The Social Dynamics of Brazil’s Rural Landless Workers’ Movement: Ten Hypotheses on Successful Leadership

This paper focuses on the social character and dynamics of political leadership in what is widely regarded as the class and social character of the leadership of a movement that others and we regard as the most dynamic social movement in Latin America today-the Rural Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brazil. Discussion of these social dynamics is made with reference to ten hypotheses that provide, in effect, a sociological portrait of this movement’s leadership.

SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF SOCIOPOLITICAL MOVEMENTS in recent years have addressed a number of questions related to the social base of these movements, the issues around which collective action is mobilized, the form of struggles involved, and the context in which these struggles take place.‘ What is generally missing in these studies, however, is an analysis of the role and social dynamics of political leadership, a curious omission given the saliency of this factor in earlier studies and the non- or post-structural “social actor” approach taken by so many social movements analysts today (Calder, 1995; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Estevez and Parkas, 1998).

One possible explanation of this is the emergence of postmodernist sensibility among sociologists and historians in this area.8The effect of

This manuscript was first submitted in January 2001 and accepted in September 2001. For examples or these studies, inter alia. Burgaw (1990); Calder6n (1985); Calder4nand J e l h (1987); Camacho and Media (1989); Eckstein (1989); Latin American Perspectives (1994); Zapata (1987) postmodernism generally has been to turn attention away from structural factors and to eschew a comparative and objective analysis of these move- mints. Indeed this lack of comparative analysis, together with a focus on contextualized and well-described but largely unexplained collective actions of a single movement, is a notable feature of sociological studies in the 1980s and 1990s (Monck, 1997).

Another feature of these studies is an orientation towards a post- structuralism form of discourse analysis and, in this new intellectual con- text, an abandonment of structuralisms, particularly Marxist class theory (Hogarth, Normal and Stavrakakis, 2000; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001a; Veltmeyer, 1997). This essay is written as counter point to this post- structuralism form of analysis and associated postmodernist and post- development theory. In this context it is argued, with reference to the political leadership factor, that the dynamics of sociopolitical movements in Latin America can best be understood in structural terms and on the basis of a reconstituted form of class analysis.

This argument is structured as follows. First, we establish the emergence of what we have termed new peasant sociopolitical movements (Noses). We then explore the dynamics of these movements in terms of a structuralism form of discourse analysis, which we contrast to the more dominant poststructuralist form. We then discuss the class and social character of the leadership of a movement that we and others3regard as the most dynamic social movement in Latin America today, This discussion is made with reference to ten hypotheses that we constructed for the purpose of interpreting our field research data on the leadership of the Brazilian Rural Landless Workers’ Movement and for drawing a sociological portrait of these leaders4With reference to these hypotheses, derived not from any general theory but from prior studies by the authors into diverse social movements and on the basis of field research data, we argue that what is distinctively “new” about the peasant-based movements that dominate the contemporary struggle for social change in Latin America is precisely the class character of their leadership as well as the organic ties of this leadership to the social base of the movements. We draw out various theoretical-and political-implications of this argument in the conclusion. Parana. Clara. And Sob Paul0 State; 2) a survey conducted of this movement’s leadership cadre: 32 regional and national leaders representing every state where the MST operates (conducted at a seminar on May 12-14.2000, in Sago Paulo); and 3) a series of in-depth interviews with Pedro Sterile, the leader of the MST, several regional leaders and activist, and a caucus-of women leaden.

The Social Dynamics of Brazil’s Rural Landless Workers’ Movernent The Emergence of New Sociopolitical Peasant Movements

In the post-Second World War context of a large-scale development project initiated in the late 1 9 4 0 ~and a globalization project initiated in the 1980sunder very different conditions, it is possible to trace three waves of social and political struggles against the capitalist system in Latin America.‘ In the 1950s through 1970s the social and political forces of change were mobilized in three ways: via leftist political parties and the use of the electoral mechanism, a strategy exemplified in the success of Salvador Allende in bringing the working class to state power in Chile; via the unionization of labor and the struggle of the organized working class against capital and the state for higher wages, improved working conditions and greater social benefits; and, in the wake of the Cuban revolution, via a guerrilla form of armed struggle against the state.

Each modality of political struggle helped incorporate elements of the working class and rural producers into the political and economic development process. But none of these anti-systemic struggles and strategies managed to overcome the array of forces ranged against them and the project of social revolution or societal transformation ultimately ended in defeat. In the 198Os, however, in the context of a democratization process, a region wide debt crisis, and the implementation of a new project based on a neoliberal program of policy measures designed to structurally adjust the economies in the region to the requirements of a new world economic order,’ protest against the new economic model of neoliberal capitalism and the project for social transformation was taken up by a second generation and a new form of social and political organization-a popular movement protagonized by the urban poor and a proliferation of non- governmental organizations that manifested a burgeoning “civil society” and the emergence of a social, as opposed to the political, left. But the forces mobilized by these civil society organizations were subsequently- in the 1990s-demobilized under conditions generated by a neoliberal pro- gram of economic and political reform measures implemented by governments in the region.’

6. On this project see, inter alia, McMichael (1996). In the optics of post development (Esteva, 1992; Ember, 1995;Rahnema and Baw tree, 1997;Sachs. 1992) this project is viewed as an imposition of an idea (development), which is “at the centre of an incredibly powerful semantic constellation” (“mod- earn mentality”), able to exert a most powerful force in “guiding thought and behavior” (Estevez, 1992).

6. On the theoretical and practical postulates of these two intellectual and political “projects” and the processes to which they gave rise alia. A periodization and analysis of these waves of struggle to bring about change and implement an emancipatory project in Latin America can be found in Petras (1997).

In the 199Os,the region was hit by a third wave of social and political forces ranged against the system in place. The labor movement was in disarray, its forces and organizational and mobilizing capacity decimated by the forces of a “silent revolution’ wrought by the capitalist class under the agency of the state. The new social movements that had dominated the political landscape in the 1980s suffered a similar fate. With very few exceptions, the forces that they had mobilized were dissipated. But in the same context there surfaced a new wave of rural activism propagandized by a number of peasant-based sociopolitical movements-the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico; an indigenous uprising and social movement led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE) in Ecuador; the Rural Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brazil; and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). These movements, all except the FARC organized in the 1980sand all but the EZLN operating on a national scale, took centre stage in the 1990sand dominated the popular struggle for social ant systemic change.

Currently, these movements constitute the most dynamic forces for social change in the region, as well as opposition to the economic and polity- cal system everywhere in place. However, these movements are still not that well understood, raising more questions than answers and generating a scholarly-and political-debate as to the nature of their social base and the dynamics of struggle involved (Brass, 2000; Bernstein, 2001; Flowerier, 1995;Haber, 1996;Petras, 1997;PetrasandVeltmeyer, 2001a).

The Question of Leadership-Ten Hypotheses

The debate on the nature and dynamics of the new peasant-based socio- political movements in Latin America has generally focused on the social base of the movements and the dynamics of their organization and mob- libation-the general form of their struggles, the particular strategy and tactics involved, and the associated ideology. However, the character and form of leadership seems to be an equally important factor in explaining the relative success of these movements in organizing and mobilizing the forces of resistance and opposition-of social change. For example, the FARC is the only peasant-based guerrilla army that not only survived the forces of counterinsurgency in the 1970sand 1980sbut that has act- ally increased its mobilizing capacity. The one striking difference between the FARC and the other guerrilla armies of national liberation and social change formed in the first two waves of post-Cuba insurrectionary active- tee is the social character and form of its leadership. In terms of their social base and operating ideology these guerrilla armies were very similar, if not identical (see, for example, Wickham-Crowley, 1993); the FARC, however, is the only such movement that was not only peasant-based but, like the Naps, peasant-led.

In the 1980s,the emergence in the region of what was conceived to be “new social movements” whose social base could not be reduced to or

Understood in class terms led to a wide scale abandonment of class analysis and the adoption of poststructuralist forms of discourse analysis (Calder6n and Jilin, 1987; Camacho and Mejia, 1989; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Mallon, 1995;Slater, 1985;Zapata, 1987). In the 199Os,class analysis ver.- tally disappeared from the map of social movements being drawn and redrawn by political sociologists, leading the authors of this paper to Seri- oily reconsider the class origins and character of the leadership of the peasant-based social movements in the region today.

In this context, and with the aim of sparking a return to a recons- toted form of class analysis, the authors chose to conduct a case study of the MST leadership in Brazil. To inform and direct this study, the authors formulated a number of hypotheses, each of which is discussed below in terms of observations made and data collected on the basis of several research visits; conversations on site with, and in-depth interviews of, sea- earl MST leaders and activists; and a formal survey conducted of a cadre of 37 leaders representing every state where the MST is represented. These hypotheses were derived not from any general theory but from an understanding that resulted from fieldwork on a number of peasant-based social movements in the region (see, for example, Petra’s, 1997; Voltmeter, 1997). Given percentages relate to a statistical analysis of the data genre- acted by this survey.

Hypothesis 1: The MST leaders have deep and continuing roots in the countryside and among the constituencies that they are organizing.

One of the most striking characteristics of the MST relative to other Latin American rural movements in the past is the high proportion of leaders with long-standing ties to the rural poor who are the social base of the movement. First, close to two-thirds are sons and daughters of peasants- small producers (37.640.6%) or landless rural workers (18.2-21.9%). Although there are no systematic data or studies for comparable move- mints in earlier waves of peasant movements, most analysts of these movements over the years have commented on the urban middle-class ore- gins of the leadership. In the case of the MST, however, most leaders (79%) originate in families of small farmers, members of producer co-operatives or landless workers.

There is an ongoing academic debate as to how to conceptualize these various categories of “peasants” in the context of an advanced process of capitalist industrialization, social decomposition and class differentiation, but the subjects of this debate generally see and define themselves both as “peasants” and as “landless workers,” creating problems of objective cat- memorization, if not self-definition (Bernstein, 2001; Brass, 2000; Kearney, 1996;Mallon, 19951.’

9. In the context of a p m s of industrial capitalist modernization, a part of the ”peasantry” is convert- end into D class of rural capitalists who most Oren invest their accumulated capital in the purchase of

From our conversations with diverse MST leaders it is clear that they not only tend to have deep roots in the countryside but they maintain and cultivate their rural ties. They return to the countryside whenever possible, usually in the context of mobilizing a land occupation, and work actively to ensure a lack of social distance from the rank and file in the field by identifying with their struggles and way of life. Furthermore, there is little to differentiate these leaders from the rank and file in terms of material conditions, including housing, eating, modes of transport and personal possessions. In this connection, it is well known that leaders who share the same material conditions as their followers are more likely to engage in struggles that relate to their common interests, as opposed to bureaucrats ensconced in hierarchies who tend to be focused on and to defend their own particular privileged position. Although there are no comparable data for other rural social movements in the past, both in South and Central America and in Mexico, there are clear indications that relative to the MST a significant social distance between the leaders and the rank and file characterized these movements. On this see, inter alia, Wickham-Crowley (1991).

Hypothesis 2: The leaders are relatively well educated and committed to continuing education, thus securing the learning and teaching shills to diagnose social realities and develop appropriate strategies.

Successful movements of the popular classes require leaders who are well trained and capable of articulating and formulating grievances, devising appropriate strategies and diagnosing social situations. In many, if not most, situations, social movements have tended to rely on well-educated leaders from the urban middle class or rank and file leaders with little formal education. However, the MST is possessed of a large cadre of grassroots leaders from the popular classes who are relatively well or highly educated. Over half of the MST leaders have some post-secondary education (either technical school or university). In addition, another third (27.9%) have completed or attended high school. Only 12% have never attended school or failed to complete primary school. In addition, the MST invests a large part of its budget in education and has developed ties with a number of universities that provide extension courses for leaders and activists (Caldara, 1997; 2000). Women leaders, who constituted 31% (9/29) of our survey sample," are particularly well educated: twice as many women as

Land, new technology, exports production and transportation. Another part u converted into a claw of intendment, medium-sized proprietor and pedicel and a large part, not Deut 60% ire converted into a rural p r o h r I a t and a portrait of journeyer on, landler or near landau workers, many of whom migrate to and are absorbed into the burrowing ruler and the informal action of Barrel’s cities. On the bash offense d a b, the rural E X ~ U From 1986 to 1996 in estimated to have reached a level of 6.6 million, leaving an intimated 4.6 million land lean worker or peanuts in the countrywide, many of whom am expected to migrate to though cities in the next few yearn (INCRA, 1999; Petra and Voltmeter, 2000).

10. In its second to last Cowpea (in 2000) the MST adopted a resolution to increase the current riper- notation of women in the regional delegations of lenders from a current level of around 4 0 4 to parity with men.

Men have some university education. Thus it is clear that the MST has a cadre of popular leaders with both the formal training and class expert- once to develop successful national organization drives. In this regard they differ significantly from the leaders of an earlier wave of guerrilla move- mints formed in the 1970s,most of whom, particularly those who were well educated, had no organic ties to their rural constituency. With tic exception of Farce’s leader, Maryland (Tirofijo), these leaders, like those of the Central American guerrilla movements of the 1970s and 198Os, were reliant on a much smaller leadership cadre that, with few exceptions, was drawn from the middle strata of the class structure. On this, see Johnson in Dominguez (1994).

Hypothesis 3: The primary loyalties of the leaders of the MST are to that organization. They do not have any conflicting loyalties to other political groups that could lead to ideological divisions and undermine their unity of purpose.

One of the perennial and divisive scourges of popular movements in Latin America is sectarian political conflict. Since many of these movements’ leaders tend to come from political parties whose prime purpose is to use such movements to build their parties, the movements are often canny- baized and immobilized in the process.” In contrast, the MST is a sociopolitical movement that has fraternal relations with other parties, particularly the Workers’ Party (PT), but its leadership insists on retaining the autonomy of the movement and its capacity for independent action (Sterile, 2000). Most leaders joined the movement through participation in MST-organized land occupations and/or through attending meetings and discussions. Having been introduced to the movement through direct contact with its activities rather than “party intermediaries,” their idea- logical formation and practice is essentially a result of social interactions within the movement. This shows up in their political attitudes: large majorities, ranging from 65to look%, are in agreement on the major issues of the day-the negative influence of Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s regime on effective agrarian reform and the negative impact of the policies designed and sponsored by the IMF and the World Bank. This internal consensus allows the Movement to focus on building outside support and to channel available resources in the direction of organizing, and mobilizing, direct action. Again, this is not a conclusion drawn by the authors as much as a point made in as many-or few-words by Pedro Sterile himself and other leaders whom we interviewed. Indeed, it is clearly a matter of inter- nil policy as well as general strategy that conflicting loyalties and other conditions that might undermine a unity of purpose be avoided, if possible and counteracted, if not.

11. This relationship of social movements to political parties is well known and is one of the key issues on the agenda for debate and discussion at the annual Faro de Sol Wool where, for the past 11yenrs. Rep- preventatives of leftist or Marxist political parties and associated social movements have met.

Hypothesis 4: The main source of recruitment is based on practical problem solving that attracts “doers” rather than ideologues.

Most of the political organizations that recruit their members on the basis of ideological polemics at the leadership level tend to create “armchair” revolutionaries given to spinning theories and discovering ideological dif- fervencies-highly ideological “purists” divorced from the language and interests of the people at the social base of the movement (on this see, inter alia, Less, 1991; Wickham-Crowley, 1991).

As for the MST, leaders generally joined the movement through par- titivation in land occupations and public meetings. By their own accounts, their attraction to the movement was based on its history of success in solving practical problems, including their own. In this regard, a majority of leaders (69%)have participated in ten or more land occupations and over two-thirds believe that land occupations are the most effective way to bring about agrarian reform and translate theory into practice. While the MST as an organization is acutely aware of the need for both theory and practice, and to unite the two, its emphasis on continuing political educe- ton needs to be understood in the context of a concern for practical problem solving. As a result, the MST tends to recruit “doers” rather than “idea- loges”-a perception confirmed by the leaders themselves.”

Hypothesis 5: The leaders have accumulated practical experience via con- tinning direct actions that enhance their capacity to organize and carry out successful actions that can, and do, attract new members and supporters.

MST leaders do not engage in successful action to then rest on their laud- reels. They are, as it were, in continuing action. Despite their relative youthfulness (88%are under 40 years old and over one third in their 20s) many have been involved in multiple land occupations. These occupations frequently involve prolonged experiences in which squatters are organized to administer the settlement, negotiate with the government, and pres- sure for a favorable resolution. Through these multiple and varied experiences the leaders of the MST have developed the know-how to secure land appropriations in such a way as to benefit their main con- stridency-landless or near landless workers. This continuing, cumulative practical problem-solving type of leadership, and the emphasis on contain- nous, if limited, gains, appears to be a key factor in the success of the MST. At least, this is the view expressed by the leaders themselves in various discussions on this point. In this connection, the MST has settled over 300,000 landless families over fifteen years of struggle and, from 1995 to 1999, at the height of the struggle for land and land reform, the MST

12. Notwithstandingt perception, M pointed out by a reviewer of this w y, the key to mccae. On thin point, one of the very few truisms of sociological thought on social movements, all of the MST leaders are in agreement.

Mobilized 363,053 families of landless “peasants” or workers for land occupations (Robles, 2000: Table 5; Petra’s and Voltmeter, first six months of 1999 the MST organized 147 occupations involving 22,000 families, a level of mobilization maintained in subsequent years under conditions of a major counteroffensive launched by the Cardoso government. No other sociopolitical movement in Latin America has demonstrated anything close to such dynamism and relative success in making practical gains to the benefit of so many of its members.

Hypothesis 6: The leaders tend to be self-reliant and less dependent on elect- total politicians, thus able and willing to engage in bringing about change via direct action.

Unlike movement leaders in other contexts (particularly the ex-guerrillas in Central America) the leaders of the MST have what could be regarded as a healthy distrust of electoral processes and politicians.“ For one thing, they have seen many popular leaders over the years enter parliament and abandon the struggle. For another, they have seen the success to be achieved via direct action.“ Both in terms of their own recruitment and in terms of evaluating the best strategy for bringing about agrarian reform, over two thirds (70%) favor land occupations over the electoral process as a means of bringing about change. And the pressures to opt for what the government and the international community of development assistance organizations term “forms of peaceful and civil struggle” (including use of the “electoral mechanism”) are considerable.16Although political Condi- tins were radically different and perhaps not comparable, this finding dif- firs markedly from findings related to sociopolitical movements for agar-

13. Not all “occupations” have led to permanent settlements; the conversion of land occupations into set- elements require a process of negotiation with the government, which has its own land reform agent-ad Nevertheless. To appreciate the scope of the problem-and success of the MST-it is estimated that there are in Brazil upwards of 1.5 million landless workers or peasants.

14. On the penchant of Central American ex-guerrillas for electoral politics, and their accommodation and absorption into the “political class” see, inter alia, Vilas (1995) on Nicaragua and Zamora (1995) on El Salvador, as well as Jorge Citified (19931, who explains (or constructs his theory Other widespread abandonment by the Latin American leer of what he regards as its utopian quest for transformative or revolutionary change, largely in terms of the shift in political orientation and behavior of these and other such ex-guerrilleros.

15. Apart from their own experience, this is also the lesson that the MST leadership (Sterile, 2000) has drawn from the history of other movements in the region such en the EZLN, CONAIE and FARC. On this point e m Petra’s (1997).

16. In this connection the MST has. For over a year at the time of writing (June 2001), been subject to a major government offensive based on a multipronged strategy that includes outright repression, a major public-relations media campaign and concerted extorts to channel grievances and land claims into the World Bank-sponsored Land Bank program. On the political dynamics of thin process, see Voltmeter (2001a). Apart of the intellectual weaponry marshaled by the World Bank, the Brazilian government has a h turned towards the ”sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) to tackling the probe- elm of entrenched NIUI poverty Based on the agency of civil society organizations (Coos) in partner- ship with the government, increasing their access to society’s productive resourced, and enumerating the use of the “market mechanism” (land titling.

In addition, a significant minority (23%)of MST leaders believes that a com- inaction of direct action and electoral campaigns provides the best route to social change. Only one leader prioritized the electoral path towards social change and development, again in contrast to what analysts have found with regard to other land reform movements in the region. In this context the MST does support progressive politicians who support their program (mainly from the Workers’ Party) but always from a position of the autonomy of their social movement; they do not, for example, suspend land occupations during election campaigns.

Hypothesis 7: There is a common understanding or consensus of the lead- errs as to who are their common enemies, the nature of state power and the impact of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international financial institutions (Ibis) on their followers and the process of agrarian reform.

MST leaders manifest a high level of consensus regarding their advert- saris and the nature of state power: 75% perceive the Cardoso regime as completely opposed to agrarian reform; over two thirds see the govern- mint and landlords as acting in concert against agrarian reform; over 75% perceive an increase in repression over the years of the Cardoso president- cy; there is unanimous agreement that the World Bank and IMF program of structural adjustment are designed in the interests of the rich and the well-to-do swell as the large corporations that dominate the economy. Its impact on the producing and working classes of Brazil are perceived as very negative. Specifically on this issue, 90% think that IMF-WB policies largely benefit foreign investors and Brazil’s rich and powerful; 94% believe that with reference to the operations of transnational corpora- tins, foreign direct investment and neoliberal policies mandated by the IMF and the World Bank, the impact of the US. On Brazil has been totally negative. In this connection, almost two thirds of MST leaders are orient- end to one form or another of socialism and 84% are optimistic about the future. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the precise source of this ideological orientation-class background, experience or political eddo- action-but there is no question as to its saliency in defining the MST.

Hypothesis 8: The leadership has a “realistic” view of the international and national configuration structure of power and whose interests it serves.

Unlike the Central American ex-guerrillas (see Vilas, 1995) the leaders of the MT! Have no illusions about the international configuration of power. For one thing, they have a clear understanding of the imperial

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Policy and interests; and, as a result, they are generally hoes- tile to Ibis and have a clear understanding of the class alignments organized against them. This is evident in several survey questions in which MST leaders were asked to define their ideological orientation and to report on their views regarding the World Bank, the IMF and other international financial institutions, which are almost universally viewed by the national and regional leadership as “agents of US. Imperil- alums.” As a result, these leaders are generally resolved to mobilize internal support rather than appeal to “outside organizations” for support or con- diction their action to accommodate the interests and demands of such organizations. Both the interviews that we conducted and our survey pointed towards this conclusion.

Hypothesis 9:The movement leaders have a common vision of an alternate- tie social system that informs their actions, thus motivating the organize- ton and providing guidelines to action.

Many former leftist parties, especially but not only in Central America, have adapted to neoliberal realities, shedding their former socialist views in the process. On this see, for example, Citified (1993) as well as Petra’s (1997). This could in part explain the divorce of so many of these move- mints from the mass struggle and their electoral pragmatism. In contrast, the leaders of the MST and their actions continue to be guided by a socialist vision of an egalitarian, participatory society based on Brazilian realities. Unlike Central American revolutionaries (see Hale sky and Harris, 1995; Less, 1991; Vilas, 1995; Wickham-Crowley, 1991) their socialist vision rejects the Soviet model and thus was not affected by the downfall of the USSR and the collapse of “actually existing” socialism. Of the MST’s 37 leaders, 27% favor socialism as practiced in Cuba; 33% favor the demo- critic socialism advocated by Brazil’s Workers’ party (PT); and 33% project anew form of Brazilian socialism. That is, 90%are oriented towards social- ism in one form or another but not as practiced in the former USSR.’\*

At a different level, that of practice rather than ideology, the MST leadership is clearly committed to the principle of substantive or popular democracy. This is evident in the decision-making related to both the for- emulation of political strategy and in the social organization of production. Our observations of actual practice in diverse contexts (small meetings and congresses that bring together up to 10,000 rank and file members, popular assemblies, consultations and open discussions with the rank and file in the encampments and on permanent settlements-and their con- stouten communities) point towards a very substantive or egalitarian form of “participatory democracy.”

18. This supports similar findings about the ideology of other peasant-based and -led social movements in the region such afar, CONAIE and the EZLN. On this see ARC-EP (2000) with regards to FARC; Maces (2000a. 2000b) with regards to CONAIE; and Harvey (1994) and Voltmeter (2000).

But secret and decisions, even on matters of fundamental strategy and policy, are generally reached, and made, on the basis of popular participation. For example, after a year of “occupation,” “encampment” and %settlement”- and successful negotiations with the government on the legal expropriate- ton o f the occupied land-peasant families are free to choose whether or not to form a production co-operative and collective, the strategy preferred and promoted by the national leadership, or to work the land on an Indi- visual household basis.

Hypothesis 10: The leaders have the Klan and mystique required in bring- in about change in the future, thus providing the motivation to sustain action in times of repression and opposition by formidable adversaries.

Unlike the leaders of so many left-wing parties and movements who tend to be skeptical about large-scale change and pessimistic about socialism, the leaders of the MST manifest a high degree of optimism (&%I, based on their own practices and successes, as well as faith in the righteousness of their cause. It is difficult to operationally the concepts of “Bland” and “mystique” as critical factors in the mobilizing capacity of a social move- mint. But with regard to the former (“Bland”) we took cognizance of the degree of enthusiasm and positive spirit exhibited by the leaders in their response to questions about what the movement means to them and their sense of its future prospects. The degree of enthusiasm and optimism about the future was striking, much greater than that exhibited by leaders of various urban-centered social movements whom we have interviewed over the course of research visits undertaken over the last four years. To some extent this enthusiasm and what we have termed dean is generated and maintained via the movement’s anthem, flag carrying and other rituals that precede and accompany each official act or daily training session at the MST’s leadership training school in Santa Catharina. Astor “mystique” it defines the particular relationship that most peasants have to the land and is exhibited in the quasi-religious spirit of solidarity (the reference here is to Durkheim) generated by ritualized events such as the annual gatherings of leaders and activists at regional and national congresses and the national meetings of regional leaders, such as the one in Shoo Paul0 where we conducted our interviews. The mystique of the movement is also reflected in the many symbolic representations of the movement’s historic struggle against the forces of reaction: banners, insignias, and songs of struggle and conquest written to lift the spirits of the movement’s members and to mobilize them to collective action. The use of such sym- bolls is a characteristic feature of events staged by the MST, including meetings and daily openings of sessions of lectures and classes at the Leadership Cadre School in Santa Catharina.

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Class as a Dynamic Factor in Political Organization and Leadership

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Despite the propensity of recent sociological analysts armed with post- modern theory to downplay, if not ignore, the class factor in social movements, viz. the objectivity and subjectivity of class conditions, there is little question about the centrality of class in regards to the social base of the most significant and dynamic sociopolitical movements in Latin America, including the MST (Voltmeter, 2000; Petra’s and Voltmeter, 2001a). But when it comes to leadership, the issues that surround the con- kept of class are more clouded. A number of peasant- or worker-based sociopolitical movements in the region draw much of their leadership from the urban-centered middle class, particularly its intellectual stratum. In the case of the MST, however, the movement is peasant-led as well as peasant-based; class is a salient feature of leadership as well as the social base of the movement.

As to the role of class as a factor of analysis, our research suggests that the principles of class analysis established by Marx, and generally used by Marxists, continue to be useful as a guide to analysis and practice: that is, the dynamics of social movements such as the MST are based on a dialectical interplay between the objective and subjective-between the objectivity of the structural conditions shared by the MST leadership with their members and the corresponding subjectivity of shared awareness as to these conditions. This is not to say that the radicalism and orientation towards direct action exhibited by the MST is directly attributable to the class origins of the leadership and the rank and file. The political land- scope in Latin America and elsewhere is littered with counter-examples. However, the leadership of the MST exhibits a high degree of class- consciousness of the socially shared conditions generated by the economic structure of Brazilian society. The mobilizations and direct actions taken by the Movement clearly reflect this class-consciousness as well as the class origins of the leadership. This consciousness is also reflected in the political education programming at the MST’s leadership training school. Also, the responses of the MST leaders whom we surveyed and inter- viewed to the questions put to them clearly establish the centrality of class as a dynamic factor in both the social organizations of the Movement and the struggles involved, swell as the subjective consciousness of the leaders and activists. Class, defined as both a relationship to the means of social production and to the instruments of political power, is clearly a central factor in the thinking, and actions, of these activists.

Summary and Conclusion

Our case study of a successful leadership group is based on a leadership whose social origins are proximate to their organizing constituency, that

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Is, who have organic ties to the social base of the movement; and that has achieved a higher education than the norm and is directly involved in practical struggles that engage supporters and are independent of other political organizations. These leaders have a unified political vision of the future and have a positive view of the their action and are highly motivated regarding future success.

The antithesis of this positive profile of successful leadership would be a leadership drawn from social classes that are distant from their con- stridency (part of the rural elite or urban professionals) or who are from the same class but poorly educated, drawn to the organization for purely ideological rather than pragmatic reasons, remote from the actions taken (leaders ensconced in central headquarters) and relying on the electoral process for solutions. Leaders who have illusions about concessions and reforms from established regimes or international donors are likely to lack both vision and initiative and to misdirect the organization with false expectations that tend to lead to internal divisions, ideological conflicts and political demoralization-a sense that there are no alternatives.

The bane of many popular movements is the “prodigal son” phenol- melon: leaders who are renegades from their class, usually in the middle strata of the class s t r u c t ~ r we, identify with the lower classes but who, upon achieving institutional positions, return to a middle class “centrism” and shift their politics accordingly, thus undermining or derailing collect- tie actions in the direction of fundamental and sustained social change. Drawn, to a large extent, from a class of landless or near-landless workers in the rural sector, the MST leadership has shown no propensity toward accommodation to the status quo as a means of feathering their own nests. While the organization has grown and to some degree has become institute- totalized, with its national headquarters in a two-story building in Silo Paulo, as well as a network of professional accountants and agronomists, it still depends heavily on the voluntary actions of lawyers, clerics and, above all, its own members to carry out daily operations. Institutionalization without bureaucratization seems to work well in providing regularities and order while supporting a decentralized and innovative style of leadership that is very responsive and accountable to the membership. Arguably, the small material differences that separate top leaders from rank and file members are a critical factor in the MST’s successful mobilizations. The idea is that a relative equality of material conditions, a Simi-

19. On the role of the middle Strata or c l a u in Latin American m c I d movement we Johnson (Dominguez, 1994). Although third factor need# to he examined more c l o ~ l yet might very well explain the fact that FARC 1 the only peasant-bad guerrilla movement of the many formed in the wake of the Cuban revolution that not only ~ u r v l v data counterinsurgency movement of the 19708 and 19801, but that has actually continued to build lobelia and political force8 of misting b the point that it now controls up to 40 percent of the countrywide in Colombia (FARC-EE 2000).

The Social Dynamics of Brazil’s Rural Landless Workers’ Movernent laity in social origins and shared social perspectives make for long-term commitments and sustained struggles.

Land occupations are a key element in the MST’s strategy for effecting agrarian reform. The success of this strategy is based on democratic participation by the mass of beneficiaries in the planning, organization and execution of the occupations and in resisting repression by local gunmen and the military police. The importance of the land occupation strategy in the thinking and actions of the MST leadership is closely linked to the participatory style of social change practiced by this movement.

The centrality of the MST in the lives, beliefs and practices of the leaders is a critical factor in the creation of the high degree of cohesion that sustains their activity. The MST is the social, political and economic organization for realizing activity. There is no separation between “parties,” “trade union” and “enterprise” with concomitant parallel and competing loyalties, as is the case in most Latin American countries. A unified and combined sociopolitical movement provides both social practice and idea- logical direction, thus avoiding the typical problems of social movements dependent on political parties, and subject to their separate agendas. Over the years, we have come across innumerable complaints by activists of being used or manipulated by their political or guerrilla leaders, the park- tidal and essential goals of the organization sacrificed for supposedly higher ends. However, the self-reliance of the MST leaders has guaranteed that the fundamental issue of interest to their constituency-land reform-has remained in the forefront of their program, struggles and negotiations with political authorities.

In conclusion-and this is the theoretical point of our analysis- successful leadership seems to coincide with material equality within the organization, social solidarity as an outreach strategy and participatory democracy in the realization of organizational goals. The fact that there is no gap between the goals of the movement and everyday practice means that cynicism and pessimism do not take root. Furthermore, the coincide- dances of everyday realities and idealism fuels optimism, faith and a belief that people can change the world-and that this change can benefit “the people.”