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Theme 2: How are People Resisting Authoritarian Populism The Role of Schools in Resisting Authoritarian Populism in Rural Areas

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Paper draws on forthcoming book: *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education* (Oxford University Press)

On September 20, 2015, twelve hundred teachers working in public schools on settlements and camps affiliated with the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), travelled to the capital city of Brasília, to participate in the Second National Meeting of Educators in Areas of Agrarian Reform (ENERA). Hundreds of the teachers who arrived for the event were longtime MST collaborators and self-identified MST activists. Other teachers at the conference had only recently started working in areas of agrarian reform, and this would be their first time learning about the movement's educational approach. Also participating in the conference were dozens of dedicated, full-time MST educational leaders who had been implementing the movement's educational proposal in public schools in areas of agrarian reform for the previous three decades. The first ENERA, held in July 1998, had marked the MST's entrance into the national debate on rural schooling. Now, seventeen years later, the goal of the Second ENERA was to discuss the current status of the MST's pedagogical initiatives and ways to advance the movement's educational program in the current moment.

On the first day of the national meeting, the teachers and MST activists gathered outside of the auditorium. Members of the MST's culture collective played music and led dances, keeping everyone energized as they waited for the event to begin. The MST education collective had decorated the halls of the conference center with symbols that represented the rural countryside (straw hats, rope, seeds, agricultural produce, machetes, decorative fabrics) and social struggle (pictures of land occupations, anti-agribusiness posters, MST flags). Inside the auditorium ten-foot-high pictures of the movement's "intellectuals" (*pensadores*) hung from the walls, including Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, José Martí, Frida Kahlo, Milton Santos, Zumbi, Moisey Pistrak, Anton Makarenko, and Nadezhda Krupskaya. There was a section in the front of the auditorium reserved for two-dozen government guests who would participate in the morning's event, including several heads of ministries.

Once everyone was seated, an elaborate 40-minute cultural performance began—a typical MST *mística*. Tractors (built out of cardboard) identified as "Monsanto" and the "Federal Court of Audits" (TCU) attempted to plow down rural farmers. A swarm of people wearing black followed, carrying signs that said *Agronegócio* (Agribusiness), *Agrotóxico* (Pesticides), *Monocultura* (Monoculture), and *Todas Pela Educação* (Education for All, a coalition of mostly private sector actors increasingly involved in defining the educational agenda in Brazil). Then, dozens of people in straw hats and farmers clothing came running into the auditorium, pressuring these "enemies" off the stage. An MST leader read a poem about the 1871 Paris Commune. A dozen other activists dressed as oil workers joined the farmers, bringing with them a large hammer and sickle that symbolized working-class solidarity between the MST and the oil workers on strike across Brazil. The government officials in the audience watched politely. After the presentation, everyone was asked to stand up for the singing of the MST's anthem. The government officials stood silently, as the teachers and activists sung proudly around them.

More than an hour later, after each of the invited government guests had a chance to speak—almost all of them emphasizing the importance of agrarian reform and *Educação do Campo*—one of the best-known MST national leaders, famous for his rousing talks, came to the front: João Pedro Stédile. João Pedro spoke about why the struggle for agrarian reform required, in addition to land, dignified housing, the production of healthy food, and of course, people’s control over knowledge. He exhorted the crowd: “The working class needs to organize its class project, and in order to do this we have to organize in all spaces of social life.” Pointing to the picture of Lenin, he continued, “Some people have interpreted Lenin incorrectly. They think we can just take the presidential palace and then have power. But there is nowhere in Brazil with less power than the presidential palace!” The crowd laughed at the remark, all too appropriate as thousands of people across the country were calling for President Rousseff’s impeachment and it seemed likely that she would soon be pushed out of office. Then João Pedro pointed to the picture of Gramsci in the back of the auditorium. “We prefer to follow Gramsci, who says that the people have to create their own social projects and contest power in all spaces of social life, the school, the land, the senate, and the presidential palace. We are here this week to discuss how to continue one single chapter of our struggle, the conquest of knowledge and education.” João Pedro turned to address the government officials: “These are our friends here. I am not here to curse you, because today you are on our team. We will curse you on Wednesday! Wednesday you can fear us because we are going to go to Brasília!” The teachers started cheering, as João Pedro listed all of the buildings they were going to occupy, and the state officials they would denounce, two days later.

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There are few institutions as emblematic of the disregard for rural communities as their schools.

These are most often single room school houses staffed by underqualified teachers struggling to teach children of multiple ages in a single classroom, with dated textbooks, paint peeling from the walls, leaks in the roofs, and chunks of concrete missing. There are also few institutions that rural authoritarian populism manifests as clearly as in the highly lucrative educational sphere. Often the biggest and sometimes only employer in rural areas, control over school employment is an easy way for local politicians to reward political supporters or punish those that contest their power. In the words of one rural school principal in Brazil I spoke with, principals are often considered “the mayor’s eyes and ears in the community.”

Nonetheless, in this talk I want to suggest that public schools are simultaneously what Althusser referred to as the most important Ideological State Apparatus of the contemporary era, and also, one of the most important spheres of resistance. Schools are both spaces where youth learn the ideology of the bourgeois and the technologies of self-discipline, and locations where social movements can promote critical thinking and self-governance. I make this provocative argument based on more than a decade of research with one of the largest social movement and well-known social movements in Latin America, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST). Although many people have researched the success of the MST’s land occupations and alternative agricultural initiatives, there has been less focus on what we could call the movement’s MST’s “Long March Through the Institutions,” in this case, activists occupation of the Brazilian public school system, from infant education to secondary and tertiary schooling.

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In the early 1980s, during the first MST land occupations, local activists began experimenting with educational approaches in their communities that supported the movement’s broader struggle for agrarian reform and collective farming. These experiments included both informal educational activities in MST occupied encampments and alternative pedagogical practices in schools on agrarian reform settlements. As the MST grew nationally, these local experiments evolved into a proposal for all schools located in MST settlements and camps—which, by 2010, encompassed two thousand schools with eight thousand teachers and 250 thousand students. The MST also pressured the government to fund dozens of adult literacy campaigns, vocational high schools, and bachelor and graduate degree programs for more than 160 thousand students in areas of agrarian reform, through

partnerships with over 80 educational institutions. During the early 2000s, the MST's educational initiatives expanded to include all rural populations in the Brazilian countryside, not only those in areas of agrarian reform. The proposal became institutionalized within the Brazilian state through national public policies, an office in the Ministry of Education, a presidential decree, and dozens of programs in other federal agencies and subnational governments. By 2010, the MST's educational proposal—now known as *Educação do Campo*—was the Brazilian state's *official* approach to rural schooling. Nonetheless, the implementation of the proposal varied widely by state and municipality.

The MST's relationship with the Brazilian state is, of course, complex and fraught with tensions. Since the MST's primary demand is land redistribution, the movement has an explicitly *contentious* relationship with the Brazilian state, as families occupy land to pressure different government administrations to redistribute these properties to landless families. As the MST promotes agrarian reform through public resources, the MST also has a *collaborative* relationship with the state, promoting agricultural and educational policies that increase the development of rural settlements—an outcome that can help both the movement and the state itself. Finally, the relationship is fundamentally *contradictory*, as the MST pressures the capitalist state to support a project with the end goal of overthrowing or eroding capitalism, through the promotion of more collective, participatory and inclusive political and economic relations. MST activists demand schools in their communities and communities' right to participate in the governance of these schools, with the purpose of promoting alternative pedagogical, curricular, and organizational practices—a process I call *contentious co-governance*. These practices encourage youth to stay in the countryside, engage in collective agricultural production, and embrace peasant culture. These educational goals are an explicit attempt to *prefigure*, within the current public school system, more collective forms of social and economic relations that advance the future project of constructing a fully socialist society.

The MST's thirty-year engagement with the Brazilian state epitomizes what João Pedro Stédile referred in the opening vignette as the movement's Gramscian strategy, not only redistributing land but also integrating farmers into a process of co-governance of their new communities through their participation in a range of state institutions. The MST's accomplishments have been astonishing, and although the movement is still far from achieving its goals of land reform, agrarian reform and social transformation, the movement has arguably done more to promote alternative practices within a diverse range of state institutions than any other social movement in Latin America.

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Social movements incorporating alternative educational practices within their organizing efforts is not a new development. These initiatives can be divided into three broad categories: informal, non-formal, and formal educational practices. Informal education is the pedagogical experience of being part of a movement, the learning that comes from participating in a protest, joining a march, or coming to a collective decision in a meeting (Choudry, 2015; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010). Non-formal educational practices are the opportunities for intentional study, reflection, and analysis that many movements offer, which can range from one-day seminars to several-months-long courses. In Latin America these non-formal educational practices, referred to as popular education, are frequently linked to the educational theories of Paulo Freire ([1968] 2000). Freire offered both a critique of traditional schooling practices and a theory for how to draw on the knowledge of oppressed groups to develop a collective political consciousness (*conscientização*¹), in order to take action and combat political and economic inequality.²

In the MST, non-formal educational practices are referred to as *formação* (political training). Since the first land occupations in the southern regions of Brazil, the MST has promoted non-formal education among its leadership through study groups and courses at the movement's *escolas da formação*

¹ Note that in Portuguese the last part of the word *conscientização* means “action,” an important point that is not translatable into English, which highlights the need to connect consciousness to action.

² Critical pedagogy in the United States grew out of scholars' engagement with Freire's work (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Giroux, 2001; hooks, 1994; Macedo, 2006; McLaren, 2003).

(political training schools). Statewide MST leadership bodies are responsible for organizing political education for people who have recently joined the movement; these courses allow new activists to learn about the major theories that drive the MST's struggle. In addition, one of the movement's organizing principles is that all leaders, even seasoned activists, should be studying, either in formal education programs or in non-formal courses—in order to continue developing their intellectual capacity for analysis and critique.

Previous literature on education and social movements has focused primarily on the role of informal educational practices and non-formal education programs (Altenbaugh, 1990; Arnove, 1986; Delp, 2002; Kane, 2001; Payne & Strickland, 2008; Perlstein, 1990; Torres, 1991).

In contrast, in my forthcoming book *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land*, I examine how engaging in the *contentious co-governance* of formal education serves as a generative sphere for movements to build internal capacity and social influence. Formal education takes place in public and private schooling institutions and educational programs that are recognized by the state and that result in a diploma that has symbolic power in society. The role that schooling institutions play in both social reproduction and social transformation is a long-standing debate in the social sciences and among political activists. For critical educational theorists, formal educational institutions are most often associated with the reproduction of deeply embedded class, racial, and gender inequalities (Althusser, 1984; Anyon, 1997; Apple, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This perspective is often traced back to Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1984), who argued that the educational apparatus had replaced the Church as the most important institution for reproducing capitalist relations. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) also contributed to theories of social reproduction by illustrating how the values, norms, and skills taught in schools correspond to those existing in the capitalist workforce. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990) discussed schools as sites of social reproduction by introducing the idea of “cultural capital”: the rules, relationships, and linguistic and cultural competencies that appear objective while actually representing the values of the dominant class. They argued that schools sort students “by conferring institutional recognition on the cultural capital possessed by any given agent” (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 88). Together, these theorists offer a convincing argument for how schools in capitalist society function to replicate and deepen inequalities, rather than to challenge them.

Nevertheless, from a Gramscian perspective, state institutions are an ambiguous civil society sphere that both protect the state from attack and represent a terrain for organizing resistance. This means that public schools are contradictory institutions that contain both oppressive and liberatory potential. Similarly, education scholars who theorize the state have often noted the limit of any government's control over its educational apparatus. For example, Roger Dale (1989) emphasizes the “inability of governments to effectively institute day-to-day control over every aspect of an apparatus's activities,” and consequently, that “state apparatuses are not directable at will” (p. 33). Dale claims that, in particular, teachers enjoy a high level of autonomy in their classrooms and are not simply “state functionaries.” Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin (1985) write that schools are a product of the “social conflict” arising from two often-contradictory educational goals: efficiency in preparing students for the work place, and constructing democratic, participative, and culturally aware citizens (p. 24). Carnoy and Levin argue that the direction of educational policy is dependent on the strength of social movements at any particular historical moments, whose leaders challenge the assumption that schools are “legitimate instruments of social mobility” (p. 108).

More recently, scholars who focus on the intersection of community organizing and educational reform have empirically illustrated this point (Anyon, 2005; Mediratta, Fruchter, & Lewis, 2002; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Shirley, 1997; Su, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). For example, Mark Warren and Karen Mapp (2011) document how “organizing groups work precisely to build a political constituency for a high-quality and equitable public education system, cultivating the participation and leadership of low-income people themselves in efforts to increase resource for public education and to redress the profound inequities faced by children in low-income communities” (p. 259). Michael Apple (2006, 2013) also offers several concrete examples of how grassroots

movements—on both the right and the left—have used educational institutions for political, economic, and cultural ends.³ However, Apple is clear that the development of these alternative educational models “is best done when it is dialectically and intimately connected to actual movements and struggles” (p. 41). Together, these implicitly Gramscian studies suggest that it is possible for social movements to interrupt social reproduction and link public schools to broader processes of social transformation.

...

I suggest three major reasons why formal schools are strategic terrains for social movements to garner influence, based on my long-term observations with the MST. First, movements’ participation in public schooling can help recruit new activists and, in particular, youth and women, to the movement. Public schools and universities are institutions where young people spend many hours each day, and are therefore important spaces for investing in local leadership development—increasing students’ interest in and capacity for social change. Although most youth initially enter school out of obligation or for their own individual advancement, while they are students in these institutions movement leaders have the opportunity to engage them in discussions about broader political, economic, and social goals. These discussions can also happen in other social movement-led training programs, such as popular education. However, the people who participate in these non-formal educational spaces are often already active supporters or at least sympathetic to the movements. In addition, schools have a steady flow of financial and institutional resources, and already bring together a wide range of community members at no additional cost to the movement. Social movement’s participation in formal schooling can help convince youth, who may have never participated in a contentious protest, to become involved in these collective struggles.⁴ Furthermore, in Brazil and other countries educational work is highly feminized (e.g., see Drudy, 2008). This means that contesting schools also engages movements with “women’s work,” and thus—perhaps unintentionally—makes it easier to recruit women to participate in the movement. In the MST, participation in the education sector has been an important path for women to enter the movement, who would otherwise feel uncomfortable in other male-dominated spaces.

Second, access to public education can help working-class activists obtain state-recognized degrees that enhance their power to negotiate with elite actors. As MST educational activist Maria de Jesus explained, “Access to educational programs helped us because before these people [state officials] did not respect us, but when we all began to graduate, and hold higher education degrees, we could debate them as equals.”⁵ Although the informal learning, popular education, and training that occurs within movements may provide activists with similar opportunities for intellectual development, these informal courses do not help activists obtain the recognized degree necessary to increase their influence with state actors. State recognition is especially important in the case of professional degrees. Over the past two decades the MST national leadership has been able to access educational programs for local activists to become teachers, lawyers, agricultural technicians, and doctors. Once movement activists obtain these degrees, they are able to carry out professional tasks for the movement, reducing its reliance on outside experts. For example, the MST has sent over 200 of its leaders to obtain medical degrees from Cuba, and now there is a large collective of MST activist-doctors who take care of health issues in the movement’s settlements and camps. Similarly, hundreds of MST leaders are employed as teachers in schools on MST settlements, or have been hired by state governments as technicians for the movement’s agricultural cooperatives. These professional positions allow activists to sustain themselves economically, while also contributing to the movement’s development and sustainability.⁶

³ More specifically, in this latter book, Apple (2013) analyzes several historical figures that theorize education and social change, including Freire, George Count, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson.

⁴ Similarly, church-based study groups (CEBs) recruited many people to participate in social movements who were not initially supporters, but rather, joined the CEBs for religious reasons.

⁵ All quotes or information from Maria de Jesus are from an interview on Sept. 5, 2011, unless noted.

⁶ Often, MST leaders who are appointed to these professional positions will give part of their salary to the

Third, public schools are important locations where social movements can begin to prefigure, in the current world, the social practices that they hope to build in the future. For example, the MST's educational interventions are attempts to prefigure in schools the decision-making processes, collective work practices, and cultural production that the movement's leaders also promote in their communities.⁷ The movement learns how to prefigure these alternative practices by building what Erik Olin-Wright (2010) refers to as "real utopias": "utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks for navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change" (p. 6). In the MST's case these practices include building social relations based on solidarity and mutual cooperation, developing collective work processes, creating cultural performances that respect peasant traditions, farming through agroecological methods, engaging in contentious politics, and of course, practicing participatory governance. It is often difficult for the MST leadership to ensure that the families on agrarian reform settlements implement all of these practices, as a range of religious, political, and economic actors shape the development of these communities. However, if movements can develop a degree of influence in the public schools, then these state institutions can become "real education utopias," which become important examples to these communities that another world *is* possible. Again, as schools consume so much time from so many people and participation in schools is generally universal and obligatory, these institutions are important spheres for building real utopias. Transforming public schools thus becomes both a goal and a means of promoting social change.

I believe that the contentious co-governance of the public school system can take can happen even in contexts of extreme rural authoritarian populism. Let's turn to one example.

...

Santa Maria da Boa Vista is a municipality in the western part of the state of Pernambuco, a region known as the *sertão* that has a semi-arid desert-like climate, which makes small-scale agricultural production extremely difficult due to limited water access. This particular municipality also has a huge afro-Brazilian population, possibly being the location of a previous run-away slave community, known as a *quilombo*.

Rural authoritarian populism is not a new develop in Santa Maria. According to the citizens, activists, and politicians in Santa Maria, only one family has held political power since the municipality's founding in 1872. This family, currently a network of dozens of cousins, are all the nieces and nephews of the most recent local "strongman" in the region, known in Portuguese as a "Coronel." Nevertheless, electoral rivalries are intense due to political splits between cousins, who really dislike each other, and form opposing clientelist networks of support among citizens. Since there are no industries in Santa Maria, government jobs are the most stable means of livelihood for an average citizen. Thus, the mayor's control over hundreds of municipal jobs is an important political tool for maintaining citizen allegiance. These systems of clientelism are not necessarily "backwards," or an archaic remnant from the past, but rather, a type of survival strategy for poor families. Auyero (2000) refers to clientelist practices as "problem solving through personalized political mediation," the only means of material survival for many of the poor citizens in Santa Maria.

Rural Authoritarian Populism's Effect on Schools: In Santa Maria, public schools are one of the most important institutions offering a steady income to citizens, and therefore, have become an important avenue of clientelistic exchange. Each time a new cousin takes power, all of the municipality's 75 school principals are fired and replaced with 75 political supporters. Tenured teachers who cannot be fired are also affected, as their political loyalty determines the schools they will teach in, some of which require a several hour daily commute. In far-off rural schools this means

movement, as a form of economic solidarity.

⁷ Carl Boggs (1977) describes prefigurative politics in contrast to more top-down forms of leadership, writing, "The dilemma persists: how to combine prefiguration with the instrument concerns of political effectiveness" (p. 383). I argue that activists engaging the state and prefiguring a future world they hope to create are complementary goals.

that there is a constant cycle of teachers and principals every four years, with the majority of teachers being sent to their communities as punishment and principals as rewards.

MST Arrival: In this context, in 1995, the MST held its first land occupation in Santa Maria, with two thousand families occupying several of the former fruit plantations in this region, which had all gone out of business over the previous decade. Within ten years fifteen settlements were created through more land occupations. After these initial land occupations, the movement began to struggle for access to public services, such as roads, agricultural assistance, and public schools in their communities. The MST also set up education collectives, and sent local activists to statewide MST meetings where they learned about the pedagogies the movement had developed, and came back to Santa Maria to implement these pedagogies in the local municipal schools. However, in order to transform these schools Santa Maria, the MST education collective quickly learned that they could not replace the clientelist system, these survival practices were too embedded in the culture of the municipality; instead, they had to navigate the complex political relationships in which these schools were situated.

Thus, MST Activists began to interact on a daily basis with these teachers, checking-in about how their teaching was going, inviting them to attend teacher trainings, participate in teacher collectives, and discuss how to make rural schools better for the lives of rural students. Although teachers often expressed initial fear of the movement, many of them began to appreciate the MST's efforts. As one teacher tells me: "The opinion I had of the MST was a feeling of fear . . . but I was invited in 1997 to an MST encampment to teach . . . The people were collecting watermelons and I helped them. They welcomed me and said they wanted a professor like me in their school. They asked me not just to teach there, but to live there. I decided to move to the MST encampment. I went with my entire family."

Prior to the MST's arrival in Santa Maria, teachers expressed feelings of total isolation in these schools, and a complete lack of pedagogical or organizational support. In comparison to this previous isolation, the MST's presence in their schools and willingness to help the teachers with their daily tasks was enthusiastically welcomed. The activists also encouraged these teachers to attend MST teacher trainings held throughout the year. Another teacher explains her transformation after attending one of these teacher trainings. "My vision was similar to everyone, I was scared and thought that this was an invasion, that the MST was just stealing land . . . My first experience with the movement was in 1997 when I went to an MST teacher training in Caruaru; I began to understand the movement in another way, my vision expanded. I went to other meetings. I go to *sem terrinha* [landless children] marches. I am connected to the MST and participating."

Many of the teachers in this municipality had not been invited to any type of professional development course for years. These MST teacher trainings were part of a process of capacity building in these communities, not only for teachers in schools in MST communities, but for the entire teaching body. Since most teachers in the mid-1990s only had a college degree, this capacity building included increasing access for these teachers to attend public universities, through the federal program I mentioned previously. I met over a dozen teachers in Santa Maria who had been able to obtain college and post-college degrees through this MST-federal partnership. So, over the past 15 years, the rotation of principals and teachers in rural schools every election has never changed. However, what *did* change is that the MST education sector became a constant presence in these schools, offering support in the local schools, suggestion new organizational and curricular proposal, and also offering teachers access to professional development experiences they had not had access to previously.

Although there were deep partisan divides between parents, teachers, and principals—who were part of different clientelist networks—activists helped communities rise above these differences and participate in a collective process of defining educational goals. Similar to their work with these teachers, MST activists also began to interact with the local municipal Secretaries of Education, offer their services, and invite them to national conferences about the MST's pedagogies. For example, the Secretary of Education in Santa Maria from 1997 to 2002, recalls her work with the MST: "Their methodology was acknowledging that they were from a different reality and that we had to recognize

this different reality . . . I agreed, we cannot just force something on them . . . I participated in the meetings they held. I even went to Brasília with them for a national conference.”

By the early 2000s, the MST was able to convince the local mayors to let them choose their own school principals, not by replacing the mayors’ clientelistic practices, but by choosing the principals from among that mayors’ network of supporters! Luckily teachers on both sides of the partisan divide had come to support the MST’s educational ideas. One teacher who became a principal explains: I am no longer a teacher who just comes, teaches, and leaves. I have a very strong connection to the MST. I see myself as a type of activist . . . I am in Leandro’s party, but today Leandro has a strong connection with the MST as well, he lets teachers go to MST teacher-training . . . I know I am in this position as a principal for a while, but this position is not mine. I was chosen because I am a teacher and support Leandro, but also because I am linked to the MST. I wear an MST shirt. As this quote illustrates, the MST could not replace the populist system. This teacher is still part of Leandro’s clientelistic network, even as she supports the MST’s efforts.

With this bi-partisan grassroots support, the MST education collective in Santa Maria has been able to implement a range of curricular and organizational goals in the public schools over the past 15 years:

- **Community Assemblies** to Define School Goals
- Principal Collectives, **Teacher Collectives**
- Generative Themes, Community Research (**Freire**)
- Department of “**Educação do Campo**” in the Secretary of Education
 - MST activists hired to work in this department
- Moving **beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries**
- Manual and intellectual labor, **Curriculum on Agro-ecology**
- **Student collectives** forming organizational base of the school

The big question is **why** do these authoritarian politicians allow the MST participation in these schools, given the movement’s notorious antagonism to the state? I argue that to some extent, it is because the political battle in Santa Maria is not an overtly ideological battle, it is a struggle over power between cousins, who are concerned first and foremost, with maintaining the loyalty of their citizens. I asked ex-mayor Leandro Duarte why he supports and funds MST teacher trainings. He said: “I think it is an evolution on our part. I do not agree with the Marxist line, the more radical line of seeing the world. But also, I cannot create an island when the settlements have a relationship with the MST. I did not want to create conflict.” In this version of authoritarian populism, the principal goal for Leandro is maintaining peace and “equilibrium” in the municipality. Therefore, if letting the MST participate in the school system avoids conflict with teachers in his clientelistic network, he supports these initiatives.

He did not seem concerned that his political rivals also support the MST’s initiatives, like ex-Mayor Rogerio Junior Gomes, who said: “After I took power, the MST became part of the administration—they helped to run the government. They began to make a lot of suggestions about education, and we invited them to participate . . . It was very practical. The MST education collective had already been working in the municipality for a long time.” This quote illustrates that maybe even more important than avoiding conflict might be the fact that, in the context of a low capacity state, the MST has more capacity to administer these schools than the state itself. It is extremely practical to accept their help. The MST’s ability to engage in the public school system and garner the support of the community for a participatory educational project has really changed the terrain in Santa Maria da Boa Vista, through a lot of work in the community, developing a participatory educational reform project. Nonetheless, the same family and its network of cousins has maintained power, holding its grip on the citizens of the city, despite conceding many aspects of the rural school system of the movement.

So, the question everyone is thinking, is this simply cooptation? Interestingly, the recent turn of events in Brazil might help us answer this question. In 2016, in Santa Maria da Boa Vista, Pernambuco, local MST leaders abandoned two decades of non-partisan politics and led a PT mayoral

campaign to oust the family that had held power for the previous century, winning despite all odds.⁸ Thus, for the first time in the history of the municipality, the PT became part of the government. This was an impressive victory, given the fact that that in 2016 the PT went from holding power in 652 municipalities to only being elected in 254.⁹

Why this sudden willingness to engage in partisan politics? Well, in the context of a national shift to the right and the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff—what the MST and others movements were referring to as a political *coup d'état*—the MST was also more willing to defend its party allegiances. As one activist explained, “We took the municipal election as an opportunity to organize a campaign against the coup, to denounce the coup and the loss of workers’ rights . . . they did not believe we could win the election, but we organized a grassroots campaign in the entire municipality . . . when they saw the polls in the last week before the election, we were 4 points in front . . . it was too late.” Thus, the political shifts that were happening at the national level convinced the regional leadership to take a decisive stand against Santa Maria’s most powerful family, despite this family’s previous support of the movement.¹⁰

It is impossible to draw a causal connection between the MST’s war of position in the public education system over the previous decade, and the movements decisive role bringing the PTB-PT coalition to victory in 2016. Nonetheless, according to the MST activists in this municipality, many of the teachers who had traditionally been beholden to different clientelistic networks decided to break with their allegiances and support the MST’s candidates. Furthermore, by 2016 there was a generation of youth who had been influenced by the MST through their public education experience, and had been taught to be critical of the traditional politics in their municipality. It is likely that the MST’s daily work in the school system, and the movement’s other initiatives supporting agricultural production, convinced many families inside and outside of the settlements that the MST’s leadership was worth following.

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In conclusion, even in the context of authoritarian populism, rural social movements can increase their internal capacity by strategically engaging institutions. Co-optation is not a useful concept for analyzing both the real possibilities and potential risks of social movements entering the formal institutional realm. It is possible for social movements to organize, institutionalize, and continue to mobilize—with the right leadership. And organizing around educational issues, which necessarily engages the state, is a good strategy for developing grassroots organizations and making substantial change.

Some Additional Reflections on the 2016 Coup and the MST’s Institutions Strategy

On August 31, 2016, President Dilma Rousseff was impeached, ending thirteen years of Workers’ Party (PT) rule in Brazil. The country is polarized, with many embracing what they see as a first step in ending political corruption (and PT incompetence), while hundreds of thousands of other citizens are piling into the streets denouncing what they call a conservative *coup d’état*. The MST is at the center of these developments, mobilizing its base and defending Rousseff—despite her minimal support for agrarian reform. The new President, Michel Temer, has already begun to take action

⁸ This was a Brazilian Labor Party (PTB)-Workers Party (PT) ticket. The PTB was founded by populist leader Getúlio Vargas in the 1940s. In 1981, Vargas’s nieces re-founded the party as a centrist party. The MST considered the PTB-PT ticket to be a left coalition given the PT’s involvement and that no members of the historically powerful family were in the coalition. The movement also helped to elect the first ever city council person from an MST settlement, a PT party member.

⁹ In 2012, the PT was the party in control of the third most municipalities, behind the PMDB with 1,022 and the PSDB with 701. In 2016, the PT had fallen to tenth place, with the PMDB still ahead with 1,038 and the PSDB with 803. See the epilogue for more on the decline of the PT’s power during this period.

¹⁰ The movement also helped to elect the first ever city council person from an MST settlement.

against the movement, privatizing agrarian reform settlements and increasing police repression against activists. The future of the MST and the Brazilian left looks bleak. These developments in Brazil are part of a larger trend across Latin America: the crashing of the “pink tide,” meaning the fall from power of most left and left-of-center governments in the region. Although the dynamics of the “end of the pink tide” are different in every country, the state of the MST, as one of Latin America’s largest and most influential social movements, is an important indicator of the state of the popular left in Latin America.

It is important not to be overly optimistic about the prospects for this grassroots movement. As I have argued, an antagonistic government in power in a high-capacity state context *is* one of the biggest threats to social movements’ ability to sustain institutional gains. In addition to legislation that cuts back workers’ rights, government spending, and public services, Temer has also implemented a series of strategies to weaken the MST. Some of these strategies have been coercive attempts to repress the movement, including spying, disbanding land occupations, and arresting MST leaders (under a law enacted during Rousseff’s administration). The conservative climate has also emboldened subnational governments to take similar actions against local activists.

Another government strategy has been to cut the funding that supported the MST’s alternative economic initiatives. Immediately after taking his interim position as president, in May 2016, Temer terminated the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MDA), the institutional host of the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA). The President folded the MDA into a “Secretary of Family Agriculture and Agrarian Development,” and put both the new Secretary and INCRA under his office’s administration, meaning much less autonomy. This institutional shift came along with the freezing of dozens of INCRA’s national programs and the cutting of significant resources. The future of the MST’s most important educational program, PRONERA (National Program for Education in Areas of Agrarian Reform), is uncertain. In 2016, the federal government halted all of PRONERA’s operations and delayed a year to schedule a meeting with the program’s civil society advisory board. In 2017, PRONERA had approximately 10 percent of its previous 2015 budget, which has meant no funding for new courses and uncertainty about whether courses started during the previous administration will be completed. In the Ministry of Education, the new Minister—a member of the most conservative political party in Brazil that is linked to the military dictatorship—also chose not to eliminate the Secretary of Continued Education, Literacy, Diversity (SECADI) and the *Educação do Campo* office. However, he did appoint a new leadership body and impose more budget restraints. Although many of the same civil servants still work in the *Educação do Campo* office, when I spoke with them in 2016 it was unclear if the office’s programs would continue. During 2016 and 2017, the new Minister also began to lend support to *Escola Sem Partido* (Schools Without Political Parties), an ultra-conservative movement that has emerged advocating for an “ideologically neutral” education—and proposing to sanction teachers that discuss “politics,” broadly defined, in schools.

Finally, the most detrimental action Temer has taken is to push for policies that “regularize” families living in settlements, issuing them land titles so they no longer qualify for loans or other special programs designated for areas of agrarian reform. By transitioning families from the status of “settled” to “landowners,” the state effectively rids itself of any social obligations it has to this sector of the Brazilian population. This process has the potential to slowly erode the movement, as areas of agrarian reform will have to adapt to the dominant economic model in the countryside. Politically, this strategy also has the benefit of not being reversible by a future administration. During the first half of 2017, the MST led a campaign against the proposed policy, visiting settlements and asking families to sign a petition to demand “concession of use rights.” This would allow families to live on the land if they are producing on it and also transfer these use rights to their children—but not have the rights to sell this land. As I observed in April 2017, during a visit to an MST settlement in Paraná, while many families support the MST’s proposal, others want land rights and reject the MST’s position. Activists’ power to intervene in these regions will certainly be eroded if settlements cease to exist as public territories. Leaders also fear that land speculators will take advantage of the privatization of settlements and buy up large swaths of these areas, thus increasing the land concentration that led to the rise of the

movement in the first place. Even if the organized left is able to successfully elect a left-leaning president in 2018, more than two years of a well-orchestrated, frontal attack on the MST, through a diverse set of strategies, will undoubtedly serve to weaken the movement.

Yet, there are also reasons for some cautious optimism. First, the definitive end of political diplomacy in Brazil has distinct advantages, with the potential of generating a surge in MST-led occupations and protests. After all, the MST is still a movement born out of a repressive military dictatorship, when leaders succeeded in organizing massive land occupations, despite the dangers and uncertainty. Brazil, the “country of the future,” is quickly becoming a country of the past with a return to familiar political and economic strategies. It was precisely in the era of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), when there was an increase in violent repression against the movement, that the MST had its broadest support and won the most land redistribution. Thus, we would expect not a collapse of MST, but a return to some old (but not that old) repertoires of collective action and engagement with the state. Furthermore, there are currently tens of thousands of other families still occupying land across the country. Although it is very unlikely that the new government will offer land rights to these families, disbanding all of the camps would require vast political and military capacity, and would most likely result in more massive mobilizations. Thus, continuing to engage in land occupations and to set up occupied encampments could prove an effective strategy under this new administration.

As Peter Evans (2008) writes, “every system of domination generates its own distinctive set of opportunities for challenge and transformation” (p. 298). With the PT out of power, the MST no longer has to engage in a delicate political dance with the federal government; it can mobilize against the new administration and openly contest its legitimacy. The unveiling of the function of the capitalist state also creates opportunities for strategic alliances and solidarity. The PT’s rise to power fractured the Brazilian left; now, for the first time in more than two decades, the majority of these left groups are coming together with a common slogan “*Fora Temer!*” (Out With Temer!), and are coordinating their organizing efforts through two large popular fronts. These national developments have local consequences.

This agrarian reform youth is the second reason for optimism. Today’s MST is a movement of young people who grew up in settlements and camps, obtained education through the movement’s formal educational programs, and participated in MST activities and events. Through these experiences and the practice of direct, popular democracy within their schools and settlements, these youth have become “political subjects” (Paschel, 2016) who defend their right to participate in the political process. Although the movement has certainly not succeeded in reversing the trend of rural-to-urban migration, these numbers are deceiving, as even a couple thousand second-generation leaders who stay in the countryside could prove critical to the long-term relevance of the movement. Thus, the MST’s current potential for renewal is a consequence of its deliberate, thirty-year strategy of investing in local leadership development. Youth’s influence is also likely to be relevant for the broader population as well. The Sunday after Rousseff’s impeachment, in August 2016, two hundred thousand people took to the streets in São Paulo, in a protest organized by the two leftist coalitions. Youth were a big segment of these mobilizations. These protesters were primarily black youth who went to college through the university quota system, urban youth who are rising up against traditional politics, and high school students who are occupying their schools across Brazil. Even though the majority of youth in the street mobilizations were not affiliated with any organization, their participation represented the potential of building a new mass movement.

Third and finally, the MST is now engaging in this contentious political struggle with a new arsenal of material, ideological, and socio-political resources. Over the past three decades, the MST has helped redistribute land to hundreds of thousands of families, and the communities and relationships that have formed through this process cannot easily be destroyed, even if families are “regularized.” Furthermore, the MST’s force has always been defined by its ability to garner the moral and intellectual leadership of settlement families. MST leaders will continue to engage in this work—even if settlements are privatized—by helping to integrate families into alternative economic enterprises, inviting them to new educational programs, and organizing events that discuss and celebrate the

movement's accomplishments. Clearly, the MST has not succeeded in its goal of making small-scale agricultural production, agroecology, and collective work practices the hegemonic mode of production in the Brazilian countryside. During the thirteen years of PT rule there was a resurgence of agribusiness, an increase in the influence of international capital, and a return to a primary export model.¹¹ The MST's institutional gains in the sphere of agriculture were miniscule compared to the gains of agribusiness. Therefore, critics on the left are partially correct to characterize this period as a Gramscian "passive revolution," or the absorption of revolutionary movements into existing systems. Nonetheless, even the small number of successful experiments in alternative agricultural production on MST settlements, which have remained bastions of anti-capitalism, have a transformative effect for the movement. Federal support for these initiatives, ranging from subsidized loans to programs that support the purchasing of food from family farmers, was critical to the success of these economic experiments. This federal support is already beginning to end. However, the government does not have the power to abolish the already viable cooperatives on MST settlements, which are now part and parcel of the fabric of local economies. These cooperatives will continue to serve as important bases of mobilization, offering examples of economic alternatives to Brazilian citizens and serving as a source of financial support for the movement.

As João Pedro Stédile said in September 2015, power in Brazil is not the sole property of the presidential palace in Brasília. In many ways, the MST's thirty-year war of position within Brazilian civil society and in state institutions has been preparation for the current political moment. The MST leadership is embedded in a complex fabric of political relationships throughout the country, and has developed meaningful connections with thousands of state and institutional actors. The state-society relations that have been established at these subnational levels and within diverse Brazilian agencies—relationships that often supersede ideological and party divides—will continue, even under a right-leaning federal government.

The MST's educational struggle offers one of the best examples of why the movement's institutional gains cannot easily be reversed. Over thirty years, the MST has been able to win access to 2,000 schools with over 8,000 teachers attending to 250,000 students. State and municipal governments administer almost all of these schools, and many of these subnational governments allow the MST to participate in educational co-governance. While 2016 and 2017 marked the ousting of Rousseff and the passing of many of Temer's conservative economic proposals, these years also marked the opening of four new high schools on MST settlements in Ceará (*escolas do campo*, see Chapter 6). In addition, the MST leadership has helped to develop programs for adult literacy, primary and secondary schooling, high school, and bachelor's and graduate degrees with over 80 different educational institutions. Although government support was initially critical for funding these programs, many of the university professors who became committed activists through their involvement will continue to work with the MST, independently of the federal government. The MST-inspired baccalaureate program for training teachers to work in the countryside (Chapter 3) institutionalized in 40 federal universities, resulting in the hiring of hundreds of new faculty. In June 2016, a month after Rousseff stepped down from office, the MST organized a seminar on agroecology and education for science and math teachers in the south of Brazil, funded by the Federal University of the Southern Frontier.¹² Dozens of other university-supported seminars and events have continued to take place in 2017.

As some opportunities for participation are cut off, other possibilities for institutionalizing the MST's goals will undoubtedly open. New opportunities for institutional gains are likely to be in contexts where the movement's leadership has the strong support of its base, and where the capacity of the state itself is enhanced by activists' involvement in local governance. However, even in more closed and authoritarian contexts, MST leaders could continue making inroads *if* they engage in enough contentious protest that state concessions become a desirable solution to public unrest.

¹¹ Tendencies that began before the PT's rule (J. M. M. Pereira & Sauer, 2006; Sauer & Leite, 2012).

¹² This university itself was created in 2009 in response to the demands of social movements.

The MST's struggle has always moved forward under contradictory and conflictive relations with the Brazilian state. Activists began experimenting with alternative educational pedagogies in a period of movement ascendance and participatory experimentation across Brazil. Throughout the 1990s, the movement found countless allies and state configurations to institutionalize their educational ideas—partially because the mobilizations of the 1980s had transformed Brazilian society. Although conservative actors blocked the most radical reforms, many left-leaning actors also gained power within the state. The MST won some of its most important concessions in the 1990s, as a result of violent conflicts and in partnership with national and international allies. Lula's victory in 2002 shifted the terrain by creating more openings at the national level, but it did not ultimately change the MST's strategy of finding different access points within the state for promoting institutional change and social movement co-governance in different forms and varying levels of intensity across the country. The Brazilian participatory context produced the MST, but the MST also strategically used this participatory context to support the movement. Now, in the context of an anti-participatory and conservative federal government, MST leaders have to defend their previous gains through mobilizations and protests, find new institutional arrangements at subnational levels to support their political project, and perhaps most importantly, use the accumulated fruits of their thirty-year war of position to sustain the many movement activities that do not require a formal political-institutional expression. Now is the test: we are going to see the true strength and limits of the MST's "long march through the institutions." All eyes should be on Brazil, as the evolving state-society dynamics in this country will almost certainly influence the rest of Latin America.

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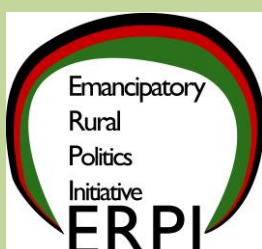
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