



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Reframing agrarian citizenship: Land, life and power in Brazil

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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Agrarian reform
Citizenship
Brazil
Landless movement

This paper investigates the changing relationship between land, citizenship, and power in Brazil, where land-related policies have historically served to situate political and economic rights in the hands of an elite land-owning minority. In response, contemporary grassroots movements in Brazil, including the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST) advocate the substantive transformation of what I develop here as a new form of “agrarian citizenship”, in which political participation, local food production, and environmental stewardship redefine the ongoing constitution of the relationship between land, state, and rural society. Based on extensive interviews, participant observation and document analysis from 2004–2006, this ethnographic study examines the contours of how changing notions of agrarian citizenship are negotiated among members of a growing body of social groups demanding land redistribution and reasserting agrarian culture in Brazil. By developing and enacting new forms of political participation that involve the transformation of personal and collective values and practices, rural activists such as the MST envision the redistribution of land as a material right, but also view the transformation of the land-society relation as an equally public responsibility.

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1. Introduction

The roots of citizenship practice in urban spaces, coupled with the maintenance of urban political and economic centers of power, have historically marginalized rural actors and spaces to the periphery of political articulation. Within this relation, land, as “the prerequisite of active citizenship” (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 652), has been a constitutive component of political and economic power. Access to land has structured control over labor and material resources even when the ownership and occupation of land are separated, with urban landowners exerting political influence over rural people and the land they work. In this sense, members of rural polities often find themselves in a situation in which they have the technical rights of citizenship, but lack the substantive rights of participation, or the power to govern the development of landed resources. In a citizenship regime based on property ownership, landownership and power structured through individual social actors often absent or external to the rural community thus fractures the potential for collective social action in the countryside.

In traditional notions of political and democratic change, the progressive acquisition of civil, political and social rights is a linear, cumulative process, as citizenship rights are successively extended to members within the fold of the state by virtue of their location in

a particular territory. This incorporation, in theory, equates equal membership in the nation with legal status, equal rights of political participation, and access to social entitlements. This conceptualization of citizenship has of course been criticized as not only inadequate, where contemporary national identities are clearly not equated with the equal distribution of rights, but also as fundamentally contested as a uniform attribute across political cultures and through time. As Isin put it, there is “now agreement that citizenship must also be defined as a social process through which individuals and social groups engage in claiming, expanding, or losing rights” (Isin, 2000, p. 5). Treatments of citizenship have thus expanded from explorations of civil and social citizenship emphasizing the relation between nationality, political rights, and social welfare (Marshall and Bottomore, 1992; Turner, 1993) to examinations of the production of differentiated “citizenships”, from the global cosmopolitan to citizenship formations based on localized discourses and practices (Brysk and Shafir, 2004; Dietz, 1992; Isin and Turner, 2002; Kabeer, 2005; Yashar, 2005).

Rural modernization theories predicated on the disappearance of the peasantry and the incorporation of rural labour into urban industrial development processes (Araghi, 1995; McMichael, 2008; Otero, 1999; Wallerstein, 1974) have also been supported by the rapid transformation of rural landscapes from primarily subsistence economies to those dominated by the production of agricultural exports. Thus, the ongoing transformation of individual and community access to land has continued to influence not only the organization of people, power and resources, but also the social

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relations of identity and citizenship (Arendt, 1998 [1958]; Hallowell, 1943; Ronsbo, 1997; Rose, 1994; Singer, 2000).

With about half the world's population still living and working in rural areas, however, the resurgence of organizations comprised of rural workers and landless peasants are increasingly referenced as one of the dynamic modern classes operating in the world system (McMichael, 2006, 2008; Petras, 1997; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001). These organizations are increasingly calling into question long-standing assumptions about the relationships between property, production practices, governance institutions, and political power. Farmer-based movements worldwide are reasserting their physical and political relevance, demanding new guarantees and political rights (Desmarais, 2002, 2007; Edelman, 1999; Navarro, 2005) and calling for the re-valuation of agrarian culture as a "virtuous activity" (Mariola, 2005). In this vein, Brazil's *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Rural Workers Movement, or MST), comprises over one million members that conduct grassroots organization and political action demanding land, agrarian reform, and "a broader social transformation" which, for them, includes promoting family farm production and sustainable agriculture based on a well-developed discourse around rural rights and citizenship. For these rural activists, political change and rural survival are simultaneously pursued through political education and mobilization in both rural and urban spaces to broaden public conceptions of the responsibilities and rights associated with rural life.

This resurgence of rural social movements and their diverse calls for new conceptualizations of citizenship has laid the groundwork for a new research agenda on the contingent relationships between land, power, social organization and citizenship in the countryside within diverse contexts of social and economic restructuring (Moyo and Yeros, 2005; Parker, 2002; Woods, 2006, 2008). For example, within a northern context, Parker (2006) has explored the role of regulation on refining the structure of a "countryside" citizenship in the UK, in which a rural governance regime defines how rural space is to be produced and consumed. Woods (2006, 2008) has called for additional research on how a new "critical politics of citizenship" reshapes relationships between a particularly rural sort of citizenship, rural politics and structures of power and governance. In this light, the particular reformulation of rural citizenship advocated here is contained in the concept of agrarian citizenship. It is modeled not solely on the geographic location of rurality but rather on understanding the changing political basis for agrarian social action, which include differential practices of production and political participation conducted within and beyond rural spaces. This concept provides a framework to explore the emerging demand for, and practice of, modern agrarian citizenship, when peasantries are supposed to be disappearing rather than mobilizing for a re-conceptualization of what citizenship means.

This investigation of agrarian citizenship builds on alternative notions of participation and production from the grassroots, and is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2006 in Mato Grosso, Brazil. Land related policies in this region have historically situated political and economic rights in the hands of an elite land-owning minority. This ethnographic research exposes how the relation between land, power, and citizenship is negotiated and reconfigured in the Brazilian countryside as a result of grassroots mobilizations around land access, production practices, and political articulation by rural people. By contesting the equation of property with citizenship, agrarian citizenship, as expressed and enacted by members of the MST, goes beyond traditional or liberal conceptions of rights linked to individual property, production, or possession. Instead, it foregrounds new collective roles and rights for rural dwellers. De-centering the role of land possession as the historical mediator of citizenship rights, contemporary agrarian actors aim for the diversification of new forms of rural political and production-oriented practices. These

are designed to ensure not only the economic survival and political demarginalization of the rural poor but also a broader conception of land stewardship as a social relation that involves all members of society. In what follows, I first examine the historical development of the relationship between landholding, citizenship, and grassroots demands for reform in Brazil. I then explore how particular actors within the land reform movement negotiate the terms of citizenship in discursive and practical ways through the development of alternative forms of political participation.

2. Land and citizenship in Brazil

The "social" nature of land is particularly evident in Brazil, where centuries of exclusion and discriminatory land administration laws have resulted in a contemporary system in which 3.5% of landowners control over half of Brazil's arable land (MDA, 2003). The link between land possession and political power has been a formative part of Brazilian society since the colonial period (Brannstrom, 2001; Bruno, 2003; Faoro, 2001; Freyre, 1953; Holston, 1991, 2008; Leal, 1977 [1949]). As a result, full appreciation of the new forms of agrarian citizenship emerging in Brazil today requires a reflection on how territorial administration has been related to citizenship status, the exercise of political power and access to material and political rights in Brazil's past.

Based on liberal notions of property as a principal organizer of individual personhood and its relation to land, rights, and the state (Holston, 2008), land administration in Brazil has served a dual purpose: to ensure Brazilian sovereignty over its inland territory, and to ensure access to land and labor for elite sectors of society by excluding workers from direct political participation in the daily affairs of the nation. In colonial Brazil, land grants to elites with political ties to the Crown were a mark of social prestige, with the possession of property guaranteeing political voice and substantive citizenship rights. Eligibility requirements for voting established in 1822 limited suffrage to those with income from property and industry, explicitly excluding wage laborers, women, and the rural landless (da Costa, 2000). Large landholders were important mediators between tenants and the state, making land possession the basis of power and a clear territorial mechanism ensuring a "citizenship gap" (Brysk and Shafir, 2004) by limiting access to political participation.

Facing an imminent labor crisis linked to the strengthened abolition movement, landowners passed the 1850 Land Law, creating a series of new obstacles to landownership for poor laborers (da Costa, 2000; Silva, 1996). The law established the commodification of land as a system to exclude those who could not pay for a title from land occupation, in the process regulating land tenure and creating individual property rights. Despite a modification in the 1889 Constitution replacing the property requirement for suffrage with a literacy requirement, landholding continued to structure political power and participation. Civil rights were granted to landless populations not by the state, but by the *senhores da terra* (landed elite) through the social relation of "*coronelismo*", or the hierarchical political relations between the rural elite and other rural people, especially those without land. *Coronelismo* emerged as a combination of violence and patronage as a way to control labor and votes, enforcing widespread exclusion from land ownership and active political participation, and leading to the social exclusion of a reserve labor force comprised of freed slaves and dispossessed peasants lacking capital to invest in expansion (Bruno, 2003; Faoro, 2001; Leal, 1977 [1949]; Mendonça, 1998).

2.1. Reform via colonization in Mato Grosso

The Center-West state of Mato Grosso, like much of Brazil, is characterized not only by the historical relations of *coronelismo*, but

also by the ongoing displacement of indigenous peoples and migrant populations, violence around land and extreme land concentration. From the colonial period onwards, a series of actors in this region including colonial *capitans* and gold-and slave-seeking *bandeirantes* [explorers] engaged in territorial strategies to secure access to wealth and power-producing spaces in the Brazilian interior through land occupation and the manipulation of labor (Moreno, 1993; Volpato, 1986). Until the first half of the 20th century (1889–1943), Mato Grosso was known as the Republic of the *Coroneis* for the violent struggles over land by armed bandits organized by the rural oligarchy in disputes over political and economic power (Corrêa, 1995). Until 1930, land policy in the state of Mato Grosso mainly regularized these illegal appropriations by large landholders dating back to the colonial era. The failure to significantly increase the local agricultural populations through state-sponsored migration further contributed to the region's political isolation from the rest of Brazil.

Colonization programs marked ongoing attempts by the federal government to transfer frontier land into the hands of national elites while simultaneously attenuating political debate and social mobilization for land reform that accompanied the years approaching the 1964 military coup.¹ In 1964, the election of left-leaning João Goulart to the presidency led to the preparation of a draft Land Statute, but in the form finally implemented by the military regime after the *golpe* later that year, the Land Statute lost its initial emphasis on land redistribution and instead became an administrative policy designed to reduce rural conflict through directed colonization of federal lands at the western frontier, that included Mato Grosso. This statute protected large landholdings from expropriation allowed by the 1946 constitution and the 1964 land statute (Ianni, 1979). Through limited state investment in road-based infrastructure but little material support for agricultural settlements, state-led colonization established the illusion of governability and land distribution.

The resulting colonization projects distributed land to 60,000 families between 1940 and 1995 in Mato Grosso. Smallholder settlers at the frontier faced financial difficulties and lack of infrastructure in addition to the lack of markets, leading to the takeover and concentration of small settler plots by ranching interests. By the end of the 1990s the rate of plot abandonment and ongoing displacement and migration at the agricultural frontier ranged from 45% to 50% in state-subsidized frontier land distribution projects (MDA-INCRA, 2001). In consequence, these land administration strategies, rather than shift the relations of land and power in the countryside through land redistribution, actually further cemented land and political inequality while fostering capitalist development (Cardoso and Muller, 1977; Ianni, 1979; Oliveira, 1987). For example, in the 1970s and 1980s under the military regime, 268 subsidized private agricultural development projects were awarded in Mato Grosso, 85% for the development of cattle ranches. A large portion of these were never developed, serving instead to privatize federal land and dispossess indigenous territory and land occupied by small producers. In short, throughout the region's history, local oligarchies constantly used their political power, founded upon historical connections to land ownership, to manipulate existing and ongoing revisions to state and federal land policy to benefit the largest landholders (Moreno, 1993).

To sum up, land reform and land distribution have been used as strategies in state resource administration in over 25 countries since

1900, but have largely failed to improve economic conditions or ensure political incorporation for rural residents (Prosterman et al., 1990).² De Janvry and Sadoulet (1989) have argued decisively that these primarily state-led reforms failed to fundamentally shift power relations in Latin America largely because their focus on (and incentives for) agricultural modernization by large landowners consolidated the economic and political power of the rural oligarchy, thereby preventing agrarian reforms from redistributing large areas of productive land or significantly changing social relations in the countryside. In particular, Otavio Ianni (1979) argues that the Brazilian strategy of "directed colonization" can be viewed as a counter-agrarian reform that in practice served to expand the structure of territorial exclusion. Under the rubric of land distribution and reform, land concentration actually increased in some areas and local power relations continued to be structured in favor of large landholders, while the high mobility of settlers leaving failed colonization schemes perpetuated the condition of landlessness and the easy appropriation of rural labor at the agricultural frontier.

2.2. Grassroots demands for land and citizenship

By the mid 1980s, movements for agrarian reform in Brazil had begun to demand access to land as a material right linked to membership in the nation, associating the struggle for land with the struggle for social incorporation in a way that made sense based on the traditional relationship between land and power in Brazil. Over time, however, the struggle for land became more than about just access to land; rather, it became a political starting point for "defining, deepening, and expanding alternative spaces aimed at pursuing effective forms of democratic citizenship" (Robles, 2002), in addition to the material aims of improving prospects for rural employment and food security. In other words, politicizing the struggle for land began to problematize the territorial relationship between state and society, in which land access historically served as an enfranchisement mechanism.

Responding to grassroots mobilization as part of the return to democracy, the federal Brazilian Government developed the first National Plan for Land Reform in 1985. The new policy included clear references to the grassroots demands for citizenship, illustrated by language that referenced the objectives of reform as not only a rural modernization strategy but also a chance to "create equal opportunities for all" through policies of land distribution and tenure regularization. In 1985, Nelson Ribeiro, Brazil's Minister of Agrarian Development, declared that the "great objective of agrarian reform is to incorporate millions of landless workers into the Brazilian citizenry" (Ribeiro, 1985). But land reform activists were careful to explain that they demanded rights to land as a function of citizenship, not a prerequisite to it. Their mobilization to counter the government cooptation of the grassroots citizenship discourse included gathering over a million signatures advocating for an agrarian reform clause in the 1988 Constitution. They saw in the 1988 Constituent Assembly the possibility to "install new equilibriums in benefit of a collectivity with territory as a backdrop" (Santos, 2002, p. 23). The movements were successful in instigating a public discussion of how the constitution would define the social function of land, resulting in its inclusion in the 1988 constitution as one of the fundamental rights and guarantees of citizenship,³ adding both discursive and legal weight to the demands of the rural land reform movements.

¹ At a time when land reform beyond anything known previously in the hemisphere had triumphed in Cuba, social mobilization around land worried the Mato Grosso state government. A 1962 state decree by Governor Fernando Correa da Costa expressed concern with the political mobilization of the Peasant Leagues in the Brazilian northeast, and sought to "calm the tempest" through private and public colonization projects rather than land expropriation (Moreno, 1993).

² Examples of "successful" top-down land reforms include W. Bengal, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Successful revolutionary or bottom-up reforms include Kerala, pre-1992 Mexico, and Cuba.

³ cf. 1988 Constitution, Chapter One, Sec XIII, on Individual and Collective Rights and Duties: property shall observe its social function.

In Brazil, legislation linking land ownership to responsible and productive use for the benefit of society has been an ongoing way to contest and control property. A social function clause had appeared previously in the 1934 Constitution, (art. 111, n.17), disappearing in the 1937 Constitution and returning in the 1946 Constitution (art. 147) with reference to requiring land use to foster “social well-being” (Pereira, 2000, p. 109). Although liberal land legislation linking ownership to productivity dates back to Portuguese colonial law, in practice this legislation was widely ignored. By the mid 1980s, however, Brazilian rural worker’s unions, the MST, and other rural social movements began to promote a concept of the social function of land that went beyond the criteria of economic production. They advocated legislation that required land use to be environmentally sustainable, economically productive, and foster equitable social relations. As related by a rural leader in Mato Grosso, these movements considered a wide spectrum of social rights to be associated with land, including:

The right to participate, the right to leisure, schools, health, roads...all the public goods that citizens have a right to. [It is a land relation that] respects labor rights...a healthy environment preserved for future generations, and democratizes access to land. It is within this democratization that we go beyond the economic vision of productivity that the legislation talks about...We ask ‘what productivity is of interest to society’? From the point of view of social gain and from the point of view of necessity, the public interest should be above purely economic interests.⁴

In response to grassroots pressure, Article 186 of the 1988 constitution exhibited a conceptual advance in the content of the social function of land, with four specific legal criteria: rational and adequate use (based on legislated norms of economic productivity); adequate use of available natural resources and preservation of the environment; compliance with labor regulations and land use that favors the well-being of the owners and laborers. In this formulation, economic productivity is seen as only one component of the social function of land. By legislating a land–society relation that considers community and environmental well-being (in the form of fair labor practices and environmental conservation) as equally important to individual use rights, the Brazilian constitutional assembly recognized that the interests of individuals do not exist separately from those of the community.

All this is to say that by the mid 1980s, a national contestation of the historical meaning of the land–society relation was peaking at the same time that agricultural modernization policies that favored large scale and export oriented production practices were leading to record levels of rural displacement. As rural populations continued to be in flux in Brazil, with significant populations forced to leave rural areas to work in urban areas, new settlements were also forming through the agricultural resettlement of thousands of displaced families as a result of the mobilization for agrarian reform.

3. Transforming citizenship post-settlement

The MST, in particular, has continued to act as a national leader in the struggle for agrarian reform in Brazil since its formation in 1984. An important component of this struggle is the changing perception by rural workers of land as a *condition* of citizenship to land as a *right* of an expanded citizenry. Like many modern rural social movements, the MST emerged from a combination of agricultural restructuring which displaced small farmers from their land, Brazil’s emergent process of democratization, and the

consolidation of isolated agrarian reform movements, many with historic ties to the church.⁵ The MST’s day-to-day operation is based on political organizing, physical land occupations in rural encampments, and alternative models of post-reform settlement. Between 1984 and 2004, the MST organized over 350,000 families in 2200 land reform settlements in 23 of Brazil’s 27 states, while between 2004 and 2006 another 150,000 families were organized in occupations and camps.⁶

But focusing on national membership numbers or on hectares of land shifted from the hands of elites or the state misses an essential element in the discursive and practical development of agrarian citizenship. For MST leaders, land distribution is necessary to ensure continued food production in rural areas, and to provide jobs for the landless. But unlike many previous attempts at land reform, the objectives of Brazil’s contemporary grassroots movements do not stop at the acquisition of land. They frame their struggle around “the social question” of agrarian reform, which not only involves lobbying the state for the broader elements of rural reform (including investment in programs designed to support rural livelihoods, protect the agricultural landscape, and foster local food security), but also seeks political incorporation founded upon participation in ongoing political action post settlement.

Aiming to foster a “broad social transformation” in Brazilian society, the MST and allied movements act simultaneously on several social and political fronts in addition to their struggle to acquire land. In actions as diverse as developing a national plebiscite on the Free Trade Area of the Americas, participating in a nation-wide Popular Assembly to legislate an alternative form of popular sovereignty, and building networks of rural social movements across Latin America and globally, the members and leadership of the MST seek to enact a structure of citizenship that provides a space for all people to participate in constructing a national project while receiving the material benefits of membership in the nation. The formation of alternative ways of organizing at the local, regional, and national levels, rather than linkage to political parties or formal interaction with the legislative structure is a key characteristic that differentiates the MST from traditional political parties and rural worker’s unions in Brazil.

After acquiring land in a reform settlement, settlers are required by the Brazilian government to have a membership in some kind of formal organization (whether the MST or an agricultural association) to access material benefits available to the settlement, including agricultural credit payments, housing materials, seeds, or agricultural extension visits. Continued membership in the MST requires ongoing participation in political activities, meetings, and neighborhood groups associated with the movement. When some settlers, as a result of political differences with movement leaders, distance or formally disassociate themselves from the movement after obtaining land, they most often subsequently join one of several agricultural associations linked to Rural Worker’s Unions, political parties, or Municipal Agricultural Offices.

An ethnographic examination of how citizenship action is negotiated post-settlement offers insights into how settlers characterize and contest forms of citizenship, political participation and the rights and responsibilities associated with land and models of agricultural production. The reconfiguration of land–society relationships post-settlement provides the diverse group of settlers an opportunity to engage in debate and political practice over an

⁵ There is an extensive literature on the origin and expansion of the MST as a national movement. In English see in particular Branford and Rocha (2002); Robles (2000, 2001); Wright and Wolford (2003). In Brazil, definitive works are Fernandes (1999, 2000); Morissawa (2001); Stédile and Fernandes (1999).

⁶ For additional information on MST land distribution figures, see www.mst.org.br and the DATALUTA Project recording land reform activity at the University of São Paulo, <http://www4.fct.unesp.br/dataluta/>.

⁴ Interview #231, Cuiabá 12/20/2004.

different meanings and experiences attached to land, membership in the MST, and alternative organizations of civil society.

4. The Antonio Conselheiro settlement

The following ethnographic description is based on six months of participant observation in the Antonio Conselheiro land reform settlement in Mato Grosso in 2004 in addition to follow up visits in 2005 and 2006.⁷ Over 100 interviews were conducted within the settlement, half with those designated here as MST activists (settlers who have maintained active participation in the movement for more than 5 years after obtaining land in the settlement) and half with former members of the MST who remain in the settlement but no longer self-identify as members of the movement.

The MST arrived to Mato Grosso in 1994, more than a decade after making significant advances in mobilization and settlement in southeast and northeast Brazil. The movement was in a phase of national expansion, and saw in Mato Grosso evident demand for rural organization combined with the highest land concentration in the country. Building on a national experience of grassroots organization based on the methods of popular education (Freire, 1970), the MST began to integrate physical land occupations in Mato Grosso with political education designed to foster a process of personal transformation linked to the construction of community well-being. The MST's method of organizing differed from the traditional model of rural organization in Mato Grosso, historically based on political membership in rural worker's unions with strong links to political parties. One MST activist who participated in the earliest land occupations in Mato Grosso remembers:

There were several movements here that had already organized the workers, but in a way very much about profit. They had the workers, but sought to gain money. Until then, no one had met any members of the MST. They had heard about us in the press, on the news, around, right? But [through the process of our first occupation in Mato Grosso] they came to know in practice, a new idea, a new discourse, something that was going to bring benefit for the families that organized themselves through this organization.⁸

Key in this statement are two important aspects of membership in the MST—a new organizational praxis, and “something that was going to bring benefit for the families.” Most settlers joined the MST simply because they wanted land, and they had heard that the MST members were usually successful at obtaining it. But in the lengthy process of political mobilization leading to the legalization of a settlement, the MST delivers a program of political education about “the movement in theory”. This process seeks to teach settlers how to negotiate bureaucracy through collective action to obtain the agricultural supports (land, credit, technical assistance) to which they have rights as rural producers, but also situates their particular agricultural problems as small producers within the larger historical context of global political economy and the influence of neoliberal policies—including increasing government support for large-scale export agriculture and decreasing support for small farmers—on their agricultural futures. In presettlement organizing meetings, the influence of neoliberalism on rural

displacement, local food relations and environmental degradation were key topics of discussion. By connecting the individual struggle for survival to a collective agrarian situation beyond local boundaries, this process of political education teaches the importance of a personal responsibility to act in support of the collective good, as an agrarian ideal. As an MST activist involved in organizing the Antonio Conselheiro settlement explains:

We show the other side of the conquest of land, the social question. [Settlers] first have to learn the theory ...politically who is the enemy, who isn't, to understand the political process of the whole society and how it functions. Even those who haven't studied, they must get out of this [political] illiteracy...to be able to go out of the old into the new. The movement goes through a process of the people conquering a space of their own, with their own force.

The activist continues:

First they come to understand the theory, right, about what is an encampment, what is the movement in theory, to later participate in practice. The person then goes conscious of what is going to happen out in the forest [the occupation]... They learn before and then they go.⁹

As such, MST activists highlight the significance of political education and conscious recognition of the roots of agricultural and social challenges as a basis for citizenship practice, rather than just the accomplishment of material objectives (land access and agricultural credit), although those material benefits were the primary reason most families joined the movement. For long-term activists, the substantive transformation of agrarian citizenship goes beyond just conquering rural space, to involve a process of personal transformation that occurs through consciously informed strategic action challenging traditional power relations in the countryside that are based on land possession.

Land occupations are the most significant public acts asserting rights to rural land for members of the movement. MST activists identify a property that is deemed to not fulfill a social function—an unproductive estate, a land use that is damaging to the environment, or an estate that uses coercive labor practices. The movement members “occupy” this land by setting up a temporary camp and school facilities and planting subsistence crops. This initial act of occupation requires the construction of a new form of collective social organization comprised of previously isolated individuals and families coming from different spheres of society. It also symbolizes one of the primary objectives of their agrarian mobilization—the production of food for local consumption, part of their vision of the social function of land. Many of the families who joined the MST in Mato Grosso were working as ranch hands, on small plots of lands belonging to extended family, as seasonal and permanent workers on sugar cane or other agroindustrial plantations, or as displaced domestic or day workers in the urban centers.

The structure of social organization in a land encampment is especially instructive regarding the way in which traditional land-society relations are challenged by rural activists. The Antonio Conselheiro families conducted an initial occupation of an idle ranch in 1996 and immediately formed about 40 “family groups” charged with the political and material organization of the settlement. Rather than electing one settlement leader, family groups comprised of “nuclei” of 25–30 families each elect two coordinators (one man and one woman) which sit on a settlement coordination council, and also elect representatives to each of the settlement-wide committees (production and environment, health, security,

⁷ Multi-sited field research was conducted in Brazil during a period of 17 months between 2002 and 2004, including participant observation in nine land reform settlements, numerous meetings and political activities organized by settlement leaders and over 200 interviews with settlers and social movement leaders. The bulk of interviews and observations were carried out in four settlements, two organized by the MST, one organized by a Rural Workers Union, and one organized by a municipal government.

⁸ Interview #30, 4/17/2003.

⁹ Interview #30, 4/17/2003.

political formation, education). This organizational structure assigns each individual person a *tarefa*, a task or action that benefits the settlement as a whole, which is intended to foster a process of self-education and responsibility in each person. This way of organizing ensures that political and other survival tasks “should not be centered in the hands of few people.”¹⁰ It also functions as a level of decision-making, seeking to break the history of patronage and dependency that characterized the political relationship of landless workers with the rural elites, often their employers and benefactors.

Antonio Conselheiro settlers remained camped for over two years waiting for the legalization of their land claim. During this time, discussions took place among the settlers on strategies of settlement organization, models of production, and ongoing political issues facing agriculture in Brazil. The MST continued to offer courses and workshops on political education, livestock management, agroforestry and agro-ecological systems, cooperative marketing, organic farming and reforestation, and other survival concerns, as well as organizing basic education, adult literacy classes, and improvised health clinics. The MST teaches that land use is for collective benefit, highlighting their focus on peasant food production as the primary economic activity in the countryside.

During the period of encampment families participated in intense discussions about both the political and social direction of the settlement, and divisions began to occur within the movement members that resulted in the withdrawal of over 300 families from the MST, while maintaining their physical stakes in the settlement and continuing to participate in legal negotiations and camp management. Interviews with participants identified several factors in the split, including some settlers who distrusted the leadership, squabbles over organizational finances, and the influence of political outsiders offering alternative organizational options, in the form of traditional rural associations. The ongoing tensions and dialogue between these two sets of settlers over what constitutes participation, and how different forms of participation relate to the relationship between land access and responsibilities, explored in the subsequent sections, illustrates the ongoing dynamism of rural politics and the changing implications of agrarian citizenship in Brazil.

4.1. Forms of political participation

Following the legal transfer of land to the settlement members, the family members from each nucleus were settled in adjacent plots in order to maintain the organizational momentum of collective action and capitalize on strong social bonds built among nucleus members during the period of encampment (see Fig. 1). MST members were located in the south and north sections of the settlement, while the remaining settlers, now denominated the “association” members, were located in the center. The effective result of the leadership split was the spatial separation of groups of settlers with divergent views on settlement management, but the maintenance of a common political and organizational structure.

For MST activists, participation in monthly family group meetings was the minimum required to maintain affiliation with the movement. By planning the structure of community living in a way that integrated the physical space of settlement and daily practice of community participation, MST activists challenged a traditional rural social structure that was traditionally based on vertical and individualized power relations. As explained by these representative quotes from the MST national newsletter and the MST-Mato Grosso workbook series used in the family discussion groups,

In this way, democracy is no longer representative and comes to be participatory. This horizontal structure functions in circles and not from top to bottom. This thing of hierarchy doesn't have space within the MST. The participation of everyone is a way to raise the level of consciousness, to form leadership, and to exercise democracy.¹¹

No one should represent anyone else, each man and woman represents him or herself. We want to overcome the problem of representativity, of delegation of powers. It is in participating that everyone represents themselves.¹²

Núcleo meetings begin with a *mística*, or “picture of life” (Martins, 2000) in which several members prepare the room or outdoor meeting space with symbols of life and the MST struggle (e.g. the MST banner, seeds, branches, soil, water). A poem or statement is made; one example is the following:

Remember that we are the cultivators of the future and we have the challenge to seed the Earth and also society with new values. We need to take care of our organization as we take care of our seeds, so that they can generate healthy plants and good fruits that will become seeds once again. *Seeds are distributed among meeting participants with the statements* We are seeds of Justice; We are seeds of Hope; We are seeds of solidarity; We are seeds of Love; We are seeds of Socialism.¹³

After the *mística* is performed and the MST hymn sung, discussions generally ensued on the political and agrarian conjuncture of Brazil and on particular questions having to do with the organization of the MST in Mato Grosso. *Cadernos de Núcleo*, or discussion guides prepared by the state organizing office, foster such questions as:

What is the seed [origin] of our landless, camped, and settled families?
 What can our núcleo do to help the MST overcome its challenges?
 What concrete actions can the núcleo develop?
 What do you think of the organizational proposal of the MST?
 How do you evaluate the current MST State Coordinating Council?
 What are your criticisms of the current leadership and what are your suggestions for the next leaders?
 How does our núcleo act and think about a new model of agricultural development?
 What does our núcleo understand by resistance? What should we be resisting?¹⁴

These questions, also debated by all settlement members throughout the long term of encampment, serve to reconsider the way in which rural citizens take power, by consciously creating their own history. Rather than a hierarchical model in which rural workers take direction from a landed employer, the struggle for land has also created alternative political spaces in an autonomous rural settlement. In addition to núcleo meetings, day-to-day interactions towards the resolution of agricultural problems and response to any political or physical threat to the settlement provided opportunity for collective discussions and action. Families also participated in occasional marches, municipal demonstrations, and in educational courses on alternative agricultural models. MST activists emphasized the need to keep collectively occupying political space after settlement. For example, at a 2004 MST

¹¹ Jornal Sem Terra, edição especial May 2004.

¹² MST-MT Caderno do Núcleo No. 9, July 2002, Cuiabá, MT and Caderno de Núcleo no. 11, October 2002.

¹³ Text from MST-MT Caderno do Núcleo, No. 10, September 2002, Cuiabá, MT.

¹⁴ Questions drawn from MST-MT Cadernos de Núcleo no. 1, 9, 10, 11 (2001–2002).

¹⁰ MST-MT Caderno do Núcleo No. 9, July 2002, Cuiabá, MT.

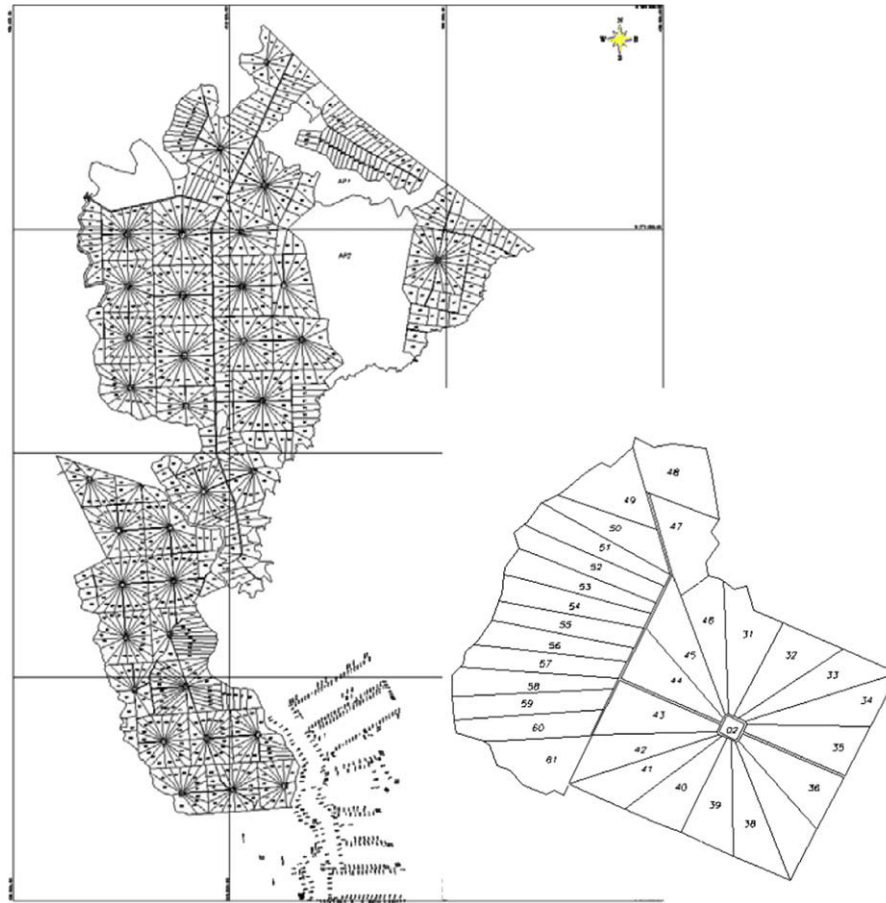


Fig. 1. Antonio Conselheiro settlement and settlement nucleus.

workshop, an activist 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 shared work (*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

This statement emphasizes that the struggle for land is a vehicle for a broader social transformation that involves changing individual perspectives on both their roles and their rights as Brazilian citizens. In “conducting their own history” as rural citizens that not only produce food through the development of agro-ecological production models, but also come out as political participants on a national stage through “public acts”, the new agrarian citizens challenge the historical conditions of the countryside in which small producers were marginalized and subjected to political patronage. Through the process of political education and political practice enacted in the social organization of the settlement and in regional organizations and movement networks, activists mark the

change in their individual consciousness towards a recognition of their multiple productive (economic and political) roles within the collectivity.

By contrast, day-to-day political participation in the confrontational style of the MST was not a stated priority for association settlers, who highlighted the administrative, rather than political function of their organizational structure. One settler explained that he moved away from the MST because the movement wasn't “doing anything for us”, and thought they would have a better chance of obtaining materials for their house through one of the associations.¹⁶ Another remarked that participation in the MST wasn't “worth it”, as he wasn't compensated for his political activities and needed time to cultivate his land, and that it was easier to “seek out benefits” through an association.¹⁷ The initial dissenting association called itself “Tapirapuá”, mimicking the name of the latifundio which had been expropriated for the settlement, in a sharp reminder of the political power the traditional landholding elite had over this population. The link to this name, which represented the traditional limits and boundaries of agrarian citizenship—land possession, wealth, and political power—highlighted the traditional channels of power in the countryside in which progress and material assistance was most easily achieved through patronage. Rural associations, with the traditional organizational forms of President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer, involved the representation of one member of each family rather than the participation of all family

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

¹⁶ Interview #144, 3/31/2004.

¹⁷ Interview #104, 1/29/2004.

members and require a monthly dues payment. Administrative meetings were held sporadically to discuss projects to meet material needs like credit, infrastructure, and government agricultural extension programs, and were often called to order by an urban-based politician. The associations used material incentives (access to agricultural credit and inputs) to attract new membership away from the MST, and local politicians also promised resources (projects, cash payments, food, and clothing) to increase the lure of the association membership as “a way to get progress”.

One president of an association, who identified himself as a former MST activist before distancing himself from the movement to start his own association, sees this traditional organizational form as an effective way to achieve material gains, rather than a forum for broader political 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

For this settler, the purpose of land reform and rural enfranchisement was to provide agricultural work and economic gain, while staying politically informed through traditional channels. In the association model, the association president controlled the flow of information and material resources to members from municipal political leaders in a historical form of vertical political relations. This mode of political participation falls more directly in line with the government-promoted rationale for agrarian reform: rural economic modernization as the centerpiece of both liberalism and developmentalism. As other settlers transitioned from movement to association, they remarked upon the de-politicization of daily life and their narrowed focus on family survival and agricultural production.

5. Agrarian citizenship as personal and collective transformation

Despite these differences in day-to-day political organization strategies and objectives, MST members and association settlers both exemplify the changing norms of agrarian citizenship in the Brazilian countryside. They do this by fundamentally challenging a land-based notion of citizenship by developing an autonomous, and sometimes internally contentious, set of settler organizations in the countryside. Now it is political organization and debate (whether via associations or MST), and autonomy in agricultural production that links settlers to their rural identity as citizens, not their exclusion from land. In this vein, a MST leader notes a fundamental difference in political work as a result of the transformative struggle for land.

Before, it was easier for a single farmer to go and talk with the mayor, than for a worker's representative or leader. They isolate you, they isolated people who were struggling for the collective good. Now, collectively we put the greater good on the agenda, we pull [the mayor] out of that small circle that they have there.¹⁹

The ability of settler associations—whether linked to the MST or not—to engage with rural and urban policy makers stands in direct contrast to the traditional patronage system associated with property colonization in Brazilian history. This engagement stems from the learned forms of political practice and organizing strategies gained during the grassroots mobilization for land experienced by all members of the settlement. Several Antonio Conselheiro MST

settlers suggested that an important factor mediating their ability to combine political activities with agricultural settlement practices and to survive as both small producers and political actors in the face of ongoing challenges to small-scale production in Brazil was the level of personal transformation that they had experienced as a result of the ongoing practical struggle to stay on the land. One activist explained: “if the body stops, the consciousness stops, it gets stagnant.”²⁰ Another settler explained his view that some people leave the settlement altogether because of their inability to experience personal transformation:

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

Association members within the settlement pointed out that they were more politically active than they had ever been before joining the settlement, and that they were using different strategies and tactics than currently practiced by the MST in the settlement. As each settlement member learned in the encampment and political education process, the MST's Freirian educational model seeks to engage each individual in a form of political awakening that allows each person to recognize the historical foundations of the obstacles that have prevented previous political participation. This education is then used as a method of understanding how to overcome those obstacles. To the extent that the political awakening is incomplete, the individual remains isolated and not free, subject to continued manipulation. For settlers in the Antonio Conselheiro settlement, opportunities for this kind of informed transformation are continual: the daily opportunities to participate in settlement activities around agricultural production and negotiation of credit, the collective protection of environmental reserve areas, adult education and literacy are simultaneously opportunities to engage in political action. Even the occasional political or settlement management conflicts between sectors of the settlement were a new terrain upon which to settle differences, according to newly installed processes of autonomous political negotiation.

Another Antonio Conselheiro settler explained his perspective on the relationship between personal transformation and public action:

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 activist redefined 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 needs like land and credit but also permanent issues like citizenship and class struggle.”²³ MST activists explained that settlers commonly focus first on material needs, and only later see the benefits of a transformative political model:

In the beginning there was that strong resistance, like 'No, I want my piece of land'. It's that culture of property, right? So,

¹⁸ Interview #87, 1/27/2004.

¹⁹ Interview #30, 4/17/2003.

²⁰ MST activist, interview #164, state workshop, Cuiabá, 12/9/2004.

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.

²³ MST meeting participant, Antonio Conselheiro settlement, 3/26/2004.

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 by yourself things just don't work, that they begin to reflect together again, about coming together.²⁴

In the case of the Antonio Conselheiro settlement, the process of personal transformation expressed by settlers gave rise to the development of a demonstrated collective consciousness, despite political differences, that is key in the new reformulation of agrarian citizenship. Through the ongoing collaboration between MST and association members to develop alternative agricultural practices, foster new markets for local food production and to protect a riverine reserve within the settlement, individual settlers become part of a collectivity, as expressed by a movement statement:

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, 25).

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 activist 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.²⁵

Creating space for ongoing political organization and participation is a continual task in the process of reframing agrarian citizenship, and an important outcome of the process of personal transformation and the development of a collective rural consciousness. In the Antonio Conselheiro settlement in 2004, the MST undertook an active campaign to politically reorganize the settlement. Families from the settlement carried out the same kind of door-to-door grassroots recruiting, recalling the initial urban work to bring people into the movement before the initial land occupation. Families who had drifted away from the movement towards association membership were encouraged to reformulate their *núcleo* groups and attend general settlement assemblies to discuss both material settlement needs and larger political issues. By re-framing organizational goals in collective terms (e.g. accessing credit and agricultural development program, improving settlement schools and infrastructure), MST leaders sought to provide forums for collective debate and political action that could transcend the organizational divisions of previous years. In a follow-up visit to the settlement in 2006, a number of interviewed families indicated that they had reframed their daily political practices within the settlement organization as congruent with the objectives of the MST, and now considered themselves "back in the movement". What is interesting is that this seemed more a transition of discourse, rather than a change in practice. Both self-identified association members and self-identified MST

members were speaking the same language of personal transformation and collective action.

In addition to issues of internal organization with the settlement and ongoing political engagement with the state and federal authorities on issues pertaining specifically to agrarian reform, settlement members have played an active role in fostering local and regional political and economic change, as part of the commitment to continued engagement in the public issues. Regular marches and demonstrations at the municipal and state level—organized by both the MST and association groups—have addressed such concerns as the rights of the state worker's unions to better salaries and retirement benefits, protests against the legalization of transgenic seeds and foods, public mobilization for additional support for the local farmer's market, and ongoing mobilization to improve rural schools and health services. Collaboration between Antonio Conselheiro settlers and MST leadership with the State University of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT) since 2002 has led to the organization of an ongoing seminar on Agro-Ecology and Family Agriculture attended by over 800 local farmers and students. A new extension relationship with the UNEMAT Department of Agronomy also fosters agro-ecological production practices, the preservation of several forest reserves, and the implementation of a community supported agriculture in a nearby city that supports the movement's commitment to increased local control over the food supply.

An MST activist from Antonio Conselheiro summarizes the importance of participation in a broader rural and national social transformation as follows:

No change will exist in our country if the people don't participate. This power of mobilization is found in the willingness to struggle and in the consciousness and the organization of the people. Change requires the organization of work, it requires indignation. And we understand that this will, this desire for change by the people, needs to be woken up again and again. From the people we need to construct a new space (*terreno*), a critical consciousness, deepened within us, with our spirit of indignation. That spirit of indignation has many spaces and directions, leading to changes in reality, and changes in ourselves, as subjects of a historical process.²⁶

As illustrated here, the concept of citizenship employed by members of rural social movements in Brazil is not derived from just access to land (or simply equating of land possession with citizenship). Rather, it situates land-holding in a complex and changing set of social relations, rights, and responsibilities that are (re)produced through democratizing access to land, as one factor in creating space for political participation. It is a seemingly subtle but fundamental difference that begins with pre-settlement organization and continues with political education during the practice of land occupation. Rural politics in this sense moves from acquiescence to a state- or elite-directed territorial administration to, as one interviewee explained,

to exercise participation from the smallest decisions, the small processes... in order for the small farmer to become the subject of his/her own history. The moment of conquering the right [to land] and to social rights in general, fundamental rights, leads to participation in the history of workers, the history of the settlement, the encampment, as a group and as part of society, in community and collective life and in political life...in the process of human and social development...as a citizen of society as a whole.²⁷

²⁴ Interview #241, 6/25/2004.

²⁵ Antonio Conselheiro leader, MST state meeting Cuiabá, 12/9/2004.

²⁶ Statement at MST Mato Grosso workshop, 12/10/2004.

²⁷ Interview #231, Cuiabá 12/20/2004.

These words illustrate the changing self-conception of rural workers and the emerging notion of agrarian citizenship. From a set of isolated individuals in rural areas, settlement members have become an organized collectivity that, despite internal political debates and differences, sees itself as part of society “as a whole.” This self-conception emphasizes a strategic shift in the notion of agrarian citizenship: the implicit nature of rights and responsibilities associated with rural production and settlement becomes collective, rather than individual. This is further explained by this statement from another rural leader:

Citizenship from an individual point of view is related to fundamental rights and guarantees of liberty, of the right to a name and title...[and other individual rights enumerated in the constitution]. But from the point of view of social advancement, of improvement in quality of life for small farmers and for the working class, for the earth and for the small ones of the earth, it is a collective project. Because from the individual point of view this confrontation [social change] is impossible.²⁸

6. Conclusion

The preceding discussion from movement activists illustrates how changing visions and practices of citizenship enacted by contemporary grassroots actors directly contest the traditional marginalization of rural dwellers from political participation. Challenging liberal notions of the relation between property and citizenship, incorporation into the rural citizenry in Brazil is not accomplished solely through the individual acquisition of land, as demonstrated by the failure of the rural colonization projects implemented by the Brazilian government from the mid-20th century onwards to change social relations and patterns of political participation in the countryside. Instead, the grassroots vision of a particularly agrarian citizenship prioritizes the creation of new rural social relations, in which citizenship is not an assumed right but rather an accomplishment. For grassroots organizers in Brazil, this accomplishment includes using land in accordance with a social function perspective—providing food for the nation, respecting labour rights and the environment, and providing rural space for political action. Agrarian citizenship thus recognizes the agency of rural peoples in challenging the traditional binaries of modernity/peasantry, landed/landless, and subject/citizen.

As shown in the contested organizational practices of settlers who acquire land through the struggle for agrarian reform, the day-to-day construction of this process of change—negotiated by the very settlers involved in its implementation—is a complicated process and one that does not happen overnight. Many settlers, formerly workers on rural estates or living on the margins of urban areas as day laborers, have never accomplished political enfranchisement, with personal and collective histories of patronage and clientelism as foundational to their perception of what is politically possible. The transformation of their personal self-vision and relation to a larger social network, through the collective struggle for land, alters the politics of the possible and broadens horizons for action. The decision to be a dissenter—even from the grassroots network that initiated that very dissent in the countryside—demonstrates that diversity is not only possible, but in itself is transformatory. The ongoing debate between political and organizational strategies between MST and association members has, in the end, contributed to a vibrant rural political community characterized by debate and dissent.

Finally, the discursive and normative political transformations occurring on a day-to-day basis in the Brazilian countryside have demonstrated material consequences of land redistribution in both social and ecological terms. For both activists that continue as members of the MST and those that engage with municipal politicians through rural associations, the experience of political participation that was directly fostered through their struggle for land has changed their lives in a substantive way. They have not just gained a piece of land, but have developed a diverse set of active political voices and socio-ecological practices that comprise a new and alternative vision of agrarian citizenship that resonates beyond the settlement boundaries.

This paper has paid particular attention to how citizenship is expressed and renegotiated around a struggle for land, reframing the meaning and practice of active citizenship in the Brazilian countryside. By unpacking the historical development of the relationship between land and power, and exploring how these relations are contested and reframed by members of land-based rural social movements, this analysis demonstrates the contours of a particularly “agrarian” citizenship, one in which rights are won and practiced not through simple presence in a rural locality but through transformative rural action, with implications for the basis of power beyond the rural spheres. As urban absentee landowners are forced to relinquish control or re-negotiate relations with rural workers, the traditional land base of power is eroded. Thus, a broadened conception of citizenship goes beyond a passive and hierarchical relationship between individual persons and the state, in which the state mediates the awarding of rights discriminately according to particular terms and subjectivities. These terms and subjectivities, in Brazil, have had a tight historical relationship to the possession of land, as demonstrated by long history of linking territorial administration and governing power to political enfranchisement. The new practices of active agrarian citizenship, as developed by grassroots actors through independent production and political activities, address and transform relationships between individuals, rural and urban communities and the state in such a way as to challenge the assumption that access to land alone will lead to the development of new forms of citizenship and rights.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful for insightful comments from Charles Geisler, Phil McMichael, Gerardo Otero, Raj Patel and Razack Karreim, as well as the two anonymous reviewers.

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²⁸ Interview #231, Cuiabá 12/20/2004.

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