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GRASSROOTS VOICES



Interview with João Pedro Stédile, national leader of the MST – Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic has underlined the need to continue fighting for paradigmatic change, including toward food sovereignty for our people and agroecology to produce while preserving nature.

KEYWORDS

Brazil; MST; agroecology; food sovereignty; Covid-19

A few weeks ago, answering questions related to the increasing number of deaths attributed to the pandemic in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil, replied, 'Não sou coveiro' ('I'm not an undertaker'). A week later, he made a joke, saying, 'E daí? Lamento. Quer que eu faça o quê? Eu sou Messias, mas não faço milagre' ('So what? I'm sorry! What do you want from me? I am Messiah [*Messias*, his middle name] but I don't work miracles'). The comments, delivered in a tone that was flippant, even light-hearted, fell especially flat coming from the president of Brazil, who has offered little indication of compassion for the more than 6,000 lives lost in the last month. No words of solidarity were offered to the health professionals working at all hours at risk of their own infection. The pandemic has been reduced to a political concern focused on an economic crisis.

Sadly, Brazil is faced with three combined crises: the crisis of a global pandemic, its economic and social consequences, and a political crisis. Despite the irresponsible actions of Bolsonaro – encouraging people to break rules of social isolation, for example – his approval rating remains around 30 percent, in general, and 52 percent in the business sector, according to the survey of 28 of May (DataFolha 2020). Even more concerning than the popular support to Bolsonaro was a street demonstration organized by his supporters, calling for a return to the military dictatorship. In the middle of April, this demonstration was attended by Bolsonaro himself, who spoke in

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Editorial Note: The *Journal of Peasant Studies* is launching a rolling forum with experiences from the frontlines of the current crisis: 'Grassroots Voices: pandemics and critical agrarian studies' – in collaboration with the Transnational Institute (TNI – www.tni.org). As the pandemic unfolds, many of the fatal flaws of capitalism are being laid bare. It is a moment when new alliances are being formed and new militant organizing is springing up, as are new forms of authoritarianism and repression. This is a moment of potentially great rupture – but in what direction and for who is up for grabs. The Grassroots Voices section seeks to document what is happening from the grassroots perspective. Migrant workers, domestic laborers, peasant farmers, small-scale fishers, informal food vendors, and rural-urban migrants all have had their lives upended. We expect this conjuncture to affect potentially radical changes in long-term trends towards authoritarian governance, industry consolidation, marginalization of migrant workers, land grabs and financialization, as well as creating a surge of left organizing, food worker strikes, mutual aid networks, and new grassroots alliances. What is the experience on the ground? These experiences of course are conditioned by the historical changes that came before, by rising populism, and the history of movement organizing. We hope to put these new experiences in historical context, track them longitudinally, and highlight emerging strategies.

¹The translation was fully revised by Eva Hershaw (e-mail: ehershaw@gmail.com)

support of the military – a military that already has placed close to 3,000 of its members within his administration, including nine ministers and the vice president.

Unfortunately, in the times of a pandemic, Brazil is facing dangers beyond those presented by coronavirus. In addition to COVID-19, which is spreading fastest in the poorest areas, the rural population has already been deeply negatively affected by the policies of Bolsonaro, for example, halting the implementation of agrarian policies such as agrarian reform. Since 2016, the federal government has not expropriated a single piece of land and, as a result, it has not created any settlement in the framework of agrarian reform program (Leite, Tubino, and Sauer 2019).

As the rural population suffers, so does the natural world. The extent and rate of deforestation and the increased number of forest fires in 2019 were devastating. In 2019, according to the National Institute for Space Research (Inpe), its satellite data detected more than 74,000 fires between January and August, the highest number since 2010. It represented an 84% increase in relation to the same period in 2018. Mainly, it was a result of Bolsonaro's encouragement of loggers and large farmers to clear the land for turning the Amazon productive (BBC 2019). Yet already, in the first quarter of 2020, deforestation alerts in the Amazon rainforest have already surpassed those recorded over the past four years. Deforestation in the month of March 2020 increased by almost 30 percent compared to March last year, which was itself the worst month since 2010 (Folha 2020).

The dismantling of agrarian policies and a sharp increase in deforestation has been compounded by another threat: an increase in land grabbing. Bolsonaro issued a new Provisional Measure (MP 910) at the end of 2019 that further eases requirements for titling illegal land tenure across Brazil. The current law governing the matter was issued in 2016 by Temer, allowing for the legalization of up to 2,500 hectares and applicable only to the Amazon. The new MP 910 effectively 'legalizes *grilagem* (land grabbing)', making land titling possible for those who are able to make payments that correspond to no more than 40% of the market value (Sauer et al. 2019).

In this catastrophic scenario, agrarian social and environmental movements are struggling to maintain policies and protect rights in the Brazilian rural areas. But at this historic juncture, they are also organizing acts of solidarity with the urban populations most affected by the social isolation and unemployment that have accompanied the pandemic. Seeking to understand the 'quasi-apocalyptic' situation in Brazil, I interviewed João Pedro Stédile, one of the national leaders of the Landless Rural Workers Movement, a political activist and renowned Brazilian economist.

1. Most of the news is related to the urban situation. So, how are the MST and Via Campesina Brazil facing social isolation? What are the experiences, including those of solidarity, lived by the MST in the times of coronavirus? What are the actions taken by MST to strengthen the struggle for land in times of social isolation?

The struggle for agrarian reform, for social justice in the countryside; the struggle for land will continue, as a result of the contradiction that exists in our society. This contradiction is grounded in an enormous concentration of land ownership: the latifundia, on one hand, and millions of families that are workers, the landless poor, living in the countryside, on the other. What can change are the ways in which we struggle and resist, given that the masses also analyze the correlation of forces and know when they can advance and when they should resist. We are in a time of resistance now. We are living in times to improve the

organization, to 'plow the land for sowing'; 'these are not harvest times,' even though social conflict continues.

The Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT) publishes data related to agrarian social struggles every year. On 17 April 2020 the CPT released its 2019 data, which accounted for 1,254 social conflicts involving some 859,000 people in the countryside. And 800 workers were freed from slave labor, working in rural operations. There were 43 land occupations with the participation of 3,476 families. Unfortunately, there were also 32 people killed, mostly on the agricultural frontier, including the murders of several indigenous and *quilombola* [descendants of African slaves] leaders.

On the side of capital and government, no expropriation of farmland was made for agrarian reform; no landless families were settled in 2019, no *quilombola* territories or indigenous lands were recognized or demarcated last year.

This class struggle – aggravated by a neo-fascist government and the outbreak of the coronavirus – demands new forms of resistance in the countryside. We need to take this opportunity to improve political formation and increase awareness; we must diversify the ways in which we denounce capitalist exploitation and question and criticize government actions or the lack of policies for the poor. It is necessary to protest and denounce, exposing their crimes against all people, whether due to a lack of food, jobs, income. Or due to public irresponsibility – the ways of managing the pandemic, not being attentive enough to the poor, who are the most vulnerable to the coronavirus. These are irresponsible attitudes and lacking actions that could lead to the death of thousands of Brazilians.

It is especially important to improve our production of healthy food through agroecology and by practicing solidarity with the urban poor, who are being contaminated by the virus in conditions of social isolation and need, without access to health care. We must practice solidarity with the working people of the cities, bringing food, donating blood. And we must denounce and criticize government policies – or lack of policies – to support the urban population in need.

Before moving to the next questions, I would like to mention that the MST – local or state branches of the MST and of other organizations belonging to the Via Campesina Brazil – are producing food. It is especially the case that settled families are producing food and/or collecting food, organizing baskets and distributing them in poor neighborhoods of cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, Porto Alegre, among others.

2. Globally, La Via Campesina is backing the 'stay home, but not silent' campaign, as an attempt to give visibility to the social effects of the pandemic and of isolation in rural areas. Taking a more international perspective, what is your analysis of the consequences or threats that this pandemic could bring to the rural population, and what are possible actions to be taken by agrarian social movements?

I am following news of Latin American peasant movements online, since it has been difficult to organize virtual meetings and in-person meetings are out of the question. In general, I think the population to be most affected by the current situation will be the urban poor, as they are without work and have little food. I think that the social base of the agrarian movements – most living in the countryside, and in lightly better conditions, including those necessary to produce their own food, such as access to a piece of land – will endure this crisis with fewer casualties and less suffering.

I think that the major consequences of the current crisis will be ideological, when it becomes clear that the capitalist model, that agribusiness, cannot solve the problems or needs of the population: employment, income, food and respect for nature. At that point, this component will emerge in class struggle. This aspect of the ideological struggle will come to the fore: struggles over the need to seek alternatives to industrial agricultural production. The crisis will highlight the fundamental need to care for nature, guaranteeing employment and income for the rural population while guaranteeing the production of healthy food, elements that are not part of the industrial model of agricultural production. Only family farming, peasant agriculture and an agroecology matrix are able to balance the need to care for nature with that of producing healthy food that can guarantee food sovereignty.

The problems of the pandemic, which are linked to the deepening environmental crisis in all countries, will challenge the industrial model of agricultural production and highlight the need for alternatives. I am optimistic! I think that agrarian movements will have opportunities to lift this ideological struggle to an international level, placing demands and alternatives at a new political level. After this pandemic, the movements will have the urban working population as allies.

3. Researchers around the world are raising theses to the likes of ‘capitalism is under threat’ or, those a bit more radical, such as Slavoj Žižek, who stated that ‘Coronavirus is ‘Kill Bill-esque blow to capitalism’. What is MST’s assessment of the consequences of the pandemic?

The coronavirus pandemic is the most tragic expression of the current stage of capitalism and the crisis of civilization we are experiencing. First, because there are several scientific studies demonstrating that an outbreak of several new viruses, previously unknown, is a consequence of misbalancing the forces of nature with the large-scale model of industrial agricultural production. Most of the new viruses have spread through the large-scale breeding of animals, birds, pigs, cattle, etc.

Second, in outbreak crises like the one we are living, the importance of our demand becomes evident: we must continue to fight for food sovereignty. That is, people, in each region must have autonomy in the production of their own food. The global trade of agricultural commodities has failed. If China stops buying soybeans for two weeks, Brazilian agribusiness breaks down, such is the dependence and fragility of such a model of production. If a strike among truck drivers lasts more than two weeks, there is a shortage of chicken meat in the supermarkets in Belém [capital of Para State in the Amazon], chicken that are produced and supplied from Chapecó [city in the State of Santa Catarina, south of Brazil], hundreds of kilometers away.

So, the pandemic will help us to discuss issues such as food sovereignty, as well as the need for agroecology, healthier food and the need to produce food closer to consumer markets. This is only possible through family farming and peasant agriculture. In this crisis, what is the use of saying that we are the largest exporters of soy, corn, ethanol, sugar and meat?

On the other hand, it will help us explain to the urban population that agrarian reform is no longer only a peasant issue. It is of interest to all people and, therefore, we can say that it has transformed into a popular land reform. Changes must be made, not only with respect to land ownership, but changes of entire paradigms, including the conservation

of nature but also to avoid climate change, water shortages in the cities, and the production of healthy food. For that, people must mobilize through all their organizational forms: from neighborhood associations, feminist, youth and black movements, in progressive churches, trade unions, agrarian and urban movements and political parties.

At the same time, agrarian reform will only be realized if socio-economic structural changes are made throughout Brazilian society. Militants must study, research, debate a new project and organize the people to fight for structural changes.

4. The month of April – especially the 17th day – marks a milestone in the global struggle for land reform. More than 24 years after the massacre of the 19 MST landless workers in Eldorado dos Carajás (State of Para), what are the lessons?

Throughout the history of peasant struggle in Brazil, the oligarchy and ruling class have unfortunately always acted with extreme violence when attempting to silence struggles for social rights from the majority of the rural population. Slave workers were repressed – beaten daily in the pillory or hunted by slave drivers – in order to prevent their escape. The peasantry only emerged in the late nineteenth century with revolts and wars for basic freedoms like those fought in Canudos (Bahia State), Contestado (Santa Catarina State) and Caldeirão (Ceará State). These are the best known popular and peasant revolts in Brazil, but there were peasant rebellions met with massacres in every state.

Beyond this, throughout the twentieth century, we see many peasant struggles suppressed by gunfire, especially following the coup of 1964. The Peasant Leagues [agrarian movement organized by the Communist Party in the late 1950s] and many of their leaders were arrested, tortured and killed under the 1964 business-military dictatorship. Members of the Leagues were persecuted and saw their rights violated continuously, but the same fate fell upon emerging rural movements and the newly created rural unions. This included the torturing and killing of their leaders, such as Gregorio Bezerra, Francisco Julião, Clodomir de Moraes, Padre Francisco Lage, João Sem Terra, Lindolfo Silva, Zé dos Prazeres, among others [well known peasant leaders from different agrarian movements in the 1960s].

This took place largely when the peasant movements resurfaced, in the context of the political re-democratization that was seen from 1984 onwards. All peasant, popular and union movements have been historically repressed by the ruling class at the moment they began to organize and fight for their rights. There are numerous individual cases against leaders, groups and movements to speak of. In these last 40 years of ‘fake democracy’, over 1,800 men and women have been murdered in the countryside. In less than a hundred of these cases, murders have been fully investigated and those responsible have gone to trial.

It is in this context of historical violations and killings that we must consider the Carajás massacre, which remains unpunished to this day. Two commanders of the Military Police were sentenced to more than 200 years of imprisonment but, due to preliminary injunctions by the courts, they are still sitting calmly in their homes today.

For peasants, but also for urban militants and the people and Brazilian society, we cannot remain silent. We must always denounce! We must take advantage of this important date to warn against and denounce these crimes, beyond paying our respects and

homage to the memory of the martyrs. As the poet Pedro Tierra once wrote about peasants' massacres in our past: 'If we keep silent, the stones will scream!'

Our mission is to learn from history, improve our organizational strength, to protect ourselves against the repressive fury of capital and to continue fighting against the unjust capitalist structures in the countryside.

5. In times of the pandemic and isolation, what is the place for debate about land reform? How can the struggle for land and land reform help us face the consequences of the pandemic?

Brazilian society is immersed in the greatest crisis in its history. Since 2014, we have been in the midst of a deep economic crisis, which in turn generated a social crisis of unemployment, precarious working conditions and a greater dependence on financial capital. This crisis became a political crisis, further deepened with the coup against Dilma and followed by the election of a neo-fascist government in 2018.

The pandemic deepened this crisis in all aspects, especially from a social point of view. As we have seen in other countries, the only way to confront the virus is through a representative, respected government that is allied with popular organizations and leaders to enforce policies and measures to help those in need. However, the neo-fascist government is the near opposite of this, acting for the benefit of eight percent of its fanatical followers, mainly neo-fascists, Pentecostals and a lumpen bourgeoisie. I believe that coronavirus will help us raise awareness and divide the bourgeoisie and the middle class. And when we return to the streets, we will overthrow this fascist government. The neo-fascist government is demoralized. It is trying to follow the ideology of the Trump administration. However, both are in the same sinking boat. The American Empire will also be defeated by this crisis.

The economic, social, political and health crises that have unfolded due to coronavirus are helping us to show the population – 85% of which live in cities – that we need to organize a new anti-liberal and anti-imperialist economic model. We hope to be able to build new paradigms for social organization. One of these paradigms is that in order to ensure the health of the entire population, we need healthy food. Only small farmers and peasants can produce healthy food. Agribusiness does not produce it; instead, it produces commodities and is interested only in profits. This is antisocial and unsustainable.

In the near future, the conditions will be more conducive to explaining to people that this new agrarian reform does not only intend to redistribute large rural properties and create work for the peasants. This new type of agrarian reform is based on new paradigms: to produce healthy food for everyone, based on agroecology, preserving nature – particularly protecting water – while confronting inequalities and environmental crises, such as climate change. This new agrarian reform will also produce food using agribusiness and scientific knowledge to the end of supporting our food sovereignty.

In other words, each region or territory will be able to produce its own food, avoiding dependence on international trade and transnational companies. We will trade food internationally only with the surplus produced after ensuring that all of our people are fed. We will value the local cuisine and the cultures of our people. We will guarantee access to education for the entire population, including schools in the countryside. This popular land reform will benefit not only peasants, but the entire population, a large part of which is already living in cities.

6. Following up on that last answer, considering the social and political consequences of isolation, can the Covid-19 pandemic change social, economic and political relations in the countryside? And how would it? What are the perspectives for change?

I think we will begin with changes to the ideological struggle, starting with a debate about the nature of necessary changes. The debates and demands for agrarian reform in Brazil now accommodate other parameters. In the past, building from proposals and concrete experiences of agrarian reforms, whether classic, radical or reformist, the objective was to democratize access to land, on the one hand, as a natural asset for the working masses. In this sense, the reforms aimed to guarantee the right to land for those who worked on it. It was the great struggle popularized by the Mexican revolution, led by Emiliano Zapata. On the other hand, the objective was to generate a large domestic consumer market, inserting the peasant mass into the production of goods for market. They would produce goods and, as a consequence, develop internal productive forces and industrial capitalism.

Now, the paradigms to be solved by agrarian reform are of a different kind. The bourgeoisie has no interest in democratizing the right to land while capitalism no longer has a need for peasants. The production of healthy food for the whole society is on the agenda now. Healthy food is on the agenda and it must be produced through agroecology, a path for the sustainable use of nature. Land, water, biodiversity, minerals and energy need to be available for the public good, for the common good of all of society. Thus, the new peasant mission must be to become the caretakers of nature. There are three prevailing conditions – capitalist farmers, agribusiness as the industrial agriculture model, and capitalism as a mode of production – that are no longer able to resolve the problems of humanity.

For this reason, we are looking at new types of agrarian reform in Brazil, in Latin America, and in most countries in the southern hemisphere that have not carried out any previous popular agrarian reform. The name, the label doesn't really matter. The most important thing is that it solves the problems and challenges outlined above. Currently, agrarian reform depends not only on peasants but on an entirety of people and popular forces, generally understood.

7. Since the coup, but even before 2016, governmental land policies were totally paralyzed, particularly processes of expropriation and land redistribution. How should agrarian movements react to this fact? What are the main struggles? How should they mobilize in times of isolation and what are the main demands?

We have never had a broad land reform process of any kind here in Brazil. We didn't even have the reformist-type changes – experiments carried out in some Latin American countries – that had the effect of partially or locally democratizing land ownership. We had colonization policies for public lands, largely along the agricultural frontiers in the Amazon and Cerrado regions. More recently, after 1985, we also saw settlement policies emerge, mainly resulting from social conflicts and landless struggles.

Given these new needs, we as peasant movements need to continue the ongoing process of organizing our social bases. We must raise our political awareness and cultural standard. By doing so, everyone will be aware of the new characteristics and paradigms of the agrarian reform we are struggling for as MST and as other agrarian movements.

At the same time, we need to promote this process of debate and organization, to bring the debate to all popular movements and to left-leaning political forces. This way, they will understand the current arena of social struggle in which we are all living. Such a stage imposes the need to debate a new popular project for Brazil. It is not just a matter of debating the agrarian question and its political consequences. We need to debate the national question and deep changes to our nation for all Brazilian people.

8. You recently launched a new book based on experiences of agrarian reform across the world. What are some lessons from these experiences that apply to the present moment?

The main objective of the book is to bring the experiences of agrarian reform across the world to the Brazilian public, militants or not. In a sentence, this was the main goal in publishing this book. This type of literature is notably lacking in Brazil and in Latin America, texts that tell us what has happened historically around the world. This lack of knowledge is due in particular to the imposition of neoliberal hegemony in universities and publication houses starting in the 1990s, which removed agrarian reform from academic research and debates. So, in the last year, I dedicated myself to the collection of writings, reports and texts from different experiences, and I systematized them into a book.

On the other hand, I was also motivated by debates in the peasant movement, generally, and in La Via Campesina International in particular. I went about creating my own systematization, classifying different types of agrarian reform, among them classic, reformist, radical and popular reforms. In this first volume, I tried to publish one or two countries representing each type, so that the reader had a general idea of how they happened.

It would be impossible to apply or 'copy' any one of these different types of land reform in the present moment. These agrarian reforms are the results of historical experiences of social struggles – they were carried out as the result of the correlation of forces that occurred in each country, in each society. In other words, the main lesson drawn from the experiences of other countries is that they should not be copied.

In Brazil, we attempted to implement a classic agrarian reform in different historical periods. This was carried out under the hegemony of the industrial bourgeoisie in other countries, developing capitalist productive forces. But we were defeated in all attempts. The first opportunity came with our attempt to escape slavery, at the end of the nineteenth century, but the right to access land was denied to former slave workers, unlike the cases of the United States or Haiti, for example.

Then, in the industrial capitalism phase, we again preferred to adopt a system of large-scale, export-oriented agriculture [or industrial agriculture] to meet the import needs of the industrial bourgeoisie. Finally, when the industrial model went into crisis in the 1960s, we again missed the opportunity to implement a classic agrarian reform. It was a missed opportunity because the proposal of Celso Furtado [an outstanding economist, who emphasized the role of the state in overcoming underdevelopment, in a pre-Keynesian perspective] was defeated by the 1964 business-military coup. After that, we only had punctual or partial experiences – with settlements for landless peasants – without realizing any sort of comprehensive agrarian reform.

9. Beyond the pandemic, we are facing another virus as lethal as Covid-19, which is neo-fascism, embodied by the current president. How can this political danger be confronted? And what are the possible scenarios or political consequences of Bolsonaro's overtly genocidal response to the pandemic? What are the possibilities or alternatives countering neo-fascism?

The profound economic crisis that defines the current stage of capitalism, the environmental crisis in which we are immersed, and the resulting social and political crises have shown that we need changes in formal bourgeois democracy and in the patterns of government. The bourgeoisie tried to impose authoritarian, neo-fascist governments in several countries. However, in all cases they failed. Most of these governments have already fallen or are in crisis: the Hungarian government and the Trump and Bolsonaro administrations are the last in line. Their ultra-neoliberal proposals and neo-fascist methods of governing, employing political threats and fanciful theories, are being demoralized worldwide.

Increasingly, social and political forces are recognizing that the Bolsonaro government is co-responsible for the deepening crisis in Brazil. In this sense, Bolsonaro is becoming an obstacle to changes that would save lives and improve living conditions. Capitalists will not be able to get out of the crisis alone, forcing the needy to shoulder all of the weight. Mr. Guedes' [the ultra-neoliberal Ministry of Economy] economic policy did not work in Chile or in the United States and it will be even less effective in Brazil. Around the world, bankers and transnational corporations are being reproached for the responsibility they bear in this situation. It may take weeks or months, but like the hegemonic proposal for society that they represent, their days are numbered.

We still lack the capacity needed to organize and mobilize the people to join forces around a new project for the country. I have hope that following the coronavirus pandemic, the people will rise. We are living a historic period, described by analysts as a momentum driven by that which is old and has not yet died and that which is new that has not yet been born.

10. Last April 19th – with the excuse of celebrating Army Day – Bolsonaro participated in a demonstration in Brasília that called for the 'return of the military dictatorship' and the AI5 [the most repressive act of the dictatorship, issued in 1968]. There are dangers of a 'militarization as response' to the pandemic in different countries. What is your opinion? Are there risks of a new 'military coup' in Brazil? What are the post-pandemic political scenarios?

In Brazil, the government is already fully protected by the armed forces. It is completely militarized, but not only due to the more than 1,300 military officials holding high positions in the government, including that of the vice president and several ministers. We also see former members of the military in other important positions – managing public companies, for example – but it is a military government also due to a political dimension. In a related process, the neo-fascist government is increasingly isolating itself from organized social forces, even from right-wing parties. These are parties that would be politically important for the government, strategic to plans for power in the long run. But in the end, the only real force supporting Bolsonaro is the army. Even for the (retired) army captain Bolsonaro, this is a contradiction: the army and generals may support him

today, sooner or later they may shift their support towards the vice president, General Mourão.

With respect to militarization in the classic sense of a military regime, I see no real sign or possibility. I do not believe that the industrial and financial bourgeoisie has to look to the military for support, as it did in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America. I think the conservative elite will continue to resort to ideological struggle, to a neo-fascist leaning ideology. A primary struggle will continue on social media and throughout the networks, as computers, robots and ideological manipulation will continue in the mainstream media.²

11. Among these disputed narratives we have that of Xico Graziano – an agribusiness intellectual and long-time Bolsonaro supported – who recently published an article on the Poder 360 blog, stating that ‘industrial agriculture and livestock will be the basis for the resumption of economic growth,’ highlighting the role of agribusiness. How does the MST respond to this type of statement?

Mr. Xico Graziano is an organic intellectual, representing capitalist interests in agriculture. He defends the business of large landowners and that of transnational corporations, in particular, which in effect are those who run, control and defend the agribusiness model. Of course, capitalists realized that they could increase business and profit in the post-crisis period. Certainly, there will be many countries that will emerge from this crisis weakened, with greater needs. Those countries concerned only with policies of food security [meaning only looking to buy food to meet demand] will increase demand on the food market, a process that capitalists will be watching carefully.

However, even in the realm of bourgeois ideologies, there are different analyses and scenarios. I read recently an article written by another intellectual, Roberto Rodrigues – a farmer, agronomist, professor and the former Minister [of Agriculture] during the Lula government – and he claimed that even maintaining the current agribusiness model will depend on structural adjustments. In his opinion, the status quo will require deep changes be made to the way large farmers produce: more effort will go to producing healthy food and to addressing sanitary concerns, for example. In this sense, there will be a strong push for supermarkets to track the origin and conditions of food production. And there will be more attention paid to stringent control that ensures environmental sustainability.

We think that the agribusiness model – characterized by large farms, mechanized monocultures, the intensive application of pesticides, a displacement of the rural population, destruction of biodiversity, nature and forests – has no future. It will be destroyed by its own contradictions, even if it takes some time.

We defend food sovereignty. In other words, we defend the right of each state or nation or society, by way of its governments, to implement public policies that reorganize agricultural production. In this way, all the healthy food needed by the people will be produced in each region and country. It will be produced and exchanged in such a

²In 2019, the Chamber of Deputies opened a Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry to investigate the dissemination of fake news from a group that has been called as ‘the office for hate’. The investigation is ongoing, but several Federal Deputies – who participated in the dissemination of false news and were elected in 2018 – revealed how these false news have been and are still being disseminated supporting Bolsonaro. Also, in 2019, some judges were threatened on social media, resulting in an investigation by the Supreme Court, which is still ongoing but has already revealed dozens of business-people who financially support the spread of false news.

way that international agricultural trade will only involve surplus. And producing healthy food is only possible by adopting principles of agroecology, a method that is intrinsically labor intensive. Capital, on the other hand, only works by way of intensive chemical applications, driving the workforce out of the countryside and maximizing profit.

It is nature, the urban population and Pope Francis³ that will help us to defeat the capitalist model, agribusiness and the entire industrial system of agricultural production.

12. In the midst of an isolating pandemic, we see a variety of analyses on the current situation, but what are the perspectives for the 'post-pandemic'? In your opinion, will the alternatives contribute to possible scenarios and popular responses? What role will struggle for land and agrarian movements have in the 'post-pandemic' scenarios?

As I said before, I think the post-crisis period – no longer simply a public health crisis, but a serious economic, social, political and environmental crisis – will provide a new stage for ideological debate around the world. In other words, humanity will face new dilemmas – civilizing dilemmas, those demanding different visions for the future and the wellbeing of all. The capitalist mode of production no longer responds to these questions. It has shown that it not only fails to solve these problems but serves to worsen them.

Ideologically, I believe that financial capital and neo-fascism will be defeated. But nobody knows what will come after that. Certainly, there will be a strengthening of the idea of state as well as notions of national and food sovereignty. I think there will be a strengthening of notions such as equality, and an increased awareness of the sentiment that all human beings have the right to work, to an income and to education.

We see how these themes and notions are returning to the agenda, strengthened and supported even by Pope Francis.⁴ He is strongly advocating for the establishment of a basic income worldwide for all families.

However, certainly these issues and demands will not be transformed into policies and social change if no pressure is applied by the masses. I believe that the post-crisis period will see the emergence of a new cycle of mass movements. We will witness working-class movements worldwide, but especially in the Southern Hemisphere. In the South, we see a working class and youth, more exploited and with access to fewer alternatives and possibilities within the framework of capitalism.

³The reference to the Pope has a historical and a contextual perspectives: (a) historically, the MST was born in 1984/1985 partially as result of social and educational works of the Catholic Based Communities and of the Liberation Theology (see Stédile and Fernandes 1999); (b) contextually, Latin America is a 'culturally catholic continent' and the recent statements by Pope Francis supporting social justice and the possibilities for alliances with the churches' progressive sectors are crucial for connecting to the grassroot people of the MST but also keeping faith and hopes in the struggle.

⁴The election of Bolsonaro is also linked to conservative religious groups, particularly an increased power related to the growth of Evangelical Pentecostal churches. According to Garcia (2019) 'The churches provide a solid social base for conservatism in the urban peripheries where they did grassroots work during the campaign. There are reports of cults where a pastor promoted Bolsonaro and his allies directly, distributing campaign pamphlets together with church pamphlets against abortion, etc. On the day that he won the election, Bolsonaro began his speech with a prayer led by an evangelical pastor, live on national television. For the left, the question now is how to rebuild the work at the grassroots and re-establish a dialogue with the poor in the *favelas* and in the peripheries, and in the churches, to counter reactionary groups.'

Therefore, in the post-crisis we will enter a new cycle of political instability, more acute class struggle and of uncertainty. The paths to be followed will be determined by the correlation of forces. These forces are established in each country and lie between the dominant capitalist class and the working class, the latter representing the vast majority of the world population.

I believe we will have a long period of uncertainty, but also of political dynamism.

13. As recently as January 2020, the national coordination of the MST announced the decision to plant one million trees a year! Could you explain the decision? What are the primary social and environmental positions of the MST? Do they relate to possible alternatives or solutions to the pandemic?

Agrarian and rural popular movements and Brazilian society as a whole is increasingly coming realize the harmful consequences the agribusiness model and its aggressions against nature and the environment. We are witnessing a series of important environmental crimes, with the most well-known consequence being climate change. These changes have a variety of impacts on agriculture, which suffers from increased storms, torrential rains and floods but also from decreasing rainfall, chronic drought and the contamination of water resources in many regions. Beyond this, we need to pay more attention to crimes committed by mining companies, including the contamination of water and food, which disproportionately affects those living in poor urban areas.

In the face of this, following grassroot consultations and local debates, our movement [the MST] embraced the idea of launching a permanent campaign. The MST decided to launch a [socioenvironmental campaign] to plant native trees. Our hope is that this campaign will motivate people to plant native trees in each of their respective biomes, cultivating fruit trees that will provide food, energy, firewood, and wood for building. We hope to incentivize the cultivation of agroforestry systems, combining reforestation and agriculture.

We designed a plan in which we plant one million trees in a year. But even this is too little. Our camping established a minimum goal, but we want to encourage other agrarian and urban movements to embrace this effort and establish their own plans, too. Beyond movements, we want to motivate city halls and public bodies to get involved and give a hand in this effort to conserve nature while producing food.

The MST will begin by reforesting our own territories. We are encouraging families to plant trees on our settlements. From our territories, we hope to then expand towards the reforestation of areas degraded by agribusiness, to motivate local governments to plant trees and reforest roadsides and public spaces like parks. In our inner cities, especially, we need to reforest with trees that can provide food [these are areas devastated by poorly planned urban sprawl].

We affirmed that one of the missions of MST is to help preserve nature. To do so, we will organize seedling nurseries, full of native and fruit tree seedlings that we will distribute to the population. This MST permanent campaign is already underway, and we are very optimistic about its acceptance and the adherence of our social base to the campaign objectives. We expect partner peasant movements to join in, together with the more serious public bodies and local governments. I believe that this campaign may help bolster our actions and struggles post-pandemic, contributing to our struggle for food sovereignty.

Afterword – 30 May 2020

Sergio Sauer

Stédile's words are clear in explaining what is happening in Brazil and how the agrarian social movements are trying to face the pandemic and the economic and political crises. However, these crises are deepening faster than it is possible to fully understand them and their consequences. It is important to reflect further on some aspects, but particularly their structural causes and social and economic consequences.

At the end of May, Brazil is globally the second most affected country, with more than 27,000 deaths and more than 500,000 confirmed cases (Folha 2020a). As these data are based on very low levels of testing, the prediction is seven times more by the most optimistic estimate and it may go up to 13 times more the total number of infected people. The quarantine is already past 70 days, but little has been done to increase the capacity for care in hospitals or run tests to reduce the levels of infection (Folha 2020b).

Even more dangerous and perverse, cases of infection are increasing rapidly in the poorest urban neighborhoods (slums areas), where the numbers of deaths are a lot higher than the national average. They are also spreading to poorer regions, including smaller cities where there are no hospitals nor Intensive Care Units (ICUs). The scenarios are of social chaos and collapse of the health care system, without any emergency plan from the federal government. Actually, the attitudes of Bolsonaro were publicly classified as 'eugenic' by a leading infectious disease physician, head of an important hospital in São Paulo (Cultura 2020).

Bolsonaro himself is only concerned in maintaining political support from his social base, meaning the 30% of popular support, according to the latest survey (Folha 2020). Negotiations for having political support in National Congress are fundamental to the government's survival, as there are more than 30 formal requests for impeachment in the Chamber of Deputies, but also the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry investigating several accusations of mass dissemination of false news starting in the electoral process in 2018, as previously mentioned.

Investigations and impeachment requests have led military ministers to make open threats to the Supreme Court and the national Congress. A letter from the Minister of Institutional Security, supported by several ministers and the Military Club, hinted at the imminence of an 'institutional crisis' among the powers of the Republic. In other words, one of the scenarios is the expansion of military dominance, that is, a 'modern coup', legitimated by the election and a certain popular support. There have been weekly demonstrations in the streets, and 'As in an April rally also attended by Bolsonaro, demonstrators called on Sunday for the closing of the Supreme Court and Congress, and a return to authoritarian measures used during Brazil's 1964–1985 military government' (Marcelino and Slattery 2020).

Despite the actual risks to democracy, the situation is not only a result of ultraneoliberal economic policies and of the insanity and lack of compassion and empathy of Bolsonaro. Social inequality and the authoritarian culture are part of the Brazilian history and are structural. Thus, it is important to point out that the current Brazilian agrarian and environmental situation is not the result only of recent events or of the government. The

‘militarized government’ is just making this inequality more evident these days (Leite, Tubino, and Sauer 2019).

The most evident, and already known worldwide, sign of inequality is the concentration of land in Brazil. The data from the last Agricultural Census of 2017 confirm the high levels of land concentration, since less than 1 percent of large farms concentrate almost a half of all registered lands. Between 2006, the previous Census, and 2017, the participation in the total area of estates (equal or greater than 1,000 hectares) increased from 45 to 47.5 percent. The large estates increased adding 3,287 farms and 16.3 million hectares, and the average area increased from 3,155.7 to 3,272.4 hectares. In the group of small farms, under 100 hectares, there was a loss in numbers, falling from 21.2 to 20.5 percent of the total farms, keeping an average area of only 15.8 hectares (IBGE 2017).

Inequality in the countryside is not restricted to access to land. In comparison with the 2006 Agricultural Census, there was a reduction of 1,530,566 people employed in the rural area. The total number of employed persons was 16,567,544 in 2006, falling to 15,036,978 people in 2017, a reduction of 9.2 percent of people employed in the agricultural sectors. In contrast, the number of tractors increased by 49.7 percent, adding 407,916 more units in comparison to the 2006 Census, reaching 1,228,634 tractors in 2017. Such data show that investments and agricultural modernization increased production but reduced labor, resulting in unemployment and increasing inequality in the countryside (IBGE 2017).

Contradictorily, such inequality is frequently praised as large agribusiness being the ‘richness and salvation’ of the Brazilian economy. An electronic portal ‘CompreRural’ (2020), praising agribusiness and stating that Brazil is a ‘country driven by agribusiness’, launched a list of ‘Reis do Agro’ (kings of agro), a list of the largest producers, ‘the giants of 2020’, or simply the larger producers that are above the national average. The first in this list is the so called ‘kings of cattle’, that is a family of three brothers who control the Quagliato group. This business group has more than 200,000 cattle, and about 150,000 are on eight farms in the Amazon. The farms are located in the south of the State of Pará, an agricultural frontier with cheap land and a long history of the highest numbers land conflict in the country (CompreRural 2020).

According to the list of Compre Rural (2020), ‘with modern technology and accusations of slave labor, the Quagliato brothers have become the largest ranchers in the country’. Thus, the statement shows the essential character of agribusiness and the historical inequality of the Brazilian countryside: a perverse combination of investments in technology and exploitation of slave labor.

According to the same list of ‘kings of agro’, the largest individual soy producer in Brazil is also the largest in the world. With more than 530 thousand hectares of planted area, the Maggi family – having one member of the family, Blairo Maggi, as the Minister of Agriculture during the administration of Temer (2016–2018) – or the Amaggi group is king of soy. According to the portal CompreRural (2020), the achievement is a consequence of ‘effective planning, teamwork, technology support and especially harmony with nature’. However, besides accusations of the patriarch using slave labor in 1980s, there was a recent case done by the family. In 2008, a special inspection team of the Ministry of Labor released 41 rural workers subjected to degrading labor conditions in a farm rented by Maggi. The team of inspectors found workers in precarious housing, poor hygienic conditions and handling chemicals with no protection. These employees were hit by

pesticides when they were spread by airplanes over soybean and cotton plantations (CompreRural 2020).

These are the first two ‘agro-kings’ listed by the website of Compre Rural (2020). There are many more cases, but it is enough to show the inequality generated in the accumulation by dispossession done in the rural Brazil. These processes of expropriation, land concentration and inequality are part of the causes for the historical struggles for land and rights in the countryside, motivating the organization of social movements like the MST but also some conquests (Stédile and Fernandes 1999).

These historical struggles and resistance resulted in the conception and implementation of a series of public policies and governmental programs that responded, even partially, to social demands for land (Sauer and Mészáros 2017). Restarting in the 1980s, led by the MST, land occupations spread across the country, resulting in a number of governmental land policies, specifically that of agrarian settlements (Stédile and Fernandes 1999). Land struggle (land occupation) and agrarian social movements’ demands increased significantly over the course of the 1990s. The increase in land occupations, peaking in 1999, resulted in new settlements (Stédile and Fernandes 1999), but also drove president Fernando Henrique Cardoso to issue legal measures to ease the social pressure for land. The main result of these legal measures was a huge decrease in land occupations, from over 800 in 1999 to less than 400 in 2000, and only 194 occupations in 2001 (Sauer and Mészáros 2017).

The electoral victory of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers Party, in 2002, was followed by an increasing number of encamped landless families, from 70,000 in 2002 up to more than 150,000 in 2003, and of numbers of land occupations between 2003 and 2006 (Sauer and Mészáros 2017). These mobilizations and demands led Lula’s government (2003–2010) to create the Second National Plan of Agrarian Reform, which resulted in new settlements involving over 500,000 families. Besides that, it is important to acknowledge that it was enough to provoke a real rupture with the old system of tenure and land concentration (Branford 2010). According to official data of the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Incra), an estimated 98 million hectares of land have been expropriated from 1990 to 2014, settling around one million landless families in over 9,100 settlements all over the country (Sauer and Castro 2020).

Whatever the differences and similarities between the administrations of Fernando Henrique (1994–2002) and Lula (2003–2010), and their respective contributions to the settlement of over 1 million landless families, the official data also underlie their failure to diminish land concentration (Branford 2010) and the structural inequality in the countryside. Over a 10-year period, Gini indicators (measuring land distribution) continued virtually unchanged from 0.857 in 1996 to 0.856 in 2006. On the other hand, land concentration and the financial privileges of agribusiness remained unchallenged, while landed property remained deeply concentrated (Sauer and Mészáros 2017; Sauer 2017).

Though land occupations are still the leading form of struggle for land access, other means of fighting and resisting have been carried out, in particular through the resistance of indigenous and the Quilombola communities (Maroons or ethnic-racial groups, self-identified as such based on black African ancestry). According to official data of Incra, 124 Quilombola territories were titled until 2012. From 1995, 139 titles recognizing territorial rights went to 207 communities, including 12,906 beneficiary families. Also, there are a total of 690 territories officially recognized as indigenous land by the National

Foundation of Indigenous People (Funai). These lands occupy an area of 112,984,701 hectares, which means that 13.3 percent of Brazilian national territory is set aside for indigenous people (Sauer and Castro 2020).

Similar processes and building social collective identities also took place in struggles for environmental protection with the creation of the 'conservation units of sustainable use' and the extractive reservations (RESEX). Following the struggles and resistance of social groups in the Amazon in the beginning of 1990, of which the rubber tappers are the best known, there are over 141 sustainable use areas. These social and environmental territories encompass over 30 million hectares for different sustainable uses and tenure (Sauer and Castro 2020).

Even though these numbers have been highly contested both by social movements and by activist scholars, they represent important social and political achievements. All of this access to land and rights of using and dwelling in these territories must be seen as conquests. These achievements gave access to around 25 percent of the Brazilian territory and resulted in a series of conceived and implemented public policies and governmental programs (Sauer and Castro 2020).

Unfortunately, all these achievements and programs are under threat in recent years, especially after 2016. Most of the public policies have been dismantled and programs are blocked under Bolsonaro's administration, leading Stédile to state that there is time for resistance in rural Brazil.

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