

Access to land and the Landless Movement in Brazil¹

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This paper offers a brief analysis of the land struggle practices of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) and the policies of Brazil's most recent governments, those of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC, 1994-2002) and Luiz Inácio da Silva (Lula, 2003-present). As a geographer, I see these struggles and conflicts as creating or occurring in "spaces" that can be either physical or social, and often both at once. These concepts of "space," used throughout the paper, seem particularly relevant to the study of land access disputes.

From its beginnings, the MST has taken space through land occupations—"territorialized"—every region of Brazil. Although land occupation is a traditional form of struggle for the Brazilian peasantry, the last twenty years have witnessed an intensification of the activity with an increase in the number of landless families and occupations.

In our research on the subject, we have tried to understand the origins of the landless population and the different methods they have created in their struggle to obtain land. We have also analyzed the various types of conflict that have resulted from this process and the policies the government has adopted in response to the actions of the landless.

The struggle for land does not begin with land occupation. Generally speaking, the families involved in an occupation have already spent months getting organized before they occupy a given property (Fernandes, 2001).

Thus, land occupations begin at the grassroots, with a process of gathering together those who might want to participate. MST organizers go from house to house in the poor, marginal areas of towns small, medium and large, to invite interested people to learn more about land struggle and agrarian reform.

Those interested meet together in various settings, from church and union halls to the schools and homes of participating families themselves. These meetings inaugurate new spaces of political socialization. The initiates there debate the potential significance of land struggle and agrarian reform.

In these "communicative spaces," participants share their stories, get to know one another, debate their life courses, and speculate about their futures. A future constructed with the MST - a farm life beginning with land occupation - appears at first as an image both hopeful and fearful. Through the examples of many people like themselves, they see hope in those who fought for and gained land. The struggle can also cause fear, since confrontations with landlords and police have resulted in the beating and death of people just like themselves.

This experience of gathering, meeting and discussing creates another spatial dimension of political socialization called "interactive space." The interaction happens as participants come to understand and appreciate how similar their lives are: they are often migrants from other states, poor, unemployed, and motivated to change the direction of their lives. The interaction also occurs because the space makes it possible for them to construct new perspectives on life through knowledge of land struggle.

The cycle of grassroots meetings takes place over the course of months before a specific land occupation is planned. Ideally, they conclude only when the families decide to occupy one or more properties presented to them for possible action by MST leaders. Deciding to occupy land, the group of families begins to create a new dimension in the space of their political socialization: the space of resistance and struggle.

The struggle and resistance space becomes a reality when the families occupy land, whether it is public, private, or in the right-of-way along the side of a highway. Through the act of occupation, the organized families transfer the political socialization space from their neighborhoods to this new place where they are now united.

This new space of struggle and resistance is called an encampment (*acampamento*). The families are no longer dispersed but joined together in many tent cabins constructed of poles and black plastic. This

¹ Paper prepared for presentations at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and Harvard University's second "Brazil Week." Boston and Cambridge, MA. 12- 16 April 2004.

form of spatial organization causes a physical impact on the landscape, demonstrating to one and all that here are gathered people who are taking responsibility for changing their lives. In this way, the landless politicize the space of passing motorists, involving those who would rather ignore Brazil's tragic inequalities. Suddenly, no one—neither the statisticians, politicians, nor the theorists—can ignore these people joined together to demand dignified living conditions.

While the visible camp makes it impossible to ignore the landless, it makes possible reactions against them. Here begins the conflict, one of the oldest repressive conflicts in Brazilian history, the landlord against the landless. The large property owners, the *latifundiários*, want to keep their traditional privileges as a matter of right while those without land seek their due through conquest in the name of democratizing land access.

The conflict, then, involves a defense of privileges, “rights” and rights, claim and counterclaim, demands and struggle. For some of you, this idea of occupying someone else's property in order to obtain it may seem like a form of theft. In Brazil, however, it fits into a century's old tradition of judging proprietorship by use, by “social utility.” Land that does not serve society's needs can legally be confiscated and redistributed. In the U.S., a related policy can be found in the practice of “imminent domain,” where the government forces private owners to give up their land in order to fulfill some larger social good, such as constructing a road. In Brazil, as in the U.S., there is also a tradition of “effective use”—he who productively utilizes the property for a given period of time can sometimes trump as legitimate owner the negligent title holder (Wright e Wolford, 2003). In its practice, the MST targets lands that fall into these categories—public and private lands that are not being used effectively. State authorities must resolve whose right to the land is more just.

One result of these conflicts has been a policy of establishing rural settlements (*assentamentos*) that have benefited nearly 500,000 families in the past nine years. It is noteworthy that 90 percent of families allotted farms on settlements previously participated in one or more occupations (Fernandes, 2000; DATALUTA, 2004).

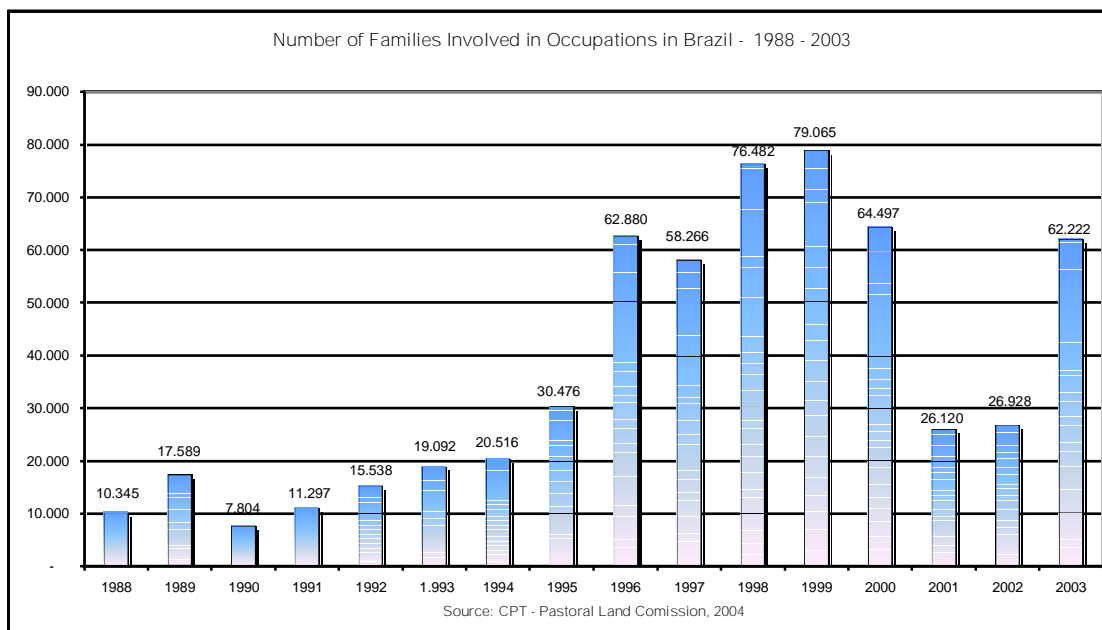
Through occupations, the landless keep the agrarian question alive in politics. Land occupation is the principal means of land access for the landless. Through occupation, the Brazilian peasantry creates and recreates itself. By applying political pressure land occupations force the state to resolve the conflicts, sometimes by resettling the families, sometimes by repressing them.

Land occupation is at once an affront to the principles of capitalist society and a convenient form of capitalist development. Through the construction of settlements, lands once forgotten become productive again and the families settled there, once cast aside to the economic margins, become economically active producers and consumers.

Nonetheless, there is little political tolerance for land occupations. As independent spaces of political socialization, occupations are regularly assaulted by the police, the tents torn down, the families forced to retreat, and the conflict intensified. Soon, the families return to re-occupy the land and the cycle continues until those who have not given up the fight in despair are relocated to settlements.

Official intolerance for direct action is weakened by the resilience of the families and by the widely understood injustice of Brazilian land concentration. In 2003, close to half of Brazil's vast territory (43.7 percent) was owned by less than 2 percent of proprietors (INCRA, 2003). The general public also condemns the system of land theft and false documentation (*grilagem*) that created many of Brazil's largest landlords. This context has helped to create an unofficial tolerance for land occupations that has enabled them to become a part of Brazil's everyday reality and a daily feature of the news. While many question the propriety of land occupation as the best means to achieve agrarian reform in Brazil, there is universal support for reforming Brazil's land tenure system.

The physical violence landlords and government authorities target against the landless has not stopped the land occupation strategy. Nevertheless, some executive orders (*medidas políticas*) have proven effective in containing the occupations. It is important to remember, however, that containment does not mean resolution. The relevant executive orders have been emitted to control popular struggle. Through social control measures the government has succeeded in changing the course of action of peasant movements. They have caused some to retreat and demobilized others. But the agrarian problem refuses to go away.



The accompanying figure shows how the number of families involved in land occupations has expanded and contracted over the past fifteen years. The abrupt contractions that occurred in 1990 and 2001 can be associated with repressive executive orders. However, the graph also demonstrates how ephemeral these social control measures were; in less than a year, the number of families involved started to grow again.

In 1990, the administration of President Fernando Collor de Mello violently repressed the occupations. In a campaign of intimidation, the government selectively imprisoned MST leaders and the federal police invaded MST offices in various states, destroying documents and equipment, and arresting members. These actions pushed the MST into retreat and reduced the number of land occupations. In 1991, however, the number of families involved began to grow again and in October 1992, president Collor was forced out of office by an impeachment process that included mass national political mobilization involving millions of people.

Promising to implement agrarian reform, Fernando Henrique Cardoso was elected president in 1994 and from 1995 to 1999, the number of families involved in land occupations increased significantly. During Cardoso's first term in office, the largest number of families in Brazil's history were located in settlements. Three factors contributed to these results: the 1995 Corumbiara massacre of landless families in the state of Rondônia, the 1996 Eldorado dos Carajás massacre in the state of Pará, and Cardoso's calculation that by settling around 400,000 families, he could drain the landless movement of its core members and thus demobilize it (Cardoso, 1991).

An increase in the number of families settled meant an increase in the number of families occupying lands and vice versa. For every settlement created, there was a corresponding multiplication in the number of landless mobilizing the grassroots, creating new political socialization spaces and "spatializing," that is, spreading, the struggle for land to new areas. This reality did not fit the Cardoso administration's hypothesis, a hypothesis that envisioned fewer land hungry families and less land available for distribution.

The Cardoso government based its agrarian reform policies on a compensatory outlook. They saw the landless as the residue of the Brazilian peasantry, a determined number of families who had been forced off the land, and they sought to compensate the displaced peasants by relocating them on settlements. Under pressure from the MST and other peasant movements, the government adopted their proposals to provide lines of credit, rural education programs, and technical assistance. But as the occupations continued, the government penalized the movements by discontinuing the education and technical assistance programs, and imposing a substitute credit policy.

The Cardoso administration changed course because it came to realize that its policies had helped to fortify the landless movement and the MST itself. Many occupations counted on the support of settlement-co-ops, which lent them money and trucks to facilitate land occupations. The government interpreted these collaborations as political and cut all sources of funds for the settlements.

Cardoso was reelected president in 1998 and his policies changed significantly. While the number of occupations had begun to drop in 2000, they went into steep decline after May, 2001, when the administration issued an order criminalizing land occupations. Executive Order 2109-52 penalized the landless and aided landlords by prohibiting lands from being expropriated any sooner than two-years after an occupation and four-years in the case of an all-so-common re-occupation.

While the Collor government had used the federal police to repress the landless, the Cardoso government depended on the judicial system. The government closely monitored land occupations and quickly sought judicial orders to restore possession to the title-holder and justify the forceful removal of the landless families. More often than not, leaders were imprisoned. As a means of preventing occupations, in fact, judges ordered the “preventive” imprisonment of leaders before they had taken any action. We call Cardoso’s use of the courts to repress land occupations the “judicialization” of the agrarian reform struggle (Fernandes, 2003).

With the number of occupations suppressed by judicialization, the number of settlements also declined. But the Cardoso government wanted to market a pro-agrarian reform image so it cooked the books. To show that the number of settlements established by the administration had not decreased, they counted settlements constructed by former governments, state governments, and even families the government had merely promised to settle. Manipulating statistics, they created settlement “clones” and “imaginary settlements” that existed only in the administration’s record books (Fernandes, 2003).

As stated earlier, land occupation is an affront to the principles of capitalist society. Even though landlords and the courts attacked the landless, the number of occupations began to grow again. In this context, the Cardoso administration adopted yet another containment strategy, a land loan program that soon became known as the Land Bank.

For the first time in Brazil’s history, the government used economic policy to intervene directly in the land struggle on a national scale. With this measure, the administration sought to transfer the land question from political to economic territory, from the realm of politics to the realm of the market. This extraordinary act further diminished the bargaining power of landless workers. Those who accepted the Land Bank policy soon found their space limited to negotiating sales contracts in the marketplace.

In 2002, there was a small rise in the number of occupations. But the end of Cardoso’s term of office came that year and the victory of opposition candidate Lula created a situation in which the number of families involved in 2003 land occupations climbed to become the fifth highest amount in fifteen years of struggle.

On December 1, 2003, a leading newspaper reported that 166,000 families were encamped in demand for land distribution all over the country (*Folha de S. Paulo*). According to Dataluta (2004), the vast majority of these—112,532—had been organized by the MST. MST activists had been busy with grassroots organizing. The dramatic return to historically high numbers confirmed the ineffectiveness of Cardoso’s policies. Neither his settlement project nor his criminalization campaign had succeeded in resolving the land question. The jump also signaled the MST expectation that things would be different with Lula in office. Lula had a long history of identification with the land struggle and the MST mobilized pressure to make sure the new government fulfilled its agrarian reform promises.

In 2003, however, the Lula government settled only 36,000 families. Although the administration announced a national agrarian reform plan to settle 400,000 families during its four year term of office and place an additional 130,000 families using a land credit loan policy, it is off to a slow start. In fact, 75 percent of the 36,000 families settled last year were placed on previously established settlements, demonstrating that Lula has yet to implement agrarian reform (MDA, 2003). Moreover, the government has not revoked Cardoso’s Executive Order 2109-52, and mass land occupations that started in April, 2004 will test Lula’s support for social movements and opposition to the repressive tactics of his predecessors.

Since the MST’s founding twenty years ago, the nature of the families participating in land occupations has changed somewhat. Although even the first families involved in the 1980s lived in urban areas, they were predominantly rural in origin. As the use of agricultural machinery intensified and threw more people out of work during the 1990s, the percentage of urban-origin families in the landless camp grew substantially.

Each region of Brazil, a country larger than the continental U.S., has its own peculiarities. In the northeast, the region of Brazil that bulges out into the Atlantic Ocean, the MST started to organize migrant workers who had returned to the area after failing to find work in the more prosperous southeast. In the southeastern state of Sao Paulo, the MST and the Roofless Rural Workers' Movement (MTST) started to organize families to fight for either farmland or an urban residence. In the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, the Unemployed Workers' Movement (MTD) has recently been organized to develop both agricultural and non-agricultural economic activities in the suburban areas around Porto Alegre, the state capital.

The increasingly diverse origins of land occupation participants demonstrates the workers' determination to ignore the government's policy of restricting land settlement to those with rural backgrounds. This is one reason why the compensatory logic of the Cardoso administration did not work out. The number of families involved in occupations has risen in all regions of the country, with unemployed urban workers taking part in the process of creating the peasantry.

The land occupations, the ups and downs of the MST, the victories and defeats of the peasant movement, the increase in the number of urban family participants, all indicate the resistance of the landless to the State's social control policies and the logic of capitalist development. They have worked hard to create new political socialization spaces to fulfill their needs. The landless believe that an agrarian reform policy is fundamental to the economic and political development of Brazil. This position has been supported by President Lula. If it is indeed the case, we can expect to see a period of advance in the development of peasant agriculture in Brazil.

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