

Liberation Theology in the 21st Century: The Catholic Church, the CPT, and Rural Movements in Southern Pará

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Abstract

This study explores the present-day manifestation of liberation theology in the south of Pará, Brazil. Liberation theology has been widely recognized as an important development in theology and Latin American history that helped spark social movements across South and Central America in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. In the Brazilian Amazon, progressive Church workers (mainly Catholic) have been historically aligned with movements to protect and regain land rights for poor rural workers. Because these movements and organizations are the primary defenders of human rights in this part of Brazil, researching the changing role of religion in their work is important to understand how marginalized people can most effectively organize for social justice. Using a combination primarily of semi-structured interviews and secondary-source research, this study attempts to answer the question: How have changes in the Catholic Church influenced its use of liberation theology in working with rural movements in the south of Pará? Analysis of results reveals that while the Church certainly no longer maintains the broad commitment to poor people and social justice that it had in the 1970s and 80s, the practice of liberation theology continues by way of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission) and progressive Church leaders who remain in the area. However, the loss of full-scale hierarchical support of the Church has decreased the overall capacity of the CPT to support rural movements in reaching their goals and organizing across a broad base of people.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa explora a manifestação presente da teologia da libertação no sul do Pará. A teologia da libertação é considerada um desenvolvimento importante na teologia geral e na história da América Latina, e foi uma inspiração para os movimentos sociais na toda da América do Sul e América Central nas décadas 1960, 70, e 80. Na região da Amazônia, líderes progressistas da igreja católica trabalhavam com movimentos de proteção e realização dos direitos da terra para o povo rural. Esses movimentos e organizações são os defensores maiores dos direitos humanos nessa parte do Brasil, e por causa disso, pesquisa sobre esse tópico é importante para entender como o povo marginalizado pode organizar eficazmente pra justiça social. Com o uso de entrevistas semi-estruturas e coleta de dados secundários, a pesquisa tenta a responder à questão: Como as mudanças da igreja católica influenciaram o uso da teologia da libertação no trabalho com movimentos rurais no sul do Pará? A análise dos resultados revela que, embora a igreja não tenha mais o compromisso maior que tinha nas décadas 1970 e 80 dirigido ao povo e à justiça social, a prática da teologia da libertação continua pelo trabalho da CPT e das pessoas progressistas da igreja que ainda estão nessa região. Porém, a falta de apoio completo da hierarquia eclesial já diminuiu a capacidade geral da CPT para apoiar os movimentos na busca de suas metas e na organização de uma base do povo.

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1. Introduction: Liberation Theology, the Catholic Church, and Land Reform in Brazil

Liberation theology, defined by one writer as “an interpretation of Christian faith out of the experience of the poor,” has been widely recognized as an important development in theology and Latin American history that helped spark social movements across South and Central America in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (Berryman 4). Faced with the reality of growing economic injustice and the spread of revolutionary movements and ideas throughout Latin America, Church officials began to think of social action as one of the commands of Christ, not just the work of radical leftists. Many writers and theologians also began to use the term “preferential option for the poor” to describe this duty. By saying that the Church was “preferential” towards the poor, these leaders suggested that support for the lives of the poor was not just a part of Church work, but should be their primary area of focus and take precedence over support for the wealthy and elites, with whom the Church had historically been aligned. Although the precise manifestation of this understanding differed according to country and locale, the late 1960s saw a major growth in priests and Church leaders refocusing on and going to the poor (Berryman).

The breadth of Catholic faith across Brazil’s population combined with the nation’s historically extreme wealth gap made Brazil a fertile country for the theory and practice of liberation theology. Brazil came under the rule of a U.S.-supported military government in 1964, and amongst other measures to suppress dissent, protect national security, and support large-scale international investment and development in Brazil’s economy was a strict regulation on people’s organizations and frequently violent punishment for groups or entities that gave support to the poor. But because of the Church’s historical connection to Brazil’s government and its respect amongst national elites, priests and Church organizations had some leeway; until the end of Brazil’s military government in 1985, Church organizations were the only groups legally able to work with and organize the poor (Wright and Wolford 2003). The Catholic Church was thus able to play a crucial role in supporting the first social movements that developed as the military government began its period of *abertura* (opening) in the late 1970s and early 80s. Progressive Church leaders’ goals of increasing people’s critical and political awareness aligned with the practical goals of movements geared toward gaining land access and rights for Brazil’s rural poor.

The primary organization defending human rights and working with the poor at this time was the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), or Pastoral Land Commission. The CPT was founded in 1975 after a resolution at the Assembly of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) that recognized the violent repression against workers and Church leaders that many bishops and priests had seen in their parishes and declared a need to articulate the Church’s response by way of an official organization (CPT 1997). The CPT was thus Catholically-affiliated and designed specifically to give assistance to rural peasants. Although it eventually spread across all of Brazil, the CPT started and was strongest in the Amazon. Apart from the violent conflicts between small-scale, poor farmers working the land for subsistence (*posseiros*) and large,

wealthy landholders (fazendeiros) that characterized much of the Brazilian countryside, the Amazon was also the main site of the government's attempts at economic development. The opening of the Trans-Amazon Highway in 1968 and the sale of large tracts of land to national and international companies was a recipe for even more conflict when combined with colonization projects, which drew landless poor from other parts of Brazil to the Amazon with promises of land and prosperity only to greet them with an unfamiliar and inhospitable landscape that hosted few of the government institutions and economic support that migrants had expected (Wright and Wolford 2003). Church leaders in this area continually denounced assassinations of rural workers and other human rights violations (Mainwaring 1986), but the CPT was designed to be a more active source of support.

The organizations the CPT has traditionally worked with are dedicated to gaining and defending land rights for the rural poor. Popular response to Brazil's historically unbalanced distribution of land has taken a variety of forms. These range from the MST (Landless Worker's Movement), a politically sophisticated national organization that works for land reclamation and reform, to rural workers' unions (sindicatos) and local groups that organize and provide technical assistance to small farmers and producers, to individuals who carry out similar work less formally and strategically. In general, all of these entities are united by a basic method of occupying land, calling for its redistribution with the argument that it is not meeting its lawfully required "social function," and tying this land work to broader campaigns for human rights and government resources that the rural poor historically have not received. The term "luta pela terra"—fight for the land—is used amongst many groups to describe their work in general. The CPT's name indicates its goal to care for and preside over the land in a manner that coincides with the Bible's demands, and as such, it has provided these organizations with varied forms of information, guidance, and legal support in the luta pela terra.

The CPT and other progressive Catholic leaders who evolved alongside liberation theology decades ago are still present and active in Brazil today, and very much so in the Amazon. Liberation theology itself, however, has lost much of its hierarchical support from the Church since the 1980s, with the succession of new popes and accompanying changes in the Vatican's policies on Biblical interpretation. Conservative bishops who criticized liberation theology on a number of accounts—that it confuses politics with religion, for instance, or that it masks Marxist ideology—had always maintained some control in Church governance. With the accession of John Paul II, the conservative backlash against the Church's progressive sway solidified. Though he vacillated between speaking out against injustice and condemning progressive Church leaders, his reign saw a general decline in hierarchical support for liberation theology. There are also a variety of different churches making their way into Brazil's city and countryside today, many of which support more conservative views about private property, faith in God, and the nature of sin (Wright and Wolford 2003).

The nature of the "luta pela terra" has also changed during the past few decades, as movements have consolidated and gained ground both literally and in the Brazilian psyche. In the state of Pará alone, there are

over 520 settlements of land occupied and reclaimed by small posseiros (Wandenberg 2007). MST work and happenings in the general landless movement appear frequently in the Brazilian news, and though coverage is almost always negative, land reform and its proponents receive a significant amount of attention in the media and the government. The fight is by no means over, but today it involves facing new kinds of threats and taking on challenges beyond the realm of land possession alone.

Both movement leaders and Church members agree that the Catholic Church and organizations affiliated with it helped give the first impetus to these serious and effective land justice movements in the 1970s and 80s; what remains unclear is the nature of the role today. Because these movements and organizations are the primary defenders of human rights in this part of Brazil, researching the changing role of religion in their work is important to understand how marginalized people can most effectively organize for social justice. Liberation theology was the driving force beyond Church support, and as such is a relevant part of the story of how oppressed these movements can succeed. But given its loss of hierarchical support from the Church, is it a relevant part of the history, or the story today? What is the significance of religion in the fight today—of religion, and of those who organize in its name?

2. Research Question and Objectives

This study seeks to understand how the Catholic Church has changed since the 1980s, and how this has influenced their use of liberation theology in work with rural movements in the south of Pará. It focuses on the past and current work of the CPT, the arm of the Church geared specifically towards faith-based movement support, as well as the concurrent changes and present-day realities of leaders of Church and the movements themselves.

Specifically, this study explores the following questions:

- What was the relationship of Church figures with movements in the past, and how did they use liberation theology in this relationship?
- What is the Church's relationship with movements today, and how do they use liberation theology?
- What is the CPT's relationship with movements today, and how do they use liberation theology?
- If changes have occurred in these relationships, why did the changes happen?
- What is the significance of faith and religion in the work done by the CPT today?
- What is the significance of faith and religion in the work done by the movements?
- If there have been changes in Church work, what are the effects of these changes on the CPT's work?
- What are the effects of Church changes on the movements in this area?

This study is geared toward expanding our understanding of social movements and religion through the lens of these organizations and this part of Brazil. It seeks to understand how the popular Catholic Church, as

represented both by progressive Church leaders and by the CPT, has evolved its understanding of Church duty and how this has been manifested in its work with social movements. The general goal of asking these questions, consequently, is to explore what it means to talk about liberation theology in the 21st century, given liberation theology's historical significance and the changes that have occurred in relevant institutions since the era it began. Specifically, the questions above are designed to procure the following information and understanding:

- The state of the Church during its most progressive era
- The form and existence of that progressivism today
- The past work of the CPT as compared to its work today
- Whether or not religious faith maintains a role for the rural movements today similar to what it had in the early days of liberation theology
- Why relations between Church forces and social movements have changed, if they have changed
- The consequent effect of this changing milieu on the work and success of rural movements

For the purposes of this study, the term “liberation theology” is understood as having a three-part significance. First, it is a theory of the Church's need to align its work with the fate of the poor. Second, it is an attempt by Church leaders and Church-affiliated agents to practice that theory by actively participating in the campaigns for social justice coordinated by people's organizations. Third, it has a historical connotation of having been not just a development in theology, but a force in inciting revolutionary movements in Latin America during the second half of the 20th century.

This third significance is also the basis for choosing the research topic. In the Brazilian Amazon as in the world at large, social injustices remain rampant and appalling, even as scores of committed and compassionate organizers develop new ways of confronting this injustice. The onslaught of globalization and the overwhelming power of international corporate elites in determining the fates of millions of people create an increasingly difficult environment in which to fight for land, economic equality, and human rights. Given that liberation theology played an important role in these fights during the second half of the 20th century, it is important to understand what its power can be today. We are in need of any tools we can find to support movements for social justice, because the lives of human beings are at stake. Religiously based organizing could be one of these tools, and research about religious forces in progressive contexts is consequently important to shape our understanding of how the world can most effectively be made a better place.

This introduction is followed by an explanation of the methodology and research tools used for this study, a deeper exploration of relevant background topics, a presentation of primary themes from the research results, an analysis of these results, and finally, a conclusion that discusses what research might come next in exploring this topic.

3. Methodology and Research Tools

This is an exploratory study carried out primarily in the city of Marabá in the state of Pará in northern Brazil. Marabá was chosen for several reasons. About 500km (310 miles) south of Pará's capital Belém at the mouth of the Amazon River, it is located in the heart of the Amazon region where so many land conflicts have taken place in the past. As a result, it is the location of one of the main CPT offices in Pará. The CPT leaders there work closely with members and leaders of local rural workers' unions and other groups based in the developing rural zone. Their office also served as a library resource for books and documents on the CPT and its history, which would not have been available in Belém (the SIT base from which the research project was planned). Furthermore, I had previous contact with the CPT leaders there and with Marabá in general by way of a group SIT visit to the city in October 2007. Marabá thus provided an ideal combination of reasonable accessibility from Belém, relevant organizations and individuals, and presence in a historically significant region. Part of the study also took place in Rondón do Pará, a small city northeast of Marabá and the location of a Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais (STR, or rural workers' union) that the CPT works most closely with. In Rondón, I attended a weekend-long meeting between the CPT and the STR.

The primary research tool used in this study was semi-structured interviewing. The Appendix includes a list of the basic interview questions used, which supplemented regularly by questions shaped by the specifics of the interview. The study also used observation (at the meeting of the CPT and the STR in Rondón do Pará) and secondary-source research into the history of the CPT, of the Catholic Church in Brazil, and of liberation theology in general. Semi-structured interviews were chosen with the assumption that only by talking to people who have been involved in this changing fight would it be clear what purposes and ideologies were in mind when key actors used different methods for action in the past and today. Although much of the factual information about CPT history, for example, was available and was researched in relevant books and secondary sources, part of the goal of this research process was to get the perspective of those directly involved with the activism in the south of Pará, and to understand which elements of the text and theory really are meaningful in the field. Interviews were consequently the preferred tool for research. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese. The secondary-source research helped flesh out the information gathered in the interviewing process, and contextualized the specifics of the Marabá region into the histories of relevant institutions and ideologies. This research included a mix of Portuguese and English sources; most sources in Portuguese were those related directly to the CPT and its history. Observations at the meeting between the CPT and the STR helped shape an understanding of the relationship and interactions between people's organizations and the CPT.

The interviewing subjects were the 4 primary staff of the CPT in Marabá (three male and one female), the president of the STR in Rondón (female), one of the primary staff members of the MST in Marabá (female), a progressive priest and nun, both working in Marabá, and a former priest who left the Church many

years ago and now helps run a cooperative organization, Copserviços, providing technical assistance to farmers in the region of Marabá. Copserviços, while not religiously affiliated, holds many of the same practical goals as the CPT in terms of helping small farmers and agricultural workers maintain a productive and autonomous lifestyle. These individuals were chosen on the basis of their ability to explain the past and present ideologies, work, and strategic goals of the entities they represent. In the case of the STR and MST leaders and the progressive Church workers, I was connected to them by way of the CPT. CPT leaders were able to explain what methods they have used in supporting landless movements in the past and today, and talking to leaders of these movements revealed not only how they have changed, but also their perspective on religious relevance today. Finally, it was important to get the perspective of current Church leaders, to understand how those who maintain progressive ideas today understand their mission and context within the current milieu. The staff member from Copserviços, given his past as a member of the Church and his longtime experience in Marabá, was able to give perspective on changes in the Church as well as development in the Marabá region in general.

The study thus used primary data collection in the form of interviews and observations, and secondary data collection through the books, pamphlets, and documents available in the CPT office and the SIT library. Most data collected from secondary sources can be found in the Introduction and Extended Background sections of this paper, whereas the primary data is presented in the Results section.

As this is an exploratory study geared more toward understanding organizer perspectives on social movements rather than on quantitatively evaluating the work of such movements, the results cannot be seen as a final judgment or statement about the movements they discuss. Rather, they show a different kind of truth—the state of social justice activism in this region as seen by some of those people most directly involved with it.

4. Extended Background Information

The historical interconnections between the Catholic Church, the CPT, liberation theology, and agrarian reform movements in Brazil have already been described above. This section gives further attention these relationships, and defines important ideas that informed and were used in the research process.

- **The progressive Catholic Church and the development of liberation theology**

Liberation theology's inception in the Catholic Church can be traced to two international events—the Second Vatican Council, held in Rome from 1962-65, and the meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) in Medellín, Colómbia, in 1968. At these events, and in the published documents that preceded and followed them, bishops from across Latin America discussed the poverty and repression they saw in their parishes and their growing sense that the Church had a duty to respond do socioeconomic injustice. This change in attitude about the nature of Church duty led many priests and Church workers to

spend more time in poor communities rather than in the comfort of elite spaces where they had traditionally worked. Indeed, Berryman describes liberation theology as primarily a “pastoral shift” involving “significant numbers of Church people...[going] to the poor and [engaging] them in a reinterpretation of their own religious tradition in a way that is more biblically based and gives them a transformative rather than a fatalistic stance toward the world” (42).

Involved in this process of “going to the poor” was the creation of ecclesial base communities, or Comundiades Eclesias de Base (CEBs). CEBs were one of the first methods of putting liberation theology into practice used by priests and lay leaders, and were designed to be a more informal space where people could talk about their own lives in relation to Biblical texts. Although the birth of CEBs cannot be precisely dated, rural as well as urban priests began sponsoring them in the early 1960s, and “by the end of the 1960s the base-community model had gained wide acceptance” throughout Latin America (Berryman 67). Originally the CEBs did not have a political goal, but were based in a Church desire to revive Catholicism in the countrysides and other places where faith had seemingly been lost and where the Church’s main methods of spiritual outreach, usually geared towards the wealthier classes, did not resonate. Yet as more priests and lay leaders began to deepen their commitment to the poor, CEBs became sites where people were encouraged to think about their lives and sufferings in terms of the Bible’s image of a just society (Berryman). Furthermore, simply by engaging significantly with large populations of the poor, support for and creation of CEBs represented a major development in both the Brazilian government and Church, both of which had historically avoided creating autonomous spaces in which the masses could meet and discuss their lives (Mainwaring 1986).

Despite the apparent widespread practice of and support for liberation theology during this era, many officials in the Catholic hierarchy maintained a tenuous or neutral stance on the subject. Theologians were at times accused of Marxist or overly political readings of Biblical texts. As early as the 1978 CELAM conference in Puebla, Mexico, documents denouncing liberation theology were making their way into official Church publications. Especially starting with the papacy of John Paul II, critics of liberation theology began to have more power in the Church’s direction overall, and the Pope himself supported measures to limit progressive measures in the Church. In one case of targeted punishment for outspoken progressive priests, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger denounced Leonardo Boff and forbade him from writing or teaching until further notice from the Vatican. Boff was a Brazilian priest who was widely respected for his writings on liberation theology, but he had also criticized many aspects of the Church itself in those same writings (Berryman 1987). Ratzinger—currently Pope Benedict XVI—was later quoted as calling liberation theology “a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church” (Rohter 2005). In his analysis of the development and decline of popular Brazilian Church during the second half of the 20th century, Mainwaring emphasizes especially the importance of hierarchical support in allowing progressives to make their voices heard and

publicize their views (1986). The removal of hierarchical support, in turn, seems to have played an important role in weakening progressives' attempts to support social justice movements in Brazil.

- **The CPT and agrarian reform movements**

As described above, the CPT was created in 1975 to be a Church-affiliated organization dedicated to the support of rural worker livelihood and land rights for the poor. Although they based their work on the conviction that rural movements should be autonomous and run by representatives of the rural community, the CPT attempted to serve these movements in whatever way possible, helping to incite and animate organization of workers and providing technical support and assistance. Sometimes they helped with mediating and communicating between rural groups and government officials, as well as with lawyers, sociologists, and other people whose work was relevant to the fight for land (Pereira 2007). Writing specifically about the CPT's work during the 1980s with the first organizers of the MST, Wright and Wolford describe the CPT as:

“...a mixture of Catholic lay people, priests, nuns and monks, [who] offered assistance to the landless and other poor people's organizations in innumerable creative ways, ranging from taking surveys of what people needed, to providing advice in nutrition and agriculture, to helping build schoolhouses and clinics. One of their most important contributions was their innovative and nonbureaucratic spirit... This new connectedness and visibility would influence the government calculus in trying to deal with the settlers” (59).

More importantly, the creators of the CPT understood its inception as the start of “a process of deepening the fate of the Church with that of the people disinherited of land, revitalizing the mission of the Church” to focus it on the lives of the poor (CPT 35). With their ideology of social justice and their varied methods of actively supporting the rights of the poor, the CPT put the theory of liberation theology into practice. Born out of the Catholic Church's need to not only denounce injustice but organize against it, the CPT took liberation theology beyond the borders of strictly Church work and made it a tool in reworking the powers at play in the Amazon and greater Brazil.

The significance of the work of the CPT is easier to understand given a context of Brazil's history of land distribution and reform. In the first decades of Portuguese colonization in the 1500s, Brazil was “divided into 14 sections” and handed out to military captains, who were left to govern and use the land as they saw fit (Alston 33). Although this particular system only lasted 16 years and was eventually considered unproductive, it initiated a pattern of land distribution based on doling out gigantic pieces of land, called *latifúndia*, to a small group of elites. This tendency has lasted for centuries; today, Brazil is “one of the countries with the highest levels of land concentration in the world” (Alston 32). Brazil has also historically had one of the world's widest wealth gaps (Wright and Wolford 2003). The inconsistency between availability of resources and distribution of them has at many times led to discussion of land reform as a social necessity and economic policy. Especially since the 1950s, when land reform was first explicitly targeted as a policy issue, the government—both during the military dictatorship as well as during presidencies before and after—has attempted a series of national projects, often combined with colonization efforts in the Amazon, to redistribute

land to the growing numbers of landless people. But as Alston explains, “land reform efforts have consistently failed to reduce the levels of landownership concentration. Owners of latifundia have been politically powerful, and they have successfully resisted the expropriation of their lands” (32). The interests of large, wealthy landowners, and more recently corporate elites in Brazil and abroad, have always dominated land reform outcomes even when support for more equitable projects has seemed widespread across the rest of Brazil’s population.

As described above, a variety of movements and organizations have sprung up in response to this situation during the past several decades. One of the most publicized of these is the MST (Landless Worker’s Movement), an organization that got its start in the early 1980s in the far south of Brazil. The MST is very active in southern Pará today, but many smaller groups pioneered the same kind of work prior to the MST’s arrival in the Amazon in the late 1980s. These groups generally consisted of rural workers’ unions, and the CPT who supported them. Today, there are over 520 “assentamentos” in Pará, land settlements that began as encampments where people have occupied public or unused private land until being granted the right to legally use it. 15 of these were initiated by the MST; the rest were organized by rural workers’ unions and by FETRAF and FETAGRI, two federations for supporting and organizing agricultural workers in the region. While these numbers—and the livelihoods behind them—represent important successes in the movement for landless people’s rights, southern Pará and the states nearby it remain an area of many land conflicts that are only predicted to increase as more development projects enter the area. The southern Amazon region is seen as a major potential site for development projects in hydroelectric energy, cattle ranching, large-scale agriculture, and “reforestation” in the form of eucalyptus forests to be used for charcoal in iron mines. All of these represent threats to the existence of small-scale, diverse agricultural production, and to the livelihoods of individuals who practice this form of economic development (Wandeberg 2007).

5. Results

This section organizes the responses from interviews into main sections that outline the primary questions answered and issues explained. All quotes in English are the author’s attempted word-for-word translations to Portuguese. Analysis and conclusions about this information follow in the next sections.

- **The Church’s progressive past**

Interviews with the CPT leaders and the progressive Church leaders in Marabá echoed the same terms used in secondary sources: the Church had a commitment to a preferential option for the poor. The priest interviewed talked about having “saudades,” or longings, for the 1970s and 80s, and described it as a beautiful time when the Church was directly at the side of the oppressed. CEBs at this time were a “grand instrument” of the Church, used as a location for religious ceremony, but also a place to talk about organizing to regain rights. They were also, according to the Copserviços staff member, a network through which to learn what

movements and events were happening in other parts of Brazil. The Church's role was to empower and support organizers and movements by sponsoring the CEBs, as well as by speaking out publicly in defense of human rights. Regarding CEBs, the priest talked specifically in terms of raising "political and critical consciousness" in parish members. CPT workers referred mainly to the Church's role in coordinating CEBs, and the CPT's role in working more directly with the structured movements. One CPT leader said that the Church was committed to the poor specifically because of the violence done against the poor people by the military regime, and the CPT itself could be a strong juridical force against this violence. Although progressive Church forces were present in the city, most of their work took place in the countryside, where conflicts were the most extreme.

From the perspective of the movements, the Church was an important force in earlier decades precisely because of this violent repression. The MST leader interviewed stated that it was very difficult to organize during the 1980s and even the 90s when the MST was beginning in this region, because of persecution of workers, agents, and coordinators, which persists even to today in some cases. The action of the Church was important for initiating MST organization.

Specifically regarding liberation theology, a CPT worker described it as a movement that came from within the Church, put forth by its most progressive members, geared towards helping people stand up for their rights against the powers of the government. The Copserviços leader stated specifically that liberation theology was an element of both theory and practice for progressive Church members in earlier decades.

- **Changes in the Church, and why**

The span of the Church's support for social movements lasts until sometime in the 1990s, according to interviewees. The Copserviços staff member, a former priest, remembers the CNBB being very supportive of liberation theology during the 1970s and 80s, and said that support from the Church hierarchy in general was strong up until the early 1990s. The nun concurred with this rough timeline, saying that even up to about ten years ago, the Church was more involved with the common people, and social movements were a more direct consideration in determining the Church's priorities.

As for where the Church stands today, interviewees generally confirmed that progressive strains remain, but said also that these trends are much weaker and narrower than they were in past decades. In the words of one CPT staff member, the Marabá diocese today still has "some of the old feeling"—some priests and nuns who are committed to the old causes and to the poor—but that the situation becomes "each time lesser, smaller" as time passes. In the diocese at large there is not at all a feeling of commitment to the poor, and there are even, according to another CPT worker, some Church leaders who actually organize in support of the power structures and against the small workers. The nun who was interviewed, on the other hand, stated that the majority of Church workers are on the side of the poor, but that there are many fewer lay

leaders, which she saw as a sign of shifts towards a less progressive Church overall. In the summary of one CPT leader, “the changes have been radical.”

These changes are also manifested in the new incarnation of CEBs, according to several interviewees. One CPT leader said that while the CEBs exist, they no longer have the form they used to, a view supported by the priest who was interviewed, who said that they no longer talk about the suffering of the people but focus on catechism and individual spiritualism. Another CPT leader said that some Church members today want to call the CEBs “Christian Communities” instead of base communities, and that in general they don’t talk about the “luta pela terra” or about improving one’s life. Furthermore, some people who used to coordinate or support the more progressive CEBs began suffering repression. This has been another cause of decreased progressivism in the Church overall.

In trying to explain these changes, many interviewees referred to changes in the Vatican and in the hierarchies of the Brazilian Church. One CPT staff member cited the Vatican’s systematic strategy, starting around the time of John Paul II’s accession, of slowly placing conservative bishops where progressives had been, in Latin America at large as well as in Brazil. This lessened the progressive space in Church leadership, and pushed the Church toward the center. Another CPT member stated that the published Church documents don’t discuss agrarian reform and liberation theology as they used to. The priest actually stated that “no one” talks about liberation theology anymore, and that the CNBB no longer encourages political participation of Christians as it once did. When talking about changes in Church emphasis, nearly all interviewees referenced the increasingly “individualistic” nature of Church spirituality—that it has become “all about the fate of the soul,” and no longer about the importance of fighting for a better life. Some priests also apparently believe that the Church should not have so much involvement in the agrarian question, because there are other organizations to represent these interests, such as the Sindicatos, the MST, and other small agriculturalists’ groups. The priest who was interviewed said that there is much “tiredness” with this fight for the land within Church leadership.

For progressive Church members still working in the Marabá region, the hope is to help people achieve or at least imagine a better life through faith in God and Christ. The priest stated that he himself and other progressive Church members still work on “conscientização,” or consciousness-raising, and on giving people a political consciousness from which to understand and analyze their own lives, but that even this is a much smaller dynamic than it once was. Inspiration for social action, he said, is “very small.” While both the priest and the nun repeatedly referred to their work as “small,” the nun pointed out that the movements themselves are independent, and expressed a reassurance that they would continue to operate even though the Church today only manages to give minor support.

At one point during his interview, the priest said with a laugh that the CPT is the “salvation” of the Church today. Their work is described next.

- **What the CPT does today**

CPT staff members defined the Marabá chapter's work as having the following main components:

1. Providing legal/juridical support by advising workers on their rights, individuals as well as leaders of Sindicatos; bringing assassinations to justice; and trying to obtain freedom and justice for victims of slave labor.
2. Serving as an resource for information pertinent to the campaigns and lives of local workers. This comes in many forms. One example given was that if a person is trying to get the rights to a piece of land or wants to camp out on that land, they can come to the CPT to find out which lands they have a better chance at based on which are public by law. The CPT can also help inform organizers about the political situation that may affect their attempt to collect or gain access to public services they currently lack. They provide more specified information resources in forums and events focused on women's health and domestic violence, as well as seminars on alternate income methods for rural workers.
3. Finally, they work generally on the issue of modern-day slave labor, a system by which workers who receive jobs with certain companies (especially in the charcoal industry, which feeds into iron mining) end up locked into an endless cycle of debts to their employers and face violence if they try to escape. One of the CPT's main jobs in this vein is to educate the public, since, as one staff member pointed out, most people in Brazil assume slave labor no longer exists. Through seminars and work in the public schools, they try to spread awareness that it is still a problem, although it has changed forms. Juridical work is also relevant for the slave labor issue, since the CPT has potential power to bring employers to justice and to get the courts involved with the issue. During the time that this study was carried out, one of the main staff people was working on a large report on slave labor in the Marabá region to be presented to the local government in hopes of increasing their attention to the issue.

- **Effects of Church changes on CPT work**

The dominant consensus from CPT leaders regarding how their work has changed as a result of changes within the Catholic Church at large was that although their organizing was (and could be) much "stronger" with the support of the Church, they continue to do what they have always done, what needs to be done, in terms of supporting the workers' movements, and they will continue to do so as long as problems continue. Furthermore, the movements themselves are autonomous, and will continue to organize regardless of what happens to their partner groups.

One CPT staff member said that when they had more direct support from the rest of the Church, it was easier to do their work because "you could touch two parts of the person: the social question, and also the

spiritual question, answered together.” The work is harder today because “we can’t reach these two things, only the one.” One benefit of the weakened relationship with the Church has been that the CPT now can work with “all publics,” not just Catholics, and in fact they are officially allied with some other churches, such as Methodists. However, reaching a wider group of people also exacerbates the difficulty of “reaching the two questions,” in that they can’t deal with spirituality when working with other religious groups. It’s also more difficult in general to work “with the bases,” where the Church once had a strong presence, because they lack the same access to those communities. Having the Church officially on board gave more credibility and access to the CPT.

Regarding all these changes, the CPT interviewees spoke to a duality in positive and negative effects. On one hand, they admitted they do have greater difficulty than they once did, and a lowered capacity in reaching out to the same spectrum of society that they once worked with. Church support strengthened them a lot in the past because of its capacity to organize and mobilize society, to talk with a wide range of people and connect with them. On the other hand, CPT leaders insist that they do not need Church support to do the work they want to do, and the lack of Church presence is not a “barrier” to them. One leader pointed out that people in the communities in and around Marabá lack many government rights and resources, and are actively looking for an organization to help them. The CPT has been in the area for 35 years now, and there is apparently a general awareness of them amongst the local communities; that does not mean it is always easy for workers and people with problems to get to the CPT office and ask for help, but they know the CPT is available.

- **The current relationship between the CPT and social movements in the area**

The movement leaders who were interviewed made it clear that the CPT has had and still has an important role in their work. The MST leader said that the MST only arrived in the southern Pará region in the late 1980s, and the groundwork already laid by the CPT was important in allowing the MST to begin its organizing. Although she made clear that the MST has always worked autonomously, today that level of autonomy from the Church is higher than it was in the past. The CPT’s role is mainly juridical, advising the MST on how to take advantage of current law structures that may affect their work. The CPT and the MST are also linked through participation in La Via Campesina, an “international peasant movement” (according to their website) that in Brazil networks between lots of people’s rights groups, including indigenous and quilombola groups. This connection provides a way to discuss national strategy and talk about changes in the Brazilian state that affect all movements. Finally, the MST leader mentioned the CPT’s role of publicizing different events that happen in the region, especially land conflicts.

The president of the Rural Workers’ Union (STR) in Rondón spoke more strongly of the CPT’s crucial role in their work, and actually made a point that they are not merely a form of juridical assistance, but a

“companion” in the journey and fight for land possession. However, she also said that the CPT no longer involves itself in the religious question, but tries to be an accessory to the workers, “capacitizing” them. In opening the type of support they give to the workers, they actually give more support now than they used to in the past, when they had a “different type of work.” The relationship between the CPT and the STR in Rondón became more clear at the weekend meeting that was observed during this study. The STR was discussing an upcoming event to commemorate the assassination of a former president that would also celebrate the culture and agricultural production of communities connected to the union. CPT leaders participated in the discussion at an equal level with the STR leaders and members. It was clear their goal and role was to provide ideas and support, not to dominate or determine the direction of the meeting. The dynamic echoed the statements of the many interviewees that while movements remain autonomous and independent, the CPT continues to be a valuable resource and ally.

From the CPT’s perspective, one aspect of their current relationship with movements today not yet covered in other parts of this section has to do with the way the CPT blatantly differs from the present-day Church. In particular, one CPT interviewee stated that the people in these organizations and movements identify very much with the CPT because it works together with them; it’s not a formal, grand institution like the Church “with priests talking in Latin.”

- **The changing fight, for the CPT and the movements**

CPT workers described the following rough timeline of the CPT’s work and the changes it has experienced. In the 1970s and 80s, their work was almost entirely about supporting the *posseiros* in the fight for land. In the 90s, they began organizing with workers in general, not just those in the rural zone, and also beginning to address environmental questions by way of promoting agro-ecology methods and providing rural workers with technical information about improving production. In the 2000s, they began publicizing and doing juridical work around modern-day slave labor, providing workers with a place to come for help getting out of the exploitative cycle of certain companies.

Asked specifically about whether this history represents a change in methods for the CPT, one staff member said, “I don’t know if it’s a change in methods, but the CPT is contributing to fighting new challenges facing the workers today.” This attitude mirrored that expressed, although with different syntax, by the MST leader, who said that their goal is to keep the main principles of organizing work, but change some of the methods, given that the fight itself is changing. A CPT staff member described these changes as a shift caused by globalization today, saying that the Church needed to “rethink its defense of rights” given the corporately-dominated, multinational development scheme being faced today. In the past, he said, the main focus was on access to land, but today the fight encompasses threats to the environment and the Amazon at large based on

the “grand projects” of international companies, such as mining companies. In order to effectively confront these kinds of threats, groups like the CPT require a “greater level of organization and articulation.”

- **Religion and faith for the movements and the CPT**

All three of the older CPT staff have a religious background—two received theological training to become priests, and one was a leader in the Church youth group for many years. They are also from rural or land-working families, and got involved with the Church at a time when it was very present in the countryside and was still working closely with people in the rural zone. All three turned to the CPT as a way to continue focusing on social issues, since the Church had started to become more conservative by the time they were looking for permanent work. The youngest CPT leader, who became connected to the CPT not through other religious work but through working with land reform and production assistance organizations, actually spoke most specifically to the “religiosity” of the CPT staff, saying that they have a certain “character” connected to spirituality that will always inform their work. He as well as one other staff person pointed out that the CPT is, after all, a “pastoral”—an organization dedicated to guidance and care (in this case, for the land) on the basis of spiritual faith. One caveat presented is that today, this faith isn’t specifically Catholic, since other Churches as well have become involved with the CPT and support its work.

The interviewee from Copserviços, who was once a priest in the region, made a complicated statement on the relevance of faith or religion for progressive Church workers today. For CPT people, bishops, and other leaders, he said, there is never a question of whether faith matters or exists, and there is always faith-based motivation for their work. However, this faith has transformed somewhat, and doesn’t have the same weight anymore. This man also described himself and others as “fish out of water,” given that they came from religious backgrounds but ended up leaving those connections behind somewhat for more directly active work. This idea of alienation from the Church was supported in an assertion by the union president from Rondón that today, the CPT people support the workers not just because of religion, but because they know that the support and juridical assistance is needed by rural workers.

Asked about religion in the context of the movement’s work, the MST leader first mentioned the superstitious nature of many farmers, citing this as an important factor in their decisions about, for example, when and how to plant crops. She also said that religion does have an “inspirative” role that touches people deeply, connecting faith in God to hope for survival and a better future. This leader had a religious background similar to that of one of the CPT leaders, working with the youth organizations in the Catholic Church.

One CPT leader said that faith has specific significance in land reform work, for the members of these movements, in that the earth is thought of as a divine inheritance, and keeping the faith is thus directly related to the fight for land. This leader also said that faith is very important in the encampments—places where

people are camped out for weeks, months, even years on a piece of land waiting to be given legal access to it—when they sense that they need faith in order to carry out and achieve what they want. In general, it's in the most difficult situations they encounter that faith is the strongest.

- **Are the movements suffering?**

Given all the mixed statements from CPT, movement, and Church leaders regarding the nature of progressive organizing today and how it has or has not been affected by the Church changes, interviews in the research process began to point specifically towards the question of whether or not the Church changes have had a decisively negative effect on the movements—if the movements are less capable of doing their work because of conservative shifts in the Church. While this question rarely received decisive or precise answers, one clarifying statement came from the youngest CPT leader interviewed. This leader said that Church changes have definitely had an effect on the movements, though not a totally disempowering effect. It's not that the movements would weaken without the Church, but they might advance more with the support of the Church. However, as he explained, the CPT is part of the Church, and by continuing the CPT work they continue this strengthening of the movements. Yet the movements could certainly be even stronger if the whole Church was on board.

In a slightly more pessimistic tone, the former priest who works for Copserviços described current movements as “subterranean,” and maintained that they have become significantly weaker without support of the Church.

- **Concerns for the next generation**

One interesting concern that came through in several interviews, though it was not specifically asked about, had to do with what will happen for the next generation of movement leaders. The leader at Copserviços, the older leaders of the CPT, and the priest all expressed doubt for future Church support for social movements based on the fact that older, generally more progressive priests and nuns are leaving their posts and being replaced by new Church members who were formed in a totally different, and more conservative, theology than they themselves were trained in. All these men received some training to become priests, one has been a priest, and one still is; all remember well the days when liberation theology was part of a new padre's training course.

6. Discussion and Analysis

In order to discuss the significance of these results, it is necessary to first review the three-part significance of liberation theology defined above. Liberation theology can be seen as a theory, a practice, and an element of history. Looking at it as a theory means recognizing how Church leaders and affiliates talk

about their work in terms of a faith- or gospel-based need to stand at the side of the poor. Looking at it as a practice means examining the ways in which such Church leaders act on that need, and the methods they choose with which to support the poor. Looking at it as a historical force means evaluating the cumulative effect of these Church leaders on the greater movements for social justice that have arisen alongside and sometimes as a result of their work.

Examined from all three of these perspectives, the results above demonstrate liberation theology maintains an important role in the progress of movements for social change in southern Pará. All of the CPT staff interviewed confirmed that faith is a source of their motivation to work for the CPT and in doing so help support the poor and their rural movements around Marabá. That three of them have a background in progressive sectors of the Church suggests that religious faith was especially important in getting them involved with social movement organizing in the first place. While the youngest CPT worker's background might suggest that younger generations do not have this same sense of a need to organize based on the demands of the Bible, it was he who spoke most optimistically and confidently of the religious convictions underlying the CPT's work. The theory of liberation theology—that Christian faith demands support and priority for the poor—thus seems to remain an important part of the way these organizers envision their own work.

Liberation theology also very clearly continues to be practiced in this region. The CPT is an organization dedicated to supporting rural movements for justice, and its organizers work at least in part on the basis of a religious commitment to pastoral work. As long as their work aligns with the goals of the movements themselves and helps improve the lives of the poor in this region, the CPT will be practicing liberation theology.

It is only when looking at the third element of its nature that the relevance of liberation theology, as a concept, becomes questionable for this region and these movements. All of the people interviewed confirmed that the movements will continue to do their work fighting for human and social rights as long as work is there to be done. Those not involved directly with the movements—such as the priest, the nun, and the Copservicos staff member—will continue to support small farmers, urban poor, and other marginalized members of society as long as society continues to marginalize some of its members. However, this conviction on the part of the interviewees is balanced by their own admission that, overall, the movements would be stronger if the Church as an entire institution were to fervently support them, as it did in past decades. This duality of the situation—that Church-supported or religion-based organizing continues, but without the intensity it once had—suggests that liberation theology is no longer the same kind of society-changing innovation that it seems to have signified in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. This analysis is based on both the actual power of religiously-based social action to influence society at large, and the way in which those social actors view their own work. The CPT and Church interviewees evaluated their contribution to social movements as existent, but not as

powerful as it once had been—an evaluation which for the purposes of this study serves as a rough measurement of such actors' effect on the movements at large. Yet there is also meaning in the fact that the interviewees view their work in this way. Without even knowing the degree to which past liberation theology organizing may or may not have affected society at large, the secondary source research shows an overwhelming conviction on the part of those past theologians and organizers that their ideology was capable of causing wide-spread social change. From official Church documents to statements by priests in the countryside, the huge spectrum of Catholic leaders talking about the Church's role in social movements appears to have created a self-supporting cycle of people who believed in their work because they knew other people did too. Although the organizers and Church leaders interviewed in this study still seem to be convinced of the importance of their work, they do not seem confident in the overall power of Church-based work at large. This lack of confidence seems partly due to an alienation from the Church, and a sense on the part of older organizers that there is little hope for a progressive Church in the future.

A comment from the staff member at Copserviços seems to encapsulate the situation well. This interviewee said that liberation theology is still very much alive, and a relevant part of history, but it no longer is talked about publicly. Social action is not discussed prominently as something that must be done, and is being done, as part of a Church mission to carry out the commandments of Christ, largely because it was the top Church leadership who spread this message. Secondary-source research suggests that the theory of liberation theology, when supported by the majority of the Catholic hierarchy, helped invigorate and inspire Church agents and gave them a sense of presence in part of an international movement with major capacity to create change. While organizers today still clearly are motivated to do the work they do for the sake of changing society, and their religious faith is built into this, they no longer have the sense that their work is part of a Church-wide movement. In a way, this brings the present-day significance of liberation theology into question because of the deep contrast between the lack of conviction today and the apparently powerful conviction of the past for people doing religiously-based organizing.

Apart from this insight into the current nature of liberation theology, the interview results also help clarify the difference between work done by Church leaders themselves, such as priests and nuns, and by Church-affiliated groups, such as the CPT. In describing both the past work that the Church did and his own work today, the priest who was interviewed frequently talked about raising parishioners' consciousness about their lives' connection to local and national politics. The description of CEBs given by both the priest and CPT workers suggests that while CEBs may have been a starting point for connections that led to community organizations, these events themselves focused discussion about life, the Bible, and political interpretations thereof. Furthermore, they were led by Church leaders, not political organizers. Organizers and CPT workers were, in the meantime, helping put together organizations outside the Church and supporting those organizations already in place. That is what they continue to do today. The specific example of the CEBs as

well as the more general comments of Church and CPT leaders thus suggests that the role of Church leaders, past and present, has been one of consciousness-raising, whereas groups like the CPT have been responsible for the direct action that takes place.

Finally, although this topic has been touched on previously, it is worth commenting specifically on the generational question raised by interviewees. To review, many older leaders—in the Church, the CPT, and Copservicos—show regret for the changes the Church has undergone, and speak fondly of the time when Church support was deep, movements were strong, and liberation theology was the big news of the day. They also mention concern for the fact that leaders in the Church today are not being formed with the same social consciousness. However, the two youngest people interviewed—one CPT staff member, and the MST leader—were the interviewees who seemed most convinced of the continued progress of their respective organizations, and least concerned about the effect of Church changes on their ability to change society at large. As mentioned above, it was actually the young CPT worker who said most clearly that faith remains an important thing for the people doing his kind of work. Unfortunately, this study did not include interviews with the younger generation of priests. It is possible that interviewing young priests would have shown a significant lack of commitment to working on social issues. But at least for the realm of organizations doing direct action on social issues, we can say the following: while there may be some concern in the older generation of political organizers in this region that future generations will not be as committed to social causes or as powerful in working on them, this study suggests they need not worry, for the younger generation is cogent of the problems and committed to the cause.

7. Conclusions, Further Thoughts, and Recommendations for Next Research

This study indicates a few basic themes about the state of faith-based social organizing, specific to the south of Pará in this era. Despite changes in the Catholic Church internationally, nationally, and locally that have lessened the focus on social issues and turned towards a more individualistic form of spirituality, liberation theology continues to play a role in the work of social movements. As a theory, liberation theology informs the decisions and actions of some remaining progressive Church officials, as well as the work of pastoral agents in organizations like the Comissão Pastoral da Terra. These individuals, who are motivated in part because of their interpretation of Christian values, engage in the practice of liberation theology in diverse ways. Church officials continue to work on raising the political consciousness of poor communities, and CPT workers continue to support community groups, unions, and larger organizations in gaining land and other rights that have been denied or taken from Brazil's poor. The CPT also publicizes offenses to human rights, in this region and elsewhere in Brazil.

However, the cumulative power of these individuals and organizations appears to have changed for the weaker, largely due to the loss of hierarchical Church support for working with social movements. This

assessment is made both on the basis of the what interviewees said about their own capacity, as well as on the basis of the way they talked about their work. Simply by indicating a lesser sense of unity with the greater Church and ability to carry out their work without this unity, interviewees suggested that liberation theology, as a concept and social force, no longer holds the power it did in its youth to create broad-based, self-aware, religiously-inspired movements for social change.

This study was designed to get the perspective of leaders involved in social movements, and bases its conclusions primarily on the statements of people interviewed. A next ideal study would use more quantitative standards, such as settlements established and government services won, to examine when and how land movements in Brazil have been most successful, rather than subjective and qualitative standards such as the self-assessment of movement organizers that this study uses. Such a study would help show with more certainty whether the loss of hierarchical Church support has genuinely damaged the greater campaign for human and social rights in Brazil, or if this support has been replaced by consolidation and sophistication in movement organizations and their allies.

Another form of research that this study points toward would look at the same type of question—relevance of liberation theology for social movements today—through the perspective of the agricultural workers and poor people whose lives are affected by the success of those social movements. This study only gets the perspective of leaders of relevant institutions, and does not attempt to speak for all movement participants. But what does the average small farmer in southern Pará think about religious faith and his own life? Does spirituality affect his decision to participate in rural workers' unions? Where does he get his inspiration for social action today? Where did his parents get their inspiration? These would all be appropriate questions to explore next.

This study suggests also that it has generally been the work of Church leaders—priests, nuns, and other officials—to raise people's consciousness about sociopolitical issues, whereas organizations like the CPT have done most of the direct action work organizing social movements. Given that progressivism is less widespread amongst Church leaders, and younger Church leaders are no longer being trained in a progressive, liberation theology-oriented milieu, there is presumably less talk about political and social issues (and less consciousness-raising) in Church communities today. This leads to several possible questions for next research: is inspiration for social action still birthed in the Church, or does it come from elsewhere? If it comes from elsewhere, what are these new sources? Do they inspire people to the same kinds of social action as liberation theologians did in the 1970s, or has the nature of social action changed as well? These are all important questions to answer to deepen our understanding of how social movements function and succeed—an understanding which, in turn, is important if we want to social movements to continue improving society in the 21st century.

8. Appendix: Interview Questions

The interviews for this research project were semi-structured. For each interview, certain questions were drawn up ahead of time with certain goals in mind about what information could be found. These were sometimes asked directly and sometimes replaced by questions that seemed more appropriate to the particular interview. The following are the general questions used most often across all the interviews. Since many questions were essentially the same apart from the organization they referenced, the questions included here only refer to one organization, but signify all the entities that interviewees were drawn from. So, for example, the first question—How did you begin working with this organization?—was asked to nearly every interviewee, but here the question is written referring to the CPT. This pattern is maintained for the whole list to keep it concise. The questions were asked in Portuguese, but here they are followed by English translations.

1. *Como você começou a trabalhar com a CPT, e por quê?* How did you begin working with the CPT, and why?
2. *Tem importância pra você que a CPT é uma organização religiosa?* Is it important for you that the CPT is a religious organization?
3. *Qual é a história da CPT nessa região?* What is the history of the CPT in this region?
4. *Como a CPT trabalhava com a teologia da libertação no começo do seu trabalho nessa região?* How did the CPT work with liberation theology during the start of its work in this region?
5. *Houve mudanças nos métodos do trabalho da CPT com os movimentos rurais? Se sim, quais?* Have there been changes in the methods of the CPT's work with rural movements, if so, in what way?
6. *Qual a importância da teologia da libertação no trabalho da CPT hoje?* What is the importance of liberation theology in the CPT's work today?
7. *Qual a importância das CEBs no passado?* What was the importance of the CEBs in the past?
8. *Qual a importância das CEBs hoje?* What is the importance of CEBs today?
9. *O que exatamente a CPT pode fazer para os trabalhadores rurais?* What exactly can the CPT do for rural workers?
 - Specific to Church affiliates:
10. *Qual é a história da igreja progressista nessa região?* What is the history of the progressive Church in this region?
11. *Esse progressismo já mudou desde as décadas 1970 e 80?* Has this progressivism changed since the 1970s and 80s?
12. *Se a igreja já mudou, qual é a causa dessas mudanças?* If the Church has changed, what has been the cause of these changes?

13. *Como a igreja usava a teologia da libertação no passado, e como a usa hoje?* How did the Church use liberation theology in the past, and how do they use it today?
14. *Parece que no passado, a igreja era uma fonte de inspiração para o povo para participar nos movimentos sociais e rurais. Hoje, a igreja ainda tem esse papel de inspiração, ou não?* It seems that in the past, the Church was a source of inspiration for the people to participate in social/rural movements. Does the Church still have this role of inspiration today, or not?
15. *Qual é seu papel nas vidas do povo dessa região e com os movimentos rurais?* What is your role in the lives of people of this region and with the rural movements?
 - Specifically for movement leaders:
16. *Qual era a relação entre as entidades católicas e o MST/STR no começo do trabalho nessa região?* What was the relationship between Catholic entities and the MST/STR at the start of your work in this region?
17. *Qual é a relação hoje? Já mudou?* What is the relationship today? Has it changed?
18. *Como já mudou o trabalho do MST nessa região desde o início?* How has the work of the MST in this region changed since the beginning of its work in this area?
19. *Qual é o papel ou importância da religião e a fé para o povo do MST/STR?* What is the role or importance of religion and faith for the people of the MST/STR?

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10. Comments for Future ISPers

Well, here we are at the night before. Honestly, it's not such a bad place to be. Certainly if I had been more diligent and spent less time haunting various blogs and grad school websites and the New York Times while I was supposed to be writing up my results, I might be sleeping right now, rather than writing my ISP comments. But hey, for some reason, everything feels great.

However, I digress. Gustavo specifically told us that this is supposed to be a place for *helpful* comments about *doing the ISP*. So here are my thoughts specific to what I did during November 2007.

- The CPT is an awesome organization. Seriously, words like beautiful come to mind when I think of them. I am somewhat apaixonada. However, if you want to research about/with them, I would recommend knowing ahead of time exactly what you're doing, and not expect a lot of academic-type advice. It's not that they aren't helpful, and they'll definitely hook you up with all sorts of cool people in southern Pará and teach you interesting things, but you should plan to have a separate academic advisor as well.
- With that said, Guilhermina was the bomb diggity and I recommend her mightily. She knows her stuff when it comes to planning, carrying out, and talking about research. She's also very good at explaining what she knows, and she doesn't scare you and make you think you'll never finish your ISP. I really cannot imagine having a better advisor.
- Regarding research in/around Marabá: the Hotel Norte Sul is a fantastic joint with a delicious free café da manhã, a gang of sweet old ladies who run the place, a great location, a decently romantic balcony area perfect for a nightly lonesome cig, and only an occasional roach in the bathroom. Their prices seemed a little steep to me but overall I thought it was worth it, and I don't know that other places would have been cheaper. Here is how to eat in Marabá for R\$10 a day: breakfast at HNS, guarana shake for lunch (R\$2-3), dinner at the Espetinho on the side of the praça closest to the river near the Correios (R\$5 for a plate of arroz, farrofa, salada PLUS a sticker of some of the best carne I ate in Brazil. The guy who cooks the meat is also wonderful. Tell him I said hi. By the way, this budget leaves you a couple reais for a beer). I was very bad at being social in Marabá, but I did make one friend outside of the CPT, and if you email me (noronic@gmail.com) and it is not too many years after this program I will hook you up. She's awesome and will give you the not-for-tourists tour of Marabá.
- If you are like me and you end up being alone for some time in your ISP feeling bad and annoyed at yourself for not aproveitar the situation and spending too much time watching movies dubbed in Portuguese alone in your hotel room, just remember that even your cool activist friends go home at night and watch *Se7e Pecados*. If you are not like me, good for you.
- I went to Marajó Island during the ISP period and the world did not end.

Eleanor Sharp

Liberation Theology in the 21st Century: The Catholic Church, the CPT, and Rural Movements in Southern Pará

Research Synopsis

SIT Study Abroad—Brazil: Amazon Resource Management and Human Ecology, Fall 2007

Liberation theology, defined by one writer as “an interpretation of Christian faith out of the experience of the poor,” has been widely recognized as an important development in theology and Latin American history that helped spark social movements across South and Central America in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (Berryman 4). The breadth of Catholic faith across Brazil's population combined with the nation's historically extreme wealth gap made Brazil a fertile country for the theory and practice of liberation theology. Rural priests began working with poor Brazilians to improve their lives and futures, and the Catholic Church was able to play a crucial role in supporting the first social movements that developed as the military government began its period of *abertura* (opening) in the late 1970s and early 80s. In particular, the history of progressive Church work parallels the history of movements organizing for landless peoples' rights. The Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) was started by the Church in 1975 to work specifically on land reform and support rural movements. The CPT is still active today, and in the state of Pará, they have worked with the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra), rural trade unions, and other local workers' organizations in the rapidly developing region around the city of Marabá. Since the 1980s, however, the Catholic Church has changed direction both domestically and abroad, no longer putting as much direct emphasis on liberation theology and actually rejecting it on the international scene. The nature of social movements that have worked with groups like the CPT has also changed, as these movements have had success in reaching their strategic goals and claiming land and rights.

Based on such a setting, this study explores the present manifestation of liberation theology in the south of Pará. Using a combination primarily of semi-structured interviews and secondary-source research, it attempts to answer the question: How have changes in the Catholic Church influenced its use of liberation theology in working with rural movements in the south of Pará? Analysis of results reveals that while the Church certainly no longer maintains the broad commitment to poor people and social justice that it had in the 1970s and 80s, the practice of liberation theology continues by way of the CPT and progressive church leaders who remain in the area. However, the loss of full-scale hierarchical support of the Church has decreased the overall capacity of the CPT to support rural movements in reaching their goals and organizing across a broad base of people.