# *Mística,* meaning and popular education in the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement[1]

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## Abstract

*The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) works to create solidarity and collective identity among its members through a variety of pedagogical practices. One such practice is mística, which is at once a public, expressive dramatic performance and, drawing on Christian mysticism, an way of making contact with a transcendent reality. Mística draws on Christian theology generally, and specifically on the practices of the Christian base communities associated with liberation theology which were key in the emergence of the MST. It fortifies activists with the high commitment needed to engage in land occupations and the creation of farming communities through which the MST pursues its central goal of agrarian reform.*

The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST) is a militant rural movement that occupies farmland to provide livelihood for its members and to press for broader land reform. Those in the movement make substantial sacrifices and take substantial risks. To encourage people to make those sacrifices and take those risks, the movement engages in a range of pedagogical and motivational practices to achieve solidarity, identification, and conviction for collective action. Among these practices (and in a sense subsuming all of them) is *mística*.

This untranslatable word refers to an expressive performance, mainly nonverbal, that incorporates themes central to the goals of the movement and affirms confidence in the achievability of those goals. It is a regular practice of the MST. It is intended to promote a sense of identity as a separate group and commitment to the group's purposes. The term mística refers not just to the performance, however, but to the whole world view that underlies it, drawing on traditions of Christian mysticism to affirm unity with a transcendent reality. Mística is sacramental in that its manifest physical reality is taken to represent the deeper meaning. It is impossible to separate the enactment of mística from the engagement with transcendence. Through participating in or observing mística, people express their ideals and believe that they come closer to attaining them.

In August, 1998, I participated in a meeting of activists and supporters of the MST in a church basement in Passo Fundo, a middle-sized city in the agricultural highlands of Rio Grande do Sul state close to the area where the

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MST arose.[2] The meeting began with a mística. In the middle of the large room, performers pantomimed various ills of urban life: robbery, begging, a homeless couple with a baby (played by a real live baby). A crowd stormed the performance area and drove out the evils; they unfurled on the floor a very large MST flag (bright red, with a circle in the center showing a map of Brazil and a farm couple, the man holding a raised machete)-MSTv2. A young person recited a poem alluding to poverty in Brazil and hope in the midst of that poverty. Then all chanted "This country is ours," and invited the audience to stand up and join them in marching around the flag in a circle. There was singing and poetry, but no dialogue; the enactment was carried out in silence.

The group was part of a contingent of the March for Brazil, a mobilization organized by the MST and allies through many cities and towns to draw attention to the anti-neoliberal platform calling for agrarian reform and other social and economic policies presented in the book *A Opção Brasileira* ("The Brazilian Option;" Benjamin et al., 1998). (I later learned that the baby and her parents were taking part in the march.) They and their local supporters were meeting for a briefing on the platform, preparing to canvass in neighborhoods the next day to invite people to a meeting to discuss it. The mística was repeated at the mass meeting, in a larger auditorium. I wrote in my notes, "It had less impact because it was on a stage, and the audience could not participate in the conclusion."

As I detail below, members and leaders of the movement widely credit the practice of mística with the creation of a collective spirit and identity that motivates their participation in militant action.

## The Christian Origins of Mística

The practice of mística has Christian origins. The land struggle arose during the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, following the dictatorship's repression of earlier peasant movements. Liberation theology was then a powerful force in the Brazilian Catholic Church as well as in some protestant churches, notably the Lutheran. Liberation theology called on the faithful to make a "preferential option for the poor," serving the needs of poor people not just for spiritual nourishment or a promise of a life hereafter but for social justice in the present world. Advocates of liberation theology constituted tyemsevles as the "popular church" and formed nuclei known as Christian base communities in their parishes (Berryman, 1987; Cleary, 1985; Mainwaring, 1986). The option for the poor implied that Christians must work for social justice, notably--because poverty is most severe in rural areas--including agrarian reform.

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[2]Between 1996 and 2003 and again in 2009, I made brief visits to MST camps and settlements in four states (Natal, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Rio Grande do Sul) and an MST training center in São Paulo, observing místicas and interviewing militants about the practice. As the reader will note, I have in addition drawn freely on the ethnographic accounts of others who have studied the practice of *mística*.

The churches promoted rural organization and became an important base for land occupation movements. The movements adopted the practices of the popular church. Liberation theology was closely linked to the practice of popular education, and the performance of mística in the MST owed elements to both. Popular education means education of, by, and for the people. Many of the principles of popular education are derived from the work of the Brazilian literacy pioneer Paulo Freire, who proposed (in the title of his best-known book) a *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), a pedagogy for poor people which made learning part of the process of liberation. Popular education is always a political and organizational process as much as an educational process; it puts into practice an ideology that declares the equality of all and insists on the full development of their capacities (Hammond, 1998).

Freire's method is designed to stimulate poor and uneducated adults to learn by engaging them politically. Popular literacy teaching therefore uses material derived from the real lives of poor people, and engages in practices of reflection, games, and dramatic and musical performances. Learners participate actively rather than absorbing passively as in the traditional classroom. Through reflection they come to a clearer understanding of the causes of their poverty and deprivation and become aware that these are not facts of nature or due to the will of God. The process of critical reflection, in other words, is a process of emancipation. "In educating adults, to avoid a rote, mechanical process one must make it possible for them to achieve critical consciousness so that they can teach themselves to read and write" (Freire 1973: 56). People come to exercise their intellectual potential, and as they do, they become aware of the social forces that constrain them and prevent them from being free. They see a connection between the physical occupation of *latifúndios* (the rural properties owned by large landowners that the MST targets for expropriation) and the occupation of the "latifúndio of knowledge" (Dutervil, 2005, quoted in Nascimento and Martins, 2008: 12).

Freirean pedagogical techniques are thus designed to encourage participation and bridge the hierarchical gap between teacher and learner. In fact, the teacher is often a fellow community member with only slightly better education than the learner. Freire argued that the goal of education should be *conscientização*, the development of a critical consciousness to enable learners to recognize and combat the sources of their oppression. Education is not just the acquisition of skills; it is the development of the whole person. Through it people come to exercise their capacity for independent and critical thinking. It therefore involves not just intellectual activity but noncognitive elements of emotion, physical movement, and collective activity embodying solidarity. Mística is an important part, including performances at public events outside of the school context.

In Christian traditions, mysticism is a form of religious ecstasy, a direct communion with the divine: "a way for the soul to free itself from the sphere of the body and reach the sphere of divinity. . . . For the mystic it brings feelings of such grandeur that words are inadequate to express what is experienced in that

direct union" (Lara, 2007: 3, 6). Characteristically, mysticism is an individual experience confined to a select few religious adepts.

Liberation theology, however, rejected both the exclusiveness and the individualism. The Brazilian churches became the support and mainstay of the social movements that sprang up and struggled against the dictatorship in its waning years. Mística underwent two important transformations in the social movements: it became collective rather than individual, and it was translated from the other world to the present world. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff argues that mística is the force which sustains the social movements that have proliferated in Latin America in recent years, whether their inspiration is Christian, Marxist, or humanist. Frei Betto, a Dominican friar and well-known political commentator, insists on the legitimacy of the political use of mística, rejecting the objections of many church people (Boff, n.d.; Frei Betto, 2006; cf. Lara, 2007: 9-10).

In the MST, mística underwent a further transformation: its meaning became secularized from God to political struggle. Despite the importance of the church in its gestation, the MST embraces no explicit Christian commitment. But it has preserved the forms of dramatic enactment, marching, and music of místicas that came from the church.

From the start the MST defined itself as a radical movement, engaging in direct action rather than lobbying or more institutionalized forms of political pressure, even after the restoration of democracy (though it has not abstained from the latter; see Hammond, 2009). It adopted the occupation as its principal tactic, and the occupation was militant, transgressive, and not only directed at seizing a particular property for a particular group of occupiers, but part of a massive struggle whose goal was general social transformation, beginning with a generalized agrarian reform that would do away with the latifúndio (Fernandes, 2000).

Yet it also sought to transcend the doctrinaire Marxist orientation that had dominated the Brazilian left before the military coup and continued to play a major role in the opposition to the dictatorship; the old left's tactics were instrumentally focused and looked to a base in the urban working class, presumed to be conscious of its objective interests. This orientation left little space for a search for transcendental meaning. The traditions underlying the MST embraced conscious symbolic production that would give meaning and direction to the individual and to group affiliation in the movement (McNee, n.d.; Sampaio, 2002). Breaking from traditional left orthodoxy, national MST leader João Pedro Stédile declared that the movement is open to "all truths, not just one" (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 59). Both the sense of larger purpose echoing its Christian origin and the radical ideology rejecting more conventional forms of political action led the movement to promote identity formation through the self-conscious use of symbols and ritual activity, infusing participation in the movement with a transcendent purpose. In its land occupations it also emphasized constructing community, something the traditional Marxist left had never attempted to do.

## The Process of Land Occupation

The MST grew out of a series of land occupations beginning near Passo Fundo in 1978 and was formally constituted in 1984. It grew in strength and activism through the 1990s to become the liveliest and most influential political movement on the Brazilian scene. It is not the only rural land occupation movement, but it is by far the largest (Brumer, 1990: 25; Fernandes, 2000; Hammond, 1999; Hammond and Rossi, 2013; Ondetti, 2008; Wright and Wolford, 2003). Typically the movement's collective action can be described in three phases: occupation, camp, and settlement.[3]

**Occupation.** The MST and other rural movements occupy idle farmland and pressure the state to expropriate it and turn it over to the occupiers to be farmed cooperatively. Brazilian law provides that agricultural land that is not being farmed productively can be expropriated and redistributed to those who want to farm it. Brazil's vast size, unequal land distribution, rural poverty, and oligarchical domination assure that there is ample idle land and a large number of poor rural people seeking to work it. But the state does not typically initiate expropriation, even where the criteria are clearly met. Instead, it only acts when direct action forces its hand. A rural movement identifies a property that appears to be eligible for expropriation, either because it is not being farmed productively or because the owner's title is fraudulent. The movement recruits a corps of occupiers from among the rural (and sometimes the urban) poor. Several hundred families together enter the targeted property at night and set up makeshift housing. They then seek legal title under the cover of the various federal and state laws. Their immediate goal is to create pressure to get the occupied properties expropriated under the country's agrarian reform law. In the longer term, they call for a more general agrarian reform.

An occupation sets in motion a process of conflict among several parties: the occupiers, the landowner (and possibly allies on both sides), and various governmental authorities, including the police forces, the courts, and the federal agrarian reform bureaucracy. Expropriation usually requires a long legal process in which landowners can intervene to defend their property rights. If the property is found to be expropriable, the owner is compensated and the property is turned over to applicants who meet an income test and other criteria. Normally the occupiers meet the criteria; the land is often awarded to them, but only after a delay of months or years following the initial occupation.[4]

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[3]This description must be somewhat simplified, because the MST is a nationwide movement in a huge country with a great variety of local social, economic, and agricultural conditions, so its actual practice varies from place to place.

[4]Occupations have declined in recent years. During the second term of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1998-2002) measures to suppress occupations were imposed; they were not revoked during the two terms of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) (2003-2010), despite the historic commitment of the PT to land reform and the longstanding alliance between the party and the movement. The PT administrations were friendlier to land reform than those of Cardoso, however, ceding government-owned land for settlements (Welch, 2011; Ondetti, 2008).

Joining a land occupation therefore entails a high commitment, as occupiers leave their entire life behind and wait to find out whether their gamble will pay off. In many areas of the country police and privately organized goon squads have conducted violent raids on settlements (Hammond, 2009). Not only do occupiers risk discomfort and possible repression, but the payoff is uncertain and at best distant. They would not risk so much without being firmly committed and anticipating a reward that will go beyond the hoped-for material payoff. For this reason, the MST uses communal and symbolic practices to cultivate identification with the movement and commitment to its goals.

**Camp.** In the interim, evicted occupiers may be resettled on land other than that which they originally occupied, either state-owned or already expropriated for agrarian reform. More often they erect a camp *(acampamento)* of improvised houses or tents somewhere in the vicinity, generally in the right-of-way of a public road, and wait for expropriation; on public property, they are likely to be safe from another eviction. The rural landscape is marked with dense groups of tiny shacks covered in black plastic sheets where land occupiers wait months, or even years, to be settled on a farm (D'Incao, 1991: 91; Paiero and Damatto, 1996: 41, 119).

**Settlement.** If they win title to the land, the payoff is high: they win the right to remain, create a settlement (*assentamento*), and farm the land, usually by some combination of individual and collective production. Not all settlements succeed, but those that do provide settler families a very good living compared to their former rural poverty (Ondetti, 2008: 231-38; Sparovek, 2003). Some even sell their farm goods to multinational corporations to market under nationally known brand names, diversify to such activities as a distillery, and promote ecologically sustainable agriculture. They create not only a farm enterprise but a community.

The movement is committed to the education of children and adults, and has created schools in many of its camps and settlements. The MST gives high priority to the education of the settlers, who are generally poorly educated and often illiterate. It promotes literacy among its militants, educating them with Freirean pedagogy. It assures universal schooling for all children. MST settlements create their own elementary schools, staffed by occupiers (usually without professional credentials), but they also seek and often achieve recognition and support from the local government, so that their schools have official recognition and their teachers are on the municipal payroll. The MST operates secondary boarding schools where young people from settlements across the country study agronomy, pedagogy, and political organizing (Caldart, 2000). It has founded the university-level Florestan Fernandes National School in São Paulo state, and has partnership agreements with universities in other states. These arrangements sometimes require the negotiation of conflict over the model of society, agriculture, and education taught in these institutions (Fernandes, 2012).

The settlements have become vibrant communities that provide a base for ongoing politicization and mobilization of participants. The MST cultivates

identification and commitment through political education and solidarity rituals such as mística and other artistic performances.

Though its main actions are extralegal occupations, the MST also takes full advantage of opportunities in institutional politics, most importantly to get land expropriated and win legal titles, as well as enjoying government benefits like agricultural credit. The movement promotes a maximal program: each expropriation is viewed as a step toward a general agrarian reform of all latifúndios and, in the long run, socialism. It is the most active land reform movement in Latin America and one of the leading national organizations behind *Via Campesina,* the international peasant movement (Fernandes, 2005; Hammond, 1999; Wright and Wolford, 2003: 315-330).[5]

## Strategy and Identity

Social movement theory is polarized between the concepts of "strategy" and "identity," or between the resource mobilization approach and the new social movements approach (Cohen, 1985; see also Hammond, 2012). Resource mobilization theory sees collective action as an effort to acquire collective goods--that is, goods that are shared by a whole collectivity and not possessed individually. The theory attempts to explain what determines the rise of collective action to achieve them and the means they use. Though not exclusively tied to the assumption of rational choice theory that actors rationally pursue their individual self-interest (Olson, 1971), it does treat social movements as strategic collective actors, calculating what forms of collective action will best achieve goals in the face of opposition from adversaries with opposed interests or from the state (sometimes conceived as an adversary, sometimes as a neutral party subject to political pressure; McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1998).

Collective identity theory[6] examines social movements primarily to address the changes they effect in the consciousness of their participants and the nature of interaction in a social movement that produces those changes. Francesca Polletta and James Jasper define collective identity as

[5]The movement also presents its message through a number of periodicals and newsletters, some of them with very attractive production values, at the local and national levels. It further communicates with its supporters in other countries through a news agency, web site and e-mail list (Carter and Carvalho, 2009).

[6]Collective identity theory is a subset of a diverse array of theoretical approaches often referred to as "new social movements theory," because the social movements arising in the US and Europe since the 1970s were regarded as a new form (Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield, 1994; Melucci, 1995; Touraine, 1985). Because "new" is not a substantive description, however, I prefer to refer to "collective identity theory," that facet of new social movements theory that most closely fits the practice of internal organization and motivation in the MST.

> an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities. . . . Collective identities are expressed in cultural materials--names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, clothing, and so on. . . . Collective identity does not imply the rational calculus for evaluating choices that "interest" does (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 285).

Polletta and Jasper go on to argue that collective identity theory's account of motives to participate in a movement--satisfactions and obligations assumed--explains participation better than any account based on material incentives, because the latter are necessarily uncertain. The theory also addresses the cultural effects--transformation of lifestyle--that can be an important part of social movement participation. Finally, the authors argue, some strategies are pursued because the actions are intrinsically appealing more than because they are instrumentally effective.

Both these approaches to social movements are clearly relevant to the MST. The success or failure of the MST's strategic choice to give primacy to the land occupation can best be analyzed in terms of resource mobilization theory. So too, the MST's efforts to influence its image in the public media is an important element of its strategy and one intertwined with its other strategic choices (Hammond, 2004).

Its internal practices, on the other hand, put a premium on identity formation as discussed by collective identity theory. It is surprising that a theory which developed in western Europe in response to social changes of advanced industrial societies in the last third of the twentieth century would apply to a movement in a third world country--though one rapidly advancing to the status of industrial superpower--and in one of its most economically underdeveloped sectors, namely family agriculture. The terminology of collective identity theory reflects its origin in advanced industrial societies in ways that are jarring when applied to rural Brazil. For example, the term "lifestyle" implies a wide range of choices and hardly seems to fit the cultural styles of poor, landless Brazilian rural workers. But becoming an MST settler evidently entails a dramatic change of lifestyle, if we abstract from that term's connotation of choice.

In summary, the combination of strategic action to secure land reform and identity formation to promote adherence and loyalty to the movement suggests the need to synthesize resource mobilization and collective identity approaches.[7] This discussion concentrates on the identity work performed by mística,

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[7]Two recent studies of the MST illustrate the two approaches: Gabriel Ondetti (2008) emphasizes political opportunities in an analysis that grows out of the resource mobilization approach, and Miguel Carter (2010) emphasizes the emotional satisfactions derived from movement participation, though each also recognizes the importance of factors put forward by the other theory.

reflecting the religiously formed viewpoint of participants rather than the theoretical categories of outside observers (although, as we will see, the movement's own leaders think theoretically and analyze their movement's behavior from a perspective intermediate between those of the wholly engaged participant and the theoretical analyst).

The physical separation of people into camps before winning land and then into settlements where they create a farm and community provides the opportunity to cultivate an alternative identity and an alternative set of values. The historical root in Christian base communities and the support of the church--strongest in the early years--promoted a pedagogy of consciousness-raising based on mística. Mística was already emphasized in an organizing manual produced when the movement was only two years old.

## Mística and Meaning

I have called the mística in Passo Fundo with which I began this paper a "performance," taking the viewpoint of an outside observer. To those taking part and to many who were watching, however, it had a much deeper meaning. Herein lies the ambiguity and at the same time the richness of "mística." The word refers to specific performances like this one; but it also refers to the spirit with which they are undertaken and their central purposes: to encourage commitment to the movement, identification with the movement as a central element of one's identity, the aspiration to the ideal future (many speak of "utopia" in explaining mística), and the belief that by their efforts they will secure that future. Many participants and observers express the firm conviction that it is mística that sustains movement participation through a difficult struggle, one whose favorable outcome would appear anything but assured to those who do not participate in mística and share the convictions that arise from it. If I emphasize the observable practices of mística, I urge the reader to keep in mind the underlying meaning and aspiration. For practitioners the performances cannot be separated from them.[8]

Místicas abound in symbols, material objects with a deeper meaning, expressing aspects of the struggle for land and the hope for the future. Some symbols relate to the land and agriculture, others to political struggle. They incorporate farm products--seeds, plants, even animals--and tools--scythes, machetes, hoes, often held raised in a position of defiance. The negative counterparts of these symbols are the symbols of the life of the city, to which the peasant deprived of access to land is forced to migrate. Political struggle is symbolized by the MST

[8]Some místicas can be seen on line, e.g. *Mistica de abertura do MST no Encontro de Amigos do MST 08/12/07* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlx6HhKMFLU>, 25 Anos MST—Socialismo Mistica <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9q2qdWZ6dk>; *Mística - Inauguração do Curso de Serviço Social do MST na UFRJ* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLwPYPEgOV0>; *La Mistica* <http://vimeo.com/63254594>.

flag, the map of the country, and also by symbolic behavior: singing, assembling in groups, and assuming postures that display defiance. Again, there are also negative symbols, representing the political forces that impede the realization of their goals: the landowner, the banker; more recently, agribusiness and the International Monetary Fund (Issa, 2007: 133; Lara, 2005: 120-21; Medeiros, 2001).

These are symbols of a deeper meaning: the right to land, the reasons why the workers are entitled to that land, and the political process of achieving it. Because mística is intended as a motivating process, its intellectual content is never separate from the emotive or motivational aspects. Indeed, the intellectual is underplayed in mística, which "responds to the need to create an environment for deepening ideas that is less univocal and rational," according to Ademar Bogo (Souza, n.d.). Symbols convey meaning indirectly and appeal to the emotions as much as to the intellect; the purpose is to create a feeling as much as it is to convey a rationally articulated set of beliefs. The nonverbal, nonintellectual aspect of mystical experience (communion with the transcendent) is conveyed by physical, kinetic aspects of performance of mística (Lara, 2007: 5, 15, 18; Boff, 2004). The content is utopian: it is intended to foreshadow and help to bring about a better future in which social justice prevails, fundamentally through the mechanism of agrarian reform which permits landless workers to labor honestly to earn their living in the countryside (Lara, 2005; Lara and Lambiasi, 2007; Sampaio, 2002). According to Claudemiro Godoy do Nascimento and Laila Chalub Martins, it is "an action that teaches and strengthens actors in their daily struggle" (2008: 115). In an interview I asked Luiz, a settler in Itapeva in São Paulo state, to explain mística. He exclaimed, "It is to make the impossible possible."

Mística embodies artistic presentation including performance, plastic arts, and music (Lara 2005 75; McNee, n.d.). The artistic elements constitute "mobilizing forces of the sense of belonging and the establishment of a distinction between 'us' and 'them.'" Songs, dance, and theater contribute to identity formation: they are "the expression of a collective feeling that unites, identifies and strengthens their spirit of resistance and struggle" (Harnecker, 2001). Collective participation creates a sentiment of unity, and helps the movement to visualize the "antagonistic other" and to constitute its own identity on that basis. Once again, the expressive mode means the predominance of the emotions over the intellect. Stories and music convey unity and emotive content. They have a substantive content as well, but it is less important than the artistic representation (Lara and Lambiasi, 2005; McNee, n.d.).

Some místicas refer to the heroic figures of agrarian struggles from Brazil's past. Zumbi dos Palmares, who led a community of escaped slaves in the seventeenth century; Canudos, a nineteenth-century community of rural withdrawal; the war of the Contestado against land grabbers and the railroads in the early twentieth century; and the Peasant Leagues of the 1960s--all are important references, along with the ubiquitous Che Guevara. Sue Branford and Jan Rocha (2002: 43) describe the *romaria da terra* (land pilgrimage) in 1988 to Palmares, site of

Zumbi's community, sponsored jointly by the church, the MST, and a rural trade union.

These must be regarded as invented traditions. Although they are real historical events, there is little if any direct continuity between them and the landless movement that emerged in the 1980s, but the MST uses mistica to affirm a connection which becomes real in the process. Martyrdom is also a prominent theme: the hundreds of landless and their supporters who have been murdered in land struggles are frequently commemorated (Bonin and Kersten, 1993: 222; Hammond, 2009; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992; Issa, 2007: 134).

The themes of the performances are chosen to represent

> a cry of the poor: . . . a cry that breaks out of the silence of many, deprived of being human beings inside of this voracious system based on capitalist relations of production. For the MST, there is a crying reality, a reality of beings who are denied in their existence--the poor, those who hide behind the desire to cry out in a profound silence, suffocated and destroyed (Nascimento and Martins, 2008: 117-118).

Mística is intended to create unity: collective ritual acts bring people together, to act in unison, in pursuit of common ideals. Rituals are a common practice in social movements, perhaps especially movements of withdrawal (Jasper, 1997: 184-85; Kanter, 1972: 99-102; Taylor and Whittier, 1995: 278-80).

Most importantly, mística contributes to the formation of identity. Shared identity makes struggle possible and has to be cultivated. Correlatively, mística identifies an enemy, an Other over-against whom the landless define themselves and their struggle. So the unity is produced within the group and at the same time separates the group from adversaries in conflict. The MST has devoted significant resources and attention to the cultivation of identity. Identity is essential to any movement because while movements may be rationally organized and instrumentally directed, their success depends on the voluntary adherence of their followers. The distant possibility of material reward cannot by itself win that adherence; the main incentive is the solidarity they feel with their fellow activists.

The landless suffer from negative stereotypes. Many Brazilians regard them as poor, as criminal, or as seeking a government handout. They may internalize them, as oppressed people often do. Mística becomes a means of overcoming them through a process of reappropriation: "taking a negatively evaluated label, and revaluing it positively, a group can change the value of the label and thus, in at least some important ways, the value of the group" (Galinsky et al., 2003: 228). Verity Burgmann calls this process transvaluation and finds it in many social movements of subordinate groups (2005: 7):

> From the 1960s new social movements roused new constituencies of subordinate groups, such as women, homosexuals, racial and ethnic minorities, with their rhetorics of difference and their emphasis on identity. "Black Power." "Gay Pride." "The woman-identified-woman." Numerous slogans come to mind . . . [M]ovements propounding identity politics have utilized the power of words to mediate between being and consciousness, to persuade subordinate groups to recognize and act upon their oppression (Burgmann, 2005: 4-5.)

According to Fabiano Coelho, "a stigmatized image of the landless has been created, as vagabonds, criminals, abused, destroyers of order, among other pejorative adjectives. And when the subjects internalize what is now being called the identity of the landless, that stigma comes to be broken down slowly" (2010: 198).

Some make a distinction between "*sem-terra*," or a landless person (with negative connotations), and "*Sem Terra*," an activist in the movement who has recovered a positive identity. As Salete, another activist, proudly proclaimed, "I am a Sem Terra with capital letters! I am Salete Sem Terra" (Prado and Lara, 2003). Not only does she invert the status of landless from pejorative to proudly acknowledged; she converts it from an attribute to a noun, from an incidental characteristic to the essence of *what she is*.

Many MST militants transvalue their identity in this way. The mística performed in Passo Fundo shows one element of this transvaluation, portraying urban life as physically and socially unhealthy, to be replaced by the sound, healthy life of hard work in the countryside. Again, Salete indicates the process:

> In the camp we began to recover our dignity. In my time, for example, when you said you were from Natalino Camp or from Danone Camp, my God in heaven, [people said to us] you are vagabonds, you are I don't know what, the worst names. Mística accomplished a lot for us to value ourselves, that after all we are people, we are part of a movement that is struggling not just for land but for dignity, for sovereignty, for a different society (Prado and Lara, 2003).

The strategic phasing of the MST's collective action from occupation to camp to settlement provides a natural setting for identity formation. These locations constitute what Bernardo Mançano Fernandes calls an "interactive space" encouraging "exchanges of experiences, learning one another's life stories, raising consciousness of their condition as expropriated and exploited, in the construction of identity as landless" (2008: 33).

In addition, geography favors this exchange within the movement. The MST belongs to a category of social movements identified by Raúl Zibechi as movements of resistance, existing on the margins of society, spatially as well as socially, where they are beyond the reach of the powerful. They can therefore resist subjection to the dominant institutions of society, including the state, and organize their own institutions (2012: 67). Zibechi includes the MST under this

heading (although the MST both at the national level and in individual camps and assentamentos has a closer relation to the state than Zibechi acknowledges, depending on it to recognize their possession of the land as well as for various forms of financial assistance). Assentamentos are relatively isolated, forming communities unto themselves; their isolation both demands and contributes to their search for a shared identity that excludes those who are not part of the movement.

Identity can also be formed through deliberately planned activities, of which mística is an important one.

> As a collective practice in the constitution of a common identity, the sense of group belonging is fundamental. . . . [Mística reinforces] a set of values, beliefs, interests that define the collective identity of a group. . . . Enacting místicas stimulates the sharing of a definition and understanding of social structure, thus guaranteeing that intra-group relations achieve unity (Prado and Lara, 2003).

It is in everyday life that mística makes its presence felt. According to an MST training manual for the practice of mística,

> A meeting, a ceremony, a festive activity can and should be full of moments that make present the reasons why we are struggling and the motives that make us comrades [*companheiros*]. so the beauty around us, the climate of confidence, happiness, music, poetry, arts, symbols, war cries [i.e., slogans chanted in demonstrations]--everything should express the values and certainties that inspire our path (Peloso, [1997]: 10).

According to Arnildo, an activist,

> All those in the camp who don't get into that practice, . . . or don't participate much, or don't get engaged so that they stay outside of the mística . . . they are the first to retreat . . . and many of them drop out of the camp exactly for one reason, in my opinion: for the lack of mística (Prado and Lara. 2003).

Místicas are performed on a variety of occasions: group meetings, gatherings, assemblies, demonstrations, congresses, and occupations (MST, 1986: 103). They are performed locally, in camps and settlements. According to Nadir Lara (2003), the camp is the ideal setting for drawing participants into the organization of the movement. When people have come together to occupy a property and discover that their first effort is unsuccessful and their success may be far away, the motivating power of mística is especially important.

Místicas become more elaborate on occasions when MST occupiers and settlers come together from different settlements or different regions: at the

movement's congresses and regional meetings, public demonstrations, and training courses--especially those dedicated to political themes but also at other kinds of courses. At such events, an assigned group prepares the mística and presents it, usually at the beginning of a session. For events lasting several days and bringing together groups from a wide area, each locale (each settlement, or each state delegation at a congress) is responsible for presenting a mística to open the proceedings on a particular day. At these events occupiers and settlers learn firsthand the reach of the movement. Místicas are carefully prepared and often elaborate, with costumes, props, and accompanying music. The groups engage in a friendly competition to offer the best mística and show the whole body that they excel in commitment and organization (Lara, 2005: 123-28; Vieira, 2007).

These occasions should be joyous, as national MST leader João Pedro Stédile emphasized: "Why should someone get involved in a march to Brasília? Because he feels good, he feels happy. Everyone looks and says, 'What a sacrifice!' But the guy is enjoying himself" (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 129). Mística is offered in a spirit of celebration, lightening up the atmosphere of serious decision-making at formal gatherings.

These performances generally have a distinctly amateur quality: enthusiastic and lacking in subtlety. They are not dramatic in that they lack real delineated characters or any but the most stereotyped plot. They present an ideological message that is meant to provoke reflection but whose truth, at the same time, is unquestioned. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster (1927) discusses "flat" and "round" characters. Flat characters are "constructed round a single idea or quality," and thus their meaning is transparent, while round characters offer surprises to the reader. Forster does not disparage flat characters, because they perform useful roles in a novel, providing atmosphere and playing to readily accessible, noncomplex emotions.

In místicas, *all* the characters are flat. They are presented not as three-dimensional people but as archetypes. Their flatness is a function of the purpose of místicas: not to arouse complex sentiments but to reinforce those that the audience already feels, and to ratify their unity which is exemplified by the expectation that all will respond homogeneously to the ideas presented, in shared celebration.

## The Power of Mística

Participants and observers are unanimous in claiming that mística is effective. It is hard to evaluate in any precise sense, but mística is integrated to the overall practice of the movement, which has, indeed, been effective: winning actual land in the form of settlements for over 600,000 peasant families[9] throughout the country and winning the battle of public opinion, at least for the issue of

[9]This includes all families who have received land through agrarian reform, not just those in MST settlements.

agrarian reform and to some extent for the movement itself, though with fluctuations (Hammond, 2004; Ondetti, 2008).

I know of no evaluation of the effectiveness of mística by a neutral observer. Not only participants and leaders but sympathetic outsiders, for example in the academy, declare it to be very powerful, however. According to national MST leader Stédile, mística provides "ideological sustenance." He goes on to say, "people participate in a march because it makes them feel good; it is a sacrifice, but they stay a long time because they have mística" (Stédile and Fernandes, 1999: 129).

Plínio de Arruda Sampaio, an academic economist, movement supporter, Workers Party congressmember and later presidential candidate of the Socialism and Liberty Party: "What motivates the MST to carry on its single-minded work? It can all be summed up in a single word: mística, or mysticism" (Sampaio, 2002).

Roseli Caldart, movement activist who is a national leader of the MST's educational projects: "Mística is what kept people on the march [to Brasília in 1997];" mística is "the seasoning of the struggle, the passion that enlivens militants" (quoted by Lara, 2007: 14-15).

Cândido Grzybowski, general director of IBASE (Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Econômicas e Sociais), a leading NGO: "[The MST] manages to maintain what they call 'mística.' People stay very engaged in the struggle; they believe in it" (interview, 1998).

Arnildo, a settler in Encruzilhada Natalino: "It creates an inner strength in the group; it makes the whole group have strength to react to repression" (Lara and Lambiasi, 2005: 75).

As a social scientist, I am wary of trusting self-reports of effectiveness, because (especially in social movements) people are capable of self-deception and disposed to overrate the validity and effectiveness of their actions. These self-evaluations raise the issue of whether insider or outsider perspectives are better able to attain the truth; the insider-outsider debate is an old one (Merton, 1972). In this case, as we have seen, there are many analytical minds in the movement, and the staying power and political success of the movement are sufficient testimony to its effectiveness that we can allow insiders to have the last word.

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