BRAZIL’S LANDLESS WORKERS’ MOVEMENT: A STRUGGLE FOR LAND, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND DIGNITY

GEOG 453: Group 4A
Catherine Bruce
Gary Chavis
Colleen Murphy
Nikola Nothnagel
Scott Williams

December 2, 2009
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. **Overview**: Scott Williams and Nikola Nothnagel

II. **Brazil’s New Land Reform Movement**: Scott Williams

III. **Foundations of the Movement**: Gary Chavis

IV. **The MST within Brazil’s Political Framework**: Nikola Nothnagel

V. **The MST and Public Space**: Colleen Murphy

VI. **The MST and the Transnational Peasants’ Movement**: Catherine Bruce

VII. **The Road Ahead**: Nikola Nothnagel

VIII. **Appendix**

IX. **Works Cited**
I. OVERVIEW

Over the past two decades, Latin America has seen a dramatic rise in the political power of social movements opposing the neoliberal economic policies of the US and Europe and institutions like the World Bank and IMF. Challenging the “Washington Consensus,” these new movements have espoused greater participation of marginalized groups to establish more local control of resources and economies. Nearly every country in Latin America has seen the rise and fall of military dictatorships which sought to stop “old” social movements from taking state power, brutally repressing socialists and communists. In Brazil, since the establishment of a formal democracy in 1984, New Social Movements such as the Landless Workers Movement (MST) have advocated for new demands within the context of a less repressive liberal democracy (Vanden). But because Brazil has one of the largest wealth gaps among countries of its size, it provides a complex backdrop for the movement whose overarching goal is to create an alternative political process representative of all Brazilians, not just a select few (Wolford and Wright, xvi). Thus the success of the MST depends on its ability to access political power and to organize its base of disadvantaged landless workers to oppose global capitalism and Brazil’s unequal distribution of land.

This paper will explore characteristics and determining factors of the MST and how it pursues its objectives through formal and informal political processes, as well as its use of public space to raise awareness of its cause and finally how it has formed, and in turn has been shaped by, the recent evolution of the peasants’ transnational movement.
II. BRAZIL’S NEW LAND REFORM MOVEMENT

Brazil’s Landless Worker’s Movement or Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), represents aspects of both new and “old” social movements. In Immanuel Wallerstein’s New Revolts against the System, New Social Movements (NSMs) are defined against the previous “anti-systemic movements” (Wallerstein 29). The “old” social movements, which according to Wallerstein existed as socialist parties, labor unions, and national movements, focused on overthrowing the ruling bourgeois class in a revolutionary struggle to transform social and economic relations. These” old” movements had distinct characteristics, particularly that they struggled against repression, sought to win through a two-step strategy of achieving state power and then changing social relations, and debated over whether they needed reform or revolution (Wallerstein). According to Wallerstein, however, “old” social movements largely failed to transform the world (Wallerstein 29-32).

New Social Movements, as one of several heirs to the fighting tradition of the Old Left and other previous social movements, exist throughout the world. Although not a homogenous category, New Social Movements contrast with the “old” social movements primarily because they reject this “two-step” strategy of revolution and then social change. Furthermore, New Social Movements typically incorporate a more encompassing analysis of race, gender, sexuality, and the environment. Many NSMs focus on single identity-based issues, rather than a unified idea of society, largely due to their distrust of state power as a means of transforming society (Wallerstein 34-35).

The Landless Workers Movement in Brazil does not fit neatly into the theories of NSMs developed by “core” region academics, but we can see the MST as a New Social Movement
because it has developed “from the ground up” as a unification of many isolated struggles for land (Vanden). As the political process opened up in Brazil in 1984 and peasants were torn from their land by economic changes, the MST grew as a leading actor in civil society in the struggle to reclaim the land (Vanden). The MST, unlike “old” social movements, focuses on the central importance of culture in its appeals for agrarian reform and freedom from the Free Trade of Americas Act. It does not specifically espouse Marxist “two-stage” theory on social change, but rather uses the rhetoric of the anti-globalization movement to oppose neoliberal policies that cause workers to lose their farms (“MST”).

In some ways, however, the Landless Workers Movement does reflect the goals of “old” social movements which were brutally repressed in Brazil. Primarily, the MST is an organization of workers who struggle for their right to the land that they need and on which they have worked. This is similar to the idea of a labor union composed of workers at a factory or other workplace. The MST as an organization also provides some resources, such as education, that parallel the benefits of labor unions. And although the MST is largely independent and focused on land reform, the movement did rise along with the leftist Workers Party and the radical United Worker’s Central Union, as well as has ties to socialist movements in countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, and South Africa (Vanden). The MST also parallels the goal of self-determination present in “old” social movements, because it struggles “for a free, sovereign and egalitarian Brazil” (“MST”). These ambitions and collaborations are a few important ways the MST reflects “old” social movements.

Thus, although the MST exhibits some features of “old” social movements, it is largely an independent New Social Movement that uses identity and popular protest, instead of the state apparatus, to promote land reform in Brazil. The potential of MST, however, to win land reform
and create a more egalitarian society is yet untold in Brazil. To fully understand the complexities of the MST, however, we must first understand its history.

III. FOUNDATION OF THE MOVEMENT

As a historically situated process, the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil has been profoundly shaped by its context. Like many former colonies, Brazil’s systemic inequalities are largely a product of Portuguese colonial policy, the end of which allowed Brazilian gentry and bourgeoisie to control an overwhelming majority of arable land in Brazil, while the indigent and subsistence farmers were left without a means to produce for themselves. Throughout the twentieth century, the new aristocracy’s claims to the land were enforced by military dictators, who in turn received both political and financial support for recognizing the existing unequal land agreements.

The dissatisfied farmers and workers, faced with both a scarcity of arable land and shrinking agricultural employment in favor of urban industrialization, began to organize themselves to respond to these threats to their welfare (“MST”). In the early 1980’s, thousands of landless families banded together to simply seize and occupy unutilized tracts of land in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The weakening dictatorship quickly switched its allegiances, as it had no choice but to recognize the encampment as legitimate and declare the land ripe for agricultural reform (Kintto 4). Though the dictatorship declined rapidly, the movement grew in both popularity and scope, turning what had begun as approximately 6,000 families in South Brazil into a national movement of 1.5 million members aiming to redistribute underutilized land to the marginalized workers of society. After solidifying itself in 1985, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, has become the largest social movement in South America (“MST”).
Much of the MST’s ideology is rooted in leftist political thinking coupled with religious tenets of indiscriminate justice and equality. Though the *sem terra* (those without land) are a group diverse in ethnicity and history, Catholicism unites nearly the entire group. Catholic priests and the Church itself were among the MST’s first supporters, so integral to the Movement’s foundation that liberation theology became a major rallying point for *sem terra* throughout Brazil (Kintto). The group also borrows from Marxist thinkers and the ideologies of social and political reform similar to their struggle, reflecting aspects of the “old” social movements discussed above; the Cuban Revolution, for instance, prompted many *sem terra* to examine and identify the same inequalities in Brazil (Betto). Yet although the MST’s struggles did first begin by opposing Brazil’s unequal distribution of land, the organization came to realize that lasting change could not be achieved through agriculture alone. In order for the *sem terra* to become subsistent in Brazil, they would require access to education, political representation, and legal and social justification for their actions. After the end of the military dictatorship in 1985 and the ratification of a new constitution in 1988, the Landless Workers’ Movement found new legal grounding for its strategies. Article V of the constitution contains a clause mandating that the Brazilian government “expropriate for the purpose of agrarian reform, rural property that is not performing its social function,” a point which resonates with the MST’s cause (“MST”). The Movement does not simply await government intervention, however; it quickly became the MST’s national modus operandi to occupy and settle unutilized land, as it had done in South Brazil.

The Landless Workers Movement is remarkable not only for its persistence and cohesion, but also for the grassroots means by which it is organized. Influenced by the work of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, the MST ardently opposes any hierarchical structure that resembles Brazil’s
current stratified society. As a result, the MST lacks elected and long-established leaders, opting instead for a communal approach in which any individual can rally his peers to take action concerning malapportioned land (Kintto 5). Naturally, a few rise to local and national prominence for their bold actions and leadership, but their power is often limited. The consequence of this approach, however well-intended, is that there does not exist a single mouthpiece for the entire group, and their pleas are all the easier for the Brazilian government and other agents to thwart and disavow. Even today, twenty-five years after the fall of Brazil’s last military dictatorship, only 3% of Brazilian citizens legally own more than 60% of arable land (“MST”). So although the conviction and dedication of the *sem terra* have not faltered since the MST’s inception, change in Brazil has been a slow process, as it is often shaped and inhibited by its interactions with the government.

IV. THE MST WITHIN BRAZIL’S POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

As the history above demonstrates, the MST was formed as a product of the highly polarized ownership of agricultural property in Brazil and the endemic poverty that plagues rural families, both of which have been greatly affected by the Brazilian government. Following the country’s independence in 1889, military coups and dictatorships dominated Brazilian politics, yet were continually accused of excluding rural poor and peasant farmers from land ownership. After a failed attempt to propose land reform to Congress in 1963, President Goulart was deposed by the military, which subsequently imposed restrictions on civil liberties and suppressed student organizations, trade unions, and most notably peasant movements similar in purpose to the MST (Wolford and Wright 4). The military finally vacated office in 1985 after public demands for democratic change could no longer be ignored, but Brazil’s government was still heavily influenced by the interests of the few rather than the many.
During the early years of the MST, the national constitution was revised and the question of agrarian reform was aggressively debated during the writing of new land-redistribution legislation. The result of these initial reforms has been characterized as disappointing at best. According to Wendy Wolford and Angus Wright, “any evaluation of agrarian reform in Brazil has to take into account the fact that the movement has made the progress it has with very little support from the state” (274). The authors determine that the first steps of agrarian reform were forced on the state by the movement and since then, the government has hindered progress through its inconsistencies toward reform and its agricultural policies that impede economic success in the MST settlements (Wolford and Wright 276). In this light, the state can be seen as a counter-force to the MST because the movement’s goals conflict with the recent liberalization of Brazil’s economy, a process that was meant to modernize the country’s economy.

With the implementation of free market policies, there has been a major shift from agricultural development to industrial development. Even within agriculture, large-scale producers have been favored over small farmers and export agriculture has been favored over domestic production. The price of agricultural goods has decreased in light of the new export-driven economy, whose hard-currency earnings are needed to repay foreign debts. While this and other policies benefit the large farmers producing exclusively for the export market, they hurt the smaller farmers producing for the domestic market who have profited from land reform (Wolford and Wright 276). While smaller farmers and rural citizens have benefitted from the land reform communities facilitated by the government, the modernization of the Brazilian economy and its accompanying policies impair smaller agricultural endeavors. The government accounts for economic policies that impair land reform progress by classifying agrarian reform not as a social program benefitting the poor, rather than as a separate agricultural policy or program (Wolford
and Wright 277). Referring to itself as a “political movement with national character,” the MST alternatively views its pursuit for agrarian reform as one integral step in building a Brazilian nation that is not polarized by wealth (Sampaio).

Within the political framework of the state, the MST interacts with the government in two ways: through formal politics and popular demonstrations. Although the MST is primarily a grassroots movement, many of its “leaders and activists are affiliated with political parties, run candidates for public positions, and publicly support candidates for various offices” (Sampaio). In this way, the MST can operate within politics in order to promote its ambitions. Furthermore, the MST organizes and participates in public protests, such as the 2005 demonstration in Brasilia, which serve to expose the inadequacy of the government’s land policies and convince both the public and government leaders that the MST is a highly mobilized force whose demands cannot be ignored (“Brazil Landless”). In order to more fully understand these interactions with the state, however, it is necessary to further examine the MST’s use of public space.

V. THE MST AND PUBLIC SPACE

Throughout history, landscape has been integral in shaping both individual and collective identity (Ruddick 135). In Brazil specifically, the use of both physical and virtual public space has played a significant role in the Landless Workers Movement. While the MST and its supporters have used land occupations, public demonstrations, and public displays of art to further their cause, opponents have taken control of the media and other virtual public spaces to hinder the movement and demonize its participants. Yet these mediums are continuously disputed and contested, exemplifying public space “as a lively domain, the site of popular protest and political struggle” (Malone 159). Thus, the MST’s ability to access public space parallels its
right to participate in the politics and culture of Brazil, as the movement is sometimes excluded and sometimes included in society.

During the late 1970’s, hundreds of families began to take advantage of Brazil’s progressive constitution by occupying unused and unproductive agricultural land, “providing impetus for the formation of an official organization” that would soon become Latin America’s largest social movement (Wolford 411). In an effort to promote agrarian reform and maintain land-related identities, the MST has continued these land occupations, earning land titles for over 350,000 families and currently advocating for over 180,000 more (“MST;” Wolford 415). The physical and political use of these spaces, however, has been adamantly challenged by the Brazilian government, which continuously evicts settlers from legally occupied land and asserts they are part of a “paramilitary organization that should be dismantled” (LRAN). Clearly, land occupations do not only secure resources and preserve culture; they also serve as a forum through which inclusion in public space and pubic processes can be negotiated, thus “taking the experience with spatial frontier and using it to create a political frontier” (Wolford 415).

Similarly, demonstrations by the MST allow participants to negotiate the right to public space, engage in political and social processes, and promote their inclusion in society. In particular, marches and protests have been successful in presenting the movement’s objectives to the public. During the movement’s most notable march to Brasilia in 2005, which constituted the biggest march in Brazil’s history, the MST exposed the external forces that impede agrarian reform. Participants “symbolically dumped the trash of society, such as products from McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, and toy guns” on the grounds of the US embassy, as well as hung posters that read “We are returning your trash” and “Bush: world-wide head of terrorism” in order to label the United States as a contributor to landlessness in Brazil (Zobel; “MST”).
Furthermore, because these marches are “still in the minds of the Brazilian people,” they serve to consolidate the movement’s sense of unity and create what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community” (“MST”). This community is further expanded by the MST’s participation in global marches, organized by movements such as the World Social Forum, which create international connections and form support networks. However, as will be discussed later, these demonstrations were highly contested by the police and severely under-reported by the media.

The use of public art, “as an act of resistance, opposition, and assertion of presence,” further serves as a means for the MST to promote its ideals, mobilize support, and defend its rights (Santino 522). Specifically, “murals, conceived of and painted collectively, strengthen the symbols of the MST” by commemorating important events and celebrating a shared identity (Vieira). For example, the mural in Figure 1 (shown in the Appendix) depicts popular participation in a 1999 march for agrarian reform, while the mural shown in Figure 2 emphasizes the importance of unity across gender and class to achieving the MST’s goals (Vieira). Furthermore, the mural shown in Figure 3, which lists names of “individuals from Brazil and around the world who struggled for the rights of the poor,” attempts to connect the movement with various social struggles around the world and thus gain support (Vieira). Along with these murals, other public symbols such as the MST’s flag, shown in Figure 4, help define the movement against the Brazilian nation of elites; the flag is “always present at the marches, occupations, and encampments as a sign of resistance” (Vieira). Because these public displays of art and symbols are largely unregulated and visible to large portions of the population, they serve as an important way to promote the MST’s goals.
Yet even though the MST has been able to access physical spaces throughout Brazil, the movement has been largely excluded from media, an influential aspect of virtual public space that shapes public opinion and often “represents marginal identities as threatening, inferior, and separate” (Mains 253). Because the media in Brazil is controlled by only seven elite families, it has continuously demonized the Landless Workers Movement and “painted its participants as dangerous outlaws, even terrorists” (Zobel). For example, after a 1996 protest known as Eldorado de Carajas, the media failed to mention that nineteen MST members were “shot at close range or hacked to death with their own farm tools” by the police (“Brazil: the Eldorado”). According to Zobel, no Brazilian newspapers or elite-controlled media condemned the police’s actions in this incident, or in the murder of over 1,000 of the MST’s participants since 1985, presenting a biased opinion of the MST to observers both within and outside Brazil. Nonetheless, there are other virtual public forums, such as the internet and film, which serve as a means for the MST to respond to the media, recruit potential members, and gain support from the international community. Thus, while virtual public space “reinforces dominant cultural discourses, it also provides the opportunity to question who has the authority to speak and represent knowledge” (Mains 262).

Because the success of a social movement is often based on its ability to mobilize resources, the MST’s use of public space and materials has been central to the process of asserting its rights and goals (Painter and Jeffrey 132). While the media, for the most part, has generated a negative image of the MST among observers in Brazil and beyond, other forms of virtual public space have served to promote the movement’s ideals and create a sense of unity among its members. The use of physical public space, through marches, land occupations, and public art, has further strengthened support for the Landless Workers Movement, although these
processes are highly contested. Thus, public space and the “ways the physical environment is internalized, embodied, imagined, and remembered” have greatly affected, and will continue to affect, the success of Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement (Wolford 410). Yet other forces, such as the international connections and linkages discussed below, must also be utilized by the MST to achieve its goals.

VI. THE MST AND THE TRANSNATIONAL PEASANTS’ MOVEMENT

As influential as the MST has been in Brazil, however, it must be understood within the broader context of increasing international linkages, which are evident in the development of the Via Campensina and the cross-border communication between domestic peasant movements. Such connections are a product of more general trends toward transnationalization among social movements over the past four decades, as well as the increased feasibility of concerted action against the forces of neoliberalism and globalization. The MST, as an evolving transnational movement, exemplifies the development of a new type of international social movement based a more global perspective. This new context, within which the MST operates, provides new opportunities and methods for the movement to achieve its goals, shaping these methods and goals as well.

The MST was instrumental in the establishment of the Via Campensina, an anti-neoliberal international peasants’ movement that was formed from various transnational networks and domestic movements in 1993 to fight for peasants’ rights around the world. The creation of the Via Campensina was the result of a trend towards consolidating networks of movements across the globe which began in the “social, cultural, and geopolitical changes” of the 1960s and which has transformed the possibilities for transnational action ever since (Della Porta and Tarrow 1). The Via Campensina, having evolved out of these changes, possesses a
new and potent “potential for circumventing local or national-level politics” through the
development of horizontal systems of international exchange and partnership (Baletti et al). This
“increasingly artificial divide between international and national realms” as addressed by Keck et
al, allows these new networks to participate in multiple scales of governance concurrently to
pursue their goals (3). Thus the Via Campensina and its use of international collaboration
illustrate the new processes of transnationalization that have evolved with the growth of these
movements over the past decades. Labeled “transnational collective action” by Della Porta and
Tarrow, these processes involve the pursuit of global justice through “coordinated international
campaigns on the part of networks of activists” and are an important outgrowth of the older
processes of diffusion, domestication, and externalization among social movements (2).

In addition to creating the Via Campensina, the MST has been particularly active in
establishing and cultivating supportive relationships with developing peasants’ movements
worldwide. Taking advantage of advances in communication and travel, MST leaders have been
able to develop sustained partnerships with other movements in order to exchange information,
ideas, services and resources and unite domestic movements. This is particularly important
because information politics, or “the ability to quickly and credibly generate politically useable
information and move it to where it will have the most impact,” is one of the most powerful
tactics of any social movement (Keck et al. 16). The MST works with movements such as the
relatively new South African Landless Peoples’ Movement (LPM), which prides itself on its
“international exchange with the MST of Brazil to learn from their proven record” (War on
Want). In fact, the LPM lists as one of its main goals “draw[ing] on a wider South/South
network to support initiatives of landless people in South Africa” (Ibid). This purpose reveals
the interesting point that although the new networks and connections provide enhanced
opportunities for global action and interaction, the movement still operates within the structure of nation-states, as the transnational peasant activist community must plan and think within the framework of their own country in order to achieve their goals and establish their identity. Therefore, rather than completely abandoning the national context, the international exchange fostered by the MST represents a broadening to simultaneous operation at multiple governmental levels and a blurring of domestic and global politics. Indeed, transnational movements are themselves “rooted at the local and national level” (Della Porta and Tarrow 11). As Baletti et al. note, both the “localized” and the “transnational” contexts are important to understanding how such movements challenge traditional politics.

Despite the continued relevance of national borders and distinctions, the transnational peasants’ movement has in many ways had an impact on how each domestic movement functions, creating a framework in which movements such as the MST must incorporate global rhetoric and goals into their objectives while transnational movement leaders must “consciously seek to develop a ‘common frame of meaning’” to tie together the numerous divergent movements (Keck et al. 7). In effect, the “development [of] a more globalized framing of their messages and their domestic appeals” which serves to “reduc[e] national particularism” is juxtaposed by the importance of global movements’ incorporation of domestic needs into their aims (Della Porta and Tarrow 9, 10). For the MST specifically, the translation of its domestic accomplishments into a new peasant internationalism had a profound effect on its focus, perspective and aims. From the 1970s, the Brazilian movement sought mainly to achieve land reform for the country’s landless population. Yet by the early 2000s, its approach had undergone a significant shift to a counter-hegemonic “global ambition” to achieve more broad societal change of “existing nature-society relations” (Karriem). In other words, the MST recognized
that “it has to philosophically and practically scale-up struggles to confront the larger structural forces that undermine rural livelihoods” if it is to achieve any significant improvements in local situations (Ibid). The MST now seeks to establish a counter-hegemonic alternative to the dominant neoliberal and capitalist assumptions concerning land, property and nature in order to achieve social transformation, while the movement’s ideas and methods have been incorporated into the overarching transnational network that promotes these goals.

VII. THE ROAD AHEAD

When considering the future of the MST, authors such as Wolford and Wright emphasize that the movement should not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon of poor farmers fighting for a piece of the vast Brazilian landscape. Rather the MST is “part of a broader set of political alliances and a larger set of social changes” that encompasses much more than agrarian reform (Wolford and Wright 330). As a new social movement, the MST highlights how a grassroots movement can successfully oppose the policies of a government whose economic principles disadvantage a large portion of its citizens. The MST’s combination of political involvement and use of public space to advance the initial stages of reform have expanded and legitimized the movement’s goals. Furthermore, the movement’s international endeavors have shed light on similar movements around the globe. As Brazil’s most significant social movement, the MST continues to spur the necessary reforms needed to mend larger social problems, but as Brazil’s history demonstrates, change often requires protracted struggle.
VIII. APPENDIX

Figure 1
Mural memorializing a national march for agrarian reform, 1999 (Vieira)

Figure 2
Mural celebrating gender, class, and generation unity within the MST (Vieira)

Figure 3
Mural honoring all those who have struggled for the rights of the poor (Vieira)

Figure 4
Depiction of the MST’s flag (Hub Website)
IX. WORKS CITED


I. **Overview**: Scott Williams and Nikola Nothnagel

II. **Brazil’s New Land Reform Movement**: Scott Williams

III. **Foundations of the Movement**: Gary Chavis

IV. **The MST within Brazil’s Political Framework**: Nikola Nothnagel

V. **The MST and Public Space**: Colleen Murphy

VI. **The MST and the Transnational Peasants’ Movement**: Catherine Bruce

VII. **The Road Ahead**: Nikola Nothnagel

VIII. **Appendix**

IX. **Works Cited**

**Editing**: Colleen Murphy and Catherine Bruce

**Website**: Gary Chavis