

The Socio-Religious Origins of Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement

Sunday 10 December 2006, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: June 2001).

The widespread protest against the impunity, five years after the event, of the military police responsible for the 1996 massacre of nineteen Brazilian landless peasants who were occupying a road in Eldorado dos Carajás has once again drawn the attention of international opinion to the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), which stubbornly pursues—despite the murders or massacres of its members by the capangas (agents of the big landowners) or the police—its work of organizing, consciousness-raising, and mobilization for the rights of the poorest of the poor: the Brazilian rural workers. What are the origins and motivations of this movement?

In his famous study of “primitive”, and millenarian rural movements, the historian Eric Hobsbawm proceeds from the observation that the irruption of capitalism into traditional peasant societies, the introduction of economic liberalism, and mercantile social relations represent a real catastrophe for these societies, a genuine social cataclysm that disrupts and distorts them. Whether this coming of the modern capitalist world is an insidious process, by the operation of economic forces that the peasants don't understand, or a brutal irruption, by conquest or change of government, it is perceived by the peasants as an aggression which is fatal for their way of life. Mass peasant revolts against this new order—experienced as unbearably unjust—often take a millenarian form. [1]

If this movement remains archaic, as in the case of the village of Canudos, founded by the poor peasants of the Brazilian Northeast at the end of the nineteenth century under the leadership of the millenarian prophet Antonio Conselheiro, it is destined, Hobsbawm proves, to defeat; the peasants' “mystical” and prepolitical revolt was crushed by the army after a long and bloody conflict. But it can also become the point of departure for an actual modern social movement, as in the case of the Sicilian Peasant Leagues of 1891-1894. To be sure, this movement remained “primitive” and millenarian to the extent that the socialism preached by the leagues was, in the eyes of the Sicilian peasants, a new religion, the true religion of Christ—a religion betrayed by the priests allied to the rich—which heralded the coming of a new world, without poverty, hunger, and cold, following the will of God. Crosses and holy images were carried in their demonstrations and the movement, which included significant participation by women, spread in 1891-1894 like an epidemic before being crushed by repression. The peasant masses were stirred up by the messianic belief that the appearance of a new reign of justice was imminent. [2]

Yet, thanks to the modern organizational practices of the socialists, permanent peasant movements were able—despite the defeat in 1894—to take root in certain regions of Sicily: “Their original millenarian enthusiasm has been transmuted into something more durable: a permanent and organized allegiance to a modern social-revolutionary movement.” This evolution is not, in Hobsbawm's view, a simple replacement of the “archaic” by the “modern,” but a sort of “dialectical integration” of the first with the second: the Sicilian experience “shows that millenarianism need not be a temporary phenomenon but can, under favorable conditions, be the foundation of a permanent and exceedingly tough and resistant form of movement.” [3]

This analysis by the great English historian applies almost word for word to Brazil's Rural Landless Workers Movement, founded in 1985, with the one exception that the role of the Sicilian socialist agitators of the nineteenth century is replaced here by lay workers of the Brazilian Catholic Church, inspired by the novel form of Christian socialism called liberation theology.

Today the MST is one of the most important social movements in Brazil and in all of Latin America. [4] It brings together thousands of peasants, poor farmers, posseiros (small landowners without titles), and salaried agricultural workers—a significant proportion of them Women—in a tenacious combat against the formidably non-egalitarian structure of land ownership and for a radical agrarian reform. The term rural workers encompasses this diversity by emphasizing work and class as the common denominator and a basis for a necessary alliance with urban workers against neoliberalism.

Completely secular and nondenominational, the MST still has its roots in the socio-religious culture of what could be called "liberation Christianity." [5] We cannot understand its origin without alluding to the role of the Brazilian Church and in particular the Pastoral Land Commission.

After having supported the April 1964 military coup (in the name of the defense of Christian values against an imaginary "Bolshevik menace"), the Church became, in the 1970s, the main force of opposition to the dictatorial regime and to its strongly non-egalitarian development model. For the most advanced Catholic sector, inspired by liberation theology and inspiring, in turn, the ecclesiastical base communities (CEBs), responsibility for the people's poverty and sufferings lay with capitalism itself. For example, in a joint declaration of 1973, the bishops and superiors of religious orders in Brazil's Central Western Region published a document entitled "The Cry of the Churches," the conclusion of which was as follows: "Capitalism must be defeated: it is the greatest evil, the accumulated sin, the rotten root, the tree that produces all these fruits which we know so well: poverty, hunger, disease, death....For this reason, we must pass beyond private ownership of the means of production (factories, land, commerce, banks)." [6]

In his studies on economic history and the sociology of religion, Max Weber had already drawn attention to the "profound aversion" of the Catholic ethic—of Lutheranism as well—to capitalism's cold and impersonal spirit.

The profound aversion [tiefe Abneigung] which every capitalist initiative inspired in the Catholic ethic...is essentially based on the fear of the impersonal nature of the relations that are established by a capitalist economy. This impersonality has the effect of tearing certain human relations away from the influence that the Church has over them, keeping it from permeating them or molding them with an ethical point of view. "This" traditional attitude is found again in the positions of the most radical current of Brazilian Catholicism, with two important differences: a) the moral protest against capitalism is supplemented by a modern social analysis, of a Marxist inspiration (dependency theory); b) the poor are no longer perceived primarily as victims and objects for compassion and charity but as the subjects of their own history, the actors in their own liberation.

Of all the structures tied to the Church, few have incarnated this "preferential option for the poor" in as radical and consistent a fashion as the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT). A vast network composed both of members of the clergy—especially from the religious orders, but also priests and even some bishops—and also of lay people of various types—theologians, experts, Bible scholars, sociologists and above all, lay workers, often coming from the rural milieu—the CPT, founded in 1975, has been a formidable school for peasant leaders. [8]

At first established in the North Region—Amazonia—and the Northeast Region, it has spread out little by little to the whole of the country; thanks to its direct connection to the CNBB (National Conference of Brazilian Bishops). The Commission enjoys considerable autonomy in relation to the

local parish structures, and is not dependent on the good will of the bishops of each region. [9]

Many lay workers, but also some members of the clergy—Father Josimo Tavares, the organizer in the so-called Parrot's Beak region (in Para state), is just the best-known example—have paid with their lives for the CPT's active and intransigent commitment to the side of the rural workers struggling for their rights.

The millenarianism of the CPT—but also of the CEBs and in a general way of liberation Christianity—is expressed in the socio-religious utopia of the “Kingdom of God,” not as a transcendent quality projected into another world, but as a new society here on earth, one based on love, justice, and freedom. However, contrary to traditional millenarian beliefs, this “Kingdom” is not conceived as imminent but as the result of a long march—*caminhada* is the Brazilian word—toward the Promised Land, following the biblical model of the Exodus. The present social struggles are theologically interpreted as stages that prefigure and herald the “Kingdom.” A reading of the Bible that is innovative and charged with a social sense of history is one of the decisive formative elements in this *sui generis* millenarian faith and its transmission into working-class strata. [10]

One of the central characteristics of the CPT's socio-religious culture, which is found in its entirety in the MST, is the critique of the drastic social consequences of the introduction of capitalism in the countryside—unemployment, eviction of peasants, pauperization, and the exodus from the countryside. This is accompanied by the denunciation of the authoritarian “modernization” policies of the military dictators and their “Pharaonic” projects and protests against the neoliberal orientation of the civilian governments that have replaced the military regime beginning in 1985.

Starting from liberation Christianity's fundamental postulate— that the poor are the subjects of their own history—the CPT has given itself the objective of assisting the self-organization of the rural workers. Respecting the autonomy of the social movements and their secular nature, the CPT rejects the traditional clerical conception of the “Christian” union—or party. It is a question simply of aiding, encouraging, supporting, and protecting—against police repression, or repression by the big landowners' agents—agricultural workers' efforts to organize themselves. As Sergio Gorgen, a Franciscan and one of the main organizers of the CPT in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, writes: “The CPT does not replace class organizations. It tries to contribute, to advise, to help in consciousness-raising, to improve the forms of organizing, to study reality scientifically, but it does not replace the representative organs of the workers.” [11]

However, in practice, the distinction between “advise” (*assessorar*)—the Brazilian term is richer than the English in its multiple meanings—and “manage” is not always easy to maintain. Inevitable tensions and conflicts arose during the years of the MST's formation between the autonomous organization and certain members of the clergy in the CPT. [12]

The MST was established in the course of the years 1979-1985, first in certain states in the south of Brazil, and afterwards in the entire country. From the beginning—the epic struggle of the Encruzilhada Natalino encampment: a thousand days of confrontation with the military and the local and federal authorities (1981-83)—the movement introduced new methods of struggle including the “illegal” occupations of idle land and the setting up of democratically self-managed camps. Often, the landless were brutally evicted by the military police, but in some cases the great visibility of these occupations and their support by the Church, the unions, and the left parties forced the government to negotiate.

An important stage in the movement's establishment was the regional (South) meeting in January 1984 in Cascavel (Parana state), the first one organized by the members themselves and not the CPT. Among the resolutions adopted were a declaration of autonomy in relation to the CPT as well

as all other institutions, and the definition of the movement's objectives: agrarian reform and a new society that is "just and egalitarian, different from capitalism." The MST was "officially" founded in Curitiba—capital of Parana state—in January 1985, at the time of the First Congress of the Associations of Landless Peasants, in the presence of 1,500 delegates who had come from the majority of Brazil's states. The final document denounces the Land Statute granted by the military as capitalist, anti-popular, and favorable to the concentration of landed property.

The CPT supplied a decisive contribution to this process of self-organization, but tensions appeared gradually as the movement was freeing itself from its "advisers." Some members of the clergy and some bishops had trouble accepting that the MST would escape entirely from their friendly solicitude and would not follow their reasonable advice. The question of "violence" crystallized the disagreements. For example, at the time of the occupation of the Annoni estate (Rio Grande do Sul), forty-nine progressive bishops-participating in the Sixth Interchurch Encounter of the CEBs in July 1986—published a declaration which supported the occupation but laid great emphasis on its peaceful character and warned the movement, in veiled terms, against an "explosion of violence" which would have a "bloody repression" as its consequence. [13]

But, little by little, the organizers of the CPT and the majority of the bishops who are close to it have resigned themselves to the MST's separation, and have supplied a consistent support while respecting its autonomy. [14]

The MST was therefore constituted as an independent movement—one that is very jealous of its independence!—secular and nondenominational, that is, open to Catholics and Protestants, believers and nonbelievers. (It must be said that the latter are rare in the rural milieux and are found primarily among the—numerous—urban political activists who cooperate with the MST.) Despite this "nondenominationalization," it is no secret to anyone that the great majority of the active members and cadres of the MST are originally from the CPT and the CEBs; some have retained ties with these structures, but all of them borrowed their socio-religious culture and the deepest ethical motivation for their commitment from liberation Christianity.

Here we are touching on the question of the MST's millenarianism or, as it is put in Brazil, its "mystique." According to Eric Hobsbawm, millenarianism must not be considered solely as "a touching survival from an archaic past," but as a cultural force that remains active, in another form, in modern social and political movements. The conclusion that he proposes at the end of his chapter devoted to the Sicilian Peasant Leagues has, clearly, a broader and more universal historical, social and political significance: "... [W]hen harnessed to a modern movement, millenarianism can not only become politically effective but it may do so without the loss of that zeal, that burning confidence in a new world, and that generosity of emotion which characterizes it even in its most primitive... forms." [15]

The socio-religious utopia of liberation Christianity is present, implicitly or explicitly, in the numerous rituals that mark the struggles and the way of life in the MST's encampments: celebrations, processions, marches, songs, speeches. These rituals, organized by the cadres and members of the movement—of whom the majority are oriented towards liberation theology—are well received by the peasants, despite the fact that the majority of the population of the camps is closer to (Catholic) traditional popular religious practice—belief in the magical powers of the saints—than to the new theology. A growing minority of neo-Pentecostalist Protestants is also present, a little disconcerted by the simultaneously Catholic and politicized ambiance of the encampments, but drawn by the struggle for the land. Two other minorities, less important, of European origin and present especially in the south of the country, are the "Romanized" Catholics (strictly obeying the doctrine of the Vatican) and the historical Lutherans, who are often close to liberation theology. [16]

But the “mystique”—not in the strictly religious meaning of the word, but in the broader sense that Charles Peguy gives it— pervades the MST’s secular socio-religious culture in a more general fashion. The term is used by the members themselves to designate the moral intransigence, the emotional commitment, the devotion to the cause at the risk of one’s life, the hope for a radical social change. The movement’s mystique displays itself, writes Joao Pedro Stedile, one of the principal leaders of the MST, “in the symbols of our culture, in our values, in the conviction that you have to struggle,” and above all in the belief in “the possibility of a more just and fraternal society.” [17]

This secular mystique and this lay millenarianism are present in the rituals, the texts, the speeches, the education of the movement’s activists. They represent a sort of investment of the members’ “believing energy” in the MST’s revolutionary utopia.

This stubborn faith in the coming of a new society “different from capitalism”—the lay equivalent of the “Kingdom”—does not prevent the MST from acting with a perfectly modern rationality, by setting itself immediate and concrete objectives, by negotiating with the authorities from a position of strength, by organizing profitable and productive agricultural cooperatives. This successful synthesis of utopia and realism has undoubtedly contributed to making the Landless Rural Workers Movement not only the organized expression of the struggle of the poor of the countryside for a radical agrarian reform, but also the central reference for all the forces of Brazil’s “civil society”—unions, churches, left parties, professional and academic associations—which struggle against neoliberalism.

NOTES

(1.) E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (New York: Norton Library, 1959), 3, 67, 119.

(2.) *Primitive Rebels*, 98-101.

(3.) *Primitive Rebels*, 101-05.

(4.) For the MST, see the articles by Maurice Lemoine and Philippe Revelli in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. For the general context of the new peasant movements in Latin America, readers can consult James Petras’ interesting work, *La izquierda vuelve el golpe*, (Rosario, Argentina: Ed. Homo Sapiens, 1997).

(5.) I understand by this term the vast social movement, including lay ministries and the CEBs [ecclesiastical base communities], which since the beginning of the 1960s has mobilized millions of Christians in all of Latin America on the side of grassroots struggles—a movement of which liberation theology, which made its appearance during the 1970s, is the spiritual expression. For more detailed information, I refer readers to my own work, *The War of the Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996).

(6.) *Los Obispos Latinoamericanos entre Medellin y Puebla*, (San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana, 1978), 71.

(7.) Max Weber, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, (Munich: Dunker & Humboldt, 1923), 305.

(8.) The Brazilian researcher Luis Inacio Germany Gaiger feels that the CPT’s lay workers have played the role of “organic intellectuals” (in the Gramscian sense) in the peasant movement in the beginning—cf. *Agentes religiosos e camponeses sem terra no sul do Brasil*, (Petropolis: Vozes, 1987), 58-60. The bishops who have been the most active in supporting the CPT are Mgr. Moacir Grechi,

president of the CPT, Mgr. Pedro Casaldaliga, bishop of Sao Felix do Araguaia, and Mgr. Tomas Balduino, bishop of Goias. Cf. Pe. Jose Oscar Beozzo, *A Igreja do Brasil*, (Petropolis: Vozes, 1994), 129-30.

(9.) Cf. Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil 1916-1985*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1986), 178-81, and L. I. G. Gaiger, *Agentes religiosos.*, 34.

(10.) See, for example, the book by the Bible scholar and Benedictine Marcelo de Barros Souza, published by the CPI, *A Biblia e a luta pela terra*, (Petropolis, Vozes/CPT, 1983).

(11.) Frei Sergio Antonio Gorgen, *Os cristaos e a questao do terra*, (S. Paulo: Editora FTD, 1987), 67-68.

(12.) Interview with S. Gorgen, June 5, 1999.

(13.) Addendum in S. Gorgen, *Os cristaos e a questao do terra*, 76.

(14.) Interview with S. Gorgen, June 5, 1999.

(15.) *Primitive Rebels*, 106-07. Once again, we are not far from the moral universe of the Brazilian MST.

(16.) Cf. Frei Sergio Gorgen, "Religiosidade e fe na luta pela terra," in Joao Pedro Stedile (ed.), *A Reforma Agraria e a Luta do MST*, (Petropolis: Vozes, 1997), 285-291.

(17.) Joao Pedro Stedile, "A luta pela reforma agraria e o MST," *A Reforma Agraria e a Luta do MST*, 105.

In the sphere of agriculture, large-scale industry has a more revolutionary effect than elsewhere, for the reason that it annihilates the bulwark of the old society, the "peasant," and substitutes for him the wage-labourer. Thus the need for social transformation, and the antagonism of the classes, reaches the same level in the countryside as it has attained in the towns.

— Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 15, section 10.

COPYRIGHT 2001 Monthly Review Foundation, Inc.

P.S.

* From the Monthly Review, June, 2001.

* Michael Lowy is the author of *On Changing the World* (Boston: Humanities Press, 1992). He is Research Director in Sociology at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) and is Guest Lecturer at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, both in Paris. He is a frequent contributor to Monthly Review.