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## The Concept of *Sem Terra* and the Peasantry in Brazil

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This paper explores the meanings and uses of the term *sem terra* (landless) in relation to the social movement, *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST, Landless Workers Movement). It looks at the process of how the term *sem terra* has been shaped by the movement and at the same time, how this term has constructed the identity of the MST. In order to arrive at this understanding, I will outline briefly how rural workers have been defined in Brazil from the 1950s until the present. I believe that the term *sem terra* is not simply a new name for “peasant”. I hypothesize that *sem terra* has been used to overcome the contradictions between small landowner (or peasants) and rural (wage) workers and that these classifications have in fact influenced the creation of the broader identifying concept of *sem terra*.<sup>1</sup>

I aim to analyze the concept of *sem terra* as an analytical category, and as a tool of self-representation or subjectivity, as well as examining the connections between the theory and the practice of the term *sem terra*. I will try to provide provisory answers to the following questions: What is the relationship between small holders/rural workers and the term *sem terra*? Is the idea of *sem terra* class-based or does it stretch beyond “class”? Which rural populations use the term *sem terra* to identify themselves? Does *sem terra* continue to be a useful tool for MST participants who have already obtained stable access to land? Finally, do different (and conflicting) meanings of *sem terra* exist for the leaders of the MST and the rank-and-file members?

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In this section of the paper, I point out similarities and differences in the ways to identify or define rural workers in German, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and French, since each language has its particular differences. The very roots of terms used for rural workers and their semantic fields differ. In German, the term *Bauer* means “the one who plants, who builds” and therefore, indicates an action. The English (peasant), French (*paysan*), Italian (*contadino*), Spanish (*campesino*), and the Portuguese (*camponês*) all refer to a life place.<sup>2</sup>

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1 This paper stems from a field research Luca Fanelli did in Brazil during the 2000. From this research come the book Luca FANELLI, *La scelta della terra. Studio di un insediamento rurale del Movimento Sem Terra in Brasile* (The choice of land. Study of a rural settlement of the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil), Torino: Zamoani, 2003. The matters of the paper were discussed with Sarah Sarzynski, Ph.D. student in Latin American History at the University of Maryland, writing her dissertation on how (changing) notions of gender, race and religion – at familial, local, regional, national, and international levels – influenced rural social activism in Northeastern Brazil from 1945 to 1964. This paper is based on some texts produced by the Movimento Sem Terra and, above all, on interviews done at a specific rural settlement: therefore, it is absolutely preliminary. In particular, it would be important to develop the research exploring how this concept is used in other rural settlements and in the middle strata of Movement organizers. Sarah Sarzynski edited the translation of the paper.

2 *Contadino* derives from «*contado*», i.e. the «*comitatus*» early medieval, fief of a count or «*comites*», landlord strictly attached with a not urban kind of power. Later on *contado* becomes the country area controlled by a town. Consequently the opposition of the peasant term toward the country strengthens, but gains force the inextricable tie between town and country. The French *paysan* derives from the Latin «*pagus*», by the vulgar Latin «*pagensis*». «*Pagus*» means village, with a strong differentiation toward town - think about the term pagan. The word «*pagensis*», later *pays* evolved in French toward the meaning of «space of a nation», making up for the idea of «space that is between one town and another»; the same direction took the term *paysage*, i.e. landscape. The

Another significant difference in these languages is that in some languages these terms describe peasants as a group (such as peasantry, *campesinato*, and to a lesser extent *paysannerie*). No such unifying term exists in Italian, Portuguese or German. The more interesting question for us is that in each language, there are many different ways to identify rural workers. Some of these ways refer to the contractual typology, others to life habits, some have a disparaging charge and others underline the professional facet of rural work. In addition, an opposition exists between the “traditional” term that refers to a unitary group with a specific way of life - peasant, *paysan*, *contadino*, *camponês*, *Bauer* - and the “modern” term that refers to a profession more aseptically - farmer, *agriculteur*, *agricoltore*, *agricultor*, *agricoltor*, *Landwirt*.

The English case is perhaps most noteworthy. In the 1950s, the term “peasant” became nearly obsolete, replaced by the more modern term “farmer”<sup>3</sup>. Studies in the late-1950s by Gunnar Myrdal and Paul Baran began to question this change<sup>4</sup>. Simultaneously, the Independence movements in a number of countries with substantial peasant populations began to suggest that peasants are often the driving force behind strong social movements. This led to increased studies about peasants and peasant rebellions/revolutions starting in the early 1960s and lasting until the late-1970s. This academic trend reintroduced the more archaic term “peasant” as a way not only to describe the participants in these movements, but also the “common” peasant. “Peasant” tended to incorporate a more universal meaning that implied a condition or a state (non-modern or non-modernized) more than a profession, unlike the term “farmer”<sup>5</sup>. Chayanov’s *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (1925) was translated and published in English in 1962 and that is crucial to understand the environment of the new researches<sup>6</sup>. Notably, the term used in the title was “peasant” not “farmer”. From this moment on, the term “peasant” became overused and declined, along with the peasant studies, in the 1980s<sup>7</sup>.

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English *peasant* has the same root as *paysan*. The Spanish *campesino* and the Portuguese *camponês* have their roots in «*campus*», that in Latin means «open place, plain». However, the «*campus*» etymology is dubious, because the Greek «*κηπεύω*» and the Indo-European root «*qamp*» means «to bend, to fold». Cf. Giacomo DEVOTO, *Avviamento alla etimologia italiana. Dizionario etimologico*, Mondadori, Milano 1979, Ferruccio CALONGHI, *Dizionario latino-italiano*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 1990<sup>3</sup>, Lorenzo ROCCI, *Vocabolario greco - italiano*, Dante Alighieri - Lapi, 1941<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Peasant: "a person who owns or rents a small piece of land and grows crops, keeps animals, etc. on it, especially one who has a low income, very little education and a low social position. *This is usually used of someone who lived in the past or of someone in a poor country*" (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, italic of mine).

<sup>4</sup> Gunnar Myrdal directs in 1957 a comprehensive study of economic trends and policies in South Asian countries for the Twentieth Century Fund, which resulted in *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations and The Challenge of World Poverty. A World Anti-Poverty Program in Outline*. Paul Baran publishes *The political Economy of Growth* in 1957 too.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Teodor SHANIN, *Defining Peasant. Essays concerning Rural Societies, Expolary Economies, and Learnign from the Contemporary World*, Basil Blakwell, Cambridge MA 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Vasil'evich CHAYANOV, *The theory of peasant economy*, [Moscow 1925], Richard D. Irwin Inc., Homewood, Illinois 1966, edited by Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay, R. E. F. Smith.

<sup>7</sup> Teodor SHANIN, *Defining Peasant* cit., p. 9.

As in other languages, there are numerous ways to define or identify a rural worker in Brazilian Portuguese in addition to *camponês* and *agricultor*. At the same time, the term *camponês* also has a “traditional” or archaic connotation opposed to the “modern” term of “*agricultor*.” In addition, in some cases “*camponês*” is used as a synonym of small landowner and as opposed to the rural wageworker or *salariado*. On the contrary, in other cases this term means the entire peasantry as opposed to urban populations or in terms of class, as opposed to landowners<sup>8</sup>.

The first time that the term *camponês* emerged to popularly describe rural peoples in Brazil - except for a brief social movement associated with the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB; Brazilian Communist Party) - was in relation to the *Ligas Camponesas* (Peasant Leagues) in Northeastern Brazil in the late 1950s. From the late 1950s until 1964, a large number of rural mobilizations obtained regional, national and international attention in their fight for citizen’s rights, including stable access to land. Major actors – in addition to the *Ligas Camponesas* - who created different projects for development to improve the conditions of the rural population include the United States and the United States Agency for International Development (US AID), the Catholic Church, the PCB, and SUDENE (*Superintendência do Desenvolvimento do Nordeste*, Superintendency for Northeastern Development)<sup>9</sup>.

In Northeast, before the end of the 1950s, rural people had been described in legal instances as *rurícola* (rural), or by their specific job *cortador da cana* (sugar cane cutter), or by their relations to land ownership such as *foreiros* (subsistence farmers who paid rent and gave an uncertain amount of unpaid labour to the landowner). In January of 1955, leader and engenho administrator of the Sociedade Agrícola e Pecuária dos Plantadores de Pernambuco (SAAPP, Agricultural and Cattle Raising Society of Pernambucan Planters) José Francisco de Souza met with lawyer Francisco Julião Arruda de Paula<sup>10</sup>. Shortly after the families of the Engenho Galiléia had formed this organization with the approval of landowner to provide their deceased

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8 "A palavra «camponês» é meio elitizada. Nunca foi usada pelos próprios camponeses [...]. O homem do campo geralmente se define como agricultor, trabalhador rural ou como meeiro, arrendatário. É, na verdade, mais um conceito sociológico e acadêmico, que até pode refletir a realidade em que eles vivem, mas que não foi assimilado." (João Pedro STEDILE, Bernardo Mançano FERNANDES, *Brava gente. A trajetória do MST e a luta pela terra no Brasil*, Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, São Paulo 1999, pp. 31-32).

9 Although there was significant rural activism in other regions at this time such as MASTER in Rio Grande do Sul and PCB rural unions in the state of São Paulo, this part of the paper will focus on the movements in the Northeastern region. For more on these other movements, see Cliff Welch, *The Seed Was Planted, the São Paulo Roots of Brazil's Rural Labor Movement, 1924-1964* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

10 Francisco Julião was known as a lawyer who was sympathetic to rural concerns. By this time, he had written a number of books and articles about rural Pernambuco such as *Cachaça*, Editora Nordeste, Recife 1951. According to his testimony, he wrote *Carta aos foreiros de Pernambuco* in 1946 and *Cartas dos Camponeses* in 1955. Francisco Julião, transcript in Fundação Getúlio Vargas/Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação (hereafter abbreviated as CPDOC/FGV), interviewed by Aspásia Camargo in Yxcatepec, Morelos, Mexico, 1977. Francisco Julião later wrote in *Cambão: La Cara Oculta de Brasil*, that he had been raised to respect rural people since his grandfather had fought against slavery. Francisco JULIÃO, *Cambão: La Cara Oculta de Brasil*, Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico 1968, pp. 21-29.

with individual coffins (instead of the borrowed communal coffin from the municipality of Vitória de Santo Antão), the landowner revoked their right to organize based on fears that the workers were meeting to discuss issues other than funerals and threatened to throw them off his lands <sup>11</sup>. Francisco Julião agreed to represent the SAPP in court, and used the Brazilian Civil Code to fight for their legal right to this land. In 1959, they won the case that allowed for the redistribution of the Engenho Galiléia. By this time, the “Galileus” had gained regional attention and a rural social movement began to develop. Journalists covering the court case labelled this movement the *Ligas Camponesas*.

According to Francisco Julião, this name was used in order to provoke opposition to the movement by associating it with a previous movement known as the Ligas Camponesas associated with the Partido Comunista Brasileiro. <sup>12</sup> According to a later-recorded interview with Francisco Julião, he introduced the use of *camponês* in the courtroom instead of the more common “legal” term *rurícola* because of the political and ideological connotation of *camponês* in relation to *latifundista* (large landowner). He recalled stating in the courtroom,

I cannot use the expression because the camponeses do not know what rurícola means and they could think I am using a bad word. I say camponês because they come from the countryside (*campo*). <sup>13</sup>

Divisions and overlapping understandings about the rural population and goals for rural “development” occurred between the major aforementioned actors – the United States and USAID, the Catholic Church, the PCB, SUDENE, and the Ligas Camponesas – as they competed for hegemony in the countryside. Although the literature on this period traditionally has argued that there were strict ideological and membership divisions between the different movements (in terms of types of rural worker involved and the movements’ goals), these divisions were not so transparent and deserve further research, especially from the point-of-view of rank-and-file participants. In fact, the “Galileus” provide an excellent example of the

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<sup>11</sup> Many versions of this story appear in the literature on the Ligas Camponesas, which is generally contradictory. Gerrit Huizer, for instance, argues that the coffin story was invented in order to prevent repression from the landowner. The real reason for the formation of the SAPP, according to Huizer, was to organize to collect money to be able to buy the land from the landowner. Gerrit HUIZER, *The Revolutionary Potential of Peasants in Latin America*, Lexington Books, Lexington, Massachusetts 1972, p. 124.

Authors who agree on the coffin story include Josué de CASTRO, *Sete palmas de terra e um caixão: ensaio sobre o Nordeste, área explosiva*, Editora Brasiliense, São Paulo 1967, pp. 23-24; Eduardo COUTINHO (ed.), *Cabra marcado para morrer*, 1982; Joseph Page writes that the SAPP began with fireworks, dancing and other festivities as Beltrão offered wood to build a chapel for the Sociedade on January 1, 1955. Joseph PAGE, *The Revolution that Never Was*, Grossman Publishers, New York 1972, pp. 36-37. Francisco Julião, transcript in CPDOC/FGV.

<sup>12</sup> Francisco Julião never considered the 1959 Ligas Camponesas “communist” in part because he was not a member of the Brazilian Communist Party. He considered himself Socialist. This distinction is confusing in the literature due to the confusion in the United States about the difference between Socialist and Communist. Most often, Francisco Julião is referred to as “communist” and the Ligas Camponesas as “communist.”

<sup>13</sup> Julião, transcript in FGV/CPDOC, 71.

murkiness of divisions between the movements. They were the “founding” members of the Ligas Camponesas but later became associated with the Church-led Federations of Rural Workers and were often referred to as being “Communist.”<sup>14</sup> It is crucial to point out that to many movement leaders, to government leaders, and to international actors such as the United States, all rural *nordestinos* were “peasants” regardless of their job as a small landowner, a rural wageworker or a sugar cane factory worker. This generalized classification of “peasant” was directly related to the Cold War and the threat of the spread of the Cuban Revolution, which was construed as a “peasant revolution.”<sup>15</sup> Although a number of scholars have tried to discern with mixed results whether the rural wageworkers or the peasants were the “most” revolutionary, this question is difficult and perhaps impossible to answer.<sup>16</sup> It also does not help us understand the reasons for significant “bottom-up” support for the movements, or the reason why they were so easily suppressed in 1964. A better outlining framework involves examining this situation of unrest (or absence of hegemony) to understand the struggles of power that took place and involved a wide variety of political actors, struggles that in some ways were similar to what occurred with the emergence of the MST twenty years later.

Actually a vision divergence about the peasantry and its movements becomes clear between Ligas Camponesas and PCB - even if they are joint in opposition toward the Catholic Church for the political representation of the countryside. The PCB considers basic to integrate the peasants into the proletariat, premise toward a revolutionary consciousness growth; legal aid, schools, medicines and burial funds are more worth to this aim than an extensive agrarian reform; the agrarian reform, in any case, is a step toward a capitalistic transformation of the

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14 In addition, in order to understand this period of rural mobilizations, it is necessary to understand the divisions within all of these movements as well. For instance, the Catholic Church also was strongly divided in these years between conservative and liberal priests, some of whom were participating in the movement of “liberation theology,” discussed at Vatican II from 1962-1965. At the same time, the Ligas Camponesas also used radical Christianity to encourage participation and direct action. For instance, in the Ligas Camponesas’ newspaper, *Liga*, notes of advice such as “*Tu dás esmolas à Igreja/e praticas a caridade/e o padre pede que sofras/com paciência e humildade/mas Cristo foi um rebelde/que lutou pela igualdade*. You give alms to the Church and practice charity and the priest asks that you suffer with patience and humility, but Christ was also a rebel who fought for equality,” appeared regularly. *LIGA* 62.11.27. p. 3 *Ligas Camponesas Outubro 1962-Abril 1964*. Ed. Francisco Julião. CIDOC Cuadernos, no. 27 (Cuernavaca, Mexico, 1962), p. 43. In sum, these preliminary findings suggest that by simply categorizing movements or participants as PCB, or Ligas Camponesas, or Church Federations, the complexities in understanding why people participated in the movements becomes lost. A “top-down” study of these social movements cannot explain the movements, their successes and their short-comings because such studies obscure the participation of the rank-and-file members, who have not been considered important actors in the movements in most of the literature.

15 After the first report on Northeastern Brazil appears in *The New York Times* in October 1960, the majority of media and U.S. government descriptions of the *nordestinos* involve the word “peasant.” In addition, other descriptions accentuate their poverty, their misery, their exploitation and their hunger and quite often they are described as being influenced by Fidel Castro and Communism. According to many media reports and US government hearing on aid programs associated with Alliance for Progress, the solution to the unrest in “feudal” Northeast inhabited by millions of “peasants” was “development” and “modernization.”

society, necessary condition toward a socialist revolution; it is so necessary to promote it together with the forces, also bourgeois, contrary to the land monopoly and the pre-capitalistic labour relations. The Ligas Camponesas vision diverges from that one: as the name itself points out, the Ligas hold in the peasants as an unitary actor which carries on considerable revolutionary scope in itself; therefore an alliance with urban proletarian forces is not necessary, still less with their bourgeois counterpart<sup>17</sup>.

During this period, the Brazilian government acted upon the belief that “peasants” were a unified actor. In 1961, the “state federation of rural workers held meetings across the country and the First National Congress of Farmers and Agricultural Workers met in Belo Horizonte”. The following year:

Because the intense interest in the organization of rural workers, the Ministry of Labour “[...] published a pamphlet [...] containing instruction for union organization. In addition, the Agency for Agrarian Reform - SUPRA - was created in 1962 precisely to work with the growing peasant movement. By 1963, 500 unions with over a half million members were grouped under a National Confederation of Rural Workers. 18

In 1963, the *Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural* (ETR, i.e. Rural Workers Statute) was enacted that “brought existing rural labour legislation into a single body of law, just as the *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* has done for urban labour in 1943.”<sup>19</sup> In this statute, the need for the government to agree to some of the demands of the rural social movements coexisted with the strongly argued intent to «re-establish government control over the same peasant movement». The ETR split up the countryside actors in two broad categories: workers and employees. At the beginning, the workers category was split up into five sub-categories, but by 1965, these extra categories disappeared.

According to this statute, “small property holders were lumped together with salaried workers, renters and squatters, while the inclusion of the sharecropper as an independent worker militated against his negotiating with his landholder as an employee.”<sup>20</sup> By seeing the peasantry as an unitary actor and at the same time ignoring the specific claims of rural workers, sharecroppers, smallholders and so on, the ETR was a brick in the construction of a corporative system; in this way, the ETR also avoided creating a coalition of rural and urban workers, as was happening in the state of São Paulo. At the same time, however, the

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16 For instance, see Florencia MALLON, *Peasants and Rural Laborers in Pernambuco, 1955-1964*, «Latin American Perspectives 19», no. 4 (Fall 1978), pp. 49-69.

17 Cf. Leonilde Sérvalo de MEDEIROS, *História dos movimentos sociais no campo*, Fase, Rio de Janeiro 1989.

18 Shepard FORMAN, *Disunity and Discontent: A Study of Peasant Political Movements in Brazil*, «Journal of Latin American Studies», volume 3, Issue I (May 1971), p. 9.

19 Peter P. HOUTZAGER, *State and unions in the transformation of the Brazilian countryside, 1964-1979*, «Latin American Research Review», vol. 33, issue 2 (1998), p. 108.

20 Shepard FORMAN, *Disunity and Discontent* cit., p. 21

combination of these groups stripped the “revolutionary” strength in seeing the peasantry as a united group<sup>21</sup>.

According to Peter Houtzager, the Brazilian military, “after having eliminated the Left as an organized force, deliberately stimulated the growth of the union movement as a part of the large transformative project of the countryside.” The main goals of this project were “increasing agricultural production, fostering national interaction and incorporating rural labor into national society.” The rural unions were a key part of the strategy to achieve the third goal<sup>22</sup>.

The structure of the rural unions established in 1962 allowed each community to have only one union representative, which responded hierarchically to a confederation at the state level and the federal level. When the military came to power, they continued to use this same structure, replacing or violently repressing the majority of the leadership and rank-and-file organizers. The *Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura* (CONTAG, National Confederation of Agricultural Workers) maintained a certain independence during the military regime whereas the “majority of rural unions [...] became pseudo-state agencies because of their dependence on the state, inability to mobilize member and delivery of social services”<sup>23</sup>. The term “camponês” disappeared from public speech, substituted by the more modern “agricultor” in the legislation and as a name associated with CONTAG. The suppression of the idea of camponês - of the non-capitalist, non-mechanized, feudal and “backwards” type of agriculture - was actively desired and pursued by the government: the farmer had to replace the peasant in Brazil. At the same time, the rural unions promoted an implicit unification of all “peasants” even those not formally considered “peasants” to be the only tolerated and recognized representatives of this rural population; moreover, the leaders of CONTAG believed that this unification was possible.

In 1973, the government passed a law that repealed the 1963 Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural (ETR; Rural Worker Statute) and partly rewrote the law, once again negating again the great contractual differences and the internal productive reality of the rural population<sup>24</sup>. This

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21 Cf. Cliff WELCH, *Rivalry and Unification: Mobilising Rural Workers in São Paulo on the Eve of the Brazilian Golpe of 1964*, «Journal of Latin American Studies», Vol. 27, Issue 1 (Feb. 1995), pp. 161-187

22 Peter P. HOUTZAGER, *State and unions* cit., pp. 104.

23 *Ivi*, pp. 105.

24 Lei 5.889, de 8 de junho de 1973. Estatui normas reguladoras do trabalho rural. In particolare gli artt. 2, 3 e 4: "Art. 2 Empregado rural é toda pessoa física que, em propriedade rural ou prédio rústico, presta serviços de natureza não eventual a empregador rural, sob a dependência deste e mediante salário.

Art. 3 Considera-se empregador, rural, para os efeitos desta Lei, a pessoa física ou jurídica, proprietário ou não, que explore atividade agro-econômica, em caráter permanente ou temporário, diretamente ou através de prepostos e com auxílio de empregados.

§ 1 Inclui-se na atividade econômica, referida no "caput" deste artigo, a exploração industrial em estabelecimento agrário não compreendido na Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho.

[...]

unity imposed “from above” began to explode in the late 1970s when the space of political action also increased. At this moment, the CONTAG leaders took a wavering stance. In the Third Congress (1979), CONTAG adopted the International Labor Organization’s 87th convention which compels governments to guarantee the right of union organization. In the Fourth Congress, CONTAG rejected the same convention <sup>25</sup>. In other words, at first CONTAG demonstrated their willingness to support a diverse rural population in the representation of rural union categories necessary to increase the incisiveness of these struggles. Afterwards, the fear of losing hegemonic control as well as the fear of the proliferation of the different categories won out. According to CONTAG leaders, this proliferation would have dismantled the articulation of interests of the different actors, a goal laboriously pursued during the dictatorship.

The wave of increased activism and the push for a renovation of union practices came at the same time of the political opening (*abertura*) along with a persisting call for unity in rural union representation. No new unions emerged from the State-led rural unions, known as the pejorative *pelegos*, or co-opted unions <sup>26</sup>. Instead, in the place of the largest mobilizations, new forces took over the local unions and gave them new direction. These combative new unions did not become incorporated into the CONTAG but they became associated with other confederations: primarily the *Central Unica dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) and to a lesser extent, the *Central General dos Trabalhadores* (CGT) that emerged from industrial trade union movements in a purely urban sphere. This merge occurred in a mixed system: at the federal level more than one confederation existed while at the local level, only one union existed. This situation continues to persist today, only changing slightly after the merging of the CONTAG and the CUT. The outcome of this confederation is still not clear. The interesting part of this described phenomenon resides in the fact that in this way, camponês unity was broken but not divided according to the different types of rural workers or peasants. The combative rural unions that united under the CUT were composed of small landowners, landless workers and rural workers. The difference between the organizations thus is not determined by the kind of peasants (small holders versus rural workers); instead, what matters is the greater or smaller

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Art. 4 Equipara-se ao empregador rural, a pessoa física ou jurídica que, habitualmente, em caráter profissional, e por conta de terceiros, execute serviços de natureza agrária, mediante utilização do trabalho de outrem."

<sup>25</sup> C87. Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948. "Article 2. Workers and employers, without distinction whatsoever, shall have the right to establish and, subject only to the rules of the organisation concerned, to join organisations of their own choosing without previous authorisation.

Article 5. Workers' and employers' organisations shall have the right to establish and join federations and confederations and any such organisation, federation or confederation shall have the right to affiliate with international organisations of workers and employers."

<sup>26</sup> *Pelego* is the young lamb hide whit wool which used to be what is put between the saddle and the horse. Because of that becomes to mean «servile person», or «hidden officer of the Ministry of Labour within the trade unions» (cf. *Dicionário Aurélio Eletrônico. Século XXI*, Editora Nova Fronteira, Rio de Janeiro 1999).

level of political action. For instance, the effectiveness depended upon the more active rural workers cooperating with the more active small landowners.

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With the end of the dictatorship came the end of the experiment of the “representative unity” of the entire peasantry, characterized by a high level of duress and coercion. In the new political scene while the majority of the rural unions continued along the same lines as aid societies and a small number of rural unions took up direct action - a new actor emerges, the Movimento Sem Terra. The MST formed within some of the more confrontational rural unions and in relation to the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT; Pastoral Commission for Land Rights) and other entities.

What stance did the MST take in the beginning about this matter of the unity or the diversity of the rural population, particularly between the small landowners and the rural wageworkers? The answer to this question is found in a text published in 1986 by the MST in the series of *Cadernos de Formação, no. 11. Elementos sobre a teoria da organização no campo* by Clodomir Santos de Moraes. According to some of the leaders’ testimonies, the MST considered the thesis sustained in this booklet - written a short time after the MST official constitution was agreed upon - partly out-of-date. However, it was in-print until 1993. Also, it had a high level of circulation and the militants and organizers who trained during these years studied and absorbed the ideas in the booklet, as they do with most of the *cadernos de formação*. Finally, as this booklet is “ancient”, it allows us to isolate some of the original characteristics of the ideologies of the MST.

The author divided the peasantry in the following way:

Primeiro: o artesão, ou seja, o produtor que começa e termina o processo produtivo de um determinado artigo [...]. O artesão da agricultura é o camponês parceleiro que começa e termina inteiramente o processo produtivo [...]. Segundo: o assalariado, ou seja, o produtor que intervém em uma pequena parte do processo produtivo para produzir um determinado artigo; o operário da fábrica que faz apenas casas para botões ou uma perna de calça. O operário do campo é aquele assalariado que intervém em apenas um pedacinho do processo produtivo necessário para produzir cachos de bananas ou espigas de milho em uma fazenda. [...] Terceiro: o semi-assalariado, ou seja, o operário que trabalha na fábrica durante o dia e pela noite ou em alguns dias da semana, se dedica a sua pequena empresa familiar e artesã. [...] Quarto: o lumpen, ou seja aquele individuo que não está envolvido em nenhum dos processos produtivos descritos anteriormente. O lumpen, em geral, não trabalha e quando o faz é eventualmente e quando lhe dá vontade.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Clodomir Santos de MORAIS, *Caderno de formação n. 11. Elemento sobre a teoria da organização no campo*, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, 1986, pp. 11-12. The italics in my quote are bold in the original text.

Once he distinguished the different rural actors, he highlighted the differences in fundamental attitudes:

O comportamento ideológico do camponês é um processo de organização de *tipo artesanal*, porque o camponês (esse artesano do campo) opera num processo produtivo único (sem divisão) no qual o produtor inicia e termina o produto. *O comportamento ideológico* do assalariado agrícola em um processo de organização é do *tipo operário*, porque o assalariado agrícola (este operário do campo) opera num processo produtivo socialmente dividido, no qual cada um faz apenas uma parte do produto.<sup>28</sup>

Then, he focused on the smallholder and describes their particular ideology:

A estrutura do processo produtivo em que está envolvido o camponês, determina muito da suas atitudes sociais e traços de seu *comportamento ideológico* no momento em que participa dentro do grupo social. Sua atitude isolacionista, aparentemente reacionária à associação (sindical, cooperativa, etc.) não é consequência apenas do nível de educação, que entre os camponeses quase sempre é muito baixo e sim procede da incompatibilidade de tipo estrutural que distingue tal atitude da organização de caráter e participação social.<sup>29</sup>

Morais reached a type of “condemnation:”

Os inimigos internos duma impresa associativa e mais ainda na impresa política se identificam nos vícios das formas artesanais de trabalho, que se manifestam minando pouco a pouco a unidade e a disciplina.<sup>30</sup>

This argument was not new when the booklet was published; in fact, it resembles a simplified version of a Marxist thesis, especially how Kautsky and Lenin interpreted Marx. Moraes did not deny that the small holder could become a revolutionary force under specific conditions, as Lenin claimed. The title of a booklet chapter is "*Mecanismos ou instrumentos*" para combater os vícios das formas artesanais de trabalho and we can read in it:

Dentre os "instrumentos ou mecanismos" conhecidos, que se empregam para evitar ou combater os vícios gerados pelas formas artesanais de trabalho, se destacam os seguintes: *a vigilância, a crítica e a reunião*.<sup>31</sup>

As this arguments state, in the basic class struggle between peasants and landlords, a gap of class-consciousness continues to exist. This gap is the difference between small landowners and rural wagedworkers. While the smallholder has the possibility of filling this gap

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28 *Ivi*, p. 12. The italics in my quote are bold in the original text.

29 *Ivi*, p. 13. The italics in my quote are bold in the original text.

30 *Ivi*, p. 27. The small caps in my quote are all caps in the original text.

31 *Ivi*, p. 37.

and obtaining a form of class-consciousness, unlike the rural workers, they could not reach this consciousness naturally<sup>32</sup>.

It is significant that the term *sem terra* almost does not exist in Morais's text. However, at this same time of the publication and during the first "national" meeting of the MST, a debate occurred regarding this term. According to João Pedro Stedile, the choice of the name *sem terra* – similar to the history of the name of the Ligas Camponesas – was partially determined by journalists.

Nunca discutimos a origem do termo no movimento. Acredito que a marca, o nome, foi a prensa que adotou, batizando como «Movimento Sem Terra», seja na época do Master, seja mais tarde, quando retomamos a luta com a ocupação da Fazenda Macali e com as outras lutas, em diversos estados.<sup>33</sup>

Stedile stated that the official decision to use the name *sem terra* dated from the meeting in Cascavel in 1984:

O primeiro debate foi sobre o nome do MST. A imprensa já nos chamava de Movimento dos Sem Terra, mas as lideranças não tinham essa disposição. Se fosse por votação, acho que passaria o nome de «Movimento pela Reforma Agrária», já que era mais amplo do que apenas a luta pela terra. Fizemos uma reflexão profunda sobre o assunto e aproveitamos o apelido pelo qual já éramos conhecidos pela sociedade: «os sem-terra». Aprovamos por unanimidade o nome de Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais *Sem terra*. Na verdade, a escolha do nome foi um debate ideológico. Paralelamente, fizemos uma reflexão no sentido que deveríamos resgatar o nosso caráter de classe. Somos trabalhadores, temos uma sociedade com classes diferentes e pertencemos a uma delas. Esse foi o debate. Não foi só uma escolha do nome porque achávamos mais bonito assim ou simplesmente para nos diferenciar, dizendo: «os sem-terra somos nós».<sup>34</sup>

The debate that took place was over whether to call the movement "Movement for Agrarian Reform" or "Landless Workers Movement" and according to Stedile, the majority supported the first one. Nonetheless, the second name won in the end; in part, due to the influence of the media. The leaders at the conference preferred the "Movement for Agrarian Reform" because it stood for a broader goal: a struggle that was not simply limited to rural populations but also included a fight for citizenship rights. At the same time, this name is tied to a specific objective that could "get old." However, as the above quotation suggests, the reason for selecting the "Landless Workers Movement" was related to the fact that the "Movement for Agrarian Reform" did not clearly identify the actors participating in the

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<sup>32</sup> Many texts and statements of militants and leaders of the MST could bear out this argument. When the organizers cope with the question of the collective groups often refer to the «individualist peasantry mentality».

<sup>33</sup> João Pedro STEDILE, Bernardo Mançano FERNANDES, *Brava gente* cit., p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 47.

struggle, but only the goal that compels the movement. The “Landless Movement” is the movement of the people without access to land: the stress shifts from the objective to the social group involved, and as Stedile argued, to the class that fights for this goal. It is no small thing that many people who by this time or join the MST do not have an identity of “landless” or *sem terra* in the proper sense of the term.

In reality, while the identification of the *sem terra* social group is vague, the construction of a class identity is only just beginning. Most probably the term has then the meaning Giuliano Procacci assigned to it fifteen years before. In 1970, Italian historian Procacci uses the term *sem terra* in a book about struggles at the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy, referring to claims of identity of the Plains of Padana rural wage workers, integrated in a modern and capitalistic reality, and the claims of identity of Southern wage workers who were integrated in a very backwards social context.

Indeed the rural workers from the Plains of Padana are not [...] a “landless peasant” in relation to the Southern rural wageworker. The latter is an ex-peasant whose goal is to be a peasant once again and therefore, the loss of his plot rules his mentality and his social behavior.<sup>35</sup>

The *sem terra* claims for land. The rural workers, on the contrary, are uprooted from their lands and thus are engaged in union activities. In conclusion, the “landless” is a person not determined by his or her condition but by their prospects.

In the face of the notion suggested by Moraes, the construction of the *sem terra* identity involves a substantial change in previous debates about the dichotomy between small landowners and rural wageworkers. This concept goes beyond that opposition, creating a multi-faceted category that encompasses more than simply “to be without land.” The concept of *sem terra* captures and gives a name to the ongoing process of rural struggle in a new and original way. A later *Caderno de Formação* presents the result of this construction and poses it to the reflections of the militants. José de Souza Martins writes:

É justamente a cana-de-açúcar no Nordeste que nos mostra com mais clareza o processo do camponês ao longo da história brasileira: agregado marginal no regime de trabalho escravo, ocupado ocasionalmente no trabalho de cana-de-açúcar, passa ao lugar principal com o fim da escravidão, como morador de condição, para, à medida que a condição aumenta e que seu trabalho gratuito ou barato na cana é a renda que paga pela terra em que planta a sua subsistência, ir ao poucos se convertendo em assalariado.<sup>36</sup>

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35 Giuliano PROCACCI, *Le lotte di classe in Italia all'inizio del secolo XX*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1970, p. 83, quoted in Giacomina NENCI, *Le campagne italiane in età contemporanea. Un bilancio storiografico*, il Mulino, Bologna 1997, p. 29. The translation is ours. The original quote is: "Il bracciante della Val padana non è infatti, occorre sottolinearlo subito e con forza, come invece è il bracciante meridionale, un "contadino senza terra", e cioè un ex-contadino che aspira a tornare nuovamente tale, il cui ambito mentale e il cui comportamento sociale sono dominati dal rimpianto verso il pezzo di terra al sole."

36 José de Souza MARTINS, *Os movimentos camponeses e as lutas camponesas no Brasil*, in *Caderno de Formação n. 31. O movimento camponês no Brasil e a luta pela reforma agrária*, Movimento Sem Terra, 1999, p. 12. The Movimento

It is possible to argue that this quote differs greatly from Morais's original arguments: in this case, the theory is applied to a particular reality of the sugar cane workers in Northeastern Brazil. It is worthwhile to mention that Martins points out a process while Morais had emphasized a steady reality. Most importantly, it is necessary to understand that this is a process that shapes and constructs the *sem terra* concept: an actor somewhere between the decapitalized small landowner and the rural wage worker or the decapitalized small landowner who is in the process of becoming a rural wage worker.

According to Stedile, another debate about the name of the MST existed between *Movimento dos Camponeses Sem Terra* and *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*. In the end of the 1960s, as we seen, the word *sem terra* disappeared in spite of the consolidation of the corporative union system. Other than the rare use of the term *camponês* by the peasants and its learned nuance, by deciding to use rural worker over *camponês*, the MST tried to make a marked difference between the Ligas Camponesas and the new rural social movement. It is important to note that the term *trabalhador rural* implies a broader social group than *camponês*, as stated by Stedile:

Na essência o MST nasceu como um movimento camponês, que tinha como bandeira as três reivindicações prioritárias: terra, reforma agrária e mudanças gerais na sociedade. Quando nós mesmos fomos nos conceituar, percebemos que o MST era diferente dos movimentos camponeses históricos, que apenas lutavam por terra.<sup>37</sup>

The leaders proposed these options to the rank-and-file, oscillating between the Morais and the Martins arguments. Through the direct testimonies of some militants, we will show how their very arguments introduced the term *sem terra* for the participants in the MST, a term that gained its strength and meaning as a concept of self-representation or as a subjective identity. Before touching this subject we may linger over a quote from a long interview with João Pedro Stedile published in the *New Left Review* in Spring, 2002:

In our movement, we try to use terminologies that take account of the fact that there are a great many *lumpens* in the country areas - the numbers living in misery there have risen with the economic crisis. The agrarian proletariat constitutes around a third of the rural population, but their numbers are dropping sharply with mechanization. [...] Then there is the classically defined layer of small farmers, the *campesinato* - those who work with their families on a little bit of land, whether it belongs to them or not. Of this fraction, a third are landless - our base of four million families. They work as sharecroppers, or tenants; or they could be farmers' children, who need to earn a wage. Another third - again, around four million families - are small farmer-proprietors, owning up to 50 hectares, about 120 acres. There is also an agrarian petty

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Sem Terra takes and published an excerpt from the book cf. José de Souza MARTINS, *Os camponeses e a política do Brasil*, Vozes, Persepolis 1981, pp. 62-80.

37 João Pedro STEDILE, Bernardo Mançano FERNANDES, *Brava gente* cit., pp. 31-32

bourgeoisie, whose properties can vary from 50 hectares in some regions to 500, or 1,200 acres. Over that - the big ranchers and landowners - we'd consider as part of the agrarian bourgeoisie.<sup>38</sup>

This quotation reveals an interesting connection to Morais's argument. In this case, the analysis is more complicated but it is still possible to identify the *lumpens*, no longer with a negative connotation; the rural workers, said to be gradually disappearing; and, the small landowners referred to as the *campesinato*, a new form of the past "camponês" that is closer to meaning "peasantry."

The second element worth mentioning is that Stedile identifies the de-capitalized small landowners as the rank-and-file members of the Movimento Sem Terra. As it turns out, in the larger Brazilian political debate, the term *sem terra* is applied to this group and a strong conflict occurs about quantifying this social group. Opponents of a serious or "real" agrarian reform project define *sem terra* as people who claim the rights to land through forms of protest. On the contrary, proponents of wide-scale agrarian reform argue that the *sem terra* includes all the de-capitalized small landholders in addition to a wide range of rural and urban working class people (proletarians). What is most interesting about this debate is that it is still unclear what is meant by *sem terra*. For this answer, we will provide an analysis of oral histories and field interviews.

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To better understand the meaning of these interviews that we present, it is necessary to put them in a context. I conducted these interview during the summer of 2000 in the Santa Maria rural settlement (*assentamento*) in the Northern area (of the Southern Brazilian State) of Paraná<sup>39</sup>. This settlement is very small in comparison to others - only 98 *alqueires* or 23, 535 hectares - and the soils are relatively poor. The proximity of the settlement to the nearby town, Paranacity which is only 10 kilometers away, proves to be beneficial. Paranacity is a small town of approximately 9,400 people, 57 percent of whom live in the urban area. Forty-eight percent of the inhabitants are involved in the service sector, and the remaining percentage are involved in either agricultural work, such as cattle ranching, or non-agricultural work in the countryside, perhaps employed by the local sugar cane mill (*usina*)<sup>40</sup>.

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38 João Pedro STEDILE, *Landless battalions. The Sem Terra Movement of Brazil*, «New Left Review», Issue 15, May-June 2002, pp. 89-90.

39 The interviews are partly transcribed and used in Luca FANELLI, *La scelta della terra* cit. For the researcher who want to use it, it is available the original recording. In the footnotes I indicate the minute and the second of the starting and end point of each recorded interview. The symbol † means «not understandable word».

40 For the population, cf. IBGE, *Censo demografico do Brazil - [Dados gerais] - Paraná*, 1991. For the occupation ratio, cf. the database «Paranacidade» (<http://www.paranacidade.org.br>) and the interviews done in place.

The crisis experienced by the coffee plantations in this region that occurred in the early 1970s caused wide-scale extirpation of these plantations. Sugar cane plantations and cattle ranching moved in afterwards. As in other rural regions of Brazil, a small number of the population own most of the land in the form of large estates, and the majority of the population has no access to land. The towns are quite poor. During this time, there was a temporary emigration from this region to Mato Grosso do Sul, Mato Grosso do Norte and the frontier region, such as the state of Pará.

The group which comes to occupy the *fazenda* develops from within the Movimento Sem Terra in the early 1990s, aiming to create a completely collective settlement and start a process of *territorialização*, or the spread of the MST in the region <sup>41</sup>. All of the families that occupy the *fazenda* in 1993 come from previously established MST settlements that have left either because these had not yet become legal settlements or to initiate a new project in favor of this type of completely collective settlement. From 1993 to 2000, there is a high turnover rate of families in the settlement. Only a “historical” group persists - about half of the original families - but other families join the settlement, so the number of families remains just about the same throughout this period. This turnover rate is the result of the difficulty of collective management, personal conflicts and the engagement of the MST families in state or federal branches. According to recent sources, from 2000 to the present, there is not such a high turnover rate.

Almost half of the adult members of the Santa Maria rural settlement come from small landowner households unable to give land to their children <sup>42</sup>. Other members come from situations in which they or their families have had access to land but have lost these lands due to influences such as the modernization of agriculture and diminishing access to credit for small producers, processes that began in the 1970s. Still others come from families that worked on coffee plantations, in São Paulo and Paraná. A few of the adult members of the settlement had been employed in non-agricultural lines of work in the countryside; for instance, working in a sawmill. A minority of the MST settlers had been born and raised in urban areas. Almost half of the adult population had lived for some period of time in a town - from a few months to twenty years - working as bricklayers, waiters, guards, or tailors.

When these people first occupied the *fazenda* Santa Maria the majority of the land was planted with sugar cane. In its nascent stages, the settlers had to free the fields of sugar cane and they supported themselves by selling their labor to some of the large farms in the area. A few months after the original occupation, they founded the *Cooperativa de Produção Agro Pecuária Vitória* (COPAVI, Cooperative of Agricultural Ranching Victoria) and almost all of the settlers

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<sup>41</sup> For the concept of *territorialização*, cf. Bernardo Mançano FERNANDES, *MST - Formação e territorialização em São Paulo*, Editora Hucitec, São Paulo 1996.

<sup>42</sup> The grandparents of these members of the rural settlement moved from the state of Rio Grande do Sul or of Santa Catarina toward the south or the west Paraná when the land was already virgin and covered with forest.

join the cooperative. The settlement management is completely collective. The families all live in a conglomeration of close houses (*agrovila*) and they do not have any individual self-subsistence plots. Each settler works to produce and feed the members, either by production or buy selling at the local market. At the end of each month, each family receives a payment based on the number of hours worked by everyone in the family minus the co-op products consumed. The settlement produces milk, breeds pork and chicken, and has a thriving garden. Most of the grain crops are intended for ranching and beans are the main subsistence crop. There is also some non-agricultural production occurring, such as the production of *rapadura* (burnt sugar), *doce de leite* (caramelized milk), yoghurt, and *cachaça* (sugar cane brandy). In addition to the production sector, there is a commercial sector responsible for sales and a “support” sector - secretariat, refectory care and militant people. They sell the goods door-to-door most commonly but also in some local (Paranacity, Cruzeiro do Sul) and regional (Maringá) markets.

Tension exists about the impressive development of the settlement and its low capitalization, over the improvement of material life conditions of the settlers and the difficult psychological stresses related to any high level job specialization, and in relation to conflicts over the self versus the collective, over the collective management of many facets of private lives. In addition, problems exist with the now-grown children who consider the settlement too narrow for their expectations and understand the “professional militancy” within the MST as the preferred way to fulfil their expected participation. Reasons for this have to do with the strong ideological commitment of their families and also due to their realization that there are few job opportunities in urban areas. However, the settlement cannot afford a greater number of militants, already employing two full-time militants and one part-time position.

The Santa Maria settlement carries out the goal of increasing the MST at a local and regional level. From 1998 to 2000, four to eight land occupations occurred in the microregion; the occupants come from local areas and from many different regions. Most of them are *brasiguai*<sup>43</sup>. The settlement is one of the few collective settlements in Brazil; thus the Movimento Sem Terra considers it as a model settlement, and promotes visitations<sup>44</sup>.

Most of the settlers that I interviewed have had a long history of struggle and in some cases, they participated in the creation of the MST as mid-level organizers. From these participants, it is possible to understand how the *sem terra* concept is based and understood in the relevant rank-and-file sector, but it is difficult to determine how the less politically aware participants of the MST perceive the idea of *sem terra*.

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43 The *brasiguai* are Brazilian people who moved in a great number toward Paraguay during the 1980s and 1990s, searching for cheap plots of land, job on chopping tree and on sawmills.

44 The *I Censo da Reforma Agraria* takes a sample of 151,678 settlers. 86.6% of them lives in individual settlement, 8% in mixed ones and 5.4% in collective settlements. Cf. INCRA, CRUB, UNB, *I Censo da Reforma Agraria no Brasil*, [Brasilia 1997].

### *Regina*

Regina said that she first joined the settlement by following her husband. Her family is the one of the only families that has a long militancy standing in the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) and did not participate actively in the MST. Ruben, her husband, was invited to join the settlement because of his experience and skills with cultivating market crops. So, Regina is outside of the settlement but at the same time, she is more and more accepting of MST ideology.

Interviewer: Assim, você é num assentamento do Movimento Sem Terra, mas você não foi nunca *sem terra*...

Regina: ...no, eu nunca foi *sem terra*...

Interviewer: ...como você, quando a gente fala, *sem terra*, o você sente, assim...

Regina: Eu acho assim, e penso exatamente porque eles falam de assentamento *sem terra*, so que aqui o pessoal já ganhou a terra, não deveria ser mais *sem terra*, *sem terra* para aqueles quem ainda tão procurando a terra né, para quem é já assentado acho que agora é com terra, que nem diz o Mauro né, que ele fala assim nos agora somos com terra não estamos mais *sem terra*; então eu acho que deveria ser o contrário.<sup>45</sup>

For Regina, *sem terra* has a literal, technical meaning. People who gained access to a plot of land should change their name, according to her. Her outside status to the MST does not necessarily influence her argument. Instead, she sites Mauro who is the “authority” and one of the original settlers. Mauro makes a very similar argument in his interview, although he states this in a joking manner<sup>46</sup>. Stedile himself in the previously cited interview with the *New Left Review*, actually defines it literally as person without land.

### *Hamilton and Jorge*

In Hamilton and Jorge’s comments, we find a different understanding of *sem terra*. Jorge was born in 1950 and he is 23 years older than Hamilton. During his childhood, Jorge grew up on coffee plantations, taking unstable rural jobs afterwards. When he was 30 years old, the Itaipú Dam project hired him. He then moved to a nearby town and then later, moved on to the settlement. Hamilton has urban experiences as well. In 1993, his family moved between Santa Catarina and Paraguay. He worked as a waiter until 1998 when he joined a MST occupation:

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45 Regina, 35:23 – 36:00

46 Stedile tells that at the beginning they debated about calling the people who gained a plot of land *Movimento Pé no Chão* (feet on the ground). Cf. João Pedro STEDILE, *Brava gente* cit., p. 92.

Interviewer: Assim, como você chegou á entrar no MST?  
Hamilton: Como foi que eu tive essa definição? Bom, para começar, quando eu trabalhava de empregado eu sempre assisti na televisão os conflitos, tá, o MST com a polícia, os fazendeiros, e eu sempre falava: “o que esta turma de doidos estão fazendo? Porque não vão achar emprego?” Mas só que no mesmo tempo eu pensava o contrário também: “á onde que eles vão conseguir emprego? Se a única alternativa deles é terra para eles plantar, produzir, para poder ter o seu alimento, seu sustento? Ai eu sempre ficava naquela, né, expectativa. Eu sabia também, eu tinha certeza que eu também era *sem terra*, que eu não tinha né, era empregado.”<sup>47</sup>

In this testimony, there is a cliché: a shift from a negative view of the MST to a more positive one. Nonetheless, it is necessary to re-emphasize Hamilton’s last phrase: Hamilton considers himself a *sem terra a posteriori*, because he is an employee and not an employer. Jorge’s testimony expands upon this idea.

Interviewer: O que significa para você a palavra *sem terra*?

Jorge: *Sem terra*? ... eu acho que significa realidade, *sem terra* é pessoas que não tem nada, né.

Interviewer: Mas você se sentiu *sem terra*?

Jorge: Eu? Sim, eu sempre falava que era um *sem terra* né, mesmo quando eu morava na cidade com uma profissão, se falava em *sem terra*, eu dizia: “pra mim são *sem terra*, eu nunca teve terra né” então, quer dizer, não tinha capital nenhum, o único capital que tinha em Cascavel era a casa, um pedacinho de terra com a casa, mas que não era terra pra produzir, não era terra produtiva, era terra simplesmente para a casa, para a residência, então não tinha terra, então se dizia “também são *sem terra*”.<sup>48</sup>

This testimony demonstrates how the MST ideology has come to work so that people remember and frame their past experiences as *sem terra* even before joining the movement. This is very important for the newcomers to the settlement. Also, it is apparent that in the second part of Jorge’s testimony he uses the term *sem terra* more literally.

In this testimony, it is clear that there is a strong perception that *sem terra* means poor and exploited person. This broadening of the concept of *sem terra* apparent in the testimonies of Hamilton and Jorge is crucial. A couple of years before they joined the movement, they understood themselves to be *sem terra* showing that the term is no longer limited to rural populations. They may have thought that the countryside could have provided a better way of

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47 Hamilton, 47:10-48:16

48 Jorge, 102:00-102:59

life, but this line of thinking did not result in direct action. This situation changed dramatically when - in the case of Hamilton - one of the leaders of the settlement invited him to join with the understanding that he could already be *sem terra* or proletarian.

This is not an isolated case. Throughout the 1990s, the base or grassroots part of the MST developed, growing to include more *rururbanos* (people who live in a town and work as agriculture workers during the daytime); more *favelados* (people who live in the *favelas*/slums) and more migrants who had left the countryside a few decades earlier. For these new members, the *sem terra* term came to represent a tool of identity construction and for this reason, it had to be assimilated with the concept of exploitation.

The broader meanings attached to *sem terra* makes it useful when constructing a tool of aggregation and identity for MST struggles in urban areas, or in places where urban counterparts are also partaking in MST struggles. These struggles include rallies in urban areas focused on the extension of social and citizenship rights. They also have an even broader appeal to international counterparts as seen in the rallies against neoliberalism <sup>49</sup>.

This conceptual depth of the MST allows it to represent urban grassroots movements but it still does not resolve the conflict brought up in Regina's testimony involving the use of *sem terra* for both people who received plots of land and for those who continue to be landless. This is relevant to understanding the Movimento Sem Terra and its coherence as a movement. Historically, the divisions caused in agrarian reform movements between those who have already obtained access to land and are no longer interested in supporting the social movement and those who have not yet received land created situations of great internal conflict and resentment. As Heidi Tinsman shows in the case of rural Chile in *Partners in Conflict* <sup>50</sup>, the agrarian reform movement in Chile became divided and weakened in part due to divisions between those who had received land and those who continued to fight for land.

In the case of the MST, this conflict has three dimensions. First, a debate exists about whether or not the settlement should invest human and economic resources in new occupations or in the support of the settlement. This choice is highly contested in the Santa Maria settlement where the full-time militants who are supported by the cooperative weigh heavily on its management. This same debate also occurs at the central level but to a larger extent since the leaders must decide how to allocate larger quantities of economic and human resources. The second dimension involves the public image of the MST. A radical image does not encourage economic growth and performance of the rural settlements since their goal is to

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49 Besides this concept widening there is a use of the model of the *sem terra* term. Similar names spread. Some of them are names of movement attached to the Movimento Sem Terra, as it is for the *sem teto*, who fight in some towns for the dwelling right. Other names do not have any tie with the Movimento Sem Terra. This is the case of the term *sem sem*, used by some scholar and journalist - partly criticising the Movimento Sem Terra - referring to the poorest inhabitants of the slums, who do not own nor land nor anything. For this later facets, cf. José Graziano da SILVA, *O novo rural brasileiro*, Unicamp, Campinas 1999<sup>2</sup>.

50 Heidi TINSMAN, *Partners in conflict: the politics of gender, sexuality, and labor in the Chilean agrarian reform, 1950-1973*, Duke University Press, Durham 2002.

integrate into the local society. So, on the one hand, the image is one of radicalism and opposition, but on the other hand, the goals of economic growth and development of the settlements depends on the settlements not being considered radical or oppositional but integrated into the larger community<sup>51</sup>. The third debate involves the extent to which there is a need to support new occupations for those who have already obtained land. Support for new occupations involves economic assistance as well as participation in accompanying mobilizations, causing losses in terms of lost working hours on the already established settlements.

### *Emma*

A new semantic shift of the term *sem terra* overcomes, at least at a subjective or self-representative level, these latent and everyday conflicts that are present in the MST. Emma clearly expresses this shift in her testimony. She was born in the countryside in the municipality of Nova Prata de Iguaçú, and she grew up there working as an agricultural laborer, difficult work especially for a child. Her father had developed a grassroots rural union. Emma's family was evicted from their land when the dam was being built and so they moved to a new plot of land, which was part of an MST occupation.

Interviewer: Uma pergunta sobre a palavra *sem terra*, porque assim na sua vida você nunca foi *sem terra*, você nunca se sentiu *sem terra*?  
Emma: Desde que eu... comecei á entender essa luta, † onze anos, doze anos que eu comecei á participar, foi em algumas reuniões nas comunidades de meu pai e vi eles comentar sobre isso, tá, a gente vi comentar de acampamentos e tal, eu sempre até hoje, até hoje que 'tó assentada aqui me sinto uma *sem terra* ainda, ainda me sinto que eu sou uma *sem terra*; me dá essa impressão aqui que, si houve... enquanto houve uma pessoa *sem terra*, me parece que eu também sou *sem terra* né... sempre tem... não é porque hoje eu 'tó assentada que se sai uma manifestação, ou se eu tenho que... se sai uma ocupação que alguém vem para me convidar para me ir participar dessa ocupação, eu vou dizer "no, se eu não vou 'tar nas terras não vou", nunca me passou isso pela cabeça, então, si houve uma ocupação e precisa de mim eu vou ajudar porque acho que hoje 'tó assentada mas eu tenho que lutar pra as pessoas que não estão assentada ainda né.<sup>52</sup>

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51 It is not clear how this matter will evolve during the Lula presidency. The conflict toward state governments and landlords will likely remain. According to the Movimento Sem Terra leaders statements, the coalition between the Movimento Sem Terra and the Lula government it is in any case subjected to certain president's actions.

52 Emma, 54:40-56:10

According to Emma, *sem terra* does not have a connection with the material condition of land scarcity or even a more generic meaning of poverty or exploitation. *Sem terra* is a person who joins the Movimento Sem Terra, a person who struggles for land and once they obtain access to land, continues to struggle for the greater MST cause so that other landless people can also obtain land.

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In the beginning of the democratic opening (*abertura*) in the early 1980s, increased mobilization took place in addition to a growing number of political forces claiming to represent the peasantry. Each actor tried to carve out popular support and a space of feasible political action. The MST was a part of this process, identifying its popular support in complex and heterogeneous social groups, but also well delineated. Their grassroots constituency evolved over time; at first, it was limited to the de-capitalized small landowner who had lost their lands due to incorporation of the lands into the market economy, the children of small landowners who no longer had access to new lands because of the closing of the frontier, the peasants displaced from their lands due to construction of dams. Then, it grew to incorporate *favela* inhabitants, rural workers recently forced to sell their lands, people who are slightly integrated into urban society but are unemployed, women who want to have a subsistence plot while their husbands and sons are day agricultural laborers elsewhere. Making this broad political claim and being represented as such in the media, the Movimento Sem Terra positions itself as a political actor that represents all of the political forces of rural Brazil. However, this goal falls short in its concrete application and action. Admittedly giving up the claim to represent all of the rural population in a “horizontal” way, the MST aims at a different coalition of forces. In this framework, both the fundamental division between small landowners and rural workers and the idea of a singular “peasantry” become inadequate to describe the participants in the MST.

The *sem terra* concept, on the contrary, goes beyond even including the entire rural population. It is a “new” term that can apply to all the social groups previously mentioned and at the same time, it gives this social group a meaningful tool for constructing a unifying identity. At an analytical level, the process of uniting these different social groups is not similar at all to the process of uniting urban and rural proletariat; the connection between these different social groups is therefore not a similar connection between the modes of production, but a similar experience of poverty and exploitation. Some participants, however, do not feel that this identity is dependent on their indefinite deprivation, but rests upon their acquisition of class-consciousness, if it is at all possible to redefine class according to entirely new parameters and different cleavages. This “vertical” depth of the *sem terra* idea stems, in part, from the interaction between the rank-and-file members and the leaders. For the grassroots members, it is a flexible tool of self-representation, useful in a variety of social circumstances. At the same

time, the term allows the leadership to continue to press for greater political struggles, such as for a new world economic order and for citizenship rights.

The idea of *sem terra* allows for homogenization of differences between the original members of the MST and the newcomers. An occupant can be a de-capitalized small landholder, or a *boia-fria* ("cold launcher," refers to a day laborer). It does not necessarily refer to any definite social condition or even a necessarily exploited condition: *sem terra* becomes the membership mark of a broadly-defined organization. Is this category socially homogeneous?<sup>53</sup> No, but actually in the concept it is possible to find the originality of the idea. The leveling of the differences among a variety of social actors who are able to relate and use the term *sem terra* is the result of a joint effort by the rank-and-file members and the leaders to overcome the strong, though enlivening, Movimento Sem Terra contradictions such as the diversity of backgrounds of the participants and the conflict between those who have land and those who continue to struggle for land<sup>54</sup>. Perhaps this is the way to state in an obscured manner that in this general crisis of the peasantry and rural populations, the only peasant who can survive economically, politically and culturally, is the militant peasant.

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<sup>53</sup> José de Souza Martins put this question in a recent essay. Cf. José de Souza MARTINS, *Representing the Peasantry? Struggles for/about land in Brazil*, «The Journal of Peasant Studies», Vol. 29, n. 3/4, April-July 2002, pp. 300-335.

<sup>54</sup> For future studies, it would be important to develop the research exploring how this concept is used in other rural settlements in different regions and how it is used among the middle strata of Movement organizers. Although this analysis of *sem terra* has focused primarily on how this new identity has allowed participants - and the movement itself - to overcome divisions based in class differences, more research is needed to understand how this term works in relations to differences based on other socially constructed identities such as region/communities, gender, race/ethnicity, and religion.

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