered her invisible both metaphorically and also to a certain extent legally, as even if joint ownership is possible, due to existing systems of patriarchy, it may eventually be the man who signs ownership, acquiring possession of the property on behalf of ‘his’ family, a situation which I encountered during my fieldwork.

Running in parallel to this situation is the fact that the MST is morally, a conservative movement (Chaves 2000; Guivant 2003), its early members (and importantly, leadership) having emerged from the rural CEBs of the Catholic church in Rio Grande do Sul and its Christian teachings (Branford and Rocha 2002). As has already been noted in chapter three, it is not permissible to posses alcohol at all in an acampamento, cause disturbances after ‘lights out’ or bring non movement women back to the camp at night time. Chaves details Toledo’s expulsion from a sem terra march for being the ‘Dom Juan’ of the group and many members commented to me on these strict policies, expressing a degree of frustration, but also admitting that controls were necessary. Paulo in particular with his urbanity, found it difficult to understand the movement’s position on marijuana, ascribing the leadership’s beliefs to their upbringing in Rio Grande do Sul. He laughed at how the mere mention of the word maconha could set the hierarchy ill at ease, even though as he argued, the drug did less harm to people than alcohol. Silva (2004) also details that in the assentamento Conquista da Fronteira, the assentamento’s rule book stated that ‘it is expected of all married couples to maintain a
good marriage to keep organisation and stability strong’ whilst it also promised punishments for ‘immoral attitudes, such as adultery’ (2004: 281 my trans.) Although, as Lúcia argues, it can be imagined that there is one rule for the leadership and another for the movement as a whole, this form of moral prescription is both familiar and unremarkable within the MST. And the relationship between a certain moral conservatism, the centrality of the family and a reluctance to articulate issues pertaining to gender is a relationship that has already attracted comment (Adrian 2009; Brinkerhoff and MacKie 1984; Reiner 2002). Indeed McDonald (2000) observes that ‘family organization is protected from radical change by an idealized family morality, a moral conservatism that [...] confines women to the hegemony of men’ (2000: 433). With such a conservative mentality prevalent in the MST, Caldeira argues that often women who are female heads of households, that is, single mothers, or simply alone, find it difficult to orientate themselves in *assentamentos* or *acampamentos* as they don’t fit into the regular movement structure of the traditional ‘family’. Indeed, such ‘women without men’ (2009: 253) perceive themselves to be so far outside the MST paradigm that Caldeira argues that they are frightened of forming women’s groups as they don’t wish to make themselves even more obvious than they already are. She details how they often consider exiting the movement, but what holds them there is the lack of any better option, or as Caldeira phrases it, the possibility of destitution.

Indeed, the vulnerability of women once they have joined the movement and invested in it is commented on by Pereira et al. (1996) describing how in some cases due to the land being registered in their husbands’ names, some women have found themselves being expelled from their homes by their husbands, without having any legal recourse to fall back upon. Rua and Abramovay (2000) also confirm Mirelle’s concerns in detailing how in cases of divorce, women are similarly vulnerable as it is problematic to divide an MST plot (*assentados* have the right of possession, but not full ownership).

This was certainly the situation in which Mirelle found herself, when to avoid further humiliation and physical abuse, she left her home to live with her sister Lúcia. Deprived of any means of production, she was required to take on a full-time job, which made it even more difficult for her to communicate her version of events to MST decision-makers. What is interesting in Mirelle’s case is that the state leadership felt it necessary for her to ‘struggle’ or ‘fight’ (*lutar*) in order for them to help her. That is, the

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35 Indeed Souza Martins argues that the *sem terra* are inherently conservative regarding ‘land, work, family, religion, and community’ (cited in Branford and Rocha 2002: 254).
situation as it was *per se*, (her husband beating her, her husband conducting a public extra-marital affair) did not necessarily mean that they should automatically intervene on her behalf. When I interviewed Perotti specifically on this issue, the interview quickly became extremely uncomfortable. Yet, what was more interesting was that a journey of over 200 miles had to be undertaken to speak with anyone who was willing to consider Mirelle’s situation. Mirelle herself told me that she felt abandoned by the movement and it was clear that she had not received the same level of support from the leadership as Lúcia had when Lúcia was desperately ill. Clearly, personages on the regional and state leadership, such as Gordão and Kleber did not feel as comfortable intervening in a ‘domestic’ as they did in a medical emergency. Perotti’s interview reveals a little more about the state leadership’s mentality. The interview started on the question of what happens to land in case of separation.

What is possible in this question of selling, is that you don’t sell the land, but you sell what you have produced on it, the infrastructure you built. You have the right to sell this. So, what do people do in general? They make this sale and split it as they have to. But this isn’t going to set you up. It’s just to keep you going. Or in some recent cases, it’s possible to relocate. I don’t know, it’s something that INCRA do, relocate the man or the woman to another plot, form another family. But this is a conversation you have to have with INCRA. So this could be a solution. Generally people make this sale, but these are rare cases.

I mentioned that Mirelle was under severe strain and asked if there was a possibility of dividing Mirelle and Andre’s plot itself and constructing another house on the land. Perotti objected on the grounds that one or the other in the future, might acquire a new partner. It was noticeable that at no stage did he admit that Andre already had a new partner and he seemed surprised when I pointed out that this situation (splitting the land and each person gaining a new partner) was something that had already occurred in the *assentamento* of N_ with another family. When I said that the movement needed people like Mirelle, he commented on the people involved.

In fact, this family problem has distanced Andre from the movement, and that’s terrible. It’s not that we need Mirelle, but we must respect her as a comrade, *militante*, because of the skills she has, of articulation, organising people,
organising the massa. So I promise to speak to her, to see if there is a possibility of her starting again.

The interview continued with Perotti making vague promises as to Mirelle’s future employment within the movement, highlighting her skill with health for example. As the conversation became characterised by a degree of evasiveness, I stated that I believed that if Andre ended up staying on the land and Mirelle had to leave, this would be contrary to the principles of the movement. Perotti agreed but added that there were difficulties involving INCRA.

Certainly, but if you speak with INCRA about dividing the land, they will be totally against this proposal, because INCRA have the logic that the land is theirs and ‘yes, we have this family here on it’.

I pointed out that INCRA would not necessarily need to be officially informed. and somewhat sarcastically, Perotti replied,

No, and if they have the possibility to produce and also lead their lives in this way on top of that, perfect.

I asked him if he could visit Mirelle.

I’ll go there, first of all to assure her that she is not alone and then to start a dialogue between them. We are late to arrive, but we have to support her like this.

I thanked Perotti and then informed him that Mirelle had said that she felt abandoned, as Kleber was the only leader to have visited her. Perotti insisted that he would visit, but upon further conversation of having two houses on one piece of land again raised objections.

Like I said, I see this danger, that if you think short term to solve something, you can create a problem in the future. You have to think of that, but I believe that I can create dialogue between them and create a possibility of reconciliation.
Because, five, ten years pass, objections store up and then, everything can explode, everything can fall apart. We can’t engineer a separation, because the community will say this, they will call you that.

As Perotti didn’t seem willing to countenance a negotiated partition of the land and to that point had only talked of engineering a reconciliation despite Lúcia’s view that this was not possible, to try and get the point across that reconciliation was not sought, I mentioned to him that I believed Mirelle to be in physical danger. There was a long pause before he delivered his response.

In fact, I know our comrade there [Andre]. It’s a calm relationship. This what you say about Andre being a dangerous person, I wouldn’t be able to agree.

It was clear that the subject was not open to discussion. And Perotti didn’t seem interested in why I thought Mirelle was in danger. He didn’t even ask what my evidence was, he was content to just refute the possibility entirely and describe the situation as tranquíla. In the silence that followed I said that perhaps perigoso, (dangerous) was not the right word. Another silence followed before Perotti exclaimed,

OK, well! I think that it’s important that we have dialogue. And to contribute to her beginning again as a person, as a human being, as a militante.

I said that if Mirelle had to leave the movement, it would be a huge loss for her, as the MST was an absolutely integral part of her life. His affirmation was the following.

Yes, we must return her to her natural habitat!

*A reluctance to engage?*

What was so interesting about this interview with Perotti was his continual insistence on the family as a primary unit. Whenever he mentioned Mirelle, he mentioned her in the context of her partnership with Andre, and when talking about their land, was keen to
stress the presence of a ‘family’ upon it. This could be observed in the way that he continually raised obstacles and was generally recalcitrant regarding the possibility of constructing a second house on Andre and Mirelle’s plot. He even mobilised INCRA as a bureaucratic opponent of the scheme, which struck me as incongruous, seeing how the movement presents itself but also acts as a revolutionary body, deliberately and demonstrably holding such federal legislation in contempt.

Also of interest was his continual insistence on trying to achieve some form of resolution through reconciliation. Throughout the interview, it was clear from both myself and Lúcia’s position that reconciliation was not the service that was being requested. Rather, it was protection and a resolution, which would result in Mirelle not having to leave her home. Perotti did not respond to this and his insistence on reconciliation, without once even mentioning Andre’s public transgressions with another women, I found to be puzzling. His reaction too, when I hinted at the domestic violence that Mirelle was enduring, was significant. He refused to engage in this issue to the extent that conversation in fact, stopped. He didn’t promise to investigate what could clearly be a very serious situation, nor did he even ask me or Lúcia, for why we believed Mirelle to be in danger. My question was phrased like this.

I don’t want to inconvenience you, but the situation in that house with Andre is dangerous, physically dangerous.

And instead of asking me for details, he instantly took my view to mean that Mirelle was in danger as a slur on Andre’s character, an allegation which he robustly denied. In this sense, he remained consistent throughout the interview, never once even hinting that Andre had done something that could be considered ‘wrong’. Indeed, it could be argued that analysing *his* proposed course of action, if there was blame to be apportioned, it was with Mirelle, as any effort he was to pursue was to the end of persuading her to return, thereby implying that she shouldn’t have left in the first place.

In this manner, therefore, Caldeira and Guivant would seem to have a valid point that within the movement, women exist merely as elements within a family rather than possessing an intrinsic individual identity. And one could even speculate that perhaps for Perotti, if eventually Andre’s woman was to live in his and Mirelle’s house, the problem would be solved, as there would still exist a family unit on the plot. Perotti’s refusal to even countenance a course of action which would entertain the possibility of
Mirelle living on her own thus demonstrates the extent to which women are bound to men in the MST. Granted, this was an extreme case and he admitted as much. But it is worth asking, how many more women might complain of domestic violence and insist on the removal of their husbands from their homes if they thought that such a course of action had a chance of being investigated seriously and acted upon by state leadership.

Silva notes how in assentamentos ‘leaders often blamed women themselves for the non-resolution of important gender inequalities which prevailed. Leaders argued that women had the power, yet for “cultural reasons”, would not use this power to act upon processes of inequality that still subdued them’ (Silva cited in Caldeira 2009: 252). And I believe that in the state leadership’s call for Mirelle to ‘struggle’ in order for them to help her, it is possible to discern an echo of this mentality. Some, of course, may find it ironic that the perpetuation of gender inequalities is being laid at the door of women, victims of inequity manifesting itself through a structural system of sexism. However, I would doubt whether this keen sense of irony is something that Mirelle felt in the midst of this situation. She was alone, having devoted her adult life to the movement, only to find that when she needed support, having been so generous toward others, it was not going to be forthcoming arguably due to two key factors.

Firstly, Andre had strong bonds of comradeship with members of the state leadership committee and had much greater access to be able to present his case to them in a personal manner. He was part of the frente de massa and as has already been discussed was able to exploit certain relationship dynamics that few women can gain access to. These clientelistic arrangements also secured for himself an extension of his tenure, a reward that is contrary to the moral position that the movement claims it adopts. But essentially, this clientelism and close relationship that Andre enjoyed with the state leadership was not enough to save him sanction on its own. The crucial second differentiator in this scenario was that Andre’s transgression related to his wife and the lack of willingness of the leadership to delve into this area speaks of a deep-rooted unease in confronting even the most basic issues pertaining to gender. There was clearly a sense that domestic violence was at some level acceptable, perhaps engendered by the fact that rural Brazil is a very conservative environment (Sardenberg et al. 1999). But the preoccupation with the family unit also helped to deflect attention away from Andre. Mirelle had refused to live with more physical and mental abuse and she had left the house. In doing so, and in the eyes of the leadership, she had therefore ceded some form of moral high ground. She had become a ‘woman without a man’ and the state
leadership’s course of action, or lack of it, was without doubt informed by this. In
Perotti’s interview, he expresses his inherent doubt regarding two houses on one piece of
land. But why did he find this to be such a problem when such a situation already
existed in the very next plot to Andre and Mirelle’s? I believe that Hartmann’s thesis is
important here because it highlights the lack of willingness to prioritise an individual
woman’s rights over the ‘tranquillity’ of the collective. Perotti’s discourse, like that of
wider movement discourse (Silva 2004) centres on a concept of ‘harmony’, of people
living together and nothing breaking the collective calm. It is perhaps the case that in
this situation, Mirelle had ‘ceded’ the high ground because she was not willing to endure
repeated abuse for the sake of this concord and order. And of course it is through this
‘order’ that the leaders believe the struggle needs to be articulated, hence the lack of
tolerance toward drinking, casual sex or drugs in amongst the massa, but clearly this lack
of tolerance excludes domestic violence and extra-marital affairs as practised by
established leaders of the movement.

Before the situation between Mirelle and Andre had become so serious, I
interviewed Mirelle and asked what for her, sem terra represented. Her answer was
moving, full of the conviction that characterised everything she expressed about the
movement. But I believe that her sentiment regarding Brazil’s lack of willingness to
engage in agrarian reform can also be equated to the movement’s lack of willingness to
engage in the equally complex struggle for gender equality.

It’s this perception that you have to construct a new world, to do something. It’s
just that in our country this isn’t easy. Because I think that if there was a
government, a real government that governed fairly, we wouldn’t need to enter
into these terrible conditions. But these conditions make you reflect on your self,
these conditions render you human.

Conclusion

Caldeira argues that women have greatly contributed to the movement’s success,
standing shoulder to shoulder in the acampamentos next to men, in the physical
confrontation that can characterise the struggle for agrarian reform. However, she states
that women’s role in this process ends there, that once they have become settlers, they are relegated to a secondary position; mothers, daughters, wives, ‘reproductive beings only’ (2009: 254). She states that their specific demands are often ignored by the community and leaders, that they have no identity and further, structural considerations mean that any form of bonding between them can be rendered extremely difficult.

Based on my fieldwork in Santa Catarina, I would have to disagree with this portrayal. It is certainly true that women have been in the front line and physically injured by police violence but I found that their role went far beyond mere confrontation. At the 2008 state meeting there were 17 members of the state leadership and five were women. Women also occupied many of the important roles within the acampamentos of the region as well as maintaining strong links between themselves within assentamentos. Caldeira’s experience in Rio de Janeiro state was very different to mine in Santa Catarina. The women I encountered were not at all confined to their houses and often were more vocal than their husbands. Sociability, especially in the assentamento of N_ was high, and people were constantly visiting each other or dropping round for tea and many of the key interlocutors of these social events were women. Yet it is also true that I did not witness any formal meetings tasked with addressing issues pertaining to gender, but of course it is possible that as a man, they occurred but I was not invited to participate.

However, as Stédile admits, the MST has not made enough progress on gender issues but an important question at this juncture is what being a woman within an MST acampamento or assentamento environment means versus that of being a single women in a non-MST social context (rural or urban, but especially rural). After all, being a single woman in the rural, conservative environment of Brazil has certain connotations (Buvinic and Gupta 1997), and it is unsurprising that these discourses can be replicated within the MST, a movement that is situated in similar geographical and socio-economic space. Although the vast majority of acampados that I met were male or men and women in a couple, there were female-headed households in some assentamentos. But of these women, what was interesting was how they had chosen to participate in collective structures of labour, rather than work an individual plot, perhaps seeking to replicate their role within a family, where men could work the fields and they could be responsible for ‘less physically demanding’ roles such as cooking and childcare. It is difficult to ascertain without further research whether conditions for women within the movement are substantially different to those of women in wider rural society, but certainly public informal activity was conducted without the strictures that Caldeira describes but as
Stédile notes, in more formal arenas, the gender sector has been conspicuous by its relative failure. And this failure can be viewed through Lúcia’s perception that the leadership had let Mirelle down, in a manner that ultimately points to a habitus which informs a widespread refusal to engage with issues pertaining to gender.

To summarise the arguments that contributed to Mirelle’s situation is complex. I have discussed the over-arching tendency of refusing to individualise women and the problems they face, echoing Hartmann’s arguments on the incompatibility of Marxism and feminism. There is also the related need within the movement to maintain the family unit, above and beyond the needs of the individuals that comprise it, a dynamic that Perotti expressed in his interview. There also exists the argument that the MST is a morally conservative movement, a situation which renders ‘women on their own’ more likely to be discriminated against, on a day-to-day as well as structural basis. In this respect the way that land registry is conducted is also problematic, often the man being the legal occupier of any given MST plot resulting in women being legally vulnerable.

It is perhaps the case that all of these factors militated against Mirelle and contributed to her powerlessness. However, I would also argue that beyond the summary I have sketched above, Mirelle’s situation was also partly created by a lack of accountability that was explored in the previous chapter and highlighted by Lúcia in this. In a similar manner, a woman who was expelled from U_ was also fundamentally subaltern and had no means to contest her dismissal from the camp, despite (or perhaps because of) her clientelistic links with Andre. For them both therefore, despite the rigid hierarchy of the movement, there was no clearly established channel through which they could appeal and due to a lack of transparent elections, no sense of accountability that may have curtailed Andre’s tenure as a leader. On a worryingly wider point, I would suggest that as a consequence of the leadership’s habitus regarding gender issues and also because leaving home and becoming a ‘woman on your own’ engenders a negative connotation, there are possibly more women in the MST, unwilling to leave violent husbands on account of the fear of having to forfeit all that they possess, their assets not being in any way personal, but merely derived from their (perhaps fundamentally replaceable) participation in a family.

In addition to the summary of factors that I have listed above and the suggestion of a lack of accountability, there is yet another structural concern regarding gender relations as they come to be manifested in private arenas and the institutionalised response to these relations in leadership policy. Parallel and yet somewhat contradictory to the
strictures on morality and conservativism of the movement’s discourse, is the fact that being a militante seems to be prejudicial to many marriages, due to the time that one has to spend away from home and in close, intense encounters with people of the opposite sex. Many members including Lúcia, Gaetano, Alvise, Mirelle, Sabine and José, commented on the idea that militancy could cause problemas conjugais, which in one case resulted in the husband of a female regional leader iteratively visiting brothels in her absence. Because the movement expects so much of its activists and leaders in terms of time away from home, it is in some ways inevitable that state leadership is going to turn a blind eye as to the conduct of people engaged on movement business. However, when the pressure that is created by the movement’s levels of expectancy results in such serious consequences as with Mirelle’s situation, ‘minor transgressions’ would seem to deserve more consideration. What seems to be the case however is that structurally, the movement is organised so that a case like Mirelle’s will occur again because of a lack of readiness to engage with gender for fear of compromising a wider struggle. And as Lúcia intimated to me, with the present organisation of leadership hierarchy, there is little prospect of the next ‘Mirelle’ being treated in any way differently.

Yet, perhaps what is most striking about what happened to Mirelle is a certain perverse generational replication of events. When I first met Mirelle and Lúcia, I came to understand that they came from a fazendeiro background. Their father had owned a herd of cattle and 2000 hectares, an inheritance that over time he squandered through gambling and alcohol. He had also routinely beat their mother. The movement argues that it needs to break old structural dynamics that have kept the Brazilian peasant enslaved in poverty. It argues that these dynamics have reproduced themselves through generations and sedimented themselves to such an extent that only the sharp decisive action of occupation can break the cycle and begin the process of creating new social citizens (Wolford 2003). What Mirelle’s situation demonstrates is that people who have been abused or exposed to abuse are vulnerable to iterative manifestations of the same process, because it is a dynamic that they are accustomed to, that they have internalised as being almost normal (Kaganas and Piper 1994). Mirelle’s mother was beaten and humiliated by her fazendeiro husband and the same situation has repeated itself with her daughter, although the roles that people are playing are configured in a different manner. What is ironic is that the themes of iteration and internalisation are part of an argument that the movement is familiar with, except that in the MST the argument is articulated around its members’ socio-economic marginalisation, rather than gender inequality. It
concerned Lúcia and many other female members of the MST who I came to know that the failure of the movement to confront issues pertaining to gender was being ascribed to women’s lack of ability to confront the forces that subdue them. And at present, with regard to the MST’s leadership’s attitudes, it would be accurate to describe them as a reflection of a ‘deeply embedded habitus that includes various kinds of unquestioned naturalizations of gender roles and the transcendent moral force of the family and maintenance of its cohesion’.

Of course the movement is not isolated from wider Brazilian rural society and the inter-generational transmission of expectation regarding domestic violence cannot be contained as such. But the negotiation of issues pertaining to gender remains a key issue for members of the MST and at present, dialogue with state leaders can be understood to be problematic.

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36 Personal communication, Gledhill, J, 2010.
Chapter 6 – Models of organisation, rurality and the question of the second generation

Ouverture

April 2009. I’m sitting in Guarulhos airport, São Paulo. Layover is eight hours before the flight to Europe so I’ve found somewhere comfortable to rest. Distracted, I begin to listen to interviews that I conducted during my fieldwork, which has now come to a close. Perhaps because I have come to the end of this phase of the PhD, my attention is drawn to the sections of recordings in which respondents talk about the future of the movement and the challenges it faces. With eight hours in front of me, I begin to review the data and the soullessness of Guarulhos, a thoroughly modern non-space (Augé 1995) dissolves, leaving me back in the Planalto, with the borachudos (black flies) and the movement.

11/12/2008 17:00

Interviewer: What for you are the biggest challenges for the movement?

Thiago: I see it like this. To create an encampment, you get people from the periferia. I’ve nothing against them… to lessen their poverty, their inequalities, you have to involve them. The big problem within the MST is that this people from the periferia don’t have the rural ways, where you have to plan for at least a whole year ahead. You plant, grow, harvest then sell. It’s long term. The people from the periferia, they get five reais today and then spend it, get five more tomorrow… but the farmer he has to plan and invest with R$5,000 or R$10,000. This for me is a big challenge.

80% of the people that the movement is recruiting in Santa Catarina are urban. And this causes problems. For example, you get drugs, a lot of alcoholism, and the movement doesn’t have the capacity to deal with this. Perhaps what we lack in the movement is that the politicians help us deal with these people, but it’s a challenge. The settlements that work out well, N_ for example, was formed by farmers. B_, farmers. H_, farmers. We had an encampment near here, 80 families from the city, two stayed and 78 went home. It’s something which isn’t working out. It’s a challenge.
Luizinho: On this subject, I wanted to talk about the difficulty of working with the urban people. Because, from the urban people, not saying anything bad about anyone in particular, but from them come a ton of vices. Real vices, gambling, drugs. The vice of alcohol for example. But on the other hand, the movement gives these people an opportunity to be human again, we produce from them new people. So many people, when they first came to the encampment were nothing, nothing had ever worked out for them, but after the encampment process, they became new people. And this is our challenge, to work with people in the encampments to produce new human beings. But as you know, it’s begun to change, because there are no more countryside people in the countryside, all of them have already gone to the city. And it’s these people who’ve gone to the city, who we have to bring back. So this challenge of working with urban people, it’s necessary, because in fact, we talk about agrarian reform, but there are no more countryside people left around here.

16/08/2008 18:18

Interviewer: What kind of problems do you think the movement has?

Erica: Wanting to or not, one of the things that has been worked on a lot and is a thing that we often end up laughing about is this question of capitalism, no? Sometimes someone will say ‘Ah, I need to go buy some trainers, I need to go buy some jeans’. Then someone else will say, ‘Ah! Are you taking part in capitalism??’ The movement preaches one thing, but like, you are forced also to be part of a capitalist system. So, in this way, there are contradictions, it’s complicated. Also to sell things. We make stuff here. But we want to sell things as well. In B_ they make bricks, eco-bricks. They are a raw material but they want to use them to build barbeques, to build a manufactured product, aggregate value. Sell them in supermarkets and the like. But there’s resistance, it’s not looked well upon. But no one ever made money from raw materials.
Interviewer: Do you make enough money like this, selling eggs and milk?

Roberto: Sometimes, it depends. We deliver milk to many people and that’s money that we can count on. But sometimes we don’t sell much at market, no? It’s like that sometimes. But when you work in a co-op like we do, it’s better for everyone, because even if you don’t have that much, you always have the potential to do more, because you have more labour – do you get it? For example, it’s all about capital. A truck, a good second hand one costs R$12,000 and a tractor costs R$20,000. Alone, to buy that, it’s complicated. In a co-op, it’s easier. For example the assentamento of H_ is a co-op, everything is done co-operatively there. And they make money, with very little land. So for me this is the big challenge in the movement. It’s organisation and how we need to collectivise.

Here in N_ for example, we have thirteen families and about thirty people. We could do a lot together, but it’s not like that, we work individually. But it’s a question of capital. For example to start a collective which processes pork costs R$15,000 to R$20,000. You need three separate environments, refrigeration and so on. You need smoking equipment, sausage mixers etc. These products sell for R$10 per kilo with a profit margin of more or less R$2 to R$4 per kilo. So you have to sell seven tonnes of products just to make the investment back. But I think we can sell a tonne a month so it frustrates me. Today I’ve sold just two litres of milk and twelve eggs… it’s not a lot. If we worked together, it would work out better but people don’t want it. This is the biggest challenge in the movement, to convince people to work together and in this way increase production.

14/04/2008 10:07

Interviewer: But for you, what are the big challenges?

Paulo: I think that the biggest challenge is in formative education (formação). You’ve got all the difficulties of structure, maintaining organisation, convincing people… but I think that before this is the question of formação. We’re going to see today, we’re going to have
the experience of an encampment. You’ll speak with people and realise that even with all
the politics that we attempt to pass on, through our sense of organisation, our objectives,
the means of our struggle... that people, even though they are encamped, they’ll
withdraw a little, sometimes. And that’s where the question of formação comes in,
because for example, the values that the movement preaches... the question of solidarity,
the question of us against everyone... Of bourgeois values and human, socialist values...
We have a different way of seeing things, a different view of life. A different way. The
relationships within groups, internally reflects the way that people take on or don’t take
on movement thought.

Today, if we see the true reality, you’ll see that people come to an encampment
with many individualistic traits, with a lot of selfishness, with many bourgeois values still
entrenched. So, we believe that what shapes (formar) people in the most efficient way, I
say efficient, although it’s not a word that I like to use much... in the most efficient way,
is political training (formação política).

27/04/2008 02:49

Cleiton: So the only solution is to put together a people’s project for Brazil. It’s not
exactly revolution of the government, but more like a process. Imagine you put together
all the movements together, MST, Passe Livre, MAB... we put together small discussion
groups which discuss all the problems of the country, from the insignificant ones to the
really important ones and we begin to come up with a solution. It’s just that these
discussion groups depend on bringing a consciousness to the people (o povo) so that we
can create pressure, so that we can bring down the existing structure and create a new
political economy. That’s why formação política is so important, to create the conditions.
It’s everything. In the MST, why is it so important? Because to get people to have an
understanding of the collective, come to a collectivised assentamento, work collectively, I
think the only way to achieve this is to create a consciousness through formação política,
educating people, because fundamentally, we are collective beings.
Interviewer: How do you see the future here in the movement, in this *assentamento*? Like, of the families?

Marquinhos: Well, the future, I think it’s a challenge. Because, like, we have enough land here for us, one family, but if my son marries, well that’s already another family, no? And this piece of land we have is enough for us, even though there’s six of us, but I worry about my kids, if they are going to win land for themselves, because if we all stay together… you have to think about it, no? The future I mean. And I don’t know! Are they going to encamp in a new encampment, or continue here? Because here we have five *alqueires* of land. And we have three children. Divide five into three and you get one and bit for each, no? So, in fact, they will be more *sem terra* than us!

Rosalete: I mean, our plot is five *alqueires*. My daughter gets married, that’s already the second generation, no? And then life gets complicated, because our plot is small!

Marquinhos: So you see, we worry a lot about this kind of thing. It’s the problem of the second generation. You know, they [Marquinhos’ children] have much more say in this question of the movement than us. It’s something you can’t force on people, because I wasn’t forced, no? Back in the beginning, we discussed it as a partnership, me and my wife, and we thought that getting involved in the movement could be an opportunity for us, a future. So today, I can’t force my family, my young ones and say ‘hey, you’re going to have to stay here with us’. They grow up, they make their own decisions. Some go work in the market outside the movement, whereas some stay within it and work because they’re more movement. So, it all comes down to what the reality of work is for them.

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37 ‘you’ here is the second person plural – Marquinhos and Rosalete are married.
38 one *alqueire* equals differing numbers of hectares depending on where in Brazil you are. In Santa Catarina it is generally the equivalent of 2.42 hectares, although some movement members said it equalled 1.8 hectares.
Tais: I reckon the biggest challenge of the movement is getting young people involved. It’s that I reckon that in the *asentamentos* and *acampamentos* it’s getting more and more difficult to keep young people from moving on, more and more difficult to keep them living together in that environment, in that style of life. Why? It’s like we were saying, you have to create new things because outside the movement there’s a market which offers so much… so, it’s difficult. So much so that myself, I understand this problem and how hard it is. I have gone to the city, and I’ve got used to city life and for me now, to return and live in the *asentamento* would be really difficult.

For example here, there was a time when we had fifteen or sixteen young people but today there is nobody. The youngest people that live here are Sabine and Cleiton and they’ve only just got here. The movement doesn’t have any perspective. Am I going to spend the rest of my life here working in the field? No, I want to work on this question of the second generation. The movement has a very weak plan regarding young people, regarding its work with young people. And it’s not just here that I feel this, but in many other *asentamentos* throughout the state.

I mean, for example, in Florianópolis, there is the secretariat of the movement, right? And there’s a girl there, a movement girl, called Beatriz. Her, for example. I’m sure that if you went to speak to her and asked her if she would go back, if she would throw away everything that she has constructed in Florianópolis to return to São Miguel do Oeste, and go back to living in an *acampamento* or *asentamento*, she would find that hard. It’s the same for me. One part of me wants to stay with the movement, but another insists on something else, to follow my studies, to have a different life, a life different to that which the movement offers. This is the biggest challenge – we educate people, and with education, you don’t want to work in the field for the rest of your life.

*Social movements, transience and evolution*

As Goodwin et al. (2001) note, ‘all movements are transient in one degree or other but we considerably underestimate the extent to which transience and ephemerality is the condition in which social movements exist’ (2001: 34). A central aspect of what
constitutes a Social Movement Organisation (SMO) is the way in which mutability impacts upon not only its trajectory but also the experience and response of its members. For Walker (1994), SMOs are profoundly elusive and ‘precisely movements’ (1994: 677) which do not stand still. He argues that members’ participation in SMOs in a greater part derives from this perception of dynamism, so often placed in contrast with the immutability of the state, thereby creating space in the marketplace of political thought for the non-state adherents of social movements. This view is also espoused by Eyerman and Jamison (1995) who focus on the cognitive dimension of SMO activity using a framework based around context, process and articulation. They argue that SMOs emerge in particular times and places, being the products of both specific socio-political conditions but also deeper historical and cultural traditions. However, despite this formative milieu, they create new contexts by transcending the situations from which they have emerged, thereby freeing public space for addressing the particular problems that their members wish to articulate. What is crucial is the emphasis on the transience, or ‘looseness’ of these spaces, as for people taking part in this new forum, it is important that their movement is distant from ‘the organizations or institutions that it will eventually become’ (1995: 450). It is in these new spaces that fresh ‘knowledge interests’ can be articulated and identity formation can occur through cognitive praxis. But this process is dependant on the inherent creativity of the forum, the forum being an ‘experimental arena for the practising of new forms of social and cognitive action’ (ibid.). For Eyerman and Jamison, SMO activity is fundamentally premised on its non-institutionalised and transient spaces of debate. That is, members are encouraged by the appearance of new discursive possibilities to articulate new visions of society precisely because of the social movement’s mutable forum.

The idea that an SMO is subject to some form of pre-ordained pattern of evolution as both Walker and Eyerman and Jamison hint at with their projection of inevitable descent into institutionalisation is not new. Herbert Blumer’s 1951 work identified four stages of social movements’ lifecycles. The four stages he described were: ‘social ferment,’ ‘popular excitement,’ ‘formalization,’ and ‘institutionalization’ (Della Porta and Diani 2006). More recent scholars have reworked these stages as ‘emergence’, ‘coalescence’, ‘bureaucratization’, and ‘decline’ (Macionis 2000) and the last of these four stages, decline, which is not necessarily a negative outcome for a social movement, has also been subject to theoretical modelling. According to Miller (1999), decline occurs due to a surfeit of success, organisational failure, co-optation by forces against which the
movement operates, repression through various means including violence, or establishment within mainstream society, and this last particular outcome has attracted a great deal of scholarship in the Latin American context (Foweraker 1995; Foweraker 2004).

Fischer (2008) has commented on how in recent years, as a consequence of the implementation of policies pertaining to the so-called Washington consensus throughout the continent, neo-liberal governmentality has opened new ‘venues’ for popular organisation in Latin America. These venues have arisen as a result of public-private and public-NGO collaboration and Fischer argues that these channels are ‘more focused on incremental change within the system’ (2008: 12) thereby channelling discontent in civil society towards ‘more manageable ends’ (ibid). Hale (2002) has also articulated a similar thesis but with the focus on multiculturalism rather than ‘NGOisation’. Commenting on how SMOs have interacted with neo-liberal conceptualisations of ‘multiculturalism’ when encountering the state, Hale argues ‘that cultural rights movements have little choice but to occupy the spaces opened by neoliberal multiculturalism’ (2002: 522). But even if they often have much to gain by doing so, Hale argues that they can subsequently only articulate their discourse within ‘the dominant bloc’ (ibid) of this frame, raising important questions regarding to what extent such SMOs’ discourse may have been compromised in the process.

And just as the issues pertaining to institutionalisation are diverse, the forces that act upon SMOs in prompting evolution in general can be many and varied, not always resulting in the clearly structured delineation of Blumer’s model. For example, faced with conflict, an SMO may moderate its aims (Della Porta and Diani 2006), perhaps become more radical hoping to mobilise a level of core support to sustain it (Jackson and Morgan 1983) or even just cut off connection with wider society and isolate itself altogether (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Indeed, there are many other factors which impact on this process of transformation, resulting in alternative SMO pathways of evolution. Lowi (1971) notes how for many SMOs, merely maintaining the structural integrity of the organisation actually becomes an end in itself to the exclusion of achieving the goals of the movement as were originally set out. Also, the majority of SMOs don’t even reach the stage of institutionalisation, many disappearing before their goals can ever be accomplished (Minkoff 1995 cited in Della Porta and Diani, 2006), although equally SMOs can also disappear once their project has been realised (Varley 1985).
Therefore, the evolutionary trajectory of SMOs can exhibit much greater volatility than Blumer’s model allows for. And as Della Porta and Diani note, for SMOs ‘whose life expectancy is short and whose aims are limited, an interest in the organization’s continuing existence may not even develop [within its members] (2006: 151). This argument that the issue behind the movement is often more important than the movement itself, is supported by Taylor (1989) who argues that the idea of SMO ‘immaculate conception’, a movement being born from nowhere, is fundamentally misleading. She contends that issues have primacy over the movements which articulate them and while a movement may come and go, the issue will remain intact. She states that ‘movements do not die, but scale down and retrench to adapt to changes in the political climate. Perhaps movements are never really born anew. Rather, they contract and hibernate’ (1989: 772).

Nevertheless, within the loose framework of evolution though, for those SMOs that can be said to have ‘attained’ a degree of institutionalisation, there is always the question of a process of conscious evolution to remain relevant and thereby continue to engage members in concomitant activity which pertains to the movement’s struggle/goal. Borland (2008) highlights how the movement that coalesced around the ‘mothers of the disappeared’ (2006: 115), a group of women who sought justice for their missing children during Argentina’s ‘dirty war’ – 1976 to 1983 – evolved from their original protest to signify and connote a wholly separate line of dissent, one aimed at the Argentine government in 2001 and one that encompassed critiques of neo-liberalism and more generally foregrounded human rights activism. Citing Shemtov (1999), Borland argues that this protest brand stretching, constitutes ‘goal expansion’ (2006: 117), a process by which a movement’s original goals undergo mutation in geographic scope, number, or direction. Borland relates goal expansion to the idea of ‘frame alignment’ (Snow et al. 1986), the ‘ongoing process by which social movement actors link their claims to interested audiences, often to strategically construct more resonant and persuasive frames that will mobilize people’ (Borland 2006: 117). Borland details how the madres (mothers), made connections between their old and new goals via collective action frames to end up participating in a struggle very different from their original protest. And she notes how it is through this evolution of purpose and willingness to tackle new objectives that the movement has survived for over 30 years, not only remaining relevant, but indeed becoming a cornerstone for other movements that articulate similar socio-economic critiques. Borland states of the madres, that they,
recognize the finite future of their organizations, and this recognition has been an impetus for goal expansion. They have managed to modernize and expand their goals, linking old and new in a way that has enabled them to remain relevant, while they prepare to leave a legacy.

(2006: 129)

And it seems that, with advancing age, a legacy could be the most important inter-generational action that they complete. Citing Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart (2000), Borland argues that ‘long-term movements rely on generational passage of ideology, repertoires and goals’ (2006: 129) and key to the madres’ continuing relevance has been their flexibility in not only responding to their advancing years and evolving place in society, but also their flexibility in responding to the changing contexts around them, as they have got older. As with culture, social actors cannot be placed sous cloche; they age, change and engage with different frames of collective action at different points of their lives.

But have the MST, as an evident example of a ‘long-term’ movement been as successful as the madres of Borland’s portrayal in remaining pertinent to the articulation of their member’s concerns? Has the movement the institutional flexibility to continue to render a germane contribution to Brazilian society? And particular to inter-generational concerns, can the ageing actors of the movement’s leadership leave a lasting legacy for a new cohort to drive the movement forward?

_A countryside-based urban movement?

The patterns of internal migration that have transformed Brazil from a country with a predominantly rural population to that of one with a predominantly urban population have been noted by diverse authors (Chant 1998; Lucas 2004; Portes 1978; Sahota 1968; Yap 1976). And Wright and Wolford describe how ‘during the time of the dictatorship, Brazil went from being two thirds rural to being two thirds urban’ (2003: 57) sending vast waves of people to the big cities, especially Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo as part of a wider government initiative to ‘modernise’. This programme of ‘modernisation’ was
particularly noticeable in the South of the country (the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul) where between 1970 and 1980, numbers of tenant farmers fell by 27.3%, sharecroppers by 35.6% and the number of rural squatters by 13.9% (IBGE 1970, 1980 cited in Ondetti 2008: 61). Indeed, overall, 42% of the rural population of the south migrated outward in the 1970s (Merrick, 1989: 40) and this trend of rural-urban migration has not slowed since then resulting in a situation where now nationally 86% of Brazil’s population is defined as urbanised.  

This data therefore, provides some illustrative context for Luizinho and Thiago’s comments when they note that there are very few countryside people left to recruit into the movement in Santa Catarina. Paulo also supported this view when talking to me about his frente de massa activity. He spoke at length about how the small cities in the countryside, such as N_ and Canoinhas each have their own periferia, made up of people that arrived from small countryside settlements a couple of generations back in search of a better life. He commented on how the frente de massa was concentrating on recruiting these urban people and deliberately trying to reverse the rural-urban migration trend. He justified this strategy by speaking of how such people had lost touch with the land and how returning to farm was a more natural existence for them, as many people’s parents or grandparents would have been small farmers themselves.

And indeed within the movement more generally, as it has evolved from its early beginnings, the wider trends of recruiting have had to adapt to new geographical expansions into areas which perhaps have a weaker independent farming tradition. Ondetti (2008) notes that as the movement expanded, MST ‘campers tended to become more urban’ (2008: 123) and that although INCRA stipulated that the beneficiaries of agrarian reform must be ‘rural workers’, in practice this criteria was rarely enforced, thereby allowing the movement to induct many people from low wage urban professions into the movement. This was certainly the case in Santa Catarina, where many of the acampados that I met were young people from the morros of Joinville, the biggest city in the state. Vergara-Camus also notes that in an encampment in Rio Grande do Sul, ‘camp representatives mentioned that 30 per cent of the inhabitants of the camps were of urban origin and without personal ties to rural life’ (2005: 7). In another acampamento Vergara-Camus details how ‘this proportion reached 80 per cent of all camps’ inhabitants’ (ibid.).

Indeed from a wider context, Rosset argues that ‘land reform holds promise as a means

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to stem the rural-urban migration that is causing Third World cities to grow beyond the capacity of urban economies to provide enough jobs’ (2006: 11) and this was certainly the approach that many members with whom I conversed argued the movement was taking. Indeed, as Luizinho notes in his interview, the MST has even begun to a certain extent to cast its recruitment policy as an act which is beneficial to the nation as a whole, removing service ‘consumers’ from the favelas and morros, and delivering capacity building courses to render these persons rehabilitated as productive members of society.

However, this positive view of urban recruitment is certainly not shared by the right wing media, which has accused the MST of mobilising ‘inauthentic’ landless people to further the movement’s political clout and bolster membership numbers. McNee describes how the MST has been criticised for exaggerating the ‘problem of landlessness by recruiting families in urban or suburban areas to engage in occupations of latifundia, or large rural estates’ (2005: 337). And he cites an influential opinion-former from the Folha de São Paulo ‘Xico’ Graziano Neto in an editorial published in May 2004:

The MST has become a factory for producing the landless. Good, poverty-stricken people find themselves mixed up with corrupt opportunists in order to get a plot of land in one of the settlements. In this way, the favela changed places – from the shacks in the urban peripheries to the rural land occupations. To imagine that somebody who is poor, alienated and without adequate skills or culture can become a successful farmer is to rationalize the absurd.

(cited in McNee 2005: 335)

And it certainly is true that the MST has expanded into a new marketplace of recruitment in Santa Catarina. Many of the people that they recruit have no farming skills whatsoever and as Thiago states in his interview, they often have a wholly separate financial rationale, one which is at odds with the economics of the countryside. Nevertheless, during my fieldwork it was clear that this form of recruitment had become a priority. Paulo was dispatched to Criciúma in the south of the state to establish a new geographical frontier of the movement, and one that was to be established specifically from the periferias in the area surrounding the city. Indeed, such was his success that he and Perotti were arrested and jailed for a short period in December 2009 as a result of their activities. When I spoke to Paulo, Lúcia, Mirelle and many others, what became clear was that the Borland’s concept of ‘goal expansion’ was key to new patterns of
recruitment. The definition of *sem terra* was ultimately flexible, Lúcia telling me that anyone who owned less than four hectares was *sem terra*. Plainly, what constituted *sem terra* was undergoing a process of brand stretching (Cabral 2000; Pepall and Richards 2002; Simpson 2006) and often the phrase *sem terra* mutated to *sem oportunidades*, to represent people from urban backgrounds. This linkage has also influenced the formation of *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (The Movement of Homeless Workers – MTST), which Wright and Wolford describe as loosely in alliance with the MST.

Therefore, despite criticism from the conservative right, the MST in Santa Catarina has without doubt attempted to enfranchise a greater number of potential members, by building alliances with non rural actors. However, the difficulties inherent to assimilating people from such differing background are manifold as Luizinho touches upon in his interview. And the reality of trucking people from an urban *morro* to an isolated rural *acampamento* can be stark. In many *acampamentos* there are tensions based on *acampados’* geographical origins, (members of Polish origin are said to exclusively frequent other members of Polish origin and members of German origin are said to socialise exclusively with others of German origin), and rural urban divides can also be perceived. But aside from how people socialise together, there are more pressing concerns that Erica and Roberto touch on, regarding the influx of urban members to the MST and their approaches to models of financial viability that are of greater relevance as the movement attempts to broaden its appeal while maintaining overall cohesion.

*Engaging in the market and models of organisation*

Issues surrounding collectivisation have long been central to MST ideology. And with ever increasing numbers of recruits coming from an urban background and more comfortable with the idea of an hourly wage rather than a yearly agricultural cycle of production, alternative fiscal strategies are finding themselves progressively more articulated in movement discourse at local levels. One such example occurred in the collectivised *assentamento* of B_, where something of a crisis was becoming apparent. The

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40 For an excellent discussion surrounding what constitutes landless identity and how an ‘essentialisation of the peasantry’ has perhaps limited the involvement of urban actors in the struggle for agrarian reform, see McNee’s ‘A Diasporic, Post-traditional Peasantry: The Movimento Sem Terra (MST) And The Writing Of Landless Identity’ (2005)
the settlement showed unsustainable losses as due to the poor quality of the soil, selling agricultural produce was not a viable long term option. What was interesting about B_, was that simultaneous with its financial situation being revealed as precarious, a new, urban intake, including Paulo and Cleiton, had significantly altered its composition of settlers. They understood that the assentamento was not financially viable in its present incarnation and initiated a series of discussions within the assembléia (assentamento committee) to find solutions. One of the assentamento’s key sources of income was the produce of ecologically friendly bricks, which were then sold to local construction firms. The assentamento also produced cheese and other dairy products, all produced and sold collectively. However, even before the arrival of the new urban assentados, lack of income had resulted in sidelines being developed and one such was providing labour to build houses for the middle classes in a nearby coastal town. And yet, income was still low and the assentamento was facing implosion. Already, three out of eleven houses were empty and it was proving difficult to find new recruits. I asked Cleiton how he had come to move to B_.

Me, Paulo and Sabine were in an acampamento. There were sixty families there. And you know what the conditions are like, no? Life is complicated there. So then, Kleber arrived and an assembly was called. He said that there were vacancies here in B_ and asked if people wanted to come. Out of the 60 families, we were the only volunteers.

It is commonly perceived that the MST is a Marxist movement but assentamentos that are organised collectively are not popular choices for the majority of acampados. I asked Cleiton why, when MST members had been encamped for a year or even two years, why more people didn’t want to settle in B_. He told me that it was known that B_ was run collectively and that acampados wanted their own piece of land. Cleiton disapproved of this mentality, and he also had ideas about the financial possibilities of the B_ site, using collective labour. Among the ideas that this new urban cohort raised were turning the assentamento into a roadside restaurant selling café colonial (a Brazilian version of the German Kaffee und Kuchen), trading on the assentamento’s proximity to a federal highway. This suggestion was in fact so unpopular that Cleiton was later forced out of the movement for proposing that he manage the restaurant while everyone else was to cook and serve. Another idea was to create nature trails in the surrounding mata (forest) with
observation platforms overlooking the sea as part of an eco-tourism project. This project foundered on the lack of capital and intensive labour required to construct the necessary paths. But perhaps the idea with the most traction was that of using the bricks that the *assentamento* produced to manufacture barbeques for sale to supermarkets and smaller traders. However, none of these ideas gained support from the *de facto* leader of the *assentamento*, Kleber, who viewed all of them with suspicion due to the extent of their involvement in a wider capitalist market. For Kleber, the land of B was for self-sustenance and not to be used as a base for capitalist production. As Erica alluded to in her interview, there was a sense among the urban cohort that especially selling a manufactured product rather than raw materials was not incompatible with the movement’s ideology, but Kleber’s view was the most important, and as an indirect result of his intransigence, all of Paulo, Sabine and Cleiton left the *assentamento*.

The example of B is interesting in terms of analysis as it highlights the problem of to what extent the MST is willing to engage in the wider market. Kleber was comfortable with the collective selling of artisanal cheese to policemen and producing batches of bricks, but he wouldn’t sanction a more regularised interaction with the market as a producer. The problem for Kleber was that the influx of urban people with different ideas as to what was acceptable had reconfigured notions relating to production and market. And this reconfiguration extends more widely to the MST in Santa Catarina, because as has already been argued, recruitment is now targeted at urban *periferias*, and these members have a different financial ontology. Encamped MST members from urban contexts have given me business cards, offered to go into business with me and solicited start-up funding for personal micro-credit schemes. I even become involved at one stage in attempting to negotiate a contract with a Brazilian pharmaceutical firm regarding the supply of organic aloe vera from an *assentamento*.

But what contextualises this growing air of entrepreneurial adventure as demonstrated by newer, urban members? Without doubt there exists amongst members of the movement the perception that financial conditions in Brazil leading up to 2010 are infinitely different to those of 1984 when the MST was formally founded. Economic growth as represented by macro level data has been widely commented upon (Armijo and Burges 2010; de Onis 2008; Pinheiro et al. 2004) and although of course this has not necessarily brought about a reduction in poverty (Andrews 2004; Ferreira et al. 2009), Brazil’s position as a global top ten economy in terms of GDP has had an impact on the

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41 R$450 for a pallet of a thousand, a good market price
imagination of MST members and non-members alike. But during my fieldwork, it was not macro data like these that tended to come up in conversations with *assentados*.

Rather, what appeared important to members, were ‘smaller’ considerations that they connoted with economic stability and therefore foregrounded the possibility to engage in a business opportunity. Phone lines were often mentioned in this context, and I was told that in the 1980s, a phone line was so expensive that an entire black market economy was established around acquiring them and renting them out. Members also talked generally about the prices of basic materials and how due to inflation seeming more stable, they could be more confident about the worth of any money that they earned, a perception that Wright and Wolford also attest to (2003: 88). The growing availability of consumer credit also seemed to be another factor from which *assentados* derived confidence; not exclusively having to purchase items *à vista* (with money up front) seemed to make a great impact on people’s daily lives. Members further expressed an opinion that there were more middle class consumers that they could now sell to. The eco-tourism idea in the *assentamento* of B_ was especially premised on this appearance of a new sector of society, a family that as Cleiton described it to me, ‘has a car with air conditioning and an apartment in the city’.

So although the economic context of Brazil has changed since the movement’s formation and importantly, MST members’ perceptions of the economy have changed, has the movement’s leadership re-evaluated its position on the interaction with capitalism? The MST is widely recognised to be an anti-capitalist movement but how does this position translate itself on the ground, when it comes to trading and

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42 The question as to whether a reduction in poverty has been realised in parallel to, or as a result of growth in GDP is a matter of much debate. Gledhill & Hita (2009) have noted ‘year-on-year declines in the Gini index since 2004’ demonstrating the progress Brazil has made in reducing levels of inequality (2009: 6). While Ivo has also noted that the Lula administration’s targeted poverty schemes have expanded ‘coverage from a total of 3.5 million families in 2003 to 11.1 million families nationally by 2006 (Ivo 2008: 170, 195 cited in Gledhill & Hita), a significant shift in the geography of poverty. And yet doubts still remain based in part on approaches that render poverty a lived experience rather than a financial condition, approaches for example like those of Wacquant’s (2007) ‘territorial stigmatisation’.

43 Indeed, statistics confirm this widely held feeling of growing stability. In March 1990, inflation spiked at 82.4% for the month. It fell to 10% the following month before gradually growing again, peaking at 46.2% in June 1994. Since then, inflation has continued at roughly 1-3% per year with a one month high of 7.4% for the month of November 2002 (IPEADATA 2010: [http://www.ipeadata.gov.br/ipeaweb.dll/ipeadata?1439644562 - accessed 18th March 2010])
manufacturing? Vergara-Camus depicts a situation in his analysis which breaks down a polarised ‘engagement or non-engagement’ with capitalism. He argues the following:

members of the MST and the EZLN, although they partly rely on non-capitalist social relations for their survival, have engaged in capitalist exchanges for a long time, either through the sale of the crops they produce or their labour for a wage. Hence, it is not the expansion of capitalist relations per se, but rather the nature of the restructuring of agriculture that explains the re-emergence of the struggles for land in Brazil and Chiapas.

(2009: 368)

Vergara-Camus adds that once an assentamento has been established, the priority swiftly becomes to find ‘ways to better integrate into the market through the creation of cooperatives, the diversification of production or through participation in the niche market of agro-ecological production (2009: 380). And Wright and Wolford detail how to restructure these engagements, one of the movement’s economic policies is to discourage settlers from trying to compete with large-scale farming in the production of certain staple commodities, such as corn. They describe how the movement argues that due to economy of scale there is no point for its small farmers to try and compete in these sectors with agribusiness interests and that instead they should aim for much more niche products. This ‘agro-ecology’ approach that both Vergara-Camus (2009: 370) and Wright and Wolford (2003: 294) highlight therefore acknowledges an imperative to engage with a capitalist market, albeit on terms which eliminate the middleman, serve local markets with high quality produce and fundamentally maintain the long term fertility of the soil. However, it should be noted that this strategy envisages and encompasses only agricultural produce, crucially configuring land as a resource to be planted, rather than exploited as, for example, a commercial premises. This is perhaps why Kleber was unwilling to locate a non agricultural enterprise on the land of the B_ assentamento and partly why, frustrated at what they considered as out of date ideology, the urban trio of Sabine, Cleiton and Paulo left the assentamento for different environs.

However, at the level of MST national discourse, the model of agro-ecology is imagined to be best implemented in a collectivised manner. And indeed, despite the failure of the Settler’s Cooperative System (Sistema Cooperativista dos Assentados – SCA), the nationwide programme of collectivisation first rolled out by movement leadership in
June 1990, MST leaders that I encountered were still in favour of a similar model of organisation being implemented throughout the movement. Amongst others, both Paulo and Cleiton were supporters of this platform and as they allude to in their interviews, believed that the main factor behind the base’s rejection of collectivisation following June 1990 and indeed its continuing apathy, was a lack of formação política; the idea that members needed to be better educated about the benefits that such a model could bring. Indeed, Ondetti details how as far back as the early 1980s ‘the landless movement’s leadership in the South had favoured collective production’ (2008: 124), wanting to bring about a situation where working on industrialised co-operatives, members could exchange their ‘peasant’ identity for a ‘worker consciousness’ (CONCRAB, 1999: 11 cited in Ondetti, 2008: 124-5). This transformation entailed the existence of no private farmland and each family receiving wages depending on the number of hours they worked in the co-op. This strategy was designed to socialise former acampados from lapsing into ‘anomic individualism once they gained land’ (ibid., cf. Wright and Wolford 2003: 86) but also according to an interview that Ondetti cites, liberate individual settlers ‘for full time activism’ (Ondetti 2008: 125) in a scenario where subsistence production was to be left behind and large scale farms established. This historical prioritisation of a collective mode of production means that many MST assentamentos are designed with their accommodation laid out as agrovilas44 (houses that are grouped together) and while it appears that this is purely a physical legacy, for many, the issue of whether there is pressure to collectivise or not is still contentious (Cf. Wright and Wolford 2003: 86). Indeed, even in the aftermath of the demise of the MST’s SCA programme, the movement ‘reiterated its long-term commitment to collective production’ (Branford and Rocha 2002: 95) labelling it as a ‘superior form of organisation’ (ibid).

In this context therefore, it is unsurprising that members such as Roberto continue to agitate for a collectivised use of land and labour, such as in his interview above, despite the tension45 that both his project and the MST’s putative national

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44 Both the assentamentos of H_ and B_ feature agrovila style housing arrangements.
45 The assentamento of N_ was originally a full cooperative. This included land, labour, selling, buying, cooking, cleaning and childcare among other facets. It was a full cooperative as an acampamento and remained thus when it transformed to a settlement. However, tensions began to surface and the assentamento split into two núcleos, one collectivised and the other made of individual plots with concomitantly individual methods of production. Roberto was a member of the former along with Davi. At a certain point Davi decided that he wished to exit the co-op and live individually.
collectivisation scheme caused and continue to cause. What is of interest however, is that leadership projections of collectivisation seem to have developed since their initial rebuttal in 1990-1. In a lengthy conversation we shared, Luizinho explained to me the updated future of the MST’s collectivised model of organisation.

*The model of rural industrialisation*

At first unwilling to be interviewed, Luizinho began by speaking about the MST idea of a ‘new person’ and how this transformation could be accomplished through *formação*. I asked him what he understand *formação* to be.

So the teaching of the theoretical has to be linked to practical matters. Work is really important. It’s work that changes things, much more than teaching in a theoretical sense. Therefore it’s this combined education that has as its role, constructing new human beings – people who think differently, who act differently, who have a different attitude during difficult times.

Conversation then moved to what might constitute ‘difficult times’ and Luizinho expressed a common concern of MST members, one that Tais and Marquinhos foreground in their interviews.

There’s a tendency for example, for kids around here and in the movement in general, to go to the city. It’s the question of the second generation. The city is always there, in the background. This is a concrete fact. The city has things that the countryside still doesn’t have. The countryside doesn’t have internet, it doesn’t have cinema, it doesn’t have cyber cafés, it doesn’t have a load of advantages, good things that the city has. So this is what we’re working on, to try

Roberto was angry at this decision and calling an assembly, moved that Davi be expelled from the *assentamento* and therefore, the movement. When this motion was not passed, Roberto continued to harass Davi and his family, with menaces and intimidation. To put an end to what the families of the *assentamento* considered as ill-treatment of Davi, they had to encamp on Roberto’s land to make their point. Direct action, was at least in this particular case, successful.
to make the countryside more attractive. Give people a monthly salary, get customers… But it’s not easy and that’s why I say that it is a challenge, and the challenge is to change the method of production.

I asked what this change would mean.

We’re trying to change things, but it’s hard because often it’s the farmers themselves, the mum and dad, who inside their heads don’t see this necessity to move away from planting in the field. But you have to get into other markets… when we say that co-ops are a necessity, it’s because it will be to the advantage of the assentamentos but it also will attract the youth. If we manage to create a form of industrialised cooperativisation in the assentamentos, to be able to produce our own inputs, our own raw materials in an industrialised way, for sure, the young people will stay more in the countryside. So this is the challenge.

At this point I asked Luizinho if the model of industrialisation would be similar to the assentamento of H_ which is fully collectivised, paying its members a salary per hour in the produce of salads which they sell by fixed contract to a large city supermarket.

Yes, like H_ or the cooperative in São Miguel which produces milk under the brand name Terra Viva. The kids need the courage to stay in the countryside and it’s a question of money. And these projects will make money, projects like making cachaca (a liquor made from sugar cane) or pork derivatives. And really, the idea is for each co-op to act as a hub of industrialisation. This will increase production. And also when you have an industrial centre like this in the countryside, it attracts other things, leisure activities, internet, cyber cafés and so on. In this way, the kids will be able to find the advantages of the city here in the countryside.

I then raised the issue of how a similar model to this had caused problems in the past and asked him how these problems could be avoided in the future.

You have to find people who already have a cooperativist mentality. But this can also be taught.
Luizinho’s proposal for a new model of organisation did seem quite similar to movement proposals for collectivisation in 1990 in that he highlighted the possibility of greater production but also the financial necessity to produce at levels beyond mere self-sustenance, which MST leaders have historically considered to be economically unfeasible (Ondetti 2008: 126). But there also did seem to be an acknowledgement of a greater need to ‘commercialise’, work with agro-ecology, and work within the market. Luizinho hinted at this when he argued that the MST’s enemies had changed over time and with them, MST strategy.

Because up to ten, fifteen years ago, our enemy was latifúndio. But from 1990 with the model of agro-exportation and agribusiness, our enemy has become the big corporations connected to the production of food, seeds, pesticides…

Monsanto, Syngenta, Cargill.

As a result of this change of direction, the MST seems to be trying to insert itself into a new market position, that of an industrialised producer of niche goods. And although the model of rural industrialisation seems to contradict the ethos of agro-ecology, specifically the tenet of fundamentally not trying to compete with companies that can deliver similar goods at lower values thanks to greater economies of scale, the model does seem sustainable if there is sufficient local, or state, demand. Already, Terra Viva milk sells in the big supermarkets in the cities of Paraná and Santa Catarina and the brand seems to be gaining market recognition. If for example, adhering to the MST’s commitment to organic production, products could be sold to a burgeoning middle class market for organic produce, then it is easy to see how financially, the model could add value.

But what also seems significant is the link that Luizinho makes between the model of a monthly salary and the idea of convincing young people to stay in the countryside. A great deal of the proposal seems to based on the generation of money through the aggregation of value, hence the need to commercialise. And the proposal of

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46 Perhaps there is a certain irony that the MST’s model of rural industrialisation bears certain similarities to the transnational capitalist project that has been implemented in the ‘development’ of rural Mexico (Cook 1984).

47 The MST co-op Coopereste in Santa Catarina, processes 200,000 litres of milk per day under the Terra Viva brand. Total production including that of other brands is 330,000 litres per day.
creating co-ops which will become rural hubs of activity around which leisure services provided by external entrepreneurs can base themselves is obviously a crucial part of the strategy of dealing with the second generation question and I will discuss this in more depth later in the chapter. Yet despite this angle concerning young people, noticeably absent from Luizinho’s interview is any mention of the detail of members’ lives within these co-ops and whether they can expect to enjoy working in them. After all, what is it like to trade an identity of ‘peasant’ for that of ‘worker’?

_R$1 a hora_

The _assentamento_ of H_ is located on the coast, in close proximity to Santa Catarina’s principal federal highway, the BR-101\(^{48}\) and within easy driving distance of Florianópolis, the state capital of Santa Catarina, Joinville, the state’s largest and most prosperous city and Curitiba, the wealthy state capital of Paraná. Therefore it has excellent transport links to big markets and this is a situation which the co-op in H_ exploits. The _assentamento_ itself is defined as 95 hectares but of that total, 82 hectares are protected _Mata Atlântica_ (Atlantic forest), and therefore prohibited for use as farmland. This means that on the remaining thirteen hectares, with the _agrovila_ and with a substantial area of land that is waterlogged\(^{49}\) there is a little under ten hectares with which to plant. The _agrovila_ consists of fifteen houses but only twelve were occupied during the period in which I did my fieldwork.

With so little land to farm and hostile neighbours, once the area that became the _assentamento_ of H_ was appropriated, the _assentamento_ faced ruin in short order unless production could be made extremely efficient and it was this situation and conditions that drove forward a programme of collectivisation. H_ produces salad crops in an industrialised manner, creating seedlings in greenhouse style controlled environments, before transplantation to intensely irrigated fields, specifically designed for a relative monoculture. Production is done to a strict schedule, with allotted times for seedlings to grow and a programme of a certain number of days for each type of salad to mature in the rows of the fields. This is because H_ has a fixed terms contract with Angeloni, one

\(^{48}\) The so-called _Estrada da Morte_ (road of death)

\(^{49}\) This waterlogged land had been put into use as pools for fishery cultivation in a further demonstration of the need to maximise every available resource.
of the biggest supermarket companies in the south of Brazil, for the supply of salads. This contract absorbs 90% of the *assentamento’s* production and is the largest single item on the *assentamento’s* income sheet. The *assentados* of H_ are paid an hourly wage for their work of just over R$1 per hour. A typical month will render a monthly salary of some R$180, compared to the legal state minimum wage of roughly R$432. However, despite the seemingly low wage, all aspects of life are cooperativised, so *assentados*, beyond working together and producing together, eat together, cook together and clean together, a process which is financially beneficial for all. The canteen and provision of all meals costs R$20 per month and of course collectivised activities such as childcare, are ‘free’. *Assentados* also have access to collectively owned property; the *assentamento* has a communal phone line and a communal car. Therefore, even though wages are low, twelve families of *assentados* manage to earn a living on the same amount of land as one family possesses in the *assentamento* of N_.

Management of the *assentamento* is split into two divisions, administration and political. The allotment of labour falls under the former, while the latter deals with social issues, such as family disputes or requests. As has already been mentioned, *assentados* are paid a wage per hour and they enjoy one day off per week. Any day which they don’t work is docked from their pay, so work that has been assigned is effectively compulsory. *Assentados* are also required to work from the age of twelve upwards, children usually being assigned cleaning duties, a fact which excites much critical comment from members of surrounding *assentamentos*. The organisation of H_ is extremely efficient. All areas of food consumption and salad production are strikingly neat and clean. The communal canteen of H_ has at any one time six neatly printed and colour co-ordinated rotas, which detail the allocation of activities. I knew that Davi and his wife Jurema had lived and worked in H_ for a number of years so the first question I asked was why they had left.

Davi: It was internal differences of opinion. That we should have been able to overcome, no? But it was also because of my wife. She gets really heated about these things. But in summary, the bottom line was that we got worried with this question of… Well, the future and what it’s going to be like. For example, if I worked there for ten years and had to leave suddenly, I would leave with nothing. I mean, when we arrived there, they welcome you, they get you into it all and they tell you, everything here belongs to us. But it’s us in inverted commas, no?
Because the day you leave, everything stays there. Nothing belongs to ‘us’. It belongs to you only when you’re inside.

I asked him to elaborate on this.

When you work there, you deposit money in the central bank of the collective and this money comes from the sweat of your labour. It’s for the good of the group. So they’ve constructed a tool shed, bought a new car, new truck, two tractors… but this is my sweat! And when I leave? I don’t even get one bolt of that tractor!

As we spoke, it became clear that this fundamental problem of the collective had left Davi feeling like interchangeable labour and not valued as a person.

Look, collectivism is the best form of progress of moving forward. It’s just that you have to have greater flexibility on the human side. Treating people like humans is not valued there. Being human there is just valued as labour, labour, labour. So when you get ill and you don’t produce anything… I felt it badly, because I broke my arm and I spent 40 days out of action. And I picked up on not being valued anymore. It’s an administrative thing. They wanted back the money from the hours I couldn’t work. I really felt like I wasn’t valued.

The concept of ser humano (being human) was recurrent in our conversation so I asked Davi what he meant when he used the phrase (see figure 16).

I don’t mind so much contributing to the central bank of the collective. You have to have this. Even though I left the co-op, I still think it’s the best method and it will eventually work out. The only thing I think is that there should be some changes in the internal politics. Like, lessen the investment in the capital side to raise the investment in being human. Because treating each other well, being human, is the source of everything. And over there it has been forgotten.
We spoke for a while about how to go on a movement mobilisation would not be considered as a ‘day off’ and therefore you wouldn’t be deducted wages. But both Davi and Jurema commented on how such was the focus on work and meeting the contract, that in fact, people had forgotten about the wider struggle. Davi at one point was even more explicit.

You know what? It’s too much work and they think twice before letting someone go on a demonstration. Because if they go, it creates a labour deficit and there, it’s work, work, work.

I asked him who he meant by ‘they’, at which point Jurema laughed.

Davi: There’s always someone who speaks louder than others, it’s useless to deny it. B_ is Kleber, no? He’ll never leave. H_ is Daniele. In the rest of the state as well, the other co-ops, there are always one or two people. So the other families come, they go, but these people stay. It’s normal that there is someone who takes the wheel. Daniele for example, he has the technical side. He understands how to plant the salads and how to treat the seeds. And his wife, Nina, she does all the accounting, she knows how many hours everyone has done, so she controls the money. She has a computer, she’s taken courses… No one else knows how to do that. So they dominate. As for decisions, I mean, there’s the administrative group, but in an assembly, the problem is that even if the majority are against something, they won’t say anything, they’ll just let it pass.

Jurema: We actually came from a co-op to another one here, because back then there was a co-op here.

Davi: It’s because I insisted, ‘come on, let’s come here to Roberto’s co-op’. And I was certain that because the people were different, the politics would be different as well. But at the end of the day, the bottom line is that it always ends up the same, you know? (cai na mesma realidade, sabe?). You can change the people, but the problems are the same. Someone gives the orders, someone makes the decisions. As a group you decide together, but this ‘someone’ will always bypass this.
Jurema: I didn’t like it. I had just lost one of my children at that time. \(^{50}\) And so I was really depressed, but I had to work in the crèche and the noise that the children made… it was terrible for me. But I had to look after them even though I didn’t want to. Because I was a mother, because I had a child in the crèche it was required. Whoever had children… The crèche was staffed by the mothers.

Davi: The women who weren’t mothers, weren’t required to work in the crèche.

Jurema: I was stuck in the house all the time. I was depressed, I was having treatment. And there were twelve children and I couldn’t control them anymore. One day, I was just crying because I couldn’t handle it and ‘they’ could see I was suffering, but nobody… ‘No! You have to look after them as you’re a mother!’

Davi: It’s a lack of humanity.

Jurema: I mean, if you’re working and earning per hour… Because you have to clock on and clock off. It’s nothing but a company. It’s a salads company.

Although both Davi and Jurema had many criticisms about life in H_ and how they were treated, Davi especially, maintained his commitment to the collective model, at least in a theoretical incarnation, throughout our conversation. He mentioned that the arguments he had fought were perhaps as a result of ‘his own defects’ and that group work was ‘one of the best methods’ of organisation. However, he also consistently advocated the need for relationships to be conducted in a ‘more human’ way and Jurema also articulated concerns pertaining to gender. She was unhappy that as a mother she was obliged to work in the crèche and she also mentioned that she used to work in the kitchen with another woman. She highlighted how if you were a cook, you didn’t work in the planting side of the assentamento and she seemed unhappy about how tasks had become gendered. A further concern for them both and perhaps the main reason why they left H_, was a lack of security in the sense of the lack of any pension. They talked of how their situation was much better in N_ as if they had to leave, they would at least have capital and assets to sell. But perhaps their main concern was how one or two people could

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\(^{50}\) Jurema was pregnant with twin boys, only one of whom survived the birth.
easily and in their opinion, inevitably, come to dominate a cooperativised environment. In H_, Daniele and Nina were identified as being able to effectively bypass meetings because people were unwilling to speak their opinion. And it seemed that this reticence was connected to members’ sense of an inferiority in technical matters, Davi highlighting Daniele’s agricultural knowledge and Nina’s IT skills in contrast to other members’ lack of capacity. In this manner, their experience seems to echo Kasmir’s analysis of the Mondragón cooperative in Spain (1999), where Kasmir argues that ‘[c]ooperative workers had considerably broader rights to participate in decision making than did workers in private firms, but they lacked the expertise and resources to turn these rights into power’ (1999: 383) with the result that ‘many co-op workers were disillusioned and disinterested in participating in management’ (ibid.).

However, it would seem that a certain lack of participation has more serious consequences than being merely wary of speaking in co-op meetings. Although during conversation it was not rendered explicit, Davi made it clear that when he spoke of ‘having to leave’, this could signify being expelled, as Roberto has attempted to do when Davi left his cooperative. Davi underlined this point when we continued to talk about the *assentamento* of B_ and how Kleber seemed resistant to change.

Against Kleber, either you agree with him, or you leave. And if you leave, you leave with nothing.

And a further subtlety to this lack of a tangible security manifested itself when we started to talk about the second generation and what benefits they might derive from a cooperative model. Davi talked about Daniele and Nina’s son in the following terms.

We need to change the internal politics, not in all aspects, just some, in this sense of being more human, no? We have to value the family. For example, do you know Daniele’s son? He was growing up when we were there, he was a little kid. Now he’s eighteen or nineteen and married. But the marriage broke up because he had no opportunities. He has nothing, no hob to cook with, not even a sink to do his washing up in!

What Davi demonstrates here is that if all property is collectivised, then there is limited possibility of passing assets on to your children. And this lack of security for both them,
and their children, seemed a key factor to their two time rejection of a collective model of work. A rejection which echoes the decision that the vast majority of members of the MST made in their collective refusal of the plans for cooperativisation which were put on the table in June 1990. And yet, cooperativisation remains stubbornly on the agenda, with H_ being held up as an example by leaders like Luizinho, as to what can be achieved with collective labour and a wider implementation of formação política. But is the model of rural industrialisation merely a response to (or mobilisation of) the growing diversity of economic possibilities brought about by the fact that the majority of the movement’s intake now comes from an urban background? Or is it simply representative of the leadership’s lack of faith in the long-term viability of the movement if its members continue with purely subsistence-based agriculture?

Although it could be argued that these issues make up a part of the project’s logic, questions pertaining to the second generation seem to run as an undercurrent to much of the debate around how to organise the movement, and yet, they are rarely addressed in MST public discourse. Even in the academic literature, it doesn’t seem a central preoccupation. Wright and Wolford do note how in the Northeast, settlers articulate similar concerns about their children to Davi and Jurema’s, concluding that money has to be garnered because if it isn’t, ‘it is clear that agrarian reform will stop with this generation. [...] settlers’ children will not stay on the land if something better comes up’ (2003: 178). And Branford and Rocha, in a book of almost three hundred pages, devote a mere paragraph to the situation, commenting that the needs and demands of the younger generation constitute a challenge to the movement and that ‘settlers need to construct a new culture more in tune with the needs and the dreams of young people’ (2002: 286). So, is rural industrialisation with its focus on providing a structure which will attract younger members of the movement, thereby preventing them from leaving for the city, the movement’s answer to the question of the second generation as Luizinho indicates? As was discussed earlier, social movements have tended to evolve if they wish to stay relevant to their membership and is this potential model of organisation demonstrative of the flexibility that such an evolution will require? Or is it simply a reboot of the failed proposals for the SCA of June 1990? Perhaps the MST is moving towards the most critical point of its history, a stage where in contrast to the past 25 years, any confrontation will only be generated from within.
In 1984, the year of the movement’s official foundation, Brazil’s yearly inflation rate was 192.12% with foreign debt to banks and governments totalling $104 billion. And as recently as 1999, Cardoso’s administration agreed to an emergency $41.5 billion loan package from the IMF. However by 2009, the economic situation had changed. Brazil’s yearly inflation rate was steady at 4.847% and in October 2009 Brazil paid off its entire debt to the IMF for the first time, even buying $10 billion dollars of IMF bonds to reinforce its position as a creditor rather than a debtor. Even though this type of macro-economic data is occasionally not considered as deserving of citation, it is undeniable that Brazilian society is changing around the MST, even if without any doubt, many of the inequalities that were present in Brazil in 1984 have not improved in a significant form (Burity 2008; Ferreira et al. 2008) so much so that the MST has recently declared that ‘Agrarian Reform has reached a standstill all over Brazil’. But if agrarian reform has stalled, what of the movement’s politics and of its wider relevance to its changing membership demographic?

Regarding its raft of ideology, the MST has undergone a profound development, starting from a basic premise to combat the inequality of landholdings in Brazil, to an engagement with the perceived inequities of capitalism, to a confrontation with agribusiness and global financial systems of capital and latterly to a commitment to organic farming and agro-ecology. Wright and Wolford characterise this trajectory as ever decreasingly radical, as rhetoric surrounding the need for societal revolution has become diluted, perhaps in acknowledgement that through government funds such as Lumiar and the *bolsa família*, financially, the government has become a key ally even if the movement leadership publicly distance themselves from Lula's administration. And in addition, perhaps it is the case that this purging of hardline calls for revolution is also due to the effort of making the movement’s appeal as broad as possible, as recruitment becomes increasingly urban (2003: 314).

The MST is evolving therefore, but just as the plans for the SCA foundered for the lack of buy-in from the base in 1990 to 1991, will rural industrialisation result in a similar fiasco? And even if it is never fully implemented, the formulation of such a

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policy without consultation with the base begs the question of just how much say members of the movement have in determining the big policies. But following this line of enquiry, surely the crucial question is whether the movement really has the organisational and institutional flexibility to accurately reflect the desires and wishes of its base and therefore remain relevant to its membership?

Without doubt, as the fallout from the movement’s dalliance with the idea of the SCA demonstrated, models of organisation are not forced on anyone. Even if leaders do believe that collectivisation is preferable, it is in no way mandatory and during my fieldwork I never saw any pressure to conform to a particular structure of labour. Indeed, when Davi was victimised, members of the assentamento militated to render the position of his antagonist, Roberto, untenable. And yet, it is easy to see why the leadership favours collectivisation, beyond the Fordist elements\(^53\) of creating a ‘new man’ (Marsden 2008). In H_, land that supports one family in N_, provides thirteen families with a good standard of living, one without doubt much superior to what those families possessed prior to their involvement with the movement. Even Davi, having suffered from the internal politics of co-ops was keen to stress their potential but was not sanguine about the prospects outside this model.

Here in Brazil, the future of the small farmer, a family like us, doesn’t have much going for it.

So does rural industrialisation really constitute a mere reboot of the 1990 plans for the SCA? Movement leaders such as Luizinho stress rural industrialisation as a potential solution to the problem of the second generation and it is also significant that rural industrialisation is premised on the concept of agro-ecology and niche market exploitation. This will not be assentamentos producing soya or corn in competition with Cargill, Danone or Sadia. Rather the model imagines small co-operatives producing high value aggregated products for local and state markets. Products like jams, sausages, gherkins and dairy derivatives are already being marketed under the MST brand Terra Viva, and combined with a growing market for organically grown goods in the big cities, there is certainly a possibility to create conditions of financial stability, or rather, to make money.

\(^{53}\) Although the MST’s ideology surrounding collectivisation may share creating a ‘new man’ with Fordism, it does not yet encompass accumulation of property and capital.
But there are concerns. Jurema’s comment that H_ is nothing more than a salads factory seems to conduct analysis to the heart of the matter. Much of Jurema and Davi’s criticism was directed at the management philosophy of H_, rather than the fact that it was a co-op *per se*. And Davi wished for greater democracy within the enterprise while rejecting what he saw as the dehumanising aspects of its harsh business logic which dominated collective life. But is H_ an exception to the norm regarding the internal organisation of potential MST co-ops or is it indicative of the manifestation of wider structural tendencies within the movement’s organisational logic? H_ did run an extremely tight operation and from my observations, and members’ testimonies, Daniele and Nina were in charge. But with so little land to exploit, it was evident that without that strong hierarchic discipline, the *assentamento* may have quickly folded and people’s livelihoods been disbanded. Indeed, the efficiency of H_ was incredibly impressive, seen from the point of view of business process logic. But the question remains, are there other models of collectivisation? Models in which leadership trust members to fulfil their roles without recourse to practices of ‘clocking on’ and ‘clocking off’? Speaking to Roberto or Luizinho, it was evident that production was a key concept in collectivisation discourse. And it may be the case that if the *assentamento* of N_ is transformed into a pork processing plant, production will be the key metric by which it is judged, at least given the ontology of its likely co-ordinators. Without further research, it is impossible to know if this prioritisation of production levels over ‘being human’ will occur or not, but it certainly seems possible, if as in H_ and B_, small dominant groups that hold production as the crucial metric are able to foreground themselves in the cooperative’s coordination.

But aside from questions as to whether H_ might be representative of other instances of rural industrialisation, more important issues need to be addressed. For example, even if more ‘human’ models are implemented, do members of the movement *wish at all* to be transferred from one static, essentialised identity, that of ‘peasant’, to another, that of ‘worker’? Is this institutional flexibility, or is this transfer and reconfiguration of the identity of the base from one category to another? In conversation with MST members, it became clear to me that people join the movement for many reasons. Some believe in the struggle from the outset, some are heartily convinced, while others just want to improve their, or more commonly, their children’s prospects. The MST promotes returning to the countryside and reversing the rural-urban pattern of migration, but trying to empathise with what people understand by the
‘countryside’ seems crucial. *Trabalhando na roça* (working the land) is a common phrase to hear when one speaks to MST members and *a roça* is often imaginatively contrasted with *a cidade*, the city. Many members explained to me that *trabalhando na roça* is not just agricultural work, it is a way of life. And it seems that part of this way of life that is distinct from the city, is that a small farmer is independent, that s/he is their own boss. Gaetano expressed that being able to plant what you want, when you want, to stay in bed late if you are tired, or work until midnight if you so wish, is a fundamental component of the life of a small farmer, in contrast to the ‘guys who work for a salary’ of the city. I am not suggesting that all members articulate these concerns or configure rural life in this way, indeed I have argued that increasingly the MST is focusing its recruitment on people from urban backgrounds. Nor am I expounding a separate essentialised identity, that of the proudly independent MST ‘peasant’, committed to a rural style of life and the self-sufficiency that it provides. But members with these views do exist, perhaps as MST leaders tacitly admit when they call for greater *formação política* and when Luizinho hints at ‘mums and dads not being willing to move away from planting in the field’.

There are also more practical concerns around the longer term, intergenerational viability of the model. As Davi and Jurema note, if you leave the co-op after working for no matter how many years, you leave with nothing and the lack of some form of a pension scheme is clearly problematic. Indeed, Marió and Woolcock (2008) highlight how even the state’s rural pension scheme has played a crucial role in poverty alleviation, making a significant difference in rural areas (2008: 12), which gives rise to the irony that Lula’s administration, so derided by many members of the MST perhaps has perhaps addressed these long-term social needs more fully than the movement. Such details as long-term social security, accident insurance or similar technicalities can of course be addressed if the model of rural industrialisation is progressively rolled out by MST leadership. And theoretically, it may encourage the second generation to remain in the countryside and attract the kind of leisure services that Luizinho mentions. But will it be a genuine response to the changing needs of movement members; will it be an organic evolution of movement direction? As I have already noted, Borland argues that ‘long-term movements rely on generational passage of ideology, repertoires and goals’ (2006: 129) to remain relevant, but does the MST have the institutional flexibility to respond to emerging dynamics of its own membership and therefore continue to deliver a germane contribution to Brazilian society? Or is it the case that the H_ model, while profitable on
paper, does not have the characteristic of ‘being human’ that Davi and Jurema seek in order for the model to have legitimacy with the people who are going to work in it?

The MST recently celebrated its 25th anniversary; a landmark achievement. No other comparable movement has managed to remain relevant for so long. But it seems that now, with the demographic of its membership beginning to change, both in terms of age and rural/urban background, that there has never been a greater risk of disenfranchisement and its corollary for a social movement, mounting irrelevance. Ultimately, the problems in H_ beset many other urban workers’ cooperatives. But the salient issue is whether the MST has the capacity and institutional flexibility to put aside idée fixe of production and collective consciousness and seek out members’ experiences of collectivisation. Put succinctly, the question remains unanswered: does the movement have the self-reflexivity to learn from its base and improve collective models for its members, as individuals.
Conclusions

From the perspective of the global North, the MST is a core actor in the sphere of grassroots activism. It has been configured as a standard bearer of the struggle against neo-liberalism and has come to represent for the George W Bush generation the quintessential Latin American protest movement, complete with Fidel t-shirts, Che stickers and the scarlet apparel of those who consciously wish to de-link with capitalism. But whatever the broad-brush outsider’s perspective may be, and despite the importance of the transnational frame, the MST has achieved indisputably concrete local results through individual actions and personal commitments and countless members to whom I spoke expressed eloquent ideas around a recurring theme, that of how the movement had altered the trajectory of their lives and bestowed upon their families a deep sense of dignity. And in the conclusion to this thesis, it is these members’ individualities, rather than any institutionalised project, that I wish to foreground, a perspective that have I privileged throughout this project.

Questions regarding how the global North perceives the movement are secondary to how the movement functions regarding interaction between differing and nuanced levels of its organisation. And at this crossroads, amidst shifting socio-economic conditions, a changing rural/urban dynamic of recruitment and volatile perceptions of ‘the future’ as the second generation of MST members come to adulthood, issues pertaining to the fundamental individuality of both new and existing members is going to be of great importance as the movement seeks to undertake new challenges. Other commentators and I have noted that the MST is fundamentally a pragmatic movement, but it remains to be seen if the movement can or wishes to deconstruct its _sem terra_ collective identity in favour of a potentially more inclusive and less threatening set of frames that will allow it to integrate members from ever more diverse backgrounds and better compete in the cities and amongst the emerging middle class.

In the process of coming to form an essential part of the transnational alliance of marginalised peoples versus capitalism, and perhaps also due to the movement’s sheer longevity, I have argued that the MST has over emphasised its collective _sem terra_ identity, at the expense of more pluralistic tropes of being. To render a germane contribution to its members’ lives and importantly to wider Brazilian society, I have suggested that the
movement faces a signal dilemma regarding the very device on which it has built its success, the unified collective front into which MST members’ identities can be subsumed. The fascination for the collective and the polemicism that this encourages generates hostility, creating distance between members and wider society, and importantly distancing the movement from pursuing alliances with bodies who might be sympathetic but yet independent, bodies, for example, such as the media and sympathetic figures within it. Issues surrounding the ossification of leadership and the refusal to place political will behind the gender sector are also linked to this fascination for the collective and these issues trouble members at grassroots levels and particularly so at the present time, as questions of the second generation and rural industrialisation grow in importance. I have argued in this thesis that Brazil’s socio-economic conditions are dynamic, as are the expectations and ideas of wider Brazilian society. And the problem is that despite the hugely positive impact that the MST has had in the past 25 years, its future is ultimately conditional on an institutional flexibility that will determine whether the movement can endure. After all, a popular movement that no longer represents its members is no longer a movement of the people. My major findings regarding this lack of institutional flexibility, premised upon constructive criticisms as articulated by MST members, are as follows.

**Major findings**

The starting point for my argument is an analysis of MST ritual focused primarily, but not exclusively, on instances of *mística*. Chapter one argues that MST ritual is important because it is one of the primary methods by which the *sem terra* collective identity is constituted and maintained. But despite (or perhaps because of) this central role, it is clear that MST ritual no longer exerts the force that it once did upon MST members. *Mística* and other forms of artistic expression have become essentialised representations of themselves as state leadership is unwilling to ‘pollute’ these approved forms with ‘outside’ influences. Indeed, such is the level of control, that new forms of artistic expression proposed by younger members of the movement are being censored and deemed inappropriate. The point to stress here is that artistic expression has ossified due to state leadership being unwilling to allow any pluralism of form for fear of introducing
pluralism into the *sem terra* identity, in the construction of which, artistic expression has such a key role. The evolution of MST ritual is being restricted and as a result its visceral effect is being lost, as members no longer feel that it speaks to them.

Regarding identity, chapter two argues that the MST has created a powerful collective concept of what it is to be *sem terra* through the use of rhetoric, activities related to encampment and the direct action policies of occupation and demonstration. This collectivised identity polemicises its membership and introduces a powerful barrier between members and wider society. Although historically, this identity, which is projected down the movement by leadership but also outward transnationally as a packaged commodity, has been key to the movement’s success, it is by no means certain that such a collective identity is effective in trying to win support from wider society. Further, such a collectivised identity and the polemicism which it entails, problematises external relations, especially with the media, which harms the movement’s long-term strategic aims. However, by far the greatest problem is that these tropes of *sem terra* identity delimit and restrict individual personal expression, a fundamentally counterproductive strategy, if the movement wishes to gain wider public support. Similarly as regards MST ritual, pluralism is seen as undesirable in what it means to be *sem terra* and in this new phase of movement interaction with Brazilian society, integrating pluralism of members’ identities is crucial to the movement remaining relevant to its constituents, garnering wider support in non-traditional spheres of alliance and therefore being in a position to better achieve the movement’s long-term aims.

As I highlight in chapter two, the *acampamento* is a key locus for the formation of the *sem terra* identity but it is also characterised in the wider literature as an environment subject to tight controls surrounding behaviour. Chapter three argues that these controls are generally required and more importantly, welcomed by *acampados*, as in some cases such organisation has certainly contributed to *acampados’* intrinsic security. However, the practice of the leadership allotting land to *acampados* based on how they have conformed to what are thought to be ‘correct’ *sem terra* behaviours is more problematic, as it is widely assumed that the way families win land in the MST is through time served in the movement. That the system is unfair is beyond doubt, as not all members can equally perform the tasks to which positive connotations are attached. This means that certain groups are privileged over others: families, or single young men, for example. The practice also makes it difficult for *acampados* to voice opinions which are not necessarily in agreement with accepted views, as by contradicting orthodoxy, they risk expulsion.
And in this way the MST is denying itself a valuable source of internal accountability through constructive criticism but also prohibiting a flow of new ideas, a crucial problem for a social movement which needs to keep evolving to remain relevant. In this sense therefore, linking the winning of land with a system of preferred behaviours, the whole of which is arbitrated by movement leaders, creates a clientelistic phenomenon which limits constructive criticism, results in unfair decisions and places *acampados* in competition with each other in a situation which is supposed to reinforce solidarity.

As chapter three details, the arbitration of the process of devolving land to certain families is carried out by leadership and this group has been criticised in wider literature, principally by Souza Martins (2002) and Calvo Gonzalez (2004). Despite the fact that various levels of leadership are an ever-present part of MST routine, chapter four states that the leadership within Santa Catarina does not micromanage the daily lives of members and there is also no doubting the commitment of leaders. However, members express concerns surrounding notions of internal democracy. Due to the fact that elections in any proper sense are not observed and leaders are chosen by their peers, the state leadership of Santa Catarina has ossified. The lack of elections means that favour and patronage are important vectors in advancement, which creates a system of clientelism, where favours are fed up and down the chain, encouraging leaders to build networks of people on whom they can rely. It is also the case that leaders have a lot of power, especially regarding expulsions, as there is no system of appeal. The central problem about the leadership, is that as leaders are in a position to promote those who they see fit, there is at present an impediment as to how the movement’s *direção* can evolve. It is salient that most of the Santa Catarina state leadership are characterised by their length of service. The question is, when will what some members term the ‘gerontocracy’ allow younger members the chance to direct the movement in alternate ways, thereby rendering the movement more flexible and responsive to its base.

Chapter four highlights the issue of a lack of accountability and this theme is explored in detail in chapter five, the central case study of which highlights issues surrounding gender, but also analyses the MST’s leadership structure’s inherent recidivism that renders the movement less responsive to change. It is generally acknowledged that the gender sector has been conspicuous by its relative failure and chapter five argues that due to the fascination of the collective, MST leadership have been unable to individualise women and the problems that they face. There is also a heavy emphasis on the family unit in the MST, an emphasis which given the fact that
land titles are sometimes solely issued to men, can render women in households as fundamentally vulnerable; women can easily be substituted as long as a family remains on the land. It is also the case that some leaders within the movement blame women themselves for not being able to forward their own struggle. The MST’s leadership’s attitudes therefore reflect a deeply embedded habitus that includes unquestioned naturalisations of gender roles and a preoccupation with the maintenance of family cohesion, sometimes at the expense of individual women. At present, it seems that as with MST ritual and identity, leadership are unwilling to introduce any form of pluralism, refusing to create any subcategory of the trope ‘worker’.

The notion of the introduction of more pluralistic tropes of identity is so important to the MST because of the present situation and how the movement chooses to position itself in achieving its wider goals after 25 successful years as an SMO. And chapter six details a key idea for future growth known as rural industrialisation, a policy which confronts the long perceived weakness of how the movement can viably maintain production levels, and a strategy that it is hoped will also incentivise the second generation to stay in the countryside. Models of organisation are diverse in the movement and although the leadership demonstrably favour collectivisation, this mode of production is not forced upon anyone. However, although the niche market exploitation mooted by programmes of rural industrialisation enjoys leadership backing, the strategy also has critics, including MST members. Much of the criticism is directed at management philosophy privileging production over more humane practice and the tendency for one or two assentados to dominate such enterprises is a recurring theme. But there are also questions surrounding how members are configured by leadership in these new programmes of labour. It is not clear that members of the movement wish to be transferred from one static, essentialised identity, that of ‘peasant’, to another, that of ‘worker’ and there is a marked lack of consultation of the base over these issues, probably as a result of the failure of the SCA programme of collectivisation in the early 1990s. Some members of the movement value the independence that being a small farmer gives them and are unwilling to become an interchangeable worker in a more neo-liberalised scheme of labour where productivity is the key metric. Essentially, there is a diverse range of views on such programmes, but more pluralistic models of organisation can only exist if leadership is more diverse and this can only occur if tropes surrounding the sem terra identity are allowed to diversify. At this key juncture, certain MST leaders
seem hesitant to allow members to fully express themselves. And this process of negotiation will surely inform how the movement evolves over the coming years.

Wider contributions

The subject of this thesis is the MST, the largest SMO in Latin America and as such, the wider implications of this research are located primarily in social movement studies in this geographical area. As I have already discussed, the MST is a central part of wider transnational alliances that have coalesced in the struggle for marginalised peoples versus capitalism, and therefore it has a great deal of influence on partner organisations as to how they conduct their business. Perhaps changes in the MST can be reflected more widely in partner organisations, thereby unifying purpose and strategy for a pragmatic attempt at achieving shared goals.

While the transnational frame is of great importance to the MST, it also exerts a great deal of influence not only over how the movement packages its identity, but also over how the movement shapes its policy. Originally, the MST was solely concerned with placing people on unproductive land, but this focus has shifted as the movement has come to act on larger, international stages. It is yet to be seen whether this expansion of goals will be beneficial to the movement; its critical stance on agribusiness and more widely neo-liberalism seems to chime more with international concerns than with the priorities of its members, although to its members, the international role that the MST performs certainly confers a degree of prestige. But perhaps the key problem, one that I highlight in chapter two, is that being part of such transnational alliances inevitably essentialises member identities, rendering pluralistic tropes of identity more problematic to express; in essence, to take part in such international rhetoric, a brand is created. And for all larger SMOs it is not clear, from a purely pragmatic standpoint, whether this is desirable in achieving long-term aims.

Such alliances also problematise the notion of what it means to be ‘progressive’. In the case of the MST, alliances have been actively sought out, but in the vast majority of cases with organisations with a similar institutionalised ideology and logic. The media, for example, have not been courted, while programmes of exchange with Venezuela and Cuba have been established. It is understandable why SMOs look to organisations with
which they can easily construct bonds of solidarity, but fundamentally, is this really progressive politics? Building alliances with actors such as national media, who might not share the orthodoxy, but yet can contribute to wider goals, seems an important step for movements like the MST, who have constructed their identity through an us-versus-them discourse, to take in more balanced strategic terms. And a key element of this pragmatic approach is lessening the sense of possession that SMO leaders can sometimes exhibit about ‘their’ movement. It is clear that allowing an organic evolution to occur is desirable for an SMO, because as I have already highlighted, if members no longer feel represented, the SMO will cease to exist, as members seek other forums in which they can express themselves. And leadership have a key role to play in this process of organisational renewal; the concept of ‘progressive’ is surely characterised by a willingness of leadership to step aside and let younger members determine related, but importantly alternative directions for the future. Being progressive surely also entails enfranchising people that bring challenging views; control in both these scenarios can lay an organisation open to critiques of recidivism.

Flexibility is an issue at the heart of this thesis and I have established that at the present time, the concept is of greater importance than ever to the MST. But flexibility and the ability to integrate alliances and views, which might challenge institutional logic, are also of importance when dealing with diverse populations, as the MST is doing. The MST is understood to be a rural movement and yet I have demonstrated that the slippage between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ is an important factor in how movement policy is being articulated. And this slippage is coming to characterise more and more SMOs, as the linkages between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ become ever more solidified through information technologies such as VOIP (for example Skype or SIP) and the proliferation of LAN houses, sites where the Internet is accessible in relatively remote rural locations for a small fee. The MST is recruiting heavily in the urban periferia, seeking to reverse the tide of immigration from the countryside to the city. And yet, in its plans, it seeks to establish rural conurbations, with the attractions of the city and a city style economic schematic. The impact of the urban is inescapable and this is evidenced by any cursory understanding of how the MST wishes to guarantee its financial viability; selling in city supermarkets is essential. Urban populations therefore need to be engaged, and following ideas about ‘progressive’ tactics, ‘rural’ SMOs perhaps can consider how they characterise (or market) themselves to two populations between which, the distance seems to be shrinking. This is why flexibility seems so pertinent for SMOs engaged in
the transnational ‘peasant’ struggle. Many of their members identify as urban and many of the people that they are seeking to sell to also live in the city. How can one identity encompass this basic diversity? Surely, after the initial phases of growth and consolidation, and as new populations are necessarily encountered, pragmatism demands that tactics be more flexible and ideology less dogmatic. For SMOs engaged in Latin American ‘peasant’ struggles, isolation from institutions or individuals who challenge the orthodoxy is clearly the result of a contested and complex process.

In this sense, programmes of artistic expression are of a central importance, as they can effectively articulate to wider audiences as well as more local ones, the diversity that all such SMOs necessarily possess in their ranks. I started this project because I believed that the effective use of programmes of artistic expression could empower those who took part, and working with the MST, despite certain strictures placed on what is *sem terra* art, has not undermined this belief. Rather, I believe that arts programmes have not fulfilled anything like their potential because these programmes could be of such wider strategic use in presenting the movement to an urban audience in much more flattering ways, than say, the occupation of city locations and consequent alienation of city dwellers. Moser’s work in Peru (2003) highlights the non-violent, non-threatening and fundamentally engaging nature of using the arts in protest and in this sense SMOs with cultural programmes are limited in their efficacy when they exercise any control over the form in which these manifestations take place. Controlling creativity, as chapter one argues, deadens the impact that a cultural form can have over time and put simply, it is anti-pragmatic to overuse a form because leadership has privileged it over others.

The role of the leadership is a central part of this thesis’ contribution to wider SMO studies and further to points that have already been raised, accountability is just as crucial to any SMO’s wider credibility and internal logic of action. The MST grew hugely in a very short of space of time and in some ways, perhaps, leadership election and accountability mechanisms did not have the chance to evolve in parallel. SMOs such as the MST, have huge impacts on people’s lives, especially when they are constituted by the marginalised, who have fewer mechanisms of safety is something should go wrong. As a result, SMOs like the MST have great responsibility to the countless thousands who transact daily life under their flag. This is why the lack of a right to appeal in the MST’s disciplinary due process is so problematic, in that it can result in decisions which have extremely wide ranging implications. After all, members’ houses, means of production,
friendship circles and access to government benefits through the movement can all be taken away from them, without any independent arbitration.

There are of course other areas of MST lived experience that this study cannot comment upon; this thesis proposes only limited idioms of understanding. And certainly further research, using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, conducted on the viability of MST models of production would be very welcome. The MST’s critics have long argued that small-scale agriculture is ‘anti-modern’ and using a simple productivity metric, it is a powerful argument for basic foodstuffs, especially if the sustainability of land fertility is not taken into account. But of course, there is nothing fundamentally alien to ‘modernity’ about subsidies. The common agricultural policy (CAP), the European Union’s agricultural programme of subsidies, represented 48% of the EU’s budget, €49.8 billion in 2006 (up from €48.5 billion in 2005) (NAO 2008), while US farming subsidies remain substantial (Young 2009). But it seems important to the movement, from the standpoint of gaining legitimacy, to be seen as efficient and financially self-sustaining and as such, further research in this area would be of great interest. The MST’s education sector is also an area that, due to the constraints of space, I could not fully engage with, but it seems that moving forward, this sector’s work, especially regarding questions pertaining to identity, would benefit from a fully ethnographic in-depth study.

However much future research is conducted on the MST, I believe that a perspective that seeks to cast light on the system through the actions of individuals, rather than a study which might seek to explain individuals through an analysis of the system, will be of much greater worth in attempting to understand an organisation as complex as the MST, an movement constituted by thousands of individual voices with deeply personal motives and circumstances. Throughout this thesis, I have privileged the voices of the members of this movement, to construct a critical analysis that I believe to be relevant to answering the questions of whether and how the movement can continue to render a germane contribution to Brazilian society. Whether these voices can be integrated into more pluralist identities to effect a more nuanced and personalised sense of empowerment at this, a crucial juncture in the trajectory of the MST and the critically important aims for it struggles, remains, however, to be seen.
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