
Agrarian reform leadership in the face of the climate emergency: training environmentalists in the Brazilian countryside

Liderazgo de la reforma agraria ante la emergencia climática: formación de ambientalistas en el campo brasileño

Lideranças da reforma agrária diante da emergência climática: formação de sujeitos ecologistas no campo brasileiro

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Abstract

This article discusses the emergence of social circumstances that, in recent decades, have shed light on forms of environmental violence in conflicts in rural Brazil, as well as investigates the internalization of environmentalist dispositions among MST leaders in times of global climate emergency. By taking seriously the trajectory of landless activists, the study seeks to understand the process of socialization of dispositions—social realities incorporated in the past—favoring conservation. Furthermore, the idea is to discuss the MST's strategies for fostering relational contexts in which leaders are encouraged to update or adopt environmentalist dispositions regarding the agrifood world.

Keywords: Environmental violence; climate emergency; socialization; landless rural workers' movement; agrarian reform.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el surgimiento de circunstancias sociales que, en las últimas décadas, han visibilizado formas de violencia ambiental en conflictos en el Brasil rural, e investiga la internalización de actitudes ambientalistas entre los líderes del MST en tiempos de emergencia climática global. Al considerar seriamente la trayectoria de los activistas sin tierra, el estudio busca comprender el proceso de socialización de actitudes —realidades sociales incorporadas en el pasado— que favorecen la conservación. Además, se busca discutir las estrategias del MST para fomentar contextos relacionales que incentiven a los líderes a actualizar o adoptar actitudes ambientalistas respecto al mundo agroalimentario.

Palabras clave: Violencia ambiental; emergencia climática; socialización; movimiento de trabajadores rurales sin tierra; reforma agraria.

Resumo

Este artigo discute a emergência de circunstâncias sociais que, nas últimas décadas, lançaram luz sobre as formas de violência ambiental em conflitos no campo brasileiro, bem como investiga a internalização de disposições ecologista em lideranças do MST em tempos de emergência climática global. Ao levar a sério a trajetória de militantes sem-terra, o estudo busca compreender o processo de socialização de disposições—realidades sociais incorporadas no passado — favoráveis à conservação. Por outro lado, a ideia consiste em discutir as estratégias do MST na promoção de contextos relacionais em que as lideranças são estimuladas a atualizar ou adotar disposições ecologistas em relação ao mundo agroalimentar.

Palavras-chave: Violência ambiental; emergência climática; socialização; movimento dos trabalhadores rurais sem terra; reforma agrária.

Introduction

In recent decades, Brazilian academia has been making increasing efforts to discuss fairer alternatives in the current global climate crisis. Discussions are being fostered on the role of agriculture, highlighting the characteristics of family farming that favor the conservation of natural resources and the performance of its multiple functions in alternative agricultural production models (Marchetti; Moruzzi Marques, 2024).

Although the relationship between traditional forms of agriculture and environmental issues is not new to the social sciences³, it was only in the 1980s that the environment emerged as a cross-cutting theme in the humanities. In political

³ Approaches such as cultural ecology and ecological anthropology have been addressing these issues since the first half of the 20th century (Moran, 2010).

philosophy, proposals were presented that advocated for the intrinsic value of nonhumans (Leopold, 1986; Neass, 2005). In history, there is a clear need to rethink research approaches and propose a new perspective capable of seriously considering the relationships between environment and society (Dean, 1996; Worster, 1990). According to Martins and Cunha (2020), this shift also occurred in rural sociology in Brazil. Since then, at least with greater emphasis, studies on rurality have begun to centrally consider environmental issues in problematizing social conflicts in rural areas. Driven by catastrophism, all these spheres of knowledge seek to define and conceptualize justice in the face of climate emergencies, aiming to identify alternatives capable of reconciling society's social and economic demands with the planet's delicate climate balance.

In an attempt to explain the emergence of political environmentalism in the 1980s, Lopes (2006) proposes the concept of environmentalization. It is a process by which part of society begins to recognize environmental issues as a public issue. It is no coincidence that environmental protection is now part of the repertoire of demands of social movements, business groups, and political parties.

The social circumstances of the current historical period allow for the denunciation of specific forms of violence that affect ecosystems and local populations. Throughout the 1960s, Carson (2010) published one of the first major series of denunciations of the damage to environmental and human health caused by the use of pesticides, which were widespread during the so-called Green Revolution. In Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s, Anna Maria Primavesi (2016) and José Lutzenberger (2012a, 2012b) already highlighted the risks and impacts associated with tropical soil management based on the prescriptions of the Green Revolution and its technological packages. In addition to these authors, Altieri (1999), with his book "Agroecologia: Bases científicas para uma agricultura sustentativa" (Agroecology: Scientific Bases for Sustainable Agriculture), as translated into Portuguese, fostered important discussions on the loss of agricultural resilience due

to the spread of the industrial approach to agriculture to the detriment of traditional knowledge, introducing production systems incompatible with local social and ecological particularities (Da Costa, 2015).

Based on these starting points, this paper proposes, on the one hand, to discuss the emergence of social circumstances that shed light on environmental issues in conflicts in rural Brazil and, on the other, to understand the internalization of dispositions—ways of feeling, thinking, and acting—through the trajectories of leaders of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). The objective is to investigate the political formation of landless people in times of global climate emergency, that is, of those who currently make up the frontlines in the defense of sociobiodiversity.

Rural leaders in times of climate emergency

In 2024, using oral history methodology to collect in-depth accounts (Meihy; Holanda, 2015), 25 interviews were conducted with MST leaders from environmentally diverse settlements in the state of São Paulo. This constitutes a voluminous and detailed body of data, allowing for the implementation of sociological investigations on an individual scale (Lahire, 2004). That is, when addressing the socialization of individuals, the aim is to identify dispositions more or less internalized in the past (Lahire, 2013). From this perspective, individuals' behavior can be understood as the result of the relationship between heterogeneous dispositions incorporated throughout life and the demands of present situations, in which these dispositions can be activated, reinforced, and/or updated in practical and relational contexts (Lahire, 2013).

Due to limiting factors, only one interview was selected to be explored here in minimal depth. This book testifies to the arrival of pesticides in rural São Paulo, the resistance of a peasant family to the brutality of development projects during

the military dictatorship, and the sublimation of individual dispositions in the struggle for democratization of access to land and environmental protection.

Finally, a comparative parallel is established with the MST's Training Notebooks over time, problematizing the historical process in which the social movement began to foster and value conservationist dispositions in its leaders. Indeed, it addresses the emergence of a new utopian configuration of the social movement that enabled or favored the formation of environmentalist leaders (Moruzzi Marques; Alves, 2025).

The poison reaches the Field

National policies to encourage the use of pesticides began in Brazil with the National Agricultural Pesticide Program (1973-1985), instituted by the military regime. This new technological package was globally promoted under the justification of responding to the risks of food insecurity and global food shortages (Moreira, 2000). Soybean established itself as the main crop of the new agro-export model during the military regime's implementation of the PNDA (National Agricultural Development Program). According to Lignani and Brandão (2022, p. 351), "from the first half of the 1970s onwards, this crop gained prominence and became one of the pillars of our economy based on the agro-export model. This growth was closely linked to the use of herbicides." Indeed, the proposal for a radically technological agriculture, with abundant application of agrochemicals and the use of machinery, was very much in line with the global benchmark for productive efficiency during the Cold War (Muller, 2018). Thus, the industrialization of the Brazilian countryside was seen as an ideal model for public policies aimed at the agri-food sector.

"Agroecology, organic food, these are life. Pesticides are death!"

Born in 1967, a few minutes after her twin sister, Marielle came from a humble, rural family, but one with the means to sustain a certain level of well-being

and emotional stability. She reported no food insecurity, material deprivation, or domestic violence in her early childhood. Her family consisted of eight children: her father, mother, and grandmother (on her father's side). The house "was a real farmhouse, with well water and a dirt floor. It had a large bedroom for the children, where everyone slept together, and another bedroom for them [the parents]. It also had a kitchen with a wood-burning stove." When describing her first home, this farmer often emphasizes that her father was a family farmer and the family lived in an environmentally protected area.

It was a farm. An orchard here and a cornfield there. And the house, on a very large plot of land. It had a large forested area. Lots of trees, native trees. My father was a true family farmer. He used whatever nature had to plant⁴.

From his perspective, his parents were farmers who followed a traditional agricultural approach, without the use of agrochemicals. It's worth noting that accounts of the family's work are not based on third-party information, but rather on empirical and lived experience.

All the knowledge was passed on to the children who worked with them. Because, for my father and mother to go to work on the farm, the children had to be there. All of them. The children had to be close by. They didn't leave us alone. They always kept an eye on the children. The eight of them went to the farm, but the younger ones only on the weekends. Weekends, in the morning, at dawn, like, at three, four in the morning, we were already going⁵.

Although the concepts of family farming and organic agriculture do not figure in the history of our interviewee's early childhood, in her reminiscing, she takes the liberty of constructing these associations as a means of valuing her family's practices in contemporary language. In this way, she not only emphasizes moments of family togetherness associated with emotional contact with the natural

⁴ Interview given by Marielle (September 2024) family nucleus 1 - state of São Paulo

⁵ Interview given by Marielle (September 2024) family nucleus 1 - state of São Paulo

environment, but also highlights the risks and catastrophes engendered by rural industrialization projects.

At the age of 5, the interviewee witnessed events that led to the ruin of her family, as well as the deterioration of her health (mental and physical) over the years. A large landowner had purchased neighboring lands to, with the military government's various tax incentives, undertake large-scale soybean planting based on technological packages originating from the so-called Green Revolution. Aerial spraying, still permitted in many Brazilian municipalities, was one of the most widely used methods of applying pesticides to his property.

I never saw my father with poison. Never! Never! But the farmer next door had a vast soybean production and every two weeks he would spray the pesticide by air. And we, in our innocence, even Mom and Dad, in our innocence, would watch the plane passing low and we would run, run after the plane, shouting, "It's a plane! Take me!" Especially me and my sister, who was my twin. And in the end, it took... It took practically my entire family. There are only a few left. The first to die was my five-year-old [twin] sister. She was the first to become infected. She died at five. The pesticide was confirmed in her system⁶.

The story evolves into a more emphatic characterization of the farmer as a small being with regard to the moral dimension, since, in addition to the apparent evidence of contamination, the man tries to buy the family's silence.

My father didn't want to go to court. He only spoke to the farmer when he brought the money home. My father told him, "You're trash, you're a monster, you're not human. No amount of money can buy my family's life. Keep your dirty money." And we gathered around my father. I remember them talking and my father's tears streaming down his face. He handed my father the envelope, but my father took it and threw it at his feet. He said all these things, telling him to keep his dirty money and that his money only brought death⁷.

⁶ idem

⁷ Ibid.

The death of his sister and the family's deteriorating health led his father to sell the farm and move with his children and wife to a house closer to the urban center of Artur Nogueira. The family enjoyed a brief period of stability, with the father able to complete a technical course to work in the city in the electronics industry and the mother selling bread. However, another episode of family drama quickly unfolded.

I was 11 years old when my mother began to suffer from the consequences of pesticides. Because everyone who is infected with pesticides is gifted with diabetes. Everyone! And then my mother began to feel very ill. On September 16, 1978, I lost my mother. Infected by pesticides. My mother was young; she shouldn't have died like that.⁸

His father soon suffered a similar fate. After his wife's death, he sought better alternatives, moving to Campinas with his younger, still-dependent children. However, he experienced an accelerated physical and psychological illness.

My father was also infected. After my mother died, we came to Campinas. My father couldn't handle the shock, nor could his children. My father had a house in Jardim Aurélia. And we came to live in Campinas. He and the three youngest stayed there. The older ones stayed there because they were already working. They stayed there to work. My father also developed diabetes. He was losing weight and losing consciousness. He missed my mother terribly. A lot, a lot, a lot. Until he fell ill in bed. Unfortunately, on February 9, 1979, my father also left, infected by pesticides⁹.

At 16 years old, our interviewee discovered that she had developed cancer due to her contact with pesticides: her case affected her mouth, similar to that of her twin sister. Over the years, the cancer spread throughout her body, increasingly deteriorating her health. Seeking a more natural and healthy lifestyle, she turned to organic farming, seeking to establish her home in areas with some space for planting. In this context, the MST and its agroecological proposal emerged as an opportunity for such a determination.

⁸ Idem, Ibidem

⁹ Idem, Ibidem

My main motivation for joining the MST was the land, the farming, but also the pain I felt from having lost everyone to pesticides. And the MST still advocates and preaches distancing from pesticides and healthy eating. So that was why. I wanted to save myself. I thought that eating healthy food would save me from infection, from pesticides. But that's not quite the case¹⁰.

Thus, she approached the MST seeking a place where she would be welcomed and reminisce about the past: "The MST gave me the opportunity to reclaim our lives. What we had to leave behind." By increasingly participating in activist activities, she was able to embrace a series of concepts fostered by the movement's political education campaigns: agroecology, family farming, popular agrarian reform, permaculture, food sovereignty, etc. Thus, it can be said that the early internalization of ecological dispositions, which occurred during her early socialization (through her family) and practiced over the years, favored her adherence to the MST—a space where these dispositions were updated, cultivated, and mobilized in militant practice for an environmentally differentiated agrarian reform.

Training notebooks and environmental protection

The Training Notebooks are books organized and edited by the MST's national secretariat with the purpose of coordinating the struggle for agrarian reform in a manner consistent with the movement's project and the strategies agreed upon at various congresses and meetings. The first two editions (The Government's Land Policy and Documents on the Land Question) date from 1984, the year the MST was founded. This type of material has been publicly available since its fifth edition, *MST as It Is Organized* (1985). Indeed, these notebooks present not only norms and instructions for organizing settlements and

¹⁰ Idem, Ibidem

encampments, but, most importantly, justifications for legitimizing agrarian reform at successive stages of its history.

These texts present arguments grounded in a specific conception of a just world that reflect the practical aspirations of social actors. In other words, the norms and institutions present in these training manuals must be accompanied by a set of common good perspectives that represent communicable frameworks for justice, not only for MST members but for the majority of Brazilian society. That is, these are justifications consistent with the historical period and social circumstances. Indeed, in Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's (2020) theory of justifications, these guidelines for just action are understood as orders of justice.

In the 1980s and 1990s, proposals such as gender equity, rural youth participation, religious tolerance, the appreciation of peasant art, and popular education were framed to correspond to certain perspectives held dear by a portion of Brazilian society at the time. According to Boltanski and Thévenot's (1999; 2020) classification of the different conceptions of justice commonly mobilized in argumentative conflicts in modern societies, the MST, in its first decades of activity, advocated for the valorization of family relationships, trust, and proximity (domestic order), as well as collective organization, equitable representation (civic order), and freedom of artistic and religious expression (inspired order) within its territories. It is also possible to affirm that, especially regarding production, the MST sought strategies to express a form of productive greatness (industrial order) and market competitiveness (mercantile order). But while these values continue to be mobilized today, the movement's main legitimizing strategies have evolved significantly.

In the 2000s, the MST incorporated environmental protection and the promotion of alternative agriculture into its national statute. This process occurred after the collapse of the Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CPA) model and the strengthening of ties with La Via Campesina (Borsatto; Carmo, 2013). In addition to

these factors, the growing representation of alternative agriculture in the debate on global climate change, linking family farming to biodiversity protection and healthy food production, played an important role in the MST's productive and organizational redirection since then.

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, with the establishment of the Sustainable Development Project (PDS) settlement model by INCRA, the MST achieved significant achievements in the construction of environmentally differentiated settlements. In the São Paulo state context, programs such as the Sustainable Rural Development Project (PDRS), implemented between 2010 and 2018, provided the necessary foundations for the creation of cooperatives specializing in the production and marketing of agroforestry products. This program is an offshoot of the State Program for Micro-Watersheds (PEMH), established in 1997 in response to the Agenda 21 commitments made during the Rio-92 Conference. This stimulus enabled the advancement of some socio-environmental proposals in PDS settlements.

Starting in 2019, with the rise to power of then-president Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a radical opponent of agrarian reform and environmental protection policies, the MST intensified the production of training materials on ecological contradictions and the strategies that produce environmental degradation and community disintegration promoted by agribusiness. Training Notebooks No. 49, entitled "The Agrarian Question and the Environmental Question in the Post-Constitutional Context," and No. 50, entitled "The MST's Struggle Against the Privatization of Conquered Territories," clearly demonstrate this line of action.

In 2020, the National Plan to Plant Trees, Produce Healthy Food was launched, proposing an agroforestry transition in settlements and the planting of 100 million trees by 2030. By 2025, according to data released by the MST, the

initiative had planted 25 million trees, established 300 nurseries, and restored 15,000 hectares of degraded land.

This new national plan consolidates the MST as one of the most significant environmental movements in the country, while also establishing the prerogative of more efficient leadership training in environmental defense, alert to greenwashing attempts by economic actors. It is with this aim that the Training Notebooks "Carbon Credit and False Exits" (No. 62) and "The Necessary Protection of Natural Resources" (No. 63), as well as the "Agroecology Notebooks" volumes 1 and 2, were developed. The MST's critique of environmental compensation initiatives, such as the carbon market, whether based on flow (emissions reduction) or stock (preserved areas), reflects an ecological conception of justice that clashes with mercantilist arguments in addressing the climate crisis. In addition to this form of denunciation, the notebooks provide a series of arguments and examples that portray the socio-environmental crimes promoted by degrading industries and industrial agriculture: the collapse of dams in the municipalities of Brumadinho and Mariana, Minas Gerais; the advance of the agricultural frontier into the Amazon rainforest; and the contamination of soil and water resources due to the intensive use of agrochemicals. Furthermore, these documents seek to guide leaders in various territories regarding the possibilities of agroecological or agroforestry transition, as well as the role of family farming and agrarian reform in the defense of natural resources and society.

Final Considerations

The brief aim here was to present a research proposal capable of addressing the complexity of the social construction of environmental subjects. In this effort, the analysis sought to balance specific issues with an examination of socialization processes and contextual factors. The aim was to take seriously materials from oral history and undertake an analytical look at life stories, investigating the origin of

dispositions in leaders of social movements, notably environmentalists. Concomitantly, problematizing the historical context and social circumstances in which the individual is inserted, inferring the possibilities for activating these dispositions throughout their trajectory, makes the analysis of the formation of these subjects very fruitful, through a dispositional and contextualist sociology (Lahire, 2013).

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