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The challenge of social transformation: aims and contradictions of the Sem Terra Movement in Brazil, with reference to the João Batista II settlement.

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For Fabio,
thanks to whom I came to SOAS.

To be the same is really boring.

Michel Foucault, 1982.

Glossary

Acampamento: encampment

Assentamento: settlement

Bóias-frias: casual labourers hired by the day and trucked in from the towns

Cordenação: settlement committee

Fazendero: big land owner

Favelas: shanty towns

Formação:

Grilagem da terra: falsification of land owner documents

Latifúndio: large estate of land

Massa: the way MST non-activists are called

Militante: full-time MST activist

Núcleo: socio-productive unit of the settlement

Posseiro: land squatter

Responsável: those responsible of the organisation of sectors in the settlements

Sem-Terra: landless

CNA: Confederação Nacional de Agricultura

CPT: Comissão Pastoral da Terra

INCRA: Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária National -Institute for
Colonisation and Agrarian Reform

MST: Movimento (dos trabalhadores rurais) Sem Terra

PT: Partido dos Trabalhadores

Abstract

The Sem Terra Movement (MST) in Brazil organises occupations of large estates of land, in order to redistribute them to landless people. However, there is a further and greater challenge of the movement: to question the neoliberalist model which strangles Brazilian society.

After critically examining the MST, this paper argues for a rethink of the movement itself; paying attention to some internal issues such as the collective identity, the active dialogue within the movement and the political awareness of its participants.

Based on preliminary fieldwork conducted in the settlement João Batista II, in the state of Pará, north Brazil, this paper will analyse these issues from an anthropological perspective.

The final argument of this paper is that the MST could solve the internal issues by enhancing local existing values. Since local existing values vary from setting to setting, and there is a diversity of interpretation of the purpose and message of the MST by its participants, the contribution of anthropology is valuable for rethinking the MST.

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