

# The Difference Ethnography Can Make: Understanding Social Mobilization and Development in the Brazilian Northeast

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**Abstract** Ethnographic research is invaluable for social movement research. Ethnographies of everyday participation in mobilization help to counter the popular image of social movements as coherent, well-bounded entities consisting of individuals committed to the goals of the collective. In this study of the *Movimento Sem Terra* (the Landless Movement, or the MST) in northeastern Brazil, I establish a more complete continuum of movement membership by analyzing two interviews (one conducted in 1999, the other in 2003) with a former plantation worker named Cicero who considered himself a member of the MST in 1999 but “didn’t even know what to say about the movement” three years later. Cicero’s interviews are noteworthy because he is not the sort of person typically featured in studies of social mobilization: he did not join the MST because of a passionate commitment (more because the movement showed up and he couldn’t see a reason not to), and he was never convinced of the MST’s primary ideals or methods. Cicero’s interviews provide what Lila Abu-Lughod calls a “counter-discourse,” in which people make decisions that are contradictory, and incomplete, often made without explicit articulation or even understanding. Ultimately, I argue that incorporating this broader continuum will help us better explain movement personalities and trajectories.

**Keyword** Social movements · Ethnography · Brazil · Landless Movement · Common sense

The decade of the 1990s was a difficult one for the sugarcane region of northeastern Brazil. Local producers were hurt by falling international prices for sugar: from a high of almost one dollar per pound in the early 1980s, the price fell to an average of ten to twelve cents a pound throughout the 1990s (World Bank Report No. 20754-BR 2002: 34). Price decreases were exacerbated by changes in the nature of state support: in 1989, the newly-democratic Brazilian government began dismantling and progressively withdrawing its generous safety net for northeastern sugarcane producers (de Andrade & de Andrade, 2001). Subsidies that had

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previously (since 1975) allowed northeastern producers to compete with their more efficient counterparts in the South were cut by more than sixty percent in 1989 (Buarque, 1997). By 1995, fifteen of twenty-six sugarcane distilleries in Pernambuco—the state responsible for a majority of the total sugarcane produced in the Northeast at that time—were either shut down or on the verge of bankruptcy (Lins, 1996, p. 2). Production in the state had fallen from twenty million tons in 1989 to 14 million in 2000–2001 (de Andrade & de Andrade, 2001, p. 147, and plantation and distillery owners were leaving their land for healthier industries elsewhere (particularly tourism on the coast). Common laborers were badly hurt by the crisis: in an industry heavily dependent on manual labor, an estimated 350,000 workers were unemployed in 1996 and considered unlikely to find work even during the harvest season.

Crises such as this one are not uncommon in sugarcane. As with most mono-cropped agricultural commodities, sectoral crises are a regular response to shifts in international supply and demand. In one important way, however, this crisis was different from the past: economic conditions combined with the increasing presence of the largest grassroots social movements in Brazilian history, *O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (The Movement of Rural Landless Workers, commonly known as the MST). As the crisis deepened, the MST began effectively mobilizing former rural workers to occupy idle plantations and pressure the government to distribute the land. The MST's methods centered on purposeful civil disobedience, particularly the occupation and symbolic appropriation of spaces such as large farms or plantations, government buildings and public thoroughfares. The movement's ideology reflected its leadership's roots in the peasant culture of southern Brazil, and also brought together an eclectic mix of leftist radicals such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, Mao Tse-Tung and Mahatma Gandhi. Formed in southern Brazil in 1984 to fight for agrarian reform, movement leaders considered mobilization in the country's poverty—stricken Northeast to be a particularly important step to transforming the regional movement into a national one (see Branford & Rocha, 2002, p. 21; also see Fernandes, 1999; Navarro, 2000; Petras, 1997; Robles, 2001; Stedile & Fernandes, 1999; Wright & Welford, 2003).

As sugarcane elites went bankrupt and MST leaders militated for land reform, the state government of Pernambuco expropriated 27 former plantations and distributed them among former workers and MST squatters (Buarque, 1997; MEPE, 1998). Seemingly overnight (although in fact it took much longer than that), sugarcane plantations were transformed: rural workers whose very identity had been produced through the hierarchical spatial and social segmentation of sugarcane production were given ownership of equal areas of land and theoretically turned into small farmers.<sup>1</sup> On one settlement, which I call Flora, in the municipality of Água Preta, 46 families were given access to land in 1996.<sup>2</sup> The beneficiaries included the wife and son of the former *patrão* (literally translated *patrão* means patron or boss; in Flora's case, the boss was renting the land from a nearby sugarcane factory), the elite administrative workers, the common workers, both legal and undocumented (the latter being those who were employed on the plantation without their legal working papers, an occupation category increasingly common after stricter labor compensation laws were passed in 1963), house servants, and the MST squatters who had occupied the property months before to

<sup>1</sup> Spatial location was a very good indicator of occupational position on the plantation. At one end of the hierarchical spectrum were the plantation owners who lived in the *Casa Grande* (Big House) and had the run of the plantation (Freyre, 1978). At the other end were the *moradores* (common laborers) who lived in row houses on the plantation, and the *clandestinos* (illegal workers) who occupied the most insecure positions because they were forced to reside in town and look for work on a daily or seasonal basis (Sigaud, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> I do not use real names in this paper, unless they are political figures who spoke "on the record." Research was conducted in the region in 1999, 2001, and 2003.

press for its expropriation.<sup>3</sup> Água Preta is in the heart of the southern sugarcane region in the state of Pernambuco and in 1999 had both the highest concentration of land ownership and the highest number of land reform settlements in the state.<sup>4</sup> The municipality is almost entirely dependent on sugarcane (and largesse from the mayor's office) for employment and production, and the economic crisis of the 1990s hit everyone hard.<sup>5</sup>

When I first visited in 1999, national, state, and local MST leaders considered both Água Preta and Flora to be strongholds of MST support and membership. When asked where I ought to locate my field research in Pernambuco, MST leaders suggested Flora as exemplary of the movement's success in the region.<sup>6</sup> The entrance to the small grouping of houses that marked Flora's center boasted a bright red MST flag, and movement activists were leading the monthly association meetings and organizing public demonstrations.<sup>7</sup> One such demonstration in September of 1999 brought over 200 rural settlers together from around Água Preta to protest long delays in the release of state-subsidized production loans. The settlers were trying to move away from the regional specialty, sugarcane: at the urging of MST leaders, they were planting subsistence crops as well as bananas and coconuts for the market.

Four years later, however, the political and economic landscape looked very different. The price of sugarcane had increased to more than twice its low in 1999 and local factories were now paying approximately R\$35 for a ton of cane, as opposed to between R\$12 and R\$15

<sup>3</sup> The renter still lived on the settlement because his wife and grown son had both accepted plots of land from the government, being eligible according to the government law that gave priority to people with some (any) former association to the land. As extraordinary as it seems, the renter—a well-off man in his late fifties—would also have received a plot if he had not been actively renting out another mill down the road. The renter was almost universally hated, even by people who had liked previous renters (one worker had worked for three renters since he arrived on the plantation in 1962).

<sup>4</sup> Between 1992 and 2000, 12 former plantations in the municipality were expropriated and distributed among 926 families.

<sup>5</sup> In 2001, an official report written by the Mayor's office (of Água Preta) listed the municipality's Human Development Index at .354, less than half the HDI for Brazil as a whole (with an HDI of .742 in 2001) and significantly lower than Pernambuco (with an HDI of .572).

<sup>6</sup> Over the course of fourteen months (in 1998–1999), I worked in the southern state of Santa Catarina (SC) and the northeastern state of Pernambuco (PE). In both regions, I interviewed settlers on three different settlements according to the following criteria: one MST settlement with a history of collective production, one MST settlement with no history of collective production, and one non-MST settlement. In all of the settlements, I interviewed at least one representative from each family, for a total of roughly 200 interviews with rural settlers. In both regions, I asked MST leaders beforehand where I should work. I did this for four main logistical, strategic and political reasons: (a) I am not a member of the MST, and I was dependent on the leaders' goodwill for access to the settlements; (b) I believe in the right of social movements to limit or manipulate access to their activities: representation is their most important asset and they need to control it in certain ways; (c) the leaders were asked to suggest settlements as research sites, they did not control who I talked to, what people told me, or what I wrote; (d) finally, knowing that I was on settlements that MST leaders considered successful constituted an important part of my research: it enabled me to ask, how does the MST evaluate success and why?

<sup>7</sup> Because of the strong relationship between agrarian reform and social movements in Brazil, settlements created after 1985 are usually affiliated with a political representative: a social movement, trade union, or religious organization. These political organizations help to lead the settlements' association and mediate the relationship between settlers and the state. In 2001, numbers issued by the Mayor's office for settlements created in the 1990s listed five settlements with the MST (including Flora), three with the state federation of agricultural workers (FETAPE), four with a non-governmental organization, and one autonomous settlement.

in 1999.<sup>8</sup> Most of the settlers on Flora had gone back to work in sugarcane. The projects for bananas, coconuts, and cattle had not been very successful, and when the opportunity to work with sugarcane came up, they took it. The settlers were, in the words of one settlement president “dying of hunger” as they planted sugarcane again—either on their land or in the mills around Água Preta. The MST was no longer Flora’s official political representative and the movement generally regarded its position in the region to be in crisis.

These changes that took place on Flora could be understood as rational responses to the changing price of sugarcane: the former rural workers left the movement because they no longer needed it, they could now earn their living planting sugarcane for the regional market. Or the changes could be understood (as the MST leaders understood them) as examples of false consciousness: the settlers were pulled back into sugarcane production because they could not free themselves from the hegemony of the plantation system. In some ways, both of these arguments are valid—planting sugarcane could be considered a rational response to changing prices, particularly in the context of the generalized dominance of sugarcane in the region. The difficulty with both of these arguments (and in fact, with the theoretical frameworks used to understand political consciousness), is that they rest on two problematic—if sometimes correct—assumptions. The first assumption is that the MST was in crisis because people who had formerly belonged to the movement subsequently dropped out. Movements are generally believed to consist of members who join and drop out with precision (such that the movements succeed and fail in the same fashion). In fact, many people who “join” movements do so with some skepticism or even reluctance, ignorance, and bad faith—and many “leave” the same way: we cannot read political beliefs off of group membership. The rural workers on Flora had all believed they were part of the movement in 1999, but they were far from “ideal” members: they participated in demonstrations and state meetings, but they didn’t always understand that the movement was supposed to be composed of landless rural workers, not simply for them. In the same way, although none of the rural workers I interviewed on Flora in 2003 said they still belonged to the MST, not all were convinced that the movement’s withdrawal from local politics had been a good thing. The thick lines between inside and outside that social movements draw for strategic reasons (and that observers sometimes draw for political or solidarity reasons) are rarely—if ever—mirrored on the ground.

The second problematic assumption is related to the first. Both rational choice and Marxist attempts to understand consciousness assume an intentionality (people do things because they mean to) that is common of social movement theories in general. Although social movement scholars are bringing people, agency, and emotions back into the analysis (Auyero, 2003; Jasper, 2004; Wood, 2003) and correcting for what has been called the structuralism of classical social movement studies (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001, p. 18), the focus on intentionality draws new lines in the sands of liberal subjectivity: people either join (and leave) social movements because they want to, usually because they decide it is in their best interests (they get fed up, they want to maintain their reputation, they believe in the cause), or they join and (more often) leave because they are manipulated or swept away against their will by people who decide it is in *their* best interests. Both of these positions assume a market-place of ideas and decision-making that invokes Liberal economic theory: believing in agency has come to mean believing in intentionality. At the risk of being cited for bad puns, one could say: the path to social mobilization has been paved

<sup>8</sup> The Brazilian currency is the real (R\$). In October 1999, one real was equivalent to roughly 50 cents and in October 2003, one real was equivalent to roughly 34 cents (from the Brazil currency exchange calculator: <http://www.brasil-br.com/currency.htm>).

with intentionality. Whether the focus is on the “people” who engage in collective action or on some set of hegemonic representatives (in this case, the sugarcane elites) who manipulate others, *someone* is making decisions with access to perfect information and in competitive political markets.<sup>9</sup> When we come across “informants” who contradict themselves, or who can’t explain their own motivations, we think of it as “noise” and it gets edited out: nonsense, by definition, does not make sense.

Instead of editing out these “unreasonable” answers, we need to add what Lila Abu-Lughod calls a “counter-discourse,” where people are “confused, life is complicated, emotional and uncertain,” (2000, p. 263) to our analyses of social change and mobilization.<sup>10</sup> In addition to bringing culture into studies of social movements (Rubin, 2004; Wolford, 2003, 2005), we need to explicitly incorporate that aspect of culture best described as “common sense.” Following others, culture can be conceived of as a continuum running from informal to formalized expressions: common sense, tradition, ritual, and ideology, where ideology is expressed in (and demonstrated by) highly developed, well thought out declarations (textual and oral), and common sense is “the simple truth of things artlessly apprehended,” (Swidler, 1986).<sup>11</sup> It is, in the Gramscian sense, contradictory, fragmented, and never autonomous from hegemonic ideologies. It is the realm of culture most fraught with internal difference, most fluid (rather than contained within a recognizable group of people) and most readily changing in order to make sense of—and take advantage of—new situations (rather than rooted in tradition). The move to incorporate common sense does not mean structure, agency, and explanation should be abandoned in studies of social movements.<sup>12</sup> Rather, our ability to explain movement trajectories over time depends on our ability to incorporate common sense into the analysis.<sup>13</sup> When asked in 2003 why they left the MST, the land reform settlers in Água Preta responded in ways that were contradictory, incomplete, attempts to justify post hoc a set of decisions that had often been made without explicit articulation or even understanding. Incorporating this “noise” into our analysis of political consciousness helps to explain that the question one might ask in returning to the sugarcane region, ‘why did the MST fail in Água Preta,’ is too black and white: in fact, the MST did not fail entirely

<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Wood’s (2003) insightful study of insurgents in El Salvador stresses the causal power of what she calls the “pleasure of agency,” where agency is defined as acting purposefully to change life’s circumstances. Jasper (2004) argues for more attention to agency, defined as or through strategic choice-making in social movement settings.

<sup>10</sup> See Javier Auyero (2003) for an excellent example of this.

<sup>11</sup> See Ann Swidler’s 1986 article on “Culture in Action,” where she argues that ideology can be defined as highly articulated, self-conscious aspects of culture, tradition as the articulated cultural beliefs and practices, and common sense as the set of unselfconscious assumptions that are taken for granted or seen as natural (p. 279). Clifford Geertz also outlines the ways in which ideology, religion, and common sense form a cultural whole. Antônio Gramsci of course suggests that common sense (as opposed to ideology, philosophy, and good sense) is the un-critical, perhaps immediate, sense that people make of events, ideas, and social relations.

<sup>12</sup> In a well-argued paper, Charles Kurzman (2004) suggests that understanding why people do things will ultimately undermine our ability to build post hoc explanations. He focuses on events characterized by what he calls “confusion” (to differentiate it from simple uncertainty), such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution: “In this case, and by extension in other cases like it, explanation aspires to make actions expected, after the fact, that even the actors did not expect at the time” (p. 332). In this paper, instead, I argue that a close understanding of why people joined the MST in Água Preta is necessary to explaining the movement’s subsequent trajectories, both local and national.

<sup>13</sup> This parallels a Foucauldian appreciation for contradiction and contingency in building genealogies instead of neat, linear histories (also see Gupta & Ferguson, 1997 on the need to incorporate contradiction into studies of governmentality). Diani and McAdam (2003) who argue that qualitative analyses can—and is needed to—explain some of the issues or problems raised by the significant quantitative (and structural) work already done over the past thirty years.

(just as it did not succeed entirely), and the movement may even have planted the necessary conditions to rebuild its presence again. There was enough uncertainty and mixed emotions among the land reform settlers to suggest that if the movement becomes a strong political actor again in the region, at least some settlers would swear they never left (and perhaps they never did).

This sort of study requires an appropriate methodology: an analysis of contradiction, silences, and confusion can only be done through what Gillian Hart calls “advancing to the concrete” through “critical ethnographies (2004, pp. 97–8) and what Abu-Lughod calls an “ethnography of the particular,” simultaneously localized and global. This attention to location (rather than the local, see Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 39), to lived experiences (rather than rhetoric, see Burdick, 1995; Edelman, 2001, pp. 309–310) and to (un)intentions (as opposed to simply action, see Ortner, 1995; Wolford, 2003) will enrich our ability to understand and explain social movements. In the body of this paper, I use the textual tools of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) *Weight of the World* to work through two interviews conducted with a rural worker turned land reform settler on Flora, in Água Preta, Pernambuco, Brazil.<sup>14</sup> He was formerly a “common worker,” not an administrative (elite) employee or an MST squatter. I call him Cicero although that is not his real name. The interviews were conducted in 1999 when Cicero said he belonged to the MST and in 2003 when he no longer “knew what to say about the movement.” The first interview was situated within the context of my seven months in Água Preta. I also visited the area and met informally with the settler in 2001.

Cicero is not the kind of social movement member who usually finds his or her way into a study: he was not vocal in his opinions, he was not the “model” member on the settlement to whom researchers were told to speak, nor was he a contrarian who walked away from meetings (or the MST) in disgust and waited for his chance to “tell all” to the American researcher on the settlement. To the contrary, Cicero was quiet, he was uncertain what to think about the movement, and he rarely picked sides in a disagreement. In this, he was perhaps representative. His reasons for joining and leaving the MST resonated with the silent majority of settlers on the settlement (silent because they do not speak out or are not asked).

Analyzing Cicero’s discussion of why he joined—and then left—the MST leads to four key points. First, the confusion and contradiction Cicero presents cannot be easily dismissed as mistakes or unimportant, they are part of his attempt to reconcile his personal circumstances with the way he imagines the world ought to work. Second, the uncertainty Cicero feels about leaving the MST highlights the fuzziness of movement membership more generally—within any given movement, there are varying degrees of engagement, and interviewing along the continuum provides us with a more representative picture of movement politics than simply interviewing movement addicts and elites. Third, the pride that Cicero feels in owning his land has to be situated in a longer history of “captivity” on the plantations: as a former plantation worker, he feels a new freedom. For movement leaders, this freedom means freedom from the dominance of sugarcane, plantation elites, and the state, but for Cicero, freedom means being able to allocate his own labor time and to work where he wants. Freedom, for Cicero, means the right to reject the MST’s advice and ultimately to withdraw from the movement. Fourth, and finally, Cicero’s discussion of politics on the settlements highlights the extent to which participation in the MST laid the groundwork for

<sup>14</sup> In the collected volume of essays edited by Bourdieu (1991), researchers present interviews with minimal introduction and ask readers to “see [the interviewees’] lives as necessary through their reading” (1).

future political participation. Even if the movement itself never regains its political strength in the region, the tools of participation that movement activists laid down will certainly be used again. Social movements may come and go, but they build on and generate broader repertoires of contention; these repertoires are easily missed if we privilege the movement as a bounded, easily defined object of study.

In presenting and analyzing Cicero's interviews, I am not suggesting that he "speaks" in a way that is representative or original and therefore authentic or necessarily insightful. I am using his words to highlight the fluidity and contradictions of social movement membership and identity. He spoke for himself in our interview but he does not necessarily do so in this text. The interviews have been structured both by my presence and by the interview format, and the text was structured afterwards through analysis and academic publishing conventions.

### **Cicero, July 31, 1999**

Cicero is a short, sturdy black man, perhaps the darkest man on Flora. He was singled out for his color in the casual, even affectionate way that people are in Brazil. People called him the 'little black one,' and when Cicero worked in the neighboring mill before receiving land on Flora, the other men knew him as 'Amaral,' the name of a nationally-known soccer player who was as dark as he. Cicero was very friendly, with a quick smile; and unlike many of the former rural workers, he always looked me in the eye when I talked to him. I interviewed Cicero on the porch of his new house inside Flora, a fast but dirty walk along a red clay path from the settlement's center. Cicero did not live in the house where we sat; he and his family had a little house in the town (*na rua*) of Água Preta. When he received the government funds earmarked for housing, he built the brick house by the small stream that ran through his property. Cicero had planted manioc along the hillside behind his house, and he grinned broadly as we walked around his plot of land. Cicero's wife and children were not with us during the interview; he had been walking alone to his house when I caught up with him. He said his wife weeded with him, but only occasionally. If the settlement ever got electricity, as the mayor had promised, Cicero said he would move the whole family into the new house.

Cicero remembered his life before the present without details. He was born on a sugarcane plantation, in the mill where his parents lived. When asked "what was it like," he seemed uncertain of the question and answered as someone who did not feel they had the luxury of choosing the broad strokes of his life: "It was what we had to do, wasn't it? What else were we going to do?" The family didn't have land of their own, though they were sometimes allowed to plant garden crops on the land near their house. Access to land for planting had once been a regular condition of tenancy, or *moradia*, where workers lived on the plantation and worked a certain number of days per week in return for land to plant and a house to live on. The tenancy relationship was severely eroded after the 1960s when national legislation extended formal labor rules to the countryside and informal "gifts" such as access to land were increasingly unavailable (de Andrade, 1988; Julião, 1972; Pereira, 1997). In the 1970s, new government subsidies increased production, and it became even harder for workers to find land for their own subsistence.

After the transformation in tenancy norms, Cicero's family displayed a mobility that has since become common to the sugarcane region: people exercise their "right" to leave a plantation when working conditions are deemed unbearable. From the point of view of the workers, this mobility offers some freedom in their otherwise highly circumscribed lives. When he was very young, Cicero's family moved around from mill to mill in the southern

sugarcane region of Pernambuco until they ended up at a mill called Jotobá where his parents both cut and weeded cane. His father always liked their old bosses and never made trouble. Cicero said the boss at Jotobá was a good man because when his father died, his mother was hired to work in the Big House. Workers in the Big House were often treated “just like family,” in the region’s paternalist system of labor relations. Cicero’s mother eventually re-married and the whole family went together to yet another mill named Barro Branco.

From Barro Branco, Cicero began working in the mills on his own. He was seventeen years old when he began gathering sugarcane (*cambitando*) in the large trucks to take to the distillery. He liked working with the trucks because it was easier than working in the fields, “the cane cutter or sharecropper is more beaten down, he has to cut a ton of cane just to earn four or five *reais*.<sup>15</sup> For people who are good with a scythe, you can cut two or three tons a day. And I can make this much money with just one or two trips with the truck, depending on the truck. If the truck was well-built, well, there were trips when I would earn R\$5.00 just on one.” Cicero always lived on the mills where he worked and remembered his bosses giving him land to plant. He liked his bosses well enough, saying cryptically that “I don’t want to see a boss for any reason when things are going well, I only want to see them when someone in the family is sick.” By the time I met him, Cicero had a world-weary sense about him, having already been “all around this world, my god! I’ve already lived in Jotobá, Pamosca, Ferrão, in Alagoas, Espinheiro also in Alagoas, Japaranduba, which is next to Palmares, and other places too.” He had been married for more than 20 years (he said with a grin, “I love my little old lady a lot,”) and he hoped to stay put for a while: “Now that I have this little house here in Água Preta, I’ve settled down. Here, what I have is mine: this was my dream. And thank god I will stay here for the rest of my life.”

When Cicero arrived in Água Preta, he worked on the mill that would become Flora. He worked as an undocumented worker (*clandestino*), hired by the man who had been renting the property—about 450 hectares of land, since 1982. “In those days,” when Cicero first arrived, the fields were well-planted: “It was full of cane here, some 100 people worked here. . . . [The former renter] was planting, and all these mills around here were full of cane.” After six years of working illegally, Cicero received his working papers. He began working with the cattle, planting cane for feed and tending to the animals. This was roughly when the plantation “began to go bankrupt, [the boss] brought himself down. He went under.” In 1993, most of the settlers on Flora agreed, the renter stopped planting sugarcane. He harvested a second and third growth from the cane already in the field (called ratoons), but was unable to maintain production in the face of reduced government subsidies and falling world sugarcane prices. This was the beginning of the industry-wide crisis in Água Preta. It was also the beginning of the demand for agrarian reform and the MST’s political presence in the region. The MST was only one of several organizations pushing for land distribution, but they were the most committed to aggressive action and arguably forced the rural trade unions, the Catholic church, and other social movements to take up the cause. The MST had actually begun organizing in 1989, but local leaders initially had trouble mobilizing support among rural workers who were embedded in very different land-labor relation than the family farmers of southern Brazil where the movement began (Wolford, 2003).

In the mid 1990s, MST leaders and members joined the state agricultural workers’ federation, FETAPE, in a massive occupation of the largest sugarcane operation in Latin America. The distillery, Catende, had been a site of political dispute since 1993 when 2300 people were summarily laid off. In 1994, the mill stopped paying its still-employed workers

<sup>15</sup> Brazilian currency, approximately one to two US dollars at the time.

their legally-mandated “rights” (*direitos*) which included back pay, bonuses, fines for late payments, unjust termination rewards and holiday pay. By 1995, political protest had resulted in the expropriation of several mills belonging to Catende, but most of the squatters affiliated with the MST were not eligible for land (the unemployed former workers were given first priority), and they moved on to occupy new plantations. In 1995, thirteen families arrived on Flora after having occupied other mills nearby and camped out alongside the street under their black plastic tents. On Flora, they occupied a small riverbank in the interior of the plantation. At that time, the land was not actively productive: “Not at all,” Cicero said, “they weren’t planting anything here at all.” The National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (hereafter INCRA) had actually evaluated the property during the faint-hearted agrarian reforms of the 1970s. The property was slated for expropriation then, but nothing happened for over twenty years. The owner remained in debt to the state for nonpayment of loans received, and the land was rented out to medium-sized sugarcane suppliers. After three non-violent (but difficult) expulsions, the federal agrarian reform agency (INCRA) expropriated the property on March 7, 1996. Cicero learned late that the expropriation was finally going to go through: “I didn’t even know about it, I only came to know after they had already signed everyone up. But then there were three people who didn’t want the land, and so I threw myself into the middle, thank god. I am very grateful to the administrator here. He gave a push for me to get this land.”

Cicero had never owned his own land before, and he thought that the expropriation was a good idea: “I thought that I would have a little piece of land to plant on. I said to myself that I wouldn’t have to live any more on anyone’s back (*às custas de seu ninguém*). Because we used to spend all of our time battling for other people. You arrive one day, and that day they have work, the next day you go back, and then there isn’t any. When I got my piece of land, I considered myself a man rich in the grace of god. Because here I work when I want, no one is going to look at me, whatever I want to plant, whatever I want to do here in my house, no one is going to beat me up, because it’s mine. They gave this to me free and clear.” Cicero repeatedly expressed his relief in no longer having to beg for the handouts that are a common feature of the paternalistic and poverty-ridden political culture in the Northeast: “After I arrived here in Água Preta, I worked in the summer for the person who rented the mill, but in the winter I was always unemployed. I got tired of always standing in the doorway of the city council, abusing this person or the other, or the mayor, getting money to do the weekly shopping from one person, getting R\$100 from another. Today, thank God, I don’t need this.”

After receiving his land, Cicero considered himself a member of the MST (“yes, I am”) because “if it weren’t for the good will of the movement, I would not be here on the settlement.” When I asked if he had participated in a mobilization or a march, he said yes, but could not elaborate further. He believed that “until now the movement has been helping me a lot. Because all of these credit projects that come out, it’s because of their work, isn’t it? The money that comes out, all of these projects, it’s the will of the movement.”

Even though Cicero was fairly representative of the MST members in Água Preta, he was by no means an “ideal” MST member, mostly because he spent very little time actually planting on his land. He did not see farming as a practical means of ensuring his subsistence and in the way of most rural workers in the region, he believed that money generated food rather than the other way around (meaning that he valued paid labor over subsistence farming). The MST had developed in southern Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s before moving up the coast into the Northeast and North, and the southern states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná are well-known as the center of small family farming in the country (see Cazella, 1992; Paulilo, 1996; Wolford, 2003). Immigrants from Germany, Poland, and Italy,

primarily, had settled there in the 1800s and early 1900s looking for land of their own to farm. This farming ideal—where land sits at the center of production and social reproduction—is at the heart of the MST’s vision for an alternative future.<sup>16</sup> In Água Preta, the manifestation of this peasant vision was the focus on eradicating sugarcane from the settlements and the drive to teach the settlers how to plant a diversified portfolio of crops, from which they would derive the majority of their subsistence. Local MST leaders were particularly insistent that the settlers not plant sugarcane (as opposed to other commercial crops), as this crop seemed to both epitomize and maintain the settlers’ dependent conditions in the region. In 1999, local MST leaders and agronomists were trying to convince the settlers that they should plant food crops on their land. They oversaw the preparation for, and distribution of, the government-subsidized production projects, which specified three alternate products for production and sale: bananas, coconuts and milk. When I first spoke with him, Cicero had planted some of his bananas and a field of manioc, but he spent most of his time away from his land “taking care of the family.” In our discussion about work, he went back and forth, arguing that taking care of the family meant finding a job and then arguing that survival meant working on his land. This “multi-dimensionality” is, of course, common to peasant production more generically but it was difficult to reconcile with the MST’s vision of a good settler and good MST member. The following quotes are taken from different segments of his interview; they are not taken out of context so much as they are taken out of the larger interview:

Cicero said he did not spend much time on his land because he “finished the house, looked to one side, looked to the other, didn’t see anything. . . and we have to battle constantly to give our family something to eat. Even this winter now, I have not been on my land, I have already lost a lot of weeks of work now. If not, I would already have a lot of stuff planted here. To do this, I want to be working on my land. Because in there, with the little bit of manioc that we have, digging out a little pool for fish, and then when things get tight, we have fish in the pond, we throw some manioc on the stove and we keep on fighting. If I had been in here all the time, I would already have a lot of things planted.”. . . “There are days when I leave here with my legs only moving by force. I get back to the house late at night and all I can do is drink some coffee and fall into bed. I had a [temporary work contract] there in the sugarcane mill, Santa Maria. I spent four or five months there, only coming home at the end of the week. If I spend time here inside the settlement without having anything where would I end up? At the end of the week, I have to arrange some milk for my son, and a little bit of change to buy even just a kilo of couscous, beans and flour, which is what we most need in the house, and so we have to fight on.”. . . “When the summer comes around and the cane-milling begins, then if I can do some work on my land, I will really stay there. I am going to buy some pesticides and kill the weeds so that when the rains come, the land will already be ready. It all depends on when I have to leave to go take care of my family (*pra segurar o meu*) you know? One has to leave to work the season of the milling and that way I can eat again this winter.”

Even as he rationalized his detachment from the land in the settlement, Cicero distanced himself further from the movement by unselfconsciously rejecting the movement’s main strategic tool: the land occupation. MST leaders throughout the country view the occupation as the fundamental formative moment and ongoing process through which landless workers become members (for themselves). A prominent MST leader from Santa Catarina (who

<sup>16</sup> The MST’s “agrarian populism,” as I call it in other work (after Gupta, 1998, see Wolford, 2005), is less evident in political discourse than it is on the ground, in the settlements.

moved up to the Northeast when the movement began mobilizing there) put it this way, emphasizing the movement's focus on land and the occupation process: "we picked an issue that united everyone—the land. [Land] is a necessity. Land is the word that unifies. Land became the element of the struggle. You offer the workers the opportunity to have land—but through an occupation [that they participate in]."

But Cicero, like many of the former rural workers on Flora, had learned to appreciate the law (through the formalization of rights after the labor victories of the 1960s and 1970s), and he distrusted methods that seemed so clearly illegal. His reasoning, however, was, to paraphrase Abu-Lughod, "confused, complicated, emotional and uncertain": "I am against land occupations. If the government has already evaluated the land and decided to put people on top of it, that's ok. Because not everyone is equal, you know? One time these people [several MST leaders] went to Recife, and they left there ruining the car they were driving. I am against that. If the head of the movement came and put people inside a property, this then I agree with. Now, to invade—this business where they don't even know if they will be able to get that land—well then, I am against that. But if the business is already all set, they're already entering into negotiations, and they throw people inside there, well then, that's correct. Because many people have already said—even the state said the same thing - that INCRA was buying land very expensively, land that had been invaded. Over there there was even a mill and the owner himself was the one who got people together, even gave them a house to invade, so that he would get more than the land was worth. If we have a little piece of land, a farm, and we arrive and find it invaded, we won't feel very good. Now, if we already owe money, and we're not producing anything, well then I agree with it."

Even on Flora, where the land had been designated for expropriation in the 1970s, Cicero didn't agree with the occupation and was unsure if the original MST squatters had full rights to their plots of land: "Because this whole business of invading here, invading there, the men who kick them out. . . . And so we didn't know anything about the movement or the occupation [before they expropriated Flora]. We found out when they were negotiating, you know? And we still don't know whether they're settled already absolutely correctly and everything - as they say in the history books."

By our next conversation, in 2003, these disagreements over what the settlers should plant, where they should work, and who had the right to land (what can be summarized as the relationship between land and labor) had contributed to a significant divide between the settlers and the MST.

### **Cicero, February 19, 2003**

I interviewed Cicero again almost four years after our first interview. We met in the screened-in area at the front of his house in Água Preta. It was the same house he had been living in in 1999. The settlement still did not have electricity and Cicero would not move his whole family there until there was running water and light. Cicero was hot and out of breath from having run up the hill to meet me. It was late summer in the zona da mata, the very end of the harvest, and nothing much was happening. Cicero wasn't planting because the fields were dry; he was waiting for the winter rains that usually began falling in May or June. This year he thought he might plant manioc again, even though he had lost almost all the manioc he had shown me four years earlier: "That time when you came around [my house on the settlement], didn't you see a lot of manioc?" "Yes, I have a picture of it." "Well, I lost all of that." The rains had come and the manioc rotted before he could pull it all up. Cicero's attempt to produce bananas did not go well either: "The bananas didn't do well at all (*não*

*deu nada*), they're over there, those little trees, they're only this tall. . . ." Cicero, like many others, now said they had only planted bananas in the first place because they were told they had to: "It was just a waste of time and work. It was wasting money like a fool, this business of investment in banana, [and other tropical fruits]. None of it did well. We only planted that banana because Antônio [the agronomist and MST leader] told us to—and the president and the extension agents too. Because if you didn't plant it, you wouldn't get the rest of [your government-subsidized loans]. A lot of people were turned off (*desligou-se*), as you saw. They turned away from the association and the movement after that."

Cicero said the government-subsidized project for banana had gone awry because the settlers had not received sufficient technical advice from their agronomist-cum-MST leader and because "salvation has to be sugarcane." "I planted lemon, orange, banana, I planted my land, you know? Well, what I really planted was just banana and maracujá, I didn't plant the rest. Because Antônio is coming today, he's coming tomorrow, he's coming this or that day and so time went by and in the end, the material that was supposed to come never came. The banana came, and I got 200 trees, but they kept saying the rest will arrive in the next batch and so they kept dividing it up for each one a little bit, and saying that when the next batch comes, you will get the rest. Today I have two cows, one horse, the fence, the pond that I built, it was all part of the government project. But the rest of it all disappeared (*foi tudo pro Belelé*). . . . "But, if I could have, I would have invested everything in sugarcane. If I had planted at that time the R\$7500 that I took, I would have put at least R\$5000 in sugarcane, and maybe my land would at least have energy and I wouldn't be owing the bank. . . . We all went along with the talk (*conversa*) of Antônio and the settlement president because if you don't plant all of this that the bank asks for and the movement asks for then you won't get the other bit of the money. I know that there are others who did not do [what Antônio said] and they got their money."

With the recent increase in the price of sugarcane, Cicero was planning to plant his fields again in the crop. "Sugarcane sustains agriculture because in the summer we have a little bit of change, you know?" . . . "[If I could do it again,] I wouldn't invest so much again in what they made me invest in. I know that I am never going to be able to pay this debt off." . . . "If the state liberated this money and said, ok the money is in your hands, I want to see you all make progress in some things, I am certain that only people who don't want something will have nothing because we would plant what the land will support (*o que a terra dava*). . . . Salvation has to be sugarcane, we have to push more for sugarcane." Cicero was planning to plant at least a hectare of sugarcane, which he estimated would produce 50 tons of cane. He had taken 18 tons to the *Treze de Maio* mill the previous harvest and said it was easy to find a place for the crop: "All of the distilleries are accepting cane, what they want most of all is sugarcane, the more that arrives for them, the better."

When I asked him if the MST was helping on the settlement, despite the failure of the bananas project, he said,

*Cicero*: I don't even know what to say about the movement. Because the only meeting we have participated in until now was this past week and so I don't know what to say.

*Wendy*: The movement doesn't come around here anymore? The militants of the movement don't come around?

*Cicero*: They only showed up here when that money came out. And at the time when they built that office that they were going to put there, seems like INCRA condemned it.

*Wendy*: Yeah.

*Cicero*.: So it was stopped and everything ended, and no one has seen anyone from the movement again.

I asked Cicero to explain what had happened with the office building that MST leaders had hoped to locate on the settlement. Local movement leaders had held a meeting with the settlers to ask if the MST could renovate the nearly-abandoned stables that sat at Flora's entrance. The movement wanted to house its regional headquarters there, on the settlement closest to the center of Água Preta as—up until then—a source of support for the movement. The settlers had voted yes, but subsequently there was confusion and disagreement and several of them went to the state capital, Recife, to get federal agrarian reform agents (from the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform, INCRA) to stop the move. I said to Cicero:

*Wendy:* The settlers didn't want the movement to build that house?

*Cicero:* They did want it, but there were many who went to INCRA. [The former president] himself went, several of them went, they said that it was going to turn into a rowdy bar (*baderna*).

But Cicero did not agree with this interpretation of the MST's intent, although he said he did not bring his disagreement up with others:

*Cicero:* The more that INCRA, the state, the movement, no matter who, wants to invest in the settlement, well, that's an advantage for us, but they (the other settlers) think that it is going to turn into a rowdy bar where the whole world will come and want to boss us around. And so it's their problem, they only want to go downhill, they don't want to see things get better.

*Wendy:* They think that the people who go to the office will want to boss people around?

*Cicero:* More or less. ... at least that's what [the former settlement president] said. I live there inside the settlement, I fight to see all of that looking good, but then they said that there had been an act that was signed incorrectly without anyone knowing about it. Because the will of the majority was that they shouldn't build [the office].

*Wendy:* It should not have been done or it should have been?

*Cicero:* No, it should not have.

*Wendy:* This was what the majority of people wanted?

*Cicero:* Yes. That building was going to be the settlement's postcard. It was going to be more attractive every time, more organized, it was an advantage for us! And so they think that it's better to go down than to come up. For INCRA, the movement could build whatever building they wanted, at least the whole business was well-organized, giving us one more attractive thing. But many people think that it's going to turn into a *baderna*, they are going to make a mess, with the whole world there coming in and out. And so what are we going to do? Stay quiet and just watch.

I then asked Cicero whether the settlement was still affiliated with the MST. He began his response with a comment about collective disengagement, but when pressed returned to his discussion of private property rights that had colored his evaluation of the MST in 1999.

*Wendy:* So the people here don't like MST any more?

*Cicero:* I don't see anyone here talk about the movement.

*Wendy:* Because in the beginning the settlement was part of the movement, right?

*Cicero:* Yes. Everything we have today we owe to the movement. I too owe everything to it. I just don't agree with this business of invading land. Who wants to have what is theirs and arrive to find it has been invaded? I have this house here and say I leave and when I get back, it's been invaded? What am I going to do? I don't agree with this. Now,

the way the law is today, where no one invades anything, because if there is an invasion it is expropriated only two years later, I think this is correct.

*Wendy:* What if they carry out an occupation on a large farm or mill that is already indebted and everything?

*Cicero:* Yes, and so the movement goes and negotiates and the owner of the property—after they negotiate, I agree with putting people inside the property. To this day I have already fought a lot, but I would never fall inside an occupation, no. I got this land because I worked in the mill, but for me to invade what belongs to other people, I never had the desire to do this. I would be afraid.

*Wendy:* Really?

*Cicero:* Yes. Can you imagine, a guy is at home in his house full of children like I am, and then a group of people come, whether it's with guns or not. If you run you will see your family be beaten down. You have to react and if you react you end up dying. I have never lied. That time when they went to that other mill, they were camped out four different times. There on my land there is a little piece of land where they camped out. Over there (he said, pointing) there's another place."

Even though Cicero did not see any one talking about the movement and didn't try to talk to any of the leaders still in the region, he was discouraged by the disorganization on the settlement, and wished there was more cooperation. He described a settlement in the neighboring state where "you can see that things work differently, I don't know if you have already been to Alagoas but there is a settlement close to a sugarcane factory there. It's a very beautiful thing, it's just like a city, there's a bakery, there's everything." Cicero said they had achieved all of this because they had a cooperative and worked together. On Flora, Cicero said, there was too much mistrust to allow people to work together: "I have already told many of them that the guy who likes things doesn't trust anyone. When a guy trusts another person it is because he doesn't like to take what belongs to other people. But people who don't trust anyone are people who already know what went on."

When Cicero encountered a political problem on the settlement he wanted to organize the other settlers again to protest, just as they had that evening in front of the city council building. Cicero blamed the mayor for not delivering the electricity that he had promised back in 1999. He called on his memories of the demonstration from 1999 to argue that "if we did this again, I am certain that the mayor would already have given us our electricity. And when we do get together—well, there was that time when we wanted the councilman Armando Souto to sign for us, about three years ago. That was the reason our credit projects were approved. Armando didn't want to sign [our papers], and I know that we got together Elias, the other Elias who was the president, everyone got together with the mayor's men, because Armando Souto was against us. Do you remember?"

He tried to convince some of the other people on the settlement to organize another demonstration like that one, "and so I said to them: 'Now, is the time for you to turn over the mayor's car.' And they said 'no, because. . . .' And I said: 'look, you guys don't mobilize for anything; the mayor said the electricity here in Flora was a priority of his, even if there wasn't enough money to finish it all, he would take it out of his own purse and finish it.' I said this to them, because it was time for them to turn over the mayor's car to make this happen, just like they did with Armando's car." Cicero remembered this demonstration with triumph, "because then the money came out, Souto signed the papers! But the mayor's being a fool, and everything's left the way you see it. . . ."

I said, "It's a lot of bureaucracy, isn't it?" And he replied, still amiably, "Yes, and the only one who gets screwed (is forced to dance) is the little guy." Cicero said that the mayor

did help with some things, but through the traditional patronage channels, which meant that it didn't always trickle down. His wife, who had joined us on the porch, explained: "He helps the presidents [of the settlement] because he'll give a job to their children and then the presidents are trapped without being able to ask for anything because the mayor will take them to task—'but you have a child, your wife, they're all working in the mayor's office. . .'"

In the end, though, even with the disorganization on the settlement and the difficulties with the movement, Cicero still thought that he was better off than he had been before he was awarded a place on the settlement. When I asked him directly if he was better off, his answer began with a discussion of material position and ended with a seemingly unrelated story about personal honor:

My life is quite a bit better now. Before [I got land] I had to wake up at dawn out of my head working in the middle of nowhere (*no meio do mundo*, a common expression having no perfect translation but meaning 'somewhere out in the world') on top of a sugarcane truck, and I would get home at ten or eleven at night. Today I leave the house at 7:30 in the morning and on Sunday I played soccer with some friends at night, then I watched a movie and went to bed at 1:00 in the morning—when I looked at the clock in the morning, I had already overslept! And if I were working for others? Now I can get to work at 7:00, at 8:00 or 9:00 and [my boss at the auto shop] doesn't say anything. One time, about three years ago, I worked in a mill around here. I worked in a job preparing the land. I would leave here around 5:30 in the morning—you're supposed to be there at 5:00 a.m. to work. One time I went to the entrance of the hospital and I came back ashamed because the guys there said: 'Well, boy, at an hour like this!' Because that was what I have been most afraid of in my life: complaining about something.

## Conclusion

So, what then, is Cicero's place—or the place for ethnography—in critical studies of development and social mobilization? The close reading of the way in which "banal geographies of everyday life" weave their way in and out of social mobilization advances our theoretical understandings in at least four directions:

1. Cicero's strong assertions of statements that contradicted one another—even well after the fact—illustrate a "clear-headed confusion" (Abu-Lughod's "counter-discourse") that rarely comes through in studies of social movements. Instead of trying to make sense out of everything that happened and treating contradiction or uncertainty as "noise," common sense should become a key epistemological tool for understanding political consciousness. Contradictions are not always contradictory: they are windows onto the messy relationship between agency and structure. Or rather, they reflect the ways in which people reconcile their personal circumstances with a view of how the world ought to work. These tensions are evident in the way that Cicero defended private property (referencing the pain he would feel if people invaded his own house) even as he attributed his property rights to the MST members who squatted on the plantation and pushed through the expropriation. He held onto the notion that the law should be respected, even as he legitimated the MST's tactics of invading unproductive land by referring to a general situation of injustice. These contradictions reflect both Cicero's own sense of confusion and deeper contradictions in Brazilian notions of property and the political subject. Within the Brazilian legal system, one can find simultaneous support for the rights of squatters (based in an individual's right to their labor and the fruits of their labor), the rights of property owners (based in an individual's right to own commodities once purchased) and the collective right of society to property as a social good, property that satisfies some sort of vaguely specified "social function." In this way, Cicero's confused stance vis-à-vis

property reflects an attempt to reconcile historical notions of property rights embedded in the plantation system with his own multi-faceted understanding of who deserved land and why. By naming Cicero's confusion as such and situating it up-front in this way, I argue that we get a better appreciation for the relationship between structural factors, such as political context, material conditions and cultural "endowments," and the actual path that any given social movement takes. Cicero's qualified support for—and equally qualified rejection of—the MST help to explain why the movement had such strong membership numbers in the sugarcane region but struggled either to generate active displays of support or to maintain ongoing participation.

2. Analyzing Cicero's interview emphasizes the importance of individual-group relations and the social construction of knowledge—both of which have been recognized as important for the study of social mobilization. Peer pressure, group expectations, intra-group leaders, and the will of the majority are all difficult to see without compelling ethnographies (Watts, 2001, p. 286). Cicero joined the MST in part because everyone else did, and he left the same way. But underneath these decisions lay a whole continuum of opinions of the MST and of collective action. Some of the people who left the MST did so with relief because they had never been comfortable as members while others left without really thinking about it—they were busy and the movement never forced anyone to vote up or down. Still other rural workers were not sure at all that they wanted to leave the movement, but when others did, they went along. These opinions could shape the future trajectory of the movement: people who left the MST reluctantly could re-join the movement or start a new social movement or engage in new forms and moments of collective action, all of which would be difficult to understand if we accepted actions and decisions at face value.
3. Cicero's interview also sheds light on the relationship between material goods and dignity. Many people have argued against the dichotomized treatment of material conditions and identity in social movement studies, and this case illustrated both their mutual constitution and subjectivity. Cicero was grateful for access to land because he was no longer held captive (*cativeiro*) to demands on his labor through his relationship to the land (see Martins, 1998). He could plant sugarcane or not, he could sell the cane where he wished or he could choose to not work on his land at all. This is what the MST activists did not understand: they believed that access to land would generate a certain, well-defined political subjectivity. In much the same way as neo-liberal projects of land titling, made famous by the Peruvian economist Hernando De Soto (1989), are established under the assumption that access to title will generate hard-working, independent citizens who steward their property and make greater personal investments in law and order, the MST's projects of land occupation and settlement operate under the assumption that access to land will generate community-oriented, politically-motivated small-holders who produce with traditional agro-ecological methods and make greater personal investments in civil disobedience and radical politics. In fact, access to land in Água Preta did symbolize material reward and freedom, but freedom meant freedom from control (even the MST's control) rather than freedom from the state or the market. Cicero was not significantly better off in 1999 or in 2003 than he was before gaining access to land. He still worked temporary contracts in neighboring mills and put odd jobs together to make it through the winter. He harvested some manioc and caught fish that he was able to eat or sell. But more importantly, his land gave him a sense of material wealth that allowed him to hold his head up high and at least imagine that one day he would have time to plant it full of money-producing crops.
4. Finally, Cicero's interviews illustrate the dynamic nature of social mobilization. Depending on when and where we stand, we get a very different picture of the MST's position

in the sugarcane region. When I first conducted research in Água Preta in 1998–1999, I assumed that the MST had introduced long-term change into the region. By 2003, it seemed as if the old saying was true: the more things change, the more they stay the same (Eisenberg, 1974). Brief snapshots of political activity are never sufficient because people add to their repertoire (or their toolkits, see Swidler, 1986) of collective action and deploy them under particular circumstances. In the case of Cicero, involvement in the MST influenced his belief in the value of contentious behavior. He held onto the sense that politics were not fixed, that they could be changed through collective action. He anticipated the need for such action (the need for electricity and the fear that the mayor would no longer honor his promises to the settlement without some sort of organized pressure) and he encouraged his fellow settlers to mobilize and “get ahead.” The fact that he has not deployed it either outside of his movement activities or within does not mean that he will not some time soon—just as the MST may regain its position as political representative of Flora in the future.

**Acknowledgments** The author would like to thank Javier Auyero, Charlie Kurzman and Jeffrey Rubin for their advice and collegiality as well as the members of the Aspen Collective, particularly Scott Prudham, for their comments on issues relevant to the paper.

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