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Making Space for Critical Discourse: The Daily Resistance of Acampamento Luiz Carlos

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Making Space for Critical Discourse:
The Daily Resistance of Acampamento Luiz Carlos

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*I dedicate this paper to the men, women and children of Luiz Carlos
who continue to struggle for the recognition from society
of their right to land and dignity.*

If not for them, I would still be lost.

Table of Contents:

Definition of Terms	4
Introduction.....	5
The Struggle for Land: a Brief History.....	6
Battle for Hegemony: the Theory that Guided my Study.....	9
Entering the field: Living Solidarity, a Profound Rebirth.....	14
Location of Research.....	19
Summary Statement of Findings: The Realities of Resistance.....	22
Limitations of the Study.....	24
Creating the Hidden Transcript: Daily Resistance and Dialogue in Luiz Carlos	
- Within the Jaws of Power: Carving Out the Space.....	26
- The Next Step: Creating a Community of the Excluded.....	31
- Beginning the Formal Dialogue: Learning Together.....	36
- Understanding the Formal Dialogue: The Personal Contexts.....	39
- Informal Dialogues: Lessons in Praxis.....	42
Conclusions.....	45
Bibliography.....	47
Indications for Further Research.....	49
Appendix.....	50

Definition of Terms:

Acampado: resident of an MST camp

Acampamento: land occupation camp

Assentamento: settlement

Barraca: black plastic and wood tents, considered the symbol of the MST land occupation.

Barracão: the main assembly tent

Comvivência: the act of living together

Conscientização: conscientization

Cordinacão: the camp coordination

Fazenda: can refer to any sized farm up to 1000 hectares

Latifundarios: large ranch owners

Latifundios: large ranches that exceed 1000 hectares

Militante: volunteer activist, the mainstay of the MST organization

Morador: farm laborer who lived on the land of a large farmer

Periferia: periphery

Reunões: Camp meetings, either for discussions or for lessons

Sindicatos: unions

Introduction:

This study explores the implementation of MST's pedagogy of *conscientização* (conscientization) within *Acampamento* (camp) *Luiz Carlos* in order to better understand the role that dialogue plays in raising the collective consciousness of peasants newly engaged in the occupation of the land. The approach I took to understanding this process was heavily influenced by Paulo Freire's works on literacy and revolution, as well as James Scott's theories of the quotidian resistance of peasants and other subordinate groups. Due to his theories and the subsequent realities encountered in the field, the focus of the study was expanded to include a better understanding of the physical and social space of the camp and how this was fought for through daily resistance to the hegemonic encroachment of Brazilian popular society.

In order to carry out this research I entered the field in order to live, sleep, eat, and struggle side by side with the families in the legal limbo of the occupation camp, engaging in observation-participation in order to gain insights into the reality of their lives, particularly the quotidian discourses of the entire group. I observed and participated in the daily work of the camp, attended the meetings and the assemblies in which the members debated and planned for their future by holding classes that ranged from the history of the MST to how to properly cultivate Cashew farms. I was also witness to the struggles and hardship that faced these men and woman daily in their struggle to maintain the camp and continue to fight for the land. I supplemented these observations with 10 interviews conducted with members of the MST militancy, the general coordinator of the camp and 6 general members of the camp to see how the specific lived histories of each individual impacted this process of *conscientização*.

The Struggle for Land: a Brief History

*“This year... is the year of Red... we are planting MST flags on every Fazenda in Ceara!”*¹ – MST Militant visiting Luiz Carlos

BRAZIL, NOVEMBER 2006. In a hotly debated election year President Lula was pushed back into office under common criticism from both sides of the spectrum that the “star of the Workers Party (PT) was beginning to lose its red.” But for those that continue the struggle for the dream of a New Brazil under a socialist banner they can take strength in these words knowing that behind the glitzy main-stage of Brazilian politics major strides are continuing to be fought for and won daily by the hundreds of thousands of landless workers organized under red banners to re-write the story of agrarian reform.

While politicians continue to debate, make empty promises and stall on the issues of agrarian reform², the *Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) have, for over 20 years, been carrying on the quotidian struggle for both land and dignity for the millions of unemployed and marginalized Brazilians that continue to suffer from Brazil’s rapid opening to the world economy under Neo-Liberal policies of sweeping privatization and rampant foreign investment.

For those unfamiliar with the basic realities of land ownership patterns in Brazil, the history is as old as the land itself. As one *acampado* (resident of an MST camp) explained, “I am 55 years old and even back when *I* was a child I remember my father talking to me of agrarian reform... today we are still fighting against the rich, the landowners, the *grandãos* who control the laws ... [and] there still exist large *latifundios*

¹ MST Militant, Friday, November 24th 2006 in a meeting with acampados in camp Luiz Carlos.

² One need only look at attempts such as the “Agrarian Reform Through the mail” program devised in 2001 to realize the almost comic nature of official attempts at reform. Wright, Angus & Wendy Wolford. To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil. Food First Books, Oakland CA, 2003, 323.

(large ranches) to this day.”³ One of the major reasons for the resilience of the *latifundarios* (large ranch owners) and their un-equal system of land ownership is that many of them trace their roots to the earliest days of Portuguese colonization as the direct descendant of the *capitanias hereditarias* (hereditary captains), powerful Portuguese nobles who were granted titles to massive tracts of land by the Crown as a way of rapidly colonizing the large and uncharted terrain.⁴ This pattern has continued to this day, with only a small number of elite families in Brazil controlling the majority of the land.

According to the Gini index, Brazil has the highest concentration of land ownership in the world. One per cent of the proprietors—around 40,000 of the biggest ranchers, or *latifundiários*—own 46 per cent of the land, some 360 million hectares, in *fazendas* of over 2,000 hectares, more than 5,000 acres each. In general, these are either occupied by livestock or entirely unproductive.⁵

At the forefront of a broad grass-roots movement comprised of a wide array of *sindicatos* (unions), *Orginações Não Governamental* (, Non-Governmental Organizations or *ONG's*) and other social groups, MST has been struggling to address these grave inequalities by calling for widespread agrarian land redistribution and systemic reform since its formation in January 1984⁶. Unlike other groups who have limited their struggle to the formal networks and traditional political channels of Brazilian politics the MST has proved its self as a true representative of the oppressed by engaging in active occupations of private landholdings in efforts to win immediate expropriation of inactive plantations

³ Interview 01

⁴ Gomes de Alencar, Francisco Amaro. Lecture outline, *Ocupação Territorial e Meio Ambiente no Brasil*. October 2006.

⁵ Interview w/ MST leader João Pedro Stedile, published in the May-June 2002 issue of the *New Left Review* .

⁶ Ibid.

for peasants and other rural workers who have systematically been denied a place in modern Brazilian society.

While its opponents often call such tactics “radical” and regularly employ such popular media outlets as *Rede Globo*, one of Brazil’s largest media networks, and *Veja* “Brazil’s rather conservative version of *Time* or *Newsweek*”⁷ in order to discredit the movement publicly by terming land occupations “invasions” and systematically misrepresenting the movement as a violent one. But as of the members of *acampamento* Luiz Carlos explained during my three week stay in his *barraca* (tent), “What [our opponents] call ‘radical action’ is the only way we know to get the government to do anything about agrarian reform.”⁸

This process of land occupation is long and hard, running up against brutal landowners who regularly resort to outright violence in preventing these occupations from succeeding, police and other local government officials who are normally the henchmen of the local landowners, and, more often than not, local populations that identify themselves so completely with this system of oppression that their initial reactions are to completely reject the collectivist goals of MST militants. In the face of such odds the MST has been successfully challenging the hegemonic order of Brazilian society for over 20 years and winning land for over 350,000 families in the process, redrawing the lines of the “public transcript,” of Brazilian society, a term James Scott employs as a, “shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.”⁹

⁷ Wright, Angus & Wendy Wolford. To Inherit the Earth, p. 264.

⁸ Discussion w/ Irmão Antonio, Monday November 5th.

⁹ Scott, James. Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1990, 2.

Battle for Hegemony: the Theory that Guided my Study

*The frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall ... the unremitting struggle over such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle.*¹⁰ - James Scott

One of the reasons for the continued success of the MST, in my eyes, is its amazing understanding of how this “constant struggle” against the state needs to be won, combining a wide array of tactics from public acts of protest to elaborate media and fundamental educational campaigns that have successfully forced the long-silenced but desperately needed debate of agrarian reform to the forefront of mainstream Brazilian society. But in order to begin to look at these processes in more depth, it is first necessary to address the theoretical context from which these methods, and my own research project, arise.

One of the most well known and earliest theories of the normative and cultural struggle for “hegemony” (dominance) in the history of Marxist literature was developed by and Italian thinker and revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci, jailed by Mussolini’s Fascist regime for his efforts to advance the global communist revolution in Italy during the period leading up to WWII. Written from Rome’s infamous Regina Coeli prison, Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, a collection of his previously unpublished subversive writings, was an effort on his part to understand the failure of Marx’s “inevitable” communist revolution in the context of Italian politics given the rapid and unexpected popular rise of Fascism. What he concluded in his analysis was that while the economic and political structures of Italian society pointed directly towards the “inevitable”

¹⁰ Scott, James. Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 14.

communist revolution, Marx's theory had completely failed to take into account the amazing power of ideology and the equal importance of the cultural realm. Gramsci concluded that besides the physical necessity of revolution, to hope to be successful, one must also engage in an ideological battle against the existing and oppressive culture of the state within the *social* and *political*¹¹ realms, an area in which the Fascist party dominated masterfully.

In brief, Gramsci's subversive theories envisioned the world, or "society" as made up of individuals who were bound together in a massive normative network of reciprocal relationships of power locked in a constant struggle for hegemony. "Every relationship of 'hegemony'," according to Gramsci, was, "necessarily an educational relationship" in the sense that both parties in any one relationship acted upon each other and thus this normative realm of society was always up for contest.¹² Gramsci believed that the larger world, or "society" was conceived in a different and unique manner by every individual, determined by their particular history and circumstance, stating that, "one's conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality, which are quite specific and 'original' in their immediate relevance."¹³ Furthermore, he believed that these attempts by individuals to conceive of their world was elaborated through, "language its self, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content."¹⁴

Despite the seeming individuality that this could imply, he ultimately believed that culture was a realm that could be used to create widespread collective action against

¹¹ used in its *public* sense, ala Foucault

¹² Gramsci, Antonio. "Notes for an Introduction and an Approach to the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture", *A Gramsci Reader*. Ed. David Forgacs. New York; New York University Press, 2000. p. 348.

¹³ Gramsci, "Notes for an Introduction...", 326.

¹⁴ Ibid. 325

the state. As he stresses, “philosophical activity is not to be conceived solely as the ‘individual’ elaboration of systematically coherent concepts, but also and above all as a cultural battle to transform the popular ‘mentality’ and to diffuse the philosophical innovations which will demonstrate themselves to be ‘historically true’ to the extent that they become concretely – i.e. historically and socially – universal.”¹⁵

At this point the reader is no doubt trying to understand how this brief lesson in theory has any real importance to what it is the MST is doing on a daily basis in the field, but in fact these theories put forth by Gramsci make all the difference in understanding the theoretical and revolutionary context for the MST’s ongoing struggle. Gramsci’s conception of culture as a linguistic field in which individuals and groups struggle to give definition to their world by addressing their particular historical realities forms the foundation for the theories of Paulo Freire and James Scott, both of whose revolutionary literature guided and shaped the theoretical framework through which I approached my study of the MST’s use of dialogical pedagogy in the battle for cultural hegemony in Brazilian society.

The underlying argument of Freire’s revolutionary work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, borrows heavily from Gramsci’s works of normative and linguistic conceptions of the world, asserting that, “Objective social reality exists... as the product of human action,” and that the “task for humanity” is thus to “transform that reality” into a world that is just for everyone.¹⁶ If one takes a deep breath and pauses just long enough to take a good, critical look at the capitalist world in which we have constructed for ourselves, it is hard not to realize that this reality in which we are living has become

¹⁵ Ibid. 347

¹⁶ Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. Continuum, New York, 1997. p. 33.

oppressive. And when one even *glances* at the figures of economic and land inequalities that currently exist in Brazil, or better yet simply walks the streets of the Brazilian *periferia* (periphery), this fact becomes *impossible* to deny. However, the question still remains for those like the MST who are struggling to right the great injustices present in Brazilian society, how do we begin to deconstruct these oppressive systems?

Freire's answer, one that plays a formative role in both the continued development of MST's revolutionary pedagogy of *conscientização* (consciousness) within the *acampamentos* (camps) and, more humbly, my own attempts at personal development, is that "to no longer be prey to [the force of oppression], one must emerge from it and turn upon it," engaging reality by means of *praxis* (another idea advanced by Gramsci) that Freire defines succinctly as the process of, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."¹⁷

Yet in Freire's answer to the problem, another practical question arises; How, in the oppressive reality of our modern surveillance and police society, in a society that views any *unauthorized* gathering of citizens as an implicit threat to the 'natural' order, in a society which has a long and bloody history of violence against un-armed or poorly defended peasants¹⁸, does one possibly go about "emerging" from it, let alone "acting" upon it? As Scott points out, "what is missing from [the perspective of studying public resistance]... is the simple fact that most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized political activity."¹⁹ In attempting to address this problem Scott's work focuses specifically on how subordinate groups, on a daily basis, struggle to create 'secret' and 'offstage' geographies of cultural

¹⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 33.

¹⁸ In the history of MST's struggle, one immediately thinks of the massacres of Corumbiara, Rondônia on August 9th 1995 and at Eldorado dos Carajás on April 17th 1996 carried out by police and the military under the Cardoso administration.

¹⁹ Scott, James. *Weapons of the Weak*. p. xv

resistance safe from the oppressive power of the culture and surveillance of the elites, spaces where they can elaborate their own “hidden transcripts” and this create new vision of the world.

After 22 years of struggle and armed with the vast wealth of knowledge learned from both victories and defeats, the MST has been able to expand its revolutionary actions, now carried out with veteran efficiency, to encompass more and more of the public theater of Brazilian politics over the years, helped in large part by a growing awareness and admiration for its struggle, and, in the past 4 years, by its newest ally in Brasilia President Lula. As a researcher I have also had free accesses to a large wealth of public information, books, papers, and MST publications that exist on the struggle for agrarian reform, and more precisely the radical pedagogy which is being practiced in the camps, but as my advisor Francisco Amaro pushed me to realize, to *truly* understand the real source of power behind the success of MST one cannot simply look at the public transcript of their resistance. As the MST itself aims to teach its members, the official and recorded histories that are taught in the schools and which fill their libraries are written by the hand of the oppressor. And, as Scott emphasizes in his work, “The point is that neither everyday forms of resistance nor the occasional insurrection can be understood without reference to the sequestered social sites at which such resistance can be nurtured and given meaning”²⁰

²⁰ Scott, 20

Entering the Field: Living Solidarity, a Profound Rebirth

If we are to understand the process by which resistance is developed and codified, the analysis of the creation of these offstage social spaces becomes a vital task. Only by specifying how such social spaces are made and defended is it possible to move from the individual resisting subject – an abstract fiction – to the socialization of resistant practices and discourses.” James Scott²¹

Even before reading Scott’s words, I knew what it was I had to do; they simply confirmed the decision that had been in my heart over 10 months ago. Sitting, much as I am today, in almost the same state of bleary-eyed busyness, books littered over almost every surface in reach, loose papers sticking out from dog-eared pages, and staring, in the same soft artificial brightness let off by all computer screens, at the half written paper unfolding in front of me I had made the decision that has compelled me to where I am today. If I really wanted to live the change I wanted to see in the world, it was high time that I enter the field to *take control* of my own education.

I don’t who it was who said that the real world is the biggest school of them all (it wouldn’t be at all surprising to hear this from either an MST *militante* or Freire) but, at age 21 and in my penultimate year of studies, I had grown profoundly tired of reading the condensed, filtered, and often less than truthful words of men and women that I had never met before trying to tell me how I ought to see the world. I didn’t need them to tell me that the world that we live in is in a deeply troubled state of disrepair, that nearly two thirds of the world was living at or bellow the “poverty line”, and I especially didn’t need them to tell me how that “poverty line” was mathematically calculated. I didn’t need them to tell me what I could see all around me, what was being lived every day on every

21

continent in the world. What I *did* need were answers, of the kind that you can't find in books.

Ironically, the first of these answers *did* come from a book, but an extremely special one; Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In one of the opening chapters of it, Freire writes that, "Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary... fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these 'beings of another'... to affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce."²² In a very rare moment of clarity I was hit with the real force of these words and before the last word had left my lips, something had begun to change within me.

It was with these words still echoing in my head that I realized that not only did I need to "enter the field" in order to study, I needed to enter in to *solidarity* with those people who's lives I planned on studying, and with these two guiding principles I begin to design my methodology for how I was going to tackle my first ever field research project.

I had read quite a lot about the MST in two classes that looked at the politics of Latin America and I had become fascinated with their movement from afar. Indeed, it was with them in mind that I chose to come and study in the Brazilian Nordeste following a link from a website of their supporters in the USA that directed me to SIT. I had heard many things about the MST but one thing that I had been told from a friend who had volunteered with them in the field was that no matter what people said, they knew what they were doing and were finally offering hope for some real changes in Brazilian society.

²² Freire, 31-2

Keeping these thoughts with me as I traveled to Brazil, I began to grow curious about what it was that “worked” in the MST and when I had the good fortune to visit one of their Assentamentos I finally learned how; direct empowerment of the people simply through allowing them to speak their mind. The MST was giving voice to those that had been excluded, helping them initially with how to organize and how to begin the process of critical dialogue within their camps but then allowing *them* to shape their future on their own. There were no formal indoctrinations, no required classes or membership fees, just a basic understanding of the political importance of the act they were about to carry out, and determination to make a change.

Once I settled upon *acampamento* Luiz Carlos as the location where I would begin to study this process of empowerment and mobilization I knew immediately that I needed to live, sleep, eat, and struggle side by side with them in the legal limbo of the occupation camp in order to capture the reality of their lives and to live their daily difficulties with them. In more scholarly terms, I hoped to conduct an “open-ended” and “qualitative” study of the *acampados* lived experiences, letting my experience there inform the final details of my research.

Living in their midst I was exposed to the complexities of daily life within a camp and was privileged to observe every facet of their daily lives, particularly the quotidian discourses of the entire group. The body of my field research came from informal observation-participation, sitting in on every official meeting of the camp and the coordination and holding many informal discussions with the different members of the group as I immersed myself in the activities of their daily lives.

I supplemented these observations with interviews from 6 members of the camp selected in an attempt to get a rough picture of the wide mix of different perspectives and

lived histories within the camp and interviews with 4 MST *militantes*, Chicão, the general coordinator of the camp, Regina Lucia da Costa a resident *militante* who was living in the camp in order to help in its organization, Francisco Carlos Ferreira Rufino a local *militante* from the *assentamento* (settlement) nearby, and Teresa a coordinator for gender at the state level.

My interviews with the MST leadership were primarily focused on the process by which they were working to enact the *conscientização* of the collective ideals of the MST movement, but I was also curious to know about how they each became personally involved with the movement. While these interviews were helpful in clearing up my understandings of the pedagogy of the movement and in gaining more insight on the daily organization, the body of my interview research was contained in the 6 interviews I conducted with the regular members of the camp. These interviews were designed to learn primarily about the history of the interviewee, told to me in their own manner, and were divided into two parts.

For the first part I asked very few questions except in a few cases when the interviewee glossed over important parts or weren't exploring deep enough. This part was designed first of all as a way of getting to understand the perspective of the particular interviewee, but secondly as a test to see how comfortable the interviewee was in talking without questions.

The second part of the interview was designed as much more of a critical questioning about the level of understanding of the camp. The flow was more direct questioning, mixing in reflections of the camp with definitions of specific words, and also questions about the personal significance of MST symbols and culture in general. The aim of this section was to, in a very rough way, gauge generally the level of

consciousness the interviewee had reached about ideas of collective living and work that are the core of the MST's social mission.

These interviews were all recorded by hand, except the last two, which were recorded and then transcribed. Because of this I was required to ask my interviewees to speak slowly and clearly, which might have been a detraction to the overall flow of the conversations.

Location of Research:

Acampamento Luiz Carlos is located on an empty strip of highway BR112, a thirty minute bike ride in either direction from two small interior cities, *Pacajus*, with a population of roughly 40,000 and *Chorizinho*, with a smaller population of around 5,000. Gazing out at the window on the ride from the major urban center of Fortaleza (a trip that takes roughly an hour and a half) one immediately notices the *vast* tracts of land that are almost completely uninhabited except for maybe the occasional cow grazing in the distance. Passing through the small “cities” that dot this landscape one begins to understand where all the people who *ought* to be out working the land live, with houses on the outskirts often no bigger than one square room crowded together on the hills and any open spaces leading into the city centers. The only other thing that one notices on this short drive is the massive *Jandaia* juice factory that lies halfway between *Pacajus* and the camp on the side of the highway. More than simply a factory, this compound of buildings dominates the landscape, complete with a small village for workers, a large 1950’s era modern church that reaches up four stories, and a sprawling reservoir that looks like it would be capable of irrigating all the surrounding land for kilometers around. Besides its immense size, one is forcibly reminded of its presence every time one passes due to a noxious stench produced by the factory waste that you cannot escape, even on the windiest of days.

Set amongst this backdrop of sprawling fazendas and large rural factories, *Acampamento* Luiz Carlos sits squeezed between the highway and the barbed wire fence that demarcates the land that they are hoping to occupy on a narrow strip of sandy, barren earth. The earliest members had hoped to construct a camp in which two rows of *barracas* (black plastic and wood tents) would have been facing each other in order to

help foster a greater sense of community, but the narrowness of the space has forced the camp to develop in a long single strip of tents, with newcomers adding on to the line at either end. The line is made of 35 *barracas*²³, all of them slightly different in design, but all of them roughly the same size as camp members are constrained by the limited availability of the black plastic sheeting provided by INCRA. Located roughly in the middle of this line of tents, a large square *barracão* breaks this repetition. It is the assembly tent that forms the official center of the camp, a large space under a black plastic awning propped up by a large palm trunk in the middle, and ringed by long roughly fashioned “benches” that are made from the same kind of palm trunks as the center post.

One of the most notable things that I see upon entering the *barraca* that is to house me for the duration of my stay is the visible wear and tear of the camp that has occurred since an earlier visit, with new holes appearing in almost every tent that I am familiar with, evidence of both the hardship and struggle that the *acampados* face daily, and also the impermanent nature of the *acampamento*.

Wandering through the tents of other members of the camp throughout my three week stay, one is constantly reminded that this space is specifically designed to be *temporary* and *movable*. The *acampamento* is very much a physical pawn in the literal “chess game” of negotiations and the *acampados* are prepared at any moment, as conversations with Irmão Antonio, Chicão, Fatima and others later confirmed, to pick up and physically re-erect their camp in a direct occupation the land if the time calls for it. Peoples’ limited belongings are stored in cardboard boxes or old and worn suitcases, and

²³For a rough layout of the camp see map, attached

the tents are sparsely furnished, with the majority of camp members sleeping in hammocks.

Another factor of the camp that serves as a constant reminder of nature of resistance that shapes this space is the barbed wire that is a physical marker throughout the camp of the open spaces beyond the camp that this unjust society is continuing to deny them. Yet, in the context of the daily lives of the camp, this ugly fence has been incorporated to suit their needs, serving as the community's clothes lines or the fourth wall of their garden, and resignified in the process.

Summary statement of findings: The Realities of Resistance

The process of conscientização, of formation is not fast, it is very slow. Also we don't have materials for school. The government has these but doesn't give them to us because we are Sem Terra. We are working with people step by step, day by day because you can't do this quickly. It takes years... - MST Militant Francisco Carlos Ferreira Rufino

After reading a heavy dose of literature about the MST in preparing my self for my project, focusing primarily on the theoretical and ideological work that they were carrying out in their struggle of political and social *conscientização*, I entered the field with what I now realize were overly exaggerated expectations to what I was going to find on the level of *conscientização*. In my original proposal I had planned to focus primarily on the role that dialogue played within this process, assuming of course that there was going to be a fairly visible level of both dialogue and *conscientização* (in the form of Freirean group discussions and critical reflections). What I was to find upon arrival, however, was that this process was still in its initial stages. This is not to say that these things were not going on, simply that the primary efforts of the camp were still aimed at the daily struggle to carve out a space of resistance in the face of many odds and to continue to strengthen and reinforce the norms of the collective community they are trying to build.

First and foremost, I immediately had to take into account the fact that the camp is only itself in the early stages of its existence having only been formed 6 months earlier on June 19th, 2006. Furthermore, as one militant explained, the process of *conscientização* is very long and hard, and one that takes years.²⁴ In this context these acampados were only 6 months into the struggle, having come from lives of individualism, isolation, exclusion and enforced silences so to expect them to be engaging in large and vigorous debates

²⁴ Interview 10

amongst the entire group during assembly was completely out of line with the realities of the camp.

What I did find however was that *when* there were dialogues being carried out within in this space, they contributed greatly to the *conscientização* of the acampados. For those who involved themselves in the daily discourse of the camp there was much that was being learned, and for those who had the fortune of having smaller “spaces” for increased discussion and *reflection*, such as a spouse at home, or the *cordinacão*, the benefits were even greater. Furthermore, the occasional collective actions that I was fortunate enough to witness, when the camp was compelled to engage in resistance and reaction to confrontations with the police, proved to be some of the most important moments of empowerment for the community by sweeping up the group into a praxis of resistance and communication in the necessity defending their “hidden” space.

During the three weeks that I spent in the camp not everything that I witnessed was positive. Barriers to constructive dialogue did arise, and not everyone I witnessed participated in the collective dialogues of the camp on every occasion and in some cases very infrequently, but I realized that these negative observations were part of the reality of field research, and that they also had to be taken in the context of both the relative newness of the camp, as well as the humongous contrary pressures, towards individualism and self interest, towards silence, and towards inaction, that were exerted daily by the mainstream culture of Brazilian society.

Limitations of the Study:

Before I can begin to address the body of my findings it is important that I first address some of the limitations of this project in order to contextualize these observations. When I set out to begin this study, my first ever field research, I had been roughly aware that life in the camp would require some adaptation, but I had not completely prepared myself to the conditions that I would be living in for the next three weeks. One Brazilian explained it well when they told me that this world that I was entering was a completely different reality, even for them. While the details of the entire list psychological effects of this change in setting had upon me is unnecessary, it is sufficient to note that the task of adapting to the reality of the camp occupied a large part of my time throughout the three weeks of my stay. In the long nights lying awake listening to the roar of trucks passing on the highway I often found myself engaging in serious self-reflection about my own motives for being in the field, analyzing privileges in life that I had completely taken for granted until then, struggling with feelings of isolation and homesickness unlike anything I had ever felt before in my life, and in general challenging the ways of “seeing” and “thinking” that I had been naturalized within me. Ultimately this process allowed me to step more fully into the reality of my *campanheiros* (comrades) in the field but from an academic point of view, it also served as a hindrance to the collection of data.

A second limitation that I feel ought to be mentioned were the physical difficulties of adapting to this life. While the camp is run in the most sanitary manner possible, my body was not physically strong enough to endure the conditions that these people had been living in for months. After any prolonged period out in the sun my entire body would break into a severe rash, and at the end of my stay I had begun to get fevers

that were caused by the series of infected cuts and scrapes that were impossible to avoid when walking daily through the *mata* (underbrush) or playing futbol barefoot on a regular basis. These physical limitations served to isolate me from fully participating in the direct observation-participation of camp life, but it also highlighted, first hand, the difficulties that these families faced daily.

Finally, since the focus of my research was on the formal and informal dialogues of the camp, it is important to mention the limitations of language that existed for me. While I had begun to be able to have relatively fluent conversations with my family and friends in Fortaleza I soon realized that the manner of speaking in the interior was completely different from what I was used to, and for this I was severely handicapped in my understanding of the daily discourses of the camp. While I eventually learned to understand their inflections and their unique accents to the point of having quite in-depth one-on-one conversations and interviews, I was still often completely unable to understand the rapid pace of the many group discussions and this shut me out from many of the more *informal* dialogues of the camp, of which I was quite aware existed, but was linguistically incapable of participating in.

Creating the Hidden Transcript: Daily Resistance and Dialogue

Within the jaws of power: carving out the space

“The social spaces where the hidden transcripts are [elaborated] are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power. James Scott²⁵

From its conception, on June 19th 2006, Acampamento Luiz Carlos has been the center of a very serious struggle with the land owner and the police, being born out of a direct occupation of the land. As Chicão, the general coordinator of the camp explained it,

We came at 4 or 5 in the morning to this Fazenda... First the owner came and told us that he would bring the police to kick us out. We talked and weren't able to counter the police so we decided to leave. When the landowner returned with the police to force us to we were already outside. We did this because it's not our objective and also we don't have the power to counter... police power, but we also did this so that it wouldn't be two years before the land was surveyed as well.²⁶

While the story of the birth and occupation of the camp may sound a bit anti-climactic to someone unfamiliar with the conditions that this process entailed, the action that these men and women carried out that morning was one of *immense* political power. Not even counting the logistical matters necessary to rapidly transport these men, women, and children, their belongings and tent-building material, the mere psychological preparations that led up to this process took a matter of months, and the physical act of the occupation carried tremendous symbolic weight. As Scott would describe it, “The first open statement of a hidden transcript, a declaration that breeches the etiquette of power

²⁵ Scott, 119.

²⁶ Interview 10

relations, that breaks an apparently calm surface of silence and consent, carries the force of a symbolic declaration of war.”²⁷ While the members of the camp had avoided a direct confrontation with the police by making the wise decision to leave, their actions, their cohesion, and their unity of purpose were a direct challenge to both the land owner and the police, both of whom are used to viewing these men and women as docile and compliant.

While it wasn't until a week into my stay in the camp that I truly began to appreciate the gravity of the situation that the Acampados lived daily²⁸, the reference that Scott makes to a declaration of war was to be more accurate than I could fathom. In conversations with members of the camp I had learned about previous instances of confrontation with the police and the landowner but in the first week after I arrived in the camp life passed incredibly smoothly and I had begun to think that these hardships were a thing of the past.

It wasn't until Friday night November 24th that I was forcibly exposed to the precarious nature of the camp's daily existence. Sitting in on one of the nightly classes that the camp holds to begin to tackle the very real problem of illiteracy I was suddenly aroused by a large commotion outside the tent. Stepping out to find out what was going on people were running past me and one of them shouted “*Policia.*” With that one word my heart began beating much more rapidly and my legs grew weak. As I looked off into the distance I could see flashing red lights down at the bottom of the camp by where there community has its one source of drinkable water. Around me camp members had begun to return from spreading the word and were now assembling in a large group to prepare to

²⁷ Scott, 8.

²⁸ Due in large part to the fact that I have never been exposed to the level of violence and oppression that threatens their lives daily in the reality of my privileged upbringing in the United States, and therefore has no mechanisms for beginning to imagine these realities.

march down the hill in order to intervene. While we were still only halfway down the hill the police took off, but the group continued on and gathered around the water valve. They inspected it and it seemed ok so the group returned to the camp, yet everyone was talking excitedly, they were worked up and many of them made angry comments about how water was their lifeline.

As we walked back to the camp with the group people were still talking in excited and angry voices and everyone was making suggestions on what to do if they come again, something which everyone believed was bound to happen. The group talked about surrounding the valve so that the police wouldn't shut it off when they came back the next day. While I was still shaken from the adrenaline that had begun to pump through my veins I made a note in my journal describing the act as a "*largely symbolic threat*" by the police. It wasn't until that next day, when the police returned for a second time to finish the job that I realized that their actions, while *symbolic* to me in my context as a clueless "scholar", still represented a very *real* threat to the survival of the community in their eyes. Talking to the oldest member of the community, Maria Ursula, a 74 year old widow and single mother, she was visibly worked up and even frightened about the fact that the police had come to shut off the water, explaining that this represented a direct attack on their number one source of survival and that it was, "serious business".²⁹

Given her perspective I realized that I needed to reflect heavily both upon my interpretation of this act and many others, in order to step further into the reality of *their* lives. In conversation with Chicão, he would explain that they really couldn't do anything if the police and water companies came to shut off the water because they were in the legal right and Brazilian society, and the courts, would never value the opinion of Sem

²⁹ Discussion with Maria Ursula 3pm Saturday, December 2nd

Terra over that of a police officer. As I wrote in reflection of this moment, I began to realize that while these acts were symbolic, their symbolism was,

backed up by a long and violent history of serious threat as the Government does have massive legal and policing action that it can resort to, while all these people have only each other, their unity and determination with which to stand and face down the police. Occasionally they may also have an MST lawyer, but that is not much when the police are allowed to operate with complete indiscretion, courts are controlled by the rich land owners and the laws of Brazil protect private property over the survival and lives and the poor.³⁰

After this incident, through questioning my own initial assumptions and observations, I quickly began to reassess the position of the acampados, realizing that their position was only getting *worse* the closer they came to winning the expropriation of the land, with the landowner becoming more desperate to disrupt their activities. Scott's words began to consolidate in my mind and I began to see how these families were engaged *daily* in a struggle to protect the hidden space of their community of solidarity from the constant advances of the state, the landowner, and even opportunistic members of their own class who would seek to use the camp as a quick way to gain a free piece of land.

In a conversation with Irmão Antonio, one of the most outspoken members of the camp and my host for the time there (an ex-coordinator), I was able to find out a bit more about the landowner, and how he acted towards the acampados. As we walked along the highway on a brief trip to survey the boundary of the Fazenda Irmão explained to me, "He is nervous, very excitable; he likes to explode and is very combative." Pointing to a mangled hulk of a tree within the barbed wire he described to me how the coordinators

³⁰Reflections, Saturday November 25th

used to like to meet under the shade of its old arched branches. He explained how on one particular day, “the owner arrived with the police. He said he had seen us and told us twice before but he wouldn’t ever dialogue with us or listen to us so we had kept on entering. The police told us it was illegal to enter the land and made us leave so we did, but the owner, instead of talking to us, was shouting and, pointing to the tree, had his men cut off all the branches.”³¹ While this gesture too appeared to be largely symbolic (and perhaps even a good indicator of *how far* the MST has come in securing a modicum of protection from outright aggression), the very violent undertones of the act were still impossible to miss, all the more so for the *acampados* who were the real target of the Landowner’s channeled aggression.

In another revealing moment of this constant state of “war” in which the *acampados* were engaged, I was sitting in on a meeting of the camp coordination not long after this incident. The coordination was discussing their serious worries and the danger of letting people into the camp that they didn’t know. Chicão, the general coordinator, explained it very succinctly. “We need to be vigilant because right now we are at war, a great war. We need to watch out for people trying to enter the camp as spy for the landowner because we are farther along in our struggle now.”³² Another worry that arose from this discussion was the potential danger that that existed for these men and women, who, from the perspective of the outside world, made up the “leadership” of the camp. Informed by the long history of violence in the struggle for agrarian reform in Brazil, these men and woman had a great deal to fear knowing that leaders of the MST and other struggles amongst the *syndicatos* have been routinely targeted in a calculated attempt to

³¹ Irmão Antonio 8am Saturday November 18th

³² Wednesday, November 29th 4:15 pm

“kill off the snake by removing its head.” In response to this, Chicão tells them that, “if someone asks who our leader is we should say, ‘He’s in Brasilia. His name is Lula!’”³³

It is within this framework that I began to realize both how accurate and how *insufficient* Scott’s words were for understanding how much time these men and women had to commit daily towards the continued maintenance of their social community of resistance, “won and defended within the teeth of power”. But at the same time, these efforts at daily resistance were also the tools that were empowering them, by involving them directly in the struggle for their own liberation.

The next step, Creating a Community of the Excluded

“Before we can begin to teach them the broader social ideas of the MST we must first work on making a community...” Chicão, General Coordinator of the Camp

We have a method of how to organize, because when they arrive here it is a completely different Before they came they were independent and they lived on their own and when they arrive we want them to be together and feel like part of a family so they don’t feel excluded. MST Militant Regina Lucia da Costa Pereira

By the time I had arrived in Acampamento Luiz Carlos the camp was well on its way to forming a cohesive community based upon solidarity, mutual respect, and a collective way of living their lives, overcoming the daily hardships of the struggle together, but after beginning to explore the diverse histories of its individual members, it soon became clear how large a task it was to bring together this diverse group of people into solidarity with one another. Interestingly however, as I continued to explore their different histories through one-on-one conversations and the process of formal interviewing I found that these initial differences ultimately provided the collective bond that was to help unite the community; a shared history of social exclusion at all levels of society.

³³ Ibid.

What began to emerge throughout my interviewing was that no matter where these man and women had turned, whether it were working the land in the interior or migrating to the city in the hopes of finding a better life, they were forever doomed to a life of exclusion and hardship, robbed of their dignity by both the system of the latifundario or the urban factories that viewed them simply as exploitable labor to be used until no longer functional.

When asking camp members who had come to the camp from the interior, it wasn't uncommon for them to describe their previous life as one of slavery. In a discussion with the oldest member of the *coordinacão*, Calisto, whose weather-worn face already spoke volumes about the conditions of labor in the fields, he described the life of those from the interior as full of, "suffering. I was a *morador* (farm laborer who lived on the land of a large farmer) from another fazenda. Our production went to the Latifundario. We lived in slavery."³⁴ These sentiments were common themes that connected almost every one of my interviewees, expressing in one way or another how frustrated and belittled they felt to have all the products of their labor going to someone else.

Other members of the camp had come from lives in the city, but their stories about the depravity of their conditions were as bad, if not worse as (often uneducated) men and women who move to the cities in hope of a better life fall prey to vicious systems of exploitation designed to take advantage of their vulnerabilities. Responding to question about whether or not he believed he had control of his future before, Andre Euzebio Dos Santos, a proud father of two who would tell you without sorrow that he had grown up with noone because he was born a bastard, painted a vivid image of the realities

³⁴ Conversation w/ the Group during my previous visit to the camp.

of this life of exclusion. “No, I didn’t. I was always trying to get better things, to better my life just a little bit, to get out of the street, to have food. I didn’t have a choice, *it was survival*. Where I was, I didn’t have a better option. People would tell me about a job, ‘Andre the have work there but it is dangerous.’ But it was better than nothing so I would move.”³⁵

Another acampado that I interviewed who had come to the camp from Fortaleza, Antonio Anofre de Olivera, was a quiet yet reflective coordinator in charge of the security of the camp. He explained that he had been born and raised on the land but that after 28 years of working it he had moved his family to Fortaleza in search of better opportunities for his family. While he didn’t have the same difficulties that Andre had faced, simply surviving day to day, he exposed an equally valid form of urban exclusion related to age. “I worked in a textile factory and then a metallurgy for a while but factories don’t want older people because they can hire younger ones for less.” For him, at age 55, “It was tough to find work. At this age you are excluded, no one wants to hire you any more because you are old but you still need to work because you still need to eat. That’s why I have come here, as a solution to my problems.”³⁶

Interestingly, in a moment that spoke to an evident level of consciousness about the system of exploitation, he also tied his conditions of exploitation to a larger societal problem that shifted the blame from simply the factory owners to include the Brazilian government as well. In response to a question about the conditions of work in the factories he explained, “Yes, we were maltreated, but it wasn’t by our bosses at work. It was by our government in the form of the minimum salary. Maybe if I was able to

³⁵ Interview 03

³⁶ Interview 01

receive training or an education it would be different, I could have made 2 or 3 times that, but that tiny salary, it was nothing.”³⁷

While one might be inclined to think that these people would have begun to adopt a very negative view of this world, what I found time and again was that while these individuals spoke to me of stories of extreme exclusion they often accompanied these stories of social alienation with very powerful sentiments of a need for unity and an abhorration of the “individualism” that members of the camp unilaterally identified as a product of the city. Instead of driving people apart, the camp and the secure and “hidden” space for discourse that it constituted was allowing them to speak freely of their separate oppressions, often for the first time, among peers who were willing to listen.

While I couldn’t get anyone to directly attest to the fact that having someone to listen to them was empowering, I did record that in their past lives every single interviewee attested to the fact that they had never had anyone in society that would listen to them if they had a problem outside of their direct family. Furthermore, when asked questions about what was different with their life in the camps answers such as Anofre’s were the norm. “When there is a problem here we can find the solution, but if you are alone, then... the life of the individual is harder.”³⁸

As Scott writes, “...isolation, homogeneity of conditions, and mutual dependence among subordinates favor the development of a distinctive sub-culture – often one with a strong ‘us vs. them’ social imagery. Once this occurs... the distinctive subculture itself becomes a powerful force for social unity as all subsequent experiences are mediated by a shared way of looking at the world.”³⁹ While this process was far from consolidated in

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview 01.

³⁹ Scott, Domination, 135

the camp and still faced a fair amount of obstacles, I was beginning to see how the sharing of their individual stories of exclusion were contributing to increased feelings of solidarity and a more unified way of describing the exploitive nature of the “outside”⁴⁰ world.

The answers that I received in my interviews and with my daily experiences of the camp spoke directly to this “us vs. them” social imagery. In response to a question about whether or not the member felt that he had the power in his own hands to change the system of latifundarios, I consistently received answers responded in the affirmative but which contextualized the question by insisting that change was only possible through *unity*. Anofre’s response was, “Me? No. *Us*. I believe that together we can make changes, but alone, no.” Andre’s response echoed this idea in a briefer fashion stating simply, “yes, together with the others,” while Raimundo Lemos, another coordinator of the camp that I interviewed elaborated on the idea, “With certainty... The landowners are always killing us, fighting us [because] each fear losing his land to the workers. When we are organized we are a huge power. It is much different than being that one person against 1200.”⁴¹

This “Us vs. Them” social imagery spoke to deeply seeded histories of individual exploitation and a shared sense of exclusion but these binary linguistic differentiations and more importantly the collective and solidary beliefs of group empowerment that they implied were also beginning to reveal the importance and efficacy of the daily discourses, both formal and otherwise, that were being carried out within the social spaces of the

⁴⁰ This term in Portuguese, “*A Fora*” was constantly being used to describe *any* location outside the camp, a testament in itself to this point about an increased sense of community.

⁴¹ Interview 01, 03, 04

camp, the *Barracão* (the main assembly tent), the informal gatherings outside individuals' barracas at night, and even the barracas themselves.

Beginning the Formal Dialogue: Learning Together

“This teaching method... is based on the idea that it is not only the teacher who knows, but that each person has his own specific knowledge and all these different knowledges have to be shared so everyone can walk the educational path together.” - Marta Harneker⁴²

“Nobody educates anybody, nobody educates himself, people educate themselves mutually, through their collective organization” Paulo Freire quoted in Harnecker.⁴³

As I was to hear over and over again from people involved with the MST, the acampamento was the real “school” of the movement, in which its newest “members” began to understand the concepts of collective work, communal living, and solidarity through the living dialogue of the camp. At the heart of this lived process was the formal structure of assemblies and *reunões* (meetings) that served as both the collective organization that ran the daily lives of the acampados and the “classroom” for the formal lessons of the camp. These assemblies and meetings took place in the *barracão*, a large open-air tent located roughly in the middle of the camp designed specifically for this purpose. It was here that the community met regularly to discuss issues of the camp three times a week, where they would vote formally on decisions proposed by the coordinators, it was here that they held their lessons about how to organize a settlement organization and what to begin to plant once they entered the land and it was here that Chicão and other

⁴² Harneker, Marta. Landless People: Building a Social Movement. Pg. 192.

⁴³

coordinators met with the other members of the camp to continue to reinforce the ideas of solidarity and collective work and urge the community that their participation was the most important role in the camp.

In many discussions with members of the camp about what these meetings meant to them they constantly impressed upon me this importance. Raimundo Lemos described it for me as, “a fountain of information,” in which, “people share their ideas with everyone else”. Irmão Antonio described it as the, “Executive of the camp,” and when I asked another coordinator, ‘Careca’ which space he thought was more important, he replied, “The Barracão, when people are in reunião because they are more excited, more involved, and they are communicating with each other.”⁴⁴ It is important to mention, however, that these were the views of men who formed a part of the coordination of the camp which met more frequently to discuss the problems of the camp and thus they were much more comfortable in vocalizing their opinions.

Through my direct observations of the assemblies and *reunões* I noticed that these men that formed the coordination were often the very same people that dominated the larger discussions in the Barracão. As interviews with them confirmed, they viewed themselves, in the role of coordinator, as role models of behavior for the rest of the camp and while they were the main voices heard in debate, they also urged their fellow acampados to speak their voice and join in on the conversations.

For the rest of the camp, these assemblies and *reunões* represented a slightly different space, more of a formal classroom than a place to debate but a source of knowledge just the same. In attempting to understand why the others didn’t participate I often asked people and often found that people would shrug it off as normal. Maria

⁴⁴ Interview 06

Evandra, who was not part of the coordination, explained it as this. “Some people are embarrassed to talk. Sometimes I am timid. It’s something you are born with. If people are poor, people don’t have experience to travel, to have opportunities to learn more and so when they leave the home they know they are timid to speak.” She also added that, “it’s still important to listen.”⁴⁵

Maria also viewed discussion as something primarily used for resolving problems, describing dialogue as “to converse, when we have a problem to resolve we can talk about it.”⁴⁶ This was a view reiterated by another of the members of the camp I interviewed who was not part of the coordination. In this interview Francisco Batista de Paula, the youngest of the interviewees told me, “I never speak in reunião but this is because I never see anything wrong to talk about. If I had a problem I would speak,” but he also expressed feelings that suggested he felt apprehensive to speak with such a large group, telling me that he thought “dialogue” meant, “a person who speaks beautifully,” but answering that he didn’t think he spoke beautifully when I pressed him. In the end, Francisco confirmed what Evandra had said about the importance that listening still played for those who were to timid to speak, telling me that had learned a lot about how to plant and tend *cajuera* (cashew tree), something he had never been taught by his employers in the “outside” world, even though he had spent every working hour since the age of 8 working on Fazendas picking *cajus* (cashew fruit) and *castanhas* (cashew nuts). He also added that, “we are also learning about the unity of the people and how to help each other and all these things are new to me.”

⁴⁵ Interview 02

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Understanding the Formal Dialogue: The Personal Contexts

human beings (as both teachers and students) within particular social and cultural formations are the starting point for analyzing not only how they actively construct their own experiences within ongoing relations of power, but also how the social construction of such experiences provides them with the opportunity to give meaning and expression to their own needs and voices as part of a project of self and social empowerment” - Henry A. Giroux, speaking of Freire’s radical pedagogy for literacy⁴⁷

Looking at the different perspectives that existed about the assemblies and *reunões* between members of the camp that were also part of the coordination and those who weren’t I began to formulate a theory that this secondary space for dialogue, smaller and more insulated than the first, represented a location of reflection that allowed the coordinators to gain confidence with speaking and gave them a much better understanding of the daily dialogue of the camp. In talking to those who did not have this secondary location to advance their processes of *conscientização* I began to notice that many of them used personal reference points from their own lived experiences as a way of understanding these communal dialogues of the camp which were addressing and *giving name* (often for the first time) to these complex systems of exploitation that they had previously lived in; ideas of “capitalism” and “individualism” and their ideological opposites “solidarity” and “union.”

As Regina described it to me in a group interview I held with three of the militants involved with acampamento Luiz Carlos, “...in the camps we were looking for a new way of educating starting with where we live, the Barraca, for example, ‘What does barraca mean? It’s your house; it’s your life that’s there. And what about the school; what can the acampados take from school? That’s why we are more open because we

⁴⁷ Giroux, Henry A. “Introduction: Literacy and the Pedagogy of Political Empowerment” in Literacy: Reading the word and the world. Bergin & Garvey, Westport, CT, 1987, 7.

want to work according to each one's life history because each one has a different life until now. What has he felt till today and how does he feel about the future?"⁴⁸

In the process of my interviews and my daily discussions with members of the camp I was trying to understand just this, and from some of the answers I received, especially when asking the interviewee to define something, I could see them using the daily context of their lived experiences in order to answer these questions. Two small but revealing examples of this case were again in interviews with Maria Evandra and Francisco. In my interview with Evandra I had asked her to define the term "individualism" for me. She had thought about the question for a while and when she did answer, she answered by applying it to her direct context. She told me, "If you give me 1000 reais for the group and I keep it all for myself, this is individualism."⁴⁹

Much like Evandra, when I asked Francisco to define the term "solidarity", he too had to think, and when he finally answered the question he employed the exact same techniques, answering, "The [truck driver] who stopped the other day to give us clothes." While these are only two short examples, they stood out to me for the reason that I viewed these two interviewees as the least conscious of the 6 camp members I had interviewed about the social values of the MST. While neither of them could provide me with an "official" definition of the words, by applying the words to their personal realities they were able to give me answers that were just as accurate.

While these two examples begin to show this new process of understanding that was being advanced in the camp, one of the best examples that I encountered of a camp member finding greater meaning of MST terms in the context of their own reality was in an informal conversation with Maria Ursula, who at 74, was the oldest member of the

⁴⁸ Interview 10

⁴⁹ Interview 2.

camp. Her particular story deserves more justice than I can do it here in these short passages but the most important part of what we talked about was her new-found happiness after meeting and falling in love with Antonio da Silva, the second oldest member of the camp, who had just moved into her barraca during the end of my second week in the field. Besides being an amazingly uplifting story of love, my entire encounter with her highlighted how she used the personal realities of her life, specifically religion (the Bible specifically) and her new relationship, in order to contextualize and give understanding to two important terms of the camp dialogue, the destructive evils of “capitalism” and the guiding principles of “union”.

To be quite honest, at first I didn't have the faintest understanding when, after stopping by her barraca to say hello, she had me read a passage from the final book of Apocalypse in the Bible. From what I had understood, the passage was about the “beast” ascending the world, but when I re-read the passage later, I learned that it was also about how everyone engaged in the acts of “buying” and “selling” would wear the number of the devil, 666. She had told me at the time that she believed that the “beast” was in the world and I hadn't understood, but after reading the full passage I realized that she had been trying to talk to me about those who were engaged in buying and selling, in other words, those involved in the system of capitalism.

After I had finished the first passage she then turned the pages to a new one that referred to the divine sanctity of “union” in the eyes of God. She told me she couldn't read but she knew the words by heart and whispered them as I read out loud. Although she didn't explicitly say it, it seemed clear to me that she was looking to assuage any doubts that she still had over the legitimacy in the eyes of God of the living situation she was currently in, sharing a *barraca* with an un-married man whom she loved. “She

mentioned their “union” quite a few times and then told me that, “Here [in the camp] I don’t have a television, I don’t have my refrigerator, I don’t have electricity or my electronic machine, but with out all of these things I met him here and finally I have found union...I have a companion to talk with, converse, dialogue with, share my confidences.” Combining her message about the evils of capitalism, she finally turned to me and said, “Look, what I’m trying to tell you is this. You can’t buy happiness with money.”

Informal Dialogues: Lessons of Praxis

The hidden transcript has no reality as pure thought; it exists to the extent that it is practiced, articulated, enacted, and disseminated within these offstage social sights. - Scott

While some members of the camp were beginning to be able to understand some of the important concepts involved with making this new community through the personal contexts of their individual histories, I found others who were also learning from their fellow *campanheiros* in different processes of dialogue. Andre was a perfect example, someone who had come to the camp with a very underdeveloped political consciousness but an avid interest in learning more “I always like to talk to Chicão, because he is always teaching me things. Also Senior Antonio [his group leader] and Irmão Antonio. I didn’t know what *individualismo* was until talking to them and then I realized I had been one of those people and never knew it.”

Trying to understanding these other informal dialogues occurring within the camp due simply to the day-to-day *convivência* (living together) involved in maintaining their space of resistance Raimundo Lemos explained that each one of the camp’s members was, “a point of organization. You are learning about companionship, how to hold your self [to comport], how to work the land, how to respect your *campanheiros*. If you are an

acampado you learn from my comportment and I learn from yours. If yours wasn't good in the past you come here and learn the comport of everyone else and when we all reach our objective [the land] we will all have learned from the other and we will know our neighbors well.”⁵⁰

The image that Raimundo's words conjure up is of an informal dialogue of corporality, of action, and of mimicry. No event that I witnessed during my three weeks in the camp embodied this vision more than the unity of action that I was both witness to and a part of as, on the second day that the police came to shut down the water, the camp streamed out of their barracas and gathered, almost without speaking, to march off and undue the work of the police and private water company. As I described it at the time,

The work of the water company and the police was much more thorough this time but it was no match for a group of determined and angry *Sem Terra*, who have been conditioned all their lives for the hard labor of the fields. Before I can even arrive the cement covers have been tossed to the side and men are already surrounding the hole as muddy dirt and water is flung into the air. Some of the men and then the children begin to take a giant rock and hammers to the cement covers to assure that the water will never be covered again. Within minutes the first block is reduced to a pile of rubble and wire framing while men continue to clean out the cement housing of the water valve. There is a festive mood in the air as the entire community is out in support, the men who cannot get close enough to work sit watching while the women bring water to the men and then begin to organize the children in a line. Fatima and Faviana begin to lead the children and soon they are singing together, chanting MST battle cries and throwing up their little fists in the air.

In reflection about the event, I have come to realize that *this* is what is so radical about what the MST is doing in the field. Contrary to the popular image put forth by the fear-

⁵⁰ Interview 04

mongering politicians and media execs of the “ignorant mobs of violent peasants”, the MST is uniting the marginalized, arming them with knowledge, patience, and non-violent techniques of resistance that make it impossible for the government to react as they normally would, with the police, the guns, the dogs, and the anonymous black masks that are the symbol of oppression the world over. In this rare moment of true praxis, up to my knees in mud and water as I joined my labors with the rest of the group in wholehearted determination and joy, I truly learned what the MST was. This understanding is still beating in my heart and is flowing through my veins. One might try to call it solidarity, but it is so much more than a ten letter word.

Conclusions:

Contained in these pages, one finds my humble attempt to give life on paper to lessons of the heart that were learned in the field. After 3 weeks of living among the brave *campanheiros* and *campanheiras* of Acampamento Luiz Carlos I was able to gain a privileged understanding of the processes of resistance that make up their daily existence, and how the “hidden” social space created by this constant struggle allows these victims of exploitation to begin to create a radical dialogue that conceives of a new way of life which is attempting to counteract the individualistic, isolating, and exploitive tendencies of mainstream Brazilian society. Initially constructed of a language based on shared histories of exclusion, this hidden transcript is strengthened and elaborated upon daily through a formal structure of assemblies, *reunões*, and the example of a smaller group of camp coordinators.

While this formal structure of large-scale dialogue benefits the entire group by serving as a type of radical “classroom” that is preparing the community for its future life on the land, I also learned that the lingering negative effects of oppressive conditions of labor exploitation governed by norms of silence and separation have carried over from the past and continue to prevent many in the camp from engaging in discussion openly among such large groups. However, wherever these members are able to find smaller, more “private” locations for reflection and dialogue, they are gaining meaning and understanding and are able to relate to the new ideologies being learned in the camp through a Freireian process of “reading” the world through the particular lenses of their own personal realities. I conclude my study by identifying the third, and to me, the most important instance of dialogue occurring in the camp, the rare moments of collective

action that serve to rally the community and contribute greatly to their *conscientização* through the radical praxis of action and reflection. While they do not happen often enough, it is during these moments when these men and women can look down at their own worn hands, can look up into the eyes of their comrade next to them, and realize, in the frenzy of activity that they are playing an active role in making change for their own future, demanding what it is that is owed to them, and asserting their own voice!

De quem é essa terra?

A TERRA É NOSSA!

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Antonio Anofre de Olivera, age 55. Coordinator of security.

Andre Euzebio Dos Santos, age 33, general member of the camp.

Francisco Batista de Paula, age 20. general member of the camp.

Francisco Evaneuldo Santiago, “Careca”, Age 42. Coordinator of Discipline.

Franciso Perrera Hiberu, “Chicão”. General Coordinator of the camp

Maria Evandra Ferreira, age 32. School teacher for the camp, teaching adults at night.

Raimundo Lemos De Silva. Coordinator of a group of *acampados*

MST Militantes

Francisco Carlos Ferreira Rufino. Lives on Assentamento Jozé Lorenço, Chorozinho.

Regina Lucia da Costa Pereira, Militant helping to organize acampamento Luiz Carlos.

Lives on Assentamento de Antonio Conselheiro, in the municipio of Ocara, but stays for long periods of time within the camp.

Teresa (only gave 1st name). Coordinator of Gender at the state level.

Discussions

Antonio Rodriguez da Silva, “Irmão”. My host and ex-coordinator of the *coordinacão*.

Calisto Clarindo dos Santos. Coordinator of discipline.

Fatima Ribero, age 31. My host, wife of Chicão.

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Indications for Further Research

As one of the militants of the camp told me and as I observed first hand, the process of political and social *conscientização* takes years. Indeed, given the influence of Paulo Freire's theories of the need for constant self-reflection on their pedagogy, and given the history of the MST itself, which has striven to explore their own lessons of success and failure as well as the lessons of a wide variety of radical political thinkers in order to constantly improve their tactics and strengthen their struggle, I think it is more than fair to say that this process never really *ends*. In this context, Acampamento Luiz Carlos has only existed for a mere 5 months, and has only just begun this process. This study would benefit greatly from subsequent visits to the field to follow the process and development of the acampados and to understand the ongoing struggles they still have ahead of them in organizing an association and the rest of their lives once they win the rights to the land.

In the greater context of the MST's cultural battle to challenge the current oppressive system of capitalism, I think that the movement needs to continue to be studied because of the profound work that they continue to do in organizing and empowering the masses of Brazil's excluded, millions of poor who have systematically been denied access to healthcare, education, potable water, and their political rights as citizens. This study is especially important in the context of Lula's second term as President. Will he live up to his mandate from the Brazilian people and deliver on promises for reforms that he promised in his last term yet still hasn't delivered?

Appendix

1) There is no way that this kind of project could have been carried out in the USA for a few factors. The first being the different situation of land distribution in the USA, the second being the lack of an organized, mass, socialist movement such as the MST struggling for land reform, and thirdly, the lack of occupation camps set up to expropriate private property. Because of these factors, almost all of the data I collected was unique to Brazil. More specifically, because of the very different terrains, systems of land ownership, levels of police repression, and levels of organization that exist within the different regions of Brazil, this data is also unique to the specific culture of the Brazilian *sertão* within the Brazilian Nordeste interior.

2) No. see question 1.

3) This process had a profound impact on how I learn and will learn in the future. I began the project researching from books and secondary sources because of how familiar I was with them, but once I entered the field I realized how much more important my daily conversations and physical *human* interactions were, and what a wealth of knowledge human interaction imparted.

4) Unfortunately, I feel that quite a lot of this monograph relies on secondary sources and this stems from my original approach of grounding my project in a heavily theoretical framework. In my last year of university as a Political Science major who regularly writes 30 page research papers relying on library material, I feel like this was an example of me reverting to what I know best. However, the actual body of the field observations is completely primary data, with the occasional secondary source brought in to tie the field realities to the larger theoretical basis of the project.

5) Because of the nature of my research, direct observation-participation, I had a wealth of data to sift through. In the end I found that my interviews were a better source of information to use in writing my monograph because they more succinctly summed up feelings and observations that I may have observed in the field.

- 6) These exercises helped to make me comfortable shedding of the typical “layers” of independence, embarrassment, and timidity that kept me from interacting with people who spoke a different language and allowed me to enter more fully into the realities any situation that I was engaged in.
- 7) I found that the community project component of the FSS was the biggest source of help for me, specifically because it put me in touch with the camp that I carried my research out in. I also found the lectures extremely helpful dealing with the ethics of approaching my work.
- 8) The biggest problem I encountered was the adaptation to life in the field since I was living with the people I was studying with 24/7. I had to adapt to a very different culture, realities of a life of hardship and struggle, a complete lack of personal space to reflect over my project, and a form of spoken Portuguese that was very different from what I had been learning in Fortaleza. I was able to resolve most of them by forcing myself to interact with and meet new people on a daily basis. In order to find breathing room to think I would leave the camp for a few hours and explore the surrounding area.
- 9) Yes, a problem that compounded these problems I encountered was the limited time I had in the field. I only really became a true member of the camp in the last week there. Perhaps this could have been avoided if I had started visiting the camp earlier and more frequently to get a better understanding of the life I was going to face there, as well as to build up some friendships to help me manage my new space better.
- 10) Yes. Thanks in part to my advisor, I expanded my project to include a study of the spaces of resistance that were necessary for the dialogue to be carried out. This literature also became much more important once I entered the field.
- 11) I was fortunate not to have to do too much searching once I decided to focus on an aspect of the MST. Through visiting two settlements I was sufficiently hooked into the large network of connections that allowed me to find a camp to study in. Of course, once

I was in the camp, the people I was interviewing were my friends and *campanheiros* and *campanheiras* in the field.

12) I used participation-observation, and a direct questioning interview style. I settled upon these methods because I knew I wanted to live in the field to conduct my observations as a member of the group I was studying and so this first method allowed me to participate and appear a researcher only secondly. As for my interview style, I was only using these interviews to ask direct questions based from observation and thought that this was the easiest way to obtain my answers.

13) I really didn't work with my advisor that often, partly because I decided on my topic at the last and also because I just didn't have time to meet with him since he was in Fortaleza while I was first visiting the camp I planned to study and then on the group trip to Recife and Bahia. During my project I never returned to Fortaleza and had limited access to a phone or computer to communicate with him. Also, the nature of my project, once begun, was pretty self contained. Even with this lack of interaction, he did play a crucial role in my project by really guiding the focus of my study, and by the indispensable advice of looking at James Scott's theories of every day peasant resistance.

14) Not anything very serious. Occasionally in the field I would create little theories within the field based on certain observations that didn't turn out to be right, but I was constantly reforming them.

15) Something that I will always carry with me in my heart from my time spent living with the men, women, and children, my *campanheiros* and *campanheiras* of Acampamento Luiz Carlos is the unconditional and profound love, honesty and hospitality that they gave freely to me. They will always remind me of the large hearts of the Brazilian people, who have been robbed of so much, yet continue to be so full of life and love.

16) Yes, I feel like I have fully adapted to the culture of Brazil and returned to the city with a comfort and casualness in my interactions that I had previously lacked.

17) As I mentioned in the conclusion of this paper, I don't think that I can truly give voice to the life lessons that I learned during my time in the field. The closest I can come to describing it is the complete humbleness of entering into solidarity with the excluded masses of Brazil.

18) My recommendations for him/her would be to try and enter the field with as little preconceptions as possible, and without any academic objective, because no matter how much "studying" one could have done for this project, the real lessons were born of the direct interaction and communication with the people.

19) Would I return to live and struggle with the members of Acampamento Luiz Carlos again? Yes, a thousand times over. But would I return to study them? Yes, only because I have made friends here and it would provide me with a way to return to live with them. My biggest issues with the idea of carrying out this project arise from the ethical problem and question of what it is that I am hoping to get out of the experience and what it is I am really giving back. I have become a member of a community and made bonds that go far beyond academic objectives. I found that my research was actually the biggest hindrance to these relationships, and I have found that I really don't think I could ever be an anthropologist because I cannot treat human life objectively.