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The rise and transformation of the Brazilian landless movement into a counter-hegemonic political actor: A Gramscian analysis

Abdurazack Karriem *

Department of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University, 321 West Sibley Hall, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA

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ABSTRACT

The Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) is widely acknowledged as one of the most organized, dynamic, and influential social movements in Latin America. The MST has increasingly inserted the struggle for land within larger political contestations for broad social change, leading conservatives and leftists alike to describe it as a "first class actor" in Brazilian politics. What explains the move from corporatist struggles for land to broader counter-hegemonic contestations; put differently, how did the MST come to acquire 'global ambition'? Much of the literature on the MST analyzes its external actions but without explaining what drives these actions. This paper utilizes a Gramscian political ecology approach to comprehend the MST's political actions and its rise and transformation into a counter-hegemonic political actor. Specifically, I evaluate the development of the MST's organizational praxis from corporatist struggles for land in the late 1970s to 'global ambition' and changing nature–society relations by the early 2000's. Such an approach brings to light the role of organization building, political education, alliance building, and subaltern agency in propelling the MST's political mobilizations. In so doing, this paper contributes to the literature on the MST and collective action. This paper also engages with a 'politics of scale' since the conquest of geographic scale is critical to understanding the MST's national growth and political actions. This paper concludes by arguing that the rise and transformation of the MST into a vibrant counter-hegemonic actor in Brazilian politics was a gradual process that matured as it territorialized into a national movement.

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1. Introduction

> [I]f yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is... a historical person, a protagonist. – Antonio Gramsci

> The MST's struggle for land reform is also a struggle for the preservation of life and nature. – MST

In this paper, I analyze the struggles of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), which is widely acknowledged as one of the most organized, dynamic, and influential mass movements in Latin America (Petras, 1997a; Branford and Rocha, 2002; Wright and Wolford, 2003). Through occupying land, the MST has pressured successive governments into settling more than 400,000 families on over 7 million hectares of farmland (Rossetto, 2005; Comparato, 2003). For the MST, a successful program of land and agrarian reform is only possible in the context of broad social change, including changing existing nature–society relations. Consequently, the MST has increasingly engaged in larger political contestations that go beyond the struggle for land, leading the conservative newspaper, *O Estado de Sao Paulo*, to call it "a first class actor on the political scene" and the Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, to characterize it as "probably the most ambitious social movement in contemporary Latin America."[1] What explains the insertion of the struggle for land within broader counter-hegemonic actions; put differently, how did the MST come to acquire "global ambition" (Harvey, 1996)?

Much of the literature on the MST's political actions analyzes its external actions but without explaining what drives these actions (e.g. Meszaros, 2000; Hammond, 1999; Comparato, 2003). I develop a Gramscian political ecology approach – a synthesis of Gramscian political economy and political ecology – to analyze the MST's political actions and rise and transformation into a counter-hegemonic political actor. Specifically, I evaluate the development of the MST's organizational praxis from corporatist struggles for land in the late 1970s to 'global ambition' and changing nature–society relations by the early 2000's. The MST's territorialization nationally does not only lead to the conquest of land, it also leads to the spatialization of an organizational praxis that challenges hegemonic constructions of 'common sense' or what McCarthy and Prudham

* Present address: 2148 O Street NW, Apt 309, Washington, DC 20037, USA.
E-mail address: ak11@cornell.edu

[1] Hobsbawm cited on back cover of Branford and Rocha (2002). *O Estado de Sao Paulo* cited by Comparato (2003, p. 121).

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(2004, p. 279) call the production of "neoliberal discourses as self-evident truths in today's world." The MST's successful scaling-up from a territorial struggle for land to a popular project of social transformation has been accomplished through an organizational praxis that introduces a counter-hegemonic popular common sense that empowers MST members to challenge private property relations through land occupations, that promotes popular education, self-organization, leadership building, and the remaking of nature–society relations through agro-ecological practices. A Gramscian political ecology approach, then, highlights the role of subaltern agency in propelling the MST's political mobilizations. In so doing, this paper contributes to the literature on the MST and to our understanding of collective action.

This paper also engages with a 'politics of scale' since the conquest of geographic scale is key to understanding the MST's political action and growth into a national movement. In utilizing the terms rural–urban, local–global, and society–nature, I do not see them as fixed or binary concepts; rather, following Swyngedouw (1997), Smith (1984), and Harvey (1996), I analyze them as mutually constitutive entities that are both produced and reproduced in the contested realm of social relations. While much of the literature on scale politics analyzes the role of capital in producing space and nature from above, I utilize an emergent Gramscian political ecology approach to evaluate how MST struggles recast scalar and nature–society relations from below.

I commence the paper by outlining the methodology that informs my research. I then theorize how a Gramscian political ecology approach might provide a useful lens through which to evaluate the MST's resource struggles and evolution into a counter-hegemonic movement. I next analyze the genesis of the MST and show how liberation theologians created the conditions for the landless to challenge their status of social exclusion. Subsequently, I appraise the MST's territorialization nationally and utilize Gramsci's concept of 'common sense' to analyze how 'global ambition' becomes rooted in the movement's organizational praxis. I then proceed to assess the MST's national consolidation, its contestations against neoliberal policies at local–global scales, the challenge to the capitalist production of nature, and its efforts to create alternative nature–society relations. I proceed to critically reflect on the MST's rise into a counter-hegemonic political actor, showing difficulties encountered and qualitative growth across its historical trajectory. I conclude by arguing that the acquisition of 'global ambition' was a gradual process that matured as the MST territorialized into a national movement.

2. Methodology

Ethnographic and qualitative research on resource struggles are common threads in political ecology analyses (Moore, 1993; Paulson et al., 2003). This paper draws on qualitative research conducted over the period 2004–2006 in the southern and northeastern Brazilian states of Rio Grande Sul and Pernambuco, where I lived in MST land reform settlements (*assentamentos*) and land encampments (*acampamentos*). I conducted 120 formal and informal open-ended interviews with MST rank-and-file members, state-level and national MST leaders, academics, government officials, and members of the Catholic Church.[2] I was a participant observer in *acampamento*, *assentamento*, state-level and national MST meetings, which, along with my interviews and numerous informal discussions, provided deeper insights into the subjective factors that move MST struggles for land, a more egalitarian society, and new nature–society relations.

3. Hegemony, counter-hegemony, and the making of Gramscian political ecology

A Gramscian political economy approach is useful in understanding how elite power is maintained and how grassroots movements can build a counter-hegemonic project. For Gramsci (1971), ruling class hegemony is not based on force alone, but on a combination of coercion and consent. That is, a hegemonic class rules by incorporating some of the interests of subordinate classes. Implicit in the notion of hegemony is the need to build alliances with other social forces and provide leadership. Intellectual or ideological leadership is not merely imposed; instead, subaltern classes consent to or are persuaded to accept dominant ideas as "common sense."

Here Gramsci challenges the view that the masses are imbued with "false consciousnesses" and argues that counter-hegemonic movements have to contest the exercise of hegemony as common sense. For Gramsci (1971), common sense is the unconscious and uncritical ways in which individuals make sense of and perceive the world around them. These cultural conceptions of the world (e.g. religion, folklore) – which are inherited from the past – frequently come into conflict with an individual's political activity. Predictably, common sense is the sphere in which hegemony is exercised, but it can also be the terrain from which a counter-hegemonic challenge to dominant ideas can be mounted. This, however, requires a sustained critique of common sense, enabling individuals to move to "good sense" or, what I call, a popular common sense. According to Gramsci:

> A philosophy of praxis cannot but be present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical guise, as superseding the existing mode of thinking and existing concrete thought (the existing cultural world)... therefore, it must be a criticism of 'common sense', basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that 'everyone' is a philosopher and that it is not a question of *introducing from scratch* a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, *but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity*. ... The purpose of the synthesis must be to criticize the problems, to demonstrate their real value, if any, ... and to determine what the new contemporary problems are and how the old problem should now be organized. (1971, pp. 330–31, emphasis added).

Central to a Gramscian analysis is a belief in the ability of historical subjects to both understand and change the world around them. Subaltern groups are not passive recipients to whom a 'readymade ideology' needs to be taken; they are the starting point for 'making critical' their social reality.

Hegemony is never absolute. It is continuously contested by oppositional forces, reformulated due to tensions or splits in the ruling bloc, and adapted to changing circumstances. Thus, hegemony is dynamic and continuously needs to be renewed to absorb internal and external pressures. This leads us to the battleground where hegemony is won, maintained, and contested, and where an alternative hegemony can be forged: civil society, the sphere of ideological and cultural reproduction. Gramsci sought to understand the resilience of capitalism and the failure of communist parties to take power in Western Europe. His analysis brought him to a critical appraisal of the relationship between the state and civil society: when power is centralized in the state, it maybe possible to seize power through a frontal assault or "war of movement" whereas in liberal democracies power is diffused across civil

[2] In line with the requirements of the Cornell University Commission on Human Subjects Research, allinterviewee names have been changed to protect confidentiality. All translations from Portuguese intoEnglish are mine.

society, thus requiring a protracted strategy – the "war of position". Moreover, Gramsci (1971, p. 235) argues that in mature states "'civil society' has become a very complex structure… which is resistant to the catastrophic 'incursions' of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)." Here Gramsci contests the reduction of hegemony to economic relations, arguing that hegemony is founded on a much broader base.

For a war of position to be successful, a counter-hegemonic force will have to move beyond its own class or corporatist interests and take into account broader national-popular demands. Moreover, it will have to engage in political and ideological struggle or "intellectual and moral reform" which requires a critique of hegemonic ideas as 'common sense.' This raises the importance of ideology as the 'cement' uniting different social groups and its role in driving individuals to make history. In Gramsci's words, ideology becomes the terrain "on which men [and women] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle" (cited by Mouffe (1979, p. 185)). Ideology does not simply take hold; it requires 'organic intellectuals' to raise consciousness and transform ideas into a material force. This does not mean that intellectuals drive a war of position. For Gramsci, transformative politics is based on mass participation and movements must continuously form new organic intellectuals to give practical content to his assertion that 'everyone is a philosopher'. Furthermore, "the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence… but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10).

3.1. Towards a Gramscian political ecology perspective

Political ecology has long had an analytical focus on struggles over access to land and the utilization of natural resources (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Turner, 2004; Paulson et al., 2003; Peet and Watts, 1996). Political ecology's concern with social justice as it pertains to resource use and access brings to light the complex interrelationship between nature and society and hence to questions of livelihoods. Resource conflicts have taken on particular importance in the contemporary conjuncture in which the far-reaching commodification of ecological resources – e.g. water (Bakker, 2007), plant genes or GMOs (Shiva, 2000), land and ocean fisheries (Mansfield, 2004, 2007) – "indicates nature's deep remaking within the circuits of capital" (Castree, 2000, p. 25). The remaking of nature under neoliberalism has, however, not been an uncontested process; it has set in motion the *making* of counter-hegemonic movements which, following Gramsci (1971), have challenged the naturalization of the ideas behind the remaking or production of nature as 'common sense'.

How do we study conflicts over resources? Neumann (1992) suggests that a political ecology analysis of resource conflicts should include attention to the actors and the social relations that they are enmeshed in, trace the connection of local relations to the broader geographical and political environment, and situate these resource struggles historically to better comprehend the contemporary situation. A Gramscian political economy approach – with its analytical focus on the production of hegemony – incorporates and complements Neuman's suggestions by providing interesting pathways in understanding how nature and space is produced through coercive and consensual means, how movements contest resources, and how society–nature relations might be remade.

While his fragmentary writings do not explicitly delve into questions of nature, Gramsci's (1971, p. 448) assertion that "human history should be conceived also as the history of nature" speaks to the mutually constitutive character of society–nature relations that have come to shape contemporary political ecology analyses. Like Gramsci, the idea of the 'production of nature' popularized by Smith (1984) challenges the notion of an "independent non-social nature" (Castree, 2000, p. 25) or the separation of nature and society (Braun and Castree, 1998; Harvey, 1996). As Smith (1984, p. 54) states: "With the production of nature at a world scale, nature is progressively produced from within and as part of so-called second nature", a process that has accelerated under neoliberalism.[3]

The production of nature, then, is deeply implicated in the exercise of hegemony, with implications for control over and the struggle for resources. A Gramscian political ecology approach provides a useful framework from which to understand the production of nature and how subaltern classes contest the remaking of nature in their struggles to build livelihoods. Gramsci's writings also engage with the scalar politics of political ecology literature. His work is replete with spatial metaphors and ideas that are spelt out, for example, in his notes on the Italian unification process and the Southern Question (Gramsci, 1994; Jessop, 2005; Wainwright, 2005). Edward Said admired Gramsci's spatial thinking, stating that he presented "an essentially geographical, territorial apprehension of human history and society… he was political in the practical sense, conceiving of politics as a contest over territory, both actual and historical, to be won, fought over, controlled, held, lost, gained" (cited by Jessop (2005, p. 435); also Wainwright, 2005).

Central to a Gramscian political ecology perspective is a philosophy of praxis: that is, of theory that informs practice and vice versa. While much has changed since Gramsci wrote the *Prison Notebooks*, his ideas still have force for both analyzing hegemonic rule and the shaping of a counter-hegemonic politics of collective action. A Gramscian political ecology perspective is particularly apt for such an endeavor since it rejects the reduction of all struggles over resources to economic and class relations, yet retains class as an important tool of analysis; it situates resource struggles within a historic context; stresses the importance of ideology, organization and strategy; and, emphasizes the significance of culture, thus taking into account the politics of everyday life that inform struggles over ecological resources. Furthermore, to forge an alternative hegemony, counter-hegemonic movements needs to do more than simply resist the dominant model; they have to develop alternative forms of production and reproduction or alternative conceptions of nature–society relations.

4. The genesis of the MST: 1979–1985

The genesis of the MST can be traced to the military regime's agricultural modernization policies – and the 1979 occupations of the Macali and Brilhante estates and the *acampamento* at Encruzilhada Natalino – which expelled family farmers and tenants and brought vast tracts of public land into private hands.[4] In a scene reminiscent of the great enclosure movement in 19th century Europe, almost 30 million Brazilians were forced off the land between 1960 and 1980 and moved to the cities (Perz, 2000, p. 866), leading to what Lefebvre (1991) calls the production of (urban and rural) space, and what Smith (1984) calls the production of space and nature.[5] Thus, the forced separation of rural workers from the means of production and into wage labor leads to the production of new agrarian-scapes and society–nature relations.

[3] The term 'second nature' is from Marx and Engels and refers to nature that has been transformed by human activity while 'first nature' is nature that is original and independent of human activity.

[4] For an analysis of the Macali, Brilhante and Encruzilhada Natalino struggles and the historical roots of the MST, (see Marcon, 1997; Branford and Rocha, 2002; Fernandes, 2001; Wright and Wolford, 2003), and Stedile and Fernandes (2001).

[5] City and countryside are thus socially constructed and subject to further reproduction (Williams, 1973). Davis (2004), in *Planet of Slums*, discusses contemporary processes of space production across the globe, showing that spatial scales are not fixed but products of changing social relations.

Brazil's conservative agricultural modernization resembles Gramsci's notion of 'passive revolution' whereby "far-reaching modifications in a country's economic structure are made from above, through the agency of the state apparatuses, without relying on the active participation of the people" (Simon, 1982, p. 49). Instead of embarking on a radical program of agrarian reform, the military regime opted to create a small class of large-scale 'modern' farmers.

Liberation theologians linked to the Catholic and Lutheran churches played a formative role in the MST's genesis period (Gaiger, 1987; Marcon, 1997). They preached that the struggle for land was just and that the landless had a right to land, which was a 'gift from god'. In asserting land as a social good, they contested sacrosanct notions of private property and provided strong religious and moral backing to land occupations. This was crucial as 'respect' for private property was deeply ingrained and enforced in rural social relations. Religious socialization is still utilized to provide moral justification for land occupations as Gustavo, a MST settler in Rio Grande do Sul (hereafter RS), suggests: "Land is a gift from God and, if we are all children of God, you have to have access to it."[6] Symbolic meanings can thus play an important role in struggles over resources, as well as over "competing cultural understandings of rights, property relations, and entitlements" (Moore, 1993, p. 383). The ability to tap into the folklore of the landless and give it a popular common sense inflection has been central to the MST's rise to counter-hegemony.

An enduring influence from liberation theology has been the continued use of the *mística* or mystique, which reflects Catholic values of suffering and redemption to confront difficulties, strengthen resolve, and provide vitality in the quest for land and a better life. Most MST meetings commence with a *mística* (a theatre rendition) which draws on peasant folklore, pays tribute to historic figures in the struggle for social justice such as Zumbi dos Palmares, and draws sustenance from indigenous and peasant struggles of the past.[7] Josue, a MST member from the Conquest of the Frontier settlement in RS, describes the importance of the *mística* as an emotional force that feeds the MST's utopia of an egalitarian society:

> [T]he *mística* touches you inside. It touches our lives even more because it shows the mystery of struggling, of dreaming, of having hope, of the world that is [out] there. So through the *mística* we receive our life, our reality, our dreams, our history. And the *místicas* give us enthusiasm, give us courage.[8]

Thus, in the formative stage of the MST, liberation theologians exercised the Gramscian role of organic intellectuals by raising consciousness. They did not bring consciousness from outside, but started in the cultural realm of common sense or the folklore of the landless. In doing so, they provided the tools for the landless to understand their social reality, organize themselves, and become protagonists of social change. It showed that that the landless were not prisoners of an all-powerful system, but subjects of their own history. This "popular religiosity" (Gorgen, 1997) would become an important component of the MST's open, eclectic ideology.

Prior to the MST's founding, Brazil witnessed a mushrooming of isolated rural struggles, which were mostly violently suppressed. In the early 1980s, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) sponsored a series of meetings to unite localized movements or "militant particularisms" (Harvey, 1996). Joao Pedro Stedile, a founder MST member, recalls the advice offered by Jose de Souza Martins, a respected analyst of Brazilian agrarian struggles and former advisor of the CPT, who stated that a movement that fights for land will only have a future if it transforms itself into a "*political agent to change society*" and if it "manages to acquire *a national character*" (Stedile and Fernandes, 2001, p. 21, emphasis added).

Stedile and his colleagues were convinced of the necessity for 'scaling up' mobilizations for land by building a national movement that transcended the pitfalls of localized 'militant particularisms'. In this regard, Harvey (1996, p. 324, emphasis added) highlights both the potential and dangers of successful localized struggles in promoting militant particularisms:

> Anti-capitalist movements... are generally better at organizing in and dominating 'their' places than at commanding space. '[R]egional resistances'... can indeed flourish in a multitude of particular places. But while such movements form a potential basis for that 'militant particularism' that can acquire *global ambition*, left to themselves they are easily dominated by the power of capital to coordinate accumulation across universal but fragmented space. The potentiality for militant particularism embedded in place runs the risk of sliding back into parochialist politics.[9]

The MST's early victories were achieved under extremely difficult conditions (of military siege in the case of Encruzilhada Natalino), and subtle and overt repression from the military police and agrarian elites; they were also due to the solidarity of urban movements and progressive sectors of the church. The church, with its local, national, and transnational scalar presence, provided crucial material, financial, and moral support. The MST drew on this solidarity to deepen the acquisition of 'global ambition' in later years.

The first articulation of 'global ambition' emerged at the MST's founding National Meeting in 1984 at Cascavel, Paraná, where it affirmed that direct action would be the means to achieve the following objectives: land belongs to those who work it; fight for an egalitarian society; maintain organizational autonomy from political parties while encouraging member participation in politics; promote leadership training; and, build alliances with urban workers and peasants in Latin America (MST, 1989).

These objectives signaled growing independence from the Church as mentor, leader, and intellectual. Moreover, in setting itself the task of building a national movement and forging alliances at the city and Latin America levels, the MST was engaging in a politics in which "scale emerges... in the fusion of ideology and practice" (Delaney and Leitner, 1997, p. 97).

5. Territorialization of the MST: 1985–1990

This period describes the spatial growth or 'territorialization' (Fernandes, 1996, 2001) of the MST into a national movement. I use the concept territorialization not only to analyze the spatial growth of the movement, but also the diffusion of an organizational praxis that drives the MST's national growth. Territorialization is not linear, but a contested process. For example, Miguel, a member of the 16th of March *assentamento* and a state-level MST leader in RS, acknowledges the contested class and spatial character of the territorialization or spatial quest for land:

> [T]he development and the continuous rooting of capitalism in the countryside continuously creates more difficulties for

[6] Interview #19, 6/08/2004.

[7] Zumbi, a 17th century slave leader, led a revolt against slave owners and established a 30,000 strong free community, the Quilombo de Palmares, which resisted for over fifty years (Branford and Rocha, 2002).

[8] Interview #55, 10/22/2004. For more on the mística, (see MST, 1998; Bogo, 2002; Issa, 2007).

[9] Harvey reworks Raymond Williams' idea of militant particularism, especially his understanding of "working class self-organization" that "tried to connect particular struggles to a general struggle" (cited by Harvey (1996, p. 32)).

> the poor, the weak; and, at the same time that we made a movement for the redistribution of land, capitalism made the concentration of land. [So] we are in this constant political dispute, struggling, fighting to redistribute land, to deconcentrate land property and, on the other hand, the mechanisms of the [capitalist] model concentrating land.[10]

Each successful land occupation leads to the establishment of an *assentamento* which provides the springboard for further land occupations and hence territorialization of the movement. A MST member, Calixto, describes the organizational praxis that drives the territorialization of the MST. Calixto and his comrades, on conquering Assentamento Sumaré I in the state of Sao Paulo, recruited other landless families to undertake another occupation and set up a new *acampamento*, which led to the conquest of *Assentamento* Sumaré II. This territorialization process was repeated and eventually led to the establishment of *Assentamento's* Sumaré III and IV, a strategy that has been territorialized across Brazil (Fernandes, 1996, 2001). This analysis does not suggest that territorialization is a straightforward process. Rather, occupations face violent evictions, often resulting in injury, arrest or death, and it can take years of living in an *acampamento* facing harsh winters and summers before being settled. Furthermore, limited access to basic human necessities (water and food) is a constant feature of this difficult struggle for land.

A key factor that drives the territorialization of the MST is the organizational praxis that is diffused in an *acampamento* or *assentamento*, which, once established, becomes a space for self-organization, political socialization, solidarity, forging global ambition, and the making of a popular common sense.[11] The MST's organizational structure draws on the ecclesiastical base communities (CEBs) promoted by liberation theologians. The CEBs are spaces where small groups or *nucleos* of individuals and families study, debate, and reflect on their social realities and organize to change them. Liberation theologians did not see the poor as victims who needed charity, but as actors who, through organization and struggle, can become the protagonists of their own liberation. Based on the CEB model, an *acampamento* or *assentamento* of 100 families is divided into 10 nucleos of 10 families, with two coordinators – a man and a woman. Other members of the nucleo participate in the health, education, communication, political education, or mass front sectors.

A typical land occupation commences when militants from the mass front sector recruit landless families, agricultural workers or the urban unemployed on farms, in rural towns, and metropolitan centers. Giselle, who participated in 40 land occupations in the Pontal de Paranapanema region in Sao Paulo, describes the recruitment process, stating that it is important to stress the risks involved to those who want land, but also highlight the reward of gaining land for their families. Potential recruits are informed that they have a constitutional right to land, but that this right is only applied by the government through occupying land.[12] The territorialization process described by Calixto above follows the methodology outlined by Giselle. Recruitment also takes place through familial or friendship ties and priests sympathetic to the MST. Ana, from *Acampamento* Guerreiros de Zumbi, describes her reasons for joining the MST and how she was recruited:

> I lived in the city. I worked for 15 years in [Porto Alegre], so what happens there? There in that society there is no work. It is very difficult, me with three children and my husband. It was very difficult to find a job, when one day a grassroots articulator [MST militant] arrived to invite us to join the movement.[13]

The decentralized organizational structure and the self-organization inculcated by the *nucleos* have thus been central to the spatial growth of the MST.

The popular method of education in the organizational structures (e.g. nucleos) of the MST allows for the dialectical process of participation–learning. Through participation–learning, MST members become active citizens who see their demand for land as a right, not a hand out. The transformation to active citizens is not automatic; it is a long, slow process, which necessarily entails challenging inherited ideas or 'common sense'. The MST's *acampamentos* and *assentamentos* are the spaces in which 'common sense' is deconstructed and disputed, and a popular common sense instituted. The adoption of Freire's (1993) method of popular education is crucial to the MST's philosophy of praxis since "Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 350). Educational relationships constitute the essence of hegemony and popular education has a key role to play in supporting a 'war of position'. To this end, the MST emphasizes political education and the development of its own organic intellectuals, which has been crucial to its growth and mobilizing capacity. Many of the local, regional and national leaders have participated in, planned, and led land occupations, and maintain an organic link with the *acampamentos* and *assentamentos*.

The promotion of a philosophy of praxis has allowed the MST to engender a consciousness of counter-hegemony among its members, many of whom come to see the fight for land not in corporatist terms, but as part of a larger project of change. Joao and Gustavo, respectively, describe the acquisition of a counter-hegemonic consciousness:

> I entered into the MST out of necessity [for land], [but] the movement taught us to have a larger vision, to have a vision that it is not enough to struggle for yourself, for a piece of land for yourself. The movement gives you conditions to understand the whole of society, the way in which it is structured, and who it is that orders in the country today.[14]

> I would like to say that the organized struggle of the people is the solution for our liberation. If ... a person thinks 'I need land!' and goes to struggle for land and not struggle for structural change, he is doubly mistaken. The struggle is for land, it is for credit, it is for the change of society as a whole, it is for schools, it is for everything. So I think, I am certain, that an organized struggle [ensures] that we get to reach our objectives.[15]

Joao and Gustavo capture the practical and philosophical outlook of the MST. Education emerges as a critical pedagogy of personal and broader social transformation, facilitating the move from common to a popular common sense. I do not suggest that all members are reached by consciousness-raising, that all participate equally, or that the attainment of global ambition is uniform.

[10] Interview #23, 6/07/2004. Miguel, formerly landless and a MST member since the mid-1980s, has been seconded by his cooperative to work full-time for the MST for a two year period. As a leader, he helps build alliances with urban and rural movements, negotiates with state-level government agencies, and maintains links with *assentamentos* and *acampamentos* in the state. However, he also has to maintain ties to his cooperative by engaging in agricultural production activities at least two weekends every month.

[11] An *acampamento* is set up immediately after the occupation of an unproductive farm. An *assentamento*, by contrast, represents land transferred to occupying families by the government.

[12] Interview #70, 12/30/2004.

[13] Interview #2, 5/29/2004.

[14] Interview #58, 10/24/2004. In a practical manifestation of global ambition, Joao and his partner, Maria, shortly after being settled on Assentamento Conquista da Fronteira, volunteered two years to help build the MST in northeast Brazil. During my field visit, Joao, Maria and their colleagues were planning another land occupation. I interviewed numerous MST members who had similarly volunteered to help build the MST throughout Brazil.

[15] Interview #19, 6/08/2004.

Indeed, my visits to MST *acampamentos* and *assentamentos* showed that levels of participation and consciousness varied, but I also found that a critical mass of members participated in Movement activities and had attained a critical consciousness. The MST thus built upon the liberation theology utopia that 'there must be an alternative' to injustice and social exclusion, a utopia that could be reached through an organizational praxis that promotes participation, ideals of solidarity, and political consciousness.

6. National consolidation and counter-hegemonic struggles: 1990–2002

In this period, the MST consolidated itself as a national movement, increasingly mobilized against neoliberal policies, and faced opposition from landlords and government. Paradoxically, the MST experienced its most expressive period of growth under Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government (1995–2002) when Brazil's neoliberal project was most forcefully implemented. The implementation of neoliberal policies was regarded as imperative in transforming Brazil into a 'modern', competitive nation and, for Cardoso, this meant that the exclusion of sectors of the rural and urban populace was unavoidable.[16] Cardoso aggressively privatized parastatals and radically liberalized trade by reducing import tariffs from 32.2% to 14.2% (Rocha, 2002). While family agriculture was left to face market forces, agribusiness received generous export incentives and cheap loans to become globally competitive. Consequently, agro-export agriculture mechanized heavily, resulting in the elimination of two million agricultural posts and the expulsion of almost 400,000 smallholders between 1995 and 1998 (Pereira, 2003, p. 52). Thus, the celebrated 'global competitiveness' of Brazil's agribusiness was produced through active state support.

For Cardoso, land reform was an anachronism under globalization and dismissed it as a 'nineteenth century demand' (Pereira, 2003). The MST, however, continued to mobilize the landless to occupy land throughout Brazil. The MST discovered that landowners in the Pontal de Paranapanema region in the state of Sao Paulo had illegally acquired a million hectares of public land and launched numerous occupations that forced the government to intervene and expropriate land, leading to the settlement of 6000 families by the end of 1994 (Branford and Rocha, 2002; Fernandes, 1996). These successes swelled the ranks of the MST and, a year later, 22,000 families occupied a further 59 estates (Hammond, 1999). The MST made numerous gains in the northeast, the north, and center-west regions of Brazil (Fernandes, 2001; Morrisawa, 2001; Wright and Wolford, 2003). The territorialization of occupations nationally has resulted in what Harvey (1996, p. 324) would call the MST's move from "organizing in and dominating" place to "commanding space."

The struggle for resources to produce livelihoods has faced violent opposition from landowners and the police.[17] In a climate of rising resource conflicts, 10 landless were killed in August 1995 at Corumbiara; and on April 17, 1996, 19 MST members were killed and 69 wounded while on a march at Eldorado dos Carajas in the northern state of Pará protesting unmet government promises. Keck and Sikkink (1998) describe how "advocacy networks" within and between nations communicate and exchange information around common concerns such as human rights. The Carajas massacre allowed the MST and network activists to exert strong domestic and global pressure, forcing Cardoso to establish a Special Ministry for Agrarian Reform and grant federal courts jurisdiction over human rights crimes (Cadji, 2000). The massacre enabled the MST to scale-up struggles for human rights, while simultaneously situating access to land as a key socio-economic right.

After the massacre, the government sought to politically isolate the MST. The MST went on the offensive and commenced a two-month-long national march for 'Land Reform, Employment and Justice' to the nation's capital, Brasília. The march opened a national debate on Cardoso's neoliberal policies which expelled small farmers and generated urban unemployment because of privatization and trade liberalization. When the 1000 marchers who covered 1500 km converged onto and 'occupied' Brasília, 100,000 people welcomed them (Chaves, 2000; Stedile and Fernandes, 2001). The march was a good example of the MST disputing the naturalization of neoliberal ideas as 'common sense' at a mass level, and is regarded as representing the "first victory" by popular forces "over the neoliberal policies implemented by the Brazilian state" (Almeida and Sanchez, 2000, p. 23).

6.1. Hegemony through domination

In a demonstration of its organizational capacity, the MST continued its offensive actions and linked corporatist struggles for land to a diversified range of national-popular contestations. For example, in April 1999, the MST co-organized the 'Tribunal on Foreign Debt' and, in December 1999, it scaled-up its struggle to the global level by participating in the 'Battle in Seattle' against the WTO. In April 2000, the MST joined indigenous movements in a national campaign against the government's celebration of '500 years of the discovery of Brazil'; in one week – April 17–24, 2000 – MST members occupied 150 unproductive farms throughout Brazil, involving 20,000 families; and, in May 2000, it coordinated the occupation of the Ministry of Finance in Brasilia and the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform offices in 19 states to demand the release of agricultural credit (Comparato, 2003; Morrisawa, 2001).

These actions generated a flood of negative media reports criticizing the MST for transgressing the rule of law. Comparato (2003), in a detailed analysis of newspaper and magazine reports, illustrates the open collusion between government and the media in tarnishing the MST's public image, creating the pretext for repressive actions. To combat MST mobilizations, the government launched an 'anti-MST package': Lumiar, the government's technical assistance program for *assentamentos*, was shut, resulting in the dismissal of 1300 agronomists; an "anti-invasion" provisional measure excluded all occupied properties from expropriation for a two-year period; and, settlers who participated in occupations were to be excluded from the agrarian reform program. Government actions thus sought to break the nexus of the MST's struggle for land and its struggle on the land (Colleti, 2002; Comparato, 2003).

These coercive measures placed the MST squarely on the defensive: land occupations dropped sharply and 258 militants were arrested on charges ranging from the formation of criminal gangs to illegal possession of arms (Comparato, 2003). A MST leader in Pernambuco acknowledged the severity of these measures: "We had already legitimated the occupation of land and [now] the government puts us into illegality, prohibiting" occupied land from being "expropriated."[18] Cardoso's government had asserted its domination over the MST. According to Gramsci (1971, p. 12), "direct domination" is exercised through the repressive state apparatus or the

[16] Cardoso stated that "the excluded might number somewhere around 16 million people!" (cited by Pereira, 2003, p. 50), an astounding statement given that Brazil already had one of the worst indices for land and income distribution in the world. The top 20% of the population appropriates 64.2% of national income, while the lowest 40% earns 5.7% (World Bank, 2000). Moreover, one percent of landowners own 45% of all farm land (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2003).

[17] Since the mid-1980s, almost 1600 workers were killed in land conflicts (Cadji, 2000; CPT, 2004).

[18] Interview #51, 8/17/2004.

"state and 'juridical government'" while hegemony is exercised through institutions of civil society. The state does not simply impose domination by force; in complex societies it tries to gain the consent of broad sectors of civil society or, as Gramsci puts it, "force should appear to be supported by the agreement of the majority, expressed by so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and associations."[19] Thus, the coercive component of hegemony was employed to enforce control over the MST since it refused to consent to and openly challenged hegemonic notions of common sense.

These measures did not stop the MST from engaging in popular struggles. In 2002, the MST, the Catholic Church, and other movements organized a national plebiscite against the Free Trade Area of the America's (FTAA), with the MST arguing that the FTAA would lead to the "complete denationalization of agriculture, and the impracticality of a national development project, a necessary condition for the viability of land reform."[20] After months of grassroots mobilizing against the FTAA, ten million Brazilians turned out to vote on September 1–7, 2002, with more than 90% voting against signing the FTAA (Osava, 2002).[21] The MST also served on the body that organized the inaugural (2001) and subsequent World Social Forums (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In allying with the rising anti-corporate globalization movement, the MST exercised an important role in helping build a global counter-movement and a new politics of 'globalization from below.'

7. Linking local–global struggles, contesting the production of nature, promoting alternative nature–society relations

In this Section 1 discuss how the MST not only challenges the commodification of nature by capital, but also works towards creating alternative models of nature–society relations that are rooted in agro-ecological practices. The MST has recognized that – in addition to domestic constraints – it has to philosophically and practically scale-up struggles to confront the larger structural forces that undermine rural livelihoods. In this regard, the MST and rural movements in the global North and South have united into a transnational peasant movement, the Via Campesina, which leads struggles against World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations on liberalizing agriculture and food from Seattle to Cancun (Desmarais, 2002). Local resources struggles are thus deeply intertwined with global economic relations.

Early into the 21st century, the MST has increasingly combated agribusiness, arguing that the agribusiness model displaces workers from the land, prioritizes agro-exports over meeting domestic food needs, further concentrates land and income in fewer hands, and is detrimental to the environment. While the MST and the Via Campesina are not opposed to trade, they challenge WTO negotiations on agricultural liberalization that favor agribusiness, stating that "food is a basic human right" that can only be attained in a system where 'food sovereignty' is guaranteed. According to the Via Campesina:

> Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its own basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security.
> (cited by Desmarais (2002, p. 104))

Food sovereignty's focus on producing food to ensure social reproduction and agricultural diversity provides a sharp counterpoint to the commodifying instincts of agribusiness; moreover, it has particular salience in the contemporary period of rampant food inflation that has generated food riots from Indonesia to Haiti, an outcome that is largely a product of the remaking of nature into biofuels. A recently leaked confidential World Bank report noted that the move to biofuels had forced up global food prices by 75%, while higher energy and fertilizer prices accounted for an increase of only 15%, much lower than originally estimated (Chakraborrty, 2008). The current global food crisis has also opened up opportunities: it affords the MST and other movements an opportunity to pressure governments to promote land reform and increase support to the family farm sector which produces most of the food crops and thereby facilitate the remaking of agriculture on a different basis.

The MST has also challenged growing control over and commodification of seeds by transnational corporations (TNC's). In line with the global campaign of 'Seeds as the Patrimony of Humanity', MST and Via Campesina members from around the world attending the 2001 World Social Forum uprooted GM corn and soy plants at a Monsanto experimental plantation near Porto Alegre. In March 2006, the MST and the Via Campesina–Brazil occupied an experimental station of the Swiss TNC, Syngenta Seeds, located near the Iguacu National Park in the southern state of Paraná, where GMO experiments contaminated an area rich in biodiversity. The MST action forced the environmental agency, IBAMA, to fine Syngenta $500,000 for contravening environmental laws prohibiting the planting of GMO's within a 10 km radius of national parks. The MST-Via Campesina transformed the station into an agro-ecological training center and planted creole or native seeds. Instead of enforcing the fine, however, the Lula government sought to amend the law to enable Syngenta to legally continue GMO experiments (MST, 2007). The MST campaign thus publicly exposed how "State functions aimed at curbing socially and environmentally destructive effects of capitalist production are 'rolled back'" through a discourse of maintaining economic competitiveness (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004, p. 276).

In line with a Gramscian political ecology perspective, the MST has not only remained at the level of protest; it promotes practical alternatives by encouraging agro-ecological methods of agriculture that respect the environment and the production of seeds that maintain biodiversity.[22] Bionatur, the MST seed cooperative, markets 63 varieties of agro-ecological seeds with an annual output of 22 tons (Ponce and Engelmann, 2006). Marino de Bortoli of Bionatur states:

> We work from the perspective of confronting the current agricultural model imposed by the multinationals, which controls the market for seeds in Brazil and the world. The Bionatur network is guided by the production of healthy food, free from agrotoxins and transgenic seeds, which is the basis for the food sovereignty of the people.[23]

The shift toward agro-ecology, then, is crucial in promoting alternatives to and ensuring independence from corporate control over agriculture, and illustrates the evolution in the MST's understanding of society-nature relations that is not based on dominating nature. Stedile (2002, p. 100) describes the development of the MST's ecological thinking, the sharing of ecological experiences and ideas that takes place across local–global scales, and how it imagines the construction of future nature–society relationships:

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[19] Gramsci cited by Joll (1977, p. 99).

[20] Cited by Karriem (2005, p. 7).

[21] According to a MST member the campaign "initially arose as an idea for conscientizing the population about the dangers of the [FTAA] and we presented the proposal of a pedagogic debate, the realization of a plebiscite to hear the [views of the] population on the FTAA" (Interview #76, 01/21/2005).

[22] On the MST's move to agro-ecology, (see Branford and Rocha, 2003).

[23] Bortoli cited in Bionatur realize terceiro Encontro National. http://www.mst.org.br/informativos/minforma/ultimas1917.htm. Accessed September 12, 2006.

> It's not enough to argue that if you work the land that you have proprietary rights over it. The Vietnamese and Indian farmers have contributed a lot to our debates on this. They have a different view of agriculture, and of nature – one that we've tried to synthesize in the Via Campesina. We want an agrarian practice that transforms farmers into guardians of the land, and a different way of farming, that ensures an ecological equilibrium and also guarantees that land is not seen as private property.

What the afore-going discussion illustrates is the transformation of 'nature as an accumulation strategy' (Katz, 1998), its implications for rural livelihoods, and the MST challenge to and provision of alternatives to nature's remaking under neoliberalism.

8. Critical reflections on the MST's rise into a counter-hegemonic movement

In the genesis period, the MST successfully drew on religious ideas to contest hegemonic, common sense constructions of private property as sacrosanct, thus providing moral justification for land occupations. In comparison to the genesis period, the MST grew rapidly during the second (territorialization) and third (national consolidation) periods of its history. In the genesis period, the level of preparation and political socialization was prolonged before an occupation, allowing for greater social cohesion, understanding of movement goals, and the transformation of families into protagonists of their own history. However, from the 1990s onward, the Movement grew so fast that preparation and political socialization suffered. For example, in the Pontal de Paranapanema region eager militants adopted a top-down approach to organizing, which led to families leaving the MST because their views were not considered. The MST leadership intervened and sent a skilled organizer, Jose Rainha, to the Pontal region (Branford and Rocha, 2002; Fernandes, 1996). Rainha went back to MST basics by re-introducing horizontal, participatory organizing approaches through which the landless take decisions and correct them if need be, thus learning by doing. In its quest to build a transformative movement that seeks to transcend hierarchical power relations, the MST has tried to be vigilant in dealing with 'tensions of micropower.'[24]

If during the genesis period the MST was strongly influenced by religious ideas, in the territorialization period there was a Marxist and nationalist orientation. The MST gave more attention to questions of production and, in line with its Marxist outlook, pushed for the collectivization of agriculture on the *assentamentos*. However, many of the collectivization experiments failed. The MST was forced to revise its strategy and adopted a more gradual, inclusive and flexible approach to cooperation through the formation of service, finance, and commercial cooperatives which brought economic benefits to the settlers (Branford and Rocha, 2002; Stedile and Fernandes, 2001). The top-down collectivization experiment had a sobering impact on the MST leadership, forcing it to adopt an open-ended ideology that was influenced by socialist, religious, nationalist, and communitarian currents.

Through its interaction with the environmental movement, the MST introduced ecological concerns into its eclectic ideological outlook. This eclecticism suggests an impressive openness to new ideas and forms of struggle. The MST's ecological thinking commenced during the early 2000's and is still relatively uneven within the movement. However, the making of a Gramscian political ecology praxis is increasingly evident in MST actions. For example, in asserting 'seeds as a patrimony of humanity', the MST contrasted seeds as a collective good that has been transferred and shared by peasants over centuries to the increased commodification and control over seeds by TNC's. The MST thus drew on a historical peasant consciousness to reinterpret the past in the present (Moore, 1993) or, following Gramsci (1971, 165), it transformed "popular beliefs" into "material forces" to contest hegemonic productions of nature and to set in motion alternative paradigms that seek to remake nature–society relations from below through agroecological practices.

To ensure the political socialization of its growing membership, the MST placed strong emphasis on political education, forming organic intellectuals, and opening its schools to other popular movements in Brazil and Latin America (Petras, 1997b). This Gramscian focus on ideas and on socializing knowledge so that it becomes a material force for both personal and broader social change takes on particular importance in a neoliberal era in which the 'end of ideology' has been declared, and in which dominant ideas are presented as natural. While capital has drawn on 'traditional intellectuals' to justify and diffuse hegemonic ideas, subaltern groups have developed their own organic intellectuals to demystify hegemonic constructions of common sense and help build an alternative hegemony. In this regard, MST organic intellectuals exercise an essential role in constructing "an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the masses and not only of a small group."[25] However, this educational relationship should not be passive, but active and reciprocal so that "every teacher is always a student and every student always a teacher" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 350).

In contrast to its early history, when mobilizations were largely restricted to the local and state-level scales and focused on the struggle for land, MST actions since the 1990s were characterized by mobilizations at national and global scales and intersected with broader political actions. This illustrated the national consolidation and organizational capacity of the Movement, the gradual accumulation of conquests and experiences, and the spatialization of its philosophy of praxis across multiple scales. The growing breadth of national-popular collective actions – land, foreign debt, environment, WSF, FTAA, human rights – exemplifies the maturation of a counter-hegemonic consciousness within the MST. In this regard, Gramsci (1971) notes that a social group engaged in counter-hegemonic struggles needs to combine its own interests with those of other popular forces in order to create a national-popular collective will. In joining indigenous movements against the government's high-profile celebration of the founding of Brazil, the MST demonstrated solidarity with indigenous struggles and historicized the struggle for land by highlighting that Brazil's economic development was founded on violent struggles of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003). Participation in the Tribunal on Foreign Debt signaled a concern with the billions of dollars that Brazil pays to merely service debt and the implication for social spending. Moreover, in contributing to the formation of the WSF and the Via Campesina, the MST signaled a keen awareness of the relational nature of local–global struggles. In this regard, Thiago, a member of the MST's communications unit in Rio Grande do Sul, displays a sharp understanding of the geographies of neoliberal globalization, the remaking of nature, and a scalar politics of resistance through which movements scale-up popular mobilization:

> [I]n this process of the construction of the Via Campesina, we realized that the stage of capitalism … today is of the supremacy of international finance capital. It placed us with

[24] I borrow the term 'tensions of micropower' from Andreas Hernandez. The MST has not always succeeded in resolving tensions, for example, around leadership (Wittman, 2005) or alternative forms of agricultural production (Wolford, 2004).

[25] Gramsci (1971, pp. 332–33). Gramsci proceeds to state that the "Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one."

> the same problems as farmers in any part of the world. . . . In our understanding . . . there are . . . five large international enterprises that monopolize the whole process of agriculture. .... from the seed, to the inputs, and commercialization. So we realized that our enemies were common. It was Monsanto in Brazil, in India, in Europe, and this permitted . . . our participation as the Via Campesina in the large demonstrations against the G-8, [in] Seattle, Genoa, . . . and the World Social Forum as a space of articulation. So in the same way that empire is present in all the territories, [our actions] are . . . felt in the center of empire. I think it was Arundhati Roy who said that our function as social movements is to besiege the empire, it is to surround it.[26]

While much of the literature on scale politics analyzes the role of capital in producing space and nature from above, Thiago illustrates how popular movements recast scalar and nature–society relations from below. Counter-hegemonic struggles, then, take on a spatial character since hegemonic ideas and practices are spatialized – although unevenly – as common sense across geographic scales. Implicit in Thiago's analysis is the necessity for alliances across interrelated scales to unite a diverse range of social groupings and thereby spatialize a Gramscian war of position to the global scale.

9. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I traced the MST's rise and transformation into a counter-hegemonic actor by analyzing the development of the MST's organizational praxis from corporatist struggles for land in the late 1970s to 'global ambition' and changing nature–society relations by the early 2000's. I also argued that territorialization does not only result in the spatial conquest of territory, it also leads to the spatialization of an organizational praxis that encourages self-organization, political socialization, and the forging of global ambition. To this end, I employed a Gramscian political ecology perspective to illustrate how the MST's philosophy of praxis empowers its members to practically and ideologically challenge hegemonic constructions of common sense and the production of nature under neoliberalism. In analyzing the internal dynamics which forge global ambition, this paper contributes to our understanding of the subjective factors which drive social movement mobilizations.

The analysis of the MST as a counter-hegemonic movement does not suggest that its political trajectory has been one of continuous advance; rather, the MST's praxis since its founding has been marked by conquests and defeats, offensive and defensive struggles, loss of lives and the conquest of land, which reflects a Gramscian war of position as a long, slow process of practical and ideological struggle for an alternative hegemony.

The acquisition of global ambition was a gradual process that evolved and matured as the MST territorialized into a national movement. Moreover, the emergence of global ambition has been informed by an organizational praxis which promotes the development of a counter-hegemonic popular common sense that challenges private property relations through land occupations, that promotes consciousness-raising, self-organization, leadership and alliance building, and the remaking of nature-society relations through agro-ecological practices.

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[26] Interview #76, 1/21/2005.

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