FAMILIES, FIELDS, AND FIGHTING FOR LAND: THE SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF CONTENTION IN RURAL BRAZIL[*]

Wendy Wolford[†]

This article analyzes the formation of the largest grassroots social movement in Brazilian history: the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (MST). In movement literature and academic discourse, MST's formation has been consistently attributed to three factors—agricultural restructuring, political transition, and religious organization. These three factors form what I call an "Official Genesis Story." I argue that although the Official Genesis Story fits together well at the macro level, it cannot explain who decided to join MST or why, because the story does not locate acts of resistance in either people or place. A comparison of MST members in two different regions of Brazil shows how the spatial constitution of production and reproduction informed individual decisions to join MST. By geographically situating the official story, we uncover the contentious actors behind the contentious actions.

Over the past seventeen years, a movement that began with 400 people in southern Brazil has grown to become "the most dynamic, best organized, and effective social movement" in the history of the country (Petras 1997:18). Founded in the belief that "land belongs to those who work it," *O Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (the Movement of Rural Landless Workers, or MST) organizes the landless poor throughout Brazil to enter (occupy) "unproductive" estates and demand title to the property. Since 1984, MST has organized over 250,000 such occupations throughout the country and won land for almost 300,000 families. In a country where a handful of landowners control the vast majority of land, the potential benefits of joining MST are clear. Individual decisions to join the movement, however, are not made easily. People leave everything familiar behind in order to engage in activities that will set them against large segments of both state and society. They live in squatter camps without access to basic services, and they are regularly subjected to psychological and physical pressure by outsiders (CPT 2000). So why do they do it?

In the literature on MST, academics and movement leaders alike have attributed the movement's explosive rise to three factors (Navarro 2000; Stedile 1997). First, agricultural restructuring in the countryside during the 1970s created a large landless class, and organization became necessary for economic survival. Second, the return to democracy in 1985 after twenty-one years of military rule provided the political opportunity for organization. Third, movement members found institutional support in progressive religious

[*] This research was generously supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the Institute of International Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Institute for the Study of World Peace. The author would like to thank Deborah Martin and Byron Miller for their very helpful comments. Felicia Mebane, Andrew Perrin, Charles Postel, Jessica Teisch, Chanequa Walker-Barnes, Michael Watts, and one anonymous *Mobilization* reviewer also provided valuable feedback on previous drafts of this paper.

[†] Wendy Wolford is Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Email: wwolford@email.unc.edu.

© Mobilization: An International Journal: 8(2): 201-215

centers located throughout rural Brazil. These three factors—agricultural restructuring, the transition to democracy, and institutional support—are referred to so consistently that they now form the heart of what I call MST's "Official Genesis Story." The story parallels three "classic" fields in social movement studies: grievance theories, political opportunity theories and resource mobilization theories.

Although the Official Genesis Story is convincing at the macro level, it does not actually explain why people decided to join MST because it does not locate the act of resistance in either people or place. The different elements of the story are correct, but in focusing on these particular correct pieces, the official story mistakenly assumes a direct link between broad structural changes and mobilization. The Official Genesis Story does not explain who, out of all the people affected by agricultural restructuring, political transition, and religious organization, constituted the small minority that joined MST. What did they hope to accomplish? And why didn't more people join? Did everyone who joined MST even want land? The Official Genesis Story cannot answer any of these questions because it is, as Sherri Ortner would say, "thin"— "thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity—the intentions, desires, fears, projects—of the actors engaged in these dramas." (Ortner 1995: 190)

The "thick" questions of why people engage in contentious activity are too often left out of the research on social mobilization. The aspatial and ethnographically thin question —"why do movements form?"—is regularly privileged over the question— "why do people decide to form movements in particular places and times?" This is particularly problematic in studies of social movements, because they are almost by definition operating outside of the social and political center. As a result, movement members are often eager to present their own genesis stories in ways that legitimate marginal(ized) identities and strategies.[1]

In their ambitious attempt to frame a new research agenda, McAdam et al. (2001) suggest a way forward that turns on the spatial dynamics of mobilization—or the political importance of place—although they do not phrase it as such. The first step toward incorporating the spatial dynamics of mobilization is to embed actors in their particular material and symbolic environments.[2] The second step is to examine how different actors negotiate the spaces of resistance and domination produced by political, social and economic forces. The third step is to acknowledge diversity (instead of trying to explain it away in defense of a particular theoretical framework) and use comparisons of diverse groups in order to understand how notions of community, place, and tradition shape mobilization—sometimes facilitating it, sometimes discouraging it—in different environments.[3]

In this article, I analyze the spatial dynamics of MST mobilization by comparing two very different groups within the movement—former small family farmers in the southern state of Santa Catarina and former rural plantation workers in the northeastern state of Pernambuco.[4] In both places—the South and Northeast of Brazil—the way in which social relations were embedded in particular spatial contexts was critically important to the decision to join MST. In southern Brazil, small farmers who decided to join MST were tied into a spatially expansive form of production that they valued as a part of a broader community. Family and community ties that were forged and re-forged through everyday practices working on the land helped to lower the threshold for participation in MST.[5] In the Northeast, on the other hand, MST found it very difficult to mobilize new members because social ties on the sugarcane plantations were too weak to facilitate mobilization and the culture of private property and hierarchy made MST's methods of land occupation appear illegitimate. MST was only able to generate support in the region when political restructuring precipitated a massive economic crisis and joining the movement became a more attractive option. At that time, community bonds actually raised the threshold for participation—the people who chose to join MST during the economic crisis were the ones who had the weakest ties to family and community and as a consequence had the least to lose from violating social norms.

In what follows, I outline in detail the "Official Genesis Story," then describe the

case-study communities in the South and the Northeast. This research is based on one year of fieldwork conducted in 1998-9. I interviewed approximately 100 MST settlers in Santa Catarina and 100 settlers in Pernambuco, as well as many MST leaders, local politicians, small farmers in the regions surrounding the settlements, agrarian reform agents and agricultural day-laborers living in urban peripheries.[6]

THE OFFICIAL GENESIS STORY IN THE MAKING

The Official Genesis Story is useful for understanding the broad context in which MST was formed. In 1964, the Brazilian military seized executive power. Two of the military's primary goals were to quell unrest in the countryside and modernize large-scale agricultural production. To quell unrest, the military re-located "men without land to a land without men," sending people from troubled areas in the Northeast and South to the as yet untamed areas of the Northwest--the Amazonian frontier. These re-settlement schemes were notoriously unsuccessful, and most of the people who accepted land in the remote rainforest region left within years of their arrival. To modernize agricultural production, the military provided the largest landowners with generous incentives and resources in the hopes that production increases would generate foreign currency and lower the cost of living for urban workers (Delgado 1985; Müller 1985).

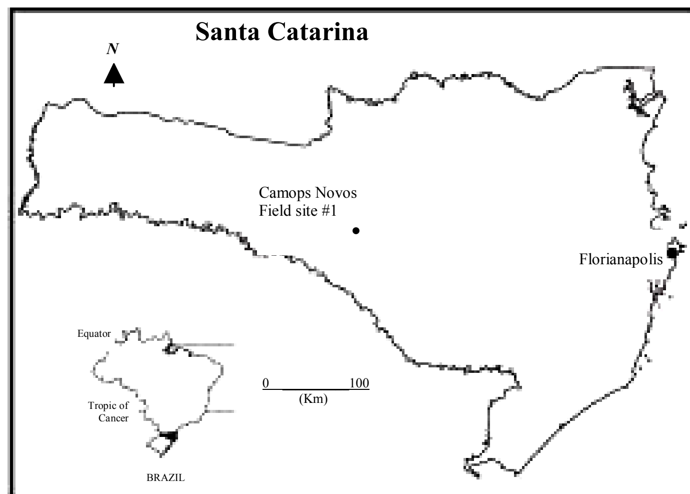
The modernization of agriculture, part of the military's overall industrial development plan, was surprisingly successful. Between 1967 and 1973, Brazil experienced such rapid economic growth that the period was dubbed the "economic miracle" (Burns 1993).[7] Despite the overall economic advances, the gap between social classes grew, and a large part of the country's population was left out of the economic miracle altogether.[8] Mechanization of agricultural production altered labor requirements in ways that spawned massive unemployment and generated an exodus from the rural areas into the cities (Graziano da Silva 1982).[9] The out-migration from the countryside exacerbated the inequitable distribution of land, and by 1985 just over 10 percent of the landowners in the country controlled almost 80 percent of the land (IBGE 1990). Movement leaders and academics have argued that this rapid modernization of agriculture was one of the most important factors underlying MST's formation (Poletto 1997; Robles 2001; Stedile and Fernandes 1999; Veltmeyer 1997). This materialist explanation of movement formation parallels the school of "grievance theories," which argues that arduous economic conditions push people to resist their circumstances (Eckstein 1989; Edelman 1996, 1999; Migdal 1975; Paige 1975; Slater 1985).[10]

MST's Official Genesis Story also emphasizes the importance of religious organizations in the movement's initial moments. As a result of the 1968 Latin American Bishops' Council held in Medellin, Colombia, the Catholic Church officially strengthened its "preference for the poor," creating *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (Ecclesiastical Base Communities, or CEBs) to be run by lay priests in previously un-serviced areas (Mainwaring 1986). These CEBs spread throughout rural Brazil and provided important meeting places at a time when oppositional political parties and trade unions had been largely shut down by the military government (Lehmann 1990). Many of the first MST leaders came directly out of the Church (Petras 1997; Schwade 1992). Social networks created by members of Catholic and Lutheran Churches in Brazil have been characterized as "institutional hosts" (cf., Houtzager 1997) that fostered movement formation among the rural and urban poor throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This emphasis on institutional support is theoretically situated within the school of Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), which argues that social movements form where and when particular groups can organize sufficient institutional, financial, and cultural resources (McCarthy and Zald 1973; Morris 1984).

The third and final component of the Official Genesis Story is the political opportunity provided by the withdrawal of the military government. The military began a

process of *abertura* (political opening) in 1978-9, and in 1982 civilian elections were held for the first time in eighteen years. At that time, trade unions (Houtzager 1997; Houtzager and Kurtz 2000), religious organizations (Mainwaring 1986), student groups, and social movements (Medeiros 1989) all organized to participate in the transition to democracy (Sader and Silverstein 1991). Even "peasants began to lose their fear of fighting against the government" (Stedile 1997: 70). Political crises and transitions—such as the democratic transition in Brazil—have been optimistically viewed as uniquely fertile spaces for movement formation (Dominguez and Lowenthal 1996; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Oxhorn 1991) because "people engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change" (Tarrow 1998:19).

Map 1. Santa Catarina



PUTTING THE OFFICIAL GENESIS STORY IN ITS PLACE(S)

The Official Genesis Story and its associated social movement theories have contributed greatly to our understanding of organized resistance, and they highlight important elements of the context surrounding MST's formation. But none of them gets to the heart of the question "who joined MST and why," a spatially specific, actor-oriented question crucial to understanding how movements come together. The Official Genesis Story and the theoretical frameworks in which it operates assume a fairly unproblematic link between context and action based on the hypothetical ideal of rational, well-informed actors (see Miller 1992). In what follows, I go beyond the Official Genesis Story to explain why certain actors made the decision to join MST in the context of agricultural modernization, political transition, and religious mobilization.

Santa Catarina

Vento is an MST land reform settlement located in the southern state of Santa Catarina.[11] Most of the families (82 percent) interviewed in Vento were small farmers who owned or rented land in western Santa Catarina before joining MST. Eighty families were

given land in Vento after spending several years in MST squatter camps, while seventeen families were given land because they had worked on the property. Once they had settled in Vento, each household received use rights to eighteen hectares of land.[12] The question, "why did these settlers join MST?" is a fundamentally spatial one because both production and social reproduction for small family farmers turned on access to adequate land, generating a spatially expansive "cultural toolkit" (Swidler 1986). The small farmers lived off of their land, and by custom, their children searched for land of their own in order to begin a family, creating a generational dynamic that Alexander Chayanov (1966) has called the "demographic cycle" (see also Cazella 1992; Paulilo 1996).[13] Even before joining MST, Vento settlers had moved an average of two times in search of land, most of them escaping the demographic pressures on land in the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul by moving northward into the relatively open areas of western Santa Catarina.

By the early 1970s, available land in western Santa Catarina had become increasingly scarce. Over the next decade, 70,000 people would leave the area (Testa et al. 1996: 22). The diminishing availability of space was a function of multiple pressures: the expansion of highly capitalized soy and wheat farms, the arrival of new migrants from the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul, and the subdivision of household plots due to the need for new land to begin a family. In addition, worsening environmental conditions effectively reduced the amount of land for cultivation.[14] As one former resident of the region said: "In western Santa Catarina, the land has been abandoned because it is so bad. Full of insects, little bugs."[15] According to another settler, years of planting corn and beans on steep inclines had led to deteriorating soil conditions and lower yields: "there were so many rocks, and it seemed like there were more every year."

As productive land became harder to find, small farmers increasingly planted on land that was not their own. Between 1975 and 1980, the number of farms worked by either a renter or a sharecropper increased by almost 50 percent—from 9,918 to 13,659 (Testa et al. 1996: 57; also see Cazella 1992: 19). MST settlers argued that renting land was a distasteful alternative to owning your own, because farmers always had to work the landlord's worst land (Cazella 1992: 33). Landowners often dealt the harshest with those tenants whose hard work might have entitled them to a legal claim on the land.[16] One settler commented: "You can't really survive by renting land in the countryside. The rent is so high and just when you start to do well, the landlord kicks you off."

As available land in western Santa Catarina dwindled, there were several possible responses. Many small farmers left the area for industrial jobs or agricultural day-work that could be scraped together from the peripheral areas of large cities. Only a small percentage decided to join MST; they did so because they saw a chance to create a new frontier--a *political* frontier instead of a *spatial* one. "*Spatial* frontiers" are areas represented as (and perceived to be) relatively "empty," although they are usually inhabited by people who do not possess the political voice to make themselves seen (Slater 2002). The Amazon region in Brazil is the best known spatial frontier in the country (Amado at al. 1990; Schmink and Wood 1984). By contrast, "*political* frontiers" are areas that have been opened up for access by political contestation or negotiation (Burns 1995). When MST occupies private or public property, movement members represent that space as "empty" and resolve their need for land by creating a political frontier—in a sense, employing their own spatial fixes to counteract the intrusions of landed capital. The new frontier makes sense to the settlers because their traditional mobility in search of land, combined with the historical existence of an open spatial frontier in the region, created an imaginary of unlimited land that rightfully belonged to anyone who worked it. The settlers in Vento saw geographic mobility as a "right"--a respectable solution to limited land, degraded soil and rental conditions they considered unfair.

The people who saw MST as an opportunity to produce a new frontier had emotional or social ties to working the land—where the land represented tradition, subsistence, social

reproduction, and community—and a determination to stay on the familiar soils of Santa Catarina. To one young settler, having land meant: "citizenship, and the dignity to be able to produce. Land is life." The settlers' strong association of property ownership with household sustainability helped them legitimate claims to new land while *simultaneously* delegitimating claims made by wealthy absentee landowners. MST's characterization of wealthy landowners as thieves fit with the small farmers' sense that the "right" to land was earned through work and overseen by God, not awarded through position and overseen by politicians.

In addition to providing an understanding of space that made joining MST thinkable, the spatialized practices of reproduction in western Santa Catarina also provided the social relations that helped to make joining MST *possible*. Many parents who were unable to give their children land from their own farm helped them survive during the occupation. One settler who regularly brought his two sons food and money while they were living in an MST encampment said he told them: "[your mother and I] can't give you land, but we will help you until you do manage to get land of your own. When you have land, then you are on your own." To parents, MST continued the demographic cycle in which young families obtained the land needed to raise their own children: "through the struggle for agrarian reform, our kids have gotten married and gone after their own land." When some settlers saw their brothers and sisters win land, they joined an occupation to "stick with" the family and "see what would happen." Sometimes, one person endured the trials of the occupation and called his or her family only when it looked as though they might soon receive land. In other cases, the whole family--wife, husband, and children—would pack up their belongings and head to an occupation together. In this way, several brothers and sisters, mothers, fathers and children settled the same land. Strong familial bonds among small farmers in western Santa Catarina created what I call a "social multiplier effect," whereby one person's decision to join the movement was multiplied by his or her influence on family members who also decided to join. The households of Vento averaged four relatives living in them or in MST settlements somewhere in the state. Without this "social multiplier effect," people probably would still have chosen to occupy land, but their decisions might not have created a movement.

The farming communities that dotted the landscape of western Santa Catarina also provided important material resources for mobilization. Communities were certainly not free from conflict, but community centers—usually a church or a school—provided relatively safe spaces for families to learn about MST. Information spread rapidly through community networks. Many of the settlers heard about MST by talking to their neighbors: "at that time, no one knew anything about the movement and these occupations. Then it began with some people who lived there and they were the first. And then one person began to pull on the other and pretty soon everyone went." Familiarity made it easier to withstand the uncertainty and fear involved in an occupation, and large groups facilitated logistical preparations. Local leaders also played important roles as mediators between the radical ideas of mobilization and resistance and the settlers' own desires for change. As one settler recounted: "In the beginning, it wasn't MST, it was just community leaders."

The small farmers who joined MST used the tools of their traditions to carve out a new form of frontier. The *political* frontier was created by occupying private property that had been preserved for several hundred years through powerful traditions of domination. Small farmers re-presented this land as both "a gift of God" and a right that every impoverished Brazilian citizen deserved. Although these acts of resistance might have been more difficult without the transition to democracy and resources provided by the Catholic church, MST never would have been formed without the small farmers who needed land and saw occupations as a legitimate means to an end.

For all of the reasons outlined above—the spatial mobility of small farmers, the demographic cycle, the "social multiplier effect," the geographically extensive community ties, the cultural attachment to land, and the historical perception of occupation as noble—the Official Genesis Story is insufficient to explain MST's formation in southern Brazil. By

decontextualizing causal mechanisms the official story points to the most obvious explanations for contentious activity, but overlooks the specific ways in which resistance was produced by the symbolic and material relationships between people and their environments.

Ironically, the genesis story of economic restructuring and political transition does work as an explanation for the movement's success in the coastal sugarcane region of Pernambuco, a state in Northeast Brazil. MST did not develop a significant presence in this region until the mid-1990s. Even then it was never as strong as in the South, nonetheless, it is there that economic modernization and political opportunity overcame community preferences and provided the impetus for organized resistance.

The Sugarcane Region of Pernambuco

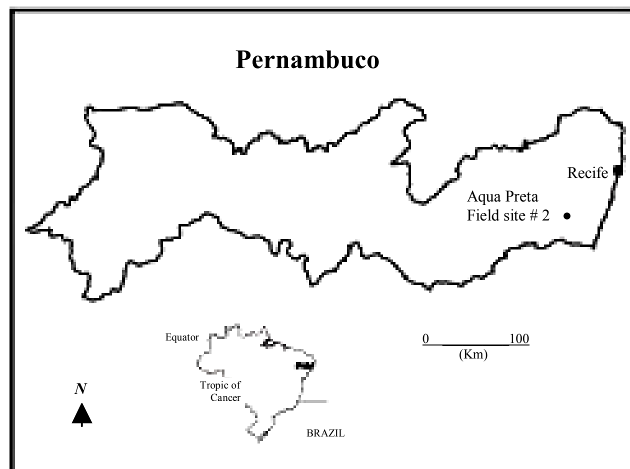
Flora is an MST land reform settlement located in the northeastern state of Pernambuco.[17] Flora was originally a sugarcane plantation, but it had not produced cane for over three years when MST members occupied the property in 1996. Thirteen families affiliated with MST were given access to land when Flora was expropriated in 1997, and the rest was distributed among the thirty-three families formerly associated with the plantation (referred to as *moradores*, or residents). According to federal law, everyone who worked or lived on the plantation and did not own (or rent) land elsewhere was eligible to receive land. Incredibly, this allowed a wide range of social classes including the former *patrão* (plantation boss) to remain on the settlement.[18] Regardless of their former social standing, each family received use rights to approximately nine hectares.

A major factor inhibiting participation in MST before the 1990s was the social construction of space on sugarcane plantations in NE Brazil. Plantation owners manipulated labor relationships in ways that separated workers from both the land and each other (Sigaud 1979). As a result, MST struggled to convince workers that land was necessary for either production or reproduction. Plantation workers were occasionally allowed to plant subsistence crops by their houses if they lived inside the plantation grounds, but permission was always at the discretion of the patrão (c.f., Sigaud 1979). When the price of sugar or alcohol was high, the plantation owners exercised their right to re-incorporate the land and plant cane wherever they could. According to one former plantation worker, "when you left your house, you opened the door, and you were already right on top of the cane." Many plantation owners simply refused to allow their workers access to land. One settler described the near total control of the mill-owners: "This mill where we were working never gave anyone land to plant, no, never. Even the trees that the workers planted, the mill-owner would knock them all down. They planted cane and threw the workers out. The mill didn't want to give anything to the worker, because they thought that the worker would take over their lands."

In addition to the workers' physical separation from the land, cultural notions of space and property discouraged occupation of "someone else's property." Plantation workers generally found it very difficult to accept MST's strategy of land occupations as morally justified by either the Brazilian Constitution or the Bible. No historical process of settlement legitimated occupations, because there had not been an open frontier in the region since the early 1500s.[19] The plantation owners who did provide their workers with land did so as a "*dom*" (gift), and "the workers were not—and perhaps are still not—accustomed to considering land as a right equal to other rights" (Sigaud 1979: 84). Plantation workers believed that private property was an institution to be respected. While they may have wished for access to land, many insisted that they wanted it only if, as one settler said, the government "gave it to [them] without any problems." As one of the former moradores who received Flora land said: "If the head of MST came and settled people inside some area, I would be in favor of this. But just to invade, when they don't even know if it is possible for them to get that land, I am against this." Even a settler who had joined in the MST occupation

said that "right up to when we entered the area of the [plantation], I didn't know that it was an invasion, I didn't know anything about this, I knew that it was to get land and so I joined up."[20]

Map 2. Pernambuco



As a result of material and cultural separation from the land, few plantation workers were experienced in family farming, and most preferred paid employment to landed production (see also Maybury-Lewis 1994). The culture of work-as-paid-employment created a dependence on money, and people relied on their regular income to purchase groceries at the weekly *feira* (market). Without their salary, they were nervous about how they would continue to pay their bills and feed themselves. An MST activist in the region explained:

> When you go to [the plantation workers] with an idea about [joining an occupation]…they measure the time [that they would spend in an occupation] against the time that they would spend employed. If they started a job today, in five days they would already have money in their pockets. And so if you go to them and ask if they want land or a job, they are going to say a job.

At the same time, the spatial segregation of laborers on the plantation generated extremely tenuous community ties. Social relations mirrored the hierarchical nature of the labor process and were reflected in style and quality of housing. The production process on the plantation required a few skilled "*empregados*" (employees) and many unskilled "*trabalhadores*" (workers). Employees managed the estate and oversaw the work crews. Workers cut the cane, weeded the fields and loaded the trucks.[21] Most common *trabalhadores* lived on the plantation in small, one-room houses connected by side walls, while more important workers either lived in larger stone houses in the center of the plantation or further out on "*sitios*" (small farms) allotted to them by the plantation owner.[22] Workers who did not live on the plantation were contracted seasonally (often without their legal working papers) and occupied the most insecure, unstable positions on the plantation. Such pronounced labor segmentation left little room for the sort of mutual assistance that took place in southern communities. None of the people on Flora participated in the MST occupation with members of their original community. People from the same community did join MST, but they had made their decisions independently and did not consciously maintain social ties after

receiving land. Community ties were further weakened by the high rate of mobility among workers. Unlike their counterparts in southern Brazil who saw mobility as a way of continually expanding or shifting the spaces of their own authority, plantation workers saw mobility as an individual survival strategy in a system that offered them few rights.[23] Working contracts on the plantation were usually informal and open to interpretation. Exit was often the most effective resistance to difficult working conditions perceived as unfair. One former worker described mobility as a welfare maximizing strategy: "At that time, there wasn't anything holding you in one place….I would spend two or three years in one place and when that started to get bad, I was already leaving for somewhere else."

Given the many factors discouraging rural workers from joining MST, it is initially unclear how the movement was able to build its membership in the region. The answer lies in the changing calculus of what was deemed necessary and possible when the sugarcane industry entered a severe crisis in the early 1990s. After thirty years of relative prosperity, plantation and distillery owners in the Northeast found themselves with fewer markets and less government support. The global market for sugarcane had become more competitive due, in part, to the presence of new competitors in global sugar production and increased use of artificial sweeteners.[24]

The market crisis was exacerbated in the northeastern state of Pernambuco, because the new civilian governments post-1985 deregulated the sugarcane industry and revised regional legislation that had previously protected the northeastern producers (Buarque 1997:3). Although national cane production increased significantly between 1982-3 and 1994-5, the contribution by northeastern producers fell from 30.1 percent to 19.4 percent (MEPF 1998:3). In 1995, 44 percent of the sugarcane refining distilleries in Pernambuco were classified as "paralyzed or functioning with difficulty" (Lins 1996:2).

The regional sugarcane crisis forced rural workers in Pernambuco to reevaluate the desirability of joining MST. Land previously subordinated to sugarcane was opened up, or "diverted" (*detournement*) in Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) words, for new purposes such as agrarian reform or tourism.[25] On most settlements, as on Flora, there were two distinct groups of people who decided to join the movement: families who had occupied the plantation with MST and families who had previously worked on, or somehow been associated with, the plantation (the "*moradores*").

The MST families defied the broader community's social norms regarding space and property, in large part because they had tried everything else and had no other option. According to one settler: "Today, sugarcane is finished…and so, the way we were living, if it hadn't been for agrarian reform, we could say that we would have been dead. There were no jobs, there was no work―how were we going to live?" In general, the people most affected by the crisis were ones who had no permanent residence in the interior of the plantations and were living in poor conditions *na rua* (in the small rural cities of the plantation region). One Flora settler described her husband's discovery of MST and their subsequent decision to join the movement: "A man came and asked my husband if he wanted a piece of land, you know? And [my husband] said that he did, because he lived working for others and paying rent [in the city]. One day it was here, the next day there, living in the stables because we didn't have a house to live in. It was too much suffering." Many of these workers were contracted seasonally as *clandestinos* (uncertified workers) and did not receive any of the public or private benefits that come with legal registration.[26] As uncertified, seasonal workers, their positions were unstable. They often had to do the most menial tasks of the harvest for a fraction of the pay they were promised. They had little recourse to complain, however, if they wished a work contract the following year (Maybury-Lewis 1994; Pereira 1997; Sigaud 1979).

The second group of people living on Flora joined MST for different reasons. They did not *have* to join MST in order to receive land. Rather, they became settlers simply by virtue of their association with the plantation at the time of its expropriation. Unlike the

people who occupied the plantation, they insisted that as residents they had a *right* to be there. A woman who worked for the patrão in the *Casa Grande* (Big House) explained: "I got [land] because I lived here on the [plantation]. It was a right, because I was working legally and so I got the land by right, I tried not to invade land or anything, it's just that this invasion came and INCRA (the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform) bought the land."

Over time, however, all of the former plantation residents decided to join the movement, because they could no longer rely on the plantation boss or the local trade union to provide economic or political support. Although the former patrão still lived on Flora, he was not in a financial or social position to provide for the workers. And the local trade union was itself greatly weakened as a result of the high unemployment generated by the sugarcane crisis.[27] MST's aggressive organizing efforts offered the settlers an alternative political voice—the settlement association.

As a land reform settlement, Flora was required to form an association that would meet regularly and be responsible for such things as collecting official documents from the settlers, disseminating information, and regulating conflict. On Flora, the movement virtually controlled the association. In the words of one settler: "Listen, it's like this, I live here inside the settlement. What they say I have to pay, and what they tell me I have to do with the association, these things, I do it." For a group of people as marginal to the political process as plantation workers, the opportunity for institutional entrée was extremely significant, even though it was sometimes unwelcome. One former morador who had worked as an administrator on the plantation said: "Whether I want to or not, I have to be part [of the movement] because we arrange things within the movement."

One of the settlers on Flora who had been a resident on the plantation before the movement said that he did not support the occupation: "[the MST people] sent for us and told us to go there and pressure the mill owner too. But I said, I am not going, I am a resident here." Three years later, however, he decided, "I am part of the movement, because if not the movement, what is ours? We only get things through the movement." The movement was considered responsible for forcing the government to disburse money for housing as well as credit for planting.

As the settlers adjusted to life in the new regional economy, ongoing participation in the movement was justified in the context of life on the plantations. Membership in MST did not necessarily indicate resistance to the political system as it had in Santa Catarina, because Flora settlers did not necessarily see the system as flawed. Instead, participation in MST improved their position by using rules with which the settlers were already familiar. They considered MST an institution comparable to a trade union, an organization that would help them navigate the political waters, not re-direct them. In this sense, MST was seen as a service organization that *represented* the settlers rather than a social movement of which they were members. As one settler said, "I think it's good, they are always doing marches and things, and it's to help us, isn't it?"

CONCLUSION: THE ONGOING SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF RESISTANCE

What are the benefits of trying to understand MST's formation from a spatially-informed perspective on contentious actors rather than contentious action? Three main benefits are evident. First, we go from explaining *what* conditions facilitated the formation of the movement to explaining *how* those conditions facilitated the formation of the movement. In Santa Catarina, political opportunity and institutional resources would not have been translated into action if they had not resonated with the spatial dynamics of local norms and practices. Small farmers needed to employ the tools of their traditions to embrace the aggressive act of occupying land. The political frontier the settlers created was unfamiliar, but the *process* of dislocation, relocation, and land occupation this new frontier required was very familiar. Rural workers in the Northeast, on the other hand, found it difficult to reconcile their notions of private property

with MST's tactics. In this case, MST was unable to build a significant membership in the sugarcane region because of the workers' very different spatial dynamics of production. The social construction of space on the sugarcane plantations generated a preference for money over land, and weak family and community bonds made it difficult for the rural workers to imagine occupying "someone else's property." Not until economic crisis hit did people began to join MST. As the crisis deepened, severely affected workers began to view MST more favorably. When the state expropriated more plantations and gave land to former workers living on the property, more settlers joined the movement because they perceived membership to be a legitimate means of accessing government assistance.

Second, if we examine who joined MST and why, we gain an implicit understanding of who did not join MST and why. In Santa Catarina, the people who joined MST were small farmers whose mode of production and reproduction clashed with capital's "spatial fix" and resonated with the movement's messages. In most cases, these were not the poorest people in the countryside or even the ones most affected by capitalist land appropriation. Many small farmers who joined MST still had a plot of land in western Santa Catarina where they came from. They were not in the same dire straits as the rural workers who left for the cities and contracted out their labor on a daily basis. But the small farmers needed the land they had—and more—in order to continue their spatially expansive way of life. At the same time, people who had fewer ties (social, material and cultural) to the land were more likely to move to new spatial frontiers or urban areas with enticing possibilities for wage work.

The third benefit of a spatially-informed perspective on contentious actors is understanding what people wanted to gain by joining the movement. MST members throughout Brazil invoke the movement's name when they march together through the streets, but with very different understandings of what it means to be part of the movement. These understandings have been forged in the diverse places where MST members have lived, both before and during participation in the movement. Evolving relationships between people and place continue to shape movement dynamics even after land has been won and settlements created. Despite MST's rhetorical coherence at the national level, the regional constitution of people and place has created very different movement actors across the country. If studies of mobilization are to become more dynamic as McAdam et al. (2001) rightfully encourage, we need to have some basis for understanding whether members will stay with a movement or drop out when the context changes. In the case of MST, the common analytical focus on agricultural restructuring, political opportunity, and religious organization has hidden the fact that a significant portion of movement members desperately tried to *avoid* joining. This attempted avoidance is an important component of mobilization dynamics because those members are likely to leave the movement as soon as the context in which they joined changes (see Wolford forthcoming a).[28]

Theoretically locating actors within spatial structures, and analyzing how the two are mutually constituted, is a useful way of incorporating actors *and* actions, as they are embedded in agency and structure, contingency and context, space and time. Comparing the formation of resistance in two distinct spatial contexts, like southern and northeastern Brazil, provides a clearer understanding of how the spatial constitution of social life shapes people's ideological and material practices and how, in turn, people shape socio-spatial practices through resistance.

ENDNOTES

[1] In MST's case, the attribution of mobilization to the depredations of capital fits neatly with the movement's ongoing critique of capitalism (see Wolford forthcoming b).

[2] This would highlight the social mechanisms described by McAdam et al. (2001: 24-27) and generate a dynamic, relational analysis that moves away from explication of structural characteristics and toward understanding how people engage with those structures (see particularly p. 47).

[3] For a critique of theoretical partisanship see McAdam et al. (2001: 312-3).
[4] These two regions, Santa Catarina in southern Brazil and Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil, were chosen because they represent very different economic and political frameworks and are strong areas of MST activity.
[5] Thanks to Byron Miller for suggesting the idea of a "lowered threshold."
[6] The interviews varied in style, but most included an extensive tour of the settler's property, lunch, and a two to three hour open-ended interview. Upon returning to Berkeley, I transcribed a significant portion of the interviews, which were coded and analyzed with the help of a qualitative research program called Filemaker Pro. A return trip to Brazil in the summer of 2001 helped me to solidify my arguments.
[7] The country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased at an astonishing annual rate of 11.2 percent per annum during this period (Fausto 1999: 291), and inflation fell from 58.2 percent in 1965 to a low of 16.4 percent in 1970 (Skidmore 1999: 178).
[8] In 1960, the wealthiest 5 percent of Brazil's economically active population earned 27.7 percent of the country's total income. In 1990, the wealthiest 5 percent earned 35.8 percent of total income (see Skidmore 1999: 198).
[9] Between 1960 and 1980, the population of Brazil's largest city, São Paulo, rose from 4.7 million to 12.6 million, and real urban wages fell by two-thirds from 1960 to 1976 (IBGE 1990). From 1960 to 1985, the Brazilian population went from being predominantly rural to predominantly urban.
[10] Jeffrey Paige's (1975) work on rural resistance in Latin America was one of the seminal pieces in the field of grievance theory in relation to Third World (agrarian) social movements. He argued that rural groups in the most precarious positions would be the likeliest to form resistance. Joel Migdal (1975) also suggested that the increasing level of peasant organization throughout the 20th century resulted from the shock of deepening imperialism.
[11] Not the community's real name.
[12] In each state, local officials with the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) calculate the amount of land considered sufficient to support a family of four (called a "module"). This amount varies from place to place depending on factors such as quality of soil and topography.
[13] Chayanov's analysis of the peasant economy in early 20th century Russia turned on the so-called "demographic cycle," whereby a household's access to land was determined by the number of people that needed to produce and consume within the household. When a peasant couple had children, the family would acquire more and more land, so that a large family would seemingly have a considerable amount of land. As the children grew older, however, they would take pieces of their parents' land in order to begin households of their own. This demographic cycle has been the most contested--and the most enduring--component of Chayanov's analysis.
[14] In 1996, a government-sponsored report (Testa et al. 1996) judged that 41.5 percent of the former agricultural land was totally inappropriate for cultivation due to soil loss, hillside slope, and prevalence of rocks.
[15] Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotes come from the author's field-work.
[16] Land law in Brazil is notoriously contradictory, because the Federal Constitution upholds both the sanctity of private property and the need for land to fulfill a "social function." Land titles are so often fraudulent that ownership can be challenged, often on the grounds of possession (see Holston 1991 for an excellent summary of what he calls the intentionally vague laws surrounding land ownership in Brazil).
[17] Not the community's real name. Community names have been changed in order to further protect the identity of interviewees.
[18] The Patrão himself did not receive land because he was renting another plantation down the road but his wife and son both received plots.
[19] The Northeast of Brazil was the first area to be settled and land in the region was considered a gift of the Crown. Land was both "nobody's" and "already somebody's," depending on the person's position in society.
[20] MST occupations are often referred to as "invasions", although generally by people who do not support the movement and wish to cast the idea of occupying land in a negative light.
[21] Although the workers planted and cut cane side by side, their daily production quotas were established on an individual basis.
[22] The importance of a worker was determined both by occupation and by the favor of the plantation owner. Plantation owners often rewarded good service with a sitio, or offered one to a worker whom they hoped to entice to work on their plantation.
[23] Lygia Sigaud's (1977; 1979) work is an excellent source of information on working conditions in the sugarcane economy of the Northeast. She outlines the ways in which owners used segmentation, insecurity, and job switching to push workers off of the plantation.
[24] Between 1975 and 1985, the industrialized countries increased their sugar exports from 20 percent of the world's total to 43 percent (De Souza et al. 1997:2).
[25] Diversion is defined as a situation where: "An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the raison d'etre which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one." (Lefebvre 1991)
[26] According to Pernambuco state law, plantation owners are expected to sign working papers for every person employed on the plantation. The papers are intended to insure that the workers receive their rights, that they are eligible for union membership, and that they have their years of service counted in the interests of receiving their state benefits.
[27] The unions were hurt badly by the region's economic crisis, because unemployment meant that people did not pay union fees. The unions' fate was intimately connected to the production of sugarcane, and union leaders were highly ambivalent about supporting MST. An MST activist said: "In seven or eight cities around here, it's the mill owner

who controls the unions, so the president of the union does whatever the boss says." In the municipality of Agua Preta, union leaders were trying to bring in settlers. Although MST leaders argued that the union was unnecessary, union leaders tried to convince the settlers that they still needed the political support traditionally provided by unions.
[28] This is in fact what happened in Flora. When I returned in 2001, the price of sugarcane had risen due to a drought in southern Brazil, and the settlers were planting cane again, essentially becoming contracted wage workers for the sugar plantations and distilleries. They seemed somewhat embarrassed when I mentioned MST, and the movement's presence was considerably less visible than it had been in 1999.

REFERENCES

Amado, Janaina, Walter Nugent and Warren Dean. 1990. "The Frontier in Comparative Perspective: The United States and Brazil." Working Paper No. 188 of the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Buarque, Sergio C. 1997. *Proposta de Re-Estruturacao do Setor Sucro-Alcooleiro e Negociacao da Divida por Terra para Assentamento de Reforma Agraria*. Recife, PE: National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform.

Burns, E. Bradford. 1993. *A History of Brazil*. New York: Columbia University Press.

______. 1995. "Brazil: Frontier and Ideology." *Pacific Historical Review* 64(1):1-18.

Cazella, Ademir A. 1992. *Assentamentos Rurais e Cooperação Agrícola: Políticas Conflitantes*. Master's Thesis in the Center for Research in Agriculture and Development with the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro: Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro.

Chayanov, Alexander V. 1966. *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, edited by Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay and R.E.F. Smith. Homewood, IL: AD Irwin.

Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), 2000. *Assassinatos no Campo Brasil 1985 – 2000: Violência e Impunidade*. Goiânia, MT: CPT Press.

De Souza, Hermino R., José F. Irmão and Tacisio P. de Araujo. 1997. *Cana de Açúcar e Cacau: Re-Estruturação Produtiva e Mercado de Trabalho na Zona da Mata do Nordeste*. Recife, PE: INCRA.

Delgado, Guilherme C. 1985. *Capital Financeiro e Agricultura no Brasil: 1965-1985.* Campinas, SP: Editora UNICAMP.

Domínguez, Jorge I. and Abraham F. Lowenthal. 1996. *Constructing Democratic Governance: Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1990s*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Eckstein, Susan, ed. 1989. *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Edelman, Marc. 1996. "Reconceptualizing and Reconstituting Peasant Struggles: A New Social Movement in Central-America." *Radical History Review* 65:26-47.

Edelman, Marc. 1999. *Peasants Against Globalization: Rural Social Movements in Costa Rica*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Fausto, Boris. 1999. *A Concise History of Brazil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fernandes, Bernardo M. 1999. *MST, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra: Formação e Territorialização*. São Paulo: Editora Hucitec.

Graziano Da Silva, José. 1982. *A Modernização Dolorosa: Estrutura Agrária, Fronteira Agrícola e Trabalhadores Rurais no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores.

Gurr, Ted. 1970. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Holston, James. 1991. "The Misrule of Law: Land and Usurpation in Brazil," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 33(4): 695-725.

Houtzager, Peter P. 1997. Caught Between State And Church: Popular Movements in the Brazilian Countryside, 1964-1989. Dissertation submitted to the Department of Political Science. Berkeley, CA: University of Berkeley.

Houtzager, Peter P. and Markus J. Kurtz. 2000. "The Institutional Roots of Popular Mobilization: State Transformation and Rural Politics in Brazil and Chile, 1960-1995." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 422: 394-424.

Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatísticas (IBGE). 1990. Censos Econômicos-1985, two volumes. Rio de Janeiro: Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics.

Jenkins, Craig J., and Charles Perrow. 1977. “Insurgency of the Powerless: Farm Worker Movements (1946-1972).” in *American Sociological Review*, 24: 249-268.

Lefebvre, Henrí. 1991 [1974]. *The Production of Space*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.

Lehmann, David. 1990. *Democracy and Development in Latin America: Economics, Politics and Religion in the Post-War Period*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Lins, Carlos. 1996. *Programa de Ação para o Desenvolvimento da Zona da Mata do Nordeste*. Recife, PE: Superintendent for the Development of the Northeast.

Mainwaring, Scott. 1986. *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916-1985.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Maybury-Lewis, Biorn. 1994. *The Politics of the Possible: The Brazilian Rural Workers' Trade Union Movement, 1964-1985*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McCarthy, James D. and Mayer N. Zald. 1973. *The Trend Of Social Movements In America: Professionalization And Resource Mobilization.* Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.

McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. 2001. *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Medeiros, Leonilde S. d. 1989. *História dos Movimentos Sociais no Campo*. Rio de Janeiro: FASE.

Migdal, Joel S. 1975. *Peasants, Politics, And Revolution: Pressures Toward Political and Social Change in the Third World.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Miller, Byron A. 1992. “Collective Action and Rational Choice: Place, Community, and the Limits to Individual Self-Interest.” *Economic Geography* 68(1): 22-42.

______. 2000. *Geography And Social Movements: Comparing Antinuclear Activism in the Boston Area*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Ministerio Extraordinário da Política Fundiária (MEPF). 1998. *Programa Integrado de Reforma Na Zona da Mata Nordestina.* Recife, PE: MEPF.

Morris, Aldon. 1984. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change.* New York: Free Press.

Müller, Gerard. 1985. *A Dinâmica da Agricultura Paulista.* São Paulo: Foundation for the State System of Data Analysis.

Navarro, Zander, 2000. “Breaking New Ground: Brazil’s MST,” in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 33(5): 36-39.

Oberschall, Anthony. 1973. *Social Conflict and Social Movements*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

______. 1993. *Social Movements: Ideologies, Interests and Identities*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

O'Donnell, Guillermo A. and Philippe C. Schmitter. 1986. *Transitions From Authoritarian Rule.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Olson, Mancur. 1971. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1995. "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal." *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 37(1): 173-193.

Oxhorn, Phillip. 1991. “The Popular Sector Response to an Authoritarian Regime: Shantytown Organizations Since the Military Coup.” *Latin American Perspectives* 18(1): 66-91.

Paige, Jeffery M. 1975. *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World.* New York: Free Press.

Paulilo, Maria. 1996. *Terra a Vista....e ao Longe.* Florianopolis, SC: Editora da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

Pereira, Anthony W. 1997. *The End of the Peasantry: The Rural Labor Movement in Northeast Brazil, 1961-1988.* Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Petras, James. 1997. “Latin America: The Resurgence of the Left.” *New Left Review* 223: 17-47.

Poletto, Ivo. 1997. “O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra e a Luta Pela Terra.” *Cadernos de Estudos Sociologicos* 97: 14-28.

Robles, Wilder. 2001. “The Landless Rural Workers Movement MST in Brazil.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 282: 146-161.

Sader, Emir and Ken Silverstein. 1991. *Without Fear of Being Happy: Lula, the Workers Party and Brazil*. London: Verso.

Schmink, Marianne and Charles H. Wood, eds. 1984. *Frontier Expansion in Amazonia*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press.
Schwade, Elisete. 1992. *A Luta Não Faz Parte da Vida...É a Vida: O Projeto Político-Religioso de um Assentamento no Oeste Catarinense*. Florianopolis, SC: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.
Sewell, William H. Jr. 2001. "Space in Contentious Politics." Pp. 51-89 in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, D. McAdam, S. Tarrow, and C. Tilly, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sigaud, Lygia. 1977. "A Idealização do Passado numa Area de Plantation." *Contraponto* 22: 115-126.
______. 1979. *Os Clandestinos e os Direitos: Estudo Sobre Trabalhadores da Cana-De-Açúcar de Pernambuco.* São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades.
Skidmore, Thomas E. 1999. *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Slater, Candace. 2002. *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Slater, David, ed. 1985. *New Social Movements and the State in Latin America*. Amsterdam: CEDLA.
Stedile, João Pedro, ed. 1997. "O MST e a Questão Agrária: Entrevista com João Pedro Stedile." *Estudos Avançados* 11(31): 69-98.
Stedile, João Pedro and Bernardo M. Fernandes. 1999. *Brava Gente: A Trajetória do MST e a Luta Pela Terra No Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo.
Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51(2): 273-286.
Tarrow, Sidney G. 1998. *Power In Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Testa, Vilson M., Raul d. Nadal, Luiz C. Mior, Ivan T. Baldissera, and Nelson Cortina, with John Wilkinson. 1996. *O Desenvolvimento Sustentavel do Oeste Catarinense*. Florianopolis, SC: EPAGRI.
Veltmeyer, Henry. 1997. "New Social Movements in Latin America: The Dynamics of Class and Identity." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 251: 139-169.

Viotti da Costa, Emilia. 2000. *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
Wolford, Wendy. forthcoming a. "Of Land and Labour: Agrarian Reform on the Sugarcane Plantations of Northeast Brazil," in *Latin American Perspectives*.
______ forthcoming b. "Producing Community: The MST and Land Reform Settlements in Brazil," in *Journal of Agrarian Change*.
Woortmann, Ellen F. 1995. *Hedeiros, Parentes e Compadres: Colonos do Sul e Sitiantes do Nordeste.* São Paulo: Hucitec.