

LEARNING, AND TRANSFORMATION: AN OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION WITHIN THE LANDLESS WORKERS' MOVEMENT IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT: This article provides an introduction to the Brazilian social movement known as the Landless Workers Movement (MST). After a brief history of the landless struggle and the international organisation of the movement, the article discusses educational philosophy and practice in the MST. The MST actively cultivates a 'culture of study' within all the diverse spaces of the movement including (but not limited to) its schools and literacy programmes, political education, agricultural production, and culture and media communications. These processes of knowledge production and dissemination are informed by the philosophical principles that constitute the MST 'Pedagogy of the Land', which links anti-capitalist struggles for land, education, and culture. Readers are also provided with an extensive reference list on publications about and by the MST - in English and Portuguese.

Introduction

Like much of Latin America, 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). This land concentration only increased throughout the twentieth century, especially during the two-decade dictatorship (1964-1984) when there was a shift to mechanized agricultural production and even more small farmers were pushed off their land. In 1940, less than thirty-two percent of the population lived in cities; by 1991, seventy-five percent of Brazil's total population was urban (Plank, 1996). After two centuries of democracy, approximately three percent of the population owned three-fourths of the land available for cultivation (Harnecker, 2003). Furthermore, Brazil has had the least significant land redistribution in all of Latin American countries (Carter, 2009, 2010).

Nonetheless, 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 throughout the twentieth-century (Branford & Rocha, 2002; Harnecker, 2003). It was also through this long history of rural struggles that land rights and cultural diversity for rural populations was ensured in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution. This 1988 Constitution also directed the newly democratic state to provide access to a culturally relevant and meaningful education for all Brazilian citizens.

Who is the MST?

The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) was founded in January of 1984. Although the MST has become synonymous with the politics of

“occupation,” the movement’s struggle has expanded from land redistribution to sustainable development and the creation of a nonviolent, equitable, just, and democratic society (see the MST website, MST.org.br MSTbrazil.org). The movement did not start as a united national struggle, but rather, as dozens of dispersed groups of peasants and small farmers in the southern part of Brazil who independently decided to occupy large unproductive land estates. Many of these initial land occupations were inspired by local priests following liberation theology,¹ who supported the peasants’ struggle for agrarian reform as a means of addressing structural issues of rural poverty. These occupations are precarious living arrangements, with landless families constructing camps and living underneath black plastic tents for four or five or more years at a time, until the land is won. According to the most recent data collected by Carter and Carvalho (2009), there are approximately 150,000 families that have received land rights through occupations led by the MST (p. 329).² Tens of thousands of more families are currently living in MST camps, waiting for more land to be redistributed.

The MST is currently organised in 23 out of 26 Brazilian states. Internal coordination and decision-making mechanisms are organised by small groups of families known as base-nucleuses, which send representatives to regional, state, and national

¹ Liberation theology is a political current within the Catholic Church that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Priests following liberation theology openly took a “preferential option for the poor” and began supporting the political and economic struggles of poor local communities.

² These numbers are specifically about families who have received land rights through MST land occupations. According to the Nucleus of Research on Agrarian Reform (NERA) at the State University of São Paulo, there are currently over 70 organizations that lead land occupations across Brazil.

coordinating committees. In addition, there are thematic sectors present at all levels of the movement—from the camps to national leadership. These thematic sectors include a range of issues, from agricultural production, to education, communication, youth, gender, and health.³ There are three overall objectives that orient the MST's struggle: Land, Agrarian Reform, and Social Transformation. The movement is known for its internal social organization, alternative agricultural production, distinct form of struggle, cooperation, and education, among other practices. The MST's promotion of cooperative forms of work allows activists to present alternatives to the capitalist industrial agricultural system. These alternatives include family agricultural production, the diversification of crops, and the preservation of indigenous seeds and other natural resources present in MST territories.

The MST's Education Sector

The Education Sector of the MST was first created in 1988 at the national level, but families on MST camps have been struggling for access to education and public schooling ever since the first land occupations in the early 1980s. The right to education as articulated by the MST extends beyond access to include self-determination or the right to construct a relevant and meaningful education for themselves. The MST's philosophy of education,

³ These sectors and dates they were founded include: Formation (1989); Education (1988); Front of the Masses (1989); Finances (1989); Projects (1989); Production, Cooperation, Environment (1992); International Relations Collective (1993); Human Rights (1995); Communication (1997); Health (1998); Culture (2000); Gender (2000); Youth Collective (2006) (Carter & Carvalho, 2009).

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, and supporting inclusive educational processes centered on ‘humanisation’ (or human development in the broadest sense) of all learners (Caldart, 1997, 2004). What sets the MST apart from other social movements that incorporate ‘alternative’ education practices is that the MST not only promotes internal education, but also demands that the state guarantee access to basic education for peasant communities in ways that reflect the diversity and specificity of these communities (Thapliyal 2013).

The first MST school to gain state recognition and support was established in 1982, in a settlement in the far southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, Nova Ronda Alta. Since then, the MST has ‘occupied’ thousands of public schools on settlements and camps throughout the country. In 1991, the MST also began to promote youth and adult education, with the Educational 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*).

The goal of all of the MST’s educational activities is to create a ‘culture of study’ throughout the movement (MST, 1996). The MST understands that the struggle for literacy, and more broadly, knowledge, is part of a fight against a capitalist form of development in which the rural worker has been

systematically dehumanised and exploited. Here is a description from an MST's national leader, João Pedro Stédile, describing the importance of education in the movement:

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 . . . The MST focuses on literacy because no matter how much land a *campesino* has, there is no chance of participation in society without literacy (Stédile, 2003, pp. 22–25)

The MST's success achieving educational access for children and adults living in areas of agrarian reform is unparalleled. Between 1984 and 2009, the MST has won access to 1800 elementary schools, with 8,000 elementary school teachers and a total of 250,000 children studying in these schools. There are also more than 20,000 landless youth and adults in adult education programs, with 2,000 landless adult educators (Carter & Carvalho, 2009, p. 311). In 2009, the movement's twenty-fifth anniversary, the MST also recorded fifty secondary schools, thirty-two "Itinerant Schools" (for more information, see Moraes and Witcel in this issue), and dozens of spaces for early childhood education (known as *cirandas*) on camps and settlements. All of these schools are schools started by the MST and eventually recognised by the government; many but

not all continue to be organised around MST educational principles. The MST also has several “movement” schools, outside of the public school system, in which activists have almost complete autonomy over students’ educational experiences. For example, in 1995 the MST founded the Institute of Education Josué de Castro (IEJC), more commonly known as ITERRA, and in 2005 the Florestan Fernandes National School was created. This latter school offers yearly courses for social movement activists throughout Latin America.

At the level of higher education, there are thousands of MST activists across Brazil pursuing bachelors and masters degrees through alternative educational programs specifically designed for populations in rural areas. These courses are organized through the MST’s alternative educational approach and are all accredited by established universities, in partnership with the federal program PRONERA.⁴ Research is a fundamental part of these university programs, and graduates have written hundreds of in-depth studies about different aspects of the MST’s political struggle. In addition, the MST leadership has collectively published dozens of pamphlets and books analyzing the movement’s history, educational philosophy, and agricultural initiatives.⁵

⁴ Program for Education in Areas of Agrarian Reform (PRONERA). There are approximately fourteen thousand students living in areas of agrarian reform that have received their bachelor degrees since PRONERA began in 1998. Over 40 public universities have accredited these PRONERA courses.

⁵ Some of the names of these pamphlet series about education include “Educação Do Campo,” “Boletim da Educação,” “Cadernos da Educação,” “Cadernos da Escola Itinerante,” and “Cadernos do Iterra.”

Processes of Learning: A Pedagogy of Land

The MST's educational philosophy is not restricted to spaces of formal schooling, although the movement also does not deny the importance of formal schooling for human formation. One of the MST's educational publications explains this relationship:

The principal environment of learning is being human. Schooling is a fundamental component of this process, and it is a right of every person to have access to schooling. Ever since the first MST camps, the struggle for access to schooling has been part of the MST's struggle (MST, 2001).

From this perspective, the MST has always fought for access to formal schooling. However, the MST has also created a theory of education that is based on the many educational practices that take place in the settlements and camps, outside of the formal school system. In 1996, activists in the movement wrote the "Principles of Education in the MST," which is one of the most important documents to guide the educational work within the movement. The document evolved from the MST's previous conversations about activists' everyday realities, and the question: "What do we want for schools in our settlements?" (MST, 1991). The following excerpt further clarifies the scope and intent of this foundational document:

The MST understands these principles as our horizon, the place that we want to arrive in

terms of transforming education. The implementation of these principles will certainly be different in every local context, depending on the historical movement, the correlation of political forces, the people with whom we are working, and the alliances and partnerships we are able to establish (MST, 1996, p. 28).

The movement's educational philosophy encompasses a vision of the world that emphasizes personal human connections, in order to build a new society. Below, we analyze four of the main philosophical principles of the MST's educational struggle.

Education for Social Transformation

Education for social transformation is a principle that asserts that educational process should be tied to the construction of a new social order. The pillars of this new social order will be social justice, radical democracy, and humanist and socialist values (MST, 1996, p. 6). Therefore, education must be oriented to developing a class and revolutionary consciousness, for both the students and the teachers. "If our goal is participate in social transformation we need to take a step forward. Our education should nurture the development of an 'organizational consciousness' that helps people go from critique to action" (MST, 1996, p. 8). In this sense, to educate for social transformation is to take advantage of studies that increase students' comprehension of reality and their cultural universe, and to take advantage of the organization of the school as its own form of action.

Education for Work and Cooperation

The MST also defends the necessary relationship between education and the challenges of each historical moment. Formation for cooperation is a strategic element of education, which aims to construct new social relations. The MST needs an education that helps to overcome a cultural heritage of individualism, isolation, and conservatism; and instead, foment a culture of cooperation. MST activists attempt to incorporate historical lessons about collective organization and collective work into their schools.

Education with/for Humanist and Socialist Values

For the MST, it is essential that the movement's pedagogy break with dominant capitalist values, which are centered on profit and individualism, and instead propose new socialist and humanist values for teachers and students. The MST suggests several values that should be emphasized in our schools, such as:

The daily indignation against injustice; the comradeship and solidarity; the combined inequality in respect to differences; collective administration and division of work; planning; discipline in work, study, and activism; an ecological consciousness; critique and self-critique; love for the cause of the people, cultivating between people; the capacity to dream, share dreams, and act to realize dreams. (MST, 1996, pp. 9–10)

If a school opts to help construct a new society and contribute to the process of social transformation, then these values need to be present in the everyday life of the school. This means transforming not only the curriculum, but even more importantly, the way in which the learning process takes place.

Education as a Permanent Process of Formation and Human Transformation

A basic condition of the educational process is a “belief in the human being and the capacity to transform,” or in other words, the notion that the MST can “change, educate ourselves and be educated in a process that only ends with death” (MST, 1996, p. 10). This principle acknowledges that although education is a permanent process, people are not educated in the same manner during all phases of their life. Therefore, a methodological debate becomes fundamental in order to reach the MST’s pedagogical objects for these determined social subjects and their particular contexts.

In addition to these pedagogical ideas, MST activists have developed a series of methodical principles that offer concrete suggestions on how to take action in the schools.

Relationship between Theory and Practice

One of these fundamental methodological principles is the relationship between theory and practice, which the MST believes should be part of every pedagogical process. The movement wants to “overcome the historical vision that sees school as

only a place of theoretical knowledge. From this latter perspective, only after the school day ends does the application of these theories in practice take place” (MST, 1996, p. 11). The MST believes that activists should organize school curriculum around concrete situations, which demand a practical response from our students. “The great methodological challenge that this principle brings us is how to learn to articulate the maximum amount of school knowledge to real situations (MST, 1996, p. 11).

Combining learning and capacity building

This principle, combining learning and capacity building, concerns how to integrate two processes that have been historically separated:

In learning, the principle goal is acquiring theoretical knowledge that comes before action. In capacity building the goal is the opposite: the action comes before the knowledge about this action . . . learning results in theoretical knowledge, or we can just say, knowledge. Capacity building results in practical knowledge, or, we can call it knowledge-doing (capacities, skills) and knowledge-being (behavior, attitude, positioning). (MST, 1996, pp. 12–13)

The combination of learning and capacity building demands a methodological reformulation of the schools that spans curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation (MST, 1996, p. 13)

Reality as the Basis of Knowledge Production

One of the principle goals of the educational process is the production of knowledge. All teachers must reflect on how to guarantee students are producing knowledge about their realities. In order to do this, students need to know what is meant by “reality”: “When we talk about reality we are not referring to only a reality that is near us, or in other words, the one we live and are embedded within. Reality is the world! Reality is all that exists and deserves to be known, appreciated, transformed” (MST, 1996, p. 14). Given this definition, it is necessary to clarify that the “reality” which is closest to the student can help facilitate learning. Or in other words, “To start from the most proximate reality is a way or a pedagogical method to arrive at the knowledge of a larger reality” (MST, 1996, p. 14).

Curriculum that is Formative and Socially Useful

The curriculum that the MST chooses to study must be linked to the movement’s objectives, learning and capacity building objectives (MST, 1996, p. 14). Furthermore, the MST insists that the process of choosing the content that is taught in school is not a “natural” process:

These are systematized knowledges that are produced socially. For these reasons the knowledge must incorporate social interests and political positions . . . There are certain questions that need to be included in a curriculum that are connected to the interests

of the working class, but that also takes into account the specific time and social space where this learning will take place. (MST, 1996, p. 15)

The MST knows that in the public schools the subjects are divided into disciplines, areas of study, or themes, which are often chosen by the Secretary of Education. The MST tries to counter this imposition and organize collective spaces of school planning, in which students, families, teachers, and local communities participate.

Education for Work and through Work

Work is a fundamental element of the MST's educational proposal. It is through work that peasants produce the riches of society, and it is through work that the landless begins to identify as a class. It is through the search for a different form of work from salaried work that the MST, "constructs new social relations and also a new collective consciousness among people" (MST, 1996, p. 16). This being true, the school must be a space that initiates the study of the world of work and production to schooling, and allows students to participate in a form of work that is educational and methodological. It is also through the link between work and education that students are able to learn the difference between relations of exploitation and relations of equality in working environments, and also overcome the general discrimination against manual labor in our society.

Organic Connections between Educational and Political Processes

Political processes refer to the mode of governance of public life, or in other words, the interaction of social forces that struggle for power in our society, in order to either conserve the current way society is organized, or transform it. Education is directly inserted into this conflict, and thus becomes “a political practice, that aligns with a process of social transformation or a process of social conservatism” (MST, 1996, p. 18). The subjects within a school cannot be separated from the process of struggle, because they represent the possibilities for transforming the objective conditions of the working class. This educational process cannot take place only through conversations and political debates.

To link education to economic processes also requires the formation and transformation of our consciousness. In order to do this it is necessary to “bring within the educational process those relations that are the base of our formation” (MST, 1996, p. 18). This refers to the economic dimension of society, or what the MST can call the material production of life: “The history of humanity demonstrates (and Marx explains) that it is the economic relations (those relations of production, distribution, and consumption) that drive society and transform people” (MST, 1996, p. 18). An organic connection between the educational and economic sphere turns productive processes into formative processes.

Organic Connection between Education and Culture

The MST understands culture as everything that people produce in order to represent or express their way of living or being. This educational principle affirms the connection between culture and education:

In our schools, in our courses, there needs to be a privileged space for our experiences and the production of culture . . . Through the cultural manifestations that make up our cultural heritage, we must also confront cultural conflicts that emerge in the day-to-day reality of this movement. (MST, 1996, p. 20)

Education should contribute to the construction of a collective cultural identity for the working class. The struggle for agrarian reform is a cultural struggle, which brings with it a multiplicity of symbols, songs, and chants that can and should be practiced and recreated in the schools on MST settlements and camps.

Democratic Governance

The democratic governance of schools is one of the central pedagogies of the MST. It insists that all students and teachers not only talk about democracy, but also create spaces of participatory democracy that allow students, parents, and teachers to participate in their own collective governance. “Everyone should learn how to make decisions, respect the decisions that are made as a group, execute decisions once decided, evaluate what has taking place, and deal with the results

(positives and negatives) of each collective action. This is democracy!” (MST, 1996, p. 20).

Self-organization of Students

The self-organization of the students is one dimension of democratic governance, and specifically refers to the autonomy students must have in their schools. For the MST, the self-organization of the students means that students have “an autonomous time and space where they can come together, discuss issues that arise among themselves, and make decisions, including decisions that are relevant to their real participation in the governance of the school” (MST, 1996, p. 21). In terms of the degree of student self-governance, this depends on the characteristics of each educational process and the age of the students. It is critical that all students have a space to practice democracy, in order to develop their capacity to create their own solutions to the problems they face.

Collective Pedagogies and Permanent Teacher Formation

Teachers also need to have collective spaces that allow for a permanent process of capacitation and formation, which goes beyond their previous training. There are many types of pedagogical collectives within the MST which meet regularly to plan and reflect on all educational practice. It is necessary for teachers to have the consciousness that those who educate must also be continually educated:

Pedagogical collectives of teachers are privileged spaces of permanent learning, which occurs through a collective reflection of their daily practice, and moments for study . . . Teacher collectives nurture our right to dream, to create, and to dare to do new things. (MST, 1996, p. 22)

Conclusion

The MST is currently an organizing force in almost every state in Brazil, and the movement's red flag is infamous among both urban and rural populations. The movement participates in a national network of around 150 local and national peasant organization from 70 countries (see La Via Campesina website, <http://viacampesina.org/en/>). The MST also sends dozens of brigades of activists to support working-class struggles around the world. Thus, the movement has become an inspiration for global struggles against capital.

Brazilian research and writing on the MST's educational initiatives spans at least three decades and includes publications by MST activists, their academic allies, and various government agencies, including the Ministry of Education (MEC).⁶ There is also a range of writing on the MST in English, touching on issues such as the regional histories of the movement (Branford & Rocha, 2002; Harnecker, 2003; Wright & Wolford, 2003), the process of land occupation (Loera, 2010), shifting internal strategies and mobilizing tactics (Kroger, 2011; Ondetti, 2008),

⁶ See, for example: (Andrade, Pierro, Molina, & Azevedo, n.d.; Arroyo, 2004; Bahniuk, 2008; Caldart, Fetzner, Rodrigues, & Fretias, 2010; Caldart, Pereira, Alentejano, & Frigotto, 2012; Caldart, 1997, 2004; Camini, 2009; FONEC, 2012; MEC, 2004; MST, 1991, 1996, 2001; Taffarel, Santos Júnior, & Escobar, 2010)

the differences and conflicts within the MST (Wolford, 2007, 2010), and democracy and the MST (Carter, 2009, 2010). Over the past decade, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship in English on the MST's educational initiatives.⁷ This special issue builds on this previous scholarship, and more specifically, contributes to the ongoing conversation about the relationship between research, education, social movements, and activism.

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⁷ See, for example: (Diniz-Pereira, 2005; Kane, 2001; McCowan, 2003; Tarlau, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Thapilyal, 2006, 2013).

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