

O Retorno do Camponês: Histórias da Luta Pela Terra no Estado de São Paulo (1946 - 2006) AUTOR: Clifford Andrew Welch

Este trabalho examina algumas transformações e permanências nas práticas organizadoras e conteúdo ideológico das entidades envolvidas na mobilização da luta pela terra no Estado de São Paulo. As mudanças e continuidades são delineadas através três períodos gerais, demarcados pelas organizações que predominaram na liderança da luta. Estas instituições foram as Ligas Camponesas e a União dos Lavradores e Trabalhadores Agrícolas do Brasil, ambas do PCB, a Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura, e o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra. Para analisar os eventos, o *paper* utiliza conceitos geográficos, como “movimento socio-territorial”, e histórico, como a “invenção da tradição”. O trabalho é baseado em pesquisas recentes, que incluem depoimentos com militantes, recortes de jornais, literatura produzida pelas entidades, processos judiciais, e documentos governamentais.

Most studies emphasize the changes represented by the appearance of the MST. There were significant changes but also significant continuities, which are generally neglected in the literature. Through a case study approach, the book project attempts to demonstrate more fully both phenomenons. Evidence comes from a series of incidents in various geographical settings. They were selected because of the way that each came to represent different phases in the land struggle, incidents that can be shown to have consolidated both the grassroots experience of rural workers forming political conscience and of commentators and theorists attempting to interpret this experience in order to explain Brazilian reality. They also reflect geographical concerns, incorporating struggles from a sampling of geo-political zones, such as the coast, the high plains, river valleys, and both extensive and intensive agricultural frontiers. The incident approach is combined with a biographical approach, identifying, researching and writing the history of the human agency of individuals who stand out as leaders in the cases chosen.

As the rural sociologist Leonilde Medeiros has observed, the Partido Comunista do Brasil was the first entity to introduce the term camponês in Brazilian politics (1988: 14). The figure first appears in the 1920s in the writings of Octávio Brandão (Fritz Meyer) and then in the organization of the political front called the Bloco Operário e Camponês (BOC). The BOC had a short life but its impact has been underestimated by scholars of the 1930 revolution. At least for the state of São Paulo, we find evidence of sizeable rallies involving rural workers of diverse categories – colonos, meeiros, posseiros, trabalhadores – demonstrating an interest in politics and the state in unprecedented ways. But it fair to say, as scholars do, that PCB penetration in the countryside was shallow until the party started to reorganize in the context of building the

Populist Republic in the aftermath of World War II. In this context, some PCB central committee members called on the party to send its best militants into the countryside to organize “peasants.”

PEASANT LEAGUES: NESTOR VERA IN THE PONTAL

The most important legacy of the early post-war period was the creation of hundreds of Ligas Camponesas in the states of Paraná, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and Pernambuco. The leagues responded, in part, to a new set of social and political rights established in law by the recently ousted Estado Novo regime of Getúlio Vargas. The leagues helped many peasants register to vote and swelled the ranks of the PCB. They also acted as representative class organizations, seeking to help members appeal for government assistance in questions related to land rents, farm production and income. The PCB saw the leagues as a means to enhance the party’s political clout while empowering squatters, rural workers, and small farmers, an unrepresented, generally neglected segment of Brazilian society. The leagues also served as a pressure group to help PCB delegates argue the agrarian question in the 1946 Constituent Assembly. The experience of the PCB-organized leagues proved an inspiration that other landless peasants followed in the mid-1950s when they organized the Ligas Camponesas in Pernambuco and other northeastern states where their leader, the lawyer and socialist politician Francisco Julião, found support. The Julião edition of the leagues proved, in turn, an inspiration for the MST.

A case in point is provided by Nestor Vera and the Santo Anastácio Liga Camponesa founded in 1946 in the Pontal do Paranapanema region of São Paulo state. The Pontal was still a frontier region of São Paulo in the 1940s. A tributary gained the saint’s name in May 1769 when a Portuguese troop stumbled upon it and a vila gradually took root there. It became the region’s second incorporated municipality in 1925. Starting in the mid-1800s, rival coroneis claimed title to the region. They used the process called grilagem and influence over bureaucrats and clergy to make historic claims to the land. They started land colonization and development companies to attract immigrants, developed settlements, and sold land titles that appeared legitimate but actually were false. By 1940, 250,000 people lived in the Pontal region and the questioning of false land claims was already a constant. Stories of brutalities perpetrated against the landless by landlord enforcers like the jagunços Juventino Nunes and Zé Mineiro were legendary in the region.

As the Alta Sorocabana railroad company constructed tracks to the state boundary, Santo Anastácio became the setting of a busy train yard and hundreds of Spanish and Italian

immigrants came to live and work in the area. This gave the backlands town a surprisingly cosmopolitan feel and created a fertile base for PCB organizing. The concept of the peasant must have resonated among these European immigrants who, we can assume, had more familiarity with this awkward class. Indeed, while Ligas Camponesas were also established in the Pontal towns of Presidente Prudente and Presidente Bernardes, the Santo Anastácio league received more attention from the press.

Established in April, 1946, the Santo Anastácio Peasant League responded to a wealth of problems among the landless and small farmers. More than 200 “camponeses, em sua maioria arrendatários, sitiantes, meeiros, e terceiros” attended the founding meeting, according to the story that appeared in the PCB-daily *Notícias de Hoje*. With the exception of the “sitiantes,” all other categories referred to rural workers who were landless yet dependent on the landed. The league was to serve “orientar a luta dos trabalhadores em busca de melhoria das condições de vida dos trabalhadores da terra.” Antônio Valero Valdeviesso, whose biography remains obscure, gave a “clara exposição” on the theme and read the statutes. Those present “democratically elected” the league’s board of directors, with Nestor Vera becoming president and another eleven officers and substitutes named in the report. Various speakers addressed the issues that would animate the league: demands for lower land rents, road maintenance, schools, and clinics. These members seemed to identify with the concept of the peasant and questioned the landed’s sense of responsibility toward the broader community. They organized collectively in the league and reached out to the state for help. Rents were too high, roads abandoned, the health and education of their children left to chance.

At least 150 landless peasants trusted the new democracy following the fall of the Estado Novo dictatorship enough to sign their names to the Santa Anastácio league petition. “Os latifúndios devem ser divididos gratuitamente aos que querem plantar,” the petition asserts. “Os nossos produtos não valem nada, mas o que consumimos custam-nos os olhos da cara,” it went on. “Sem terra, sem direitos, nossos filhos sofrem de maleita, amarelão, tuberculose, raquitismo, frio e fome,” the petitioners complained. “Por este pequeno relatório vimos a presença de V. Excia para relatar-lhe a atual situação precária que há anos vamos passando,” the document began. In addition to the demand for radical agrarian reform, the appeal for policies that would help them retain more profits from their production in order to care for their children, the petition criticized the landed for charging rents for poor lands, rents often higher than the land’s sale price. The result was not only a super-exploitation of the landless but a tendency for them to

abandon the countryside and move to the cities in search of “melhores condições de existência.” (Something Vargas era policies were meant to address in order to “fixar o homem do campo.”)

A final clause supports the need for the peasants, as well as rural wage workers, to have their own representative organizations. The Communist press documented further Santo Anastácio peasants dissent in May when the director of the Cooperativa Agrícola Mista de Santo Anastácio denounced the precarious condition of the more than 800 peasant-family co-op members. He supported the need for the league given the “miserável...vida que os meeiros e arrendatários levam... porque o rendimento do seu trabalho vai todo parar nas mãos do latifundiário”.

In June, the state responded to the pleas of these uppity children by cracking down on the Santo Anastácio peasant league. “O povo brasileiro precisa é de chicote e não de democracia,” Santo Anastácio Sheriff Roque Calabrese was quoted as saying on the occasion. The size of the organization must have been too much for the landed’s private militias to handle. Even the region’s most influential landlord, the coronel Alfredo Marcondes Cabral, infamously quoted as believing that “terra empapada de sangue é terra boa,” did not have the forces to cripple such a movement. Indeed, the timing of the June 1946 crackdown links Sheriff Calabrese’s action to local interests by isolating it from larger trends. The Cold War-influenced decision to suppress the PCB and shutdown front organizations like the peasant leagues would wait nearly a year, until May 1947, to be put into place. League president Nestor Vera protested the action in telegrams to President Eurico Gaspar Dutra and the heads of each of the political parties participating in the Constituent Assembly. “A polícia local fechou a Liga Camponesa,” Vera wrote, “apreendendo seus arquivos e impedindo o direito de organização aos pacíficos trabalhadores do campo”.

Himself a camponês, Vera put the sheriff, an authority beholden to the local power structure, in the central role. Calabrese had warned them to formalize the founding of the league, so Vera had the founding statutes published in the *Diário Oficial* and filed the papers with the local notary. His moves to strengthen the league only seemed to make it more threatening to the landed. “As justas reivindicações [dos camponeses] em torno dos problemas mais sentidos do nosso camponês fortaleciam sua estrutura,” Vera told a *Notícias de Hoje* reporter, “devendo ser, este o motivo principal que levou a polícia e demais autoridades a determinar o seu fechamento”. What happened in the Pontal reveals truths about the limits of peasant political action in early post-war era. The state intervened not to help but to repress the movement. As Calabrese said, it was a whipping not democracy that the peasants needed. The peasants unified

in a self-help society but the historical context created obstacles. The implied violence of the Sheriff's statement reflected the arousal of heartfelt hatred toward those who denied the landed their claimed superiority, who dared defy the landlords.

. ULTAB/CONTAG: JÔFRE IN SANTA FÉ DO SUL

In September, 1954, the PCB allied with São Paulo governor Garcez to host the first national congress of farm laborers and farmers in Ibirapuera Park. Hundreds of representatives from hastily organized agricultural associations attended. They named delegates to represent Brazil at an international congress of agricultural and forest workers in Prague and formed ULTAB, electing its officers and establishing a charter that included agrarian reform to help small farmers and improve rights and conditions for farm workers. On one level, ULTAB was a weapon in the Cold War, helping the PCB fulfill part of its responsibilities to the USSR by ensuring Brazil's participation in the Soviet-linked labor organizations headed by the WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions). On another, it was a way for the PCB to develop its credentials as a power broker in the countryside by organizing and thus helping rural workers, tearing them away from their dependency on their landlord employers. In the 1960s, the rural labor associations, which had very limited legal standing, transformed into Sindicatos de Trabalhadores Rurais (STR) and in 1963 the corporatist CONTAG replaced ULTAB. These developments helped create an organizational structure for rural workers and small farmers, enhancing Brazilian democracy and the power of the PCB until the military golpe in 1964. Recuperating from the repression, CONTAG initiated the Movimento Sindical dos Trabalhadores Rurais to expand and fortify the union structure. Until the 1980s, the basic model established by ULTAB and CONTAG predominated in the countryside.

Interesting is how the word *camponês* practically disappeared from the debate from the early 1950s to the 1980s. (An important exception is the re-formation of the *Ligas Camponesas* in the northeast from 1955 on and the resurrection of the concept at the so-called *Congresso Camponês* in Belo Horizonte in 1961, but neither of these developments revived the word in the practice of rural mobilization in the state of São Paulo.) To the contrary, the emphasis on “trabalhadores agrícolas” and “lavradores” spoke to the PCB's theory of progress. These words represented historical personalities of capitalism whereas the word *camponês* represented feudalism, a stage of growth the party wanted to leave behind. A signature struggle of the period was the infamous “Grass War” in Santa Fé do Sul.

Around 1957, a former army corporal and itinerant salesman named Jôfre Correa Netto arrived in the Santa Fé do Sul region of São Paulo for the first time. In various interviews, he

told interrogators that at first he lived among some fifty families who farmed disputed land in the flood zone of the riverbank. At some point in 1957, while he was away, the man who claimed to own the land had their makeshift homes burnt down and their crops destroyed. “By the time I came back from my travels,” Jôfre told me in a 1997 interview, “they’d burned down forty-five homes, lean-tos, burnt down with what little money each family had saved over the whole year, burnt down with their harvests stored inside.” Jôfre and the others blamed José de Carvalho (Zico) Diniz, the area’s largest private landholder, for this attack.

This event proved to be the first battle in a confrontation between Jôfre and his peasant allies, and Zico Diniz, his business partners and their retainers in what escalated into the so-called “Grass War.” Landsharks and priests founded Santa Fé do Sul in 1948 and the Grass War had roots in the municipality’s development process. In 1946, a colonization and immigration company known as CAIC had purchased much of the region’s land. In the 1950s, Zico Diniz bought two extremely large sections of territory, amounting to more than one-fifth of the original CAIC purchase. These were known as the Fazenda Mariana and the Fazenda São João do Bosque. Diniz represented an expanding force in Brazilian agriculture, the cattleman. As Brazil’s urban population grew, especially in industrial centers like São Paulo, the market for beef expanded. Diniz intended to capitalize on this market by clearing the forests off his Santa Fé land and turning it into pasture.

To do this economically, he employed a sub-letting system. By written contract, he rented large portions of his land to a couple of tenant-contractors (José Lira Marim rented the Fazenda Mariana and Joaquim Nogueira rented the Fazenda São João) who then sublet it through oral agreements to hundreds of migrant families. As tenant-farmers, the migrant’s job was to clear the land of dense, tangled woods, cultivate it, and then plant capim-colonião, a vigorous pasture grass. They were supposed to make a living by selling surplus food from their crops and by earning a little money for each acre of grass they planted. Tenant-contractors Marim and Nogueira earned money by selling the cleared wood for firewood, lumber, and railroad ties. Zico Diniz claimed half the wood sales profits and, after three to five years, stood to gain more than 18,000 acres of new pasture for his cattle herds at virtually no cost. This was how it was supposed to work, at any rate.

This tried and true method of exploiting both natural and human resources ran aground in April 1959 when Jôfre inspired some of the tenant farmers to up-root the grass they themselves had planted in their crops at the behest of Nogueira and Marim. The potential threat to the established order posed by Jôfre’s activities had been under observation by São Paulo’s

secretive “political and social order” police for several months. Early intelligence showed Jôfre had earned some clout in the region by campaigning in 1958 for Santa Fé do Sul mayoral candidate Deraldo da Silva Prado. Inaugurated January 1, 1959, Mayor Prado warmly received a petition from “thousands” of farmers living in the county. The petition asked for his help in providing for their medical and schooling needs. The petition also requested that the mayor and city council support the peasants in “creating an association of farmers” so that the farmers and municipal government could “work together more easily and less painfully to help Santa Fé grow and to promote a better standard of living for the greatness” of the state and the pride of the nation.

The list of those who signed the petition has not surfaced so it is difficult to assert that Jôfre was responsible for it. It is clear, however, that the police had identified Jôfre as a leader of the Santa Fé peasant movement and by June, when a large assembly of more than 1,000 peasants formally founded the association and elected Jôfre president by acclamation. His apparent connections in São Paulo, his role in the April grass uprooting, and his charisma propelled him to leadership.

As the grass began to grow and stifle the farmers’ crops in March, Jôfre stepped up his activities. Before the up-rooting took place, he threatened the action in several confrontations with the tenant-contractors Marim and Nogueira. Anticipating the tenant farmers’ resistance early in April, Diniz appealed in court for a preventive injunction against Jôfre and the association. The court asked the police to open an investigation. The authorities concluded that the association was subversive, allowing them to close it down by confiscating its belongings, basically some leaflets, legal papers, and a desk located at a boarding house in the village of Rubineia. But these measures did not stop Jôfre’s plans. Rather than be intimidated, he took the lead in organizing an up-rooting of 60 to 240 acres on the Fazenda Mariana.

The sources agree that Jôfre Corrêa Netto instigated the grass war and inspired the tenant-farmers to resist being expelled from their farms. By April 1959, the expulsion of some 800 families – perhaps as many as 5,000 people – was imminent. Marim and Nogueira’s contracts with Diniz obliged them to return one-half of the land they had rented by September 1959 and the rest by September 1961. The first half, where the majority of the peasants lived, was to be delivered as pasture by the end of January 1959. Some argue that Nogueira and Marim misled many peasants, promising them that their tenancy would be for five years. Others had arrived recently and just when their first crops began to grow, the overseers ordered them to plant grass and leave. Newspaper reports speak of their hardship and misery. The grass stifled

their food crops and some complained of starving. Many were lucky to eat meals of roast capivara, a giant rodent, and boiled roots. Some noted an increase in the death of infants. One family still living in the area in 1999 reported the tragic loss of five babies during this period. They complained that it “wasn’t just” to entice poor migrants to the region with promises of great opportunity, only to kick them out just as they had succeeded in turning the wilderness into productive farmland. Reluctantly, some began to plant the capim in their fields.

Jôfre and his comrades in the association understood the tenant-farmers’ misery and seized on their complaints and needs to resist their expulsion. They adopted an ancient method of resistance by destroying the product of their labor in order to take control of the situation. Some tore up the grass and announced their intentions to stay put. Intuitively, Jôfre grasped the core injustice. “My friends,” Jôfre said, “let’s treat these grass clods well so that we can send them to Diniz and the governor to eat!” Speaking for many, he said no to the idea that the farmers quietly give up their crops and livelihoods so that cattle could be grazed for a meat market few of them could hope to enjoy. This audacious act attracted considerable attention from authorities, the media, and politicians, and led to Jôfre’s incarnation as the “Fidel Castro of the São Paulo Backlands.”

Jôfre’s behavior served the party by grabbing headlines and drawing attention to the problems of the rural poor, a constituency the PCB had been trying to make its own since the mid-1940s. Jôfre’s behavior also produced the Grass War’s only bloody encounter, something the Communists wanted to avoid. On the morning of August 5th, Jôfre stopped at a bar on his way to catch a train to São Paulo when a gunman shot him in the face and leg with a .38 caliber revolver. The first bullet, fired point blank, smashed through his teeth and lodged miraculously in his jaw. The second bullet, fired at his gut, missed its mark, too, when Jôfre reacted quickly to the first shot. The shooter, later identified as a man named Silva Preto, fled the scene and bystanders are said to have run about town yelling, “They’ve killed Jôfre! They’ve killed Jôfre!” But “they” had not killed Jôfre. By the next morning he had arrived by plane in a São Paulo hospital for treatment of his wounds.

After Jôfre’s departure, the state government gradually regained control. The governor sent to the region a versatile biologist named Paulo Vanzolini as troubleshooter with special powers to contain and settle the dispute. The PCB assisted him in a clever way. While the party condemned the shooting and threatened violence, it also worked to find a compromise. The PCB put out the order that if any other peasant were shot they would “burn down the fazendas, not leaving a single tree standing. It will be violence against violence.” In this way, the party used

the incident to gain some leverage and convince the governor to take the conflict seriously. Duarte then worked closely with Vanzolini to persuade the tenant farmers to accept a one-year extension on their tenure. By the end of September, they managed to convince Diniz and his men to allow most of the others to stay on until July 1961. Lawyers for the two sides wrote a model contract and Vanzolini attended mass meetings organized by the association to get it signed; they also rode horseback around the vast property to get the reluctant ones to accept the deal. The party presented the contract deal as a great victory. At the end of September, the weekly PCB tabloid, *Novos Rumos*, ran an article titled “Landlord Loses the Grass War.” It featured a photograph of Jôfre, with a caption that described him as the “leader of the Santa Fé do Sul farmers.”

Into the 1980s, the PCB continued to operate underground through the rural labor movement. CONTAG continued to underestimate peasants and the land struggle, imagining a future consistent with that of US but for having better organized and compensated farmers and farm workers: highly-productive, mechanized agriculture. This was the sort of progress that could bring socialism and the eventual dictatorship of the proletariat. Let capitalism develop and refine Brazil’s productive capacity and in a world of plenty, workers could take over. The very process of agricultural modernization in Brazil during the 1970s seemed to point in this direction. The expanding agriculture frontier had forced millions off the land and into the cities where they swelled the ranks of the working classes. The intensification of agricultural production, in the meantime, created demands for more rural industrial and wage workers causing the formation, some theorists held, of a rural proletariat. Rather than invest in the concept of the *camponês*, the PCB imagined that progress would eliminate this historical agent and form a unified industrial and agricultural proletariat to lead the revolution. The job of militants was to assist capitalist development, use the union structure to ameliorate the pain workers experienced through this process, and build a unified, revolutionary working class. Because of the predominance of the party and of this sort of thought, the *camponês* ceased to exist as a political identity in São Paulo from 1954 to the 21st century.

MST: ZÉ AND NOVO CANUDOS

Some blame the “incompetence of Brazil’s bourgeoisie” for the rise of the country’s landless movement over the course of the past two decades (Stedile). Whether due to misfeasance or malfeasance of the rural ruling class, the fact is that tens of millions of Brazilians fell into the ranks of the unemployed, underemployed and socially and economically “excluded” during the period of military rule and the formation of the New Republic brought further misery

and signs of hope only in the form of social movements and non-governmental organizations such as the MST (founded 1984). Politics and political parties remained important but a variety of factors caused the poor to put faith in autonomous organizations. In this neoliberal phase of capitalist development, the state withdrew from the economy as well as the society and militants, like entrepreneurs, were encouraged to depend on their own devices. With a productive base in agriculture, the MST proved uniquely successful in this new environment, organizing hundreds of thousands of “sem-terras” and helping hundreds of thousands of family acquire farms in publicly financed settlements around the country.

Surprising expectations about the formation of a rural proletariat and the modernization of agriculture, many struggles took place in the state of São Paulo during the 1980s and 1990s. Skilful organizing and the history of *grilagem* made the Pontal a postcard for the MST. There, José Rainha Júnior, a charismatic militant from the state of Espírito Santo eventually called for turning the region into a Novo Canudos, recalling the historic millenarian community established in the northeast by the rural poor. As famously recounted by Euclides da Cunha, the original Canudos was suppressed by the Brazilian military but the town of Euclides da Cunha Paulista in the Pontal became the setting of lively land struggles in the 1980s and 1990s. In neighboring states and the favelas of São Paulo, the MST found thousands of recruits for its land occupation strategy. Curiously, these mobilizations were not interpreted as peasant movements but as landless movements.

A partial explanation for this can be found in *Brava Gente*, an extended interview conducted with MST co-founder João Pedro Stédile in 1998 by geographer Bernardo Mançano Fernandes. Asked if the MST was a peasant movement, Stédile responded: "Acho que o MST nasceu como movimento camponês, de agricultores acostumados com o trabalho familiar e que resolveram lutar pela terra." If this was the case, asked Fernandes, why did they not call the MST the Movimento dos Camponeses Sem Terra? "Porque a palavra 'camponês' é meio elitizada," answered Stédile. "Nunca foi usada pelos próprios camponeses. Não é, digamos, um vocábulo comum. O PC do B foi o único que usou o termo 'camponês'. O homem do campo geralmente se define como agricultor, trabalhador rural ou como meeiro, arrendatário. É, na verdade, mais um conceito sociológico e acadêmico, que até pode refletir a realidade em que eles vivem, mas que não foi assimilado. Não sendo uma palavra popular, não tinha como colocá-la no nome do movimento. Na essência, o MST nasceu como um movimento camponês, que tinha como bandeira as três reivindicações prioritárias: terra, reforma agrária e mudanças

gerais na sociedade. Quando nós mesmos fomos nos conceituar, percebemos que o MST era diferente dos movimentos camponeses históricos, que apenas lutavam por terra" (2000: 31-32).

Indeed, camponês was not in Rainha's vocabulary until the 21st century. In a 2004 interview with me, he used the word frequently and presented some leads for understanding the term's resurrection, demonstrating familiarity with the thinking expressed by Fernandes in "Agricultura camponesa e/ou agricultura familiar" (2002).

CLIFF - Então, por alguns, a via campesina é um modelo alternativo. Você usa estas palavras, também: camponês, campesina? Como é que você entende a diferença entre agricultor familiar e camponês, e a via campesina em si?

Zé - Não. Porque é o seguinte: o modelo de agricultura familiar que se está colocando, num sistema capitalismo não funciona. Ele é falido. Porque você tem um modelo de agricultura familiar em que você tem sete bilhões prá agricultura familiar produzir. Olha, é que é responsável pela maior produção de tudo! Ali, tudo nós ganha. A pequena produção. E o agronegócio que é a grande propriedade em extensão tem 35,40 bilhões. Tinha que ser ao contrário. Aí sim! Essa é que é a questão. Essa agricultura combinada não é competitivo com o mercado? Não, é. Ela é assassina! Você fica integrado no mercado. Então, o governo tinha que criar um novo modelo, no mecanismo, onde você pudesse comprar a produção e garantir a produção, e que ele tivesse o mesmo parâmetro de competitividade. Não tem. Então, o cara pega milhões prá investir numa produção de soja, de milho, e aqui você tem mil prá investir num plantio de mandioca pequeno. Quando você vai pro mercado... ora, quem plantou duzentos, trezentos alqueires de mandioca vai ter uma produção de alguns milhões. E como é, quem determinar o preço de mercado? São eles. Você que tem um alqueire só... então, você anda a reboque. Então, esse modelo que está aí, da agricultura familiar é falido! Então, não adiante achar que nós vamos qualificar o assentamento. Tem que mudar o modelo. O contrário. Tem uma reforma agrária aí, ao contrário. Quem produz mais? Os pequenos? Então, os pequenos deveriam ter mais. O Estado, que é burguês, o que faz? Faz o contrário. Porque o estado empresta milhões para o grande. Que não usa na agricultura, vai para a especulação imobiliária. Prás grandes cidades, prá maracutais. Essa é a desgraça. Que tá acontecendo com nós. Então, esse modelo que está aí, tá falido.

CLIFF - Então, fala mais sobre este modelo de agricultura camponesa?

Zé - Agricultura camponesa. O que nós estamos dizendo? A agricultura hoje é de sobrevivência. Daí, como nós estamos brigando quanto a mudar o modelo, já vou insistir. É viável. Ela só é viável nos países socialistas, ou nos países que têm subsídios, por exemplo no caso da França, acabou de dizer, no caso da Inglaterra, ou o próprio Estados Unidos. Ela sobrevive. Ela tem subsídios. O estado tem que subsidiar ela. O que o estado subsidia? Pelo contrário, além de você ter pouco crédito, você tem uma taxa de juros altíssima. Como é que você acaba plantando milho e não colhendo? Você fica no banco e fica falido. Você quebra e tem que vender a propriedade para pagar o banco. Entendeu? E acontece que, o modelo para quebrar, pra ele depois se integrar ao grande, prá vender a terra pro grande. Foi isso. Acabou. São milhões e milhões de pequenos produtores nos anos setenta que perderam a terra. Então, ora, que modelo é esse? O Banco do Brasil que deveria subsidiar o estado, ajudar, não quebrar ele. Então, é inviável. Então, o que é que nós defendemos? Nós achamos que tem de mudar o modelo. Mas enquanto isso, tem de ter a agricultura camponesa, que é de subsistência. Ainda não é a do exportador. Não é a do agro industrial ainda. Temos dificuldades.

Stédile also used the term to describe the MST in his address to the National Meeting of the organizations leaders in 2004. As noted in his 1998 interview, however, the term has not

developed deep roots among either the landless or settlers. Random interviews among MST participants around São Paulo demonstrate that terms such as *sem-terra* and *assentado* remain more common as collective identities. Nevertheless, the term has returned to usage among movement leaders. One additional example of this is the massive editorial project called “História Social do Camponato do Brasil,” now being undertaken by some twenty scholars under the sponsorship of the Via Campesina – Brasil, an off-shoot of the MST and other rural labor movements. Searching for the history of Brazil’s peasantry, the crop strives to create depth for construction of this collective identity. The term provides the rural poor with an identity rich in political, social, and cultural history but, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, it is an identity with few roots in the Brazilian countryside. In this sense, the resurrection of the term is a symbolic act, an attempt to invent a tradition to fortify the landless and small farmer movement.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. As the story of the Santo Anastácio Liga Camponesa documents, the term *camponês* resonated better with **European immigrants** than with the **internal migrants** who came to compose more of the rural labor force from the 1950s on.

2. Usage of peasant concept as a **political identity** began with the PCB and depended on the PCB. When the party’s theories about national development changed and the term became associated with a **fraction of the working class bound to be eliminated by progress**, the party ceased to invest in the concept and it did not develop roots among the rural poor. These factors were shown in the story of Jofre and the tenant farmers of Santa Fe do Sul.

3. **Sem-terra** was also used to describe the rural poor as early as the 1940s but became a political identity that developed roots due to its popularity among the press and its adoption by the MST, which mobilized around the homogenizing, **unifying features of the concept for 20 years**.

4. *Camponês* returned to the political language in the 1990s with the formation of the **Via Campesina** in France and Central America. This movement placed itself in **resistance against land concentration and the globalized agrifood** system, offering land reform and agro-ecology as an alternative development model (Bove, 2001; Sevilla Guzman and Gonzalez de Molina, 2005). The MST affiliated with the Via Campesina in the 1990s but the organization had a more significant presence when it participated in the II World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002, raising challenges to the question of support for “family agriculture,” as questioned by Fernandes (2002) and Rainha (2004).

5. As a concept, **campesinato** is argued to contain not only a unifying political identity for a heterogeneous mix of subjects interested in producing and reproducing in the countryside, it also embraces a development model that is held to be socially, economically, politically, and environmentally healthier than that promised by agribusiness. **Via Camponesa vs. Via Agronegocio.**

6. In Brazil and other settings, considerable **intellectual resources are currently being invested in the concept.** The Via Campesina-Brasil and the MPA have organized about 20 intellectuals in the construction of a multiple volume work on the **Social History of the Brazilian Peasantry.** Where traditions don't exist, we will find them because of how this identity show promise of being useful in the current context. Without a sustained investment, it may not take hold among those being mobilized but it will surely create a legacy for helping to understand some of the key questions defining the current conjuncture.

7. Considerable **continuity** can be found in the constant mobilization of rural workers since World War II, search for solutions, involving the state and the incorporation of cultural and intellectual production. (CPC, AP, Caio Prado Junior, José de Souza Martins, Horacio de Carvalho, and today's **HSC project**)

8. **Change**, too, characterizes the period as political identities and affiliations have shifted. The focus of these movements has altered from peasants to rural proletariats to sem-terra and back again to peasants, a group which increasingly includes the urbanized descendants of peasant immigrants and migrants. (**Gender** and age and internal organization, but still a lot of **machismo** and difficult engaging youth which is shown in the case of Rainha in the Pontal. The example of **COHAB** in this case also shows how difficult it will be to build a political project around agro-ecology.