

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE POLITICAL BEING

Carlos Pessoa¹

Abstract. There has been a great level of research on the capacity of social movements to create fundamental transformations. Among the literature, the question of how social movement are perceived as political is an important one. This article points how the concept of the political is an important area to be discussed, before one can analyze whether social movements holds political transformative capacity. The article discusses two concepts of the political, personified and collective-strategy. It then takes the example of the Brazilian social movement Landless Peasants (MST – Movimento dos Sem-Terra) to affirm the relevance of the collective-strategy conception of the political.

Key-words: Social Movements, The Political, Movement Landless Peasants.

Movimentos Sociais e o Ser Político

Resumo: Tem havido um grande nível de pesquisa sobre a capacidade dos movimentos sociais criarem transformações fundamentais. Na literatura, a questão de como os movimentos sociais são percebidos como políticos é de fundamental importância. Este artigo aponta como o conceito do político é uma importante questão a ser discutida antes que se possa analisar se os movimentos sociais abraçam uma capacidade de transformação política. O artigo discute dois conceitos do político, o personificado e a estratégia coletiva. A partir deles, toma o exemplo do Movimento dos Sem Terra – MST, para afirmar a relevância da concepção coletivo-estratégica do político.

Palavras-chave: Movimentos Sociais, O Político, Movimento dos Sem Terra.

1 Introduction

A key question of debate in the research of social movements is the possibility of social movement to be engaged on a political strategy

¹ Professor at Saint Mary's University, Canada.

or carry out fundamental political transformations. The question can be laid as the following: How can a social movement contest dominant political structures of the regime in place? In Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, the political capacity of social movements drew attention mostly through their activism against military regimes back in the 1970s.

During the 1970s, while protesting against social conditions and economical policies of the military regime, social movements were taken at to demonstrate potential for political transformations. In the 1980s, and spreading throughout 1990s, the process of democratisation brought back the role of the old actors, such political parties. They became the main element at the political scene. A number of social movements saw discussions of their demands been taken place at the constitutional arena, eventually draining their very *raison d'être* at the new political context (FOWERAKER, 1995).

The story is well documented in various works relating to social movements in the Brazilian context, and Latin America more generally.² However, it also tells us the widespread conceptual disagreement on the very notion of the political and, consequently, how exactly social movements are to be taken as being engaged on a political strategy. At times, social movements are perceived as political for questioning the state's economic policies; other times solely for politicizing issues that until then were taken as apolitical. In other words, there is no clear conceptual agreement on how a social movement can be conceived as taken a political turn.³

In this article, I discuss two possible conceptions of the political, which I will term them as the personified and the collective-strategic notion of the political. The two concepts became dominant through research on social movement as conceptual anchor to define whether a social movement was political or not. I start by firstly discussing how criticisms of the classical concept of the political led to these two conceptions. After going over these two concepts of the political, I shall argue that the Brazilian MST's experience during late 1990s validates the collective-strategic notion of the political.

² One of the best accounts of this period of time is given in Assies (1990).

³ This lack of clarity on the notion of the political and political strategy is also noticeable in some works post-1980s. See G. L. Munck (1995) and T. Jordan (1995).

2 On the political

Traditionally, politics has been intrinsically related to the state apparatus and its personnel. A classic reference of this view comes from the work of the American political scientist David Easton. For Easton, politics referred basically to the institutional order of the state, which provides the terrain for 'authoritative allocation of values'. Politics, then, consists of the various activities in which government responds to the demands of the society by allocating benefits, rewards or penalties (EASTON, 1979; 1981). The consequence of this notion is that the political being is typologically bounded with the state. In this way of reasoning, politics is seen as the result of actions taken in cabinet rooms, legislative chambers, and political parties' activities. Political actors refer to party politicians, civil servants, and lobbyists. Others institutions situated outside the state machinery, such, schools, business groups, community associations are left outside of the realm of politics.

In such state-centred notion of politics, the political strategy of a social movement would basically refer to the relations that it holds with state institutions. The focus, then, is how a social movement relates to institutions such as political parties, political executive, or members of the parliament; and the effects of such relation on the movement's activism and demands. From 1960s onwards, however, strong criticisms were directed toward the notion of state-politics. One finds at the site of these criticisms two main conceptual developments on the notion of the political from which I will now turn.

2.1 Personified notion of the political

The first conceptual development that rose from the critical stand towards the traditional notion of politics is closely related with the social movements' activism occurring the 1960s. At this period of time, issues of racism, sexism, and identity among others, did not have a wide public recognition as systemic oppression at various corners of the world. Women's movements, for instance, brought the understanding that the exploitative and exclusionary conditions were not unique, but widely shared by women in their work, marriage, culture, child-fostering and language. The exclusionary conditions experienced at personal level were taken as to entail systemic socio-political layout. Similar understandings were taken in relation to blacks, gays, the poor and so on. In other words, the personal experiences and conditions that limited one's growth was widely

shaped by and social and political settings. The feminist motto 'The personal is political' became widely known to represent such conceptual notion.⁴

Kate Millet's "Sexual Politics" is just an example of such conception. In the development of a 'theory of sexual politics', she takes the step to reconsider the notion of politics. She argues that:

In introducing the term "sexual politics", one must first answer the inevitable question "Can the relationship between sexes be viewed in a political light at all?" The answer depends on how one defines politics. This essay does not define the political as that relatively narrow and exclusive world of meeting, chairmen, and parties. The term "politics" shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another (MILLET, 1972, p. 23).

Here one finds politics equated with power relations ('power-structured relationship') and no longer just within the State institutional sphere. It is taken to represent systemic power relations, which could be found to any sphere of society. There were at least two implications that came from this conceptual development. First, the political is no longer bounded within state apparatus, but it is diffused into the civil society. Here various social issues that up to then were taken as apolitical, for been situated in the private realm or taken as secondary, were revealed as consisting an intrinsic political nature. It challenged, then, the conception of the state as the locus of politics.

The second implication of this conceptual development was to move the notion of the political into the particularity of the social struggle. The systematic boundary of the political went from representing the boundaries of the community to the boundaries of a particular sector of the community. The consequence of this latter implication was that the mere existence of a social struggle to a particular demand or issue was taken as being political. One finds, then, of what others have called an 'epistemology of provenance', where oppressive experience is taken as to directly represent, and thus a legitimate ground, of a political stance (KRUKS, 2001).

The particularistic/personified notion of the political has had great level of influence on how groups think over their particular demands and actions. Woman groups, as well as Black movements are

⁴ Women's movement drew particularly heavy on this notion. See Sara M. Evans (1979).

often taken as the classical examples of where such reasoning has carried an important impact. But one can also find in other groups such as gays and lesbian in their queer politics (BLASIUS, 2001), indigenous groups (ALFRED, 1999), and disable people in a politics of disability (DAVIS, 1997), as well as variety of academic disciplines.⁵

One finds, then, a trend of fragmented type of politics such as 'identity politics', 'lifestyle politics', and 'food politics', where particular sectors such as women, blacks, ethnic minorities, and even the way to dress, to eat, consume, and talk, are taken as constituting a political nature by its mere experience of any form of social oppressiveness. A key issue, then, is that there is an emphasis and focus on the *self*-transformation rather than *social* transformation. Political strategies, as in so far as to align with other social sectors, are diminished of its level of importance. This is exactly what differentiates from the collective-strategic notion of the political.

2.2 Collective-strategic notion of the Political

A second development can be pointed from the re-thinking of the traditional notion of the political. It shares the move of the notion of the political from being intrinsically linked to the domain of the State. However, it has taken some key conceptual dissonance with the personified notion of the political. The most important one is that it puts back the notion of the political as relating to the universal boundaries of the community. It sees the rise of the political not in the systemic conditions of certain sector of the population, and their eventual struggle, but in the strategic construction that brings them together to formalize the boundaries of the community. This second development can be understood as collective-strategic notion of the political. Two examples of this conceptual development come from the works of Claude Lefort and Ernesto Laclau.

Lefort formalises a distinction between politics (*la politique*) and the political (*le politique*) mainly in order to detach the state institutional domains as the sole place for politics. For Lefort, politics refers to the state institutional arena with political activities such election, partisan competition. The political, however, Lefort conceptualise it as the shaping of the whole. The political is the institution of the social that brings divisions together within society and gives them meaning as one (LEFORT, 1988).

⁵ See, for instance, Onyango and Tamale (1995) and Koppelman (1993).

The main implication that rises from Lefort's intervention is a notion of the political as a construction of the overall boundary of society. In contrast to the idea of the personified political, the political relates the creation of a social formation, a set of social relations among society's sectors. In this sense, the political is put into a social-collective unit. Another example that follows similar re-thinking of the political, although with much conceptual complexities and elaboration, comes from the work of Ernesto Laclau.

Ernesto Laclau is generally known for his work on hegemony, co-authored with Chantal Mouffe (LACLAU and MOUFFE, 1985). "Hegemony and Socialist strategy" was an initiative to re-orient the Left into an anti-essentialist strategy that could possible articulate number of diverse social actors towards a radical democratic project. Laclau's work, however, can also been taken as to construct an innovative conception of the Political.

The key aspect of the Laclau's conception is to distinguish between the social/the political. The political sets the overall face of the former (with its institutions and practices). The Political, then, holds primacy over the social, as it is what sets apart from other societal organization.⁶ In other words, it is the Political Face of a society. Political institutions (parliaments, party-systems, etc) are 'sedimented forms of objectivity', particular institutions well established within a social formation. They are sedimented in so far as their existence, functions and procedures are no longer explicitly linked to any political discourse (LACLAU, 1990, p. 34). In other words, they have been naturalized. The starting point for re-thinking the political, then, consists on the political reactivation of the original moment of segmented social relations in order to demonstrate very political formation of the given, and often naturally taken, social relations.

There are two main theoretical elements in Laclau's notion of the political, which are important to this present discussion. First, the political rises when a social actor engages on an articulatory strategy towards the construction of the universal boundaries of a community. Second, this construction has limits and antagonism, established by exclusion of a social element of the social arrangement, is what shapes the boundary of the political.

The first aspect that comes in Laclau notion of the political is its relation with an articulatory construction of the universal

⁶ For the primacy of the political see Laclau (1990).

boundaries of the community. In opposite to a personified notion of the political, the political subject is located in the process of creating a systemic frontier within which various social elements becomes moments of a hegemonic discourse (LACLAU and MOUFFE, 1985). For Laclau, this move towards an articulatory strategy is an essential step by any social actor, who wants to engage in a political action. In a later exchange, Laclau posed the issue in the following general manner:

The central point is that for a certain demand, subject position, identity, and so on, to become political means that is *something other* than itself, living its own particularity as a moment or link in a chain of equivalence that transcends and, in this way, universalizes it (LACLAU, 2000, p. 210).

For Laclau, then, the political cannot be situated not the particularity of a social struggle, but on the construction of the universal boundaries of the community. The chain of equivalences occurs when a number of different social bodies come together as one, commonly negating a particular politico-social order. The overall negation boundary that shapes the Political, tells us the second theoretical element important to Laclau's conception of the Political: the role of antagonism.

Closely resembling Schmittian notion of the political, antagonism plays a key-defining role in Laclau's notion of the political. The moment of antagonism, then is '...where the undecidable nature of alternatives and their resolutions through power relations that becomes fully visible, constitutes the field of the political' (LACLAU, 1990, p. 34-35). In that sense, antagonism is not based on a sharing commonality of a particular logic of exclusion (based on class, gender, race), but arrives with the construction of the enemy as shared among a set of social elements. In all, for Laclau, the political rises when various social elements (social movements, social actor, regional or local leaders, union, etc) takes the aim to formalize or become part of alternative community, commonly holding an antagonistic relation towards a social element (or an exclusionary system of power relations). This level of radicality in the construction of the universal boundaries of the community makes Laclau a radical communitarian.

As in case with Lefort, the political in Laclau's work returns to the site of the universal boundaries of the community. However, it is not that the political moves away from particularity completely into universality. To the extent that a particular social agent engages an

articulatory strategy towards a construction of a universal social formation excluding certain social element, particularity is not completely absorbed by universality. In other words, the political is the construction a particular universality, where social element can maintain its particular but demonstrate its political side, by engaging with others into a wider struggle.

Regarding social movements and its possible political action, by following Laclau's elaboration on the political, a social movement that maintains with its own struggle - fighting for its own cause and with no horizontal link to other social actors - is not being political at all. In order to engage itself on a political strategy, a social movement needs to come together with other social movements or actors towards a new overall social formation that commonly antagonizes a system of power relations.⁷

To summarize, then, the questioning to the traditional conception of politics has led to a clear conceptual separation between the political and politics. The two recent conceptual developments that came from this re-thinking were the personified notion and the collective-strategical one. Both equally set the political as having no necessary link with the State institutional realm and moves into the civil society. Both equally argue that the political can rise from any domain of society. However, while the personified notion of the political grants the political to the particularity of the struggle, the collective-strategic notion denies it and links to an articulatory strategy towards forming the boundaries of a community. In this sense, following Heidegger terms, the former establishes an ontic notion of the political, while the latter aims to establish a more ontological notion of the political. From these brief theoretical discussions, we can turn discussions to the empirical case of the Brazilian Landless Movement.

3 A case of the political: movimento dos sem-terra (MST)

Taken to be the biggest social movement in Latin America, the MST (*Movimento dos Sem-Terra*) is active in 23 out of the 27 states in

⁷ Laclau finalises his argument by putting a "basic political dilemma of our age" in direct relation to social movements: "will the proliferation of new social actors lead to the enlargement of the equivalent chains which will enable the emergence of strong collective wills; or will they dissolve into mere particularism, making it easier for the system to integrate and subordinate them?" See Laclau (2000, p. 210).

Brazil involving almost 1.5 million people.⁸ The MST is an important movement to discuss not only for its size, but also in face of the general idea that this century we have witnessed the 'death of peasantry', where peasants are taken as a numerically reduced sector and eventually have lost their significance as political actor.⁹

Although one can historically point to colonial agricultural structure as a factor in the creation of the movement, there were also three main factors that set the conditions for the formation of the MST in the early 1980s. First, the economic crisis in the late 1970s created harsh conditions (mainly unemployment) that decrease migration from rural to urban areas. In this sense, more landless peasants were available for mobilization at rural areas. The second factor was the Catholic Church was the second major factor in the formation of the MST. Established in the 1970s to expose and combat the rural violence in the rural areas, the Catholic group CPT (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*) provided support and assistance to rural workers in the formation of the MST early 1980s. The last factor was the oppositional climate against the military that greatly grew in the beginning of the 1980s and reactive various sectors of civil society.¹⁰ In all, these factors influenced the formation of the movement on January 1984, in the city of Cascavel, state of Paraná.

There have been different approaches taken towards the MST and the implications of its activism. The MST has been taken to represent a leftist resurgence with innovate practices, demonstrating that utopia is not 'unarmed' in the region (MOUTERDE, 2002). The MST has also be taken as to have created paradigm implications on how peasant movements can still be conceived as being an effective social actor in the economic and rural structure of society (MESZAROS, 2000; PETRAS and VELTMEYER, 2001). At the same time, the MST has faced such a violent response from landowners and the local police that it has been approached through the dimension of human rights. In general, there has been more implication being drawn from human rights groups and NGOs than academic research. According to the catholic group CPT, from the end of military regime 1986 to 1998 there were 1,167 assassinations of rural workers. Of these, only eighty-six cases have made it to the courts. The MST has faced with direct physical violence and politically motivated criminal charges that have created serious questions to the Brazilian authorities

⁸ MST's own data at web-site <http://www.mst.org.br>.

⁹ This view has been best popularised by Eric Hobsbawn (1994, p. 289-293).

¹⁰ For an account over these factors see Maria I. S. Paullilo (1996).

and at the same time seen as to expose ‘deep flaws’ in the Brazilian judicial system.¹¹

The MST has also been taken from a socio-legal perspective where the legal dynamics involving legislation, legality, and legal institutions are taken as central in relation to the question of land (HAMOND, 1999; MESZAROS, 2000). In relation to the MST’s own land settlements, an innovative pedagogical system has equally brought attention of its benefits under a challenging environment (CALDT, 2000; KANE, 2001). Amidst this body of literature existing on the MST, there is not much discussion on the political strategy taken by the movement. In that sense, the paper not only deals with the broad theme of social movement and political strategy but also aim to contribute to the already existent literature on the MST. I will start discussion by firstly giving an exposition of the Brazilian rural context, which is dominated by land concentration and poverty.

3.1 Social context

By 1996, the governmental agency responsible for handling land reform INCRA (*Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária*) gave some data on the land concentration. The *latifúndios*, consisting of 35.083 properties, forms only 1% of the registered estates. They occupied about 15 million hectares, which is almost half of all the rural properties added together.¹² Furthermore, only about 30% of the agricultural area is actually used to cultivate. In the North region, the cultivated land on the possible agricultural area goes all the way down to only 13.6%.¹³

At the same time, poverty was particularly strict in the rural areas. World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, for instance, has pointed out that ‘about 50% of the Brazilian poor live in rural areas, and the incidence of the poverty among the rural

¹¹ See CPT – Comissão Pastoral da Terra - Brasil 98 (Goiania: CPT, 1999); Amnesty International Brazil: Eldorado dos Carajás – Hopes Betrayed (London Amnesty Press Release: 2002); Brazil: Rural activists once again under attack in Southern Para (London: Amnesty International News Service 2001); Brazil: Political motivated criminal charges against land reform activists. London Amnesty International: 1997).

¹² If one would assume that each of these properties had a different owner, which is far from the being the case, it would be as if about 35 thousand people own an area equal to France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and Austria. See *Veja* 16/04/97.

¹³ *Minifundio* is defined by the INCRA methodology as a small plot of land that cannot hold sustainable productivity. Source: INCRA, *Atlas Fundiário Brasileiro 1996* (Brasília: INCRA, 1996).

population is more than double that in large cities and urban areas'.¹⁴ It is under these social and structural conditions that one finds agrarian reform as one of the most urgent demand to solve poverty in the Brazilian society.

In legal terms, the 1988 Brazilian Constitution enables the Federal Government to confiscate any large unproductive rural property as long as it is not 'carrying its social function' and the landowner is paid a fair price beforehand. On the constitution, the notion of 'social function' makes references to a 'rational and appropriate use of the land' for the well being of its proprietor and workers.¹⁵ The vague way of defining 'social function' has allowed various landowners to have an unwritten advantage in the judiciary system, known for its bias towards property owners.

It is under such social and rural structural conditions that one find the MST. The movement vindicates and pursues agrarian reform through direct land occupation of unused public and private lands, occupation of public buildings, as well as carrying protests and marches. The MST is basically composed of those excluded of land ownership. In this sense, the MST brings a variety of peasant and rural workers under its organisation that in turn creates some terminological issues who exactly takes part of the movement. I will now turn to the composition of the MST in order to analyse this issue.

3.2 The strategic political move

By late 1980, the MST had already acquired national dimensions. National conferences and Congress would bring representative from various corners of the country. It would be at the National Congresses that the MST would hold discussions on tactics and strategies.¹⁶ The first key aspect to be highlighted in the political move taken by the MST, then, is its articulatory strategy that came from discussion on its National Congress. On the 7th National Meeting December 1993 (Salvador, Bahia), various key strategic issues took the centre of discussion. Although ambiguous and without much consistency, the main point to be highlighted here is the initiative to

¹⁴ For a general exposition of rural poverty see the World Bank, *Brazil Land Reform and Poverty Alleviation* (1997) at <http://www.worldbank.org/pics/pid/br50772.txt>; and Inter-American Development Bank, *Self - Sufficiency for Agrarian Reform Settlements* (1997) at <http://www.iadb.org/exr/doc98/pro/ubr0274.htm>.

¹⁵ Articles 184-186 of the Brazilian Constitution.

¹⁶ While National Meetings are held every two years, National Congress is held every five year.

articulate with other social struggles. Among the issues settled, there were two main issues that have important relevance to this discussion.¹⁷ The first issue is of tactical nature. The MST made the decision to expand its range of tactics in order to press for agrarian reform. The movements decided not only to better organise occupations of lands, but also to carry marches, occupation of public buildings, etc. This expansion of tactics would carry important political implication later on.

The second issue, and the most important issue to this discussion, the MST established a strategical move to co-ordinate with other sectors of the society. It aimed to strengthen its link with the Workers Central Union - CUT (a national confederation of unions) and other urban groups. It's exactly at this point that one sees the MST taking initiative to link the demand of agrarian reform with other social demands of employment, privatisation, and homeless issues. Following a collective-strategic notion of the political, the move to horizontally articulate the MST with other social struggles carried important political ramification. It was an initial manoeuvre from which one find the MST taking joined actions with other rural and urban movements for other causes than just agrarian reform. For example, the MST has taken various co-joined actions organised by the combative union CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*), CNBB (*Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*), OAB (*Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil*), CMP (*Central de Movimentos Populares*) student groups, and other urban groups such as *Sem-Teto* (Without-Roof). Among other actions, there was occupation of public buildings aiming to disrupt privatization plans of state companies; protest and marches against unemployment and for urban reform. It also carried social actions that brought together sectors engaging on a momentarily demand against the government.¹⁸

One see in these co-joined actions, a clear articulatory strategy that brings together various sectors of the society taken as 'excluídos' ('excluded) in opposition to the government. Agrarian reform, at this point, is linked to other various social demands, that formalize a political opposition to the government in power. One finds, then, a collective-strategic political stand in so far as the MST is able to bring various social issues together in an antagonist relation to the

¹⁷ As quoted in Veltmeyer et al (1997, p.191).

¹⁸ For example on September 1997, the MST came together not only with CUT, Sem-Teto, federal civil servants, oil workers, and even with the civil and military police, who at that time on strike for higher wages. See *Folha de São Paulo* 3/07/97; 26/07/97; 12/12/97; 24/12/97.

government. Although all the actions took a political character, not other event best symbolised such political move as the 1997 March for Agrarian Reform, Employment and Justice (*Marcha para Reforma Agraria, Emprego e Justica*).

3.3 National march for agrarian reform, employment and justice

On the February 17, 1997, the MST started a march from various corners of the country to reach the country capital - Brasília - on the anniversary of the Eldorado de Carajás massacre (April 17). By the time the 1,500 *sem-terra* arrived in Brasília, the march had brought in various other segments of the population with a wide set of social demands. The march became a key event for the MST since it demonstrated its ability to aggregate a wide social response not just for agrarian reform, but a wide set of social issues. For many then, the MST moved beyond its particular demand for agrarian reform and brought to the capital 'a global project for solving the most acute social problems.'¹⁹ The political aspect of the march was clear from its very name. Not just focusing on the movement's main objective (land reform), the issue on unemployment had already taken its toll as a consequence of the government economic policies. At the same time, the signifier 'Justice' was taken broadly enough to include various movements from which the administration was taken as responsible for their exclusionary social conditions.

The initial negative response, however, did not come from the government, but from the media. By trying to portray the marchers as a small sector of radical, lacking representativeness of the wide rural population, the media took its part on the verbally bashing against the MST. For example, the news weekly magazine *Veja* presented the march as 'The March of the Radicals' - *A Marcha dos Radicais*. However, by the time of the march's arrival in Brasília, it became clear that this was not a demonstration of a small sectarian group, but a social event being held by a variety of social sectors against the government.²⁰ The political nature of the event can be perceived not

¹⁹ See Clovis Moura (2000, p. 134). The Minister of Finance, Pedro Malan, commented that the march 'was like May 68 in France' (*Veja*, 23/04/97, p. 30).

²⁰ See *Veja* 16/April/1997. By the time of its arrival, the March was composed by the following groups 2000 landless, 2000 Sem-teto (Roofless), 2.000 - 5.000 unemployed metalworkers, 150 natives leaders, 5.000 public servants, 4.200 professors. NGOs and other groups: Núcleo de Serviços de Paz e Justiça, Movimento Nacional dos Meninos e Meninas de Rua, Comissão de

only from the wide number of social actors involved in the march, but especially from the government's own response.

3.4 Government response

Agrarian reform only became a main issue to Cardoso's administration after the international outcry to the Eldorado Massacre in April 1996, where nineteen members of the MST were killed on a road blockage. Cardoso created a new ministry – Extraordinary Ministry for Land Policy – that would have direct link with him, and surpassing the ministry of agriculture. The New Minister, Raul Jungman, had, at first, amicable relation with the MST.

By 1997, MST intensified its well-established actions of land and public building occupations. The period between 1995-1997 one finds encampments of occupied land more than doubling its numbers, and involving higher numbers of families. It is at this context the national march of April 1997 happens, going right at the heart of the Brazilian State power. At this point, the then Minister of Justice, Nelson Jobim, urged the state government and the *Ministério Público*, state prosecution service, to take a 'harder line' against the MST and those who organise land occupations, whom he saw as 'criminals'. He described the MST as a "political apparatus being used by other groups (...) with no commitment to agrarian reform as such" (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 1997). The minister of Justice was echoing the opinion equally shared by landowners.²¹

From the 1997 national march onwards, Federal government took a hard stand against the MST. The response was not made on clear, open, and repressive measures with violence, as one commonly see in Latin America regimes. The measures were prudently orchestrated within legal boundaries. First, Cardoso and his Extraordinary Minister for Land Affairs Raul Jungmann would use strong verbal attack to address the MST and its activities.

Justiça e Paz, Comissão dos Direitos Humanos do Distrito Federal, Instituto Nacional dos Estudos Sociais, UNEB (6.000 throughout the country); Associação de Aposentados e Pensionistas, Caritas Brasileira, Movimento Negro Unificado e Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher, Cimi Sindicatos: bank workers (2.500 São Paulo), rubber tapers, psychologists, health public workers(1.500 São Paulo). Source: MST/CMP; Folha de São Paulo 15/04/97.

²¹ At exactly the same period, the president of the landowner's group Rural Brazilian Society (*Sociedade Rural Brasileira*) Luiz Haffers openly stated 'The MST is a project of political power'. As quoted in *Veja* 16/April/1997.

The MST leader João Pedro Stédile was portrayed as “a product of hatred that Catholic immigrants in Rio Grande Do Sul for modernity, technology, and the uncertainties of capitalism”. The MST was taken as to “disrespect human rights and invade public building (...) entrenching democracy in favour of totalitarianism”. The MST was blamed for violence, “opting for provocation in disrespect for democracy and citizenship”. The MST was accused of having political plans and detached from its original objective land reform.²²

The MST leaders, then, found themselves as being continuously arrested, facing long trial and being charged for eliciting illegal activities and even murder. On June 1997, for instance, the jury of a small town of the state of Espírito Santo found MST charismatic leader, José Rainha Junior, guilty of murdering a landowner and military policemen in 1989. Prosecution lawyers felt to produce any incriminating evidences since Rainha was found at the time and place of murder over 2,000 km away. Amnesty International found that Rainha was convicted “on basis of his activism in the MST in organising land occupations rather than on the basis of evidence presented in the trial”. The case drew international outcry from various human rights agencies and intellectuals, including Nobel Prize winner José Saramago and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.²³ It continuous arrests drained the movement out of their energies and resources, which were originally used in their actions.

Cardoso took legal measures in order to criminalize the movement and its activities. For instance, the Federal Police was told to create an internal department do deal solely with agrarian conflicts. Although landowners would be inspected for any illegal actions, the MST was particularly targeted with members being followed and suffering constant interrogations. The movement would spend a lot of energy just to maintain regular activities. Few couples of month of existence, the Agricultural and Land Conflict Division (DECAF – *Divisão de Conflitos Agrários e Fundiários*) had about 32 investigations involving the MST all over the country.²⁴

²² As quoted in *Veja* 03/06/98, *O Estado de Sao Paulo* 24/03/2000 and *Folha de Sao Paulo* 4/05/2000.

²³ See Amnesty International, *Brazil: Political motivated criminal charges against land reform activists*. See also Jacques Derrida condemnation letter ‘Ce que je crois et crois savoir...’; *L’Humanité* Mardi 30 novembre 1999. José Rainha would be later absolved for the sentence of 26 years.

²⁴ As reported in *Estado de Sao Paulo*, 15/ 10/02.

Cardoso also tried to strip the MST main tactic: land occupation. He announced a legal provision that would ban for 2 years expropriation any plot of land that would be illegally occupied for the first time. If the same plot of land would be occupied the ban would be for 5 years. Finally, Cardoso revalidated the old National Security Law degree by the military and encouraged to be used against the MST. Up to this point, resisting eviction could be charged with ‘disrespect for government employees’ and get a maximum sentence of one-year imprisonment. With the National Security Law, one could be charge with ‘threatening the functioning of the established power’ and get a sentence of up to ten years.²⁵

One interesting aspect in this context of political repression undertaken towards the MST was how the government related to other groups with similar tactics. The Cardoso administration also faced protest and actions from other social sectors, but none of them faced the severity and decisiveness to the same level as the MST. By pointing to Cardoso’s soft intake towards other movements with similar activism at the time, Sue Branford and Jan Rocha correctly explained Cardoso’s severe response to the MST: “[w]hat the government finds intolerable is the scope of the MST’s ambitions. While the lorry drivers and the indigenous groups are defending their own particular interests, the MST wants a far-reaching transformation of society”.²⁶ In relation to our discussion, it is that this precise point - where far-reaching transformation is aimed at - that a social movement wears a manta of being political. In other words, it is when a movement moves beyond its particular interest and articulates with other social demands in overall antagonistic relation towards the government in power. This is moment when a social movement becomes political.

4 Conclusive remarks

Based on the discussion of the concept of the political taken as the beginning of the paper and the case of the MST, it is possible then to affirm at least two main theoretical remarks in relation to social movement and political strategy. First, the experience of the MST

²⁵ Sue Branford and Jan Rocha give a wider descriptions to the various in their excellent book *Cutting the Wire: The story of the landless movement in Brazil* (London: LAB, 2002), especially on the chapter ‘The government’s Counter-Offensive’.

²⁶ On May 20, thousands of lorry drivers brought Brazil to a standstill with a lighting strike. Indigenous groups have occupied public building and took hostages staff of the federal agency, FUNAI. In both cases, the government negotiated and conceded some of their demands. As cited in S. Branford & J Rocha *Cutting the Wire*, p. 286.

comes as an empirical case to demonstrate how the political has no specific locus. Far from being bounded within the state institutional domain, it can well be generated from the civil society. The way in which the MST brought together various social sectors, the reaction by the government, demonstrated clearly this possibility.

Second, being political means to engage oneself into a project that aims a wide set of transformations and not maintaining itself within a particular demand/transformation. In this sense, the political is not within particularity, but in the offering of an alternative universal community. It becomes a struggle towards an overall systematic change of the community's social relation and not just a systematic particular relation. The construction of such universality, however, is done through articulatory strategy that brings other social movements together against the dominant discourse in place. In all, the experience of the MST affirms the collective-strategy concept of the political.

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Carlos Pessoa
E-mail: Carlos.Pessoa@smu.ca

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