

Landless experiences: youth and social movements in Brazil and South Africa

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to compare the role youth have had both in the national and international expansion of the Brazilian landless movement or MST (“Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra”) and in the South African “Landless Peoples Movement” (LPM). These movements have been sharing their experiences for several years, despite their completely different “generation structures”: the Brazilian structure is supported by very young militants - around the age of eighteen - while the South African structure is organized by senior activists – around the age of fifty. A comparative perspective helps us understand the impact and possibilities of each particular generation structure on these movements through their specific tactics and discourses and the social reactions they awaken.

Introduction

As Moyo (2005) states, there has been a resurgence of rural social movements in countries of the southern hemisphere in recent years. Beyond isolated actions, this process reveals a never-before-seen international articulation of peasant movements that have come to share their experiences regarding mobilizations in diverse contexts by means of *La Via Campesina* and world social forums. The Brazilian MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) and the South African LPM (Landless People’s Movement) are among the main protagonists of such processes. Since 2001, when the LPM was officially created, these two movements have maintained close relations in the exchange of militants and repertoire of actions. The most important of these encounters occurred in 2005, when two militants from the MST spent three months in South Africa alongside their local comrades. Having had the opportunity of accompanying a large part of the activities developed during this period, I took particular notice of the generation differences and conflicts among the militants. While the Brazilians were under thirty years of age (and were already considered experienced militants), most of the South Africans were around fifty years old. Throughout this text, I offer data from the research I have been developing and discuss a number of the implications of these generation structures regarding the distinct meanings attributed to the movements and the very notion of landlessness.

MST –landlessness of the youth

The MST was formed in southern Brazil after the expulsion of young families of small rural producers that lived on public lands at the end of the 1970s¹. Most were families that had not been able to accumulate capital in order to buy property as a result of the large increase in land value in the region and ended up invading a large public area destined for indigenous peoples. When the families were kicked out in 1978, one portion turned to the occupation of unproductive state farmlands, thereby initiating the large encampments that began to attract landless families from other regions of southern Brazil.

These events validated encampments as a legitimate form of demanding agrarian reform from the State and were the basis for the formal creation of the MST in 1985. Since then, occupations of unproductive areas have spread throughout all the states of the country. According to figures from the movement itself, there are currently more than 300 thousand people living in settlements and around 150 thousand living in encampments organized by the movement. The national headquarters of the movement is in Sao Paulo, the largest city in the country, and there is a branch in each and every state.

In this paper, I will refer only to the group of people that work in the organization and mobilization of the landless: the militants. This group represents just over 1000 people throughout the country and is basically formed by individuals under thirty years of age who entered the MST before the age of twenty. Most of these people are recruited in the encampments and go through local and regional training courses that give them the capacity to take on coordination responsibilities on the local, regional, state and, lastly, national level.

As I pointed out in an earlier text (Rosa, 2004), for a large number of these militants, entry to the movement meant leaving home and becoming an adult. In their own words, they became part of the "family of the landless"; they began to share a new universe of moral values. In the same article, I classified the experience of *being in a movement* as a real possibility of social mobility for young people (men and women) from rural areas and who, throughout most of the country, have no access to public schools.

Traveling the country and spending months in political training courses is something viable for young people with no fixed work, plenty of free time and who are not rooted in the traditions and relationship networks of their social universe of origin. Everything seen as lacking or as a handicap in their small towns becomes extremely valued and values them as people within the movement. By means of the movement, they are inserted into a network of social hierarchies which I have termed a new venue of the social division of labor; a network that their very participation helps to weave and is forever

¹ The lands on which they lived were transformed into a reservation for indigenous peoples.

renewed by the lines of newly arrived youth. For the most part, these young people emanate from the encampments organized by other young people who are already militants and each new encampment represents a conquest of new militants for those already formed. Furthermore, this militancy takes place in a venue of political negotiations that, in the Brazilian case, encompasses the relations between social movements and diverse levels of the bureaucratic structures of the State. It is up to the young leaders to organize occupations, maintain encampments and negotiate with ministers and mayors. For the execution of these tasks, the militants receive a small cost assistance of around US\$100 per month.

This is the origin of the two people that went to South Africa in 2005. Vanderlei was 27 years old and his family had participated in the first encampments in southern Brazil at the end of the 1970s. After having received the right to a lot in a settlement, his parents left the movement. Nearly twenty years later, he was invited to take part in an encampment – which is normally the first step or obligatory rite of passage through which young people enter the movement. At the time, he worked as a carpentry apprentice for his father, building houses. He had dropped out of school after five years of elementary study in which he only learned to read and write. After his entrance in the encampment, he was invited to take the political training courses of the movement and quickly transformed into a militant. He had a brief experience as a local leader in the state of Rio Grande do Sul and was then transferred to the state of Minas Gerais, more than 2000 kilometers from the town in which he lived. In a short time, he became the principal leader of the MST in the region. In Minas Gerais, he married another MST militant who had come from the state of Mato Grosso and today he lives with two other militant families in a house rented by the movement.

His companion to South Africa was Inês, who was 32 years old. Inês was born in the state of Maranhão, in the northernmost part of the county, to a family that had migrated from the rural zone to the state capital. Having worked for a number of years as a secretary for urban unions, she was invited to work in the bureaucratic functions of state branch of the MST. What she thought would be just another job, like any of the jobs she had had before (with particular work schedules and functions) began to occupy her entire life. She married a militant and drew her brothers and sisters into the movement².

As I stated above, entry into the MST represented an important change in the lives of Vanderlei and Inês. It was by means of the movement that they left their parents homes, were educated and established their own families. Through this type of experience, the movement blends together with the lives of its militants, whose sociability is directly mostly toward activities concerning the MST.

² The only brother that did not join the MST was arrested for assaults and is currently serving a sentence in a prison in Sao Paulo.

This total dedication to the movement was fundamental in their being designated by the national directing body of the MST to go to South Africa for 3 months to teach the activists of the LPM about how mobilizations were performed in Brazil. Taking into account her experience in the structure of the movement, Inês would have the task of explaining the bureaucratic organization to the LPM. Vanderlei, in turn, would be in charge of spelling out the mobilization tactics of rural populations and the forms used in Brazil for demanding land from the State, especially the way in which the occupation of unproductive farmland was organized.

O LPM – landlessness as result of other experiences

The LPM was created in 2001 as an initiative of the National Land Committee (NLC). The NLC was founded in 1990 as a result of a coalition of diverse regional NGOs defending the right of access to land on the part of the Black population. As Sihlongonyane (2005) states, the LPM was a creation of these NGOs from top to bottom, inspired by the MST, seeking to encourage a response from the families of Black rural laborers that were being expelled from rural areas. The LPM was also intended as a national instrument of pressure on the government for the fulfillment of promises made at the end of apartheid that 30% of the rural lands in the country would be restituted to the Black population by 1999.

Leaders acting in regional movements defending the right to land were mobilized for the formation of the LPM. The national council of the movement brought together one representative from each province. In South Africa, this meant uniting people who were historically defined as ethnically distinct, who spoke different languages and pertained to a variety of political groups (political parties, partisan leagues, unions, NGOs, etc.). When I arrived in Johannesburg, where the headquarters of the movement was located, I soon perceived the difficulties this heterogeneity of genesis and extension of the LPM implied for the research that was being developed. Most of the time, there was only one employee in the house where the office functioned – a young secretary who had no political connection to the LPM. For whoever sought a talk or interview with one of the leaders engaged in the movement, it was quite rare to find any of these principal representatives at the headquarters.

None of the directors maintained exclusive dedication to LPM activities. Differently from the MST, work in the movement was not remunerated (the NGOs that supported the LPM only covered transportation and meal expenses). The function of a movement director was divided between formal jobs in the cities of origin (sometimes over 1000 km from Johannesburg), work in political parties and

in some of the regional NGOs that had formed the NLC. In summary, the LPM was, in most cases, one activity among so many others for its militants.

During the time I spent following the activities of the movement, I kept in close contact with five national directors – three men and two women. Two were from the Kwazulu/Natal province (on the Indian Ocean); one was from Limpopo (on the border with Mozambique and Zimbabwe); one was from Free-State (in the center of the country); and one was from Johannesburg.

The representatives from Limpopo and Free State lived on the outskirts of Johannesburg (the one from Free State lived at the LPM headquarters itself) and had jobs as a driver for the electric company and a bricklayer, respectively³. Their jobs only allowed them to participate in the activities of the movement at night and visit their provinces on weekends (time that was also divided between their families).

The representative from Johannesburg was a public school teacher and also worked at a regional association in Soweto (where she lived). The two representatives from Kwazulu/Natal were linked to an NGO as well as a commission for the protection of rights among rural populations – both with headquarters in Pietermaritzburg (capital of the province). They also had homes, families and cattle in small towns in the countryside, to where they would head whenever possible.

In all the cases, participation in the LPM was the result of previous affiliations, and therefore inseparable from their public lives. In the cases that I followed more closely, of people over 40 years of age, there was not one that had the LPM as their first political experience, as occurs in the MST.

The main consequence of these multiple bonds was a constant coming and going of people that passed through the headquarters of the movement sporadically in order to participate in the meetings of the National Council.

First impressions: another kind of movement

When I arrived in Johannesburg, the MST militants had already been at the LPM headquarters for two weeks. Our initial conversations revealed the Brazilians' surprise at the form of organization of the LPM. The first observation was that it was actually a movement controlled by NGOs, with little autonomy.

³ Despite working in Johannesburg, these LPM directors had families in their hometowns and went to visit them whenever their jobs permitted it.

During their stay in Jo'burg, they had paid some visits to areas in which LPM activists tried to avoid the expulsion of people from their lands. They had not yet carried out any of the activities they had planned from Brazil. They said there was a lack of organization and plans changed from day to day depending on the whims of the local leaders. Sometimes, they traveled more than 10 hours by car to participate in a meeting that had been cancelled. A further criticism they made with regard to the leaders was that personal problems always came to the forefront when discussing issues linked to the movement.

Activism and adulthood

The MST militants spent a large part of their time in South Africa with the two activists from Kwazulu/Natal (Mangaliso and Thobekile), and on the road between Pietermaritzburg (headquarters of the NGO in which both activists worked) and Jo'burg, they often detoured from the path so they could visit their children.

Mangaliso had 9 children. His wife had died a few years earlier in an automobile accident on the trips to Jo'burg. He lived in a mud hut on his family's lands in the Ingogo region, on the property of a White farm owner who was trying to expel him from the area. This same farm owner also had the habit of stealing Mangaliso's principal asset when he was away: a few head of cattle⁴. A number of times I heard him speaking about the anti-apartheid organizations in which he had participated in his youth, about various friends that were killed at the time and also his preaching in the Methodist Church, where he was a pastor. It was commonplace in his discourse to speak of the disappointment with the government of the African National Congress (ANC), which he said to have frustrated the expectations of social integration for the Black population in the last 10 years⁵

Thobekile was 36 years old, a single mother with three children. She lived with her parents in the rural area of Ladysmith on property that also pertained to a White farm owner. She began her life as an activist after taking a course in 1997 promoted by the Association for Rural Advancement for the training of local leaders. At that time, she and Magaliso were chosen to work as "development agents" of the NGO.

⁴ Cattle is a fundamental element among the Zulu. The exchange of cattle constitutes the bride's dowry in marriages.

⁵ Despite not being the aim of this paper, it is important to investigate the Mangaliso's public relations during apartheid. According to Dlamini (2005), there is historic and generational tension in Kwazulu/Natal between the ANC and the Inkhata or IFP (Inkhata Freedom Party). The author states that the ANC represents an emerging generation that condemns the administrative structures of apartheid, including that which established an exclusive territory for the Zulu ethnic group. The Inkhata, however, combated apartheid, but defended maintaining the ethnic territory of the Zulu Kingdom.

The cases of Mangaliso and Thobekile exemplified the way LPM leaders related with the movement. Beyond their political positions, they had urgent family obligations: they needed to provide food for the family, take care of their homes and manage conflicts with the farm owners that were trying to expel them⁶. Differently from the MST, the LPM did not provide them with resources to sustain their families, which were entities completely separated from the activism of the LPM⁷. Their small paychecks basically came from services they provided for AFRA⁸. As they were older and had entered the movement with their families already established and previous political experiences, the LPM leaders attributed a different meaning to activism. The movement was just another of the legitimate venues for their old political disputes (including the above-mentioned ethnic problems) to have a voice. In conflicts with other directors, I often heard both state that they had no qualms about returning to their regions and organizing a different movement⁹.

Vanderlei and Inês had begun their adult lives through the MST, which had given them an education, their own income, financial assistance to their families and, especially, a world view. On the contrary, Mangaliso and Thobekile seemed to see the LPM as an important instrument for expressing their previous political aims in a louder voice.

The landlessness as generational experience

The situations described above point to something very close to that which Max Weber (1993:10) defines as a *conduct of life*. In the words of the classic author, social conduct is formed through causal relations of varied experiences orchestrated in such a way as to confer coherent meaning to actions. The relation between the LPM activists and the MST militants reveal two completely distinct types of conduct: for the young Brazilians, their conduct of life obtains meaning from the social experience of landlessness; for the South Africans, coherence of actions cannot be understood and reduced simply to this landlessness.

Beyond the historical differences between the two countries, the element that most attracts one's attention to the distinction between the movements is the place they occupy in the social life of each of the individuals that participate in them. Entering a movement at a young age, as in the Brazilian case, signifies choosing that organization as the place *par excellence* of one's social significance (Elias,

⁶ There was one time during the National Land Summit in 2005 (the largest conference in African history on the agrarian issue) when Mangaliso had to leave the discussions and return to Ingogo to get back the cattle that had been taken.

⁷ In the time I spent with the LPM, I only remember having met one niece of Magaliso's at an activity of the movement.

⁸ In March 2006, Mangaliso, Thobekile and other LPM activists went to Brazil for a conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). At the time, only Magaliso wore the LPM initials on his name tag. Thebekile and the others wore the AFRA initials or initials of other organizations in which they also participated.

⁹ Magaliso defended a greater autonomy for the LPM and its members in relation to the ANC.

1997), and the more time one remains inside, the truer and more meaningful it becomes. Following this line of thinking, we can understand the participation and engagement in the MST as one possible path in the search for a one's own (individual) meaning within society. This search is far from universal and only occurs when certain individuals in specific social situations make contact with a universe of values that are distinct from family values. Away from their families, barred from significant positions in the job market for not possessing a formal education and without access to traditional political organizations (for being too young), these young people transform the condition of being landless into a social position.

They do not see themselves as young, just as the directors of the LPM do not consider themselves old (at least in the context studied). The generation factor, in the eyes of this text, is not configured as an identity or a naturalized position¹⁰. In this case, being considered young is an outer attribute that, among other things, has the power of designating the place of an individual in day-to-day life. In Brazilian families of rural origin, this position acquires unique marks, such as that in which to be an adult it is necessary to have one's own piece of land to cultivate and establish a family. This *leitmotif* that leads a large number of people between 15 and 20 years of age to join the ranks of the MST brings us to the observation that, as in the cases of Vanderlei and Inês, they can become socially independent through the movement.

¹⁰ “une classe particulière de conditions sociales engendre une classe particulière d’individus porteurs des caractéristiques qui leur confèrent une certaine unité et, à travers eux, une classe particulière de comportements qui leur sont propres dans la situation où ils sont placés [...]” (Sayad, 1994:159).