Of Land and Labor

Agrarian Reform on the Sugarcane Plantations of Northeast Brazil

by
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The sugarcane region of Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil (known as the *zona da mata*, or forest region) has historically been characterized by poverty, paternalistic politics, and rigid social hierarchies.[1] The region also has a long history of social mobilization as rural workers and small farmers have resisted the oppressive conditions of plantation production and struggled variously for a redefinition or expansion of political and economic rights. In the mid-1990s, when a new social actor, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Movement of Rural Landless Workers—MST), began to organize plantation workers and the rural poor in the region to fight for agrarian reform.

It was initially very difficult for the MST to build its membership in the sugarcane region. Rural workers who had worked all their lives on the plantations had internalized "spatial imaginaries," or understandings of the land, that conflicted with the MST's conceptualization of land as the privileged space of production and social reproduction (Wolford, 2003a; 2003b). These spatial imaginaries were produced, in Lefebvre's (1991) words, through conceptions, perceptions, and experiences of access to land as signifying stability and status within the hierarchical ordering of plantation space. The rural workers conceived of full employment and paternalistic protection on the plantation rather than ownership of a small plot of land as the ideal. It was not until the early 1990s that an economic crisis in the sugarcane industry enabled the MST to organize increasing numbers of land occupations and build a political position in the region.

Wendy Wolford is an assistant professor of geography at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The research for this paper was funded by the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the Institute for International Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Institute for the Study of World Politics. The author thanks the *Latin American Perspectives* reviewers, Angus Wright, Andy Perrin, Meenu Tewari, and Felicia Mebane for their comments.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 135, Vol. 31 No. 2, March 2004 147-170
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X03261378

The extreme economic crisis of the 1990s had its immediate roots in Brazil's transition to democracy. Beginning in 1989, newly elected civilian governments at the state and federal level began to dismantle the generous system of production subsidies that had disproportionately supported northeastern producers vis-à-vis more efficient producers in the south of the country (Lima and Silva, 1995). While national cane production increased significantly between 1982–1983 and 1994–1995, the Northeast region's contribution fell from 30.1 percent to 19.4 percent during the same period (MEPF, 1998: 3). At the same time, international prices for sugarcane fell steadily from 1996 to 1999, and successive droughts during the 1990s forced distilleries (*usinas*) and mills (*engenhos*) alike to shut down.

As they had during previous crises in sugarcane production, local government officials discussed the possibility of implementing agrarian reform.[2] The large-scale producers resisted the idea of land distribution, but they faced a new political and social moment in the history of the region. With the withdrawal of the military government and direct civil elections in 1985, the demand for agrarian reform was back on the political agenda, and the MST was increasingly active in the sugarcane region. As hundreds of thousands of rural plantation workers were laid off because of the regional economic crisis, the MST organized groups of smallholders, rural workers, and the urban poor and occupied plantations that were either not producing cane or heavily indebted. Stories about MST occupations and public demonstrations were featured regularly in the state newspapers, and by the mid-1990s the state government had made agrarian reform in the region a priority. Between 1986 and 2001, 2,199 families were settled in 27 former plantation areas.[3] Throughout the coastal sugarcane region, temporary squatter encampments were set up, and the MST's bright red flag could be seen hanging from improvised flagpoles. It seemed evident that a regional transformation was under way.

In this article, I examine the relationship between the MST, the rural workers, the sugarcane industry, and the state in the largest municipality of the zona da mata, Água Preta, Pernambuco (see Fig. 1). In the latest agricultural census (2000), Água Preta was characterized by the largest concentration of land in the region and the highest number of land reform settlements.[4] One settlement in particular, Flora, will be presented as a case study.[5] Forty-six families lived on Flora, 13 of whom had received land because they occupied the area with the MST in 1996 and 33 of whom had been given land because of their previous association with the property, which had been a large-scale sugarcane plantation before its expropriation in 1997.

I argue that rural workers in the sugarcane region resisted the MST's early attempts at organization because their spatial imaginaries, forged on the

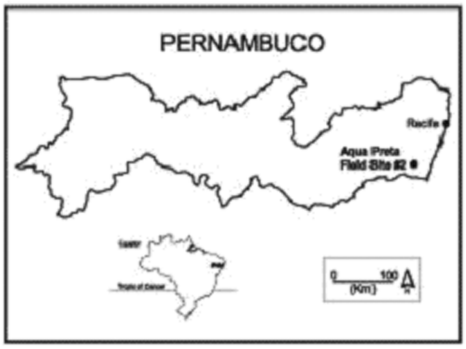

Figure 1: Água Preta, Pernambuco

plantations, did not resonate with the movement's ideologies or methods. They joined the movement only when the economic situation became too difficult to navigate alone and the movement established a position of influence with local political leaders, including municipal mayors and state agrarian reform agents. Once on the settlement, MST leaders were able to persuade the settlers to move away from sugarcane production toward specialty items such as high-value fruits and vegetables.

The disjuncture between spatial imaginaries, however, made it difficult for the rural workers to adopt the MST's ideology, either in theory or in practice. This became evident in 2002–2003, when the sugarcane industry in the region made a dramatic recovery and cane was being processed again in the distilleries surrounding Água Preta. The local price of sugarcane per ton was two to three times higher than it had been in 1999 because of an increase in international prices and federal deregulation that removed restrictions on exports. As the distilleries roared back into life, they turned to a new, supremely flexible source of sugarcane supply—the agrarian-reform settlers. They were able to lure the settlers back into production because the settlers continued to value wages and paternal political protection over subsistence agricultural production and what the MST referred to as their "universal" right to goods and services such as education, health care, and running water.

The MST was unable to maintain a strong hold in the sugarcane region because the settlers' spatial imaginaries were shaped by social hierarchies and reproduction strategies firmly segmented in carefully delineated living and working spaces. Having access to land made a difference in the settlers' lives, but that difference was situated within an understanding of land as

providing independence from outsiders (including the MST) and a paternalistic interpretation of political rights. Because the government was the ultimate overseer of the settlements, the settlers now turned to local and state officials rather than the distillery or mill owners when they needed assistance. The settlers willingly sold their sugarcane at relatively low prices because they did not subtract family labor costs from their expenses and did not demand the same set of rights that plantation workers had won in the 1960s (Sigaud, 1979).

The arguments made here are based on research conducted in MST settlements between 1998 and 2003. The bulk of the fieldwork took place between September 1998 and October 1999, when I interviewed approximately 100 settlers in the southern state of Santa Catarina and 100 settlers in the northeastern state of Pernambuco. The settlers interviewed are not the object of this study; rather, they provide the point of departure from which to observe the larger processes of changing social relations (cf. Garcia Jr., 1990).

SUGARCANE PRODUCTION IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: ACCOMMODATION AND CRISIS

Sugar production has dominated politics, economics, society, and culture in Pernambuco for almost 500 years (Andrade, 1988). When the Portuguese first colonized the new territory of Brazil, sugarcane was a valuable commodity in the European market, and production spread rapidly along the coastal reaches of the new colony. By 1570 there were reportedly 23 sugar mills in Pernambuco, and by 1580 that number had almost doubled (Schwartz, 1987: 73). Between 1580 and 1680, the "land of Brazil, otherwise called America" (Léry, 1992), was the most important sugar producer in the world. It was not until the 1700s that Dutch production in the Antilles began to challenge Brazilian producers.

Sugar production in the coastal areas of Pernambuco gave rise to a socioeconomic structure that remains markedly evident today. The rigid class structure imported from Portugal simultaneously supported sugar production and was supported by the commodity's need for large quantities of land and labor (Schwartz, 1987). High overhead and immense risks made overseeing the process from planting to shipping expensive and therefore an activity suitable only for the very rich—the *senhores de engenho*, or "masters of the mill." They achieved the status of nobility through plantation ownership, and their title was one that "demanded to be heard, obeyed, and respected" (Pinto, 1963: 61). The sugar produced on the plantations was primarily intended for export. Planters sold some raw sugar (known as "clayed

sugar" because of its brown color and heavy, wet consistency) on the Brazilian market, but the majority was shipped to Britain to be distilled. Industrialization of the commodity in Europe meant that few upstream benefits such as alcohol production and distillation technology were captured locally.

To run the plantation, the owners depended on a limited number of employees who understood the complicated machinery and administrative issues. The majority of the tasks, however, required relatively little skill and tremendous exertion. These conditions served to segment the labor force into two distinct groups: skilled and unskilled. Because the plantations relied heavily on slaves imported from the African continent, labor segmentation was color-coded from the outset.

In the late 1800s, the Pernambuco plantation economy experienced a double-edged crisis. Producers in Cuba modernized the industry's processing techniques, and the island's favorable access to the North American market hurt Brazil's export opportunities. At the same time, the gradual decline of slavery threatened Brazil's supply of cheap labor.[6] The stratified plantation system allowed the owners to respond to the crisis by absorbing an alternative labor source—the subsistence farmers who had carved out family farms on the edges of the plantations (Eisenberg, 1974). These *moradores* (residents) were already tied into production through nonmarket obligations and rights that the owners manipulated in order to engage them in sugarcane production (Sigaud, 1979). The sugarcane plantations represented an entire economic, social, and political system that revolved around the Casa Grande and the workers' quarters (see Freyre, 1978). The plantation owner usually sold basic foodstuffs and work supplies to the workers. If the workers lacked the money to purchase goods at the weekly market in town, they were often forced to pay high prices at the plantation store, and many accumulated enormous debts.

The crisis of the late 1800s also pushed the sugarcane plantation owners farther into formal politics, their survival being heavily dependent on their ability to acquire state resources (Lima and Silva, 1995; Wanderley, 1978). Early reliance on state protection shaped the industry's future in that it encouraged planters to increase their profits by securing state subsidies rather than by improving production techniques (Lima and Silva, 1995: 188). The northeastern sugar producers were very successful in garnering state support. In the 1930s the federal government created an ambitious program to promote the sugar industry. Particular emphasis was placed on protecting the northeastern producers from the increasingly competitive southern states. The Instituto de Alcool e Açúcar (Institute for Alcohol and Sugar—IAA), created in 1933, maintained production in the Northeast with a complicated set of production quotas and differential prices, but by the early 1950s the state of São Paulo was producing ten times more sugar per hectare than

producers in the Northeast (Maybury-Lewis, 1994: 65). To boost Brazilian productivity vis-à-vis Cuba, the IAA modernized production by centralizing plantations within industrial distilleries that introduced a higher level of technology into the production process and paved the way for superior ethanol production in the 1970s.

Government intervention, combined with a favorable export market in the early and mid-1900s, breathed new life into the limping plantations of the Northeast. The planters responded with a concerted increase in production and adoption of new techniques that reduced their reliance on labor. Between 1950 and 1960 they cut their permanent labor force in half (Maybury-Lewis, 1994: 65). Through a variety of means, moradores were encouraged, more or less directly depending on the circumstances, to leave the plantation for the town. Planters relied heavily on workforce segmentation to persuade them to go (Sigaud, 1979). Moradores accustomed to doing one job were often ordered to do another for which they were ill suited, and they often found it in their best interest to move to town. The capacity to resist or challenge the pressure to leave depended on one's outside family connections and alternative work opportunities.

Resistance to the changing land-labor arrangements was surprisingly strong. In 1955 workers of the Galileia Mill, under the leadership of the plantation-born lawyer Francisco Julião, founded the Peasant Leagues in protest over the owner's refusal to provide a coffin for a worker's burial as tradition required (Pereira, 1997). The Peasant Leagues, made up primarily of small-scale farmers who had been driven off the plantations by returning owners in the 1950s, grew rapidly.[7] Rural unrest attributed to them was partly responsible for the 1964 coup that turned the government over to the military for the next 21 years. The military dismantled the Peasant Leagues, although a union structure remained that allowed some branches to continue organizing among plantation workers who had the proper legal working papers (Maybury-Lewis, 1994). Tighter labor regulations, however, encouraged many plantations to use *clandestinos* (illegal workers) from the small towns nearby.

At this time, state officials in Pernambuco debated the possibility of implementing a progressive distribution of land in the sugarcane region. The memory of peasant and worker unrest lingered even though the military government had broken up the Peasant Leagues and penetrated the rural unions. At one meeting of agronomists, academics, and politicians, those attending recalled the words of Joaquim Nabuco that "abolition without agrarian reform is only half done." Ultimately, however, discussions of agrarian reform focused more on addressing the tendency toward structural crisis in

sugarcane production than on alleviating the suffering of the rural poor. Agrarian reform would help the local sugarcane economy by removing the landless (and discontented) poor to another region where they would find unlimited resources and serve their country by colonizing Brazil's interior. As the agronomist Francisco Targino de Siqueira, of the Instituto Nacional de Imigração e Colonizaçao said at the meeting (*Cana e reforma agrária*, 1970),

> We have too many people here in the Northeast, and they're dying of hunger; we have families anxious to occupy empty land, and meanwhile we do nothing. [Outside] agitators come and order us to distribute land here, where there is no land, or if there is, it's an ungrateful land, an eroded land, a hilly land, a land with improper topography. I think that the agitators should, as patriotic men, have the spirit to occupy empty land, as they did in the United States less than a century ago.

In the early 1970s, the federal government began to subsidize migration out of the Northeast into the less populated Amazon region, moving, in President Medici's words, "men without land to a land without men." Ambitious colonization schemes were established in the Amazonian region and the grasslands of the Center-West.[8] Between 1964 and 1985, millions of Northeasterners migrated to the Amazon or to the growing industrial development pole of São Paulo (Garcia Jr., 1990).

At the same time, the federal government created new legislation that would protect and foster the sugarcane industry. In 1974 a significant drop in sugarcane prices coincided with high oil prices, motivating the military government to search for a low-cost fuel alternative. The National Alcohol Program (PROALCOOL) was created in 1975 to provide incentives for processing sugarcane and thereby reduce the country's reliance on foreign imports of oil. Between 1975 and 1989, the government invested US$10.5 billion in PROALCOOL and ethanol production increased from approximately 500,000 liters in 1975 to over five-and-a-half million in 1982 (Andrade 1988: 671). The investment was crucial in enabling the relatively inefficient producers of the Northeast to remain in business (Maybury-Lewis, 1994: 35).[9]

During this period, distilleries continued to rationalize their productive base, renting out part of their properties to *rendeiros* (renters) who essentially oversaw the planting, harvesting, and transportation for the distillery. The move from direct to indirect control was experienced bitterly on the plantations. As one former rural worker said,

> In the distillery we had our full rights. There was a regular *cesta basica* (food basket). And at the end of the year, we received [our rights]. . . . Now the distilleries are having some difficulties. . . . But even now they still pay, they don't

> pay all at once but then they keep paying. But with the rendeiro, no—with the rendeiro we don't have regular food baskets, we don't get the tenth, there isn't a quarter salary that is paid by the bank, which is a right that the government gave to the worker. There isn't a family gift anymore, it doesn't exist. We don't get anything, we never did [from the renter]. The distillery is different because it pays all of this—and the same obligations that we used to pay to the distillery we pay to [the rendeiro]. But you can't go after your rights, because [it's hard].

After 30 years of relative prosperity, the Pernambuco sugarcane region was again hit by economic, political, and ecological crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Andrade and Andrade, 2001). The market for both sugarcane and ethanol was rapidly shrinking, partly because of the increased participation of the industrialized countries in global sugar production. Between 1975 and 1985, the industrialized countries increased their sugar exports from 20 percent of the world's total to 43 percent (De Souza, Irmão, and Araújo, 1997: 2). At the same time, the production of popular artificial sweeteners reduced the demand for refined sugar, and world prices were steadily dropping.

The crisis in Pernambuco was exacerbated by the loss of the industry's main source of support—government funds. In the 1990s the new civilian government deregulated the military's support program for sugarcane and revised regional legislation that had previously protected the northeastern producers (Buarque, 1997: 3). Serious droughts in 1992–1993 and 1997–1999 also hurt the industry (Andrade and Andrade, 2001), and by 1995 44 percent of the sugarcane refining distilleries in Pernambuco were considered "paralyzed or functioning with difficulty" (Lins et al., 1996: 2).

In response to the crisis, the state government of Pernambuco pinpointed agrarian reform as one of the region's most viable alternatives. A 1998 government report read: "The crisis of the sugarcane industry in the northeastern tropical forest region is a crisis of the [productive] model. The crisis provides a unique opportunity to carry out sweeping structural changes that will eliminate the concentration of landholdings and monocultural production, in order to benefit the economic development of the region with equality and social justice" (MEPF, 1998: 1).

Between 1986 and 2001, 27 former plantations in the sugarcane region were expropriated and distributed among the rural workers. These expropriations represented a revolutionary transformation of productive and social relations on the plantations as rendeiros, administrative workers, and ordinary workers alike were given the rights to small plots of land. The new settlers were also provided with initial grants for short-term subsistence and materials to build a house. They were eventually provided with investment

funds geared toward the production of subsistence and alternative market crops such as banana, coconuts, and pineapples.

THE MOVEMENT OF RURAL LANDLESS WORKERS

Founded in 1984, the MST began in southern Brazil as landless farmers occupied idle properties to pressure the federal government to distribute the land. The movement's leaders emphasized the importance of building a national organization, one that would unite people from around the country (Fernandes, 1999; Wright and Wolford, 2003). To be an important political actor the movement needed to be seen not just as an expression of regional problems but as an expression of the broader struggle for citizenship at the national level.[10] By the late 1980s MST was aggressively building its membership throughout the country and had established local offices in 22 of Brazil's 26 states. MST leaders considered the plantation region of northeastern Brazil particularly important for organization because the long history of sugarcane production had generated such extreme poverty, hunger, and violence (Fernandes, 1999).

But organizing a struggle around the land would prove to be very difficult because the land embodied different meanings for different people (Wolford, 2003a; 2003b). The MST's vision of agrarian reform was constructed within the cultural traditions and experiences of small farmers and landless workers in southern Brazil, a region characterized by a relatively strong peasant tradition. In the southern state of Santa Catarina, the sons and daughters of small farmers who joined the MST did so because they valued their way of life on the land and were coming to the end of the spatial frontier in the region. These people accepted the MST's methods of occupying land as legitimate because of their own cultural traditions of mobility and colonization of "empty land" as the means to acquiring access to their most important productive resource. Land was also needed for social reproduction, as new generations needed access to their own land to begin a family.

Rural workers who had spent their entire lives working on the plantation did not value the land in the same way as those in southern Brazil, and it was difficult to persuade them to fight plantation owners for a piece of land. Most of the rural workers in the sugarcane region privileged access to a salary over access to land, and there was little in their occupational history that legitimated the notion of occupying "someone else's property." The settlers relied on their regular income to purchase their groceries at the weekly market, pay their bills, and feed themselves. Although MST leaders had tried to organize

occupations in 1989 and the early 1990s (Branford and Rocha, 2002; Fernandes, 1999), membership did not grow significantly in the sugarcane region until economic crisis in the early 1990s coincided with expanded political will for reform.[11]

Rural workers in the forest region joined the MST in two distinct groups. The first group, usually rural workers who had occupied the most insecure positions on the plantation, joined MST occupations to fight for access to land. The second group, moradores who continued to live on the plantations even after they stopped planting cane, joined the movement only after the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform—INCRA) expropriated the plantation for redistribution. According to federal law, the moradores received first priority, although there was usually sufficient land to provide some for the people who occupied with the MST.

Ultimately, people accepted the land because they had few other economic opportunities and membership at least provided them with political representation vis-à-vis local government and state agrarian reform officials. According to development statistics published by the mayor's office in Água Preta, the level of development in the municipality was about half that of the nation as a whole. Without sugarcane production, there were no other jobs available. The severity of the crisis in the region meant that most of the people associated with the plantation, including the former rendeiros, skilled administrative workers, and moradores, accepted the offer of land. The local MST leader in Água Preta was an agronomist tapped for his job by the mayor. He was exceptionally adroit politically and managed to secure resources for the settlers that incorporated them into a paternalistic web of gifts, services, and allegiance so that membership in MST provided many of the same benefits as the rural unions or plantation owner used to: medicines, an occasional food basket, money for transportation, and access to the mayor's ear. In return, settlers brought the MST leaders gifts such as bottles of rum or a handful of fresh manioc.

In spite of the MST's rapid growth in the sugarcane region, many of those who joined the movement were ambivalent about what it represented. Many of the rural workers had a difficult time reconciling their understanding of land as private property with the movement's concept of land as a social good. For the rural workers, land on the plantations had always belonged to someone—and even though they employed mobility as a survival strategy in the face of cruel treatment by the plantation owners, they did not necessarily envisage freedom as the colonization of open or empty land in the way that farmers from southern Brazil did. The rural workers distanced themselves

from the movement's practice and ideology of occupying land. As one former resident who had won land through the expropriation process said in 2003, "We all owe what we have today to the movement. I myself, I owe everything to it, I just don't agree with this business of invading land. Who wants to have what is theirs and then arrive and see it invaded? I have this house here and I leave, and when I get back, it's invaded?"

Another settler who had been an administrator on the plantation before receiving land demonstrated his ambivalence toward the movement:

Researcher (R): And now are you part of the movement?
Settler (S): I am now part [of the movement] because truly I live on [the settlement] and in any case I have to be [part of the movement] because whether I want to or not I have to be part [of the movement] because we arrange things within the movement.
R: And do you pay the movement something?
S: They [the people from the movement] charge a fee, and so I paid some fees and now we are waiting for other charges for us to continue paying again.
R: How was it decided that you would pay?
S: The president [of the association] decided. He got together with the agricultural extension agents [who were all MST militants] . . . to make some charges that would be put into practice . . . [with] the settlers.
R: Have you ever spoken with the militants, the leaders of MST?
S: Until now I have never been close to the leaders of MST because I truly don't know them well, no. I only speak with the agronomists who have to talk with them. But I am not very close to these leaders of MST, no. I hardly know them.
R: Do you support MST?
S: I support MST.
R: Have you participated in some mobilization, a march, or something like that?
S: Until now not that I know of.
R: Does the movement help you today?
S: No, up to this point, the movement hasn't helped me with anything.

In spite of this ambivalence and differing levels of commitment among the two groups of rural workers on the settlement, by 1999 many of the settlers in Água Preta and all of the settlers on Flora had joined the MST and were responding to its vigorous call for an end to sugarcane. They were planting bananas and coconuts in addition to subsistence crops, and many had plans for introducing cattle onto the land. These production decisions were made in accordance with the regional "production plan" formulated by MST leaders and INCRA officials. The settlers received approximately R$7,500 in investment credit in 1999–2000, and they were required to fill out production and repayment schedules with the settlement agronomist before receiving the money. The money was eligible only for planting bananas and coconuts and buying cattle.

SAVING SUGARCANE: THE INDUSTRY RETURNS

In 2000–2001 sugarcane prices began to rise again. After falling for six straight years, international prices increased because of reduced production in India and Cuba, two of the largest exporters globally. The extinction of the IAA liberalized export quotas and allowed a greater proportion of production to be oriented toward the external market. A drought in southern Brazil in 2001 also increased the value of production in the Northeast. With the rise in sugarcane prices, the distilleries in the forest region were planting and processing sugarcane again.

In 2003 most of the settlers on Flora had covered their land with sugarcane. They had weathered the sugarcane crisis by planting subsistence crops and receiving money from the government in the form of both investment credit and short-term welfare assistance. They had actively participated in discussions about alternative crops and moving away from sugarcane, but when high prices returned they could not resist the temptation to have money in their pockets again. In 1999, a former morador who was active in settlement politics as the treasurer of the association and met often with MST leaders had said he would never plant cane again: "No, look, you can't make enough money planting cane, and now we read in the papers that cane is going to fall by 8 percent—and it was already cheap! It is at R$21.70 (per ton) now and so if it falls by 8 percent, the price will be about R$14.00. . . . Can you imagine—we plant cane and sell it for R$14.00? That's a lot of work. . . . You have to stop, really stop, planting cane." By 2003, however, this morador was working for a neighboring mill cutting sugarcane as well as planting cane on his own land. He argued that it was not possible to make a living farming, and so the settlers found work on the plantations: "At this moment, almost everyone is working in one of the mills over there, Barra d'Ouro. They're cutting cane, filling bags, doing everything. And then when it's evening, they work on their own land."

Sugarcane overtook the alternative crops people had planted earlier. The banana plants and coconut trees were either gone or disappearing. As an MST militant said, "There are a lot of *parceleiros* who didn't plant cane—they planted banana, potato, green corn, vegetables—and today they are beginning to plant cane. They are beginning to give up the potato, to plant less, and to plant cane because they're seeing that that's the way—it isn't the way out but, unfortunately, it's been 500 years." As one settler said,

> Look, the situation with the bananas is this. I wasted a lot of money with that banana. Now, I planted it just to make the boys from the movement happy. I said, I am going to plant [this], but I am going to lose the money. It has been 45

> years since I arrived in this place. . . . [Now,] sugarcane is a good crop. It's a crop that is exported all over the world, as sugar. I harvested 170 tons of cane this year. . . . If the distilleries pay the proper price, God willing, I will keep planting cane and taking care of my *lavourazinhas* (little garden plants).

The sugarcane distilleries around Água Preta facilitated the settlers' incorporation into their production system by sending buyers out before the harvest to coordinate the settlers who had cane to sell, offering to set up accounts for them at the distillery. When the cane had been harvested, the settlers loaded it on trucks and paid a fee for delivery to the distillery. As an MST militant said with some resignation,

> Nowadays it's very easy to sell your sugarcane to the distillery. The distillery assigns a person [to this job] who goes around on a motorcycle. He comes [to the settlement] and does everything. He takes your information, takes it to the distillery. The truck [with the sugarcane] arrives in the distillery and all of your information is there already. . . . Before, it was more difficult to have an account with the distillery because you had to have a certain amount of cane, you had to be a large-scale supplier. But today you can take one little truckload and go there [to the distillery] and whether they have your information or not, you get there and take care of business.

This reorganization of production and priorities on the settlement was carried out with the implicit assistance of the state government. Even as the state was arguing that the sugarcane crisis of the late 1990s provided the opportunity for a "dramatic restructuring of the industry," it essentially reorganized production in a more efficient manner for the sugarcane industry. The "sweeping structural changes" anticipated would, however, have been very difficult to implement given that the economic and social structure of the Pernambuco sugarcane region was built around expectations of market protection, government subsidies, and debt pardons (Lima and Silva, 1995: 188). Even amidst generalized crisis, few people suggested that sugarcane production be entirely abandoned (Andrade and Andrade, 2001). Instead, plans for diversification included agrarian reform primarily as a means of occupying land that was inappropriate for sugar production, employing excess labor on a seasonal basis, and fostering smallholder suppliers of cane for the large distilleries (MEPF, 1998: 2). The government pledged to encourage the modernization of sugarcane through targeted programs that would "free" more labor for small-scale cane production and supply the large-scale distilleries. And this labor would even be provided at a price below subsistence, as one settlement president in Água Preta said: "There are so many [settlers], my God, who have land and–I don't know why–they have

land and they're dying of hunger." When asked why those settlers hadn't planted anything on their land, the president responded, "They're tired, they have to leave the house early to cut cane so they have something to eat." A document prepared for discussion by INCRA (Buarque, 1997: 9) states that agrarian reform in the sugarcane region would ideally allow the settlers to plant part of their land in cane and part of their land in goods targeted "above all for the subsistence of the family in the interharvest period."

The return of sugarcane in Água Preta coincided with the virtual disappearance of the MST there. It had been active enough in 1999 to claim at least three settlements, but by 2003 it flew its flag on only one. Even that settlement was only officially affiliated with movement because of the settlers' allegiance to their association president, a woman who had occupied the plantation with the MST and continued to be faithful. As she prepared to leave the presidency, she believed that the settlers would also leave the movement.

EXPLAINING THE MST'S DISAPPEARANCE FROM THE SUGARCANE REGION

As important as the structural conditions for sugarcane production are in explaining the disappearance of the MST in the zona da mata, they do not tell the whole story. The apparent fragility of the movement's position as an important intermediary between the settlers and local government needs to be explained in the context of how social, economic, and political relations on the plantation shaped a particular perception of the value of land and the nature of "rights." Although most of the settlers on Flora were glad to have land of their own, they valued it because experience had taught them that land meant stability, independence, and the freedom from outside intervention (Sigaud, 1977). As Jaime Amorim, the MST leader for Pernambuco, put it, "There's the culture of the region—the people are individualistic, they don't trust other people, so there's a strong resistance to working collectively." Their understanding of "rights" was embedded in the assistance orientation of the plantation rather than in universalistic notions of "citizenship" or human rights.

On the plantation, the space of residence was an indication of occupational position within a fairly strict hierarchy (see Fig. 2). Residential spaces were clearly distinguished by proximity to others, quality of housing, and access to land. The plantation owners, at the top of the hierarchy, lived in the Casa Grande, set apart from the rest of the residents and graced with sufficient space for fruit trees, decorative plants, and a vegetable garden. The

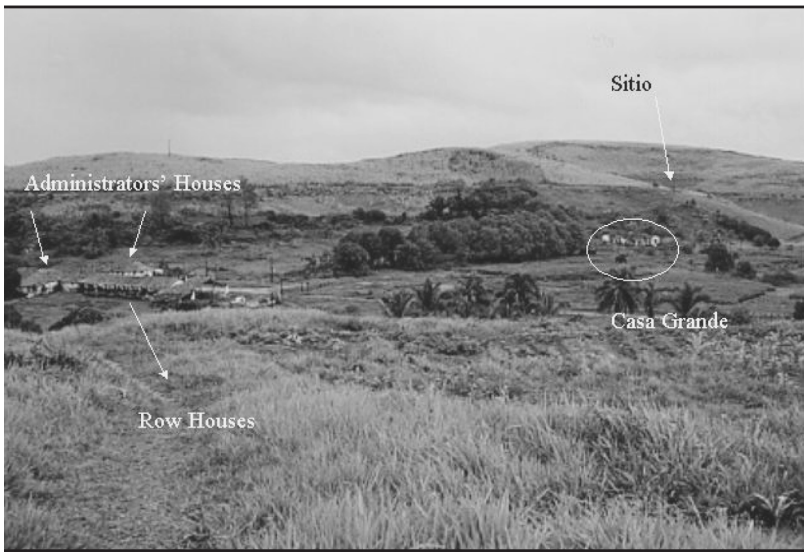

Figure 2: Spatial Order on a Typical Plantation, Água Preta, 1999

owner was the only person who had free run of the plantation; the workers all kept to the spaces inscribed by their rank. The administrative workers (*empregados*) generally had individual houses as well, situated between the Casa Grande and the common workers' (*trabalhadores*) houses. The common workers lived in small, two- or three-room houses connected to each other in a long row (see Fig. 3). These houses had no proprietary space outside, and when the price was high sugarcane would be planted "right up to the door." Another group of workers lived inside the plantation on small farms (*sitios*). When the plantation owner wished to show respect or favor to particular workers, he granted them access to a sitio. These workers not only lived apart from the rest of the people on the plantation but also had land on which to grow subsistence crops and fruit trees. Isolation and access to land were privileges accorded to those who did well, and in this way access to land became a signifier of status. At the opposite end of the occupational hierarchy, undocumented workers (*clandestinos*) occupied the most insecure positions, both demonstrated and exacerbated by their inability to claim any living space on the plantation. These workers lived in the nearby towns and cities and sold their labor on a seasonal or daily basis.

In the 1960s and 1970s the increasing numbers of undocumented workers heightened the sense of competition among plantation workers. The existence of a highly flexible, low-paid workforce in the cities meant that planta-

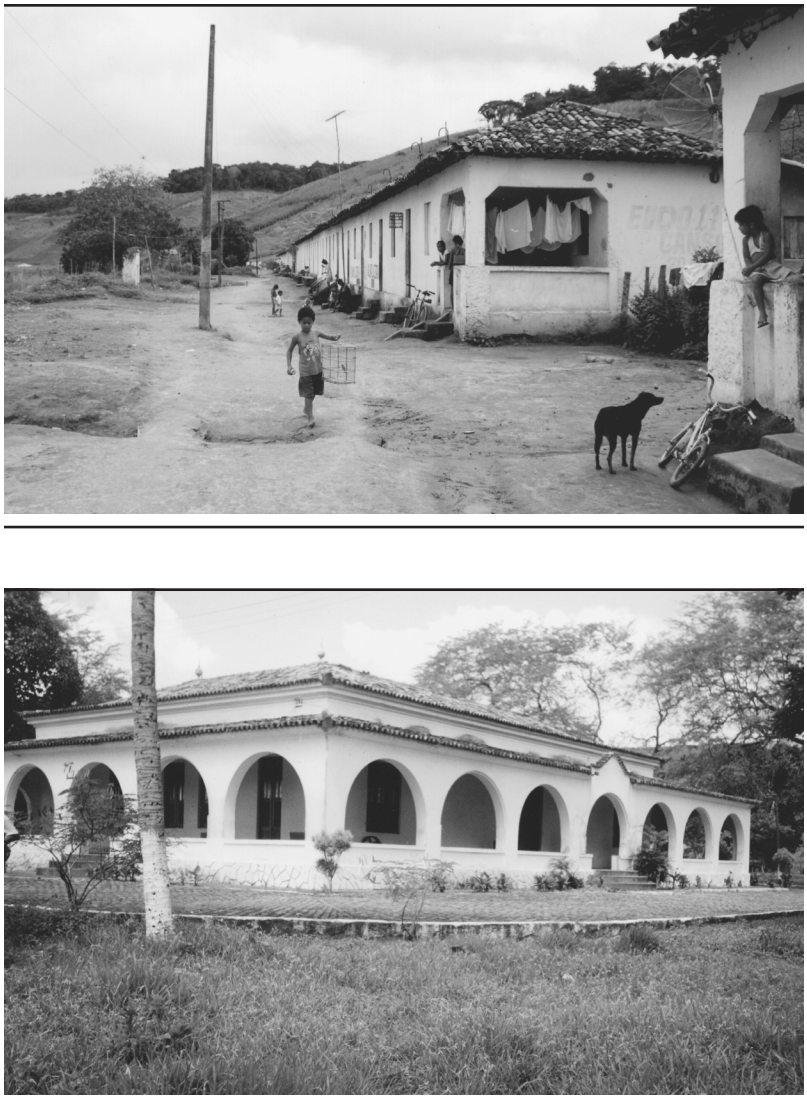

Figure 3: The Casa Grande (top) and Row Houses

tion residents had to fight harder to cut enough sugarcane to make the daily quota and a living wage. As the son of an older settler on Flora who had worked under several different owners since 1963 said,

> Look, waking up early in the morning is a priority. The fight over the sugarcane means that you have to leave [your house] earlier than the others if you are going to get your full salary. Those people who work illegally also have to live off of the sugarcane harvest, and so when they burn part of the cane field—say, [an area with] 500 tons of cane planted—then 400 people will go there to cut this cane. If they were all to do two salaries' worth [of cutting], it wouldn't be enough, and so there's constant fighting. Each person wants to get there first, before the others, and this makes it difficult. It means that the worker is obliged to wake up early—even sometimes at one in the morning, or midnight, they are already working.

Because of the way in which people negotiated access to land within the hierarchically segregated plantation space, the settlers on Flora valued their new lots because they provided independent spaces where they would be allowed to live as they pleased. This interpretation of personal freedom went beyond individualism because the histories of hierarchy and competition on the plantation had bred distrust among the workers. One of the MST activists working in the region put it this way:

> First, the people here left slavery and ended up in the [sugarcane region]. . . . The people who stayed in the sugarcane region were the negros who left the *senzalas* (slave houses) and then got into neo-senzalas, which were the shacks the plantation bosses had for them, similar to what they used to have. . . . Now [they are saying], "I want my land. I want my space." Within [the settler's] space he feels his freedom [and says], 'On these ten hectares I am the master, I am free. If I don't want to do anything, I will sit on the riverbank and stay there looking at it, but the view is mine."

The desire for land as a space free from the supervision or influence of others was evident when INCRA divided the expropriated land among the settlers. The settlers were very worried that others would gain access to land unfairly by using political connections or simply by making a better case with the government officials in charge. One settler preemptively cleared a plot of land to stake his claim:

> After it came out in the newspaper that this area was going to be expropriated, I went there inside the plantation and I said, I am going to start right away here. I planted some . . . garden crops right away. I weeded some banana trees that were in the valley, and I opened up some streambeds. And so when INCRA came to survey everyone, to expropriate the land, the doctor said that I had the right to stay where I was, maybe a little more towards the front, maybe a little towards the back, but I would stay in that area. And thank God, I managed to stay.

Three years after the land had been divided among the settlers, bitterness remained because, according to the settlers, there were several such preemptive plots. As one settler said,

> There was a lot of fighting, and the son of the former renter was president of the association–the group put him there–he wanted all of this land here, all of this land in front of us. He's smart, isn't he? The land was expropriated, and he's going to get all of the best land? . . . But there was a resident–who is even a good person–who said to me, "If you have abused [our plan], I am going there to that place [you picked out], I am going to plant and I want to see if you come down on me." I said "No, I am not going come down on you, no, boy. . . . I am not going to fight with you, because you aren't going to plant. Plant what you want, because I am within my rights. If the doctor says that it is for me to stay, then I am staying." We saw that it wasn't going to go well because if we [all individually] asked for these little things from INCRA [we would end up with nothing].

The son of the former plantation owner did go to the government offices and demand his pick of the land, but the INCRA agents in charge went back to the settlers and negotiated a map that everyone finally agreed to. The settlers resigned themselves to receiving the land that INCRA allocated, although they protested loudly when they learned that the government was going to allow the former owner to stay in the Casa Grande. The settlers organized two large-scale demonstrations in front of the house and sent several delegations to INCRA requesting that the decision be overturned. They argued that everyone was equal on the settlement now and therefore the Casa Grande should be turned over to the settlement association rather than remaining in one person's hands. In the end, the former plantation boss was able to secure his place by appealing to a local judge who happened to be related to his wife. The judge ordered the settlers off of the land surrounding the Casa Grande, and the INCRA officials allowed the judge's order to stand.

These struggles over the distribution and allocation of land reflected the ongoing perceptions of space as hierarchically ordered and made it difficult to foster a sense of community on the settlement. As Jaime Amorim, the MST leader for Pernambuco, said, "In the forest region there is no regional attachment. The [settlers] don't think about themselves as belonging to a settlement, let alone a region. There is no unity within the settlement."

Once the process of distributing the land on Flora was completed, most of the settlers were pleased to be landowners, and many of them attributed their new status as landowners to the MST. This gratitude, however, did not manifest itself as allegiance to the movement because the settlers saw their land as the means to independence—even from the movement. The settlers willingly "joined" the movement only when they believed doing so would provide

them with access to certain benefits. They reserved the right to leave and submit themselves to a different patron when they chose. As an MST activist in the region said, "The residents want to breathe in their own freedom. [They say] 'now I want my piece of land, I am going to take care of my own life.' "

The settlers were particularly resistant to the MST's attempt to claim physical space on the settlement. In 2002–2003 MST turned what had been horse stables at Flora's main entrance into an attractive small house intended to be used as the movement's new regional headquarters. All of the settlers agreed that the house was very nice and constituted an improvement over the stables, but as the work came to an end they got together and sent a group of representatives to the INCRA offices in Recife. The settlers protested the movement's intrusion on their space, even though they had apparently signed an "institutional act" agreeing to the construction. They argued that the MST had tricked them into signing a document they did not understand. They insisted that it build its headquarters in the nearby town rather than occupying settlement land. If the MST was able to claim space within the settlement, the settlers worried that it would also be able to claim a set of rights over *them*: "Whenever they come, they will want to order us around." One settler who in 2003 said that he still supported the MST said, "I don't even know what to say about the movement. . . . [The movement activists] only visited the settlement when that [investment] money [PROCERA] came out, and then they wanted to have the office built [on the settlement], but I think that INCRA condemned it. . . . Many of the settlers went to INCRA. . . . several [people] went, they said that it was going to turn into a rowdy bar."

The long history of life and work on the plantation also shaped an understanding of "rights" as a set of goods provided by plantation owners. These rights had been set in Brazilian law in 1963, but because implementation depended on the relationship between plantation owners and workers the laws were open to interpretation, manipulation, and negotiation. When the plantations were operating, owners were seen as fulfilling their responsibilities if they took care of their workers. One former rural worker who received land on Flora described his life as an administrator for a nearby distillery as follows:

> [The land] was owned by the distillery—everything was well organized. [On the distillery] there was full work for everyone. We all had papers and we had our proper rights. We worked right through; there was no lack of work. . . . We weren't missing anything, no, they paid all our proper rights correctly. . . . There were about 180 people with their papers in the distillery at this time, all the responsibility of the distillery. . . . Everyone lived on the [plantation] and worked, there wasn't any difficulty with salary or with lack of money, things

> were very different. We always had a better life than we have now, better than the life that we are starting now, but I don't know how it will be from now on.

If the plantation owners did not fulfill their obligations to the workers and were seen as not trying hard enough, the workers exercised their historical right to leave the plantation. As a former rural worker said, "At that time, there wasn't anything holding you in one place. . . . I would spend two or three years in one place, and when that started to get bad I was already leaving for somewhere else." On the settlement, the rural workers exercised this same right to exit. One settler who became frustrated with the movement's inability to provide him with material assistance said, "I was part of the movement too, along with the boys, but afterwards I said, 'I am going to get out of this, because it's not going to work for me, just going all over the place and never getting anything together for myself. I am going to drop out.' " Although this settler had occupied the plantation with MST and undergone the formative experience of living in an encampment, he withdrew from settlement politics after his first disagreement with the other settlers: "I didn't vote [at the settlement's second association meeting]. . . . They called everyone together, but not everyone went, and so [those who went] did what they wanted. I myself, if I had been there, I wouldn't have voted for anyone. I prefer to be working on my land, battling slowly, rather than always being in meetings."

When the movement arrived in Água Preta, movement leaders were able to build their membership because they were in a position to provide the settlers with the same assistance they had come to expect from their former plantation bosses. Although the MST argues that access to land, running water, and electricity are basic rights due any citizen of the nation, in practice it was difficult for the settlers to believe in their rights as universal goods. MST leaders and activists were able to secure this material assistance for the settlers because of their ties to the local mayor's office. It was the mayor who had selected the settlement's agronomist, and the two maintained a close working relationship. Through the mayor, the movement was able to provide material assistance for the settlers. As a leader in the region said, "[At that time,] we never needed to go to Recife for a mobilization, for transportation, or even for food. [The mayor] always went to meetings, to give speeches, he participated in everything. . . . Whenever settlers affiliated with the MST needed the mayor's office, the doors were open."

In 2000, Flora's agronomist worked long hours on the mayor's reelection campaign, passing through all of the settlements in Água Preta and encouraging people to vote. When the mayor was reelected, the agronomist accepted a full-time position as his assistant. At the same time as the agronomist left the settlement (although his wife was still technically a settler on Flora), the MST

also rearranged its regional leadership, bringing in new leaders and activists. People considered the new leadership inconsiderate because it was unable to provide the sort of resources they had come to expect. Even though they understood that there were financial difficulties caused by the withdrawal of agrarian reform resources at the federal level, they still believed that the MST leadership was not trying hard enough. Their perception gained strength when the new leader violated local political norms by supporting an MST candidate for state deputy in the 2002 elections rather than the mayor's son, who was also running. Although the MST candidate belonged to a party closely allied with the movement at the national level (the Workers' party), even movement militants in Água Preta criticized the new leader for not supporting the mayor's son because, as one activist said, "after this last election, [our support] has diminished."

CONCLUSION

The MST is one of the most important political actors in Brazil today and the most important grassroots social movement in the country's history. People from across Brazil—including people in the sugarcane region—have joined the movement by occupying large farms or plantations and pressuring the government for a set of rights defined as those due any citizen of the nation. The movement will, however, have little effect on the social structure produced and supported by the sugarcane industry unless reforms are enacted with the region's specific history in mind. Function does not automatically follow form—place matters. The MST constructed a significant presence in the sugarcane region, but its mobilization efforts were weakened by the singular conception of land: according to Jaime Amorim, the movement was successful in building a national membership because "we picked an issue that united everyone—the land. [Land] is a necessity. Land is the word that unifies. Land became the element of the struggle. You offer the workers the opportunity to have land—but through an occupation [that they participate in]." An analysis of movement membership and politics in Água Preta suggests that land is indeed important but people attach many different meanings to it. A certain set of values or desires cannot be inferred from the act of joining the MST. Not all of the people who joined the MST in the sugarcane region of Pernambuco did so for the land, and even those who did want land wanted it for stability rather than subsistence and for political status rather than political rights.

As the MST continues to grow, its biggest challenge will be building an organization that can represent people from the many different regions of

Brazil who bring with them very different spatial imaginaries. The difficulty lies in the need for diversity and ideological and methodological coherence. As an MST leader from the South of Brazil said, "You have to fight diversity with diversity, but how do you do that and maintain a principle?" This struggle for inclusive representation has plagued rural social movements around the world, and the MST is no exception.

NOTES

1. A strip of land about 100 kilometers wide running along the coast from Sergipe to Rio Grande do Norte (see Andrade, 1988), the zona da mata is a humid tropical region that used to be covered with Atlantic forest, as was much of the country's eastern coast.

2. A "partial and voluntary" land distribution program, PROTERRA, was instituted in 1971, but the program was never very effective in distributing good-quality land, as mill and distillery owners were able to designate the land available for distribution. The program largely came to a halt when PROALCOOL was implemented in 1975, offering incentives for the production of ethanol from sugarcane (Andrade, 1988).

3. This information is updated regularly on MST-PE's web site, http://www.mst.org.br/mstpe/.

4. According to a report published by the mayor's office, in 2001 there were 24 settlements in Água Preta, 11 of which were established between 1973–1978 and 12 of which were established between 1992–2000.

5. Not the community's real name.

6. Slavery as an institution was abolished in 1888. Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to do so.

7. Martins (1981: 77–79) distinguishes between two groups of workers expelled with the rise of centralization and modernization: "peasants" (small-scale farmers) and "rural workers" (residents of the plantations who worked for the distilleries). Julião preferred to work with the peasants because they were better instruments of revolution (see also Forman, 1975).

8. The government's development program for the Amazon region, POLONORTE, was designed to attract both large and small farmers, while the development program for the Cerrado, the grasslands of the Center-West, POLOCENTRO, was largely designed for large-scale farmers who had the capital to purchase modern agricultural equipment.

9. The cost of fostering the inefficient industry is today conservatively valued at over US$6.5 billion (De Souza, Irmão, and Araújo, 1997: 3). In 1994 the cost of producing a ton of sugar in the Northeast was US$319.12 in comparison with US$216.05 in the South (Buarque, 1997: 2).

10. MST activists have created a national network by spreading out from the South into the rest of the country. In the mid-1980s, MST sent 20 young activists from the South to the Northeast, and since then only one has returned to the South. Many of those who remained in the Northeast continue to play key roles in the movement's leadership at the state levels. Perhaps the best example is Jaime Amorim, an activist from Santa Catarina who has been the leader of MST in Pernambuco for 12 years. Leaders such as Jaime are closely connected to the main offices of the movement and bring a remarkable uniformity to MST's ideology and actions in different regions. These activists make it possible for MST to coordinate demonstrations and land occupations throughout the country.

11. The number of occupations in Pernambuco rose steadily after 1992. The movement carried out 3 occupations in 1991, 9 in 1992, 35 in 1996, and 51 in 1997 (see the MST web site for Pernambuco: www.mst-pe.org.br).

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