

Reframing the public in public education: The Landless Workers Movement (MST) and adult education in Brazil

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Abstract

Education for rural Brazilians has historically been dominated by two imperatives: human capital and political patronage. For the last four decades, the Landless Workers Movement (MST) have maintained a struggle to democratise public education and democracy itself. In this article, I make a situated analysis of the educational politics of the MST for adult education. I focus on the time period between 1988 and 2002 to examine the ways in which the MST i) resisted neoliberal literacy initiatives, and ii) pressured the state to recognise and support their radical adult education philosophy and practice. I argue that MST educational politics embody possibilities for the democratisation of knowledge as well as democracy itself.

Keywords: social movements, adult education, radical democracy, Landless Workers Movement

Introduction

Literacy education in Brazil has historically been constructed as a “favour bestowed principally on the poor and excluded by a benevolent elite” (Ireland 2008:715). The same might be said about rural education which has been marked by an enduring and widespread neglect of basic education combined with selective and sporadic ‘compensatory’ interventions. An oligarchical political system controlled by landholding European immigrants has controlled and regulated access to free and quality education to the detriment of the urban and rural poor, Afro-Brazilians, and indigenous peoples (Plank 1990,1994; MEC 2008).

It is only recently that the Brazilian state has been compelled to address the disproportionately high rates of illiteracy amongst rural populations and other historically

disadvantaged groups. The 1988 Constitution (which was drafted by a wide range of social movements and activists) placed equal emphasis on the educational rights of the school-age population as well as illiterate youth and adults. State governments were given primary responsibility for the eradication of illiteracy. However, the Brazilian state as a whole was charged with the responsibility to fulfill the right to education through processes that respected the socio-cultural diversity of the citizenry. More specifically, the new Constitution reaffirmed the right to land for the rural landless (recognised in the 1964 Land Law) as well as their right to a culturally relevant education.

In this article, I analyse the politics of Brazilian adult education policy during the first two decades after the return to democracy. Specifically, I examine the struggle of the Landless Workers Movement (MST, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) to claim the right to education for illiterate rural youth and adults. As this situated historical analysis will show, the MST is not simply concerned with claiming legally recognised and guaranteed rights. Their struggle for the 'right to literacy'ⁱ represents possibilities for the democratisation of education and democracy itself.

Much of the English-language literature on education in the MST has focused on MST pedagogy and the kinds of 'learning' enabled through the experience of participation in a social movement. I will provide a brief discussion in a later section but it is assumed that readers of this journal are broadly familiar with the scope and substance of MST educational philosophy and pedagogy (McCowan 2003; Diniz-Pereira 2005) which conceives of education as fundamentally concerned with the construction of emancipatory consciousness, identity, and knowledge (Freire 1970ⁱⁱ). The Brazilian scholarship on the MST spans at least three decades and includes publications by MST activists, their academic allies, and the Ministry of Education (MEC) (MST 1999; Arroyo and Fernandes 1999; Caldart 1997, 2004; Taffarel 2010) around the broad themes of education and social movements, MST philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy, specific educational programmes and institutions, and the relationships between the MST, the state, universities, and other actors in rural education (MEC 2004; Molina 2006; de Souza 2007).

In this article, I analyse the politics of federal adult education policy in the decade of the nineties as Brazil transitioned from military dictatorship to democracy. Specifically, I examine the struggle of the Landless Workers Movement (MST, Movimento dos

Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra) to claim the right to education for illiterate and out-of-school rural youth and adults. As this situated historical analysis will show, the MST is not simply oriented towards claiming legally recognised and guaranteed rights. Their struggle for the ‘right to literacy’ represents possibilities for democratising and transforming capitalist education and democratic systems.

This analysis is situated in the decade of the nineties for a number of reasons. First, as previously mentioned, it was a time of intense social (political, economic, cultural) change during which President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995 - 2002) used state power to construct a new approach to rural development centered on decentralisation, privatisation, and the market – his vision for the ‘New Rural World’ (Wolford 2010:212). It was also the time during which the MST transformed from a movement for land redistribution and agrarian reform to a movement with a broad and deep vision for just, democratic and sustainable development for all Brazilians and global anti-capitalist struggles (Harnecker 2003). The conquest of PRONERA (The National Education Programme in Agrarian Reform) – a federal literacy programme specifically targeted to rural landless populations – is an important milestone in this transformation. As I will show, it connected and legitimised the struggle to occupy land with the struggle to occupy education and established the MST as an influential national actor and legitimate representative of rural Brazilians. Last but not the least, the struggle for rural adult education in the nineties is a vital component to understanding the more favourable political conjuncture for rural education reform (as compared to agrarian reformⁱⁱⁱ) during the tenure of President Lula (2002-2010). This article draws on data from interviews with MST activists conducted in 2004-2005 and a range of official MST news and research publications. I have indicated where I have translated excerpts from Portuguese.

A Conceptual Framework

This analysis begins with the premise that public education in capitalist society is a site for contestation. For the capitalist state, mass education serves dual and contradictory functions: the enhancement of capital accumulation as well as maintaining the legitimacy of the democratic capitalist state (Youngman 2000).

In Brazil and the Latin American region, this duality has created favourable conditions for ‘popular’, ‘radical’ or explicitly anti-capitalist approaches to adult education often linked to

larger radical political projects and social movements (Torres 1990). From this perspective, it becomes possible to theorise about why we see the passage of a federal programme like PRONERA which recognises and affirms alternative education approaches at a time when the dominant approach to providing education for marginalised groups (rural, illiterate etc.) is characterised by privatisation through so-called public-private partnerships.^{iv} It becomes possible to explore the relationship between the social movement and the state in a way that privileges social movement activity as a key site for resistance as well as the revitalisation of democratic imaginations and actions. In short, I am concerned with the possibilities for the democratisation of the state and the “struggle for the democratisation of democracy” (Santos & Avritzer 2005:lxii).

In order to make a complex analysis of the ways in which the MST engaged openings for civil society participation and democratic decision, I also draw on feminist^v conceptualisations of the public sphere where the exploration of democratisation processes can not be confined to the ‘official, bourgeois’ (Fraser 1990: 59-62) or ‘autonomous’ public sphere wherein the boundaries of politics are not subject to ‘democratic scrutiny’ (Eschle 2001:41). The ‘public’ is conceived of as heterogenous and pluralised into multiple and competing publics (Fraser 1990; Benhabib 1996). Furthermore, the scope of democratic politics extends participatory parity to challenging the notion of a ‘bounded’ polity e.g. through the separation of state and civil society and the public-private divide. And relatedly, assumptions about what constitutes the ‘common’ or ‘public’ good. In summary, I proceed from the standpoint that dominant constructions and practices of liberal, representative democracy operate on flawed and unjust assumptions about who participates, on what terms, and the purpose of democracy.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which the MST resist, interrupt, and transform dominant democratic practice, I will draw on Nancy Fraser’s (1990:74-77) scholarship on ‘strong competing publics’. Fraser defines strong publics in which citizens can engage in ‘authoritative decision-making in contrast to weak publics in which citizens are limited to ‘mere autonomous opinion formation’. In capitalist democratic societies, strong competing publics have historically worked to insert historically excluded voices into the public domain as well as participation on their own terms.

In addition, the scope for ‘discursive contestation’ embodied by strong publics extends beyond the struggle for inclusion into capitalist democratic structures. These publics have the potential to challenge capitalist conceptions of the public good and the underlying public-private binaries which have worked to promote the interests of capital and exclude potential citizens. These publics demand greater accountability for the state to its citizens as well as the expansion of mechanisms for citizen engagement and self-management. Specifically, Fraser (1990:76) identifies ‘inter-public coordination’ or democratically structured alliances between publics as one of the ways strong publics can support active, deep, and direct citizenship. In summary, the power of strong competing publics accrues not only from their capacity to communicate subaltern perspectives but also to achieve ‘political force to hold public power accountable’ (Fraser 2007:13).

This conception of social movements as strong competing publics supports diverse and deep conceptions of democratic process and citizen participation in contrast to the narrow neoliberal conception of citizen as self-interested consumer and voter (Jelin 1998). In reframing the ‘public sphere’ it also reframes the question of public responsibility (as opposed to individual responsibility) for the kinds of inequality and injustice that are endemic to capitalist democracies (Dagnino 2005). I will apply these formulations to explore and analyse the politics for rural education constituted by the MST.

The Landless Workers Movement and the struggle for rural education

As readers of this journal are aware, Brazil has one of the most unequal distributions of land in the world a condition created by the colonial system of slave plantation labour and subsequently maintained by oligarchic politics and capitalist development policies (Harnecker 2003). After two centuries of democracy, -- per cent of the population owned -- per cent of cultivable land (cite). Brazil has also redistributed the least amount of land compared to other Latin American countries (Carter 2010). Since the saturation of urban employment opportunities and the decline of the military regime in the seventies, rural Brazil has witnessed some of the most intense struggles for democracy and redistributive justice. The mass occupation of unused agricultural land became the key nonviolent strategy for compelling the state to enact land redistribution (Harnecker, 2003). Officially founded in 1984, the MST have become synonymous with the politics of ‘occupation’. Their struggle

has expanded from land redistribution to sustainable development and the creation of a nonviolent, equitable, just, and democratic society (MST website).

The Education Sector of the MST was first created in 1980. The first schools were ‘occupied’ in 1982 when 2 camps in Rio Grande do Sul started their own primary schools. The MST began youth and adult education (EJA) in 1991 with the Education Campaign for Youth, Adults, and the Elderly in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The campaign was launched in a settlement called Conquista da Fronteira (Conquering the Frontiers) in the presence of Paulo Freire with the motto ‘It is always time to learn’ (*sempre é tempo de aprender*). Between 1984 and 2009, the MST estimates to have educated approximately 160,000 children and adolescents and trained approximately 4000 teachers (MST 2009a). In 2009, their 25th year anniversary, the movement counted between 2000 to 3000 public primary schools including 250 schools that provide the full 8 years of primary education. They also had 50 secondary schools, 32 mobile schools, early childhood education (*cirandas*) youth and adult education programmes (EJA), teacher and activist training institutes founded in 1995 (Instituto Jose Castro, IJC, and ITERRA) and a university (Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes) (MST Informa # 149 2008). In addition, an estimated 28 thousand youth and adults and 2000 educators have participated in the EJA programmes (MST 2009a).

The MST philosophy of education, also referred to as the ‘Pedagogy of the Land’ developed around the following themes -- the recovery of dignity of the rural landless, building a collective identity for political action that is respectful of internal diversity^{vi}; and supporting inclusive educational processes centred on ‘humanisation’ (or human development in the broadest sense) of all learners (Caldart 1997). Specific goals for EJA include to: understand the lived realities of learners and integrate them into the educational experience; respect diverse learning styles; to encourage attitudes and behaviours conducive to learning; diversify learning materials; create and support literate environments (MST 2004). For these reasons, MST educators are expected to live with their students and actively participate in community activities including the work of agricultural cultivation (Thapliyal 2006).

More broadly, the goal of all educational activity is to create a ‘culture of study’ throughout the movement (Vargas in MST 2009a). The MST understand that the struggle for literacy is part of a broader struggle against capitalism in which the rural worker has been systematically dehumanised and exploited:

The MST started as a struggle for land. When we began our struggle we believed that land alone would be enough to get people out of poverty. We were wrong. We learned that the enemy was not just the large estates. We learned that there are other fences besides the ones that kept campesinos off of the land. We learned that the lack of capital is a fence. We learned that ignorance, a lack of knowledge, is a fence. We learned that international capitalism and its multinational corporations are fences as well^{viii}... the MST focuses on literacy because no matter how much land a campesino has, there is no chance of participation in society without literacy (Stedile 2003: 14).

Indeed, the historical approach to rural education and development in Brazil has been dominated by capitalist conceptions of development that construct land (and other natural resources) and rural people as exploitable and expendable commodities (Soares 2001; Thapliyal 2006).

The disposability of poor and landless rural Brazilians is underlined by the pervasive lack of comprehensive data on rural education. In fact, the first census on rates of illiteracy in the settlements created by the agrarian reform project was only conducted in 1996 by INCRA. Though the census covered an estimated 80% of the families living in federal settlements, it included only a single question about educational levels in settlement households. The 1996 census found that almost forty per cent of the household heads had only one year of schooling while another forty per cent reported between one to four years of schooling (Andrade and Di Pierro, 2004).

It was only as recently as 1988 that the Brazilian Constitution directed the state to provide not just access but a culturally relevant and meaningful education for all Brazilians. The cultural diversity of rural Brazilians and the particularity of their educational needs was specifically acknowledged by the same Constitution. In the next section, I provide an analysis of efforts by the federal government to implement the 1988 Constitutional mandate.

Rural education policy: 1988 - 2002

For almost a decade after the return to democracy, initiatives for adult education were stalled by the exigency of 2 failed Presidential administrations in quick succession (Haddad & Di Pierro 2000). More generally, implementation of the progressive Constitutional mandates were actively thwarted by a political culture that remained inherently undemocratic (Plank,

Sobrinho & Xavier 1994). Thus, the first stable federal administration to develop and implement EJA policies was the Presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

The Cardoso administration drafted the 1996 Education Law (LDB) through rhetorical engagement with the progressive Constitutional mandates and a complete disregard for a process of extensive public consultation carried out by members of the House of Representatives. The LDB was followed by the establishment of the national Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Primary Education Development and the Teaching Profession (FUNDEF) – a federal funding mechanism intended to establish minimum levels of spending on education across the country. Given the limitations of time and space, I will only make a brief examination of the scope and purpose of adult education policy in the Cardoso administration^{viii}. The analysis is organised around the following three variables to facilitate a critical analysis of adult education policy:

- decisions about resource allocation (Torres 1990);
 - decisions about internal organisation or structuring of the Ministry of Education (MEC)(Torres 1990); and
 - Relationship with civil society (Youngman 2000).
- Decisions about resource allocation

The Cardoso administration adopted a policy of so-called public-private partnerships to deliver literacy programmes to targeted high-poverty urban and rural populations. These short-term literacy interventions almost exclusively focused on functional literacy and skill development with priority for youth and adults in the ‘working age’ population (Andrade and Di Pierro 2004). They relied heavily on funding sources external to the state (including the World Bank and corporate philanthropy) with the exception of the Solidarity Literacy Programme^{ix} (PAS) created in 1996. PAS deserves special mention not only because it was headed by the President’s wife – Ruth Cardoso – but also because it was the only federal literacy programme to receive a steadily increasing stream of resources from multiple federal agencies during the Cardoso administration (Thapliyal 2006). Funding for PAS remained constant even as Cardoso vetoed provisions to include adult education in the newly formed National Fund for Education – FUNDEF- on grounds of maintaining fiscal stability. Also created in 1996, FUNDEF was intended to facilitate the redistribution of resources for expenditure on basic education between rural-urban and rich and poor municipalities. His administration would repeatedly default on legally mandated payments to FUNDEF for the

next six years (Haddad and Graciano 2003). Thus, even though the right to literacy was guaranteed by the Constitution, in reality, adult education continued to compete for funding at the municipal and the state levels of government.

Decisions about internal organisation of the Ministry of Education

The economic and technical rationality discourse outlined above was also used to restructure the Ministry of Education with the end result that the dedicated federal agency for adult education was dismantled completely. Administrative responsibilities for federally supported youth and adult education initiatives were farmed out to the Home Ministry (for PAS), the Ministry of Work (for PLANFOR), and the Ministry of Agrarian Development (for PRONERA), and the agency/ secretariat for primary education within MEC respectively. The logic underlying this restructuring was consistent with a functionalist and reductionist approach which conflated adult education with improving functional literacy and/or worker productivity (Thapliyal 2006).

Relationship with civil society

Last but not the least, two years after Cardoso came to office, MEC deactivated the National Commission for Youth and Adult Education (CNEJA) – a consultative body comprising of civil society and state and municipal government representatives – which had become increasingly critical of administration policy (CITE). Thereafter, MEC would only hold consultations with organisations sympathetic to the Cardoso administration. This formulation of civil society participation was modelled by Cardoso himself as well as his education minister who categorically refused to meet with the MST until they stopped land occupations.

In sum, the actions of the Cardoso administration underline the fallibility of extent democratic arrangements and progressive policy mandates in essentially non-democratic political cultures. The federal government selectively engaged with Constitutional and other progressive mandates to transfer scarce public resources to a virtually unregulated private sector (through PPPs) (Haddad 2003). Since these programmes were restricted by narrow conceptions of literacy (Ribeiro & Batiste 2005), the administration actively diluted the more expansive directive to eradicate illiteracy through meaningful and culturally respectful educational processes. In the absence of strong central leadership, these progressive provisions were integrated into State Constitutions with varying interpretations and degrees

of emphasis (Soares 2001). This process of dilution and evasion was aided by the hostile stance of the Cardoso administration towards progressive civil society which enabled conservative local governments (states and municipalities) to adopt a similar stance (Ação Educativa 2005).

The campaign for Educação do Campo

In the previous section, I have outlined the limits of progressive legal and legislative mandates in a non-democratic political culture. It is in this context that I now examine the strategic ways in which the MST engaged the federal state apparatus during the Cardoso administration. Readers must bear in mind that Cardoso himself refused to negotiate with the MST until they stopped their land occupations. While these neoliberal policies had a demoralising effect on public school educators (Haddad 2003), the MST responded by intensifying their efforts to occupy land and schools.^x

The discussion is organised around three national meetings on rural education which the MST regard as important milestones in their struggle for rural education. The MST played a lead role in organising these meetings with support from their allies in Brazilian academy, civil society^{xi}, as well as UNESCO^{xii}. It is however important to stress that this organisation is not meant to suggest a linear sequence of events where the meetings represent ‘beginnings’ or ‘ends’ to the struggle. As with all MST mobilisations, these national meetings were always preceded and followed by organising at sub-national level. Moreover, these national meetings should be viewed as part of broader organic processes of learning and mobilisation enacted by the movement.

Readers may find it helpful to consult the Table below to follow and contextualise the chronology of events discussed here. The Table identifies key milestones for the MST as well as relevant actions by the federal state apparatus (in bold).

Table: Chronology of events leading to national policy on rural education

1991	MST begins the Campaign for the Education of Youth, Adults, and the Elderly in Conquista da Fronteira camp (Rio Grande do Sul) in the presence of Paulo Freire
1994	First meeting of 'Educators in Assentamentos' Belo Horizonte
January 1995	Cardoso elected President
1995	3 rd National Congress of the MST 'Land reform: A universal struggle'
17 April 1996	Massacre of landless peasants by Military Police in Eldorado dos Carajás (Pará)
December 1996	New Education Law (LDB)
December 1996	Creation of (FUNDEF) which excludes funding for EJA and ECE
1996	Creation of federal literacy education PAS
1996	MST-UNESCO agreement expands EJA to 16 states
April 17 1997	First MST National March for Land Reform, Jobs and Justice to Brasília
July 1997	National Meeting of Rural Educators (ENERA)
16 April 1998	Creation of PRONERA
27-31 July 1998	First National Conference for Rural Basic Education
December 2001	CNE releases report 'Operational Directives for Rural Basic Education'
January 2002	National Seminar for Rural Education, Brasília, DF
3 April, 2002	MEC publishes Resolution on Rural Education policy
January 2003	Lula assumes office.

1997 ENERA and PRONERA

The first National Meeting of Educators for Agrarian Reform (ENERA) was held in July 1997 with support from the University of Brasília, UNESCO and UNICEF. These four actors created an informal partnership or coalition with the goal of advocating for a national policy on rural basic education. It brought together almost one thousand educators of the MST from all over the country under the theme of ‘School, Land and Dignity’. The educators led the discussion about the achievements and challenges encountered at every level of rural basic education from early childhood to EJA to teacher preparation.

ENERA ensured public attention and debate about the continued neglect of rural education at a time when the federal government had chosen not to include rural education in initial drafts for the forthcoming 2001 National Plan of Education. In a 14 point Manifesto addressed to the public, MST educators laid out their radical vision for rural education: “We are at a historical crossroads. On one side is the neoliberal project which is destroying the country and exacerbating social inequality. On the other side is the possibility of collective resistance and the construction of a new project” (1997 Manifesto in Kolling, Nery and Molina 1999). They positioned themselves with the Brazilian working-class and claimed the right to respect, professional status, dignified working conditions, and the right to ‘think about and participate in decisions about education policy’.

ENERA also gave rise to the idea of a federally supported programme which would fund adult education for beneficiaries of the agrarian reform programme. The proposal for PRONERA (National Programme for Education in Agrarian Reform) as it would come to be known emerged in the course of discussions between rural educators associated with MST and CONTAG (the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers) and a group of academics located in 14 prominent public universities with a long history of support for peasant movements. The proposal for PRONERA proposal was completed by the same group at a follow-up meeting in October the same year. It was then presented to the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Brasília, Professor João Cláudio Todorov. Though the Ministries of Education and Labor participated in early consultations, they would eventually decline to participate in the management or financing of the program, citing unwanted ‘interference of social movements’ as their primary reason (Andrade & Di Pierro, 2004).

PRONERA was created in April 1998 and housed within the MDA and administered by INCRA – the agency in charge of land redistribution. The programme supports basic and higher education for illiterate youth and adults as well as teacher training, professional education, and health services for the former landless - inhabitants of settlements created by the agrarian reform process. Federal funding for PRONERA during the Cardoso administration was always vulnerable to so-called macroeconomic priorities and never commensurate to the demand. Funding actually decreased every year until President Lula took office in 1992 (Di Piero 2003). In comparison, budgetary considerations never had an adverse effect on PAS (which also happened to be personally administered by the wife of President Cardoso). Despite these challenges, PRONERA reached 55000 adult learners by 1999, 105,491 learners by 2002, and 326,547 by 2006 (MEC 2008).

For the MST, PRONERA was and remains a significant ‘conquest’ because it is the first federal adult education intervention to recognise the particular and specific experience and educational needs of rural communities. It also has a relatively more radical point of departure in formulating the goal of rural EJA as sustainable development as opposed to functional literacy or increasing worker productivity for example:

“For us, PRONERA provides an institutional structure which supports pedagogical innovation; PRONERA has become a laboratory for new methodologies, new ways to organise the educational process and new content for the education of the people of the countryside”^{xiii} (Clarice dos Santos, National Coordinator for PRONERA in MST 2010)

1998 First National Conference

The 1998 Conference was organised by the MST in collaboration with the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), and the University of Brasília (UnB) with support from UNESCO and UNICEF. The Conference contributed significantly to both the pedagogical and political objectives of a transformative project for rural education and development. Again, rural educators and their varied experiences were foregrounded and critically analysed the ways in which their work revived and supported the struggle, the culture, the work, the life and the dignity of rural workers (Kolling et al, 1999). Evoking Paulo Freire, the Final Declaration of the 1st Conference reiterated the commitment to inculcating the kind of literacy that would allow a ‘reading of the world’ as well as ‘the word’ (First National Conference Final Declaration 1998 in Kolling et al 1999).

Participants in the Conference brought with them a multiplicity of representations and experiences that contradicted hegemonic ‘deficit’ discourse about rural people and their ways of life. For the MST, one of the most important outcomes was the construction of a new, empowered and empowering discourse about rural education predicated on an alternative and participatory model of development (First National Conference Base Text 1998 in Kolling et al 1999). The language of rural education was replaced by the language of ‘educação do campo’ for the following reasons. First, participants agreed that the word rural needed to be replaced by the more inclusive term *o campo* to acknowledge the diverse groups and peoples that make their home in the Brazilian countryside. They also articulated the right to education as a right to schools that belong to the countryside (*escola do campo*) instead of schools physically located in the countryside (*escola no campo*). This distinction underlined the fact that the Landless were not simply demanding access to public schools/education. They also claimed an education that “is politically and pedagogically connected to the history, culture, social and human causes of the subjects of the rural area (...)” (Kolling et al., 2002:19).

In terms of mobilisation, the Conference brought together an unprecedented range of actors opposed to a neoliberal development project for Brazil including NGOs, trade unions and social movements who had not necessarily previously mobilised on the issue of a national policy on rural education. They found common ground in a shared critique of the 1) withdrawal of the state from social policy through the vehicle of public-private partnerships (PPPs) including those that had replaced federal leadership in adult education (programmes like PAS etc.); and 2) constraints placed on the participation of progressive civil society in the official public sphere.

Thus, the First Conference was a ‘seed that bore multiple fruits’ for the MST towards the goal of claiming a national policy on rural education (Vargas 2006). Though UNESCO and UNICEF no longer publicly support the MST, the coalition created in the mid-nineties would work throughout the Cardoso administration to keep the issue of rural education on the public and state agenda. They organised follow-up national, regional, state and local level meetings to disseminate, discuss, and strategies about the conclusions from the national meetings. The meetings in turn generated a wealth of publications which presented a coherent and

comprehensive argument for a national policy on rural education (Arroyo & Fernandes 1999)

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In response to the sustained mobilisations by the MST and its allies, the National Council on Education (CNE) commissioned a historical study of rural education by Council member Edla de Araújo Lira Soares in 2001. Soares (2001) sympathised with the critiques of hegemonic urban-centric education (and development) as well as the alternative recommendations that had emerged through the national meetings. Subsequently, the CNE passed a Resolution in 2002 which provided the government with a framework of action for developing a national policy on rural education. Building on the guidelines provided by the 1996 Education Law and the Soares report, the Resolution provided federal, state and municipal governments with fourteen recommendations for the adaptation of all levels of public education to the particular needs of rural learners including EJA.

In anticipation of Lula taking office, the MST and its allies held another seminar at the beginning of 2002 (See Table). It was attended by approximately 300 representatives from 25 states and civil society and focused on elaborating on the CNE report and recommendations for rural education. The ensuing report entitled 'Declaration 2002: For an education of the countryside' provided specific recommendations for all areas of rural education including EJA. More specifically, it recommended the use of the MOVA (the Movement for Youth and Adult Literacy) literacy education model; the inclusion of youth as literacy educators; a culturally relevant curriculum for rural learners, continuity of funding, and the provision of EJA through rural primary and secondary schools (Kolling et al 2002).

In summary then, the MST played a central role in the creation of a strong competing public which effectively countered efforts by the state to marginalise and silence rural landless. They functioned as key spaces for the rural landless in which to construct and act on a collective political identity and strategies for self-representation and participation 'on their own terms'. These counterpublics also contributed to the deconstruction of official 'deficit' discourse about the rural landless and foregrounded an alternative development trajectory for Brazil. On taking office President Lula was presented with a comprehensive argument for a national policy on rural education constructed through a nationwide, highly organised, and multi-level process of dialogue initiated by the MST. While his first administration was marked by deep contradictions and reversals relating to radical agrarian reform (Carter 2010;

Morais & Saad-Filho 2011), the Ministry of Education would undertake several significant actions on the issues of rural education and adult education (MEC 2004; MEC 2008).

Discussion: Democratisation of knowledge and governance

The resilience of the MST in large part accrues from its ability to move effortlessly between protest and engagement, resistance and negotiation. While the goal is always to effect ‘popular control over the state’ (Carter 2010), MST political practice is best characterised by fluid and situated strategies which allow the movement to maintain a resilient struggle to ‘democratise democracy’ (Santos 2005). Indeed, as I have shown, while the movement has always taken advantage of access to official public sphere when possible, the lack of access is never an insurmountable barrier.

This strategic fluidity is evident in the ways in which the MST navigated the overtly hostile political climate spearheaded by the Cardoso administration. It is in this political environment that the MST and its allies succeeded in gaining state approval for PRONERA - the first federally-funded adult education programme in history to acknowledge the specific educational needs of the rural landless.

In this section, I will expand on how the MST crafted inter-public alliances in order to strengthen their demands for rural education.

As previously discussed, the alliance between the MST and Left-leaning Brazilian academics served the strategic purpose of negotiating with a state apparatus committed to delegitimising and criminalising the MST. Furthermore, I will argue here that this alliance contributed to the interrelated projects to democratise knowledge and governance and therefore to a radical democratic project.

Breaking down the fence of knowledge

The scope and scale of the project to break down the ‘fence of knowledge’ is one of the features that sets the MST apart from other social movements that have created their own educational alternatives (e.g. the Zapatistas). Though the close relationship between activists and scholars in Brazil is not necessarily unique to the MST^{xv}, the movement made an early commitment to developing relationships that would support ‘systematisation’ or the need to

document and critically reflect on all aspects of their political practice^{xvi} (Kolling et al 1999). What is important here is that these alliances are contingent on a mutual willingness to recognise and engage the lived realities of MST activists educators and the larger struggle (Knijnik 1997 in Kane 2001). The following statement explains how the MST analyses the power differentials embedded in the construction of knowledge:

In Brazilian society, historically and currently, the universities symbolise ownership and hegemonic knowledge (like the latifúndios symbolize the concentrated ownership of land); it is an institution based on elitist logic that is disturbed every time it encounters organised people (social movements) with a different logic (MST 2004:17)

Almost three decades of research published by the MST underline that the movement is committed to a rigorous engagement with ‘academic’ and ‘scientific’ knowledge (see website). The campaign for PRONERA and its implementation is one of the spaces in which the MST has struggled for recognition of their conception of ‘educação do campo’. In this context, it is therefore important to emphasise that federal approval for PRONERA included recognition of the ‘Pedagogy of the Land’ which emerged from the experiences of radical rural educators. It represents an approach to adult education constructed and enacted through ‘popular’ process which were collective, collaborative, and non-hierarchical and based on values for human dignity, critical pedagogy, collective political action, and sustainable and just development. This is why the MST regard PRONERA as an important milestone in their struggle: ‘PRONERA must be preserved; it is a concrete response to the demands and historical mobilisations of social movements for the right to a quality education in rural areas.’ (Edgar Kolling 2009; MST National Secretariat and Coordinator of Education)

Moreover, after the Lula administration came to power, the Ministry of Education officially adopted the language of ‘educação do campo’ and instructed all state governments to develop a policy on rural education in consultation with social movements and other members of civil society (MEC 2004; Molina 2006). In the second term of the Lula administration, MEC introduced programmes to provide specialised training and certification for rural teachers and to develop curriculum and pedagogy that respects rural cultures (MEC 2008).

Governance and self-management

The forms of citizen engagement and self-management embedded in PRONERA stand in stark contrast to the public-private partnerships (PPPs) promoted by the Cardoso

administration and capitalist development discourse at large. In their survey of adult education in Brazil, Ribeiro and Batista (2005:14) conclude that the indiscriminate use of the language of PPPs conceal fundamentally oppositional conceptions about the ‘public nature of these policies’. Certainly, there was little scope for active citizen participation in the short-term functional literacy education provided through PPPs during the Cardoso administration (di Pierro 2003). In discourse and practice, these initiatives spearheaded by corporate foundations and non-governmental organisations tended to reproduce constructions of citizenship as ‘concession’ and at best functionalist conceptions of citizenship rather than citizenship as ‘struggle’ (Dagnino 2010:105).

As originally conceived, PRONERA was to be governed by a council constituted of representatives of social movements like the MST and CONTAG as well as representatives of public universities (Andrade and Di Pierro 2004). Educational programmes were to be constructed and evaluated through non-hierarchical collaborations between university academics and educators affiliated with these social movements. Participating universities were intended to play a supportive role to help rural adult educators enhance their abilities to develop, deliver, and evaluate such programmes.

In practice, the governance structure established by the Cardoso administration was highly bureaucratic with both INCRA and the universities positioned as intermediaries. Social movements were not entrusted to handle public funds (something that would again change with the federal literacy programme instituted by Lula). Participating universities were positioned as ‘monitors’ which perpetuated the hegemony of academic knowledge as ‘expert’ and ‘scientific’ knowledge. Indeed, many academics uncritically took on the role of experts and ‘gatekeepers’ to regulate access to public funds (de Souza 2007; Freitas 2007;). In other instances, structural limitations notwithstanding, PRONERA has supported the collaborative construction of radical adult education by MST activists and academic allies (Thapliyal 2006; Mendes and Carvalho 2010).

Conclusion

In 2009, Immanuel Wallerstein wrote that as the crisis of the world capitalist order intensifies, we must seek out “all kinds of new structures that make better sense in terms of global justice and ecological sanity... and encourage sober optimism”. In June 2013, Brazil

erupted in the largest street protests seen since the 1989 elections. The protests brought together oil and metal workers, public school teachers, a cross-section of urban youth, and rural social movements across the nation including the MST. The protests were triggered by increases in the cost of urban public transportation and endemic political corruption. The MST added its considerable voice to the expansion in demands from free, high quality transportation, political reform to expansion of working class rights, agrarian reform and above all stronger mechanisms for effective popular participation (Stedile 2013).

In this article, I have provided a situated analysis of the ways in which the MST has resisted and contested the privatisation of the public sphere and more specifically, public education. The MST have constructed and implemented an alternative discourse of education that counters the dominant tendency to let human capital and efficiency imperatives drive social policy. The Sem Terra have demonstrated their determination and ability to construct meaningful educational processes for themselves. Their humanist educational philosophy and practice stands in stark contrast to the functionalist adult education programmes conceived and delivered by state-corporate partnerships. Moreover, the movement and its allies have actively contested the transfer of public resources to private interests who are sometimes loosely held accountable to the state but rarely to the citizenry. In claiming the right to self-determination and self-governance as a part of the right to education, the Sem Terra offer alternative situated conceptions of how the state and citizen might be in relationship with one another without technocratic and bureaucratic intermediaries.

My intention here is not to romanticise the MST in any way. No social movement is monolithic or static and the MST certainly does not deny internal and external challenges (Carter 2010; Wolford 2010). It must also be pointed out that the relationship between the MST and an apparently sympathetic state is by no means free of contradiction and contestation. Thus it is not my intention to suggest that the shifts and openings in rural education policy discourse are a) permanent or secure in any way or b) always representative of structural transformation.

First, and as readers may know, Lula did not keep many of his promises to the rural landless on election. In response, the MST organised another national march to Brasilia in 2006 where Lula met with them. While the land redistribution process did not accelerate, Lula did

increase funding for PRONERA. However, PRONERA has remained a constant target of the right-wing. Indeed, funding for PRONERA came to a complete halt in 2008 after a sustained campaign by the right-wing and corporate media alleging corruption and misuse of funds (MST 2009b). INCRA suspended agreements for new courses and the Lula administration cut 62% of the budget, prohibiting the payment of grants to university professors and other educators in the program (MST Informa, 2009). In addition, the government tried to restructure the funding application process into a market-style 'bidding' process evoking the need for transparency and accountability. In response the MST organised protests in 16 states and occupied INCRA offices in the states of Alagoas, Bahia and São Paulo. In the negotiations that followed, the INCRA president agreed to ensure to find funds for existing and proposed courses in the current budget. In 2010, President Lula signed a decree which converted PRONERA from a programme to a permanent public policy housed in the Ministry of Agricultural Development – another significant victory for the MST (Nagoya 2011).

Second, the present location of PRONERA within the federal state apparatus (within MEC as opposed to INCRA) must be continued to be viewed critically. More specifically, PRONERA and other federal literacy initiatives have been housed in the Secretariat for Continuous Education, Literacy, and Diversity (SECAD) which also looks after education for Afro-Brazilians, indigenous peoples, and learners with disabilities. An analysis of the scope of the power and influence exercised by SECAD within the Lula administration is beyond the scope of this paper. However this positioning would suggest that the discourse of 'difference' and 'education for diversity' is closer to an 'add-on' rather than an integrated interpretation of the 1988 Constitutional directive to educate with respect for diversity. Certainly, for the MST, the Pedagogy of the Land has something to offer to all learners not just the rural landless (Thapliyal 2006). More research is required on the extent to which these transformative educational discourses have influenced the public education system as a whole. However, I would assert that in the absence of an integrated national policy on rural education (as demanded by Declaration 2002), we can infer that rural education as a whole will remain vulnerable to shifts in federal and local political dynamics.

What is significant here is the sustained struggle by the MST to claim the state as a 'public space'. Despite the contradictions, the fact that PRONERA continues to exist is due to the steadfast defence of the programme by the MST. Till date, PRONERA remains the only

federal adult education programme articulated and institutionalised by the rural landless (Kolling 2009). The struggle for PRONERA represents and remains a struggle for democratisation on a number of levels. It rejects functionalist and instrumentalist social policies that amount to ‘emergency responses’ (Dagnino 2005) by the capitalist state to the needs and rights of its most vulnerable citizens. It also rejects the conception of civil society as the implementor of the aforementioned privatised ‘bandaid’ policies (Dagnino 2005). Instead, PRONERA represents possibilities for policy and decision-making process driven by collective action by citizens (Eschle 2001:39). Relatedly, it embodies new possibilities for state accountability based on direct engagement between citizen collectives and the state (Santos 2005). Next, the struggle for literacy is not just a means to economic and political inclusion but to transform capitalist societal relations and arrangements. As Stedile (2004) so eloquently points out, the struggle to break down the fences of knowledge is inseparable from the struggle to break down the fences to land. The struggle for democracy cannot be limited and controlled with boundaries that divide the socio-cultural, economic, and political domains of our lives.

More broadly, MST educational politics support fluid and situated conceptions of citizenship and citizen participation which extend beyond liberal conceptions of the citizen as legal rights-holder (and duty-bearer) and citizen as beneficiary of state concessions. Here, citizenship is understood as a relational, dialogic and transformative process (rather than status) requiring a broader imaginary for the common or public good. In seamlessly interconnecting the struggle for land with the struggle for education, the MST have reframed public education as a vital site for contestation in which to provoke discussion about what kind of society we fundamentally want to be members of (Dagnino 2005:5).

The MST is ‘an organisation of poor people operating with scarce resources’ (Carter 2010:197) which is working incrementally towards a radical conception of education and democracy itself (Holst 2002; Holford 2003; Morrow & Torres 2003; Hickey & Mohan 2005). By positing an incremental conception of change, I draw on Gramscian theory in the work of critical sociologists Carlos Alberto Torres and Wendy Wolford. Torres defines a politics of ‘incrementalism’ that follows the logic of ‘what is possible within the context of capitalist states’; where politics becomes the “science and art of what is possible instead of... what is probable” (Torres 1990:146). In her scholarship on the MST, Wolford (2010:9) argues that the MST is engaged in a ‘war of position’ – “a more subtle war of negotiation to

win positions of power, create alliances (or hegemonic blocs), and construct new revolutionary political subjectivities”.

To occupy education then means to demand that the state provide access to education for all rural landless and not just those individuals deemed productive. It also means to recognise and support the rights of the landless to determine the nature of their own education. To occupy education means to disrupt hierarchies of knowledge that privilege mental over manual work and rationalise elite- and expert-dominated policy-making. To occupy education is to demand that the state directly engage its citizens without multiple intermediaries and interlocutors. It also means that the state supports its citizens in their efforts to manage and govern themselves in ways that expand rather than restrict our understanding of ‘citizenship’ and the ‘common good’:

The right to education is only guaranteed in the public space. Our struggle is in the area of public policy and the State should be compelled to become a public space. Social movements should be the guardians of these rights and the State should listen, respect and translate the demands of the rural people into public policy (Kolling et al 2002: 139).^{xvii}

The MST is best known for its superbly organised land occupations which directly and visibly challenge one of the bedrock principles of capitalist democracies – the private ownership and commodification of natural resources. It is my hope that this article contributes to our understanding of how dominant paradigms that commodify and privatise education might also be ‘occupied’ and transformed.

ⁱⁱ The provision of literacy education continues to be hampered by differences in terminology and understanding of what is meant by literacy (Torres 2002). In Brazil, adult education is legally recognized as a ‘form of specific schooling, to which is attributed greater flexibility as to work load, curriculum, forms of evaluation and use of distance learning methodologies’ (Ribeiro and Batista 2005, 8). The system of schooling called Youth and Adult Education (EJA) includes all those 14 years and older. It is provided mainly by municipal and state school systems but nongovernmental organizations, social movements and the federal government are also involved in provision. The term literacy (alfabetização) is also commonly used in official policy discourse. Literacy data collected by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) defines a person with less than four years of school to be functionally illiterate (Di Pierro 2003). As I will show, the MST approach literacy education with a much broader and humanistic conception of education and humanity.

ⁱⁱ For an in-depth discussion in English of the MST’s conception and practice of critical pedagogy and socialist education see Thapliyal (2006) and Tarlau (2013). See also related literature on ‘social movement learning’ and ‘the movement is the school’ which explores the kinds of personal and collective learning that take place for participants in collective struggle (see for example Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998; Foley 1999, Hall 2005, Kane 2001, and McCowan (2003)

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Wolford (2010) and Morais and Saad-Filho (2011)

^{iv} For a detailed discussion in English which draws on the work of Marcia Andrade and Maria Clara Di Pierro, see Thapliyal (2006)

^v Critical feminist scholarship has also demonstrated the dual characteristics of the capitalist state and underlying dichotomies of thinking which have operated to domesticate, contain, and outright repress engendered challenges to the capitalist state (Eschle 2001).

^{vi} The MST recognise the rich diversity that characterises rural Brazilians groups that comprise rural Brazil based on differences of occupation, geography, and cultural identity including: agricultores (farmers), quilombolas (descendants of farming communities founded by Africans who escaped from slavery), povos indígenas (indigenous peoples), pescadores (fishermen), camponeses (country people), assentados (settlers or occupiers of unutilized land), reassentados (re-settlers), ribeirinhos (riverside dwellers), povos da floresta (people of the forests), caipiras (provincials), lavradores (ploughman), roceiros (country worker), sem-terra (people without land), caboclos (literally copper-colored), and bóia-fria (agricultural dayworker) (Kolling, Cerioli and Caldart, 2002).

^{vii} Along with the multinational corporations, the World Bank was a key influence in market- and non-governmentalised approaches to rural development and education in the nineties through initiatives such as the Land Bill (*Cedula da Terra*) and FUNDESCOLA (Fund for Strengthening Schools) respectively (Andrade and Di Pierro 2004). The MST was at the forefront of opposing market-oriented land and credit reforms.

^{viii} See Thapliyal (2006) for an indepth discussion of rural education policies implemented by the Cardoso administration.

^{ix} It was created to expand access to adult education in the municipalities with the highest rates of illiteracy through partnerships with civil society. Though touted as a partnership with municipal governments and civil society, the federal government quickly handed over the governance of PAS to a corporate controlled nongovernmental organization (Andrade and Di Pierro 2004). The program consisted of five months of literacy instruction to primarily illiterate youth and rural and urban municipalities with the highest rates of illiteracy (Andrade and Di Pierro 2004).

^x Most famously, the MST carried out a superbly organized national march on Brasília to commemorate the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre .

^{xi} Contrary to portrayals in the corporate media, the movement has always, if strategically, allied with other social movements - rural, environmental, students, and so forth. During the Cardoso administration, allies included the association of rural trade unions (CONTAG) , the Catholic Church Commission for Land (CPT), the Movement of Dam-Affected People (MAB), and other rural education movements (RESAB, CRF, EFA). The MST also participated in other counterpublics such as the Annual National Meetings for the Education of Youth and Adults (ENEJAS); the Movement for Youth and Adult Literacy (MOVA) and the Network of Support for Literacy Action in Brazil (RAAAB) (Thapliyal 2006).

^{xii} Along with the Catholic Church, the MST regards UNESCO as an important early ally through the nineties. While an indepth analysis of trends and shifts in UNESCO politics – particularly in relation to adult education - is beyond the scope of this paper, interested readers are directed to Mundy (1999) and Wickens and Sandlin (2007).

^{xiii} Translated by author

^{xiv} As part of the campaign for PRONERA, in partnership UNICEF, UNESCO, UnB MST, CNBB commissioned a 4 part series on the subject of basic rural education as part of their advocacy for an integrated national policy on rural education (Arroyo & Fernandes 1999). The publications synthesised and document the alternative discourse on rural education and development emerging out of the meetings of rural educators including some of the publications by Arroyo and Kolling cited here.

^{xv} Fischer (2005) dates the long history of collaboration between Brazilian universities and progressive social movements to turn of the century efforts to challenge the ‘ regulated citizenship of the corporatist era (p.105)’. For an account of the historical relationship between Left academics and social movements in Brazil, see also Carvalho and Mendes (2013).

^{xvi} Since the 1970s, the MST has systematically developed relationships of solidarity with Brazilian artists, intellectuals and academics on the Left including the scholars cited in this paper as well as Paulo Freire, Sebastian Salgado, , Frei Bette and others.

^{xvii} Translated by author

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