

A Reform for the Reformer?: The MST's Decline During Lula's First Administration

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The landless movement in Brazil regarded Lula's electoral victory in 2002 with a certain degree of caution. Given the gradual shift to the center, Lula and the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) raised doubts about whether this new government would truly commit itself to progressive change.ⁱ The Lula administration soon confirmed that suspicion, leading to disappointment and criticism from the left. For the most visible landless movement—O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (MST), the Lula administration has not seen an increase in movement activity over the course of Lula's first term, despite its sympathetic ear to the concerns of the landless. In fact, it seems like the environment is hostile to the landless movement since the movement's activity has dropped in the second half of Lula's first administration.

Gabriel Ondetti seeks to explain the variations of the MST's activity by applying the political opportunity structure framework. He demonstrates how external political factors can create opportunities for social movements to grow and achieve success. For example, Ondetti suggests that public outrage at the Eldorado massacre in 1996 forced Fernando Henrique Cardoso to undertake an unprecedented land redistribution program. By tracing the MST's development from the fall of the military government, he further argues that the consequent fall of the landless movement during Cardoso's second administration and its resurgence during the first few years of Lula's administration resulted from the changes of the political opportunity structure (POS) during each administration. In his study of the MST, Ondetti fails to identify the larger, more influential factors of the political context that require a reexamination of the POS during Cardoso and Lula's governments. The POS changes presented by Ondetti miss the continuity of the larger POS that has essentially remained the same throughout the democratic period. This suggests that activist choices of the MST leadership account for the fall in movement activity during the second half of the Lula period.

Instead, negative public opinion towards the MST explains the decline of the landless movement in the second half of Lula's first term as president. This negative public opinion resulted

from radical activist choices made by the MST leadership since the Cardoso administration that have isolated the movement from the public. The MST's use of dogmatic political rhetoric and conflictive forms of protest has weakened the ability of the landless movement to attract potential participants due to the negative qualities associated with the MST.

The first half of this paper argues that the broader political opportunity structure of the MST has not changed since the military government. The first part of this paper presents the limitations of the POS as described by Ondetti. In its place, I propose a two-tiered way to discuss political opportunity as it applies to the MST that places more weight on the economic system and government institutions and less weight on government rhetoric/attitudes. I also discuss the importance of activist actions in shaping attitudes and opinions and the importance of those opinions on the movement. The second part of this paper discusses the agrarian economic structure from the military government to the democratic transition to demonstrate the government's decision to promote commercialized agribusiness as an essential part of the economy.

The second half of this paper applies this interpretation to the recent administrations of Cardoso and Lula, emphasizing the importance of public opinion and activist choices in influencing the MST. The third part of this paper reveals how Cardoso managed to protect agribusiness even while implementing a program for land redistribution. This suggests that the government continued to value the export-driven agricultural market, treating land redistribution as a public concession or a welfare program. This land redistribution then responded only to a brief change in public opinion, and once such pressure subsided, Cardoso cut back on the redistributive process of land. The final part of this paper builds on the third section and focuses on how changes in public opinion can affect the MST's activity. The radical activist decisions taken by the MST leadership hardened public opinion against the MST and the landless movement as a whole. This negative public opinion undermined the perceived viability of the MST and thus caused decline of activity.

The reformulation of the political opportunity structure into a two-tiered structure:

This section describes Ondetti's political opportunity structure as a point of departure for a reformulation of the POS with regards to the MST. A more accurate way to understand the POS is as a two-tiered structure with a "lower" tier and a "higher" tier. In addition, a complete POS must take into account how activist choices based on subjective perceptions of the POS affect the current and future political opportunities. This reformulation of the POS is essential to understand how the broader POS of the MST has not changed since the military government even under Lula. It is also necessary in order to explain why the movement has declined in the second half of Lula's first term.

Scholars explain the emergence of social movements in four general ways: grievance/discontent, organizational strategy, activist choice, and political opportunity.ⁱⁱ The grievance/discontent theory explains the rise of social movements as a response from a social group to a particular grievance brought by the prevailing system. The organizational capacity theory proposes that a movement's organizational structures determine a social group's ability to coordinate and maintain social action. The focus of this theory is the social networks that exist prior to the emergence of the social movement since such networks would aid or hinder its subsequent development. The activist strategy theory suggests that the problem-solving skills of a movement's leaders contribute to the fluctuation in the movement's intensity. Protest, then, is a game of tactical calculation that requires leaders to negotiate with the government as well as the public.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ondetti's analysis, however, emphasizes the political opportunity structure framework, which analyzes how a social movement responds to the changes in the political environment. The POS, according to the widely accepted definition by Sidney Tarrow, is the "consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for the people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure."^{iv}

Ondetti argues that the change in the POS was the reason that the MST and the landless movement continued to grow while other social movements felt a sharp decline. Between 1985-1994, the MST grew amidst a general attenuation of social activity. The existence of a supportive legal and institutional structure such as the 1964 Land Statute emphasized the redistribution of unproductive land. This made the Brazilian state vulnerable to pressure by the landless movement to enforce these laws. Occupation thus was an effective means to put additional pressure on the government to redistribute land.^v

The POS is a difficult theory since it is hard to measure. It is too simple to say that a social movement has simply more political opportunity at one moment and less at another moment because some political environments are receptive to the movement in some areas but not so much in others. Instead, the POS must take into account how some structures and beliefs remain constant over time. Thus, the POS is better described as a two-tiered structure: the “lower” tier is related to more specific and less influential factors such as government attitudes/rhetoric and unforeseen political events. The “higher” tier is characterized by broader and more influential factors that relate to more permanent structures such as the economic system and government institutions. This higher tier is more influential because it accounts for fundamental decisions or attitudes that guide a country’s direction. A market-based economic system will always circumscribe a social movement’s efforts to establish a socialist society. Likewise, how the government formulates a reform program will hinder or help a social movement achieve its particular goals. Government attitudes/rhetoric on the other hand change often within an administration and between administrations, and so they do not represent clearly a change to the POS.

Finally, the important limitation of the POS is that it separates the actor from the situation without taking into account how integral activist choice is to the current POS and the future POS. Not only must actors recognize that the POS has changed, but also the way that they choose to react

can determine how future opportunities are formed. Therefore, POS do not exist independently of the movement itself, but rather, they react to each other.

This section summarized Ondetti's interpretation of the MST's development through the lens of the POS in order to reformulate the POS into a two-tiered structure. This section also discusses how activist choice plays an important role in the POS. This reformulation will be used in the next section to demonstrate how the military government decision to promote commercialized agribusiness as an essential part of the economy constitutes a higher tier factor that has lasted throughout the post-authoritarian democracy.

A commitment to export-driven, modernized agriculture: a historical perspective

Throughout its history, Brazil has never experienced any significant challenge to the landed oligarchical control over resources in the countryside, and the state has traditionally protected large landowners' interests, despite the unproductive use of the land. However, the military government promoted the modernization of the agrarian system, changing the sector into a vibrant, export-driven economy based on large agribusiness properties that use a highly mechanized production process. This decision to modernize this sector represents an important choice to change in the agrarian economic system as well as a lasting commitment on the part of the government to support this agricultural market. Thus, this decision is an important higher tier POS factor that has continued until present day.

As the economy began to expand beyond the production of sugar and coffee in the first half of the 20th century, government officials had to decide what to do with large properties, which were seen as hindering Brazil's development. At this time, these properties were considered traditional and backward, based on outdated production practices. The modernization of agriculture pushed rural workers, tenants, and peasants out of the economy. In the 1950s and 60s, grassroots movements began to fight for those who had lost their lands or jobs as a consequence of this process. Along with the Brazilian Communist Party, rural trade unions, and the Catholic Church, these movements began

to advocate for agrarian reform, organizing various rural unions and trade associations in several states.^{vi} In this context, sugarcane workers in Pernambuco created Peasant Leagues that began to protest against the unfair treatment of labor by landowners, spreading rapidly throughout the state.^{vii}

The landed elite pressured the government to quell these mobilizations, and the government reasserted the authority of the state in the countryside. The coup in 1964 was an opportunity not only to repress these social movements, but also to redirect the country in a different direction. The military government started its own land redistribution program under General Humberto Castelo Branco, but it relocated the landless in the Northeast and South to the Center-West and the Amazon as a way to fill up the vast emptiness of the Brazilian territory.^{viii} In addition, the government passed the 1964 Land Statute, which recognized the need to redistribute private lands. Although it only existed on paper, it provided the basis for future movements to demand land reform from the government. However, in the end the military government removed the topic of land redistribution from public discussion, and despite these reforms, the concentration of private land deepened under this new government.^{ix}

Instead of land redistribution, the military government pushed forward an ambitious agrarian modernization project that aimed to transform the inefficient agricultural production into a technology heavy sector based on machinery. Providing government incentives such as tax breaks and easy credit, the military government encouraged investment in agricultural machinery that would make Brazilian products competitive on the international market.^x This restructuring of agricultural sector fundamentally realigned traditional labor relationships, pushing out the uncompetitive smaller farms, and the machines eliminated the jobs of many rural workers.^{xi} The South and Southeast felt these changes most significantly, but federal census data shows that these reforms affected all parts of the country. While the number of tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and squatters declined sharply, wage labor increased dramatically from 15.0 percent to 23.3 percent in the 1970s. Specifically in the South, wage labor increased from 9.8 to 15.9 percent of the regional workforce, and this region

experienced the largest exodus as well.^{xii} The MST originated from the south party due to these massive changes in the rural workforce during the economic modernization.

As a response to these changes, social movement formed in order to fight for land reform during the military dictatorship. The Catholic Church began to organize the landless to fight for land reform and social justice through liberation theology. In the 1960s and 70s, through *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (Ecclesiastical Base Communities—CEB) and later through the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (Pastoral Land Commission—CPT), the Brazilian Catholic Church engaged the local communities in the land struggle and spread throughout all of Brazil, creating nation-wide networks of reform oriented leaders. The CEBs and the CPTs provided fundamental organizational resources to the landless that allowed them to express their grievances in an organized manner.^{xiii} With the gradual weakening of the military regime in the second half of the 1970s, landless peasants and rural workers started to occupy land sporadically in the southern states of Brazil.^{xiv}

The MST officially formed in 1984, managing to develop an effective argument and strategy for pressuring the government to redistribute land. Specifically, the MST argued that the military government failed to resolve the problem of land distribution, and in fact, their policies of modernization actually exacerbated the inequalities faced in the countryside.^{xv} Throughout the transition period, the MST broadened its discourse to include not only land reform but also issues pertaining to equality, social justice, and basic citizenship that legitimized the movement.^{xvi}

However, the success of civil society during the democratic transition does not suggest that the MST or the landless movement won any sort of structural battle regarding who controls land in Brazil. The rise of the MST coincides with the outburst of civil society, which exerted increased pressure on the weakening of the military regime from all sectors of the society. As the Brazilian elites abandoned their support of the military government, the political environment softened, permitting other manifestations of protest and social discontent. While the MST's participation in this activity further weakened the position of the dictatorship, it could only gain importance, in the

words of key leader João Pedro Stedile, “because it coincided with a broader struggle for the democratization of the country.”^{xvii}

The MST and the landless movement in and of itself do not constitute a powerful enough social movement to pressure the Brazilian state alone. Throughout history the state has always set the parameters for the struggle for land redistribution in the countryside, protecting the interests of the large landowners to the detriment of tenant farmers, peasants, and rural workers. In fact, the government has made deliberate choices regarding the modernization of agriculture that crowd out smallholders and wage laborers in favor of production with capital-intensive machinery on large plots of land.

This emphasis on an export driven, large-scale agricultural sector continues until the present day. Brazil has become an important agricultural player with a large comparative advantage. As the world’s leading producer in coffee and now the second largest producer in soy and sugar, the Brazilian agriculture sector occupies an important part of its developing economy. Although the sector itself only accounts for less than 7% of the GDP, the sector accounts for 20% of all formal jobs in the economy as well as many other informal, seasonal jobs, and the GDP related to agribusiness such as food processing, sugar, alcohol, paper, etc accounted for 34% of Brazil’s GDP. The agribusiness sector accounts for \$42.7 billion worth of the country’s trade surplus, which amounts to about 90% of the total trade surplus.^{xviii}

Therefore, the structure of the agrarian system has not changed because the government has decided that a market-driven agrarian economy is the most efficient and effective way to not only maintain a vibrant export sector but also to tackle the problems of land inequality and rural poverty. In the administrations of Cardoso and Lula, each president has introduced market-led agrarian reforms (MLAR) as their solution to the land inequality in the agrarian system. A market-driven system places the responsibility of success or failure in the individual’s ability to survive, and it would consequently relieve the government of the fundamental responsibility of land reform. The

Cardoso government promoted these MLARs as a conflict-free way of acquiring land to the landless workers and small farmers.^{xix} Effectively, this reinforces private property rights and ensures the protection of the largest properties held by landowners.

Despite the fact that there has been agrarian reform, the government's choice to implement MLARs such as the *Banco da Terra* (Land Bank) has reduced the government's commitment to assist the landless workers in building essential infrastructure, attaining credit, and maintaining the basic economic viability of these settlements. In 1997, after the implementation of the first MLAR called *Cedula da Terra* (Land Title), *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária's* (INCRA – National Institute for Agrarian Reform and Colonization) annual budget shrank from R\$2.6 billion to about half that amount in 2001. Furthermore, MLARs such as the Land Bank create a market of the properties of small/medium landholders, and it does not touch the unproductive land of the large landholders.^{xx}

These programs have critical problems that reduce the effectiveness of the programs. The first problem is that the lump-sum payments given to the landowners overvalue the cost of land. The second problem is that the poor quality of land purchased makes it impossible for the settlers to generate enough to pay off their debts, preventing the economic viability of these settlements. Added to this debt problem is the struggle for survival in a plot of land with scarce infrastructure and low government support. The third problem is that the settlers do not have a choice in the land they buy. Instead, associations of workers created by landowners and controlled by local politicians decide which lands should be purchased.^{xxi} Therefore, the reforms promoted by Cardoso and Lula do not change the structure of the agrarian system because they do not represent a state commitment to support the landless worker. Rather, they represent an extension of the market system. This system defends the status quo and reduces government responsibility in land redistribution.

The importance of the large-scale agribusiness sector in today's economy represents the economic continuity of the agrarian system that began with the military government. The economic

modernization of agriculture has continued to thrive throughout the democratic period, and the government has shown its commitment to defend this system of large-scale agriculture, even through land redistribution programs. Thus, this section described for formation of the current commercialized agricultural economy and the government's role in facilitating the modernization of the agrarian system. It argues that despite the gains made by the MST during the democratic transition, the MST was not powerful enough to change the economic system put into place by the military government. This economic system has lasted until the present, and the various MLARs do not challenge the market logic of the agrarian system. The moment of agricultural modernization represented a fundamental commitment on the part of the government to support this agricultural market. Thus, this decision is an important second-tier POS factor that has continued until present day.

Cardoso: the defense of the agrarian system through market-led agrarian forms

Cardoso administration redistributed more than three times the amount of land than the previous decade.^{xxiii} However, Cardoso's redistribution of land was a response public pressure. It was a change in the lower tier POS caused by the public anger at the repression of an MST occupation. This section explores how the MST's activist choices and the public reactions to these choices affected the rise and fall of the movement's activities. In the first administration, the public outrage at the Eldorado massacre in 1996 explains the unprecedented land reform undertaken by Cardoso. Likewise, the fall in public opinion during the second administration explains why a Cardoso could harden his stance against the MST's occupations. These changes affect the lower tier POS, but the higher tier POS remained unchallenged throughout this period. In fact, the Cardoso administration through MLARs managed to reinforce the market logic of land reform.

The acceleration of land reform during Cardoso's first term was a governmental response to public outrage after the Eldorado do Carajás massacre in April 1996. The landless movement achieved its greatest success after this massacre because public criticism forced Cardoso's

administration to commit to the agrarian reforms he proposed during his presidential campaign. Additionally, it made future rural violence politically dangerous and therefore undesirable. As a result of these two factors, the landless workers increasingly joined the landless movement because it seemed more likely that their attempts would be rewarded.^{xxiii} Thus, during the first four years of Cardoso's presidency, the number of land occupations skyrocketed from 119 in 1994 to 586 in 1999. The number of occupying families also skyrocketed from 20,516 in 1994 to 77,632 in 1999.^{xxiv}

Cardoso's land reform was a concession to public anger, and so the government appeased the public to the extent that it reduced pressure. Despite the apparent success, critics of the land reform claim that the program was not nearly as extensive as publicized. The MST asserted that during the period between 1995-2000 about 900,000 smallholders lost their land. A study done by the Escola de Economia da Universidade de São Paulo corroborates these claims, finding that over 400,000 smallholders lost land and 1.2 million rural workers lost their jobs.^{xxv} The agrarian economic structure actually left peasants landless faster than the program could distribute land, and it demonstrates that Brazil's agricultural sector still rested on a market-led system that favors large exportable goods, crowding out the small producers and wage laborers who cannot compete with this modernization.^{xxvi} The Cardoso administration defended this market-led system in two general ways: the first is the failure to correct the structural inequality through the enforcement important reforms to the rural taxes, the expropriation process, the land eviction process, and the land titling system. The second is the implementation of MLARs that reduced state responsibility in the land redistribution process and implicitly supported the status quo of land tenure.

The Cardoso administration did pass important reforms that addressed the inequalities of the agrarian system, but the government did not enforce these laws. In 1996, the Brazilian National Congress passed two laws that attempted to address these structural inequalities. The first law raised the *imposto territorial rural* (rural tax on land —ITR) as a way to punish those who allow large tracts of land to remain fallow. This tax was fairly large: the top tax on unproductive land increased from

4.5 percent to 20 percent. The second law was a revision of the land expropriation procedure that would permit the government to expropriate land and negotiate its price in a more efficient manner. Along with these two laws, the government also passed a law that protected the rights of the settlers on the land occupations, requiring that any eviction of land follow a process that involves the adjudication of the court system and the Public Ministry.^{xxvii}

These laws in theory would provide concrete incentives to use their land as productively as possible and reduce the ability of the landowners to evict forcibly the settlers on occupations. However, the reality is that these reforms have existed mainly on the books. Given the absence of a strong rule of law, these new laws did not have much of an effect. Landowners often do not pay their taxes, and the more stringent ITR did not result in more tax revenue. In fact, 98.7 percent of the largest land properties did not pay the ITR, suggesting that the tax itself is largely superficial.^{xxviii} The new procedure to expropriate the land also unjustly benefited the large landowners. Although the Real Plan brought down the price of land, the government decided to pay the pre-Real Plan prices, overpaying an estimated R\$7 billion, which could conceivably settle around three hundred thousand families.^{xxix} Even the land eviction law experienced problems: Pereira cites the complaints of Stédile who claimed that the Public Ministry law was not respected and the court system ignored the requirements to follow new procedures or the Public Ministry.^{xxx}

In addition to these problems, the system of land titling still did not correct the disparity of access to government resources. Many small farmers did not have access to credit because acquiring a land title for a smallholder is a challenging and expensive task. With a complicated, inefficient, and politically motivated land titling system, many smallholders do not possess land titles, making them ineligible to receive credit to improve their production techniques.^{xxxi} In fact large landowners still reaped the benefits of the credit system. Government agricultural credit goes mostly to large landowners who have the political power to renegotiate debt to their advantage. In 1995-96, large landowners managed to cancel the indexation of inflation on their debt, which ultimately cost the

government between R\$1.8 and R2.5 billion. In 1999, once again large landowners received another break on their debt, effectively punishing the small and medium landowners who paid their loans back on time.^{xxxii} Thus, unresolved titling issues not only prevent small farmers from enjoying their property rights but also allow large landowners to benefit unfairly from government resources.

Through these continued structural inequalities, the government showed its reluctance to undergo drastic land reforms that would possibly threaten the export agriculture. These land reforms were essentially methods to reduce pressure on the government. More importantly, as public outrage subsided from these land redistribution projects, Cardoso replaced the state-led redistribution programs with MLARs that relied on the market to redistribute land.^{xxxiii} These MLARs did not just represent another example of neoliberal fiscal austerity: the Cardoso government also introduced these MLARs as a mechanism that could compromise the MST's control over the landless rural workers by offering them a different path. These reforms could disrupt the momentum of the MST and further reduce the pressure felt by the government due to land occupations.^{xxxiv}

As a part of his "New Rural World" strategy, Cardoso created the *Banco de Terra* in 1998, which gave loans to people who could then use that money to buy land. If these poor subsistence farmers qualified for the loan, they would receive US \$40,000 dollars, and in an association with other interested buyers, they would negotiate a price for a particular piece of land. Once this land was chosen, they would receive state-subsidized loans to help build infrastructure. These rural producers would have twenty years to pay back the loan at an interest rate between 4% and 6% with a grace period of three years.^{xxxv}

Cardoso publicized the *Banco de Terra* as a way that provided land access through the market in the hopes that it would convince current or potential landless workers or peasants to abandon the MST's efforts in favor for this method. This program would reward those who chose to use the market, ignoring those who remained entrenched, conflictive encampments throughout the country.^{xxxvi} These MLARs initially was a complementary program to the state-led reform, which

redistributed land through expropriation of fallow properties. The MLAR focused on creating a market of small and medium landowners who would be willing to negotiate a price with the landless. However, it soon replaced the state-led reform.^{xxxvii} The government believed that it could let the market system work, and these MLARs would preserve the landed hierarchy and simultaneously present the government as working towards a greater equality. Cardoso cut funding of land redistribution programs, and government spending on INCRA dropped from .48 percent of the federal budget in Cardoso's first term to .20 percent in his second.^{xxxviii}

The failure to enforce rural reforms and the introduction of MLARs as a market mechanism to redistribute land reveal that the Cardoso administration essentially did not change its decision to support the large agribusiness export economy despite its work to redistribute the largest amount of land to the landless. After the Eldorado massacre, political opinion undeniably changed in favor for the MST, and it forced the government to redistribute land. However, as demonstrated, the agrarian system still privileged the large landowners to the detriment of the landless, and the government's reforms reinforced this privilege.

This demonstrates how public opinion at unforeseen events can pressure the government to change its attitudes. This makes the lower tier POS more favorable to the landless movement on a specific level, but it does not challenge the broader POS of the economic system. During the second Cardoso administration, negative public opinion as a consequence of radical activist choices also affected the MST's activity. This allowed Cardoso to assume a stronger position against the MST's land occupations, which further worsened the prospects of increased participation in the movement.

The number of occupying families dropped significantly in the second Cardoso administration from 77,632 families in 1999 to 26,958 families in 2002. The number of land occupations also dropped during this period from 586 in 1999 to 184 in 2002. Ondetti suggests that the political opportunity structure changed significantly due to a government crackdown on the MST,

and since the government no longer appeared receptive to the MST, landless families risked being punished indefinitely.^{xxxix}

The public opinion had an important effect on these governmental changes since it had turned against the MST during the first Cardoso term. Without pressure from the public, Cardoso could curtail the landless movement's activity since public opinion had changed significantly from the time of the Eldorado massacre. The MST no longer was seen as the victims of an oppressive system created by cruel landowners. Instead, they were seen as a controversial, radical group that destabilized the government through belligerent conflict and unruly protest. With Marxist rhetoric and ties to other controversial groups in other countries, the public began to see the MST as counterproductive. The MST began to take increasingly controversial actions to draw attention to the movement. In 1998, the MST looted supermarkets and trucks, and it also in some cases occupied productive farmland. Furthermore, the MST took to occupying highway tollbooths, mobilizing national protest campaigns, and occupying public buildings.^{xi} Although the MST used these tactics as a way to put pressure on the Cardoso government to reform, it damaged the public's perception of the movement itself, and thus it made public support for the movement dissipate.^{xii} The way the activists chose to pressure the government played a significant role in how the public perceived the movement as a whole, and consequently it affected the political opportunity structure of the movement itself. The MST's image changed from victims fighting for justice to troublemakers threatening the burgeoning democracy and the social order.^{xlii}

Cardoso passed a provisional measure that would invalidate occupied territories for expropriation for two years (and for four years if occupied again).^{xliii} Those who participate in these occupations of private property or public lands would be ineligible to receive any land or government funding, and those who had already received land could lose it. INCRA's assessment the contested land, a requirement in land expropriation process was banned from all occupied territories.^{xliv} The Cardoso government also created a new federal intelligence agency dedicated to defend public

security in the country and protect the occupation of federal buildings.^{xiv} These measures were a reassertion of state power over the movement itself. It demonstrated publicly that the government at the very least *could* punish those who violated the rule of law and disrupted the social order in the countryside.

Confrontational MST activist choices led to the fall in public opinion against the movement. This fall gave the Cardoso administration enough space to curtail the landless movement's activity by imposing an anti-occupation measure and creating a federal agency for the implicit purpose of controlling the MST. The developments over the second Cardoso administration confirm how public opinion can affect a movement's lower tier POS. More importantly, it suggests that activist choices can affect the POS by changing the public's opinion towards the movement itself. In the case of the MST, this change allowed the government to take a stronger stance against the movement.

Thus, reviewing the developments of the MST through the Cardoso administrations, concerns over the viability of the agricultural export sector influenced any initiative for land reform under Cardoso administration, whose ultimate goal was to curb the uncontrollable inflation and maintain macroeconomic stability. This sector would serve as a reliable way to support the anti-inflationary Real Plan, to increase exports, and to provide a source of domestic food. Thus, rather than threaten the sector with land reform, the Cardoso government preferred to respect the land claims of the large landowners. In this context, the government's land reform program served as a social welfare program that would curb the worst effects of the agricultural modernization without challenging the system itself.^{xv} By choosing to allow MLARs govern the process of land redistribution, the government implicitly reinforces the status quo, removing the burden of equality from its shoulders and placing it on the individual's. The broader POS for land reform has not effectively changed since the fall of the military government.

However, it is true that the lower tier POS did change with the changes in public opinion. The dynamic between the MST's activist choices and the public's reaction to these choices determine

how public opinion pressures the government. Thus, the dynamic between public opinion and activist choice explain more clearly the rise and fall of the movement's activity. This section discusses land redistribution under Cardoso using the lower tier and higher tier POS to distinguish between the government's conciliatory reaction to public outrage and the government's expansion of neoliberal reform in the agrarian sector. It incorporates the dynamic between activist choices and public opinion as an explanatory factor in understanding the changes in the landless movement's activity over the course of Cardoso's presidency. It concludes that despite the success of the MST during the Cardoso administration, the government's treatment of land reform did not change.

Under Lula: a losing battle

The final part of this paper builds on the idea that the fluctuations in public opinion change the lower tier POS and consequently the levels of MST activity. It affirms that the Lula government is a continuation of Cardoso's neoliberal administration, and as such, it does not represent a change in the broader POS. Through an examination of the dynamic between activist choices and public opinion, it concludes that the radical activist decisions taken by the MST leadership hardened public opinion against the MST and the landless movement as a whole. This negative public opinion undermined the perceived viability of the MST and thus caused decline of activity.

Initially, the MST and the landless movement increased their activity in the first half of Lula's presidency, but it has dropped steadily throughout the second half of his presidency. After Lula took office in 2003, the land occupations in Brazil jumped from 184 in 2002, reaching its apex of 496 in 2004 (see table data). Ondetti suggests that the movement increased its activity between 2003-2004 because of an improved political opportunity structure. Compared to the harsher attitude of Cardoso's second administration, Lula was more sympathetic: he has increased federal grants to landless movements and ignored Cardoso's anti-occupation law.^{xlvii}

However, the fall in land occupations and families experienced by the landless movement seems to contradict this idea. By Ondetti's logic, the movement should have increased activity or

stayed constant throughout the Lula administration, but it has not. Since then, the number of land occupations has dropped steadily to 364 in 2007. Similarly, the number of occupying families also increased from 26,958 in 2002 to its peak of 79,591 in 2004. Like the number of occupations, the number of families has also dropped to 49,158 in 2007 (see table 1 data). There has been no major change in agrarian reform laws, and there also has been no drastic political event that has mobilized the country against the MST and the landless movement. This means that Lula in fact does not represent the change the Ondetti believes.

Lula's administration presents a complex challenge to the MST because of its leftist political image. This image frames both the way the public reacts to the MST as well as what effects the MST's actions have on the public. Given Lula's humble background, the Lula government can occupy the political space of the Left while incorporating neoliberal reforms that are supported by the right-wing opposition such as fiscal orthodoxy, privatization, pension reform, labor law reform, and social security.^{xlviii} For example, Lula's social programs *Fome Zero*, *ProUni*, and *Bolsa Família* not only balanced out the administration's fiscal austerity but also reaffirmed Lula's ethos as the representative of the poor.^{xlix} Thus, PT's image "as both government and opposition" allows Lula to give fiery speeches against inequality and unemployment while his administration proposes legislation that contradicts that very message.^l In fact, Lula has passed various neoliberal reforms that Cardoso failed to do. The Lula government passed a public-sector pension reform that Cardoso failed to pass, a neoliberal tax reform inspired by one of Cardoso's initiatives, and the separation of the regulation of the Central Bank from the regulation of the financial system.^{li}

In general, Lula has proven to maintain the status quo, and this is also true with respect to land redistribution. The policies proposed by Lula largely reflect the MLARs of the Cardoso administration. Although in some cases the coverage provided by the government has expanded, the Ministry of Agrarian Development merely renamed the previously existing programs. The Ministry's new program is called the "National Plan for Agrarian Reform: Pace, Production, and Quality of life

in the Countryside.” This national plan has three lines of credit: Combating Rural Poverty, Our First Land, and Consolidation of Family Agriculture that essentially mirror the Land Note, the Land Bank and the Land Credit of Agriculture of the Cardoso administration.^{lii} Furthermore, Lula’s land redistribution has not met the expectations of the landless movement at all, and the rate of expropriation has slowed significantly in comparison to the Cardoso administration. In fact, the average number of expropriated hectares each year between 2003-2005 was only two-thirds of the average between 1999-2002, an average that does not take into account the large spike in governmental land redistribution in the first Cardoso term.^{liii} This demonstrates that the Lula administration represents the continuation of Cardoso’s government under the leftist guise of social reform, and Lula’s decision to continue Cardoso’s neoliberal policies and MLARs reflects the broader POS that has remained constant since the military regime.

Given that the Lula government represents continuity, the change in the movement’s activity is an outcome of the public opinion’s view of the movement. The deepening negative public opinion towards the increasingly radical activist choices by the MST has undermined the movement’s ability to act as a credible social movement. Ondetti’s assertion is probably accurate in the sense that the sympathetic image of Lula did lead to an initial increase of activity in the MST. However, this analysis leaves out how the consistently radical actions taken by the MST has alienated public opinion and undermined its credibility as a movement.

Thus, the way the MST conducts itself has debilitated its image with the landless since the MST increasingly appears to be recalcitrant and unreasonable. It refuses to reinvent itself rhetorically in a changing political landscape. In addition to the disruptive political actions taken by the MST described in the last section, the MST’s problematic image consists of various organizational and rhetorical characteristics that portray the MST as dogmatic and confrontational. These characteristics are a *mística* (mystique) that can be criticized or distorted easily, a polarized ideology that

encourages confrontational leadership, and an intolerance of dissenting views from within the movement.

The first problem with the MST image is the reliance upon a strict set of rhetorical symbols that serve to bind all members under the movement's vision and purpose or, as Wolford writes this, an "imagined community." This imagined community roots itself in the Marxist doctrine of conflicting classes and links itself to a tradition of land struggles throughout Brazilian history. In fact, the MST presents itself as the most recent expression of a traditional battle over land that the landowners have stolen.^{liv}

The MST's imagined community uses *mística* to present a unified vision of struggle such as the official flag and the official hymn as well as poetry, skits, and posters. However, since it offers a variety of symbols to the public in order to facilitate cohesion, conservative and leftist political groups manipulate these symbols to their own political ends. For example, the hymn stirs up an image of revolution: "With our arm raised we will dictate our history / Suffocating with force our oppressors / Let's raise the red flag / Let's wake up this sleeping fatherland / Tomorrow belongs to us, the workers."^{lv} According to Navarro, both sides of the political spectrum often misinterpret this type of *mística*, and so this image justifies the conservative reaction of the right while stirring up revolutionary rhetoric from the left.^{lvi}

The second characteristic is the confrontational leadership created by the polarizing ideology of the MST educational system. The new MST leadership who passed through the educational system provided by the MST has a more radical, closed worldview that encourages polarization rather than creative problem-solving.^{lvii} As a result, the MST in recent years has become increasingly extreme, drawing the movement away from former political alliances. The MST's most prominent leader João Pedro Stedile demonstrates this type of polarized view through his vision of class conflict. Stedile characterizes the MST's struggle as an inevitable contradiction between two incompatible models. The only way that the MST can be satisfied is through the triumph of the

movement's vision of the *camponês* model. Furthermore, the rhetoric demonstrates that the MST's goals are not merely for land redistribution of unproductive lands, but actually are for the complete revolution of the current system of agribusiness in Brazil. Thus, he places the MST inevitably against the whole structure of globalized agribusiness.^{lviii}

The final problematic characteristic is the intolerance of dissenting or differing views from different landless movements. According to Navarro, the MST's organization is based on social control of their members. The participants of settlements must submit themselves to the leaders of the movement since these leaders serve as the link between the settlement and the local government. As such, these leaders have control of the public funds needed to survive.^{lix} Those who do not ascribe to the movement's interpretation of history or struggle are marginalized and separated from the other settlers. After this expulsion from the settlement, these landless workers lose their significance, only relevant when serving as some sort of political appendage of a local politician or some leftist political party. For example, in Pernambuco between 1996-1997 six separate landless movements organized but ultimately disbanded since they could not compete with the MST's hegemony.^{lx} This idea is supported by Wolford's study of the town of Flora in Pernambuco. Thirteen of the forty-six families that joined the MST from Flora decided to participate since they did not feel they had any alternative in an increasingly difficult sugar economy.^{lxi} The rest of the community joined the movement when the government expropriated the sugar plantation and gave them a piece of land.

These problematic characteristics have concrete effects in the way the public reacts to the MST, and consequently, the MST's ability to attract potential participants for future activity. In fact, Hammond's study of the media's portrayal of the MST found that "demonization" is the most common portrayal of the MST by the media. This portrayal presents the MST as troublemakers that disrupt the rule of law and prevent the government from functioning properly. It demonizes the leaders of the movement in two ways: as following anachronistic socialist doctrines and as manipulators of the unwitting masses in their quest to conquer land.^{lxii} These confrontational images

of the MST have led to a loss of confidence from the public towards the MST as a whole. As the MST continues to rely on polarized language, the movement marginalizes itself and it becomes more and more irrelevant.

Public opinion data reflects this turn against the MST. As shown by four *Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística* (IBOPE) polls, the public's image of the MST has deteriorated significantly in the last decade. At the height of the land redistribution of Cardoso's first term, the public held the landless movement in generally good terms. The public, if they did not support the process of land occupation, generally supported the redistribution of unproductive land. Hammond cites an IBOPE survey taken in March 1997 in which 52% of the participants were "generally favorable to the MST" and 85% approved of non-violent land occupations.^{lxiii} In 1998, 80% of respondents supported the redistribution of unproductive land. With regards to the MST, the public had an ambivalent view of the movement: 48% of the respondents believing that the MST used land reform as a way to disrupt the country in order to achieve political gains. However, 43% of the respondents disagreed with that statement.

The IBOPE polls of 2006 and 2008 show public opinion to be not only against the MST but also against the goals of the landless movement in general. In 2006, 56% of the respondents believed that the MST's actions were detrimental to agrarian reform negotiations. The survey also suggests that the public believes that the leaders of the MST manipulate the participants since 42% of the respondents replied that the majority of the workers involved do not have an understanding of the goals of the MST. Finally, 76% of those surveyed believed that the land occupations have upset the Brazilian democracy.

The 2008 survey also adds another dimension on the public's perception of the MST. In the context of evaluating various social movements of Brazil, 65% did not have confidence in the MST as a movement, and 45% of respondents attributed the word "violence" to the MST.^{lxiv} More

importantly, 61% of those surveyed believed that these rural and social movements in general are harmful to the economy (see table 2 data).

This data demonstrates that the public opinion has shifted against the MST and the landless movement in general. Between 1997-1998 the vast majority of the population supported the idea of land redistribution, but in 2006 and 2008 surveys, a majority believed that these rural/social movements were harmful to the economy. The public's attitude towards the MST itself has changed from ambivalent to negative. While in 1998 the public was arguably ambivalent about the MST, in 2008 the public clearly associated the movement with conflict.

This survey data therefore confirms that the public's reaction to the MST's activist choices can affect the movement's activity. While the MST's goals are still relevant to the landless rural workers, tenants, sharecroppers, and small farmers, the movement's rigid rhetoric and belligerent actions have prevented the necessary adaptations required to retain a viable position in the Brazilian democracy. By presenting itself as a polarizing movement and by committing controversial and disruptive acts of protest such as looting supermarkets and trucks, occupying productive farmland, highway tollbooths, and public buildings, the MST has marginalized itself from the public's approval, and as a consequence, the MST cannot easily attract new participants. Potential landless activists do not want to be associated with the belligerent image of the MST, and so it reduces the incentives for landless workers to join a movement that is considered radical, anachronistic, and violent.

This section argues that since the Lula administration has maintained Cardoso's neoliberal policies and market-led agrarian reforms, it does not represent any change to the broader POS. It then argues that the current drop in the MST's activity is a result of negative public opinion against the MST. This negative public opinion is a response to the dogmatic and conflictive way the MST chooses to protest and present itself to civil society. The public increasingly associates the MST with conflict, which prevents the recruitment of potential members.

Conclusion: A reform for the reformer? The future of the MST

This paper has demonstrated that the decline in landless movement activity Lula's first term as president is a result of the MST's activist choices. The confrontational actions taken by the MST have alienated the public and have led to a decline in public opinion. This negative public opinion has made the MST seem radical, violent, and unproductive, essentially preventing potential participants from joining. It has done so by arguing that one must divide the political opportunity structure into two levels: one level pertains to the short-term, immediate changes in government attitudes/rhetoric while the other level pertains to the long-term structure of the economic system and government institutions. Using this distinction, this paper has shown that the broad political opportunity structure has not fundamentally changed since the military regime modernized the agrarian sector. Each successive government has supported the export market, which has detrimentally affected the small landowner, the tenant farmer, and the sharecropper. This governmental commitment characterizes both the Cardoso and Lula administrations. In light of this continuity, this paper argues that the changes in the landless movement's activity result from the dynamic between the MST's activist choices and the way the public reacts to those choices. Public opinion during the Cardoso administration determined the way the government could treat the landless movement. Similarly, the negative public opinion towards the MST during the first Lula administration has marginalized the MST, curtailing the movement's ability to expand.

This is not to say that no change has occurred. Land redistribution has continued, and the reforms passed under Cardoso give the landless a legal justification to pressure the government, just like the 1964 Land Statute. The MST has achieved impressive accomplishments over the course of its existence, and land redistribution remains an important challenge for the future. However, in order to remain a viable, credible political actor, the MST needs to pay attention to how the public reacts to its actions. It should not be satisfied with internal, self-righteous visions of the movement, but instead it must adapt itself to the changing political environment.

Ondetti suggests that one of the reasons why the MST grew during the democratic transition while other social movements declined was because the landless movement provided a concrete individual good: the acquisition of land. Other movements fought for public goods, and thus, members had no incentive to continue to participate when everyone could enjoy such a good without any additional effort. Land, however, was an individual good, and so the land struggle of MST avoided the loss of members by promising land.^{lxv} Wolford's study demonstrates that same motivation is what drives people to participate in the MST today. The MST has acted as an effective mediator between the landless and the state, and thus, people joined the MST because the movement has proven to work in the past.^{lxvi} As this paper argues, the perceived ability for the MST to maintain this role has been compromised by polarized rhetoric and confrontational actions. In the eyes of the public, the MST has been losing its credibility, which will consequently compromise its ability to negotiate with the state.

Broader structural change can be achieved in a democracy, but it has to be achieved through democratic means. Real structural change would be the reduction of MLARs and a commitment by the government to facilitate the acquisition of land for the landless and to provide for support in the form of subsidized credit and infrastructure to these new settlers. The challenge for the MST is to convince the government that such expenses are necessary and viable: that the government can be committed to a modernized, commercial export agrarian system and as well as a small landowning agrarian system.

If the MST refuses to rethink its message and goals creatively, public opinion may just render the movement effectively obsolete. The MST needs to find new ways of furthering its message because if it continues along this path, it may truly become an imagined community: a thought experiment caught up in its own self-righteousness.

TABLE 1: Occupations (2000-2007) and Encampments (2001-2007) in Brazil

Occupations:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Occupations</u>	<u>Area</u>	<u>Families</u>
2000:	384	534,804	64,497
2001:	194	344,513	26,120
2002:	184	753,903	26,958
2003:	391	677,302	65,552
2004:	496	941,265	79,591
2005:	437	1,029,201	54,427
2006:	384	924,222	44,364
2007:	364	652,450	49,158

Source: CPT 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007

Encampments:

<u>Year:</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Families</u>
2001:	65	10,311
2002:	64	10,750
2003:	285	59,082
2004:	150	21,778
2005:	90	17,233
2006:	67	10,259
2007:	48	6,299

Source: CPT 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007

Note: According to Rute Caldeira, *acampamento* and *assentamento* are not interchangeable words. *Acampamento* refers to the stage right after the occupation in which the legal status of the disputed land is still up for arbitration. Settlements are former encampments that have been recognized as legal. (See Caldeira, Rute, "Up-dating Its Strategies and Amplifying Its Frames: The Landless Rural Workers' Movement in Brazil and the Displacement of the Struggle for Land," *PGDT* 7 (2008): 135.)

TABLE 2: Data from IBOPE (Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística) Polls

1. March 1998

(a) 80% of 3,000 respondents said that they support the redistribution of unproductive land, while 12% are positioned against it

(b) When asked if the Movement of Sem-Terra (MST) uses the land reform as a way to agitate the country and engage in politics: 48% agree, 43% disagree

(c) 38% of respondents believe that the MST thinks more in the social outcomes of their actions. 45% believe that the MST is more interested in policy outcomes and 7% said the movement is concerned with both things.

(d) With respect to the invasion of land: 59% disapprove the idea, while 34% agree

IBOPE 1998. Survey theme: Agrarian reform. This survey was conducted between March 5th to the 8th with a sample size of 3000 people aged 16 or older.

2. February 2006

(a) Do the actions of the MST bring more positive results or more negative results for the negotiations regarding agrarian reform?

32% said positive results, 56% said negative results

(b) In your opinion, are the majority of workers who participate in the landless movement aware of the goals of the MST?

44% believe that they have knowledge, 42% believe that they do not have knowledge

(c) In your view, should the government use the police to remove members of the MST when they occupy farms?

53% said they should, 41% said they should not

(d) In your view, have the invasions of land promoted by the MST upset or not upset the Brazilian democracy?

76% responded that it has upset the democracy, 16% responded that it has not

IBOPE 2006. The sample size was 2,002 interviews. The highest margin of error is 2% in either direction. The data was collected through personal interviews with a questionnaire. A trained team employed by IBOPE conducted these interviews.

3. April-May 2008

(a) Prompt: I will read the names of some institutions and groups, and so in general, would you say that you have confidence or do not have confidence in each of these institutions, groups and personalities:

Movimento Sem Terra: 31% has confidence, 65% no confidence

(b) Words associated with MST:

Violence: 45%
Manipulation: 24%
Radicalism: 20%
Justice: 21%
Social Equality: 21%
Courage: 27%
Agrarian reform: 24%

(c) Prompt: The MST says that its goal is to guarantee that agricultural production is for food security, the elimination of hunger, and economic/social development of workers and regions. When you hear this, how do you react?

27% Agree with the objective and believes the MST is really fighting for it

38% Agree with the goal but think that the Movement is deviating from it

31% Does not agree with this goal because agriculture in Brazil should be a business

(d) Prompt: Some people say these social/rural movements are damaging the country's economy, and are frightening national and international investors. Other people believe that they help economy by promoting more social equality and pressuring properties to be productive. Which of these two positions do you believe more:

61% are harming economy, 30% are helping the economy

IBOPE 2008. The sample size was 1,204 interviews. The highest margin of error is 3% in either direction. The data was collected through personal interviews with a questionnaire. A team employed by IBOPE conducted these interviews.

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ⁱ Gabriel Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for Agrarian Reform in Brazil* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2008), 206.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 22-48. Please see Ondetti's first chapter for a more complete characterization of the other movements.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 34.

^v *Ibid.*, 137-8.

^{vi} Wendy Wolford, "Producing Community: the MST and Land Reform Settlements in Brazil," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3:4 (Oct. 2003): 503-4.

^{vii} Anthony Pereira, *The End of peasantry: The Rural Labor Movement in Northeast Brazil, 1961-1988* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 30.

^{viii} Wolford, "Producing Community," 504.

^{ix} Anthony Pereira, "Brazil's Agrarian Reform: Democratic Innovation or Oligarchic Exclusion Redux?," *Latin American Politics and Society* 45:2(2003): 43.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} Wolford, "Producing Community," 504-505.

^{xii} Ondetti, *Land, Protest and Politics*, 60-61

^{xiii} Wolford, "Producing Community," 505.

^{xiv} Wolford, "Agrarian moral economies and neoliberalism in Brazil: competing worldviews and the state in the struggle for land," *Environment and Planning A* 37:2 (2005): 247.

^{xv} Wolford, "Producing Community," 505-506.

^{xvi} Wolford, "Agrarian moral economies," 248.

^{xvii} João Pedro Stedile and Bernardo Mancano Fernandes, *Brava Gente: a trajetória do MST e a luta pela terra no Brasil* (São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 1999), 22.

^{xviii} Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Profile: Brazil*, www.eiu.com, 2007: 30-31.

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^{xx} Wolford, "Agrarian moral economies," 249.

^{xxi} José Juliano Carvalho Filho and Maria Luisa Mendonça, "Agrarian Policies and Rural Violence in Brazil," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 19:1(Spring 2007): 80-1.

^{xxii} Gabriel Ondetti, "An Ambivalent Legacy: Cardoso and Land Reform," *Latin American Perspectives* 34:9 (Sept. 2007): 20.

^{xxiii} Ondetti, *Land, Protest and Politics*, 177.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 157-8.

^{xxv} Pereira, "Brazil's Agrarian Reform," 52.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, 51. See chart.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 54-5.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, 57.

^{xxix} *Ibid.*, 58.

^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 55.

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, 55-56.

^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, 57.

^{xxxiii} Wolford, "Agrarian moral economies," 249.

^{lxiv} Other significant words were Courage, Manipulation, Radicalism, Justice, Social Equality, and Agrarian Reform

^{lxv} Ondetti, *Land, Protest and Politics*, 133-134.

^{lxvi} Welford, "Producing Community," 517-518.