

# **Rural social movements and their historical contribution for building democracy in Brazil<sup>1</sup>**

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This article is the result of a joint research project to investigate recent ways of building democracy through rural social movements' organisation, party building, political struggles and social mobilisation in Brazil. Following that project (see Franco 2007), the field research's goal was to gather information to evaluate possible innovative rural-based initiatives that – in struggles against poverty and political exclusion – contribute towards building democracy and development in countries like Brazil.

Almost 20 years ago, in the context of political transition to democracy and the first steps of new agrarian movements like the emerging Landless Peasants' Movement MST, Grzybowski stated that rural democratisation would require agrarian reform in Brazil. He also said that it would require “participatory and autonomous social movements and a role for rural workers, as full citizens, in the definition of state policies and the allocation of rural development resources” (1991: 22).

Brazil has not experienced any sort of major agrarian reform since then, but dozens of rural movements have been organised and hundreds of thousands of landless peasants have acquired the right of access to land (especially through settlement projects) as a result of these social movements' struggles. After so many years of fighting and popular mobilisation, what are these movements' contributions to building rural democracy? This study seeks to understand this process by evaluating social movements' alliances (both rural and urban alliances) and evaluating their relationships with political parties, especially with the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT) and with the Brazilian Federal Government.

Thus, the research and the article are based on the assumption that rural social movements are constantly struggling to be recognised as collective political subjects (Grzybowski 1991: 22) and that their fights, demands, social identities and forms of organisation are mechanisms for building citizenship and democracy in the countryside. In such a context, the concept of democracy cannot be reduced to its political-institutional dimensions (political aspects or transformations of the state), but it

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must include other fundamental values like equality, freedom, recognition of the majority but with respect for minorities' rights, and fulfilment of constitutional rights (Chauí 1989: 141). Therefore, it is also assumed that human rights (individual freedom, social rights, and humankind's common heritage) and popular sovereignty are two key aspects of democracy (Comparato 1989).

It is also important to understand that democracy is a political system or situation that not only allows but also presupposes the existence of social conflicts (Chauí 1989: 145). Conflicts are not symptoms of a social pathology or anomaly, as Durkheim and Parsons considered them to be from their view of societies as harmonious organisms. But they are expressions of particular interests of different social groups or classes. As collective political subjects, the social movements struggle for rights which the Brazilian cultural and political system denies on a daily basis. These rights are embodied in the social conflicts in Brazilian society.

Agrarian issues – land reform policies, land struggle, rural conflict over land ownership, social movements' mobilisations, and so on – have been ongoing political issues for decades in Brazil and have caused a lot of stress and conflict between popular movements, landlords' organisations and the state. However, rural social movements are active not just in the struggle to access land (land occupations) since they also demand – and, in some cases, participate in – decisions and implementation of many different governmental policies and programmes (technical assistance and rural extension, education, health care, artistic and cultural initiatives, etc), thereby enlarging the very concept of agrarian reform.

Following the research proposal (Franco 2007), the field work tried to get information about the interviewees' evaluations of the relationship of the social movements to the state, the relationship of the movement to political parties, and the movement in relation to political alliances. Starting with questions related to personal ties to political parties, the main goal was to allow for the interviewees' evaluations (around 20 open-ended questions) on these subjects. There were no direct questions about their understanding or concept of democracy, but one question asked about “the main mechanism to achieve democracy in the countryside”. However, the references to agrarian reform were attached to concepts of or references to human rights (access to education, health care, and so on) and political participation.

In an effort to capture Brazilian cultural, economic, social, and political diversity, it was decided to interview not only national reference people, meaning not only people directly related to the national government and living/working in the capital. Thus, using Terra de Direitos's knowledge and contacts in two important states (Paraná and Pernambuco<sup>2</sup> in the south and northeast regions

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<sup>2</sup> These two states represent the diversity of the Brazilian rural reality. Paraná represents one of the most well developed, modern agricultural systems, especially in cropping soybeans, but part of the Pernambuco's territory is in the arid region, severely damaging its agricultural production. Both have well-organised, rural social movements, but with quite different experiences in terms of relations and conflicts with State Governments.

respectively), several political people and leaders of social movements were interviewed there.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the field research was done through interviews with approximately 30 leaders of social movements and non-governmental organisations, representatives of political parties, and Federal Government officials in these two states and at a national level (people located in Brasília).<sup>4</sup>

The field researchers collected data in three different settings and the questionnaire was designed to obtain information related to social movements and their relationships with political parties and government at state level, but this paper will only reflect upon elements of the national context. On the one hand, including material to analyse the particularities of rural social movements' struggles in each state would have meant also including a lot of historical and contextual information, which was far beyond the scope of this work. On the other, the main results (answers) concentrated on the national perspective, that is, evaluations and opinions were about national movements, the Federal Government and its agrarian policies, etc. This was not only because there were several questions related to national issues but also because, under the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, agrarian issues are mainly the responsibility of the Federal Government, leading to views and perspectives exclusively related to the Federal Government's actions and policies.

This article begins to rescue some aspects of the historical struggles in the countryside after 1960s, and the rural social movements' contribution to re-establishing democracy during the 1980s in Brazil (part 1). Since there were no specific questions related to this historical process in the field research, this evaluation is based on bibliographical materials only. Following an historical perspective, the article deals with the interviewees' responses, starting with their perceptions and opinions about the relationships between movements and progressive political parties (part 2), with the great majority of answers focused on evaluating the Workers' Party (PT) actions. This movements-parties relationship is part of the background to discuss answers on social movements and Federal Governments' relations and conflicts, especially evaluations of the presidency of Luiz Lula da Silva (often referred to as Lula) after 2003 (part 3). Finally, there is a discussion about rural-rural and rural-urban alliances and the main challenges of social movements for building democracy in the countryside (part 4).

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<sup>3</sup> The field research selection was done informally, since each organisation indicated who would answer the questionnaire on its behalf. Alternatively, the researchers asked people close to the social movements' struggles to answer the questions. It is important to note that several people did not respond to our demands, which meant organisations like the National Confederation of Labourers in Agriculture (CONTAG), for example, were left out.

<sup>4</sup> There were members of the National Movement of Peasant Women (MMC); the Landless Peasants Movement (MST); the Amazonian Working Group (GTA); the Co-ordination of Indigenous Organisations of Brazilian Amazon (COIAB); the Pernambuco State Federation of Workers in the Agriculture (FETAPE); the National Federation of Family Farming (FETRAF); the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT); the Institute for Social and Economic Studies (INESC); Terra de Direitos; the Latin American School of Agro-ecology; the Institute of Popular Educators; the Department of Social and Economic Studies for Rural Development (DESER); the Centre for Research and Support to Workers (CEPAT); the Workers Party (PT); the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL); the Socialist Party (PSB); the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCRA), and the Cabinet for Agrarian Development (MDA).

## 1 Fighting for democracy: rural movements' contributions

The 1950s and 1960s were a period of emergence and mobilisation of agrarian popular organisations (Peasant Leagues and pre-union associations) in Brazil, orchestrated by the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the north-east region. Peasants and rural workers' social movements acquired a more political perspective and demanded better working conditions and access to land, which forced the Federal Government to include land reform in its modernisation development programme. The Communist Party and the Roman Catholic Church, in spite of their disputes and intentions, politicised the peasants' struggles which created political mediators such as rural unions and other channels to express peasants' demands. Their works transformed the local resistances of the peasants in organised struggles and gave a national and political character to their demands for land reform (Martins 1981; Sauer 1996).

The military coup d'état in 1964 repressed these rural social movements. Their leaders and militants were intimidated, arrested and even tortured, and most peasant organisations were destroyed (Martins 1981). On the other hand, the military regime (1964-1985) invested heavily in the implementation of the Green Revolution and an agricultural modernisation project by capitalising large estates (*latifundios*). This was done through generous allocations of financial resources and by generating conditions for the use of innovative inputs (from hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers) and mechanised agricultural implements (from chainsaws to harvesters). Through tax breaks, credits and subsidies, the dictatorship favoured large property-holders and altered the productive base of the primary sector, provoking what some social scientists have described as a "painful" and "conservative" modernisation process (Silva 1994).

This process has been called "conservative modernisation" (Silva 1994) because it opened the countryside up for new technological levels in agriculture, which promoted a great increase in production and productivity without implementing any kind of democratisation of land ownership. Instead of democratising access to land through a land reform programme, the modernisation process was based on the economic development of large land-holdings, maintaining or even deepening the concentration of land ownership. It increased the concentration of land's ownership and provoked the expulsion of millions of peasants and rural workers, with the result that "in rural Brazil, a highly modernised and dynamic agricultural economy coexists with a pauperised society" (Carter 2007: 5).

On the political perspective, the military regime severely persecuted communists, peasant leaders and pastoral agents. From 1964 to 1968, peasants and rural workers were isolated by the political persecutions and suppression of all progressive organisations. The Communist Party was banned and lost its power as an organised political force in the countryside (Sauer 1996). This repression was intended to destroy social and political mediations by isolating and neutralising peasants' demands for land. It also blocked any possibility of transforming the agrarian question into a

political problem which would threaten the established political alliance between industrial/urban groups and the rural oligarchy (Martins 1981).

Since the military regime's modernisation process was not implemented peacefully, old rural conflicts took a turn for the worse and new ones emerged. The dispute over land worsened and conflicts intensified, especially in the agricultural frontiers of the Amazon region. Abandoning its expectations and hopes in the military modernisation process, the Roman Catholic Church became fully engaged in the peasants' struggles after 1968 and denounced the atrocities carried out during the expansion of modern enterprise in the Amazon. The state repression of social movements made the Catholic Church an important political mediator of peasants' demands for more than 10 years. The church's pastoral work through the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT) created in 1975 (Sauer 2002), supported Amazonian rural dwellers<sup>5</sup> who claimed the right to stay on and till land to fulfil their rights as workers.

In spite of military repression and persecution, the rural conflicts and demands for land stayed on the national political agenda. Local rural unions, popular leaders and pastoral agents (most of them under CPT's co-ordination) mobilised and organised peasants who stayed on land and resisted those trying to expel them from it – particularly rural dwellers living on the agricultural frontiers. The social demands for land kept the subject on the national agenda, forcing the government and also organised Brazilian society to respond, and so transforming the struggle into a fight for freedom and democracy.

The Catholic Church and CPT were not alone in their defence of rural people, because rural unions and associations continued to exist in spite of the military repression, although their actions and resistance were restricted to a local level. Also, the National Confederation of Labourers in Agriculture (CONTAG), founded in 1963, demanded land reform, but its struggles were based on the argument that the Land Statute (an agrarian law issued in 1964) should be implemented, reinforcing a more "institutional" way of social pressure. This legalist position changed after 1979 when its national congress demanded massive and wide-ranging land reform (Medeiros 1993). Also, CONTAG like other organisations, started to associate the demands for agrarian reform with the needs of re-establishing political democracy in Brazil.

Added to this historical resistance, there were new political opportunities for popular mobilisation in the late 1970s, as a result of the military regime's gradual political opening and restoration of democracy. These mobilisations and the political amnesty granted in 1979, which allowed the return of many political leaders from exile, resulted in the creation of several popular organisations. Examples are the Workers' Party (PT) in 1979, and the Central Workers' Organisation (CUT) in 1983, which encompassed several urban and rural trade unions.

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<sup>5</sup> The rural dwellers were – and still are – families who lived on land but had no legal documents to ensure their rights to the land. They just tilled and lived on the land without legal title (they are not landless peasants), which created insecurity which led to the frequent denial of their rights to possession by landlords.

In this process of building a new, popular organisation and rebuilding old political parties like the Communist and the Socialist parties, which had been illegal for more than 20 years, the rural mobilisations kept agrarian issues and demands for land on the political agenda (Deere and Medeiros 2007). More than merely influencing the agenda of social mobilisations, this political process resulted in the creation of the MST, officially established in 1984 (Stédile and Fernandes 1999),<sup>6</sup> which consolidated a new process of land struggle through land occupations.

Newly-organised rural movements joined old ones – such as CONTAG and CPT – and urban coalitions and political parties in street demonstrations and rallies demanding democracy and political freedom. Agrarian movements were directly involved in the popular pressure which forced the military to step down from power at the end of 1984. These popular mobilisations against the regime “raised expectations regarding the possibility of agrarian reform” (Deere and Medeiros 2007: 83) being part of the political process of democratisation. Thus, popular struggles and mobilisations to end the military regime incorporated the cause of agrarian reform, and included it as a mechanism to achieve real democratisation of Brazil (Sauer 2002).

In this context, the social pressure and demands for land obliged the first civilian government (President José Sarney’s administration, 1985-1989) to formulate a National Plan for Agrarian Reform (PNRA). Officially launched at the 4th National Congress of CONTAG in May 1985 by President Sarney himself, this PNRA promised to set aside land and settle 1.4 million families in four years. But as the government failed to take action toward the realisation of this goal, and anti-reform alliances took shape to support Sarney, the popular struggle for a meaningful change shifted to the Constituent Assembly, which was formed to draft a new Constitution in 1987.

Led by CONTAG and the Brazilian Association for Agrarian Reform (ABRA), rural social movements fully engaged in the political process related to the new Constitution, between 1987-1988. Certainly, this process of popular mobilisation was historically the greatest effort to build democracy through institutional means. Initially, led by CPT, the agrarian organisations demanded that the new text be written by an assembly elected specifically for the job. Since the decision was that the congress elected in the 1986 election should write the new Constitution, the populist organisations demanded mechanisms for participation which were created by an instrument called “popular amendment” to the new text.

Rural social movements actively participated in the whole process with several mass mobilisations in Brasilia, and a “popular amendment” demanded the inclusion of land reform in the

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<sup>6</sup> The MST did not appear exclusively because of the fights and demands of the rural population, but because of different factors at an important political moment. According to Stédile, the MST “could only be formed as an important social movement because it coincided with an ampler process of struggle for the democratisation of the country. The struggle for the agrarian reform was added to the re-organisation of labour strikes, in 1978 and 1979, and to the fight for the democratisation of the society”.(Stédile e Fernandes 1999: 22) For more information about the MST, see also Sauer (2002) and Carter (2007).

constitutional text. About 1.2 million signatures were gathered in support of the amendment, resulting in, for the first time, a Brazilian Constitution which stated clearly that private property shall fulfil its “social function” (Article 5). Also, Article 186 adopted the logic that land guaranteed as private property is dependent upon guaranteeing collective rights to life, including that the exploitation of land be environmentally sound, and that any land which does not fulfil its social function shall be expropriated for agrarian reform (Souza and Sauer 2008).<sup>7</sup>

It may sound like a great victory by rural social movements, but in spite of their active participation and mass mobilisation they were defeated at the end of the process. In the intense dispute over each term in the agrarian text, the large landlords were able to assert themselves through an additional clause in Article 185 that excluded productive property from the expropriation process. Since the promulgation of the Constitution in 1988, its implementation means that productivity is considered to be the only criteria taken into account to evaluate if owned land fulfils its social function, which has become one of the greatest hurdles in the implementation of agrarian reform.

At the end of the 1980s, after being institutionally defeated in the Constitution process, social agrarian movements intensified their grassroots mobilisation. The rural dwellers’ resistance by staying on land evolved definitively into new tactics of struggle by shifting to land occupation (Martins 1989). According to Grzybowski, the MST arose during this process of land struggle – meaning, its origin was closely intertwined with the new development of land occupations as the most important method/strategy of action. (1991: 23). As the MST’s history demonstrates, the struggle for land was no longer an action of “resistance” – carried out especially by rural dwellers – it became an offensive (proactive) fight. This initiative forged a new social actor (the landless peasants), a new organisation (the MST) and a new way of struggle (land occupation) in Brazil (Martins 1994).

The rural dwellers’ struggles to stay on the land they possessed and for their right to work were supplanted by land occupations and by struggles or demands for expropriation; therefore “the encampments had had a major impact upon the meaning and perspective of the fight for land in Brazil” (Martins 1994: 150). MST became the most well-known agrarian movement and its mobilisations and struggles for land deeply influenced other social movements and popular organisations like CONTAG and CUT, including CUT’s rural branch and associated local rural unions.

Land occupation became the main form of struggle for access to land, but the agrarian movements – and the concepts developed by them – did not restrict their demands for agrarian reform to access to land. During the 1990s, while shaping their views on the struggle, their demands started to

<sup>7</sup> Martins (1989) is extremely critical of this rural social movements’ political option and involvements in the Constitution process, and asserts that they made a huge mistake in exchanging the land struggle (a social struggle) for demands for agrarian reform (an institutional and governmental step). It resulted in institutional defeats (the introduction of the concept of “productive property” in the Constitution forcing a closer connection between property and production) and created setbacks in the few advances achieved in the Land Statute (Martins 1994).

include access to education (from first grade to university level), health care, technical assistance, and so on. More than just making demands, the rural movements carried out several initiatives to improve the living conditions of rural people, such as creating their own schools – which included university courses for sons and daughters of landless families – and organising cultural events and activities to entertain the rural youth.<sup>8</sup>

Deeply influenced by several state federations and rural unions that were organising and leading land occupations at the beginning of the 1990s in several states like Pernambuco and Goiás, CONTAG made mobilisations and organisation of land occupation its key tactic to expand and consolidate family farming in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> With the decision to affiliate to CUT – made during its 6<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 1995 – CONTAG reasserted the importance of massive agrarian reform. This also became an important element of CONTAG’s opposition and criticism of agrarian policy of Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s Government.

In the middle of the 1990s, the growth of land conflicts in São Paulo, Brazil’s richest state, and a long MST march to the nation’s capital, Brasília, in 1997 kept land on the national agenda and forced the administration of President Cardoso (1995-2002) to formulate an agrarian reform programme. His administration recreated a cabinet for land policy, which developed a variety of initiatives related to agrarian issues, including a package to settle 400,000 landless families in four years. However, this did not slow down the social movements’ opposition to Cardoso’s administration.

With its demand that “the state play a more active role in social development” (Carter 2007: 2), one of the rural social movements’ greatest achievements was the creation of the National Programme for Strengthening Family Farming (PRONAF) in 1996. Responding to the demands for credit, technical assistance, education and so on, the Cardoso administration created the first public policy exclusively aimed at family farmers and families settled by the agrarian programmes.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the context of neo-liberalism and the state’s reforms, the Cardoso administration sought to reduce the social pressure for land by slowing down land occupations and mass mobilisations. According to Deere and Medeiros, “facing escalating anti-government social

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<sup>8</sup> For example, several agrarian movements and rural organisations are part of the Brazilian Federal Government’s technical assistance programme to the settlements (co-ordinating technicians’ teams, helping with planning the activities and so on) and the MST, jointly with public universities, is implementing university’s law courses involving young people from the settlements and camping out landless families.

<sup>9</sup> Meszaros points out that “mobilising beyond traditional borders – geographic and legal – would give the movement its national characteristic as well as the capacity to concentrate large groups of people in small areas without the usual restrictions” (2007: 5).

<sup>10</sup> There are several critics of, and even opposition, to the PRONAF but it was a rural social movements’ victory and an official governmental recognition of this agricultural sector’s social and economic importance and role within Brazilian development process. After the PRONAF, several other government programmes were created exclusively to meet the demands and needs of poor rural people.

mobilisations, the Cardoso Government responded by trying to isolate the MST in order to reduce its role as the main protagonist in agrarian reform” (2007: 87). Together with the decentralisation process, several legal and administrative measures were taken, including criminalising social movements’ actions (a decree was issued that prohibited the expropriation of occupied land) and delegitimising these occupations. This was done through a media campaign designed to create a negative image of the landless movements and their forms of struggle (Pereira and Sauer 2006).

Brazilian social and political and economic models have historically been based on large land ownership. It has taken on new dimensions through history, but has not changed significantly because there are always power rearrangements and new alliances between sectors of the industrial and financial ruling class and the rural oligarchy (Martins 1994). In such processes and alliances, the peasantry was historically left out of all political pacts and arrangements (Martins 1981), denying them basic aspects of citizenship (basic human rights) and democracy (popular participation, inclusion in decision taking). Consequently, the peasants’ struggles are not restricted to demanding access to land, but also include fighting against political exclusion and social marginalisation, which increased with the rural modernisation and has continued in recent decades, with the result that their struggle is eminently a political struggle for land, citizenship and democracy (Sauer 2002).

In spite of all of this political involvement and contribution to democracy by the agrarian movements and rural trade unions – and the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation in the late 1960s throughout the 1980s – social and economic democratisation of rural areas is still a dream and a struggle for those who suffer and live in the countryside. Since there has been no massive agrarian reform, Brazilian rural areas were historically, and remain, marked by social exclusion and political domination through power based on property/landholdings (a patrimonial system), characterising what is called an “authoritarian political culture” (Grzybowski 1991: 25). In this perspective, to struggle for land – demanding public policies and government programmes to support new landowners – is still to fight for democracy, even though some scholars assert that it is an “old-fashioned” struggle (Navarro 2007).

## **2 Rural social movements and ties to the Workers’ Party<sup>11</sup>**

The struggle for democracy and against political exclusion has strong ties to the political fights carried out mostly in the institutional arena. The “political opening” period<sup>12</sup> that started at the end of

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<sup>11</sup> An important note here is that the questions asked in the field research did not mention any particular political party. The research restricted questions to personal political affiliation (whether the person was or was not affiliated to a party and why) and his/her evaluation about the movements-parties relationships. However, most of the answers directly referred to the Workers’ Party, including those who declared themselves not affiliated to it and even some people who were attached to another party.

<sup>12</sup> Also it is called as “gradual democratisation process” and it was carried out as a way to answer popular demands for democracy, but done based on a political agreement among dominant groups or parties. Even allowing Brazil to move out from the military regime, most critical thinkers define this

1970 and was “concluded” in the middle of 1980 with the election of a civilian government and the formulation of the new Constitution, was a time when all progressive political parties were reorganised in Brazil. This process happened at the same time that several social movements, popular and trade unions’ organisations were created, for example, the Central Workers Organisation (CUT) in 1983, and the Landless Peasants Movement (MST) in 1984.

In this political context, the Workers’ Party (PT) was conceived (1979) and born out of social mobilisations, including the popular struggles for land and better working conditions in rural areas. The PT’s novelty was that it was not a left-wing party – since several others had been reorganised, such as the Brazilian Communist Party, the Communist Party of Brazil, the Brazilian Socialist Party, the Labour Party – but that it was a progressive or socialist party with strong urban and rural leadership and organisational support (Fernandes 2006). Breaking a “progressive tradition” of being in the vanguard, the PT became the political expression of social urban (especially the steelworkers of São Paulo) and rural movements. Its main contribution was not to lead the progressive sectors but to express politically popular demands, creating a different perspective for participation and democracy (PT 1979).<sup>13</sup>

Again, as at a few other times in Brazilian history, a socialist party (a left wing or progressive party) had strong support from organised social groups and popular leadership (rural workers, landless peasants, steel workers, union leaders, progressive pastoral agents, and so on),<sup>14</sup> and most of its leaders came from urban and rural organisations. The popular support and presence of many social movements’ leaders – which did not happen in any other party – deeply influenced the political agenda of PT in its first decade of existence.

Consequently, the agrarian reform and rural movements’ demands were part of the PT’s political platform since its very beginning, when it stated that it would defend “an agrarian policy that aims to end the current land structure” (PT 1980: 2) and struggle for a “massive, comprehensive agrarian reform under the workers’ control” (PT 1980: 5). Thus, most of PT’s official historical documents and public statements affirmed agrarian reform as a key government policy for Brazilian society, endorsing its frequent official and public support for the land struggle and for all the rural social movements’ actions and demands.

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process as a deal “to change power not changing anything” in terms of political domination (Fernandes 2006).

<sup>13</sup> In its Letter of Principles, issued in May 1979, the PT defined itself as “a party of popular masses, uniting industry workers, the vanguard of all exploited people, all other workers – bank employees, teachers, public employees, small market workers, rural daily paid workers, liberal professional people, students, etc – who fight for better life conditions, for real democratic freedom and for political participation”. (PT 1979: 5)

<sup>14</sup> It is important to acknowledge here that such role was partially played by the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) related to the mobilisations and struggles of the Peasant Leagues during the 1950s, until the military dictatorship destroyed them and arrested or persecuted their leaders and supporters, including banning PCB and arresting some of its leaders.

Reinforcing this historical analysis, several interviewees reaffirmed close ties between rural social movements and the Workers' Party. Asked about the rural movements' relationship with political parties, possible advantages or gains and problems in such relationships, more than just ties, some people pointed out that the PT was born out of the social movements:

It has a programmatic identity, a daily relation in the social struggles and the militant presence of an expressive number of agrarian movements' persons affiliated to the PT; the origin and ascension of the party are directly linked to the ascension of the social and democratic struggles (NAC5).<sup>15</sup>

PT was born in the midst of and out of the social struggles, such as the trade union movement, the churches' social and pastoral works, and the students' movement, which fought against the dictatorship and for the re-democratisation of the country (NAC8).

Based on such historical ties and PT's commitments, some interviewees said that a political party is an important instrument to help rural workers and landless peasants in their struggles for land, jobs and better living conditions in rural areas. According to them, there are good relationship between PT and social movements "because, at the most difficult moments of the struggles for land, it has been the most supportive party" (PE1) and "because it (the PT) respects our autonomy and supports our main demands" (PE7).

There is no doubt that these opinions illustrate the important role played by the PT in the 1980s and 1990s. Encompassing most of rural and urban social movements' demands, the PT was a sort of "organic intellectual" – to use a concept formulated by Gramsci – of the agrarian movements. This was because, first of all, it gave a political and national dimension to the local struggles, such as the resistance to expropriation and voicing demands for participation in the local/state political arena. Second, the PT was the main party that represented the social movements and their demands in the political arena (a sort of resonance box to the popular voices).<sup>16</sup> Third, it linked the rural and urban social movements' agendas, "interpreting" their specific demands into political dimensions, such as local struggles as an opposition to central governments; demands for land as national demands for agrarian reform, and so on.

Thus, asked about movements and parties' relations, some respondents pointed out the importance of such collaboration between these instruments of democracy (NAC7). It is important to

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<sup>15</sup> To protect each interviewee, their names and organisation will not be cited in the quotations. Quotations will be followed by letters and numbers. The letters NAC (number) refer to the national leaders and representatives; PE (number) refers to people interviewed in Pernambuco; and PR (number) refers to people interviewed in Parana state.

<sup>16</sup> Martins used to criticise such ties between social movements and PT, affirming that there was a mistake taking the party option (or the partisan struggle) as meaning political struggle, since the option was for "the organisation – the trade union and the political party" (1994: 161).

emphasise that these reflections are almost exclusively related to PT<sup>17</sup> and there is a strong emphasis on the need for autonomy by the social movements. Actually, this emphasis is, on the one hand, the recognition of the importance of this autonomy, but it is also a “declaration” that such autonomy is not so easy to achieve, on the other.

The movement’s relationship to the party is good, but it is an independent relationship of contribution in a left front; they join a bigger struggle. The great challenge of this relation is for the movement that shall not allow itself to be co-opted by the party; to keep its autonomy and to make the social struggle to advance independently from the party. The social movement cannot tie itself to a party because it will lose its essence (PR2).

The movement’s relation to the party is good; it is [marked by] autonomy and dialogue, based on agrarian issues and the social interest of the working class. In this relationship, there are gains such as keeping the agenda of the agrarian question and acquiring public policies; also the discussion of other subjects of general interests, like the privatisation process (PR3).

Even while recognising PT’s closeness to social movements’ agenda, it has been a historical position taken by many popular leaders not to have any institutional or official ties to political parties in Brazil (NAC10). According to several interviewees, this position, kept official for a long period, was meant to preserve the autonomy of the movements from any political parties (PE8, NAC10). There were always ideological and political alliances (political programmes, common goals, joint mobilisations, and so on) between PT (and with other left-wing parties, but much less significant) and agrarian movements, but with independent structures, purposes, administrative mechanisms, and different ways of struggling, and different actions and goals.

However, if there were no official (institutional or organisational) relationships between PT and social movements, there were close ties among people and popular leaders<sup>18</sup> (several people mentioned a party other than the Workers’ Party, but all of them were attached to socialist or left-wing parties).<sup>19</sup> According to one person: “There is great identification between the movements’ social basis

<sup>17</sup> There is an important exception since one person, having PSOL as reference, said that “there is a process of reorganising social movements, which were fragmented because their deception with Lula’s Government. And our party [PSOL] is very new. We are working to strengthen ties to these movements, supporting them daily. The political party and social movements are essential instruments for social transformation” (NAC7).

<sup>18</sup> This personal tie is clearly put in the research since – when asked about political affiliation – several national and state leaders declared themselves quite close if not affiliated to a political party, especially to the Workers’ Party. According to one person, “CPT, as a pastoral commission, does not have official relations with any political party, although many members have close relations with PT and many are affiliated to it” (NAC1).

<sup>19</sup> There was no particular concern about having many political parties represented in the field research, but among those who mentioned affiliation or close relationship other than with the PT, we found the Humanist Party of Solidarity (PHS), the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), and the recently created Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL).

and the Workers Party” (NAC4). And another: “PT was seen as an instrument for strengthening the popular struggles and a path to winning institutional space” (PR9).

Actually, this sort of relationship is part of Brazilian political debate in populist circles with quite distinct positions, including those people who believe some parties are always using the social movements simply as instruments or tools for popular mobilisation (NAC7). Departing from the notion of the party as an “organic intellectual”, there were some interviewees who said that these political relationships were fundamental since the party was suppose to be the leading force for transforming society.

They may have similar ideologies, but they must have separate activities (...). The social movements should struggle defending the interests of particular social categories. (...) A political party must serve the well-being of the state or the nation, and worry about the rights of all social classes (PE2).

The debate about the relationships between progressive parties, especially PT, and movements gained a new dimension after 2003. This was not due only to the presidential election in 2002 and President Lula da Silva’s administration, but several problems gained new intensity and led to clear conflicts between the social movements’ demands and the parties’ political intentions and goals. The most critical interviewees’ answer was the affirmation that there is no political party that embraces social causes these days, and there is no party support for agrarian reform or for the movements’ struggles.

The movement’s relationship with the party is good, but autonomous. The movement does not seek support only in the party, but also from the churches and trade unions, always preserving its autonomy. The social movement has to keep political relationships and, in the struggle for agrarian reform, searches for left-wing parties’ support, such as the Communist Party of Brazil; at present, the reality in Brazil is that there is no party that is immersed in populist struggles or that embraces social change. Since the PT abandoned the agrarian programme, the movement does not have tools and the PT is not longer the dream ally (PR7).

We may deduce from these statements that the PT’s role among the popular struggles changed significantly with the 2002 elections.<sup>20</sup> There are several reasons for such change – which did not happen suddenly but was part of an historical process started in the 1980s – but agrarian reform as a principle demand for opposing the central government was perhaps the most significant factor. Progressively, the PT moved away from daily popular struggles and concentrated its efforts in on political battles and reduced its activities to gain votes and conquer state power. Maintaining a

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<sup>20</sup> According to one person who left the Workers Party: “The PT assumed power in 2003. In the last few years, the PT has moved away from its programmatic goals, abandoned its ethical references, and lost the socialist beliefs and militancy” (NAC7).

discourse in support of popular demands, social movements' struggle for land and popular demands for agrarian reform became part of the PT's political strategy in opposing the central government, including its role as the main opposition party to President Cardoso's administration (1996-2002).

As the main party of the ruling government from 2003 onwards, PT has not "strengthened" the land struggle. It is also resistant to criticism against the current agrarian programme that has not been properly implemented or has not met the social movements' demands. This position is the main reason the Workers' Party may have lost its political role as "organic intellectual" of the rural movements. According to Carter:

PT and MST usually converge strongly when both party and movement are in opposition to the governing authorities. The rapport becomes more problematic when PT is the party in government, as is currently the situation with the Lula presidency. Overall, these tensions have been partially tempered by the MST's own political sagacity, including its ability to differentiate between foes and allies in the Lula Government (2008: 16).

On the other hand, there were very critical positions taken by the interviewees, considering that the relationship between party and social movements has not been so good. Criticising PT for many mistakes – such as its historical process of bureaucratisation or even its use of social movements' capacity to mobilise only to gain votes – one person said that "the party [PT] always placed itself above popular organisations" (NAC6) and moved away as soon as it won the national elections in 2002.

It is evident that the Workers' Party moved itself away from the social movements after arriving in Federal Government. And its main leaderships now do not include their speeches and actions, for example, the necessity of comprehensive and massive agrarian reform, which historically the party always stood for (NAC3).

It has been a while since the PT has no relations with the social movements. The party became so bureaucratic; [it became] so institutional, and even became a federation of regional chieftains. It does not consider the social movements; worse still, it sees the social movements as a nuisance to its political aims (PR9).

Some people, especially those who have left the PT – like those representatives of the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) – took strong and critical positions denying the party's historical role of representing demands of sectors of Brazilian society. According to one interviewee the movements-party relationship was only good to show that

...the party is not the main instrument for popular struggle. The organisations or popular movements cannot be considered as an instance or an instrument of the parties. We need to build an instrument to articulate the popular struggles whose

relationship is more direct (and not representative) with the struggle as well as building an organisation that will replace the state (NAC6).

Such a position goes far beyond a mere criticism of left wing or progressive parties' mistakes in general, and puts all hopes for change in the social movements' actions. Such positions raise discussions on the role of the state and the historical option of progressive forces to conquer the state (a dominant option throughout Latin America). Maybe these positions do not go as far as Holloway's position that it is possible – and necessary! – to change the world without taking or conquering political power, meaning to gain or conquer the state (Holloway 2003), but certainly they raise questions about the roles of the political parties and of the social movements in a changing society.

Besides the discussion about the state's role in Brazilian society, it is important to see that PT's role changed considerably in the last decade. The 2002 election made clear that PT's actions and goals were going through a process of moving away from the movements' demands. Its involvement in election processes and “bureaucratic jobs” – running local city halls, state administrations and parliamentary work – drove it away from social movements' agenda. This became clear after 2002, since the main concern was with governance and not with its historical commitments, such as its position on agrarian reform. There is an ongoing process of negotiation with the Federal Government and social mobilisations, trying to keep the PT as an ally knowing it is not going along with the movements' agenda entirely.

From the agrarian movements' perspective, the struggles and demands have been articulated to face these new political realities. Even so, according to most interviewees, agrarian reform is still seen as a fundamental public policy in building democracy in Brazil. According to them:

The democratisation of rural areas will happen only with a great programme of agrarian reform. The rural areas must democratise land ownership. Only agrarian reform can bring alternatives for all workers who live off agriculture, and can eradicate illiteracy and bring education to rural areas (PR7).

This macro-policy is not seen as a way to bring about democracy only to the rural areas, but it is thought of as a social and political transformation that will (or should) affect Brazilian society as a whole. Thus, over all, its political dimension is openly stated, pointing out the likely impact on the country as a whole. It is important to notice that “agrarian reform” is used as a very broad concept that goes far beyond redistributing and accessing rural land or as a public policy to eradicate poverty, enforcing not only the social dimension of democratisation an agrarian reform.

The main mechanism to democratise rural areas is still agrarian reform. This land reform should completely remove concentrated land ownership and limit the size of rural properties; an ecological land reform that values the relationship with nature and the cultures of traditional people; an agrarian reform that articulates rural and

urban areas in healthful food production for the population. And that, as the MST already does, also promotes emancipatory education and culture (NAC7).

Such a concept is directly contrary to the perspective adopted by those who are against agrarian reform in Brazil. Navarro (2007), for instance, is very critical of the MST's actions. This is based on the presumption that "the social demand [for land] is decreasing" because Brazil is an urban country<sup>21</sup> and that agrarian reform is unnecessary "except in some regions", basically in the "polygon of droughts" region (north-east region) to alleviate rural poverty. Even if Navarro's perspectives are correct, agrarian reform would have a major national political impact, since this "polygon of droughts" embraces eight north-eastern states – almost 900,000 square kilometres – and over 1,300 municipalities.

Regardless, this was not the perspective adopted by the interviewees. With respect to the need for a comprehensive or massive agrarian reform, many of them mentioned aspects or steps in structural public policies that go far beyond mechanisms like expropriation and settlement projects. According to the interviewees, real democratisation of land ownership must be done by implementing several political and/or legal measures, such as changing aspects of the Constitution and other laws to assure a better life and working conditions in the countryside.

The mechanism to democratise rural areas would be a set of policies that also include more effective participation by civil society in its management. Rural areas need to be seen as an important sector for a development model; they need to be given more value in academic spaces, with educational projects. The countryside is still seen important only for food production, but it is not recognised by society as a whole (PR6).

Clearly, most of the interviewees have a very broad concept of agrarian reform since they view access as only one and the first step in a long process. Many answers did not restrict agrarian reform to macro-policies directly related to access to land (governmental actions of expropriation and settlements), but cited several other mechanisms and public policies. They mentioned education as a second key element to bringing democracy to the countryside.

Education is the main instrument to democratise the countryside because it creates citizenship. Access to electrical power (associated with other infrastructure components) is another mechanism that democratises social relations in the countryside (PE8).

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<sup>21</sup> Based on distorted data related to population and to economic activities, arguments that Brazil is an industrialised and urban country and that the large agribusiness enterprises are more efficient – associated with neo-liberal ideas that the market will solve the problem of concentrated land ownership – are constantly used to deny the importance of agrarian reform, especially the political dimension of the democratisation of land ownership.

Secondly, [with it comes] the programmes for the democratisation of knowledge like technical assistance, education, documentation, and several others; after them [come] housing and production programmes (NAC4).

Along with education,<sup>22</sup> there are other mechanisms that were mentioned to achieve democracy, such as professional education (or training) and dissemination of information to rural families (PE6), that confirmed that a very broad concept of agrarian reform will impact on different dimensions of rural life. On the other hand, the interviews supported Chauí's (1989) concept of democracy, which goes far beyond political-institutional dimensions including social rights and popular sovereignty.

### **3 – Social movements and government: real changes in their relations?**

The election of President Lula, a former leader of the Workers' Party, as the Brazilian President in 2002 considerably changed the relationship with rural social movements. Different from previous administration (President Cardoso, 1996-2002), the central government was no longer viewed as an open enemy of the land struggle and social movements. On the contrary, PT's historical commitment to the matter generated great expectations that President Lula's administration would implement massive agrarian reform. According to Carter:

The 2002 election of President Lula brought a measure of respite to the MST. After all, Lula and the MST had long held friendly relations. The new PT administration no longer sought to criminalise the movement's protest activities, despite repeated demands for a "mano dura" (heavy hand) approach by right-wing politicians and the conservative media establishment (2007: 10).

There are no doubts that Lula's election refreshed hopes and expectations related to land struggles in Brazil. Such hopes led to a great increase of encampments of landless families along the highways. According to MST estimates, these numbers jumped from around 70,000 in 2002 to nearly 140,000 landless families camping out and demanding access to land at the end of 2003. According to Meszaros:

Temperamentally, at least, significant sectors of Lula's Government, including the president himself, were favourably disposed towards land reform. This raised the tantalising possibility that, for the first time in decades, a fundamental reorientation

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<sup>22</sup> According to Carter (2007: 11), the MST "has placed a uniquely strong emphasis on the education of its participants and cadres. (...) Presently, the MST runs a network of 1,800 primary and secondary schools, attended by 160,000 children". Furthermore, pressured by the rural organisations, the government established an adult literacy programme (PRONERA), which serves hundreds of thousands of families, run by the movements' educators and teachers in co-operation with public universities.

of the state – and its corollary, a loosening of the legal regime and decriminalisation of landless struggles, might take place (2007: 4).

Believing that the state/government would take a different position, the movements and organisations fully supported the formulation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Plan for Agrarian Reform (II PNRA) by a committee appointed by the Agrarian Development Ministry (MDA). This plan was announced by Lula, who personally addressed thousands of militants of all rural movements at their final gathering after a week of marching at the end of 2003. The II PNRA aimed to settle 400,000 families and title land to another 500,000 families in a four-year period (2003-2006),<sup>23</sup> materialising Lula's commitment to implement a massive agrarian policy. According to Meszaros, with the 2002 election:

The most important issue was the extent to which the presidency would address social contradictions and mark the emergence of a new and radical partnership for agrarian reform, and the beginning of the end of the long cycle of conflict between state and society (2007: 26).

The goals of II PNRA were not met in the first four years of Lula's administration. The main aims were reviewed a few times during the period and in the end a massive process of expropriation was completely abandoned. It is significant that there were no clear goals regarding agrarian issues in Lula's 2006 electoral programme, because it was not thought to be an easy subject for the electorate.<sup>24</sup> Shifting their main aims, MDA and the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCRA) emphasised the need for an "agrarian reform with quality", which entailed more emphasis on investments in the existing settlements as a way to justify the decrease in expropriations and the small number of families settled on land.

Amid ongoing MST pressure tactics, Lula's Government has maintained an open dialogue with its leaders. During its first term, it increased funding for agricultural settlements and MST educational projects. Yet Lula has fallen short on his land reform promises and disappointed those within the MST who hoped his government would steer away from the neo-liberal fiscal policies of his predecessor (Carter 2007: 10).

Because of its historical commitments, Lula's administration was "sensitive" to the demands for agrarian reform in its first term, but it has not been able to implement the II PNRA or any other programme that attended to the minimum of popular demands for access to land. These problems have several basic causes, such as the Lula Government's political choices and its alliances with

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<sup>23</sup> The drafting committee initially proposed expropriating enough land to settle one million families, but this was considered too ambitious by MDA, which established the goal of settling 400,000 families, and to which President da Silva committed himself. For more details about the II PNRA, see INCRA, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> It is important to mention here that the pluri-annual plan (budgets' and programmes' law) for the 2008 to 2011 allocated financial resources sufficient to settle only 20,000 families per year.

conservative parties and sectors of Brazilian society to get into political power. Several parties that support Lula (including the Ministry of Agriculture who is a representative of large agribusiness interests) have landowners joining their ranks, who push against any measures to democratise land structures.

Consequently, there is recognition that Lula's administration has made advances compared to the previous government. Almost all the evaluations stated that the election of Lula as president opened up more room for the social movements. According to these opinions (which were expressed by most of the interviewees), dialogue with the Federal Government was a key achievement after 2002. All interviewees agreed that in contrast to previous administrations, there is now more respect, dialogue and room for negotiation, in spite of the continuing criminalisation of the movements' actions (such as issuing a law criminalizing the land occupations in 2000), which was also constantly done during President Cardoso's administration.

The main change is related to the treatment of the social movements. The Federal Government – without the courage to revoke authoritarian garbage, like the “law” that hinders the inspection of occupied properties – is not treating the social movements as criminals as occurred in the Cardoso Government (NAC3).

In relation to Lula's Government, there are several achievements: it has slowed down the neo-liberal project; it has diminished the criminalisation of social movements; it has made possible the dialogue between social movements and government; it has organised conferences where the movements are present and speak about any subject, including public policies, and they also participate in the nomination of people to specific positions (PR1).

There are acknowledgments of improvements, especially “an opening for much talking, welcoming and dialogue” (PE4) or even some participation<sup>25</sup> under Lula's administration. The participation and these dialogues were not defined by the interviewees, but these steps are an essential condition to deepening democracy and breaking down the historical process of political exclusion of peasants. However, it is not seen as an important political achievement since this participation is done in “informal ways” and “for personal reasons with immediate interests” (NAC2).

Even some improvement in the level of movements' participation during Lula's administration was considered too little by most interviewees. There is a critique that although some public policies have improved the living conditions of the rural poor, these are only social assistance without political consequences, meaning that the achievements “have even been very palliative” (PR8).

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<sup>25</sup> Even criticising is done only in “informal ways”. One person said that “the movements have participated in diverse spheres of the Da Silva Government that they had never had before with any other government” (NAC2).

The Lula Government brought some achievements: the food security law and the Zero Hunger Programme that give new hope to the social movements, the direct purchase [programme] and even the agrarian reform policy (PR5).

Related to Lula's Government, I believe that it is positive for family farming; it has made some advances related to credits, public programmes and policies. The problem is that, no matter how much it had invested in agriculture, it has not yet defined that the projects for the countryside are agrarian reform and the promotion of family farming. There is confusion about development models and the path of agribusiness (PR6).

Even while recognising that there is more political space, several people noted that social movements face problems for mobilising and making their demands clear. These people pointed to different reasons and causes for this, among them that social movements' leaders end up working for the government, that there is a certain attitude that the government should solve all the problems, and that the movements are spending all their energy fighting for institutional space in spite of working on popular mobilisations.

The social movements had great dissent during Lula's administration; many leaders ended up going [to work] for the government, which weakened the social struggle. Some policies started to be dangerous to the movements, like the Family Assistance Programme [Bolsa Familia] that weakened the struggle and strengthened electoral enclosures (PR5).

The social movements had found a good channel of dialogue with the Lula administration and it resulted in a certain accommodation in the struggle. The social movements had difficulty in mobilising their people, even with respect to some important issues. The dialogue process moved away from the struggle (PR6).

Another considerable gain was the discovery and the creation – not even in an institutional [form] – of negotiation and participation mechanisms in the government. Thus, the movements had stopped considering, at least partially, mobilisation as the only form of struggle, and started – at least the leadership did – to think about institutional disputes [inside the state] (NAC2).

Probably, the problems faced by social movements were caused by a combination, to varying degrees, of all the aspects mentioned above. Naturally, there is a tendency for the mobilisation process to slow down – largely done to push those in power – if there is a belief that the government will fulfil its commitments because it identifies or has sympathy for the cause.

However, the identification or proximity between President Lula and the agrarian movements created important challenges for the latter. First of all, the movements' agenda was historically

oriented towards open opposition to the central government. There were always some levels of negotiations, but the political stance was always a clear opposition to the established political power. Consequently, the challenge was how to be critical of the Federal Government's policies – and keep up the mobilisations and struggles – without being seen as being in direct opposition to Lula's administration.

On the other hand, if more space for dialogue or opportunity for participation is seen as a positive aspect, there are also accusations of co-option of social movements by the Federal Government. In other words, everybody sees that there is proximity or even symbolic or political identification with the government – one person even mentioned that “the president is accessible by the poor people” (PE6) – but not all see it as a positive development.

There is a process of co-option of the social movements... Many are running after government compensatory policies. [The destination of public resources is] for strengthening the movements or [if it is done as] a process of archaic [ways of doing] politics through “trade” [give and take] in Brazil? (PE4).

Many affirm that the biggest achievement is the fact that Lula's government does not criminalise the social movements and that it welcomes dialogue with them. However, this is the minimum that a government that considers itself as left [should do]. I do not see improvements with Lula's administration. Worse still, I see co-option, [a process of] weakening the ideological debate, a reduction of the social movements' agenda, de-politicisation of the government and social movements relations (PR9).

With regard to the accusation of co-option, some of the responses (mainly those who openly oppose the government) were so critical of Lula's administration and called it a “mistake” or even a “betrayal” of the popular struggles. This perspective is probably influenced by a poor “administrative and managerial concept of power”, which does not view political power as being based on “agreements and arrangements that reconcile the antagonism of diverse interests within common projects” (Martins 1994: 147). Even so, according to some interviewees:

It is a government that betrayed the interests of the popular struggles. Its policy – mainly through the public policies – co-opted leaders and organisations. The public policies, created for helping low-income social classes and/or popular movements, aimed to assist and not [have as its goal] integration (NAC6).

The electoral victory and rise to power created a distance from the social movements, coexisting with bureaucratic processes that contradict society's objectives that have historically been forgotten by the [previous] governments (NAC4).

The electoral victory and rise to power created a distance from the social movements, prioritizing bureaucratic processes [running the state] instead of meeting the society's objectives that have historically been forgotten by the [previous] governments. (NAC4)

Instrumentalisation and new forms of patronage are being practised, mainly with union movements – which manage governmental programmes – that work as a conveyor belt of the government and the PT (NAC7).

Instrumentalisation and new forms of patronage are being practiced, mainly with union movements – which manage governmental programmes – that work simply as riggers [transmission or reproduction] of the government and the PT (NAC7).

Not all the responses were as critical, but everyone recognised that there are too many problems, and many challenges – which depend on political decisions but which are not easy to implement. Examples of this are the need to overcome legal barriers to improve agrarian measures, to make government mechanisms more agile and to deal with, or at least to avoid, situations like the co-optation of social movements.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, there is a general consensus that “related to Lula’s Government, agrarian reform has been blocked” because it is “lacking a true land reform programme that would democratise land property. The government did not touch the agrarian structure” (PR7).

Most of the criticism against Lula’s administration is based, first of all, on the great expectations generated by his and PT’s historical commitment to agrarian issues. Such commitment resulted in assertions like “the debt of Lula’s Government is historical and its policies take better care of the interests of the agribusiness than of peasant agriculture” (PR7).

Together with this expectation, there is a political view that concentrates the resolution of social problems in the hands of the state. Asked about the main instruments to achieve democracy in the countryside, the great majority mentioned structural mechanisms and public policies, pointing out that a “democratic state” is responsible for leading society to democracy. Initially, we could say it is a perception or concept based on a “top down” process for implementing democracy.<sup>27</sup> Such concept or understanding, however, should also be interpreted in the Brazilian legal and historical context.

First of all, it is important to be clear that agrarian reform is, above all, a state policy. Different from land struggle (a popular action), the concept of agrarian reform is tied to the state’s role and responsibilities, and linked to government (political and administrative) measures. Secondly, Brazil has historically been run with policy based on patrimony, meaning that land ownership is the path to

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<sup>26</sup> According to several evaluations: “Lula’s Government has given more space to the rural movements and it has not restrained or criminalised them. However, the challenge is to work with movements that, in certain ways, have been co-opted by the government’s liberality and, therefore, have become less radical in actions and confrontations” (NAC1).

<sup>27</sup> It is important to mention that the question about mechanisms of democracy initially had a complementary point asking about the “main government programmes”. Such linkage, however, was present only in the first version of the questionnaire and most of the interviews did not have this complementary point, but the responses tended to emphasise the institutional or state’s perspectives.

power, and which gives a special political meaning to any kind of popular demand related to land. This legacy and Brazilian historical processes deeply influenced the notion of agrarian reform as a macro-policy which can only be implemented by strong state intervention. These lead easily towards a notion of agrarian reform as purely a responsibility of the state.

Actually, this perspective is deeply influenced by the Brazilian Constitution, which puts all responsibilities for agrarian measures exclusively in the hands of the Federal Government. It states clearly that most agrarian policies – especially land expropriation processes – are an exclusive responsibility of the Federal Government.<sup>28</sup> This constitutional view influences popular perspectives, but it has also been used as an excuse to avoid implementing public policies in rural areas by the local and state governments, on one hand, and used to make direct demands to the Federal Government by all the social movements, on the other.

This view of “the state as the provider of all solutions” is not the only one among the responses. Together with, or perhaps because of, the deceptions or frustrations with Lula’s administration, there is a clear understanding and re-affirmation that there is an urgent need to re-start social mobilisation and popular struggles. There is a shift from a hope in the state to assertions that the government is not the solution, and several interviewees emphasised the need to concentrate energy on popular mobilisations.

During Lula’s first term of office, the social movements gave him some credit, understanding that the government was new and needed to organise itself; however, time passed and they noticed that only the struggle would bring about changes. They had retaken the struggle, bombarding the government with their historical agenda, like the agrarian reform, health, education. It was clear that nothing could be expected from the government. For any kind of conquest, direct pressure is fundamental; without it nothing happens. Pressure and negotiation are the tactics of the movement [MST] (PR6).

The main improvements are the understanding that to gain the executive (the presidency, even in a presidential system of government) does not necessarily imply the radical modification of public policies or goals of such policies to quickly diminish inequality or exclusion. Our learning from our frustration (...) must also be considered a gain (NAC2).

Some people mentioned the need to organise society and to strengthen social movements for autonomy and participation, revealing a perspective that a democratic society is reflected by a

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<sup>28</sup> Despite having several questions asking for their opinions about and evaluations of the relations between rural social movements and local or state governments, most interviewees were weak or vague about this issue, with an analysis centred on the Federal Government’s measures and its relationship to popular demands.

democratic state. As previously mentioned, most of the interviewees based their perceptions and desired mechanisms upon the state and its measures, revealing an institutional concept of democracy. Even so, there were references for organising and mobilising people to “use mechanisms of direct participation to democratise the countryside, assuming autonomous associations” (PR10), aiming to increase popular participation in political processes.

Patient and persevering work [is necessary] to have popular awareness, that is, in the local communities, men and women, young people and adults; to help the small ones in the discovery of the power that they have to provoke changes with small, well-motivated groups (PE2).

As we read in the previous quotation, there are clear references to popular control, workers’ participation or/and management, and so on. Only one person, however, explicitly mentioned land occupation – one of the most important instruments of popular mobilisation in the countryside – as a mechanism or instrument to democracy.

The main mechanisms to democratise the countryside are: the permanent organisation of the people, the encampments (camping out), and the land occupations (“pacific civil disobedience”) and the construction of political rural-urban alliances (PR3).

Such affirmation is built upon a political concept that democracy is achieved within society and shall be anchored to popular sovereignty and citizenship. Consequently, agrarian reform – far beyond a public policy implemented merely to fulfil the right to access land – must be combined with land struggle (social mobilisation) as an autonomous action with full participation that, consequently, allows people to be the subject of their own history.

In summary, the relationships between agrarian movements and the Federal Government became much more complex – leading away from a simple political opposition or confrontation – after the 2002 election, which caused several problems for the movements and popular organisations. Lula’s administration created room for dialogue, but it did not implement any significant reforms related to the democratisation of land, which left the movements empty handed. It also created different perspectives and new challenges to the agrarian movements and rural organisations, since their “opposing” political agenda had to be reshaped to deal with a friendly government, while keeping up demands for agrarian reform and social mobilisation.

#### **4 – Political alliances: challenges to building power and democratic relations**

Together with the increase in demands and action for agrarian reform, the 1990s saw an “explosion” of agrarian movements and the spreading of struggles for land and better life conditions in the countryside. There is no doubt that the MST was still the most well known organisation, but there

were many different social movements in rural areas. The number of them then is uncertain but there are more than 50 different agrarian and rural movements in Brazil today. If not for all, for most of them, their struggles are not restricted to the access to land, but land occupation is still the leading form of mobilisation and political pressure put on the Federal (national) and State Governments.

Brazilian rural or agrarian movements are spread out all over the country, but most of them are regionally or locally organised, and all of them struggle for land and public policies in the rural areas. However, there are around a dozen national organisations, such as the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT), the Landless Peasants Movement (MST), the National Confederation of Workers in the Agriculture (CONTAG), the Federation of Family Farming (FETRAF),<sup>29</sup> the Movement of Small Farmers (MPA), the Movement of Peasant Women (MMC), and the Movement of Peasants Affected by Dams (MAB).

There are two national, well-organised nets or forums of rural movements: the National Forum for Agrarian Reform (FNRA) and Via Campesina-Brazil. As a continuation of a national campaign for agrarian reform during the 1980s, the FNRA was established nationally around 1995 and was joined by over 40 social movements, national federations of rural trade unions, and non-governmental organisations. Nationally organised and consolidated after 2000, Via Campesina-Brazil was joined by over 20 social movements, with the MST as the leading force.<sup>30</sup>

Asked about the importance and challenges of such alliances, everybody said these two fora – or other local and regional links – are important instruments for agrarian struggles. Some interviewees strongly emphasised that it is part of her/his organisation's official policy to build alliances with other social rural and urban movements. This was clearly stated by a MST's leader:

The MST's relations with other movements has been one of its policies. [The goal is] to create relations to accumulate forces to face capital. It has been proved that the fights against corporations are becoming more difficult every day and the path is to join forces against powerful enemies. Thus, the decision was to unify the people who live and work in agriculture through Via Campesina. The alliances are important spaces because there is organised action (PR7).

Almost all opinions were positive specifically about the National Forum for Agrarian Reform (FNRA) as a national alliance of social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

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<sup>29</sup> Initially organised in the three southern states, the Federation of Family Farming (FETRAF) was officially founded in 2005 as a national articulation of local rural unions. It is the result of a split in the rural unions' movements, raising a political dispute between this Federation and CONTAG. Even being a family farming organisation, the FETRAF-Brazil uses land occupations as one of its main forms of mobilisation, and agrarian reform is its main purpose.

<sup>30</sup> With the exception of the CONTAG and the FETRAF, which are not members of Via Campesina-Brazil, all the main national movements have joined both fora, but there is underlying competition between these two movements, since Via Campesina has become better organised in Brazil.

However, these positive evaluations are generic assumptions of its importance as a space to strengthen political power and to articulate common initiatives.

Alliances like the FNRA are important spaces; the FNRA has organised debates about the transnational corporations' activities and limits for rural property. The FNRA works with a project for Brazil, on core subjects (such as health, education, etc) and not only on the agrarian issue. The only challenge is to get closer to the daily social fights (PR5).

The National Forum for the Agrarian Reform is a space that gathers together all actors related to rural workers; it has been able to organise some actions that emphasise points of unity that connect diverse rural movements and organisations, in spite of the specificity of each one of them (NAC1).

Since 1995, the FNRA has played an important role as a forum for organisations to exchange concerns and problems related to agrarian conflicts and to plan some common action. As it is an informal forum, the member organisations do not have to follow the decisions, but it has successfully planned national events, like campaigns, seminars, and conferences (like the national conference on land and water, held at the end of 2004 that gathered over 10 thousand landless peasants, family farmers, and indigenous people). For sure, such initiatives help to promote a very good public perception of the FNRA in Brazilian society.

The FNRA fulfils an important role. It has added an ample number of organisations and it has kept the agrarian reform in the political agenda; also it has tried to face the violence in the countryside and to create legislation for a rural module [limit of the size of land property] (PR3).

Although recognising the importance of national alliances, some interviewees pointed out problems, especially great political differences between the organisations' positions – often antagonistic points of view – related to key issues.

There are great political differences between the organisations, like their evaluation of the Land Bank, the market-based agrarian reform, etc; but there are points of unity between them and it is important for the agrarian reform and the Brazilian peasantry (NAC10).

Alliances like the FNRA are valid because they aim to promote social justice and fellowship in the countryside. Gains are the creation of a pool of solidarity in the struggle, joined forces to fight the large state and inequality. The problem is when interests of one entity are different from the interests of the alliance (PR1).

Acknowledging these recent diverging points of view, it is important to point out two different situations in which there was political unity among the FNRA's member organisations: 1. the struggle against the implementation of the so-called "market-based land reform" of the World Bank, during 1998 to 2000;<sup>31</sup> and 2. the organisation and promotion of a national campaign trying to limit the size of land property in Brazil, during 2001 and 2002. After that, political unity has been only for specific events and gatherings, meaning that there is no common agenda among the member organisations.

In spite of all the good evaluations, some of the interviewees were critical, pointing out some concerns or challenges to the FNRA and its member organisations. Such criticism has different sources or motivations, but most of it is related to present political reality, especially the relationships between movements and the government. There is criticism that the FNRA is going through a process or "momentum of fragmentation", although "all the initiative that is meant to unify the social struggles is important" (NAC7).

There is no further explanation for this "fragmentation", but considering the current situation and the political position of the interviewee, the opinion refers to political ties and the Federal Government's attempts to negotiate directly with – or to co-opt, as some people mentioned – each social movement. It seems that, after the 2002 election, the FNRA lost its capacity to mobilise the movements into a unified opposition to the Federal Government's agrarian policies. Since each movement or organisation has its own channels for political negotiation, the FNRA's role as a space for mobilisation has been restricted to specific events or isolated initiatives like conferences and campaigns.

The second criticism made by some interviewees is detached from the present political context. It is not based on possible consequences of the initiatives of Lula's Government, but it is trying to point out what is understood as core problems of the FNRA.

Although being an important political initiative, I do not consider the FNRA an alliance between movements; at most [it is] a forum for gathering and some joint activities. [However], to gather in the same space is not enough to constitute an alliance between movements; [they need] to have common identities, a vision, and a political agenda. The FNRA does not yet constitute itself as a relevant social actor in the ongoing disputes about the agrarian reform in Brazilian society (NAC5).

According to this view, the FNRA lost its strategical importance as the agrarian movements and organisations use it only at specific moments. There is a political calculation in using it only when an action demands greater power or larger unity among the movements. Consequently, the FNRA

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<sup>31</sup> This unity against the World Bank's agrarian policies was broken by CONTAG's support for a new programme called Land Credit, initiated in the middle of 2000. For further information about FNRA's involvements, actions, and activities against the World Bank's programmes of market based agrarian reform, see Wolf and Sauer, 2001.

“functions as a formal alliance of entities with a mere utilitarian perspective, for tactical use by the movements that do not recognise this space for building their unity or political, ideological and programmatic alliance” (NAC5).<sup>32</sup> In the same way, an interviewee mentioned that one of the greatest challenges of alliances like the FNRA is “to make the organisations include the effective construction of these collectives spaces in their strategies” (PR10).

Trying to change this perspective, the FNRA is planning to re-orientate the national campaign to alert society about the political, economic and social damage done by large land-holdings to the whole of Brazilian society. This campaign aims to call the attention of the public to a law project that shall limit the maximum size of rural properties in Brazil.<sup>33</sup> It seems that the campaign was planned with at least two main aims: 1. to establish a common goal and a consensus platform to all the FNRA’s member organisations to work together; and 2. to build a channel of dialogue with urban groups broadening its aims beyond particular demands for sectoral public policies.

There are no doubts about the importance of alliances and linkages between the social movements for building democratic channels and forms of mutual support. However, such initiatives demand political will and a great amount of effort on a daily basis. Also, one interviewee said that there are problems related to some undemocratic experiences among social movements.

The alliances and creations of forum are extremely important, therefore they attract different organisations and, at the same time, have informality [of] character, giving freedom for discussion resulting in more authentic dialogue, and opening channels to the government. The problem is the work to keep this type of alliance; it demands great effort and overloads some organisations. [On the other hand] our democratic experience is very limited (PR3).

Asked to evaluate the importance of rural-urban linkages, everybody described these alliances as fundamental for building democracy since they make stronger social movements. However, such alliances are seen as challenging in spite of ongoing realities in Brazil. Reflecting on the main challenges for social movements, one person said that these alliances articulate urban social matters with agrarian issues, and allowed for them “to propose a new development model that is, at the same time, socially just, ecologically responsible, culturally diverse and politically democratic” (NAC7).

I think that this alliance [the FNRA] is not just necessary, but fundamental.

Independently of the geographic position (urban or rural) of the workers, the origins

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<sup>32</sup> Having stronger internal unity, Via Campesina’s national consolidation has assumed part of the FNRA’s political role and, having clear programmatic goals, it is becoming the forum that represents the main national agrarian organisations’ demands.

<sup>33</sup> The FNRA has been planning this campaign since 2006 and it was launched at a national event that took place in Brasilia in the first semester of 2008. The event gathered thousands of landless peasants and family farmers from different social movements. The campaign has the political support of all main national member organisations of the FNRA, but it is not having an effect on influencing and mobilising public opinion about the importance of this discussion.

of the problems and general objectives, the main demands, are the same ones (...). Here, we should have to evoke the old Marxist advice: “urban and rural workers unite!” (NAC3).

Nobody denied or diminished the importance of such links, but all the answers were restricted to generic affirmations of a “dogmatic” principle. Most of the interviewees used general justifications to emphasise the importance of rural and urban alliances like “the gains are to have space to bring up the agrarian agenda in urban places, breaking the isolation of the rural movements” (NAC1), and “the rural problems are not exclusively the countryside’s [problems]. They are systemic problems that, if not questioned in their complexity, cannot be solved” (NAC2).

However, talking about relations between urban and rural movements, the answers revealed problems with the urban social movements. Even recognising or reaffirming the importance of such links, the interviewees said that “it is still a very tenuous relation, with a lot of problems to build a common agenda of struggles and demands” (NAC6) and that “there are ongoing alliances, but [they are] still of an embryonic form, and not on the level of organisation and with the necessary connections for [the present] great historical challenges” (NAC3). The main problems for building alliances are the “lack of experience” and “problems of mobilisation” (NAC8), “lack of organisation and leadership” (PR5), “spatial and thematic fragmentation” (NAC5), or “disarticulation” (PR3) of the urban social movements.

Even affirming that “the construction of urban and rural common agenda strengthens the class struggle of workers and unifies common urban and rural interests” (NAC8) most of the interviewees cited problems among the urban social movements. Such problems are very important difficulties that block the initiatives for building alliances and channels of cooperation. Consequently, everybody said that although it is important and there are common interests,<sup>34</sup> there are not many rural-urban links in Brazil, but the urban movements “have used rural movements’ capacity for mobilisation” (NAC2) to strengthen their struggles.

It is possible to verify that these movements are increasingly organised, but there is a long way to go. It is necessary to strength these movements, and the government must be one of the main forces. But, this strengthening also depends on our capacity to mobilise and to organise civil society (NAC3).

[The urban movements] face an extremely complex context in which to organise and to implement their actions, especially in metropolitan areas, where rapid processes of “urbanisation” are at a completely different speed to those of urban policies, access to basic rights, and initiatives for democratising the management of

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<sup>34</sup> Even recognising all problems, an interviewee said that “there are gains in joint struggles; for example, the possibility for creating a new agricultural model for producing healthy food. There is an urban sensitivity for the agro-ecology, for example” (PR5).

such spaces. They still face dispersion in the interactions with the state, involving several powers' spheres, especially a certain municipalisation of their struggles... (NAC5).

Even with many problems, there were references to good examples of concrete attempts for rural-urban links, such as the healthy food campaign of the National Movement of Peasant Women (MMC), which tries to bring together rural producers and urban consumers. Trying to fulfil one of its most important challenges – to produce and consume healthy food (healthy agricultural products) – the MMC has launched and is leading a national campaign for solutions to family farming problems and better life conditions in rural areas, as well as linking with urban concerns and demands.

The MMC felt the need for concrete action and positive goals, beyond political-ideological confrontation. It launched a national campaign for healthy food production and consumption last March. Together with the concern with water and biodiversity protection, the [campaign] is meant to dialogue with the concerns and demands of the urban population (NAC9).

Other good examples of concrete attempts to link rural and urban struggles are the MST's joint activities with the National Jobless Workers Movement and the National Homeless Movement. Maybe because of some similarity between the struggles, the urban housing movement is mentioned as a good example of urgent and necessary popular alliances.

The housing movements are growing in the large urban areas and demand better quality housing. Such movements here are represented by national entities and associations, but the unification of these movements is their main challenge, together with the popular awareness, organisation and mobilisation, which are still very precarious (NAC7).

Together with the need for building alliances and establishing political relationships with governments – combining political pressure and mass mobilisation with negotiations and bargaining with state authorities (Carter, 2007) – there have been new challenges like the ecological agenda (needs for a sustainable agriculture) and gender relations. Important steps in establishing more equal relations between men and women has been taken up by the rural social movements. For example, the MST's decision to have 50 per cent of women in all its committees and boards, and the creation of the Peasant Women Movement (MMC), which raises gender themes.

There were no direct questions related to women-men relationships in the field research, but the problem of patriarchy appeared in some interviews. According to one person, dealing with unequal social relations in families is a key challenge to achieving democracy based on equality in Brazil's rural areas.

It is fundamental to work with family relations, to face patriarchy with cultural actions and concrete mechanisms such as the joint land title. INCRA's research shows that only 12 per cent of land is in women's legal possession. The women participate actively in the struggle for the land, but they are neglected in its division and in the right to own it (NAC9).

Certainly, there are different social, cultural and economic steps to bring about a more democratic and equal relationship between women and men in rural areas. The access to land – and the legal right to own it – however, is seen as an important step to achieving such a position. It is because owning land also means to access credit and to control the means of production, consequently, to control the family's income and freedom. Thus, these are part of some social movements' agendas, including the need to improve women-men relationships in the settlements and in the farming families.

In summary, everybody agrees that it is very important to build rural-rural and rural-urban alliances, but there are several problems and/or challenges to face. Some interviewees clearly stated that the existing rural alliances, especially the FNRA, are facing problems like the capacity of political unity, leading to merely formal linkages or practices based on a utilitarian perspective. Some agrarian movements use these alliances for specific and limited purposes, but avoid a real political unity. Related to a few existing rural-urban alliances, the interviewees stated that they are still “in an incipient phase”, especially because “there are different logics and timings, that need to be sharpened” (PR4). Even that the “social mobilisation is small in the urban areas” (PR4), the agrarian movements are able to bring up political questions, and the MST is achieving “some concrete results” like “unified action plans” (NAC10) with some urban social movements.

### **Concluding remarks**

Facing a historical reality of political exclusion and poverty, the popular movements have built a strong opposition between central governments and agrarian social movements with a special effort to end the military regime in the 1980s. These efforts were an important contribution to achieving political democracy and institutional advancements like those achievements written in the Brazilian Constitution. Also, the rural social movements were able to push the central governments to build public policies to attend the poor rural population like the education programmes, PRONAF, and even the settlements' programme.

The movements' contribution towards democracy cannot be restricted to institutional achievements, since mass mobilisations and political action, including the organisation of land occupations and encampments, are fundamental to building citizenship. As a struggle against exclusion, such actions are part of the process of re-socialisation of landless families who learn to be

citizens and to rebuild sociability based on respect for human rights. Through the social construction of an identity as landless peasant, hundred of thousands of families are exercising their citizenship.

Also, the government-movements opposition has deeply influenced a political concept of agrarian reform, which was clearly stated by the interviewees when asked to reflect or express their opinion about mechanisms to achieve real democracy in Brazilian rural areas. Several of them said that comprehensive agrarian reform is still a key public policy to bring about democracy in Brazil. According to one, “the mechanism to democratise rural areas is massive and unrestricted agrarian reform, implanting a new agricultural model, based on agro-ecology principles” (PR5).

However, the demand for agrarian reform is far beyond accessing land since it is a political condition to share power (participation and the possibility of decision making). Also this struggle includes several other demands like the fulfilment of human rights and especially access to education, health care, and better life conditions in the countryside. Related to education, public policies and programmes like PRONERA are concrete cases of what Grzybowski established 20 years ago as a condition for democratisation, meaning autonomous social movements designing and helping to implement state policies for rural population.

Democratisation is a permanent process involving struggles within society (Franco 2007) and the rural and urban social movements are a very important expression of these struggles. This is especially so in an unequal country like Brazil, where a great part of the society faces poverty and lack of citizenship. There is much to be done to build real rural democracy, but the historical struggle for accessing land, as the leading force and motivation for mass mobilisation, has played a significant role in such political process, making the rural social movements collective political subjects.

There are many problems in the relationships between rural social movements and political parties and weak rural-urban alliances, but such links are fundamental in the democratisation of Brazil. Since 2002, it has become clear there are many differences among these collective political actors or subjects, but their historical cooperation achieved important victories, not only in the rural areas. Social movements are facing new challenges, especially related to having a historical ally running the state; a government that is not an open enemy but it is also not implementing any substantial agrarian policy.

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