

# Preface

Many academics study experiments that counter the capitalist system. But studies generally reach only the university world, while people that take part in these experiences—the research objects—do not see much of those studies. We have had various persons here, interviewing, researching, and observing. And we always say, not just to you but to all people that come here, that it is important to study these experiments from the workers' point of view. I don't think it is only our community, or our movement, that have positive experiences. I believe that academics that have this outlook, that identify with the working class, are likewise operating against the hegemony under which we all live. It is therefore important that you, who study our experiments, find ways to disclose the results to our community. That would help us advance our struggle.

There is undoubtedly a critical edge to Luisa's statement. Living in one of the most well-organized and prosperous communities of *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), Luisa has become accustomed to curious outsiders. She recurrently tells her story to visiting students, researchers, journalists, and activists. Twenty years ago, Luisa typically begins, she occupied a large land estate together with other landless rural workers in Southern Brazil. For years, she and the other occupants struggled for legalized land access. They wanted to be farmers, not farm workers. Eventually, in the early 1990s, the occupied land was officially expropriated, transformed into a state-sanctioned rural settlement. The settlers started to cultivate rice and soon advanced into manufacturing. Today, Luisa concludes, the MST settlement produces high-quality food for the rural poor, their organic rice distributed to public schools all across interior Brazil.

Luisa tells her story with pride and dignity. She finds it important to voice one of the collective "experiments that counter the capitalist system." Yet Luisa is tired of being a "research object." And she declares this to me, another question-asking visitor, foreigner to their community, to their collective experience. Luisa therefore requests of me to disclose a report that "would help us advance our struggle." But that I cannot do. What I can do, however, is to outline how such an advancement is fostered by storytelling itself. The MST story is repeatedly narrated by interviewed MST participants, like Luisa, as well as academic scholars, like me. The story is told in dialogue with the past, recalling protagonists from a narrative prequel to

situate Brazil's Landless Movement in historical context. Yet this story is not some narrative monolith. It is flexible, constantly modified, and revised. And it is continuously revived, put into action through narrative enactment. It is therefore, I believe, the dynamic usage of the movement narrative that best answers Luisa's request.

This book explores the story of Brazil's Landless Movement: its historiographical prequel, its narrative components, its modifications, and its enactment. The scientific purpose with this exploration stems from a *non-essentialist* understanding of social movements and other agents of resistance. This means that groups of people that somehow confront, defy, or escape the repressive workings of power do not necessarily represent some preexisting identity, nor share a prescribed social essence. From the non-essentialist theoretical perspective, resistance agents derive not from class, ethnicity, gender, or any other form of social categorization. Agents of resistance instead become distinguishable through their activities and advocacies. From this non-essentialist perspective, resistance agents are understood as diverse, or divergent, *political subjects*. Resistance then becomes a contingent activity; individuals are unified, in a specific time and place, through their struggle for sociopolitical advocacies. This notion of resistance contingency motivates, I believe, a thorough exploration of the MST story.

Brazil's Landless Movement is commonly narrated as one of the world's most long-standing and successful social movements. The story begins in the late 1970s with rural mobilizations, materialized as land occupations. These resistance activities become increasingly interconnected, and the Landless Movement soon grows nationwide. Through successful land occupations, numerous families, hundreds of thousands, now gain legalized access to farm land. In this storytelling, MST continuously navigates Brazil's uneven politico-economic topography.

Here, we encounter what social scientists typically call a *research problem*. If we accept the notion of social movements as contingent political subjects, how can we possibly understand their continuity over time? The answer to this question, I believe, is partway found in the dynamic activity of history writing.

With empirical focus on Brazil's Landless Movement, this book explores the enabling power embedded in the movement narrative. The book begins with MST's historiography, encompassing what I refer to as a *prequel* to the MST story. My empirical analysis of ethnographic and written MST sources suggests that the scene of this prequel, just like the MST story, takes place at the social margins of the Brazilian nation-state project. The historiographical characters, recalled in the narrative prequel, include runaway slaves, indigenous peoples, religious groups, and rural labor unions. Together, these insubordinate resistance agents, *protagonists* of the MST prequel, portray the historical context—five centuries of resistance—in which the story of Brazil's Landless Movement is then situated.

Local translations of the MST story, like Luisa's storytelling, imply the narrative's importance for political subject formation. Collective memories create a mutual *space of experience*, specific understandings of past events that assign meaning to contemporary resistance activities. The space of experience is therefore a vital resource for political imagination, formulating a *horizon of expectation*. The

movement narrative, the MST story, becomes a stabilizer for political subject formation. The contours of this narrative are drawn not only by MST participants, but also, as implied by a meta-analysis of 275 MST-related scholarly texts, by academic storytelling.

At the same time, the MST story seems to be notably flexible. A systematic analysis of the entire compilation of *Jornal Sem Terra*, MST's internal newspaper, shows that substantial narrative changes have occurred over the past thirty years. The antagonist of the MST story shifts from the traditional large landowner toward export-oriented agrifood corporations. This antagonist shift parallels an increased emphasis on the small-scale farmer, and a fading narrative importance of the original narrative protagonist, the landless rural worker. What remains constant, however, is the storyline, the *plot*. Alike the MST prequel, the constant plot of agrarian social conflict allows insertion of various characters into the storyline. The stability of the narrative plot enables flexibility of the story's main characters.

Yet this flexibility is only feasible to a certain point, that is, when it jeopardizes the narrative's stability-producing function. Let me exemplify. The contemporary focus on reinforcing producer cooperatives motivated key MST figures, in a rare act of protest, to leave the movement in 2011. By not prioritizing novel land occupations, the critics argued, MST had not only abandoned the landless workers, but also outstepped the very frames of the MST story. These conflictual meanings of the movement narrative, its balance between stability and flexibility, highlight political subject formation as an ongoing social process. The writing of history informs the making of resistance.

To put it differently, the making of resistance involves recurrent *enactment* of the movement narrative. My ethnographical sources (18 focus groups, 14 individual interviews, participant observations) demonstrate everyday narrative enactments: an explorative becoming of the protagonist, a dynamic affixing of the antagonist. The enactment of the MST story becomes most noticeable in the specific, and constitutive, collective activity recognized as *luta* (translated into English as struggle). This confrontative resistance activity, typically manifested in occupations of large land estates or government buildings, actualizes the plot of social conflict, the storyline that pushes the narrative onward. Hence, the MST story is not only revisited by movement participants, reinforced through their personalized storytelling, revised for more precise applicability. The story is also revived, continuously put into action, enacted. And that fosters, I believe, continuity of a contingent political subject.

It is therefore impossible for me, another academic scholar that studies Brazil's Landless Movement, to answer Luisa's request. I cannot write a book that advances the MST struggle. This can only be done by those who take part in the very story they strive to enact. Yet it is still my ambition to return the results of my research, in gratitude, to those who made it possible. This book would simply not have existed without the numerous *Sem Terra* that, with remarkable hospitality, and tremendous patience, openly introduced their world(s) to yet another curious outsider. For integrity reasons, I cannot name you here to express my sincere thankfulness.

Any academic product is, and this cannot be emphasized enough, a collective enterprise. This book is no exception. In Rio Grande do Sul, I am especially indebted to all of you who enabled my field study. I wish to especially acknowledge MST coordinators Cedenir, Patrola, Irene, and Salete; University-affiliated sociologist Sergio Schneider; historian Antonio Bezerra; historian Cliff Welch; geographer Aline Weber Sulzbacher; as well as the accommodating and helpful personnel at the INCRA's head office in Porto Alegre. And, most importantly, my focus group interviews were particularly aided by the professional interview and observations skills of sociologist Julice Salvagni, who accompanied most of my field study. I must also thank all transcribers for their tremendously rigorous job.

Outside Brazil, many people have made substantial contributions to this book. The space here does not allow me to mention all of you by name. The most persistent manuscript commenter is undoubtedly Paulina de los Reyes, with profound analytical insights and diligent encouragement. I am also deeply grateful for valuable comments from Ulf Jonsson, Fredrik Uggla, Mats Morell, Jonas Lundström, Thaïs Machado Borges, Andrés Rivarola Puntigliano, Matilda Baraibar, Ronny Pettersson, Sandra Hellstrand, Emma Rosengren, Daniel Berg, as well as the two anonymous scholars employed by Springer to critically review my manuscript.

Finally, the making of this book would not have been realized without the insistently clearheaded support from Sanna, my beloved travel partner, in Brazil, and throughout the crooked paths of life itself. My dearest thanks also go to Märta, now six years old and sister to newborn Gösta. Märta's engaged interest in stories—as consumer and producer, co-writer and actor—has profoundly enthused my exploration of the power embedded therein.

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The Making of Resistance

Brazil's Landless Movement and Narrative Enactment

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2017, XIII, 143 p. 17 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-55347-4