

Struggle, Revolution, and the MST: Reflections on the Meaning of Resistance

by

Andrew Cole

Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania
Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Philosophy

The School for International Training
Culture, Development and Social Justice

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Abstract:

The following is an ethnographic account of the motivations, attitudes, and ideology of several residents of Lenin Paz II, a Brazilian land-reform settlement in the northeastern state of Ceará. The particular focus of the study is on the reasons these individuals decided to get involved with the social movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) that brought them to the settlement after a 2-3 year process of land occupation. Theoretically, the paper focuses on the development of a collective sense of social or class consciousness amongst the landless who were interviewed, drawing heavily on James Scott's theory of resistance outlined in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

Keywords: *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), land reform, peasant resistance, class consciousness, hegemony, social movement, new Left

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Preface: *Movimento Sem Terra* as a Peasant Social Movement

With roots in the tense social climate of Brazil's military dictatorship and a current membership of more than 1 million people, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Rural Worker's Movement, abbrv. MST) claims to be the largest social movement in Latin America. Engaged in both confrontation and negotiation with the Brazilian state and private landowners, MST demands agrarian reform through a process of land occupation to pressure the government to expropriate unproductive lands and settle the landless upon them. As MST is a class-oriented organization that targets and mobilizes the Brazilian rural poor, the question of peasant consciousness drives this study: Given both the risks involved and the explicitly socialist ideology of MST, why would someone who is *sem terra* (landless) choose to occupy land, a radical act of collective resistance, and ultimately live on an MST settlement?

Over the course of a 3-week stay on the relatively young MST settlement of Lenin Paz II (located in the northeastern Brazilian state of Ceará), I conducted interviews with several residents about their life, experience with class, and motivation for getting involved with MST. During the process, I also observed MST's ideological project in action and witnessed the daily routine and social interaction of the settlement. What follows is an ethnographic account of my findings that provides empirical data for the development of a theoretical understanding of peasant consciousness, as well as class and social consciousness more generally.

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The Backdrop: Two Different Visions of Agrarian Reform

“The government does not have a policy of agrarian reform, it has a policy of social compensation.”

-Marcelo Matos, Director of Communications MST-CE¹

To understand the behavior, objectives, and posture of MST and its members, it is necessary to understand the political and historical context in which they are functioning. The legacy of Portuguese colonialism in Brazil has been the concentration of the bulk of Brazil’s land in the hands of a small percentage of the population:

Brazil’s big landowners own 35,083 properties, 1 percent of the total, with a total acreage of 378 million (153,000,000 hectares), almost half of the area of all rural landholdings put together. Even more unreasonably, these 35,083 holdings belong to a much smaller number of owners. Moreover, only 14 percent of their arable lands produce crops and 48 percent produce livestock; the remaining 38 percent is totally unproductive wilderness.²

From this social fact emerges the debate over agrarian reform. The question is not a question of whether or not land should be redistributed (almost every important player in the discussion at least nominally recognizes the need for land reform, save a group of stubborn and sometimes violent landholders), but a question of *how* this redistribution should occur.

In her study of the MST’s relationship with the free-market economic philosophy called *neoliberalism*, Monica Dias Martins explains that “land reform is not necessarily radical”, and in fact under the authoritarian rule of the military after a 1964 coup, land reform was considered both an issue of national security (helping stave off a potential communist insurrection of landless peasants by giving them some material compensation) as well as critical for the ultimate economic goal of the regime, industrial

¹ Matos, Marcelo. Personal interview. 22 May 2007. Partial transcript: ISP Journal p.162(a)-165(a).

² “An Interview with João Pedro Stédile.” João Pedro Stédile; Maria Orlando Pissassi; Fatima Cabral; Mirian Claudia Lourencao; Laurence Hallewell. *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 5, Radical Left Response to Global Impoverishment. (Sept., 2000), pp. 46-62. For more on the history of the concentration of land in Brazil, see materials published by MST in *A história da luta pela terra e o MST*, São Paulo. Expressão Popular (2001) pp.56-116

and capitalist development.³ It was in this context that the military government passed the 1964 Land Statute, under which ‘‘private property can be expropriated if it does not serve a social function’’⁴. After the collapse of the dictatorship in 1985, this law became the basis for a similar provision in the later ratified 1988 constitution that provides the legal basis for the current federal policy of land reform and is the source of two divergent models: the market-based model which emphasizes individual private purchase of land from the government (backed by the large landowners and the World Bank) on the one hand, and the model proposed by MST on the other.⁵

MST presents a markedly more radical alternative to the traditionally state-approved model of agrarian reform. With origins in various pre-existing peasant movements such as MASTER (Movement of Landless Farmers) and the Ligas Camponesas (Peasant Leagues), the MST was officially formed in 1985 following a 3 year land occupation in the state of Rio Grande do Sul that resulted in the government resettling those involved.⁶ Today, MST is present in almost all of Brazil’s 26 states and claims a membership of roughly 1 million people, with almost 350,000 families settled on more than 5 million hectares of land in the countryside following land occupations organized by the group.⁷ It is through its constant campaign of land occupation that MST mounts pressure on the state to make good on its promise of agrarian reform. However, it is not just land that the MST is interested in; the political project of the movement is aimed at long-term structural change of Brazilian rural society.

³ Martins, Monica Dias. ‘‘The MST Challenge to Neoliberalism.’’ *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 5, Radical Left Response to Global Impoverishment. (Sept., 2000), pp:33-45.

⁴ *Ibid* pp.35.

⁵ *Ibid* pp.35-36.

⁶ Carter, Miguel *The Origins of Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST): The Natalino Episode in Rio Grande do Sul(1981-1984) A case of ideal interest mobilization*. Working Paper Number CBS-43-03, Centre for Brazilian Studies, University of Oxford, 2003. <<http://www.brazil.ox.ac.uk/carter43.pdf>>. For more on the history of MST’s political formation, see *A história da luta pela terra e o MST*, MST, São Paulo, Expressão Popular (2001).

⁷ ‘‘About MST’’. Friends of MST. <<http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=about>>. Accessed June 7, 2007.

The organization presents itself publicly as both socialist and anti-state.⁸ For MST the state is a bourgeois institution to be negotiated with, as, rather than truly being dedicated to a policy of agrarian reform, they are engaged in mere “social compensation” of the rural poor.⁹ The MST is described as a social movement of the “third wave” of the Latin American left, which “subordinate[s] electoral politics to direct action” and “occup[ies] land or public buildings, factories, and offices” seeking to “establish autonomous self-governing centers of authority”.¹⁰ The vision of the movement is:

a new massive and radical land reform proposal [that] is not simply land redistribution to incorporate more farmers into the capitalist system but involves shifting the entire agrarian structure: production, power, and cultural relations. It means the whole economic-social-political system is going to be changed.¹¹

It is with this objective in mind that MST envisions agrarian reform as “a type of revolution”, and engages in the identification and occupation of unproductive lands by the landless themselves, demanding they be expropriated by the state and that those engaged in the occupation be settled on the land.¹² Within these two models of agrarian reform the question of my research arose: what motivates someone to get involved with the process of agrarian reform, specifically with an organization as radical as MST?

⁸ Matos, Marcelo. Personal interview. 22 May 2007. Partial transcript: ISP Journal pp. 162(a)-165(a).

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Petras, James and Timothy F. Harding. “Introduction” in *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No.5 Radical Left Response to Global Impoverishment. (Sept. 2000), p.3-10.

¹¹ Martins, Monica Dias. “The MST Challenge to Neoliberalism.”

¹² Conversation with “Dona Nato”. Informal interview. 20 May 2007. Summarized ISP Journal pp.158(b).

Theoretical Concerns: Understanding Social Consciousness

“The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating.”

-Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*¹³

MST defines its primary role as a social movement as follows: “[T]o continue organizing the rural poor, raising consciousness (*conscientizando-os*) of their rights, and mobilizing them to struggle for change.”¹⁴ Important for our purposes is the concept of *conscientização*: “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”¹⁵ Influenced heavily by the critical pedagogy of Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire, it is no accident that the MST leadership chooses the verb *conscientizar* to express the nature of their activity: they see themselves as fundamentally engaged in the process of radically altering the political and social consciousness of the Brazilian rural poor. Thus the theoretical focus of this study is on the nature of this social consciousness MST seeks to cultivate: how can it be understood in relationship to the material conditions of the world?

In his work on the relationship between MST and the health of democracy in Brazil, Miguel Carter lays out two contrasting theoretical approaches for understanding the behavior of the movement: a *structuralist* approach that evaluates the actions of political actors in terms of structural features of the society (such as class divisions, the degree of the coercive power exercised by the state, institutions within civil society etc.), which stands in contrast to *rational actor analyses*, which, “though appropriately grounded on the idea of human agency, assume that individuals are trying to maximize

¹³ As cited in Freire, Paulo *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 53.

¹⁴ “Quem Somos”, MST <www.mst.org.br/mst/pagina.php?cd=1>: “Hoje, completando 22 anos de existência, o MST entende que seu papel como movimento social é continuar organizando os pobres do campo, conscientizando-os de seus direitos e mobilizando-os para que lutem por mudanças.” Accessed May 14, 2007. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

benefits.¹⁶ Analysts from the Marxist tradition are frequently associated with the structuralist approach, class struggle being central to Marx's theory of capitalism and history, while the rational actor approach is closely associated with the development of both capitalism (via Adam Smith, as well as the utilitarian moral philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham) and liberal democracy (via social contract thinkers like John Locke), and treats humans fundamentally as autonomous self-interested individuals.¹⁷

Which of these theories can provide a better explanatory account for the behavior of the landless involved with MST? As will be explored later, the nature of land occupation is costly, and by no means a certain guarantee of material benefit. As Carter suggests with his theory of "ideal interest action", the members of MST are engaged in a collective act of defiance that cannot be easily explained in terms of self-interest.¹⁸ However, is it in fact the structures of society (concentration of landholding, the mechanization of farming resulting in the expulsion of the rural workers from the countryside to the margins of the cities etc.) that are dictating these events?

Complicating this picture is what's referred to as the problem of *false-consciousness* or *ideological hegemony*. Articulated in its strongest form by Italian communist and Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, the idea was originally an explanation for why (given the structuralist logic of class antagonism in orthodox Marxism that predicts an inevitable revolution) socialist revolutions had not yet taken place in the developed capitalist nations:

¹⁵ Roughly translated as "critical consciousness". Freire, Paulo *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 35.

¹⁶ Carter, Miguel *The Origins of Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST): The Natalino Episode in Rio Grande do Sul (1981-1984)* pp.43

¹⁷ Gil, David. *Confronting Injustice and Oppression*. New York. Columbia University Press, 1998 pp. 50-51.

¹⁸ *The Origins of Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement* pp. 43-45

The central idea behind it [ideological hegemony] is the claim that the ruling class dominates not only the physical means of production but the means of symbolic production as well. Its control over the material forces of production is replicated, at the level of ideas, in its control over the ideological “sectors” of society- culture, religion, education, and the media – in a manner that allows it to disseminate those values that reinforce its position.¹⁹

On this view, the idea of the individual rational actor can be questioned altogether, as “elites are able to impose their own image of a just social order, not simply on the behavior of non-elites, but on their consciousness as well.”²⁰ If this is the case, the degree to which anyone existing within various social structures can make decisions based on their own interest at all, as they may in fact be “mystified” by the ideology of the dominant elite and be making decisions contrary to their class (and by extension individual) benefit. This is particularly relevant to MST, an organization that explicitly aims at the political empowerment of a subordinate class, the alleged victims of “false-consciousness”.

As James Scott argues in *Weapons of the Weak*, his work on class consciousness and ideological hegemony in a peasant rice-farming village in Malaysia, Gramsci’s theory correctly moves the debate away from an objective structuralist reading of behavior dictated by, for example, the mode of economic production, and back into the realm of ideas and human agency.²¹ While Scott is critical of the idea of ideological hegemony, suggesting that the appearance of false-consciousness is part of society’s power dynamic and in reality just all that much posturing by the subordinate to avoid material sanction (in the form of police repression, loss of jobs, cuts in pay etc.) by the dominant elite, I treated it as an open question during my research: to what extent do the MST settlers exhibit evidence of ideological domination? To what extent do they resist?

¹⁹ Scott, James. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1985 pp.315.

²⁰ *Ibid* pp.39.

My research location was particularly suited to test Scott's refutation of the hegemony thesis, as the movement provides the peasantry an unprecedented opportunity for political activity and the settlement is a perfect example of what Scott refers to as the spaces where the "hidden transcript" can emerge and the dominated can question the prevailing ideological order without fear of repression.²² As such, I went into the field with an analytical framework both aware of the large social forces of Brazilian agrarian society (structuralism) as well as sensitive to the ways in which the human actors of the settlement interpret those facts and act upon them (ideology and human agency).²³ These are the constitutive elements of a theoretical understanding of social consciousness.

²¹ *Ibid* pp.315-320

²² *Ibid* 322-335.

²³ *Ibid* 46-47.

Methodology: A Quantitative and Phenomenological Approach

“Neither peasants nor proletarians deduce their identities directly or solely from the mode of production, and the sooner we attend to the concrete experience of class as it is lived, the sooner we will appreciate both the obstacles to, and the possibilities for, class formation.”

-James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*

The theoretical approach to the study and my methodology are intimately related. As the focus of my study was the social consciousness of a group of MST activists and settlers, I had to somehow gain access to their own subjective interpretation of their experience. As such, the nature of my findings are quantitative, as data gathered from a large number of subjects was ill-suited for my purposes, and phenomenological, providing a descriptive and interpretative account of data collected through extended social interaction and conversation with the subjects rather than surveys or self-reports.

The bulk of my data comes from six formal personal interviews conducted over the course of my three-week stay at Lenin Paz II as well as several informal interviews that took place in the context of casual conversation. Generally the interviews were about the life story of the participant, always including the question “Why did you decide to participate in the land occupation?” When appropriate, I have also included my personal observations of events and social life on the settlement, although I tended to primarily use data from the interviews as they provided more reliable access to the thoughts, motivations, and attitudes of the settlers as they conceived them. Only when my observations added additional insight or indicated a potential contradiction between what I was told and what I saw did I include them.

Beyond the standard difficulties involved with studies centered on subjective experience (questions regarding the validity of the data, problems of interpretation, honesty of the subjects given the context of the interviews etc.), limitations to this

methodology were my limited knowledge of the culture and developing Portuguese language skills. At times this deprived me of the context in which to interpret certain observations or I simply would fail to understand what was occurring. Additionally it inhibited the degree to which I was able to faithfully transcribe the content of my interviews. My best efforts are included in my work journal; however they are by no means word-for-word documentation of my conversations. The names of the participants and places of the study have been left unchanged after securing verbal consent from those involved.²⁴

²⁴ For a full list of key informants see ISP Journal p.180(b).

A Brief Description of Assentamento Lenin Paz II

“*Reforma Agraria: Por um Brasil sem latifúndio!*”

- Placard hanging on the water tower of Lenin Paz II

About 3 kilometers outside the city of São Luis de Ibaretama, Ceará (located in a municipality a 2-hour bus ride outside of the state’s capital and largest city, Fortaleza) is a roughly 2400 hectare plot of land, christened Assentamento Lenin Paz II on Nov. 10, 2005.²⁵ Formerly Fazenda Santa Barca, the land was expropriated by the National Institution for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) following more than two years of assorted land occupations and protest by MST. The settlement is situated just south of a small mountain range, visible for kilometers in the flat, sparsely vegetated plains that characterize the semi-arid northeast of Brazil and stretch to the south of the settlement. As you walk along one of the dirt paths that winds away from Ibaretama to the center of the settlement, half-finished houses (the future homes of the settlement’s 48 families) appear to each side, each with a plot of 500 square meters demarcated by barbed wire stretched across hand-chopped wooden posts, and often a small amount of crops already growing, from beans to watermelon.²⁶

At the center of the settlement is the site of the former *fazenda*, now referred to as “*a sede*” (headquarters) by the residents of Lenin Paz. The majority of the families are still living in the buildings there, what were once the homes of the *fazendeiro* and the accommodations for the *moradores* (temporary rural workers hired by the landowner), while a few have moved out into their now-completed houses. Adjacent to the former *fazendeiro*’s house is a small Catholic church, roughly 20 meters away from a flat cement surface that has been converted into a soccer field by some of the boys of the settlement. The buildings of *a sede* surround this makeshift field, including one

²⁵ dos Santos, Francisca Maria or “Dona/Irmã Preta”. Personal interview. 18 May 2007. Partial transcript: ISP Journal pp. 152(a)-156(a).

that's walls have been painted over with imagery of the movement. This is where the residents hold most of their meetings and eventually will be the site of a school for the younger children of the settlement (the others catching a bus to the schools in Ibaretama each morning). Just outside the boundaries of *a sede* (marked on three sides by the same simple barbed-wire fence constructed around the individual houses and to the south by a 2-meter tall cement wall that is split in half by a large gate), a water tower looks out over the settlement, bearing a placard painted with red flag of MST and the words: "Assentamento Lenin Paz II. Reforma Agrária: Por um Brazil sem latifúndio!"²⁷

To the north of *a sede* is the collectively worked land of the settlement. As the settlement is still engaged in constructing the individual houses for each family and building a fence to demarcate an area where the crops for production will be planted, this land is still largely uncultivated and unproductive.²⁸ Palm trees and brush dot the landscape, and surround three lakes that the settlement uses for water and fishing. In the distance loom the mountains, casting long shadows over the land when the sun rises from behind the most easterly of them each morning. It was here that I spent three weeks getting to know the several of the *assentados* of Lenin Paz II, where they had come from and what they plan to do now.

²⁶ Much of the description is based on personal observation. For a more detailed description of the settlement and hand-drawn map of "a sede" see ISP Journal pp. 51-53.

²⁷ Agrarian Reform: For a Brazil without the latifúndio! This motto of the MST expresses their opposition to the concentration of land, often referred to historically as the system of "latifúndios", a type of large farm similar to the plantations of the American South. For more see *A história da luta pela terra e o MST*, p.13.

Life in the City: Constructing the Past

“As in any history, assessing the present forcibly involves a reevaluation of what has gone before. Thus, the ideological struggle to define the present is a struggle to define the past as well.”

-James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*

During my stay, one of the *assentados*, Marinete Gomes, the mother and wife in my host household, reminded me several times that “each person here has a different story, a different life”.²⁹ While this is certainly true, it’s striking what the life stories of the various residents of Lenin Paz II have in common. Everyone I spoke with narrated a similar general trajectory: born in the interior of Ceará to a rural family, moved to the periphery of Fortaleza (or in one instance Brasília) as a young adult, and participated in MST’s land occupation after finally deciding they had enough of life in the city.

By far the most common complaint about Fortaleza regarded personal safety: “I was always worried about the safety of my children...in my neighborhood you can’t walk on the street at night because of the thieves.” “I have a friend who was assaulted 8 times while working [at a gas station] there.” “Fortaleza is dangerous, so dangerous.”³⁰ Through the process of occupation and eventual settlement in the countryside (where crime is not non-existent however is far less frequent³¹), MST provides a way out of the violence that accompanies the poverty-ridden periphery of many Brazilian cities, where “social polarization forms the background for the violence of everyday life, street children, gang warfare, police brutality and impunity”.³²

²⁸ Conversation with Marinete Gomes Pinto. Informal interview. 23 May 2007. ISP Journal pp. 165(b)-166(a).

²⁹ *Ibid* 166(a).

³⁰ Formal and informal interviews with “Dona Preta”, Joseli Gomes and Marinete Gomes. ISP Journal pp. 155(a), 171(b), 176(b) respectively.

³¹ For example, only one person I spoke with could recall a solitary incident of armed assault occurring in Ibareta in 2006. Mendes de Oliveira, Jilvan. Informal interview. ISP Journal pp. 170(b).

³² Vilas, Carlos M. “Participation, Inequality and the Whereabouts of Democracy.” North-South Center, University of Miami, 1997 pp.23. Vilas goes on to make an apt comparison to the life of the poor in Latin America to the Hobbesian state of nature in modern political theory, where there is “no Society, and what is worst of all, continued feare, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.”

Work was also a concern. Several of the *sem-terra* had experienced unemployment, ranging from three to eight months.³³ One man attempted to list the various jobs he had held while living in Fortaleza, but stopped when there were too many to remember.³⁴ Even when one could secure a reasonably steady job, the work was described as unrewarding: “I was tired of working for a company. I worked a lot and earned little. I wanted to find a place for my family where things were shared, distributed better.” “I worked at a *gas station!* I wanted better work.”³⁵ For some, MST indicated not only an escape from the physical insecurity of the city, but also the promise of more satisfying (and potentially lucrative) work, as part of MST’s vision is productive agricultural activity for each settlement.

However, as the case is always more complicated than it seems at first, the image of life in the city as difficult, violent and toilsome was not universal. The sociological platitude of rural-urban migration, in which “rural people are drawn to the city by the expectation of higher wages and improved access to services”³⁶, was brought to life by the descriptions of various motivations the *assentados* originally moved to Fortaleza: seeking better health care, looking for access to education, needing work outside the family which could not support the children any longer, all of which were rapidly becoming harder to find in the impoverished countryside.³⁷ It was hope for better living conditions that brought them to the city at first, and despite the difficulties of life there, some of the troubles of life in the interior were alleviated. Marinete never worried about her children having a school to attend while living in Fortaleza, and her husband David was able to take care of the health problem that

³³ ISP Journal pp.174(a) and 176(b).

³⁴ Pedro do Santos, José. Personal interview. 2 June 2007. ISP Journal pp. 179(b).

³⁵ Interviews with David Alves Pinto and Joseli Gomes. ISP Journal 160(a) and 173(a) respectively.

³⁶ Loker, William M. *Globalization and the Rural Poor in Latin America*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder pp.28.

³⁷ David Alves Pinto, Jilvan Mendes de Oliveira, Joseli Gomes. ISP Journal 160(a), 170(a) and 172(b).

initially prompted him to leave his life as a rural worker with his father.³⁸ As we will see later, the return to the agrarian way of life with MST is no easy task, and asks its participants to give up what material comfort they did manage to find through their move to the city.

At first glance, this analysis seems to provide ample support for the proponents of rational actor theory, the material interest (their jobs, their personal security) of the landless being the operative factor in their decision making process. However, in his discussion of the importance of remembered history in the formation of class consciousness, James Scott provides illustrative analysis that can help make sense of the collective memory of life in the city:

At the core of the social experience of class is the growth of a distinctive and shared understanding of history – an understanding that sets one class apart from others. Taken collectively, these perspectives amount to a shared worldview embodying both standards of justice and their application to events past and present.³⁹

The memories of Fortaleza and the life before serve as an important reference for the *sem terra* of Lenin Paz II, as they are an articulation of their common experience with the structural elements of the Brazilian and global social structure – a core element in the formation of a group consciousness.

This is not to slight the material interests of those who get involved with MST. Indeed, when it comes to the basic goods people need to survive, there's a compelling argument to be made for the moral primacy of material needs in condemning and demanding the change of an unequal distribution of resources.⁴⁰ Rather, the manner in which these individuals subjectively experience and interpret these interests can tell us

³⁸ ISP Journal 176(a), 159(b).

³⁹ *Weapons of the Weak*, pp. 147.

⁴⁰ "The damned impertinence of these politicians, priests, literary men, and what-not who lecture the working class socialist for his 'materialism'! All that the working man demands is what these others would consider the indispensable minimum without which human life cannot be lived at all.... How right the working classes are in their 'materialism'! How right they are to realize that the belly comes before

something important about the nature of social life and the development of a self-conscious perception of one's class. The shared life history of the residents of Lenin Paz II (and arguably the majority of MST's *assentados*) is the first clue when looking for evidence of a uniquely *sem terra* consciousness.

Occupation: A Long and Difficult Struggle

The evidence assembled thus far indicates an individual understanding of the past that just so happens to have much in common with the other *assentados* of Lenin Paz II. How do we go from here to making the case for a shared conception of what it means to be *sem terra* in Brazil or establishing a common value structure? A fruitful place to start is the act of land occupation, something all the *assentados* of MST in Brazil have experienced.

The occupation process of Acampamento Lenin Paz II took more than two years of living in simple black plastic tents on the side of the highway, in often scorching weather, before the participants were finally granted access to land.⁴¹ What's more, some families had already spent time involved with other MST land occupations, living off-and-on in these harsh conditions for more than five years.⁴² Dependent on a meager food subsidy from INCRA, the federal government's land-reform institution, the *acampados* were in a precarious situation regarding their subsistence:

‘I did not want to go to the encampment...[I was scared] my children would go hungry. My brothers told me that no one was going hungry there, but I knew there had already been one month when the food from INCRA did not come.’⁴³

‘It was very difficult. The days were long and hot, and at the end I would go to sleep without beans, without meat, without coffee. Only water in my stomach.’⁴⁴

An MST land occupation demands that the participant leave their old life behind, often severing ties with sources of employment and income, straining family relationships as well. Many of the former *acampados* I spoke with were reluctant to bring their families

⁴¹ ISP Journal pp.170(b), 172(a).

⁴² *Ibid* pp. 170(b)

⁴³ Gomes Pinto, Marinete. Informal interview. 31 May 2007. ISP Journal 176(b).

⁴⁴ Pedro do Santos, José. Personal interview. 2 June 2007. ISP Journal pp. 179(a).

with them to the settlement at first, spending several months at a time away from them while waiting for the land to be expropriated by the government.⁴⁵

Apart from the problems inherent in coping with the conditions in the encampment, the landless are also the target of the coercive apparatus of the state and violent repression. Forced to move the location of the encampment three times, the landless of Lenin Paz encountered the police no less than forty minutes after pitching their tents outside Posto São Paulo (a gas station just outside of Ibaretama on the highway), this already being the second time the encampment changed locations.⁴⁶ Historically, MST's interaction with Brazilian law enforcement has been problematic, and even resulted in violence, such as the now infamous massacre of 19 landless at Eldorado de Carajas in 1996.⁴⁷

While their relationship with local law enforcement was tense, violence was avoided by their acquiescence to the State's demand to move the encampment. The real threat came instead from the landowner whose *fazenda* was being targeted for expropriation by the MST:

‘‘It was only one week [after my arrival], the 6th or 7th of September, when the *fazendeiro* and his friends arrived with the support of the bullet. They had fire bombs, the noise sounds like a gun's bullet. It was to cause fear, to make us leave. And the next day, 10 families left the encampment. I still remember that night, the violence of the *fazendeiro*.’’⁴⁸

Determined to defend his land by any means necessary, the landowner successfully frightened away several families from persisting in their demand for land.

⁴⁵ ISP Journal 174(a), 176(b).

⁴⁶ Gomes, Joseli. Personal interview. 29 May 2007. ISP Journal pp. 172(b).

⁴⁷ See *A história da luta pela terra e o MST* pp.156 for more on this event.

⁴⁸ Gomes, Joseli. Personal interview. 29 May 2007. ISP Journal pp. 172(a). For more on violence over land struggles in the countryside and the connection of wealthy landowners in Brazil to the emergence of paramilitary groups dedicated to violently disrupting the activities of MST and other peasant organizations, see ‘‘Brazil: Movimento Sem Terra Continues Land Takeovers’’ in *NotiSur, Latin American Database*, April 4, 2003.

Finally, once the landless that remained through the weather, hunger, fear, and threat of violence are granted access to land, there is no guarantee that their troubles are going to stop. While INCRA provided food for 3 months after the expropriation of the *fazenda*, the situation is still quite precarious.⁴⁹ A year and a half later, Lenin Paz is still in the process of constructing houses to live in and a fence to demarcate the land they will produce on, and has only succeeded in planting a small amount of crops for subsistence, yet to begin the cooperative production that will eventually be a source of income and improvement of the settlement. As such, almost all of the families of Lenin Paz II still receive money from Bolsa Família, a federal aid program that provides supplemental income to poor families.⁵⁰

Lenin Paz is also the beneficiary of government projects meant to develop the interior of the country and particularly to help land reform settlements in their stages of infancy. The programs supply the money for activities such as fence construction and the purchase of a small herd of cattle for breeding purposes, however are contingent on the planning and work of the *assentados* themselves for implementation, a source of worry for some: “Some people here aren’t helping with the projects, but if we don’t work to breed the animals, there’s going to be hunger on the settlement”, something that has never occurred on Lenin Paz II, however it was also explained to me that other settlements have in fact spent a significant amount of time without food.⁵¹

The process of land occupation and eventual settlement is a demanding task with serious material disincentives. The benefits are long-term and far from guaranteed. If one accepts the earlier described view of rational actor theory, the phenomenon is incredibly puzzling. Rational actor analysis compels us to believe that, in moving out

⁴⁹ ISP Journal pp.177(a).

⁵⁰ *Ibid* pp.175(a).

⁵¹ Gomes Pinto, Marinete. Informal interview. 31 May, 23 May 2007. ISP Journal 176(b), 165(b)-166(a).

the countryside to live in tents waiting for the government to expropriate land that may not become productive for some time afterward, that the MST is somehow behaving inexplicably, or at least irrationally.

Perhaps a case could be made in defense of the rationality thesis that, given the options of poor life in the city or struggle for land in the countryside, the struggle is in fact the most rational option to maximize individual benefit. This interpretation is quite strained, however, as many of the landless I spoke with had (reasonably) materially comfortable lives before beginning the occupation, especially in comparison to the uncertain and harsh conditions of the encampment. While rational actor analyses correctly point out the material basis of human action (something they actually share in common with Marxist structural analysis), the inability to explain the actions of the individual *assentados* indicates a more general problem the theory has an explanatory model for collective social action. The fact that alternative values to self-interest (the driving force behind rational actor theory) are at work is hinted at when one of the *assentados* tells me ‘I worked for a legislator, and with benefits, had about 3 times the minimum wage. It wasn’t a bad life...But I was tired of receiving orders. Here, the life is free. I’m as free as a bird.’⁵²

Collective Resistance: the Political Project of MST

“Sem terra só briga quando é neccesarrio, sem terra só não gosta de latifundiario.”
- MST Marching Song

Despite the formidable material barriers to land occupation, hundreds of thousands of the Brazilian landless have participated in one or more since the inception of MST. What’s even more striking than the material disincentives, however, is the *politically radical* nature of the occupation. The act of not just demanding the redistribution of land, but taking the matter into one’s own hands by living on the land in question until it is expropriated represents a radical challenge to both the system of private property and the authority of the state; an act of resistance. Given the large (and increasing) membership of the organization, it represents a potentially *revolutionary* challenge.

The fact that the landless engage in collective and political acts of resistance raises important questions about their social consciousness, and has theoretical implications for the earlier discussed idea of “ideological domination”. If, as Gramsci’s theory and its proponents imply, it is possible for the dominated to be ideologically “mystified”, then what factors contribute to the existence of individual and collective resistance, manifested in groups like the MST?

Some, from the Marxist-Leninist tradition, maintain that what is needed to spur revolutionary consciousness is the “vanguard party”, comprised of dissident members of the intelligentsia (academics and other privileged members of society who have penetrated the ideological hegemony).⁵³ From this perspective, it can perhaps be argued that MST fills this role for the landless: with a well-developed national and state-level political infrastructure as well as a special class of activists called *militantes*, who are

⁵² Mendes de Oliveira, Jilvan. Personal interview. 2 June 2007. ISP Journal pp. 180(a). While Jilvan’s case is not common in terms of income and material wealth of the *assentados*, we will see below why his comment is particularly illustrative.

required to attend special training schools that teach, among other things, radical pedagogy and political theory, MST as an organization certainly has that flavor.⁵⁴

It cannot be denied that MST comes from a tradition of peasant movements in Brazil that provides opportunity for coordinated resistance typically unavailable to a class that historically, without access to education and often preoccupied with the securing their most basic needs, has had little opportunity for political activity.⁵⁵

However, it is my contention (in concurrence with Scott's theory of peasant resistance laid out in *Weapons of the Weak*) that "neither 'revolutionary consciousness' nor an elaborate ideology, as those are ordinarily understood" are necessary prerequisites to resistance.⁵⁶

What exactly comprises an act of resistance? In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott lays out the following definition:

At first approximation, I might claim that class resistance includes *any* act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are *intended* either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes.⁵⁷

By this definition, the act of land occupation clearly makes the cut, as well as numerous other acts of protest and political action the MST engages in. However, do the landless themselves conceive of what they are doing as resistance?

⁵³ *Weapons of the Weak*, pp.341

⁵⁴ Matos, Marcelo. Personal interview. 22 May 2007. Partial transcript: ISP Journal p.162(a)-165(a). The interview with a member of MST's *militancia* serves both to illustrate the degree to which the *militantes* (at least ideologically) match the description of the 'radical intelligentsia' who comprise the vanguard party. For more on MST's structure and schooling system, see *A história da luta pela terra e o MST*.

⁵⁵ *Weapons of the Weak*, pp.299

⁵⁶ *Ibid* pp. 345.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 290. Emphasis original. What Scott later refers to as the "dichotomy" between *real* resistance and *token* acts (selfless vs. selfish, collective vs. individual etc.) need not concern us yet, as, although I agree with his refutation of this dichotomy as a false one, I intend to demonstrate that MST's actions can meet even the stricter definition of "real" resistance while at the same time having their roots in what he outlines as "the wellspring of peasant politics", namely, the so-called "bread-and-butter" issues.

For evidence of the *sem terra* perspective on land occupation, we turn to a few conversations I had with Marinete. She was insistent on several occasions that what MST does is not an “invasion” or “theft” of the land, but rather that “we *earn* the land. It is unproductive and then taken by the government for us.”⁵⁸ What’s interesting here is her appeal to the state for legitimacy. It was important for her to justify what she was doing in terms of her relationship with the government. MST’s project as described to me by the Director of Communications for MST-CE is one that is “anti-state”.⁵⁹ On a strict definition of “resistance” which must imply “ideas or intentions that negate the basis of domination itself”, MST’s engagement with the state might place its revolutionary credentials in jeopardy.⁶⁰ Not because of the act of engaging with the state *per se* (the aforementioned MST-CE activist was quick to remind me that the reason they *negotiate* with, not *accommodate* to, the bourgeois state is because the state has the power), however in the ideological disposition, evidenced in my conversation, that seeks legitimacy from the actions of the state.⁶¹

This is only problematic on a strict and somewhat more orthodox definition of what constitutes resistance. To demand a revolutionary anti-state consciousness from each individual engaged with MST and to use this as “the basic criteria to determine what constitutes resistance is to miss the very wellsprings of peasant politics”.⁶² In fact, the formation of consciousness is itself a *dynamic* process of thought and action, in which acts of resistance can lead to the development of social and class consciousness and vice-versa, something that the stricter definition of resistance misapprehends.

⁵⁸ ISP Journal 177(a). Here I translate *conquistar* as “to earn”, synonymous with the verb *ganhar*, which was also sometimes used by the landless to describe how they got the land. The most common phrase, however, was simply “*chegar na terra*” (arrived on the land).

⁵⁹ Matos, Marcelo. Personal interview. 22 May 2007. ISP Journal 162(b).

⁶⁰ *Weapons of the Weak* pp.292.

⁶¹ Matos, Marcelo. Personal interview. 22 May 2007. ISP Journal 162(b).

Class Consciousness and Political Empowerment: A Developmental Process

“A settler turns himself into a citizen; he ceases to be a modern slave. He walks with pride, he votes with awareness. He participates in society. His children study. When he lived as a landless peasant, sharecropper, day laborer, or crofter, he was a pariah unwanted by society, a commodity in the bosses’ labor market. The very fact of having escaped that transforms the subject into a citizen. No statistic can measure that!”

-João Pedro Stédile, MST Direção Nacional⁶³

We’ve already seen how the material interests of the landless factor into their decision to get involved with MST, however also indicated that, at the level of ideas, something deeper is occurring. With an understanding of the opportunities for resistance provided by MST, the political project of the organization is fertile ground to look for evidence of the role ideology plays in this process.

Apart from land occupations, MST also engages in several other acts of public protest, such as protest marches and the occupation of public buildings:

In Fortaleza, my brother told me about an occupation of the INCRA building he participated in. He was there for three days when the police arrived. He told me that he was standing in front of the building, between INCRA and the police. The police had guns pointed at the landless but they didn’t leave, resisting and resisting and resisting. And next, thank God, the *police* left!⁶⁴

This story was related to me as one of the primary reasons this particular person decided to come to the encampment. Told with a degree of glee, the act of resistance on the part of her brother was inspirational, empowering her to get involved with MST as well.

The existence of others, those who came before and serve as both an example and source of hope, is important for understanding how the *sem terra* overcome the enormous material barriers to the radical collective resistance asked for by MST. The relationship with others is also a useful way to understand the development of alternative values to self-interest among the *assentados*: “Before I arrived here, before I did an occupation, there were already *campanheiros* in encampments. There are still. I

⁶² *Weapons of the Weak* pp.295.

⁶³ “An Interview with João Pedro Stédile” p.57

already have what I need, but I'm going to help the others."⁶⁵ Note his explicit appeal to helping the *others*, who he refers to as *companheiros*, a word that roughly means 'comrade' or 'companion'. In direct contrast to the idea that all people are naturally or inherently self-interested, he engages in acts of protest altruistically; evidence of solidarity and the beginning of an articulation of alternative values.

What's even more striking is *why* he does this: "Thank God I was never hungry in the settlement or the encampment. But there are *companheiros* now that are. Here we have beans, watermelon, we always have something to eat. But not everyone does."⁶⁶ The development of solidarity is in fact rooted in his *material experience* with food insecurity, something he shares in common with the other members of MST. While the *militantes* have a more conscious and theoretically sophisticated ideology (during a coordination meeting at Lenin Paz II, one such activist made an open appeal to solidarity to motivate the others into finishing the construction of the houses for all the families on the settlement), the seeds of this emergent alternative value are sown not just in the classroom, but in the lived experience of class and deprivation that each different perspective brings to the table.⁶⁷

The consciousness of the *sem terra* is thus an emergent process, beginning with the concrete experiences and slowly developing with further commitment and involvement with the organization. One of the *assentados* grasped this with a particularly apt comparison, which is accurate in more ways than one: "Here's what I think. I have a son now, very young. He's still learning to walk. One step here, one

⁶⁴ "Dona Preta." Personal interview. 18 May 2007. ISP Journal pp. 156(a).

⁶⁵ Gomes, Joseli. Personal interview. 29, May 2007. ISP Journal pp. 173(b)-174(a).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Coordination meeting of Lenin Paz II. 19 May 2007. ISP Journal 157(a). The political structure of Lenin Paz II is constituted of 4 *nucleos de base*, the smallest and most basic unit of 10-12 families. Each of these comprise the General Assembly, which unanimously ratifies all decisions of the settlement. There is also an executive structure of various coordinators (discipline, production, each NB etc.), who meet at the aforementioned coordination meeting.

step there. It's like this settlement, we're learning to walk. We'll get there."⁶⁸ As time passes, the settlement not only physically develops, but the social consciousness and alternative values such as solidarity emerge as well. "The struggle is about much more than just land" one *assentado* told me. "Its about our rights."⁶⁹ While the initial demand may begin simply asking for a place to live and work, the struggle of MST gradually takes on a much larger scale, including a political dimension.

It is ultimately this aspect that gives MST's work its revolutionary potential. While the movements of the old Left were preoccupied with seizing the power of the state to quickly affect structural changes to society, MST's revolution is an on-going process that aims at a revolution in *consciousness*:

In Cuba, they had guerilla warfare, but did they have revolution?...The revolution comes with consciousness...Right now we have many children who are living on the settlements. It won't be us who make the revolution, but as they grow up and become leaders, it will be them.⁷⁰

The long-term goal of the organization is more than simply to resettle the landless in the country-side and get them access to the means of production to improve the material conditions of their life. Rather, they hope to create the conditions necessary for a fundamental change in the nature of Brazilian society, in which the marginalized can assert themselves against the forces dominating them.

Conclusion

⁶⁸ Gomes, Joseli. Personal interview. 29 May 2007. ISP Journal pp. 173(b)-174(a).

⁶⁹ Mendes de Oliveira, Jilvan. Personal Interview. 2 June 2007. ISP Journal pp. 180(a).

⁷⁰ Matos, Marcelo. Personal interview. 22 May 2007. ISP Journal 164(b)-165(a).

The MST's project is crucial to understand for those interested in matters of social justice and imagining a world that is "less ugly, more beautiful, less discriminatory, more democratic, less dehumanizing, more humane."⁷¹ A number of considerations related to the nature of class, social experience and collective action have been explored in this monograph, with a degree of theoretical sophistication that hopefully provides some intellectual resources for making sense of the complex human phenomena known as "consciousness". It is MST's engagement with the people it identifies as the oppressed and its project to develop their social consciousness that sets them apart from several of the so-called "popular" or "revolutionary" movements of the past.

Its not an easy task; the reality they desire to change is powerfully entrenched and their struggle takes place at the margins. However, during my stay at Lenin Paz II I saw first hand the revolutionary potential of their work. Ultimately, it's not in the theoretical discussions of social consciousness that one looks to find the seeds of social change, but in what is done by those who live outside the "parliament" of ideas, "working at social change without knowing what the parliament is doing".⁷²

Indications for Further Research

⁷¹ *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* pp.25

⁷² *Weapons of the Weak* p.304

As my conclusions indicate, social consciousness is a developmental process. It would be interesting to see its further development (or lack of development) on Lenin Paz II. The reasons for any changes in attitude, levels of awareness, or barriers to solidarity could be explored. A comparative study of the levels of consciousness on an MST encampment, young settlement like Lenin Paz, and an older settlement (in Ceará there are settlements that are almost 20 years old) could prove useful in this regard as well, as a means to explore this developmental process more directly.

Also, while it did not make it into my final monograph, I observed and spoke with the *assentados* about their religion. Fruitful research could be done on the relationship between religion and the MST, as many of them place God (from varying Christian and spiritualist standpoints) as central to both the successes and failures of their struggle.

Alternative theoretical perspectives (such as a defense of a rational actor approach to MST, or a critique of the extensive use of class as an operative factor in this monograph) could provide further insight into the behavior of the movement, as well as provide additional rigor and depth to the theoretical model outlined above. I collected a significant amount of unused data on the political structure of the settlement (the NBs, General Assembly, executive board etc.), which could provide fertile ground for a structuralist interpretation of MST's actions.

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Glossary of Portuguese Terms

acampado: encamped person. Used to refer to someone engaged in a land occupation.

acampamento: encampment. Refers to the land occupations of MST.

assentado: settler. Used to refer to the residents of an MST settlement.

assentamento: settlement. Refers to land-reform settlements created by INCRA.

companheiro(a): comrade or companion. Used by the residents of Lenin Paz when referring to one another.

conscientização: critical consciousness, or consciousness-raising. Coined by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

conquistar: to conquer, or to earn/achieve. Used by the landless to refer to their arrival at Lenin Paz II after the land occupation.

fazenda: ranch.

fazendeiro: landowner.

latifúndio: a large farm, roughly analogous to the plantations of the historic American South. Now resemble the factory farms of agro-business.

morador: a type of temporary rural worker.

reforma agrária: agrarian reform. Refers to the MST's goal and a controversial policy implemented by the Brazilian government. Also called "land reform".

sede: headquarters. Used by the residents of Lenin Paz II to refer to the central area of the settlement.

sem terra: landless. Used by the residents of Lenin Paz II to refer to themselves, as well as by MST to refer to its constituency.

ISP Appendix

1. No, this project was not possible in the USA. The opportunity to live on a land-reform settlement and interact with members of MST was unique to my physical presence here in Brazil. Furthermore, the development of my language skills was

- contingent on my living in Brazil as well, practicing Portuguese each day leading into the research period. Many of my key informants would have been inaccessible without my language skills and, with lack of Internet access and telephones in many homes on the settlement, inaccessible without my physical presence in Brazil.
2. See above. With the exception of the literature review and potentially my interview with the Director of Communications for MST-CE, none of this could have been done in the USA. The information about the lives of many of the *assentados* was only accessible after I had developed a relationship with them by living on the settlement.
 3. Definitely! Previously I had been accustomed to evaluating arguments of scholars presented in traditional formats such as books and articles. During the ISP process I learned to piece together and interpret information from a variety of sources, including myself and my environment.
 4. A roughly 3 to 1 ratio of primary to secondary data.
 5. I began by developing the primary themes that had emerged and constituted the chapters of my findings. I then assembled all data relevant to those themes, excluding the data that was not (which was a sizeable amount, as during the ISP period I collected data through an open process of interview and observation, recording everything.)
 6. My community project field exercise helped directly, as I spent it at the same location as my ISP. This not only provided me with some preliminary data and contacts on the settlement, but also helped me develop my cross-lingual interviewing skills, which was crucial to the success of my ISP.
 7. The focus on the development of the problem statement. It was the problem statement that helped me focus my interviews on a single topic and branch out to gather more related details.
 8. My primary problem was the language barrier. My Portuguese was still a work in progress when I arrived on-site. I resolved this by spending the first few days simply practicing Portuguese extensively with my host family before beginning the data gathering process. This put me in a conversational and confident mood to begin research.
 9. No, 3 weeks was plenty of time to collect my data in the relaxed atmosphere of the settlement. I interviewed everyone I planned to with the exception of one settlement leader who was incredibly busy for the duration of my stay.
 10. As I had a clearly defined problem statement before arrival that was simple and relevant to the lives of the *assentados*, my topic stayed roughly the same with the exception of some additional theoretical analysis added as I completed more of my literature review.
 11. SIT had a pre-existing institutional contact with MST-CE and was easily able to place me on a settlement. Once on-site, I integrated myself into the daily life of my host family and gradually got to know the people of the settlement. As I got to know an individual better I would set up a time for a formal interview with them. Most of my literature was from the SIT library and Internet databases accessible through SIT and my home institution.
 12. My methods were determined by my problem statement. I was interested in the motivation of the *assentados* to get involved with MST. As such, I conducted interviews with them about the history of their life, focusing on the time period during which they got involved with the land occupation. The interviews were my primary sources of data. Additionally, I took data from several informal

conversations I had, as I was living on my research site and forming social bonds with the subjects of my research.

13. While not indispensable, he provided an invaluable suggestion for a book to read that later became the basis for my theoretical framework. Other than that, I had a hard time meeting with him due to extenuating circumstances, such as illness in his family. While providing some guidance, I did the bulk of my work independently with limited feedback from the adviser.
14. Everyone I talked to had data relevant to my problem statement. While I collected some data that turned out to be irrelevant, I wouldn't describe any experiences I had as a "dead end".
15. What was truly valuable was experiencing the culture of people who were poor and denied access to goods such as education and health care. Up until my ISP, I felt I was interacting with a privileged portion of Brazilian society (much like my interactions with the privileged portion of society in the States), but during the research period I was exposed to a segment that was not as fortunate. Living and making friends with them expanded my understanding of what it means to live at the margins of society and assert yourself against those forces that are dominating you.
16. I spoke much more Portuguese, as I was cut off from interaction with the other English speaking students of the program. This helped immensely with my integration into the culture, and I immediately noticed improvements with my host family upon returning to Fortaleza.
17. To go with the flow. Sometimes a person can't make it to a scheduled interview, or your adviser gets sick. These things happen, and will not ruin your research. I learned a lot from adapting to these situations.
18. I would recommend first, practicing and speaking Portuguese as much as possible before the research period began, as this will provide you understanding and access to more data during the 3 weeks. Second, be prepared for a lack of access to certain amenities you may be accustomed to in your life at home(toilets, shower-heads etc.)
19. Yes! I would love to expand my understanding and the scholarly knowledge-base of MST, and I feel this experience gave me invaluable preparation for doing just that.