

## **Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance and Solidarity Economy: Debates and Practices in Everyday Cultural Political Economy**

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In Latin America, the social and solidarity economy (ECOSOL)<sup>1</sup> is thriving around a variety of experiences, partly in response to the hardship created by neoliberalism and its impacts on so many individuals and families, especially since the 1980s. Yet, this form of ‘alternative economy’ is also building on principles and values long shared by communities, as well as the creativity of peoples around the continent who have maintained and valued different forms of exchange (Gaiger, 2007; Souza da Silva and Feijó Fagundes, 2011). As Souza da Silva and Fagundes argue, we could find solid empirical knowledge and innovations among peasant communities that are based on solidarity and communitarian values. However, these values and knowledge, like any others, are continually adapting in their interactions with their milieu and through contacts with other values and forms of knowledge. They became much more fragile and marginalized, often depicted as inefficient, in parallel with the adoption of a set of policies supporting an industrial model of specialized monocultures. Looking back to historical ‘developments’ and decision-making processes (see for instance Rist, 2008; Escobar, 2004; McMichael, 2004), one begins to understand how the Western-led development and modernization agenda has been constructed by ‘experts’ in such a way as to displace and marginalize—but never erasing completely—solidarity economy and reciprocity practices. This has been reinforced with the adoption of the Green Revolution and its technology packages promoting a capital and oil-intensive, but reportedly more ‘efficient’ and productive agriculture. In doing so, many family farmers have been displaced, put in precarious positions, or else made to believe that their only chance of survival was to adapt and “get bigger” to remain competitive.

Since colonization, which has persisted post-independence, fertile lands in Brazil—now a worldwide agricultural powerhouse—have remained highly concentrated among a handful of landowners, drastically deepening the crises in the countryside. Thousands of farming families have been displaced and pushed towards industrializing urban centres without many employment opportunities. With the accumulation of evidence on the destructive and unsustainable consequences of modern development and agriculture, we have witnessed mounting frustrations, economic collapses, intermingling crises (financial, energy, ecological, political and food crises) and despair, in the global North and South. Nonetheless, this is only one side of the story. The other side that we intend to explore here is the growing number of individuals, organizations, and communities who are seeking to maintain or implement alternative forms of living and work by appropriating and subverting dominant norms and practices in their everyday activities. In Brazil, the ECOSOL is one such alternative, emerging as an innovative way to respond to people’s needs and hopes, beside and beyond the market economy, or at least partly sidestepping market exchanges and the circuits of capital.

In this paper, and based on field research completed by Marie-Josée Massicotte, we will focus on encampment experiences, and especially on two successful cases of food cooperatives of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST, for its well-known Portuguese acronym) in the

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<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, this is the common expression used to refer to the Solidarity Economy (see Gaiger, 2007: 311).

southern region of Brazil.<sup>2</sup> These coops exemplified collective searches for better living and working conditions that rely on alternative economies and cooperation, and that explicitly challenge the dominant market economy and model of agriculture. Indeed, these coops appropriate the dominant ideology and material conditions imposed on them in order to create innovative “arts of doing” (Certeau, 1990) culminating in original modes of existence. It should be noted that these are not representative and easily replicable cases.<sup>3</sup> Many cooperatives are much more fragile or have failed in seeking to implement similar norms and practices in Brazil and elsewhere. However, it remains essential to examine and make visible those emerging and positive experiences that can contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which social change is actually happening in specific cultural, political and socio-economic contexts.

Our objectives are therefore to explore: 1) the everyday practices and ways of thinking (vision, hope, projects) within these food coops and rural communities; 2) the extent to which they create and promote alternative forms of production, social reproduction and knowledge (another economy and ecology) that could nurture greater self-determination/autonomy/self-management, and democratic participation, in order to 3) begin to understand how these communities appropriate (and transform) dominant norms and practices in their everyday lives. This latter process is a crucial aspect of the work of researchers and activists interested in social change since these social forces are contributing in significant ways, as we argue, to open up spaces for new practices, based on different values and socio-political projects, as well as new political imaginaries and subjectivities in the making. These existing norms and practices are already critically participating in shaping our societies, even as they remain rather invisible and marginalized (see Santos 2006; 2007; 2010; J.K. Gibson-Graham 2006).

### **Perspectives in Political Economy: the Solidarity Economy and Everydayness**

Karl Polanyi (1957) has powerfully reminded us that societies are not only organized and integrated following market relations, but also through redistribution (through the modern state, the church, feudal systems, etc.) and reciprocity (exchange of services, care, labour, land, seeds, as well as more symbolic aspects such as honour, respect, love, emotional support, etc.). Polanyi also demonstrated that the attempts to separate, or dis-embed, the economy from society were far from natural or automatic, requiring rather violent forms of intervention (enclosure, work house, Poor Laws, etc.). The very efforts by some to create a so-called self-regulated market have led to a counter-movement from society to protect itself. Polanyi argued that such a separation of the economic and the social spheres have not and could never be completed, except by destroying the very fabric of society—that is, the *raison d'être* of the economy that was first thought of and described as the sphere of activities for providing what is necessary for the wellbeing of the individual or the family units—and the environment, which is also essential for human survival. In this sense, solidarity economy is a rediscovered social organization that communities across the globe are promoting in order to nurture economic relations that respond to people’s needs and

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<sup>2</sup> The fieldwork was completed between 2005 and 2011, mostly in southern Brazil, in the states of Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo. It relies on documentary analyses as well as semi-directed interviews and participatory observation during different visits to encampments and settlements of the MST, as well as at the MST national secretariat, two MST state secretariats, the MST national school Florestan Fernandes, the Escola Latino Americana de Agroecologia of La Via Campesina, and the MST school Milton Santos.

<sup>3</sup> We have translated all quotations from Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre (French to English), and from fieldwork interviews (Portuguese to English).

aspirations. As J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) and their research collective have shown (see [www.communityeconomies.org](http://www.communityeconomies.org)), alternative economic practices are used in different sectors and regions on a daily basis as the main source of revenue for thousands of people around the world. Here we intend to explore how such practices work and what kinds of implications they have for the participants and for thinking more generally about potential and available alternatives to the (mal)functioning of today's globalizing, yet not all-encompassing, market economy.

Solidarity economy is often defined following legal principles and characteristics as a specific form of economic organization. Following the work of Quijano (2008), Gaiger (2007) and Corragio (2009) however, we focus on key principles that work to foster a set of solidarity practices, including self-determination, *collective* forms of authority and decision-making (capacity and community building), equality seeking, co-responsibility, reciprocity, and cooperation. In our view, these elements are central to processes aimed at deepening democratic practices and stimulating the full potential of individuals and collectivities. Such principles are not all shared equally, nor systematically put into action by communities promoting alternative economic practices. These are ideals that help us to clarify what we refer to and what we are interested in further investigating. We thus have chosen to focus on two cases where there is a history of practices and explicit efforts to implement at least some of these principles. We also chose to focus on "success stories" since these specific cases may allow a greater analysis of the conditions and means by which these coops were able to translate such principles into daily practices. This is informed by a normative stance, not to propose specific recommendations, policies or actions, but rather a shared sense that these types of innovations and changes are necessary to move towards a more just and sustainable society and agriculture. Hence, it is essential to better understand how some specific actors have been able to consolidate alternative norms and practices in particular contexts.

Seabrooke and Hobson argue that for traditional and many heterodox International Political Economy (IPE) approaches, "It is as if elite actors or international institutions write the script, which everyday actors receive in a passive way" (2007: 1). What is neglected, indeed, is an understanding of the reciprocal process of transmission of dominant norms to everyday actors and vice-versa: an analysis of how individuals express—that is, reproduce or transform—dominant norms. In other words, one must investigate how agents use dominant codes of conduct and representations that delineate the boundaries within which everyday actors construct their socio-economic behaviour. The question of subjective creation is thereby introduced by looking at how individuals—through thought and behaviour—contribute in the institution of norms. Thus, the type of questions that we believe a political economy approach concerned with the sphere of the everyday must address is: What is the *use* that everyday actors make of mainstream norms and practices? How do everyday actors *perceive* and *internalise* dominant ideas and practices and then *reproduce, challenge* or *transform* them in everyday life? How should we understand the *process of translation* that occurs between the *ideal way* that dominant agents envision mainstream norms to be understood and followed by everyday actors, and the *effective way* that these norms are incorporated and used in daily life? Are there any *techniques* or *tactics* to surround the dominant way of being? How should we conceptualise the *process of creation* of new norms and practices that occurs on a day-to-day basis?

Briefly put, although not exhaustive, this set of questions will allow us to introduce a field of inquiry aiming at analysing two processes: (a) the transmission, appropriation and use of dominant

principles, practices, and representations by everyday actors; (b) the opposite process, that is, the creation of norms and practices by everyday actors that in turn affect broad socio-economic organisations and institutions. This paper will focus on part (b), by examining the ways in which actors produce new norms through their everyday practices that challenge dominant ideologies. As Certeau writes: “The effective order of things is precisely what popular ‘tactics’ hijack for their own ends without the illusion that it [the order] will change anytime soon” (1990, 46). This way of grasping ‘the social’ by taking into account the everyday creation and appropriation of discourses and practices sheds light on ways of being or modes of existence that critically participate in shaping our societies, but that have thus far been invisible in IPE. This section briefly discusses the theoretical common ground and limits of key authors in the field that are writing about the everyday.

All IPE authors connecting the everyday to political economy agree that everyday life is an intrinsic and essential dimension of the economic system; that it is affected by and participates in shaping systemic forces. It is both a site for resistance and an imperative realm to be ‘colonized’ by dominant social forces in order for the (capitalist) economic system to function. Paul Langley, for example, argues that day-to-day saving and borrowing activities have a crucial role to play in the formation of the global financial system: “It is not simply that global finance has implications and consequences for everyday credit practices, but that global finance in part rests upon the *restructuring* of everyday life” (2003: 4, emphasis added).

For Seabrooke and Hobson “structures are a product of everyday actions (as much as vice-versa)” (2003: 14). Everyday actions do not have to ‘win’ to be meaningful, as they understand them as “*acts by those who are subordinate within a broader power relationship but, whether through negotiation, resistance, or non-resistance, whether incrementally or suddenly, shape, constitute and transform the political and economic environment around and beyond them*” (15-16, emphasis in original). They present a normative stance in the belief that their work “will reveal not only how everyday actions and actors are important to the world economy, but how their agency provides avenues for emancipation.” (2003: 4).

Similarly, implicitly drawing from Jürgen Habermas, Andrew Sayer develops an account of everyday life which claims that the ‘lifeworld’ can be colonized by the ‘system,’ even though the latter is “always culturally embedded in and dependent” on the former (Sayer, 2001: 689). According to Sayer, “The lifeworld should not be idealized or systems simply condemned; power is certainly not limited to systems—the lifeworld can be a site of domination and misrecognition” (2001: 690), as well as a site for resistance.

Rob Aitken develops a similar project that studies popular finance for understanding the ways in which capital relies on everyday actions. Combining techniques of ‘self-government’ and ways of restructuring everyday life, he elaborates on three popular finance programs—mass investment in the New York Stock Exchange, Social Responsibility Investment (SRI), and asset-accumulation policy—to show how these programs “aspired to govern individuals but also to govern *through* the self-governing capacities and performances they seek to provoke... The governing strategy often at the core of popular finance is one that seeks to provoke different modes of individual agency and performance” (Aitken, 2007: 19-21, emphasis in original).

In one way or another, all these approaches understand everyday life and the institution of its subjects as fundamental elements that participate—through speech and action of subjects located within a broader and disadvantaged power relationship—in shaping the political and economic system as a whole. All these authors recognize and pinpoint governance strategies deployed by systemic forces trying to orient everyday life to serve a specific socio-economic objective. Our contribution is to explore a neglected process in the analysis: how everyday actors produce practices and discourses that challenge dominant norms. In this sense, the MST is a valuable example of the institution of a community in their encampments (*acampamentos*) and settlements (*assentamentos*) through values and behaviours that explicitly contest the capitalist ideology. Solidarity and reciprocity between community members, for example, are put forward as guiding principles in the everyday lives of MST members, thereby instituting community values that go against individualism and utilitarianism.

#### *Everyday forms of resistance*<sup>4</sup>

If the connection between the realm of the everyday and the broader systemic dimension is undeniable and strongly highlighted in the above analyses, the mechanisms of transmission of meanings within representations and the transformation (or production) of these meanings into norms and practices is still largely absent. We thus want to analyze the everyday creation of practices and meanings that, in the long run, can affect socio-economic systems. As Certeau puts it:

The presence and the circulation of a representation (taught by preachers, educators or popularisers as the code of socio-economic promotion) in no way indicate what such representation is for its users. It is still necessary to analyse its manipulation by its practitioners who are not its fabricators. Only then can we appreciate the gap or the similitude between the production of the image and the secondary production that hides itself in the process of its utilisation (Certeau, 1990, xxxviii).

The subjective appropriation that everyday actors have of mainstream representations implies a process of reproduction or “secondary production” of meaning that may or may not reflect the initial norm in circulation. Indeed, these actors are not passive receptors. They must be analyzed as adopting a pro-active—tacit or explicit—behaviour that may succeed in taking normative constraints and distort, twist, and ‘pervert’ them into a more positive outcome that may serve their lives. This type of analysis allows for a better understanding not only of the conditions under which resistance emerges but also of how subjects attribute meaning to their own struggles.

#### *Lefebvre and the creative activity of the everyday*

The everyday subject, for Henri Lefebvre, actively participates (consciously or not) in shaping the socio-economic order—the ‘social’—in which she lives. This subject deploys herself over time through a series of instituting experiences inscribed on a tissue of meaning. Time is constantly redeployed, states Lefebvre, as a permanent reactivation of the past by a present that is always betting on a future. And this process is *en oeuvre* in the sphere treated with disdain by philosophers: the everyday.

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<sup>4</sup> Borrowing from James Scott (1985).

Lefebvre undertakes his investigation of the everyday by picturing it as a “first sphere of meaning, a domain in which the productive activity projects itself thus going up-front of new creations [...]” (1968, 34). Herein understood, the everyday is the sphere of existence where first meaning experiences are deployed thereby articulating a social historic *milieu*: the everyday, where “we enjoy and suffer” here and now, is the place where to seek the incessant movement through which subject and social are instituted: “...the place [“lieu”] where concrete problems of *production* in a large sense are formulated: the way that social existence of human beings is produced...” (Lefebvre, 1968, 50, emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup> A central idea guiding Lefebvre is the need for everyday actors to *appropriate* the imposed social-economic scenario in which they live in order not only to function in it, but also to be able to create new meanings and practices that pave the way to different paths of life and modes of being. Indeed, the *imaginary* is an integral part of everyday life, which is composed of a dialectic between *appropriation* and *constraints*. The role of the imaginary is “to mask the predominance of constraints, the weak capacity of appropriation, the acuteness of conflicts and ‘real’ problems. However, sometimes it can also serve the opposite, that is, to prepare an appropriation, a practical investment” (Lefebvre, 1968, 172). The subject must confront the obstacles imposed on him at the same time that he absorbs possibilities for understanding and creating. Language can illustrate this process. Everybody must familiarize with a language in order to be able to speak it. However, once this assimilation is completed we are then able to “play” with our new skill, acquiring the capacity to personify the language and thereby (gradually) change it. Therefore, language is at once an appropriation and a constraint. Something that the subject must ‘deal’ with at the same time she can use it to produce something original.

This subjective process of confronting constraints while appropriating structures and meanings is called “practical everydayness”: the imaginary can either materialize as profane dreams in the image of, for instance, a luxurious and needless lifestyle as promoted on television, or as a just society where people would all live a decent life (Lefebvre, 1968, 172). The imaginary thus nourishes appropriation and constraint. The “investment practice” of appropriation can either lead the subject to learn a militant language and incorporate an ideal to his life being or make him bear insurmountable constraints (Lefebvre, 1968, 172).

Although Lefebvre’s approach develops important conceptual tools in the understanding of the everyday it lacks a more precise understanding of the subjective process of appropriation and creation that concerns us here. How exactly subjects ‘play’ with constraints to appropriate dominant norms and practices? To answer this question we now turn to Michel de Certeau and the “invention of the everyday”.

#### *De Certeau: tactics of the everyday*

In line with Lefebvre, the heart of Certeau’s project is to show that the *usage* everyday actors have of mainstream ideas, practices, and representations does not necessarily coincide with the way systemic forces imposing these messages, behaviours, and images would have liked everyday actors to use them (Certeau, 1990, 55). In other words, Certeau wants to show that fabricants and promoters of the mainstream socio-economic order do not always succeed in

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<sup>5</sup> In a very similar manner concerning the question of time, Certeau affirms that “An essential WHAT is at play in this quotidian historicity, impossible to dissociate from the existence of subjects who are the actors and authors of conjectural operations” (1990, 39).

imposing the exact representation of social order on everyday practitioners. His initial postulate states that everyday actors, tacitly or explicitly through ‘crafty tactics,’ escape or ‘appropriate’ the social discipline imposed on them, thus transforming and adapting it to their own way of being:

As tools, proverbs or other discourses are *marked by usages*, they present to the analysis the *acting prints* (“empreintes d’actes”) or the process of enunciation; they signify the *operations* of which they were the objects, operations relative to situations and made possible as conjectural *modelisations* of the enunciation or the practice; more broadly, they indicate a social *historicity* in which systems of representations or procedures of fabrication no longer only appear as normative frameworks, but also as *tools manipulated by the users* (Certeau, 1990, 39-40, emphasis in original).

Luce Girard, in the preface of *L’invention du quotidien*, straightforwardly states that Certeau is seeking to elaborate “a theory of everyday practice” (in Certeau, 1990, xi). However, in Certeau’s view, practices are not exterior to theory; they are not the object of theory. Theory is here to be understood as a simultaneous construction of practices. Practices, or more precisely tactics, “form a field of operations in which the production of theory also develops itself” (Certeau, 1990, 117). Certeau wants to make explicit certain “ways of doing” (*manières de faire*)—the ways everyday actors appropriate dominant norms to distort them. In this sense he takes seriously all “resistances,” even “minimalist” ones that, albeit in different forms, have always existed (Certeau, 1990, xii).

To study everyday practices that institute social norms requires an understanding of what the ensemble of these practices represent. Certeau thus defines culture as “practices of appropriation”: “[Culture] develops itself in the element of tensions, and often of violence, that it supplies with symbolic equilibriums, contracts of compatibility and more or less temporal compromises” (1990, xlv). In popular culture, which he also calls the “arts of doing”, the social order is “played” by an art, that is, “foiled,” “fooled” by it. In the determination of institutions “a style is insinuated in social exchanges, a style of technique inventions, a style of moral resistance” (Certeau, 1990, xv). In the ethnographic work Certeau undertakes in Parisian neighbourhoods he wants to detect “schemes of operations” with “common categories” between them that allow for an understanding of the “ensemble of practices” (1990, xvi).<sup>6</sup> These combinations of operations are also what determine a culture as “the everyday invents itself with a thousand ways of *poaching*” (Certeau, 1990, xxxvi, emphasis in original). Methodologically, he aims to make theory from a concrete case; it is what he calls “description or historiography” (1990, xx). Much similar to Lefebvre, Certeau’s goal thus consists in studying how everyday practices escape or appropriate the social discipline that is imposed on them.

Furthermore, Certeau distinguishes between two logics of action: *strategies* and *tactics*. Generally speaking, for him, a strategy is the ambient political, economic and scientific rationality. It is the overarching and dominant ‘doxa’ or ‘common sense’ that permeates all social relations as soon as they become bounded in a specific lieu. Strategies become particularly apparent in the attempt to

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<sup>6</sup> This analytical standpoint of emphasizing the need to study the “ensemble of practices” is similar to the works of social anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss who puts at the central of his findings on the system of gift and counter-gift the idea that these practices institute a “total social fact” that allows for the understanding of a given social as a whole.

isolate “subjects of will and power” from their “environment” allowing for “the calculus of the power relationship (rapport de force) between them (Certeau, 1990, xlvi). On the other hand, tactics “are a way of changing the will of the other,” by persuading and sometimes using one's perception and affect with the intention of surmounting a constraint in a slyly manner” (Certeau, 1990, xlvi). Although restrained to the possibilities offered by circumstances, tactics are not defined by, and do not obey to, the law of their milieu. “What distinguishes one from another is the type of operations in those spaces where strategies are able of producing, mapping and imposing, whereas tactics can only utilize, manipulate and hijack them” (Certeau, 1990, 51). A tactic must “play with the terrain that is imposed on it; a terrain organized by a foreign force” (Certeau, 1990, 56). The settlements of the MST where a “way of inhabiting” creates a “way of utilizing” the constraining order of a specific territory serves as an example of a tactic: “...without leaving the place where he [an everyday subject] must live and that dictates him a law, he establishes plurality and creativity” (Certeau, 1990, 52). A tactic entangles the “art of doing” with the “art of usage” (Certeau, 1990, 53). Through this study of the creative sphere of human activity found in the image of the ‘ordinary man,’ we aim to undertake our investigation of alternative economies in the south and southeast of Brazil.

### **Solidarity Economy experiences in Brazil**

In Latin America, the participants in ECOSOL come from different backgrounds and sectors; many are either excluded from the formal market economy or their salary is insufficient to live a decent life and to support themselves and their family (Maranon and Lopez, 2010).<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, these experiences also have the potential of re-politicizing the economy and creating new forms of interactions, as well as deepening democratic and solidarity norms and practices. Following Lefebvre, we are interested in examining this “first sphere of meaning” where the “practical everydayness” is in action: *subjective and collective processes of appropriation* of economic and reproductive activities—forming an “ensemble of practices” in Certeau’s terms—that rely on solidarity among people (an alternative to the ‘modern’ rationality), and that value another form of living together that respects ecosystem cycles in specific cultural, political and ecological territories (see Quijano, 2008).<sup>8</sup>

We thus refer to ECOSOL as an *explicitly sociopolitical and emancipatory* project, designed, promoted or appropriated by core participants to open up opportunities, and to foster greater equality, democracy and cooperation among themselves.<sup>9</sup> Following Lefebvre, ECOSOL subjects live through daily “investment practices” that often produce positive imaginaries capable of nurturing a solidarity vision of the community. We examine concrete experiences where people are engaging and collectively participating in initiatives to secure their subsistence through ‘tactics’ of

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<sup>7</sup> We can think of the Argentinian workers after the 2001 financial debacle who have organized to regain control and restart bankrupt factories as workers coops. Such experiences allow participants to ensure their subsistence, but work and income generation remain key objectives for the actors under study here.

<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the concept of “buen vivir”, or living well, promoted by indigenous communities especially in the Andes (see Gutiérrez-Escobar 2011 pursuing this argument).

<sup>9</sup> As noted (p.2), not all solidarity economy projects fit into this definition but we focus our analysis on cases that respond to these criteria. We also avoid free association and collective ownership of the means of production as principles, because in some cases the cooperative was not always the preferred option for organizing economic activities. Some participants felt under pressure to first join the coops, and most coops of the MST chose not adopt a collective ownership of the land, but do consider the cooperative as an alternative, emancipatory project.



production, thus succeeding in improving their common wellbeing (differently defined and evolving through experiences). We also hope to briefly discuss, in conclusion, some of the obstacles and opportunities that sustain and limit the potential for consolidating and diffusing such alternative solidarity economies and communities based on the dialectic between appropriation and constraint.

### **Encampments: a privileged space of politicization and everyday collaborative exchanges**

In what ways and to what extent do everyday practices and values of the participants in MST encampments and cooperatives contribute to challenge dominant norms and ways of living, and to create and consolidate alternative economies based on solidarity principles? In order to answer this question, we first need to explain the relevant practices of the MST. This landless movement emerged in a context of effervescence in Brazil in the early 1980s, a country that was still under a military regime, but which was losing control over a population fighting for change, democracy and justice. For decades there have been demands for agrarian reform, but the dictatorship had emerged partly in response to a modest attempt by President Joao Goulart, in March 1964, to redistribute land in response to popular pressures (Konder Comparato, 2004). In a society with dire rates of poverty and startling inequalities between the richest few and the masses of poor people, land occupations in rural areas re-emerged in the early 1980s as a prominent way to resist and survive.

When the MST was officially created in 1984, the objective was to join forces across the immense national territory to call for justice that, in the eyes of those commonly experiencing exploitation, requires democratizing the access to land. One of their main slogans already tells us much about their tactics: “Occupy, resist, produce.” Through direct action, the MST leadership invites landless people to collectively occupy underutilized land. They use moral justification or in Certeau’s words “a style of moral resistance” (injustices and colonial abuses) as well as legal and constitutional arguments (redistribution to fulfil the “social function” of the land and contestation of land titles fraudulently acquired) as tactical tools to demand redistribution and gain legal titles (Wright and Wolford, 2003: 24). However, it often requires months and years of struggles, political pressure, and organizing in encampments before they acquire those titles. In the meantime, the families are organizing and resisting. The first action consists in assembling as many people as they can to be stronger when facing authority or thugs sent by absentee landowners. They then occupy, often during the night, and rapidly set up their black plastic tents, with the help of more experienced allies from other occupations, and very often bringing along the whole family. Women are usually at the forefront of the actions. They want to make visible their intention to hold the line and struggle with their male counterparts, in their shared struggle for land and dignity.

The next step is to organize daily life in these emerging communities. Indeed, some families and friends may get involved together, but most participants do not know each other, nor come from the same area before the occupation. To ensure their physical security, they thus need to develop trust and to rely on each other—examples of guiding principles that orient everyday personal conduct and contest the norms of individualism, and suspicion and fear of the Other in liberal capitalist societies (Michéa, 2007)—to avoid being displaced or attacked, and to secure their belongings. Most importantly, they need to find ways to survive, that is, to obtain access to food, shelter and clean water, to explore the area and be informed of potential activities around the

newly occupied territory (see Stédile and Mançano Fernandes, 1996; Brandford and Rocha, 2002; Wright and Wolford, 2003). Encampments are therefore a privileged space of politicization, resistance, mutual help and friendship building among participants, and through interactions with MST leaders and allies. These people have different individual life goals and values that are not necessarily community oriented. However, the need to work together on a daily basis to fulfil everyone's needs functions as a social integration mechanism that allows community leaders to stand up and social relations of reciprocity based on the exchange of services to emerge. As we will emphasize below, it is the experiment of a community put in motion by choice and by necessity that allows the institution of alternative and foundational norms and practices, such as solidarity and reciprocity, and which in turn, bind people together, not only through a common goal (land access), but through a common imaginary of judging and perceiving what a just community should look like in practice.<sup>10</sup>

### *Leadership styles*

For such imaginary to consolidate, the different styles of leadership that emerged among those occupying can make a key, positive or negative, difference. Some are charismatic leaders, others are respected for their long farming experience or formal education, and yet others bring in particularly useful skills in communicating and reconciling participants who have divergent views or interests. They come with different background and experiences. Hence, they have different ways of appropriating their lieu according to their capabilities in order to serve a common goal. Tactics put forward by leaders will convince and attract differently, mobilizing or dividing the encamped. It is what Lefebvre identifies as a dialectic of appropriation and constraint that leads to the creation or transformation of common and subjective imaginaries. According to Certeau, these "practices of appropriation" or "ways of doing" ultimately end up creating a particular "culture" of the community: the beginning of a social historicity (Certeau) or a social historic milieu (Lefebvre).

The politicization and collective organizing in encampments thus occur by necessity. Meetings and decisions need to be made from the very minute occupants put their feet on the land: where each individual and family will set up their tents, which group will be responsible for food, for childcare and education, how many hours in a row and how many people will guard the encampment. This is the beginning of community building and participatory democracy in action. From the start, the MST encourages every participant to get involved, including women and children, to gather in assembly and smaller committees (shelter, food, communication, conflict-management, etc.) and to make collective decisions based on the wider consensus possible. The different sectors are then responsible for translating decisions into practices and ensuring that everyone respects the rules agreed upon by the collective assembly (e.g. no drugs or alcohol in camps, no single individual taking unilateral action or negotiating with authorities on their own). While following general operating methods, each camp devises its own rules, through their daily activities, becoming co-responsible for each other's security and wellbeing that involves environmental stewardship. A

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<sup>10</sup> Each experience of encampment remains unique and the process of organizing is in itself quite stressful and prone to confrontations and constraints vis-à-vis outside forces, and among participants themselves, despite their shared social marginalization. The harshness of everyday life in camps (fear, hunger, cold, rain and mud, burning hot days, etc.) often discourage some participants or some family members, dividing people and diminishing the number of bodies to defend the 'conquered' territory.

sense of commonality thus emerges. This is part of what Hannah Wittman identifies as “agrarian citizenship” (2009). Subjectivities are transformed from the social references participants had prior to land occupations to new values and “ways of doing” that they “appropriate” daily. In this process of constant interactions, they establish social roles, norms and status, helping each other in shaping the new collectivity they are now part of: solidarity and co-responsibility become core values that guide their everyday behaviours.

The work of Nashieli Rangel Loera (2010) has powerfully highlighted the role of what she calls “encampment time” in politicizing participants and putting in place incentives for greater activism, political training and leadership building. Indeed, months and years of *everyday sacrifice, suffering* and *commitment* symbolize key social status markers among the ranks of the MST in order to obtain access to land, but also to gain respect within the movement. For example, those with the most “encampment time”, which represents a type of seniority among MST members, and who play a key role in coordinating everyday activities, organizing other families for new occupations, keeping up the ‘spirit,’ and thus *actively supporting* MST’s values and activities, are well positioned to obtain land title and to climb the ladder within the movement. There were divergences and animosity vis-à-vis those who did not make the same sacrifices to obtain land title. MST leaders have the power, often in partnership with INCRA<sup>11</sup> officials, to decide who has priority in a new settlement, based on formal and informal rules, as well as internal and external pressures. Such moments do create divisions and feelings of injustice rather than nurturing cooperation and solidarity. These difficult times can translate in the retreat of some people from active participation with the MST and community life. On the other hand, there are remarkable experiences of mutual help and reciprocity among those who joined MST occupation and experienced long periods of time living together in very precarious conditions in encampments. To survive and gain a piece of land they can finally call ‘home,’ through agrarian reform,<sup>12</sup> they had to learn to live together, make decisions, divide the work, and ensure each other’s security on a daily basis. Very often, *acampados* become very close friends and do not want to leave their fellow *acampados* and the region they have occupied when it is time to settle and build their permanent homes. They have developed very strong social connections that tie them together through what Marcel Mauss would call a “system of gifts and counter-gifts”<sup>13</sup> in which individuals and families owe each other mutual help. But this debt is voluntarily acquired and the social link is a sort of obligation or co-responsibility based on friendship, again explicitly tackling dominant norms of utilitarianism and interest maximization. In other words, *acampados* produce different socio-political imaginaries that reshape their behaviour and their way of seeing their relationship to their milieu.

The “success stories” of some cooperatives in terms of agricultural production and their living environment continue to play a crucial role in mobilization and of sustaining new practices of everydayness and activism from which people can envision and fight for better lives, first for themselves and their families, but also for other MST members, rural communities, and beyond.

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<sup>11</sup> INCRA stands for the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária, the federal government agency in charge of colonization and agrarian reform, with whom the MST needs to negotiate to secure land titles.

<sup>12</sup> The military regime had adopted a law that was later included in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution allowing redistribution of non- or under-productive landholdings in order to fulfill its “social function”. Moreover, many titles have been fraudulently acquired, so that they can be contested in court, while also using social justice claims as a key argument for land reform. For further, accessible analysis, see Wright and Wolford (2003: chapter one).

<sup>13</sup> See Mauss, 2007.

MST leaders and activists insist on the collective responsibility and the need for solidarity to pursue the struggle until every landless can live a decent life (various conversations and interviews with members; states of Sao Paulo; Parana, Rio Grande do Sul, 2006, 2009).

The *raison d'être* of the MST... is to struggle for the democratization of land...because of the historical problem of land concentration. (...) This means that land needs to be distributed... to those who want to work and live on the land. (...) But we live in a society that is capitalist, that is individualist, and that privileges values we don't share. (...) Hence, there is permanent confrontation. (...) In fact, this is the work of the MST. Who's part of the MST? The *assentados* and *acampados*. Because those who are *assentados*, it is because they have been *acampados*. And if he is *acampado*, it's because he's with the MST and therefore, he must continue with the MST [by participating in trainings, marches, and helping to support other occupations and settlements] (interview, Porto Alegre, 2009).

This illustrates the tense relationship—but mutually influencing—between ‘ordinary men’ or everyday appropriators of social orders and systemic forces with the power to impose strategies and constraints on everyday actors. The encampment also allows the emergence of an alternative economy through an “investment practice” that relies on everyone’s skills, assets, cooperation and solidarity, without much direct interaction with the market economy, which can either collapse or consolidate in the settlements. Family, friends, neighbours and allies in church, unions and other citizens’ associations give moral as well as material support, from driving the families on the site of occupation, to helping with setting up the tents, providing money, food, seeds, animals, tools, pots and pans, wood or clothing. On the one hand, these much needed resources for occupation’s participants are a way to deal with strategic constraints while developing their own “tactics of appropriation.” On the other hand, it already contributes to mark social differentiation, where some come to the camp with much more ‘resources,’ including sociopolitical relations.<sup>14</sup>

Different interviewees, analysts and members of the MST have emphasized that the “cooperative is born in the encampment, and it has grown in the settlement” (MST coordinators, production sector, São Paulo and Porto Alegre, 2009). Indeed, they often insist on the crucial role of discussions, socialization, as well as “political and ideological training” that happened among *acampados*, where some participants become convinced, and help to convince others, of the need for and advantages of collective work and cooperation: that “this should be used and that it is *the way*” to go (interview with MST coordinator, Porto Alegre, 2009). It is the birth and formation of their own norms—that will translate into practices—once they appropriate the reasons why they find themselves in their socio-economic conditions of dispossession.<sup>15</sup> They are the ones that can then promote, implement and consolidate the principles and practices in the settlements when they secure land titles, through different forms of cooperation. This is one early way through which a certain distinction emerges between those *acampados* who become MST activists, supporting the

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<sup>14</sup> However, we will discuss below how other type of resources are valued as ways of climbing the ladder within the MST. Alternative economic activities also take forms as some participants begin to cultivate the land with beans and vegetables, while others continue to work outside of the camp, often in the informal economy, if they are close enough to a village or city. Over time, *acampados* usually try to negotiate with public authorities through various programs to get connected to electricity grids (or to do it themselves) and to gain access to other public services, such as transportation.

<sup>15</sup> See Harvey, 2003.

broader sociopolitical project and values of the MST, including cooperation and solidarity to promote a more just and sustainable society for all, and those who take part in the occupation only to secure access to land, and who tend to resist further political involvement (Vergara-Camus, 2009).

### **On the role and multiple forms of cooperation and cooperatives in the MST**

As of February 2012, the MST claims to have over 130 cooperatives (Previattelli, 2012) across the country, mostly concentrated in the southern states of Brazil, and between 450-500 associations also based on cooperation without having the legal characteristics of cooperatives (interview, São Paulo, July 2009). After experiencing a number of failures and criticisms for trying to implement a fully cooperative form of agricultural production and collective ownership of the land among landless families that, very often in Southern Brazil, came from individually owned, family farming culture, the MST has decided that this form of social organization should not necessarily be privileged to organize settlements (interviews, Sao Paulo, Curitiba 2009; Gonçalves, 2008; Brenneisen, 2005). Indeed, many MST participants (and analysts) explained that even though the collective ownership and production of the land are not the most common, nor the most favoured forms of organizing in today's settlements, cooperation as a normative principle remains an essential value and feature of their everyday lives:

Cooperation can take various forms. From joint mobilizations and community tasks (*mutirão*), cooperatives, and regional cooperatives, which we have the most as forms of cooperation within the MST. (...) These coops work with many settlements...providing services, marketing, helping with training...Production cooperatives per se are the most advanced model of cooperation. They require a degree of training, of awareness [*“conscientização,”* in Paulo Freire's sense of an awakening of consciousness, through practice and dialogue], of availability and of willingness that is greatly superior to others. This is why it is not all families who want to work in such coops. But what is important is that, in one way or another, we have cooperation, for a tractor, for machinery, to buy or sell, that there are forms of cooperation, this is what the movement promotes (interview with MST coordinator, Porto Alegre, 2009).

This interviewee explicitly states that to attain a high degree of cooperation an equivalent degree of consciousness, training and individual must be acquired. He emphasizes a correlation between “spiritual” and political sentiments that translate into day-to-day activities and what a group of people can achieve in terms of collective responsibility towards their community.<sup>16</sup> In recent years, the most common way of promoting cooperatives within the movement is through the development of what the MST calls “transformation and marketing cooperatives.” In Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná, for example, regional coops have emerged as a way to gain greater autonomy, increase the value of their products, and keep most revenue within the MST and its settlements (interviews, Nova Santa Rita, Porto Alegre, Curitiba, Lapa and São Paulo, 2009; various settlements and encampments, Paraná, 2011). By creating agro-industries owned and

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<sup>16</sup> Some coops are rooted at the local and regional levels, compared to others that are active at the level of a state, or even across a few states, while others operate on a national scale. Some are focussing on production and/or marketing, whereas others provide services to local and regional coops, like credit unions and coops providing technical trainings in agroecological production or cooperative management.

managed by the MST, they have acquired the capacity to transform and commercialize agricultural production of many families from different settlements. An MST national coordinator in the production sector further emphasized:

One of our strategies is what you saw in our *assentamentos*, where people try to obtain as much autonomy as possible, from production until the agro-industrialization of all our products. So we put a lot of effort not on producing and selling only primary products to anybody in the market, but on setting up industries, in our own areas [MST settlements], to transform and sell not any products, but a *product that carries an ideological weight*. ... We don't want to just sell seeds, but produce and sell ecological seeds, produce in a correct way in terms of both ecological management and the human beings that are working and producing them [through, for example, the MST's own organic seed production, called Rede BioNatur]. This is a central element of our struggle, that we can gain this autonomy, which is not easy (interview, Sao Paulo, July 2009, also quoted in Massicotte, forthcoming, our emphasis).

These practices represent a very good example of how dominant norms become appropriated and transformed by everyday actors to serve the collective goals and needs of the MST and its members. Embedded in a normative discourse they become a sort of "praxis" of ECOSOL. Although they still adopt a division of labour and produce in part for capitalist markets, where they need to be "competitive to secure financial revenues," they have partly subverted the production process to make it fit into their own norms and priorities, including a permanent struggle that ultimately aims at dislodging capitalist markets to redistribute wealth more equitably in society.

This same interviewee, a young woman, not only discusses the challenges faced by MST cooperatives as a result of the 2007-08 food crisis, but also and more generally the recurrent fluctuations of food prices: "We cannot be romantics! It isn't sufficient to say that we'll make an all-nice settlement and work in agroecology...[but] everybody needs an income to survive and if this financial return doesn't come, we cannot make it" (interview, São Paulo, 2009).<sup>17</sup> This "economic rationale" supporting transformation and marketing coops emerged from MST participants themselves who are well aware of and do reassert the influence and penetration of dominant economic discourses and material constraints imposed on them. However, they devise their own tactics and strategies by bringing together many small-scale producers, by avoiding intermediaries and by controlling almost every aspect of the food chain. In doing so, they increase the revenues that remain within the settlements, thus strengthening the movement and its political agenda.

Yet, if compared to agribusinesses, cooperatives continue to be "very small enterprises" that face several difficulties:

The consequences of the crisis for us are much bigger, because of the enormous competition on the market. (...) And we don't work with the intention of exploiting

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<sup>17</sup> Agroecology refers to an alternative model of small scale, diversified agriculture that avoids the use of chemicals, pesticides and GMOs, that is economically and environmentally sustainable, and that produces healthy food primarily for small producers and local markets. It also adopts a holistic view that values local knowledge and the socialization of such knowledge, so that a greater number of small producers can benefit from it and contribute to improve each other's techniques and productivity, working with and respecting the life cycles of ecosystems (see Glissman, 2001).

workers. So there is a different conception here. This is why for us, in our settlements, the impact is so important in a collective enterprise...In the conventional market, the one who lost the least is the *fazendeiro* (rural landowner), the agribusiness, because he has this *strategy of exploitation* and we don't. (...) The size of our industries makes it very painful to absorb such attacks. In the case of milk, for a long period we could not sell, so the whole process became very fragile...because we don't have the structure to support the crisis. There is the *political force*, the *will to struggle*...but the crisis is cruel in our settlements...And on top of that, the government finances and is concerned about the agribusiness, but he does not help small producers, he does not provide what he offers to agribusinesses. So, for us, it can be fatal (interview, São Paulo, July 2009, our emphasis).

The wording of this interviewee is of particular interest here. She talks about a “strategy of exploitation” that can be linked to how Certeau defines strategy as the dominant “common sense,” that is a prevalent “way of doing” things. At the same time that she recognises this approach, she consciously says that this is not the “way we do things here.” In other words, constrained by the “strategy” they employ “tactics.” While they use dominant tools such as the market, they refuse to use them in the same way as dominant forces would envisage: they transform the rules of the game through their “political force”. They remain embedded in an individualist, consumerist and capitalist society, yet their practices reject the dominant market ideology and seek ways to implement alternative economic practices that sustain other norms and values.

In parallel, we begin to see dilemmas and tensions faced by MST cooperatives in Brazil. This economic model allows many peasants to collaborate in exciting and demanding collective endeavours, including transitioning toward diversified agroecological production and industrialization that have effectively increased their income and quality of life. Agro-industries have simultaneously increased the level of integration into the capitalist market economy, giving them better access to credit *and* debt, and in turn, making them more vulnerable to market competition and its boom and bust cycles. Nonetheless, it is crucial to highlight the incredible opportunities that the very spaces and territories of encampments and settlements have opened up for numerous landless and marginalized households. What emerged from shared everyday experiences of organizing and resistance is a new subjectivity: a revamped sense of identity, dignity, and hope, and a sense that better lives are possible and in the making. As their slogan “Occupy, Resist, Produce” highlights, the political struggle of the MST is located in the foundational field. If what they want in the short-run is to be able to survive and live a decent life, which requires in the medium-run changing state and economic policies, in the long-run their struggle is to found a different society that aggregates itself around new values and different ways of being. The following section looks at two cooperatives in particular to try to demonstrate that indeed, some experiences have been quite successful in nurturing a “collective self” that seems to be the secret ingredient for consolidating the coops as successful alternative economies.<sup>18</sup>

### **Daily life in MST settlements and cooperatives**

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<sup>18</sup> Many landless come to the MST with an individualistic and consumerist culture, dreaming of owning their piece of land to guarantee the wellbeing of their family and descendants, as well as to break dependency linkages and avoid the suffering they have known well. One thus needs to recognize that not every participant who benefits from land redistribution are equally committed to the longer term fights for agrarian reform and for a different society and economy, based on the socialist ideals of the MST leadership.

### *Cooperunião and Conquista na Fronteira settlement in Santa Catarina*

Located near the Argentinian border, in Dionisio Cerqueira, Santa Catarina, Cooperunião is today an economically successful and self-sufficient, and one of the early cooperatives of the MST officially launched in October 1990. After an ‘encampment time’ between two and five years in the region, hundreds of families witnessed Conquista na Fronteira being legalized by the government in June 1988. Sixty families (35 from the municipality, as required and favoured by INCRA and the municipality; and 25 from the MST, following the principle of seniority among MST *acampados*) obtained 1,200 hectares of land, where they work, produce and live. The whole community in the settlement now have decent shelter, and like many other MST settlements, they have a health clinic, a cultural center, a daycare and an elementary school with their own curriculum. These are social and political vehicles through which they try to institute their own norms and practices on a daily basis through intersubjective interactions. At first, there were important tensions and disagreements between settlers who formed two distinct groups and separated the land between them, with an equivalent of 20 hectares per family (see Frente de Prensa, 2007; Candido and Dal Ri, 2003). Whereas the municipality group was first opposed to the collective model, the MST families favoured the creation of a production cooperative. Among the landless that were politicized through MST occupations, self-management or “autogestão”<sup>19</sup>, and collective work were seen as more appropriate forms of collective organization for small producers to gain leverage and be more effective. Their everyday experiences reshaped normative discourses rather than the other way around.

When the coop Cooperunião was first created, only MST families became involved. They followed the usual cooperative organizing structure with a general assembly as the main mechanism for decision-making. However, they added management elements characteristic of other MST settlements, organizing in “núcleos de base” (small committees) of about 10 families, in different sectors of production (cattle raising, milk, vegetable, transformation, management, market sales, etc.) as well as other key sectors for organizing collective life (sport and leisure, education, health, etc.). They began production with apiculture in 1991, and expanded to include breeding beef, involving some groups of non-MST families. At first, the two groups had their own tractor but it became clear that unifying forces would grant them access to other machineries and resources.

Since 1994, and despite the difficulties along the road, all 60 families or so are *associados* (associates), actively involved in one aspect or another of the activities of this 100% production cooperative of the MST (interview, São Paulo, June 2009). The associates generally work five days a week, 8 hours per day, regularly attending meetings, making all key decisions collectively, and sharing the responsibilities for their successes and failures. They now internally produce everything that is necessary to ensure subsistence and relatively good living conditions for every household. Hence, the cooperative tends to institute the functioning of the settlement not only around the socio-political goals of the MST and the daily needs of the community (interrelationships, security, services, socio-political and cultural activities, etc.), but also around its economic activities. In Polanyi’s words, they are re-embedding the economy into the political and cultural sphere of the community. Through the activities of the coop, it is indeed easier to see how various forms of paid and unpaid work intermingles with other spaces of daily life thereby

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<sup>19</sup> A very distinct form of collective organization than the one privileged by neoliberal tenants.



multiplying and diversifying social interactions among settlers.<sup>20</sup> Work is strengthening community life yet also reinforcing the need to maintain good relationships since people continually have to interact and collaborate with each other in different ways. This reinforces our argument about the emergence of a Maussien system of reciprocity, based on obligations and co-responsibilities that bind community members together on a voluntary base.

Like in other non-coop-based settlements of the MST, Cooperunião's main organ for decision-making is the monthly general assembly, through which the different sectors are responsible to implement the decisions and report back on progress, constraints and difficulties. The assembly is electing, in this case, through secret ballot among its members, those in charge of the different productive activities and responsibilities of the coop. The same process is applied to other committees. They are elected for a three-year period, followed by new elections encouraging a rotation of tasks and responsibilities. This rotation helps to build capacity and leadership of the community as a whole, and to encourage a form of reciprocity and mutual learning. When one member assumes difficult tasks, she or he knows that this is only for a specific time. Yet, this also means that they have to transmit their knowledge and techniques to others, a "way of doing" promoted by the MST with its emphasis on ongoing education and trainings, in schools as well as "on the ground," or what some refer to as "learning by doing," through practices and exchanges. This is an effective way of avoiding dependency on a single person/leader to perform certain tasks, although in practice, this method has its own challenges.

The coop sells under an MST brand, 'Terra Viva,' in five Brazilian states. With the help and advice of agronomists, they have chosen to produce fish as it allows them to use parts of the chicken to feed the fish and thus greatly reduce what is usually considered as "waste" and discarded in the environment. Here they have found original ways to farm in a holistically integrated life cycle of the products, from the beginning to the end of the food chain (interview, MST member, June 2009).<sup>21</sup>

All the basic food items come from the settlement. People can buy if they want, like white sugar, because we only produce brown sugar internally. But... in general, people don't go to the store. ... in my mother's home... you cannot get them [plastic bags] as you don't go to the market; you produce (interview, MST member, June 2009).

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<sup>20</sup> Building on the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) and the community economy research collective, we want to emphasize the fact that it is not only in the global South, nor only within marginalized communities that a wide variety of labour and transactions are observed. However, it is particularly evident to perceive such diversity and interconnections between productive and reproductive activities in MST settlements, such as caring for elders, children and the land (soil, water, trees, etc.), while raising chicken, gardening, transforming milk and cooking. Nevertheless the 'machista' culture continues to assign traditional roles to men and women, thus reproducing gender relations and power structures, for example by attributing more value/income to certain types of work. Nonetheless, coops tend to divide revenues among all *associados* working for the coops, including women and young adults, either equally or based on the number of hours worked. Some coops are also debating or have agreed that more value should be attributed to more complex or demanding tasks that only some members are willing or able to engage in.

<sup>21</sup> The Cooperunião has expanded to the point of producing about 1100 litres of milk per day (as of 2007), transformed and commercialized by another MST coop of the region, the Cooperoeste (Prensa de Frente, 2007). They are developing their own agro-industry with about 7,000 chickens going to their own abattoir on a daily basis (interview 2009). While this larger scale production allows them to become more competitive on the regional market, it also means that the method used is conventional, and as mentioned earlier, market fluctuations is felt more directly by coop families.

We thus have a concrete example where the families have opted and succeeded in organizing productive activities on a fully collective basis, where the work and monthly income are divided among all active participants in the coop, which includes every household of the settlement. As one interviewee explained, this coop is known internationally for its economic success, but it is also a very interesting, even if less visible, experience in terms of self-governance from below. The participants have “learned to cooperate through their daily practices” in order to organize daily life, production, as well as social reproduction of the broader community (interview 2009).

*The Coopan, Nova Santa Rita, settlement Capela, Rio Grande do Sul*

In the state of Rio Grande do Sul—where the Labour Party (PT, for its well-known Portuguese acronym) was strong at the end of the 1980s in the capital city of Porto Alegre, and innovating with initiatives such as the participatory budget—the MST has been criminalized, especially during the last four or five years. Negative media coverage towards the MST is not new, but recent government officials and economic sectors have increased their attacks, for example by refusing to pay for itinerant schools and MST professors in three encampments (and 21 settlements?) remaining in the state (interview, 2009; 2012?). In this context, the successful experiences of the MST have been essential to demonstrate the benefits for society and for numerous rural farming families, as a result of a still limited process of land distribution. As of 2011, the MST claims that among the 400 settled families who gained access to land in this southernmost state of Brazil, they are producing “3.800 hectares of organic rice” and planning to get 350 thousand bags for the year 2011-12. This organic rice will not only benefit the upper and middle class *gaúcho*<sup>22</sup> households but it will also be redistributed to public schools and food baskets for poor families through CONAB and various governmental programs (MST article online, 2011).<sup>23</sup> The Coopan (Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuária Nova Santa Rita Ltda.) is one of the MST coops producing organic rice.

Created in May 1994, at the same time that the Assentamento Capela was established, the 30 associates of the Coopan chose to work collectively to gain more social and economic benefits. Around 70 families have chosen not to participate in the coop while remaining part of the settlement and working their plots individually (interview, 2009). Coopan members (who seemed to have better homes and more socio-cultural activities) opted for a diversified model of production. Most households of the *agrovila* (small rural villages where coop members have lined up their homes close to the coop installations, including an abattoir, a cafeteria, an office, etc.) are growing organic vegetables and herbs in small kitchen gardens, as well as fruit trees and flowers for subsistence and to embellish their environment. Having benefitted from the housing program created under the PT government of Lula da Silva, one also notices the quality and good size of the houses. In addition, these shelters have electricity, which is also essential for the coop industries discussed below. Many homes have Brazilian-style barbeque, and some even have a garage and a car, symbols of higher social status in the Brazilian culture.

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<sup>22</sup> In Portuguese, a *gaúcho* is a person who comes from the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

<sup>23</sup> CONAB stands for the *Companhia Nacional de Abastecimento*, or National Food Supply Agency. This public company was created by the federal government in 1990 to work in the agribusiness sector and to ensure regularity in food supply. It monitors agricultural production and store food stocks, but it is also in charge of providing income to small rural producers, as well as food to poor households and social sectors through various public programs and policies.

In order to generate permanent, monthly revenue (and having faced some failures with other products in the past), coop members rely mostly on pork (old family practice for many), milk and organic rice production (10-12 thousand bags per year). They have around 980 pork heads, of which a hundred are sent to the coop's abattoir on a daily basis. Over the years, the coop has developed its own agro-industries and marketing circuits for these products to "create more jobs for their children," to "avoid exploitation," and to gain "greater autonomy and control" over fluctuating markets (interview, Porto Alegre 2009). These products are sold in 30 regional and local farmers' markets in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre. At first, rice and milk were produced following conventional methods, using the usual package of agro-toxics. Yet, they have decided to make the "transition towards agroecology" for rice and milk, after realizing how damaging traditional methods were ecologically, as well as making them "less healthy and poorer," because of the dependency on and the price of these "technological packages" (interview, 2009). Emerson Giacomelli, coordinator of the settlement and president of the Cooperativa Central dos Assentamentos do Rio Grande do Sul (Central Cooperative of the Settlements of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, or Coceargs) explains that when MST settlements opted for organic rice, "conventional producers thought we were crazy. Today, they want to know how we make benefits in the middle of the crisis." Giacomelli maintains that this political decision is why even if organic producers "entered the crisis, they did not go bankrupt" like so many conventional producers, because they have lower cost of production (15 R\$ per bag compared to 28 R\$ for conventional) while seeking to maintain affordable prices for consumers (no author, Arroz Sem Crise, 2011).

The coop sustains close to a hundred families, thus helping to strengthen the MST economically and symbolically, by providing a concrete example of the capacity of landless people to organize themselves and produce quality food. Moreover, as attested by Zara Lubing Schroeter, vice-mayor of the nearby town of Nova Santa Rita during the 12th anniversary of the Coopan in 2006, coop members are contributing to the regional economy, by generating income, expanding the circulation of products and money, promoting education and cultural activities:

The benefits are not felt only by *assentados*, but by the local population as well. (...) The MST settlement only brings benefits. These are people who work and contribute to our economy. (...) Here we have people (Landless) that were born believing in an egalitarian country and today, they are concretizing this dream. We have a lot to celebrate (quoted in MST article, May 2006).

This is a concrete example of everyday practices based on alternative discourses directly influencing the socio-economic development of communities beyond their own. Public authorities recognize their positive role in improving the dynamism and social structures of the region.

A founding member of the Coopan, Etelvino Romanzin, constructively synthesized the multiple and transformative impacts that collective work and everyday life in cooperatives, as well as in many encampments and settlements, mean for many MST participants:

The cooperative opens up more opportunities for progress and social and economic development of the settlement. (...) It is a *new experience of living collectively* (experiência nova de convivência no coletivo). (...) Working together, we are able to get better prices for our products and we develop ourselves as citizens (MST article, our italics).

This “new experience of collective living” that “develops” the coop members as “citizens” is an extremely important process of political subjectivization. Indeed, it is through everyday interactions based on solidarity and mutual help that the members elaborate their sense of duty and belonging to the community. They become aware of the importance of co-responsibility in the development of both their own individuality and of the collective wellbeing.

Beyond significant material gains for MST participants, Emerson Giacomelli insists on the “human benefits” and on the fact that the decisions to industrialize and develop their own marketing strategy came “from small producers themselves,” as a way to face the crisis and to increase the value of their production:

Our conquest is *more human than it is material*. The settlement and the Coopan bring dignity to the Landless; they allowed these people to walk with their heads up high and to acquire their rights. They now have an employment and leisure activities (quoted in MST article, 2, our emphasis).

This testimony is revealing of what they consider to be their main achievement. Of course, as we saw earlier, they must produce for their subsistence and therefore (to a certain extent) play by market rules. However, as this MST coordinator highlights, what they “conquer” is “more human than material.” They learn the importance of working together, as a community, for a common goal, which also involves some personal sacrifices for an ideal greater than themselves.

When discussing the opportunities and limits of promoting alternative models of agriculture based on agroecological principles, one interviewee noted that agroecology is nurturing a sense of community towards greater participation, and social and environmental justice. Some federal programs exist for small producers engaging in ecological farming, but in his view they are negligible in comparison to policies and resources supporting agribusinesses. For him, the battle remains at the level of ideas and perceptions, which requires constant social struggles. For instance, he argues that people are becoming more aware of the “need to diversify food production, to preserve the environment... and the result is that we have more consumers [for organic products]” (interview, Porto Alegre, 2009). However, he also highlights that the problem with the battle against genetically modified organisms (GMOs), for example, is that “we are far from an awareness that translates into practice”... The media has entered the battlefield in response to activism against GMOs and they are very effective in convincing people that there is no alternative to them. So even as there are growing concerns among the population, it is mostly “for their own health rather than for the wellbeing of future generations and for what will happen later to the environment” he argues. He deplores that the organizing spirit revolves around more individual than collective goals, and that a lot more needs to be done before more people turn their concerns into concrete action to preserve the environment or to pressure the government.

Nonetheless, the constant efforts of the MST in Rio Grande do Sul to occupy lands and put pressure on governments have led to important steps towards settling the remaining 1,000 families who live in three encampments across the state. Indeed, the federal government and the PT state government of Tarso Genro have signed, in December 2011, an agreement to proceed with land reform and settle all these families before the end of 2013, while also committing to strengthen existing settlements (Leandro Molina, 19 Dec. 2011; anonymous, 28 Oct. 2011, MST website).



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