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## **Introduction**

Brazil faces the contradictory situation of disposing of a large amount of unproductive land concentrated in the hands of few owners while millions of people are denied the access to land. The Brazilian land question is complex and rooted in the colonial history. Notwithstanding decades of debate, today the need for an agrarian reform has become essential viewing for even the most reticent.

The MST Movimento Sem Terra (or Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra -Landless Movement), the largest Latin American social movement, represents today the major challenge for land concentration. It aims to promote the Agrarian Reform through an active process of land occupation and negotiations with the Brazilian institutions. The MST also questions the neoliberalist dominant model and in this perspective it struggles for a process of social transformation in which peasants are active agents. However the social transformation so far has not started. In fact there are several hindrances and conditions to realise in order to make it happen.

This dissertation deals with the possibility to build a new society based on brotherly principles (as the MST wishes) in the era of cable TV and massive globalisation. Is it possible for peasants to boost a social transformation? What are those conditions, internal to the MST, that could bring about such a revolution?

The argument of this dissertation is that there are several internal conditions which are required in order to realise the social transformation. These will be analysed in the light of the preliminary fieldwork, that I conducted during the month of July 2003 at the Sem Terra settlement "João Batista II", in the region of Pará, northern Brazil. The analysis of

external conditions for the social transformation is beyond the scope of this paper. On the other hand, potential areas of internal discussion for MST will be highlighted.

Following Escobar (1992), the present paper argues for a greater engagement of social movements research in anthropology. Building up from Touraine, Escobar (ibid.) highlights the necessity to insert the analysis of social movements in their cultural and historical framework. However, if Escobar overemphasises the potentiality of social movements, this paper will balance expectations and reality, the challenge and the constraints, looking at those basic internal issues that the movement has to resolve in order to promote the social change.

## **Organisation**

This dissertation begins with a bibliographic part, which aims at presenting the problematic Brazilian reality of social and economical inequalities, focusing on the issue of land concentration. It will then introduce the MST, which is one of the most successful social movements acting in Latin America, its theoretical base, its strategy, the action, the repression it faced and still faces, the enemies and supporters. I will briefly introduce the João Batista II settlement and describe the way I conducted the preliminary fieldwork. This part has been written in an effort to provide a clear understanding of the context for the following section.

Since MST action covers almost the whole country, it faces many different and manifold realities; this has to be taken into account to avoid misleading generalisations.

The overview of the land struggle in Brazil does not do justice to this multiplicity of realities but is sufficient for the understanding of how MST has been shaped by historical events.

The second part of the dissertation is concerned with the challenges that the MST has to face, and it will go into the issues of collective identity, internal relationships and political awareness of those who join the movement. These are the conditions the paper argues are necessary for a social movement such as the MST to promote a social change. The paper will also deal with what is here considered a hindrance to the process of social change: the clash existing between the reality of MST settlements, with clear reference to João Batista II, and the images peasants perceive from the media, in particular television, the source of illusions and fake convictions. However, television will also be considered as part of the existing cultural domain, and in this sense a dynamic, inevitable, representation of the community itself.

The paper concludes arguing for the enhancement of local existing values, as a concrete chance for the MST to rethink about internal issues in the light of a social transformation, with the contribute of an ethnographic approach.

## **PART I**

### **Land concentration and its challenge**

#### **I.1: Brazil: a paradoxical reality**

Brazil is living through one of the most ridiculous and dramatic paradoxes: 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, (Stédile J. P., 2002). Remarkably, there are 262 farmers who own 40,000,000 hectares of land (Bradford S., 2003). Three main phenomena in the last 150 years brought about this land concentration, which today strangles many Brazilian small farmers.

The **first** has been the privatisation of huge amounts of public land, following the Lei de Terras (Lands' Law) of 1850, which stated that whoever paid an amount of money to the Governor would become the legal owner of a parcel of land. This law excluded all the peasants who were not able to pay from becoming landowners, in particular freed black slaves who had to migrate to the ports, and work in the docks (Stédile J. P., 2002).

Moreover, in many cases fazenderos (landowners) deceptively deprived small farmers of land: a pernicious form of corruption, which led to the creation of latifúndio, was, in fact, the practice of grilagem da terra. This consisted of the falsification of documents which fazenderos were adopting to expel settled farmers from those parcels they wanted to absorb. The name "grilagem" comes from the act of putting fake documents in a box with a cricket (grilo in Portuguese) in order to make them look convincingly old and genuine. Consequences of grilagem were dramatic: violent expulsions, opponents shot dead, entire families and indigenous communities suddenly moved from what was their home and with often no other option but to migrate to the cities

The **second** cause has been the support to big agri-industries by means of subsidised and plentiful rural credit by the military regime after 1964, in order to boost production for export<sup>1</sup>. This strategy was implemented to the detriment of the economy of small farmers: not only were they not benefiting from any subsidy, but the negative effects of the adopted policies on them were also totally ignored by policy makers.

The **third** phenomenon has been the mechanisation of agriculture and the introduction of the use of chemicals during the 1970s and 1980s, decades of dictatorship. A primary effect of this process has been rural unemployment showing that Brazil was not ready to reorganise the labour surplus.

The congruence of these phenomena favoured large-scale agri-business and the concentration of land and agricultural structures in the hands of few. With this huge fall in land availability, the rural population faced only two options: either to stay in the countryside working for fazenderos, often in over-exploited conditions, or migrate to big cities trying to seek their own fortune.

In the first case, most small farmers became just *bóias-frias*, casual labourers hired by the day and trucked in from the hamlets at low cost, depending on the fazenda or multinationals' peak needs.

In the second case, thousands of rural families poured into the cities, which were not ready to offer them decent employment and living standards. This massive exodus from the countryside to big cities (during the 1960s and 1970s) revealed dramatic problems of social integration and unemployment. Most people in fact did not have enough material assets nor any specific labour skills, leading them to survive thanks only to the informal economy at the

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<sup>1</sup> This process involved also mono cropping, which needs a strong support of chemical inputs in order to keep the soil productive. Ongoing chemical use might compromise soil sterility and lead to water pollution.

borders of society, in shanty towns and, often, to resort to crime. The latter consists mainly of thefts, prostitution and drug-trafficking, becoming the new economy of the poor, an essential instrument to cope with hunger (Sella, A., 2002:24). In sum, in Brazil urbanisation has been the other side of the coin of land concentration.

The Brazilian paradox lies in the existence of a law in the Constitution, which guarantees the agrarian reform. The Estatuto da Terra, Land Statute, known as Law 4504/64, revised in 1988 and still in force, allows the expropriation of unproductive and oversized latifúndios, and its redistribution to fulfil social function. However the latter ambiguous concept created a "loophole that [...] greatly benefited estate owners" (Bradford S. & Rocha J., 2002:51) and the existing links between politicians, landowners and agri-businessmen meant that the Law was never applied. Furthermore, alliances between poor people following personal interests and rampant politicians seeking votes kept society divided and weak. Weyland indicates the phenomenon of "clientelism<sup>2</sup>" as fragmenting the state and reducing its powers. "Since the Brazilian state has 'dialectically' lost its capacity for coordinated action, it cannot overrule elite opposition and enact redistributive reform on its own initiative" (Weyland K., 1996:5).

As the sociologist Martins de Souza eloquently pointed out, Brazil went from being a country where men were enslaved but the land was free to a country where men were free but the land was not (Martins de Souza J., 1999:76).

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<sup>2</sup> "Clientelism" refers to the relationship between local politicians and the lower strata of society, and involves economic favours/rewards, in exchange for votes and support (Correia C., 2000:24)

## II.1: MST: history and aims

It is in this dual scenario of urbanisation/land concentration that the MST was born in 1984, not casually marking the end of a period of dictatorship which lasted 20 years (1964-1985). In this climate of revolt and repression, freedom of speech and demonstrations were curtailed whereas land occupations started to spread nation-wide, many of them initially independent and unconnected.

After democratisation, the question became a chance to unify internal divisions and external opposition (Correia C., 2000:14). In fact, democratisation gave the opportunity to thousands of peasants and urban excluded to fight for land and for a more egalitarian society, and at the same time for a coalition of fazenderos, agri-élites, armies, politicians and multinationals to form against them. Thus the MST grew out of repressed struggles aiming to interrupt a hegemony which, as described before, has been built on by deception and violence since at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

MST is probably the most ambitious contemporary social movement in Latin America, since it struggles for land distribution in one of the most unequal but natural resource rich countries of the world<sup>3</sup>. It is an ambitious movement not only because it aims to distribute latifundios to poor landless people, but mainly because its project is to challenge the dominant neoliberalist model aiming at eradicating those inequities which strangle Brazilian society at all levels. This means to transform radically the conditions which rule the society at political, economical, cultural and religious levels, offering equal basic conditions to everyone. It can be said that MST, like many other New Social Movements (NSMs)<sup>4</sup> in Latin

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Human Development Report 2003 Brazil Gini-Coefficient is the 6<sup>th</sup> in the world for inequality, referring to the country's economic wealth ([www.undp.org/hdr2003](http://www.undp.org/hdr2003)). Gini-coefficient can be referred also to land tenure, it varies between 0 and 1; if it was 1 all land owners would have the same amount of land, if it was 0 one owner would possess the whole land. In 1999 Gini-coefficient for land concentration in Brazil was 0.854.

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of NSMs see Escobar & Alvarez (1992).

America, arose to challenge “the state’s economic and political models and called into question authoritarian and hierarchical ways of doing politics” (Escobar & Alvarez, 1992:2) as Escobar and Alvarez aptly pointed out.

In this light the Agrarian Reform assumes a wider and more radical meaning: it becomes an instrument to redistribute political consciousness and social dignity to those who, for centuries, have been excluded from democracy and active citizenship, when “the exclusion of farm workers from civil rights, citizenship, and political participation [was] directly connected to the survival of authoritarianism and social despotism” (de Almeida & Sánchez, 2000:18).

In this scenario land becomes not only the space for the rural production, but an arena for the collectivity, which starts benefiting from equal structural, material and social conditions to work the land, in which “passive” peasants turn into powerful actors fighting for land and political participation (Martins M. D., 2000:37).

João Pedro Stédile<sup>5</sup>, one of MST’s historical leaders and founder, who considers a classical agrarian reform and the democratisation of land today only a naive objective, best states the challenge MST is currently facing. According to him, the survival of millions of farmers’ depends on the transformation of the whole economic model (Sella, A., 2002:11), and land reform is a means to achieve this. The land struggle is forged by its historical period, adapting to the contemporary events. Stédile acknowledges how the latter require a commitment that goes beyond the redistribution of land, rather the need to engage in a wide social transformation.

[...][MST] is a farmers’ movement that has been transformed and politicised as a result of the advance of capitalism, of Neoliberalism. If the fight we are carrying on today had been waged in the 1930s [...] it would have just been a

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<sup>5</sup> João Pedro Stédile himself, a Professor of Economics at The University of Rio Grande do Sul, is one of the most vocal and visible leaders of the MST national steering committee.

movement for agrarian reform, seeking only to meet the needs of its own sector (Stédile J.P., 2002).

This shows how important it is to adopt for the study of the movement a historical perspective, which emphasises the local framework.

However, MST leaders are aware that land reform is not the panacea to fight all inequalities of Brazilian society, rather it is the most powerful instrument, and that "what makes the difference is who controls it" (Martins M.D., 2000:35). In this light the MST argues for an active involvement of the masses in the political life, which, according to the movement, is only possible through the engagement and organisation of MST.

## **II.2: Theoretical basis of MST**

In order to understand which critical points of MST which will be discussed, it is of primary importance to introduce the theoretical streams that influenced the formation of MST. The theoretical basis for the new model of development arose from the necessity to interrupt the deprivation faced by thousands of people living both in the cities and in the countryside. Building up from socialism MST considers the capitalist model itself as responsible for the existence of social inequalities in the world today. Furthermore, it aims to build the consciousness for the necessity for social ownership of the means of production (Martins, M.D., 2000:33). In fact, if capitalism highlights the importance of owning capital in the productive process, to the detriment of those who possess only their labour power, MST counteracts proposing a new productive model based on the supremacy of labour over capital. For this reason people embracing MST's project are those who, amongst the three productive factors described by economists -labour, land, and capital - own only the first.

Thus, according to MST, land is understood as a means to emphasise the labour, in contrast to those agri-policies which privileged national and multinational capital.

In contrast to the neoliberalist view, the pivotal subject of the Sem Terra struggle becomes the **collectivity**, so that the social and productive unit MST refers to is never the individual farmer, but the family. To challenge the dominant model, MST believes in the organised mass of people, as the only force that can bring about social change: the mass struggle becomes the instrument of challenge (Stédile J.P., 2002). MST's dream is clearly and officially a socialist dream.

Since the 1970s the theoretical basis of MST has been highly influenced by **Liberation Theology**. The latter believes in the active commitment of oppressed struggles, and in this sense the oppressed become the historical subject of a liberation which leads to a more equal society. Liberation theology followers supported the Sem Terra struggle above all during the dictatorship, when the Church was the only institution capable of challenging the military regime (Correia C., 2000:12) and offered solidarity to the excluded. In that context liberation assumed a political character: it was not only a liberation restricted to the sin in a Christian sense, but also a liberation with a historical dimension and economic, political and cultural legacies. This aspect is very important in building the collective Sem Terra identity and fomenting the struggle.

Liberation Theology shares with the Marxist doctrine the critique of capitalism, seen as the source of the oppression of the masses, and the proposition of new ideology of liberation, engaging in a concrete struggle. However, this discipline never embraced the Marxist atheist view nor its philosophy of dialectic materialism, consequently the mainstream churches often distanced themselves from Marxist ideology.

The strong link between Liberation Theology and landless struggle gave birth to the CPT Commission Pastoral da Terra -Pastoral Land Commission- in 1975. Padre Adriano Sella,

member of CPT and professor of Theological Ethics at Belém, resumes the commitment of Christians in the land struggle by saying “we believe that our dream has also been Jesus’ one: land for everybody” (Sella A., 2002:31).

### **II.3: Struggle and repression**

The instrument of Sem Terra is the **struggle**, expressed by an active occupation of land. MST believes in nothing else but action (MST, 2000). Struggle allows access to social and physical assets through a direct action by the excluded who live on the outskirts of the cities. People have their lives transformed through the MST, as it will be argued in the second part. MST, through the struggle, stimulates a process of active citizenship, promoting the exercise of people power.

Unfortunately struggles often face harsh repression. This repression is organised by landowners and their pistoleros (gunmen), often with the complicity of the police. They force people to evacuate from the occupied lands destroying the small plots cultivated for subsistence. Over 1,600 peasants and activists have been killed in land conflicts since 1984 in Brazil<sup>6</sup>. The cruelest repression so far has been that in Eldorado dos Carajás, in south Pará, in 1996 when 19 Sem Terra were shot dead by the Military Police of Pará in an MST camp<sup>7</sup>. The massacre, ordered by the state governor, went unpunished, and today the 17<sup>th</sup> April, the day of the repression, has become the International day of farmer struggle. MST every year organises marches and events to commemorate the massacre; everything is done to enhance the Sem Terra identity and foment resistance.

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<sup>6</sup> From [www.corporatewatch.org.uk/magazine/issue8/cwglob5.html](http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/magazine/issue8/cwglob5.html).

<sup>7</sup> For further sources on the massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás visit [www.mstbrazil.org](http://www.mstbrazil.org).

## II.4: MST strategy

MST's plan is to challenge the present neoliberalist model by three main steps, summed up in the slogan "Ocupar, Resistir, Produzir" (Occupy, Resist, Produce). Occupation of the land, resistance is towards the political and military repression, and then, finally, the production of food on the occupied land (MST, 2001:24). The third concept is actually broader since it includes the "production" of new people through a process of education and politicisation.

In practice, in order to redistribute land to those who have been excluded, MST's strategy is to occupy those latifúndios which are not productive or which have been obtained by the practice of grilagem. This phase is called acampamento (encampments so-called due to the precariousness of the situation) and it can last several years, during which MST local leaders struggle with local government and INCRA (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária) for the application of the Land Statute. INCRA is the federal government agency in charge of land distribution, an organ that mediates the requests of the landless. The very first occupation of MST, prior to the massive one in the fields, generally occurs at INCRA offices, to obtain a direct and visible impact on the organ that will then legalise the land. Occupations can last several years; they are a form of resistance that create solidarity amongst the participants. Once Sem Terra obtain legal entitlement to a piece of land, physical infrastructures are built on the encampment transforming the latter into a real assentamento, settlement, which is a permanent structure that nobody can disrupt anymore. This process has so far distributed 20,000,000 hectares of land to 350,000 Brazilian families<sup>8</sup> and, most importantly, has given a social dignity back to people hitherto excluded from society.

When land finally belongs to the peasants, MST's next commitment is to provide financial resources, technical infrastructures, health, education and political formation first to

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<sup>8</sup> From [www.mstbrazil.org](http://www.mstbrazil.org) .

the rural encampment and then to the settlements. In the settlements the process entails building houses, schools, health centres, organising agro co-operatives, obtaining access to credit for production, etc... . Furthermore, MST creates a social network of aid between settlements and encampments, enhancing the solidarity amongst communities<sup>9</sup>. In order to enhance the communication among all Sem Terra the movement has set up a radio station<sup>10</sup> and established a newspaper, *Jornal Sem Terra*, which provides monthly updates on events associated with the land question. The activists plan everything.

The strongest MST commitment in the settlements is probably that of **education**. From the encampment MST organises a school for both children and illiterate adults. In fact the movement considers "knowledge, culture and information as means of power" (Stédile in Sella A., 2002:71) that Sem Terra need to achieve in order to struggle. In this light the school does not represent only the chance of learning how to read and write, rather it is a way to gain the instruments to analyse contemporary society and consciously challenge the related issues. This pedagogical method has been highly forged by that of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire<sup>11</sup>, whose view was that literacy can serve as an vehicle of empowerment, through the process of "conscientização", consciousness-raising. Following Freire's idea that "a settlement, precisely because it is a productive unit, should also be a pedagogic unit" (Freire quoted in Martins M.D., 2000:39), the MST emphasises the education as a way to build a Sem Terra collective identity, as will be described later.

The peculiarity of the Sem Terra school is that the educators are the activists, those most involved in the MST organisation, so that students soon learn MST values, the challenges and the problems it faces.

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<sup>9</sup> Each settlement pays a "tax" of 2% of their revenues to the administrators of the movement at the state level (de Almeida & Sánchez, 2000:16)

<sup>10</sup> It is now working only in the South of Brazil, where the settlements are older, but the project is to extend it nation-wide (personal communication of a João Batista II militant).

<sup>11</sup> Pedagogue Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is the man whose revolutionary educational programme promised to eradicate illiteracy but was abruptly ended by the military government after the 1964 coup. He was arrested and exiled; other countries benefited from his methods while Brazilian education stagnated (Bradford & Rocha, 2002:112). He collaborated with MST, many Sem Terra schools are named in his memory.

Critiques of education as an instrument of indoctrination are frequent. Even some activists find a lack of self-critique and creativity in the pedagogic methods of MST schools (Bradford & Rocha, 2002). However the process of transforming illiterate peasants into politically aware teachers with their own creative method requires years and is a big challenge for the MST. It is a process that requires time and that needs to adapt itself to different realities.

## **II.5: Structure of MST**

In order to organise thousands of landless people, a movement needs a complex organisation which, in the case of MST, is reflected in a pyramidal structure.

MST developed first in the south of Brazil, and then spread throughout the country. This means that the movement is still young in the North and Northeast regions. Today MST works in 23 states out of the 27 of Brazil; in each of them there is a Regional Co-ordination Committee (Direção Regional), whose members are elected by each settlement committee (Cordenação) and which elects the members for the State Council (Direção Estadual). The latter responds to the National Council (Direção Nacional), the most important body of decision, made by 18 elected members and three permanent leaders.

The MST "soldiers", soul and activists of the organisation, are called militantes, militants. They are those who recruit potential settlers in the cities, who promote their political formation through debates, meetings and training. Militants also organise the day-to-day life in the camps, coping with the threats of landowners and police, and they set up the first social structure of the future assentamento. In fact each settlement is organised since the encampment phase by grouping together more or less a dozen families, generally friends or relatives, in núcleos (units). Each núcleo elects two representatives, a man and a

woman, which, together with the militants, participate in the weekly meetings of the settlement committee, the Cordenação.

Other pivotal roles emerge during the occupation: the responsáveis are those responsible for the organisation of each social or productive sector (education, health, production, security, discipline, human rights, gender, leisure and feeding) of the settlement. Responsáveis are also part of the Cordenação, the decisional body of the settlement. If there are delicate issues on the agenda of the Cordenação, the final decision is taken by all the families in the assembleia of the assentamento, the sovereign institution.

## **II.6: Enemies and Friends**

MST faces different forms of opposition but it also relies on a gamut of supporters. At the **political** level, the MST encounters the main opposition in the agri-élites and multinationals, who both hijack politicians decisions to protect their interests. A good example of the political voice of landowners is provided by Antonio Ernesto de Salvo, President of the CNA, Confederação Nacional de Agricultura -Agriculture and Livestock Confederation of Brazil (a confederation of large farmers and big agri-business), who blatantly argues that there is no need for an Agrarian Reform in a country as competitive as Brazil. He argues instead that Brazil is benefiting by an explosion of agricultural production which has allowed for increasing exports by more than 20 billion dollars a year and that, on the contrary, rural poverty is concentrated in small landholdings (Osava, M., 2003).

At the **executive** level, MST faces three main forms of opposition: from the judiciary, media and the intelligence services (Stédile J.P., 2002); the three also reflect the interests of agri-élites entwined with the executive power.

Notwithstanding the different forms of repression, MST receives great moral and practical support both from Brazilians and from abroad. First of all Martins (2000) reports that survey results showed how 94% of the Brazilian population is in favour of land reform,

indicating the scale of urgency of the issue. Secondly, the struggle has been so far so successful thanks to the support of organisations such as CPT, PT – Partido dos Trabalhadores- Workers Party- and many local and foreign NGOs.

The first, **CPT**, is an expression of the progressive Church, detached from the conservative mainstream churches and totally committed in the front-line of the Sem Terra struggle. Its aim is to provide “pastoral, theological, methodological, juridical, political and sociological support in the countryside [...] in order to stimulate and reinforce its protagonist” (CPT, [www.cptnac.com.br](http://www.cptnac.com.br)).

The second one, **PT**, is a political coalition founded during the mid 1980s by the actual Brazilian President, Lula. It is the nearest party to the Sem Terra struggle; however, the MST official position is to be independent from any political formation, since it is believed that the effects of internal party splits and factional battles weaken the mass movement (Stédile J.P., 2002). However, as Escobar and Alvarez suggest from other experiences, “the relationship between social movements and political parties is a dialectical one in which both movements and parties potentially stand to win a good deal” (Escobar & Alvarez, 1992:10), as it is very likely in the case of MST and PT.

Thirdly, transnational activism is increasing: support groups abroad and many international organisations (such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International) independent artists, intellectuals and academics (Sebastiao Salgado, Gilberto Gil, Chico Buarque, Noam Chomsky) have joined the MST project, and also international organisations such as the EU and UNESCO co-operate with it. Furthermore, MST is the largest member of Via Campesina, the biggest international peasant movement<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Via Campesina is an international movement which co-ordinates peasant organisations of small and middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, rural women and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America and Europe.

### **III.1: João Batista II: methodology of fieldwork**

The preliminary fieldwork at João Batista, during the month of July 2003, involved conversations with different families, individual peasants, militants and several MST leaders, as well as visits to the productive nucleus and attendance at a co-ordination meeting. This was done in order to try to insert the research into local people's working activities so as to avoid interruptions due to the presence of an 'outsider', which always takes away precious time and resources from their timetable.

Due to the little time available, the aim in the field has primarily been to find out about the peasants and their struggle, their projects in order to understand their self consciousness and the perception of social transformation the MST aims at realising.

Considering the settlement as one unit of the huge movement that is the MST, the interest of the research focused on the possibility local peasants joining the MST had to promote the social change (*mudança social*). In this light it has been my aim to analyse whether the process of social change is consciously embraced by its participants or steered by circumstances or by the organisation.

I have also sought to identify the bases, potentiality and limits to constructing a community with people that until five years ago did not even know each other. To do this I started talking with them.... this has been my methodology in the field.

### **III.2: Position, brief history and personal backgrounds**

João Batista II settlement is situated in the Amazon region, in Pará, the state which holds the primate of land concentration of the whole country<sup>13</sup>.

Before being occupied by Sem Terra, fazenda Bacuri held hundreds of hectares cultivated for pastoralism. MST organised the occupation at fazenda Bacuri in 1998, and this lasted two years. After negotiation with INCRA and after two years during which people were living in

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<sup>13</sup> The 88% of the agrarian land of Pará is concentrated in latifúndios; 1.240.825 hectares are not utilised (Sella A., 2002).

improvised huts of straw and black polythene, the encampment turned into an official settlement. The name João Batista has been given to the settlement in memory of one parliamentary activist of MST, who had been killed whilst trying to defend the landless.

As with all the other MST communities, João Batista II was not only physically built from empty spaces, but it was also “socially constructed”: people who now share a common life, a common land and common decisions did not know each others even five years ago. However most people of João Batista II share a common past from which they wish to escape. This is often from the outskirts of Belém, Pará’s capital, where they were living by doing casual, low-paid jobs. In fact, although the stories are quite differentiated, the need to change life and to run away from the past seems common. People run away from favelas, from drug or alcohol abuses, from violence, from criminality, from unemployment or low-paid jobs or simply from places full of sad memories. However is not only the escape which pushed 200 families to struggle for a plot of land, but mainly the hope in a social justice from which they were feeling excluded. **Nestor**, for example, has two degrees; he was director in a school near Belém, where he lived in his own house, when he decided it was time for him to commit to the struggle of MST to challenge the capitalist model. Probably his house at João Batista II will not be his last, since he is ready to start again another occupation.

Following MST’s strategy, most people who are today settled at João Batista II were approached by MST militants while they were still living in the city. Some of them spontaneously looked for MST, ready to embrace the challenge. Escaping from their past, many people looked for another identity, another life, a commitment in defence of their rights as Brazilian citizens.

The following story is meaningful for those who, after the struggle, started a new life, and, as this paper will argue, built a new identity. **Marina**, 55 years old, had a steady job in Belém as cleaner for a luxury hotel. She was bringing up her two sons alone, when one of them got irremediably sick. She started assisting him at night and working hard during the day to afford the medicines, until this situation became unsustainable. She quit the job and committed herself to the MST struggle. The dream of land, social justice and the hope of sharing a common life with other peasants brought Marina, alone, to challenge her past and look for another identity, and greater support for her. Today, even if the son is still struggling against his illness, she feels stronger.

## **PART II**

### **Issues for the social transformation**

The second part of this paper deals with the 'revolution' of MST at the grassroots level. During the period I spent at the João Batista II settlement I came to perceive some of the issues related to the social transformation which are potential areas of discussion within the movement. These are deeply interlinked, and they could be considered different aspects of the same duality existing within the movement: that between the 'intelligentsia' and the grassroots. The duality is a simplification of the fact that different people have different representations of the MST and, consequently, they have different expectations from the struggle. I am going to highlight three issues which I consider points of contradiction that the movement will have to address if it is to proceed.

The **first** deals with the necessity to build a collective Sem Terra identity. Are all the Sem Terra recognising themselves in the MST? Are the individual subjectivities challenging the collective identity? How can individual preferences harmonise with the collective dream?

Considering that the MST is characterised by a pyramidal structure, the **second** relevant issue deals with the kind of relationships within the movement, above all that between militants and the so-called "massa" (grassroots). This issue is related also with the chance for all the social actors to participate democratically to the project of MST.

The **third** condition is linked to the political awareness and to the revolutionary commitment of each Sem Terra: is it possible to nurture the attitude to commit to the social transformation? Is there a homogeneous level of political awareness throughout the movement?

Finally, I will analyse a potential threat to the social transformation, which is expressed by the contrast between MST ideology and the images Sem Terra perceive from television.

## IV.1: In search of identity

The story of Marina, in the previous chapter, is representative of those who joined the movement in search of a new identity. Following Escobar and Alvarez (1992), collective identity is here discussed as socially constructed, often through processes of negotiations and conflict. In fact Sem Terra strongly identify themselves in the struggle they have experienced, whether their personal aims were to push for the social transformation or to achieve the land for individual interests. It is through the struggle that they build a collective identity, and from being 'sem a terra' (without the land) they become 'Sem Terra'.

MST is what gives excluded people the elements, the support, the resources and the notions to face the struggle. Peasants know that without a solid organisation and meticulous planning they would never achieve the land. Some of the Sem Terra clearly state they do not have anything else but the MST and since this has given a social dignity and instruction to those who have been deprived from it, the level of identification with the MST itself is high. Caps, T-shirts, flags with MST symbols are all things distributed to Sem Terra in order to contribute to the creation of a common identity. To forge the Sem Terra identity MST relies mainly<sup>14</sup> on two processes: on the **formação**, during the ocupação, and on the process of **resistance** to landowners and police.

1. **Formação** during the occupation is "the real school of class struggle that will transform [the peasant] and help him discover his class identity" (Stédile in Pinassi, 2000:51). It is the process that actively makes a Sem Terra. It occurs during the ocupação, a phase in which landless people, in their endeavour to succeed, show great solidarity amongst them. Oppression, poverty, personal sacrifice, collective

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<sup>14</sup> An other important element the MST uses to enhance the collective identity is the *mística*, which is a animation made of songs, theatrical representations, poems, flags which express the willingness to struggle for the land. The *mística* is a reflection and dramatisation of landless struggle [...] This involves the most emotional and physical dimensions of the person (Sella A., 2002:92).

desperation, as well as absolute unity shape the Sem Terra during the difficult months of occupation. What keeps them tight together is the struggle for the land and for a more egalitarian society. This process is necessary in order to build a community for people that never shared anything before and to bring about the next step: the life in the settlement. All those willing to become Sem Terra need to pass through the phase of encampment, if not they cannot achieve a plot of land. This shows how much the movement gives importance to the formation of each Sem Terra.

2. The second process which forges the Sem Terra identity is its opposition to the dominant landed gentry. This produces forms of resistance against them (such as land occupation, marches, protests, etc...), which become a key element in the Sem Terra profile (Bradford & Rocha, 2002:249), and creates what Dan Baron Cohen<sup>15</sup> calls a “**culture of resistance**” (forthcoming). The hardships imposed by military repression, the evolution of the economy in aggressive capitalistic terms and media slanders have also played an important role in nurturing the culture of resistance. Both the influence of Christianity, through the support of CPT, and Paulo Freire’s theory contributed in forging the Sem Terra identity as victim of the oppressor. To give an idea of the influence of Christianity, it is worth noting that most of the people I talked with at João Batista II interspersed their conversations giving praise to God for helping them in achieving the land.

On the other hand Freire’s contribution to building the process of resistance can be synthesised in the following statement: “it is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors” (Freire P., 1979:42).

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<sup>15</sup> Dan Baron Cohen is an activist, artist and educator. He has worked for social movements in Northern Ireland, Palestine, South Africa and spent five years in Brazil collaborating with MST.

Both of the above processes are pivotal for the formation of Sem Terra as political beings within a perspective of collectivity. However, the construction of a collective identity does not mean that there is not subjectivity within the movement. In a country as culturally differentiated as Brazil, the MST faces with a myriad of realities which shape each settlement differently, according to the legacy of the past of each community. Moreover within the settlements, different subjectivities arise as a function of the different way actors experienced the struggle.

At João Batista II, in a region where the movement is still young, it emerged that the youth do not always recognise themselves in the Sem Terra struggle, and since they lived in the cities before moving to the settlement, they are still reluctant to adapt to the new, rural, way of life. The legacy of a childhood spent in the city is too recent to let a smooth passage to a youth in a place which, to them, does not offer many leisure activities. Those young at João Batista II not involved in the MST activities feel the awkwardness of their life, compared to what they were experiencing in the cities and to the images they see on television. This shows a potential need to develop a subjectivity for young people, as well as for other marginalised groups, although this does not necessarily mean it is in contrast with the collective identity. Adults in the settlement acknowledge this as a problem but it seems they are not able to resolve it. To the question "how would you cope with the problems of young people?" many did not have any other answers than "trabalhar no campo" (work in the field) or "estudar" (study). These answers reflect the importance of land and of education for Sem Terra, however, they also show an inability to deal with the issues concerning the new generation. Priority, for most of the people in the settlement, is to boost the agricultural production or to hire a vet for the cattle.

The need to develop new internal subjectivity for young people is also felt in the south, where the movement first started and the settlements have been running for twenty years.

In these situations young people do not recognise themselves in the struggle for land, since they did not take part in it as active agents even considering they grew up in the settlements.

Conversely, adults, both in the north and in the south, seem to remain fixed in the struggle they experienced and are unable to transform the legacy of the past in the new context, for the next generation.

Dan Baron Cohen, after years spent working in different settlements, indicates the need to develop a culture of transformation, of **liberation**, which brings people to deal with a different awareness of themselves and of the community and mainly, to find the motivations to continue the challenge of the movement. This means transforming the legacy of the past in something dynamic in which also young people, through an active participation, can identify themselves. What he calls the transition from a **culture of resistance** to a **culture of liberation** is not as smooth as it seems, and many settlements, including the recent João Batista II, are facing today a problem of social and human fragmentation. What Baron Cohen argues is that:

the necessity which motivates land occupations, strikes and collective resistance to repression does not organically evolve into the choice or capacity to build cooperatives (Baron Cohen D., forthcoming).

This recalls to a valorisation of the subject within the community. As a pedagogue Baron Cohen finds that the way out of this impasse is through what he calls "pedagogy of personal and collective self-determination". This method is based on the practice of emotional and cultural literacy and on drama-techniques aiming at discovering the performative nature of the person.

From what I understood in the field people's individual subjectivity, if not recognised, listened and transformed in collectivity and in solidarity risks being stifled by the movement itself. Subjectivity often emerges only through requests of individual plots to cultivate, perceived by the MST as individualistic choices<sup>16</sup>. If people find in the MST only a chance to obtain a plot of land, social transformation is not going to occur in the meanwhile.

At the same time, it is important for the MST that subjectivity does not remain voiceless. If the movement, for example, which families researchers can speak with and which families not to speak with, the risk is to lose part of the voice of the community. It would be more advisable that those families not willing to meet researchers would refuse by themselves, making their own choice, using their voice. In this sense the threshold between protecting and censoring some of the voices is subtle and it deserves comprehension by the leaders and militants.

Often MST failed to recognise these different subjectivities within the community and this is something they will need to do in order to transform the experience of the struggle in terms of solidarity and democracy.

## **IV.2: In search of an active dialogue**

Considering the need to first acquire a self-consciousness in order to understand the relation between the individual and the community and amongst the individuals, it becomes important to identify the kinds of relationships existing within the settlement. In this section I will argue for the need to have dialogic relationships amongst the different actors of the MST since I consider that a social transformation needs all its parts in order to succeed.

Critics argue that the pyramidal structure of MST faces a critical point in the relationship between the militants and the peasants, called by the movement itself massa-

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<sup>16</sup> Requests for individual lands are often satisfied even if they are not on the MST's ideological agenda. This issue opens up a huge discussion which, due to the limited amount of space, I will not deal with here.

mass. Militants are the heart of the MST, and are those who, following the main guidelines, organise the struggle and the recruitment of the future Sem Terra. Peasants, on the contrary, are often considered by the right-wing critics as the pawns of the movement, manipulated by the militants in order to foment the revolution. In regard to this, sociologist Martins da Souza finds a profound contradiction that exists between the revolutionary project of the militants and the struggle of the rural workers. He indicates the enlistment of Sem Terra as "soldiers in a revolutionary army" a project that is "doomed to failure and is betraying the very people it claims to be defending" (Martins d. S. J., 2001 quoted in Bradford & Rocha, 2002:254).

Despite the accusations, a fracture between the roles played by militants and the mass does exist. As de Almeida & Sánchez suggest, MST should not underestimate the differences of outlook between the leaders of the movement, its local leadership and those at its grassroots (de Almeida & Sánchez, 2000:24). Roles within the movement are represented in a pattern of relationship which is typical of a hierarchical structure. However, relationships of subordination exist and they need to be contextualised, they cannot be simply defined as "manipulating", since militants and peasants are first of all persons. This means that the relevance of personal relations, outside the political roles played by the actors, has to be taken into account.

At João Batista II no one has been forced by the activists to commit to the struggle. At the same time decisions taken from above seem to be unquestioned, and forms of resistance towards the activists and militants are frequent, even if only concealed behind silence. In regard to this, Baron Cohen analysed the forms of internal resistance, which are very complex, particularly that of silence "critically important, questioning and testing of authority" (Baron Cohen D., forthcoming). During his existence in the settlements, he

questioned how transformations of attitude could be inhibited even by those most intimately connected [such as the case of communities like João Batista II], and the influence they also have in the resistance (ibid.).

Considering that occupations last several months, even years, and that the struggle makes people more close to each other, it becomes important to understand how social relationships evolve through time in forms of resistance. This can be done by exploring the past: if the grassroots use the silence as a form of resistance, this can be interpreted as a legacy of the dictatorship. Martins da Souza aptly highlights how

the poor are excluded because they were excluded and deprived of the right to speak for themselves [...] even when proclaiming itself revolutionary and identifying itself with the holy principle of freedom of consciousness (Martins d. S. J., 2002).

Here Martins da Souza reveals how concealed silence can occur even in a context of screamed slogans and active affirmation of rights. For the same reason, de Almeida & Sánchez acknowledge how “the landless are [...] one of the most characteristic products of the conservative modernisation of the Brazilian countryside” (de Almeida & Sánchez, 2000:18). If the past excluded people from a democratic participation in politics as well as in the social life, and considering that the aim of MST has been to reintroduce them in the society as active citizens, the necessity to build communities of active dialogue within the movement itself arises. Only these would allow the MST to assert a real democratic structure, in which everybody has the chance to participate actively. This will define the level of active participation within the community, within the movement, which is important since the movement cannot afford to lose those who struggled for its cause.

Further critique (Bradford & Rocha, 2002) on the internal relationships at MST relates to the leadership at the top of the pyramid, the National Council (Direção Nacional), which has remained undisputed since the beginning and still takes all the main decisions. Bradford and Rocha present the risk that the current leadership will “retreat into a monolithic political culture” (Bradford & Rocha, 2002:263) if a rethinking of the movement is not effected soon. They indicate the change of the “old guard” the real test for the internal democracy of MST.

Bradford & Rocha also criticise the control MST leadership operates over the grassroots, for example through the *mística* (see footnote 13), which is a powerful instrument and it is always conceived by MST’s head offices. From what I saw the *místicas* organised at João Batista II have been played by the militants and activists, without a major engagement of the rest of the settlement.

After considerable criticism, MST has started to realise the problems linked with the internal relationships, and in August 2000 the movement held its fourth congress in Brasilia where it emphasised the importance of listening to the grassroots and to “believe in each part [of the movement]” (MST, 2000). However, the issue is far from being resolved in the near future, since the process of building a culture of active dialogue takes a long time and it varies from place to place.

### **IV.3: Political Awareness**

Another relevant aspect, which is at stake for the social transformation throughout the movement, is political awareness. In the field it has been one of my primary interests to find out about the political awareness peasants have. While everybody in the settlement declared to be in favour of PT politicians, a difference of political awareness in the sense of revolutionary commitment emerged. Militants and activists showed easily their political knowledge and their approval for socialist values promoted by the MST, which reflected the political formation they went through. Many peasants were aware of the social

transformation planned by the MST, and many of them seemed ready to embrace the further challenge. However many others –amongst them mainly young women- were clearly satisfied by the land they “conquered” without showing any “revolutionary” attitude. This suggests that it is probably a matter of motivation for the socialist dream which is lacking in João Batista II people, where the majority are satisfied by the new house, job, plot of land, education for the children while they are not attracted by the perspective of being active agents in the social transformation.

This highlights a contradiction with the political project of MST which the movement is already aware of and which tries to counteract by means of educating children and adult illiterates at school using Freire’s method, promoting trainings for militants, etc. From the movement’s perspective the lack of willingness to engage in the Sem Terra struggle devalues the struggle itself (MST, 2001). However the process of building up a motivation takes a long time and it is not something that can be imposed from above.

To explain the complexity of the issue and the different perspectives existing within the MST, it is worth reporting on a conversation with an external agronomist who, at the time of the preliminary fieldwork, was starting to collaborate with the settlement. To my question whether the movement should be satisfied with what achieved so far, he answered: “if I was poor I would say no: MST should continue to struggle for the social revolution. But I come from the middle bourgeoisie”<sup>17</sup>. Since people throughout the movement have different political awareness they also have different representations of the MST and thus different expectations from the future.

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<sup>17</sup> Personal communication of the João Batista II agronomist.

## **V.1: Media clashing with the socialist dream**

A further point of discussion, which can be considered as a threat to the realisation of the MST socialist dream, is the existing dichotomy between the socialist ideology MST nurtures, and the images of the world outside the settlements which people perceive through the media, mainly through television. In fact televisions are proudly placed in the middle of almost every living room in João Batista II, where, however, there are no toilets, nor running water and where walls are not plastered.

Televisions propose ways of life which are utterly in contradiction with the Sem Terra culture, involving "the selling of ideology of consumption" (Oliveira quoted in Aufderheide P., 1993:583) when people cannot afford it. This can bring about a tension between the socialist ideology and the consumption one. The issue is striking since TVs are switched on almost all day long and after a day spent working in the field almost everybody spends their free time in front of the TV with the family. The main TV channels running in Brazil are those belonging to Tv Globo, symbol of the consumer Brazil, proposing shows and novelas (soap operas) which "sow illusions from 'another world'" (Petra J., 1997:182). As Tauxe acknowledges "luxurious consumption patterns are notoriously prominent in the immensely popular prime-time novelas of the dominant Globo network" (Tauxe, C.S., 1993:597) and these images "work with the illusion that seeing is believing and thereby operate to produce consent among receivers" (ibid.). Consents that can be frustrated by both the impossibility of achieving certain assets and by the political framework.

In his subtle critique of CCC (Contemporary Cultural Colonialism) the sociologist James Petra (1997) highlighted the existing links between a politico-military domination and contemporary media, together operating a social control on passive masses, especially in poorer countries. He pointed how "Third World people are entertained, coerced, titillated to be 'modern', to submit to the demand of the capitalist market" (Petra, 1997:187) by the "media cultural penetration" and how the strategy of cultural imperialism consists in the

cultural manipulation. Furthermore, he showed how the increase in the number of televisions in Latin America (40% between 1980 and 1990) is directly linked to the decline in income and in mass struggle and to the rise of neo-liberal governments.

Notwithstanding its potency, Petra's argument may appear too partisan, describing a global scenario too catastrophically. The links he highlights between income and number of televisions cannot be extended to the MST settlements. Moreover, his analysis fails in the consideration of Third World people as "passive mass" manipulated by the hegemonic forces of Western-style media.

Considering that Tv Globo is the most watched commercial network in the world with a nightly audience of some 60 to 80 million viewers, and that 75 percent of the households of this nation had televisions (Tauxe, C.S., 1993:596) it is worth recognising the dimension of contemporary Brazilian media pervading society, included the Sem Terra settlements. Looking at the quality of images it can be said that there exists a cultural clash between them and the MST socialist dream. The movement apparently does not see the television as a threat to its project, a part from the quality of the news reported. People at João Batista II too were not aware of any potential threat from the TV to their struggle. The number of spectators I was able to interview is too small to serve for a valid generalisation, yet it is worth noting that most of the people did not consider the watching of television as a threat for the socialist dream. However, these people were mainly those with less revolutionary attitudes. Many of them declared to watch television without giving it too much importance, although spending several hours in front of the screen. At the same time, messages from the media are subtle, and spectators seem unable to recognise the threat. As Bradford & Rocha also acknowledge "while the Sem Terra all over Brazil have grown expert at extracting hard information from the heavily biased TV coverage of MST activities, they are far less skilled at examining critically the inherently conservative values embedded in the barrage of consumer propaganda" (Bradford & Rocha, 2002:257).

If, on one side, TV represents a “virtual” threat to the socialist dream and it often lacks plurality of voices, on the other hand, it has to be considered as part of the Brazilian culture, which nobody can forbid anyone to watch. Furthermore, I assume that television has different significance for different people, and that anthropology can help in the study of such representations in the various settings.

If MST has to be understood, it has to be done in its overall discourse and practices, including people’s leisure in the everyday life. As Burdick magnificently explains “we are [...] impelled to inquire into the range of conscious and less than conscious choices and social pressures that condition our subject’s behaviour” (Burdick J., 1992:183).

This also means that if we cannot switch televisions off and if we cannot influence the quality of programmes, we need to be aware of the threshold between entertainment and frustration for the impossibility of acquiring that life style. Thus a potential point of inward discussion for the movement could be the relationships between the electronic media and political commitment.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The MST faces today the need to rethink of itself on the basis of the diversity of social actors and discourses at stake. Although a prescriptive attitude is beyond the scope of this paper, the issues of collective identity, internal relationships and political awareness which have been highlighted are here considered critical internal points which the movement will need to address if it is to continue.

The ways MST people represent differently the collective identity, build internal relationships, have different political awareness, are significant of the gamut of realities existing within the movement. Considering this, an anthropological perspective aimed at contextualising and being aware of differences, is suggested for an internal rethink. Being aware of these differences means also being aware of the boundaries of each reality. It is being conscious of the existence of boundaries which brings awareness of the existence of community and of the threats it faces. An internal rethink from an anthropological perspective could give the basis for the boost of social transformation.

Following this purpose a comparison between Sem Terra settlements and "living communities of culture" is outlined in this section, since it is considered valuable for the movement to rethink of itself enhancing local existing values. Sem Terra settlements are potential "living communities of culture", as Goulet defines those vital societies animated by their values (Goulet D., 1995:144). He indicates three main characteristics of living communities of culture. These are a common system of meanings, norms and values, a shared basis to identify themselves as members of a single group and, most importantly, the will to be primarily self-identified as a member of a given community. Although the theoretical frameworks of MST settlements are different from that in which living communities of cultures have been conceived, the latter have the features that MST would need to acquire in order to boost the social transformation. Living communities of culture would be the ideal unit for MST socialist transformation. However, the process of building

these units is ongoing and it cannot be imposed from above, in this case from the MST headquarters.

Goulet's contribution to the study of MST settlement, from a "social transformist" perspective, is given in his emphasis to "promote the values for which oppressed and underdeveloped groups struggle" (Goulet D., 1995:12). In this sense, the need for an anthropological perspective, keen to contextualise the local values and challenge external presuppositions, emerges. In fact, this paper argues that the complexities of MST can be approached ethnographically. Following Goulet this paper's argument is that local and existing values have to be enhanced by those who organise the Sem Terra settlements. In this light it becomes possible to think about those most marginalised groups (such as the young), finding their subjectivity, building a community of active dialogue and coordinating different political awareness.

The way towards the creation of settlements as living communities of culture is long and difficult, but it becomes a worth, concrete, chance for Sem Terra to reinvent themselves in the light of a social transformation.