

Agrarian reform and land reform: social movements and the meaning of landlessness in Brazil and South Africa¹

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Introduction

The comparison between the Rural Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil (MST) and the Landless People's Movement of South Africa (LPM) has already been the subject of Rosa (2007 and 2008) and Balleti et al (2008). The former compared the relation between these movements and the State, while the latter looked to list the differences in the form of organization and mobilization of each case, identifying the potential limits of social movements international networks formed over recent years. Both authors set out from the premise that the movements are comparable since both represent the *landless* in each of the countries analysed. What neither seems to question, though, is precisely the fact that *land* and *landless* may not have the same connotation or the same political meaning in each of the countries. If the meanings of the objects and causes to which they devote themselves in their struggles are not necessarily the same, the movements may after all not be exactly equivalent in a sociological perspective. Hence the present chapter does not depart from the acceptance of the *landless* category as a universal equivalent but from its reconstruction through the evidences left by the agencies of the movements themselves in public space.

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The analysis, which nonetheless aims to be comparative, will focus, following the steps taken by Boltanski (2000), on the situation of public disputes in which each of the movements emerges as a representative of those demanding land. In these situations, I argue, the subjects involved are explicitly asked to present *proofs* of their worth and importance. By desingularising the position of the actants, these proofs enable the constitution of what Latour (2005) calls collectives. From this viewpoint both the MST and the LPM are collectives organized through the association of the notion of landlessness with actions, symbols, discourses, documents and histories that in turn comprise meanings specific to each movement. By analysing these objects the chapter looks to describe the different assemblages that, in each movement, give social meaning to the landless and land in Brazil and South Africa.

Setting out from these premises, I look to highlight the fact – overlooked in the aforementioned comparisons – that if crucial differences exist in the terms employed in each country, the relations between land and the landless cannot be taken as stable, unequivocal or univocal: while the Brazilian movement struggles for ‘agrarian reform,’ the South African movement struggles for ‘land reform.’ Finally I develop the central hypothesis that racial questions specific to each country and their relation to agriculture are essential to understanding this difference between land and the landless in each place.

What to compare?

The MST was formed in 1985 as result of consecutive rural land occupations in Southern Brazil. Since then the movement was expanded to almost all states in Brazil. At the beginning the movement did occupy state land and after 1993, when a specific clause of the 1988 constitution was finally regulated (the one determining the criteria to declare a farm unproductive/unused), they began to occupy private unproductive lands. Land occupation and the formation of encampments were followed by marches and governmental buildings occupations to speed up land expropriations or to claim post-settlement policies as housing, loans and rural development. The most active period for the movement was the 90’s. In 1997, the peak year, 856 land occupations involving 113.909 families all over the country were carried out (Dataluta, 2012). After 2004 the number of actions, encampments and

people has decreased and the last set of data available for 2012 shows 253 occupations and 23.145 families. Besides the fact that MST has pioneered the contemporary forms of collective action to claim agrarian reform in the country, the movement is not the only organization behind the land struggles. In 2012 they were responsible for 42,7% of the land occupations and around 60% of the families mobilized in such actions (Dataluta, 2012: 31).

The LPM was formed in 2001 as a response to the failures of the South African democratic government to accomplish with the expectations of a massive land reform both in rural and urban areas. For a short moment (2003-2005) the movement had a National Office in Johannesburg, but at most of the time their members had local or regional roles (specially after the national office was closed). The movement became known by its participation in marches and sit-ins during international events held in Durban and Johannesburg and for reproducing these strategies in the local levels to claim celerity in the land reform programmes, rights for farm-dwellers, the punishment of abusive farm owners and evictions. It is hard to estimate the number of members or people mobilized by the LPM since the movement has never had long term occupations or any other source from where we could draw conclusive comparative data. The rural wing of movement was active until 2011, especially in Kwazulu-Natal, while few urban groups, mainly in Johannesburg, still claim the legacy of the original movement.

Taking all these differences in account I would not like to compare the movements by their achievements, forms of action or membership but only regarding the notions of land, landless and landlessness they mobilize in their struggles.

When movements meet

From the outset of our analysis, we need to acknowledge that the comparison between the MST and the LPM does not exist merely in the heads of the researchers studying them. Since the creation of the LPM in 2001, the two movements have promoted exchanges in Brazil and South Africa through *La Via Campesina*, an international coalition to which both are affiliated. The research informing the present text was itself developed from an ethnographic study of one of the trips made by Brazilian activists to South Africa and the dilemmas that emerged in the everyday contact between the two organizations.

In 2005 I accompanied a group of activists from the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) visiting the Landless People's Movement (LPM) in South Africa.² During one of the initial encounters, in Kwazulu-Natal province, with people linked to LPM, the first question asked of the MST representative was: *why are there whites (like the activist himself who was speaking) in the MST?* The question shook not only the activist but also the researcher who was accompanying him. Until that moment, for the activist and for myself, the association between being landless and being white was absolutely normal and uncontroversial. Indeed, in terms of the MST's history, we know that the movement was born among the white *colonos*³ who had organized occupations of public land in the south of Brazil at the end of the 1970s.⁴ After the foundational moments people from different colours and races joined the movement, but there are many works highlighting the racial tensions in settlements and encampments organised by MST (Gehlen 1997 and Schimidt, 1992). Despite this fact, it is extremely rare to see any reference to skin colour in the description of the landless on the Brazilian side of the Atlantic, either in sociological texts or in the accounts produced by the movement itself.

The LPM, for its part, was formed entirely by black people who during the post-apartheid period have demanded formal ownership of the lands on which they live or where they lived prior to being evicted by the racist regime. It did not take long for us to realise that the question made by the black South African activist was far from simple and would involve the very bases of the action of both movements. As we shall see in the sections below, the *skin colour* of the landless would become essential to understanding what the struggle for land means in both places.

² My thanks to the MST and the activists Vanderlei Martini and Inês Pinheiro for allowing me to accompany them on their trip to South Africa and to share with them the surprises and anxieties of dealing with the land question in the latter country. The concerns that prompted this text are the collective product of innumerable conversations and situations that unfolded during one month of living together as we travelled between the various South African provinces. I apologize if the conclusions reached in this text only poorly reflect our mutual learning process during this period. I also thank Mangaliso Kubheka and Thobekile Radebe for their generosity in enabling my visit.

³ The term *colono* (colonist or settler) refers to someone recognized as a descendent of German, Italian or Polish immigrants, among others, who arrived in Brazil during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to live and devote themselves to working the land. Here it is important to note that the historical narrative privileged by these groups identifies peasant Europe as their birthplace, while also emphasizing the positive (read: productive) aspects of colonial occupation in contemporary Brazil, obliterating the violence of this process, especially in terms of the construction of the image of empty, unproductive, people-less lands, just waiting to be cultivated by appropriately skilled subjects – that is, the settlers.

⁴ These occupations are explored in more depth in Rosa (2012) and Sigaud, Rosa & Macedo (2008).

Along with the colour of the landless, we came across another important point distinguishing these two movements in terms of their discourses and documents: the *slogan* of their struggle. In Brazil all the MST's documents and the discourses gathered during the research refer to a struggle for *agrarian reform*. In South Africa, though, using the same research procedures, we mostly encountered references to *land reform*.

Taking as a subject the forms through which the activists, movements, sociologists and governments justify and aggrandize (in the sense of attributing scales and magnitudes for defining relevance and importance in a relational way, as described by Boltanski, 2000) their actions in theoretical and racial schemes, slogans, documents and symbols, my aim is to show that the association between the race of the landless and their respective struggles may be a fertile path for a better insight into the meaning of their actions. Rather than elucidating and defining the true meaning of these struggles, this comparison aims to highlight essential epistemological obstacles and challenges, in the sense proposed by Stengers (2002), for those immersed in the field of rural studies in Brazil and South Africa.

In methodological terms, I attempt to follow Boltanski's suggestion of analysing the "way persons build causes, good causes, collective causes" and how these operations always depend on an *aggrandizement* of people, discourses and all the other objects implicated in this dispute (Boltanski, 2000: 26 *et passim*). For these authors, in looking to become *worthy* of taking part in a dispute, people deploy objects and situations in social *states* so as to create equivalences recognizable by the participants. It is the reconstruction of these states that enables social relations to be analysed through these paradigms, which are not parameters of political action extrinsic to the context under investigation but, on the contrary, conceptually fabricated by the subjects in dispute. The fundamental element in this type of sociological construction is the actants' recognition of the *proofs* presented in a legitimate form to *justify* the existence and construction of a determined social relation. Taking Bruno Latour's idea (2005) that we must reconstruct the associations that allow the social existence of our research subject, I look to show how the actions of the two movements connect with the history and sociology of each country.

In the present case, we shall be placing in perspective the form in which, in the context described above, the landless of South Africa and Brazil, using specific sets of *proofs* (such as skin colours, slogans and also sociological concepts), in equally particular situations, organize what have generically been called *struggles for land*.

Discourses and narratives as proofs

The first step is to take as a starting point an analysis of the forms through which the MST, by means of its activists and documents, justifies itself as a *worthy* or valued actant in the struggle for land in Brazil.⁵ What objects and proofs allow it to mobilize people, resources and theories that, by making it recognizable, create the public value of the landless during the emergence of this movement?

Observing that the present research set out from an institutional comparison of the movements and their respective places of action in the two countries, I shall look to use as an analytic material the *reports* produced on who the landless are and what they are demanding from the respective States in each country, as a way of constructing a possible response to these questions.

Who are the landless of the MST?

In this section I present written discourses produced by the MST or its members that seek to define its objectives and its social bases. Writing for a publication that tries to account for the various meanings acquired by the term 'land' in Brazil, Ademar Bogo, one of the main national leaders of the MST, defines his idea of who the landless are as follows:

⁵ The term actant, highly familiar to readers of Bruno Latour, was coined by the linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas. Roughly speaking his 'actantial' model can be said to have been inspired by Vladimir Propp's theories concerning narrative structures. Although the structuralist approach is, from a panoramic viewpoint, common to them both, Greimas argued that the actant occupies actantial roles depending on the narrative's trajectory. Thus an actant is not the same as a character and, consequently, cannot be characterized in an isolated form, independently of the plot. Greimas's formulation was appropriated by diverse intellectuals later described as being dedicated to thinking through the "crisis of the subject," such as Julia Kristeva. In Latour's work this discomfort with the hegemony of the subject as the only plausible actor is dissipated by investing in the concept of the actant, only definable in the process of recomposition of the social.

“Initially it is a composite noun that designates the social condition of those who live off agricultural work and have **the skills** for the same, but do not possess their own land.” (Bogo 2005: 419). My emphases in bold.

In the MST’s proposal for agrarian reform of 1995, republished in a collection edited by another of its main leaders, we find another definition that alludes to the same elements:

“Who do we consider landless: Rural workers who work the land under the following conditions: sharecroppers, leaseholders, farmhands, tenant farmers, squatters, permanent and temporary wage labourers and smallholders owning less than 5 hectares.” (MST 2005: 178).

Though separated by a decade, in these two discursive moments the MST presents itself to other subjects (in one case the academic public, in the other a larger sector of society, including the State) in a way allowing the movement to be considered legitimate. Both definitions are very close to those that we can read in the first manifestos from the landless encampments in the south of Brazil, found in the book by Méliga & Janson (1982) and Gehlen’s thesis (1983), among others.

Turning to the forms of written presentation in each of these cases, we can think each of the elements associated with the landless condition as an *object* that is used as proof of its *public worth (or dignity)*. In these situations, productive work on the land – the result of aptitude for rural activity – appears as the justification for the person to receive a plot. As we shall see below, the dispute leading to a certain type of political action from the movement and from the State is made possible precisely by the recognition – from the MST and other actants – of the obligatory relation of equivalence between *land* and productive space for *agriculture*.⁶ It is important to note the *landless* and the *land* cannot be seen or analyzed in these manifestos as things that possess their own value independent of their relation to other objects. Both need to be made worthy by other elements such as *work*, *skills* and *agriculture* that enable its differentiation from another type of *land* and another type of *landless*:

⁶ It is important to note that “Land for who works on it” was one of the slogans adopted by the MST between 1984 and 1988.

that land that is not used for agriculture and *that* person that, despite owning land, does not work or have the skills to use it productively.

Understanding, based on its expression in the movement's public discourses, the meaning of these proofs and associations between the figure of the landless and all these objects populating the MST documents is impossible unless we consider these characteristics to be constructed through a *dispute*.

Reading its documents, the MST's main dispute was with the *latifúndium*, the large scale rural property, as a mode of production and a political unit. In all the documents publicized by the MST over the last 20 years, this is the enemy to be combated: the large estate, associated with various other proofs whose worths are always negative, such as monoculture, speculation, unproductiveness, violence, labour exploitation

These terms form part of an assemblage that takes into account the value attributed to these terms in any given social situation. In Rosa (2012) I looked to show that the landless category emerges from the interaction between demands for land and State policies: or, more precisely, it is formed as a category for specific public policies. In this earlier text, I pinpointed the government of Leonel Brizola in Rio Grande do Sul (1959-1963) as one of the primordial sources of the term.⁷ In this context, the landless were identified as *poor* farmworkers with no access to land. The main cause of this, identified in various documents produced by the Brizola government, was the predominance of large estates in the region. Paulo Schilling – one of the persons responsible for the government's agrarian reform program and also one of the founders of the first movement to use the expression *sem terra* (landless) namely the Landless Farmers Movement (MASTER), founded in the state of Rio Grande do Sul in 1960 – defines the situation thus:

“Setting out from the unquestionable premise that the agrarian infrastructure [...] is condemned and should disappear, we shall see initially what objectives are to be attained through agrarian reform: 1) elimination of the *latifúndium* [...] as an institution and the *latifundiário* (the large scale farmer) as a class;” (Schilling [1965] 2005: 234).

⁷ Bernard Alves's work (2010) makes substantial progress in terms of our comprehension of the origin of the term in Brazil, making it a fundamental text for understanding the set of associations that were present when the term was originally constituted.

Another element that should not be overlooked in this collective of proofs and *actants* is the form in which the State, in its legislation defining legal access to the land, binds the terms ‘agrarian reform’ and ‘landless.’ In the Land Statute (Law no. 4.504, of 30 November 1964), the central legal instrument to deal with the demands of movements like the MST, we find the following passages:

Art. 25. The lands acquired by the Public Authority, (...), shall be sold (...), in accordance with the following order of preference:

I – to the owner of the disappropriated property, so long as he or she **makes use** of the plot, either directly or through his or her family;

II – to those who **work** on the disappropriated property as tenant, wage labourers, smallholders, or leaseholders; (...)

IV – to farmers whose properties are proven to be insufficient for their own subsistence and that of their family;

V – **to those who are technically qualified in the form of the legislation in force or who have proven competence in the practice of agricultural activities.**

§ 1. Within the order of preference set out in this article, priority shall be given to the heads of large families whose members propose to engage in **agricultural activities** in the area to be allocated.

§ 2. Only **landless workers** may acquire plots, save for the exceptions established under the present Law.

(My emphases in bold.)

As we can see, as far as the Brazilian state is concerned, agrarian reform can only take place if the landless exist as workers possessing the skills needed to engage in agricultural activities. In quoting these varied elements, I wish to highlight the fact that when the MST first emerged (in 1985) and tried to impose itself as a legitimate actant in the disputes for land, it looked to deploy elements identifiable by others as justification of its actions and aggrandizers/dignifiers of its conduct. In looking to assume the representation of the landless, the MST brought a series of proofs that accounted for the importance of this task and already deployed in other disputes in the past.

The recognition of certain aspects of so-called Brazilian social thought and the worths deployed by it is appropriated by the MST, as we can observe in the collection *A questão agrária no Brasil* [The agrarian question in Brazil], edited by João Pedro Stédile (the movement's main leader) and issued by the publishing house also linked to the movement. The five edited volumes reprint manifestos from movements and political parties placed alongside academic texts on the dilemmas of the agrarian social processes within Brazilian left. The publication literally associates intellectual and political views that help legitimize the causes defended by the MST, the foremost of which is undoubtedly the condemnation of the *latifúndium* as a social, political and economic matrix. This association allows the movement to present itself critically in the eyes of its grassroots support, academics and the State itself (actants that also orient themselves through use of the same terms when they refer to the land issue in Brazil) legitimizing a cognitive field defined by the expression “agrarian question.”

Following this brief survey of the multiple universe of objects put to the test in diverse situations in which the *land* appears as a fundamental element, it is also important for us to comprehend why it is always associated in Brazil with the realization of *agrarian reform*. If land appears invariably related to the *agrarian question*, it stands to reason that the political and academic programmes (especially those published in the Stédile collection) emphasize *agrarian reform* as a legitimate and necessary action.

In the approach adopted in this chapter, the aim is simply to show, as the MST has done in recent publications, that these *white landless* – as the South African activist made us vividly aware – are the outcome of a specific situation. In the Brazilian historical narrative, it is the agent with the potential to lead a transformation in the country's agrarian and agricultural structure because, over time, the commercial farmers recognized and represented as ideals – especially the large farmers, but also the smaller ones – were always those with white skins.

What we have seen so far is that the MST incorporates into its justifications well-known historical forms and formulas. Through a specific set of these, it creates a “regime of engagement” within its struggle (Thévenot 2006). In this context, it should be noted that the possibility of an activist feeling worthy of participating in the movement involves the desingularization of his or her individual situation (of the biological body or the limits of a movement, party or institution), a process made

plausible and possible through the correct deployment of the universe of objects we have seen above. Being landless in Brazil, at least in the discursive field, implies incorporating the relation with the land performed by settlers in the south of the country who claim a European origin. Without being connected to these *objects* (such as work and agriculture), their actions would be unrecognizable as worthy and could be seen as illegitimate or unjust by other sections of society or the State.

In other words, we have seen that the landless of the MST are the result of a deployment of historical narratives, sociological interpretations, legal frameworks and social situations that established a condition for their action. In these terms, there is no shared social justification for the action of the *landless* of the MST unless it involves the *agrarian question* and *agrarian reform* in the classical European way. These considerations may seem natural and self-evident to those familiar with studies of this movement. However when we enter into contact with other realities, such as the South African case, the of homology between landless and agrarian shifts completely.

Who are the landless of the LPM?

Having learnt how the landless of the MST are presented and legitimized in Brazil and beyond, we can turn now to the other side of the Atlantic and to the associations involving the actions of the landless in South Africa.

In its internal constitution, made to present the movement to the outside world, but also for those who would like to join its cause, the LPM clearly defines those constituting its landless:

“We, the landless people of South Africa, declare our needs for our government and the world to know. We are the people who have borne the brunt of colonialism and neo-colonialism, of the invasion of our land by the wealthy countries of the world, of the theft of our natural resources, and of the forced extraction of our labour by the settlers. We are the people who have borne the brunt of apartheid, of forced removals from our fields and homes, of poverty in the rural areas, of oppression on the farms and of starvation, neglect and disease in the Bantustans. We have suffered

from migrant labour, which has caused our family life and communities to collapse. We have starved because of unemployment and low wages. We have seen our children stunted because of little food, no water and no sanitation. We have seen our land dry up and blow away in the wind, because we have been forced into smaller and smaller places” (LPM Interim Constitution).

And in its Landless Peoples Charter, the movement asserts that:

“the entire black population of South Africa that needs land must have the right to land reform, since we have all lost our land during colonialism and apartheid.”

Accepting that these documents are forms of justification that allow or allowed the LPM to occupy a place of importance in the disputes for land over recent years (Jacobs, 2012), we can perceive straight away that the associations made are very different to those found in the discourses of the MST, presented above.

The fundamental object presented is colonialism (and its contemporary variation, neo-colonialism) as the broadest historical process capable of explaining the current state of the land issue. For the LPM, the social situation of being landless was the result of a process of occupation of the territory today belonging to their country by the Dutch and British, among others, over the last few centuries. The term defining this colonial action is none other than the theft of the land inhabited by “Africans” or “indigenous people,” categories that appear on distinct occasions as synonyms.⁸ Following this originary theft, new objects would be related with the land, such as racial prejudice, poverty, hunger, migration and forced labour.

Nonetheless colonialism does not appear alone in this dispute. Its central association is with *apartheid*, a regime that officially instigated racial difference as social difference in South Africa. For the LPM, *apartheid* did not begin with the arrival in power of the Nationalist Party in 1948 and the formal installation of the segregationist regime. The movement recognizes that the colonial situation became even more complicated following the introduction of laws that imposed limits on the use of the

⁸ As well as the written documents, some of the terms used here were heard in discourses, conversation and meetings involving the participation of LPM members.

land by the country's black population. The Natives Land Act of 1913 restricted the possibility of black ownership of land to the so-called reserves (territories specifically demarcated for black African populations) and, in percentage terms, limited these areas to just 7% (later 13%) of the national territory. The Natives Land Act was followed by even more restrictive legislation that created the means for a massive process of clearance of black people from rural and urban areas and a simultaneous transfer of their lands into the hands of white farmers, a continuous process that reached its peak in the 1960s and 70s. The only type of rural property allowed to the black population was, so to speak, 'communal,' located in the reserves governed by traditional authorities (local chiefs empowered by the apartheid government) whose main function was to deliberate on the allocation of the lands under their responsibility.⁹

A step back in history is necessary for us to comprehend that these questions placed the theme of land to the centre of South African political debates long before the existence of the LPM. Throughout the entire period of apartheid and especially from the 1970s onwards, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worked to challenge the actions of the racist government in clearing and indiscriminately allocating rural and urban lands. One of the most important local NGOs was the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), founded in 1979 to contest the removal of black communities to reserves or bantustans¹⁰ in the area of the former province of Natal. The projects promoted by AFRA led to the emergence of the first committees of people affected by the apartheid land policies. These committees in turn gave rise to the main leaders of the Landless People's Movement more than 20 years later.¹¹

These NGOs and their campaigns looked to associate the discriminatory practices of land eviction to poor living conditions both in the reserves and in the urban spaces (townships) where many of the families were relocated. Reflecting the fact that a number of their members were activists from opposition parties, it was the demands

⁹ On the allocation of lands by traditional chiefs, see the work by Ntsebeza (2005). According to James (2007), the imposition of the traditional chiefs as authorities with the power to allocate land in the reserves was the result of the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act.

¹⁰ AFRA's operation is limited to Kwazulu-Natal province, one of the nine provinces into which the country was divided at the end of apartheid.

¹¹ "Most accounts of the early debates over land reform ignore the participation of landless people. Marginalized landless people gained access to policy debate through non-governmental organization (NGO)-sponsored events such as the 1993 "Back to the Land" Campaign and the 1994 Community Land Conference. Both of these events were organized by the National Land Committee (NLC), a Johannesburg-based national land rights NGO" (Alexander 2004: 13).

of these NGOs that, according to James (2007:34), guided the policies of the African National Congress (ANC) in its negotiations to end apartheid.¹²

The land question opposed on one side the white landowners defending a presentist *agrarian* policy that would safeguard the interests of the commercial sector and, on the other, the NGOs advocating a *land* policy driven by a racially-oriented past of loss or 'dispossession.'¹³ The result of this controversy was the incorporation of the land question in the country's constitution in the following form:

"A person or community whose tenure of land is legally insecure as a result of past racially discriminatory laws or practices is entitled, to the extent provided by an Act of Parliament, either to tenure which is legally secure or to comparable redress.

A person or community dispossessed of property after 19 June 1913 as a result of past racially discriminatory laws or practices is entitled, to the extent provided by an Act of Parliament, either to restitution of that property or to equitable redress."

(James 2007: 5).

The *land question* was seen as a question of reparation of social rights to the contingent of people harmed by the state's segregationist policies. Above all the aim was to guarantee equity in terms of possession of the national territory. A series of laws, acts and constitutional amendments were introduced to regulate this policy whose overall objective was to hand back 30% of the country's lands to black people.¹⁴ For many local analysts this form of incorporating the right to land into the constitutional text became known as the *rights-based approach* (Cousins, 2009).

In a document presented in 2006 by the South African minister of agriculture at an event organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), we can clearly see the meanings that the South African land policy acquires for the government itself:

¹² "The land NGOs played a particularly important role in the design and implementation of the land reform programme. They emerged in a context where communities threatened with apartheid's 'black spot' resettlement – and other landless people such as evicted farm workers – required help to defend themselves from state actions." (James 2007: 35).

¹³ A brief description of these negotiations and the position adopted by the ANC can be found in Ntsebeza 2005.

¹⁴ On the legislation referring to the theme of land in South Africa, see Claassens & Cousins 2008.

“Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.”

These are the words of Mr Sol. Plaatjie, the first Secretary General of the African National Congress, taken from his book *Native Life in South Africa*. On that date, the Natives Land Act No. 27 of 1913 drew a firm line between white and black land holdings by segregating Africans and Europeans on a territorial basis. African farming would only be allowed in the “native reserves,” comprising about 8 percent of all land at the time. In 1936, the Native Trust and Land Act (Act no 18 of 1936) would add about 6 million hectares to the native reserves (later to become the homelands), bringing the total land set aside for blacks to 13.7 percent of the total land area. By 1994, the same highly unequal pattern of land ownership was still in place. This is the legacy of apartheid that the new democratic Government started to address when it came to power.”

(DLA, 2006).

If the *land question* was being treated by the actants (NGOs, State and researchers) in the form described above, it was entirely logical that the association between colonialism and apartheid – understood as a process of destitution – would be fundamental to the concept and sentiment of the South African *landless* in the post-apartheid era. In South Africa the process of losing land is strongly associated with the loss of formal rights over the use of the country’s soil. It is in this context of associations that we must locate the definitions offered by the LPM in its manifestos from 2001 onwards. The proofs and objects deployed by the movement made its action justifiable vis-à-vis a scenario of disputes that took root in South Africa over the last 100 years and that reached its peak at the end of apartheid. In this case the reference to Sol Plaatjie’s classic text is equivalent to the Brazilian sociological narratives cited earlier. *Native Life in South Africa* helped to shape the parameters within which the relation with the land would be sociologically framed and narrated in the country.¹⁵

In contrast to what we observe in the MST case, at no moment does the LPM support its proofs on foundations like work, production or agriculture. Neither are its

¹⁵ This narrative is classified by Walker (2009) as the “master narrative” that guides the entire structure of the South African land reform program.

public enemies the large rural estates. Not because the LPM's members are not interested in land or because the rural estates are not an obstacle in their struggle. The absence of this type of proof does not invalidate any aspirations to agriculture, but it does show us the universe of legitimate worths in the situation of demands for reparation for the injustices of the past. Both, agriculture and the large-scale farmer are secondary in relation to the racism associated to the land policies in the country.

Objects in trial: Flags and their meanings

As Sigaud (2000) pointed out in Brazil the hoisting of a flag became a central element in the disputes for land. Waving a flag in an area under occupation by the landless indicates the movement and type of organization involved in each encampment. In the South African case there are no land occupations or encampments, but demonstrations such as marches, sit-ins in public buildings, wakes and court trials.¹⁶ In all these cases, flags are a diacritical sign that points to the author and type of demand being made. It indicates what type of collectivity and what type of issues are at stake.

If we look at the two flags show in the photograph below, we can easily recognize the correspondences between them. Their colours, proportions and designs make it clear that the South African flag is related to the Brazilian one.¹⁷

¹⁶ Over the last five years, the most frequent actions involving the LPM were the burial of people linked to the movement who lived on the farmland of whites who disallowed this type of ritual, as well as mobilizations to accompany court cases involving conflicts between landowners and farm estate residents.

¹⁷ The article of Mnxitama (2005), one of the founders of the LPM, makes clear how the movement was influenced by its Brazilian partner.



Figure 1 – Flags of the LPM and the MST in a protest organized by the LPM in 2007 in Kwazulu-Natal Province

As we can see in the photo above, taken on the day when the LPM organized and commemorated the burial of one of its female activists without the permission of the farmer (owner of the area where her family lived as farm dwellers), the flags not only tell us who is protesting but with whom the demonstrators are allied (Borges 2011). In fact the MST flag appeared at all the public events held by the LPM between 2005 and 2009. Despite fluttering together and being very similar, the two flags are nonetheless icons and assemblages that also reflect the distinct national contexts of dispute. Their differences and similarities will also help us to introduce new elements into our analysis of the meanings of being landless.

In their public documents both movements provide detailed explanations of the meaning of their flags, including the colours and images used. In each case, as we shall see below, elements that could be thought to be similar acquire very different meanings when used to justify each movement's struggle.

For the MST, the flag adopted after 1987 is composed of the following set of symbols, colours and meanings:

Red: represents the blood flowing in our veins and the willingness to struggle for Agrarian Reform and for the transformation of society.

White: represents the peace for which we struggle and that will only be won when there is social justice for all.

Green: represents the hope for victory with each rural estate that we conquer.

Black: represents our mourning and our homage to all those workers, men and women, who have fallen struggling for the new society.

Map of Brazil: represents the fact that the MST is organized nationally and that the struggle for Agrarian Reform should reach the entire country.

Male and female worker: represents the need for the struggle to be undertaken by women and men, by the whole family.

Machete: represents our tools for working, fighting and resisting.

In the internal constitution of the LPM, the colours and objects are defined in the following order and form:

Black: for the masses.

Green: for our land.

Red: for the blood spilt for our land.

White: for the peace for which we struggle and which will be achieved when there is land and food for everyone.

Logo: The LPM logo shall be a woman and a man leading a landless march on a red and green background placed within the symbol of women's power, surrounded by the name of the Landless People's Movement and by the slogan: Land now! Organise and unite! The woman shall be holding an LPM flag in one hand and with the fist of her other hand clenched. The man shall be holding a farm tool with the fist of his other hand clenched.



Figure 2: Logos of the LPM and the MST

Comparing the form in which the flags are presented we can note some similarities and also many differences that refer us to the contexts of struggle described in the previous section. Among the similarities, we can observe white as a synonym of peace, the depiction of men and women side-by-side (the man always carrying the work tool) and even the red that animates and is spilt in the struggles for land.

The differences appear in the arrangement of the colours: in the LPM case, it reveals the meaning of the question at the start of this article. The first colour mentioned is black. It serves to symbolize the masses rather than mourning as in the case of the MST. As the colour of the skin of the man and the woman shown in its logo attests, the struggle of the LPM is a struggle of black South Africans. Meanwhile in the MST logo we find a white man and white woman conferring legitimacy to its struggle (it does not mean that there are no blacks in the Brazilian movement).

The colour of the figures and the use of the colour green reveals an order of worths of crucial importance in the history of each struggle. While for the MST green signifies the land conquered from the large rural estates, for the LPM the land is what belongs to the natives of South Africa from prior to colonization. This leads us to the very historical time in which these definitions are inscribed. The MST does not demand land that once belonged to those it represents (MST has never represented the Brazilian indigenous population), as does the LPM, according to the logic of the memorable text by Sol Plaatjie.

Colonialism and Colonization: when indigenous people are or are not landless

Another element that seems to be important in comprehending the distinct regimes of justification in both countries is the use of terms like colonization and colonialism. When the landless South African asked his Brazilian comrade about the reasons why white people would consider themselves or be considered legitimately landless in Brazil, he was also alluding to these differences. As we have seen, on its flag, in its documents and in its discourses, the LPM deploys a series of objects that look to prove that the current situation of its members is a direct result of colonialism.

In the universe of worths in which the MST and its demands are inserted, the colonial question inevitably acquires other dimensions. If we recall that the mobilization that gave rise to the movement was called a “settlers movement” (the poorest portion of the settlers) we can begin to understand that the MST cannot deny colonialism without invalidating its own existence: the colonist in the discourse of the MST is someone who also suffers the harmful effects of the large scale property. Again the proofs presented by the MST do not emerge from the movement self-interest but from a very particular universe of worths. While in South Africa the most common term is colonialism, in Brazil – in terms of sociology and social movements – the idea of colonization has much more frequently been adopted. Without needing to return to the world of the classics of Brazilian social thought, we can simply recall that their critiques of *latifúndium* are based on the association of this type of use of land with a specific process of colonization: one based on large export crops. At no time, as is recurrent in the South African literature, did Brazilian or its political movements question colonialism as an illegitimate practice. Some authors like Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda (a local equivalent of Sol Patjie), for example, criticized the type of colonization and administration implanted by Portugal, comparing Brazil’s case with that of the Spanish colonies. However colonialism in itself was never put in question. In this regard, what matters is comprehending the limits and thinking of ways of reconstructing or redirecting the process of colonization, which had been an undesirable social matrix.

It takes little effort to recognize that the *landless*, just like Brazilian social scientists themselves, are outcomes of the colonial process, but neither one nor the other are associated with an idea of natives or indigenous peoples.¹⁸ This does not mean that the MST does not recognize the struggles for land of other agents such as the indigenous population or descendants of African slaves (*quilombolas*). On the contrary, the MST publicly expresses the legitimacy of these groups and their struggles, but for historical reasons does not classify them as *landless*.

Precisely the opposite occurs in the South African case. As the black population forms the majority (much more in the LPM than among the intellectuals who publish on the movement), categories like these are seized from the colonizers to constitute

¹⁸ It should be observed that even today few representatives of Brazil’s indigenous populations have become social scientists or national political leaders.

weapons of unequalled worth. Being native, being black, being African means being a victim of expropriation more than any other and this condition of worth supersedes any object linked to the realm of production, the market or the economy. Land reform (advocated by the LPM) thus refers to a universe of worths that find no equivalent in the idea of agrarian reform, understood here in the sense of aptitude for agriculture, as we saw in one of the definitions provided by an MST leader.

In the South African universe, the relation to the land precedes the chronology of the nation – as authors like Walker (2005) and James (2007) observe with astonishment – and leads to a claim questioning the very meaning of the land as a unit of production only. In Brazil what is disputed is the type and quality of production (in its various sociological senses) to be developed. The argument is for a form of production that enables a greater social division of the use of property and the land.

Final words: agrarian reform, the land question and the sociological perspectives

In this chapter I have looked to show how the analysis of that situation can be interpreted, in the words of Boltanski (2000), as a *dispute* in which the race of the landless was used to justify the LPM's struggle (in a country where the capitalism was a racial project). At the same time, it served to question the role of the white MST activist and to stimulate an analysis of the objects and proofs that comprise the very sociology of the struggles for land in Brazil and South Africa over the last century.

When Moyo & Yeros (2008) coined the expression *reclaiming the land* to describe the resurgence of rural movements in what has now come to be called the south, they are describing a process of mobilization whose biggest icon is this object called *land*. By studying the encounter between two of the movements that also appear in the book by these authors, it becomes clear that despite being oriented by the same icon (the land) and turning their lack of the same into a mobilizing identity, the assemblages deployed locally are very different. The worths associated with the land are of incomparable magnitudes. These differences point to a set of objects and proofs that have served to justify the existence of a *land question* and mostly the existence of movements that struggle for it. In addition, actants like the State, NGOs

and social scientists themselves, to limit the examples to the scope covered in this chapter, also enter into these disputes.

Making the question of land central in Brazil means associating it directly with a transformation of the social space towards a different form of organizing agricultural production. Over the course of the text we have seen that in its critical activities the MST has made use of terms like *latifundium*, agriculture and mainly agrarian reform as objects that legitimize them to those who they wish to mobilize and also to actants such as governments, academics and other organizations. By dynamically associating terms that for many analysts of the Brazilian case always formed part of the same set, the MST provides us with certain evidences to understanding which worths are involved in being *landless (sem-terra)*. These worths are not exactly congruent with two fundamental questions for the LPM: the fact of being indigenous and black.

The meaning of the colour black on the LPM's flag was an essential element in obtaining a better understanding of the equivalences between the South African and Brazilian experiences. In the former case the landless are primarily black. Being black in South Africa means being a victim of colonialism and apartheid. Being black also means being indigenous and wanting to regain land stolen from your ancestors (Borges 2011). The association between these different objects used in situations of dispute over land construct a sense of justice that involves a reform of rural space that cannot be equivalent to the agrarian. The agrarian object still has a value in South Africa, but, bearing in mind that it is the white colonizer who mobilizes this meaning in this same dispute (warning the nation about the risk of agricultural collapse if land is transferred to unskilled black claimants), its worth is less. It is less because as well as being a synonym of white, agrarian is also equivalent to colonialism in this specific political context.

We can gain an even better insight into these disputes when we consider that South Africa had until 2008 a department dedicated to 'land affairs' that coordinates all the policies for reorganizing the distribution of the national territory in the post-apartheid

era.¹⁹ Meanwhile the ministry dealing with the same issue in Brazil is responsible for 'agrarian development.'²⁰

The brief references to the encounter between the Landless People's Movement and the Landless Rural Workers' Movement demonstrates how sociology has always been better equipped and more comfortable in dealing with the MST and the agrarian than the LPM and land. This discomfort was not only reflected in the disorientation caused by the association between landlessness and indigeneity imposed on myself and the MST during the research. It pervades all the recent works looking to comprehend the meanings and impacts of the commitment to redistribute 30% of South Africa's land. Authors like Ntsebeza (2007) try to call attention to the fact that the land question is above all a question of rights and cannot be disconnected from the State's programs. On the other hand, authors like Cousins (2009), Walker (2008) and James (2007), adopting a perspective equivalent to the Brazilian approach to the land question, concentrate their analyses on the State's failure to transform the land issue into an agrarian issue – that is, its failure to promote what they call rural development.²¹ This mismatch is perhaps the same experienced by the MST activist when he visited his colleagues from the LPM. In South Africa the struggles of the landless are not simply associated with agrarian development or to a conservative and primitive cultural frame.

From this contrast we learn care is needed to avoid considering that the struggles of the *landless* are only justifiable when associated with the agrarian, as we have seen predominate in sociology in general (excluding ethnology and the emerging studies of *quilombolas*, the former black slaves communities, in Brazil, which never appear associated with the idea of being *landless*). Avoiding this political and sociological association would allow us to perceive that these movements, now associated, had distinct political projects for the future of the landless people that they represented. One directed towards agrarian reform, the other towards land reform. This not only separates them into two different *collectives* in Latour (2005) words, it also creates

¹⁹ Department of Land Affairs.

²⁰ It is important to note that in the last four years the South African government has adopted a series of new policies very similar to the Brazilian's. The most impressive cognitive movement, in my opinion, was the transformation of the Department of Land Affairs into the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform.

²¹ These authors focus their critiques on the idea of land reform as a rights-based public policy. For them the policies of the South African government and the struggles of the LPM (James 2007) have proven unable to transform the material conditions of existence in the country's rural zones.

stimulating epistemological obstacles for the social sciences dealing with land and agrarian processes.

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