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Gaining Land and Gaining Ground? The Popular Agrarian reform by the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil

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Abstract

The Brazilian Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), one of the most important social movements in Latin America, known for its massive land occupations, recently launched a program to implement a new model of agrarian reform (AR), the Popular Agrarian Reform (PAR), which demands land distribution, but also requires a model of governance based on food sovereignty and agroecology. The launch of such re-conceptualized project departs from classic understandings of AR as a governance tool that solely redistributes land. It indicates a profound change in the character of agrarian movements' discourses/claims. In certain ways, MST's new discourse might converge with those of other actors, and yet its meanings and politics might portray a set of underlying conflicting interests. In the midst of this dynamics, one must ask: is AR still a necessary policy in Brazil? This question must engage with a contentious theme: the development of capitalism in the countryside and its consequences for the "peasantry" - the agrarian question (AQ). Its contemporary relevance is a matter of debate, and agrarian populism has gained traction in academic and popular discourse. MST's PAR, and agrarian movements' new claims generally, must be situated within these debates, as a response to processes of agrarian change. The aim of this qualitative case study was to map how MST understands the AQ in contemporary Brazil and the politics of its new claims and demands (PAR). Fieldwork was conducted in Southern Brazil in January-February/2015. Analysis indicates that PAR reflects the understanding of a new AQ by MST, a process of gradually assembling classic Marxist readings that have informed much of the movement's thinking before and newer agrarian populist positions. I argue that PAR, and the governance demands that it entails, was partly born due to a dilemma MST faces: frustration regarding possibilities of a classic AR; de-legitimization of previous land occupation claims; the loss of material/symbolic territory to agribusiness as well as the tension in keeping cohesion in MST territories. PAR must be understood as a strategy not only to conquer land, but keep it and gain ground.

Keywords: agrarian question; agrarian reform; agrarian change; rural development; peasant movements; agrarian social movements; rural politics; territorial disputes; social conflict; land struggle; land occupation; MST; Brazil; Paraná; social change; agroecology; thematic analysis

List of acronyms

AQ – agrarian question

AR – agrarian reform

FA - family agriculture

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization

FAP - Food Acquisition Programme (Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos – PAA)

FFNS - Florestan Fernandes National School (Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes – ENFF)

HSA - Health Surveillance Agency (Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária- ANVISA)

IBGE – Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística)

IMF - International Monetary Fund

LASA - Latin American School of Agroecology (Escola Latino-Americana de Agroecologia – ELAA)

MST – Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement)

NFSA - National Food Supply Agency (Companhia Nacional de Abastecimento – CONAB)

NICAR - National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária – INCRA)

NSFP National School Feeding Programme (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar – Pnae)

PAR – Popular Agrarian Reform

R&D – research and development

TDR – territorialization/de-territorialization/re-territorialization

Introduction

What is the place for an agrarian reform within the current development of Brazilian capitalism? Is there any room for it? [...] What is the suitable role for us now? (Rodrigues 2014a)

These are questions asked by a national leader of the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers' Movement¹ (MST). Born in 1984 in Southern Brazil, it is considered one of the most important, well-organized, effective and influential social movements in Brazil and Latin America (Wolford 2010; Fernandes 2009; Karriem 2008; Rosset & Martínez-Torres 2012; Domingues 2007; Petras 1998). It has been responsible for organizing the land struggle in Brazil, keeping the pressure on agrarian reform (AR) from the bottom, forcing governments to expropriate areas as well as influencing many other organizations (Fernandes 2010; Sampaio 2010; Caldeira 2008; Petras & Veltmeyer 2001). Estimates account for a membership of 2 million, with more than 500.000 families distributed in more than 700 municipalities (Welch 2006:199). MST's base is diverse, composed of people with peasant, landless rural worker and urban backgrounds (Vergara-Camus 2009:379)

The movement's aims are to fight for land and social change due to high levels of land concentration and social inequality in Brazil (MST n.d.). Land as a means to guarantee work and a dignified life has been part of MST's discourse since its origins (Vergara-Camus 2009:384). Occupying land has been MST's main tactics of struggle. From 2000 to 2013, MST was the movement that most occupied land in Brazil: 2.861 occupations, mobilizing 464.034 families (Dataluta 2014a:31). Some claim that "successful land occupations have a demonstration effect" (Petras & Veltmeyer 2001:99), and "[o]nly occupations accompanied by open conflict have persuaded the government to negotiate with agribusiness to cede some fraction of the fought-over territory" (Fernandes 2009:96). Yet some argue (Caldeira 2008) that land occupations have lost its centrality as a tactics.

MST had its heyday in the 1990s, the period they conquered more land. It was an intense period of land occupations by different movements (Medeiros 2007:1504). It was also in the 1990s that MST became one of the founding members of Via Campesina. In the 2000s, the movement started to discuss changes in the productive matrix, acknowledging problems with growing standard crops². The discussion touched upon the use of agrochemicals and the lack of support for settlements³. These and other concerns led to the understanding that settlements needed to become more than just officially conquered land: people needed access to good healthcare, education, quality of life. Over the years, MST has broadened its initial focus from a classic AR to other themes such as environmental sustainability (Petras & Veltmeyer 2001; Caldeira 2008). Agroecology, consequently, was officially incorporated as MST's new productive system in the 2000s. For MST, agroecology politically questions the mainstream agricultural model (Borsatto & Carmo 2013). However, these new contentions "have yet to prove as effective as land occupations" (Caldeira 2008:137).

After 30 years, MST finds itself in a moment of reflection on their capacity of struggle and future perspectives. In this context, MST launched their Agrarian Program in 2014 with proposals to implement their new strategy, the Popular Agrarian Reform⁴ (PAR). The word of order is to struggle through the development of an alternative model of AR, which demands land distribution, but also requires a model of governance based on food sovereignty and agroecology. Such re-conceptualized project departs from classic understandings of AR as a governance tool that solely redistributes land. In certain ways, MST's new discourse might converge with those of other actors, and yet its meanings

¹ In Brazilian Portuguese: "Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra"

² MST members refer to cash crops which are not produced according to agroecological principles as "convencional" - conventional, standard agriculture. In their view, the two existing options are "convencional" (standard) and agroecological (many times expressed as organic, since the terms organic and agroecological are employed interchangeably).

³ A settlement is an idle landholding that has been acquired by the State for the purposes of AR. The State usually acquires idle landholdings through financially-compensated land expropriations. A landholding is divided into individual plots for each AR beneficiary household. It becomes a settlement, a rural community where many families live and work the land.

⁴ In Brazilian Portuguese: "Reforma Agrária Popular".

and politics portray a set of underlying conflicting interests. In the midst of this dynamics, one must ask: is AR still a necessary policy in Brazil, the warranted, incontestable answer to the economic, social and political problems of the Brazilian countryside?

This question must engage with a fundamental, contentious debate: the question of the development of capitalism in rural areas, especially its consequences to the peasantry - the agrarian question (AQ). As formulated by Kautsky (1988: 12 in Akram-Lodhi & Kay 2010a: 179), it refers to “whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones”. The contemporary relevance of an AQ animates different stances on the topic, namely, those who argue that there are new AQs and that this debate could not be more relevant today (e.g. McMichael 2006, 1997; Akram-Lodhi & Kay 2010a/b; Carter 2010; Fernandes 2012, 2010, 2009; Delgado 2014, 2010). Other positions emphasize the lack of currency of the term or that the AQ, as a question of the development of capital in agriculture at a global scale, does not apply any longer, but rather, we see an AQ of “fragmented classes of labor” (e.g. Bernstein 2009; 2006; 2002). Underlying these views are positions more or less sympathetic to the value and suitability of a peasant agriculture and way of life in the 21st century. Agrarian populism seems to have gained traction in academic and popular discourse.

MST’s PAR, and agrarian movements’ new claims generally, must be situated within these debates, as a response to processes of agrarian change and in relation to the rise of the hegemony of agribusiness and the corporate food system in the last decades. PAR demands changes to the overall model of Brazilian development by opposing the international export-oriented agribusiness sector. If many petty small-scale/peasant farmers have been made redundant by processes of agrarian change as Akram-Lodhi & Kay (2010a) have suggested, then understanding their responses, or how “former peasants resist the logic and imperatives of their marginalization”, is key for “understanding the prospects for capitalist accumulation and anti-systemic movements on a world-scale” (ibid.:180). Investigating such projects can add to a better understanding of agrarian movements’ demands, rationale and the contemporary hold of agrarian populism globally. Thus the aim of this qualitative case study was to *map how MST understands the AQ in contemporary Brazil and the politics of its new claims and demands (PAR), with a focus on land occupations, settlements and agroecology*.

This article is based on empirical research, a qualitative case study conducted for a Master’s thesis defended in Lund University, Sweden, in 2015. The data collection methods were in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observations and document analysis (MST’s Agrarian Program document). Fieldwork was carried out in MST’s camps⁵ and settlements in Paraná, Southern Brazil, in January–February 2015. I lived in two MST camps and one settlement: Herdeiros da Luta de Porecatu and José Lutzenberger camps as well as the Contestado settlement. Fieldwork was also conducted during MST’s National Coordination Meeting in Guararema, Southeastern state of São Paulo. This event is MST’s main forum for debate, where more than 300 leaders from all over Brazil gather to discuss relevant issues. I was granted exclusive access to this event, usually off-bounds to non-MST members. The study’s participants are mostly, but not exclusively, national, regional and local camp and settlement leaders. Data was analyzed by using Braun & Clarke’s (2013; 2006) thematic analysis method. This method is epistemologically flexible and can be used within a wide range of theoretical perspectives.

Conceptual framework

The agrarian question(s)

The AQ as posed by the classical works of Marx, Kautsky and Lenin were capital-centric readings of processes of agrarian change (Bernstein 2006), a question of the emergence of capital in specific times and circumstances; a question of the constraints in the rural world, including property regimes, that

⁵ An MST camp is formed when MST carries out a land occupation: members enter the chosen land and set up tents. Camps vary in duration, and some last for more than a decade. When the State finally expropriates the occupied farm, the camp turns into a legal settlement.

would prevent or facilitate the emergence of the capital-labor relation, and hence, of agrarian capitalism. The AQ through these lenses is a history of how peasants⁶ fare under the development of capitalist social relations in agriculture; a history of class differentiation that allows the emergence of the capital-labor dichotomy and the process of capitalist accumulation in agriculture; a history of the emergence of wage-labor and the peasantry's dependence on product and labor markets (Akram-Lodhi & Kay 2010a). In Kautsky's thought, "there were no inevitable laws of agrarian development" (ibid.:187-8). There could be different arrangements in which agroindustrial capital would thrive, and such arrangements did not necessarily mean the end of the peasantry. Due to the specificities of the agricultural sector, the peasantry would perform tasks that the agroindustrial capital would not. Thus the existence of a peasant sector can be interesting from capital's perspective, but from the peasant's perspective, that meant working harder and having smaller returns in order to compete with agroindustry and survive.

Here it is paramount to mention the work of Chayanov, whose main ideas referred to family agriculture (FA) having its own logics different to that of capitalist farming with the former relying on family labor through more or less intense self-exploitation in order for the family to reproduce itself. Thus the basic objective of "peasant households is to meet the needs of (simple) reproduction while minimizing 'drudgery' (of labor)" (Bernstein 2009). Yet peasant agriculture, organized through cooperatives, was considered by Chayanov as a "technically superior" way of organizing agriculture. Chayanov also argued, in contrast to Lenin, that peasant differentiation was not due to class differentiation, but rather demographics. Both were committed to modernizing agriculture, admitting of machinery and agrochemicals to raise labor productivity (ibid.:59-61). Bernstein (ibid.) claims that Chayanov's ideas have been adopted by different types of neo-populist discourse today in order to propel small-farm development.

Today, the existence and relevance of an AQ animates contemporary debates in critical agrarian/peasant studies. Academic inquiry has expanded to themes beyond the classic concerns to encompass forms of capital's exploitative relationship towards natural resource appropriation (e.g. Fairbairn et al. 2014:656). Underlying the heated debate are positions more or less sympathetic towards a "peasant way" in the 21st century. Agrarian populism, or the "defense of a threatened (and idealised) way of life" of the "people of the land", is what Bernstein (2009:68-74) criticizes in such positions championed by McMichael (e.g. McMichael 1997; 2006). Polarization in the debate could not be clearer than in the exchanges between these two authors. McMichael (ibid.) defends the idea that there is a new AQ posed due to the advent of globalization and the structuring and consolidation of the corporate food regime. This new AQ has produced a "global agrarian resistance" whose basic trait is the "peasant way" for development (e.g. Moyo, Jha & Yeros 2013), the type of views Bernstein (2009:77) calls "populist formulations of a 'new agrarian question'⁷". For Bernstein (2006:454), a key problematic aspect in populist views is the lumping of peasants into one analytical category, a "the 'persistence' or survival of some essential pre-capitalist social category". What the author is criticizing

⁶ Vergara-Camus (2009:378-9) argues that the definition of the peasantry in studies of peasant rebellions cannot be based on the analytical distinction between peasants and rural wage-workers. In contemporary Latin America, this distinction seems inappropriate because rural populations engage in various forms of productive occupations and experience different class statuses in a more fluid manner, which seems to apply to the MST case. In turn, the most prominent Brazilian agrarian sociologist Martins (2000) works with the "peasantry" designation, but only so because the term got much currency in Brazil, and so using it becomes necessary to engage in the AQ debate. However, the author considers such term inappropriate: "[i]n the peasant of today there no longer subsists the peasant of yesterday, only as an ensemble of its overcomings" (ibid.:113).

⁷ Bernstein (2009:76) is especially critical of such "global agrarian resistance" and what romantic views do to research on social movements: "[c]elebrations of 'global agrarian resistance' and the transformational aspirations attached to it, lack any plausible formulation and analysis of how it could work as a political project /.../ Interestingly, the MST /.../ in Brazil is especially emblematic for both those who advocate land struggles as the cutting edge of semi-proletarian politics in the 'South' today (Moyo and Yeros, 2005) and those who aspire to transcend the capital-labour relation through 'revalorising rural cultural-ecology as a global good'. Both are frequently given to long quotes from MST documents in ways that elide that necessary distinction or distance between sympathy with the programmatic statements of the organisation and its leadership and the demands of analysis".

is essentialism; in the scholar's view, "nothing is gained, and much obscured, by characterizing contemporary small farmers as 'peasants'" (ibid.). What Bernstein sees is an AQ constituted by the fragmentation of classes of labor and its crisis of reproduction in globalized times (Bernstein 2009; 2006; 2002). McMichael (2015:196-200), in turn, affirms that it is "not about category purity" and that Bernstein's AQ of labor "surely underscores the depredations involved in the purported triumph of agrarian capital".

Akram-Lodhi & Kay (2010a; 2010b), upon identifying not one but seven contemporary AQs, conclude that the AQ has much relevance today in times of globalized neoliberalism. In their view, agriculture still has a role in capital accumulation in developing countries and so does "petty-commodity peasant farming". However, the authors caution that not many petty-commodity producers are able to have such role in capital accumulation at a national and global scale due to processes of marginalization and exclusion. Consequently, the authors argue that resistance to processes of exclusion by peasant farmers is brought to be central to the understanding of processes of capitalist accumulation.

What seems to be common to many views is that globalization has changed the rules of the game and so have neoliberal politics and economics. According to Vergara-Camus (2009), the tensions generated by the expansion of capitalism into rural areas and State-led modernization are key elements engendering processes of agrarian change and, consequently, uprisings both in Mexico and Brazil. It is of note, however, that the author does not see "the expansion of capitalist relations per se" in rural areas as a condition for the rise of contemporary land struggles in these countries, but instead it is "the [neoliberal] nature of the restructuring of agriculture" that has spurred the reactions (ibid.:368). Akram-Lodhi & Kay (2010b: 270-8) take the neoliberal restructuring of agriculture as a point of departure in their analysis and expose key elements to understand the 21st century AQ in the South.

The scholars (ibid.: 274-8) conceptualize a "neoliberal agricultural export bias" in developing countries, where domestic and export markets can be either articulated or disarticulated. I believe this is an important distinction for understanding some authors' proposition of a Brazilian AQ today. In simple terms, when the domestic and export markets are disarticulated, production for the home market is neglected and usually gives way to high-value production for international markets. In such countries, agriculture certainly contributes to rural accumulation, but this accumulation is concentrated in the export-oriented sector and does not get through to the home market. Such countries present high dependence on food imports. In contrast, countries such as Brazil, which have their domestic markets articulated to export markets, production for domestic consumption is in tandem with production for the export market; these are not necessarily at odds. Thus agriculture contributes to rural accumulation and this accumulation also happens to contribute to the home economy. Broadly, these analytical distinctions support the authors' argument that agriculture still matters for capital formation/accumulation in a global level. Above all, Akram-Lodhi & Kay (2010a; 2010b) provide a useful account of the AQ(s) as a framework to analyze processes of agrarian change, a framework that should be understood as context and time-bound, nuanced and that should capture the diversity of rural change processes in different parts of the developing world. This is a view I would argue is in line with that of Martin's (2000) in the Brazilian front.

The Brazilian agrarian question(s)

For Brazilian sociologist Martins (2000:98), "the AQ has its own temporality"⁸. An AQ must be understood as a product of a specific historical time. According to the author (ibid.:105-6), the process of agricultural modernization in the 1960s in Brazil, which provided incentives for urban enterprises to acquire land, meant the end of possibilities of a classic redistributive AR and facilitated the major means for capitalist accumulation: extracting rents. Therefore, in Brazil, an AQ is necessarily one connected to the structure of capitalist property relations in the countryside. Even more so when the nature of the large landholding has changed, turning it into a financial speculative tool in the economy. Consequently, the author sees an AQ of land as speculative store of value.

⁸ Own translation from the original in Brazilian Portuguese.

In Brazil, the debate on the actual existence of an AQ touches upon the hegemony of agribusiness as a productive force. Some positions highlight that agricultural modernization and the neoliberal restructuring of the agricultural sector have finally brought a “resolution” to the AQ. This stance stresses that AR is not necessary any longer due to these processes that have set in place a profitable, highly efficient system that generates much foreign exchange, the agribusiness. Another argument refers to the decrease in number of idle landholdings in Brazil. Many previously idle estates are now considered to be productive (Rosset & Martínez-Torres 2012), which has mainly happened in Southern Brazil (Carter 2010). Agribusiness would have turned the backwards, unproductive large landholding into a highly modernized sector. In turn, Delgado (2010) sees a new Brazilian AQ connected to the inherited neoliberal macroeconomic policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the 1980s. Brazil has not yet broken with this model of policy that guarantees the growth of the agribusiness sector, but does not benefit the whole economy. It also presents detrimental effects to the peasant/FA sector due to land price fluctuations, high rates of rural unemployment and capture of land rents. This context amounts to an obstacle to the development of peasant/FA and AR settlements (ibid.).

Martins (2000:114) interprets the AQ as a cyclic question, managed by the State apparatus that keeps it under control. Similar to Delgado’s (2014) view, it is the imbalance between a property regime that holds absolute rights to private property versus the social consequences of such regime that warrants an AQ. Driven off settlements due to a variety of reasons such as poor management and unsuitable technical support, people end up joining and rejoining the ranks of demand for AR: “a circularity of demand for new settlements”⁹. For the author (ibid.:125), the AQ is represented as a challenge that “ends up improperly looking like or being presented as a historical impasse that demands, for some, a revolution, when it actually demands a profound transformation of livelihoods of significant parts of the population, especially the one devoted to farming work”¹⁰.

Contemporary formulations also conceptualize the Brazilian AQ as a territorial question. Territory, according to Fernandes (2012:06), is not just a physical entity: territory is also the terrain of social relations and power disputes. Relations of conflict come to the fore because the agribusiness and the “peasantry” are striving for different projects regarding the patterns of use of territory. In the author’s view (2012, 2009, 2008a), there is a constant territorial dispute that corresponds to processes of territorialization, de-territorialization and re-territorialization (TDR) of capital and “peasantry”: “[t]he territorialization of capital means the de-territorialization of the peasantry and vice-versa”¹¹ (2008b:337). When capital appropriates “peasant territories”, it de-territorializes the “peasantry”. When the “peasantry” appropriates capital’s territories, either through occupations or other means, it de-territorializes capital and re-territorializes itself. Territorial disputes and TDR processes entail a state of *permanent tension*¹² (Fernandes 2012; 2008a). As Fernandes (2012:12) argues, agribusiness also controls “peasant territory” through the imposition of “farming production techniques and technologies”, other means that are non-material. The author foresees (2009:97-8) a future which will likely hold a “heated territorial dispute” as both peasants and agribusiness conquer more territory of their own in Brazil.

Competing views on agrarian reform in Brazil

No massive redistributive AR has taken place in Brazil so far. Carter (2010:49) states that AR in Brazil has been timid compared to other countries in Latin America. According to the author (2010), Brazil has seen a conservative, “palliative” AR, one that fears displeasing the elites, has not produced

⁹ Own translation from the original in Brazilian Portuguese.

¹⁰ Own translation from the original in Brazilian Portuguese. Here the author is making a clear allusion to MST as well, a movement Martins (2000) believe has an equivocated, linear reading of history as if the struggles of the present constituted a continuation of struggles from the past. For him, this reasoning is based on “an epistemology of accumulation” instead of an understanding that history is contradictory. Martins (ibid.: 110-6) is very critical of movements such as MST in this regard and how they “fabricate history in the dispute for legitimacies”, a “populist revisionism” of history.

¹¹ Own translation from the original in Spanish.

¹² Own translation from the original in Brazilian Portuguese.

structural changes and has not provided support for beneficiaries. In this model, elites do not necessarily lose much since State compensations for expropriations can be high. Fernandes (2009:97) states that AR in Brazil has somehow altered the agrarian structure and both agribusiness and the “peasantry” have acquired more land. Yet it has not changed the patterns of land concentration, what the author considers a paradox.

For some, democratizing the agrarian structure through AR is a tool to counteract social and economic inequality (e.g. Carter 2010; Sampaio 2010). According to this view, many could benefit from a broad reform, despite the majority of the population being predominantly urban¹³. An AR would create jobs in rural areas, reinvigorate the socioeconomic life of small towns and mitigate rural-urban migration. A key part of the argument for AR is also connected with notions of productivity: the efficiency of the agribusiness is brought into question due to its dependency on political support and large public subsidies in contrast to little public investment that is channeled towards FA. Proponents of a redistributive AR affirm that FA can be more productive in contrast to the advantages of scale that agribusiness enjoys, besides producing food for the domestic market. In turn, positions contrary to AR reinstate that settlements are nothing much of a failure. AR is seen as obsolete, an ideological construct, and might actually endanger Brazil’s international competitiveness in the global markets (Carter 2010: 68-70; Sampaio 2010).

Peasant responses: land occupations and agroecology

Occupations

Peasant social movements, including MST in Brazil, have been important protagonists in challenging the effects of AQs. Fernandes (2009) highlights that it is not only capital that has the power to destroy and recreate the “peasantry”; the “peasantry” also struggles by means of occupying land. This is a double-edged sword, though. As the “peasantry” tries to recreate itself through land occupations, it also reinserts itself into the very capitalist system that has promoted its destruction (Martins 1981 in Fernandes 2008b:336). Nevertheless, the dimension of land occupations as a means of access to land in Brazil cannot be overstated. For Fernandes (2009:94), AR in Brazil “only occurs alongside the organization of peasant movements, through land occupations”.

An MST occupation takes place when its members enter the land and set up tents, later forming a camp. Camps vary in duration, and some last for more than a decade¹⁴. When the State finally expropriates the occupied farm, the camp turns into a legal settlement. As important as occupations are to the territorialization and re-territorialization of “peasants” and access to land, Caldeira’s (2008) empirical research on MST in Rio de Janeiro has pointed to a slight change in MST’s politics of land occupations in favor of other forms of struggle. This would be a result of political measures from Cardoso’s neoliberal administration. Legal acts were passed by this government in 2001, which considerably limited the movement’s ability to conduct land occupations¹⁵. Caldeira (ibid.:147-8) concludes that “MST’s repertoires of contention are changing, as well as the movement’s demands and frames”.

Rosset & Martínez-Torres (2012) come to a similar conclusion upon studying the MST case. The authors argue that land occupations by MST were backed on moral claims on the social injustice of a highly unequal distribution of land, especially so when landholdings in the hands of the agrarian elite

¹³The current rate of urban population in Brazil corresponds to 85% of total population (UNDP n.d.).

¹⁴This is the case of the José Lutzenberger camp in Southeastern Paraná. The camp is 12 years old.

¹⁵The Cardoso administration realized that the high number of settlements it had had created during its AR program had unintended consequences. Instead of diminishing the demand for land as expected, it strengthened MST and increased the number of land occupations. The government, consequently, passed two Provisional Measures (in Brazilian Portuguese, *Medidas Provisórias*) (Fernandes 2008a:48-9; Branford 2010:411-4). One of the legal measures “prohibited the settlement of families that had participated in land occupations” previously; the other, “prevented the inspection of occupied lands for two years, when occupied once, and for four years, when occupied more than once” (Fernandes 2010:171). This inspection is a mandatory step in the process of creating settlements. In practice, these measures made it harder for movements to occupy land. The Provisional Measures have not been revoked until this day.

were idle. As already mentioned, with the strengthening of the agribusiness sector, much unproductive land has become productive, and “[a]s idle lands dry up, the landless are left only with the option of occupying the productive lands of agribusiness” (ibid.), forcing movements to reformulate their claims. One way of doing so is by opposing the socio-environmental degradation of agribusiness in contrast to a virtuous, agroecological alternative that produces healthy food for the domestic market and keeps people in the rural countryside (ibid.). According to Caldeira (2008:147), agribusiness corporations have become targets for the movement as well, and “[t]he link between multinationals, capital, large estates, and environment is then another issue that gradually has made its way into MST’s political discourse”. However, these new repertoires “have yet to prove as effective as land occupations” (ibid.:37).

Agroecology

For agrarian movements, the agroecological discourse offers the possibility of a critique of agribusiness environmental damage in contrast to an agroecological, peasant farming way (Rosset & Martínez-Torres 2012). Altieri & Toledo (2011) define agroecology as productive systems that are:

“...biodiverse, resilient, energetically efficient, socially just and comprise the basis of an energy, productive and food sovereignty strategy” (Altieri 1995, Gliessman 1998). “Agroecological initiatives aim at transforming industrial agriculture partly by transitioning the existing food systems away from fossil fuel-based production largely for agroexport crops and biofuels towards an alternative agricultural paradigm that encourages local/national food production by small and family farmers based on local innovation, resources and solar energy. This implies access of peasants to land, seeds, water, credit and local markets, partly through the creation of supportive economic policies, financial incentives, market opportunities and agroecological technologies” (Altieri & Toledo 2011:587-8).

According to the authors (2011), agroecological systems have its roots on “traditional” small-scale agriculture and should be understood as more than just alternative farming practices. Agroecological systems’ core characteristics are sustainability and resilience. The difference between capitalist industrial-scale agriculture and “agroecology-based peasant food systems” is summarized below:

Industrial food systems	Agroecological peasant food systems
Agroexport crop and biofuel production, thousands of food miles, major emissions of greenhouse gases	Local, regional and/or national food production, local production and consumption circuits
Focus on less than 20 livestock and crop species	More than 40 livestock species and thousands of edible plants
Large-scale monocultures	Small-scale diversified farming systems
High yielding varieties, hybrids and transgenic crops	1.9 million land races and local crop varieties
High petroleum dependence and agrochemical inputs	Local resources, ecosystem services provided by biodiversity
Fertilizers for crop nutrition (to feed the plants)	Plant- and animal-derived organic matter to feed the soil
Top down, technicist extension schemes, corporate controlled scientific research	<i>Campefino a Campefino</i> (farmer to farmer), local innovations, socially-oriented horizontal exchanges via social movements
Narrow technological knowledge of parts	Holistic knowledge of nature, cosmovision
Inserted in simplified, degraded natural matrix non-conducive to conservation of wild species	Inserted in complex nature’s matrix that provides ecological services to production systems (i.e. pollination, biological pest control, etc.)

Source: modified from Rosset et al. (2011) and ETC (2009).

Source: Altieri & Toledo (2011:592)

Altieri & Toledo (2011) optimistically claim there is an “agroecological revolution in Latin America” in the face of a generalized food crisis, centered on five areas: Brazil, Cuba, Central America, the Andean region and Mexico. In this revolution, agroecology is being constructed together with social movements. Among other reasons the authors enumerate for the adoption of agroecology by social movements, two seem to be relevant in MST’s case: “[a]groecology is socially activating as its diffusion requires constant farmers participation” and “[i]t promotes economically viable techniques /.../ avoiding dependence on external inputs” (ibid.:597-9). However, the scholars admit that there are major constraints to the scaling up of agroecology. One such constraint is the political economy of knowledge production in research & development (R&D) that supports the agroindustry whereas research on agroecology is neglected (ibid.:608).

The development of agroecological thinking and practice has been connected to resistance to agricultural modernization (Sevilla-Guzmán & Woodgate 2013). According to Rosset & Martínez-Torres (2012), agroecological farming has become a way for movements to organize spaces - acquired through land occupations or AR - as peasant territories. In doing so, agroecology can be a suitable productive system for movements to “strengthen their resource base and become more autonomous from input and credit markets, and thus indebtedness” (van der Ploeg 2010 in ibid.)¹⁶. Valadão & Moreira (2009) argue that this agricultural practice is seen by MST as a means for achieving (socialist) social justice rather than an end in itself. The authors (ibid.:2845) conclude that agroecology is configured as a strategy of resistance with different dimensions, aligned to a concern for deterring further environmental degradation, the promotion of decent living conditions in settlements and, most broadly, the provision of an alternative model of rural development. The resistance dimension refers to the struggle for settlers’¹⁷ autonomy in relation to agribusiness through the development of alternative practices in order to “improve productivity all the while minimizing environmental impacts”. Finally, it is important to stress that certain social movements’ concerns regarding environment and nature do not really subscribe to an enchanted view of “deep reverence to nature”, but rather to a “material interest in the environment as a source of conditions for subsistence, not due to a concern related to the rights of other species and future human generations, but, instead, a concern for the poor humans of today”¹⁸ (Martinez Alier 2014:34 in Rodrigues 2014b:199-200).

Local context and agrarian reform in Paraná and Brazil

Brazil presents some of the highest patterns of land concentration in the world (Carter 2010; Delgado 2010). According to the latest census by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics¹⁹ (IBGE), these patterns have barely changed since 1985. Large farms (>1000ha) represent around 1% of total units, but take up more than 43% of total farming area. In contrast, small farms (<10ha) amount to almost half of the total units and have less than 3% of total farming area. The same pattern can be seen in Paraná. Large farms (>1000ha) are fewer than 0.5%, but amass 19% of farming land, whereas small farms (<10ha) represent 44.5% of total units, but take up 5% of farming area (IBGE 2012; França et.al. 2009:82).

Paraná is a key farming area in the country, presenting a larger area covered by farming units than the national rate (IBGE 2012). Paraná is a state located in the South, where idle lands are supposedly drying up (Carter 2010:67), and the agribusiness is highly consolidated. In Paraná, MST has mobilized

¹⁶Rosset & Martínez-Torres (2012) work with van der Ploeg’s concept of re-peasantization and de-peasantization as analogous to Fernandes’ (2012, 2009, 2008a) TDR. However, I choose to limit myself to Fernandes’ TDR.

¹⁷Settlers are the beneficiaries of AR who live in the official settlements.

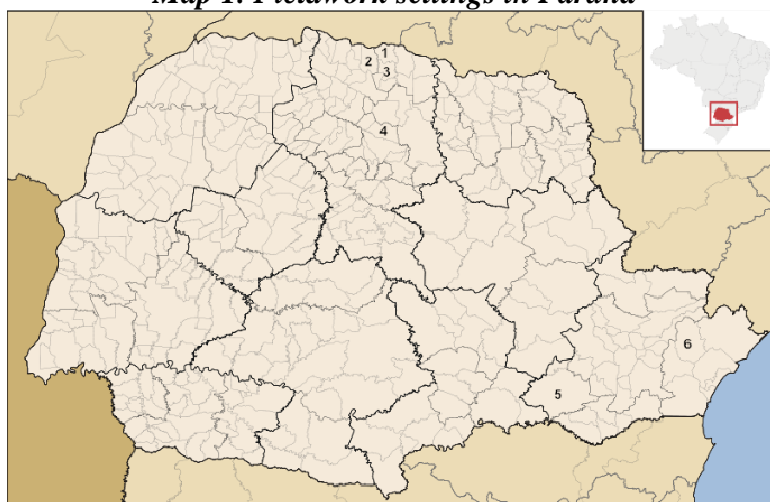
¹⁸Own translation from the original in Brazilian Portuguese.

¹⁹In Brazilian Portuguese: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). I am using the revised version of the census, published in 2012. The data refers to 2006 (reference period: January 1st - December 31st, 2006). IBGE makes use of the Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) **definition of farming unit**, which is mainly economic – the farming unit is one productive unit under single management. For instance, one large landholding might be leased into several plots to different producers, which would count as several farming units (different productive units). The other way round is also true: contiguous landholdings leased by one producer are considered one farming unit (IBGE 2012). Production in an area might or might not overlap with legal ownership of that area, given the numerous productive arrangements in place in the rural countryside.

70% of the total number of families in occupations from 2000 to 2013 (Dataluta 2014a:38). Paraná presents areas where MST's PAR is being implemented or, at least, discussed, and is home to recent MST occupations. Most of MST's efforts to disseminate the practice of agroecology have also taken place in this state, where educational centers were created to promote it (Borsatto & Carmo 2013:656-7).

Fieldwork settings in Northern Paraná are located among soy and sugarcane monocultures where land disputes are heated. This region presents high conflict potential with the Atalla family, who owns 40.000ha, mostly sugar cane monocultures. There are around 4000 landless families in this area (Gouvea 2014). Fieldwork settings are located on or around Atalla family's lands. Southeastern Paraná, where fieldwork was also conducted, is home to MST areas where there are more established agroecological practices, such as the Contestado settlement, where MST/Via Campesina's Latin American School of Agroecology (LASA)²⁰ is located and where families are going through an "agroecological transition" (Valadão 2009:2844). According to the IBGE census, all of these areas are dominated by crop production, with the exception of one fieldwork setting on the Southeastern coast, an area also focused on crops, but covered by forest.

Map 1. Fieldwork settings in Paraná



Source: Adapted from Abreu (2006)

Table 1. Fieldwork settings: Northern Paraná	
Porecatu (1)	Herdeiros da Luta de Porecatu Camp (<i>The Inheritors of the Porecatu Fight Camp</i>)
Centenário do Sul (2)	Dois de Dezembro Camp (<i>Second of December Camp</i>)
	Maria Lara Settlement
Florestópolis (3)	Manoel Jacinto Correia Camp
	Zilda Arns Camp
Arapongas (4)	Dorcelina Folador Settlement
Fieldwork settings: Southeastern Paraná	
Lapa (5)	Contestado Settlement
Antonina (6)	José Lutzenberger Camp

The Brazilian legal land tenure regime was officially established through the 1850 Land Tenure Law, which prohibited acquiring land through any means other than purchasing (Sampaio 2010:398-9). Later on, the 1964 Land Statute established the principle of social function of the land (Medeiros 2007:1503), enshrined in the new 1988 Constitution. Article 186 of the Constitution defines that rural property must meet four criteria simultaneously if it is to guarantee its social function (Delgado 2014):

²⁰ In Brazilian Portuguese: Escola Latino-Americana de Agroecologia (ELAA)

Table 2. The social function of the land: four simultaneous criteria
1) Rational and adequate use of the land
2) Adequate use of the available natural resources and environmental protection
3) Compliance with the provisions that regulate labor relations
4) Enterprise that favors the well-being of its owners and workers

Adapted from Delgado (2014: 37)

Only the first criterion has been regulated by a subsequent law, which defined specific productivity indicators based on an out-of-date 1975 census (ibid.). In theory, the consequence for not meeting the criteria is the mandatory, financially-compensated expropriation of idle lands by the State for the purposes of AR (Medeiros 2007:1504). Yet as a consequence of the outdated productivity indicators, few landholdings end up being classified as idle and, therefore, liable to expropriation (ibid.:1515). The 1964 Land Statute also stipulated that prices paid by the State for expropriated land should reflect the market value (Medeiros 2007:1503).

The federal authority responsible for AR implementation and land governance is the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform²¹ (NICAR). NICAR is responsible for the classification of landholdings as productive/idle and land expropriations (INCRA n.d.a). NICAR can acquire land for settlements via expropriations or direct purchase (INCRA n.d.b). A settlement is an idle landholding that has been acquired by NICAR for the purposes of AR. The landholding is divided into individual plots for each AR beneficiary household. It becomes a rural community where many families live and work the land. The family plot is not negotiable for 10 years until the beneficiaries become eligible to receive the legal title. Beneficiaries must pay for the land (INCRA n.d.c; Law 8629/93). From 1979 to 2013, 9.195 settlements have been created, settling a little more than one million families in Brazil. In Paraná, a total of 322 settlements were established from 1981 to 2013, and 20.043 families were settled (Dataluta 2014a:18; Dataluta 2014b:16). AR has slowed down in the last decade.

Generally, NICAR settlements are established in remote and poor areas, receive little State support and present “high levels of abandonment” (Carter & Carvalho 2010; Sauer 2006 in USAID 2011). According to Spavorek (2003 in Carter & Carvalho 2010), half the settlements present precarious living conditions. In turn, 1990s World Bank market-led AR has not been much successful either. It has been criticized due to its blindness to the unequal bargain power the landless have in negotiations to purchase land, besides the high level of debt accrument to farmers, no substantial improvement in their income levels, lack of resources to make investments, little technical assistance, isolation from markets, low quality of acquired land, among other problems (Sauer 2006 in USAID 2011:09; Medeiros 2007). Social movements such as MST have been vocal opponents of such initiatives.

Analysis: MST, the agrarian question and the Popular Agrarian Reform

A clear pattern across the data shows that PAR is under construction, and building alliances with society is a key element in the strategy. As a leader from Herdeiros camp explains²², the word “popular” means that society should endorse PAR as the best AR project, as it is also connected to the interests of the urban population. The understanding of the “popular” character is, nevertheless, not consistent across the participants. PAR can also be interpreted as a result of reflections on the isolation of settlements. As a Maria Lara settlement resident explains²³, PAR affects more than just the *campesino* or the landless, it integrates society.

Why have MST members felt the need to build alliances with society? Why has MST devised an alternative AR project? MST’s Agrarian Program from 2014, which contains the proposals to implement PAR, is based on the movement’s readings of the current socioeconomic and political context. The first part of the Agrarian Program document reflects MST’s analysis of the process of the development of capitalism in the countryside. Its emphasis lies on the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the consolidation of transnational agri-food corporations and the effects of this new conjuncture on Brazilian agriculture, land concentration, labor and income. Such interpretation is aligned to

²¹ In Brazilian Portuguese: Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA)

²² Interview with leader from Herdeiros de Porecatu camp, Northern Paraná.

²³ Interview with MST Paraná production sector member.

arguments' such as McMichael's (2006) on the existence of a new AQ due to globalization and the rise of the corporate food regime and Akram-Lodhi & Kay's (2010b) "neoliberal agricultural export bias". The second part of the document entails an account of different types of AR in different countries and contexts, reducing a historical period starting in the 19th century in Brazil to a single history of struggle for land that reaches the neoliberal era in agriculture, "a new model of capital's domination in the countryside, to meet the demands of the external market" (MST 2014:29). Upon contextualizing MST's stance, the program presents a series of demands to implement PAR, summarized below:

Table 3. MST Popular Agrarian Reform (PAR): key proposals and demands	
Theme	Key proposals and demands
Democratizing land	Democratize land access, use and property, natural resources and agricultural means of production for all <i>campesinos</i> ; expropriate all land that does not meet its social function, including land owned by foreign companies; establish a maximum size for rural landholdings; eliminate land rent and leasing; de-bureaucratize access to land by the camped landless.
Water	No private ownership of water sources. Demand from the State: conservation, drinking water supply in all rural communities and towns, adequate access and use by <i>campesinos</i>
Organizing production	Organize production/commercialization through all forms of cooperation; organize agroindustry; demand public policy for energy consumption/production for the rural population; " <i>prioritize the production of healthy foods for all the Brazilian people, guaranteeing the principle of food sovereignty, free from agrochemicals and transgenic seeds</i> " (MST 2014:42)
New productive matrix (agroecology)	Demand from the State: financing and research for agroecological production; organizing the production of agroecological farming inputs and " <i>to combat the production and commercialization of agrochemicals and transgenic seeds</i> " (ibid.:44). Fight intellectual property rights and patents over seeds, productive systems and others.
Agricultural policy	Demand from the State: price guarantees; anticipated purchase of all production; rural credit; rural insurance; technological assistance; access to the means of production by all <i>campesinos</i> ; restructuring of agricultural research towards agroecology and <i>campesino</i> agriculture
Education in rural areas	Meet the new educational demands to construct PAR. Demand from the State: policies for youth and adult literacy program; universal access to primary and secondary education through, among others, the construction and maintenance of schools in AR areas; promote access to professional education tailored to PAR; access to higher education
Social infra-structure in rural areas	Develop a program to build and renovate housing, with access to alternative energy, drinking water, sanitation, public health, transportation and roads
The nature of the State	Concretizing PAR is only possible with changes to the nature of the " <i>anti-democratic</i> " " <i>bourgeois State</i> ", a bureaucratic State that " <i>prevents public policy favorable to the working class</i> " (ibid.:48). PAR can only be carried out with a truly popular government.

Source: my own elaboration based on MST's Agrarian Program 2014

Upon careful analysis of the data, PAR seems to have come to existence due to a key realization by the movement - the *disenchantment with the possibility of a massive, redistributive AR in Brazil*, as articulated by many interviewees and also leaders at the National Coordination meeting in São Paulo. One leader explains²⁴ that MST needs to build PAR in order to accumulate strength in a moment when the classic AR is “blocked” in a context in which there is no will by the State or elites to conduct such reform as well as no “objective conditions” to advance towards a radical AR. I argue that such *disenchantment regarding the “classic AR”* and the effects of the *transformation of idle lands into productive areas* configure a *new understanding of the AQ by MST*. According to MST’s reading of reality, the new AQ is agribusiness hegemony in agriculture, a strong pattern across the data. This is a view somewhat aligned to Akram-Lodhi & Kay’s (2010b) and Vergara-Camus’ (2009) argument regarding the neoliberal restructuring of agriculture being an important element in contemporary processes of agrarian change and peasant responses to it. In the Brazilian case, the changed nature of large landholdings has meant the end of possibilities of a massive redistributive AR as argued by Martins (2000:114). As idle lands turn into productive areas (Carter 2010; Rosset & Martínez-Torres 2012), MST’s previous legitimizing claim for land occupations has been de-legitimized by agribusiness, which led the movement to reframe its claims, as explained by a resident at Herdeiros camp²⁵:

Our enemy is strong. From the 80s occupations until now, we had a struggle for unproductive land. And today, in Brazil, it is rare that you find unproductive land, so our dispute on land occupation is going to be direct with the agribusiness, which is the productive farms. That is why we have this role of building AR because the dispute with them is going to be arduous. /.../ And for us to organize the movement, it is given that it is about reclaiming the settlements, /.../ implementing PAR.

The same has happened in Paraná, according to an MST Paraná member²⁶, who states that the Northern area is a large, “green carpet” covered with only four or five different crops. Consequently, it has become more difficult for MST to uphold the contention that land is idle and does not meet its social function in comparison to some decades ago.

The understanding of a new AQ by MST seems to entail a process of gradually assembling classic Marxist readings that have informed much of the movement’s thinking before and newer agrarian populist positions. As much as the classic alliance of the peasantry and the urban working class is a weighty element in PAR, other equally important frames are shaping it too. These include the virtuous role of the peasantry in producing healthy food for the national market, the detrimental effects of the corporate food regime, among other agrarian populist views of the likes of McMichael (2006). This is exemplified by statements from a resident at Manoel Jacinto camp, who affirms that small producers are the ones who grows beans, corn and rice whereas large landholders grow soy and cane “for the world”, which is not for eating. Moreover, the participant explains that Brazil ends up solely investing in international companies that would rule the country. The poor is, then, left on a corner: “but we are not going to let that happen”²⁷. There is also a growing concern about capital’s natural resource appropriation as explained by a leader from José Lutzenberger camp²⁸, who says they feel there will be more tensions in areas where biodiversity is more concentrated, such as the region where the camp is located, amidst the rich and endangered Atlantic Forest. The leader also says that they used to struggle against the large landholder in the past, and now they do not know whom they are fighting any longer.

If the AQ is a dynamic, non-linear process (Akram-Lodhi & Kay 2010a/b) with its own “temporality” (Martins 2000), then I argue this is exactly what allows the constant construction and reconstruction of interpretations of AQs as the socioeconomic and political landscape changes. In the Herdeiros camp resident statement further above, regarding agribusiness productiveness and reclaiming the

²⁴ Interview with MST leader.

²⁵ Interview with MST Paraná leader.

²⁶ Interview with MST Paraná member.

²⁷ Interview with Manoel Jacinto camp resident.

²⁸ Interview with José Lutzenberger camp leader.

settlements, one can see a hint of how MST is reconstructing their discourse on a new AQ: a territorial question as in Fernandes (2012; 2009; 2008a). It is my contention that MST is constructing a “peasant territory/identity” discourse as a way of building their own territories out of conquered spaces in order to regain strength through PAR.

Constructing the response

The politics of occupations/camps

There is a key argument in order to understand the politics of occupations/camps in PAR. Now land occupations seem to assume a different character beyond than just a means of access to land. As Rosset & Martínez-Torres (2012) have argued, movements are reformulating their claims by opposing the socioenvironmental degradation of agribusiness. I argue that in MST’s case, it goes beyond mere opposing. It implies a different politics for choosing which lands to occupy. Occupations/camps have now a *denouncing character* in MST’s project, denouncing perceived agribusiness flaws, especially environmental degradation due to the overuse of agrochemicals, modern-day slavery and other problems, in the hopes that society would endorse the view that the agribusiness is not a suitable agricultural model. In Northern Paraná, this happens by denouncing the Atalla Group, which produces sugar and ethanol out of sugar cane and owns 40.000ha.

As explained by a camp leader²⁹, the Atalla Group does not obey the legislation; it has had 11.000ha of idle land expropriated by NICAR. The leader affirms that modern-day slavery has been found in Atalla’s lands with 228 workers being rescued by the Federal Police, and points out the environmental degradation caused by the sugar cane monocultures owned by the group. MST camps in this area are located on Atalla’s lands. The destruction of an Atalla sugar cane monoculture adjacent to Dois de Dezembro camp is part of this politics of denouncing agribusiness. One of my key informants, another camp leader, explains that the destruction of a monoculture is possibly “the most important moment in the whole occupation process”³⁰.

This is a tactics to advance over agribusiness territories literally and metaphorically, over agribusiness geographic and discursive terrains. It can be read as a manifestation of the state of permanent tension between “peasantry” and capital as in Fernandes (2012; 2008a). In this context, stressing the principle of the social function of the land³¹ becomes even more crucial for MST. Thus the Agrarian Programme (MST 2014:40) demands the immediate expropriation of all land that does not meet its social function regarding productivity as well as labor and environmental conditions as guaranteed by the Constitution.

The politics of settlements

Settlements are the main space where PAR is to be implemented, although occupations/camps also have a key role to play in this project. Implementing PAR in a settlement means organizing production and commercialization, generating income, and turning such spaces into peasant territories where people can enjoy access to health, culture, education and infrastructure. However, besides aiming at reorganizing settlements so that people can live with dignity, I argue that the politics of PAR in settlements has another strategic meaning for MST: counteracting the detrimental effects that the selling/leasing of plots has to the movement.

Settlers might sell their plots due to difficulties in securing their reproduction and/or due to the wish to increase their income, among other complex factors. As an MST Paraná member explains³², MST has a contention with NICAR on a very delicate matter: land titling. This participant explains that when NICAR provides the settlers with a legal title to the land 10 years after having being settled, the plot

²⁹ Interview with a camp leader in Northern Paraná.

³⁰ From fieldnotes.

³¹ See section “Local context and agrarian reform in Paraná and Brazil”.

³² Interview with an MST Paraná member.

becomes the settler's legal property, not the Federal Union's any longer³³. The participant affirms that people might think, generally, that this is a great victory, especially when the ones who received the title have spent so many years struggling in camps. However, this is only a victory for the movement "as long as this guy [any person] is fully aware that he is not going to hand it to the enemy again". However, it happens that settlers might face a rough time to secure their livelihoods and end up selling their plots: "we are going to lose, /.../ and lose it legally"³⁴.

In my view, this is an example of what Martins (2000) argued is the cyclic character of the Brazilian AQ: many join and rejoin the ranks that claim land, a constant cycle of demand for AR. The author believes, consequently, that this is a question of a "profound transformation" of rural livelihoods much more than a historical challenge that demands a revolution (ibid.:125). It seems MST has understood that. Although still committed to a socialist future, PAR is clearly focused on improving the livelihoods of its members. Fundamentally, MST understands that *when settlers sell or lease their plots to agribusiness, the movement loses strength and territory, power*, a process of de-territorialization as in Fernandes (2012; 2008a). The Agrarian Programme (MST 2014:41), consequently, forbids the selling and leasing of plots in AR settlements³⁵.

The territorial dispute in settlements gets to the individual plot level either when agribusiness tries to lease plots, or when settlers themselves make use of agribusiness' "symbolic territory" - agribusiness technology - inside their own plots. During a group interview, for instance, residents at Contestado settlement tell me that agribusiness has tried to lease land in order to grow onions and tobacco. They explain that companies offer a complete technological package and that settlers could produce under the company's terms, selling most of the produce (contract farming). Some plots are "parallel", as they call it: producers grow both standard and agroecological crops. Thus, there is a key tension between this individual character and the collective project of constructing a different kind of community in settlements, tension exacerbated by the constant agribusiness advancement on MST's territory. As Delgado (2010) has argued, such agribusiness hegemony, with its rentier mentality, reintroduces an AQ of the challenge to the development of peasant/FA and settlements, an interesting twist on classic readings of the AQ.

PAR implementation is a key challenge for MST now. The process of organizing production/commercialization is still not totally clear. Yet one thing is a pattern in the data: the expected strong role of the State in supporting it through public policy. Accessing FA government programs is surely very important for the families, which became evident when I attended the National Food Supply Agency (NFSA) meeting in the Contestado settlement³⁶. The meeting took place in order to inform small peasant/family agriculture producers on the new rules to access the Food Acquisition Programme (FAP), one of the most important State programs for the commercialization of peasant/FA produce. Production/commercialization in the Contestado settlement is organized through the Free Land Cooperative³⁷, open to MST and non-MST members. The cooperative has 266 members today and accesses FAP. This year, the cooperative expects to sell 863.000Kg through FAP only, with an expected total revenue of around R\$1.500.000³⁸. Organizing production/commercialization through

³³ Law 8629/93 regulates the AR process and states that the three legal instruments that grant AR beneficiaries the right to the land – Title Deed, Use Concession or Concession of Real Rights of Use are not negotiable for 10 years. This means that plots in settlements cannot be leased or sold for 10 years.

³⁴ Interview with same MST Paraná member.

³⁵ The Agrarian Programme reads: "All the AR beneficiary families will only receive titles to the concession of use rights, with the right to family inheritance, with joint titling including the woman, being forbidden the selling of parcels of AR land" (MST 2014:41).

³⁶ This meeting was organized by the NFSA (in Brazilian Portuguese, Companhia Nacional de Abastecimento - Conab) in the Contestado settlement in order to inform small peasant/FA producers, not only MST Paraná members, on the new rules to access FAP (in Brazilian Portuguese, Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos - PAA). FAP is a program that aims at supporting FA through the purchase of FA produce by the government without the need for public procurement. The produce is then sent to different social projects (Conab n.d.; IPC-IG & UNDP 2013). NFSA was the main actor responsible for the meeting, since it is the agency that operationalizes FAP.

³⁷ In Brazilian Portuguese: "Cooperativa Terra Livre".

³⁸ This amounts to a little more than US\$500.000, based on the rate on 27th April 2015.

the cooperative and accessing State programs are seen as a good opportunity to generate income, especially for the youth.

The politics of agroecology

One of the many aspects of the politics of agroecology in PAR is to keep people in the rural countryside, with an eye on the youth. In the Contestado settlement, around half the plots are certified³⁹ out of a total of 108, but not all of them are fully agroecological. The “parallel” plots can be seen as an experience, a way of convincing settlers that agroecological produce is viable, as explained by a cooperative member during a group interview. Around 38 plots still grow standard, which they affirm are also in the process of transition. According to cooperative members, the cooperative would stop accepting non-agroecological produce in 2015. As much as the agroecological revolution in Brazil (Altieri & Toledo 2011) is likely an exaggerated claim, there are surely fruitful initiatives. Yet an agroecological transition takes time and there is tension between this project and the immediate need of generating income.

Equally important, the politics of agroecology can be understood as a counter-politics by MST to deal with what they see as the livelihood but also environmental effects of an existing AQ. MST’s environmental discourse is projected through the discourse on agroecology and the degradation caused by agribusiness as can be noted in MST Paraná members’ statements below:

*Agroecology is about rescuing some human principles like understanding that nature, she has her cycles, that respecting them is necessary*⁴⁰.

*The role of agroecology, she... speaks to...organic production, one of agroecology’s aspects is to detoxify the Brazilian countryside. This thing about not using poison, intoxicating the environment, destroying it*⁴¹.

MST’s understanding of agroecology is still evolving, and it is not homogenously defined. Beyond a populist view of a peasant rationality connected to land and nature, the politics of agroecology in PAR has a strategic character: it becomes a new way of justifying and legitimizing the need to have an AR. As explained by another MST Paraná member, agroecology cannot be fully developed in vast tracts of land; i.e. monocultures. Even if it could, agroecology demands people to work the land, in contrast to the little demand for human labor in the highly mechanized agribusiness model. Thus this discursive tactics justifies the need for the end of monocultures - the end of large landholdings – and, therefore, the need for an AR:

*For us, the agribusiness is not suitable. Right, we are here proposing another way of organizing. And agroecology does not fit this agribusiness model because the agribusiness is viable in large land tracts as are the organics. And for agroecology you need to carry out land redistribution*⁴².

Connecting the dots

Implementing agroecology can be a challenge in both camps and settlements. As Altieri & Toledo (2011) have pointed out, however, agroecology demands farmers’ participation, which is interesting for MST to keep the movement’s cohesion, especially in settlements. Moreover, agroecology constitutes an important means by which to propel their territorial project in camps as well, as land occupations are members’ entry-door to PAR, agroecology and to the very movement. José Lutzenberger camp, on Paraná’s coast, is a case in point. According to my key informant, the

³⁹ The settlement is part of a network of participative, bottom-up agroecological certification conducted by groups of families themselves called Ecolife Agroecology Network (in Brazilian Portuguese, Rede Ecolife de Agroecologia). The network aggregates non-MST families as well. An account of the emergence of the network can be read in Wezel et.al. 2009.

⁴⁰ Interview with MST Paraná member.

⁴¹ Interview with a camp leader in Northern Paraná.

⁴² Interview with MST member.

production is fully agroecological. There is a small agroindustry unit to manufacture simple products such as fruit pulp. At a local level, PAR is about involving the surrounding “communities”, which is also a way of spreading the word about agroecology. This involvement happens, in the camp, through participation in an association - the Small Rural Producers Association for the Sustainability of the Atlantic Forest – Children of the Earth⁴³. Through selling the produce at the open market in town and working with non-MST members in the association, they can show the communities around the feasibility of working with agroecology.

Generating income is vital for families both in camps and settlements. Among other reasons, Altieri & Toledo (2011) believe that social movements adopt agroecology due to its economic viability and low reliance on external inputs, and MST seems to agree with that. As a member of MST/Via Campesina’s LASA explains⁴⁴, from an economic point of view, agroecology is welcome because it broadens the members’ “economic resistance”. However, agroecology is not a panacea to fix all troubles, and income from agroecological produce is not generated overnight. An agroecological transition takes time and, despite having a lower dependence on external inputs as claimed by Altieri & Toledo (ibid.:2011), people who have very few resources to kick-start such agroecological process need inputs such as seeds, seedlings and others. When pressed against the immediate need to generate income, especially in camps, people might choose to grow standard crops. As an MST Paraná member from the Production Sector⁴⁵ explains, many people in camps have no options – few resources. So in order to survive and guarantee some income at short and medium terms, camp residents in Northern Paraná grow standard crops. In such camps the main crops grown are corn, soy and cassava. The participant also explains that the way these crop cultures are structured in such difficult camp circumstances demands conventional management and also the use of agrochemicals.

Yet, as Rosset & Martínez-Torres (2012) have argued, agroecology can be a means for movements to organize spaces as peasant territories. In MST’s case, promoting agroecology as PAR’s productive system is a way the movement has found to struggle against the process of de-territorialization and also to re-territorialize itself, advancing onto agribusiness territories. Agroecology would be an alternative to reproducing the same agribusiness productive logic inside the settlements and, to some extent, camps, which MST believes is contradictory. This is the dimension of the politics of agroecology as a strategy of struggle, as explained by an MST leader:

*There is a whole process of struggle by the families, a local impact, the establishment of the settlement [...] after the creation of the settlement, the families start to reproduce [...] the same agribusiness production process. We can say, like, that we conduct a whole process of struggle, all this confrontation, in the economic, political and cultural spheres[...] then in the field of production, we end up being a vehicle for a project that is not ours, that is the agribusiness project*⁴⁶.

None of this means that carrying out occupations is less important now as a tactics of struggle. As an MST leader explains⁴⁷, “if our settlements, these territories, do not provide a political answer, you will not even have political conditions to carry out new occupations”. Thus PAR in settlements “is the possibility of creating political conditions for the new occupations to take place. This is how we have to see this aspect”.

Conclusions

It seems the *popular character* of MST’s AR project reflects the understanding of a new AQ by the movement: a process of connecting classic Marxist readings with agrarian populist positions. This would be due to a disenchantment regarding the feasibility of a classic redistributive AR and the

⁴³ In Brazilian Portuguese: “Associação de Pequenos Agricultores Rurais para a Sustentabilidade da Mata Atlântica – Filhos da Terra”.

⁴⁴ Interview with LASA member.

⁴⁵ Interview with MST Paraná member from the Production Sector.

⁴⁶ Interview with MST leader.

⁴⁷ Interview with MST leader.

effects of the “transformation” of idle lands into productive areas by agribusiness. Thus PAR can be understood within a power dispute in the terrain of ideas. I argue that PAR, and the governance demands that it entails, was partly born due to a dilemma MST faces, composed of:

- the disenchantment regarding possibilities of a classic AR
- the de-legitimization of previous land occupation claims due to the “transformation” of idle lands into productive areas by agribusiness
- MST’s de-territorialization in settlements, with the selling and leasing of plots and the reproduction of the same agribusiness rationality both in camps and settlements
- Settlements’ more individualized character in comparison to camps, a challenge to the movement’s cohesion on the ground

MST has been gradually constructing the “peasant territory/identity” discourse as a way of turning their conquered spaces into their territories, something to be achieved through PAR. In PAR, the politics of occupations assume a slightly new character, that of denouncing the flaws of the agribusiness model. This implies a new politics for choosing which lands to occupy. The politics of settlements, in turn, involves organizing production/commercialization, with the expectation that the State should have a strong role supporting it. The politics of settlements in PAR also has another strategic meaning: counteracting the selling/leasing of AR plots - loss of territory to agribusiness. The territorial dispute plays out inside the individual family plots when settlers make use of agribusiness productive rationality. Finally, agroecology entails a counter-politics by MST to deal with the livelihood and environmental effects of an AQ, legitimizing the need for an AR.

At the basic level, PAR is clearly a response that demands policies and governance systems to support “peasant”/family farmers and improve their living conditions in MST’s terms. Whether such demands stand the test of viability is something that warrants further investigation. However, beyond the consideration of viability and the calculations of political and economic rationality within the possibilities of today, it is mandatory to take heed of their demands as ones that count if the Brazilian State is to do something about these economically, politically and socially excluded groups. It cannot be said that the latest Brazilian governments have been ignoring “peasant”/FA; much support previously cut during the 1990s neoliberal administrations has found a way back to official budgets (Fernandes 2010:190). Yet evidence has suggested that settlements are precarious, and land concentration - wealth concentration, as land is store of value in Brazil - has not changed in the last 20 years. Even if one does not subscribe to moral arguments on the unfairness of such inequality and populist arguments on the value of a peasant way, there are economic arguments on the effects of inequality on growth, poverty reduction and liberal democracy (see Carter 2010:42-6). It is important to acknowledge that the rise of positions such as MST’s is natural when high levels of socioeconomic inequality and marginalization persist.

MST’s earlier Marxist views on how to organize agriculture in settlements were favorable to large-scale, mechanized agriculture with agrochemical use (Borsatto & Carmo 2013), which points to the fact that MST did not dismiss this kind of agriculture as inherently “anti-peasant” or environmentally damaging in its old days. As time passed, other understandings and claims have been constructed, just as agribusiness’ economic and political hegemony has also been. MST is a pragmatic, sharp, seasoned movement that understands its own external and internal challenges and adapts to them. I believe MST understands the spirit of our times in agrarian matters - “celebrations of agrarian resistance” carried out by essentialized “people of the land” - and adopts this discourse due to its potential to deal with its external and internal challenges. It seems such adoption is useful in dealing with external challenges – the unmatched battle against agribusiness hegemony – because it provides a more contemporary, gripping discourse on rural people’s destitution. When speaking of rural marginalization has no traction in mainstream circles in Brazil in the face of an agribusiness sector that is considered productive and profitable, adopting a discourse that brings back bucolic times of plentiful is an interesting resort, dichotomizing agribusiness and “peasants”, *capital and the other* (see Bernstein 2014). Such discourse can also be interesting in dealing with internal challenges the movement faces, helping to keep cohesion and an active membership.

This is, of course, not to deny that many members surely live a “peasant life” with its values and norms. This is also not to deny the importance of “peasant” cultural difference through a reductionist or functional argument. It is the other way round, so that issues of inequality and marginalization are not reduced to only a question of politics of culture and identity. A complex view of such questions is of necessity, and romanticizing peasant movements is not a productive way to understand agrarian movements’ rationale and demands. In sum, MST’s PAR is born as a strategy for the movement to regain strength in times of agribusiness hegemony, a strategy to conquer land, keep it and gain ground.

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