

Agrarian reform and the production of locality: resettlement and community building in Mato Grosso, Brazil

Hannah Wittman

Professora do Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Simon Fraser University

Endereço profissional: Burnaby BC V5A 1S6, CANADA, +1 604 268-6632

Endereço eletrônico: hwittman@sfu.ca

Abstract

This paper investigates processes of place-making and community formation following agrarian reform resettlement in Brazil. Based on case studies conducted between 2002 and 2004 in several settlements organized by the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, I argue that resettlement through agrarian reform in Brazil is *a process of intentional community-building through resettlement and emplacement*. Ethnographic data from one settlement, Antonio Conselheiro, shows that land recipients passed through a series of physical movements [displacement, occupation, encampment, settlement] that shape the production of locality, or what I refer to here as emplacement. I discuss key social processes that contribute to emplacement: the transition from individual to imagined community, from imagined community to collectivity, and from collectivity to place-based community.

Key-words: MST, Mato Grosso, agrarian reform, resettlement.

Resumo

Reforma agrária e produção do local: reassentamento e construção comunitária em Mato Grosso, Brasil

A sociologia está sendo chamada para desenvolver novas maneiras de caracterizar os processos sociais envolvidos na mobilidade, movimento e na reestruturação da sociedade no mundo contemporâneo e globalizado. Trabalhos acadêmicos na área de reassentamento, especialmente no âmbito dos deslocados da violência social ou dos atingidos por barragens, procuram compreender como é que os povos re-assentados formam novas comunidades estáveis. Dentro do contexto do reassentamento, este artigo procura identificar como as experiências individuais e coletivas da migração e mobilização física e simbólica das famílias interagem com as forças sociais históricas e contemporâneas nos espaços emergentes no estabelecimento de um assentamento. O argumento está baseado em pesquisas de campos realizadas entre 2002 e 2004 em vários assentamentos organizados pelo Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), no estado de Mato Grosso, na região centro-oeste do Brasil. A autora sustenta que o processo de formar assentamentos através da reforma agrária no Brasil é um processo de formação intencional de comunidade. A experiência particular de um assentamento do MST, Antonio Conselheiro, na região central do Mato Grosso, mostra que os recipientes da terra passam por uma série de mobilidades (despejo, migração, ocupação, acampamento, assentamento) que definem o processo da produção da localidade. Discuto processos-chave que contribuam a produção da localidade: a transição do ser indivíduo a uma comunidade imaginária, da comunidade imaginária a coletividade, da coletividade a comunidade, baseado em localidade.

Palavras-chave: MST, Mato Grosso, reforma agrária, reassentamento.

Resumen

Reforma agraria y producción do local: reasentamiento y construcion comunitaria en Mato Grosso, Brazil

La disciplina de sociología está buscando nuevas herramientas teóricas para caracterizar los procesos implicados en la movilidad y en la reestructuración de la sociedad contemporáneo. Trabajo académico en el área de desplazamiento y reasentamiento, especialmente para los refugios de guerra o las personas afectados por represas hidroeléctricas procura entender los procesos que facilitan la formación de un sentido de comunidad estable entre los pueblos que forman los asentamientos nuevos. Dentro del contexto do proceso de reasentamiento, este ensayo pretende identificar cómo las experiencias individuales y colectivas de migración y movilización física y simbólica de las familias interactúan con las fuerzas sociales históricas y contemporáneas en los espacios emergentes del asentamiento. O argumento está fundamentada en trabajo del campo realizado entre 2002 y 2004 en varios asentamientos organizado por el MST en el estado de Mato Grosso en la región centro-oeste de Brasil. La autora señala que la formación de asentamientos de reforma agraria en Mato Grosso es un proceso de intencional formación de un sentido de comunidad. La experiencia de un asentamiento en Mato Grosso, el Antonio Conselheiro, muestra que los recipientes de tierra pasan por una serie de movimientos físicos (desalojo, migración, ocupación de tierra, acampamiento, asentamiento) que definan el proceso de producción de localidad. En el análisis final, se destacan los procesos sociales dominantes que contribuyen al emplazamiento: la transición del individuo a la comunidad imaginada, de la comunidad imaginada a la colectividad, y de la colectividad a la comunidad basada en el lugar nuevo.

Palabras claves: MST (Movimiento de los Trabajadores Rurales Sin Tierra), Mato Grosso, reforma agraria, reasentamiento.

Introduction

Displacement and community fragmentation are prominent outcomes of the changing terms of globalization. The shifting and consolidation of economic projects changes the meaning and practice of locality and livelihood for both rural and urban people, with estimates of more than 10 million people forcibly displaced every year (Feldman, Geisler and Silberling, 2003). As Doreen Massey pointed out more than a decade ago, we are faced with increasing uncertainty concerning the definition and boundaries of places and communities (Massey 1994a; 1994b); and more practically, how we continue to produce and live in them.

This paper is about one story of contemporary place-making through grassroots agrarian reform in Brazil. In response to ongoing rural exclusion and displacement, land redistribution and resettlement policies are prominent on the agenda of advocates for social change in Brazil. Increased mobilization by Brazil's largest and most successful social movement, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) and the many other regional and national landless movements in Brazil created significant pressure for the Lula government, elected in October of 2002, to make good on a campaign promise to implement a "massive and immediate" land reform. At the onset of Lula's campaign, the number of landless families had reached five million, and over 150,000 families were camped on roadsides, abandoned estates, and on the patios of beleaguered Federal Land Reform Agencies (INCRA) in almost every state. They demanded the expropriation and redistribution of the 44% of Brazil's arable land that is classified as unproductive under the current criteria

established by the 1988 Constitution (de Janvry, Sadoulet and Wolford 2001).¹ Soon after his election, Lula asserted that “agrarian reform is... fundamental if the Brazilian economy is to be rebuilt. And it will play a crucial role in making the country fully democratic” (da Silva 2003).

To explore the implications of land reform resettlement for fostering place-making processes and emergent communities, this paper examines the experiences of grassroots agrarian reform in Brazil *as a process of intentional resettlement and emplacement* by members of a social movement. Using a case study approach, I highlight key moments in the displacement and resettlement process to illustrate how the *process of producing place* influences the potential for stable *reproduction* of both community and locality.

Displacement and emplacement

Development induced displacement is a concept that recognizes that the uprooting of peoples, communities, and livelihoods is a direct result of the changing terms of an international “development project” that follows Western models of industrialization and fails to address local and global inequality (McMichael, 2004). In rural areas across the globe, dynamics of movement and mobility include direct physical displacement resulting from infrastructure projects (e.g. hydroelectric dams) as well as a more indirect process through which patterns and foci of economic development change the value of particular labor and livelihood practices. In the face of global fragmentation, this paper suggests ways of approaching the “aftermath” of displacement: where do displaced people go and how do they reconstruct their lives after migration and resettlement?

Literature on resettlement has tended to focus on transnational migration (Conradson and Latham, 2005; Ong, 1999; Smith, 2005) and compensation for development-induced displacement (Cernea 1996; 2003; Cernea and McDowell 2000). Refugee camps and massive forced resettlement projects literally move entire communities across space and territorial boundaries, but often fail to recreate community, livelihood, or permanent resettlement (Kibreab, 2003; Malkki, 1995). Across the globe, however, resettlement occurs on a daily basis as individuals, families, and social movements engage in new and creative place-making projects and processes, developing new forms of *cosmopolitan localism* which combine global imaginations of change and resistance with local realities and resources (McMichael, 2004; Sachs, 1992). Within national borders, processes of mobility, resettlement, and emplacement continually re-create emergent localities and regional cultures that influence society, local political economy, and individual livelihoods. In today’s mobile world, social constructions of place, identity, and scale offer nodes of resistance to the homogenous world culture of globalization.

In investigating the process of placemaking through agrarian reform in Brazil, I build on the insights of Doreen Massey, who argues that places are processes rather than static sites. She states that “what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey, 1994b, 154). Resettlement through agrarian reform involves shifting both people and property, in the process creating new social and environmental relations and permanently transforming both symbolic and physical landscapes. Agrarian reform settlements – as emergent places – are sites of changing identity, community, and livelihood that build individual and collective histories and relationships to surrounding physical spaces. As Englund argues, the process of emplacement in the global landscape is revealed “in practices spurred by the globalist imagination, ... [in which] the local appears as an achievement that [migrants] carve out of the cultural materials that the fact of their movement provides” (2002, 266-267).”

¹ After a march from Goiania to Brasilia in May 2005 involving more than 12,000 participants the Lula administration agreed to revise the productivity criteria, expected to increase the amount of land eligible for expropriation.

As a response to agrarian transformation and development induced displacement, agrarian reform offers a fresh analytical lens on contemporary place-making processes and experiences not only for those regions currently engaged in a process of agrarian reform but for all areas interested in processes of sustainable community building. The places emergent from land reform settlement provide new contexts for migrants and displaced individuals to make new sense of their changing role in community and society. Working with local resources in a physical setting (as), migrants in a resettlement project engage in a co-production of the physical and the social to shape their own sense of emergent place, and construct a shared identity and history (Englund, 2002; Gieryn, 2000; Gustafson, 2001).

Agrarian reform as a place making process

Land reform, as the distribution of land to landless individuals and families who have been economically displaced – offers an opportunity for the development of territorial alternatives to social isolation and cyclical migration. In turn, this provides a direct impulse to place-making processes. In its more ambitious expressions, agrarian reform is implemented through a set of policies and institutional changes that include land redistribution and a host of agrarian support programs including agricultural credit, technical assistance, and other social services including housing, education, and health care.

Redistributive land reform has been carried out in over 25 countries since 1900 primarily as an economic development strategy, based on its potential to reduce poverty and advance food security through the democratization of access to land and other productive resources (Barraclough, 1994; Dorner, 1992; IFAD, 2001; Lipton, 1993; Madeley, 2002; Sobhan, 1993). Mobilization for agrarian reform is increasing worldwide with active campaigns occurring in Brazil, Paraguay, South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Honduras, Mongolia, Scotland, Mexico and in other global spaces (Moyo and Yeros, 2005). For example, the *Vía Campesina*, an international coalition of peasant organizations, has placed agrarian reform as one of its primary platforms for international mobilization (Desmarais, 2002; 2003). The growth and strength of these movements and organizations suggest that land reform is a meaningful political construct in a changing era of globalization as a means to address issues of displacement, inequality and inefficiency in rural landscapes, as well as a way to provide increased employment, rural welfare and food security for at least some of the world's estimated 817 million rural smallholder and landless rural families (Ghimire, 2001).²

Agrarian reform in Brazil

As a result of the historical linkages between land concentration and economic transformation in which workers were from excluded from land access as a means to control labor, Brazil today has over 5 million landless families and one of the most unequal land distributions in the world.³ Despite land reform legislation dating back to 1964, which allowed the expropriation of idle estates for redistribution to landless families, reform programs in Brazil have predominantly taken the form of frontier colonization and expansion of the agricultural frontier. These “top-down” reforms were designed to reduce social conflict and pressures in areas of southern Brazil where mechanized agriculture was expanding, to ensure Brazilian sovereignty over the Amazon region. The majority of colonization took

² Estimates of the magnitude of the world's landless population vary; in 1985, the FAO estimated 817 million landless and landpoor in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This number is used widely by social movements advocating agrarian reform and by Ghimire (2001); IFAD has an alternative mid-1980s estimate of 324 million landless rural people in 64 developing countries. see <http://www.ifad.org/events/past/anniv/co.htm>.

³ Brazil exhibits a Gini index of land concentration of 0.8 in 2003 (MDA 2003).

place in the North and Center-West regions to open up frontier areas for the expansion of agricultural export commodity production. These reforms failed to fundamentally change the structure of land tenure and rural displacement; internal migration and rapid urbanization continued as prominent features of Brazilian society in the latter half of the 20th century.

By the mid 1980s, the government acknowledged the existence of 10.8 million landless or land-poor rural workers and developed the First National Plan for Agrarian Reform (PNRA) in 1985 as a project of the new democratic movement. The 1985 PNRA aimed to use land reform as a rural modernization strategy, in particular to:

Change the structure of land tenure, progressively eliminating the latifundio and minifundio and ensuring a regime of land use and land tenure that addresses the principles of social justice and increased productivity, to guarantee socio-economic progress and the citizenship rights of rural workers (quoted in Silva 1985, p. 77).

This program proposed the resettlement of 7.1 million families by the year 2000 (Silva 1985, 78). However, resistance of the rural elite to land expropriation led to ongoing use of frontier colonization programs as the major component of state-led land reform during that period. By the end of President José Sarney's mandate (1986-1990), only 6% of the PNRA had been carried out and fewer than 120,000 families settled (Fernandes 2000). Continued rural exodus contributed to a rise in urbanization from 30% urban in 1940 to 81% in 2000.⁴

During the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), the federal land reform agency (INCRA) claimed to have settled over 600,000 families in almost 5000 settlements. This figure is higher than the total number of families settled in redistributed land since 1964. Not only have both government and independent studies shown that these numbers are inflated by as much as 48% (Mattei, 2005; Ondetti, 2004; Pereira, 2003), but land concentration increased rather than decreased in Brazil during the last half-century. In 2003, 85% of farms occupied just 20% of land, while just 1.7 percent of farms (large landowners with more than 1000 ha) occupied almost 44% of land (see Table 1). According to data from Brazil's 2003 National Plan for Agrarian Reform (PNRA), of Brazil's 420 million hectares of private property registered with the National Institute for Colonization and Land Reform (INCRA), only 48 million hectares are cultivated, about 11%.⁵

Table 1. Land Distribution in Brazil, 2003

Lot size (Ha.)	Properties	% of properties	Total area (Ha.)	% of area	Average area (Ha.)
< 10	1,338,711	31.6	7,616,113	1.8	5.7
10-25	1,102,999	26.0	18,985,869	4.5	17.2
25-50	684,237	16.1	24,141,638	5.7	35.3
50-100	485,482	11.5	33,630,240	8.0	69.3
100-500	482,677	11.4	100,216,200	23.8	207.6
500-1000	75,158	1.8	52,191,003	12.4	694.4
1000-2000	36,859	0.9	50,932,790	12.1	1381.8
> 2000	32,264	0.8	132,631,509	31.6	4110.8

⁴ Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatísticas, www.ibge.gov.br, accessed 5/10/2005.

⁵ *Jornal Sem Terra, Edição Especial, Abril 2005*. p4. There is much uncertainty over these figures. According to an April 2005 report in the national weekly newsmagazine *Veja*, unproductive lands measured by INCRA are 140 million hectares, while according to IBGE the figure is 24 million hectares. In any case, the land requirement to settle 400,000 families with 25 ha plots is just 10 million hectares.

total	4,238,387	100.1%	420,345,362	99.9%	99.2
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Source: (MDA 2003)

Numerous studies have shown that government organized colonization settlements at the agricultural frontier suffer from isolation from infrastructure, markets, and public services, lack of agricultural extension, and lack of settlement political organization, leading to extreme deforestation, rapid degradation of agricultural plots, and re-concentration of land as family plots are sold to individual ranchers (FAO/PNUD 1992; Fearnside 2001; Fernandes 1997; Goodman and Hall 1990; Guimaraes Neto 2002; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Mahar 1989; MDA-INCRA 2001; Thiesenhusen 1989). One government study showed that the highest rates of plot abandonment in agrarian reform settlements for Brazil during the period from 1995-2001, in settlements created under the FHC government, were in the frontier Center-West and North regions (MDA-INCRA 2001):

Table 2 Plot retention in Agrarian Reform Settlements, Brazil 1995-2001, in %

North	41.8
Northeast	15.1
Center-West	40.4
Southeast	12.1
South	25.1
Brazil	29.7%



These figures have been used by some analysts to argue that land reform fails to foster community stability and deter ongoing elevated migration rates, and that families have a difficult time “adapting” to their new environment. Others attribute the high abandonment rates to the “quantity, not quality” characteristic of the settlements made during the FHC administration. A more recent study at the national level by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro has shown, however, that settlements created between 1985-1995 through social

pressure have a much lower rate of abandonment, even when holding constant variables such as infrastructure provision. That study showed that the national plot abandonment average for settlements organized by Brazil's *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) is just 12.5 %, while for government initiated settlements the rate increases to over 50%.⁶

The Emergence of the MST – building a new relation between land and society

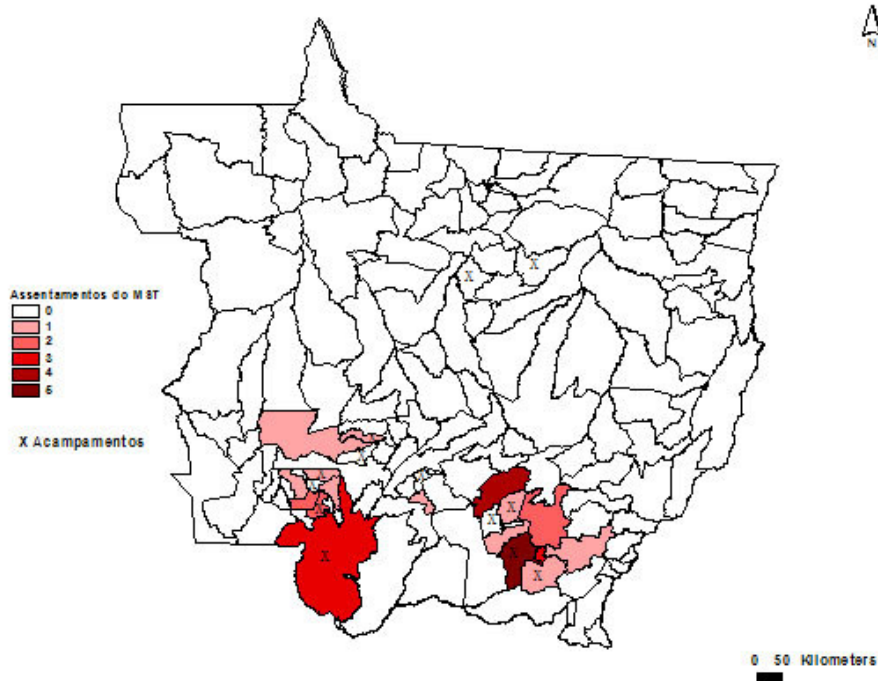
Since 1984 the MST has organized over 350,000 families in new agrarian reform settlements in Brazil, and by the close of 2004 another 160,000 families were organized in land occupations across the country to demand additional land redistribution.⁷ Building on a long history of agrarian mobilization in Brazil, the MST was officially formed as a national movement at a historic meeting in Cascavel, Paraná in 1984. The emerging movement made a strategic decision to remain autonomous from political parties and church organizations, and established its primary objectives of seeking land for the landless, a comprehensive agrarian reform program that would include agricultural credit, extension, education, and rural health services, and a broader social transformation that incorporated not only a new land ethic, but the democratization of Brazilian society as a whole

While the MST works in 23 of Brazil's 27 states and land reform and agrarian struggles are relevant across the country, I chose Mato Grosso as the site of my field research because of the particularly compelling contradictions in the changing agrarian landscape. During the last two decades, Mato Grosso has become Brazil's leading soybean producer and the expansion of export-oriented agriculture in Mato Grosso has been a priority of local, state, and federal governments. In 1995, the MST began mobilizing to resettle small farmers in Mato Grosso, more than a decade after its first land occupations in the south of Brazil. By 2002 the MST had won 31 legal settlements in Mato Grosso and settled 3440 families on 124,623 hectares. An additional 7000 members of the MST are camped on occupied land in southern Mato Grosso in 2004.

Figure 2: Location of MST settlements in Mato Grosso.

⁶ study by the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro para o Ministério de Política Fundiária, cited at <http://www.pt.org.br/san/san90.htm>. Globally, the FAO indicates that for any human settlement, there is a 15 percent yearly turnover or mobility rate.

⁷ from www.mst.org.br, accessed 10/6/2004.



Between 2002 and 2004, over 35,000 additional landless families engaged in occupations and roadside camps in Mato Grosso waiting for the promised land reform. The struggle over the landscape – as a space for the emergence and maintenance of sustainable communities local food economies or as the “breadbasket” of the world as the largest soybean exporter - is particularly pronounced in Mato Grosso where large scale commodity producers and small farmers compete for the same plots of land.

As an agricultural frontier region, the state of Mato Grosso has been a recipient of displaced agrarian workers from southern Brazil since the late 1950s . These workers were prompted by state and federal incentives to settle the area and provide labor for timber, ranching, and modernized agriculture, as well as to alleviate population pressures from southeast and northeast Brazil. Since that time, the state has been marked by ongoing cycles of internal displacement, migration, and resettlement of individuals from across Brazil. These settlements in Mato Grosso are marked by high rates of plot abandonment and mobility at the agricultural frontier – many of the families who are settled in Mato Grosso have moved 5-10 times in search of employment and “a better life” before joining the MST.

The case study that follows explores the implications of a grassroots land reform initiative for fostering place-making processes and emergent communities in Mato Grosso. This process of *intentional resettlement and emplacement* by members of a social movement is designed to foster community, environment, and production not only for these particular landless workers, but for their host communities and regions. This model of agrarian reform holds emancipatory potential to break the cycle of community fragmentation and social isolation. In the case study, I will discuss a series of interrelated processes that comprise the experience of emplacement in the Antonio Conselheiro land reform settlement as a process of identity construction and production of locality. The processes discussed here are: *the transition from individual to imagined community, from imagined community to collectivity, and from collectivity to place-based community.*

Antonio Conselheiro

I divided my research in Brazil between nine agrarian reform settlements, but the bulk of the ethnographic material here is based on six months spent living in one settlement in central Mato Grosso organized by the MST. I chose the Antonio Conselheiro settlement for this analysis because it is one of the earliest and most consolidated MST settlements in Mato Grosso and also one of the largest, with almost 1000 families settled on 35,000 hectares. Typical of MST settlements in the state, Antonio Conselheiro includes a mix of settlers from diverse regional backgrounds, about half of whom are migrants from other areas of Brazil and half are internally displaced families from the settlement region. By 2004, after six years of settlement, 76 percent of the 1000 original families who received land in 1998 remained in the settlement, a rate of plot retention almost double the average for Mato Grosso.⁸

The Antonio Conselheiro settlement is located near three municipal centers (Tangará da Serra, Novo Olímpia, and Barra do Bugres, with a total population of more than 120,000) which provide opportunities for marketing farm products, access to health care, and access to the political system. In contrast to the frontier colonization model, the MST seeks to settle people near their place of origin, where they have knowledge of the local environment, access to infrastructure, and where they remain close to family and a social and ecological safety net. A regional leader explained that the movement's decisions regarding where to organize depend on three factors: availability of quality land appropriate for smallholder agriculture, presence of landless rural workers, and proximity to a consumer market. By definition, this places the MST's geographic center far away from the newest agricultural frontiers at the Amazonian transition zone.⁹ It also places them front and center in reconstructing the landscape of older frontiers now dominated by large commodity interests.

The occupation: from individual to imagined community

The initial act of land occupation for MST members in Mato Grosso requires the collective construction of a social organization comprised of previously isolated individuals and families coming from different spheres of society. This process of coming together in a symbolic occupation begins the process of constructing both imagined community (Wolford 2003) and the practical experience of popular struggle (Fernandes 1999; 2000; 2005). In her study of MST organization and membership in Pernambuco and Santa Catarina, Wolford (2003) argues that “the community is imagined because adherence to MST's ideological and practical guidelines requires each individual to go well beyond past experiences to imagine a new social, political, and economic ideal” (506).

For MST members,

the encampment is a school of life, because we come to understand how the exclusionary society functions that turned us into Landless people. In the camp we also learn that we need to struggle to transform this society and the struggle for Agrarian reform is one of the tools to combat the system. The camp teaches us to find collective solutions for the problems that society faces, with the union and participation of everyone (MST, 2001, p. 18)

Prior to the occupation of the Antonio Conselheiro settlement in 1996, MST militants carried out initial grassroots organizing or *trabalho de base* on the Itamaraty sugar plantation in the municipality of Novo Olímpia, and in several ranch worker communities in Arenópolis,

⁸ These figures are based on my analysis settlement beneficiary data. I cross referenced the official INCRA plot beneficiary list of 1998 with the names found in a 2003 INCRA vistoria report (INCRA SR/13/0/MT 2003). I also field-checked the list in Spring 2004.

⁹ for a discussion of the national MST politics regarding organizing settlements in the Amazon region, see Wright and Wolford (2003) and Wright (2004).

Porto Estrela, and in peripheral communities of the municipality of Tangará da Serra. Many of the initially interested families were working as ranch hands, on small plots of lands belonging to extended family, as seasonal and permanent workers on the sugar cane plantations, or as domestic or day workers in the small urban center.

The MST organizers spent several months before the occupation educating potential members about the process of agrarian reform and social transformation advocated by the movement, in addition to educating the landless workers about Brazil's agrarian history and sharing stories of previous land struggles in the region.¹⁰ This program of political education or "*formação política*" is an intense process intended to develop a sense of personal and individual responsibility to act in support of the collective good of the broader landless community, based on a collective historical experience. This process of political education is designed to overcome the vice of "individualism" in which each person learns that they have a shared history and a shared responsibility to engage in a collective struggle for space – both physical and symbolic - in rural Brazilian society.

Because of a history of violence against MST members occupying land in Mato Grosso, MST leaders had made arrangements with a local landholder to cede an area for a provisional camp.¹¹ The act of occupation was intended to be both symbolic and public, with 600 families gathered at the entrance to the roadside estate near Tangará da Serra on October 6, 1996. The estate holder who had agreed to cede the area for occupation bowed to pressure from neighboring ranches who sought to discredit the "culture of occupation". The families were then forced to camp along the narrow shoulder of the public highway, MT-070, about 20 km from Tangará da Serra near a ceramic/brick plant owned by Ze Epidio, the then-mayor of the municipality of Novo Olímpia. After eight days, by which time camped families numbered over 1000, a cargo truck and trailer lost control coming down a hill and crashed into the settlement, killing five MST members and injuring dozens of others. In reaction, the MST blocked the roadway for five days, until negotiations between the municipal and state governments and INCRA led to provisional accommodation on the Fazenda Tapirapuá in December of 1996, expropriated in the MST's favor on June 17, 1997.¹²

This early experience of occupation vividly marked the transition from individual to collective history as a member of the movement, and resonated with the global history of violence against landless workers that lay behind the imagined community of the MST.

The camp: from imagined community to collectivity

Members of the MST describe their organizational activities and activism as not just "going to the streets with flag and staff, but undergoing permanent changes in our daily life...with the objective not only immediate and material (e.g. land and credit) but permanent (citizenship and class struggle)".¹³ Part of this vision involves transforming the imagined

¹⁰ Bernardo Mançano Fernandes (interview, June 2004) noted the importance of the lengthy political education process in the early days of the MST, often lasting one year or more before a family was considered sufficiently "conscious" to conduct an occupation. The timespan of the pre-occupation *trabalho de base* has shortened considerably in the 1990s, in Mato Grosso and elsewhere in Brazil.

¹¹ A 1998 provisional measure passed during the Cardoso administration disallowing the expropriation of occupied lands. In many cases, local politicians and even INCRA will "rent" land for occupation and encampment from an estate holder to avoid more public contentious occupations of public lands, parks, and mayoral offices. A 2005 MST pamphlet refers to the fact that the source of violence around occupations has changed. "It is no longer for the protection of possession (*manutenção da posse*) but for the threat of the loss of power that the loss of land means for the latifundiário in the region."

¹² The families were housed for several months during this process on the Itamaraty sugar plantation and at the public fairgrounds in Nova Olímpia. Fazenda Tapirapuá dates back to the colonial period, and was famously the seat of a grueling exploration expedition of Mato Grosso by Theodore Roosevelt and Marechal Rondon in 1914. For a fascinating exposition of this expedition see Diacon (2004).

¹³ MST meeting participant, Antonio Conselheiro settlement, 3/26/2004

community that emerged in the initial occupation process into a collective that works together to meet the needs of survival. This process takes place most vividly in the daily acts of survival necessary to maintain an occupation camp, a process that often lasts from one to three years. As Fernandes argues, “the encampments are spaces and times of transition in the struggle for land...[and] realities in transformation” (2005, 330)

The camped families chose to honor the historic figure Antonio Conselheiro in naming their settlement after him. This important agrarian leader led the establishment of a squatter community in the Bahian backlands between 1893 and 1897 in an attempt to build a new society based on egalitarian principles.¹⁴ Antonio Conselheiro was a visionary who provided the MST with a historical model for land occupation, collective resistance, and participatory community formation. At a 2004 MST workshop in Mato Grosso, a leader from the Antonio Conselheiro settlement explained:

When I talk about our collective and organized actions, I'm talking about occupation, I'm talking about marches, I'm talking about public acts, I'm talking about the work party (*multirão*) in the camp, the settlement, about all of the actions of struggle that we know. Through our collective and organized actions in the struggle to win land, we as landless workers rescue our right to have our own consciousness and to use it to participate in a different life. To the extent that we enter into the struggle...we begin to mark our right to be conscious of our rights. We also go on changing our role, as citizens, in conducting our own history. To the extent that we fight, we begin to occupy a geographic and political space in society.¹⁵

During the period of encampment, over 700 families lived in close quarters in a roadside camp, working together in committees to ensure the needs for survival – housing, food provision, a bathing regimen, and youth and adult education. During this time, Antonio Conselheiro families formed 35 “nuclei” comprised of 25-30 families which were settled in groups in sections of the settlement (See Figure 3). Each *núcleo* is comprised of two coordinators (one man and one woman) and a representative to the sectors of production and environment, health, security, political formation, and education. This *organicidade* seeks to ensure that each individual person has a *tarefa*, a task or action that benefits the settlement as a whole, at the same time as awakening a process of self-education and personal responsibility. This way of organizing ensures that political and other survival tasks “should not be centered in the hands of few people.”¹⁶ It also functions as a level of decision-making, seeking to break the history of patronage, dependency, and displacement that characterized the political relationship of landless workers with the rural elites.

Joined by 300 families from another MST encampment in another municipality, after expropriation the 1000 families remained camped for another six months on the expropriated ranch, 15 km distant from the roadside camp, where discussions took place among the settlers on strategies of lot division and settlement organization. During this period, the MST continued to organize courses and workshops on political education, livestock management, agroforestry systems, health care, and a host of other survival concerns, as well as organizing basic education, adult literacy classes, and improvised health clinics. At the same time, several collective production areas were cultivated with corn, manioc, squash, rice, and beans to feed the camped families.

The close proximity of the 1000 families crowded into a 300 hectare riverside area gave rise to intense discussions about both the political and social direction of the future settlement. The camped families were aware that there was a relationship between the physical characteristics of their forthcoming settlement and the way that the families would

¹⁴ For the original account of the Battle of the Backlands see the Brazilian classic *Os Sertões (da Cunha 1923)*. For a recent analysis of the symbolic importance of this cultural figure and historical event for the MST and other rural social movements, see in particular Sá (2004).

¹⁵ MST coordinator, MST state workshop, Cuiabá, 12/9/2004.

¹⁶ MST-MT *Caderno do Núcleo* No. 9, Julho de 2002, Cuiabá – MT

relate to one another. Rejecting the standard government physical layout for settlement, in which families are isolated from one another on rectangular lots and are assigned by lottery, the MST's settlement strategy is designed to foster both community interaction and agricultural production. The MST in Mato Grosso has adopted a system of *núcleos de moradia* to foster cooperation among the settlers, based on the *núcleos de familia* originating during the encampment process. This difference in structure creates a space for participation in family groups, the national criterion for ongoing membership in the MST after settlement (See Figure 3).

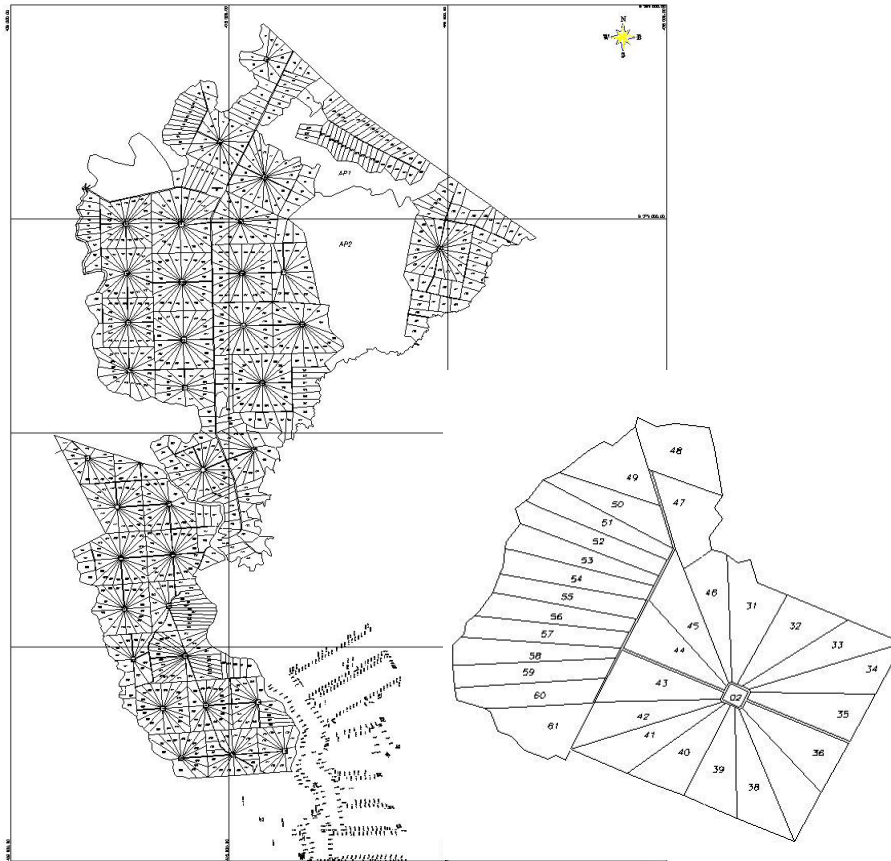


Figure 3. Antonio Conselheiro Settlement, Núcleo de Moradia

The MST family groups serve to integrate the physical space of settlement and daily practice of community, which for the MST, is defined and bounded by participation in organizational life of the *núcleos de moradia*. Modes of participation in the family groups vary from settlement to settlement, but in Antonio Conselheiro participation was centered on bi-weekly to monthly discussion meetings, in addition to day-to-day interactions regarding agricultural production and response to any political or physical threat to the settlement.

The settlement: from collectivity to place-based community

Once the members of the camp received their individual lots they embarked on another stage of the passage from individual to community within the land reform settlement. There is a distinction between settlement, community, and place (Gombay 2005; Massey 1994b). For the MST, settlements represent the physical manifestation of social change in the countryside. As explained in one MST educational pamphlet,

We need to advance our understanding that settlements are not just a unit of production. They are above all a social nucleus where people live together and develop a group of community activities in the sphere of culture, leisure, education, religion. We need to be attentive so that the settlements can fulfill their historic mission of seeding change in the rural areas (MST, 2001, p. 24)

Within Antonio Conselheiro, three distinct communities have emerged in particular localities within the settlement, each uniquely combining part of the imagined community and physical locality of the larger regional settlement. After settlement expropriation but before specific lots were assigned to the family groups, internal divisions and conflicts emerged between groups of settlers. A group of about 20 families, encouraged by a group of local right-wing politicians, sought to create an internal division within the encampment. An extensive debate took place within the camp whether to expel the families. In an attempt to respect regional diversity in political organization, however, and understanding the origin of the families' concerns in manipulation by traditional political relationships, the MST leadership decided not to expel the families.

The association that emerged from the initial split quickly grew to 200 families out of the 1000 that were camped. It gave itself the name *Associação de Trabalhadores Rurais Tapirapuã*. This split led to the geographic separation of the families who remained with the MST and those who did not within the settlement. When families moved to the núcleos de moradia, grouped by the nuclei that had formed within the encampment, the MST took over two main areas, named Che Guevara and Paulo Freire, while the Association families were concentrated in the middle section of the settlement. These three communities have emerged as distinct “places” within the settlement, associated with a municipal school in each community that is the center of community affairs.

The organizational style and content of the Antonio Conselheiro Associations contrast sharply with the MST *núcleo* meetings in the Che Guevara and Paulo Freire communities. The dissident Association Tapirapuã, rather than being organized around a new organizational structure or proposal, was an attempt to maintain traditions of rural organization in the countryside. Rural associations, with President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer, usually but not necessarily involve the representation of one member of each family; and a monthly dues payment is required. Meetings are held once a month or more sporadically, and are not based around discussion but around strategizing for how to meet material needs like credit, infrastructure, and government agricultural extension programs, and are often called to order by an urban politician in attendance. The Association uses these material incentives to attract new membership, while local politicians provide resources (projects, cash payments) to increase the lure of the association membership as “a way to get progress”. But one settler notes: “they just talk about advancements. They promise that things will arrive for us but they never arrive”.¹⁷

The idea is rather than a collective debate and discussion towards the construction of a new society (the project of the MST), the association president controls the flow of information to and from municipal political leaders and who also controls the flow of material resources. One president of an Association, who briefly had participated as a militant with the MST before starting his own association, sees the association as a way to get material gain, not for debate and discussion.

No, generally we don't have much discussion, because I think that people who are working, they are more concerned about the work itself. The day-to-day work. But they aren't against discussion, they stay informed.¹⁸

Over the course of the next six years, the differing organizational strategy of the MST appeared to influence the ability of settlers to remain within the settlement. Visible differences began to emerge between the families who continued as members of the MST

¹⁷ interview #127, Antonio Conselheiro settlement, 2/13/2004.

¹⁸ interview #87, Antonio Conselheiro settlement, 1/27/2004.

and families who left the movement to joined the Association or one of its many offshoots.¹⁹ My research showed that of 726 Antonio Conselheiro families that were members of the MST at the time of plot distribution in 1998, over 82% of those families were still living in the settlement in 2004. Of the 262 families that had withdrawn from the movement but still received land, only 61% still remained on the land 6 years later.²⁰

By contrast, the MST *núcleos de moradia* provide a forum for individual and collective action, and for resolving the day to day problems that might lead to plot abandonment. They help to “deny the illusion of individualism” (Wise 2000, 301), by creating the settlement as a space of community and by providing a collective avenue towards the possibility of a settlement with a future means of defense against threats and continued displacement. The ability of MST to do this depends on personal transformation, the development of a collective consciousness, and ongoing political participation. The *núcleo de moradia* family groups, formed to support both political action and day to day struggles, appeal to both the personal and collective responsibility of settlers to make their own homes, breaking the cycle of dependency on the traditional political system of patronage.

Antonio Conselheiro MST settlers suggest that an important factor mediating the ability to continue occupying the public space of the settlement was the level of personal transformation and participation, and the desire to participate in a *continual* reorganization of daily practice both at home and in the world. One leader explained, “if the body stops, the consciousness stops, it gets stagnant.” Another settler continued, to explain why some people leave the movement and settlement:

People who join the MST and then leave, and hang around defaming the movement, these people did not experience any social transformation. I think that people don't change because they don't want to. You have to have a lot of strength and courage and even sacrifice, because many times we have to leave things aside, to enter into this struggle. If you can't do that, you will never be able to carry out a transformation of yourself.²¹

The MST's Freirian educational model seeks first to engage each individual on his or her own level. This political awakening is meant to be liberating, to allow each individual to feel free to participate in the public sphere. To the extent that the political awakening is not completed, the individual remains isolated and not free, subject to continued manipulation. The openings for transformation are ongoing. The daily opportunities to participate in settlement activities around agricultural production and negotiation of credit, protection of environmental reserve areas, adult education and literacy are simultaneously opportunities to engage in political education and community building.

An Antonio Conselheiro settler explained the relationship between personal transformation and the formation of community:

The most important thing is the change within ourselves, that isn't easy, it doesn't always work in the countryside. You have to wait out a lot of sacrifice. Speaking of myself, when I entered the MST I had a great transformation inside myself, I changed a lot.²²

Another young MST leader continued:

¹⁹ “The Association” became a generic concept for any social organization which was not the MST in the settlement. However, these alternative organizations were fairly homogenous in their social structure, function, and organization, and were mostly offshoots of political infighting for within the original Association Tapirapuá.

²⁰ see note 8.

²¹ settler from Antonio Conselheiro, #202, MST state meeting Cuiabá, 12/9/2004.

²² settler from Antonio Conselheiro, #202, MST state meeting Cuiabá, 12/9/2004.

In the beginning there was that strong resistance [to collective thinking and organization], like ‘No, I want my piece of land’. It’s that culture of property, right? So, Puxa, ‘I have my lot, right’?! Then you put a fence up...but with time you begin to realize that it’s not like you thought. It’s only later when you see that alone things just don’t work, that they begin to reflect together again, about coming together.²³

In MST workshops and internal debates, the idea of being “woken up” or “reborn” through political education is a common topic of discussion. But care is made to emphasize the collective nature of individual transformation. As one leader explained,

Collective and individual reflection is one of the principles of struggle coming out of our 20 years of accumulated experience in political and methodological practice. The advancement of consciousness is done collectively, in community, as opposed to a process of individual reflection like that done in a monastery. It is done through a three-legged process of organization, political education, and struggle. Our ideas and our people are re-born every day as we move forward in the struggle that places new challenges before our conscious and permanent participation. We have the commitment to participate.²⁴

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the social formation of agrarian reform communities transforms the individual experience of landlessness to a collective experience of community building and social and physical emplacement. For members of the MST, personal transformation is the first step towards realizing a different community based on participation in society from which they had been formerly excluded. The physical formation of locality in the settlement plot organization fosters a different kind of social interaction between the settlement members – MST as well as association – that creates long lasting ties through the process of collective decision making.

Social and economic displacement is a constituent feature of modern society, at the root of newly emergent social, cultural, and economic formations. Resettlement through agrarian reform offers one opportunity to analyze the changing terms of contemporary place-making processes, with lessons for sustainable community building initiatives in Brazil and beyond. In this study, the thread of personal and social transformation runs through each step in the emplacement process outlined above, from displacement, occupation, encampment, settlement, to dynamic community formation. Multiple grounded communities emerge from the final settlement, each with particular ties to region, family and organization and a product of the individual and collective experience of displacement and resettlement. Each has a collective past and an imagined future that involves the co-construction of social organization and physical locality.

²³ interview #241, Dorcelina Foledor settlement, 6/25/2004.

²⁴ Antonio Conselheiro leader, MST state meeting Cuiabá, 12/9/2004

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