

# Landless: Meanings and Transformations of a Collective Action Category in Brazil

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## Abstract

This article identifies the historical process through which the social category of the 'landless' was produced in Brazil, as well as the subsequent growth of a social movement claiming this category, between 1960 and 1980. The article analyzes two moments in which the landless appear, the first being the governorship of Leonel Brizola in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul in the 1960s; and the second, the occupations that occurred in the same state between 1978 and 1980, culminating in the birth of the MST (Landless Rural Workers' Movement). These cases demonstrate that collective action involving the landless shaped government responses and, furthermore, that the mobilization of the category has presupposed the mobilization of the state.

## Keywords

landless, MST, rural social movements, Brazil

## Introduction

Over the last 25 years, the term 'landless' in Brazil has been linked to a specific social movement called the Landless Rural Workers, Movement,

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or MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*). This common understanding of who is landless and to which movement this person relates has been propagated through the media, without necessarily reflecting the breadth of organized groups that claim to be represented by this social category.<sup>1</sup> However, it must be recognized that it was the MST that established the social category of the 'landless' through a wide repertoire of political actions and strategies. New repertoires and concepts that have been undertaken or created by MST enable people to occupy not only farms considered unproductive, but also buildings and public spaces across the country. The importance and sheer volume of the movement's actions have awakened intense sociological interest about its methods of mobilization and collective action. Researchers such as Fernandes (2000) and Navarro (1996, 1999), among others, have dedicated themselves to unveiling some of these practices by focusing on the traditions that gave birth to the category and changes that occurred in matters of strategy. However, these authors do not provide more in-depth reflections on the relationship between the MST and the political category it represents, known as the 'landless'. Schmidt (1992), Ernandez (2003) and Loera (2009) point out that landless as an identity, along with its politics, are shaped in the encampments. If individuals identify themselves as landless only after they join the movement, it becomes necessary to understand the origins of this category used by MST and other movements to mobilize these social layers. What circumstances made this a legitimate category for settling claims to land?

This article focuses on the history of the landless category in Brazilian politics. Until now, this aspect has not been well-researched, and has sometimes been taken for granted by literature analyzing the MST. The idea to conduct an analysis of this nature came from a collective research project that sought to understand how land occupations emerged as a way to settle land claims in Brazil over the last several decades. Our research took us back to the 1960s in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, where the term was first used to settle claims. This article shows that the term landless was first used as a category in public policy during the governorship of Leonel Brizola (1959–63), and was then appropriated and transformed by movements and organizations in the following decades in very distinct regions and social situations. All of these share a common thread that entails persuading government to focus their policies on small farmers.<sup>2</sup> Our hypothesis is that, historically, the 'landless'

as a mobilization category and as an identity never existed independently of the state. Therefore, understanding the origins and the historical importance of this category will provide a clearer perspective on informal (non-professionalized) participation in two great waves of mobilization: the first, in the 1960s, involving the Landless Farmer's Movement (MASTER), and the second, in the late-1970s, involving the MST and other related social movements in Brazil.

### **Theorizing the 'Landless' in Brazil: Research Sources and Theoretical Approaches**

The most effective way to clarify the complex meanings that the landless category accumulated in recent Brazilian history is through new research. Between 2004 and 2007, we conducted extensive research using the Gaúcho Institute of Agrarian Reform (IGRA) archives in Rio Grande do Sul, which are kept in the home of a former IGRA employee. The archives contain important official documents about agrarian reform that were produced before and during the early days of MASTER, the first movement to use the term 'landless' as a land claim category. After the military coup of 1964, this former IGRA employee secretly stashed the documents in his house, afraid that they might be used as evidence to incriminate leftist activists, and has only recently granted access to them. Consequently, these archives have never been used until today by the few researchers that analyzed the movement, such as Eckert (1984). These public and personal documents describe the complex steps taken to develop public policies for the emerging landless social category in Brazil during the 1960s.

After consulting and analyzing the archives, we conducted approximately 30 interviews with people who participated in organizing MASTER and the encampments in the 1960s and the 1970s/80s. Besides the organizers, whose testimonies generally supported other research about these events, we also interviewed people who participated in the mobilization efforts that took place in both periods.

This data permitted us to reconstruct events that occurred prior to formalized land occupations by the MST and MASTER movements. Some testimonies allowed us to understand better the context that

connected people and events in both decades. Moreover, several people who participated in the occupations in the 1960s were also present in the occupations that took place 16 years later, allowing direct comparison and reflection on the linkage between these processes.

In piecing together these experiences, we draw on the ‘figuration’ concept developed by Norbert Elias (1987, 1989). According to Elias (1987: 25), figurations counter the Weberian concept of the ideal type by not representing a pre-conceived and, therefore, always artificial model of social relationships. Elias (*ibid.*) argues that figurations are capable of allowing sociological analysis simultaneously to include institutions and individuals in their descriptions without creating hierarchies and divisions between actors and structures. By adopting this approach early on in our research, we were able to focus on the ‘interdependent networks’ that had formed between individuals holding institutional positions, yet able to leave their mark on social processes. Only then could we understand the role that governors, mayors, and other state employees played in developing the idea of the landless as an important category in public policy. The concept of figuration also allows us to include in our analysis families that organized land occupations, but did not have any formal institutional position in the movements at the time—that is, families excluded from most analyses of movements and the landless. Here, we look at these individuals through their interdependent relationships with other individuals. We sketch a figuration linking actors such as state employees and politicians, as well as MASTER and MST leaders, whose relationships were fundamental in creating the idea of land occupations, enabling the idea to circulate through ties of camaraderie, friendship, family, and religion. Like Elias (1989), we argue here that social processes can never be described by their intentions, only by the interrelationships produced within them.<sup>3</sup>

The position of the landless as a historical and social category needs to be understood, therefore, precisely in relation to other subjects and institutions. In this context, the Catholic Church and the MST played important roles in publically consolidating the landless category, as demonstrated by Vergara-Camus (2009) and Carter (2003). However, they were not the only, nor the first entities to organize rural people under the landless flag.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing presence of the state in the narratives of all those who participated in these events—since the first actions

undertaken by MASTER—indicates the central role that the state and its officials played in the production of the ‘landless’. Moreover, this historical analysis helps us to understand the reasons why the government and its agencies are still intimately connected to the current meaning of the term landless, according to Sigaud et al. (2008).

### **Landless in the 1960s**

The beginning of the 1960s was a crucial period for issues related to land and politics in Brazil. Many events brought together groups living in rural areas with political parties, movements, organizations, and governments (on municipal, provincial, and national levels) across the country.<sup>5</sup> There is no question that Peasant Leagues, rural workers’ unions, and MASTER were responsible for staging the most important public manifestations at the heart of this political wave. Extensive research on rural workers’ unions helps us to understand, for instance, how labour rights expanded beyond factories and urban areas (Camargo 1973; Palmeira 1978; Rosa 2004; Sigaud 1979). Although researchers like Azevedo (1982) and Bastos (1984) have produced some important descriptive works about Peasant Leagues and their birth in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco, it is still rare to find research that adds new theoretical, or even documented, perspectives to what we already know—especially in other regions of the country. For example, in the last 30 years, only two authors (Eckert 1984 and Alves 2010) have analyzed how MASTER was created and developed.

The gap between these pioneering studies and what has been researched more recently indicates a lack of more detailed research into the history of the movement, which generally leads to a dichotomous interpretation that classifies MASTER as either an extension of Brizola’s government (Carini and Tedesco 2007), or as a relatively autonomous group that imposed land issues on the government (Eckert 1984). Both interpretations establish a connection between MASTER and the state, but have been accepted quite uncritically—a point which extends to other social movements, like the MST, which has also been linked to the state, through other actions and engagements.

The ambiguous political history of the Brazilian Workers' Party (PTB) raised doubts about Brizola's influence on MASTER. PTB was responsible for regulating labour laws and for institutionalizing urban labour unions in Brazil during Getulio Vargas' mandates as president (1930–45 and 1951–54). Many analysts believe that initiatives taken by Vargas and PTB were attempts by the state to control popular movements, especially unionists.

Authors like Campilongo (1980) and Tedesco and Carini (2007) have used a similar type of argument to describe the relationship between Brizola and MASTER. Although he had strong ties with Vargas, Brizola carved out his own career within the party. He was elected state deputy, in the parliament of Rio Grande do Sul, and later mayor of Porto Alegre, the capital of the state, before he won the election for governor in 1958. Interestingly, Brizola's administration was marked by alliances between progressives and agrarian oligarchs in his state. The first half of his mandate was marked by huge investments in education policies and in building schools in rural areas. According to Alves (2010), during the second part of his mandate, conservative groups belonging to the farmer elite separated themselves from the original coalition, when Brizola and his allies turned their attention back to the so-called 'fight against *latifundium*' (defined in Brizola's government as farms larger than 2,000 hectares).<sup>6</sup> This second phase can also be interpreted as a situation of a 'radicalized state', according to the definition by Moyo and Yeros (2007) for the Zimbabwean government during the 2000s, where the land reform and alliances with rural social movements were also a response to an opposition party linked to large-scale farmers.

Although Brizola supposedly encouraged MASTER and other groups representing the demands of low-income citizens in the state beginning in the 1960s, it cannot be proven that he created the movement, much less had direct control over them during his mandate, as Tedesco and Carini lead us to believe (2007). He and others in this period did, however, prioritize the landless in policies to access credit and land, weaving a process explored in the following section.

Through this analysis based on new sources dealing with events that involved MASTER and the Brizola government and others, we analyze how the issue of landlessness was built into the long relationship between Brazilian social movements and the state government.

## The Landless in Brizola's Government

MASTER was founded in the 1960s by Milton Serres Rodrigues, the PTB mayor of Encruzilhada do Sul, a municipality in the central region of Rio Grande do Sul, after a farmer—who belonged to the opposition party—tried to evict a group of peasants from their land. According to the farmer, he was the true owner of the farm since the peasants had no ownership title. The mayor mobilized these peasants and others, organizing a municipal landless association in his town, as well as in other municipalities, supported by governor Brizola. These associations were the seed to what later became MASTER. Although there are no reports of any contentious actions taken to repossess these lands, we do know that the occasion gave birth to the movement. Significantly, the state 'expropriated' the land involved in the Encruzilhada do Sul episode. However, no information exists of any further mobilization or public action taken by the movement, until 1962, when the invasions began, as we will see later.<sup>7</sup>

Although there were no, or few, mobilizations after this episode (in Encruzilhada do Sul), the landless were effectively on the government agenda. A series of documents in the Gaúcho Institute of Agrarian Reform (IGRA) files, as well as personal letters found in the archives of the institute's employee, show that the living conditions of rural citizens was a constant concern of the Rio Grande do Sul government between 1960 and 1961.

First, a state Commission on Land and Housing (CETH) was created to promote 'the acquisition of lands for peasants and their organizations',<sup>8</sup> implemented before the organization of MASTER. A few months later, a report from this same agency made provisions for the state government to 'expropriate and receive tracts of land'.<sup>9</sup> In that same year, 1960, CETH conducted a detailed survey to determine the number of properties in the entire state that were over two thousand hectares, and concluded that the existence of '*latifundium*' was one of the main problems in the Province of Rio Grande do Sul.<sup>10</sup>

In 1961, the same person responsible for conducting the property survey by CETH led a task force which laid the groundwork for the formation of IGRA. The first time the term 'landless' is used in the Brizola government is found in IGRA documents. According to the publications of the institute, internal colonization and land distribution policies were

geared specifically towards the landless, a category that in this period encompassed all groups that lived in what the government considered precarious conditions.<sup>11</sup> The landless became the favoured target of public policies dealing with rural land issues.

The institutionalization of the landless as a public problem was accompanied by an ample bureaucratic apparatus that evolved first from a committee dealing with land and housing, to a task force, and finally to an agency exclusively created to deal with the matter. Another indicator of the increasing importance of agrarian reform policies in the Brizola government was the nomination of João Caruso to the Department of Agriculture. In the first half of the administration, Caruso was the Secretary of Construction and the Executive director of CETH, which were pillars of the administration. However, despite the impressive amount of investment and planning, especially when compared to other state governments at the time, no internal colonization or land expropriation occurred between 1960 and 1961, as stipulated by public policies of the period.<sup>12</sup> Although Brizola was ambitious in prioritizing the landless, his government took no measures similar to those taken in Encruzilhada do Sul the previous year.

This situation changed completely in January 1962, with the news of the first collective invasion of a private farm in the state.

## **When the Landless Invaded**

On 11 January 1962, several hundred people set up wooden shacks and tarpaulin shelters along the sides of the highway connecting the towns of Passo Fundo and Ronda Alta, situated in northern Rio Grande do Sul. The land was called the Sarandi Farm, which was owned by a Uruguayan company that used only a small portion of the land.

Eckert (1984) and Tedesco and Carini (2007) are unanimous in attributing the invasion and the formation of the encampment to MASTER. However, after analyzing documents and oral testimonies, and crosschecking the material cited by the above authors, we found no mention of any participation by MASTER in organizing or setting up the encampments.

To better understand this critical event, we reconstructed the organization of the invasion that led Brizola to expropriate the land two days



later. The group that arrived at the Sarandi Farm was made up almost completely of people from Nonoai, a municipality 100 km away. According to interviews with leaders who participated in mobilizing invaders (peasants without title deeds who lived around Nonoai) and setting up and organizing the encampment, everything had been prepared by PTB member Jair de Moura Calixto, the mayor of Nonoai.

A more in-depth study of the Nonoai case complicates interpretation of this invasion as either spontaneous or simply an act ordered by the governor.<sup>13</sup> MASTER leaders and state officials were intimately connected to each other. Governor Brizola, Mayor Calixto, and MASTER founder Milton Serres Rodrigues were not only members of the same political party, Brizola and Calixto were also cousins, and at times political opponents. Calixto, for instance, unexpectedly attacked his own party in Nonoai. When he lost in the PTB voter polls for mayor, he reacted by running for the same office through another party. Once he won the election, he promptly returned to the PTB.

In the four months prior to the invasion, Calixto had been an important participant in an armed campaign led by Brizola that secured the presidency for Vice-president João Goulart, when Jânio Quadros resigned in 1961—an event known as the ‘Legality Campaign’ (*Campanha da Legalidade*). In the campaign, Calixto led an armed guard of over one thousand men in Nonoai to protect Rio Grande do Sul from a possible army invasion from the neighbouring state of Santa Catarina. In the end, there was no invasion or conflict, and João Goulart took office as president.

The success of the resistance dramatically increased the mayor’s popularity. Several men that had made up the Legality Campaign guard were later used to mobilize people living in the area to participate in the Sarandi Farm invasion. But where did the idea to invade the Sarandi farm and to use the term landless come from? Despite having spent two years analyzing documents and interviewing people, we were unable to precisely determine Calixto’s reasons. Consequently, we chose to approach his stance using a ‘figuration’ dynamic to understand the context from which he addressed, prioritized, and mobilized landless issues.

In the months that followed the Legality Campaign, the state government financed the participation of a group of MASTER leaders, many of whom at that time were members of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), in the 1st National Congress of Farm Labourers and Rural

Workers in Belo Horizonte, state of Minas Gerais. At that event, members of MASTER and the Peasant Leagues (mostly active in north-eastern states) proposed and approved the slogan ‘agrarian reform by law or by force’, a platform that opened the doors to intensified rural struggles across the country. There are reports of a series of meetings in Rio Grande do Sul between MASTER leaders, all of them members of political parties, and the governor, in December 1961. According to Eckert (1984), they discussed setting up landless encampments in some of the main cities of the state. During this same period, there are also reports of Brizola summoning Calixto to his office to talk about these issues, as we have heard in the interviews conducted in 2005. One version of the events says there was an agreement between Brizola, the mayor of Sarandi and Jair Calixto about the Sarandi invasion. However, Sarandi’s mayor and the state secretary supposedly persuaded Brizola against invading, because it would turn an important part of his PTB supporters—the big farmers—against him.

Meanwhile in Nonoai, Calixto enlisted the help of dissident PCB members and, without MASTER leadership, began announcing that there was a piece of land in Sarandi that could be occupied. One of his Legality Campaign militiamen was responsible for finding the proper place to set up the encampment. The facts that followed are well-known, and describe Calixto’s jeep leading a caravan of trucks loaded with men down the dirt road, spending the night in Ronda Alta, and arriving the next morning at the site of the invasion.

We found no mention of MASTER, or of its leaders in documents or interviews related to this incident. The central figures are Calixto and Brizola, who personally visited the area days later. One of the versions recounted to us by a former PTB member stated that Calixto was responsible for mobilizing the people, even against the will of the government. According to him, once the encampment was set up, Brizola’s only alternative was to support the invasion.

In the weeks following the invasion, MASTER leaders began taking on more important roles. Milton Serres Rodrigues is seen in photographs taken during the governor’s visit to the Sarandi encampment, and later, local newspapers announced that the movement would register landless families at the encampment. There is nothing official at Sarandi that points to MASTER leading the landless invasion of the farm, although they did appear later to register the families.

In a matter of days, the movement was in all the newspapers, when a new encampment was set up in *Banhado do Colégio*, in the town of *Camaquã*, an area 500 km from *Sarandi*. This time the organizer was known by all and identified himself as the president of the local landless association (affiliated to MASTER). Here, again, the government expropriated the land. After *Banhado do Colégio*, dozens of camps across the state sprang up between February and March 1962, all organized by landless associations linked to MASTER.

In April 1962, three months after the first land occupations, IGRA finally joined the action. *Banhado do Colégio* and *Sarandi* were targeted with so-called resettlement projects, in other words, demarcation of plots for housing and agriculture and delivery of technical support to develop crops and grazing. Part of the *Nonoai* forest reservation was also made into a resettlement project to shelter families that had registered in an encampment set up there by MASTER with the help of *Jair Calixto*. In March 1962, *Brizola* personally donated 1,000 hectares from one of his wife's farms to be occupied by local farm workers he chose himself. That same month, the state government published appeals in the state newspapers asking other large property owners to follow his example and donate part of their land to shelter landless families.

The sequence of events above illustrates the political construction of a category that first appeared in state government documents, was mobilized when families at *Encruzilhada do Sul* were threatened with eviction, and finally became the emblem of a movement whose leaders were members of political parties connected to the government. Although MASTER formally came into existence in 1961, there is no record of its actions until after the *Sarandi* Farm invasion in January 1962.

Once the first invasion took place, MASTER organized itself to put into action the public policies created by the *Brizola* government. If the landless category was indeed initiated during *Brizola's* government, it soon moved out of its control. With the *Sarandi* encampment and the presence of MASTER in other cases, the landless became a relatively autonomous force. In 1962, the governor himself publically asked for a truce in the invasions and suggested forming a commission made up of MASTER leaders, government officials, and large farm owners.

Those who suggest the governor carefully planned all these events, reinforce stereotypes of 'patronage and populism'. As demonstrated by *Sigaud et al.* (2008), we argue that invasions and the notion of the

landless was created through a network of social movements, the responsiveness of certain government officials to precarious living conditions in rural areas, structural changes in the internal alliances within Brizola's government in this period (Alves 2010), and the unpredictable participation of mayor Calixto and others. This network took on a very specific meaning: it gave social grounding to an indistinct category, the landless, that had been in government plans but did not have representatives in society. Through specific collective action (invasions and encampments) and a movement (MASTER), the category of landless came to life.

### **The Return of the Landless: 16 Years Later**

The Brizola government ended in 1963, before most of the encampments attained the same success as those at Sarandi Farm and Banhado do Colégio. In other words, there was little land distribution compared to the amount of claimants. The majority of the families that had been registered by IGRA in the encampments, which were later transformed into resettlement projects, were not resettled.<sup>14</sup> Because of changes in government (Brizola's party was defeated by opposition groups), the encampments led by MASTER were repressed, and after the 1964 military coup their main leaders were either arrested, or fled the country.

Nevertheless, hundreds of people remained in the region holding registration papers that identified them as landless farmers. These people never received any land at the time and returned to where they came from, especially to Nonoai, and settled on the land that belonged to the Kainganges indigenous reserves.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1960s, it was possible for non-indigenous people to remain on indigenous lands of that region under leasing conditions. However, this practice was prohibited after the Statute of Indigenous Peoples was enacted in 1973. On the Nonoai reservation alone, there were over 1,000 lessee families living under these conditions, many of which had been in the Sarandi Farm encampment in 1962.

In this context, the peasants, who called themselves *colonos* (colonists or resettled people), were now threatened with eviction because of a government decree intended to ensure land rights for indigenous groups.<sup>16</sup> After three years of frustrated negotiations between the National

Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples, colonists, and indigenous groups, the peasants were evicted from their homes in 1978. Most families were forced to leave the indigenous reservation with only their clothing and some furniture, unable to harvest the crops for they had used most of their capital to plant. Some were able to find housing with friends and relatives in the same region, but the not so fortunate were taken to an improvised camp in Taquaruçuzinho (a village on the border of the indigenous reserve).<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to what took place in the 1960s, the government did not take up their issue, or consider them a public policy priority. Instead, it created a new and tangible mass of landless families. Over one thousand families lost their main source of survival from one day to the next. The fact that the state government was responsible for what happened on the indigenous reservation became immediately clear when evicted families tried to find new land. Now completely destitute, these peasants turned to unused public land.

Authors such as Carter (2010) suggest that these *colonos* were mobilized to occupy land by a clergyman in Ronda Alta in 1979. Our interviews with evicted families show, however, that the first attempt to occupy land occurred in May 1978, on a forest reservation belonging to the state government near the town of Planalto. People living near the forest reservation alerted their relatives, who had been evicted from the indigenous reservation, to the presence of unused government land near them. The connections with the 1962 invasions and encampments are very strong. Relatives who had settled in Planalto lived in an area called the *Quarta Seção*, the area that Brizola had taken from the forest reservation in 1963 in order to settle landless families that had been registered at the encampment led by Jair Calixto. In other words, families that had benefited in the 1960s hoped and expected the state government to take similar action and surrender public land to solve a public calamity such as this one in the 1970s. All those we interviewed who had participated in the invasion and encampment stated that their main reason for invading that specific area was because it was part of state-owned land that had already once been given to their relatives.<sup>18</sup> The results were not as expected. The local police evicted the families coming from the indigenous reservations the same day they arrived. Participants whom we were able to interview said that the invasion was unsuccessful because local

politicians did not permit the case to be taken to the state governor. In their minds, its lack of success was due to the lack of interference by the state government.

The idea that their intentions were just and those of the local authorities were wrong helps us understand why a few days later some of these same people, along with dozens of other families, invaded another part of the forest reservation through the town of Rondinha. The Rondinha reservation is over 100 km away from Nonoai, and has yet another connection to the 1962 events. It was part of the Sarandi Farm that had been given over to the landless when Brizola expropriated the area. At that point, it became clear that not all the land that had been expropriated during the previous decade had been distributed to the landless. Besides the forest reservation, there were two tracts (Brilhante and Macali) that were almost equal to the 4,000 hectares that had been leased to large farm owners by the state government after the Sarandi expropriation. Why did the peasants coming from the indigenous reservation choose the forest reservation? The most conclusive answer we found was that it was government land. One of the few explanations that we heard was given by Sebastião Manuel dos Santos, a man who was present in the 1960s invasion, and currently lives in the region. He states that it was the families that lived in the Sarandi Farm vicinity that alerted the evicted families (some of these families were also their relatives) about the unoccupied government land. It is important to keep in mind that all the families we interviewed had been made landless by the state, and that is why state-owned land was the only target of their actions.

Contrary to what happened in Nonoai, news of the invasion of the Rondinha Reservation in 1978 did reach the state government. According to some people who were at the camp, the encampment was visited by the then candidate for state governor (during the time when the governor was nominated by the President of the Republic without elections) and also by Father Arnildo Fritzen, the priest in Ronda Alta. The families that had been at the encampment for over one month were registered, after which the peasants went back to the same relatives and friends with whom they were since their eviction from the Nonoai indigenous reserve.

While the encampment was established, it was surrounded by police forces that prevented new people from entering. However, within a few days another camp was established inside the Rondinha forest reservation. This time, the invaders did not include people evicted from

indigenous land, but young peasants that were children of those who had benefited from the Sarandi Farm and lived on the land of their parents. These young locals decided to mobilize when they saw the encampment set up by people from Nonoai, so that if the remaining land of the Sarandi Farm was going to be distributed, they would have priority. According to one of those young invaders, there was a general understanding that the state would be and should be responsible for the children of first beneficiaries of the Sarandi resettlement project. This idea supposedly came from promises made by state workers that administrated the colonization project instated by Brizola and implemented during the Ildo Meneghetti administration in 1963–64.

We can see, therefore, that this last invasion brought to the surface once again commitments that had been made by other government administrations 16 years earlier. Promises made by past and present government administrations to different generations of landless citizens in completely different situations shaped the ways in which the landless sought public authorities to help solve their problems. They were unified by the belief that the state was responsible for the landless.

The idea that state-transferred land was the solution for the Nonoai landless was reinforced in the following days when an additional group that had also been evicted from the indigenous reservation arrived. Because the police did not permit their entry to the Rondinha forest reservation camp, they decided to invade the Brillhante tract that had been leased to large farm owners. The group camped in Brillhante for over a month and even planted a crop of corn. However, because the land was being used by private entities, they did not get as much attention as the others that had invaded the Rondinha forest reservation. They were not registered. They were simply surrounded by police and eventually forced to return to the homes of friends and relatives or to the encampment, a 100 km away, that had first taken them in after they left the indigenous area.

These cases reinforce our argument regarding the obligatory nature of the relationship between landless and the state in the beginning of collective actions for land in Brazil. The fact that when the families left the indigenous reservation in 1978 to participate in three invasions in heterogeneous groups, and that all of them took place on public land is undeniable. We found no reference to the possibility of entering privately owned land in any of our research materials, which included interviews

with people who had been involved in the camps and analysis of documents.

Although the intention was to mobilize state government to solve their problems, the 'landless colonists', as they became known, were not able to obtain any immediate answers like they had in 1962. After over one month of hardship, the state proposed to confine the families to a fairground in the town of Esteio (about 400 km from the indigenous reservation), until a final solution could be reached. This was the way out for approximately 700 families. On the fairgrounds, they occupied the exhibition areas and received food from the state government. However, their freedom to come and go was restricted, and the only ones permitted to leave the grounds were those authorized by the chief of police, in charge of the camp. Some people were allowed also to serve as domestic workers in the homes of politicians who offered to help the families.

According to the interviews, a definitive solution for the case was urgently necessary for landless families and for state officials. During the following months, the first proposal was to send families to colonization projects in the northern region of Brazil, especially Mato Grosso (a state 2,000 km away).<sup>19</sup> Some families accepted the offer and were taken by plane to the outskirts of the Amazon forest. A small minority refused to leave Rio Grande do Sul. Families who were not taken to the northern region were offered a settlement on state government land in Bagé, on the border with Uruguay, over 600 km from Nonoai. The Nova Esperança colonization project was started in the beginning of 1979, when 125 families were transferred there and given plots of land.<sup>20</sup>

Government mobilization only partially solved the case. We must remember that although close to 700 families had been taken to the Esteio fairgrounds, over 1,000 families had been evicted from the reservation. The attention given to the more needy *colonos* led other families to get involved in the political meetings in the Nonoai region. Many of those who received land in Mato Grosso or Bagé were relatives of those who stayed in Nonoai, and they circulated the news that the state was distributing land for those who had stayed in Rio Grande do Sul.

In 1979, the families who remained in Nonoai formed a commission that relied on the help of unionists, agents from the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), and an employee of the state Department of Agriculture to mediate negotiations with the state government. Between January and September of that year, several meetings were held where



the only concrete proposals were to move the remaining families to Mato Grosso as well. In some ways, this commission served to extend the government commitment to all those that had been evicted from indigenous lands. However, due to lack of concrete results, the landless and their relatives decided to stage another land invasion. In September 1979, a group of just over 100 families set up camp on the Macali tract, which was the only piece left of the Sarandi Farm that had not been invaded. Once again, they decided to invade state-owned land, a place remembered as a successful settlement, this one being leased to a timber company.

The Macali camp quickly gained the attention of the state government and, in less than a month, it authorized the peasants to begin planting a crop and set up an office on location to conduct the settlement process of the 104 families. Once the government reacted positively to the Macali camp, another camp was set up on the Brilhante tract—the same one that had been invaded in 1978 on the border of Macali—with the remaining families that had been evicted from the reservation. Once the ‘Sons of Sarandi’, or the children of the 1962 settlers, understood that the rest of Sarandi farm would sooner or later be distributed to families coming from Nonoai, they once again set up their own camp, this time in Brilhante.

In 1980, the state government finally conceded ownership titles in the Macali and Brilhante lands to the colonists from Nonoai, transforming the tracts into official state settlements. Legalizing land possession brought new problems, because there was not enough land to include all the settlers.

Certain that the landless issue had its place on the government agenda, CPT agents and other invasion leaders decided to occupy another adjacent farm called Anoni, which the state government had been in the process of expropriating for over a decade. The Anoni farm had been expropriated to receive families that had been displaced by the Passo Real dam. However, the place was still under legal dispute, despite some families having been settled there in 1973. This encampment was violently repressed by the police, and families were taken to the sides of the road that connects Ronda Alta and Passo Fundo to occupy part of a plot on the Macali settlement. In other words, the Sarandi camps of 1962 and 1980 not only transformed an army of landless peasants into a political action category, but also contributed to creating a supply of land that not

only allowed two generations of families to settle, but also served as a support base for new camps.

This last encampment set up in the late 1980s became known as Encruzilhada Natalino, where families who had been evicted from Nonoai and others were reunited. In a short time, the land became a shelter for thousands of peasant families that had been living in the region on borrowed or leased land who came looking for a piece of their own land to plant their crops and live.

Besides these families from the region, the encampment also began to attract others that had been evicted from the indigenous reservation and taken to Mato Grosso, but had not adapted to the living conditions there. When these 'returnees' discovered that their former neighbours had been settled in their own region, they decided to go back and live closer to their families.<sup>21</sup>

A sample of the differences between the Natalino camp and the Macali and Brilhante camps can be seen in the testimonies collected and cited by Méliga and Janson (1982). Among those interviewed at the camp, there were 13 families from Ronda Alta, three returnees from Mato Grosso, and five families that had been evicted from the reservation but had not joined any previous camps. There were also several children of families that had received land from the Sarandi Farm in the 1960s.

This data shows that Encruzilhada Natalino took the landless issue to another level. This was not simply another group suddenly removed from their homes on indigenous lands because of state ineptitude. Here, the term 'landless' assumed its original meaning as defined by the Brizola government and no longer referred to a specific group of colonists. The landless were now understood by the state and activists as families living in rural areas under precarious subsistence conditions, especially those who were not landowners.

The landless settled in Encruzilhada Natalino in the late 1980s were not a simple product of some governmental policy, such as what happened in the early days of MASTER. The relative success of the encampments and subsequent settlement claims caused lessees, sharecroppers and even children of small landowners to identify themselves as landless. Our hypothesis is that identifying as landless meant sharing the idea of being able to claim state benefits, especially land redistribution for farming. It is important to remember that everyone at the camp saw his

or her friends and relatives benefitting on a daily basis from government land distribution.<sup>22</sup>

The Encruzilhada Natalino camp also became a symbol of the fight against the military dictatorship, and attracted the attention of activists from across the country to the landless issue. When the landless were elevated to a category that symbolized resistance to the dictatorship, the events at Encruzilhada formed a solid base for building a social movement, the Landless Rural Worker's Movement (MST), even though it did not exist as an organization until 1984.

Even before the MST came into existence, state and federal governments were forced, for the first time since 1962, to expropriate privately owned land to shelter settlers in Encruzilhada Natalino because there were no more state-owned properties to be used. Between 1981 and 1984, the state government purchased land in the towns of Palmeiras das Missões and Salto do Jucaí, which are in the Ronda Alta vicinity.<sup>23</sup>

After MST was formally established, it stopped using the term 'land invasions' and began to use the term 'occupations' to emphasize that they were taking large pieces of unused land that were not fulfilling their social function as a rural property.<sup>24</sup> This terminology endeavoured to accentuate the social right of land access as opposed to the right to property, both of which are present in the Brazilian Constitution. At the same time, the MST began occupying and setting up camps on private land and demanding that the state use its resources to redistribute these properties.

## Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to bring new empirical evidence about the origin of the 'landless' as a social and political category in Brazil to public and sociological debates. By reviewing over 20 years of the history of landless struggles, we can now explain one of the major pillars of the MST's longevity as a social movement in Brazil: the historical relationship between the landless social category and the state.

Beginning with MASTER and the camps in Rio Grande do Sul in the 1960s, and their overlap with processes that were part of governor Brizola's priorities, we were able to establish the 'figuration' (in the Norbert Elias' sense) from which the landless political category emerged.

It emerged as a power play that was not necessarily planned, and, importantly, its central figures occupied public positions. There were mayors, state secretaries, and even a governor that played key roles in consolidating this social category and making it the subject of public policies. Associating this category to encampments as a way to settle claims, such as the events on the Sarandi Farm in January 1962, marked the beginning of the transformation of landless collective action—an action which we believe was not, and could not, be organized by MASTER. The movement appropriated the ‘encampment form’ (Sigaud 2000) which was established when the mayor of Nonoai and his fellow party members legitimately occupied the Sarandi Farm. In this manner, the government, MASTER, and people wanting their own piece of land were able to engage in these collective actions, as a means to access land, as they watched neighbours, friends, and relatives attaining land through legal measures. Critically, people in legitimate public positions guaranteed these actions from the beginning.

Labels such as ‘clientelism’ or ‘patronage’ (terms used to explain the actions of the Brizola government that made history) do not help us to understand the actual processes in question.<sup>25</sup> Actions taken by municipal and state government officials were not based solely on their charisma, or on using the state apparatus in their favour. Agrarian reform during the Brizola government is characterized as a public policy that was clearly guided by a desire to transform the living conditions of citizens living in rural areas in Rio Grande do Sul, established in documents of the state government and in their actions to address landlessness as a social problem. From the perspective of ‘figuration’ terms (Elias 1987, 1989), Brizola, Calixto, and Milton Serres Rogrigues were individuals caught in a scenario that none was able to manage alone. The network included MASTER, the Nonoai residents, people within PTB, as well as a complex mix of subjects in key positions.

It is important to note that the landless category and the public policies geared towards it specifically ended when Brizola’s term ended, or in other words, when the figuration formed in the early years of the 1960s lost its original structure.<sup>26</sup> Although the next administration did follow up on previous policies, they produced no new settlements. When the military regime took powers in April 1964, the category landless practically disappeared from social life and state policies, which gave preference from then on to the subject of ‘*colonos*’ and ‘colonisation’.<sup>27</sup>

As we have demonstrated, the landless only return to the political stage when colonist families from the Nonoai Forest Reserve were evicted. In that context, the interdependent relationships that made up the original 'figuration' (established in 1962) were completely dispersed. There were no political officials or party members involved with the evicted families or other organized political forces. During that period, the relationships between subjects that identified themselves as landless were based on public land invasions. The planned invasions of state-owned areas then created social ties amongst elected officials and government employees who were not necessarily in line with the military regime. Solving the landless problem was at that time a way of solving another problem created by the government: regulating the use of indigenous property. There was, in Boltanski's (2000) sense of the word, a set of 'proofs' (*épreuves*) that recognized and also made possible the need for state intervention.<sup>28</sup> One such widely accepted set of proofs was the desperate situation that state negligence had brought upon families, while at the same time maintaining underused public land that had been expropriated in 1962. This caused the state to reinstate the landless category as a subject for action and for them to collectively mobilize, all of which led to the creation of MST almost six years later.

If we were to survey rural and urban areas around Brazil, either today or 40 years ago, we are sure that few would label themselves as landless. The cases in southern Brazil indicate that inhabitants in rural areas identify themselves as landless only when they come into contact with landless movements. The core principals of these movements are not to represent generically the 'poor in the countryside', but to develop a legitimate relationship with the state, as long as they can convince government officials to consider the rural areas and land reform as matters of public policy. All other advances are built on this foundation.

Some authors dedicated to this movement, such as Navarro (2008), have failed to provide a comprehensive picture of the MST, because they do not conduct a more in-depth analysis of the meaning and origins of the landless as a social category. Works like this are always seeking to identify landlessness (understood as an economic situation related to the land as a means of production) as the only justification for social mobilization. The argument in this article enables us to critique definitions of the landless simply as an identity, or as a natural social condition that is part of the Brazilian development process.

The cases presented here allow us to dialogue with what Tarrow (1999) refers to as ‘dynamic statism’, or in other words a theory that recognizes the importance of the state in comprehending collective action without ignoring the fact that not everything can be explained by structural changes. This perspective operates at an intermediate level that attempts to understand long and short-term processes in which social movements and collective actions are not simply results of state weaknesses or strengths. The Rio Grande do Sul case demonstrates that the understanding of the multiple layers involved in exemplary situations, like the invasion and the encampment at Sarandi farm, can be an innovative way to represent the role of the MST in Brazil.

MASTER and MST developed in tandem with the reinforcement of government institutions, as seen in the case where several agencies were created to deal with agrarian reform through colonization in Brazil over the last decades. These institutions, however, are managed in short-term processes that result from local and personal conflicts between agents with state power—mayors and secretaries, to name a few—and families seeking a piece of land. When these levels which are part of the same figuration meet, interdependent links are altered and movements contribute to a situation of institutional opportunities. Movements also learn ways to create opportunities and become capable of transmitting strategies and collective action methods to other subjects through ‘contentious conversations’ (Tilly 1998).

By creating a common vocabulary centred on the landless category, the state recognized the new social force of rural Brazil, and maybe for this reason it has become better equipped to deal with it. Beginning at local levels, movements have fed on this strength and expanded the scope of their settlement claims to the national level, far beyond their original areas and their specific identity.

Our goal throughout this article has been to show that Brazil as a country does not have the landless on one side and the State on the other, or that at a given moment the first decided or were forced to demand some kind of action from the second by means of a social movement. We affirm that the state and MST are part of the same ‘figuration’ and their interdependent relationship is linked historically by the landless category. Besides simply showing that MST challenges the state, a fact that Rosa (2008) and Vergara-Camus (2009) strongly support, empirical evidence demonstrates the powerful and contested ways in which the

historical relationship between the landless and the state and its agencies have been produced together.

The processes that gave birth to the landless as a political category in the twentieth century in Brazil can also be linked to what Moyo and Yeros (2005) describe as the 'state model' of land reform. In such situations, we cannot separate or juxtapose state and social movements, simply because they are under a process of structuration. Both depend on each other in order to effectively mobilize rural people into politics to support a radicalized state (the case of the Brizola government) or a claim for settlement, as in 1978.

### Notes

1. According to data from the National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) and the Pastoral Commission on Land, over 60 different movements organized land occupations in Brazil in the years after 1990.
2. Bernard Alves (2010) presents new and important information about the origins of this category. According to him, the landless category was included in the State Constitution of Rio Grande do Sul in 1947, when Leonel Brizola was a member of parliament.
3. A more specific analysis of Elias' concepts can be found in Bogner (1986), Layder (1986), and Mennell and Goudsblom (1998), among others.
4. The work of Carter (2010) is a good example of the way most of these works lead readers to believe that the occupations only began in 1979, and that the families never considered any kind of response to being evicted until they came in contact with the priest. Our research, however, indicates that families had already occupied three different areas before even going to the priest.
5. For an accurate description of this historical period see the work of Camargo (1973).
6. This is found in a letter from the Secretary of Agriculture to the governor, cited by Alves (2010).
7. A PTB Deputy read, during a National Congress session, a letter informing that MASTER had its own 'constitution', a sign of its important role as a social movement.
8. Decree 11.201, 29 February 1960.
9. 1960 CETH activities report.
10. This report is part of the IGRA files belonging to the personal collection of Paulo Schmidt.
11. Colonization is used here to describe a process of resettlement that was, at the same time, a process of internal colonization by descendants of white

- settlers to develop Brazilian agriculture. This term was widely used to describe the white occupation of indigenous land in the Amazon region.
12. Exceptions are the properties acquired in the towns of São Jerônimo (1158.31 hectares) and Cangaçu (595.84 hectares), whose designations are unknown, and the land in Encruzilhada do Sul in 1960. This information was found in the governor's report presented to the Legislative Assembly in Rio Grande do Sul in 1961.
  13. Unfortunately, there is no known research that offers a more in-depth study of what happened in Encruzilhada at the time that MASTER was founded.
  14. From the 2,000 families indicated by the interviewees, just 450 were resettled in the Sarandi Project by 1964.
  15. Indigenous reserves are areas belonging to the Federal Government, reserved for indigenous groups in order to assure their customary practices.
  16. The term *colonos* is used in the southern states of Brazil to define families who identify themselves as descendants of Italian, Polish and German immigrants, for the most part. The 'colonists' differentiate themselves from Brazilians (generally those with Portuguese last names) and from indigenous peoples (whom they called *bugres*). Many of these colonists settled in Brazil as small farmers, which made land issues central to their social reproduction. For more information see Sigaud (1989).
  17. This information was given in interviews with members of the Schneider family, Alcides Souza, Mrs Deusneuda, and her husband Lauro, and with Mr Dino. All of these families were settled and currently live in the Macali and Brilhante settlements, areas that were part of the old Sarandi Farm expropriated by the Brizola government.
  18. During our research, as well as Gehlen's (1983), we found people that had been evicted from the indigenous reservation who had saved the registration paper they received at the camp in 1962 to prove that the state owed them.
  19. For more information about the colonization project that involved the Nonoi landless, see Tavares dos Santos (1993).
  20. Not all families were included in these two options. Some of them were offered retirement or jobs on rural properties overseen by government workers.
  21. Tavares dos Santos (1993) presents an in-depth description of the precarious conditions of the colonization project in Amazonia. He also followed and interviewed some of these returnees when they returned to Rio Grande do Sul in the 1980s.
  22. Ivaldo Gehlen (1983) describes how one group of families receiving land from the government was important in mobilizing other families, and how camp leaders exploited this situation.



23. For a report on land expropriated by the government at that time, see Navarro et al. (1999).
24. According to the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, '[t]he social function is met when the rural property complies simultaneously with, according to the criteria and standards prescribed by law, the following requirements: (i) rational and adequate use; (ii) adequate use of available natural resources and preservation of the environment; (iii) compliance with the provisions that regulate labour relations; (iv) exploitation that favours the wellbeing of the owners and employees'.
25. These terms appear in works by Campilongo (1980) and Tedesco and Carini (2007).
26. In 1962, the candidate for state governor supported by Brizola was defeated by ex-governor Ildo Meneghetti, who took office in 1963.
27. For studies on the colonization process during the military regime, see Tavares dos Santos (1983).
28. The word *épreuves* has also been translated into English as 'conventions', as seen in Boltanski and Thévenot (1999).

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