

**“Every Monkey has its Own Head”:  
Rural Sugarcane Workers and the Politics of Becoming a Peasant in Northeastern Brazil**

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To those reading this chapter for the Yale Agrarian Studies' colloquium:

This paper is chapter four of a manuscript (very much) in progress tentatively entitled *This Land Is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meaning(s) of Land on Sugarcane Plantations in Northeast Brazil*. The manuscript project is an attempt to understand the cultural politics of mobilization, asking in brief why and how rural workers in the sugarcane region of northeastern Brazil joined and then left the largest grassroots social movement in Brazilian history: *O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (The Movement of Rural Landless Workers, commonly referred to as the MST). The MST was formed in 1984 to fight for access to land and pressure the Brazilian government to transform the land tenure structure and function in the countryside. The book I am writing turns on a critical ethnography of sugarcane workers and MST members in the northeastern municipality of Água Preta, Pernambuco, Brazil.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Wendy

(Note: I have included an appendix with two maps and several pictures. If you print the paper, you can just leave off the last few pages to avoid wasting your printer ink!)

## *Introduction*

It was an unusually warm September evening in 1999 when approximately 200 land reform settlers marched down the main street of Água Preta, a small rural town nestled in the heart of northeastern Brazil's sugarcane zone.<sup>2</sup> The marchers were a dramatic presence. They were organized by one of the most powerful grassroots social movements in Brazilian history, the MST. Many of the marchers carried the movement's symbolic red flag and two of them held a long white banner between them that read *MST: A Ordem É Ninguém Passar Fome* (MST: Order Means No One Going Hungry).<sup>3</sup> These were rural sugarcane workers who had joined in the MST's struggle and won access to land on former sugarcane plantations. The marchers headed towards the town council building of Água Preta where city councilors were holding their monthly meeting. The marchers' intention was to demand the immediate release of their subsidized agricultural credit which (as was often the case) was already very late. As the season for planting had come and gone, local MST leaders planned the march to publicize the demand for credit and pressure the councilors to release the funds. With the sun quickly setting behind the city buildings, the march was proceeding smoothly: the marchers swarmed steadily up to and then outside the council building. And then, suddenly, things took a bizarre turn. Armando Souto, the councilor leading the meeting, urged the MST leaders to enter the council room alone to state their demands. As the whole crowd of marchers attempted to push into the building, Souto rushed out the back door. Amazingly, Souto then tried to get away by driving his white sedan through the crowd of marchers, and he was quickly surrounded. People pulled at the door handle of the car, and Souto came storming out. Loud discussion followed and the marchers closest to the car threatened to turn the vehicle over even as Souto threatened back angrily. This did not go on for very long before a heavily armed squadron of military police showed up. The local police had called in reinforcements from a nearby town, and things quickly grew very tense. Slowly, people began to turn away and straggle off in the direction from which they had come. Loud music meant to be soothing poured out of the rusty speakers lining the main street as the marchers left the town center and regrouped back in the settlement.

This public demonstration represented an extraordinary moment in the politics of the sugarcane region of Pernambuco, in northeastern Brazil. After ten years of aggressive organizing, leaders of the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (the MST) could accurately say that they had succeeded in mobilizing sugarcane workers to fight for agrarian reform under the movement's national banner.<sup>4</sup> Because of the sugarcane region's immense poverty and symbolic position as the birthplace of the Brazilian nation-state, the movement's ability to organize rural workers there was a significant victory.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See map, figure 1, and pictures, figures 2 – 5, appendix. Água Preta is the name of both the municipality and the municipal political seat.

<sup>3</sup> This was a form of what Guyatri Spivak calls "catachresis," or, "reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" (Spivak, "Poststructuralism, Marginalization, Postcolonialism and Value," 228, cited in Prakesh, 1994, p. 1476). The MST's popular slogan simultaneously appropriates and re-codes the nation-state slogan that adorns the Brazilian flag: Order and Progress.

<sup>4</sup> There are several other organizations involved in organizing the struggle for agrarian reform in Pernambuco, including most importantly the rural unions affiliated with the Federation of Agricultural Workers in Pernambuco (FETAPE) and the Catholic Church. Throughout the 1990s, the MST was, however, the strongest of the organizations in terms of political capacity and organizational strength.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout the paper, the general term "sugarcane region" refers to the 'zona da mata sul,' the southern end of the humid-tropical coast of Pernambuco where sugarcane has been produced since at least the 1530s. All

Mobilization among the sugarcane workers was no easy task, however; as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the MST had to struggle to make political headway. It took the movement six years, from 1989 to 1995, to begin building a solid membership among rural workers in Água Preta. And even after the MST succeeded in articulating the struggle for land in the sugarcane region, the social relationships between people and place that characterized the difficult mobilization period continued to shape dynamics within the movement's membership.<sup>6</sup> The MST had developed its political position in the sugarcane region in the midst of multiple crises: an economic crisis of the sugarcane industry itself; a political crisis as sugarcane elites fled and rural unions lost their ability to represent the growing number of unemployed workers; and a cultural crisis as people seemed to lose hope in the future of a crop whose fate seemed intimately tied to the fate of the region (Andrade and Andrade 2001). And yet, even in the midst of crisis, the imprint of the crop was still visible on the landscape. Plantation after plantation was expropriated in the region and divided among the former workers, but sugarcane is as hard to rid from the heart and mind as it is from the land: sugarcane as a commodity may have been in crisis, but sugarcane as a culture lived on, nourished by the plants' famously deep roots. Rural workers on the former plantations joined the MST, but their intentions in doing so were not easily understood from their actions. Many of the people who joined the movement in Água Preta wanted land to live on, but preferred salaried work to live from. They valued their land, but more for stability and status than for their subsistence.

This crucial distance between intentions and actions was overlooked by MST leaders who believed that the act of joining the movement and participating in movement activities was inherently transformative: members were supposed to join the movement by participating in a land occupation where the occupation operated as an organic space for the construction of progressive alternatives, the "new society" the MST hoped to build.<sup>7</sup> Although the movement recognized the diversity of its

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interviews analyzed for this chapter come from the municipality of Água Preta, PE, although the author interviewed rural workers and MST leaders throughout the region. There are considerable differences among sugarcane producing regions in Brazil, from the southern state of São Paulo to Minas Gerais to Paraíba, and although this study is relevant to the study of plantation production more generally, empirical differences among regions complicate any generalized conclusions.

<sup>6</sup> The term "articulation" is used in the double-sense of both expression and bringing together (see Hart 2003: 7, fn. 6).

<sup>7</sup> See Bernardo Mançano Fernandes (1999) and Jean-Yves Martin (2002) on the transformative aspects of the encampments. The alternative space the MST hopes to create parallels Foucault's concept of a heterotopia. Foucault described heterotopias as those spaces in which alternative readings of the world could be made (see "Of Other Spaces," in *Diacritics* 16/1: 22-27). Most people interpret heterotopias as having an emancipatory potential, but others have argued that Foucault's under-appreciation for the politics of place created an anti-normative definition of heterotopia where any space separated spatially or temporally from the dominant/dominated spaces qualified. Harvey (2000) argues that the relativity of the concept robs it of critical, emancipatory potential – it is everywhere and nowhere.

members' origins, once people had joined the movement, they were treated as relatively unified and homogenous subjects who, together, dreamt the eternal dream of the peasant: the desire for land as the basis of production and social reproduction.<sup>8</sup> This process of subject-elision is common to both the practices and analyses of social movements for reasons that are strategic, ideological, and analytic. (Re)presenting an organized, united front is one of the main strategic advantages a social movement possesses, particularly social movements that are poor in material resources. At the same time, coherence is ideological: people organize and lead social movements because they are committed to a particular vision for the future. This coherence then seeps into scholarly and journalistic analyses, both of which tend to treat social movements as unified sociological entities once they have formed. In the case of the MST, "leaders" are allowed to speak for the movement as a whole, while public actions such as demonstrations and land occupations are assumed to signify a widely-held set of intentions.

And, indeed, MST occupations -- and the temporary encampments built on the occupied properties -- *are* sites of cultural and social production, but the flight from the past (or, better, pasts) is not as footloose in practice as it is in theory. History layers itself onto the present in the form of norms, values, traditions, preferences, social relations, and collective or individual interests.

Even as MST leaders led the settlers down the street that evening in September of 1999 in what was eventually a successful demonstration, the victory was fleeting: three years later none of the people who had participated would consider themselves members of the movement. They had mobilized to demand their credit for planting bananas on their small plots of land so they could finally be free of the colonial yoke of sugarcane, but three years later they would almost all be planting sugarcane again, some on their own land and others in the local mills. And although the movement's symbolic red flag had waved proudly at the entrance of the settlement where everyone regrouped after the demonstration, in 2003 the same settlers would request legal assistance from the federal government to prevent the MST access to physical space on the settlement. When the rural workers were asked in February 2003 why they did not stay in the MST, the most common, immediate, response was: "*cada macaco tem a cabeça sua*" (every monkey has its own head).<sup>9</sup>

When the settlers used this phrase, they meant to suggest that they couldn't all get along -- either amongst themselves or with the local and regional MST leaders. They had tried to work with the settlement association, the group that all settlements were required to form upon receiving land through INCRA (the federal agrarian reform agency), but the differences of opinion had become too wearisome, so they decided it was in their own best interest to tend to business on their own.

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<sup>8</sup> See figure #6, appendix, for a child's rendition of the MST's dream for its members.

<sup>9</sup> Other ways of saying this were: "every monkey should stick to his own cage," and "every head is a world."

This answer is a simple one and it seems to make sense – who could argue that the average monkey has more than one head? As simple as it is, however, I would argue that the answer itself (and the action it is intended to explain) is less important than the reasons *why* it “rolled off the tongue,” why it was the first-cut, obvious answer that appeared to be “common sense” and seemed to require little further explanation. It is “common sense” that needs to be interrogated here, where common sense is understood as a complicated consciousness that includes: unthinking reflection, “it’s just common sense”; street-smart, feet-on-the-ground savvy, “you have to use your common sense”; and popular tradition (or, ‘the past in the present’), lying somewhere between (and produced or maintained through) folklore and academic treatise. The pithy saying “every monkey has its own head” was offered and made sense because it is common in the sugarcane region to argue that rural workers are individualistic and that popular culture is disruptive to collective action. These facile associations run through the rural workers’ self-identification and color the MST’s own evaluations of mobilization work in the sugarcane region (and in Brazil more generally).

Leaders in the sugarcane region argued that the rural workers lacked political consciousness because of “the cultural factor, the factor of general domination” which led them to value independence over organization.<sup>10</sup> When the settlers left the movement, Jaime Amorim, the MST leader for the state of Pernambuco, explained it as: “the culture of the region—the people are individualistic, they don’t trust other people.” This negative interpretation of individualism comes out of the movement’s reading of the relationship between ideology and material conditions, where self-interest is a “sub-ideology generated by private ownership of the means of production.” Even though most workers and even small farmers don’t own their means of production, this sub-ideology permeates the popular consciousness, according to the MST, because people are embedded in a system that sanctifies private property and prioritizes “individualism” (described as a vice that causes people to put themselves above the organization), as well as “spontaneity” and “immobility” (which causes a person to not “involve himself with anything”).<sup>11</sup> The MST works to replace this “I” that characterizes capitalist subjectivities with the “we” of a “new society.”

In this chapter, I argue that the difficulties the MST encountered in Água Preta cannot be understood simply as individualism versus collective organization or as a lack of political consciousness on the part of the rural workers. The MST had a hard time establishing and maintaining a presence in the sugarcane region because the movement assumed that membership was productive of (if not always

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<sup>10</sup> Interview #49, regional MST leader, Belem da Maria, PE, February 17, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Other vices generated by the capitalist system are: personalism, anarchy, complacency, sectarianism or ‘radicalism’, impatience, adventurism, and self-sufficiency (*Jornal Sem Terra* 1991).

produced by) a singular subjectivity, characterized by a singular relationship to the land. Ultimately, the rural workers' common sense could not be reconciled with the construction of "good sense" promoted by the MST.

### *From Social Mobilization to Sugarcane*

The history of sugarcane in northeastern Brazil has been shaped by the vagaries of nature, world market conditions, and political pacts negotiated among regional and national elites. All of these macro-level processes or relationships are refracted through local power relations where a relatively small plantation elite has wielded monopoly control over land and labor for almost 500 years (Schwartz 1985). This sugarcane elite has historically weathered periodic economic downturns, droughts or floods, and occasional episodes of political unrest by manipulating local land-use and labor arrangements, providing more land for their workers to plant subsistence crops when prices were low, and planting cane "right up to the front door" when prices were high (Andrade 1988; Eisenberg 1974; Sigaud 1979).<sup>12</sup> As a result, even though production in the sugarcane region appears to have changed very little over the past 500 years, the normative understandings of "appropriate" behavior as well as the relationship between workers and the land have been constantly re-worked among the different social classes (Andrade 2001; Freyre 1963; Sigaud 2004).

By 2001, the economic crisis that began in the sugarcane region in the late 1980s had come to an end. Three years after industry prices hit bottom, falling to six cents a pound (world market price) in 1999, they began to revive again.<sup>13</sup> After falling for six straight years, international prices increased sharply because of lowered production in India and Cuba. Continued de-regulation of the industry also allowed a greater percentage of production to be exported, and a drought in the productive fields of southern Brazil during the 2001 planting season increased the demand for production from the northeast. There was also excited discussion of the possibility that the new president, elected on October 17, 2002, would re-invigorate PROALCOOL, the alcohol incentive program that had provided sugarcane producers around the country with over 10.5 billion dollars of subsidies from 1975 to 1989.<sup>14</sup> With the

<sup>12</sup> This relationship between subsistence production and market conditions seems to have characterized both the colonial and post-colonial period. Although there were clearly variations from mill to mill, the relationship between planter and worker (whether slave or free) was probably more "human" (Eisenberg 1974) when markets conditions were less favorable. The best discussion of the mutual relationship between subsistence and export production is in Stuart Schwartz' *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels*, Chapter 3 (pp 65-103). Also see Bert Barickman (1994) and Peter Eisenberg (1974).

<sup>13</sup> All crises are, by definition, spatially and temporally limited: crises are only identifiable vis-à-vis that which is ordinary. The sugarcane region is particularly noteworthy, however, for the severity and frequency of its boom-and-bust shifts.

<sup>14</sup> Lula does not have a well-defined energy program, but the war in Iraq prompted the president to push for increased alcohol production as an alternative fuel to petroleum-based products (as the 1973 oil crisis had originally prompted PROALCOOL). Distillery owners were offered substantial loans on generous terms to finance the year-round production of cane for ethanol. The amount of the loans was calculated on a

rise of sugarcane prices, and the tantalizing promise (and then realization) of renewed government support, the *engenhos* (mills) and *usinas* (sugar factories) in the region began planting and processing sugarcane again.<sup>15</sup>

The sugarcane factories in and around the town of Água Preta made it easy for the settlers to begin planting sugarcane.<sup>16</sup> Factory representatives visited the settlements, riding deep into the former plantations on fast little motorcycles and signing up prospective cane sellers even before they began planting. There were no producers too small. As one settler said, “[before the crisis] it was more difficult to have an account with the factory because you had to have a certain amount of cane, you had to be a large-scale supplier. But today you can take one little truckload and go there [to the factory] and whether they have your information or not, you get there and take care of business.”<sup>17</sup> The representatives filled out a card with the settlers’ information and set up an account for them. When it came time to harvest and process the cane, the factories sent trucks to the settlements and discounted the cost of transportation from the price paid for the sugar.

By 2003, most of the settlers in Água Preta had covered some portion of their land with sugarcane. Sugarcane overtook many of the alternative crops that people had planted earlier: the banana plants and coconut trees were either gone or disappearing, and plans to build cattle fences and fish ponds were proceeding very slowly. Settlers who had sworn never to plant sugarcane again were working in the neighboring mills cutting sugarcane, as well as planting cane on their own land. As one settler said, during the final weeks of the harvest season, “At this moment, almost everyone is working in one of the mills over there, in [a nearby mill called] Barra d’Ouro. They’re cutting cane, filling bags, doing everything. And then when it’s evening, they work on their own land.”<sup>18</sup>

By working with the land reform settlers, distillery owners and managers were cleverly (even if unintentionally) re-negotiating land-labor relationships in the region to ensure what was seen as a regular supply of raw materials but was, in fact, a regular supply of cheap labor. Distillery owners did not have to pay these workers any of the rights that had been won in previous decades, including regular weekly or bi-weekly salaries, vacation pay, yearly bonuses, and legal certification for membership in the rural trade union.<sup>19</sup> And the distilleries had little to fear from labor unrest: the land production quantity basis, so the more sugarcane the distilleries processed, the more credit they received.

<sup>15</sup> An *engenho* is an old-fashioned mill which is comprised of cane fields, but no processing facilities. An *usina* is a more modern entity that combines both cane fields and processing facilities (or factories).

<sup>16</sup> I use factories here because there was a division of labor: the factories around Água Preta used the settlers as essentially contract farmers who supplied sugarcane, while the mills hired the settlers during the harvest season to help cut, gather, and transport the sugarcane.

<sup>17</sup> Interview 40b, Água Preta, PE, February 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Interview #3b, Água Preta, PE, February 14, 2003.



reform settlers were ill-placed to utilize the most important political tool of the 1980s, the annual strike.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps even more importantly, this new working force was spatially removed from the distilleries, which worked to distance labor from management even more efficiently than the hierarchical spatialization of occupational position on the former plantation (see chapter three). Distillery owners no longer had to provide the goods that convention had previously demanded of them, including housing, land, electricity, and clean water for their workers. These goods, seen alternately as “gifts” or “rights,” had been progressively dismantled since the 1950s but still existed in some form on many distillery and plantation properties (Sigaud 1979). Now, with the rural workers on land reform settlements, the state was responsible for the social reproduction of the workforce. The local (municipal), state, and national governments were all engaged in providing the settlers with access to land, electricity, passable roads, agricultural extension assistance, and even emergency food donations to help them weather lean periods.

These state services, combined with the settlers’ tradition of work on the plantations, created nearly perfect workers: the settlers were skilled, having cut sugarcane for most of their working lives, and they were embedded in cultural systems that valued planting sugarcane over and above alternative crops. When the settlers worried about providing for themselves and their families, they turned to sugarcane, not trusting other crops to put sufficient food on their table. As one settlement president said, “*There are so many [settlers], my God, who have land and – I don’t know why – they have land and they’re dying of hunger.*” When asked why those settlers hadn’t planted anything on their land, she answered, “*They’re tired, they have to leave the house early to cut cane so they have something to eat...*”<sup>21</sup>

And it was clear from government documents that although agrarian reform was envisioned at the federal level as a means of producing small family farmers, at the state level agrarian reform was envisioned primarily (as it had been in the past) as a means of “rationalizing” or modernizing the sugarcane industry and only secondarily as promoting small family farming. In discussing the “Integrated Reform Program” for the northeastern sugarcane region, the strategic goals for combating the sugarcane crisis were outlined as including: restructuring the organization of production in the region; supporting family agriculture; diversifying production “without undermining the supply of sugarcane”; and strengthening the sugar-ethanol industrial park (MEPF 1998: 8-9). Family agriculture

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<sup>19</sup> Technically, the rural workers’ rights included the right to a small plot of land (approximately two hectares) if they resided on the plantation (this was the *Lei do Sítio*), but the law was never actually implemented. In annual negotiations, the rural unions fought for the right to land for subsistence production, but this was very different than the struggle for agrarian reform (see chapter two). FETAPE only created a secretariat of agrarian reform in 1993 (see Rosa 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Between 1979/1980 and 1992, the rural workers’ unions in the sugarcane region went on strike every year to pressure the plantation elites to sign the annual labor contract.

<sup>21</sup> Interview #50, settlement president, Água Preta, PE, February 2003.

was to be supported so that it could serve “above all for the subsistence of the family in the inter-harvest period” (Buarque 1997: 9).<sup>22</sup>

With the revival of sugarcane production in Água Preta, the MST was scarcely visible on the local settlements. The movement’s symbolic red flag no longer hung at the entrance of the settlement closest to town and none of the settlers interviewed still considered themselves part of the movement. According to the regional MST leader, movement membership in the sugarcane region of southern Pernambuco had entered into a “crisis,” dropping to one third the level it had been in the late 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Many of the most active leaders had left the region as well, some returning to their families, others working in new areas for the MST, and still others waiting for the movement to begin functioning again in the sugarcane region.

In what follows, I explain how the rural workers’ perceptions of land, which they held to be common sense, shaped their relationship with the movement. The most important aspects of this relationship can be understood through an analysis of the settlers’ attitudes towards production, property rights, and politics.

### ***Production: Bananas and Sugarcane***

When MST leaders first began mobilizing in the sugarcane region, one of their priorities was to convince people that land was (and should be) the key element for both production and social reproduction. The former rural workers who joined the movement were discouraged from planting large-scale commodity crops *and especially from planting sugarcane* on their land. Sugarcane was equated with the evils of colonization, with exploitation, and with poverty, and agronomists affiliated with the MST encouraged the settlers to move into subsistence garden crops, high value fruits for sale on local markets, and small-scale livestock production.

The vehicle through which normative ideas about production were transmitted on the settlements was bank credit.<sup>24</sup> Through a program called PROCERA (the Special Credit Program for Agrarian Reform), the federal government provides all agrarian reform settlers in the country with annual production loans (*custeio*) as well as a one-time loan for investment (*investimento*).<sup>25</sup> Funds for both

<sup>22</sup> This was, in fact, a common trope in the sugarcane region: in crisis after crisis, regional elites argued against the dismantling of sugarcane because of the jobs the industry provided. The emphasis of state efforts to provide relief during crises has been placed on rationalizing production such that the efficient producers receive support and the workers are given assistance when there is no or little employment. This is discussed further in chapter one.

<sup>23</sup> Regional leader, discussed during regional meeting in the municipality of Belem de Maria, PE, held February 17, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> This is true of any market production system, particularly capitalism, and particularly in the countryside.

were channeled through the Bank of Brazil. Although the exact funding amount varied, in 1999 settlers were entitled to an annual loan of up to R\$2,000 (approximately US\$1,000 in May of 1999) as well as a one-time investment loan of up to R\$7,500. All loans were to be re-paid in half, the other fifty percent being a “rebate” or “free.” The annual loans were to be paid back at the end of each year, at which time the settlers would be eligible for a new short-term loan, and the investment loan was to be paid back over seven years, with a two-year grace period and low interest rates.

In accordance with government specifications, these loans for production and investment were not given directly to the settlers. “Projects” (as they were called) for both production and investment were drawn up in conjunction with a trifecta of experts, including state agrarian reform officials (representatives of INCRA, the national agrarian reform agency), lending agents with the Bank of Brazil, and MST-affiliated agricultural extension agents (these were often the local MST leaders, as in the case of Água Preta).

In every region of the country, these projects focused on a few key crops that land reform settlers could produce for the market. A key concern of government and bank officials, transmitted to the agricultural extension agents, was *rendabilidade*, or income-generation that would enable the settlers to pay back their bank debts in a timely way. In the sugarcane region of Pernambuco, the annual production projects were slated for banana and coconut crops while the investment projects were to be used for raising cattle. For the annual production loan in 1999, the settlers in Água Preta were required to plant at least 200 banana trees using the recommended applications of fertilizer and pesticides; and for the longer-term investment credit, which was expected to arrive in 2000, they were required to fence in their land, plant pasture crops, and purchase between three and six cows. Local MST leaders hoped to secure further funding through the Bank of the Northeast to establish a fruit-processing facility to make, among other things, the banana candies that are popular in the region.

Representatives from the Bank of Brazil, INCRA, and the MST all expressed different goals in relation to the projects: for the bank, the main goal was repayment; for the state, the main goal was to ensure the settlers’ future independence from government support; while for the MST, the main concern was that the settlers received (and continue to receive) sufficient credit to produce on their land. In all three cases, however, production decisions were based on the ability of the settlers to generate income working on their land as small family farmers. For the settlers, this was a serious flaw: the projects measured income in terms of farm sales rather than in wages (as had been the workers’ custom). The settlers argued that the agronomists and government officials had calculated the costs and benefits of

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<sup>25</sup> PROCERA was created in 1985, but only became effective in 1993. It was merged into the broader funding program for small family farmers in 2001, a point of contention with the MST.

production in detail but without taking into account the cost of the settlers' labor. The time the settlers would spend building fences, planting pasture, tending to the bananas and coconut trees, etc., was not accounted for because the experts considered the settlers to (now) be family farmers – and, therefore, by definition, not earning a wage. One settlement president described the bank's calculations and said: *“Look – the bank has already [drawn up the project guidelines], but if you divide things up like this, we are going to work for free, we are going to plant the pasture for free to feed the cow -- we are going to do a lot of things for free here.”*<sup>26</sup>

To ensure compliance with the project, agronomists in Água Preta were required to fill out project evaluations for each individual settler. As Antonio, the agronomist and local MST leader in the region, said at a settlement meeting on July 26, 1999 in Água Preta:

*“More now than ever, we need to do our things correctly. We have an extension agent, we have an agronomist, we have assistance, and so we need to make sure that from now on things happen naturally, but also with competence: we have to produce this banana so that in the year 2000 we can pay the bank back without having to sell our land.”*

The settlers themselves were not consulted about the formulation of the production projects. Logistical and cultural difficulties encouraged a centralized decision-making process. It was difficult to physically reach all of the settlers and even harder to envision them agreeing on particular crops (other than sugarcane) and, at the same time, it was widely believed that plantation workers lacked the experience to establish their own production agendas on the model of the small, family farm. As one settlement president said when asked if the settlers had been consulted about the investment project,

*“No, the boys [from the movement] said: ‘we’re going to do a project.’ [And we said] ‘ok.’ [And they said] ‘we are going to do a project to plant coconut trees and we are going to do a project with cows.’ And so other people said, ‘I don’t want cows, I want sheep.’ Every person wanted a different [thing], and afterwards they said to us that it was going to be coconuts and cows, and that was it (pronto).”*<sup>27</sup>

In fact, the production projects were predicated on removing the settlers from the one area in which they could reasonably claim agricultural expertise -- sugarcane. Movement leaders insisted that the settlers not plant sugarcane on their land; bananas were to be planted in the river-bottom land that had been the privileged space of sugarcane. The crop was associated with a historical legacy of inequality, labor exploitation, and environmental damage and MST leaders argued that if the rural workers were to become small family farmers and MST members, they would have to leave sugarcane behind. Movement leaders incorporated lessons into settlement meetings describing the long, dark history of sugarcane. Cultural performance, or the *mística*, was used to explain the value of planting alternative

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<sup>26</sup>Interview #50, settlement president, Água Preta, PE, February 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Interview #50, settlement president, Água Preta, PE, February 2003.

crops.<sup>28</sup> Movement activists argued that the sugarcane already on the settlers' land, left over from the days of the former plantation, ought to be pulled up to make room for the new crops. Having sugarcane on your land was seen as both an act of defiance and a lack of political consciousness. As one rural leader said,

*“We debated this quite a lot, and it is our settlements that are rebellious, who do not obey, who do not follow our instructions, they are the ones that plant sugarcane. Because they have sugarcane in their heads, [they think] that sugarcane is the future, that sugarcane makes money, although in reality we know that sugarcane is a monoculture, and in reality sugarcane doesn't have a future, it's just a waste, just work, and there are other crops around here that we could plant...”*<sup>29</sup>

In this way, production came to be seen politically as zero-sum: MST leaders argued that a person had to plant either sugarcane *or* subsistence crops and the settlers came to equate planting sugarcane with going against the movement's wishes. As one settlement president said,

*“We used to plant sugarcane here [because that's what did well]. But since the movement doesn't want [us to plant it], it is a huge fight. I have sugarcane here in the front [of my house], but it's a huge fight whenever [people from the movement] come. But I spent two years just losing [money], I lost [it all] – and then I said, I'm done....– and so we planted sugarcane, but there has already been half a world of fighting over this cane here.”*<sup>30</sup>

As the quote above demonstrates, the movement had a difficult time convincing the settlers that they should not plant sugarcane. Most of the settlers had grown up in the sugarcane region and they believed the hegemonic narrative that sugarcane was the crop best-suited to the particular climate, topography, and soil conditions of the region. Although this narrative was largely inaccurate -- the soils in the region are some of the richest in the world and the humid tropical climate favors a wide variety of fruits and vegetables -- extreme social inequality worked to naturalize sugarcane's dominance in the region.<sup>31</sup> Plantation elites have consistently worked to discourage the production of alternate crops, and attempts to create or sustain an independent peasantry have foundered. In 1973, Manuel Correia de Andrade argued that although there was sufficient physical space for small farmers, there was very little political space because plantation elites were afraid of the possibility that “a small middle class of farmers whose standard of living would soon contrast with the rural wage earners, demonstrating to them the need to fight for better living and working conditions” (Andrade 1980: 194). This narrative was never a coherent one nor was it uncontested: rural workers have planted food crops on the plantation openly and in secret. But the hegemony of the narrative was such that even as rural workers planted fruits and vegetables, they still maintained that sugarcane was the only truly viable crop. One

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<sup>28</sup> See chapter two for a discussion of the MST's *mística*.

<sup>29</sup> Interview #51, local MST leader, Água Preta, PE, February 14, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Interview #50, settlement president, Água Preta, PE, February 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Although his work is not yet published, Thomas Rogers, a Ph.D. student in History at Duke University is doing excellent work on this topic.

worker described with delight all of the fruits and vegetables he was planting, proudly demonstrating each flowering tree, bush, and plant as we sat on the porch of his small house,

*“I planted all of this and it’s already ready for harvest. I have already made caju juice and there are even apples.... although the tree doesn’t produce all that many apples, I have [tropical fruits], graviola, carambola, caju, and mango. The mangoes aren’t ready for harvest yet, but the caju is just about ready. I have oranges too – they’re not ready yet but they’re already looking good. Later on I am going to plant more. God willing, I will plant string beans over there below the stream.”<sup>32</sup>*

After describing his fruits and vegetables, however, this same settler explained that he could not depend on these products for his subsistence or his livelihood because: *“The land here in this place only supports sugarcane. Sometimes you need to use fertilizer, but it is also good for sugarcane without fertilizer if you take care of it constantly. But for us to live off of garden crops here is to die of hunger (é pra morrer de fome).”<sup>33</sup>* The settlers throughout Água Preta argued that sugarcane was the only crop really suited to the region: only sugarcane had long enough roots to grow on the steep hillsides that characterized the topography in the southern region (see appendix, figure 7), and they spoke admiringly of sugarcane as a *“good crop.... one that is exported all over the world, as sugar.”* The particular nature of this hegemonic narrative worked to justify its own contradictions: the simultaneous presence of lush sugarcane fields and immense poverty makes (common) sense in the region.

The settlers’ resistance to the idea that they move from sugarcane to bananas went beyond a simple dependence on sugarcane however; their responses were also situated within the particular natural and social construction of bananas themselves. Even though bananas are everywhere in the sugarcane region, growing wildly on the side of roads and along waterways, many settlers did not have land that was appropriate for banana production. Banana plants are considered easy to grow, but they require careful attention when grown for regular fruit production. They do well in soil that is easily-watered but loosely-packed to allow drainage, and they need frequent applications of fertilizer, fungicide, and pesticide.

The region’s topography, characterized by low, rolling hills meant that much of the land in the settlements was on a slope or a hill-top, and only people who had access to good-quality land near streams could plant bananas.<sup>34</sup> Without irrigation, settlers who could not easily access groundwater would lose their plants during the long dry season. When the settlement closest to the town of Água Preta, called Flora, was created, all of the settlers were supposed to receive equivalent nine hectare plots of land. But the mapping process was chaotic, and not all of the soon-to-be settlers were equally

<sup>32</sup> Interview #8b, Água Preta, PE, February 15, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Interview #8b, Água Preta, PE, February 15, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> See figure #7, appendix.

well-placed to negotiate with government officials for their plot of land. Those rural workers who approached the INCRA officials in charge of the expropriation were told that any settler who had cleared and planted land before the settlement map was drawn up would be able to remain in that area. Those settlers who already had small farms (*sítios*) or who possessed the time, extra family labor, skills, and capital to begin clearing land did so quickly. Thus, occupational and spatial hierarchies from the plantation period were retained: the former sitio owner had a plot of land near stream beds already planted with fruit trees; the former plantation renter (*rendeiro*) maintained his right to the Big House (*Casa Grande*) because his wife and son received plots of land; and former plantation administrators were able to begin planting immediately. The resulting unequal distribution of land and water on Flora meant that only a few settlers had sufficient good-quality land to plant the number of banana trees required by the bank to fulfill the terms of the investment project.

Many of the settlers accepted money for production even though they recognized that they would probably not be able to grow bananas:

*“Look, the situation with the bananas is this. I wasted a lot of money with that banana [project]. Now, I planted it just to make the boys from the movement happy. I said, I am going to plant [this], but I am going to lose the money. This year, I harvested 170 tons of sugarcane...If the distillery owners pay the proper price, god willing, I will keep planting cane and taking care of my little garden plants (lavourazinhas).”<sup>35</sup>*

When the settlers accepted the government loan to plant bananas, they received money that did not have to be paid back, but they also tied themselves to a crop with which they had little experience. As plantation workers, they were rarely allowed to plant bananas. Even when the plantation owner allowed them a small plot for subsistence crops, they were only allowed to plant annual crops like manioc and corn because plantation owners were afraid that planting perennial crops with “*raízes*,” or roots, could be used to prove a worker’s squatter rights to that land. The constitutional definition of “*direito de posse*,” or right of possession, allowed a person who was producing on land the possibility of a legal claim to the land, or “*revindicação de posse*.”<sup>36</sup> As one rural worker said of his former plantation boss,

*“This mill where we were working never gave anyone land to plant, no, never. Even the trees that the workers planted, the mill-owner would knock them all down. They planted cane and threw the workers out. The mill didn’t want to give anything to the worker because they thought that the worker would take over the land.”<sup>37</sup>*

<sup>35</sup> Interview #8b, Água Preta, PE, February 15, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> This legal tool derived from the colonial period when the Portuguese monarchy was attempting to encourage colonization and proper land use (Wright 2001; Andrade 1988). One well-documented effect of the law has been to push landowners to move tenants around frequently in an attempt to ensure they would not be able to claim rights to the land (Stolcke 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Interview #25, Água Preta, PE, 1999.

On the plantations in Água Preta, workers were sometimes allowed to plant food crops, but bananas were rarely allowed, even when the land was not being used for sugarcane. As one settler said when asked if he had planted food crops while working for the former mill owner, “*We were free to plant, he just didn’t want us to plant bananas. If a person planted bananas, the administrator would pull them up, so we had to plant them in secret.*”<sup>38</sup> Another settler summed up his experience in this way: “*Not every mill would give the worker land to plant, on some you had to hide what you planted. And when they did give you land, they told you not to plant bananas. [They said] ‘plant a garden or staple crops that don’t last seven months, three months and that’s all’.*”<sup>39</sup>

Because the settlers did not have experience with bananas and because the government did not follow through on its promise of sending extension agents to all of the settlement areas, the settlers planted the banana trees too close together, in tight-fitting rows without room for the roots to spread, and they lit fires to rid the clear weeds from the ground cover. As one settler said when asked whether any extension agents had been out to help instruct the settlers in growing crops, “*To show me how to plant? No, not yet. They tell us to plant bananas and not to plant sugarcane but [they haven’t come] to explain to us how to work on the land, not yet.*”<sup>40</sup>

As a result of the difficulties the settlers experienced in carrying out the production plans outlined for them, they resorted to sugarcane when prices were high enough to offer the promise of an immediate cash return. They pulled up banana trees to plant sugarcane, made contracts with the local mills for delivery, and found work on neighboring plantations for R\$7 a day.<sup>41</sup> Because sugarcane had been presented and come to be seen in zero-sum terms, when the settlers began planting sugarcane again, they left the movement -- not because they necessarily wanted to, but because they believed that by planting cane they were *de facto* exiting from the movement.

### ***Property: Private and Privacy***

Even as the settlers argued with MST leaders over what crops to plant, they jealously guarded their new identity as settlers because access to land signified a “place in the world.” As landowners they had more status in the community and more stability in their own lives. Freed from the “*cativeiro*” (captivity) of the plantation, they were “*senhores*” (masters) of their own land, and on those nine hectares they did as they pleased. As one settler who had been born on a former plantation in Água

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<sup>38</sup> Eldorado interview

<sup>39</sup> Interview #19, Água Preta, PE, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Interview #15b, Água Preta, PE, February 19, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Most of the settlers were working in the mill, Barra D’Ouro, which was offering R\$7 for a day’s labor. This was considered very good money when compared to the going wage of R\$5 per day.



Preta said, “*In my opinion, things are better [now] because here [on the settlement] there isn’t anyone who orders you around. We do what we want and whatever you have on your land is yours. Now we plant what we want and no one sticks their nose in.*”<sup>42</sup> Access to land brought with it some certainty about the future, a certainty that had been denied to plantation workers whose most effective form of resistance was exit (or, migration from mill to mill). As one worker said, “*I don’t live all that well, but given the life that I used to live, I am better off than when I lived knocking about the world (no meio do mundo).*”

The conceptualization of private property as a means of securing *privacy* eventually came into conflict with the movement’s conceptualization of property as a social good. For the MST, private property was intended to be the material basis for producing new social and economic relationships. In other words, property was not just the means of *promoting* the social good, it was itself a social good. This is why the movement calls all of its members *Sem Terra* (Landless) even when those who are already land reform settlers are, technically, *com terra* (literally, with land).

In this spirit, the MST tried to claim physical space on Flora, the most visible and politically active settlement in Água Preta. Movement leaders hoped to establish their regional headquarters in Flora’s old plantation stables, which stood at the entrance to the settlement’s main *agrovila* (residential community). This decision proved to be a turning point in the movement’s relationship with the settlers.

Before the MST leaders decided to take over the stables, the building was run-down and dark. The only animals housed there were two (sometimes more) straggly horses, and every evening the steps of the building filled with young boys who would wrestle loudly and call out to people passing by on the street. When the MST decided to use the building for its headquarters, they called the settlers to a meeting and everyone who attended signed an “*ato*” (a legal document) attesting to their willingness to have the movement on the settlement grounds. When the renovations were finished, all of the settlers agreed that the new building was very attractive and a considerable improvement over the stables. But as movement leaders prepared to move in, the settlers began to worry that if the movement was able to claim such an attractive and highly visible space on the settlement, they would also have a claim over the settlers themselves. They worried that if the movement occupied such a nice house, in effect claiming land on the settlement, they would be able to act like plantation bosses and, “*whenever they come, they will want to order us around.*” They worried that having the movement activists on the settlement would mean other government officials would be around more often and this de facto surveillance would be an invasion of their privacy and, ultimately, their independence. As one settler said, “*if they build this office, and we leave a wheelbarrow outside, or this or that [lying around]... then*

<sup>42</sup> Eldorado interview, 1999.

*the guy from INCRA, or from the government, from the state, will be around and we won't be able to leave things around outside.*"<sup>43</sup>

So the settlers got together to demand the MST's removal from the stables. They sent a small group of settlers to the state INCRA offices in Recife, protesting that the movement had tricked them. They insisted that the movement should remain in the small house it used in the nearby town rather than occupying their land. A settler who had supported the movement strongly in 1999 explained why he objected to the MST's project: *"The deal with the headquarters that the MST was building was the following...they did that construction work there but it was pretty much by force."* And when I questioned him, what did he mean "by force," and he said, *"Yes, it was by force, and I say that because we can't do this sort of thing – go behind INCRA's back [to build the stables], INCRA is the federal government, can you do a thing like this?"* I said, "I don't know, I don't understand the whole thing very well," to which he responded:

*"But I do...we were put here by the [MST], but I can't agree with having those headquarters here because we still don't have title to the land here, we just have a contract of occupation... They stopped the construction because we have to have a formal decision [about it], because we can only put a person there if INCRA says we can. Here I have my land and I can't put any outsider to work on it, and we can't just take a piece of land to build an office on it..., and so the settlement [association] and INCRA put a stop to it. For me, it was a bad business because we can only give what is ours to give, that settlement land there is community land.... And people from outside [the settlement] can't just build there, can they?"*<sup>44</sup>

Movement leaders were confused by the settlers' decision to turn to the government behind their backs. They insisted that the settlers "did not want to improve their position in life," but the decision to force the movement off of the settlement made sense in the context of the settlers' belief that private property should protect their privacy rather than be the stepping stone to a "new society." For the settlers, access to land improved the social good but was not itself a social good. They had worked and lived for years on sugarcane plantations where their personal space was circumscribed by the plantation owner's demands. Now, as settlers, they drew the line between public and private at the edge of their property.

### ***Politics: Progressive Patrons?***

As is clear from the preceding discussion of production and property, access to land in the sugarcane region was embedded in a historically-understood set of political relationships and rights. Before becoming settlers, land ownership was not an isolated good, or a right in and of itself, rather access to land on the plantations was embedded in a broader set of workers' *direitos*, (rights). Rural workers

<sup>43</sup> Interview # 15b, Água Preta, PE, February 19, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Interview # 3b, Água Preta, PE, February 14, 2003.

earned legal protection for their rights only in 1963 when the Consolidated Labor Laws (established in 1945 for urban workers) was extended into the countryside. After 1963, the relationship between plantation owner and worker became more formal, although both were still bound by notions of honor, or the social obligation to be a “good worker” and a “good boss.” This was, in James Scott’s (1985) words, a “reciprocal manipulation of the symbols of euphemization,” (309) or, more concretely, “to be generous was a value, and the patrons’ prestige was measured by outward signs of his magnanimousness” (Sigaud 2004: 135).<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the rural unions came to play an increasingly visible role as both the legal protectors of the rural workers and as the moral or social providers of the assistance that plantation owners had formerly provided, including: transportation to the weekly markets if the mill was far from town, transportation for emergency reasons, access to medical care, and occasional monetary or subsistence support (Pereira 1997).<sup>46</sup>

But in the late 1980s, with the crisis of the sugarcane industry, the rural unions began to lose membership (and spirit). As plantation owners went into debt, the basis of the moralized working economy shifted and the expectations of plantation owners were significantly lowered. Increasingly, rural workers had to fight simply to be paid on time and in full. As plantations were turned into settlements, it was the MST that stepped into the rural unions’ shoes (Rosa 2003). When the plantation workers in Água Preta became land reform settlers in the late 1990s, many of them joined the MST because the movement had become an important political intermediary between the settlers, the local mayor, and state agrarian reform officials.

One of the local MST leaders from 1997 to 2001 was an agronomist named Antonio. He had grown up in Água Preta but was working in Minas Gerais when he was tapped for his job by the mayor. He returned to the sugarcane region and began to work as an extension agent for the state and as an MST activist for the movement. He was very skillful politically and was able to use his friendship with the mayor to secure resources for the settlers. Under his guidance, membership in the MST provided many of the same benefits as the rural unions or plantation owner used to: medicines, an occasional *cesta basica* (food basket), money for transportation, and access to the mayor’s ear. In return, settlers brought the MST leaders gifts such as bottles of rum or a handful of fresh manioc. One long-time

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<sup>45</sup> Lygia Sigaud points out that these mutual obligations, written in social conventions, were hierarchically perceived: workers and owners saw their contribution (labor) as an obligation while both saw the contributions of the owner (a house, land, salary level) as “gifts” or donations rather than obligations. These were the terms on which the details of the relationships were negotiated.

<sup>46</sup> The emphasis put on defense of workers’ rights or on provision of assistance differed depending on the particular region and ideological disposition of local union leaders, see Sigaud 1979.

movement activist in the region remembered the alliance with the mayor fondly: “[At that time,] we never needed to go to Recife for a mobilization, for transportation, or even for food. [The mayor] always went to meetings, to give speeches, he participated in everything.... Whenever settlers affiliated with MST needed the mayor’s office, the doors were open.”<sup>47</sup>

But in 2001, the agronomist began spending more time away from the settlements. He worked hard on the mayor’s re-election campaign, visiting all of the local settlements and advocating for the mayor under the banner of the MST. When the mayor easily won re-election in 2001, the agronomist left the movement to begin working as the mayor’s right-hand man. At the same time as this leader left the movement, there was a more general shift in leadership. A new regional leader, Eduardo, was brought in and a new local-level leader, Dona Nica, was appointed to head the “micro-region,” which included the municipalities of Água Preta, Palmares and Joaquim Nabuco. The two leaders represented contradictory traditions in their leadership style, and neither was able to effectively mobilize the settlers.

Eduardo, the new regional leader, was a young man, enthusiastic and idealistic. He was committed to the movement and looked to the national leaders of the MST to provide guidelines for his actions in the sugarcane region. Eduardo took what he called a “liberalist” perspective, arguing that MST activists ought to move around regularly because if they didn’t they would “lose capacity,” becoming too familiar with local norms and customs to be able to objectively understand the organization’s problems or failures.<sup>48</sup>

Eduardo tried to teach the rural workers a new “way of doing politics.” He wanted the settlers to leave behind the paternalistic “relational politics” of the plantation and subscribe to what he presented as the universal rights of every Brazilian citizen: the right to free political expression and a safe, sustainable livelihood. He argued that past leaders of the region had become mired in plantation politics and that people had begun to confuse movement leaders with patrons.<sup>49</sup> The old leaders were criticized for “*always dominating [the discussion] and acting like one of the old plantation bosses (porque o camarada é paizão).*”<sup>50</sup>

But the settlers’ understanding of their rights was embedded in the assistance orientation of the plantation rather than in universalistic notions of “citizenship” or human rights. And so unlike the

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<sup>47</sup> Interview #40b, Água Preta, PE, February 2003.

<sup>48</sup> Interview #49, Belem de Maria, PE, February 17, 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Notes from a MST regional meeting, in Belem de Maria, PE, February 17, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Interview # 49, Belem de Maria, PE, February 17, 2003.

agronomist who had been perceived as a powerful leader, Eduardo was seen as politically incompetent. People argued that he was inconsiderate because he did not provide the same sort of resources the settlers had come to expect from the movement. The new leader was of course in a difficult position because the federal government was withdrawing funds for agrarian reform and there was considerably less money available. But at the same time, Eduardo violated local political norms by supporting an MST candidate for state deputy in the local 2002 elections rather than the mayor's son who was also running. Although Eduardo and other MST leaders argued that the settlers had the right - and even the obligation -- to vote their conscience, the decision not to support the mayor's son was criticized because, "*after this last election, [our support] has diminished.*"<sup>51</sup> The settlers' relationship with the mayor became problematic because they challenged his right to establish the political agenda.

At the other end of the leadership spectrum, the new "micro" leader (as she was called), Dona Nica, conducted herself very much like an old-style plantation boss. She came from a relatively wealthy family in Água Preta and had a nice house in town. She was trained as a nurse and first became acquainted with the movement through her medical position. When the MST's state leadership asked Dona Nica to take over control of the micro, she accepted, saying that her true solidarity was with the *Sem Terra* and she would "help the miserable people to rise up." She attempted to lead the settlers in the tradition of the plantation boss: she was inclined to "*mandar*" (order people around) and hated to attend meetings. But she led the settlers without the crucial element of "honor" or resources that had been an integral part of the plantation moral economy. Without the means to back up her claim to authority on the settlement, Dona Nica was widely despised among the settlers.

As one rural worker said, explaining how the MST had let its constituency down by bringing in these two new leaders who were not able to provide the necessary strategic leadership:

Settler: "*With [the former MST leader in the sugarcane region], everything worked differently. At times we needed some medicine and we always went to look for it in other settlements. We always had medicine, we always had a car, everything happened in a different way. Now with [this new leader], there's just his car and [the other leader's] motorcycle...*"

Wendy: "And [the other leader], does she come here to help?"

Settler: "*No, she just comes to talk. She's the MST coordinator here. There are some people who need things, they need a food basket, a bit of medicine, and so, whether you think it's good or bad, you have to go and ask the mayor. Because the MST won't take care of these things now! [This new leader] has never done anything. By the end of the winter there were three people in the settlement going through a terrible crisis.*"

Wendy: "What sort of crisis?"

Settler: "*They didn't have the means to survive, and so they came looking for me, and I went into the mayor's office and I talked to [a young woman there] and I got together three food baskets. But the movement... well, I talked to [the two MST leaders] and I told them how it was with these people (who were going through a crisis) but they didn't do anything for them. And that's why we want to*"

<sup>51</sup> Interview #40b, Água Preta, PE, February 16, 2003.

*organize ourselves, call a meeting and get out of the movement.”*

Wendy: “How strange! When I was here before the movement was so strong.”

Settler: “Yes, it was, when you were here before, no one needed food. There was one time when we had more than 200 food baskets!<sup>52</sup> And so if anyone needed anything, we would take out some food and give it to them. [The leader at that time] said: if you need anything, you just have to ask.... In those days there was more incentive [to be part of the movement]. Now there is no incentive”.<sup>53</sup>

The effect that these leadership changes had on the settlers’ experience of membership in the MST should not be understood simply as isolated cases of particular leaders. The conflictual relationship between the settlers and the MST leaders highlights the personal nature of politics and the importance (and context) of cultural politics in framing the struggle for social change. The settlers had been able to work with the MST leaders who worked in the region from 1997 to 2001 because their modes of leadership made sense to them. These leaders knew how to play the local political game even as they introduced new aspects of collective organization, such as the demonstration they organized on that unusually warm evening in September, 1999. When the leadership changed abruptly in 2001, the settlers were confronted with leaders they did not understand and did not like. Unaware that all members of the MST are theoretically equal, the settlers utilized a strategy that had been common on the plantations when a conflict with the owner occurred: they left.

### ***Conclusion***

The path that the settlers in Água Preta took from their successful mobilization in September of 1999 to their withdrawal from the movement four years later was a gradual one. It was not predetermined by the structural conditions of the settlers’ history as plantation workers, nor was it a product of individual interests triumphing over the good of the collective. Instead, it was shaped by conjunctural events and processes perceived through the subjective lens of a localized “common sense.”

As plantation workers, the settlers possessed a social memory of the value of land, and most expressed gratitude for the opportunity to own their own. They built houses on their land, planted fruit trees, flowering plants, and vegetables, and, for a period, they actively engaged with the MST’s vision for their future.

But the settlers’ historical relationship to the land was characterized by what came to be seen as contradictions -- contradictions when compared to the ideal of peasant production. Even as the settlers planted their fruits and vegetables, they energetically defended the dominance of sugarcane in the region as a product of natural environmental conditions. And even as they celebrated the removal of the old plantation boss, they followed his lead in demanding control over the use of their common

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<sup>52</sup> These food baskets were arranged by the former leader, Antonio.

<sup>53</sup> Interview #3b, Água Preta, PE, February 14, 2003.

spaces. For the settlers, the right to own land was embedded in the political and social relations of the former plantation: land was not just a means of production it was a means of improving one's political (and therefore economic) position. The settlers could not accept what the movement assumed: that owning a small plot of land was synonymous with becoming a peasant.

The history of mobilization in the sugarcane town of Água Preta is clearly a specific one, but the lesson for the study of social mobilization more broadly is that understanding *why* people join social movements is a necessary part of understanding the seemingly contradictory dynamics of collective organization.<sup>54</sup> It has become increasingly common (though no less important) to argue against the structural bias of most "classical" work on social movements (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), and to insist that culture and subjective interpretations matter to the formation of social movements (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998; Rubin 2004; Wolford 2003). This attention to culture is the product of both a conjunctural change in the rise of new social movements (Slater 1985) and a theoretical change in the transition from Marxist-Leninist analyses of social mobilization to a more nuanced Gramscian focus on cultural production among social movement activists and academics alike (Alvarez and Escobar 1992; Castenada 1994). But simply introducing the concept of culture into social movement analyses does not necessarily resolve the structure-agency debate: cultural traits and processes can become so overwhelmingly influential and static (where tradition equals culture) that they are structural in their effect, and, alternatively, if "actors" and agency are allowed to stand in for culture, then social action is voluntaristic, perpetuated primarily by "great men" (and, occasionally, women). Furthermore, the use of culture itself risks becoming tautological (culture matters because culture *matters*) unless we move on to explain not only that culture matters, and how, but *so what?*

In analyzing the particular case of mobilization in Água Preta, it is clear that the rural workers' intentions in joining the MST shaped the movement's regional trajectory far more than their actions did. In other words, the reasons *why* the rural workers joined the MST were as important as the fact that they joined at all. An analysis of the rural workers' reasons for participating in the MST helps to introduce dynamism into the study of social movements because their reasons for joining the movement influence the ability of the movement to continue organizing and influence the relationship between movement, society, and state. At a very minimum, an understanding of why the rural workers joined the MST helps to explain why they would begin working for wages on the sugarcane plantations

<sup>54</sup> The most common question in analyses of social movements is a structural one, 'why do movements form?' Material grievances, political context, and the ability to access resources, are all considered the critical variables to understand movement formation, and they form the basis of the three dominant theories on social mobilization, Marxist-grievance theories, political opportunity theories, and resource mobilization theories respectively. In a 2003 article published in *Mobilization*, I argued that this very "thin" question, 'why do movements form' had to be replaced with the question, 'why do people join social movements,' a question which requires the thick description of intentions, political beliefs and cultural norms.

as soon as jobs were available -- and why they would see this as a reason to exit from the MST.

In this chapter, I have argued that we can better understand the political role of culture by analyzing the place of common sense in cases of collective mobilization. Common sense, as Gramsci conceived of it, is difficult to measure: it is contradictory, fragmentary, and never autonomous from hegemonic ideologies. But we can obtain a picture of common sense in particular places if we analyze the intentions that lie behind and beyond people's actions. Common sense understandings of the value and purpose of land were reflected in the paths that the settlements took in the sugarcane region. This, I would argue, as others have (Hart 2003; Mintz 2000), is the political role and the place for critical ethnographies of social mobilization, where individual case studies and thick descriptions of intention underlying action serve to spoil our meta-narratives, even progressive ones. The "politics of place" disrupt any attempt to universalize and naturalize (Massey 1991; Harvey 2000).

Ultimately, the conclusion to this chapter is the beginning of the next: even though the rural workers had effectively withdrawn from the MST by 2003, their experiences of participation in movement politics have expanded their "repertoire of resistance" (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2000; Tilly 1978). Through what is still a largely invisible historical memory of participation, the rural workers have added to their strategies for political action. They remember that organization was once effective and may again be. They see mobilization as a tool for political action that they might draw upon when necessary or advantageous. They called upon their experience with collective action to withdraw from the MST, and they will use it again to demand basic goods from the mayor. And even though they have rejected membership in the MST for now, it does not mean they always will. Strategies of resistance are never static and cannot be understood without attention to the way they change over time. The settlers in Água Preta made their political decisions in circumstances that were constantly in movement, even as their own experiences dictated a new set of understandings for evaluating those factors.



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Appendix

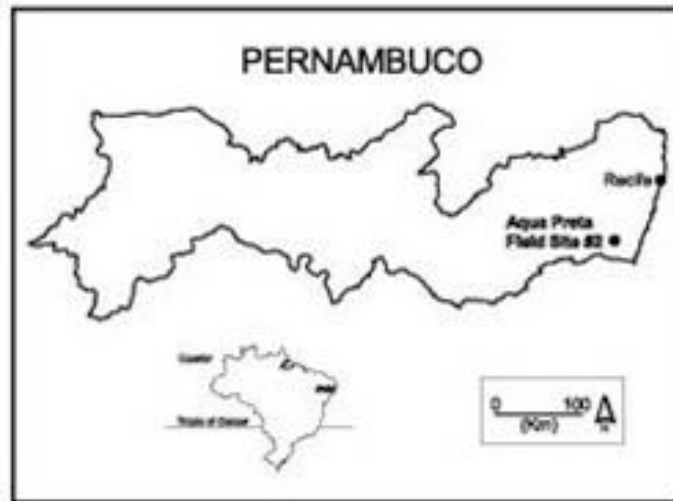


Figure #1: Map, Field Site, Água Preta, PE, Brazil



Figure #2: Demonstration in Água Preta, September 1999



Figure #3: The settlers reach the city council building, Água Preta, PE



Figure #4: Inside the city council building, Água Preta, PE



Figure #5: The Military Police arrive and dispel the demonstrators, Água Preta, PE



Figure #6: “A Dream Realized,” by José Santos Souza – Nova Conquista Settlement

Figure #7: Sugarcane in the rolling hills of the *zona da mata sul*, Pernambuco



Figure #8: A settler and his land, Flora, Água Preta, PE, 1999.