

# **The rural Landless People's Movement: the movement that never was not, but was**

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## **Introduction**

*Judging from 1994–2005 resistance in the countryside, the Landless People's Movement (LPM) arguably marked the highest and most inspiring development in rural mobilisation and organisation. (Jacobs, 2012: 176)*

*The formation of the Landless People's Movement (LPM) was by far the most significant event in the resurgence of resistance in South Africa's land sector at the dawn of the 21st century. ( Ntsebeza, 2007, 8)*

The political temperature surrounding the land question rose between 1999 and 2004. This period saw the formation of the LPM demanding decisive action from government and threatening illegal land occupations... (Hall, 2010: 43)

The formation of the Landless People's Movement in 2001, as we can observe in the quotations, was considered a landmark in the history of social mobilisations in South Africa. All of the hopes academics and activists had regarding the emergence of a rural social movement in the country came together in the LPM.

However, disappointments surfaced almost as quickly as the enthusiasm had and starting in 2005, many authors, including the ones above, were more sceptical about what was occurring:

*When the LPM was founded and when it attempted to generate support, it did so on the basis of the landlessness in an elastic category allowing 'people who do not have a historical link to the land to be defined as landless.' (...) But the movement proved unable effectively either to specify or to marshal its potential membership along these inclusive lines. (James, 2005: 254)*

*Without these basic organisational building blocks, mandate and accountability are impossible. There was no way of deciding who should nominate or vote for candidates to a national council. Women are under-represented at the national council, with four women and seven men on the council at the time of writing.... The movement is therefore a hybrid between a party-like, hierarchical organisational*

*structure and an agglomeration of grassroots struggles, the latter sometimes spontaneous and sometimes facilitated by the formal structures of the movement. Greenberg (2004:21)*

*A key problem for the LPM, according to Ricardo, is that leadership is seen as part of the middle-class intelligentsia because NGO staff members have been so influential in the direction the LPM has taken. According to Ricardo, even the South African state criticized the landless movement for not having a leadership that was connected to the grassroots base (Balleti, Johnson and Wolford, 2008:307).*

In my view, this enthusiasm and the subsequent disenchantment are evidence of the fact that the movement was not only an expression of the interests of the landless, but also a political project that embraced a large portion of the civil society. Interestingly, most of the analyses mentioned above were made possible because the movement, for a short time and in certain situations, expressed itself in accordance with the desires of these outsiders.

If the movement was a top-down organisation, the expectations and the analysis presented until this moment tended, in my perspective, to be organised from the outside-in. This means that the studies we have been analysing are constructing the movement from the normative point of view of NGOs, academics, political activists, policy makers and even that of other movements like the Brazilian MST.

There is nothing problematic about adopting and reproducing such positions; they are what Law (2004) calls “modes of gathering” things. According to the author, all modes of gathering are partial, circumstantial and “connote(s) the process of bringing together, relating, picking, meeting, building up or flowing together,” (Law, 2004:160). These modes, which we can easily consider methods, are performative in the sense that they enact the subjects they describe, thus bringing them under certain boundaries and limits. As we can see, the literature was prolific in defining what the movement was not and what it did not achieve.

What I would like to present in this work is a “gathering” that attempts to examine the boundaries and limits created by the literature in its attempt to explain the LPM and the consequent dilemmas of rural unrests in South Africa.

Drawing from six years of collective fieldwork with the National Council and with the Kwazulu-Natal wing of the movement, I am aiming to offer a depiction of the movement through the actions and achievements we have observed.<sup>1</sup> Instead of what is absent, I would like to offer some glimpses into what actions and agencies emerged from our intimate contact with some LPM activists during this period.

In the subsequent sections, I will deal with the challenging topics raised by the literature, beginning with the controversial role the NGOs have played in rural mobilizations and extending it to the LPM's own problems. Later, I will present some of my own research data to discuss the theoretical and methodological dimensions of the findings.

## **The movement that never was**

### **Rural politics, NGOs and the LPM**

*The NLC network grew from four organizations into ten land NGOs within seven years, each more or less representing one province. Thus, the NLC network became the only segment of civil society with a national presence struggling for land ownership patterns to change. (Mnxitama, 2006:45)*

The NGOs have played a central role in rural politics in South Africa over the last thirty years and the literature has been prolific in analysing the way they normally work (Greenberg, 2004; Fortin, 2010; Sato, 2012). It is common knowledge that the key aspects of non-governmental organisations are “communities” and “projects” and that after the apartheid regime collapsed, many of these organisations worked to address the insecure relationship to land which some communities faced. To cite James (2005), the goal of the NGOs was to secure to rights of restitution and the people's rights to stay on the land where they lived. The proper notion of rights was, of course, a result of the legal structure implemented after democracy, a structure that was also influenced by the advocacy work of the NGOs. It is no coincidence that the population groups which appeared as entitled to land rights under the new dispensation were the

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<sup>1</sup> When I use the first person plural, I am referring to with a group that included Prof. Antonadia Borges and a group of students such as Joyce Gotlib, Fabricio

same ones consecrated by the NGOs: farm dwellers, occupiers, labour tenants, the dispossessed and few others.

There is no doubt that NGOs have performed a very important role in creating these categories for both the state and rural communities. We cannot overlook the fact that these categories were palatable for the international financial support needed at that point, as Shivij (2005) has noted. Nonetheless, there is some information that is missing here, such as how the communities we came to know as “landless” captured the attention of the NGOs in the first place. This is the side of the story that not been covered by the research done in the past. As we saw before, scholars had a strong desire for a grassroots movement but found it difficult to understand that there were local politics that predated and exceeded the NGOs in these places.

According to Sato (2012), AFRA (one of key members of the NLC and an important supporter of the LPM in Kwazulu-Natal) never had a prominent role in organising the affected communities internally. In most cases, AFRA would have very selective contact with one person inside the community and would try to organise gatherings to inform the locals. But how were these gatherings possible? Who attended? Why did the fieldworkers decide to visit these specific sites? In many cases, as Sato demonstrates, the NGOs never reached what has been vaguely referred to as the “grassroots”:

*Apart from research work which occupied considerable time and energy of AFRA fieldworkers, AFRA started to bring together threatened rural communities at a series of workshops”... “However, AFRA learnt with great disappointment that these representatives did not necessarily take feedback from these workshops back into their communities. (Sato, 2012: 10)*

There were many reasons for this failure, but a discussion of them would exceed the scope of this paper. As Sato stresses, the lack of field workers and rapid turnover made it difficult to create closer relationships on the ground level contributed to that. In his analysis of LPM-NGOs relations, Greenberg affirms:

*“In most cases, affiliates had always only interacted with the LPM on their own terms, especially through typical NGO workshop and capacity-building processes disconnected from concrete grassroots mass actions.” (Greenberg, 2004:20)*

The ongoing work of Ntsebeza (2013) on the farm worker strikes in the Western Cape (2012-2013) is also raising some important questions on the relations between the regional NGOs and local leadership. Ntsebeza’s work also reproduces the self-centred vision of the NGO and more generally, of academia (since the author is involved in both) on the need for a national movement and on the lack of organisations meaningful to civil society (his concerns are not very different from those of Mnxitama, 2006). However, at least provisionally, the work admits the possibility for new and complex relationships in rural areas, where there could in fact be room to consider a new research agenda.

To conclude, we must consider that if the literature reveals a strong desire for a national grassroots movement or for a struggle that would spread nationally, there were also immense failures on the NGO side. We cannot ignore the fact that at least three national structures were formed over the past two decades. The National Land Committee (NLC), the Alliance of the Land and Agrarian Reform Movements (ALARM), and now the Tshintsha Amakaya (TA) have all tried to pursue some national unity at this level without any sustainable results until this moment.

### **What they never were**

The LPM and the NGOs were always analysed from a mélange of political and organisational perspectives where what is “good and right” is simply accepted with almost no question. The failed relations within the National Land Committee, among NGOs and between LPM representatives, and the idealised “people on the ground” were read as organisation problems mainly associated with the decision-making processes and accountability, and also with the flow of information (Greenberg, 2004).

Based on the analysis of these organisations, it is not difficult to conclude that although the LPM had a national council, it was never a national movement. In 2005, I embarked upon a national tour with two of the national council members and another two MST militants. For a month we travelled together to all the South African provinces in order to strengthen the movement's local mobilisation. Only in Kwazulu-Natal, Limpopo and Gauteng was I able to identify a clear LPM membership (groups that never exceeded fifty people in a limited number of rural places). In all other provinces, we visited groups that were struggling for their land rights but were outside the scope of any LPM influence, as also observed by James (2007). In Mpumalanga At this point in the journey, my impression was that the LPM leaders wanted to involve these communities in the movement but knew this involvement would require more resources than they would ever have. The feeling that emanated from these national tours is now much clearer to me. For the local people, it was important to be aware that there was a movement out there, a movement that was almost impossible for them to join collectively due to many reasons. For the LPM, the tour allowed representatives to feel they were struggling for something that was bigger than their organisation or any individual cause. I considered that as LPM leaders (not considering the NGO people), they aspired to represent a national cause – the struggle for land reform – but weren't savvy enough to turn the organisation into a national movement. This is crucially different from what scholars and NGO activists expected from the LPM.

If the movement was not national, it was also never a mass movement. Those who quote LPM performances from the international meetings in Durban and Johannesburg at the beginning of the 2000s do not claim that the marchers were LPM constituents. The fact the movement was able to mobilise such a great number of protesters was, in my opinion, more indicative of the importance of the land question in South Africa (attested by its high drawing power) than of the strength or force of the LPM. There is little written information on these marches that could help us understand what kind of mobilisation they were.<sup>2</sup> The press statements, however, clearly state that the Landless Assembly was part of The

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<sup>2</sup> <http://archives.lists.indymedia.org/imc-sa/2001-August/000199.html>

Landlessness=Racism Campaign, which was organised by the UN World Conference Against Racism(WCAR). The same would occur at another UN Summit in 2002 when thousands of marchers joined the LPM to support their causes.<sup>3</sup>

As Greenberg (2004) sustains, at a certain point after the NLC's internal conflict, they made a decision for regional members to sell membership cards (together with a movement t-shirt) in the provinces. The idea was to create a sustainable source of income to liberate the LPM from the NGO's financial control, and also to establish a proper group of members and not just sympathisers. These packages, as they referred to the card and t-shirt, were accompanied by receipts to be returned to the movement's national office. At a price of ZAR 24.00 the packages sold were in some cases not enough to cover the expenses of the members who sold them<sup>4</sup>. The results of this initiative seemed not to be good enough both from the side of funds and ground mobilisations.

Another point that received much criticism was the lack of direct actions. Unfortunately, the LPM was always unfairly compared to the Brazilian MST. As *Balleti, Johnson and Wolford* (2007) suggested, the movement never organised the mass land occupations their Brazilian counterparts had done with great success. I consider this comparison unfair because the authors did not consider the possibility of any direct actions other than land occupations. According to them and to Mnxitama (2006), land occupations never happened due to the repressive nature of the South Africa ruling party in a context where the ghosts of land reform in Zimbabwe (largely based on land occupations) had the potential to offset the recently established balance of power in the country. The next section, attempts to demonstrate that there were other direct actions relatively successful in terms of mobilisation that were never mentioned in the

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<sup>3</sup> In this sense, I agree with James when she states "On these occasions it has joined forces with other protesters against the post-apartheid government policies." (2007:15)

<sup>4</sup> The amount was supposed to be divided as follows: twelve rands to the national council, six rands to the province and six rands to the local branch, according to the minutes of the LPM meeting on 7-8 May 2002

literature, mainly because they were regional and not national. I will also discuss a significant obstacle to land occupations that I discovered among most of the LPM members whom I worked with in Kwazulu-Natal and with the families James (2007) affirms to have founded the LPM in Mpumalanga, who were farm dwellers and/or labour tenants who had access to land.

### **What was the movement?**

For analytical purposes, I suggest that the history of the movement can be divided into three moments. The first is the foundational period (2001-2004), accurately described by authors like Greenberg (2004), Alexander (2004) and James (2007), when the main features included a high media profile through press statements and the well-known marches in Durban and Johannesburg. At that point, the NLC was the main structure and driving force since it was behind the selection and mobilisation of the activists who would attend the foundational moments.

The second moment (2004-2006) was the aftermath of the split within the NLC, when radicalisation and disputes over government relations within the NGO coalition caused divisions among the members of the movement's fragile national council. The NLC thus started to break down just as the movement established an independent office in Brixton, Johannesburg. At the offices, I witnessed an increasing number of power disputes among the national council members and, at the same, time a progressively diminishing interest in the movement among both radical and more moderate activists.

The council dispute mainly focused on control over the scarce funding sent by the British NGO War-on-Want to pay for office upkeep and the travel and cell phone expenses of council members. During the period I stayed at the office, they had office facilities and rooms where members could stay when in Johannesburg. While there, their meals were also covered by the movement. They would be on site to attend the council meeting as well other events promoted by the government and NGOs.



The third moment was after the national office shut down and all council members had to return to their own provinces. I would say that at least in Johannesburg and Kwazulu-Natal, this was the most active period in terms of real actions and the less explored by the literature.

Since the national office was closed, I decided to follow the two members of the national council who had welcomed me and the MST activists in 2005. Both hailed from Kwazulu-Natal, where they had a local office at the AFRA (Association for Rural Advancement) building until 2009.<sup>5</sup> Here, due to the limited scope of the paper, I will not discuss their relationship with this NGO, but the continuous support of this institution is unquestionably one of the reasons why the movement lasted longer in that province.

In Kwazulu-Natal, it was easier to observe an actual movement. The LPM there was formed as an extension of the Tenure Security Coordination Committee (TSCC) a sort of support group for families facing eviction, farm dwellers and labour tenants.

*The TSCC was formed in 1997 almost three years into the new dispensation in South Africa. Representatives of mainly farm communities who had gathered, with the assistance of the Association For Rural Advancement (AFRA), to discuss the Extension of Security of Tenure Bill seized the opportunity and formed a committee to co-ordinate the activities of farm dwellers in the province. (Mkhize, 2004:43)*

This does not mean that the LPM had replaced the organisation, but that the majority of its members had attachments to another group also supported by the AFRA.<sup>6</sup> In Kwazulu-Natal, the areas where the movement was most effective coincided with the areas where AFRA had helped to organise local committees to

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<sup>5</sup> To understand the role played by the AFRA in Kwazulu-Natal, the work of Sato (200x) is a very consistent reference.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.afra.co.za/upload/files/AR01.pdf>

defend the rights of the farm dwellers: the midlands and the northern part of the province.<sup>7</sup>

I am describing this background in order to demonstrate that in Kwazulu-Natal, like in Limpopo and Mpumalanga, the movement was formed by and attracted groups of farm dwellers and labour tenants who were threatened with dispossession by farmers. It means that unlike Brazil's landless, who appeared in the work of *Balleti, Johnson and Wolford* (2007), these tenants were already on the land. It would thus appear illogical to think that land occupations should emerge from the LPM's actions in those provinces. From a certain point of view they were already considered occupiers of the farms they lived on by the farmers and by the law.<sup>8</sup> In all the cases raised during our fieldwork from 2005 to 2011, the farm dwellers who claimed rights of residence and faced evictions were regarded by the legal proprietor as if they had seized the land the Brazilian way.

In the case of many of the LPM activists we visited, simply leaving the household alone to attend one of the movement meetings was a source of anxiety. On such occasions, the farmer could simply tear the activist's house down or impound his/her herds of cattle. In other cases, farmers locked the gates or used armed guards to keep the activist from returning.<sup>9</sup>

Although the occupation strategy was not effective, we have observed another very successful direct action. According to the ESTA provision 6 (2) (dA) the

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<sup>7</sup> At the beginning in Vryheid, Estcourt, Danhouser, Howick, Newcastle, Greytown, Impendle, Colenso and Mooi River, and later in cities like Dukuduku, Melmoth, and Boschoek when some restitution claimants also joined the TSCC (Mkhize, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> According to the Extension of Security of Tenure Act 62 of 1997, "‘occupier’ means a person residing on land which belongs to another person, and who has or on 4 February 1997 or thereafter had consent or another right in law to do so, but excluding: (b) a person using or intending to use the land in question mainly for industrial, mining, commercial or commercial farming purposes, but including a person who works the land himself or herself and does not employ any person who is not a member of his or her family; and (c) a person who has an income in excess of the prescribed amount."

<sup>9</sup> Both strategies were used by farmers in the districts of Ingogo, Howick and Mooi River in 2007.

occupier has the right “to bury a deceased member of his or her family who, at the time of that person's death, was residing on the land on which the occupier is residing, in accordance with their religion or cultural belief, if an established practice in respect of the land exists.”<sup>10</sup> According to AFRA,<sup>11</sup> from 2001 to 2006 at least 30 families in the region had their right to bury a deceased person denied by farm owners. From 2006 to 2008 during our stays in Kwazulu-Natal, we observed at least four cases when the LPM member organised a mobilisation to force the proprietor to allow the funeral on the farm.

In many ways, we can consider the forced burials to be the main direct action from 2005 to 2009. First, these were mass actions involving hundreds of movement members and sympathisers exclusively from rural communities. Second, the burials were real achievements that resonated far beyond the family involved. When a deceased man or woman is buried on a farm, the families are also granted the rights to visit the graves and to perform a ritual even if they leave the household. Third, winning a dispute with the farmers through the support of the movement reinforced the legitimacy of the LPM among labour tenants.

What about the mediation between the dwellers and farmers? Can it be considered a direct action of the movement? In the period between 2008 and 2010, we had the opportunity to accompany five different LPM members during their daily activities. The first thing we noticed was the massive number of calls they received on their prepaid cell phones from local families threatened by farmer actions. In these cases, they normally tried to contact the farmer to explain the specific rights the family had according to the ESTA or any other law. They also paid visits to some of the farmers and families. On various occasions, they were able to negotiate an alternative to eviction, the return of the cattle impounded, permission to receive visitors or access to roads and even to water. The mediation was only possible because of the LPM's reputation as a legitimate

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<http://www.plato.org.za/pdf/legislation/Extension%20of%20Security%20of%20Tenure%20Act%2062%20of%201997.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.afra.co.za/jit\\_default\\_1034.html](http://www.afra.co.za/jit_default_1034.html)

institution. In all the cases we witnessed, members wore their LPM red t-shirts to appear trustworthy.

The action of the LPM activists, as said above, helped local people get better information about their relations with the government. Especially in cases where the labour tenant claims were being reviewed by the courts or a ruling had been issued, they usually visited the local DLA branches to check up on the process. In some cases we followed, even the DLA officials would ask for the help of the activist when visiting a farmer or a family that had filed a claim.<sup>12</sup>

It was not unusual to observe the activists themselves helping people residing in areas controlled by traditional authorities when the land where they were residing was a matter of dispute.

The mediation as the LPM main direct action in Kwazulu-Natal became central after the movement eviction from AFRA's house in 2009. After the conflict with the NGO, a group of activists started direct negotiations with the British NGO War on Want (WOW), which granted them a stipend of ZAR 100, 000 to establish an independent office in Ladysmith. The office was open for a year in a commercial building downtown. With a computer (the same one they had in Johannesburg) and a landline, the office was run by one of the local LPM activists and it became a point of reference for rural citizens in the region. Through personal networks, labour tenants and other farm dwellers facing problems with farm owners or any of the state agencies (DLA, education, municipalities) would visit the office and ask the movement to intervene. After few months, they had organised mediations for more than a hundred claimants.

Despite the relative success in the mediation of conflicts, the few activists who continued working for the office (no more than 10) faced new internal disagreements. The main problem was again the fact that none of them were employed and, at the same time, they did not receive a salary for their activism.

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<sup>12</sup> Joyce Gotlib was part of the research group and gathered this information during 2009 and 2010.

Food, cell phone airtime and transportation were a heavy burden not always covered by the movement stipends.

At the end of the first year, the activists received a letter from the WOW asking for a report on the movement's political activities and its financial situation to fulfil the LPM's part of the agreement. My collaborators and I were there when the letter arrived and together with the activists, we realized they did not have proper control of their bank account or, more importantly, the writing skills necessary to produce the report. These tasks were always handled by their partner NGO. Later, the WOW sent an independent auditor to report on the movement. The report was critical of the movement's problems, especially in terms of the accountability of its activities and expenses, and repeated the gossip circulating among local NGO activists. After this report, the office was closed and leadership returned to their particular residential areas.

The files and the furniture from the movement's office were sent to the house of the former national speaker and are now stored under a dilapidated ceiling alongside used cars parts. Although I have not observed any movement gatherings in the past three years, the people I meet continue to call themselves LPM members and in 2013 a Facebook page was created for the movement in Limpopo.

### **A modest gathering**

One quality few social scientists praise is modesty (Law 2004). We normally try to present broader pictures of reality and use such pictures to generalise our conclusion to even larger contexts. Some would say this is the method of the social sciences per se. Together with Law (2004) and Latour (2005), I would prefer to say that this one of the methods social scientists have relied on (probably the predominant one), but there are alternatives.

The LPM analysts seemed to follow this line of thought. They have been looking for a national movement and massive direct actions. In this search, sometimes

influenced by the boastful attitudes of certain NGO officials behind the movement, they have not paid enough attention to what was happening on the ground level. One thing is concern that modest actions will never lead to a countrywide land and agrarian transformation, but claiming that nothing is happening overlooks these modest actions entirely. For scholars to say the movement is dead nationally is in this case tantamount to saying it no longer exists. All the actions described above happened after the movement was considered to be in disarray according to the literature and none of them have appeared in the descriptions of land struggles by scholars to my knowledge.

The main problem, from my perspective, is that we keep saying we want action to be constructed from the ground up, though we are not willing to actually take a look at the ground level and see something other than what the literature has predicted.

Following Law (2004), I consider that the current research on rural mobilization in South Africa, but also in many countries in the global south, has created a sort of certainty that does not allow for any alternative interpretations of such processes. It is as if only a very specific set of political and organisational forms were possible. This set has to be coherent in all its aspects. In this specific context, rural dwellers are generally regarded as passive especially when they face the institutions of modern politics (NGOs, political parties, international coalitions). By imposing such formulas, we are blocking any possibility of agency for these people just because their actions do not live up to our own expectations.

This is why I think the notion of “mode of gathering” can help us to be fair to what the LPM was and tried to do according its own local activists. This methodology *“is used to find a way of talking about relations without locating these with respect to the normative logics implied in (in)coherence or (in)consistency,”* (Law, 2004:160).

## **Conclusion and ways forward**

My central aim is to affirm that we must reconsider, in sociological terms, the notion of “gathering” as political agency. In South Africa and in many other places, political agency is always identified with a very specific capacity of action: the capacity to gather people together to fight for a cause. The problem with social scientists, in most cases, is that they take certain forms/shapes of these struggles as the only possible way to mobilise people. As I have demonstrated there is a strong desire in South Africa for a movement “from the bottom up.” Consequently, there is a desire for such actions to emerge *nationally* from actual *rural or landless people*. The data and methods presented in most of the works analysed here have effectively demonstrated that this specific kind of mobilisation has not occurred. As Law (2004:143) argued, “Methods, then, unavoidably produce not only truths and non-truths... but also arrangements with political implications..

I believe none of the analysts are happy with the picture they have assembled. To affirm “there is no movement” is not the same as saying there are no politics at work in rural areas. Drawing from other experiences, like the Brazilian MST or urban movements, we tend to create an exemplary mode of political action based on the recollection of certain experiences (land occupation, autonomy, the organisational skills of the leadership) regarded as universal and constant especially in the political realm.

Nevertheless, are any of the features of landlessness in South Africa exemplary? I am not defending the exceptionalism of the South African situation, though it is necessary to recognise the unstable context in which the landlessness (especially the one connected to the LPM) was produced. Besides the fact that there is a very effective master narrative on the process of land dispossession in the country, it has had many different implications for the non-whites on the ground as we can observe in the works by James (2007) and Walker (2008). How can we expect regularities and periodicities?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Here I am referring to the debate between Walker (2008) and Hendricks (2013). For Walker (2008), the “master narrative” of land dispossession had a

As I have demonstrated if we gather the facts from Kwazulu-Natal (my own work), Gauteng (Alexander, 2004) and Mpumalanga (James, 2007), the exemplary modes of analysis will not simply work. Instead of opting to describe the lack of the exemplarity, why not describe the simple elements that are in fact at work?

In the moment when I analysed the movement, my understanding of the scale of the movement was transformed. I did not view the LPM as a national gathering (so “national” was not a condition of its existence). Instead, following what Latour (2005) suggests, I have presented effects such as the awareness of rural people’s rights among police officers, conservative church leaders and farmers. I have also brought up the forced burials and the facilitated dialogue between land claimants, DLA bureaucrats, traditional authorities and NGOs.

The re-scaling of the movement is a methodological procedure and thus has political consequences. It is important to note that this is not a simple traditional empirical conclusion versus a broader political analysis. I could have witnessed those events in my fieldwork without considering them relevant. Gathering the “local information” to produce new effects is a deliberate procedure to create a new understanding of movement, or better, a meaningful agency for it. Of course, it involves a risk of non-coherence, like saying the local and the international dimensions of the movement did not miss the national. It can also be said the affiliation to La Via Campesina or the forced burials were never addressed by the national government, which is true but doesn’t mean the movement was in disarray at the local level.

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deleterious effect over land policies since it oversimplified the complexities of the real processes. On the other side, Hendricks affirms that Walker’s approach individualises the question, leaving no terrain to speak of land reform. We must note that the “master narrative” and the “individualised cases” operate in different modes of gathering, yielding diverse political uses. Walker is speaking from the Land Claims Commission, while Hendricks approaches the matter from a broader political-economic position.



We can extend this rationale to another level. What about the capacity of gathering institutions to struggle with and for the landless? The hegemonic version on the history of the LPM has been the one stressing the top-down organization where the NGOs were the ones who rallied the people (Alexander, 2004; Mnxitama, 2005; Greenberg, 2004) to fulfil their own specific interests. What if we posited exactly the opposite: who rallied the NGOs that once formed the NLC to struggle alongside the landless in South Africa? What were the capacities the “landless” needed to call the attention of “white liberals”, “elites”, scholars and other middle class individuals to the “sufferings” of rural people in South Africa? It is common knowledge, as Sato (2012) has demonstrated, that the NGOs chose their cases. Though this is true, we should also understand that some people “on the ground” had to get their attention and put together a legitimate case before the NGOs arrived. Local activist had the hard task of adapting their individual situations to fit the portfolios of the NGOs.

This exercise in reversal is not a rhetorical approach: it is necessary if we really want to understand the social mobilization in the South African countryside over the past decades. However, in order to do so we must pause to examine the traditional model of political organization. Not only because some of them have failed to respond to the needs of people and scholars, but also because we must allow new forms to emerge. It is necessary to keep our theories, desires and assumptions from interfering with what Law (2004) calls “modes of gathering”. Part of my own agenda is to understand the conflicts between the projects of the NGOs and the local problems while avoiding the top-down theory.

The main problem of this view is that agency is already attributed to certain *actants* (white liberals, government and NGO officials, academics or chiefs) and there is thus no space for emergent forces. My objective here was to show that if we want something different to happen, we must actively produce these differences both theoretically and methodologically.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Besides the need to consider James Scott’s important “weapons of the weak”, here I am trying to present an alternative. I do not consider that social space is a

Finally, going back to the LPM, the re-scaling of movement allows us to understand that it did not play a national role in mobilising the rural landless or in pressuring the national government. It was effective at a level the NGOs normally do not normally reach: the face-to-face mediation of conflicts over land.

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continuum from the national to the local level and I also do not believe that the national is necessarily a superior force at the local level.

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