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Cliff Welch  
*Grand Valley State University*

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## Camponeses

# Brazil's Peasant Movement in Historical Perspective (1946–2004)

by  
Cliff Welch

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*Comparison of the histories of three leading peasant organizations in the Pontal do Paranapanema region of Brazil—the Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCB) from 1945 to 1964, the Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores na Agricultura (CONTAG) from 1964 to 1984, and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra (MST) from 1984 to 2004—suggests that continuity is as important as change in understanding Brazilian peasant movements. The MST has been considered a “new social movement” in that it has eschewed partisan politics, incorporated families as members rather than just male heads of household, had a national scope and a participatory decision-making structure, and been attuned to the international struggle over globalization. Placing it in historical perspective makes it clear, however, that this is not the first time that militants have organized around the concept of peasants as a political identity; that while the representation of peasants in the leadership of contemporary rural labor organizations may be greater than in the past, earlier peasant leaders also struggled on behalf of their class; that earlier peasant organizations had, if not a national presence, a substantial presence in the agricultural states of the time; and that attempts at international organization to unite peasant struggles around the globe are not entirely new. This is not to deny the innovative features of contemporary movements but to suggest that the investigation of past achievements will contribute to a fuller appreciation of these movements’ conditions and prospects.*

**Keywords:** *Peasants, Rural labor organizations, New social movements theory, Pontal do Paranapanema, State*

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This article examines examples of change and continuity in the organizational practices and ideological content of individuals and entities engaged in mobilizing peasants in Brazil during the latter half of the twentieth century. I intend to locate recent rural social movements such as the Landless Workers’

Cliff Welch is a participating editor of *Latin American Perspectives* and professor of history at Grand Valley State University. He has taught as a visiting professor in the graduate programs of the Pontifícia Universidade Católica of São Paulo and the Universidade de São Paulo and the Universidade Estadual Paulista, Presidente Prudente campus, where he continued to work as a collaborating professor and researcher from 2007 to 2009. In addition to various scholarly articles, he is the author of *The Seed Was Planted: The São Paulo Roots of Brazil’s Rural Labor Movement, 1924–1964* (1999), a revised and up-dated Portuguese version (2009), and, with Sebastião Geraldo, *Lutas camponesas no interior paulista: Memórias de Irineu Luís de Moraes* (1992) and producer of the documentaries *Grass War: Peasant Struggle in Brazil* (2001) and *Sonhando com futebol* (2004). He is currently working on a book about the struggle for land in São Paulo, Brazil, from 1959 to 2009.

Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra—MST) in Brazilian historical perspective and evaluate what is “new” about them, especially in relation to democratization. The analysis traces change across three general periods defined by the predominant organizations occupying the leadership space of peasant struggle.<sup>1</sup> These were the Peasant Leagues (*ligas camponesas*), a front organization established by the Communist Party of Brazil (Partido Comunista do Brasil—PCB) in dozens of municipalities soon after World War II; the Farmers’ and Farmworkers’ Union of Brazil (União de Lavradores e Trabalhadores Agrícolas do Brasil—ULTAB), a pragmatic would-be corporatist front founded by the PCB in 1954 and replaced in 1963 by the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores na Agricultura—CONTAG), an official corporatist entity administered by Communists, Catholics, and bureaucrats during the dictatorship (1964–1985); and the MST, an autonomous movement that celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2004 by hosting the fourth international conference of the Via Campesina, an organization dedicated to coordinating the worldwide anti-neoliberal peasant movement.<sup>2</sup> Continuity is traced across the three periods in the relatively similar discourses and related practices of the different leadership groups.

Some analysts characterize the social movements arising in Latin America since the 1970s as new, suggesting that they also represent an improvement over past movements (Slater, 1985; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). Supporters of the new—and improved—social-movement concept argue that whereas the older movements were politically oriented to induce revolutionary change, the new movements are social, seeking immediate improvements for members as well as long-term reform. Thus, unlike older movements, the new are not based on traditional class formations and workers’ struggles for state power. These new movements are part and parcel of the wave of “democratization” processes that washed over the region in the 1980s and 1990s. Brazil, for example, shifted from military to civilian rule in 1985, ending 21 years of military dictatorship with an elected government. Consumer revolts, women’s protests, territorial occupations, gay marches, and other multiclass, issue-oriented movements appeared, bringing a new dynamic to civil society.

Another important contextual pillar is globalization, particularly the neoliberal reforms that reduced the role of government in society, thereby expanding the expected role of civil society, community groups, and entities such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements. The military and other traditional institutions and politicians, it is argued, marginalized the less powerful, causing the injured to rise up in autonomous organizations to demand equal participation in the political economy. As the political scientist Harry E. Vanden writes, the insecurity of these groups drove them “to seek new forms of protest and different political structures that might better address their needs” (2005: 22).

Regarding Brazil’s MST as a new social movement, Vanden and others argue that historical land concentration and recent modernization—especially mechanization—made land difficult for peasants to retain and drastically reduced the need for rural labor, causing significant unemployment in the sector (Fernandes, 2000; Branford and Rocha, 2002; Wright and Wolford, 2003;

Nef, 2006; Welch, 2006a). Years of dictatorship had caused many to lose faith in political parties and labor unions. Numerous mobilizations and new organizations took shape to help force the military out of power. In this context, the MST arose and “rapidly became a national organization with coordinated policies and strong local participatory structures characterized by frequent state and national meetings based on direct representation” (Vanden, 2005: 23). The MST was a new social movement because it eschewed traditional politics, incorporated families as members rather than just male heads-of-household, and had a national scope and a participatory decision-making structure. It had an unprecedented “broad national vision” to transform Brazil’s society and economy through mass mobilization “attuned to the international struggle over globalization.” It built alliances with other civil-society institutions but remained autonomous from political parties, even the leftist Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT), whose candidate Luis Inácio Lula da Silva was elected as president in 2002. This “new repertoire of action” broke with “old forms of political activity” such as orientation by political parties or actions to promote the violent overthrow of the state by an armed revolutionary vanguard (Vanden, 2005). The analysis of the political scientist Jorge Nef differs somewhat from these conclusions in associating the rise of the MST with a crisis in representative democracy—its “failure to include and give a space to the popular sectors” (2006: 6)—in the neoliberal era rather than with the transition from military rule. Nef sees hope as lying in the ability of such movements to adopt formal democratic political behavior.

The “new social movements” literature has faced an onslaught of criticism, particularly as it relates to peasant movements (Frank and Fuentes, 1989; Knight, 1990; Hellman, 1995). In *Cutting the Wire*, the journalists Susan Branford and Jan Rocha place the MST in a context that extends back to the English Diggers of the mid-seventeenth century (Branford and Rocha, 2002: 264–266). In her essay on the “riddle of new social movements,” the political scientist Judith Adler Hellman argues that it is “particularly obvious in the case of rural mobilizations” that questions about the mode of production are just as central today as they were decades ago (Hellman, 1995: 157). For the MST, it is here argued, agricultural production has been a fundamental question, and the target of mobilization has been public policy and bourgeois practice. The central issues and means of mobilizing, therefore, were little different from those of past peasant movements. New Brazilian peasant movements are more autonomous, but, like the old movements, they still depend on political alliances and state power. It is the affiliations, if not the ideologies, that have changed. During the cold-war era, more militant peasants were affiliated with the PCB and identified themselves as Communists. In the globalization era, they associate themselves with a range of political parties, use Marxist analysis and communist imagery, and increasingly identify themselves as *camponeses* (peasants), quite like their politicized predecessors (Welch, 2006b).

Through a case-study approach, this article places a series of incidents in one geographical setting, the Pontal do Paranapanema region of the state of São Paulo, in the broader context of Brazil’s process of democratization. As Brazil’s richest state, São Paulo has tremendous influence on the nation’s

political economy. Significantly, it is the country's leading agricultural producer, responsible for 40 percent of Brazil's agricultural export earnings—a huge sum given Brazil's world leadership in agricultural commodities production (Welch, 2007). It is also the country's most populous state and home to some of Brazil's most influential media conglomerates and politicians, and this helps to make the state politically powerful as well. Politicians and businessmen proudly point to São Paulo's leadership in the progress of Brazilian social, economic, and political development. For these reasons and more, the movements discussed here have their headquarters in São Paulo. Providing a contrast with the state's favored image of modernity and progress, the Pontal is one of São Paulo's poorest regions. Located in the far northwestern corner of the state, the Pontal has long been the setting for peasant conflict, in part because of its remoteness and in part because of the dubious basis of property rights. The incidents were selected to represent different phases in the land struggle, demonstrating important aspects of change and continuity in the formation of rural social movements and their interpretation by commentators and theorists. This approach is combined with a biographical approach, identifying, researching, and writing the history of the human agency of individuals who stood out in the cases chosen. In each case, peasants and their movements questioned the distribution of property in land and the best way to exploit it, contributing to the rich history of the country's democratic development struggle.

### PEASANT LEAGUES: SANTO ANASTÁCIO AND NESTOR VERAS

The most important legacy of the early postwar period was the organization of dozens of peasant leagues in the states of Paraná, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and Pernambuco. The leagues responded, in part, to a new set of social and political rights established in law by Getúlio Vargas, who ruled Brazil from 1930 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1954. The new laws included labor rights for farm workers and organizational structures for farmers. Dictator Vargas was forced out of power in 1945 by the pulse of democratization that hit the world following the war, bringing Brazil a dynamic period of electoral democracy that historians refer to as the Populist Republic. Until 1947 the PCB enjoyed a unique moment of legality, and militants used the opening to found the leagues, helping many peasants register to vote and thus swelling the ranks of the party (French, 1989; Welch, 1999; Medeiros, 1999). The PCB saw the leagues as a means to enhance the party's political clout while empowering squatters, sharecroppers, rural workers, and small farmers, an unrepresented, generally neglected segment of Brazilian society. Acting like special-interest groups, they helped members appeal for government assistance in questions related to land rents, food production, and income. The leagues also served as a pressure group to help PCB delegates argue the agrarian question in the 1946 Constituent Assembly. The experience of the PCB-organized leagues proved an inspiration for other landless peasants in the mid-1950s when they organized the *ligas camponesas* in Pernambuco and other northeastern states where their leader, the lawyer and socialist politician

Francisco Arruda de Paula Julião, found support (Moraes, 1970). The Julião edition of the leagues proved, in turn, an inspiration for the MST (Stédile and Oliveira, 2002).

A case in point is provided by Nestor Veras and the Santo Anastácio Peasant League founded in 1946 in the Pontal do Paranapanema region of São Paulo state. The Pontal was still a frontier region of São Paulo in the 1940s. A tributary of the Paranapanema gained the saint's name in May 1769 when a Portuguese troop stumbled upon it, and the village that gradually took root there became the region's second incorporated municipality in 1925. Starting in the mid-1800s, rival political bosses (*coroneis*) claimed title to the region. They used a process of fraudulent land grabbing called *grilagem*, as well as influence over bureaucrats and clergy, to make historic claims to the land. They started land colonization and development companies to attract immigrants, developed settlements, and sold land titles that appeared legitimate but actually were false. By 1940, 250,000 people lived in the Pontal region, and the questioning of false land claims was already a constant. The brutalities perpetrated against the landless by landlord enforcers such as the hired guns (*jagunços*) Juventino Nunes and Zé Mineiro were legendary in the region (Leite, 1998).

We are still learning about the life of Nestor Veras. Apparently he was born May 19, 1915 in Ribeirão Preto, an important agricultural center in São Paulo state, which was the world's leading coffee producer. The PCB, as well as the police, described him as either a peasant (*camponês*) or a farmer (*lavrador*) who lived in the Santo Anastácio area. Curiously, the PCB literature does not reveal his status as an elected city councilman, while state police reports of the period referred to him as "Vereador [town councilman] do Prestes" (in reference to the PCB leader Luis Carlos Prestes). In 1948 the police investigator Floriano Ferreira Guarita described him not only as a city councilman but also as a former candidate for the state assembly and a representative of the National Labor Party (Partido Trabalhista Nacional—PTN), with which the PCB occasionally aligned itself. A 1949 police inquiry profiled him as an "agrarian agitator" and "self-styled peasant leader" from Santo Anastácio (Guarita, 1948). We know that he remained dedicated to this cause and to the PCB, debating other militants and reporting on the struggle in São Paulo, serving as a officer of ULTAB, elected first treasurer of CONTAG in 1963, and representing it at international rural labor assemblies such as the Quinta Conferência Mundial dos Sindicatos dos Trabalhadores da Agricultura, das Florestas e das Plantações in 1967 until his arrest and disappearance in April 1975, a victim of the dictatorship (Veras, 1960; 1967; MST, 1987 [1985]: 117).

As the Alta Sorocabana Railroad Company constructed tracks to the state boundary, Santo Anastácio became the setting of a busy train yard, and hundreds of Spanish and Italian immigrants came to live and work in the area. This gave the backlands town a surprisingly cosmopolitan feel and created a fertile base for PCB organizing. The concept of the peasant must have resonated among these European immigrants, who, we can assume, were familiar with classic forms of this awkward class (Shanin, 1972). Indeed, while peasant leagues were established in other Pontal towns, such as Rancharia and Presidente Bernardes, the Santo Anastácio league received more attention

from the press. The University of São Paulo researcher Emiliana Andréo da Silva, depending entirely on her pioneering investigation of the state political and social police (the Departamento Estadual de Ordem Política e Social—DEOPS) archive, argues that the Santo Anastácio league was one of the only ones actually established—that the police succeeded in shutting down most others before they were founded. Other sources challenge this view, and her interpretation is suspect for being too consistent with the impression of competence the political police tried to convey in order to justify their existence (Silva, 2003; Welch and Geraldo, 1992).

Established in April 1946, the Santo Anastácio Peasant League responded to a wealth of problems among the landless and small farmers. More than 200 “peasants, most of them tenants, small farmers, sharecroppers by halves and thirds,” attended the founding meeting, according to the story that appeared in the PCB daily *Notícias de Hoje* (June 28, 1946). In this period, cotton predominated in Santo Anastácio agriculture, and many migrants were attracted to the area by landlords promising riches through tenancy arrangements. The league was to serve “to guide the struggle of workers seeking to improve their situation as tillers of the soil [*trabalhadores da terra*].” Antônio Valero Valdevieso, whose biography remains obscure, gave a “clear exposition” of the theme and read the statutes aloud. Those present “democratically elected” the league’s board of directors, including Veras as president and another 11 officers and substitutes. Various speakers addressed the issues that would animate the organization: demands for lower land rents, road maintenance, schools, and clinics. These members seemed to identify with the concept of “peasant” and questioned the landlord’s sense of responsibility toward the broader community. They organized collectively in the league and reached out to the state for help. Rents were too high, roads abandoned, the health and education of their children left to chance.

Some 150 landless peasants trusted the new democracy of the Populist Republic enough to sign their names to the Santa Anastácio league petition.<sup>3</sup> “The large estates must be subdivided, free of charge, among those who want to plant,” the document asserts. “Our produce is worthless on the market, but what we buy costs us an eyeful.” Describing themselves as “landless, without rights, our sons and daughters suffering malaria, yellow fever, tuberculosis, rickets, cold, and hunger,” the petitioners explained. “We come before your Honor to relate the precarious situation that we have been suffering for years.” In addition to the demand for radical agrarian reform—the appeal for policies that would help them retain more profits from their production in order to care for their children—the petition criticized the landed for charging rents for poor lands, rents often higher than the land’s sale price. The result was not only a superexploitation of the landless but a tendency for them to abandon the countryside and move to the cities in search of “better living conditions” (something the Vargas-era policies were meant to address in order to “keep the peasant down on the farm”) (Welch, 2006b). A final clause supports the need for the peasants to have their own representative organization. The Communist press documented further Santo Anastácio peasant dissent in May when the director of the mixed agricultural cooperative (*cooperativa agrícola mista*) of Santo Anastácio denounced the precarious condition of the more than 800 peasant-family co-op members. He supported the need for the league

given the “miserable life led by sharecroppers and tenant farmers because the fruit of their labor is entirely taken by the landlord.”

In June the state responded to the pleas of these uppity children by cracking down on the Santo Anastácio peasant league. “What the Brazilian people need is a good whipping, not democracy,” Santo Anastácio Sheriff Roque Calabrese was quoted as saying on the occasion. The size of the organization must have been too much for the landowners’ private militias to handle. Not even the region’s most influential landlord, the coronel Alfredo Marcondes Cabral (infamously quoted as saying that “land awash with blood is good land”), had the forces to cripple such a movement (Leite, 1998). Indeed, the timing of the June 1946 crackdown links Sheriff Calabrese’s action to local interests by isolating it from larger trends. The cold-war-influenced decision to suppress the PCB and shut down front organizations like the peasant leagues would wait nearly a year, until May 1947, to be put into place. League President Nestor Veras protested the action in telegrams to President Eurico Gaspar Dutra and the heads of all of the political parties participating in the Constituent Assembly. “The local police closed the peasant league,” Veras told the newspaper *Notícias de Hoje* (June 28, 1946), “apprehended its files, and denied it the right to organize the peaceful rural workers” (Barriguelli, 1981: 211–212).

Himself a peasant, Veras put the sheriff, an authority beholden to the local power structure, in the central role. Calabrese had warned them to formalize the founding of the league, and consequently Veras had the founding statutes published in the *Diário Oficial* and filed the papers with the local notary. His moves to strengthen the league only seemed to make it more threatening to landlords. “The peasants’ just demands in relation to their most hardfelt problems strengthen the league’s structure,” Veras’s interview with *Notícias de Hoje* continued, “and this must be the principal motive that drove the police and other authorities to close it down.”

Despite repression by the sheriff, Nestor Veras persisted in his effort to organize Pontal peasants. DEOPS documented his attempt to found the União dos Camponeses da Alta Sorocabana in March 1947, including an aggressive police assault on the assembly that resulted in numerous serious injuries and the death of a police officer. Police battered and jailed Dr. José da Silva Guerra, an outspoken Communist physician from neighboring Presidente Bernardes (Moniz, 1949; interview with Pedro Paulo Guerra, Alphaville, SP, 2004). When President Dutra extinguished the PCB’s legal standing in May, the party used clandestine means to organize among peasants. Partly because of the repression and the campaigns of church and state authorities to link the PCB to illness and to devil worship and other abnormal, antisocial behaviors, peasant identification with communism and the Communist Party dwindled over time, but it remained the leading political force among peasants and laborers in the countryside for at least two more decades (Welch, 2006b). In fact, the DEOPS files document how peasants succeeded in obtaining legal status for a new peasant league in the *município* of Santo Anastácio in 1949. In 1954, delegates from the region participated in the founding congress of the PCB’s ULTAB (interviews: José da Silva Guerra, Presidente Bernardes, SP, 1986; Pedro Paulo Guerra, Alphaville, SP, 2004; José Alves Portela, São Paulo, SP, 1988; Silva, 2003).<sup>4</sup>



What happened in Santo Anastácio in the late 1940s serves as a partial basis for analyzing new and old rural social movements in Brazil. The attendance numbers and repeated mobilizations show considerable discontent in the region and support the argument that the league's organizing arose from this discontent. The agency of Nestor Veras is not fully understood, but his characterization as a local peasant, elected official, and known member of the PCB make credible that the league was founded in an attempt to link this local movement with a national movement articulated by the party and oriented by a broader ideology, including an international anti-imperialist agenda. The means of protest were fairly traditional from the point of view of democratic systems. The peasants assembled and elected leaders, forming an interest group to petition the state for interventions to help them socially and economically. They complained of high rents and asked for the distribution of public lands, they complained of chronic illnesses and asked for medical assistance, and they protested the neglect of their children, demanding schools—nothing revolutionary, but extraordinary in the context of the day. A dictatorship had recently come to an end, but the repressive apparatus of the DEOPS remained active, and it was deployed to extinguish this movement—a strategy that, despite momentary victories, inevitably failed. While much of this experience compares with current events, some contrasts include the role of the Communist Party (as a political party linked to structures that no longer exist), the importance given to formalities (especially the formalization of the organization), the predominance of men on the available attendance lists, and the absence of any direct-action mobilization.

### ULTAB/CONTAG: TEODORO SAMPAIO AND ZÉ CRUZ

In September 1954 the PCB allied itself with São Paulo governor Luis Nogueira Garcez of the PTN to host the first national congress of farm laborers and farmers. Hundreds of representatives attended, many from hastily organized agricultural associations some of which were based on peasant-league organizing in the mid-1940s. They formed ULTAB, elected officers, established a charter that included agrarian reform and demands to help small farmers and farmworkers, and named delegates to represent Brazil in Prague at the first international congress of organized agricultural and forest workers. On one level, ULTAB was a weapon in the cold war, helping the PCB fulfill some of its responsibilities to the Soviet Union by ensuring Brazil's participation in the Soviet-linked labor organizations headed by the World Federation of Trade Unions (Welch, 1995). On another level, it was a way for the PCB to develop its credentials as a power broker in the countryside by organizing and thus helping rural workers, pulling them away from total dependence on their employers.

In the early 1960s farmworker unions replaced the early labor and small-farmer associations established by ULTAB militants during the mid-to-late 1950s. Catholic priests and laymen also participated in establishing these associations, largely oriented by the Church's effort to confront PCB advances among rural workers. The 1963 Farmworker Statute permitted union formation.

The law was a significant conquest of the combined pressure of Communists, Catholics, and populists. The law mandated the creation of state federations of farmworker unions and a national confederation of these bodies. This was CONTAG, the corporatist institution that effectively replaced the autonomous ULTAB at the end of 1963, with many Communist officers and militants continuing as leaders of the rural labor movement. (Radical Catholics, dissidents of the Church's mainstream campaign, also joined CONTAG's executive board.) These developments created a formal organizational structure for rural workers and small farmers, enhancing Brazilian democracy and the power of the PCB until the military coup in 1964. Recuperating from the repression in the early 1970s, CONTAG initiated the Farmworkers' Union Movement (Movimento Sindical dos Trabalhadores Rurais—MSTR) and greatly expanded and fortified the union structure into the late 1980s (Medeiros, 1989; Welch, 1999; Ricci, 1999; Cunha, 2004; Houtzager, 2004).

Until the 1990s, the basic model established by ULTAB and CONTAG—one that emphasized the formation of a rural proletariat and the eventual disappearance of the peasant—predominated among rural social movements in Brazil. Under the military's first dictator, General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, the regime sent a mixed message. On the one hand, it maintained the rural labor union structure and supported passage of the Land Statute, a land reform law that had long been in debate. Surprisingly, Castelo Branco bragged that the new "revolutionary government" would bring about radical reforms without the agitation and instability caused by Goulart's efforts. The statute altered Article 10 of the 1946 Constitution to allow a more flexible payment mechanism via government titles rather than cash, facilitating land expropriation (Campanhole and Campanhole, 1980; Callado, 2003 [1985]: 57–59). On the other hand, the military eliminated the peasant leagues, closed down hundreds of farmworker unions, and jailed known militants, Communists, progressive Catholics, and socialists. Thus, the regime backed policies that promised representation for the landless and land distribution but repressed those best equipped to use these structures and turned agrarian reform into a vehicle for expelling peasants, concentrating land ownership, and modernizing agricultural techniques. In essence, the regime told rural workers to be patient and let the government decide when, where, and how favors would be distributed. Ironically, small farmers controlled the labor union apparatus used to facilitate the implementation of these policies (Gonçalves Neto, 1997; Houtzager, 2004).

However, as numerous studies have shown, the military regime pursued an agrarian development policy most aptly described as "painful," especially from a rural labor perspective (Silva, 1982; Gonçalves Neto, 1997; Linhares and Silva, 1999: 182–195). The new ruling class, which looked very much like the traditional rural class in olive drab, supported radical change that intensified the historic agro-industrialization process, alienating the rural oligarchy while stimulating the rural bourgeoisie. These policies both intensified production and extended the agricultural frontier. The former involved the transformation of diverse crop land into monoculture, segmenting the labor process in various regions and thus increasing the instability and insecurity of most rural work. The latter generated another phase of enclosure and land concentration

that cast millions of peasants into flooded urban labor markets. In the South, for example, soy displaced wheat, forcing many family farmers out of business. Pig and poultry production also became concentrated, with new forms of dependency created for large conglomerates to control the production of farmers. In the Center-South and the Northeast, full-time resident sugarcane plantation workers were fired and rehired seasonally as harvesters through third-party labor contractors, resulting in greater exploitation (Silva, 1981: 82–100; Martine, 1987; Goodman, 1989).

This interpretation is exemplified by examination of land disputes in the Pontal. A case in point is that of the Gleba Santa Rita, located just north of the Paranapanema River in the municipality of Teodoro Sampaio, which was incorporated in February 1964. The story of the Gleba Santa Rita begins 10 years earlier, in 1954, with a land scheme orchestrated by the powerful São Paulo politician Adhemar de Barros. In collusion with the Sorocabana Railroad and Sebastião Camargo, owner of what was to become the huge Camargo-Correia Construction Company, he encouraged political associates to buy land in the Pontal that promised to increase dramatically in value with the construction of a new track called the Dourados branch. One of the beneficiaries was Justino de Andrade, then mayor of nearby Presidente Bernardes. Andrade created a colonization company and anticipated building a town called Santa Rita do Pontal, subdividing the 10,000-hectare area among migrants and profiting from the train traffic, lumber production, and farm produce (Leite, 1998: 100).

Although Barros served as governor during the 1940s (1947–1951) and the 1960s (1963–1966), Andrade's dream remained unrealized. The train line was never built, and Andrade's town rose and fell, never hosting more than two dozen houses. In fact, the land should never have been sold to him; the acreage, like the vast majority of Pontal land, belonged to the state. Despite repeated warnings about the dubious legality of land titles in the region, Andrade acted as though the land were his, and to make something of it he depended on a classic land development scheme. In 1967 he let about 1,000 hectares of Santa Rita's forested land to a cotton-gin and trucking-company owner from Martinópolis, São Paulo, named Francisco Pereira Telles. In turn, Telles sublet the land to some 400 families in 1968. The details of these arrangements were typically murky. Andrade later claimed that Telles was to return the land converted into cattle pasture within three years. Telles claimed that the land was not Andrade's to rent and that he had gotten the permits to clear the forest, attracted the families, and organized the production of cotton farming, doing everything by the book as defined in the 1964 Land Statute. In a 1978 newspaper article, Andrade essentially corroborated Telles's version, complaining that while he had received almost nothing, Telles had gained shares of the cotton produced and encouraged the tenants to defy him by telling them that the land belonged to the state (Leite, 1998; Correia, 1977; *O Estado de S. Paulo*, July 13, 1977, and July 11, 1978).

The accumulation of wealth from the Gleba Santa Rita proceeded primitively. While Telles rented the land, he was also a property owner, although he did not control as much land or enjoy as much clout as Andrade. Such intermediaries were an essential part of the expanding agricultural frontier in Brazil. They applied their capital and organizational skills to the first stages of converting virgin land into a commodity. Adequate records have not yet

emerged to document the entire process. Telles claimed to the press that he had spent Cz\$365,000 to develop the land he rented from Andrade. Andrade told reporters that he had gained nothing from the land; in fact, the peasants were the ones who were getting rich, since, from 1972 on, they no longer paid rent to Telles, who had abandoned them. Andrade repeatedly sued Telles for damages but never won, largely because of the questionable legality of his title (Correia, 1977; *O Estado de S. Paulo*, July 13, 1977; Santos, 1980).

Telles defended himself in the press, wrapping himself in the law and blaming Andrade for his own misfortunes. The newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* summarized his arguments as follows (Correia, 1977: 12):

Telles said that he did everything according to the Land Statute and that, in addition to seed and chemicals, he furnished [the farmers] with health care assistance. But, when they completed the deforestation work, he said, "because of the social question I stopped providing employment for the 400 families there, and they started to suffer from hunger. Although I may be wrong to see it this way, I don't feel responsible because the families that I placed there, more than half of those that honored my judgment, left the land at the end of the contract. But Justino should maintain better vigilance over his property, to impede its invasion by other families.

The documented history of the 400 landless families begins, in all but one case, with their resistance against savage capitalism. They entered the scene in silence, accepting without apparent question the offer to clear the forest and plant cotton for shares. Only when this arrangement ended and they were asked to leave the land and join the roving, insecure agricultural labor market, multiplying the "dangerous classes," did the media capture their voices for the public record.

One exception was a *posseiro* (squatter) named Jenival who was interviewed by the literary critic Antônio Callado in November 1984.<sup>5</sup> Callado visited the region on assignment for the São Paulo Energy Company (Companhia Energética de São Paulo—CESP) to write about the combination of inundating land for a CESP hydroelectric plant and the construction of a compensatory agrarian reform settlement. (The subtitle of Callado's book—"Essay about a Brazilian Agrarian Reform That Never Occurred"—undoubtedly repelled CESP marketers.) On meeting Jenival on the Gleba Santa Rita, Callado discovered a curious fact: this landless family had been living in the same house for 17 years. "For a Brazilian farmer," Callado (2003 [1985]: 39) wrote, "he is a person with an extraordinarily stable life."

In a 1975 event that also defied the spin of Andrade and Telles, 33 landless families walked the 65 kilometers from Santa Rita to Teodoro Sampaio and disrupted the peace of the town with their demands for help. "With the soil prepared, but without seed, something they cannot buy due to the impossibility of obtaining bank financing, the squatters directed their grievances at the municipal government. Given the refusal to attend their needs, they revolted, trying to get by force at least some food." At least a portion of these allegedly well-treated families were starving to death; to keep the peace, the mayor eventually arranged to feed them a meal at the Hotel Comercial, while the military police sent reinforcements to defend public order (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, October 30, 1975).

The police learned to know the Santa Rita landless almost as well as anyone during the 1970s. Between 1973 and 1980, they joined Andrade's gunmen and other authorities four times to fulfill expulsion orders from judicial authorities. The worst cases occurred in 1973 and 1974, when they forced 63 families from land that they had cleared and made productive. To make the action stick, they burned down the peasants' shacks and sheds, uprooted their crops, and killed their livestock (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, July 13, 1977, and July 11, 1978). In 1977, gunmen poisoned some wells and livestock died. At the time, two of the peasants told reporters, "The landlords' gunmen have the run of the place, intimidating the squatters and threatening their families. They come accompanied by police officers who, according to the squatters, are being paid by Justino to 'legalize' their threats" (*A Folha de S. Paulo*, October 1, 1977). In 1982 gunmen randomly shot at them, and in 1984 cattle were stampeded over their crops. For 13 years the families lived under intense pressure, with new threats of violent expulsion regularly directed at them and hopes of permanence shattered again and again. The majority of the original families slowly gave up, but reinforcements arrived as displaced rural workers sought stability and opportunity on this ill-fated land. Despite expulsion actions, court orders, the intervention of state governors, death threats, and vigilante violence, the peasants hung on. In 1979 Andrade was 70 years old, blind in one eye, and barely able to speak but "was not in the mood to cede his land. Nor were his lawyers, as according to them, the farmers were trespassers" (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, March 18, 1979). In 1986 he had to give up when Brazil's first civilian president, José Sarney, expropriated the land, bringing to something of a just close this tragic story.

Peasant resilience in the face of such intense and prolonged pressure seems to defy the logic of the military era. This was the same period that saw the dictatorship send three military missions to the Araguaia River basin in order to exterminate a small band of Communist militants (members of the Partido Comunista do Brasil—PCdoB) and facilitate the expansion of commodity agriculture in peasant territory (Portela, 2002). Since this story of occupation and repression dominates representations of the military regime's relationship with peasants, one might have expected the security apparatus to have eliminated the Gleba Santa Rita landless within a few days. But the military could not rule by violence alone. Machiavelli, Gramsci, Arendt, Skocpol, and other theorists of state power help us understand the necessity of consent for the longevity of even the most brutal regime. Even as the hard-liners tightened their grip on the regime and intensified the repression, they found ways to win the hearts and minds of the working class.

The early 1970s were relatively good years for the Brazilian economy. The so-called rising cake of an "economic miracle" of capitalist growth provided a basis for the popularity of the military president Emilio Garrastazú Médici (1969–1974) despite a concomitant heavy investment in repression. In a 1997 interview, the former union leader and future Brazilian president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva analyzed the Médici period (Couto, 1999: 117):

Today we can say that it was due to the external debt, you know, the Brazilian miracle and such. But a concrete fact is that, had there been direct elections at the time, Médici would have won. And it was a high point of political repression,

what we now call the hard-line period of the military government. Médici's popularity among the working class was huge. Now, why? Because it was a period of high employment.

If the relative prosperity of the period brought support for the regime among industrial workers, its popularity was even more profound in the countryside.

In his study of Brazilian citizenship, the historian José Murilo de Carvalho (2004: 172) comments that the "rural electorate supported [the military regime] in every election." This habit could be explained away as simply a by-product of conservative rural traditions or the manipulation of voters by powerful rural bosses. To the contrary, the consent of the landless was rational when one considers that Médici approved the most sweeping reform in the history of Brazilian rural social relations, the PRORURAL law of May 1971. This law for the first time extended retirement benefits to rural workers and small farmers, eventually becoming one of the largest rural social programs in the world. Through the Rural Assistance Fund (Fundo de Assistência Rural—FUNRURAL), the law helped rural communities establish health care facilities and other social services. The military empowered the rural labor unions to administer these programs, stimulating a boom in rural labor union formation around the country via CONTAG's MSTR (Ricci, 1999; Couto, 1999; Carvalho, 2004: 172; Gaspari, 2002: 210; Houtzager, 2004). Into the twenty-first century, measures based on these policies continued to support hundreds of towns and millions of people.

The growth of the rural labor union movement, with its Church connections and state-sponsored social assistance services, was the lubricant of military rule in the countryside. In the case of the Santa Rita conflict, it is important to note that problems erupted in the same year the Teodoro Sampaio rural labor union was founded, 1973. Statistically speaking, this was a tough time for peasants. Between 1970 and 1978, Teodoro Sampaio lost 78 percent of its rural properties. The number of minifundios, farms with less than 20 hectares, dropped from 1,862 to 203. Two new properties with more than 10,000 hectares appeared during this period, and the number of farms between 20 and 100 hectares grew by 20 percent. The geographer Leite connected the dramatic decline in *minifundios* to the end of the lumber cycle, as nearly all the remaining lumber mills closed in the 1970s with the disappearance of the forest reserve. The lumbermen, many of whom lived on small subsistence plots without title, were left without paid work and forced to migrate. This resulted in a decline in cultivated area of nearly 10,000 hectares during the period. In 1979, the state planning department issued a development proposal that confirmed CESP's intentions and added a sugarcane alcohol mill (an innovative fuel important to the military's 1974 development project, the Programa Nacional de Alcool—Próalcohol), promising further land concentration with the expansion of sugarcane cultivation on 15,000 hectares (Leite, 1998: 184–189; Thomaz Júnior, 2002).

According to Divanil José Cruz, who ran the union with his father, José Ferreira "Zé" Cruz, from 1973 until the 1990s, it was Mayor José Natalício dos Santos who initiated the process of founding the organization. Teodoro Sampaio was only about 10 years old and had no medical services, he explained. Taking advantage of FUNRURAL financing, Teodoro Sampaio

could gain a clinic, with a doctor and dentist. The Cruzes had been involved with a rural union in Paraná before moving to the Pontal. A priest there had impressed upon these farmers the need to be involved in the union movement. In Teodoro Sampaio, their efforts paid off. It was not long before the union had around 1,500 paying members, and—along with the Church—it quickly became one of the town's chief social institutions. Confirming Lula's impression of working-class political behavior at the time, Cruz became a member of the pro-regime party, *Aliança Renovadora Nacional* (Alliance for National Renewal—ARENA), and expressed nostalgia during the interview for military rule because of the support that rural unions then received.

Carvalho (2004: 172) argues, like many critics, that FUNRURAL helped co-opt the rural labor movement. "Now, assistance tasks were assigned to the unions, which contributed a lot toward reducing their political combativeness and generated political dividends for the regime." The political scientist Claudinei Coletti (1998: 85) is harsher in his criticism of union officers like Cruz. "In the hands of the dictatorship, assistentialism transforms itself into a powerful instrument of social and political control, permitting the expansion of the self-interested union administration (*peleguismo*) in the labor movement." Both concede that positive results were possible. The case of Teodoro Sampaio confirms Carvalho's suspicion that some towns had medical services solely because of the union's administration of the FUNRURAL. Coletti says that a combative union leadership could convert the FUNRURAL into a base for organizing greater negotiating power for rural labor. Analysts such as Biorn Maybury-Lewis (1994), Regina Novaes (1997), and Peter Houtzager (2004) emphasized these positive aspects of the military's strategy and sought to understand "the politics of the possible." It is in these terms, I believe, that the Santa Rita conflict is best understood. Without considering the possible positive role of the Teodoro Sampaio union, it is difficult to understand peasant resistance.

In August 1973, 80 military police fulfilled the first judicial expulsion order of Santa Rita peasants without interference. In January another 16 families were forcefully removed, but further action by the police was contained by Zelmo Denari, the recently appointed regional state prosecutor (*subprocurador*). Born in Presidente Bernardes in 1935, Denari was the son of a large landholder. Dr. Guerra, the Communist physician who helped found the Santo Anastácio peasant league in 1946, was the family doctor, and Denari told me that he had been impressed by the spirited debates Guerra and his father had had as he grew up. He claimed the Guerra children as best friends and credited the family with shaping his value system. In the late 1950s Denari left the area to attend college and make his career in São Paulo. When he returned, he found that his role as defender of São Paulo's interests had the potential of placing him in conflict with landlords like Andrade. To do his job well meant resurrecting disputed title claims, and the expulsion of the Santa Rita peasants stimulated him to do this both professionally and morally. The presence and participation of Bishop José Gonçalves da Costa helped him turn the tide. The bishop denounced the police action and treatment of peasants as "inhumane," drawing attention to their plight. Denari entered the fray, contending that the land did not belong to Andrade and that the peasants should be allowed to stay until proper ownership was established. This act and Denari's consistent

effort to demonstrate that the land belonged to the state proved crucial. Although the military regime had begun its own process of controlled withdrawal, Denari reported that he had received threats from police and landlords that frightened him enough to make him lose control of his bladder in his sleep (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, July 13, 1977; July 11, 1978; interview, Zelmo Denari, Presidente Prudente, SP, 2004; interview, Pedro Paulo Guerra, Alphaville, SP, 2004).

In 1975 the press began to cover the Santa Rita dispute, and until about 1985 the Teodoro Sampaio rural union remained present in the narrative as a regular advocate for the peasants. It appeared first as a provider of social assistance, a relief agency of sorts, expected to help the landless survive once expelled from the land. From the perspective of the regime and critics of bread-and-butter unionism, this should have been the beginning and end of the union's involvement. The papers quoted Divanil Cruz as complaining that the union did not have enough resources to deal with so many displaced families. He noted that membership dropped with the end of the harvest season and that workers did not make enough to afford dues. This, in and of itself, was a harsh criticism of the regime. Reporters were directed to document rural labor conditions. "Shape-up sugarcane cutters (*bóias-frias*)," an observer was quoted as saying, "so long as they have some land, even in a situation where they suffer suppliers who won't extend them any credit, a banking system that makes it impossible for them to get financing, malnutrition, and even death due to a lack of medicine, don't see these as sufficient motives for complaint. They normally accept everything, because the slightest protest can mean they'll be fired" (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, November 1, 1975). Ten years later such stories would be common fare, but this one exposed a fissure as yet unrecognized in the reflection of the "economic miracle." The Cruzes regularly exploited the attention attracted by the Santa Rita land struggle to expose rural distress and document their efforts to address problems. The union reportedly worked with the mayor and the Church to create shelters and raise money to feed and clothe peasants expelled from the Santa Rita lands.

These two union roles—relief agency and propagandist—were maintained throughout the period. Two other roles were also typical of the Teodoro Sampaio rural labor union: interlocutor and legal advocate. These roles put the union in the news as representative of the peasants before executive and judicial authorities. These were classic union jobs, and clearly the regime accepted these functions. As interlocutor, Zé Cruz in particular appeared to be ready, willing, and able to lobby executive authorities on behalf of peasants. To help attract attention to the cause of the landless and give him more bargaining power with the authorities, he also wore the hat of an organizer (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, March 23, 1980).

During the transition from military to civilian rule, Zé Cruz helped organize several rallies and spoke privately with three governors, helping to buy more time from each. In 1977 he spoke with the dictatorship's state intervener, Paulo Egydio Martins, when he visited the nearby town of Andradina. "There's one thing I can guarantee," Egydio said after the interview. "No one is going to touch you. This I guarantee" (*A Folha de S. Paulo*, October 1, 1977). In April 1979 he spoke with Paulo Maluf, the military's new state administrator, and publicity



surrounding the appeal apparently forced Maluf to stop another expulsion action later that month. Arguing for the “settlement of the squatters ‘in order to impede injustice and social chaos’ through the land’s disappropriation” (*Realidade Rural*, 1979; Santos, 1979), in 1983 Cruz organized a caravan of Santa Rita landless to go to the state capital to appeal to São Paulo’s first postcoup elected governor, Franco Montoro. In March 1984 Montoro expropriated a portion of the land and ordered it distributed among the peasants, a job that Cruz and Denari were to manage (*Realidade Rural*, 1983; *O Estado de S. Paulo*, March 24, 1984; *A Folha de S. Paulo*, March 24, 1984).

While Zé Cruz worked on the patriarch, lawyers worked on the courts. From the common-law perspective, the Brazilian judicial system appears to be extremely dysfunctional (Taylor, 2004), but its decentralized structure provided a means for repeatedly addressing grievances, and these appeals bought time for the peasants. The Teodoro Sampaio union did not have its own lawyer until 1980. Before that, CONTAG and state federation (Federação Estadual de Trabalhadores na Agricultura do Estado de São Paulo—FETAESP) lawyers advised Cruz on the peasants’ legal rights. In 1979 Cruz revealed his frustration with the legal strategy, suggesting that “‘legal means for helping them were already almost completely drained’” (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, March 23, 1979). But the following year the attorney Emidio Severino da Silva started to work for the union. He joined Zelmo Denari and his assistant attorney, Gilberto Lima, in their judicial appeals.

The courts were in fact an essential battleground in the land struggle, since a key issue was the legal status of Pontal lands. While everything else was going on, judges in various jurisdictions and at various levels worked to resolve the question of the land’s rightful ownership. Justino de Andrade’s lawyers defended his title tooth-and-nail while the peasants’ lawyers fought to demonstrate that the land properly belonged to the state. The labor movement joined the state’s case but also used the courts to defend the rights of the landless under the land statute, the rural labor statute, and other laws that gave them leverage. Under the land statute, for example, contracted Santa Rita tenant farmers had rights to permanence on the land until the end of the harvest season. They also had the right to be compensated for the structures they had built, so the police were accused of violating the law when they destroyed peasant property. The relative autonomy of judges within the judicial system allowed lawyers to seek out sympathetic jurists to issue last-minute stays. These cases disrupted the easy application of class power on the part of landlords and their allies in the military and helped extend the peasants’ stay until the end of the dictatorship. It was only then, with expropriation decreed by President Sarney in August 1986, that the landless of Santa Rita do Pontal became smallholders (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, August 24, 1986).

Despite its perfect old-movement characteristics, the Teodoro Sampaio rural labor union acted in ways that demonstrated some continuity with the new social movements. The union was part of a system rooted in historical forces of Communist and Catholic organizing among peasants in the region. Its immediate origins lay in the development process of a new municipality then being incorporated into the sugarcane-fuel agro-industry, part of the military regime’s plans for Brazil’s orderly progress toward global capitalist integration. The enclosure of the Santa Rita peasants was part of this process:

once they had cleared the land of forest, they were to be cleared away as well, opening the land for commodities such as beef cattle and sugarcane. But the tenants resisted, and union leaders Zé Cruz and his son Divanil, migrants and farmers themselves, took up their cause in the name of the rural working classes, ignoring the fact that the peasants were nonmembers.

Despite its roots in historic social mobilizations, the Teodoro Sampaio union had clearer origins in political and bureaucratic influences. Thus, part of the Cruzes' work involved taking advantage of peasant mobilization rather than instigating it directly—a marked difference from the methods later used by the MST. The reasons for this cannot be explained away by accusing the Cruzes of being co-opted. Structurally, the union was part of a state-sanctioned system, arising and descending from the municipal unions to the state federations to the national confederation, CONTAG. The mode of production at the time also lent itself to a defensive rather than offensive stance. At this time, the task of agrarian reformers was not to create settlements for landless peasants but to help retain those already on the land. In either case, as Hellman wrote, classic base-and-superstructure issues, the sorts of influences that supposedly had no impact on the new movements, were at play. The MSTR used a number of novel weapons to represent the peasants' interests, including the manipulation of public sympathy through the media, assemblies and manifestations, social assistance relief measures, pressuring authorities, appealing to officials, the courts, and alliance building with other entities as well as politicians. These same "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1987) remained part of the MST tool bag into the twenty-first century.

### MST/VIA CAMPESINA: NOVO CANUDOS AND ZÉ RAINHA

Some blame the incompetence of Brazil's bourgeoisie for the rise of the nation's landless movement (Stédile, 2006). Because of the misfeasance or malfeasance of the ruling class, tens of millions of Brazilian peasants fell into the ranks of the unemployed, underemployed, and socially and economically marginalized during the period of military rule (Martine, 1987). With the end of the regime, the New Republic was formed. Most Brazilians suffered significant declines in their power of consumption, and a new index, the misery index, was created to chart change. Signs of hope came in the form of popular mobilizations such as the 1992 movement to oust a corrupt president and the MST's 1997 march to Brasília. For a time, politics and political parties remained important vehicles for democratization, but a variety of factors caused many of the poor to put more faith in autonomous organizations and direct action. In this neoliberal phase of capitalist development, the state began to withdraw from the economy as well as society, and militants, like entrepreneurs, were left to their own devices. With a productive base in agriculture, the MST proved uniquely successful in this new environment, organizing hundreds of thousands of *sem-terras* and helping hundreds of thousands of families acquire farms in publicly financed settlements around the country (Robles, 2001; Branford and Rocha, 2002). By 2004 the MST reported 350,000 families living in 5,000 agrarian-reform settlements and 200,000 land-occupation encampments, for a total of some 2 million members; in 2008 the Center for Agrarian Reform

Study, Research and Projects of the Universidade Estadual Paulista reported the MST to have counted on the participation of 376,214 families in 2,183 land occupations between 2000 and 2007 (MST, 2004; Fernandes et al., 2008: 30).

Countering expectations about the process of modernization, the disappearance of the peasantry, and the formation of a rural proletariat, many land struggles continued to take place in the state of São Paulo into the twenty-first century. The history of *grilagem* and skillful organizing were to make the Pontal a lightning rod for the MST. There, José Rainha Júnior, a charismatic militant from a farm family in Espírito Santo state, eventually called for turning the region into a Novo Canudos, recalling the historic millenarian community established in Northeastern Brazil by the rural poor at the end of the nineteenth century (Levine, 1995). As famously recounted by the Brazilian journalist Euclides da Cunha, thousands of peasants repelled three government assaults on the original Canudos until the military eventually suppressed their resistance in 1897 (Cunha, 1999 [1901]). A century later, the Pontal town of Euclides da Cunha Paulista was the setting for lively land struggles. In São Paulo and neighboring states the MST found thousands of recruits for its land-occupation strategy. "We're going to pump up the occupations," Rainha threatened in 1995. "There'll be no reduction" of peasant pressure on landlords, he said. "If military police troops come into the picture, it'll be like a repetition of Canudos, 100 years later, only this time the victory will be that of the landless" (*Oeste Notícias* [Presidente Prudente, SP], April 11, 1995; *O Imparcial* [Presidente Prudente, SP], April 11, 1995).

Rainha's aggressive discourse derived from experience rather than education, strictly speaking. Like Veras and Cruz, Rainha was a peasant. His father had been a smallholder, but financial problems with Brazil's dependent-capitalist development model had forced him to sell his land and enter the rural labor market. Rainha and his siblings had followed suit. Like most peasants, the Rainha family was Catholic, and like many young people radicalized during the dictatorship Rainha was awakened to the injustice of his situation by liberation theology. He became an activist in the Church and took classes from numerous priests and laymen, including the progressive Catholic essayist Frei Betto. In the early 1980s, still a rural laborer, Rainha joined an opposition ticket influenced by the Church to take control of the rural labor union. With little formal education but considerable ideological and political formation, he was chosen to participate in founding the MST in 1984. He eventually left the labor movement and dedicated his time to organizing land occupations and protests in support of agrarian reform in Espírito Santo and states farther north, enjoying several dramatic victories. The target of repeated death threats, he was transferred to the Pontal in 1991 (Barbeiro and Nascimento, 1996; Salgado and Peres, 2003; interview, José Rainha Júnior, Mirante Paulista, SP, 2004).

One of the first bases of support for establishing the MST in northwestern São Paulo came from a former priest, the Belgian René Parren, and his Brazilian wife Lúcia, who lived in Andradina. Inspired by liberation theology, Parren became frustrated with the local Church hierarchy and so actively engaged in the temporal world that he lost his vocation. The object of his engagement was a land struggle that resulted in the creation of a land-reform settlement in Andradina known as the Fazenda Primavera. This was the launching pad for establishing the landless movement in the region, the

Movimento dos Sem Terras do Oeste de São Paulo. Pontal lands, with their questionable legal status and militant residents, proved fertile soil for the movement's expansion in the 1980s. At first, Parren and movement activists from Andradina turned to the Teodoro Sampaio rural labor union to build an alliance to help the Santa Rita landless (Fernandes, 1996: 85–114; interviews: José Domingos Bragheto, São Paulo, SP, 2004 and René Parren, Andradina, SP, 2005).

In April 1983, Parren's movement and the union presented a petition to Governor Montoro signed by 4,000 landless workers from the Northwest interested in obtaining land in the state. In June, the Movimento submitted a follow-up letter threatening land occupations if the governor failed to act quickly by expropriating and distributing land to the landless. "One of the outs for the economic crisis," read the letter, "is to make AGRARIAN REFORM, as it will create millions of jobs. . . . For this reason we demand . . . AN AGRARIAN POLICY THAT FAVORS THE SMALL FARMER, OR WE WILL BE OBLIGED TO OCCUPY THESE LANDS TO BE ABLE TO SUSTAIN OUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS AND CONTINUE SURVIVING." A handwritten note on the letter, signed by Parren, explains that he took advantage of a gubernatorial visit to the Pontal to organize a caravan of rural workers to deliver the appeal to Montoro and agriculture secretary José Gomes da Silva in Presidente Epitácio (Movimento dos Sem Terras do Oeste de São Paulo, 1983). As we have seen, this campaign resulted in a state expropriation decree in March 1984.

The strategy of appealing to the governor and organizing caravans of landless workers to increase the pressure and personalize the cause were tactics that Zé Cruz and the Teodoro Sampaio union used. Coletti (1998: 83) criticizes the unions as old social movements for just these sorts of tactics as well as for depending on letter writing. The Movimento's letter celebrated the labor movement's 1979 national congress, which had confirmed agrarian reform as a central demand. Indeed, for nearly two decades CONTAG's slogan was "Agrarian Reform: Land for Those Who Work It." Union appeals also used the desperate situation of the *posseiros* to challenge the state morally, protested the economic crisis suffered by the class, and presented agrarian reform as a key solution to Brazil's political and economic challenges.

One of the important distinctions between old and new peasant representatives lay in their relationship to the state and the law. The unions were part of the corporatist state structure and depended significantly on the skilled use of existing procedures and processes (albeit sometimes radically interpreted). The Movimento's letter to Montoro expressed an ultimatum based on the movement's willingness to violate the law. If the governor were to delay in implementing policies favoring small farmers, they wrote (and in capital letters!), the peasants would be obliged to occupy—to take—the lands in question to feed their children and persevere. This threat of direct action was different from anything the unions contemplated, and it was to remain a defining characteristic of the MST that grew out of regional groups from around the nation such as Parren's Movimento.

The first private-property occupation in the Pontal started on November 15, 1983, when several hundred landless crossed the fence line onto Teodoro Sampaio property owned by the industrial conglomerate Camargo-Correia.

Parren's movement did not initiate this action, but, along with the union, it worked with the Church to help the families and negotiate a solution with the state. The occupation, which grew with the arrival of thousands of landless workers from Paraná and other states, helped pressure the state government to expropriate and distribute lands in the municipality. Following Montoro's expropriation ceremony the following March, Cruz commented that now some 8,000 landless would become peasants: "The group of farmers hoping for land in Teodoro Sampaio has reached 5,000 people. Adding in the area's 3,000 migrant farmworkers, that means that 8,000 people are happy today" (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, August 11, 1984). But the courts overturned Montoro's action in May 1985, and the MST do Oeste took the law into its own hands, occupying Santa Rita in solidarity with the families already there (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, May 8, 1985, and October 27, 1985). Despite his lack of connection to the occupation, Cruz claims that he suffered death threats from a recently formed landlord protection society called the Democratic Rural Union (União Democrática Ruralista—UDR). He eventually condemned the occupation as an "invasion" and expressed his support for the decision of the federal agrarian reform agency (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária—INCRA) to reject applications for land in the Pontal from out-of-state immigrants (*Jornal do Brasil*, November 8, 1985; *O Estado de S. Paulo*, November 17, 1985). A pattern of distinction between the two groups—one functioning within the corporatist system, one outside it—is confirmed by this case.

The law had always been important to the rural labor movement. Lyndolpho Silva, the national head of PCB rural labor organizing in the 1950s and CONTAG's first president, noted the power of promising rural workers that "this here's the law" "Peasants and rural workers were men who put a lot of faith in the law," he told me. "They were educated that way. What's outside the law, scares them" (Welch, 1999: 210). Silva's conclusion is an intriguing one in the context of nearly universal emphasis on the way Brazilian culture denigrates the law in favor of personalism, a trait exemplified by MST direct action and one that was evident at the time I interviewed Silva in 1988. The quote reflects Silva's work as a promoter of Brazilian rural labor law during the 1950s and the PCB's struggle for legitimacy, as well as the modernist faith and progressive historical vision that were essential to the postwar ideological context (Medeiros, 1999; Cunha, 2004; Welch, 2006b). By the 1980s, however, many rural workers had experienced the poverty of progress, and the long saga of the Santa Rita landless demonstrates the limiting characteristics of the law more than any emancipating quality. The rural bourgeoisie frequently got the upper hand in the judicial process, whereas the working class lost again and again, its occasional victories proving almost Pyrrhic. This discussion recalls the phrase attributed to Getúlio Vargas: "For friends, everything; for enemies, the law" (DaMatta, 1991: 137–197).

This is not to say that the MST pursued an outlaw strategy. To the contrary, it developed a method of legally defending its actions, seeking to convince the public and the courts that its interpretation of the law was more legitimate than that of its opponents (Meszaros, 2000). Over time, the movement seems to have developed a plan of action rooted in common law—in the notion that the law should reflect rather than control reality, a posture quite different from that expected of citizens living in civil-law regimes such as Brazil's (Davidson,

1953; Thompson, 1975; Tourinho Neto, 2000; Taylor, 2004). In the case of land rights, the link between physical possession and entitlement is firmly based in Brazilian experience (Foweraker, 1980; Holston, 1991). Since 1988 the MST has defended its land occupation strategy with constitutional law, particularly Articles 184 to 189, with their emphasis on the legitimate motives for agrarian reform and the social interest or function of land.

The MST brought tactical innovation to the agrarian reform struggle, but the strategy of interpreting the law to favor peasants is little different from the way it was used during the peasant league and ULTAB/CONTAG periods. Land targeted for occupation by the MST has generally been identified as subject to agrarian reform expropriation by the appropriate state or federal agencies. Occupations generally seek to speed the implementation of decisions already made. They are secretly organized and take place at night in order to prevent landowners from preempting them with protective court orders and impassable barricades. When court orders arrive to force the expulsion of militants, the MST usually negotiates a peaceful withdrawal and forms an encampment on public land near the land in question. When delays occur, the MST organizes further occupations as well as sit-ins in public buildings (Fernandes, 2004; Garcia, 2000). These acts of civil disobedience have rarely resulted in the successful prosecution of leading militants, although numerous leaders have been jailed and many have been killed by outlaw landlord henchmen or trigger-happy authorities.

Running all of these risks, Rainha proved remarkably resilient. Located in the Pontal, near the hub of national and international media production, Rainha had become, by the late 1990s, the personification of the MST.<sup>6</sup> His high profile may have helped keep him alive, but it certainly did not help him stay out of jail. He was constantly targeted for arrest, accused of various crimes from murder to the illegal possession of weapons. The latter charge caused his most prolonged imprisonment, which lasted from July to December 2003. Claiming a desire to avoid repeated arrest, Rainha maintained a low profile in 2004. In fact, in what became known as "Red April," with an unprecedented number of land occupations memorializing the 19 MST marchers murdered by police in 1996, Rainha's name hardly appeared in the press (Arruda et al., 2004). In May the MST juggled 10 occupations in the Pontal alone, but Rainha's name entered the picture only for historical background (Tomazela, 2004c). In June he reappeared in a story in *O Estado de S. Paulo* about the MST's efforts to influence the upcoming mid-term elections. He had been sent to the state of Bahia for the month to talk with supportive politicians, arguing that they could count on the votes of 135,000 militants if their actions favored agrarian reform (Arruda, 2004). At the end of the month, the same paper reported that a dispute between Rainha and another Pontal militant had resulted in the dismantling of the huge encampment known as Novo Canudos.

Established in May 2003, the encampment attracted as many as 4,000 families. Rather than resist the arrival of families from neighboring states as Cruz had recommended, Rainha welcomed them. José Maria Tomazela, a reporter who regularly covered the land struggle for *O Estado de S. Paulo*, connected the size of Novo Canudos to Lula's inauguration in 2003. Lula's election brought the expectation that the PT administration would settle all agrarian reform campers. Inspired by party rivalry, the governor of São Paulo announced his

plans to settle 1,400 families in the region. Rainha took advantage of these public policy statements to concentrate the landless on lands in Presidente Epitácio, a Pontal municipality located on the bank of the Paraná River, which divides the states of São Paulo and Mato Grosso do Sul. In this remote setting, he reiterated his desire to re-create Canudos, which had claimed a population of nearly 30,000 peasants before its repression. Expecting a historically sympathetic politician to institute agrarian reform on his own, the MST held steady during 2003 without promoting a single occupation in the Pontal. Rainha's imprisonment helped prevent a break with this peace treaty. But after the MST founding coordinator João Pedro Stédile declared the movement's intention to "make the countryside a living hell [*infernizar o campo*]" during April, the remaining occupants of Novo Canudos were mobilized to participate in a week-long march to Presidente Prudente, rallying there in support of agrarian reform on April 6. A few days later they formed two groups of 300 each that were later deployed to occupy large farms subject to expropriation. In the following weeks, the occupants played cat-and-mouse with authorities, resisting expulsion orders and negotiating with the police until the final "ultimatum," when they peacefully withdrew (Tomazela, 2004a; 2004b).

In June 2004 the MST celebrated its twentieth birthday and entered a new phase that depended less on personalities like Rainha.<sup>7</sup> The Red April occupations had failed to force the Lula administration to implement agrarian reform. In fact, arguments in favor of an agribusiness development model intensified. As in broader economic policy, the Lula government proved orthodox in its agricultural policy, supporting a commodity-export model of wealth accumulation. As agribusiness advocates such as Lula's first minister of agriculture, Roberto Rodrigues, argued, the extraordinary profits of exported soybeans, beef, and oranges could be used to pay down Brazil's debt, freeing resources for social investment, including family agriculture. Rainha criticized the large-producer approach as "murderous," noting that land concentration threatened to wipe out the small family farmers who were Brazil's greatest producers of foodstuffs (interview, José Rainha Júnior, Mirante Paulista, 2004; Welch, 2007).

Frustrated by Lula, the MST searched for new means of achieving the strategic goal of agrarian reform. Movement organizers realized that forces had to be mobilized to counterbalance if not overwhelm the pressure of the agribusiness lobby. The search for new tactics also involved greater articulation with international allies in order to understand and confront transnational agribusiness corporations and the Western governments that defend global agribusiness trends. The MST solidified its long relationship with the Via Campesina by hosting the organization's fourth international congress in Brazil on the occasion of the movement's twentieth anniversary. Allying itself with other organizations, the MST formed the Via Campesina-Brasil and devised new tactics to confront agribusiness. Some of these included the occupation of "productive" plantations such as eucalyptus forests (used for cellulose production) and the construction of a unifying peasant identity for all rural social movements. As the Canadian anthropologist Annette Desmarais (2002: 99) has noted, "For the *Vía Campesina*, agrarian protest is driven by a strong peasant identity and a vision of an evolving and vibrant peasant culture involving innovative practices and new ways of thinking about and doing politics." Rainha's go-it-alone tendencies conflicted with the collective

organization and diplomatic skills required by the new strategy of confrontation with agribusiness (Safatle and Pardini, 2004; Stédile et al., 2004; interview, José Rainha Júnior, Mirante Paulista, 2004).

In a lengthy interview of cofounder João Pedro Stédile in 1998, the geographer Bernardo Mançano Fernandes asked if the MST was a peasant movement. Stédile responded: "I think that the MST was born as a peasant movement, one of agriculturalists accustomed to work with family labor that resolved to struggle for land." If this was the case, asked Fernandes, why did they not call the MST the Movimento dos Camponeses Sem Terra? "Because the word peasant is somewhat elitist," answered Stédile. He went on (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 31–32):

It has never been used by the peasants themselves. It isn't, let us say, part of the common vocabulary. The PCB was the only organization that used the term *camponês*. The man of the country generally defines himself as an *agricultor*, rural worker, sharecropper (*meeiro*), or tenant (*arrendatário*). In truth, it's more of a sociological or academic concept that might even reflect the reality in which they live but has not been assimilated as an identity. Without being a popular term, there was no way we could put it in the name of the movement. In essence, the MST was born as a peasant movement that waved the flag of three top demands: land, agrarian reform, and general changes in society. When we thought about how to conceptualize this, we perceived that the MST was different from historic peasant movements that only struggled for land.

Stédile's analysis is important for conveying the memory of the moment of the MST's founding. In fact, as we have seen, the PCB used the word *camponês* successfully in the 1940s and 1950s, and it was also used by the PCdoB, under Chinese influence, until the 1970s. But this political legacy of the peasant identity led the dictatorship to repress the use of the word in the press, and it gradually disappeared from common usage (Welch, 2006b; interview, Moacir Palmeira, Campinas, SP, 2008).

In 2004, Stédile signaled a shift in tactics, using the term to describe the MST in his address to the national leadership meeting. Later that year, Rainha had not incorporated the new language. For him, a *camponês* was someone engaged in subsistence agriculture, probably the most popular definition (interview, José Rainha Júnior, Mirante Paulista, 2004). While scholars have demonstrated the term's utility and appreciate its historical connections to Europe, those trained to lead the MST remained uncertain about using it to form a common collective identity.<sup>8</sup> This is one reason that Via Campesina–Brasil decided in July 2005 to call together some of Brazil's more prominent rural-studies scholars to produce the multivolume *Coleção história social do campesinato no Brasil* (Carvalho et al., 2008–2009). The hope was that revealing the history of this neglected class would provide its descendents and heirs inspiration to adopt the identity and a better chance of being respected in the present and future. As the study reveals, the term "peasant" has a rich political, social, and cultural history. The resurrection of the term in the present context is a symbolic act, an attempt to invent a tradition to fortify the landless and small-farmer movement.<sup>9</sup>

The international origins of this effort remind us of the forces that inspired Brazilian Communists to call their rural subjects *camponeses*, reaching out to organize them since the 1920s, forming the peasant leagues in the 1940s, and



founding ULTAB in the 1950s. While we cannot say the movement has come full circle, it would also be inaccurate to claim that today's movement in this direction is new.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Conceptual generalizations about movements new and old, peasants, and democracy need to be measured against the experience of the groups being discussed. The capacity of social movements to challenge inequality and empower the poor to advance democracy and foment other dramatic changes is hurt when historical knowledge is neglected. Social history has the potential to make arguments about social movements weightier and more persuasive.

Considering the MST in historical perspective, some analysts have found parallels in the past and in other national settings. The journalists Susan Branford and Jan Rocha end their award-winning book *Cutting the Wire* (2002) by placing the movement in comparative historical perspective with the English Diggers, the American Populists, the Mexican revolutionaries, and the Italian peasant leagues. The Diggers, like the MST landless, they write, "deliberately defied the power of landowners" (265) and linked enclosure to slavery and land to freedom. "Just like the MST a hundred years later," they argue, the Populists "gave the oppressed farmers the confidence to think for themselves" (270), and along with the Italian peasants the MST has shown a willingness to "reinvent itself" (283). In the conclusion, Branford and Rocha raise the MST from its national context to the international context of the broad-based anti-globalization movement, where they see the potential for a revolutionary reversal of the "Green Revolution" recently reenergized by genetic engineering and relaxed trade rules: "The MST is well placed to join such a global revolution. As some *sem-terra* themselves are realizing, their future is not as economically unviable peasant communities living in a time warp but as modern, sustainable, green communities" (282). They introduce important historic parallels that help us gain perspective on the MST as a social movement that we will eventually understand as having its own beginning, middle, and end.

By placing the MST in historical perspective we discover that this is not the first time that Brazilian militants have organized around the concept of the *camponês* as a political identity. The twentieth century is rich with examples of the struggle to improve the lot of the rural poor. Even the term *sem-terra*, which seems unique to the MST, was commonly used by Communists in the 1940s. Although the representation of peasants in the leadership of contemporary rural labor organizations may be greater than in the past, peasants such as Nestor Veras and Zé Cruz also struggled on behalf of their class. The MST has a national presence that the PCB and its organizations did not fully achieve by 1964, but the PCB's peasant leagues and ULTAB associations had a presence in the leading agricultural states of the time. Moreover, the MST has yet to acquire a structure and membership as extensive and large as that constructed by CONTAG by 1984. The Via Campesina uses new forms of communication and transportation to organize internationally, but it is not the first international organization to try to unite peasant struggles around the globe. My intervention is not intended to deny the remarkable achievements and

innovative characteristics of contemporary movements. To the contrary, I think it essential to fully investigate past achievements and innovations in order to fully appreciate and measure the conditions and prospects of the so-called new rural social movements.

## NOTES

1. I am using “peasant struggle” as an umbrella term for the emancipatory fight for land and/or the labor rights and benefits of agricultural wage workers, sharecroppers, small family farmers, migrant rural workers, and all others who pursued agricultural livelihoods without being owners of significant property or full-time employers of alienated labor. This definition is rooted in theoretical literature such as Chayanov (1986), Mallon (1995), Kearney (1996), Brass (2003), and Otero (2004).

2. Among the entities examined here, the Via Campesina is a relative newcomer and merits introduction. It was founded in 1992 by representatives from peasant, farmer, and indigenous organizations from various countries and first headquartered in Honduras (later in Jakarta, Indonesia). It shares information and establishes cooperation among diverse member movements to defend the common interests of small and medium-sized farmers and fight against the expansion of corporate-led agribusiness globalization. The MST is coordinator of the Via Campesina’s South American region, which encompassed 32 organizations in 10 countries as of its fifth international conference in October 2008. At that time, the MST was joined by four other organizations in the Via Campesina–Brasil: the Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas, the Movimento de Atingidos por Barragens, the Movimento de Pequenos Agricultores, and the Pastoral da Juventude Rural. The operational secretary of the Via Campesina–Brasil can be contacted at [viacampesina@terra.com.br](mailto:viacampesina@terra.com.br). The Via Campesina site is [http://viacampesina.org/main\\_en/index.php](http://viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php), (accessed December 14, 2008). See Desmarais (2002) and Stédile et al. (2004).

3. Two hundred was the number reported in the April *Notícias de Hoje*. In Guarita (1948), the attendance list of the May 19, 1946, meeting included 112 names, all male.

4. Additional evidence for these stories can be found in DEOPS, “Delegacia da Policia de Santo Anastácio—Pomptuário 900,” Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo.

5. The term *posseiro* is just about as ugly and negative in connotation as its nearest English translation, “squatter.” The root of *posseiro* is *posse*, which means “possess.” The word is used to distinguish those who possess but do not own or have title to land, and it is used exclusively to describe those who are smallholders and thus precariously located in the political economy. (A large landholder without title is a *grileiro*, another negative term that is used exclusively by advocates of agrarian reform.) The more aggressive agricultural capitalism, expanding into less densely populated areas, the more *posseiros* had to be cleared away. An interesting account of this process from the period is Pomar et al. (1981).

6. The pinnacle of recognition in Brazil today is representation in the 8 p.m. Globo TV Network soap opera (*novela*). In 1996, Rainha and his militant wife, Diolinda, became models for MST militants in the novela *Rei do Gado* (Cattle King). For a compelling account of the sociopolitical function of Brazilian novelas, see *The Heart That Bleeds* (Guillermoprieto, 1994: 287–316).

7. Rainha was formally expelled from the MST by mid-2006. During years of tense relations with the MST’s national coordinating committee, he submitted himself to further training and education, but the media continued to isolate him as if he and the movement were one and the same, and his charisma expanded his popular following among workers in the Pontal. These two forces led him to make individual decisions that irritated and finally distanced him from the MST leadership, which believed that disciplined collective behavior was essential to the movement’s longevity. In 2007, Rainha’s connections to the Movement were completely cut by the MST National Directorate.

8. In 2004 I interviewed 15 mid-level MST militants. They included individuals from around Brazil who were organizers, encampment leaders, regional delegates, agronomists, and other technical specialists. Each was asked to describe his or her understanding of “agricultural peasants (*camponeses*).” Few expressed the sophisticated politicized perspective of the Via Campesina.

9. As a participant in the history project’s national editorial council, I offer this interpretation on the basis of my experience and the concept of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

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