"The Land Belongs to Those Who Work It"

Brazil's Landless Movement (MST) and the Changing Culture of Property

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Property is an imagined reality. There is no inherent physical quality which causes things to be (or become) property; instead property is imagined because it abstracts objects beyond their physical nature into social and economic realities. The common element in all property systems is a social organization of the natural world. Property determines the distribution of resources and power in society and is integral to understanding local sources of power. Capitalism is founded upon a system of private property whereby individuals are afforded complete control over commodities that they own. As markets expand through economic globalization, this system of private property proliferates and is integrated into a global network of capital. The unique aspects of local property relations are not eclipsed through the global network; rather they become vital to the integrity of the entire system.

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In Brazil, the Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST) is challenging the dominant notion of private property, which has become a site of political struggle due to unequal land distribution. Brazil has one of the world's top ten economies and one of the world's top ten most unequal income distributions.[1] Three percent of the population owns 70 percent of the land and denies rural peasants access; 1 percent of the farms account for almost 50 percent of the total agricultural land area; 44 percent of the arable land is insufficiently productive. The MST occupies private property that it believes is failing to satisfy the legally required social function, and demands that the government expropriate it. As such, the MST claims that "the land belongs to those who work it."

The Landless Workers' Movement is based on the dynamics of land occupation. This act of rebellion attempts to begin the construction of a just, more fraternal society, through the subversion of private property.[2] Land occupation is intended to create the conditions for widespread agrarian reform; it endeavours to end the exploitative capacity of capitalism by modifying the property system so that it is subordinate to the needs of society. The protests of the MST have made the meaning of land in Brazil contentious: is it an individually owned commodity (private property), or does it have social and cultural obligations? As there is nothing innate in land that makes it property (or property in a particular form), the actions of the MST require people to imagine property differently. Therefore, the meaning of land in Brazil is being redefined through land occupation and an arsenal of symbolic images that attempt to re-signify the imagined reality of land. In creating a new material reality through land occupation, the MST is re-signifying cultural images to conceive of property with a social function.

To compare varying conceptions of land, in this essay I will pay particular attention to the changing culture of property in Brazil. A culture of property is a shared understanding of the rights and obligations of individuals in relation to the access, use, withdrawal and management of things of value. A culture of property has three key dimensions: the first defines people based on their relation to property, the second subjects all members of the group to the authority of those definitions, and the third organizes the relations of production. In defining the property relations, society confers rights and obligations on individuals, and also serves to constitute the identity of the individual. By defining rights and obligations, an authority system is developed, which subjects all members of the group to the known and accepted rules, through the use of

coercion and the social force of norms and values. Art supplies the images that disseminate and construct the definitions and authority of a culture of property; societal organization flows from the knowledge of these structures. The requisite relations of production are an organization of economic and cultural relations through relationships of power, or institutions, which integrate labour in order to produce the needs of society.

My definition of a culture of property necessarily prioritizes the material reality over the cultural by assuming that cultural realities originate in the material. Moreover, it proposes that by examining the relationship between labour and the land (the social reality) we can better understand how the material reality of property is constructed.[3] Furthermore, the culture of property allows for the identification of how a changing material reality re-constitutes the cultural reality and causes a social re-signification.

This essay will consider the historic property relations that fuel the struggle of the landless workers. It will explore the struggle of the MST through an explanation of the movement and the people. To better understand what land means to those involved in this movement, I will examine six works of art; from these works I will extrapolate what land means in Brazil and the implications of this emerging imagined reality. Finally, this essay will compare the historic culture of property in Brazil to that of the MST, and discuss the implications of both.

With the two cultures of property reduced to their component parts, in the last section I will analyze what is revealed by understanding the material conditions of property. What alternative to the historical culture of property is the MST offering? How is the conflict over land being visually negotiated? The MST is often heralded as a revolutionary social force in Latin America, but is the MST proposing a radically new conception of property? What about the movement is revolutionary?

I. History of the Land

To understand the roots of landlessness, the plight of the MST, and the extremely high rate of inequality, we must first consider the historic pattern of land distribution. This section will briefly explore some pertinent aspects of Brazil's historic culture of property and the roots of landlessness by highlighting the evolution of land law and the labour market since colonial times.

Why is there Landlessness? Or, What is the Historic Culture of Property?

In 1500, when the Portuguese Crown claimed the Brazilian territory, incentives for migration to the new world were still far off. In order to secure the territory against rival colonial powers and maintain royal coffers, the king gave large tracts of land to nobles and royal favourites. The land along the coast was divided into fourteen *capitanias*, so called because they were given to "captains" to rule in the name of the king. The twelve men that ruled the territories (two of the captains were given two territories) had autonomous control to raise taxes, establish laws and appoint local government officials.[4] These large landholders were relatively secluded and ruled their territory like fiefdoms; they were often the only employer, industry, and government in the area. With few Portuguese settlers, *latifundios* (large estates) were established to make a profit on the land and pay duties to Portugal.[5] A secondary source of land was the *sesmarias* system (named after the fourteenth century *Lei das Sesmarias,* or Land Grant Bill, of the Kingdom of Portugal), which gave land grants to white, free, Roman Catholic men that were cultivating the land and residing on it.[6] Imported African slaves were the primary labourers until the abolition of slavery in 1888.[7]

In anticipation of a labour shortage, Brazil revised the land laws in 1850 in order to promote mass immigration. The resulting Land Bill removed the ethnic qualifications from property ownership and simultaneously removed the property rights of both squatters and those living on and cultivating the land. This bill devolved the state's rule over granted land and instituted private ownership rights to property. By creating legal mechanisms that made large landed estates obligatory, the law was intended to promote primitive accumulation and construct the conditions for a proletarian labour force.[8] Land became a commodity, able to be bought and sold, with complete management, exclusion and alienation rights residing with individuals.

In the changing labour market of the late nineteenth century, the latifundios and the export-orientated economy were maintained through the colonato system, whereby immigrant families were recruited from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, and later Japan for work on commercial farms. They were hired to do agricultural work in exchange for a mix of wages and non-monetary privileges, such as the right to have a small family plot.[9] The colonato system was prevalent in

sugar cane production in the Northeast and in coffee production in Southern Brazil until the mid-1950s.

Brazil's Historic Culture of Property

With the Land Bill of 1850, the Brazilian Empire shifted the right of land distribution and acquisition from the state to the market. This made it difficult for small farmers to obtain land and ensured the preservation of elite rule in Brazil. The elite classes of landowners designed and built Brazil's system of private property. In defining property, this class endowed itself with exclusive rights to use, access, manage and withdraw resources from the majority of Brazilian lands. To make this property profitable, it allowed families of workers to inhabit and subsist on a small portion of property, so long as it served landowners' needs. This became problematic as Brazil progressed and modernized in the century-and-a-half after the law was established.

Private property is usually viewed as a progressive move toward modernization because it introduces market mechanisms, which imply efficiency. Given Brazil's settlement patterns, however, private property is inefficient as it fails to recognize three intrinsic assumptions of private property. Private property assumes first that the owner chooses to manage the property well, and second that it induces industry. These assumptions are not met in the case of Brazil; market mechanisms enshrined ownership of large tracts of land, which continue to be unused, underused, or used wastefully. Third, private property relies on the assumption that the interests of the non-owners are in accordance with those of the owners.[10] The workers and the landowners benefited from private property so long as the workers remained employed and lived on their employer's land. However, as the colonato system degraded in the twentieth century, so did the institutional incentives for workers to support the latifundio system. This left rural Brazilians excluded from economic, social and political life. As the rural economy mechanized over the twentieth century, this exclusion proliferated, since large farms required fewer employees to make a profit. Private property in Brazil entrenched an organization of ownership which concentrated political and economic power and disabled Brazil's capacity for efficient production.

This form of land ownership was "part of the client-orientated and oligarchic system [which] constituted … an economic reward for political loyalty," as well as a means to control the workforce.[11] The

maintenance of this system required strict authority for those it excluded yet significant latitude for those included. In rural areas of Brazil there is little distinction between the landowners and public institutions.[12] The elite "right" to these properties is enforced by public police forces which are indistinguishable from private security forces.[13] All aspects of rural society depend on landowners: the workers, who require employment; the state, which maintains their interests; and even the Catholic Church, as community parishes relied heavily on their support.[14] The norms of the historic culture of property serve to maintain historic continuity and a strict structural hierarchy among workers, owners, and non-workers, valuing those who uphold them. These values are even evident in the Brazilian flag: the design is based on that of the nineteenth century Brazilian Empire, and in the centre it reads "Order and Progress" (See Figure 1).

The flag exemplifies the historic culture of property as it upholds historic privilege through orderly or non-revolutionary economic development. This has been achieved by denying rural peasants education, health care, job security, and in some of the drought-affected areas, even access to potable water.[15] Maintaining the incapacity of the working class preserves the working class' reliance on landowners and stifles their attempts to revolt or improve themselves. Moreover, it creates a large reserve of unemployed workers, allowing wages to remain low, and further reinforcing the power of the landowner.[16] As production modernized in the twentieth century, latifundio landowners allied with capitalist industrialists and the colonato system collapsed. Modern industrial relations were established.

Prominent Brazilian sociologist José de Souza Martins says, "Brazil's oligarchs have always presented a modern face as a facade behind which they hide the economic backwardness of the latifundios and its social and labour relations."[17] The facade of private property and the exclusionary aspects of labour relations are inherent contradictions in Brazil's culture of property. These contradictions are the seeds of the contemporary landless problem. Agricultural modernization has resulted in an enclosure of agricultural lands and a reduced need for labour—the interests of the land owners have come into conflict with the non-owners. This excludes increasing numbers of workers from employment and subsistence.

Brazilian agriculture underwent significant changes as it increasingly became a commercial enterprise. The reciprocal relationship between colonato workers and landowners ended: landowners became

merely employers, and peasants became employees. The high-tech agrarian solutions afforded by the green revolution required less labour to produce the same product. Amidst these production changes many peasants found themselves excluded from both land ownership and employment.[18] This condition of exclusion which led to the peasant's inability to produce sustenance came to be known as "landlessness." The particular causes of landlessness are location-specific.[19] In some areas of Brazil landlessness is partially due to the enclosure of colonato lands and the reduced need for labour.[20] A number of economic and political conditions created landlessness; however, it was the exclusionary tendencies of the historic culture of property that gave landlessness its political force.

II. The Landless Workers' Movement

The landless workers in Brazil are known as the *sem terra*. There is no collective noun for the peasantry in Portuguese, but sem terra literally means "without land." The term originates from journalists covering the highly politicized confrontation at Encruzilhada Natalino.[21] Over time the sem terra concept has come to encompass a large constituency of people: small farmers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, day workers, seasonal labourers, peasant farmers, and squatters.[22] Despite the differences between these groups of people they all share an experience of poverty and exploitation. More specifically, they share an "exclu[sion] from the wealth they had helped to generate."[23] The sem terra concept unites the excluded in their struggle for social, economic and political inclusion.

The sem terra are located in the agricultural states of Brazil, predominantly in the South and Northeast.[24] The composition of the sem terra varies in each state. In the Northeast, farmers are generally *mestizos*,[25] while southern farmers are generally European migrants.[26] It is estimated that there are four to five million sem terra families in Brazil, which means almost 30 million people are without land.[27] Brazil's population is approximately 175 million, therefore the landless may represent as much as 17 percent of the population. Because the colonato system employed entire families, statistics about the sem terra always report figures in terms of families, not individuals. One result of the destruction of the colonato system has been the involvement of entire families in the struggle for land through the MST.

What are the Dynamics of the Landless Workers' Movement?

The MST's website outlines the goals of the movement and of agrarian reform in general. The first two general objectives are:

> 1. To construct a society without exploiters in which work has supremacy over capital, and;
> 2. The land is a good of everyone and it must contribute to the whole society.[28]

Correspondingly, the first two goals of Agrarian Reform are:

> 1. To modify the structure of landed property, and;
> 2. To subordinate landed property to social justice, to the necessities of the people and to the objectives of the society." [29]

These goals are enacted through land occupation carried out by sem terra peasants.

Occupations are organized by MST activists and participating families are notified at the last moment in order to avoid the police. They take place at night, and by morning shelters are built and the settlement is established. The families live in polythene tents and construct a hut to house the communal kitchen and a space for the open air school. Occupations can last up to several years, and the threat of eviction is constant. During the process the sem terra may face violence and ridicule. To keep up morale in the camp, cultural activities such as art and drama take place, and children attend school. Members of the camp are required to adhere to a strict routine: they get up early in the morning for first assembly; take part in group activities; and prepare for mass resistance with singing, marching and shouting slogans.[30] Alcohol and violent behaviour are prohibited in the camp. There is a strong sense of community in the camps as they share the struggle for land, the humiliation of eviction, and daily life tasks. Even though the conditions of the camps are very rudimentary, the sem terra describe land occupation as the only remaining option for survival.

The family dynamic is central to the struggle for land. Whereas family involvement in the colonato system was a built-in form of social control, the participation of desperate families in land invasions has become a radical force. One sixty-four-year-old woman engaged in the struggle described her motivation in this way:

> I've come on the occupation to help my children. Not one of them has a job. My youngest son is worst off. He just got married. They have a baby and they haven't even got a house to live in. When I get a plot of land, I'm going to put it in his name.[31]

The so-called radicals of the MST movement are simply farmers without land or employment who see no end to their desperate situation.

The communal dynamism of the MST informs its political organization. The movement has a decentralized structure that aims to build consensus amongst its members through participatory democracy which identifies and executes its goals.[32] The MST also has no formal membership; all landless people are considered to be sem terra and people become a part of the movement through participation. This departs from the hierarchal organization of unions and political parties of the past and allows the focus to remain on the whole family, or community, rather than the individual worker or peasant.[33] Through this structure the organization does not claim to speak on behalf of people; instead it endeavours to educate the poor so that they may make their own decisions and speak for themselves.

What is the Relationship between the MST and the State?

In many ways there is no relationship between the state and the MST. The MST has no clear leaders, leaving the state to interact with each settlement and family individually through legal and bureaucratic channels. Furthermore, the state refuses to recognize the movement legally as they have never been named as a plaintiff or defendant. Nevertheless, the state has tacitly acknowledged the MST through violent repression and criminalization, as well as through land expropriation, settlement financing and favourable legal rulings. This ambiguous relationship is reinforced by an equally ambiguous constitution, which seems to provide a legal basis both for and against land occupation. In this tumultuous climate of indecision and incoherence, the various articulations of land's (potential) meanings become highly contentious.

Despite being unrecognized, through land occupation the MST has created a political frontier which forces the state to examine the constitutionality of the land. As Brazil re-democratized in the 1980s, the concentration of land ownership proved to be the most contentious issue during the writing of the "Citizen Constitution" (*Constituição Cidad*) in

1988. There was significant conflict in the Economic Order Committee and Land Reform Sub Committee, which dealt specifically with this issue.[34] The result is a document that both embraces progressive land reform and upholds traditional notions of private property; it "simultaneously protect[s] the government's right to expropriate land not fulfilling its social obligations *and* ensures the sanctity of private property [emphasis in original]."[35]

This results in institutionally weak land law that is context-specific and always subject to political negotiation. The social function of property, mentioned five times in the Constitution, requires that agrarian lands be "used in a manner that is (i) economically rational … and (iv) favorable to the well-being of both owners and workers," according to Article 186.[36] However, this stipulation is tempered with a clause in Article 185 preventing expropriation of productive property for agrarian reform. The definitions for the social function of property and productive property were intentionally left vague, for subsequent laws to determine. As such, the legal battles over land are as much about establishing jurisprudence for agrarian reform as they are about land expropriation.[37] In this context, the meaning of land becomes a highly controversial political issue as both sides articulate moral arguments based in the constitution for their right to land.

State-led agrarian reform has been taking place since the first MST occupations.Unproductive properties that the MST occupy and that are found not to meet the social function are expropriated by the *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (INCRA). To do so, the state establishes a settlement contract with all agrarian reform beneficiaries. In this contract the state becomes the landlord as settlers are given use rights, not title, to the land.[38] Though the amount of land provided to settlers varies by state and region, each family is given enough land to support a family of four according to government calculations. The state also provides money as start-up capital for the settlements, which is enough to build a house and buy initial supplies for production. Settlement infrastructure such as roads, education, and health services are also maintained by the state, albeit poorly. State-led agrarian reform establishes both the means and the conditions of the settlements. Wendy Wolford writes, "If settlers want to move to a new settlement, experiment with alternative production practices or request additional assistance, they need to go through the agents of the state."[39] Despite its reliance on the state to achieve its objectives, the MST presents the state in a villainous light due to its treatment of the movement.

Though the state has criminalized and violently suppressed the MST in many ways, it has also legitimized it.[40] In 1996, justice Luiz Vicente Cernicchiaro, leading intellectual on the penal code, was part of a decision by the *Superior Tribunal de Justiça* (a senior court) to accept the MST's claims that they need to occupy land in order to obtain it, thus admitting inaction of the state on the question of agrarian reform as the impetus for MST action.[41] The constitutional contradictions of land reform give it a relative nature that is highly dependent on political framing and pressure. Despite the election of "Lula" da Silva and his Workers' Party (the political party most closely aligned with the MST) in 2003 and again in 2006, this has not resulted in the comprehensive plan for agrarian reform that the MST longs for. The MST continues to pressure the government, but its efforts to create support for land reform through transforming Brazilian culture incrementally may remain its greatest contribution to Brazilian society.

The politics of land have daily consequences for the sem terra. The concentration of land ownership and lack of sufficient employment means that they are often unable to feed themselves. Potential land ownership is an opportunity to achieve food security. Agrarian modernization has increased the capacity of food production, but as the Brazilian economy primarily produces commodities such as soy, sugar and coffee for export, local food needs are not met and food is imported. The high cost of imports renders food out of reach for many of the rural poor. Hunger is the means by which the population is coerced and controlled, which results in relationships of control and power that may be likened to slavery.[42] For the sem terra, owning land represents freedom from hunger and emancipation from manipulation.

It is through the act of physical trespass that the sem terra transgress against an oppressive social order and in turn, recreate their physical and social reality. The technique of land occupation and the organization of the MST are effective. It is estimated that of the 1.5 million members, hundreds of thousands of them have received plots of land on 1,200 agrarian settlements. The movement has also established 18,000 schools, 104 rural cooperatives and ninety-six food processing plants.[43]

III. Understanding the MST

The tactic of land occupation forces a political conversation about the meaning of land. However, land occupation has its limits. According to Murray Edelman, "Material conditions and striking events render people

susceptible to new ways of building reality, but artists must provide the categories, the premises, the modes of seeing, and the cognitive pathways."[44] Though the immediate struggle of the MST is material, the long term goals involve changing embedded cultural practices in order to render Brazil's political and economic culture more just and inclusive. Images produced and reproduced through art are critical in promoting transformation.

Political behaviour is influenced and shaped by conceptions and perceptions of reality, which produce an imagined reality and the language to describe it. "Art, like language, derives [its] importance from metaphors they suggest to observers."[45] In suggesting alternative ways of perceiving the world, art plays a formidable role in establishing patterns and ideas about society that people believe are their own. Orwell pointed out that "all art is to some extent propaganda;" the ability of art to appeal to emotions and disguise itself as common sense through use of myth, symbolism, and rhetoric means that all art is on some level propaganda.[46] However, it is not my intention here to discern what is or is not propaganda, but instead to alert the reader to the power of the image in the collective subconscious—to recognize art as propaganda is to recognize its potential use as an ideological weapon; what is particularly pertinent here is art's service in conceptualizing and defining the meaning of land in Brazil.

The six works of art I will examine all originate from the struggles of the sem terra in the MST. The MST claims legitimate title to the land it occupies through a particular normative understanding of the meaning of land that is represented in art. Art and other cultural productions of the MST form something it calls the *mística,* or "mystic," a cultural practice which endeavours to further its political struggle. Four of the works of art are part of the Landless Voices Archive and two are symbols of the movement.[47] To examine these works of art I will attempt to locate them in this cultural framework and then decode the symbols used in each to understand the visual language being employed. The focus therefore will be on both how these works of art convey meaning, and what meaning is conveyed.[48] To understand what these images say about the meaning of land to the sem terra, I will complement this analysis with research which reflects how these images interact with other cultural narratives, how they are located in the sem terra experience, and how they are attempting to re-signify the Brazilian cultural landscape in order to advance widespread agrarian change.

What is the Cultural Framework in which these Images were Produced?

The mística originated as a way to boost morale amongst the settlers during land occupation. Since then it has become prevalent in all areas of the MST, taking on the characteristics of the local culture and adapting to the struggle for agrarian reform.[49] For this reason it is a concept that evades easy definition. The Landless Voices glossary describes it as:

> A cultural and political act developed in various rituals, in which the *Sem Terra* express their readings of lived experiences through poetry, music, mime, painting, art in general. It is also a form of language of the unlettered who express, communicate, and interact in the building of the consciousness of the land struggle.[50]

What is important in this definition is that it indicates that the *mística* is a way in which people involved in the MST interpret their own experiences and that it is an artistic language with political intentions. The transformative power of this language is described in religious terms by one MST militant:

> All *mística* has its liturgy; a language of symbols that combines gestures and words. Each liturgy is an aesthetic expression of a transfigured view of the world.… It expresses the anguish of a population always oppressed and living on the limit of survival. It exorcises the humiliation imposed by the ruling class, and the yoke of hard, submissive labour.[51]

For the MST the *mística* is a way of symbolically creating the world differently.[52] The mística integrates MST members into the process of producing alternatives by re-establishing the authority of every person to author their own reality. The act of creation allows for a space apart from dominant and oppressive cultural symbols of the status quo. In this space alternative political behaviour is possible.

The works of art that I will be examining depict the reasons for the sem terra's struggle, the struggle itself, and the utopia they are seeking to create. These works were chosen due to their pertinence to the meaning of land in Brazil and the extent to which they are relevant to MST culture.

Reasons for the Struggle

The struggle of the sem terra against the latifundios is depicted in *Representation of Peasants Confronting a Barbed-Wire Fence* (see Figure 2). This piece uses dark-toned colours to depict three figures which share the large brim of a peasant's hat. There are hills in the background, and in the foreground the hands of one peasant rest on a barbed-wire fence.

There is a saying in northeastern Brazil which translates as "the problem is not the drought; it is the fence,"[53] which is to say that the social, political and economic disaster is more profound for the peasants than that of the naturally harsh environment of the *sertão* (region known for its dry climate). The fence is a prominent symbol in peasant culture and a frequent symbol in MST art, as it represents the various ways in which the peasant is historically excluded in Brazilian society. Exclusion is the source of their suffering, as it results in their exploitation and hunger, and the violence against them. In this painting the high dark hills in the background give the impression that the peasants are forced to confront the fence, with no escape route or alternative.

The unfortunate circumstances of the peasants in this painting are in contrast to their disposition. The peasant's common hat brim is a sign of solidarity; it displays the strength peasants have in collectively confronting the problems of exclusion. The gazes of the peasants reinforce this by confronting the viewer. Two of the peasants are looking out of the painting towards the viewer, demanding that the viewer recognize their plight: they are trapped between the fence and the hills. The third peasant, on the left, is looking into the estate on the other side of the fence, as if to demonstrate the collective desire of the peasants. This peasant evokes the sense that although they are bound by the fence, in their solidarity they may collectively confront and overcome the obstacle.

In this way, *Representation of Peasants Confronting a Barbed-Wire Fence* takes the known cultural meaning of the barbed-wire fence and reinterprets it. The re-signification of the barbed-wire fence may serve to emancipate the mind of the viewer and generate new ways of seeing the world.[54] This does not indicate that art creates cultural ideas separate from the material reality—rather, the transformed material reality of some is communicated through works of art. The MST stems from, and perpetuates, the transformation of material reality, and thus all its art is informed by this fact. The transformation means that a barbed wire fence

is no longer a static symbol of oppression; rather, for the MST, it becomes the means and challenge of peasant emancipation.

Peasant Tools Foregrounding Congress contrasts the modern and traditional through its depiction of farm implements over fertile and dry land in relation to the Brazilian Congress (see Figure 3). The tools represented here are used by peasants and carried during land occupations. These and other tools symbolize "bringing in the harvest and … promoting the struggle."[55] The manual labour these tools are used for enables more widespread employment amongst peasants than does mechanized labour. Because of their identity as workers without land, the tools evoke the presence of the sem terra without depicting people. These traditional instruments contrast with the explicitly modern shapes of the Brazilian Congress, which was intended to be symbolic of the modernization of the Brazilian economy. The government buildings are symbols of the state and in this painting they represent the modernist ethos of successive governments.[56] The land between the tools and Congress speaks to how the modern and traditional elements interact: at great distance and in confrontation.

The results of modernization can be seen in the land: cultivated green fertile land and dry neglected land. The cumulative effects of modernization have resulted in a few agricultural "islands of prosperity" which are found in a "sea of stagnation."[57] One MST writer, Ademar Bogo, says that "land and man have the same history," and by association the same present and future.[58] The blood in this painting also indicates the unity of body and land. The stark separation of dry and fertile land suggests that despite the promises of modernity, the gap between rich and poor remains. The tear that causes the blood is the same colour as Congress, thus linking the pain of the peasants and the land to modernization. Not only have the promises of a better world not materialized for members of the MST, but modernism has also exacerbated their problems. Violence inflicted on the land, e.g., through modern pesticides, translates directly into violence on the human body through hunger stemming from decreased employment for peasants. Symbolic fusion of body and land is a visual technique to equate the effects of modernization on the land with the condition of the people.

This fusion of body and land images is a recurring theme in MST art. This is due to the struggle of the MST; by liberating the land, the body is equally freed from its condition of oppression. Bogo describes the act of land occupation for the individual as an opportunity to "discover the possibility of being reborn."[59] Though *Peasant Tools Foreground-*

ing Congress represents the land, it does not include depictions of people and therefore does not indicate liberation of the land or the body. This painting does not contain a message of hope because it lacks the agents of change.

Peasant Tools Foregrounding Congress is an indication not of what has occurred, but of what has not. The exclusion of the peasant has meant they have not benefited from Brazil's progress and have suffered through the country's development. Taken in combination with *Peasants Confronting Barbed-Wire Fence,* which connotes the peasant's desire and need to change the landholding system, these two paintings deny the historic values of order and progress portrayed in the Brazilian flag. Instead, they represent values of social justice by portraying the wrongful treatment of the land and the body, and mass mobilization through peasant solidarity. These themes will reoccur in depictions of the struggle and the utopia that the MST seeks to create.

Depictions of the Struggle

Because the experience of land occupation is the primary source of meaning for the movement, the most prominent symbols of the MST contain depictions of the struggle. Encruzilhada Natalino is in many ways the birthplace of the MST, as it was during a land confrontation there in 1980 that land ownership entered the public discourse and land occupation became politicized.[60] In 1983 the demands of the families were met and 164 families received 1,870 hectares of land. Today there is an MST settlement there, as well as a monument to the struggle that took place (see Figure 4). The statue consists of two figures that appear to be marching; the man carries a farm tool and the woman a flag. Their posture seems to indicate strength in conviction, and their forward-looking gaze a positive outlook on the future.

The act of marching for the MST is a process of self-discovery and awareness; it is a time when one becomes conscious of one's conditions. Awareness fuels the desire for transformation and the struggle for land. As many of the sem terra claim that land occupation made them who they are, the metal pieces that compose these figures seem to symbolize the experiences that they have collected during their struggle. Each experience (re)creates and fortifies them, and eventually results in their complete transformation. This process of re-constituting oneself is likely what Bogo refers to as being "reborn."

The flag of the MST, adopted in 1987 at the Fourth National Meeting of the MST, is red with a circular logo in the centre (see Figure 5). Each aspect of the flag represents different aspects of the movement. The colour red symbolizes the blood of each person involved in the struggle for agrarian reform and social transformation. The circular logo in the middle of the flag names the movement and depicts a man holding a machete and a woman beside him contained within the shape of Brazil. The shape of the Brazilian territory indicates the national character of the MST and the national involvement in the struggle for agrarian reform. The territory is green to represent the vast number of estates that could be made productive, and the prospect of a victorious struggle. The man and the woman symbolize the families involved in the struggle.The machete in the man's hand, like the farm implements discussed above, represents the tools of work, struggle, and resistance. The black circular outline is homage to those workers who have fallen in the struggle and the white is a reminder of peace and social justice for all.[61] T-shirts and hats bearing this logo are frequently distributed and worn by members of the MST.

Common to the MST, and depicted in both of these works of art, is the idea that a new man and woman are forged in the struggle for land. The sexes are depicted as equals in this endeavour, although they retain their distinctly masculine and feminine features. Although men are prominent in the leadership, egalitarian images serve to portray and value equality while demonstrating the possibility of cultural transformation.[62]

Depictions of Utopia

Agrarian reform seeks to create terms under which rural peasants will become full participants in Brazilian society. The last two images I will consider depict the reality they are seeking to create. These two paintings are vivid depictions of utopia. The act of dreaming is advocated by educator Paulo Freire, who takes issue with the paradigmatic discourse that believes facts are reality, and asserts that it is the role of the educator to unveil possibilities for hope through political analysis.[63] The MST relies heavily on his work in its attempt to re-signify and create the world differently.

With an immense respect for the experiences of people in Brazil, Paulo Freire was devastated by the apparent prohibition on being happy or having hope which he saw around him. The educational philosophy

he developed as a result embraces a belief in the "possible dream" and the utopia that will come once those who wish to make their own history do so.[64] On the importance of dreaming he states:

> Dreaming is not only a necessary political act, it is an integral part of the historico-social manner of being a person. It is part of human nature, which, within history, is in a permanent process of becoming.… There is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope.[65]

Paulo Freire believes the individual must become an active participant in making their own history in order for change to take place. The ontological vocation of the human being is the utopian dream of humanization. This dream motivates people to engage in a process of individual reinvention. The struggle for utopia continues because it is never realized, and people are always in the process of producing it.

The utopias of the MST are portrayed in works of art such as *Panel Celebrating Education in the MST*, which contains the phrase "School, Land and Dignity" (see Figure 6). One MST activist said, "When you're illiterate, it's the same as being blind. With its schools, books and practice the Movement teaches us to see the world."[66] Literacy is an MST ideal which attempts to teach everyone to "read, write and assess reality," as the power of knowledge enables social inclusion and instills within people courage to rebel.[67]

Panel Celebrating Education in the MST is constructed using a tent structure to divide the painting. Above the tent, next to a combination MST/Brazilian flag, are two arms holding an open book, which is like the sun behind it, radiating knowledge. Below the tent we see that it is supported by a pencil which is anchored to the ground by a fence post, and the barbed-wire is cut away. The pieces of wire that remain have been used to secure the "tent of learning". Under the tent of learning is an open air classroom, a number of black plastic tents, as well as children and teachers.

The large hand bearing a cornucopia of harvest associates the material successes of the MST with the intellectual potential of education. The hand and arms along the top of the tent represent all of Brazil's ethnic groups. The arms holding the book are made up of masses of people marching, which is an indication of the process by which the learning under the tent was (or is being) made possible.

The little boy on the left who gazes at the school children seems to be dreaming of the road ahead, as featured above him. Both the sun

Figure 1. The Brazilian Flag.

Figure 2. Anonymous, *Representation of Peasants Confronting a Barbed-Wire Fence*. Painting photographed by Malcolm McNee. The highlight in the lower centre section is glare from a camera flash. Reproduced by permission from the University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-05.phtml?rd=OFPEASAN501&ng=e&sc=1&th=7&se=0 (accessed December 14, 2006).

Figure 3. De Afonso, *Peasant Tools Foregrounding Congress.* Painting photographed by Malcolm McNee. Brasilia, Brazil, MST-Brasilia Offices. Reproduced by permission from the University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-05.phtml?rd =PEASANTT516&ng=e&sc=1&th=7&se=0 (accessed December 14, 2006).

Figure 4. Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, *Monument in Tribute to the Landless Rural Workers,* 1990. Photograph. Encruzilhada Natalino, Brazil. Reproduced by permission from the University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-12.phtml?rd=MONUMENT011&ng=e&sc=5&th=54&sf=monument&se=0&st=1 (accessed December 14, 2006).

Figure 5. Logo of the MST.

Figure 6. Elda Brolio, *Panel Celebrating Education in the MST*. Painting. Reproduced by permission from the University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, http:// www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/ archive-12.phtml?rd=PANELCEL387&ng=e&sc=5&th=54&sf=school&se=3&st=1 (accessed December 14, 2006).

Figure 7. Elda Brolio, *Agrarian Reform, Everyone's Struggle*. Mural. Reproduced by permission from the University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, http:// www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-05.phtml?rd =REFORMAA510&ng=e&sc=1&th=6&se=0 (accessed December 14, 2006).

on the horizon and the top of the tent indicate the broad horizon of possibilities that are afforded the sem terra through land and education. Utopia is represented in the horizon because it is always ahead of a person, never reached, and always containing the possibility of being otherwise. With a political consciousness attained through literacy, the sem terra can dream, seek, and make their future.

According to Paulo Freire, the sem terra, in seeking their own humanization, are in turn allowing the humanization of all Brazilian society. By no longer tolerating oppression, the sem terra are liberating themselves and their oppressors from the reciprocal effects of dehumanization.[68] The struggle for agrarian reform is thus an effort to transform the whole country. Land is only the first step towards agrarian reform; the challenge, after land is obtained and a settlement established, is to make peasant agriculture viable. Social hierarchies, a diminishing sense of community, and adjustments to their new way of life present to settlements the biggest challenge of the movement.[69] In light of this, the MST's Third National Congress in 1995 emphasized the inclusion of everyone in efforts for land reform. In commemoration of this event, *Agrarian Reform, Everyone's Struggle* depicts agrarian reform in the context of all of Brazilian society (see Figure 7).

The mural shows rural land dotted with houses on the left and an urban area on the right. The people from both sides have come together under the flag of the MST to support the goal of agrarian reform. Beside the MST flag a pregnant woman stands next to sprouting seeds, reminding viewers of the natural development process and the future that agrarian reform enables.

The largest seed in this mural is beginning to break ground. There are three smaller seeds to the left that show incipient signs of growth. Seeing the seed germinating reminds farmers looking forward to the harvest of the fertile waiting time during which invisible growth takes place.[70] This implicit knowledge of the farmer, related to agrarian reform, is a call to sustained belief in the struggle. The organic images speak to the natural development of things. In other paintings, similar organic images are contrasted with toxic chemicals. The MST promotes the use of organic farming methods and prohibits the use of transengenic seeds. The organic nature of the produce in *Agrarian Reform, Everyone's Struggle* evokes the natural order of things, and concurrently reminds people of the harms in hastening the developmental process or creating artificial remedies.

Despite the different subjects of these two utopian paintings, they both depict mass mobilization for the betterment of society. The paintings are teeming with life; there are people, produce and a variety of activities occurring simultaneously. Solidarity is important because of the mass mobilization required for land occupation. Indeed, only one of the paintings considered here lacks images of people in solidarity. Community solidarity is created by a common need for land and overflows into other activities such as education and agrarian reform. Furthermore, the utopia depicted in these works demonstrates no sign of individual ownership. There are individual tents and houses but no fences divide them and they are all uniform, without individual distinctiveness. There is a sense of collective improvement to which no one family or individual may lay claim, because the challenges and the benefits have been distributed evenly amongst the whole.

What do these Images Suggest about the MST's Understanding of Land?

These images are a part of the MST mística. Understood as a "liturgy of images," they make up the cultural rites and public worship of the MST. They are premised on a Marxist reading of Christian values, which promote a social gospel of equality and justice.[71] The sem terra have incorporated Biblical stories of oppression and God's promises into their collective folklore. Particularly evocative is the story of Exodus, in which God's people leave Egypt, a place of slavery and oppression, for a land "flowing with milk and honey." Concepts of social justice in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount[72] also have been integrated and made relevant to the sem terra. Through the liberation theology of the Pastoral Land Commission, Brazil's landholding system is understood to be the source of injustices experienced by the peasantry, and the rightful focus of the struggle for justice.[73]

Biblical connotations underpin the moral position of the MST and its conception of the land. The idea of the individual being transformed through the struggle is likened to being "reborn" in Christ. The resulting "new man and new woman" are constituted through the liberation of the land, which equally liberates the body. Moreover, MST ideas of ownership are couched in religious terms; one sem terra said, "God didn't sell the land to anyone, he left it for us."[74] In this way, land is understood as a means to life that God provides equally to everyone.

The understanding of land as a gift from God relies heavily on Lockean notions of property inspired by Biblical texts. This is clear in the MST's proposition that "the land belongs to those that work it." This claim focuses on the morality of land ownership and the ways in which Brazil's economic and political structure has disinherited the sem terra from the fruits of their labour. It also highlights the social function of property, which the 1988 Constitution lists in Article Five as one of the fundamental rights and guarantees. According to Locke, one who mixes one's labour with nature may enjoy "as much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils."[75] The unused portion is wasted unless it is used by others. Thus the social function of property is contingent on the common good of property's uses.

For the MST, the land belongs to those who work it not only because it contains their labour, but because they need it and can make use of it—or, constitutionally speaking, they can make it productive. This is demonstrated in the empty and dry landscapes of *Peasant Tools Foregrounding Congress* and *Panel Celebrating Education in the MST*, which become the place of learning in the former and a cornucopia of production in the latter. The value the MST places on land is derived from its use. Land is a place of community, where social relations and traditions may thrive through events such as the weekend soccer game.[76] This communal solidarity enables large work parties to assemble to build a school house or repair a neighbour's barn. Land is also valuable for its ability to provide the sem terra with food sovereignty. The social function of land is therefore found in both the physical and social reproduction.

Locke's focus on property use extends from the state of nature into the sphere of a social contract. Under a social contract, property can be accumulated by exchanging it for money. Although unequal and unlimited accumulation is permitted, the entrenched rights of the individual in the social contract mean that they do not infringe on the liberties of other people.[77] By not recognizing Brazil's land distribution as legitimate, and concentrating on land's use value, the MST is explicitly rejecting the Brazilian social contract. The MST demonstrates the sem terra's exclusion from the contract by occupying land and conducting themselves as though they are in a pre-contract state of nature. Yet through this apparent rebellion they are also voicing their desire to redraw and enter the Brazilian social contract. Land occupation demonstrates the sem terra's aspiration to become a part of the social contract by proposing alternative patterns of land ownership, or terms to which

they could agree. It offers the possibility of an increased standard of living as a result of the economic growth and more robust local economy.

More than a cultural and productive space, land acquisition for the sem terra means "citizenship, and the dignity to be able to produce. Land is life."[78] *Panel Celebrating Education in the MST* expresses this potential citizenship through the combination Brazilian-MST flag. The granting of citizenship is a process of inclusion whereby everyone is afforded the things they need to participate in society. Unrestricted by the barbed-wire fence, the people in this painting emanate a sense of freedom because they have been enabled to do what they must. Freedom from hunger and manipulation facilitates their ability to be willing parties in the social contract.[79] Land encompasses the struggle to be included in the socio-political sphere and therefore contains the *possibility of being* differently. The connection in many of the paintings between the corporeal and the telluric symbolizes this transformation first in the material, and then in the social realm.

The MST's Culture of Property

Overarching Christian and Lockean ideas about property provide the moral foundation for the sem terra as workers to make a claim to land; however, it is the Marxist idea of collective mobilization of the dispossessed that allows these ideas to be practiced. Mobilization, grounded in the sem terra concept, asserts an affirmative mass identity that defines the settlement community and membership in the MST. The sem terra are people who translate their experience of exclusion into a self-constituting act of occupation, which becomes part of their own sense of identity. This is evident in the words of Pacote and Anir Palotnik (sem terra participants in an encampment): "[the camp] was something really tremendous, it made us who we are … everyone worked together, everyone shared … and talked constantly of our hopes for the future."[80] The sem terra identity embodies norms and values of the ideal settler; they are a peasant transformed into the "new man and new woman."

The ideal settler identity defines and enforces appropriate behaviour in a community.This settler avoids social vices such as individualism, spontaneity, immobility, personalism, anarchy, complacency, sectarianism, radicalism, impatience, adventurism and self-sufficiency.[81] These qualities confer a significant amount of deference to the community which becomes important on state-led agrarian reform as settlement contracts confer communal responsibility on the functioning of the

whole settlement. According to the contract, settlers can be removed from the land if they "become disruptive elements [that negatively affect] the development of the workers in the project area due either to poor conduct or inability to adapt to community life."[82] In 1997, two members suspected of espionage were expelled.[83] Sufficient agreement amongst settlers can result in an individual's expulsion, which ties the ownership and use of land directly to the individual's ability to conform to social norms as agreed upon by the MST community. While the settlement contract names the state as the chief overseer of the settlements and their activities, this relationship is both made possible by and continuously mediated by the MST. Therefore the rights and obligations of the sem terra are defined in accordance with their relationship to the community as well as the state. Both the contract and the community are authorities that ensure that all members adhere to accepted rules.

The settlement contract provides the means by which the sem terra can enter into a relationship with the state and negotiate the terms of their inclusion. Access to land also satisfies the immediate need of settlers by providing means to food security. The settlement contract creates semi-communal private property, thereby limiting the possible ways in which the settlers may choose to organize production. Overall, production is organized by the state through the institutions enforced by the state. Although collective farming or collective tasks such as marketing are undertaken as cooperative activities in the MST, these activities take place in a relationship of obedience. The settlement contract creates relationships of power that favour the state, and positions the MST as an intermediary that holds the relationship together.

The art of the MST creates the narratives and symbols that lend meaning to the experiences of the sem terra.[84] The works do not depict the signing of a contract with the state, but rather they imagine what it could mean to be incorporated into Brazilian society. Citizenship, in these works, is associated with being part of a community which has access to land enabling the material and cultural production of the community. The fact that the individual is subject to the will of the community is not considered problematic in these works because community has been integrated into the concept of inclusion and the identity of the individual as a citizen.

The re-creation of private property accomplished through the settlement contract is equally unproblematic because it does so by accepting an alternative meaning of land that requires the modification of the inequitable distribution of land. Moreover, the contract reaffirms core

values of the MST such as, most importantly, the political force of land occupation and the importance of land's uses. The settlement contract, in conjunction with the meaning of citizenship conveyed through MST art, negotiates the terms of a new social contract and a place of inclusion for the sem terra. In the conflict and negotiation of the terms of this agreement, art, by symbolizing the meaning of land differently, acts as a "rhetorical bullet in an ideological war."[85]

IV. Brazil's Culture(s) of Property: An Analysis

The MST assaults the sensibilities of the historic culture of property by interfering with the exclusivity of land and disturbing the social hierarchy. Its land occupations and land claims are embedded in ideas of access to land through divine gift, hard work and necessity.[86] But Brazil's elite, operating in a historic culture of property, advocate market-led agrarian reform (MLAR) to put an end to the land occupations and alleviate pressure for state-led agrarian reform. This alternative to land occupation attempts to maintain the ideas and values of a historic culture of property. After a brief discussion on MLAR, in this section I will consider the two cultures of property and assess the MST's potential for revolutionizing the Brazilian landholding system and transforming society.

What is the State and/or Elite Response to the MST's Method of Agrarian Reform?

Rural landowners in Brazil have articulated a moral objection to the MST's activities. Estate owners consider the tactics of the MST to be land *invasion*, not occupation. They base their claims to land in "historical notions of rightful access through hard work, individualism, competitiveness and 'playing by the rules' (of the market)."[87]

In response to the aggressive tactics of the MST, in 1997 the Cardoso government instituted MLAR through the *Cedula da Terra* (Land Title), with the financial help of the World Bank. This pilot project became the *O Banco da Terra* (Land Bank) in 1998 and with its expansion it became the official program of agrarian reform for both national and state governments. MLAR provides rural farmers with a loan which allows them to buy land and establish a small family farm. The land loan is granted on the condition of an approved farm plan and the farmer's membership in an association. Membership in an association (or "benefi-

ciary organization") is intended to help small farmers achieve economies of scale and monitor the progress of their peers.[88] MLAR is purported to create the conditions for more productive farms due to the loan's base in an economic plan, making the farmers that undertake the loan more likely to succeed and become self-reliant.

MLAR is admired by landowners, as it makes the land reform process voluntary, and acclaimed by governments for its anticipated low cost of reform. However, there is more at stake in MLAR than simply a better policy. MLAR promotes Brazil's historic culture of property, "a worldview that labels [the sem terra's] poverty an indication of slothfulness and interprets their request for assistance as a sign of weakness."[89] It does this by maintaining the social hierarchy, promoting orderly progress and rearticulating the separation of politics and economics. The hierarchal values of the elite are upheld by selecting privileged members of the poor for the program. People take part in the Land Bank through knowledge of the program and are chosen if they are the "fittest" candidates for a loan. As such, participants often are poor elites with connections to politicians or landowners.[90] Because those that are chosen are elites selected on the basis of a plan, their farms are expected to be more productive and require less state assistance over the long term. MLAR institutes progressive ideas of agrarian reform while maintaining peace, law and order by matching willing sellers with willing buyers. Since the land transaction takes place in the privacy of the economic sphere, the potential for confrontation or a politicization of the process is eliminated. Through these practices, MLAR promotes market mechanisms as the only correct way to obtain property. The market-led approach also preserves the legitimacy of those who own property by not coercing them into selling. Boras has found that in Brazil large estate owners frequently choose not to sell their land through this method.[91] MLAR is admired by landowners not only because of its apparently improved policy, but also because it is consistent with the historic culture of property.

Although MLAR does achieve land redistribution, it does not resolve the contradictions between exclusive ownership and the social obligation of property. It ignores the historical political forces that enabled large landowners to obtain land and rewards landowners who acquired properties fraudulently, by not allowing their title to be challenged. Moreover, it does nothing to address the contradiction between land ownership and the interests of the rest of society, thus ignoring the use dimension of the property. More importantly, these contradictions are not resolved through land acquisition but only through widespread

transformation. It is this disconnection between the needs of society and the political and economic system that incited the formation of the MST and has caused its popular proliferation. Only the MST is attempting to overcome these contradictions.

Is the MST a Revolutionary Force in Brazil?

The MST has received mixed reviews from academics for its contribution to various discourses. To those that view it as a progressive movement, the MST represents the potential for sweeping changes, but for those that view its ideology as regressive and its tactics as disruptive, the movement is regressive.[92] Both academics and Brazilians are conflicted over the propositions of the MST. This confusion may be in large part due to the underlying ambiguity in the term revolution: to some it entails the seizure of political institutions, to others it is a restructuring of property arrangements. This paper has demonstrated that the MST does neither of these things to the extent that they may be understood as a radical departure from other political and economic institutions or social groups. Nonetheless, the question of whether or not the MST constitutes a revolutionary force in Brazil asks whether or not their actions and ideas will have a long term impact and if they have the potential to cause substantial and meaningful change.

Rural farmers are unlikely revolutionaries. Conservative ideals of land, work, family, religion, and community are deep-seated in the rural agricultural production of Brazil, as evidenced in the works of art examined. By definition, conservatives endeavour to maintain the status quo, reducing the potential for a substantial break with the past. Sem terra experiences in the family, community, and on the farm influence how they function when they have their own land. Specialization in a particular mass-produced crop such as sugar cane may influence production decisions despite its market value or the environmental consequences. In the same way, knowledge of pesticides and machinery uses in agricultural production may inform how they choose to farm, despite the extensive investment costs. The largest challenge after land acquisition is making peasant agriculture viable; many times the experiences of the farmers hinder this endeavour.

It is the "experience of the plantation [which] shapes [the peasant's] perception of the land as an independent space where they will be allowed to live as they please."[93] Through the settlement contract, this space is one principally of private property—a definition which carries

the baggage of a capitalist economic system. Despite the MST's socialist goals, it undeniably enables the re-creation of private property and the means of accumulation. The experience of private property and the associated exclusive ownership make the sem terra unlikely supporters of significant changes to the property regime, as many have already received land. Despite the movement's goals, this experience will continue to influence the potential for agrarian reform to go beyond capitalism.

Land as a conduit for relations with the national community has emerged throughout this paper as an integral part of the meaning of land for rural Brazilians. This is expressed in the works of art and the testimony of MST members. This connection is supported by the experience of Luis Coirlio, World Bank Manager for the Land Bank, who comments on the program's results:

> What has moved me the most … is the farmer's new sense of self-worth. "Now I am a real human being," the people tell me. "Before, the bank manager would see right through me. Now he receives me as a respected client. I am part of the society."[94]

The MST's efforts to obtain land for the sem terra enable their citizenship, but the experience is not exclusive. Rather, it is directly associated with the peasant's connection with the land, irrespective of how it was obtained. If the substantive contribution of the MST may be reduced to the tangible benefits it produces, such as land obtained, social inclusion, or incorporation into the social contract, then it is doubtful that their contribution may be considered revolutionary.

Even so, the conflict over land in Brazil is as much about the meaning of land as it is a claim to land. Through land occupation, the MST is making the meaning of land a contested concept in Brazilian society. They are constructing normative ideas about what land should mean and implementing those ideas through the force of their actions. Because ideas about the meaning of land are matched with an alternative material reality, land becomes a touchstone for the changing relations amongst Brazilian people. The substantial and revolutionary change that the MST proposes is in the articulation of an alternative definition of land.

Although the occupation techniques of the movement may be considered radical, they are merely a means to stimulate conversation about the connection between land use and land ownership.[95] The sem terra begin the discussion by determining the time and place, and creating both the political and material space for their conception of land.

This conversation ends in either military force, whereby the sem terra encampment is removed, or by negotiating a settlement contract with the government. If the conversation is not immediately suppressed by force, the very engagement in conversation implicitly denies the values of the historic culture of property by legitimizing the act of mass mobilization and engaging in a discussion that meets the terms of the MST.

Land occupation also frames the debate about land by creating the conditions of possibility for alternative conceptions of property. In challenging the Brazilian legal structure of property rights, the sem terra transgress the illusionary separation of politics and the economy and denaturalize the historic conditions that enabled property owners to obtain the land.[96] This debate is particularly evident in the Brazilian legal system, which in diverse ways supports both the MST's definition of land and traditional ideas of private property. This may be in part due to the constitution being regarded as a political document rather than law, but the actions of the MST do contribute to the realization of the progressive elements of the constitution.[97] The relatively new nature of this constitution means that the establishment of jurisprudence around conflicting meanings of land will shape future legal understandings. The MST's successful promotion of a holistic (not exclusive) meaning of land may do more than just inform contemporary legal decisions regarding property, as the precedents will be incorporated into the legal definition of Brazilian property. In this way, land occupation promotes normative ideas about what land *should* mean through revealing the imagined realities that construct what the land *does* mean.

Another important revolutionary aspect of land occupation is its contestation not of *who* owns the land but *what* happens on the land. This discussion focuses principally on land's uses and how they affect society as a whole. As we have seen through the art and culture of the MST, the economic benefits of land are secondary to the uses it affords people. The MST conceives of property not purely as a commodity but as land, a threefold noun: first it is a people, because land assists in defining one's identity, history, and associations; second, land is a place or space in which one can interact; and finally, land is the top layer of the earth from which things grow.In this definition the economic potential of land is subordinated to social, subsistence, and cultural uses. For the MST, land's uses are subsumed in the idea that land must have a social function. The MST therefore upholds the idea of (often private) property; however, the basis for this claim is the use value of the land rather than the market exchange value.

All property systems define the property holder with respect to something of value, which represents a consensus between people as to how assets should be held, used, and exchanged.[98] The social function of land is in direct confrontation with liberal economic understanding, whereby "property … is a mediating device that captures and stores … the stuff required to make the market economy run."[99] Land occupation is a blatant statement of disagreement with existing property relations, and contains an alternative approach to understanding property. Property is a concept of land which comes to be understood as land's meaning, through a social definition of the material reality; focusing on the economic meaning of land ignores the inherent social meanings. The proposition and enactment of different definitions of land are revolutionary, as they possess the potential to incite substantial and meaningful change.

Successfully asserting a definition of land serves to legitimize one definition over another. Over the past few years the social function of property has been advanced legally, yet at the same time it has been prohibited through the government's policy of MLAR. In order for the MST's alternative conception of land to become more widely accepted it needs to make lasting claims to legitimacy in a number of political and economic areas. In doing this, art plays an important role in (re)defining and conveying possibilities. Art speaks from a lexicon of images which are successful insofar as they may represent and re-imagine political possibilities. Art need not be translated, except through the shared experiences of people, and it need not be sanctioned by powerful organizations. The images of the MST examined here provide significant insight into the revolutionary nature of an organization that defies conventional understandings of revolution. The MST is able to do so by uniting the cultural and material realities and projecting them into the mind at a glance.

The social legitimacy of images like those discussed here will play an important role in determining whether or not Brazil will resolve the contradiction between exclusive ownership and the social obligation of property. There are many policy options for agrarian reform and land redistribution; however, if reform is undertaken with the assumptions of the historic culture of property, the reform will be superficial. By decisively breaking from this culture of property, an alternative definition of land, through its use value, offers the possibility for resolving this contradiction, and the MST is the most prominent organization proposing such a revolutionary alternative.

The contradiction between exclusive ownership and the social obligation of property begins to be resolved in the self-constituting identity of the sem terra. By constituting themselves as modern individuals and (re)negotiating a social contract with the state, the sem terra increasingly legitimize the social function of property. The inclusive space that is created incorporates them into national society, in addition to providing a conduit through which they are able to access and interact in local, national, and global society. They are creating a social space in which they may become educated, fully engaged members of society, and thus enabled to pressure the government to provide them with the same level of social services that other citizens receive. No longer shackled by ignorance, the sem terra are creating a new understanding of the Brazilian citizen through the struggle for land. Land must also be understood as a touchstone for the changing relations amongst people. Land represents the latent possibilities of space; redefining this space has the potential to cause substantial and meaningful change in Brazil.

Notes

[1] Brazil's Gini coefficient is greater than 0.6, where 1 is perfect inequality and 0 is perfect equality. This is comparable to South Africa, Columbia, Chile, and Paraguay. Statistical descriptions of Brazil's inequality may be quoted ad nauseam; this one originates in the US State Department Country Reports, 1999 and the FAO State of Food and Agriculture 2001 Report.

[2] Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil* (Oakland, CA: Food First, 2003), 75. For a good general understanding of the MST I rely heavily on *To Inherit the Earth*; and Sue Branford and Jan Rocha, *Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2002).

[3] My concept of a "culture of property" is derived from Claire A. Cutler, "Historical Materialism, Globalization and Law: Competing Conceptions of Property," in *Historical Materialism and Globalization*, eds. Mark Rupert and Hazel Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 231-256; and Elinor Ostrom and Edella Schlager, "The Formation of Property Rights," in *Rights to Nature: Ecological, Economic, Cultural and Political Principles of Institutions for the Environment*, eds. Susan Hanna, Carl Folke, and Karl-Goran Maler (Washington: Island Press, 1996), 127-156.

[4] Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 113.

[5] Ernest Feder, *The Rape of the Peasantry: Latin America's Landholding System* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

[6] José de Souza Martins, "Representing the Peasantry? Struggles for/about Land in Brazil," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 29, nos. 3&4 (2002): 304.
[7] Portuguese settlers quickly discovered that the local indigenous population was not a suitable source of labour. They were unaccustomed to the labour force and the types of work involved in the production of primary export commodities such as sugar and coffee.
[8] Martins, "Representing the Peasantry?" 302.
[9] Ibid., 306.
[10] Daniel Bromley, *Environment and Economy: Property Rights and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 24.
[11] José de Souza Martins, "Representing the Peasantry?" 303.
[12] Public political officials are notoriously corrupt. For examples of public and private force, see Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 138; and Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 109. For examples of the attitudes of the law community, see George Meszaros, "Taking the Land into Their Hands: The Landless Workers' Movement and the Brazilian State," *Journal of Law and Society* 27, no. 4 (2000): 517-541.
[13] The most striking example of the elite's protection of established private property is in the military coup of 1964, which was precipitated by rural social upheaval and calls for land redistribution; the Brazilian legislature proposed over forty-five major bills on land reform and twelve major agrarian reform bills between 1947 and 1962, according to Nancy Diane Lapp, *Landing Votes: Representation and Land Reform in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 130.
[14] Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 7.
[15] José de Souza Martins, quoted in Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 115, says: "School was a right denied to the *sem-terra*, because of their very condition as rural workers."
[16] The historic culture of property was maintained by a repressive military dictatorship through the 1960s and 1970s. It began to relax in 1974 but power was not completely devolved until the mid-1980s when a constitution and elections were instated.
[17] José de Souza Martins, quoted in Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 275.
[18] Maurilio Galdino, "The Return of Radicalism to the Countryside: The Landless Movement," *Collective Action and Radicalism in Brazil: Women, Urban Housing, and Rural Movements* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2005), 133. Excess labour from rural areas found employment in urban centres until the economic crisis of the 1970s, when the conflict for land re-emerged as people could no longer rely on migration; instead they had to stay in the countryside to make a living. The creation of hydroelectric dams has displaced small farmers without providing them with suitable alternatives. Martins, "Representing the Peasantry?" 317. In southern Brazil, degradation of the soil due to sharecropper arrangements that

require maximum use of the land (and, by association, pesticides) have also contributed to the cycle of landlessness amongst rural farmers. In the South, small family landholders of German and Italian descent found it difficult to find land for their children, and undertook the practice of ultimogeniture, whereby the youngest child inherits the family property.

[19] On small farms, debt caused by the loss of crops, lower than expected returns, or migration caused families to lose their land. In other areas peasants lost their land due to the effects of land use.

[20] For example, under the *colonato* system the farm family would weed in between the coffee plants. With the advent of chemical pesticides this labour was no longer necessary (see Martins, "Representing the Peasantry?" 305, 313-314 for discussion of labour on coffee plantations.

[21] João Pedro Stedile, "Landless Battalions: The Sem Terra Movement of Brazil," *New Left Review* 15 (2002): 77-104.

[22] Luca Fanelli and Sarah Sarzynski, "The Concept of Sem Terra and the Peasantry in Brazil," in *Globalization and Development in Latin America*, ed. Richard L. Harris (Whitby, ON: de Sitter, 2005), 242. The *sem terra* previously had no collective identity in Brazilian society. Fanelli and Sarzynski note, "*Sem terra* has been used to overcome the contradictions between the small landowners (or peasants) and the rural (wage) workers."

[23] Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 52.

[24] Susan Branford and Oriel Glock, *The Last Frontier: Fighting over Land in the Amazon* (London: Zed Books, 1985). The MST is active in twenty-three out of the twenty-seven states in Brazil—all except Amazonas, Acre, Roraima and Amapá. Although there is a struggle for land in the Amazon (particularly by the indigenous people), the politics of land originate from the military dictatorship's efforts to exert geopolitical control over the region. This essay will generally not consider agrarian land questions in the Amazon region, as the MST is not active there.

[25] A term used in Portuguese-speaking areas to describe people of European and indigenous ancestry, also known as *creole*.

[26] Stedile, "Landless Battalions," 89. Brazilian farmers are generally neither black nor indigenous and therefore these groups are not widely represented in the MST. The indigenous peoples were traditionally hunters, not farmers. The black slave populations were excluded from owning land after the abolition of slavery by the 1850 Land Law, as it removed the rights of squatters. As a result, few became farmers.

[27] See, for instance, Stedile, "Landless Battalions," 90; and James Petras, "Peasant Movements: The Political and Social Basis of Regional Variation in Land Occupations in Brazil," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 130.

[28] Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, "MST: Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra," Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem

Terra, http://www.mst.org.br/historico/objetivos.html (accessed February 2006; site now discontinued). Translated by WorldLingo online translator (http://www.worldlingo.com).
[29] Ibid.
[30] Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 87.
[31] Ibid., 82.
[32] Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth*, 325. An elected executive committee represents the MST in external relations and establishes priorities. There are leadership arrangements nationally, and in every settlement, region (macro and micro), and state. There are also committees that deal with specific priorities of the organization: education, communication, administration, international relations, human rights, students, voluntary work and women. This structure requires huge communication efforts for the dissemination of information and feedback between and across the organization. Once a year every level of the MST holds nation-wide meetings for its members, called National Congresses, in order to understand what members are thinking and to plan activities for the coming year.
[33] Ibid., 65. Brazilian unions and political parties of the past are known for their hierarchal structure. They were used to dispense political power and control social unrest by speaking on behalf of the people.
[34] Lapp, *Landing Votes*.
[35] Wendy Wolford, "Agrarian Moral Economies and Neoliberalism in Brazil: Competing Worldviews and the State in the Struggle for Land," *Environment and Planning* 37 (2005): 244.
[36] Peter P. Houtzager, "Social Function of Property, Movement of the Landless (MST), and the Judicial Field in Brazil" (presentation, Institute of Development Studies workshop, Brighton, UK, October 16-18, 2003). http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/law/pdfs/socialfunction.pdf (accessed December 14, 2006).
[37] The constitutional contradictions are due to the clash of progressive and conservative forces in the Assembly during the writing of the 1988 Constitution. For more information on the conflicting groups involved in writing the constitution, see Lapp, *Landing Votes*; for more information on the contradictions in the document, see Meszaros, "Taking the Land into Their Hands".
[38] Settlers are expected to begin paying for the land in ten years.
[39] Wendy Wolford, "Producing Community: The MST and Land Reform Settlements in Brazil," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3, no. 4 (2003): 514.
[40] Examples of violence include the 1995 murder of three adults and one child in Rondônia and the 1996 massacre of nineteen people participating in a highway blockade in Pará. Evidence of criminalization is found in the state treatment of MST leader José Rainha Jr., who faced twenty-five accusations of forming a

criminal organization in the state of Sao Palo and was sentenced to twenty-six years and six months in prison.
[41] Meszaros, "Taking the Land into Their Hands," 534.
[42] Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 118.
[43] Miguel Carter, "Conference Report: The Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) and Agrarian Reform in Brazil" (report, University of Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies conference, Oxford, UK, October 17, 2003).http://www.brazil.ox.ac.uk/confreports/Conf%20Report%20-%20MST%2017.10.03.pdf (accessed December 14, 2006).
[44] Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 63.
[45] Ibid., 64.
[46] Martins, quoted in Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2004), 2. See chapter two for a discussion of the difficulty in defining propaganda.
[47] Else R.P. Vieira, "The Sights and Voices of Dispossession: The Fight for the Land and the Emerging Culture of the MST (The Movement of the Landless Rural Workers of Brazil)" (project, University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, Nottingham, UK, January 16, 2003. http://www.landless-voices.org/vieira (accessed December 14, 2006). "*Landless Voices* hosts a series of multi-disciplinary and multi-region research projects into the cultural expressions emerging from landlessness—the experience of the mass movement and re-settlement of peoples. Else R.P. Vieira's archive on landlessness in Brazil opens the series."
[48] I will not consider the individual artists or the environment in which the works were created, largely due to a lack of available information.
[49] Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 51. Wright and Wolford describe how different regions have adapted their cultural traditions to the *mística* according to the African, European or indigenous roots of the inhabitants.
[50] Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, "Pequeno Vocabulário da Luta pela Terra," University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-13.phtml?rd=M%CDSTICA[055&ng=e&sc=3&th=46&se=4 (accessed December 14, 2006).
[51] Plínio Arruda Sampaio, "The Mística of the MST," trans. Plínio Arruda Sampaio, ed. Else R.P. Vieira, University of Nottingham School of Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-05.phtml?rd=MSTICAOF657&ng=e&sc=3&th=42&se=0 (accessed December 14, 2006).
[52] Many of the symbols are related to the Catholic Church. After the Vatican II Council the Church began to incorporate liberation theology into their Biblical

interpretations. This theology incorporates Marxist methodologies for assessing reality and the development of a religious practice applicable to social realities.
[53] Nicholas Gabriel Arons, *Waiting for Rain: The Politics and Poetry of Drought in Northeast Brazil* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2004), 3.
[54] Edelman, *From Art to Politics,* 12.
[55] Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 258.
[56] Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1992), 3.
[57] Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 179.
[58] Ademar Bogo, "The Culture of the Sem Terra," trans. Thomas Burns, ed. Else R.P. Vieira, University of Nottingham Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-05.phtml?rd=CULTUREO381&ng=e&sc=1&th=14&se=0 (accessed December 14, 2006).
[59] Ibid.
[60] Encruzilhada Natalino is at the crossroads of Ronda Alta and Passo Fundo in southern Brazil. People that had been displaced from Indian land occupied unproductive farm land at this crossroad after a planned expropriation and redistribution failed to take place. The military dictatorship responded vehemently, attempting to intimidate and discourage families in their struggle for land.
[61] *Calendário Histórico dos Trabalhadores* (São Paulo, Brazil: MST, Setor de Educação, 1999), 20, quoted in "The Flag of the MST," trans. Thomas Burns, University of Nottingham Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-13.phtml?rd=FLAGOFTH032&ng=e&sc=3&th=46&se=2 (accessed December 14, 2006).
[62] In an attempt to integrate more women into leadership roles, the MST formed a gender committee in 1998. Images of gender equality are therefore not representations of reality, but they speak to the potential and desire for real gender equality. In reconstituting women as equals, these images speak to the potential for peasants to be reconstituted as equal citizens in Brazilian society.
[63] Ana Maria Araújo Freire, notes to *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Friere, trans. Robert R. Baar (New York: Continuum, 2004), 1-3.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Baar, notes Ana Maria Araújo Freire (New York: Continuum, 2004), 77.
[66] Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 109.
[67] Ibid., 117. This perspective on literacy is inspired by the work of Paulo Freire.
[68] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope,* 84-85.

[69] Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 104; and Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 153.
[70] Ênio Bönhenberger, "The Importance of Art for the MST," trans. Thomas L. Burns, eds. Catherine McGuirk and Else R.P. Vieira, University of Nottingham Modern Languages, http://www.landlessvoices.org/vieira/archive-05.phtml?rd=IMPORTAN260&ng=e&sc=1&th=14&se=0 (accessed December 14, 2006).
[71] Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire,* 240. These values stem from the Pastoral Land Commission and six prominent founding members of the MST who were trained for the Catholic priesthood.
[72] Matthew 5.
[73] Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 9. For a more robust discussion of Biblical ideas of justice in relation to property, see Ulrich Duchrow and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Property for People, Not Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital* (London: Zed, 2004), 5-28.
[74] Wolford, "Agrarian Moral Economies and Neoliberalism in Brazil," 255.
[75] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2003), 290. Locke's spoilage limit may be evaded through trade (46), but the social function of property is necessary for Lockean government created by and for free and equal individuals. Locke's concept of charity in the first treatise, and the law of nature in the second treatise support this as well.
[76] Wolford, "Agrarian Moral Economies and Neoliberalism in Brazil," 255.
[77] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government,* 292.
[78] Wendy Wolford, "Families, Fields, and Fighting for Land: The Spatial Dynamics of Contention in Rural Brazil," *Mobilization: An International Journal* 8, no. 2 (2003): 206.
[79] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government,* 284. Locke says, "For a man, not having the power of his own Life, cannot, by Compact or by his own Consent, enslave himself to anyone, nor to put himself under the Absolute Arbitrary Power of another, to take away his Life, when he pleases."
[80] Pacote Palotnik and Anir Palotnik, interview by Anugs Wright and Wendy Wolford, quoted in Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil* (Oakland, CA: Food First, 2003), 75.
[81] Wolford, "Producing Community," 508n12.
[82] Ibid., 509.
[83] Ibid., 510.
[84] Edelman, *From Art to Politics,* 7.
[85] Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2004), 27.
[86] Wolford, "Agrarian Moral Economies and Neoliberalism in Brazil," 243.

[87] Ibid.
[88] Saturnino M. Borras Jr., "Questioning Market-Led Agrarian Reform: Experiences from Brazil, Colombia and South Africa," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3, no. 3 (2003): 371.
[89] Wolford, "Agrarian Moral Economies and Neoliberalism in Brazil," 245.
[90] Borras, "Questioning Market-Led Agrarian Reform," 376.
[91] Ibid., 377.
[92] For positive accounts see Monica Dias Martins, "The MST Challenge to Neoliberalism," *Latin American Perspectives* 27, no. 5 (2000): 33-45; Bruce Gilbert, "Worker's Power and Socialism," *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* 1, no. 2 (2006): 73-86; and James Petras and Timothy F. Harding, "Radical Left Response to Global Impoverishment," *Latin American Perspectives* 27, no. 5 (2000): 3-10; for a negative account see J.E. da Veiga, "Poverty Alleviation Through Access to Land: The Experience of the Brazilian Agrarian Reform Process," *Land Reform, Land Settlement and Cooperatives* 2 (2003), http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/j0415t/j0415t07.htm#bm07 (accessed December 14, 2006). Branford and Rocha, *Cutting the Wire*, 254-255 discusses the MST's reform and revolutionary capacity.
[93] Wright and Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth,* 153.
[94] Borras, "Questioning Market-Led Agrarian Reform," 375.
[95] Galdino, "The Return of Radicalism to the Countryside," 135, differentiates between radical techniques and radical ideology.
[96] Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (New York: Verso, 1994), 14, discusses property as the nexus between the nationalistic state and the capitalist economy. As land is implicated in both, the separation of the economy and politics is fictional; land has the potential for revealing this.
[97] Peter P. Houtzager, "The Movement of the Landless (MST), Juridical Field, and Legal Change in Brazil," in *Law and Globalization from Below: Towards a Cosmopolitan Legality*, eds. Boaventura de Sousa Santos and César A. Rodríguez-Garavito (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2005), 236.
[98] Bromley, *Environment and Economy*; and Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
[99] de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital,* 63.